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Opening Extract from...

Sheer Abandon

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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Sheer Abandon

Penny Vincenzi

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Prologue

August 1986

People didn't have babies on aeroplanes. They just didn't.

Well – well, actually they did. And then it was all over the newspapers.

'Gallant aircrew deliver bouncing boy,' it said, or words to that effect, and then went on to describe the mother of the bouncing boy in some detail. Her name, where she lived, how she had come to be in the situation in the first place. Usually with a photograph of her with the bouncing boy and the gallant crew.

So – *that* wasn't an option.

She couldn't have a baby on an aeroplane.

Ignore the pain. Not nearly bad enough, anyway. Probably indigestion. Of course: indigestion. Cramped up here, with her vast stomach compressed into what must be the smallest space in the history of aviation for what? – seven hours now. Yes, definitely indigestion . . .

Didn't completely solve the situation though. She was still having a baby. Any day – any hour, even. And would be having it in England now instead of safely – safely? – in Bangkok.

That had been the plan.

But the days had gone by and become a week, and then two, and the date, the wonderfully safe date of her flight, three weeks after the birth, had got nearer and nearer. She'd tried to change it; but she had an Apex seat; she'd lose the whole fare, they explained, very nicely. Have to buy a new ticket.

She couldn't. She absolutely couldn't. She had no money left, and she'd carefully shed the few friends she'd made over the past few months, so there was no danger of them noticing.

Noticing that she wasn't just overweight but that she had, under the Thai fishermen's trousers and huge shirts she wore, a stomach the size of a very large pumpkin.

(The people at the check-in hadn't noticed either, thank God; had looked at her, standing there, hot and tired and sweaty, and seen simply a very overweight girl in loose and grubby clothing.)

So there was no one to borrow from; no one to help. The few hundred she had left were needed for rent. As it turned out, an extra three weeks' rent. She'd tried all the things she'd heard were supposed to help. Had swallowed a bottle-full of castor oil, eaten some strong curry, gone for long walks up and down the hot crowded streets, feeling sometimes a twinge, a throb, and hurried back, desperate to have it over, only to relapse into her static, whale-like stupor.

And now she had – indigestion. God! No. Not indigestion. This was no indigestion. This searing, tugging, violent pain. Invading her, pushing at the very walls of the pumpkin. She bit her lip, clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. If this was the beginning, what would the end be like?

The boy sitting next to her, as grubby and tired as she, whose friendliness she'd rejected coldly as they settled into their seats, frowned as she moved about, trying to escape the pain, her bulk invading his space.

'Sorry,' she said. And then it faded again, the pain, disappeared back where it had come from, somewhere in the centre of the pumpkin. She lay back, wiped a tissue across her damp forehead.

Not indigestion. And three hours to go.

'You OK?' The boy was looking at her, concern mixed with distaste.

'Yes. Fine. Thanks.'

He turned away.

They had landed; everyone was standing up, pulling their luggage down from the lockers. The moment had coincided with a very violent pain. She sat in her seat, bent double, breathing heavily. She was getting the measure of them now; they started, gathered momentum, tore at you and then departed

again. Leaving you at once feebly grateful and dreadfully fearful of their return.

Well – she hadn't had it on the plane.

For the rest of her life, when she read of people describing bad experiences of childbirth, of inadequate pain relief, of briskly bracing midwives, of the sense of isolation and fear, she thought they should have tried it her way. Alone, in a space little bigger than a cupboard, the only pain relief distraction therapy (she counted the tiles on the walls, more and more as the time went by), her only companion a fly buzzing relentlessly (she worried about the fly, the dirt and disease it might be carrying, looked at it thankfully as it suddenly dropped, exhausted, on its back and expired). And then there were some brushes and mops and some clean towels – thank God for those towels, how could she ever have thought one pack of cotton wool would be enough? Her isolation was absolute, her only midwife herself and her precious book, propped against the wall as she lay on the floor, studying its explicitly sanitised diagrams desperately, heaving her child into the world. How could she be doing this, so afraid of pain she couldn't have a filling without a local anaesthetic, so clumsy she could never fasten her own Brownie tie?

But she did.

She managed because she had to. There was nothing else for it.

And when it was all over, and she had cleaned herself up as best she could, and the room too, and wrapped the baby, the tiny, wailing baby, into the clean sheet and blanket she had packed in her rucksack (along with the sharp, sharp scissors and ball of string and large bottle of water which was the nearest she could get to sterilising anything), she sat on the floor, slumped against the wall, feeling nothing, not even relief, looking at the baby, quiet now, but breathing with astonishing efficiency, its small face peaceful, its eyes closed.

It was over. She had become a mother; and in a very short while she would be one no longer, she could walk away, herself again, free, unencumbered, undisgraced.

She could just forget the whole thing. Completely.

It was over.

Wonderfully, neatly, absolutely over . . .

The Year Before

August 1985

They sat there in the departure lounge, on two separate benches, consulting the same departure board: three girls, strangers to one another, the faded jeans, the long hair, the beaded friendship bracelets, the sneakers, the small rucksacks (vastly bigger ones already checked in) all marking them out as backpackers, and about-to-be-undergraduates. With school and parents shaken off, a few hundred pounds in their new bank accounts, round-the-world tickets in their wallets, they were moving off; to travel a route that would take in one or all of a clearly defined set of destinations: Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Nepal and the Himalayas, and even the States.

They were very excited, slightly nervous, above all impatient for the journey to begin; constantly exchanging looks, half smiles with one another, moving slowly physically closer as more and more people filled the lounge and the space surrounding them.

It was the announcement that brought them finally together: the announcement that their flight to Bangkok had been delayed for three hours. Their eyes met, eyebrows raised, and they all stood up, picking up their bags, moving towards one another, smiling, annoyed at so early an interruption to their journey, and yet welcoming it as an excuse to meet and to talk.

'Coffee?' said one and 'Great,' said the other two, and they walked slowly towards the cafeteria, already over-full, tables filled with dirty cups, cigarette stubs swimming in spilt coffee, harassed staff wiping grubby surfaces with grubbier cloths.

'Here's a table,' said one of the three. 'I'll keep it – leave the bags,' and she settled at the table, pulling out a pack of Rothmans and studying her new friends as they queued at the service

counter. One of them was tall and very slim with a cloud of wild blonde hair, the other shorter and distinctly plump, with her hair pulled back into a plait. The blonde kept looking over her shoulder slightly anxiously.

'We hope it's coffee,' said the plait, as she set the tray down on the corner of the table, 'but we're not sure. It's hot and wet, anyway. Sugar?'

'No thanks. Here, let's clear this muck onto the tray. I'm Martha,' she added, smiling quickly at each of them, pushing back a long mane of loose brown hair, 'Martha Hartley . . .'

'I'm Clio,' said the plait. 'Clio Scott. Spelt with an i. Clio that is.'

'Jocasta,' said the blonde, 'Jocasta Forbes.'

'That's quite a name. Jocasta, I mean.'

'I know. My parents were punishing me for not being a boy.'

'I think it's rather a good name,' said Clio.

'Well, it's all right,' said Jocasta, 'if you don't mind a rather strong association with incest.'

'Did they get the boy in the end?' asked Martha curiously.

'Less than a year later. Only time he's ever arrived anywhere without a long wait. He should be here now and look at him. Or rather don't, since he's not,' she added.

'He's going travelling with you?'

'Yup. Well, we're starting out together. It made our parents less nervous.'

She smiled at them, pushed back her hair. 'Anyway, what about you two? Martha – any story behind your name?'

'My mother said she always identified with Martha rather than Mary, in the Bible you know? She was the one who did all the work while Mary just sat at Jesus' feet doing nothing. My poor mother works terribly hard.'

'It's a nice name anyway,' said Jocasta. She had looked rather blank at the biblical link. 'Clio, what about you?'

'My parents met at Oxford, reading classics. There was a muse and a nymph called Clio. It comes from the Greek word Kleos, which means glory. And my sisters are called Ariadne and Artemis,' she added. 'You did ask!'

'I did. And are you going to follow in their footsteps, read classics?'

'Absolutely not. I'm doing medicine at UCH.'

'I was born there,' said Martha, 'we all were. My sister sixteen years ago today, actually.'

'Who's all?'

'My sister and my baby brother. Only he's not really a baby any more, he's ten. But that's how we all think of him.'

'I have a similar problem,' said Clio, 'only it's me. The baby, I mean. Anyway, what about you two, what are you going to do?'

'I'm going to read law at Bristol,' said Martha.

'Same as my brother,' said Jocasta.

'Is he going to Bristol?'

'No, back to school, to do Oxford entrance. He's horribly clever. He got four A levels, all As, and a year early of course.' She sighed. 'And before you ask, I only got three.'

The eyes of the other two met momentarily, then Martha said: 'And what are you going to do?'

'English. At Durham. I want to be a journalist, a reporter. Tracking down stories, uncovering scandals, that sort of thing.'

'How exciting.'

'Well – I hope so. I'm told I'll spend my first five years at least covering village fetes.'

'Josh, you made it. Amazing. Only an hour late. Lucky they held the plane for you.' Jocasta seemed suddenly less at ease. 'Here, come and join us. This is Martha and this is Clio. And this is my brother Josh.'

And Martha and Clio saw a boy who looked so like Jocasta it was almost shocking. The same wild blond hair, the same dark blue eyes, the same just slightly crooked smile.

'Hi,' he said, holding out a thin hand. 'Nice to meet you.'

'Hi,' said Martha, 'nice to meet you too.'

'You're incredibly alike,' said Clio, 'you could be – '

'We know, we know. Twins. Everyone says so. But we're not. Josh, why are you so late?'

'I lost my passport.'

'Josh – you're so hopeless. And fancy only looking for it this morning.'

'I know, I know. Sorry.'

'Was Mum OK, saying goodbye to you? He's her baby,' she added to the others, 'can't bear to let him out of her sight.'

'She was fine. How was your dinner with Dad?'

'It never took place. He didn't get back till twelve. And this morning he had to rush off to a meeting in Paris, so he couldn't see me off either. What a surprise.'

'So how did you get here?'

'Oh, he put me in a cab.' Her expression was hard; her tone didn't quite match it.

'Our parents are divorced,' Josh explained. 'Usually we live with our mother but my dad wanted – '

'*Said* he wanted,' said Jocasta, 'to spend yesterday evening with me. Anyway, very boring, let's change the subject. I'm going to the loo.'

She walked away rather quickly.

There was a silence. Josh offered a pack of cigarettes, and Martha and Clio each took one. Josh's arrival had brought a tension into the group that was a little uncomfortable. Time to withdraw, at least until the flight . . .

Their seats were far apart, but they managed to spend some of the flight together, standing in the aisles, chatting, swapping magazines, comparing routes and plans. From Bangkok, Josh wanted to go up country; Martha was spending a short time in Bangkok before going on to Sydney, where she was meeting a school friend. She planned to stay a few weeks there, 'working in bars and stuff' before moving up to Ayers Rock and then the rain forest and the Great Barrier Reef. 'After that I don't know, but I want to finish in New York, maybe visit California on the way.'

Clio was island-hopping for a few weeks and then travelling on to Singapore, where a distant cousin of her father's would put her up. 'Just for a couple of weeks. He's got a son who they seem to think might want to travel with me. Apparently I'm sure to like him.'

'What, because he's eighteen too?' said Martha.

'Of course. I'm sure he'll be gross. After that, Australia, probably, but I do want to get to Nepal. I wouldn't do that on my own though; I'm relying on meeting someone.'

Jocasta didn't know what she was going to do. 'Go wherever fate takes me. Start with the islands, definitely. I don't want to go north with Josh, and he wants to get rid of me as soon as he can.'

'Why don't you come to Koh Samui with me?' said Clio. 'You're sure to make friends with someone down there you can travel on with.'

'Yes,' said Martha. 'My best friend's sister, who went last year, said you keep meeting people from your own town, your own school, practically your own family.'

'God, I hope not,' said Jocasta. 'Family, I mean. I've got quite enough of mine with me.'

She looked across the aisle at Josh, who was engrossed in his book, occasionally pushing his wild hair out of his eyes.

'I certainly won't,' said Martha. 'My entire family see a day-trip to France as a huge adventure.'

'I don't want to meet any of mine either,' said Clio. 'This is my first chance to do something on my own without my sisters.'

'Don't you like them?'

'I suppose so. But they're both older than me, both very beautiful and successful and they treat me like I was eight, not eighteen.'

'So – did you have trouble persuading your parents to let you come? As you're the youngest?'

'Well, my mother died when I was tiny. My sisters persuaded my father. Although they all made it very clear they thought I'd be home by Christmas, tail between my legs.'

Her round little face was at once harder and infinitely sad; then she smiled quickly. 'Anyway, I got away.'

'My parents couldn't wait to get rid of me,' said Martha.

'Why?'

'They just find it all so exciting. They lead a rather – well, a very narrow life.'

'In what way?' said Jocasta curiously.

'Well, my father's a vicar. So we have to live in conditions of unbelievable respectability. Nothing remotely racy. And in a spotlight of sorts. A small one, but it's still a spotlight. The whole parish watching.'

'I'm really surprised,' said Clio, 'in this day and age.'

''Fraid this day and age hasn't really reached St Andrews, Binsmow. It's in a total time warp.'

'Where is it?'

'Deepest Suffolk. When I tell you I went to the cinema on a Sunday with some friends last year and at least a dozen people got to hear about it and complained to my father, you'll get some idea of what I'm talking about.'

They digested this in silence. Then, 'And what about your mum?'

'She's just a perfect vicar's wife. Runs the WI and stuff. But she loves it. She's absolutely thrilled I'm going away, even though she's a bit worried.'

'How on earth did they get you, these terribly conventional people?' asked Jocasta, laughing. 'Where did you go to school? One of those wacky places?'

'Oh – just a grammar school,' said Martha quickly. 'That's the other thing about being a vicar's family. There isn't a lot of money, to put it mildly. What about you two?'

'Sherborne,' said Jocasta, 'and boarding prep before that.'

'Day school,' said Clio, 'Oxford High. I always longed to go to boarding school.'

'It isn't all fun, I can tell you,' said Jocasta. 'Loneliest place in the world if you're homesick, which I was.'

'I expect you were, at – what were you, eight?' asked Martha.

'Yes. My mother was busy having a nervous breakdown – my father had left her by then and my mother didn't want a stroppy child about the place. Josh stayed at home a bit longer. Of course. But I got used to it. You can get used to anything, can't you? In the end?'

She stared out of the window, clearly discouraging any further probing into her family life. The others looked at one another and started discussing an article in *Cosmopolitan* about how to have it all: career, love, children . . .

'I wouldn't want to,' said Martha. 'Have it all, I mean. Well, certainly not children. My career, that'll be quite enough for me.'

A disembodied voice asked them to return to their seats.

They spent three days together in Bangkok, three extraordinary days in which they bonded absolutely, adjusting to the soup-like