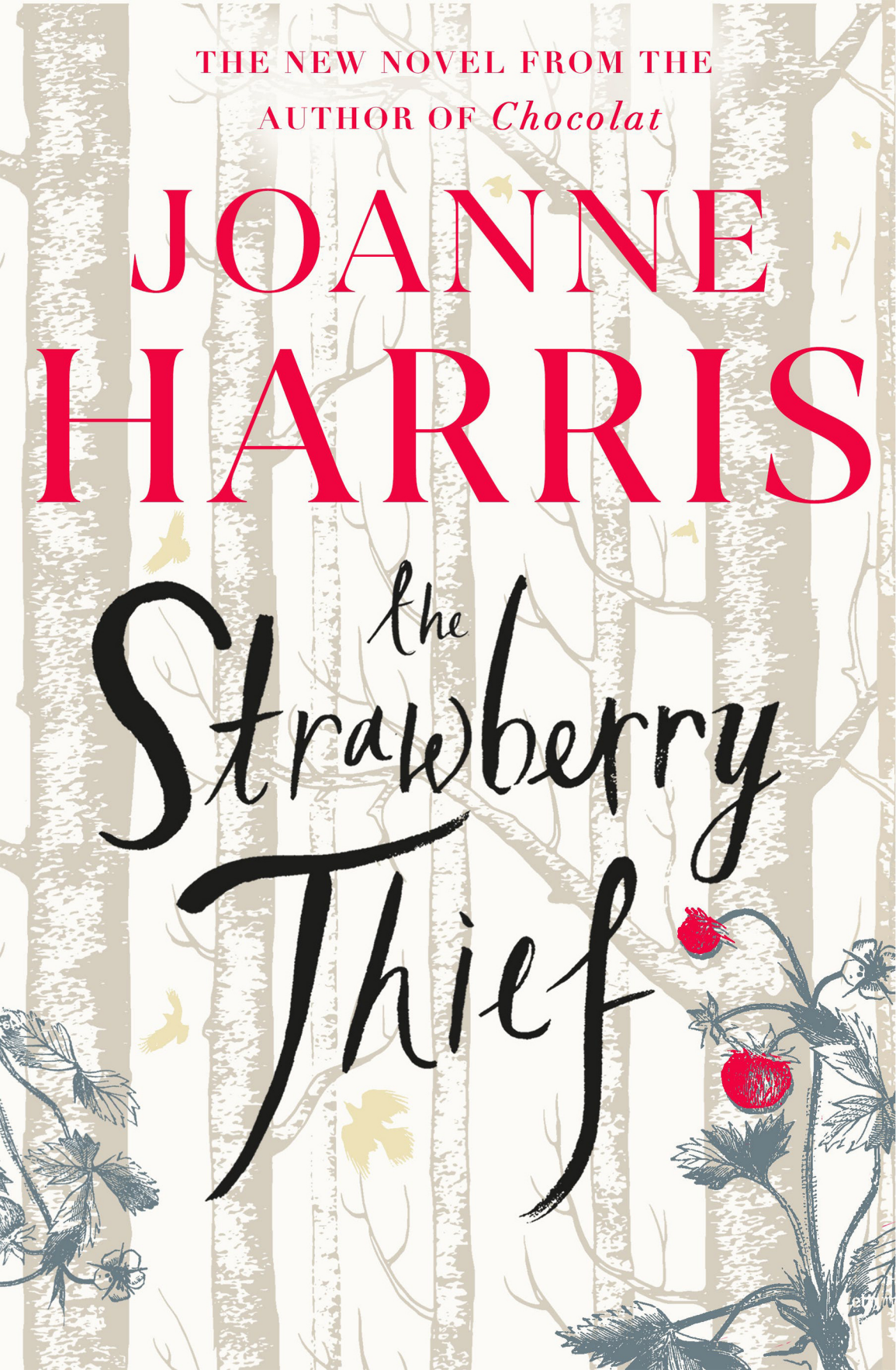


THE NEW NOVEL FROM THE  
AUTHOR OF *Chocolat*

JOANNE  
HARRIS

the  
Strawberry  
Thief



*the*  
Strawberry  
Thief



JOANNE  
HARRIS

*the*  
Strawberry  
Thief



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To you.

Yes, *you*.

You know who you are.



Wind





# I



*Friday, March 10*

There's always a moment before a storm when the wind seems to change its mind. It plays at domesticity; it flirts with the blossom on the trees; it teases the rain from the dull grey clouds. This moment of playfulness is when the wind is at its cruellest and most dangerous. Not later, when the trees fall and the blossom is just blotting-paper choking the drains and rivulets. Not when houses fall like cards, and walls that you thought were firm and secure are torn away like paper.

No, the cruellest moment is always the one in which you think you *might* be safe; that maybe the wind has moved on at last; that maybe you can start building again, something that can't be blown away. That's the moment at which the wind is at its most insidious. That's the moment where grief begins. The moment of expected joy. The demon of hope in Pandora's box. The moment when the cacao bean releases its scent into the air: a scent of burning, and spices, and salt; and blood; and vanilla; and heartache.

I used to think it was simple, that art. The making of harmless indulgences. But at last I have come to learn that *no* indulgence is harmless. Francis Reynaud would be proud

of me. Forty years a witch and now, at last, I have become a Puritan.

Zozie de l'Alba would have understood. Zozie, the collector of hearts, whose face still comes to me, in my dreams. Sometimes I hear her voice on the wind; the sound of her shoes on the cobbles. Sometimes I wonder where she is: whether she still thinks of me. No indulgence is harmless, she knew. Power is all that counts in the end.

The wind doesn't care. The wind doesn't judge. The wind will take whatever it can – whatever it needs – instinctively. I was like that once, you know. Seeds on the wind, taking root, seeding again before moving on. The seeds do not stay with the parent plant. They go wherever the wind goes.

Take my Anouk, now twenty-one: gone to wherever children go whenever they follow the piper. We used to be so close, she and I. We used to be inseparable. And yet I know that a child is on loan, one day to be returned to the world, to grow and to learn and to fall in love. I'd once believed she might stay here in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes; that Jeannot Drou might keep her there; that of course and the *chocolaterie*, and the promise of security. But it was Jean-Loup Rimbault, in Paris, who decided things. Jean-Loup, the boy with the hole in his heart. Did Anouk fill it? All I know is she left a hole in mine; a hole that all the chocolate in Mexico could never fill; a space in the shape of a little girl with eyes as dark as the ocean.

And now, my Rosette, sixteen years old, hears the voice of the wind, and I know how hungry she is; how wild, how wilful, how volatile. The wind would take her in one gust, if she were not fastened down like a sail, if I had not taken precautions. And still the wind keeps worrying at the cords that keep us safe. Still we hear its siren call. And it smells of

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other places. It speaks of danger and sunlight, adventure and joy. It dances through the motes of light in shades of chilli and peppercorn. It catches at the back of the throat like unexpected laughter. And in the end it takes them all; everything you laboured for. Everything you told yourself that you could somehow take with you. And it always begins in a moment of playfulness, magic – even of joy. A moment of brightness between the clouds. A taste of sweetness; a ringing of bells.

Sometimes, even a fall of snow.



Snow



# I



*Saturday, March 11*

It snowed today. A week into Lent, a miracle come early. At first I thought it was blossom. Blossom out of the bright blue sky, covering the pavements. But there was snow on the window-sill, and crystals in the sparkling air. It could have been an Accident. But maybe it was something more.

It hardly ever snows down here. It's hardly ever cold, not even really in winter. Not like in Paris, where sometimes the Seine used to crackle with thin black ice, and I had to wear my winter coat from Hallowe'en to Eastertime. Here in Lansquenet-sous-Tannes you get cold weather for maybe a month. Frost in December. White on the fields. And then there's the wind. The cold north wind that always brings tears to your eyes. But today, there was snow. It's a sign. Someone will be dead by dawn.

I know a story about a girl whose mother made her out of snow. The girl is supposed to stay out of the sun, but one summer's day she disobeys, and goes out to play with the others. Her mother looks for her everywhere. But all she finds are her clothes on the ground – BAM! – in a puddle of water.



Narcisse told me that story. Narcisse, who owns the flower shop. He's old now, and someone else runs the shop on weekdays, but on Sundays he still comes in, and sits by the door, and watches the street, and never talks. Except sometimes to me. He says:

'We're the quiet ones, aren't we, Rosette? We don't chatter like magpies.'

That's true. While Maman makes chocolates and talks, I prefer to sit quietly, playing with my button-box or drawing in my drawing-book. When I was small, I never talked. I sang and sometimes shouted – BAM! – or made animal noises, finger-signs or bird calls. People like birds and animals. People didn't like me much, and so I didn't talk to them, not even in my shadow-voice, the one I use when I'm being someone else. Instead I went into a bird, and flew very high into the clouds. Or sometimes I was a monkey, swinging in the trees, or sometimes a dog, barking at the wind. But even then, people didn't like me; except for Maman, and Anouk, and Roux, and my best friend Jean-Philippe Bonnet. But Maman is always working now, and Anouk is in Paris with Jean-Loup, and Roux comes and goes, but never stays long, and Jean-Philippe (whose nickname is Pilou) goes to school all week in Agen, and doesn't want to play any more.

Maman says not to worry. He hasn't really changed all that much. But now he's sixteen, and the other boys would laugh at him, and tease him for playing with a girl.

I don't think that's fair. I'm *not* a girl. Sometimes I am a boy like Pilou. Sometimes I am a monkey, a dog. Sometimes I am something else. But other people are different. Other people care about these things. And of course I can't go to school. The school in Agen didn't want me. They told Maman I wouldn't fit in, or talk the way I was meant to. And then

there was Bam, who wouldn't behave, and makes me shout his name – BAM! And sometimes there are Accidents.

And so now I learn what I can from books, and birds, and animals, and sometimes even people. People like Narcisse, and Roux, who never mind when I don't want to talk, or when my voice isn't a little girl's voice, but something wild and dangerous.

Maman used to tell me the story of a little girl whose voice was stolen by a witch. The witch, who was clever and devious, used the little girl's young, sweet voice to trick people into doing her will. Only the little girl's shadow could speak, but it was rarely ever sweet. Instead it only told the truth, and sometimes it was merciless. *You're like that little girl*, Maman said. *Too wise for fools to understand.*

Well, I don't know if I'm wise. But I *do* have a shadow-voice. I don't use it very often, though. People don't like hearing the truth. Even Maman prefers not to hear some of the things my shadow says. And so I stick to signing most times, or else I don't say anything. And if I feel my shadow-voice wanting to break free I shout – BAM! – and laugh and sing, and stamp my foot, the way we sometimes used to do to keep the wicked wind away.

When the snow began to fall, Maman was working in the shop, making Easter chocolates. Rabbits and chickens and baskets of eggs. *Mendiants* and nougatines. Nipples of Venus, and apricot hearts, and bitter orange slices. All wrapped up in cellophane, and tied with coloured ribbons, and packed in boxes and sachets and bags, ready to give for Easter. I don't like chocolates very much. I like *hot* chocolate, and a chocolate croissant, but I don't want to work in a chocolate shop. Maman says everyone has something. With her it's making chocolates, and knowing which one's your favourite. With

Roux, it's making bird calls and being able to fix almost anything. With me, it's drawing animals. Everyone has an animal, a shadow of their true self. Mine is Bam, a monkey. Maman is a wild cat. Roux is a fox with a bushy tail. Anouk is a rabbit called Pantoufle. Pilou is a raccoon. And Narcisse is an old black bear, with his long nose and his shuffling walk and his little eyes filled with secrets. Some people think Bam isn't real. Even Maman calls him 'Rosette's imaginary friend', especially to people like Madame Drou, who can't even see the colours. That's because Bam can be naughty. I have to watch him all the time. Sometimes I have to shout at him – BAM! – to stop him from causing an Accident.

But Maman only pretends she can't see him now. Maman doesn't want to see. She thinks it would be easier if we were like the others. But I know she still sees Bam. Just like she sees her customers' favourite kind of chocolate. Just like she sees the colours that tell you how someone is feeling. But now she tries to hide those things, to be like the other mothers. Perhaps she thinks that if she does, I'll be like the others, too.

When the snow began to fall, Maman didn't notice. She was with two ladies who were choosing chocolate animals. Ladies in spring dresses with high-heeled shoes and pastel coats. One is called Madame Montour. She doesn't live here, but I've seen her around. She goes to church on Sundays. The other one was Madame Drou, who never comes in for chocolate, but only to find out what's happening. They were talking about a boy who was fat, and wouldn't do as he was told. I don't know who the boy was. I thought of two parrots, or two pink hens, clucking and preening and fussing. And I could see Madame Montour wondering why I wasn't at school.

No-one in Lansquenet wonders why. No-one in Lansquenet is surprised that I sometimes bark, or shout, or sing:

*Bam-Bam-Bam: Bam, badda-BAM!* But I could see Maman watching me. I know she worries about me. There used to be Accidents, when I was small. Things that shouldn't have happened, but did. Things that made us different. And once they tried to take me away, when I was still a baby. Someone tried to take Anouk, too, when we lived in Paris. Now Maman worries. There's no need. Nowadays, I'm careful.

I drew a rose-pink parakeet for Madame Montour, and a hen for Madame Drou. Just a few strokes for the little pink head, the beak half open in surprise. I left them there on the counter, where Maman could see, and went outside. The wind was coming from the north, and there were petals on the ground, but when I stopped to look I saw that the petals were clumps of snow, whirling out of the blue spring sky like pieces of confetti.

The priest was standing outside the church, looking surprised at the falling snow. The priest's name is Francis Reynaud. I didn't like him when I first came, but now I think perhaps I do. And *Reynaud* means 'fox', which is silly, because anyone can see he's really a crow, all in black, with his sad little crooked smile. But I do like the church. I like the smell of polished wood and incense. I like the coloured window glass and the statue of Saint Francis. Reynaud says Saint Francis is the patron saint of animals, who left his life to live in the woods. I'd like to do that. I'd build myself a house in a tree, and live on nuts and strawberries. Maman and I never go to church. Once, that might have caused trouble. But Reynaud says we don't have to go. Reynaud says God sees us, and cares for us, wherever we are.

And now here comes the spinning snow, from a bright blue lantern sky. A sign – maybe even an Accident. I spread my coat like wings, and call – BAM! – to make sure he knows

it isn't my fault. Reynaud smiles and waves his hand. But I can tell he doesn't see the flash of colours across the square. He doesn't hear the song of the wind, or catch the scent of burning. These are all signs. I see them all. But I can tell he doesn't know. Snow, out of a clear blue sky. Someone will be dead by dawn.



*Saturday, March 11*

There she goes. How strange she is: my winter child; my changeling. Wild as an armful of birds, she flies everywhere in an instant. There is no keeping her inside, no making her sit quietly. She has never been like other girls, never like other children. Rosette is a force of nature, like the jackdaws that sit on the steeple and laugh, like a fall of unseasonal snow, like the blossom on the wind.

Women – mothers – like Joline Drou or Caro Clairmont do not understand. The dread of having a *different* child is more than they can imagine. Nearly sixteen, and still Rosette cannot speak in the normal way. To them, it makes my child a burden; pitiful; less than whole. To them, she is *Poor Rosette*, as I am *Poor Vianne* behind my back; left with that child to bring up alone, and the father so shockingly absent.

But Caro and Joline do not know how Rosette looks at me when I kiss her goodnight; or how she sings to herself in bed; or how she can draw any animal or bird, or living creature. All they see is a little girl who can never grow up, and this, they think, is the saddest thing. A little girl who can never grow up will never fall in love, or be married, or

get a job, or move away to the city. A little girl who can never grow up will be a burden forever, and her mother will never be able to go on that round-the-world cruise she had planned, or take up exciting new hobbies, or socialize at the country club. Instead she will be doomed to stay here, in sleepy Lansquenet-sous-Tannes; hardly the kind of place in which you'd hope to stay forever.

But I am not Caro Clairmont, or Joline Drou, or Michèle Montour. And the thought of being rooted in one place, never to be blown away, is a dream I have cherished all my life. Small dreams are all I've ever had; small dreams are all I hope for. A place in which the seeds I sow will grow into something I recognize. Clothes hanging in a wardrobe. A table, scarred with familiar marks. An armchair, moulded to my shape. Maybe even a cat by the door.

You see, I am not demanding. These things are surely achievable. And yet, whenever I think that maybe I have silenced the wind's incessant demands, it begins to blow again. The weather changes. Friends die. Children grow up and move away. Even Anouk, my summer child, with her little messages and phone calls every Sunday – unless she forgets – her eyes already alight with the thought of other places, new adventures. How strange. Anouk was always the one who *wanted* to settle down, to stay. Now her orbit has shifted, and it is *his* star she follows. It was inevitable, I know, and yet I sometimes find myself wishing, darkly wishing—

But not with Rosette. Rosette is mine. A *special* child, says Caro Clairmont, with the pious expression that so belies the genuine disgust she feels. She must be a burden, thinks Caroline. A daughter who will never grow up; a child who can never be normal. She has no idea that this is precisely what makes Rosette so dear to me.

*A cat crossed your path in the snow, and mewed. The Hurakan was blowing.*

No. I turn away from the memory. The winter of the cat in the snow, the gilded cage, and the circle of sand. I did what had to be done, *Maman*. I did what mothers always do. I have no regrets. My child is safe. And that is all that matters.

I check my mobile phone. I have taken to carrying one since Anouk moved back to Paris. Sometimes she sends me a photograph – a little window into her life. Sometimes she sends me text messages. *Adorable blue-eyed husky outside the Métro station! Or: New ice cream shop at Quai des Orfèvres!* It helps to know I can speak to her, or hear from her at any time, but I try not to be demanding, or show her that I am anxious. Our phone calls are light and amusing: I tell her about my customers; she tells me about the things she has seen. Jean-Loup is studying at the Sorbonne; Anouk, who could have studied too, has taken a job in a multiplex cinema. They live together in a rented bedsit in the 10th *arrondissement*. I can imagine it perfectly: an old building, with damp in the walls and cockroaches in the bathroom, much like the cheap hotels we stayed in when Anouk was small. She could have stayed here and worked with me in the *chocolaterie*. Instead she has chosen Paris – Anouk, who never wanted anything else but to live in a place like Lansquenet.

I go back into the kitchen. There are *mendiants* cooling on a sheet of greaseproof paper; little discs of chocolate, scattered with pieces of crystallized fruit; chopped almonds and pistachios; dried rose petals and gold leaf. *Mendiants* were always my favourites; so simple to make that even a child – even Anouk at five years old – was able to make them unsupervised. A sour cherry for the nose; a lemon slice for the mouth. Even her *mendiants* were smiling.



Rosette's are more complex, almost Byzantine in their design; the little pieces of crystallized fruit arranged in ingenious spirals. She plays with buttons in the same way, lining them up against skirting-boards, making intricate patterns of loops and foils across the wooden flooring. It is part of the way she sees the world; how she represents its complexities. Caro looks wise and talks about obsessive-compulsive disorder, and how common it is in those children she likes to call *special*, but there's nothing disordered about Rosette. Patterns – signs – are important.

Where has she gone this morning, so quiet and so purposeful? It is cold; the hard blue sky ringing with the frozen wind from the Russian steppes. She likes to play by the side of the Tannes, or in the fields down by Les Marauds, but most of all she likes the wood that runs alongside Narcisse's farm, a wood to which only she is allowed access, without risking the wrath of the owner.

Narcisse, who owns the flower shop opposite the *chocolaterie*, and who supplies fruit and vegetables to markets and shops along the Tannes, is gruffly, fiercely fond of Rosette. A widower of thirty years, he has chosen to adopt her as a surrogate granddaughter. With others he is often dour to the point of rudeness. But with her he is indulgent; telling her stories, teaching her songs, which she sings without words, but with the greatest enthusiasm.

'My strawberry thief,' he calls her. 'My little bird with the secret voice.'

Well, today the little bird is off exploring the new-fallen snow. It will not last, but for now the fields are seamed in white, with the peach trees all in blossom. I wonder what Narcisse will say. Snow as late as this is a curse to fruit trees and to growing crops. Perhaps that is why his shop is still

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shut, even though the weekend is often the best time to sell flowers. Eleven-thirty, and the stragglers at the end of the service have all gone home to their families in the unexpected snow, their Sunday coats and berets and hats all scattered with white feathers. Even Reynaud will have gone home by now, to his little house on the *Avenue des Francs Bourgeois*, and Poitou's bakery on the square is getting ready to close for lunch. Above, the sky is blue and hard. No sign of a cloud. And yet the snow continues to fall, like thistledown on the wind. My mother would have called it a sign.

I, of course, know better.