The Birdcage

Marcia Willett

Chapter 1

PROLOGUE

The child, waking suddenly and finding herself alone, sat up anxiously amongst the makeshift bed of cushions and rugs. She could hear her mother's voice, echoing oddly - now loud, now quiet - a murmuring duet with a deeper voice, flaring and dying so queerly that she scrambled to her feet and went out into the passage. Small, tousled, without her shoes, she hurried along until she emerged into a Looking-Glass world where painted gardens ascended into cavernous shadowy places, a flight of stairs revolved gently away, and walls drifted silently apart. A cluster of lights, perched aloft, lit up an interior as neat and bright as a dolls'-house room, with cardboard books on painted shelves and shiny plaster food set upon the small table; almost she expected Hunca Munca to appear.

Standing quite still, just beyond the circle of light, a draught shivering round her legs, she watched her mother, who talked and smiled and stretched her hands to someone whose arm and shoulder, clad in severe dark cloth, could just be glimpsed; but, before she was able run to her, a sudden surging roar pinned her in the dark corner. As it beat up, swelling then receding dizzily about her head, she squared her mouth to cry out in fear, and then there were people all about her, lifting her, soothing her, carrying the small struggling figure away from the woman who remained on stage as the curtain rose and fell, again and again. She yelled aloud in panic as she was borne off - 'Angel!' she shouted - but her voice was lost in the backstage bustle and she cried out again. No sound came and she wakened - properly now - to the present, her head at an uncomfortable angle against the arm of the chair, her mouth dry. The fear was still with her, a sense of terrible loss clinging with the fragments of the dream, so that she passed her hands over her face as if to wipe away both the dream and the panic together.

'Sleeping in the afternoon,' she told herself disparagingly. 'What do you expect?' and glanced hopefully at her watch. Twenty-eight minutes past five. Once, not so long ago, this would have been a time of preparation, of nervous tension; swallowing black coffee, forcing down some bread and butter, before going to the theatre. There, the world beyond the stage door brought its own particular brand of comfort. Snuffing up the familiar theatre smell - dust, greasepaint, sweat - hearing the chatter in the dressing-rooms, a kind of comradeship and relief that sprang from the security of being where you belonged, concentrated the mind on the work ahead. Still nervous, oh, yes! But excited now and part of the family: listening to the gossip as you sat at the mirror and applied the colour to your face.

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Lizzie Blake straightened in her chair, shrugging her shoulders to ease the crick in her neck, stretching her long, still-glamorous legs. She rose from the armchair, humming. She'd discovered that humming held thought - and fear - at bay and she knew plenty of tunes. Today it was South Pacific: 'This Nearly was Mine'. She waltzed into the kitchen, exaggerating the beat, hamming it up, humming and singing alternately, slipping back nearly twenty-five years. Lizzie filled the kettle and switched it on; not that she wanted a cup of tea but that dread, empty, early evening desert between five and seven had to be filled somehow - especially now that Sam was gone.

She hurried herself away from this thought at once, humming again - 'A Cockeyed Optimist' this time - and began to make the tea, tapping out the rhythm on the caddy with a teaspoon, wondering whether she might allow herself a ginger biscuit: just one. After all, her weight never increased. She remained as tall and slender as she'd been at twenty - her work and self-discipline had kept her fit and supple - and the masses of dark reddish-gold hair were barely touched with grey. It was pinned, as usual, into a mysterious bundle fromwhich screwy tendrils escaped and tortoiseshell hairpins occasionally slipped; her ivory skin was dusted with freckles and her amber-brown eyes were rather shy beneath the feathery brows. As she'd grown older - too old for the roles of Nellie or Ado Annie or Bianca - she'd been cast in small comedy parts and had also had a great success in a television sitcom that had run for several years. Meanwhile, her singing voice had carried her into voice-over jingles for television commercials and now, if she'd wanted to, she could have listened to herself at least three or four times each evening, extolling a particular brand of face-cream, or watched herself at the wheel of a popular family car complete with two small children and a delightful mutt-like dog. This last was a very amusing and popular commercial and she'd become a household face - something she'd never quite achieved through those long years on the stage nor, even, with the sitcom - and she was getting used to passers-by doing double-takes and crying, 'Oh, you're that lady in the advert . . .' She longed to be blasé about it, to shrug and smile distantly, but, truth to tell, she rather liked the recognition and was quite ready for a little chat, a bit of a chuckle with these friendly admirers. Deep down she felt rather ashamed at the pleasure this gave her but there was no harm and it cheered her up, boosting her ego and warming the heart: reactions not to be sniffed at, especially since Sam . . .

Lizzie seized the biscuit tin: two biscuits and a good look at the latest holiday brochure would be an excellent distraction from the long empty hours ahead. Perhaps her friends and her agent had been right when they'd advised that she shouldn't leave London to return to the house in Bristol where she'd grown up with Pidge and Angel. It was simply that London had been so awful without Sam; so lonely and . . . just wrong. She lifted the mug and tasted the hot tea, glancing at the highly coloured brochure advertising the beauty of the West Country.

'Will you be travelling with a party?' the young woman in the travel agent's office had asked earlier that morning.

'No, no. Quite alone.' She tried to make it sound adventurous and gay but the words had a rather pathetic ring and the woman glanced curiously at her.

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'I lost my husband three months ago.' The words leaped from her mouth and seemed to lie on the counter where they could both look at them: Lizzie with dismayed surprise and the woman with shocked pity.

'I am so sorry.'

The hushed tone and special sympathetic expression had an odd effect on Lizzie; she could feel wild laughter creeping below her diaphragm. Instinctively she breathed in, tightening her stomach muscles, beaming so madly that the woman almost flinched away from her.

'So am I,' she answered brightly, speaking clearly. 'Terribly, terribly sorry.'

The woman's expression grew anxious; she seized some brochures, and pushed them across the counter, muttering unintelligibly, her eyes averted.

Remembering, Lizzie burst into a fit of laughter, nearly choking on her tea; tears streamed from her eyes and she dabbed at them. Could it be that she was crying? Resolutely she took her mug and the booklets and went to sit at the dining-table.

In this big first-floor room, the kitchen had been divided from the living area by the simple means of placing an upright piano in the middle of the floor. Its back, which had a square deal table placed against it, was turned to the sink and cupboards and shelves, hiding the smaller working area very cleverly. On its other side, a long refectory table was set about with assorted battered wooden chairs, one wall was lined with bookshelves, another hung with paintings, and a long sofa, which fitted comfortably into the wide bay window, kept company with three unmatched armchairs and a low carved chest used as a table.

Sitting in the wide-armed carver, pushing an old silk cushion into the small of her back, Lizzie set down her tea, took the brochures from under her arm and opened the biscuit tin. She began to turn the pages. Beyond the window, the plane tree trembled in the light, soft breeze; the June evening was warm and the voices of the children, playing in the square, echoed through the open casement. The room faced west and the pattern of the leaves shifted and changed in the sunlight, flickering over faded linen chair covers. A crimson petal fell soundlessly from one of the roses in a vase on the piano, their scent drifting in the high, airy spaces. Lizzie turned another page.

'Dunster Castle towers above the little village huddled at its gates . . .'

She stared at the picture, frowning, her mind balancing on the edge of a memory: the sandstone castle, glowing rich and warm at sunset, the mosaic of red and grey slate roofs silvered by gentle rain, a peaceful, sheltered garden; the sea breaking on grey stones and shingle, the ache of weary legs on the long walk home from the beach . . . And Angel, restless, brittle, never still.

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Lizzie put the brochure aside. She saw a tiny cameo, a sliver of the past: a meeting, charged with tension and excitement, and Angel staring at a woman of her own age whilst she, Lizzie, gazed at the small boy who held the woman's hand.

The telephone bell shivered the memory to pieces and made her jump.

'Hello, dear heart.'

Lizzie smiled with relief to hear her agent's voice and sank into a deep-lapped armchair.

'Hello, Jim. How are things?'

'Things are good. Very good. That holiday you were talking about. You're not going too far away?'

'No, no.' Her eyes strayed to the table, the open brochure, the glossy photographs. 'I thought, maybe, the West Country. On the coast somewhere. Why?'

'Just as long as you're in Manchester on Monday week.'

They talked for a few moments longer, Lizzie replaced the receiver and returned to the table. She stood for a long while, staring down at the picture.

Dunster Castle towers above the little village huddled at its gates.

She slept late the next morning. Half a sleeping tablet had finally released her from an exhausting mental circling, resurrecting memories and sharpening grief, which dogged her into the early hours. Her dreams were curiously vivid.

Pidge and Angel are sitting together at the table, a bottle of wine between them whilst she sits on the floor beneath the long board with her toys. Angel's feet are bare and fidget constantly, rubbing one upon the other or tucking themselves into the long, cotton wrapper that ripples round her legs. Pidge's feet are placed upon the long bar and her shoes, with pointed toes and little heels, are soft dark blue leather.

'I loved him so much, d'you see?' she is saying. Her voice is full of pain and, more than that, there is a kind of desperate need to be understood, forgiven even. Her narrow feet remain quite still, planted firmly there on the wooden rail, whilst Angel's white, rounded toes, with their brightly painted nails, push at each other restlessly. She murmurs at intervals, in soothing counterpoint to Pidge's recital, comforting her.

'After all, sweetie, he didn't belong to me either. I mean, did he?' Her chair creaks a little as she leans forward. There is a tiny chink of glass, a liquid gurgle. 'To be honest, it's quite extraordinary. Rather fun, I think . . .'

Pidge's feet come down from the rail, her shoes are eased off and she hitches her chair forward an inch or two: Angel's toes cease to rub together, she crosses her legs, drawing the wrapper about her knees, and sits back comfortably. With the voices

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murmuring above her head, listening to bursts of smothered laughter and the occasional exclamation, the child continues her game; setting the scene that her toys enact on the soft silky rug, with the refectory table like a roof, the broad end-leg as a wall, sheltering and enclosing them.

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