



SEPTEMBER



ROSAMUNDE PILCHER



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September is a work of fiction. Any resemblance between any character in *September* and an actual person, living or dead, is unintended and purely coincidental. Any similarity between events taking place in *September* and events that have actually transpired is likewise unintended and coincidental.

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1

Tuesday the Third

IN EARLY MAY, THE SUMMER CAME, at last, to Scotland. Winter had clung, with steely fingers, for far too long, refusing to relinquish its cruel grip. All through April, bitter winds had blown from the north-west, tearing the first blossom from the wild geynes, and burning brown the yellow trumpets of the early daffodils. Snow frosted the hilltops and lay deep in corries, and the farmers, despairing of fresh grazing, tracted the last of their feed out to the barren fields where lowing stock huddled in the shelter of the drystone walls.

Even the wild geese, usually gone by the end of March, were late in returning to their Arctic habitats. The last of the skeins had disappeared around the middle of April, honking away north into the unknown skies, flying so high that the arrowhead formations looked no more substantial than cobwebs drifting in the wind.

And then, overnight, the fickle Highland climate relented. The wind veered around to the south, bringing with it the balmy breezes and the soft weather that the rest of the country had been enjoying for weeks, along with the scent of damp earth and growing things. The countryside turned a sweet and verdant green, the wild white cherry trees recovered from their battering, took heart, and spread their branches in a mist of snowflake petals. All at once, cottage gardens burgeoned into colour—yellow winter-flowering jasmine, purple crocus, and the deep blue of grape hyacinths. Birds sang, and the sun, for the first time since last autumn, brought a real warmth with it.



Every morning of her life, rain or shine, Violet Aird walked to the village to collect, from Mrs. Ishak's supermarket, two pints of milk, *The Times*, and any other small groceries and supplies needed for the sustenance of one elderly lady living on her own. Only sometimes, in the depths of winter, when the snow piled in deep drifts, and the ice became treacherous, did she eschew this exercise, on the principle that discretion was the better part of valour.

It was not an easy walk. Half a mile down the steep road, between fields which had once been the parkland of Croy, Archie Balmerino's estate, and then the stiff half-mile climb home again. She had a car, and could perfectly well have made the journey in that, but it was one of her convictions that, as old age crept up on you, once you started to use the car for short journeys, then you were in dire danger of losing the use of your legs.

For all the long months of winter, she had had to bundle up in layers of clothing for this expedition. Thick boots, sweaters, waterproof jacket, scarf, gloves, a woollen hat pulled well down over her ears. This morning, she wore a tweed skirt and a cardigan and her head was bare. The sun lifted her spirits and made her feel energetic and young again, and being uncluttered by extraneous garments reminded her of childhood satisfaction when black woollen stockings were abandoned and one felt the pleasant, draughty sensation of cool air on bare legs.

The village shop, this morning, was busy, and she had to wait for a little to be served. She did not mind, because it meant that there was time to chat with other customers, all of whom were familiar faces; marvel at the weather; ask after somebody's mother; watch a small boy choose, with painful deliberation, a packet of Dolly Mixtures, which he proceeded to pay for with his own money. He was not hurried. Mrs. Ishak stood with gentle patience while he made up his mind. When he had finally done this, she put the Dolly Mixtures into a little paper bag and took the money from him.

"You must not eat them all at once, or you will lose all your teeth," she warned him. "Good morning, Mrs. Aird."

"Good morning, Mrs. Ishak. And what a lovely day it is!"

"I could not believe it when I saw the sun shining." Usually Mrs. Ishak, exiled to these northern climes from the relentless sunshine of Malawi, was bundled in cardigans and kept a paraffin heater behind the counter, over which she huddled whenever there was a moment of quiet. This morning, however, she looked much happier. "I hope it will not become cold again."

"I don't think so. Summer is here. Oh, thank you, my milk and my paper. And Edie wants some furniture polish and a roll of paper towel. And I think I'd better take half a dozen eggs."

"If your basket is too heavy, I can send Mr. Ishak up to your house in his motor car."

"No, I can manage, thank you very much."

"It is a lot of walking you are doing."

Violet smiled. "But just think how good it is for me."

Laden, she set off once more for home, for Pennyburn. Down the pavement, past the rows of low cottages, with windows blinking reflected sunlight, and doors standing open to the fresh warm air; then through the gates of Croy and up the hill again. This was a private road, the back driveway of the big house, and Pennyburn stood half-way up it, to one side and surrounded by steep fields. It was approached by a neat lane bordered in clipped beech hedges, and it was always something of a relief to reach the turning and to know that one did not have to climb any farther.

Violet changed her basket, which was becoming heavy, from one hand to the other, and made plans as to how she would spend the rest of her day. This was one of Edie's mornings for helping Violet, which meant that Violet could abandon her house and instead get busy in the garden. Lately, it had been too cold for even Violet to garden, and things had become neglected. The lawn was looking tired and mossy after the long winter. Perhaps she should run her spiker over it and give it a bit of air. After that, a huge pit of carefully nurtured compost needed to be barrowed and spread over her new rose-bed. The prospect filled her with satisfying joy. She could not wait to get down to work.

Her step quickened. But then, almost at once, she saw the unfamiliar car parked outside her front door, and knew that the

garden, for the moment, would have to wait. A visitor. Such irritation. Who had come to call? Who was Violet going to have to sit with and talk to, instead of being allowed to get on with her digging?

The car was a neat little Renault and betrayed no clue as to its owner. Violet went into the house through the kitchen door, and there found Edie at the tap and filling the kettle.

She dumped the basket on the table. "Who is it?" she mouthed, making pointing gestures with her forefinger.

Edie, too, kept her voice down. "Mrs. Steynton. From Corriehill."

"How long has she been here?"

"Only a moment. I told her to wait. She's in the sitting-room. She wants a wee word." Edie resumed her normal voice. "I'm just making you both a cup of coffee. I'll bring it in when it's ready."

With no excuse or possible escape route, Violet went to find her visitor. Verena Steynton stood at the window of the sun-filled sitting-room, gazing out at Violet's garden. As Violet came through the door, she turned.

"Oh, Violet, I am sorry. I feel embarrassed. I told Edie I'd come back another time, but she swore you'd be home from the village in a moment or two."

She was a tall and slender woman around forty, and invariably immaculately and elegantly turned out. Which instantly set her apart from the other local ladies, who were, for the most part, busy country women, with neither the time nor the inclination to bother too much about their personal appearance. Verena and her husband Angus were newcomers to the neighbourhood, having lived at Corriehill for a mere ten years. Before that, Angus had worked as a stockbroker in London, but having made his pile, and tiring of the rat race, he had bought Corriehill, ten miles distant from Strathcroy, moved north with his wife and his daughter Katy, and cast about, locally, for some other, and hopefully less demanding, occupation. He had ended up taking over a run-down timber business in Relkirk, and over the years had built this up into a lucrative and thriving concern.

As for Verena, she, too, was something of a career woman, being heavily involved with an organization called Scottish Country Tours. During the summer months, this company shuttled busloads of

American visitors hither and yon, and arranged for them to stay, as paying guests, in a selection of well-vetted private houses. Isobel Balmerino had been roped into this exercise, and hard labour it was, too. Violet could not think of a more exhausting way of making a bit of money.

However, from the social point of view, the Steynton family had proved themselves a true asset to the community, being both friendly and unassuming, generous with their hospitality, and always willing to give time and effort to the running of fêtes, gymkhanas, and various fund-raising events.

Even so, Violet could not begin to imagine why Verena was here.

"I'm glad you stayed. I would have been sorry to miss you. Edie's just making us a cup of coffee."

"I should have telephoned, but I was on my way to Relkirk and suddenly thought, much better to drop in and take my chance. On the spur of the moment. You don't mind?"

"Not in the least," Violet fibbed robustly. "Come and sit down. I'm afraid the fire's not been lighted yet, but . . ."

"Oh, heavens, who needs a fire on a day like this? Isn't it blissful to see the sun?"

She settled herself on the sofa and crossed her long and elegant legs. Violet, less gracefully, lowered herself into her own wide-lapped chair.

She decided to come straight to the point. "Edie said you wanted a word with me."

"I just suddenly thought . . . you'd be the very person to help."

Violet's heart sank, envisaging some bazaar, garden-opening, or charity concert, for which she was about to be asked to knit tea-cosies, declare open, or sell tickets.

"Help?" she said faintly.

"No. Not so much help, as give advice. You see, I'm thinking of throwing a dance."

"A dance?"

"Yes. For Katy. She's going to be twenty-one."

"But how can I advise you? I haven't done such a thing for longer than I can remember. Surely, you'd be better to ask somebody

a little more up-to-date. Peggy Ferguson-Crombie, or Isobel, for instance?"

"It's just that I thought . . . you're so experienced. You've lived here longer than anybody I know. I wanted to get your reactions to the idea."

Violet was nonplussed. Casting about for something to say, she welcomed the appearance of Edie with the coffee tray. Edie set this down on the fireside stool. "Are you wanting biscuits?" she asked.

"No, Edie, I think that will do very nicely. Thank you so much."

Edie departed. In a moment, the vacuum cleaner could be heard roaring away upstairs.

Violet poured the coffee. "What sort of an affair did you have in mind?"

"Oh, you know. Reels and country dances."

Violet thought that she did know. "You mean tapes on the stereo, and eightsomes in the hall?"

"No. Not like that. A really *big* dance. We'd do it in style. With a marquee on the lawn . . ."

"I hope Angus is feeling rich."

Verena ignored this interruption. ". . . and a proper band for the music. We'll use the hall, of course, but for sitting out. And the drawing-room. And I'm sure Katy will want a disco for all her London friends, it seems to be the thing to do. Perhaps the dining-room. We could turn it into a cave, or a grotto. . . ."

Caves and grottoes, thought Violet. Verena had clearly been doing her homework. But then, she was an excellent organizer. Violet said mildly, "You *have* been laying plans."

"And Katy can ask all her friends from the south . . . we'll have to find beds for them, of course. . . ."

"Have you spoken to Katy about your idea?"

"No, I told you. You're the first person to know."

"Perhaps she won't want a dance."

"But of course she will. She's always loved parties."

Violet, knowing Katy, decided that this was probably true. "And when is it to be?"

"I thought September. That's the obvious time. Lots of people up for the shooting, and everybody still on holiday. The sixteenth

might be a good date, because by then most of the younger children will have gone back to boarding-school."

"This is only May. September's a long way off."

"I know, but it's never too early to fix a date and start making arrangements. I'll have to book the marquee, and the caterer, and get invitations printed. . . ." She came up with another pleasurable idea. "And, Violet, wouldn't fairy lights be pretty, all the way up the drive to the house?"

It all sounded dreadfully ambitious. "It's going to be a lot of work for you."

"Not really. The Tourist Invasion will be over by then, because the paying guests stop coming at the end of August. I shall be able to concentrate my mind. Do admit, Violet, it is a good idea. And just think of all the people I'll be able to cross off my social-conscience list. We can get everybody off in one fell swoop. Including," she added, "the Barwells."

"I don't think I know the Barwells."

"No, you wouldn't. They're business colleagues of Angus's. We've been to dinner with them twice. Two evenings of jaw-aching boredom. And never asked them back, simply because we couldn't think of anybody who could be asked to endure an evening in such excruciatingly dull company. And there are lots of others," she remembered comfortably. "When I remind Angus about *them*, he's not going to raise any difficulties about signing a few cheques."

Violet felt a little sorry for Angus. "Who else will you ask?"

"Oh, everybody. The Millburns and the Ferguson-Crombies and the Buchanan-Wrights and old Lady Westerdale, and the Brandons. And the Staffords. All their children have grown up now, so they can be invited, too. And the Middletons should be up from Hampshire, and the Luards from Gloucestershire. We'll make a list. I'll pin a sheet of paper to the kitchen notice-board, and every time I think of a new name, I'll write it down. And you, of course, Violet. And Edmund, and Virginia, and Alexa. And the Balmerinos. Isobel will give a dinner party for me, I'm sure. . . ."

Suddenly, it all began to sound rather fun. Violet's concentration drifted back to the past, to forgotten occasions now remembered. One memory led to another. She said without thinking, "You should

send Pandora an invitation," and then could not imagine why she had come up with the impulsive suggestion.

"Pandora?"

"Archie Balmerino's sister. One thinks of parties, and one automatically thinks of Pandora. But of course you never knew her."

"But I know *about* her. For some reason, her name always seems to come up at dinner-party conversations. You think she would come? Surely she hasn't been home for over twenty years?"

"That's true. Just a silly thought. But why not give it a try? What a shot in the arm it would be for poor Archie. And if anything would bring that errant creature back to Croy, it would be the lure of a full-blown dance."

"So you're on my side, Violet? You think I should go ahead and do it?"

"Yes, I do. If you have the energy and the wherewithal, I think it's a wonderful and generous idea. It will give us all something splendid to look forward to."

"Don't say anything until I've bearded Angus."

"Not a word."

Verena smiled with satisfaction. And then another happy thought occurred to her. "I shall have a good excuse," she said, "to go and find myself a new dress."

But Violet had no such problem. "I," she told Verena, "shall wear my black velvet."

2

Thursday the Twelfth

THE NIGHT WAS SHORT and he did not sleep. Soon it would be dawn.

He had imagined that, for once, he might sleep, since he was tired, exhausted. Drained by three days of an unseasonably hot New York; days filled to the brim with breakfast meetings, business lunches, long afternoons of argument and discussion; too much Coca-Cola and black coffee, too many receptions and late nights, and a miserable dearth of exercise and fresh air.

Finally, successfully, it had been achieved, though not easily. Harvey Klein was a tough nut, and some persuasion was necessary to convince him that this was the very best, and indeed the only way to hook the English market. The creative campaign that Noel had brought with him to New York, complete with a time-schedule, layouts, and photographs, had been approved and agreed upon. With the contract under his belt, Noel could return to London. Pack his bag, make a last-minute telephone call, stuff his brief-case with documents and calculator, take another telephone call (Harvey Klein to say safe journey), get himself downstairs, check out, flag down a yellow cab, and head for Kennedy.

In the evening light Manhattan, as always, looked miraculous—towers of light thrusting upwards into the suffused glow of the sky, and the freeways moving rivers of headlights. Here was a city that offered, in its brash and open-handed way, every conceivable form of delight.

Before, on previous visits, he had taken full advantage of all the fun, but there had been no opportunity, this time, to accept any of them, and he knew a pang of regret at leaving unfulfilled, as though he were being hustled away from a stupendous party long before he had even started to enjoy it.

At Kennedy the cab dropped him at the BA terminal. He duly queued, checked in, rid himself of his suitcase, queued again for Security, and at last made his way to the departure lounge. He bought a bottle of Scotch in the Duty-Free, a *Newsweek* and *Advertising Age* from the newsstand. Finding a chair he sat, slumped with tiredness, waiting for his flight to be called.

By courtesy of Wenborn & Weinburg, he was traveling Club Class, so at least there was space for his long legs, and he had asked for a seat by the window. He took off his jacket, settled himself, longed for a drink. It occurred to him that it would be fortuitous if no one came to sit beside him, but this faint hope died almost at once as a well-upholstered individual in a navy-blue chalk-stripe suit claimed the seat, stowed various bags and bundles in the overhead bin, and at last collapsed, in an overflowing fashion, alongside.

The man took up a great deal of space. The interior of the aircraft was cool, but this man was hot. He pulled out a silk handkerchief and dabbed his brow, heaved and humped, searched for his seat-belt, and managed to jab Noel, quite painfully, with his elbow.

"Sorry about that. Seems we're a full load this evening."

Noel did not wish to talk. He smiled and nodded, and pointedly opened his *Newsweek*.

They took off. Cocktails were served, and then dinner. He was not hungry, but ate it, because it passed the time and there was nothing else to do. The huge 747 droned on, out over the Atlantic. Dinner was cleared and the movie came on. Noel had already seen it in London, so he asked the flight attendant to bring him a whisky and soda and drank it slowly, cradling it in his hand, making it last. Cabin lights were extinguished and passengers reached for pillows and blankets. The fat man folded his hands over his stomach and snored momentarily. Noel closed his eyes, but this made them feel as though they were filled with grit, so he opened them again. His

mind raced. It had been working full throttle for three days and refused to slow down. The possibility of oblivion faded.

He wondered why he was not feeling triumphant, because he had won the precious account and was returning home with the whole thing safely sewn up. A suitable metaphor for Saddlebags. Saddlebags. It was one of those words which, the more times you said it, the more ridiculous it sounded. But it wasn't ridiculous. It was immensely important not only to Noel Keeling, but to Wenborn & Weinburg as well.

Saddlebags. A company with its roots in Colorado, where the business had started up some years ago, manufacturing high-class leather goods for the ranching fraternity. Saddles, bridles, straps, reins, and riding boots, all branded with the prestigious trademark of a hoof-print enclosing the letter S.

From this modest beginning, the company's reputation and sales had grown nation-wide, outstripping all rivals. They moved into the manufacture of other commodities. Luggage, handbags, fashion accessories, shoes and boots. All constructed from the finest of hide, hand-stitched and hand-finished. The Saddlebag logo became a status symbol, vying with Gucci or Ferragamo, and with a price-tag to match. Their reputation spread, so that visitors to the United States, wishing to return home with a truly impressive piece of loot, chose a Saddlebag satchel, or a hand-tooled, gold-buckled belt.

And then came the rumour that they were moving into the British market, retailing through one or two carefully chosen London stores. Charles Weinburg, Noel's chairman, got wind of this by means of a chance remark dropped at a London dinner party. The next morning Noel, as Senior Vice-President and Creative Director, was called for his briefing.

"I want this account, Noel. At the moment only a handful of people in this country have ever heard of Saddlebags, and they're going to need a top-gear campaign. We've got the headstart and if we land it we can handle it, so I put through a call to New York late last night, and spoke to Saddlebag's President, Harvey Klein. He's agreeable to a meeting but he wants a total presentation . . . layouts, media coverage, slogans, the lot. Top-level stuff, full-page colour spreads. You've got two weeks. Get busy with the Art Department

and try to work something out. And for God's sake find a photographer who can make a male model look like a man, not like a shop-window dummy. If necessary, get hold of a genuine polo-player. If he'll do the job, I don't care what we have to pay him. . . ."



It was nine years since Noel Keeling had gone to work for Wenborn & Weinburg. Nine years is a long time in the advertising business for a man to stay with the same firm, and from time to time he found himself astonished by his own uninterrupted progress. Others, his own contemporaries, who had started with him, had moved on—to other companies, or even, like some colleagues, to start their own agencies. But Noel had stayed.

The reasons for the constancy were basically rooted in his personal life. Indeed, after a year or two with the firm, he had considered quite seriously the possibility of leaving. He was restless, unsatisfied, and not even particularly interested in the job. He dreamt of greener fields: setting up on his own, abandoning advertising altogether and moving into property or commodities. With plans for making a million, he knew that it was simply lack of the necessary capital that was holding him back. But he had no capital, and the frustration of lost opportunities and missed chances drove him nearly to distraction.

And then, four years ago, things had dramatically changed. He was thirty, a bachelor, and still resolutely working his way through a string of girl-friends, with no inkling that this irresponsible state of affairs would not last for ever. But his mother quite suddenly died, and for the first time in his life Noel had found himself a man of some means.

Her death had been so totally unexpected that for a little while he was shocked into a state where he found it almost impossible to come to terms with the cold fact that she had gone for ever. He had always been fond of her, in a detached and unsentimental manner, but basically he'd thought of her as his constant source of food, drink, clean clothes, warm beds, and, when he asked for it, moral support. As well, he had respected both her independence of spirit and the