

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *FOR THE SAKE OF ELENA* AND *A GREAT DELIVERANCE*

ELIZABETH GEORGE



MISSING JOSEPH

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JOSEPH*

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FOR DEBORAH

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The image shows a book cover with a dark, textured background. A central white rectangular label with a thin black border contains the title in a black, elegant serif font. The title is arranged in three lines: 'NOVEMBER:', 'THE', and 'RAIN'. The background of the cover features a faint, repeating pattern of a decorative, stepped rectangular shape.

*NOVEMBER:
THE
RAIN*



CAPPUCCINO. THAT NEW AGE ANSWER TO DRIVING one's blues momentarily away. A few tablespoons of espresso, a froth of steamed milk, an accompanying and generally tasteless dash of powdered chocolate and suddenly life was supposed to be all in order again. What drivel.

Deborah St. James sighed. She picked up the bill that a passing waitress had slid surreptitiously onto the table.

"Good Lord," she said and she stared, both dismayed and disgusted, at the amount she was going to have to pay. A block away, she could have ducked into a pub and acknowledged that importunate inner voice saying, "What's this chi-chi rot, Deb, let's just have a Guinness somewhere." But instead, she'd made her way to Upstairs, the stylish marble-glass-and-chrome coffee shop of the Savoy Hotel where those who imbibed in anything beyond water paid heavily for the privilege. As she was discovering.

She'd come to the Savoy to show her portfolio to Richie Rica, an up-and-coming producer employed by a newly formed entertainment conglomerate called L.A.SoundMachine. He had travelled to London for a brief seven days to select the photographer who would capture for posterity the likenesses of Dead Meat, a five-member band from Leeds whose most recent album Rica was shepherding all the way from creation to completion. She was, he told her, the "ninth frigging photog" whose work he'd seen. His patience, apparently, was wearing thin.

Unfortunately, it gained no girth from their interview. Straddling

a delicate gilded chair, Rica went through her portfolio with all the interest and the approximate speed of a man dealing cards in a gambling casino. One after another, Deborah's pictures sailed to the floor. She watched them fall: her husband, her father, her sister-in-law, her friends, the myriad relations she'd gained through her marriage. There was no Sting or Bowie or George Michael among them. She'd only got the interview in the first place through the recommendation of a fellow photographer whose work had also failed to please the American. And from the expression on Rica's face, she could tell she was getting no further than anyone else.

This didn't actually disturb her as much as seeing the black-and-white tarpaulin of her pictures grow on the floor beneath Rica's chair. Among them was her husband's sombre face, and his eyes—so grey-blue light, so much at odds with his jet-coloured hair—seemed to be gazing directly into hers. This isn't the way to escape, he was saying.

She never wanted to believe Simon's words at any moment when he was most in the right. That was the primary difficulty in their marriage: her refusal to see reason in the face of emotion, warring with his cool evaluation of the facts at hand. She would say, God damn it, Simon, don't tell me how to feel, you don't *know* how I feel . . . And she would weep the hardest with the greatest bitterness when she knew he was right.

As he was now, when he was fifty-four miles away in Cambridge, studying a corpse and a set of X-rays, trying to decide with his usual dispassionate, clinical acuity what had been used to beat in a girl's face.

So when, in evaluation of her work, Richie Rica said with a martyred sigh at the monumental waste of his time, "Okay, you got some talent. But you want the truth? These pictures wouldn't sell shit if it was dipped in gold," she wasn't as offended as she might have been. It was only when he jockeyed his chair around prior to rising that her mild ember of irritation feathered into flame. For he slid his chair into the blanket of pictures he'd just created, and one of its legs perforated the lined face of Deborah's father, sinking through his cheek and creating a fissure from jaw to nose.

It wasn't even the damage to the photograph that brought the heat to her face. If the truth be told, it was Rica's saying, "Oh hell, I'm sorry. You can print another of the old guy, can't you?" before he heaved himself to his feet.

Which is largely why she knelt, keeping her hands steady by pressing them to the floor as she gathered her pictures together, placing them back into the portfolio, tying its strings neatly, and then looking up to say, "You don't look like a worm. Why is it you act like one?"

Which—the relative merit of her pictures aside—is even more largely why she hadn't got the job.

"Wasn't meant to be, Deb," her father would have said. Of course, that was true. Lots of things in life are never meant to be.

She gathered up her shoulder bag, her portfolio, her umbrella, and made her way out to the hotel's grand entry. A short walk past a line of waiting taxis and she was out on the pavement. The morning's rain had abated for the moment, but the wind was fierce, one of those angry London winds that blow from the southeast, pick up speed on the slick surface of open water, and shoot down streets, tearing at both umbrellas and clothes. In combination with the traffic rumbling by, it created a whip-howl of noise in the Strand. Deborah squinted at the sky. Grey clouds roiled. It was a matter of minutes before the rain began again.

She'd thought about taking a walk before heading home. She wasn't far from the river, and a stroll down the embankment sounded lovelier than did the prospect of entering a house made tenebrous by the weather and rebarbative by the memory of her last discussion with Simon. But with the wind dashing her hair into her eyes and the air smelling each moment heavier with rain, she thought better of the idea. The fortuitous approach of a number eleven bus seemed indication enough of what she ought to do.

She hurried to join the queue. A moment later, she was jostling among the crowd in the bus itself. However, within two blocks, an embankment stroll in a raging hurricane looked decidedly more appealing than what the bus ride had to offer. Claustrophobia, an umbrella being driven into her little toe by an Aquascutum-outfitted Sloane Ranger several miles out of territory, and the pervasive odour of garlic which seemed to be emanating from the very pores of a diminutive, grandmotherly woman at Deborah's elbow all joined forces to convince her that the day promised nothing more than an endless journey from bad to worse.

Traffic ground to a halt at Craven Street, and eight more people took the opportunity of jumping into the bus. It began to rain. As if in response to all three of these events, the grandmotherly woman

gave a tremendous sigh and Aquascutum leaned heavily onto the umbrella's handle. Deborah tried not to breathe and began to feel faint.

Anything—wind, rain, thunder, or an encounter with all Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—would be better than this. Another interview with Richie Rica would be better than this. As the bus inched forward towards Trafalgar Square, Deborah fought her way past five skinheads, two punk rockers, half a dozen housewives, and a happy group of chattering American tourists. She gained the door just as Nelson's Column came into view, and with a determined leap, she was back in the wind with the rain beating soundly against her face.

She knew better than to open her umbrella. The wind would take it like tissue and hurl it down the street. Instead, she looked for shelter. The square itself was empty, a broad expanse of concrete, fountains, and crouching lions. Devoid of its resident flock of pigeons and of the homeless and often friendless who lounged by the fountains and climbed on the lions and encouraged the tourists to feed the birds, the square looked, for once, like the monument to a hero that it was supposed to be. It did not, however, hold out much promise as a sanctuary in the middle of a storm. Beyond it stood the National Gallery where a number of people huddled into their coats, fought with umbrellas, and scurried like voles up the wide front steps. Here was shelter and more. Food, if she wanted it. Art, if she needed it. And the promise of distraction which she had been welcoming for the last eight months.

With the rainwater beginning to drizzle through her hair to her scalp, Deborah hurried down the steps of the subway and through the pedestrian tunnel, emerging moments later in the square itself. This she crossed quickly, her black portfolio clasped hard to her chest, while the wind tore at her coat and drove the rain in steady waves against her. By the time she reached the door of the gallery, she was sloshing in her shoes, her stockings were spattered, and her hair felt like a cap of wet wool on her head.

Where to go. She hadn't been inside the gallery in ages. How embarrassing, she thought, I'm supposed to be an artist myself.

But the reality was that she had always felt overwhelmed in museums, within a quarter of an hour a hopeless victim to aesthetic-overload. Other people could walk, gaze, and comment upon brush-

strokes with their noses fixed a mere six inches from a canvas. But for Deborah, ten paintings into any visit and she'd forgotten the first.

She checked her belongings in the cloakroom, picked up a museum plan, and began to wander, happy enough to be out of the cold, content with the thought that the gallery contained ample scope for at least a temporary respite. A diverting photographic assignment may have been out of her reach at the moment, but the exhibitions here at least held out the promise of continued avoidance for another few hours. If she was truly lucky, Simon's work would keep him the night in Cambridge. Discussion between them couldn't resume. She would have purchased more time in that way.

She quickly scanned the museum plan, looking for something that might engage her. *Early Italian, Italian 15th Century, Dutch 17th Century, English 18th Century*. Only one artist was mentioned by name. *Leonardo*, it said, *Cartoon. Room 7*.

She found the room easily, tucked away by itself, no larger than Simon's study in Chelsea. Unlike the exhibition rooms she had passed through to reach it, Room 7 contained only one piece, Leonardo da Vinci's full-scale composition of the Virgin and Child with St. Anne and the infant St. John the Baptist. Additionally unlike the other exhibition rooms, Room 7 was chapel-like, dimly illuminated by weak protective lights directed upon only the artwork itself, furnished with a set of benches from which admirers could contemplate what the museum plan called one of da Vinci's most beautiful works. There were, however, no other admirers contemplating it now.

Deborah sat before it. A tightness began to curl in her back and to form a coiled spring of tension at the base of her neck. She was not immune to the excellent irony of her choice.

It grew from the Virgin's expression, that mask of devotion and selfless love. It grew from St. Anne's eyes—deeply understanding in a face of contentment—cast in the Virgin's direction. For who would understand better than St. Anne, watching her own beloved daughter loving the wondrous Infant she'd borne. And the Infant Himself, leaning out of His mother's arms, reaching for His cousin the Baptist, leaving His mother even now, even now . . .

That would be Simon's point, the leaving. That was the scientist speaking in him, calm, analytical, and given to looking at the world in terms of the objective practicalities implied by statistics. But his worldview—indeed, his world itself—was different from hers. He

could say, Listen to me, Deborah, there are other bonds besides those of blood . . . because it was easy for him, of all people, to possess that particular philosophical bent. Life was defined in different terms for her.

Effortlessly, she could conjure up the image of the photograph that Rica's chair leg had punctured and destroyed: how the spring breeze blew at her father's sparse hair, how a tree branch cast a shadow like a bird's wing across the stone of her mother's grave, how the daffodils he was placing in the vase caught the sun like small trumpets and furled against the back of his hand, how his hand itself held the flowers with his fingers curled tightly round their stems just as they'd been curling every fifth of April for the last eighteen years. He was fifty-eight years old, her father. He was her only connection of blood and bone.

Deborah gazed at the da Vinci cartoon. Its two female figures would have understood what her husband did not. It was the power the blessing the ineffable awe of a life created and brought forth from one's own.

I want you to give your body a rest for at least a year, the doctor had told her. This is six miscarriages. Four spontaneous abortions in the last nine months alone. We're encountering physical stress, a dangerous blood loss, hormonal imbalance, and—

Let me try fertility drugs, she'd said.

You're not listening to me. That's beyond consideration at the moment.

In vitro, then.

You know impregnation isn't the problem, Deborah. Gestation is.

I'll stay in bed for nine months. I won't move. I'll do anything.

Then get on an adoption list, start using contraceptives, and try again this time next year. Because if you continue to carry on in this fashion, you'll be looking at a hysterectomy before you're thirty years old.

He wrote out the prescription.

But there has to be a chance, she said, trying to pretend the remark was casual. She couldn't allow herself to become upset. There must, after all, be no demonstration of mental or emotional stress on the part of the patient. He would note it on the chart, and it would count against her.

The doctor was not unsympathetic. There *is*, he said, next year. When your body's had an opportunity to heal. We'll look at all the options then. In vitro. Fertility drugs. Everything else. We'll do all the tests we can. In a year.

So dutifully she began with the pills. But when Simon brought home the adoption forms, she drew the line on cooperation.

There was absolutely no point in thinking of it now. She forced herself to study the cartoon. The faces were serene, she decided. They seemed well-defined. The rest of the piece was largely impression, drawn like a series of questions that would remain forever unanswered. Would the Virgin's foot be raised or lowered? Would St. Anne continue to point towards the sky? Would the Infant's plump hand cradle the Baptist's chin? And was the background Golgotha, or was that a future too unsavoury for this moment of tranquillity, something better left unsaid and unseen?

"No Joseph. Yes. Of course. No Joseph."

Deborah turned at the whisper and saw that a man—still fully dressed for the out-of-doors in a great wet overcoat with a scarf round his neck and a trilby on his head—had joined her. He didn't seem to notice her presence and had he not spoken she probably wouldn't have noticed his. Dressed completely in black, he faded into the farthest corner of the room.

"No Joseph," he whispered again, resigned.

Rugby player, Deborah thought, for he was tall and looked hefty beneath his coat. And his hands, clasping a rolled-up museum plan in front of him like an unlit candle, were square and blunt fingered and fully capable, she imagined, of shoving other players to one side in a dash down the field.

He wasn't dashing anywhere now, although he did move forward, into one of the muted cones of light. His steps seemed reverential. With his eyes on the da Vinci, he reached for his hat and removed it as a man might do in church. He dropped it onto one of the benches. He sat.

He wore thick-soled shoes—serviceable shoes, country shoes—and he balanced them on their outer edges as he dangled his hands between his knees. After a moment, he ran one hand through thinning hair that was the slow-greying colour of soot. It didn't seem so much a gesture of seeing to his appearance as it did one of rumination. His face, raised to study the da Vinci, looked both

worried and pained, with crescent bags beneath his eyes and heavy lines on his brow.

He pressed his lips together. The lower one was full, the upper one thin. They formed a seam of sorrow on his face, and they seemed to be acting as inadequate containment for an inner turmoil. Fellow struggler, Deborah thought. She was touched by his suffering.

"It's a lovely drawing, isn't it?" She spoke in the sort of hushed whisper one automatically uses in places of prayer or meditation. "I'd never seen it before today."

He turned to her. He was swarthy, older than he had seemed at first. He looked surprised to have been spoken to out of the blue by a stranger. "Nor I," he said.

"It's awful of me when you think that I've lived in London for the last eighteen years. It makes me wonder what else I've been missing."

"Joseph," he said.

"Sorry?"

He used the museum plan to gesture at the cartoon. "You're missing Joseph. But you'll always be missing him. Haven't you noticed? Isn't it always Madonna and Child?"

Deborah glanced again at the artwork. "I'd never thought of that, actually."

"Or Virgin and Child. Or Mother and Child. Or Adoration of the Magi with a cow and an ass and an angel or two. But you rarely see Joseph. Have you never wondered why?"

"Perhaps . . . well, of course, he wasn't really the father, was he?"

The man's eyes closed. "Jesus God," he replied.

He seemed so struck that Deborah hurried on. "I mean, we're taught to believe he wasn't the father. But we don't know for certain. How could we? We weren't there. She didn't exactly keep a journal of her life. We're just told that the Holy Ghost came down with an angel or something and . . . Naturally, I don't know how it was supposed to be managed but it was a miracle, wasn't it? There she was a virgin one minute and pregnant the next and then in nine months—there was this little baby and she was holding him probably not quite believing he was real and counting his fingers and toes. He was hers, really hers, the baby she'd longed for . . . I mean, if you believe in miracles. If you do."

She hadn't realised that she'd begun to cry until she saw the man's

expression change. Then the sheer oddity of their situation made her want to laugh instead. It was wildly absurd, this psychic pain. They were passing it between them like a tennis ball.

He dug a handkerchief out of a pocket of his overcoat, and he pressed it, crumpled, into her hand. "Please." His voice was earnest. "It's quite clean. I've only used it once. To wipe the rain from my face."

Deborah laughed shakily. She pressed the linen beneath her eyes and returned it to him. "Thoughts link up like that, don't they? You don't expect them to. You think you've quite protected yourself. Then all of a sudden you're saying something that seems so reasonable and safe on the surface, but you're not safe at all, are you, from what you're trying not to feel."

He smiled. The rest of him was tired and ageing, lines at the eyes and flesh giving way beneath his chin, but his smile was lovely. "It's the same for me. I came here merely for a place to walk and think that would be out of the rain, and I stumbled on this drawing instead."

"And thought of St. Joseph when you didn't want to?"

"No. I'd been thinking of him anyway, after a fashion." He tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket and went on, his tone becoming more determinedly light. "I'd have preferred a walk in the park, actually. I was heading to St. James's Park when the rain began again. I generally like to do my thinking out of doors. I'm a countryman at heart and if ever there're thoughts to be had or decisions to be made, I always try to get myself outside to think them or to make them. A proper tramp in the air clears the head, I find. And the heart as well. It makes the rights and wrongs of life—the yes's and the no's—easier to see."

"Easier to see," she said. "But not to deal with. Not for me, at least. I can't say yes just because people want me to, no matter how right it may be to do so."

He directed his gaze back to the cartoon. He rolled the museum plan tighter in his hands. "Nor can I always," he said. "Which is why I head out for a tramp in the air. I was set on feeding the sparrows from the bridge in St. James's, watching them peck at my palm and letting every problem find its solution from there." He shrugged and smiled sadly. "But then there was the rain."

"So you came here. And saw there was no St. Joseph."

He reached for his trilby and set it on his head. The brim cast a triangular shadow on his face. "And you, I imagine, saw the Infant."

"Yes." Deborah forced her lips into a brief, tight smile. She looked about her, as if she too had belongings to gather in preparation for leaving.

"Tell me, is it an infant you want or one that died or one you'd like to be rid of?"

"Be *rid*—"

Swiftly, he lifted his hand. "One that you want," he said. "I'm sorry. I should have seen that. I should have recognised the longing. Dear God in heaven, why are men such fools?"

"He wants us to adopt. I want my child—his child—a family that's real, one that we create, not one that we apply for. He's brought the papers home. They're sitting on his desk. All I have to do is fill out my part and sign my name, but I find that I just can't do it. It wouldn't be mine, I tell him. It wouldn't come from me. It wouldn't come from us. I couldn't love it the same way if it wasn't mine."

"No," he said. "That's very true. You wouldn't love it the same way at all."

She grasped his arm. The wool of his coat was damp and scratchy beneath her fingers. "You understand. He doesn't. He says there're connections that go beyond blood. But they don't for me. And I can't understand why they do for him."

"Perhaps it's because he knows that we humans ultimately love something that we have to struggle for—something that we give up everything to have—far more than the things that fall our way through chance."

She released his arm. Her hand fell with a thud to the bench between them. Unwittingly, the man had spoken Simon's own words. Her husband may as well have been in the room with her.

She wondered how she had come to unburden herself in the presence of a stranger. I'm desperate for someone to take my part, she thought, looking for a champion to bear my standard. I don't even care who that champion is, just so long as he sees my point, agrees, and lets me go my own way.

"I can't help how I feel," she said hollowly.

"My dear, I'm not sure anyone can." The man loosened his scarf and unbuttoned his coat, reaching inside to his jacket pocket. "I should guess you need a tramp in the air to think your thoughts and

clear your head,” he said. “But you need fresh air. Wide skies and broad vistas. You can’t find that in London. If you’ve a mind to do your tramping in the North, you’ve a welcome in Lancashire.” He handed her his card.

Robin Sage, it read, *The Vicarage, Winstlough*.

“The Vic—” Deborah looked up and saw what his coat and scarf had hidden before, the white solid collar encircling his neck. She should have realised at once from the colour of his clothes, from his talk of St. Joseph, from the very reverence with which he’d regarded the da Vinci cartoon.

No wonder she’d found it so easy to reveal her troubles and her sorrows. She’d been confessing to an Anglican priest.