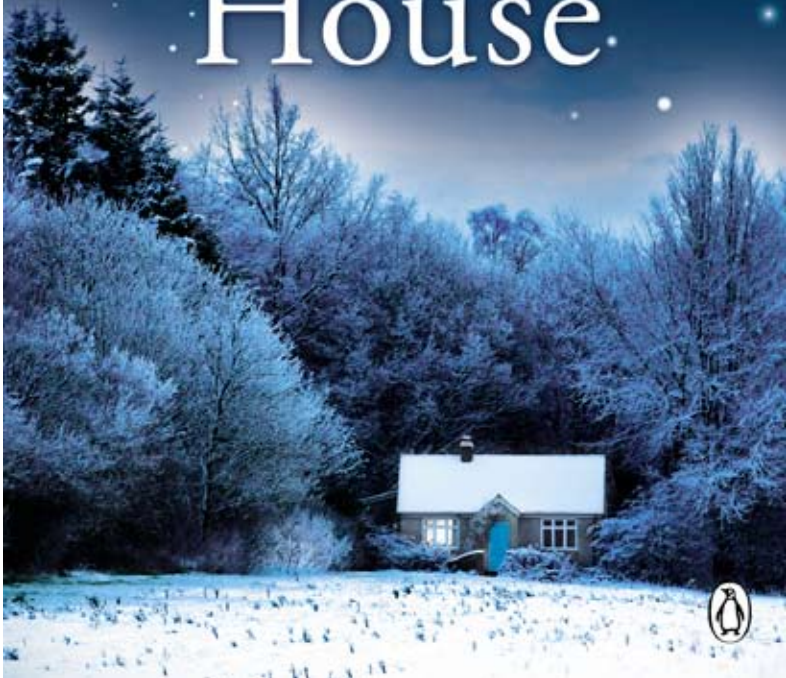


FROM ONE HALF OF BESTSELLING DUO. NICCI FRENCH

Nicci Gerrard

*The*  
Winter  
House



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by  
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## Chapter One

The phone call came at a quarter to eight, when it still wasn't fully light outside; a chilly drizzle spattered the window-panes and spread a fine gauze over the skyline, so that nothing was entirely clear and rooftops and trees acquired a blurred, mysterious air. Marnie hesitated. Her slice of bread was under the grill and already done on one side; her coffee was brewing in the cafetière; a newspaper lay open on the table beside the plate and the jar of marmalade. This was her peaceful time of the day. She had already been out for a run and taken a shower. Now she was wearing her dressing-gown, scrubbed and virtuous, the pleasurable ache of exercise in her limbs, in a kitchen that smelt of toast, detergent and the basil that grew in a pot on the window-sill, which she watered every morning. Eva and her boyfriend would be asleep for hours, the door shut on the unimaginable squalor of their room. The unblemished day lay ahead of her. Reluctantly, she picked up the phone.

'Hello? Marnie here.'

'Marnie?' The voice, overlaid by a static crackle, was not one she immediately placed, though it was oddly familiar and, as certain smells can, awoke a powerful but elusive memory.

'Yes, speaking.'

'This is Oliver. Oliver Fenton.'

‘Oliver?’ She frowned, and her grip tightened on the phone. The morning tipped into strangeness. ‘But – I mean, what –?’

‘I know this is unexpected. I’m calling about Ralph.’

‘Wait,’ said Marnie. ‘Please hold on for just one moment.’ She put the phone down carefully, noticing that her hands were shaking slightly, and went to turn off the grill. The toast was just beginning to burn, its crust singeing. She poured herself half a cup of coffee and picked up the phone again, turning her back on the ordered morning she had prepared for herself and looking instead out of the window. In the flats opposite, a man in boxer shorts was eating cereal straight out of the packet. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I had to – Ralph, you said?’

‘You need to come and see him.’ The voice bounced, losing syllables. It sounded as though Oliver was shouting through a high wind.

‘I need to come and see him,’ she repeated stupidly. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘He’s dying.’ A young woman in combat trousers carrying a polystyrene cup of coffee was passing beneath the window now; Marnie gazed down at the straight white parting in her sleek black ponytail. She walked very gracefully, like a dancer. ‘Marnie?’

‘I’m still here.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I can’t hear you very well.’

‘I said, he’s dying. And he wants to see you.’

‘But I –’

‘He’s in his cottage in Scotland. I’ve booked you on a flight to the nearest airport. It’s about sixty miles from here.’

‘Hang on. I can’t simply – as if –’

‘The plane leaves at three twenty this afternoon. From Stansted. You just need to show your passport.’

‘I have to go to work today.’

‘Someone will meet you there,’ continued Oliver, as if she hadn’t spoken.

‘You’re breaking up.’

‘I said, someone will meet you there. OK?’

‘Oliver, wait! You have to tell me – I mean, *why?*’

‘I can’t do it alone,’ he said. Or she thought he said, through the crackle.

‘Wait!’ The wind blew down the line at her and she shuddered, imagining she could feel its cold breath against her skin. ‘How long for?’ she shouted against it. ‘Hello? Oliver? Are you still there? Can you hear me? Damn.’

Frowning, she returned the phone to its cradle. Her hands were no longer trembling, but she felt cold and oddly heavy. She took a gulp of coffee, but it was tepid and bitter, so she poured it down the sink. She threw the toast into the bin. Put the marmalade back on the shelf. Folded the paper so the headline (‘Family die in fire’) was no longer showing, and sat at the table, shutting her eyes and resting her head in her hands. She wanted to think but for a while no thoughts came, no images, even, just a voice in the darkness repeating words that made little sense. ‘It’s Ralph . . . He’s dying . . .’

When she lifted her head again, the room seemed suddenly unfamiliar to her, as if she had already left it, and it had receded into her past, like a story that was over: a small, well-lit space; four chairs pushed against the wooden table she had rescued from a skip and restored;

well-stocked cupboards; shelves lined with herbs; the calendar on the wall turned to December – a bare tree spreading its boughs across an empty winter landscape. There was a small whiteboard on the door, items to remember written on it in red felt-tip. ‘Milk,’ ‘Bin bags,’ ‘Phone council,’ ‘B’day cards to Claire, Martin and Anna’. It was snug and functional, like a cabin on a great liner. Returning from work in the evening, she would look up at her illuminated window, and it would seem to her that her flat was bobbing in the buoyant darkness above.

Perhaps she would simply ignore the phone call, pretend that it had never happened. Then her life could continue on the same tack, a steady course that over the last months had consoled her. But even as she thought this, imagining herself going smoothly through her unchanged day, she was making plans. She heated up a second cup of coffee in the microwave and made a list in her head of all the things she needed to do, her mind skittering across the icy surface of the news and trying not to break through into scary waters. Pack a few clothes – it would be cold in the north of Scotland in December. Walking boots and thick sweaters, gloves, thermal socks. Layers: that was what her mother had always counselled whenever Marnie was packing, and she seemed to have been packing for most of her life. Ralph was dying – at least, Oliver had said so, but it didn’t feel true or even possible. Passport, although it was only a domestic flight. A couple of books. Her notebook. Travel light – how long would she be gone, anyway? A day? Two? More? For a moment, Ralph’s face flashed into view, vivid with life, youthful with time unaccounted for, smiling at her

as she sat befuddled in her kitchen. She felt a vicious pinch of panic. He couldn't die. He couldn't leave yet. Tampons, toothbrush, makeup, migraine tablets. She hadn't asked how he was dying. Had he been hit by a car? Or perhaps a stroke, so now his mobile face was slack and lopsided. Would she even recognize him?

Eight o'clock: only fifteen minutes had passed since Oliver's phone call. She needed to tell Elaine that she wouldn't be at work for the next day or so, and she knew Elaine would not be best pleased. Marnie worked in a puppet museum in Soho, just a few minutes from her flat, and Elaine was the owner. She was a short, fat, squashy American woman of indeterminate age who lived in Chichester with her cats, wore mustard-coloured leggings and prickly woollen jerseys, carried her purse (often containing great wads of cash) in a plastic bag, talked in bursts of furious speed, and was as sharp as a tack. She was also, it seemed, very rich, although Marnie had never discovered how, and the museum – which was really too small, dark, dusty and strange to deserve such a name – was one of her hobbies on which she occasionally, fiercely, lavished her attention and money until she forgot about it once more. She never expected it to make a profit and it never did.

Indeed, unpublicized and hidden down an obscure side-street, few people seemed to know of its existence. There were entire days when Marnie would receive not a single visitor; she would spend her time rearranging the items that were for sale, dusting exhibits, cleaning windows, making cups of coffee. Sometimes, turning the handmade 'Open' sign to 'Closed', she would play truant

for half an hour or so and wander round Soho, speeding past shops where leather corsets and alarming sex aids stood in the windows, but lingering in places that sold Indian wedding shawls or battered second-hand books of engravings.

Nevertheless, Elaine liked her to be at the museum from nine thirty until six, except on Wednesday and Sunday when it was closed to the public. You could hire it then for parties, apparently, although nobody had done so in Marnie's time: the rooms were too small, the stairway too narrow, there was no kitchen and only one tiny lavatory, which was squeezed into the space between the Sicilian marionettes and the shelves of tiny finger puppets.

Marnie dialled the number.

Elaine answered on the first ring. 'Hello.'

'Elaine, it's me, Marnie – I hope I didn't wake you.'

'Nonsense – it's past eight. What time do you think I get up?'

'It's just . . . I have a problem. I've got to take a few days off work.'

'Are you ill?'

'No, not me. A friend.' She hesitated. 'A good friend. I've got to go to Scotland.'

'When?'

'Today.'

'Oh!' Elaine gave a small grumbling sigh. Marnie could hear her tapping her stubby fingers on a surface. 'Well, if you've got to go, you've got to go. I'll just have to try and find someone to cover. We can't have the museum closed while you're away, can we?'

'I was thinking, I know someone who might be able

to stand in. She's young, not quite twenty, but she's – Marnie broke off. 'Responsible. And she knows the museum already – she's spent time there with me. She loves it.'

'Who's this paragon?'

'Eva. She's my, um, niece, kind of.'

It was simpler than saying that Eva was her ex-stepdaughter.

'I didn't know you had siblings.'

'No – well, it's complicated.'

'This Eva, when could she start?'

'Today, I'm sure. She's staying in my flat, so I could show her the ropes before I go.'

'Hmm. Responsible, you say?'

'Yes.' Marnie said it more assertively this time, swallowing her misgivings.

'Does she know about this?'

'I thought I'd ask you first. But I'm sure she'll want to do it – she's looking for work.'

That wasn't quite right, of course: for the past ten days, Eva had been thinking about looking for work or, even, planning to think about it.

'All right, then. If you vouch for her.'

'I do.'

'And, Marnie . . . ?'

'Yes?'

'Your friend, I hope she – he? – will be all right.'

'Thank you.' For a moment, the knowledge of what she was going to flooded through Marnie and she stood breathless, although she was half conscious that it wasn't only fear she was feeling but a kind of mysterious, tingling

excitement. There were moments when certainty dropped away and you were left in a high and lonely place, dizzy with precariousness. She put out a hand to touch the table, pressed her bare toes into the tiles. She wanted to add something, but all she could think was ‘His name is Ralph.’ Saying his name out loud brought meaning closer. And when had she last spoken it?

Elaine’s tone became brisk again. ‘Right. Give this Eva my phone number in case of emergencies.’

‘Of course. Thanks, Elaine.’

‘Take care now.’

‘I will. You too.’

Marnie made another pot of coffee, extra strong. She heated some milk and sloshed it into two mugs, adding a teaspoon of sugar to one. Then, holding both in one hand, she rapped sharply at Eva’s door. Waited. Rapped again.

‘Hnnuff?’

‘Eva?’ She pushed the door with a toe and it swung open a few inches before it was blocked by some unseen obstacle. ‘Good morning.’

‘Stime?’

‘I’ve brought you both some coffee.’

Marnie squeezed through the door, wading over soft drifts of discarded clothes and occasional crunchy objects – a CD case, a mobile phone, a wallet – to the futon where Eva and her boyfriend Gregor lay. She could make out Gregor’s soft brown locks, a single squinting eye, and one hand, outflung so that his fingers trailed on the littered carpet, but Eva was invisible. A sequined cushion, made by Marnie many years ago, lay squarely over her

face, and the duvet was wrapped around her body. Only three toes, with dark purple nails, peeked out at the end of the bed. What was more, there was a third body in the room, sprawled on the floor dressed only in boxers and one sock, with a T-shirt of Eva's covering his face. An irregular snore whistled through it and his hairless chest rose and fell peacefully.

The curtained room was full of a sour morning smell, mixed with tobacco and perfume. Marnie wrinkled her nose. Until Eva had turned up, this had been her small workroom. Now all her tools and materials were stacked in shoeboxes and large bags under her bed and on top of her wardrobe. In their place, Eva and Gregor had scattered their things like farmers sowing seed. It felt like a mathematical impossibility: they had so few possessions yet they made so much mess with them.

'I wouldn't have woken you, only there's an emergency.'

A snuffling query came from under the cushion. Gregor's long fingers curled into a fist that was retracted under the covers. He gave a wounded sigh. The man on the floor shifted slightly.

'You've got a job. Eva, do you hear me?'

'Job?'

'Yes. You said you were looking for a job. Now you've got one.'

'I'm hibernating.'

'I'm putting two mugs of coffee down. I didn't know you had a visitor. Don't spill them. So this is where all my mugs have got to. Some are growing mould. Listen, I've got to go away for a few days.'

Eva pulled the cushion off her face, though her eyes remained screwed tightly shut. She aimed her blind glance in Marnie's direction. 'When?'

'Today. In a few hours. You're taking my place.'

The eyes opened a crack. 'I am?'

'Yes.'

'In your museum?'

'Right.'

'Oh.' The eyes shut again.

'Don't go back to sleep again. Eva! I'm turning on the light – are you ready? I'm going to take you there in, let's see, half an hour or so. I'll show you how everything works and leave you.'

'Half an hour!'

'Yes. Please, Eva. This is important.'

'Why?'

'Because I need to leave before –'

'No.' Eva struggled to a half-sitting position and pushed back a tangle of black hair. 'Why are you going?'

'I'll tell you when you're out of bed and dressed.'

'Marnie!'

'Ten minutes. I'll get you something to eat.'

'K.'

'Remember your coffee before it gets cold.'

'Yeah, yeah.'

Marnie retreated, pulling shut the door. In her own room, she put on a black corduroy skirt, thin T-shirt, pale grey V-necked jersey and a pair of old black boots, then pulled her holdall out of the cupboard. It still had its last air ticket attached to the handle and in a side pocket a small spray deodorant and a hairbrush. She added

knickers, bras, several pairs of socks and toiletries. Hardly pausing to think, she selected a pair of jeans, three shirts, another jersey, the dressing-gown she'd just got out of. What else? Shampoo, toothbrush. Passport, with six years left before it expired. Four years ago she'd looked much younger – a kind of softness about her face that had since been chiselled away. She pulled her belted grey coat out of the wardrobe and threw it on top of her bag.

Knocking at Eva's door again as she passed, she returned to the kitchen and put two *panini* into the oven. A *panino* with Marmite and melted cheese was Eva's current favourite breakfast (previously, it had been a cinnamon bagel). She was a slender young woman, everything about her – wrists, ankles, thin face, shallow hips and narrow shoulders – delicate, almost breakable, but she ate with the gusto of a brickie at the end of a hard day. Marnie didn't know where it went: Eva rarely did any exercise and was as indolent as a cat lying in a puddle of sunlight.

Eva and her younger sister Luisa were probably the reasons why Marnie had stayed with their father, Fabio, for as long as she had. Perhaps they were the reason she'd fallen in love with him in the first place; that and the need that had filled her body, top to toe, to have a child herself. When she had first met the girls, they were nine and just seven: shock-headed, springy-limbed waifs with dark eyes who'd been motherless for a year and a half and who had about them, in their different ways, a neediness that had overwhelmed Marnie with a maternal desire to protect them that she had never quite shaken off, just learnt to hide. Luisa, mild and painfully shy, had trusted Marnie at once, climbing into bed between her and Fabio, slipping

her small hand into hers on the way to school each morning, allowing Marnie to tie her unruly hair into plaits and choose her clothes with her; Eva had ignored her, then sneered at her in front of Fabio, trying to humiliate her out of her patience, then fought her, once even spat at her, like a wild cat, and finally accepted her in a gust of tears.

Marnie had steered both girls through hormonal rushes, friendship worries, periods, exams, first boy-friends, hangovers. She had taught them how to cook English food as well as Italian; how to use oil paints and watercolours; how to sew, knit, mend pots and change plugs. They had shown her Florence, Siena and Pisa, and corrected her Italian grammar. She had taken them sailing, as her own mother had taken her, and as the salty spume licked over her face and she saw them laughing while the little boat bucked through the waves, she told herself to remember this moment and call it by its proper name: happiness. She had held them when they wept. She had giggled with them. She had never had that baby with Fabio and bit by bit, like a fog gradually lifting, she had come to see that Fabio was off not-having-babies with other women as well, returning to her after each one with an exuberant, penitent tenderness that should have warned her long before it did. Leaving him was easy; leaving them was perhaps the hardest thing she had ever done – except that by the time she did, they were leaving too. And then, a few weeks ago, Eva had turned up on her doorstep with a small bag and a large, dishevelled Polish boyfriend. She'd come, she had said off-handedly, to stay for a bit and look for work before travelling – that was all right, wasn't it? And Marnie, hiding her grateful

joy under an equally casual manner, said that of course it was fine; she should stay as long as she wanted.

She grated cheese over the *panini*, popped them back under the grill, then opened the kitchen door. ‘Eva! Come on!’

‘One minute.’

‘It’s been more than fifteen already.’

When Eva finally made it into the kitchen, her high shoes tick-tacking over the tiles, she was wearing a short, swinging green skirt over patterned tights, an orange long-sleeved shirt, half unbuttoned to show a pink top beneath it. She was festooned with necklaces, bright bangles jangled on her wrists and earrings rattled in her small lobes; a stud glittered in her nostril. Her finger nails were painted vermilion, her eyelids turquoise, her lashes dark blue, her lips a luscious red.

‘Good Lord,’ said Marnie, feeling suddenly cheerful in spite of the phone call. ‘You make my eyes throb.’

‘I thought I should make an effort.’ Although her English was fluent, her intonation still pattered, a tuneful machine-gun.

‘Who’s the man on your floor?’

‘I’m not sure,’ said Eva, vaguely. ‘He did tell me. We met him last night. He missed his last train home. Is this for me?’ She took a large bite of *panino*, and threads of melted cheese attached to her pointed, determined chin.

Marnie saw that she had a small spiral painted – or tattooed? – on her collarbone. ‘You look like an emergency flare. At least it’s quite dark in the museum. That’ll mute you a bit. Anyway, there might not be any customers to scare off. Some days are very quiet.’

Eva perched on a chair. 'So, tell me. Where are you off to, all dressed in black and grey like a nun?'

'To see a friend who's ill.'

'A friend? A man friend, by any chance?'

'Someone I knew a long time ago.'

'Before Babbo?'

'Long before.'

'A mystery. How ill is he?'

Marnie didn't reply: in the face of Eva's concern she found that she couldn't. There was a hook in her throat. She bit her lip hard and stared out of the window. Three young women rippled past in the increasing rain; a traffic warden, trudging head down; a father and his tiny child, who was swaddled in a colourful scarf and had a bobble hat pulled down over his brow.

'It's that bad?' said Eva. 'Oh dear. Dear-dear-dear.' She had a motherly side: she tutted soothingly and her small hand, heavy with cheap rings, was stroking Marnie's shoulder.

'I'm not sure when I'll be back. It won't be long. A few days. Maybe I'll be home tomorrow. I'll ring. You'll be all right?'

'Certainly I'll be all right.'

'And you'll –'

'And I'll look after the flat and not make too much noise at night and I'll make sure everything's all right at your work. Can I borrow your pink woolly jacket?'

'Sure,' said Marnie. 'I expect you to plunder my wardrobe. It makes me feel I'm still your stepmother.'

'You'll always be my stepmother. My other mother.'

'That's all right, then. We should make a move.'

But she tarried for a moment, then took a crooked striped mug from sideboard and from the cupboard a small glass jar of whole nutmegs and a pot of local honey. Eva watched her with a glinting stare but didn't ask any questions.

The museum had a Dickensian pokiness about it that had probably been one of its contrary selling-points for Elaine. She had fallen for its quaint, uncomfortable Englishness, its warped shutters and narrow staircase, and was unfailingly delighted when other people – not her, because of her short stature – bumped their heads on its beams. It was squeezed between a sixties office building and a down-at-heel house that had been divided into several unsatisfactory flats. Its three narrow storeys looked out, at the back, onto a tiny yard. Marnie had been clearing it of its accumulated junk (a child's broken tricycle, a stack of assorted roof tiles, tins of hardened paint, a rotting door), and was planning to stock it with potted shrubs and perhaps an apple tree. She was going to buy a bird table, and she had even started a compost heap in the corner, which she fed with customers' coffee grounds, teabags and orange peel. Marnie had never managed to cure herself of her home-making compulsion. If she was staying in an anonymous hotel room for just one night, she would still unpack her bag into the drawers, line up her toothbrush, hairbrush, face cream and shampoo as if she was settling in for the long haul. Ralph used to tease her about it. He used to call her 'Mother Hen'. He would lay his thin, untidy body at her feet and tell her not to clear him up as well.

‘The bulbs are always going,’ said Marnie, unlocking the door. ‘There are spare ones in the big cupboard.’ She switched on the lights and at once the shapes hanging from beams and sagging on shelves came to life. She had never quite got used to the eerie effect of so many puppets watching her with their painted eyes, their sectioned jaws gaping and leering, their spindly hands dangling by their sides and their legs folded under them. She was quite well acquainted with them all by now: she knew their names, their ages (some of them were hundreds of years old), their origins. She could tell visitors which came from Sicily, which from Indonesia, which were home grown. She had repaired many of their costumes – this Japanese silk kimono, for example, she had stitched back together, and she had fashioned a new sword for one of the old wooden warriors in the back room and a fan for the courtesan, whose hickory cheeks were painted scarlet. The large, shabby dragon near the entrance, which children loved, had newly mended seams. She had polished Orlando’s armour. Sometimes, when she was alone, she would gently lift one down from its perch and walk it over the floor, the lozenge-shaped feet drumming the boards, the arms lifting jerkily as if to ward off a sudden blow. Some were ornate – like the twenty-eight-inch princess from Burma – and upstairs many of the others were simple hand puppets. There were several topsy-turvy dolls among them and a few that reminded her of the papier-mâché puppets she’d made at school, dipping shreds of newspaper into water and glue, and laying them over the crudely fashioned Plasticine head. There were some inflexible figures, too, mounted on sticks, and others that

barely earned the title ‘puppet’ at all. Her favourite was the small, blunt-faced dog from Papua New Guinea, whose crumbling, legless body was made of bark.

Marnie turned on the heating, stacked leaflets and post-cards on the front desk, showed Eva where the coffee and tea were, and how to operate the till. You could buy cheap puppets here – animals with foolish faces, villains with moustaches, kings with crowns and jesters with surprised eyebrows – and also the flatpack of a bright miniature theatre, complete with tiny cardboard characters you could colour yourself and move around on sticks. Marnie would have adored it as a girl: she tingled with nostalgia whenever she sold one.

‘Do you think,’ asked Eva, running a finger over the shelf where cardboard masks were stacked to inspect it for dust, ‘that you and Babbo will ever –’

‘No.’

‘That’s very – What’s the word?’

‘Unequivocal?’

‘I don’t think that was it. You shouldn’t have left us.’

‘I didn’t leave you, I left him – and, anyway, I only left what was already long gone. You know that. In any case, this isn’t the right time to talk about it.’

‘I know. I always start talking just when the other person’s about to leave. It’s a bad habit. There must be some psychological explanation, but I don’t know what it is.’

‘Well, *I*’m going to leave now. You’re sure you’ll be all right?’

‘Don’t worry so. I’m grown-up now, remember?’

‘And is Gregor –’

‘Staying? Yes. You asked that before. But he’ll behave, OK? We’ll both behave. We won’t drink all your wine and trash the place.’

‘So I’ll be going, then.’

‘You will be, yes.’ Eva slitted her eyes. ‘Don’t you have a plane to catch?’

‘Yes.’ She reached out and removed an imaginary hair from Eva’s shoulders, just for the comfort of touching her and breathing in her familiar smell. Under the tobacco smoke, camomile, lemon and balsam, she was sharp and clean. They hugged. Eva’s soft black hair rustled on her neck and her warm, grassy breath blew against her cheeks.

‘Good luck,’ said Eva, as she left.

As the plane took off, Marnie leant against the window; her forehead bumped gently against the smeary oval. The sky was a stewed brown. Through it, she briefly glimpsed a scattering of houses, patchwork hills and then the curve of the Thames. Somewhere down there her day was continuing but without her in it. Eva was sitting in the gloom of the museum, tapping her glossy nails or smiling at a customer with her full red mouth. Heavy-limbed, white-faced, silent Gregor was occupying her flat and filling it with his own smell of beer, tobacco, Polish food. Her mother was lying in her small plot of ground, beneath needles of winter rain. And the other two, of course – but they had died so long ago that their graves were shallow, grassy mounds, one so small that it was scarcely visible. Then there was David – he lay somewhere down there as well, although Marnie tried not to think about him too much, pushing his memory to the muddy floor

of her consciousness, where occasionally it stirred, sending up dark clouds in which she could detect no shape, just a vague dread. Ahead of her were Ralph and Oliver: her past had flipped and lay waiting in her future. After months of peaceful inactivity, of repair and slow consideration, she was on a journey again. And although the journey was to say goodbye, she felt again a throb of excitement. Something was happening. Life was shifting under her feet.