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**Opening Extract from...**

# **A Place for Us**

Written by Harriet Evans

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# *A Place for Us*

Harriet Evans

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# Martha

*August 2012*

The day Martha Winter decided to tear apart her family began like any other day.

She woke early. She always did, but lately she couldn't sleep. This summer sometimes she'd been up and dressed by five: too much to think about. No point lying in bed, fretting.

On this particular morning she was awake at four thirty. As her eyes flew open, and memory flooded her body, Martha knew her subconscious must understand the enormity of what she was about to do. She sat up and stretched, feeling the bones that ached, the prick of pain in her knee. Then she reached for her old silk peacock-feather-print dressing gown and quietly crossed the bedroom, as always stepping over the board that creaked, as always silently shutting the bedroom door behind her.

But David wasn't there. She could count on the fingers of both hands the nights they'd spent apart, and this was one. He'd gone to London to see about that exhibition, and Martha meant to put her plan into action today, before he came back; told her she was wrong.

In late August the sun still rose early over the hills above Winterfold, the heavy trees filtering the orange-rose light. *Soon*, they'd whisper, as the wind rushed through the leaves at night. *Soon we will dry up and die; we will all die some time.* For it was the end of summer, and the Plough was in the western sky. Already, she could feel the chill in the evening air.

Was it because autumn was on its way? Or her eightieth birthday? What had prompted this desire to tell the truth? She thought perhaps it was this exhibition next year. 'David Winter's War', it was to be called. That was why he said he'd gone to London, to meet up with the gallery, go through his old sketches.

But Martha knew that was a lie. She knew David, and she knew when he was lying.

That was what had started this all off. Someone in a gallery in London deciding the time was right for a show like this, little knowing what damage they would do. So innocuous, thinking the past was dead and buried and couldn't hurt anyone. 'Didn't David Winter do some rather good stuff on bombed-out London?' 'David Winter? The Wilbur cartoonist?' 'Absolutely.' 'Gosh, no idea, old chap. Where was he from?' 'East End, I think. Could be interesting. Not just cartoon dogs and all that.' 'Good idea. I'll write and ask him.' And then plans were laid and events put in motion and slowly, inexorably, the truth would come out.

Martha made herself a pot of tea, every morning, singing to herself. She liked to sing. She always used the same mug, Cornish pottery, blue and cream stripes, her gnarled fingers hooked round its scalding middle. She had time to drink tea now, gallons of the stuff, and she liked it strong. 'Thrutchy,' Dorcas had called it. A good Somerset word, that: Martha had learned it during the war. Evacuated out of Bermondsey aged seven in 1939 – four kids in one room, where life and death was seemingly as random as swatting a fly or missing it – one day she'd simply been shoved on to a train and the next morning woken up in a strange house with a view of nothing but trees out of the window. She might as well have been on the moon. Martha had gone downstairs, crying, and there she'd seen Dorcas, sitting at a table like this. 'Cup of tea, my dear? Nice and thrutchy, it is.'

A long time ago. Martha drained her first mug of tea, then spread her pens out, and the smooth creamy paper. Ready herself for the moment when she felt able to write.

So many years now in this gentle, honest house, every inch of it made with care, refashioned with love. They had been here for forty-five years. At first Martha had thought she'd never be able to take it on. It was a mess when they saw it; green paint covering the original Arts and Crafts wooden panelling, rotten floorboards, the garden one large compost heap of mouldy, brown mulch.

‘I can’t do this,’ she’d told David. ‘We don’t have the money.’

‘I’ll make the money, Em,’ he’d told her. ‘I’ll find a way. We have to live here. It’s a sign.’

The children had bounced up and down, holding on to their parents’ arms, little Florence like a monkey, gibbering with excitement, Bill peering out of windows, shouting, ‘There’s a huge dead rat up here, and something’s tried to eat it! Come up!’ Even Daisy’s face had lit up when she saw the space Wilbur would have to run around.

‘But do you have the money?’ she’d asked, worried. Daisy heard too much, Martha knew it.

And David had swept his daughter into his arms. ‘I’ll make the money, little one. I’ll make it. For a house like this, wouldn’t it be worth it?’

Martha always remembered what Daisy said next. She’d struggled to be put down on the ground again, crossed her arms and said, ‘Well, I don’t like it here. It’s too pretty. Come on, Wilbur.’

She’d run off into the house again, and Martha and David had looked at each other and laughed.

‘We have to live here,’ she’d said, feeling the bright sunshine on her head, the children shouting happily behind her.

David had smiled. ‘I can hardly believe it. Can you?’

‘Shall we tell them why?’

Her husband had kissed her, and stroked her cheek. ‘No, I think not. Let’s keep it our secret.’

They had money now, of course, but not then. David was the creator of Wilbur the dog and Daisy, the little girl who thought she understood him. Every home had a Wilbur tea towel, pencil case, a book of cartoon strips. But back then Wilbur was in the future and the Winters had nothing much, except each other. Only Martha and David knew what they’d gone through to get to the moment where they stood on the lawn that hot day in 1967 and decided they’d buy Winterfold.

She had forgotten nothing, nothing that had happened before, or afterwards. The secrets every family acquires, some small – little indiscretions, tiny jokes. Some big, too big for her to bear any more.

The morning sun was above the trees now. Martha moved around the kitchen, waiting for the tea to brew. She'd learned the art of patience long ago; learned that having babies slows you down, takes your dreams of your own career and slowly chips away at them. She had wanted to be an artist too, as much as her husband. But each pregnancy tied her firmly to her home; each night lying awake on her side, feeling the movement, back aching, breath short, and nothing to do but wait for the baby to come. And then you grew older and slower and those babies grew up and left you. You could hold them close but one day they would leave, as sure as the sun rising in the morning.

Bill was still here, she told herself, but he was different, not the man she'd thought he'd become. He was nearly eight when they moved to Winterfold. Daisy and Florence would spend all day out in the garden, or in the tree house in the woods, collecting friends, dirt, stories to tell. But Bill would usually remain inside, playing Meccano, or battleships, or reading his book. Occasionally he would come into the kitchen or the sitting room, his sweet, serious face hopeful: 'Hello, Mother. Are you all right? Can I give you a hand with anything?'

And Martha, in the middle of mending a plug or stuffing up a mouse hole, for there was always something to do in this house, would smile, knowing what he knew: that Bill had saved up his visit to her, counting down the minutes, because he wanted to be with her all the time, but knew he couldn't. It was sissy, and Daisy already taunted him about it, not to mention the boys at school. So if she felt she could get away with it Martha would give him a hug and something to do: washing up, chopping vegetables. Both of them pretending he didn't want to be there, that he was only trying to be helpful. Where was he now, that serious, brown-eyed boy who'd broken her heart with love every day?

At least he was still here. Her daughters weren't. After Bill came Daisy, and the moment they'd handed her to Martha that first time Martha had looked into her green eyes, just like her own, and known her. She could translate perfectly her furious, shifting expressions, her love of solitude, her little plans. Daisy was the only thing Martha

and David had ever fundamentally disagreed about, in six decades. People didn't understand her. But she'd proved them wrong, hadn't she?

'Daisy? Oh, yes, she's very well. We don't hear from her so much these days. She's very busy and the area she's in has extremely poor communication. She sends a message, from time to time. But we're so proud of her.' It was a neat little speech, she knew: Daisy had come good. Daisy wasn't who everyone thought she was. Whereas Florence . . . Martha often felt Florence was like a giraffe in a family of eels. She loved her, was so proud of her, in awe of her intellect and her passion and the way she'd become, against all the odds, spectacularly her own person – but sometimes she wished she wasn't so . . . *Florence*.

Bill, Daisy, Florence. Martha told herself she loved all her children equally, but in the secret part of herself she had a little rhyme: Bill was her first baby, Daisy was her first girl and Florence was David's. She knew it sounded awful. But it kept coming back to her, this little rhyme. She'd find herself chanting it under her breath while she weeded the garden, walked into the village, brushed her teeth. Like a song stuck in her head, as though someone were playing it while she slept every night. She found she was terrified someone might look into her heart, and see what she had done. But the time for secrets was over. It was coming. It was all coming to her, and soon it would all come out.

Would anyone want to come back after the truth was out? There was a set programme of entertainment in place at Winterfold, which never varied in the detail. Their Christmas drinks party was the biggest night in the diary for miles around: mulled wine served from a huge, two-foot-high pot on the Aga, Martha's famous gingerbread cut into stars and hung with ribbons on the huge Christmas tree, which stood in the sitting room, by the French windows, as it had done for years and would continue to do. The Valentine's Day drinks, where the children handed round heart-shaped sandwiches and the guests drank too much sloe gin, and more than one amatory mistake had been made late at night walking back down to the village (the teenage Bill, alighting from the bus late one night



returning from another party, swore he'd seen Mrs Talbot from the post office kissing Mrs Ackroyd, the landlady of the Green Man, on the other side of the bus shelter). Fireworks every year on Guy Fawkes Night, a hugely popular Easter egg hunt, and there was always a summer party in August, around which people planned their holidays: an awning on the lawn and paper lanterns stretching along the driveway.

Nothing changed, not even after the disastrous summer party of – was it 1978 or '79? which had passed into local legend. The truth was no one knew why, or could have explained how it was different, at Martha and David's. Their house was lovely, the food was delicious, the company was always warm and fun. All Martha had ever wanted was to make it clear that you were welcome. Whoever you were. Whether you were the television actress who lived in the mansion at the top of the hill, or the postman who stopped to chat to Mr Winter about cricket every day in summer. That there was no 'gang'. All she and David had ever wanted to do was to make a home, a place unlike their past. To give their children a childhood that would stay with them. To work hard together. Be happy.

A blackbird bounced through the herbs in her garden, acid-yellow beak pecking at the cocoa soil. He looked up with a bright, glassy-eyed stare at Martha as she sat by the window, pen poised, and she met his gaze until he darted into a hedge. She took another sip of tea, delaying for just a second. Savouring the final moments of stillness. For she knew that the moment she began to write, something would be set in motion, a time bomb waiting to go off. She would post the invitations and then the party would happen and she, Martha, would finally be able to tell them all what she had done. And it would never be the same after that.

A single tear dropped on to the worn kitchen table. She sat up straight, and said to herself, 'Come on, old girl. It's time.'

Carefully her pen scratched across the surface, lines cross-hatching and curling till they formed something, a house, a long low house: the roof, the wooden buttresses, the old front door. Underneath, in her beautiful italic script, she wrote:

*David & Martha Winter  
request the pleasure of your company at  
a party to celebrate Martha's 80th Birthday*

*There will be an important announcement.  
We ask that you please be there.*

*Drinks with friends Friday 23rd November 2012 7p.m.  
Family only lunch 1p.m. Saturday 24th November  
Winterfold, Winter Stoke, Somerset  
R.S.V.P.*

# David

It was a mistake. He shouldn't have come back.

David Winter sat alone in the corner of the pub, trying not to look as obviously out of place as he felt. Returning to the old neighbourhood was one thing. Meeting here – he'd been crazy to suggest it, but he hadn't known where else to go. The old Lyons Corner House was a bank, the other old places round here all gone or so gentrified they weren't actual pubs any more.

He flexed his aching hands in and out and checked his watch again, blinking hard. Some days he felt better than others. And some days the black cloud felt as if it were swallowing him whole in its pillowing softness, so that he was ready to float away with it. He was so tired. All the time. Ready to lie down and go. And yet he couldn't, not yet.

Seventy years ago, when he was a boy, the Spanish Prisoners had been the roughest pub in the whole area, and that was saying something. They said the Ripper had drunk there, once upon a time. That a barmaid was murdered and buried beneath the bar. The clichés weren't funny here, they were true. Every kind of Bill Sikes was to be found at the Spanish Prisoners – and Nancys too, women like his mother. There was nothing David didn't know about that, about dark corners, terrified women, fear that sank into your bones so deep you didn't know if you'd ever shake it off the rest of your life, ever be free of its shadow.

The Spanish Prisoners had stunk of tobacco, of piss and sweat, of mould and sewage, and stout. There were men there who could recall sheep being driven down Islington High Street to Smithfield Market, who remembered the old Queen's death, who'd had sons killed in the Boer War. Davy Doolan had collected the pennies whenever his mother played piano and waited to help her husband home. If he decided to come home, that was. The pub was a vast

Georgian box on the outside, London stock brick, big windows, and it was a mystery how inside it was such a dark warren of a place. You had to be fearless, or dying of thirst, to go in there.

Now, in 2012, it was unrecognisable – a gleaming temple to the religion of coffee and microbreweries – and David wished his hands weren't so damned painful that he couldn't whip out a notebook there and then and start drawing. The wood shone, glass sparkled. The list of beers was as long as David's arm; he hadn't known where to begin, and in the end had plumped for an orange juice. The barman had a beard, tortoiseshell-frame glasses and when he walked past David after his shift ended, David had noticed, with his cartoonist's eye for detail, that he was wearing shorts, socks and slip-on loafers, carrying a canvas printed bag. Before that, though, he'd presented David with a minuscule glass of hand-pressed Valencian orange juice and said politely, 'Four pounds, please.'

*Four pounds* for a glass of orange juice? He thought how Martha would laugh if she saw him, for the first time practically, balk at the expense of something. But Martha wasn't here, and he couldn't tell her about this. He had to carry on with this fiction for his visit to London. And he hated it, hated lying to his wife.

It wasn't entirely fiction: there was to be an exhibition of his early East End work. When the call came through, he had agreed, hadn't he? With a weary acceptance: time was running out. A fortnight after the gallery had rung him to suggest the idea, David had finally taken out the drawings, hidden away for decades in hard, cloth-backed folders in the cupboard in his study. He'd waited till Martha was out; gritted his teeth, and at first it had been fine. Then, suddenly, it had been too much, looking at them again, the weight of what he carried. He'd simply put his head on the desk and cried, like a little child. And he couldn't stop crying, had to tell Martha he was going to bed, another headache. He knew then, knew it meant he had to ring her up, beg her to see him again.

'Davy?'

The tap on his arm made David jump; he looked up in shock. 'Don't get up.'

‘Of course—’ he struggled to stand, his breathing rapid, every gulp an effort. ‘Of course I will. Cassie, my dear.’ He put his hand on her shoulder.

They stared at each other, face to face after forty-four years.

She was the same height as he, tall for a woman; he’d loved that about her. And her eyes were cool and clear and grey, like they saw through you and were laughing at you. Her ash-blond hair was smooth, carefully twisted up on her head. She wore no wedding ring. She looked . . . classy.

‘You’re still tall,’ he said. ‘Tall and slim and beautiful. I’d know you anywhere.’

She fiddled with the belt of her coat, never taking her eyes off him. ‘I can’t say the same about you, Davy. You look – well. I wouldn’t have known you.’

He gave a faint smile. ‘Let me get you a drink.’

‘No, Davy. I’ll get it. You sit down.’

She returned with a rum and Coke. ‘Five pound eighty! Five pound eighty, Davy, what a racket!’

Her rueful smile relaxed him. He pointed. ‘Four pounds, this was.’

‘The world’s gone mad.’

‘Too right, Cassie.’

There was an awkward pause; she took a sip of her drink. David cleared his throat. ‘So – you keeping well?’

‘I’m all right, thanks.’

‘Where you living?’

‘Flat off the Essex Road. I came back, you see.’

‘I’m glad,’ he said, uncomfortably.

‘It’s not the same. Everyone’s gone. It’s bankers and lawyers round here mostly. Or younger people. I don’t know anyone.’ Beneath her heavy fringe her eyes filled with tears. ‘Long way back to Muriel Street from where you are, isn’t it?’

He nodded. He didn’t belong here. He’d hoped he might walk around afterwards, but fear haunted these streets for him, the way it always had. Suddenly he wished he was at home, sitting in his sunny study, the sound of Martha singing in the kitchen, Daisy and Florence playing in the garden . . . He blinked. Daisy was gone,

wasn't she? And Florence . . . Cat was still there, yes? No, Cat had gone too. They'd all gone.

'You got any more kids? I'm sorry. I don't know – anything about you.' He gave an embarrassed half-laugh.

'You know I didn't want us to stay in touch,' she said. 'Look, we got our own lives. No. I haven't got any kids, Davy. We never had any, me and Terry.' Her watery eyes were fixed on him again. 'You understand what I mean.'

His hand covered hers. 'I do, Cassie.'

'What I don't understand is why you wanted to see me,' she said. 'After all this time.'

David shifted in his seat. 'I'm dying,' he said. He smiled at her, trying to ignore the pain that was always there. Her grey eyes widened.

'Davy. That true? Cancer?'

He loved the vowels. *Kainsa*. That London voice. He'd lost it deliberately, couldn't wait for it to melt away. 'No. My heart.' He clenched his fist, in and out, like the doctor had showed him. 'The muscle's dying. It doesn't want to work any more. One day I'll just – phut. Then that's it.'

Her tears fell then, little black circles staining the newly waxed wood tables. 'Oh, Davy.'

He hadn't told Martha. Only his son, Bill, knew. As Cassie put her arms round him and drew his head on to her heaving shoulder, as she cried softly and silently, it occurred to David she was the only link he had to where he'd come from. He'd tried for years to put it away, to push forward towards the golden life he'd promised himself he and Martha deserved, only to be obsessively seeking it out again now. He thought of the meeting he'd had that morning with his gallery in Dover Street.

'I mean there's a few I wonder if we need to show. Sensitivity and all that. Do we want to include this one?' Jeremy, the director of the gallery, had slid the watercolour, pen and ink towards him.

David had looked at it and as he always did with everything he drew, squeezed his arms against his sides, a little *aide-mémoire* to help him recall what it was, why he'd done it, how, what it had been like. In fact, he remembered the scene well, a bombed block of flats out

in Limehouse. He'd walked there, the morning after a bad night. V2 rockets had come to London when the war was almost over, and they were worse than the bombs of the Blitz. You only heard them, flying towards you, if you were out of their path. If they were headed right for you you never knew, until it was too late.

David didn't sleep much, since the bomb that hit their street. He'd dream about pulling Mum out of the wreckage, his sister too, running away with them somewhere safe. Not to the shelters but far away, out of the city, out where there were trees and no dead people, and no dad, coming at him, huge and black, stinking of stout and that smell men got.

He'd woken up early that morning. Walked and walked as he liked to do. He could walk for hours, no one was bothered where he was, after all. He'd gone along the canal to Limehouse, past the bombed-out warehouses, the abandoned boats, the muck. A girl asleep on a bench, lipstick smudged, greenish tweed skirt twisted around her legs. He wondered if she was one of those kinds of girls and he'd have stopped to draw her but a policeman came past on a bicycle and shoved him along. He kept on walking, and walking, because John, a boy down the street, had told him there was a bad lot there.

The sketches he produced that morning of the scene in Victoria Court became the painting he'd seen that morning, nearly seventy years later, in the white, hushed gallery in Mayfair. But he could still remember how it felt, all those years later. Women sobbing, hair coming lose from their scarves. Men dazed, picking through the rubble. It was very quiet, otherwise. There was one wall standing, against the road, and he'd squatted and sketched, a parody of a still-life scene of the corner of a room.

Flaps of yellow wallpaper printed with ribbons, fluttering in the morning breeze. The side of a cup, a packet of rice, a tin plate, blue paint scratched off. And a child's arm, probably a toddler, the cotton sleeve of its shirt frayed where it had become detached from the body with the force of the explosion. The small pink fingers, curled up.

'Of course it stays in,' he'd said.

Jeremy had hesitated. 'David, I think it's wonderful. But it's very dark.'

'War is very dark,' David had said, the pain almost sending him under. 'Either we do this or we don't. If you want cheeky urchins playing in rubble, forget it.' He had bowed his head, remembering, remembering, and the other men were silent.

Now, as he hugged Cassie, he realised he didn't know her any more, and that he had to do what he'd come here for. He sat back and patted her hand.

'Don't cry, dearest. Let me tell you why I wanted to meet.'

She wiped her nose. 'Fine. Make it good. You bastard, making me cry, after all these years. You're the one who ran out on me, Davy.'

'Don't start that. Didn't I help you?'

'You saved my life,' she said. 'And my little girl's, later. I know it, I'll always know it. Davy . . .' she gave a big sigh, '. . . I wish it was all different, don't you?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Maybe. Maybe not. I'd never have gone to Winterfold if it hadn't been like this. I'd never have met Martha. And had the children.'

'Give me their names, then? All of them?'

'Bill, he's the eldest.'

'Where's he?'

'Oh, Bill never went far. Lives in the village, he's a GP. Pillar of the community, you might say. Married to a nice girl, Karen, much younger than him. Second marriage; he's got a grown-up daughter, Lucy. Then there's Daisy . . . she's – well, we don't see her so much any more. She's in India. A charity worker. Very dedicated. Raises money for these schools in Kerala.'

'Blimey. How often does she come home?'

'It's sad. She doesn't, really.'

'Never?'

'Not for years now. She has a daughter, too. Cat. Lives in Paris. We raised her, after Daisy . . . left.'

Cassie seemed fascinated by this. 'She ran out on her own kid?'



‘Yes. But . . . it’s hard to explain Daisy. She was – she’s difficult to understand. We’re very proud of her.’

It was such an easy lie, once you got used to it. He kept thinking of Daisy these days. Wondering what had gone wrong with her, whether it was his fault, something in his genes.

‘And – the other one, Davy, so what’s she called?’

‘Florence. Florence is the baby. But she’s very tall too.’

Her eyes met his. ‘Just like her father.’

‘Just like her father and we’re very close. She’s . . .’ he hesitated, ‘. . . very academic. She’s a professor, Cassie. Of art history. Lives in Florence.’

‘Lives in Florence and she’s called Florence?’

He smiled. ‘It’s true. She—’

A languorous waiter came over to ask them if they wanted food, and broke the spell. David looked at his watch and said no, and Cassie slid her purse into her handbag. She clicked her tongue. ‘So tell me what you want.’

David took a deep breath, ignoring the fluttering pain in his chest. ‘I want you to come to Winterfold. Meet them all. Before I die.’

She laughed. It took him by surprise, big belly laugh, a touch of hysteria, and it went on and on, until the fellow drinkers turned round to see what the two old people in the corner found to laugh about.

When she stopped laughing, she swallowed, and drained the rest of her rum and Coke.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Absolutely not. You got your nice life down there, I got mine. That’s the deal we made. I wish it were different but it’s not. Forget it about the past, Davy.’

‘But we need to straighten everything out. I want it all done before . . . I don’t know how long I’ve got. It could be months, it could be a years, but—’

She gripped his wrist, her eyes bright. ‘Davy, you always said I was cleverer than you. Didn’t you? So listen to me. Leave the past alone. Forget you saw me. All right?’

‘But doesn’t family mean anything to you, anything at all?’ David tried to hold on to her grip, but she pulled her hand away from him and stood up.

‘Yes, my dear, it does. It means pain, and misery, and suffering, and you’re mixed up with it enough. Take the time you’ve got and just enjoy it,’ she said, fixing her big bright scarf, not looking at him. Her voice wavered, but she finished firmly, ‘Let it be, Davy. God bless you, my love.’