

JOANNE HORNIMAN



# ABOUT A GIRL



*About a Girl*

*Also by Joanne Horniman*

*My Candlelight Novel*

*Secret Scribbled Notebooks*

*Mahalia*

*Little Wing*

*A Charm of Powerful Trouble*



# *About a Girl*



*Joanne  
Horniman*



ALLEN & UNWIN

First published in 2010

Copyright © Joanne Horniman 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. *The Australian Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or ten per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (cal) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin  
83 Alexander Street  
Crows Nest nsw 2065  
Australia  
*Phone* (61 2) 8425 0100  
*Fax* (61 2) 9906 2218  
*Email* [info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
*Web* [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Horniman, Joanne

About a girl

ISBN 978 1 74237 144 3 (pbk.)

A 823.3

Cover and text design by Bruno Herfst

Cover illustration by Amanda Soutar

Set in 11.2 pt Dante MT by Ruth Grüner

Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Tanka*  
*for my muse, Tom*



*I search the kiln shed,  
the orchard,  
and in the ferns ...  
then you appear in the kitchen  
when I least expect you*

This page intentionally left blank

## Prologue

**T**HIS MORNING I woke and remembered her, and went to the window to look out into the leafless garden, leaning my forehead against the cold winter glass.

Flynn.

I whispered her name.

*Flynn* – one single, flighty syllable, the teeth flicking the bottom lip and the tongue expelling a breath of warm air. The window clouded with a small patch of mist. And then it faded away.

Flynn: she was graceful and intense, beautiful, serious. I remember when we lay together for the first time and I closed my eyes and felt the crackle of her dark hair between my



fingers. She was all warmth and sparking light. When I was with her, my skin sighed that the centre of the world was precisely *here*. Nowhere else.

## PART ONE

This page intentionally left blank

## Chapter One

SHE DREW HER fingers across the strings of her guitar, and the sound jangled into the room.

And I saw that it was *her*, the girl I'd seen running down the street only fifteen minutes earlier with a white guitar clutched to her chest and a boy trailing after her, as though in her slipstream.

She gazed out into the audience as though expecting someone special, and her expression was so trustful and tender that my heart went out to her. Then, turning her face to her guitar, she played another chord, lifted her throat, and began to sing. And her lovely, soft shoulders in a little strapless cotton dress, and her bare legs, and the way she smiled with humble delight at the applause ... And her voice was round and full and confident,

and her guitar ramped right up so that it was loud, the way I like music to be. I stood motionless and listened. The other people in the room fell away. It was as if she was singing for me alone, and no one else in the world existed.

When she'd played four songs straight she paused. She had kicked off her black rubber thongs and was sitting on a chair in the spotlight barefoot, bare-shouldered, dark-haired, with her white guitar cradled in her arms like a lover. She drummed her feet lightly on the floor, staring into space as though considering what to play next.

'They say soft is the new loud,' she said quickly and almost indistinctly into the microphone. She seemed shy, except for when she was actually playing.

The songs in the rest of her set were quieter, a beautiful contrast to what had gone before. I listened and watched, mesmerised.

When she had finished she said, 'Thank you. Thank you so much for listening to me. I'm called Every Little Thing.'

And then she unplugged her guitar from the amp and walked straight off the stage into the audience. She took a swig of beer from a glass someone handed her, and grabbed the hand of a boy – perhaps the one I'd seen following her down the street. Without looking back, she took off with him, the white guitar once again held close, and my own unplugged heart trailing behind her down the stairs.

## *Chapter Two*

ONE SATURDAY SOON after that I went to a café for lunch, one I hadn't been to before. The place was all hard surfaces – polished concrete floors, brightly painted brick walls, timber-and-chrome chairs and tables. There were paintings on the walls, an exhibition by local artists. I looked around at the other customers. There were all sorts – young people who might have been students, and barefoot hippies and middle-aged people. One or two of them were regulars at the bookshop where I worked. They recognised me, and smiled.

And then my lunch arrived.

'Sorry to take so long,' said the waitress. 'We've been run off our feet.' A smooth arm reached in front of me to deliver

the plate. I looked up and saw that it was the girl from the gig, the girl called Every Little Thing.

I was surprised; I had imagined that she was like the visiting band she'd been opening for, an exotic, glamorous creature from Elsewhere, here for one night and then moving on. I'd not imagined that she was an ordinary girl like myself living in this very town, with a job at a café.

She had a way of holding her mouth as though in anticipation of saying something, a kind of breathless thoughtfulness. And it was a rueful mouth, the most rueful mouth I have ever seen.

I watched as she moved back behind the counter. There is a whole genre of waitress songs: about falling in love with them, the way they move across the floor, their grace, their beauty – and who am I to add to it? I can only say that my day had burst into a rosy, piquant sweetness, like popping pomegranate seeds on the tongue.

When she returned with my coffee I ventured to say, 'Didn't I see you performing last week? Are you' – and I must have blushed as I said it – '... are you Every Little Thing?'

She said, with pleasure, 'Oh – were you there? Yes, that was me.'

'I really enjoyed your songs.'

And she smiled and said, 'Thank you. Oh, thank you!' smiling and smiling, embarrassed maybe. Then she dipped her head modestly and moved off, and one of the customers called out to her, 'Hey, Flynn! When do you get off work?'

She went over to chat to him.

I finished my lunch and left, but I longed, I so longed, to see her again.

## *Chapter Three*

ONLY DAYS LATER, we ran into each other in the street as I was leaving work.

She was carrying several string bags full of vegetables; I saw her first, and wondered if she'd recognise me. She did, pausing to get a better grip on one of her bags.

'Oh, hello,' she said. A bunch of celery dropped out onto the footpath.

'Hi.' I picked it up.

'Shopping,' she said, and grimaced at the bags cutting into her fingers.

I was still holding the celery. 'One day they'll cross this with something shorter – like a potato – so it'll fit into shopping bags.'



'I *hate* the way celery always falls out! Hey – I live just up the street. If you can carry it home for me I'll make you a cup of tea.'

We started walking. I was amazed to be actually there with her, she was so astonishingly lovely, with her long dark hair and smooth skin. And that mouth. She wore denim jeans, with a red-spotted blouse. My dress was made from almost identical fabric. I like to break that stupid rule that redheads shouldn't wear red.

'We kind of match,' she said, nodding towards my dress, and almost running into a man on a mobile phone. She skipped aside to avoid the collision. Only a few seconds later, she stopped at a doorway sandwiched between an optometrist and a travel agent. 'My flat's just up here.'

The stairwell was dark, and smelled of eucalyptus. The stairs and walls were painted purple; I kept my eyes on the treads the whole way up, and on the back of her heels. She wore the black rubber thongs I'd first seen her in at the gig – later I was to know that she almost always wore black rubber thongs. On her they took on a kind of elegance.

At the top there was a landing, and a door, which she opened with a silver key. Everything about her was magic.

And we still hadn't introduced ourselves.

The door opened into a small living room full of old sofas, with a sound system and piles of cds. We went through and she dumped the bags onto a table in the kitchen, a room that had been painted green, long ago. It was a dim room, full of shadows, and bowls of fruit. The kitchen table held, among other things, a honey jar with a used knife beside it and a slice of half-eaten wholemeal bread-and-honey on a board, as

though someone had gone out in a hurry, or simply become tired of eating it.

The window looked across to the back room of the building next door, where a group of oldish women were taking part in some sort of tai chi class. 'The white dove spreads her wings,' she said, glancing across at them. 'Tea or coffee?'

'Tea, please.'

She didn't bother putting away the vegetables. While the kettle boiled, she leaned against the sink and said, with a look of mixed earnestness and hilarity, 'Don't you love making new friends? *Please* don't tell me your name just yet. One of these days I'll know all about you, and I want to savour the moment of not knowing.'

I saw that her rueful mouth could also look delighted and mischievous. I wanted to reach out and trace the contours of her lips. I was filled with intense happiness and delight because for some reason I found her utterly attractive, and feelings like that don't happen often for me.

I didn't tell her that I already knew her name. I, also, wanted to savour the moment of not officially knowing. I said, 'Then what shall we talk about? I know that you sing. May I tell you I work in a bookshop?'

'That one down the road? I hardly ever go in there, so that must be why I haven't seen you before.'

Her teapot was called Lavinia. She told me that much, at least. Lavinia was made of white porcelain, decorated lavishly with leaves and flowers, a tall, slim, elegant pot like a maiden aunt from the late nineteenth century, a woman who wore a lacy blouse buttoned right up to the neck and had a topknot on her head. She laughed when I told her this and said, yes,

that was exactly what Lavinia was like; she must have been thinking of that when she named her.

She put the teapot on a tray with mugs and a sugar bowl. 'Let's drink this outside,' she said, and led me out of the kitchen. There didn't seem to be anyone else home. The flat was large and rambling, and ran along the back of the building. She opened a door and went in. It was a light-filled room, disordered and feminine. I saw a music stand holding the white guitar, clothes strewn everywhere and several single flowers in vases. She handed me the tray, kicked off her thongs, hoisted herself up onto the windowsill and swung through, reaching back for the tray once she was outside.

I joined her. We were on the roof at the back of the building, overlooking the very laneway from which I entered the bookshop each morning. The tin on the roof was hot, and rather dirty, so she went inside and came out with towels for us to sit on.

'I don't normally bother,' she said, as she handed me one, 'but that looks like a work dress. A pity to mess it up.'

We sat and sipped tea. I noticed the geometry of the backs of the buildings, all squares and triangles of various sizes and shapes. Graffiti on a wall across the lane said SHADOW; it was written with grey paint in slanting capitals with shadowing behind the letters. Like everything that day, it seemed beautiful to me.

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall. 'This is my special place,' she said. 'I love sitting perched up here above the street – and no one ever thinks to look up, so it's quite secret. It's not pretty, but ugliness can be kind of nice too, don't you think?' She sat up and looked at me earnestly, as though she valued my opinion.

I smiled at her in agreement, and turned my face to the sun.

Occasionally, someone walked through the street below; you could hear their footsteps. And then there was the sound of a van backing, and departing, and everything was still. I thought of the incongruity of the grimy bricks and old galvanised-iron roof, against the soft human-ness of us – or of her, at least. I couldn't stop looking at her. She noticed, and smiled. Really, I think both of us felt shy, but it was a happy feeling of anticipation for me.

Then she got up and went through the window, returning a couple of minutes later with the remains of a banana cake, which we shared. A cat had followed her out. It was her cat; his name was Timothy, and he was old and arthritic. He had brown striped fur, with curious dark pools of colour on his feet, as though he'd stepped into brown ink. He looked right up into my eyes with an expression that begged acceptance; he had such a humble, cautious, affectionate way with him that I fell in love with him immediately. I stroked his long, appreciative back, all the way to the tip of his striped tail, and thought how frustrating it was that we can take such liberties with animals, but not with people. I wanted to stroke *her* head – this girl I secretly knew was called Flynn. I wanted to follow her long, black, glossy hair halfway down her back, and then go back to the crown of her head and start again. Would she curl up in my lap?

'Anyway, my name's Anna,' I said at last.

'And I'm Rose,' she answered.

I think I looked up with surprise.

'But people call me Flynn. Maybe I'll tell you why one day.'

And with that, she got up and went back through the window, and returned with some crayons and art paper.

‘Do you draw?’ she asked, handing some paper across to me.

I do, though I can’t draw people. So I set to work on a likeness of Timothy, who had jumped up onto a low wall overlooking the street, next to where we’d put the teapot. We both scratched away at our paper, and it was a relief, in a way, not needing to talk for a while. All the time I could feel my heart beating in my chest, painfully aware of Flynn’s proximity. I kept sneaking looks at her. She had a tiny scar on her chin, and her little toe was twisted, as though it had once been broken. She had pointy elbows, and a perfect widow’s peak.

I was also aware that she kept looking at me – we caught each other’s eye every so often and I looked away quickly. But she seemed to be drawing me, so she had an excuse. She appraised me carefully and then returned to her paper; it was a kind of objective scrutiny that made me feel self-conscious and flattered.

‘Your hair is such an extraordinary colour!’ she said. ‘And your face ...’

I know that I have a face that people often look at twice. I’ve been told that I look very grave and truthful, but that is only an accident of feature. My father once told me my face can appear either very beautiful or quite ugly depending on the angle I’m viewed from, and that many actresses have that quality.

I told Flynn what my father had said, and she only stared at me more intently, so that I was sorry I’d told her.

‘My face is also a curse,’ I added, lightly. ‘There must be something about me. Old ladies are always asking me to reach

for things in supermarkets, and people are constantly stopping me to ask for directions, or the time. If I look that trustworthy, maybe I'd make a good politician, or newsreader.' She laughed when I said that, and I felt a bit easier about her looking at me.

'May I touch your hair?' she asked a bit later. And she was so sweetly serious as she asked permission that I did not assent nor deny. So she reached forward, and ran her hand down my hair, from the crown to where it curves in a bob to my chin. I wondered if she also felt the delicious tension between us, like a string pulled taut, the sparks coming from our skin when we leaned close, the simple heat.

To dispel my awkwardness I started to prattle. 'Apparently I inherited my colouring from my father's grandmother. Her name was Molly McGuire, and she had white skin that never burned or freckled, and this red hair. Only the women in the family inherit it – my father is dark. My sister, Molly, is exactly like me.'

'You have a sister! She got Molly McGuire's name as well! Is she older?'

'She's younger. Only eight.'

I stopped talking then, because I didn't want to get onto telling about Molly.

We went back to our sketching. I'd made a very rough drawing of her cat, and wasn't very happy with it, so I drew the teapot, Lavinia, as well, making them look like a pair of identical animals staring down into the street. I showed what I'd done to Flynn, and she smiled. Then she revealed the portrait she'd done of me. I looked rather odd and quite beautiful, not at all like myself, which was fitting, as that was the way I'd felt

ever since running into her that afternoon. Because being with Flynn did make me feel odd and beautiful.

It was getting dark, and there were a few drops of rain, so we moved inside. I plonked Lavinia onto the kitchen table and the lid rattled. In the building next door the windows were shut and darkened; the white doves had spread their wings and departed. 'I must go,' I said, sounding like someone entirely other than myself. I don't think I *was* myself. I was out of my mind with longing.

But I made no move to leave, leaning against the kitchen bench. Timothy had jumped onto the table and was licking honey from the slice of abandoned bread. Flynn stroked him along the length of his back and he raised his hindquarters with pleasure.

'All right, I'll let you go,' she said, sternly. 'But only if you promise to come and see me again soon.' She put her hand on my arm.

'Of course,' I replied, my heart pounding.

She released me – that's what it felt like when she took her hand away – and I turned and went out, not wanting to go, feeling the pull of her. The cord between us stretched as I went down the purple, eucalyptus-smelling stairs in the twilight, and with every step I wanted to stop, and go back.

But I came at last to the foot of the stairs, into the darkening street, and walked quickly away.

## *Chapter Four*

I HAD LIVED for only a month in a little flat high on a hill. It was part of a duplex, two low, detached buildings built in the 1950s or '60s, old, but not old enough to be quaint or charming.

The buildings backed onto the street and sat in a concreted yard edged with a low brick wall. A previous tenant had left a collection of succulents in rusty olive-oil cans, and they spilled over in profusion, grey-green and knobbed and somewhat lizard-like. Several blue-tongue lizards lived out there, and they blended in so well with the foliage that we sometimes surprised each other. A couple of straggly pawpaw trees leaned away from the building towards the light. There was something Mediterranean about it all: the warmth and sparseness perhaps,



or maybe it was those olive-oil cans. I often sat on the wall and sunned myself like a cat, and looked out over the town. It was a toy town from there. You could hear voices floating up, the growl of trucks, and sometimes the low bass beat of music from passing cars.

I spent most of my time in the narrow front living room. It had a line of little push-out windows that faced the view. I especially liked it at night; with the lights from the town arrayed below, it was like living above the stars. There had been curtains there when I arrived – dusty, horrible things – and I'd taken them down.

The kitchen ran up the side of the flat, a narrow galley open to the living area. The rest of the place reminded me of a train; it was strung out, with three bedrooms along a strip of hallway. The whole back of the flat was quite depressing. I slept in the first of the bedrooms and pretended that the rest of it wasn't there, though it yawned gloomily behind me. I could have got someone in to share, but at that time I needed to live on my own.

A young musician and his family lived in the other flat. I heard the children's voices sometimes as they played handball against the side of their house. The father, long-haired and skinny, was a sole parent, and I had the impression that the children stayed with their mother most of the time. When he was alone he played on his guitar, sounding very forlorn.

But it was a private place, at the end of a steep street, from where a track led through a weedy tangle of trees to a grassy, rubbish-strewn lookout. I had come to this town on impulse from the south, and the flat I'd found to live in suited my spirit. It was solitary and starkly beautiful despite

its scruffiness, or perhaps because of it. The sky was pure, and carried intimations of infinity. In my little front room, I might have been floating.

I had found work in a bookshop – that was why I'd moved north.

Each morning, as I walked down through the leafy streets, some so narrow and crooked it was a wonder cars could even negotiate them, I had moments of pure pleasure. Vine-covered fences, pretty timber cottages, fat dozing cats, yappy dogs, the occasional crawling car or wandering pedestrian – I found myself smiling at it all.

At the bottom of the hill, where timber houses gave way to brick walls and urban grunge, I scuttled across four lanes of traffic. I had a key to the bookshop and was often the first to arrive, letting myself in through a back door from an untidy laneway. At the moment when the lights flickered on, I could feel the books coming to attention after dozing the night away.

It was a big store, filled with merchandise – and that's all most of the books were, for they contained none of the magic of what I regarded as *real* books. Sometimes I felt I might have been selling bathroom tiles or washing machines. There was a time when I was romantic about all books, but working in a bookshop it didn't take long for me to see that they were not all created equal. Some were like tricked-up tarts, and others reminded me of packets of soap powder, great square blocks stacked in formation, waiting smugly to be reached for and shoved into shopping baskets. The shop was like a city with different suburbs: a prominent area for glossy cookery books,

an exclusive area for literary titles, the high-rise stacks of the soap-powder books in the centre, and the children's and teenagers' books shoved down the back in a sort of shanty town. I loved most the almost ecclesiastical purity of the Penguin Classics, a small ascetic gathering waiting on some out-of-the-way shelf. Most of them were large and solid like men in long black coats and top hats, rather imposing and self-important, while others were lean and made me think of funeral directors.

It was a large bookshop, with a number of women working there, and though I liked them all, they were quite a bit older than me, in their thirties and forties. They had made me feel most welcome, but they had families and busy lives, and I didn't want or expect to see them after hours. Like me, they loved books, and would often steal a few solitary moments in the stockroom poring over the latest releases.

I loved the picture books best. I ran my fingers over their glossy pages and imagined I could feel through the illustrations to the real things they represented. At lunchtime I sometimes went out to the park, but more often I stayed in the back of the shop with a salad sandwich, trying not to drop beetroot onto the book I was reading.

So that was my life at that time: my flat, and work, and solitary salad sandwiches.

And then, as I have said, I met Flynn.

## Chapter Five

SHE HAD MADE me promise to come and see her again *soon*. Her words repeated in my head. I kept seeing her face as she said it; she'd looked deep into my eyes as though she really meant it – hadn't she?

But I made myself wait five days (I counted them off, one by one) before I went there again, breathlessly, arriving late Saturday afternoon, fearing that I wore the look of a suppliant on my face.

But it wasn't Flynn who answered the door; a boy did, one of those boys with short, carefully tousled hair and a carefree face. Was it the same boy who'd gone off with Flynn the night I'd seen her at the gig?

‘Hey, Flynn!’ he called, turning his head so that the cords of his neck stood out.

She came in with a towel round her head, and said my name with obvious pleasure. She took me to her room, and I felt foolish for all my worry and anticipation, all my heart-in-mouthed-ness and tingling skin feelings, because after all weren’t we just two girls, being friends?

The bed was unmade, and the cat Timothy lay there among the tangled sheets; he looked expectantly up at me, so it felt perfectly natural to sit down and caress him. He received my attention with the same humble, grateful expression on his face that I remembered, flexing his feet, and plucking at the bedclothes with his claws. The sheets were soft and none too clean, and the green bedcover had been hand-printed with tiny skulls.

Flynn stood at the window towelling her damp hair.

‘Who was that?’ I asked, gesturing with my head towards the door. I feared he might be her boyfriend, but I had to know.

‘Who? ... oh, just Caleb. One of my flatmates. There’s Caleb and Hannah and me – but they’re never home. I often wish they were, it gets a bit boring on my own. I mean, if you’ve got a share place, it’s nice to *share*, isn’t it? What about you?’

‘What?’

‘Do you share with people?’

‘No. I live on my own.’

She threw the towel onto the back of a chair and sat down on the bed. I felt the mattress sink a little, and smelled the scent of shampoo coming off her wet hair. ‘What are you doing here?’ she said, with curiosity, as though she really wanted to know.

‘Well – you asked me to call in again ...’ I replied, a little defensively.

‘No, silly! In this *town*.’ She took my hand and squeezed it. Her hand was warm, her face moist and pink from the shower. ‘You didn’t go to school here, did you – or I’d have remembered you.’

I shrugged. ‘You have to leave home sometime. And if you’re going to leave ... well, I suppose it’s good to get right away.’

‘And where is home?’

‘Canberra.’ I stopped to wonder if it did still feel like home, and couldn’t decide.

‘I know you have a little sister. Molly, the lucky one who got Molly McGuire’s name.’ She paused, as though prompting me.

‘And I also have a brother, Josh, who’s twenty-two – he’s in a band – still lives at home. With Mum, I mean. Though he lives out in the garage now. My parents are separated.’

She dropped my hand, as though taking it had been a mere whim (but my own hand still burned with pleasure). ‘A brother!’ she said, her face suddenly closing. ‘And a musician! What sort of music does he play?’

‘Indie rock – sort of psychedelic pop – it’s beautifully melodic, and you need to listen to the words.’ It occurred to me that Josh and Flynn might be very interested in each other if they met. She might well want a boy just like Josh for a boyfriend.

I wanted her to take my hand again. But she reached for her guitar, which lay next to the bed, and began to strum. She tilted her head and listened to it as though I wasn’t there.

I stood up and went to the window, and looked out to the rooftop where we had sat together and talked only five days

before. It had been so easy then, but was so awkward now. The teapot, Lavinia, sat there on the selfsame wall. I remembered bringing her (it! – it was just a teapot!) inside that day, the clink of the lid as I set it down on the table. It pained me to think of Flynn sitting out on the roof since, perhaps with someone else; to think that afternoon with Flynn on the roof might not be special, but just an everyday occurrence to her.

I had thought she'd forgotten I was there, but she started improvising to my name as she strummed, singing: '*Anna ... Goanna ... Anna ... Spanner ... Anna ... Lavinia ...*'

'Did you think Molly got the good name?' she asked, not looking at me, but at her own hands as she fingered the strings.

'I used to,' I said, surprised. She must have been able to read right into me, for it was true that for a long time I didn't much like my name. 'But then,' I said, wondering at how easily I could talk to her now, 'I found a book with a character called Anna Livia, and I saw what a musical name I had.'

'Anna Livia,' she repeated, her fingers moving rapidly across the frets so the strings squeaked the way dry sand does when you run across it.

'It's in a very odd book called *Finnegans Wake*. And she's identified with the River Liffey that runs through the book – and through the city of Dublin – so that she's like life itself.' I paused. There was so much of my life that book reminded me of – Michael, my father and mother, and a time that had been at once strange and painful and wonderful.

Flynn was looking at me so intently that I must have blushed. She had a most direct stare, and her dark eyes slanted up at the corners. And so did her mouth, when she smiled.

*'Anna Livia, Anna Life, Anna Spanner, Anna Goanna ...'* she sang again. 'Don't keep standing there at the window. Come and sit down.' She patted the bed beside her.

I sat, feeling self-conscious. Flynn put down her guitar. 'I have to go to see my mother later on. She lives out of town. Brothers and sisters?' she said, as if anticipating my inevitable question, though I wasn't about to ask any such thing. 'I have none. I'm an only, lonely, child.' She lay on the bed and hugged her knees, staring at the ceiling.

'And is there just your mother?'

'No. I have a father. But I'm a mummy's girl.' She smiled at me. 'You know, we'll have to do something together one day.'

Warmth flooded through me.

'What sort of things do you like doing?' I asked her.

'Apart from singing and writing songs, not a lot. I enjoy camping in the bush. I used to be a Girl Guide, but it was too sissy for me. We could go to the beach!' she added, as though having a brainwave. 'I have a car.'

'So do I, but I don't use it much.'

'Mine's a bomb,' we said, at the same time.

I smiled, pleased and dismayed. It was too much for me, being with Flynn. 'Okay,' I said. 'We'll do something, then.'

'It's a date!' she said. 'I'll call round for you one weekend. I'm often working Saturday mornings.'

'I always do.'

'One Sunday, then. You'd better give me your address.' She fetched a book with flowers and butterflies all over it, and opened the page to A. I scrawled my address and, as an afterthought, the number of the mobile phone I rarely switched



on or even carried with me, because there were so few people who rang.

She hugged me briefly at the front door, and our cheeks collided softly. As I made my way down the purple stairs, my head was full of the way our skins had touched. When I came out onto the street, the sun was shining. I had forgotten it was daylight, a bright summer day.

That night I was too restless to stay in my flat. I prowled about, making a cup of coffee and tipping it out, sitting for five minutes with a book before putting it down. I needed to go out and walk to get rid of my energy, so I showered and changed into a dress, the red-spotted one I'd worn that day on the roof with her.

At the door I stopped to look into a small mirror that hung beside the door, a leftover from a previous tenant. I appeared surprised and expectant.

Then I let myself out into the night, startling a thin grey cat, which ran down the path, pausing to look over its shoulder at me. 'Here, puss, puss, puss.'

But it fled.

I went over the top of the hill, through the weedy grasses, into the glorious warm darkness. There were cars parked at the lookout, and people sitting on the low barricades at the edge of the car park, smoking. I looked at the lights of the town, and relished for a moment the exquisite feeling of possibility that lay before me. Flynn was somewhere down there, and one day soon anything might happen.

I remembered Michael, the two of us sitting on the top of Mt Ainslie observing the lights of Canberra. And it was

a tender feeling of sweet regret. Then I thought of Flynn's rueful mouth, and treacherously I forgot Michael and thought of *her* again.

I felt that I could walk all night, up the narrow streets and, just as inevitably, down again. Lismore was a very up-and-down place, as well as being rivery, and remembering those rivers, I instinctively headed towards them.

I went along broad main roads along which cars streamed; and made detours into cul de sacs, which made me feel like a loiterer when there was nothing to do but turn round and go out again. Through leafy gardens I saw houses lit up and open to the night, doors and windows flung wide for the heat. I heard music, and television, and voices calling out in ordinary conversation; I encountered dogs, and cats, but very few people.

Finally I came to the shopping streets, and passed the bookshop where I worked, saw the window display I'd made last week illuminated, the books lurking behind it in the dim shop.

And then there was the door that led up to Flynn's flat; the steps that I wanted to climb but mustn't, not yet. Because it seemed that hers must be the next move. I passed the entrance to the lane behind the shops and paused. If I went down there, just to look up and see if there was a light on in Flynn's window ...

I resisted the temptation.

And continued on, down to the river at last, where I walked beside the murky water on a lonely dark footpath.

It was a large town to walk around if you had a mind to, and I did. I could have walked all night, taking it all in, and all the time my body thrummed, *Flynn, Flynn, Flynn*.

I walked past churches and cathedrals, pubs and clubs, across sporting fields, and even along the defunct railway line, where grass grew between the tracks. Finally, I found myself climbing through the hilly streets towards my flat, and came suddenly to my own gate with a shock of recognition. The light I'd left on was glowing; I saw that lights left on in an empty place don't fool anyone, for it still looked deserted. Now I was incredulous that this was where I had made a home.

I found a key in my pocket, and it fitted the lock. I felt like a stranger entering my own flat. I fell into my own, unmade bed, which smelled familiar; it must smell of me. And I went to sleep at once.

## *Chapter Six*

I DREAMED I was desperately knocking at a door, willing it to open. When the sound persisted, I swam up into daylight and found that the knocking was real. Someone was rapping at the door of my flat.

Wearing my red, spotted, and extremely crumpled slept-in dress, I walked out gingerly and opened the door. Flynn was sitting on the steps, patting the grey cat I'd seen the night before. 'Is this your cat?' she said.

'I think it's a stray,' I said weakly. Flynn had said that we must do something together one Sunday. She hadn't said anything about the very next day. I peered at the sky. It must be past noon.

She came in, along with the cat. ‘Did you sleep in that dress?’

‘Um ...’

I think that at that moment I was incapable of speaking. I had imagined Flynn coming to my place, had longed for it, and now that she was here it seemed almost incredible. Incredible, and wonderful, yet amazingly ordinary in the clear light of a summer’s day.

The cat had thrown itself at her feet and rolled over to have its stomach scratched.

‘Do you have any cat food?’ she asked.

Of course I didn’t, so Flynn suggested mashed-up Weet-Bix; she warmed milk and found a dish while I went to shower.

When I came out, I found her examining my collection of CDs. The cat had finished eating and was sitting in the sunlight from the front windows, fastidiously washing a white paw.

‘Do they pass muster?’ I asked, of my CD collection.

‘I love Okkervil River, too,’ she said. ‘You must have every album.’

‘I think I do. I don’t know what I like best about them – the music or the words – the dream-like images. And I like it that they’re named after a Russian short story ...’

I looked towards my bookshelf where sat *White Walls*, by Tatyana Tolstaya, but Flynn broke in.

‘The music can be so lyrical and heartbreaking, and then sometimes it sounds as if they just go into the studio and rock their dark little hearts out ... it’s real raw and unsettling ...’

She looked into my eyes as she said that, and it came home to me that we both knew how raw and unsettling music can be.

Then she looked away, and licked her lower lip before flicking through the stack again.

I made tea, and handed her a cup as she knelt there on the floor. It was so painful and pleasurable to have her in my flat, looking through my things with such an air of candour. I tried to look at the flat through her eyes, and saw how drab it was. The truth was that I had simply not cared much about where I lived, and had not bothered to decorate. I'd moved in with the bare minimum, and picked up things from chain stores and op shops when I found a need for them.

'Well, shall we go?' said Flynn, jumping to her feet and putting her cup on the kitchen table.

'Go?'

'To the beach?'

I stood up and tipped the rest of my tea down the sink.

'Bring your swimmers,' she reminded me as I picked up my bag.

'I don't have any.'

'What do you bathe in?'

'I don't.' I felt myself go pink. 'I come from an inland place. I used to have some from when I was at school, but when they wore out I just didn't get around to buying any more.'

'I have a spare pair at home,' she said. 'Let's go.'

The grey cat went out with us, curling round our legs as I locked the door. It sat on the wall beside the house as we drove away in Flynn's car. She stopped outside her place and ran in for her spare swimmers, coming back to throw them on the back seat.

She was a very fast, very confident driver. Even in her old Toyota, she passed newer, more powerful cars in the uphill

passing lanes. I felt a grateful sense of release and freedom, sitting there beside her, and a feeling of intimacy, even though (or perhaps because) we didn't speak much.

As we got near the beach – it was only a forty-minute drive – the sky seemed larger and bluer, the blue more transparent, the light more diffuse. Since my arrival up north I had scarcely ventured to the coast, and now here I was with Flynn, who knew just the place to go: a beach that was long and practically deserted.

We ran down to the sand and dropped our stuff. 'Walk, then swim?' said Flynn.

As we set off, two little girls aged about nine or ten came up to us. They wore identical striped shorts, and brightly coloured sunhats, made of straw. 'Do you know what time it is?' one asked me.

'I don't have a watch,' I told them, 'or a mobile. But I can tell you *approximately*. It's about ...' and I stopped to estimate, '... two-thirty.'

They thanked me and ran happily away.

'People really *do* come up and ask you the time,' said Flynn, grinning, and I blushed with pleasure. Maybe this was evidence of my attractiveness and pulling power.

We came to a huge old log half buried in the sand. Flynn jumped onto it and balanced along its length like a child. She jumped down and went around to do it again and I followed; we laughed as we jumped off it at exactly the same time.

After a few more turns, Flynn jumped off and ran up the beach. I followed her, and she slowed down so I could catch up. We walked for a while with our heads down, looking for things washed up on the tide line. Flynn found a black cowrie

shell, and handed it to me with a flourish. 'You get the luck!' she said, and sprinted on ahead a little way before I could ask what she meant. Probably some childhood superstition. I fingered the fine teeth along the bottom of the shell, and put it into my pocket.

We caught up with the little girls at the end of the beach. One shielded her eyes from the sun with her arm, and her hat fell off. She squinted up at me. 'Do you think you can tell us the time again?'

*'Approximately ...?'* put in the other.

I looked at the sun. 'I think the time is approximately ... fifteen minutes past three,' I said, making a great show of thinking about it.

'We'd better get back!' they said in unison, looking at each other. Picking up the fallen sunhat, they thanked me and ran off.

'Do you know what you are?' said Flynn teasingly, as we turned around to go back ourselves. 'You're a Time Lord!' She bent down and picked up a piece of dried kelp from the sand and placed it around my shoulders. I shook it away with a smile, and we glanced at each other. Her look was full of affection.

When we got back to where we'd left our things, Flynn stripped off and put on her bikini. There was no one around on our stretch of beach, so there was no need for modesty, but I self-consciously struggled into Flynn's old one-piece.

Flynn was taller than I was, sturdier and more muscular, so her swimmers were a bit large for me. She tried tying the straps together with a hair ribbon she found in her bag, but the whole arrangement came undone again.



‘Oh, what does it matter if they fall off in the surf?’ she said. ‘Who’s going to look?’

They did fall off in the surf, or at least the straps fell off my shoulders and the top sagged down, exposing my breasts. I struggled for a while, and then left the water. I didn’t like to admit it to Flynn, but I don’t really like swimming in the ocean. It’s too salty, too rough, and makes you too gritty and uncomfortable afterwards. I have a pernickety side to me. I can be as fastidious as a cat.

I took our things up under the shade of a scrubby tree growing at the edge of the sand, and sat there in a sticky heap. Shielding my eyes from the sun, I watched as Flynn went out into the waves again and again and again. She seemed tireless.

Finally she came out, water streaming from her hair. ‘This,’ she said, throwing herself onto the sand next to me, ‘has been the best day.’ She blew water from her nose and sat looking out to sea, her sandy knee touching mine.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked. ‘Because I’m *starving*.’

I ought to have been hungry, because I’d had no breakfast, just that cup of tea. I wasn’t hungry, because being there with Flynn somehow filled me up and made me not need anything else.

More than anything, I wanted to lean across to her. It wasn’t far, after all, our knees were still touching ... I yearned for the courage to move my head just so far, but the distance was like an eternity, if distance can be measured in time ...

What if I leaned over and kissed Flynn on the mouth?

It would be a warm, sticky, salty kiss. I would feel the heat from the sun on Flynn’s face. I would see her face up close, and she would be a different Flynn, once I had made that move.

But I lacked the courage.

Flynn leaned back and took an orange from her bag. Peeling it with her hands, she tore it apart and handed bits to me. I ate them and licked my fingers clean. Flynn delved into her bag for another orange, and repeated the procedure. Then she sat with her elbows on her drawn-up knees, orange juice running from wrists to elbows, her fingers splayed.

I reached out with my index finger and took a drop of juice that ran down her arm. And put it in my mouth.

Without indicating that she'd noticed what I'd done, Flynn stood up abruptly and dusted the sand from her legs and backside with firm *thwacks* that resounded in my ears. Then, without even looking at me, she ran into the water to wash the sand off.

We struggled into our clothes and found a fish-and-chip shop. We took the parcel down to a nearby jetty, and watched the boats and the pelicans while we ate. Flynn ate delicately but hungrily, pulling the fish apart with her fingers and popping tiny pieces into her mouth. Grease shone on her lips. She saw me watching her and ducked her head, looking away.

And when we'd finished eating she drove us home. We arrived at my flat just as the sun was going down, sending spears of blinding light through the windscreen of the car. She turned off the engine, and we sat in the silence.

'Thank you,' I said, 'for the day.'

I didn't want it to end.

I wanted to invite Flynn inside. But we'd already spent the whole afternoon together. Surely she would consider that enough.

Flynn turned her head and looked at me. I saw her eyes, looking into mine, and that lovely mouth. I reached out and touched it, and ran my finger along her bottom lip.

I had the impression that both of us had forgotten to breathe.

I removed my hand, and Flynn turned back to face the windscreen.

And all I could do was gather together my wet lump of towel, and my bag, and get out of the car.

I did not see her face as she drove away.

Inside the flat, the bowl Flynn had given to the cat stood empty on the floor. The mug she had used sat on the table. That part of the day seemed a lifetime ago.

I hung my towel on the line outside, and rinsed Flynn's swimsuit and hung that beside it. Then I sat on the wall that overlooked the town and watched all the lights come on, while something like the ghost of Flynn hovered nearby on the clothesline, just an empty shape, an absence, a memory.

Much later, after I had come inside and showered the salt from myself, after I'd made myself a cup of instant coffee, after I'd searched for the cat and failed to find it, and when I'd decided that the whole flat contained a dreary aroma of no expectation whatsoever ... after all that, someone knocked at the door at the same instant that my mobile rang.

The call was from my mother.

'Anna! How are you?'

'I'm fine. I'm okay ... I'm ...'

The knocking at the door continued. I went to open it, the phone pressed to my ear.

*Flynn.*

'I'm sorry,' I told my mother. 'Someone's just come to the door. Yes, um ... a friend.' I motioned to Flynn to come in.

'Well, I won't keep you too long then,' my mother said. 'I'm just ringing to say that I thought Molly and I could drive up to see you in a couple of weeks.'

Flynn had gone to the living-room window and pressed her forehead to the glass, so that she was joined at the temple to her own reflection in the black mirror of night. The cat had drifted in with her, and was coiling about her legs.

'Would that be all right?' my mother persisted, though I doubt I was making any sense.

'Yes!' I said, though all I could think about was Flynn. My mouth was so dry I could barely speak.

After my mother rang off I put down the phone.

Flynn turned from the window. Her face was as grave as that of a Madonna, or a saint. She bit her lower lip, and without a word took several steps towards me. We sat down on the sofa, side by side. And after a little while, Flynn put her arm around my shoulders, and I leaned against her. We sat like this for a long time.

We turned to face each other, and Flynn's mouth found mine. 'Is it all right to do this?' she whispered, and I did not answer with words. Then Flynn stood up and held out her hand.

I took it.

In the bedroom, we did not switch on the light; enough shone through from the living room for us to see each other.

We lay down. I put my hand under Flynn's shirt. Her ribs stood out. I lifted up the shirt and lay with my head on Flynn's

torso, just beneath her breasts. Her heart was pounding as rapidly as my own.

She was lovely. Soft and strong and tender and surprising. It was like meeting someone for the first time and knowing them instantly. It was like meeting myself.

## Chapter Seven

I LOVED THE salty flavour of her. She'd not had a shower since coming back from the beach and I loved the way that the ocean water had coarsened her long black hair. She still had sand in the creases of her buttocks, and fanny; the saltiness of her must have been emphasised by the sea. I loved everything about her. I loved *her*. We had very little sleep; I wanted to say everything to her, do everything with her, but in the end we spoke very little, and learned a great deal about each other.

The next day at work I offered to unpack the new books because I was too exhausted to face serving people. I loitered in the stockroom and read.

The book I chose, one that had just arrived, was *Notes from Underground*, by Dostoyevsky. *Hilarious yet disturbing* was the

quotation from the *Sunday Times* on the cover. It had a moody photograph of a man's unshaven face, cigarette between his lips, in tones of blue. It looked like a modern, grungy novel, not one written in Russia in the 1860s.

*I am a sick man ... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver.*

I could imagine hand-selling it to certain people. *Hand-selling*. It was one of those specialist bookseller terms that I loved.

I think I loved everything that day.

'Anna,' came the voice of the manager from the doorway. I closed the book. 'Anna, there's someone to see you.'

It was Flynn. She was standing in an aisle at the back of the shop, pretending to browse through a pile of discounted cookbooks, and looked up shyly as I approached. It was the first time we'd seen each other since parting that morning, only hours before, yet it was long enough for us to have discovered a newfound shyness. It seemed that all we could do was smile.

'I was on my way to work,' said Flynn, 'and I just wanted to see you again.'

I couldn't think how to reply. The manager was standing only metres away.

'So ... that's all,' she said, with a pleased, secretive smile. 'Anyway, shall I see you tonight?'

'Yes,' I said, my mouth dry.

'I'll come to your place then.'

And with a lingering glance, she was gone.

On the way home, I deliberately avoided going past the café where Flynn worked. I ducked down a side street to a supermarket, where I bought eggs and potatoes and mushrooms

and salad. As an afterthought, I bought a tin of cat food. The grey cat had spent the night on the bed.

I waited impatiently for Flynn to arrive, attempting to tidy the house and discovering there was little to tidy, I lived such a sparse, monk-like life. In the last light of day I went outside to call the cat but it didn't appear.

I sat on the warm brick wall in the going-down sun and thought about her. All the clichés about being in love were true. I went over every word, every gesture of the night before. The cat had sat at the foot of the bed, and purred, and Flynn had brought it into bed with us. And then, still unable to sleep, we decided we were ravenously hungry and got up for cheese on toast, which we had eaten sitting close together on this very wall in the dead of night, the whole town lying silent below.

The night became chilly, so we went back to bed and huddled under a light doona, and must have slept at last, because I woke with my arm wrapped round her waist. She opened her eyes and stretched and smiled. I watched her get up and go to the window and look out. She had such a strong, narrow back, slim waist and long legs. I loved looking at her.

Then she wrapped a sheet around herself like a toga, and walked outside, and crouched on the wall in the sun, watching over the town. She smiled up at me when I delivered a cup of tea. And it seemed like a miracle that I had someone who wanted to be with me.

'Anna?'

Flynn arrived at last. She had been knocking at the door for ages, and finally walked around the building to find me sitting out on the wall daydreaming. It was now quite dark.



She had washed her hair; it was still damp, and so she was a different Flynn that night, one with soft, clean hair, and a body washed free of sand. She smelled of soap. I offered to make a mushroom omelette, but she said, 'Are you hungry yet? Because I'm not.' And we took each other to bed again. But this time we did sleep afterwards through sheer exhaustion, because of not having slept properly the night before.

When I woke, the bedroom was dark and Flynn was not beside me. Light shone through from the living-room, and when I went out I found that she had dressed and was crouched broodingly on the sofa, her knees drawn up.

'Is anything the matter?'

She looked up, and bit her lip. 'No. I mean, I think I should get back to my own place now. Hannah and Caleb will be wondering where I've been, two nights in a row.'

'You can say you've been with me. I mean, they're not your mother, are they?' I think I must have given an uncomfortable laugh.

'Actually, Anna ... what I need to do is to take some time to think about all this.' She gestured with one hand.

'Think about it?'

What was there to think about? I felt ill, at the thought that she might leave me.

'I mean, it's all so new to me. I'm not sure that this is what I want.'

*But, I thought, you did want it. I could tell you did.*

And abruptly, in the middle of the night, Flynn left me. She kissed me coolly on the cheek and walked out the door, pulling it to, softly, and I couldn't do a thing but sit and listen to her car start up and drive away.

## Chapter Eight

I CALLED IN sick and stayed home from work, sleeping all day beneath a sheet on the sofa. I couldn't face going near my bed, afraid it would still smell of *her*.

When I woke, the unopened tin of cat food on the table reminded me that Flynn and the grey cat had both deserted me. I shoved the can to the back of a cupboard, and went out.

Determined not to be disconsolate, I bought a bag of black jellybeans and ate them while reading *Notes From Underground*, which I'd borrowed from the shop the day before.

*I am a sick man ... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver.*

A voice in my head told me that Flynn's departure at this point was understandable. *Everything's happened so fast – of*

*course she needs time to think.* In fact, I probably needed time to think.

But a self-pitying, red-eyed bug with a brain the size of a grain of rice had set up home in my heart, and it mewed, *but I love her! Doesn't she love me? If she did, she wouldn't have done that! She may never come back, and nobody else will love me ever!*

I went back to the jellybeans and the book.

Underground Man has a bad liver but he won't go to the doctor. *I know better than anybody that I am harming nobody but myself. All the same, if I don't have treatment it is out of spite. Is my liver out of order? – let it get worse!*

I heard a noise outside the door. *Flynn!* I got up to look. It was nobody. Not even the cat. I checked my phone to see if it was switched on. I checked fruitlessly for messages.

*I once used to work in the government service but I don't now. I was a bad civil servant. I was rude, and I enjoyed being rude. After all, I didn't take bribes, so I had to have some compensation. (A poor witticism; but I won't cross it out ...)*

I had only come to the end of page one.

Flynn had touched this very book. She'd picked it up from the kitchen table the night before and asked, 'What's this like?'

'I don't know – haven't read it yet. But it's pretty dark and disturbing, I imagine.'

Flynn put it down. 'Sometimes I get tired of dark and disturbing. I don't want to be disturbed when I read, or when I watch a movie. I want to be happy.'

But dark and disturbing songs were all right? I thought of Okkervil River. I thought of the love songs – the songs of lost love that I'd heard Flynn sing on the night I'd first seen her. *They* hadn't been all happiness and light. But I hadn't wanted to put

anything between Flynn and me by pointing this out.

Now I tossed aside the jellybeans and opened a tin of tomato soup. I changed my bed so that the scent would not remind me of Flynn, when all I wanted to do was to lie down in the dirty sheets and wallow in memories. I washed the sheets at midnight, pegging them on the line in the dark, detesting the artificial smell of lavender from the washing powder.

In my fresh, forcibly celibate bed, I stayed up and read *Notes From Underground*. It described a dark underworld of unconscious desires, and the protagonist was scarcely sane, but reading it as I did, at a time when I was ill with desire for Flynn, imprinted it on my mind forever.

I wanted her! How much I wanted her!

At last, I dropped the book to the floor and fell asleep with the light still on.

I finished *Notes from Underground* next morning over a cup of coffee, and in honour of Dostoyevsky, I dressed entirely in black. I returned the book to the shop, and managed to hand-sell a copy that very day.

A boy came in, one of those confident, well-balanced looking boys with just the right degree of grunginess to make him look interesting. He scanned through the novels, picking one up, reading the back cover and putting it back again.

‘Can I help you?’ I asked, though my head had started to throb.

‘I’m looking for a book for my sister,’ he said, with a matter-of-fact grimace. ‘Birthday present.’

‘What does she normally read?’

‘Anything ... everything ... she loves reading.’

'And, how old is she?'

'About ...' said the boy, giving me an appreciative glance, '... your age.'

'So, she really reads everything?'

'Especially the classics,' he said. He had lively, humorous eyes.

I gestured with my hands, meaning, *which ones?*

'Oh, you know ...' He thought for a bit. 'The nineteenth century! Jane Austen, all that.'

'Does she read the Russian writers? Tolstoy? Dostoyevsky?'

'Especially the Russian writers,' he said, leaning his shoulder against a shelf, and giving me a particularly attentive look.

He was giving out distinct signals that he found me attractive. If I'd wanted, if I had been *that way inclined*, I was sure I could flirt back enough for him to ask me out. '*I'd like to meet your sister*,' I wanted to say, perversely.

Instead I said, 'Here's a book by Dostoyevsky that I've only just finished reading. I know the cover makes it look like a contemporary novel, but it was actually written in the 1860s.'

The boy took the book and looked through it.

'And it really does read like a modern novel in many ways,' I told him. 'The feeling of alienation and disaffection. And it's full of all sorts of philosophy and ideas – the character's quite repulsive, of course, but that's not the point ... if your sister has ever read *Crime and Punishment* she'd like it, because this character is another version of Raskolnikov.'

'I'll take it.'

'You will?'

'Yep. You've sold me on it. And if my sister doesn't like it,

I'll read it myself. Actually, I think I'll read it anyway, before I give it to her.'

We returned to the counter. I glanced up at him as I took his money, and could see that he was about to say something else. And as I handed over the package with a smile, he said, 'If you're not doing anything later ...'

But I gave him a regretful look, and declined.

I felt the pull of Flynn; she was so close, but so far away. I wanted to march up the stairs to her flat, and beg to see her again. But I could not. I must not, because she said she needed time away from me.

And so I sat that evening on the wall overlooking the town, my legs drawn up to my chin. And there was no cat, and no Flynn. A blue-tongue lizard sat on the concrete beside its camouflaging pot of succulents, drawing the last warmth from the ground, as I did.

When the rays of the sun shot red from the horizon, someone who was not Flynn came over from the flat next door with a bottle of wine and two glasses, and the person who was not Flynn said, 'You look like you could do with some cheering up.' Not-Flynn sat down beside me; I could feel the air stir feebly in protest. And the wine poured *glug glug* into the glasses and I reached out and took one. I sipped.

Not-Flynn talked about his ex-wife and his children till the bottle was finished and the purple sky was flecked with circling bats. I was only able to make little noises of sympathy. The air was like a moist face-washer, and I felt suffocated by the misery and convolutions of his wasted marriage. I got up and squirted my face with water from the hose, and the lizard

crept away to wherever lizards go at night. I stood on top of the wall with my arms stretched out to air them, and did not feel any drunkenness, only leaden reality.

There was no Flynn; it all amounted to that. She might be down there among the lights somewhere, or she might have left town. It was no longer my business to know, because Flynn was staying away to *think about us*, about what had *gone on between us*. As if she wasn't entirely delighted about it all, as I had been.

'I'll get another bottle,' said Not-Flynn. I looked up, startled. I had forgotten he was there.

'No, but thanks,' I told him. 'I think I might've had enough.'

I put my hand on my forehead and pushed back my dampened hair.

And I watched the person who was not Flynn take himself and the glasses and empty bottle off to his own flat.

I went to bed and lay on top of the warm sheets and knew that I would not sleep. I went over everything that Flynn and I had ever said to each other, thought of every expression that had played across her face. Hearing a small sound outside the back door, I went out. It was the cat, which slipped into the house and mewed at me in the dark.

I opened the can of food and put it in a dish. In the morning the dish was empty, and the cat gone through the window, which stood open as though allowing everything in my life to flee from me.

At work I no longer loitered in the stockroom reading the books. They didn't soothe me anyway, and being alone gave me time to think, something I wanted to avoid. I made myself

extra busy, became more-than-usually charming to customers, but all the time my heart was heavy, because everyone was Not Flynn.

At home I wondered whether music could distract me, flipping through my CDs, but I couldn't bear to listen to anything.

*I love Okkervil River, too*, she had said. I stopped at an album, and the title taunted me: *Don't Fall in Love with Everyone You See*.

*But I don't*, I whined in my head, pathetically. *I hardly ever meet anyone I'm really attracted to. And there's nobody like Flynn. So intense, and beautiful. I love her mouth, the way she holds it when she's thinking about something. And when we're together it's as though we're the only two people in the world.*

I jumped up and paced around the flat. It was so deathly silent! But music would tear at me, and release emotions I'd rather forget. I couldn't stand my own bedroom, and the sofa, where she had sat, loomed at me.

I raced out to the supermarket and was overwhelmed by the lights and people and all the useless shit you can buy, none of which could fill the hole made by Flynn's absence.

On Sunday, I slept all day. I didn't dream of her.

The cat didn't return. I tipped the remainder of the tin of cat food into the bowl and left it outside on the wall. Something came and ate it.

My mother rang to remind me that she and Molly were driving up the following weekend. Towards the day of their arrival, I stirred myself. I cleaned every surface in the flat and laid in a stock of food. I went to a chain store and bought



a pile of cheap, cheerful cushions and threw them onto the old sofa so that they appeared charmingly disarrayed. On Saturday afternoon after work, the day they were due to arrive, I brought home a big bunch of lilies, a cake from the bakery and a sketchbook and crayons for my little sister. I sat on the sofa with a cushion hugged to my chest, waiting.

## Chapter Nine

THE CAR CREPT into the driveway without me noticing. And they were suddenly there, standing at the door like people I'd dreamed about and forgotten. The *hereness* of them was a shock for me, because I had been so tied up with thoughts of Flynn.

*Here* was Molly's pale little face; *here* my sister's arms round my neck. *Here* my mother holding me close as if she did not want to let me go. She said, 'Hey, you're not crying, are you? Oh – come here, you silly girl ...'

Their things dumped in the middle of the floor. My mother's exclamations at the view. Molly bouncing on the sofa. The whole flurry of arrival.

'I should get a teapot,' I said, half to myself, as I dangled

teabags in two cups. *I should get a teapot and call it a crazy name.*

Flynn was everywhere and nowhere. She had sat on *that* chair, the one my mother now pulled out and was sitting in with her chin propped on her hand, her elbow on the table. Flynn had sat on *that* sofa where Molly sprawled, her face suffused in smiles ...

‘It’s so funny, Annie, seeing you here in your own place.’

I think I flashed a wary smile.

‘And are you okay? I mean, really?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I am.’

‘And you’ve made friends?’

‘Well, not really ...’

‘But someone arrived that time I called ...’

I shrugged. ‘More of an acquaintance, really.’ I wondered exactly what Flynn and I were to each other. If she decided she didn’t want to be with me, I didn’t see how we could ever be just friends.

At least I wouldn’t have to explain her to my mother.

The cat came in through the open door. Molly jumped up and cried out, ‘A kitty! Anna, there’s a lovely little kitty!’ Just as if it lived there, the cat rolled over to have its belly scratched.

‘Oh! Do you have a cat?’ My mother put down her cup and craned her neck to see.

‘No. It’s a stray ... at least ...’ I didn’t want to explain the on again-off again nature of my relationship with the cat, and edged it with my foot towards the door.

‘Don’t make it leave, Anna! I love it! And it loves me!’ Molly seized the cat and dragged it up off the floor so that it dangled in her arms.

So I relented and let it stay. Molly put it down and it rushed

at once to the place where its bowl had been and looked expectantly up at me, purring. So I went to the cupboard and opened the tin of cat food I'd bought while I was stocking up on everything else.

While the cat ate, I went to Molly, and took her face between my hands. It was such a pretty face, but her eyes were almost expressionless. 'Molly,' I said. 'Did you have a good trip?'

She nodded.

'We stayed in a motel last night, didn't we?' said my mother. 'That was fun! Wasn't it, Molly? Tell Anna about breakfast.'

Molly looked blank, then remembered. 'On a tray!'

'Yes. Little packets of cereal ... what did you have, Molly?'

'Cornflakes.' She allowed her head to loll to the side. I stroked the side of her face. I could hardly see the scars now, on her forehead and chin. They were just fine lines on the clear skin. 'I have a sketchbook for you,' I told her. 'And some crayons.'

'Draw with me, Anna!' said Molly. 'Draw with me!'

So I sat on the floor and drew with her while my mother fetched the rest of their things from the car, inflated the airbeds she'd brought and made them up in one of the spare rooms. And the cat came purring round us and flopped down onto the paper; Molly pushed it away, but it kept coming back.

The next day I took my mother and Molly to a market, and there, among the rainbow flags and the milling crowds of people, I thought for one second that I saw Flynn. I felt a pain stab somewhere inside me – I looked again, hoping and fearing it was her. But it wasn't, and I felt ill with disappointment.

At a potter's stall, my mother stroked a teapot with a glossy black glaze and green stripes and murmured, 'You said you

should get a teapot – how about I buy you this one? It's rather lovely, don't you think?'

I did think, and caressed the cool, smooth glaze. 'It is beautiful, but I don't really need a teapot,' I said.

I couldn't explain to my mother that it wasn't the right sort of teapot, the sort of Flynn-like teapot you could laugh gently at, and in any case, I didn't really want a teapot, I wanted Flynn.

That night, Molly lay with me on my bed while I read to her, which only meant showing her pictures in a book and talking about them. It's unlikely that Molly will ever read Dostoyevsky. I wondered if it was such an advantage to be able to read all those complicated novels, if you could not be happy. And Molly seemed to be happy.

She fell asleep on my bed. 'Let her stay,' I told my mother, when she came to pick her up and take her to her own bed. I wanted the closeness and companionship of another human being breathing beside me, and I loved Molly. I was surprised how much I had missed her.

During the night there was a certain amount of clashing about of limbs and meeting of foreheads, because Molly was a restless sleeper, and so was I. Finally, I fell into a dreamless sleep, and woke with someone holding me by the hand, staring into my face. For one blissful moment I imagined it was Flynn, before realising that the hand was far too childish and small.

That was the week I got to know my mother; I began to stand back a little and see her as a separate person. And in a funny way I think it made me love her more, seeing her as separate from myself.

She had grown thinner, these last couple of years, and allowed her hair to go grey. But it was nicely cut, as ever. My mother had always had a certain comfortable elegance. In winter she'd wear a neat wool coat with big buttons down the front, and stylish boots, and a close-fitting hat. She was the kind of mother who stopped off at a smart bakery on the way home and bought good sourdough bread. And then in summer she'd be in crisp pants and top and fashionable sandals, not looking at all hot and bothered in the dry heat. It was all part of the way she coped, like standing up for Molly, making sure Molly got the help she needed at school – that was all part of her.

Now she stood wiping down the sink in my kitchen, keeping an eye on Molly playing outside with the cat. She'd bought a sarong one day when she and Molly went to the beach while I was at work, and was wearing it tied up underneath her armpits, leaving her shoulders bare. They were slightly burnt, freckled shoulders. And her feet were bare; they were freckled, sturdy feet, quite pretty really. I imagined her wearing the sarong in the garden on a Canberra summer evening.

My mother glanced once more out the window towards Molly and said, 'I thought you should know – Morgan's pregnant. Your father hasn't said anything about it to you, has he?' She turned to me and wiped her damp hands on the sarong. Her face looked strained.

'No,' I said. I was flabbergasted, and I didn't want to know, really. I willed my mother not to go on.

But she did. She said, 'And you know – I don't really care. I thought I would, but I don't. I think the caring's gone right out of me.' She laughed. But it was a laugh without any humour. She spoke to me the way I had heard her talking to her friends –

with candour, and a kind of tough, womanly resignation.

‘Does Molly know?’

‘Not yet. It barely shows. She’ll have to know soon. But *he* can tell her. I mean, it’s *his* business, not mine.’

I finished putting crockery away in the cupboard.

She said, ‘How do you feel about it?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ I told her truthfully. ‘But I suppose I don’t really care, either.’ I couldn’t help imagining, though, what this new sibling, this new *half* sibling, would be like. This new brother or sister.

The time flew, and by the end of the week they seemed to have always been there.

My mother and I cooked together each night, talking, it sometimes seemed, like old friends. And yet I didn’t tell my mother about Flynn. I couldn’t talk to her about what had been happening to me. She said, one evening, stopping what she’d been doing and looking at me with an odd smile, ‘You know, Annie, sometimes I never really know what you’re thinking.’

I looked back at her. I could have laughed it off, and said that there was absolutely nothing going on in my head, that everything about me was perfectly straightforward. But that would have been a lie, and both she and I would know it. I looked into her eyes honestly, but I said nothing.

And it occurred to me that my mother was not telling me everything either, that she was putting on a brave face (as she always had, especially since Molly had been born). And perhaps this was what people did, mothers and daughters, and friends, and probably even lovers as well.

## *Chapter Ten*

**A**LL I COULD think about was Flynn. When the bookshop closed at Saturday lunchtime, I felt drawn towards the stairs to her flat, but knew I could not walk up them. Apart from anything else, I had a certain amount of pride. I wondered how much, and felt faint at the thought of putting it to the test.

On the way home I avoided walking past the café where she worked, in case she was there and I caught sight of her. Seeing her again was something that I longed for, and dreaded. Because what if she had decided against me?

And then, after all my longing and trepidation, as though she'd been conjured up simply by my desire to see her, Flynn arrived at my flat that evening. She stood at the door as though



she'd never been away, her face bright, not even awkward or ashamed that she'd gone away and left me hanging. Without her eyes leaving my face, she put out her hand, and her fingers touched my lips.

She looked surprised to find my mother there, but recovered with aplomb. I could not breathe, and stood awkwardly, introducing Flynn to my family.

'Flynn,' said my mother. 'That's an unusual name.'

'It's Rose, really.'

'Oh, that's pretty ...'

'Believe me, I'm more of a Flynn.' She smiled ruefully, but she did not elaborate or explain.

She smiled across at me, and it was a smile full of promises and secrets. She had gone away to think about us, and now she must have gathered her thoughts. Her face told me she wanted to be with me; it was impossible that she had decided otherwise. I looked away, because I wanted to take her face in my hands. I wanted to lie down at her feet, though by rights I should have struck her across the face and demanded an explanation of her behaviour.

Instead I offered a glass of wine, but she declined and asked for water. She appeared thinner, and browner, her face more grave; she was lovely, as poised as a tiger. It seemed impossible that this creature had come back for me.

We sat down. Nursing the glass from which she had not drunk, Flynn leaned forward in her chair and asked my mother how she'd enjoyed her holiday. She chatted to Molly about the cat, and it seemed no time at all before she said that she must go.

'Call round and see me,' she said shyly, as she left. She waved

her hand awkwardly from hip level, the hand that I must not, for now, touch.

I followed her out to the car. With my mother safely inside, in the cover of darkness I put out my hand and touched her face. When my hand reached her mouth, she took my fingers softly between her teeth and bit them. I pinched her on the back of the neck, playfully. Then, wanting to punish her, I pinched harder, and she slapped me away. We glared at each other. How much I hated and loved her at that moment!

‘That was a nice girl,’ said my mother.

‘Yes,’ I replied, not able to look her in the eye.

I wondered if she could see how I burned.

They left very early next morning, just as the sun was coming up. Molly was an early riser anyway, and my mother wanted to get a large part of the distance covered before they stopped at a motel for the night.

I wiped a tear as the car pulled away. And then thought with relief and guilt that nothing prevented me from going to Flynn at once. I wanted so much to see her, but to run to her place straight after saying goodbye to my family would be like saying that I had wanted them gone. And my pride stood in the way as well. She’d left me hanging on in agony for what had seemed like an aeon, and I didn’t want to be at her beck and call.

I went back inside, and the place was empty and lonely. I washed up the few breakfast dishes. There was no bedding to deal with as they’d taken it away with them.

I fought a battle between anger and longing. My flat felt as

barren as a wasteland. Someone might have died there.

I stared out through the windows, and sat all day watching the shadows move across the room. Finally, when I could bear it no longer, I got up and showered, automatically dressing in something I could wear to work the next morning.

And I walked down the hill to the town, in the twilight, in the red light of a summer evening, in the crow-cawing evening, with the setting sun pinking the clouds, to the purple staircase, the shadowy purple staircase to her flat.

## PART TWO

This page intentionally left blank

## Chapter One

**B**UT BEFORE FLYNN, before nearly everything, there is Michael. There is Michael, there is *Finnegans Wake*, there is my mother and Molly, my father and Josh. There is Morgan. There is a girl in a diaphanous dress.

But to begin at this particular moment: I am experiencing something close to bliss. I am sixteen, and browsing in a second-hand bookshop in our suburb.

The shop's in Canberra's inner north, part of a villagey shopping centre with a park in front and at the rear. Down the laneway that leads between the two parks, the narrow shop stretches halfway up the lane, its windows offering views of the maze-like arrangement of shelves inside. It's the most

higgledy-piggledy shop I've ever seen. Everything is in categories, but books are only roughly alphabetical, only barely shelved. Little piles of books lie in abandon everywhere, and finding one you want is like a lucky dip.

LITERATURE is right at the back. I lean against the glass, warmed by the early afternoon autumn light. I am filled with bliss because I've discovered a fat, barely thumbed book called *Finnegans Wake*.

*riverrun* is the way it starts – I always like to see how a book begins and ends – and the incomplete last sentence of the book appears to form the beginning of the first. That is, if this book could be said to have sentences by the usual definition, or indeed be *about* anything. But the language makes sense in a rhythmic, nonsensical way, and this matter of making sense and yet not at the same time has me hooked. You could have fun with a book like this. I have the feeling that this book might contain everything in the world. So I lean my head and shoulder against the warm glass of the shop window and read.

*riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay ...*

Michael comes up to the window and waves at me, but I am barely conscious of him, only of a darkness on the other side of the glass.

And then he appears next to me, though I am still so taken by the book that I'm only aware of the toggles of his coat at eye level, and the faint odour of mothballs. He is wearing his father's black duffle coat from thirty years ago, and a button that says, DON'T PANIC.

'Have you found something?' he whispers.

I check in my purse. 'D'you have five dollars?' And he rummages in his trousers.

We take the book up to the front, where a tall man with glasses and a myopic gaze sits like a bear in a cave behind a huge desk covered with books and papers. The book is eleven dollars, but he charges only ten, and I give the remaining dollar to Michael when we get outside. We go to the park behind the shopping centre and throw ourselves on the ground. I open the book.

*riverrun ...*



## *Chapter Two*

**I**F THERE WAS a time before Michael, I've forgotten it. No, that isn't exactly true, but it seems my life proper only started once I met him.

We were eleven, and at an educational weekend for gifted children, though not in the same group most of the time. We happened to sit near each other at lunch out under the trees, neither of us used to feeling at ease with others. I liked his pale face and floppy fair hair, his big glasses, and the neatly practical way he consumed his lunch. He was one of those fearsomely bright children who made me feel blessedly average.

Was it then, or a bit later (surely it was later) that he said to me, 'Anyway, everyone's different in their own little way.'

The words had a kind of confidence, and were said brightly

and lightly, but they held hurt and uncertainty, and a hidden story of not belonging. Hearing them, I almost wanted to cry, because they held out a kind of hope to me. I had always been different, without really knowing why. I only knew that I would never fit in.

We became friends. It turned out that though we went to different schools, we lived only streets apart. This meant we were almost neighbours, though as I pointed out to Michael, ‘streets apart’ also meant to be far removed from something.

I loved going down the deserted suburban streets with their avenues of trees to his house, because I knew when I got there there’d be companionship, and interesting conversations. I’d go round the back, knock on his window, and clamber in. It was easier than going to the front door, because I didn’t have to encounter his parents, who took far too much interest in me. They were the kind of people who needed to know everything, and Michael and I most emphatically didn’t want to tell them, though we didn’t get up to anything much.

In many ways he and I didn’t speak the same language. I had to translate his scientific way of looking at the world into my metaphorical one. He knew things that I could never even begin to understand. And yet it was as though we were two sides to the same coin, different, yet welded together.

On the day of *Finnegans Wake* we stretched out on the grass in the park in perfect ease. It was thin, wiry grass like a thread-bare carpet, and the earth showed through. Fallen leaves lay everywhere, brown, crunchy ones from the year before, and newer drifts of wine-red ones. The ground was cool; it was not quite winter, but everything spoke of it – the pale, thin

sunlight, and the sulphur-crested cockatoos that screeched at the top of the tall pine trees, and the icy fragrance of trodden leaves that made your nostrils thrill and contract.

‘Show me this book then,’ said Michael, taking it from my fingers and opening it at random. He read aloud: *‘To sum, borus pew notus pew eurus pew zipher. Ace deuce, tricks, quarts, quims. Mumtiplay of course and carry to their whole number. While on the other hand, traduced by their comedy nominator to the loaferst terms for their aloquent parts, sexes, suppers, oglers, novels and dice.’*

He laughed, and his chest shook with mirth. ‘I like it! I think I’ll take this problem to my mathematics lecturer.’

I grabbed it back. ‘Get your own copy.’

‘It is! Half, anyway.’

‘Four tenths.’

‘Aha! You *can* do maths! When you want to. But seriously, do you think everything in life should be traduced to the lowest comedy nominator? Discuss.’

He was only sixteen, but he was in his first year of university. I was in Year Twelve, and it was the first-term break. Less than two months into his course of study, Michael had gained a new confidence, perhaps because for the first time in his life he wasn’t the smartest person in the class. And with this confidence he had suddenly become beautiful, though I could see that he wasn’t aware of it yet.

‘But what does it all *mean*?’ I asked him, as he took the book from me again and started to read it.

After a while he pronounced, ‘I don’t think it’s meant to mean anything. It’s pure music. I think it’s meant to make you laugh.’

It was cold on the ground, so we stood up and brushed the leaves from our clothing. I took up my new book and kissed it. *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce. I knew I had found a new, beloved friend, one that promised many hours of happy reading.

But that day, the one I later thought of as *the day of Finnegans Wake*, also became the day when everything in my life changed.

## Chapter Three

IF SOMEONE WHO knew us had been asked to describe my family, they might have said, 'comfortable'. Because isn't that the way people describe families who have enough money, seemingly enough of everything (though what that *everything* might be I could not say) not to worry?

We lived in a lovely house in a pleasant old suburb. It was a house full of paintings and flowers and piano music (my father taught painting at a college, and my mother piano, part-time). There was comfortable clutter; it was a house where books lay in piles next to chairs, or on coffee tables, and shells and seed-pods were arrayed along windowsills. The kitchen seemed always to have a few bowls in the sink, and a cake cooling on the bench, and bowls of fruit made prettier by the addition of

a couple of pomegranates from the garden, or a dragon fruit from the greengrocer.

But ever since I was very young I'd seen myself as a kind of interloper, a stranger who had come from somewhere and inveigled her way into the family. One day, they would have to find out what I was really like.

That was why meeting Michael had been such a blessing. He was also *different in his own little way*. Increasingly, home became a sort of stopping-over place for me. My real life was lived inside my own head, or with Michael, while we roamed around the city and suburbs looking at things, or talking, or simply being together.

On the day that I came home with *Finnegans Wake*, I had the house to myself. I went to the kitchen and took a stash of home-made biscuits from the tin, and went to my room, where I dipped into the strange, intoxicating world of the new book. I heard my family come home; first my mother with Molly (Mum put her head round my door to check on me – she *never* knocked!), and then I heard my brother, Josh, pull up on his motorbike, and soon after loud music burst from his room. I rapped on the wall for him to be quiet and he rapped back, but did not turn down the sound. Just before the time we usually had dinner, I heard my mother and father conferring in the hallway.

And then they called me from my room.

Everyone sat on sofas in the living room, and the air was full of tension. Josh sat staring into space, as though waiting for an unwelcome appointment, and Molly, who was only five, sat on Mum's lap, her face vacant.

'We've called you together ...' said my father, clearing his

throat and staring into the air, sounding frighteningly like someone convening a meeting. And then he seemed to forget what he was going to say, and looked at the floor.

‘We need to tell you something,’ my mother said quickly and nervously, looking at Josh and me. She hugged Molly closer to her. My parents sat on opposite sides of the room. ‘And we need to tell you together.’ Mum stared across at Dad, willing him to look at her. He took up the cue to speak, but still would not face her.

He said, as though he’d rehearsed it, ‘We ... I mean, I ... am moving out of the house ... we’re separating.’

‘Tell them why,’ said my mother, in a challenging voice. Molly couldn’t really have understood, but must have picked up on the tension. She gave a puzzled cry, and Mum took hold of her head gently, and kissed her.

Our father still would not look any of us in the face.

‘I ... that is ...’ Then he threw the words at us as though he couldn’t get them out quickly enough. ‘I’ve met someone – I’m going to live with her ... her name is—’

He stopped. I wanted him to go on, but perhaps he thought the name of this person he was leaving us for wasn’t important.

He sat there with his palms out loose and beseeching on his thighs. My father was a tall man, as muscular and lean as a drover, still handsome. I adored him.

‘Is that all, then?’ said Josh dismissively. He got up and went to his room, his head high, the set of his shoulders like that of someone bearing up to pain. His door banged, and he put on his music again, turned up loud.

In a swift, impulsive movement, my father moved across the

floor and knelt in front of Molly, cupping her face in her hands. 'Sweetheart,' he said. 'I can't live here with you anymore. But I love you. It's not because of you.'

'Can't live here!' snorted Mum derisively. 'And she doesn't understand.'

My father's face was filled with such pain. He was, in effect, also kneeling in front of my mother, but he was looking only at Molly. I got to my feet and headed for the door.

'Anna?' he pleaded.

I turned round. 'You've said all you need to, and I don't want to talk about it.'

I went to my room and cried.

I heard my father's car leaving, and Molly wailing in her bedroom, my mother comforting her.

When my mother came in, offering words and soup, I shrugged my shoulders and said I was fine, in a cool little voice designed to shut her out.

No one ate dinner that night.

I burrowed into my new book, remembering the bliss of its discovery only hours before. Perhaps it had been sent my way for a reason. It might have something to tell me.

Opening it at random, I read:

O

*tell me all about*

*Anna Livia! I want to hear all*

*about Anna Livia.*

And it was comforting and anaesthetising to lose myself in that book, the day of *Finnegans Wake*, the day my father left us.



## Chapter Four

OVER THE NEXT few months, my feelings about what had happened changed. At first I thought that the rift in our family had occurred precisely because we *were* so smug and comfortable – a kind of comeuppance. And then I realised we had never been comfortable at all. It had all been a façade. I blamed each of us in turn; but oddly, for a long time I didn't think to blame my father.

At first I took it all upon myself. It was *all my fault*. My secret self had caused cracks to appear in the fabric of our lives. I was the cuckoo in the nest, pretending all the time to be one of the family, when all along I was an oddity. For years I'd distanced myself from them, sneaked away at midnight to spend the night at Michael's place, tucked top-to-tail in his bed.

Then I blamed Molly. Nothing had been the same since she was born, a late baby, beautiful and yet damaged. Molly wasn't so difficult in herself. She didn't scream or run away or make scenes as many children with learning problems apparently did. She was just vague and vacant and slow; not all there. There were obviously many things she would never be able to do. Even so, in my opinion my mother worried about her too much. There were countless times I hated my little sister. *She gets all the attention!* I screamed at my mother when Molly was only a toddler. *Nobody ever thinks about me!*

If that makes me seem cruel and selfish, I was. But just because Molly had 'special needs' didn't mean that I had none.

And then there was Josh. All he thought about was his band, and his girlfriend – whichever one was current. He didn't seem to keep them long. Very often he didn't even bother going to the music course that he was meant to be doing. Our parents were so easy on him – they just let him loaf, while I, who was meant to be the clever one, bore the weight of their huge expectations. I felt the pressure to do well at school, go to uni and be academically brilliant, and presumably get some impressive job.

So I stewed away in the weeks after my father left. Finally (and perhaps most) I blamed my mother. She'd only ever had time for Molly these last five years, so no wonder Dad had found love in the arms of another woman. I heard my mother going on to her friends about it – they all rallied round her in supportive rage and righteous indignation. The New Woman (and sometimes they called her the Bimbo) was only twenty-seven, one of his students. Almost twenty years younger than him!

I overheard my mother say that he had told her he needed to find himself, and concentrate on his painting. 'As though we were holding him back!' she sobbed. 'Blaming us! Putting it all back onto us!' She didn't even seem to care that I might be standing on the other side of the door hearing everything, all that outpouring of anger and grief she'd concealed from me, pretending to cope, as though I was still a child.

'And look at the way I supported him while he was an art student! The shitty jobs I did. All those years down the drain – for nothing!'

I crept away, crushed and hurt. I wondered if my mother meant that she'd also wasted her life on us.

All my father's things disappeared from the house. He'd used the garage as a painting studio, and that emptied out too. One day I came home and it was all gone, the completed canvases that had been stacked against the wall, and the ones in progress, the paints and brushes and boards used as a palette, the paint-stained rags, all the paraphernalia of him. All that remained was the smell of paint and cleaning fluid, and dollops of colour all over the floor.

Michael and I had made the part of Canberra where we lived our own. We were as territorial as magpies or cats, and roamed with abandon, walking down the middle of streets beneath canopies of red leaves, crunching acorns beneath our feet. Once, falling behind to do up a shoelace, I saw what a solitary figure Michael was – a tall boy in a dark coat, who turned around in surprise when he realised I was no longer beside him. I ran to catch up, but it had been interesting to observe him on his own, the long dark streak of him beneath

the sheltering branches. In the streets filled with boxy houses there was seldom anyone about, so it felt as though we were the last people in the world.

After my father left, I hurled myself into the book I'd bought on the day of his leaving. I began to read it aloud with a newfound angry energy. I opened it at random and read it to Michael. He'd been the one who had *got* it first.

He got that it was like a piece of music, that it helped if you read it aloud, or sang it. That you didn't need to start at the beginning, you just found a word or phrase you liked and dived in, and were carried along like a river.

'It's Dr Seuss for grownups,' he explained to me.

Together we wrote in it, and drew pictures in the margins, and carried it through the streets chanting it and singing it. We wandered through grassy wastelands at the back of houses, along stormwater drains, and reclined on unwanted couches dumped beside bus stops or in parks.

Each of us had found a character we could pretend to be.

I was Anna Livia Plurabelle:

O

*tell me all about*

*Anna Livia! I want to hear all*

*about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You'll die when you hear.*

And Michael was Michael Arklow:

*... a local heremite, Michael Arklow was his riverend name, (with*

*many a sigh I aspersed his lavabibs!) and one venersderg in junojuly, oso sweet and so cool and so limber she looked, Nance the Nixie, Nanon L'Escaut, in the silence of the sycomores, all listening, the kindling curves you can't stop feeling, he plunged both of his newly anointed hands, the core of his cushlas, in her singimari saffron strumens of hair, parting them and soothing her and mingling it, that was deepdark and ample like the red bog at sundown.*

So much to heart did we commit the words that we would casually recite them in idle moments.

'O tell me all about Anna Livia! I want to know – all – about – Anna Livia!' Michael would chant.

'... Michael Arklow was his riverend name ...' I would respond.

We were strange and unknowable to anyone but each other.

Our suburb ran along the base of Mt Ainslie, a dry, scrubby area of bush with a lookout and a marker light at the top, one of the city's landmarks. You could enter the bush there from anywhere at the back of the houses that bordered the park area, not just on the designated walking trails. There were secret paths through the scrub, known only to certain locals. It was wonderful to have this wild, desolate area at our doorstep, and Michael and I went there often, tramping across the grey, discarded limbs of gum trees, crunching through dead leaves, or sitting watching the magpies, the only spots of intense contrast, patrol the patches of faded ground. Sometimes what I thought to be the trunk of a fallen tree would turn out to be a grey kangaroo, reclining, and we'd turn away so as not to disturb it.

Once, we took off our clothes and sat in the thin sunlight on one of the lesser-known paths, to feel what it was like to be entirely naked out in the open, under the immense, all-seeing blue sky. I watched the light play across Michael's freckled shoulders like gauze. We heard someone coming, but were so mesmerised by sitting that we didn't bother to move. Soon, two elderly women walkers came past and said *good afternoon* cheerfully, as though it was unexceptional to find a pair of naked teenagers on the path.

We took to walking up Mt Ainslie at night, lit only by a hazy moon. There we could sit and watch the constellations of lights marking the roads, the moving patterns of cars, and the softer, intimate glow of houses. There were huge floodlit areas marking the Australian War Memorial and Parliament House and Anzac Parade, all precisely and frighteningly lined up so there was an unimpeded view between them.

Michael talked to me about Walter Burley Griffin, the American architect who had designed Canberra; I switched off a little, as I felt that I'd heard it all in school. But Michael was interested in the mathematics of it. He told me about the use of the *vesica piscia* in the design, which was an ancient geometric concept, a pointed, oval-shaped space created by intersecting circles, a fishlike symbol of the intersection of the material and spiritual worlds (though for some reason, while he told me this, I remembered a nature program I'd seen on cormorants in China, which had been trained to fish; I kept thinking of the lines put round their throats to keep them from swallowing the fish they'd caught).

There was a theory, Michael said, that the planning of Canberra had some esoteric secret buried in it. 'There are

secrets everywhere,' I retorted. I could have been referring to Parliament House, sitting off in the distance, where our politicians often conceal the truth from us.

I could also have meant the comfortable suburban homes – ours – that lay at the foot of the hill.

## *Chapter Five*

**M**Y FATHER COLLECTED Molly and me from home one Saturday morning and took us to his new place for the first time. Josh would not come with us. He had moved into the garage soon after our father left; it was his way of announcing that he was taking more independence for himself. He was nineteen and, as well as his studies, he had a job in a coffee shop in the city. He said he was saving to go into a share house.

As the car pulled up outside my father's rented house I tried to summon a feeling of reluctance. But the truth was, I longed to see where he lived and spend time with him. I missed him as bitterly as my mother did, but without feeling her anger.

The house was one of those small, narrow, brick and fibro



places, without much of a garden, and with old rolled-up newspapers rotting on the tussocky grass. But I'd heard my father complain it was expensive for all that, now he was supporting two households.

The woman he'd left us for was called Morgan, a name that I knew meant 'morning'. The only Morgan I'd ever known was a girl at my school who was dark-haired and bossy, and somehow that was the sort of person I had expected. So when I met this Morgan, my expectations were overthrown.

'Anna ... hello,' she said, moving forward with an uncertain expression on her face. She shook my hand; she looked as nervous as I was, but her touch was firm. As her hand slid from mine it was like something ineffable slipping from my grasp.

Later, I was to learn that the habitual expression on her face was one of innate surprise. And she was so lovely to look at that it quietly took my breath away. She had clear skin, wore no make-up, and was casually dressed in old jeans and a striped top that looked just right. Her bare feet had beautiful toenails painted all different colours. Her long blonde hair looked as though she'd cut it herself: the fringe was all crooked. I could tell that I wasn't what Morgan had expected either. Both of us were a little shy with the other.

Of course my father would have given Morgan the run-down on Molly, to account for her special needs, but what had he told her about me? Would he have said, *my difficult daughter ... my clever daughter*? I couldn't imagine, and it made me realise how little I really knew my father.

'Can I get you something to drink?' Morgan asked. 'Molly, I've heard that you like chocolate milk?'

Molly clapped her hands, as she did when she was happy, and allowed Morgan to lead her into the kitchen.

Then Morgan made me a cup of coffee, and asked me about my final year at school, and commiserated at how everyone made such a fuss about it.

‘It’s not the end of the world if you don’t get the marks you want,’ she said. ‘I ended up taking time off for a while, went back and did a course I hated, and now I’m studying something I really love.’ She glanced at my father as she said this, but there was nothing flirtatious or ambiguous in it.

My father showed me round the house. There was a spare room if Molly or I wanted to stay over, and a bedroom for my father and Morgan with just a double mattress on the floor, and cushions everywhere, and beautiful pieces of cloth hanging on the walls. There was a room for Morgan to work in; it contained a desk and books and all sorts of strange and lovely things she’d collected – masks from all over the world, various body parts of porcelain dolls, Japanese fabric, and handmade paper. I could have lingered there for hours. My father had the garage as his studio, but it didn’t look nearly as lived-in yet as the old one had. There wasn’t much furniture – my father had only taken his personal possessions.

Morgan chatted to me while she showed Molly how to make animals with coloured pipe cleaners and painted her toenails the same colours as her own. My father joined in our conversation from time to time, looking pleased and happy that we were there. He went out to shop for food, leaving us alone with Morgan. Molly scarcely noticed he was gone, and when he came back, loaded up with stuff that we never ate at home – prepared pasta and sauces, baked beans, and chocolate

biscuits – I glanced at him shyly. This was my father – my new father, my old father – and I had to get to know him again.

Driving home with him, Morgan having seen us off at the door, I felt surprised and rather shocked. I had been prepared to hate the new woman in my father's life. What I hadn't expected was to fall in love with her.

There followed a period of conflicting loyalties. My mother would ask about my visits, and I feigned indifference, or even scorn, but they were the glittering centre of interest in my life.

'What did you have for dinner? my mother would ask.

'Tinned spaghetti on toast.'

'Oh. Doesn't she cook?'

'I don't think so.'

'Oh, that's a *shame* ...'

My mother's sarcasm rankled. She was an excellent cook. My father and Morgan ate takeaways, or stuff from tins, or bacon and eggs. Lots of things on toast.

I vowed to do the same. Why spend time cooking? Stuff on toast was fine.

The first time Morgan touched me I almost swooned. The word *swooned* came to me as I closed my eyes and felt the world falling away. I went home and looked the word up; the computer's dictionary described it as to be overwhelmed by happiness, excitement, adoration, or infatuation, to experience a sudden and usually brief loss of consciousness.

And all Morgan had done was to touch my hand. We were standing at the kitchen sink. 'Anna, look at that,' she

said, indicating a tree in the backyard filled with blossom, its branches dancing in the wind.

Her hand was soft and warm; she left it there, in no hurry to take it away. I could tell she was used to touching people. I was to find that she did it often, casually and apparently unconsciously.

The first time Josh went to visit Dad in the new place, I went out to the garage when he got back.

‘What did you think of Morgan?’ I asked, standing at the door. Josh never invited me to enter, and I didn’t have enough confidence to barge in.

Josh looked up. ‘Oh ... she’s all right,’ he said indifferently. I turned away with a smile. So Josh was smitten, too – *smitten*: past participle of *smite*, to hit somebody or something hard; to affect somebody strongly or disastrously (*archaic or literary*) (*often passive*); to fill somebody with love or longing (*humorous or archaic or literary*) (*often passive*).

The house was only a few streets away. I took to calling round when my father wasn’t home, hoping to find Morgan there. One day she opened the door with a pair of scissors in her hand.

‘Oh, Anna, you’ve arrived at just the right time. I’m cutting my hair, and it’s so hard to do the back.’ She made me feel more than welcome, and despite my protests that I was no good with scissors, we went to the back yard and Morgan instructed me on what to do. I lifted the hair from the back of her neck, closed my eyes and breathed in the scent of her.

‘Don’t be timid,’ she said. ‘Just hack away. Nothing’s irrevocable.’

'You haven't seen how much damage I can do,' I said.

'I trust you,' she said, making me blush. I blush easily; it's one of the things I hate about myself.

I cut and cut at Morgan's hair, darting around the front every so often to see how it looked, and every time I did I encountered her smile. She surveyed the result in the hand mirror, and then went to the bathroom and snipped a bit more off herself, and then she was done.

'Could you do mine?' I asked.

'I don't know if I'd dare. Your mother might kill me.'

'She might kill you anyway.' And we laughed.

'Oh, very well,' she said, in a mock grumbling tone. 'If you insist.'

'I'd like it really short. And sort of scrappy, like someone's chewed it off.'

'Are you sure? It's *such* a beautiful colour, it seems a shame.'

'It'll still be a beautiful colour – there just won't be so much of it.' I was sick of having it long. 'Anyway, nothing's irrevocable.'

'At least where hair's concerned.'

I wanted to sit there all day with Morgan combing and clipping, her hands brushing against my skin. In the end, she didn't cut it extremely short, but made a shapely bob, layered at the back and cut up into the nape of my neck. Too soon it was finished, and I had to make my way home.

'I didn't know you were going to the hairdresser,' said my mother.

'D'you like it?'

'Suits you. Should have done it like that ages ago.'

I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, even

though Morgan and I had already examined the haircut from every possible angle. I liked the way the hair at the front curved beautifully to my chin, making a frame for my face. And in profile, the cut-away at the back accentuated my long neck and made me look quite regal. For the first time in my life I looked into the mirror and knew that I looked lovely.

I looked like a person that someone could fall in love with.

Closing my eyes, I leaned my forehead against the cold glass, remembering the warm, thrilling touch of Morgan's hands on my shoulders.

## *Chapter Six*

**T**HAT WINTER, AS the richly coloured leaves of autumn mounded brown in the gutters, and the bare gardens struggled in the frosty, dry air, my mood changed. My crush on Morgan became a cause of disgust with myself – it was so stupid and childish, worse than an unrequited and impossible love for someone my own age. I started to avoid going around to my father's place, and I hated being at home as well.

I felt angry a lot of the time, and to fit my mood, I now dressed entirely in black. Old black clothes, faded, smelly things found in op shops: black wool skirts, black cotton blouses with buttons coming off, black jumpers unravelling at the elbows. Black suited the season, and my mood. I even dyed my hair black. To my annoyance, my mother had told me that

the colour didn't suit my skin tones, that I had a redhead's skin. When I looked in the mirror I secretly agreed, though I would never have told her so.

My change in mood affected even my friendship with Michael. As usual, I would appear at the window of his room at all hours, clamber in, and lie on his bed without a word. When I wouldn't talk, he'd sit and hold my hand. He stroked me, the way you would a cat, but I could feel my body remain tense. It was impossible for me to soften. I was simply incapable of it.

One night, obviously fed up with the way I was behaving, he said, 'Anna, what's the *matter* with you?'

'The matter? There's no matter.'

And I flung myself off his bed and stomped out of the house, not worrying that I was probably waking his parents.

I saw pain everywhere, and developed a bitter way of looking at the world. Canberra in winter was cold and inhospitable. I saw a young man stumbling in the city, searching in the pockets of his torn coat for change, spilling the few pathetic coins all over the ground. His eyes were red, and his skin thin and as dry as sandpaper. Who was there to love him? A man with a racking cough begged on the pavement with a tin in front of him; when I dropped in a few coins I could not look at him when he thanked me. In the newspaper, it was reported that a man had died somewhere up on the slopes of Mt Ainslie. He had built himself a shelter out of stones, moving them around at night so he wouldn't be seen. He had lived there for years, and died in his lonely hut.

I felt that the entire world was black. I began to read Dostoyevsky – *Crime and Punishment*. It had a black cover.



With a young man dressed in a black coat. And even though the picture was from an old painting, he looked as though he could have been a student now. With his scraggy beard and haunted eyes, he could have been the young man I'd seen in the city.

I took a job in a bookshop, to save towards the next year when I would go to uni. My mother reminded me that this was my HSC year, but it had been so disrupted anyway I couldn't care less.

I loved to handle the books. I relished their predictable oblong squareness, so similar and yet so different, their individual smells, the various cover designs and textures, and the secret power I had of placing the books I liked best face-out in the shelves, even though the manager often came along and asked me to change the display over to the best-sellers.

When I went to work I wore my most presentable-looking black clothes, and long black boots and black tights. Working in the bookshop almost dispelled my gloom. It almost made me forget how unlovable I was, that I would never be loved, that there'd never be a person in the whole world who would ever look at me in *that* way.

When spring arrived, my mood grew even worse.

My grandmother said, 'I'm worried about you, Anna.'

This was my mother's mother. She was a doctor, a retired GP, and divorced herself. Her ex-husband, my grandfather, had been dead for years. She lived in a house close by with a beautiful garden, *all my own work*, she proudly told people. She was stout and old. There was something about her glasses and old-fashioned hairstyle that spoke of grim determination. She'd

never been a cuddly grandmother. When I was small, she had taken me onto her solid, practical lap and I had not wanted to repeat the experience.

I told her, 'Worry about Mum. Worry about Molly. I need to go and study.'

The final year of high school was meant to be a difficult one, and who was I to confound people's expectations?

It all came to a head at the party held each spring by some friends of my parents. There was always a band, and people brought food and drink to share.

I said I'd go, because my mother insisted I needed a break from study, and because Josh's band was going to be playing. I could see that my mother wanted someone to go with. Molly was visiting my father that day by herself – I stayed home, saying that I needed to work, but really it was because my father and Morgan made me so angry. They were obviously happy with each other – sometimes I think they flaunted it. But what about what they had done to *us*?

Josh's band had started to play, and I sat on a blanket spread out under a tree with my mother and a few of her friends, taking a few sips from her glass of wine and listening to the music. I looked across at my mother – Ruth, her name is – and Ruth raised her glass and smiled into my eyes. And really, my mother looked very pretty and young; she was starting to enjoy herself again. I could see that the bitterness was beginning to seep away.

Into all this, like gatecrashers into our lives, stepped my father and Morgan. Morgan looked embarrassingly as though she could be his daughter. And holding Morgan's hand, as

though she belonged to her, was Molly – smiling, innocent, beautiful Molly.

I stood up as though I'd been stung, and heard my mother say my name, pleadingly.

But I couldn't stop myself. I walked straight to my father and demanded, 'What do you think *you're* doing here?'

'Why – I come to this party every year. Stephanie and Pete are my friends.' He said it uneasily, but laughed, trying to make light of it.

'But you must have known Mum would be here! If you ask me, you have a bloody hide. You and your ...'

People were staring at us, but I didn't care. When I look back on it all, I wouldn't have minded so much if they hadn't come flaunting Molly like that. *Did he have to let Morgan come in bloody well holding her by the hand?*

'You don't care what you did to us – to Mum, and Molly, and me – even Josh has suffered. You're hateful!' I spat out. My head felt woozy and light; I thought I might be sick all over them.

Molly started to cry.

I heard Morgan drawl, 'Anna, grow up.'

As though *she* was so mature and sophisticated, stealing our father like that!

My hand shot out and slapped her in the face.

I fled before I burst into tears. I went to Michael's place. No one was home, but I let myself in through his window, and crawled into his bed, pulled the covers up over my head, and cried so much I thought I'd die.

## Chapter Seven

NOT LONG AFTER the drama of the backyard party came the horror of the HSC. As everyone expected, and despite the disruption of my parents' separation, I did extremely well. A lot of people at my school went away after the exams, but I stayed in Canberra.

Michael and I continued to prowl our territory like restless animals, and after the long, parched days, we lay about on the dusty ground in parks and listened to the earth tick over. The city seemed to sit so lightly and provisionally on the land; the earth below it was so close, the film of civilisation so thin, that it was not like living in a city at all, but in an imaginary place that might disappear without notice. Sometimes I lay with my head on Michael's belly and listened to *him* tick over;

he seemed as elemental and necessary to me as the world.

‘What I’m really scared of,’ I confessed to him one night, ‘is that I’ll go through the whole of my life alone, without anyone to love me.’ I said it looking up at the stars, and it seemed to me that they drank my words in and accepted them. The words didn’t sound stupid or self-pitying at all, but honest and clear.

‘You have me,’ Michael said mildly. ‘I’m sure your mother loves you,’ he added. ‘And your father. Don’t know about Josh. Molly loves you.’

‘I’m not talking about family love, or friend love. I’m talking about lover love.’

And for the first time, I told someone what I had never uttered to another person. ‘Michael, I like *girls*. I always seem to like *heterosexual* girls. How on earth will that work out?’

I didn’t tell him about my feelings for Morgan, which I’d almost banished from my mind. But there had been other girls, ever since I was very young. Ever since I was about six, I had known this thing about myself.

Michael didn’t seem surprised by my admission; it was as though he’d known all along. But he said, curiously, ‘I didn’t know you liked *heterosexual* girls. Which ones?’

‘Oh... heaps,’ I said crossly. ‘Just crushes, you know. Unrequited. From afar. All that stuff. They’d be ill if they knew.’

Deep down, underneath this worry was my conviction that I, Anna – alone in all the world – was unlovable.

When I told Michael that I liked girls, I didn’t mean that it was simply a trivial matter of choice.

My *liking girls* was a fundamental part of my nature. It had been acquired involuntarily, the way I had red hair and pale

skin. Even my liking for books like *Finnegans Wake* and *Crime and Punishment* seemed to be something I had no control over. Sometimes I wondered whether free will existed at all.

The following year, as everyone expected, I went to university.

Growing up not far from the campus of one of Australia's best universities meant that it was familiar to me. Michael and I had often roamed around there, attempting to feed the wood ducks, who preferred to graze on the grass, and sunning ourselves on the concrete benches while we watched enviously older, more sophisticated people walk past. But it felt like a different place now that I had legitimate reason to be there. I chained my bicycle up each morning and casually strolled down the broad central plaza between lectures. I hoped that, at last, I might have found a place where I fitted in.

I saw little of Michael during the day because our classes were in different parts of the campus and we were both so busy, but I still climbed in through his window at night, or took him off for rambling midnight adventures through the streets. We started going to pubs together to hear bands, and the louder the music the better, as far as I was concerned. I submerged myself in the noise.

Once, we went to a gig held in an abandoned building, an old community centre. Everyone, including the band with all their gear, had to climb in through a single window. We'd heard about it through the grapevine. There were rules in order to avoid detection: cars were to be parked a long way from the venue, and there was to be no standing around outside. About a hundred people were packed inside.

It was a cold night, but the place was warm from all the

bodies, and the noise gave off its own kind of heat. The building was on a ridge. There was a bush reserve behind, and I wondered if people in the houses below could hear. But no one disturbed us, and we stayed far into the night. I think that was almost the happiest I'd ever been, losing myself in the crowd, becoming part of what seemed to be a single organism. It was a pity, in the misty small hours, to be hoisted one by one out of that small window and go our separate ways.

One Friday night very late Michael and I bowled into the café where Josh was working, the only one on duty at that hour. We were arm-in-arm and feeling light-headed and silly, having just stolen a sign that said **CONFINED SPACE. DO NOT ENTER** from a building site. On a whim, I presented it to Josh with a flourish to put above the door of his garage; I could hardly credit that it was my same grumpy brother when he laughed, and offered us both a milkshake on the house.

I sipped frothy milk through a straw, and savoured Josh's friendliness. There were no customers at that hour, and we stayed on, listening to music and talking to Josh while he cleaned down the benches and tables. Then a couple of Josh's friends dropped in and were also treated to free milkshakes. Josh introduced me as though he was proud he had such a crazy little sister. Then he introduced Michael as my friend.

Standing there at the counter with Michael, I felt almost as though I was with a boyfriend. It wasn't that I *wanted* a boyfriend, but I relished the appearance of normality. I could see our reflections in the glass; we no longer looked like daggy, outcast teenagers – we were attractive young adults with a kind of weird, groovy look to us.

One night I told Michael that there was a girl I liked in my English tutorial.

‘Her name’s Laura. We’ve had coffee a couple of times, and she’s invited me to call in and see her.’ Laura lived in one of the university residences.

‘And you’re attracted to her?’ Michael asked. He put down his trumpet. He’d picked it up to begin playing it, but when I started to confide in him he decided to give me his full attention.

‘Well, yes,’ I said. I thought it was obvious that that was the point of my telling him.

‘What’s so special about her?’

‘Well ... we have things in common. We both study Eng Lit. And she’s very pretty.’ I had the grace to blush – I had an eye for pretty girls, that was the truth of it. ‘And she likes me – at least, she’s friendly to me. And ... I just want *someone!*’ I said with a groan, hugging Michael’s pillow to my face in embarrassment. ‘Is that so bad of me?’

‘No,’ he said.

He put the trumpet away in its case.

‘Actually,’ he went on. ‘There’s a girl I’ve been seeing.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. It’s not very serious. She’s in my year, and she’s a bit older.’

‘How old?’

‘Nineteen.’

We were seventeen. Nineteen seemed ancient.

‘She’s brilliant, actually. I mean, really smart. I’d like you to meet her sometime.’

‘Okay,’ I said.



I felt rather jealous. I wasn't interested in Michael as a boyfriend, but he was my best friend, my only friend, and I was peeved that there was someone else he liked. Someone whom he'd 'been seeing' for a while, and hadn't even told me about.

'Her name's Anna,' he added. 'I know. Strange, but true. But it's not such an uncommon name, is it?'

I met her sooner than I thought I would. Arriving at Michael's place one Sunday afternoon (climbing in through the window was a bit undignified for someone my age, but it was still a habit), I landed on the floor, and there was the other Anna just coming into the room with Michael, each of them with coffee cups in their hands.

'Anna?' said the other Anna, crinkling up her eyes in a smile. 'Michael said you might arrive unexpectedly like that, and I thought he was having me on.' She sent Michael a glance of affectionate complicity.

I resisted the urge to straighten my clothes or dust myself off; I knew my entrance had lacked dignity.

'Michael's told me so much about you!' we both said at the same time, and stopped. She pushed her short brown hair behind her ears and smiled; she was a round-faced girl, with plump dimpled cheeks and almond-shaped eyes, plainly and practically dressed in jeans and shirt; I saw her sneakers had been discarded in a corner.

We all sank down onto the carpet, our backs against the wall or bed, and Michael went and got me a coffee, and then put on a jazz CD. Wreathed by the floating sounds of trumpet and piano, we talked. Anna and I did the usual sussing each

other out, and while Michael had told me almost nothing about her, it seemed she knew quite a bit about me. I didn't know whether to be flattered or annoyed.

But I liked her. Michael had been correct about her being smart. She was one of those people who are quick on the uptake, and funny and nice with it. She was thoughtful and watchful, too, and I saw that she was a little unsure of me. But she looked so comfortable with Michael it seemed as though they'd known each other for ages. I didn't know whether they were lovers yet, but if they were, it was clear they'd been friends for a long time first.

After a while I felt like an intruder, but it was being made most welcome by them both that gave me this feeling, not the opposite. There were various politenesses, which I hated. So I said I must go, and went this time out the front door, pausing to have a few words with Michael's mother, who was doing something with the plants in the front garden.

And I felt sad, because it was as if something in my life was ending. My relationship with Michael would never be the same again.

## *Chapter Eight*

**L**AURA HAD ASKED me over to her room, so I went, not knowing what to expect or what I really wanted.

Fenner Hall was an off-campus university residence on Northbourne Avenue, two tall towers of grey brick with a multitude of small windows. As I chained my bicycle to the rack outside, I noticed a girl squatting in the narrow garden at the edge of the car park. She bent towards a tiny mirror propped against one of the logs, and made up her face. She wore a diaphanous white dress; you could see her camisole and knickers through the thin fabric. It was late afternoon, and becoming quite chilly.

The entrance had a security door. Laura was expecting me, so I sent a text message, and waited. People came and went,

and I could have skipped in behind any of them, but I didn't know her room number. I stood and peered up at the array of windows, long row upon row of them. Michael and I had often wandered past the building late at night or in the early hours of the morning, and there were always lights dotted here and there, no matter what the hour. We thought of it as a repository for restless souls, and speculated that the lights meant diligent students were swotting away.

I glanced at the girl making up her face. She was outlining her lips carefully with dark lipstick, working with an intensity I imagined reserved for works of art. Surveying herself critically, she set to work on her lashes. I wondered whether she was making herself beautiful for someone, or simply for her own satisfaction.

So taken was I by the girl, I'd almost forgotten why I was there, so Laura's arrival was something of a surprise. Her face had a fresh-scrubbed look to it, and she was dressed casually in trackpants and singlet, as though she'd been working out and had just had a shower. She swiped her card to let us both into the building.

'Have you been here before?' she asked. I hadn't, so she offered to show me round. Downstairs, we peered into spacious common areas facing out to courtyards, but I was only interested in looking at Laura. She often wore her fair hair loose, but today it was pulled back from her forehead into a thick plait that shone under the fluorescent lights.

It was a self-catering residence, and there was a whole basement floor dedicated to rows of identical kitchen units made up of bench, sink, stove, fridge and table. Students, singly and in groups, clustered around preparing or eating food. Laura

showed me the unit she shared with three people; they all cooked at different times, and she hadn't really gotten to know them. 'I'd like to find someone to cook with,' she told me. 'It's lonely eating on your own.'

I followed Laura into the lift. Her trackpants sat low on her hips and her singlet was tiny, revealing a strip of tanned skin around her narrow waist. When the lift stopped and I stepped out, I had to dodge a cluster of black balloons hung from the ceiling. A board was filled with notices about formal residence dinners, and groups and activities to join in with. It looked like a good place for joiners. But what if you weren't? I imagined Michael or me in this place. We would be curled up in our individual rooms like snails in their shells.

We went down a narrow corridor; almost every door had cartoons and signs and messages on it, and there were more balloons clustered here and there. Laura stopped at a completely bare door, opened it, and stood aside to allow me to enter.

Inside, it was cramped and tidy. There was a single bed, a desk, built-in cupboards, and a small hand sink with a cold-water tap.

'It's horrible, isn't it?' she said.

I couldn't help smiling my agreement, and because it did feel so claustrophobic, I went over to the window and peered out.

I looked down into the car park, and saw the girl in the diaphanous dress, finished with her make-up now, a velvet drawstring bag dangling from her wrist. She was clearly waiting for someone, with an air of impatience. As I watched, she went over to the window of one of the parked cars and checked her

face, obviously liking what she saw, because she threw her reflection a kiss and turned back to waiting with immense self-satisfaction, swinging her hips and her make-up bag.

Laura said something to me, but I was so absorbed with watching the girl that I didn't hear what it was.

'Sorry,' I said. 'Could you say that again?'

'Would you like a coffee?'

'Yes, please.'

I watched as she filled a kettle with water from the tap, and spooned coffee into two cups. Then she sat on her bed to wait for the kettle to boil. I sat in the one easy chair, regulation university issue. The room was filled with photographs of Laura's family (a little brother and an older sister) who lived in a town in New South Wales, her pet cat and two dogs, her school friends who had all gone away to different unis. I had already heard about all of them in our coffee-shop conversation.

The truth was that I had not known what to expect from this visit, but now felt a little bored by Laura. She was such a nice girl, a girl obviously destined to be popular once she met a few more people. She was so pretty, and sociable, and eager to please. Even Laura's clothes – the pale green trackpants, and the stretchy little top – announced her normality. I was dressed in an old tartan dress two sizes too big, and lacy, patterned stockings with a pair of tartan sneakers, and was clearly barking up the wrong tree.

I thought with longing of the girl in the car park, and knew that what I wanted were the diaphanous girls, the ones who gleamed with light and danger.

'Would you like to stay for dinner?' asked Laura. 'I was going to cook some sort of stir-fry.'

But she didn't look too disappointed when I declined and said that I should be getting home. I knew that what I ought to do, out of sheer decency and friendship, was invite Laura back to *my* place for one of my mother's lovely meals, but I hadn't the heart for it.

Before I left, Laura reached into a drawer and showed me a picture of a boy. 'This is Colin,' she said. 'I don't put it out with the others because it'd make me miss him too much.'

I took the picture and looked at it, and made the right kind of interested noises.

'Do *you* have a boyfriend?' she asked me.

*Before* ... before Michael had met the other Anna, I might have told a little white lie and said yes.

'No,' was what I answered truthfully. 'No, I don't.'

Outside, it was almost dark. The girl in the car park had gone, and was no doubt now travelling inside a warm, purring car, her little velvet bag tucked up on the seat beside her. I unlocked my bicycle and switched on its light, and rode the few blocks to home, the light making a little wavering gleam in front of me.

## *Chapter Nine*

I LOVED MY sister Molly.

Though there were countless times when I felt that I hated her. But the only time I ever said it aloud was once, to Michael. 'I hate her! I hate her!' I said childishly, pounding my fists on his bed.

Michael listened with a meek expression on his face. He didn't try to persuade me otherwise, he just listened.

Because the truth, and we both knew it, was that I loved her. I had a fierce protectiveness towards her that knew no bounds.

What I hated was the way people looked at her when they realised she wasn't normal. She was slow, and had difficulty learning, and was like a child years younger. She often started crying at inappropriate moments. Or smiled at inappropriate moments.



She'd applauded at the funeral of one of my mother's close friends, who'd died of cancer. I could have died myself when she did that. As we walked out of the church my mother told me that people understood. *Why do you have to take her everywhere?* I wanted to ask. I stood and glowered, my arms crossed in front of my chest, as the hearse pulled away. There was a lot that I wanted to say to my mother, but didn't.

I hated the way Molly was my mother's first priority, always, the way she assumed that I didn't need her because I was so bright and capable. *I'm not all right!* I wanted to scream. *Look at me! I have no friends! And I am absolutely and horribly abnormal! I am ...*

And here, even in my own mind, I stopped and did not allow myself to think the word.

The day Molly had her accident, it was a mid-semester break, and I was meant to be looking after her while our mother went out.

It was a crisp, sunny day, too lovely to stay inside, so I took Molly out to rake up leaves in the garden. I used the large rake and Molly her small one. We mounded the leaves into a heap, and jumped into the pile, scattering it, then raked and jumped, raked and jumped ...

After that we wanted something cold to drink – apple juice was what Molly fancied – and with nothing in the house I decided on a quick trip to the convenience store up the road. Out we went, happy, hand-in-hand. For a while I forgot that I had to be careful with her, that Molly's hand had to be held *at all times* as my mother always warned me. The streets were almost empty, and as we crossed a road, I neglected for *one moment* to hold her

hand. A car swung round the corner, and screeched to a halt. The sound went through me like a razor. I heard Molly land with a thud, where she lay, frighteningly silent.

I went ice-cold. For a moment there was silence, and stillness.

And then people came running out of the houses. Soon we were surrounded by a crowd, as Molly lay with blood all over her face and arms. She held out her arms to me, and started to whimper.

Someone was screaming; it was the old woman who'd been driving the car. She kept repeating that Molly had come out of nowhere, that she simply hadn't seen her.

Afterwards, I wondered how any of us managed to get through it. There was the ambulance, the hospital, the arrival of my mother, and then my father. We sat, not saying a word, a family but not a family. There was the waiting, the endless waiting, and my mother's endless questions about how *exactly* it had happened. And I found that I didn't know exactly. It had just happened.

*And it was all my fault.* No one told me that, but I knew.

Thankfully, we found out that Molly had not been too badly hurt. The car had glanced off her, and the cuts on her face and limbs were from the gravel when she'd fallen down. The doctor had to pick dirt and stones meticulously and painfully from her skin. She had stitches on her face.

For weeks afterwards my mother had to dress the wounds with special stuff several times a day to prevent as much scarring as possible. It seemed that no sooner was the dressing completed than it needed to be done again. My memories of that time were of my mother sitting at the dining-room

table with Molly's face turned towards her, dabbing away at the wounds.

*And it was all my fault.* I hated the continual ritual of the dressings, the frown that creased my mother's forehead as she examined Molly's face. I wanted to scream, *Why worry about a little scar on her face when she's not right inside the head? Shouldn't you be worrying about that?* But of course, I knew deep down that that was what worried my mother most of all.

I wanted to yell at my mother, for everyone to hear, *Worry about me! I'm not right inside, either. But you don't see, it, do you? Is it because you're blind, or just that you don't want to?*

Molly's wounds had almost healed when I received my first major essay back. There was a murmur of anticipation in the room as the tutor walked around, placing the marked papers in front of each student. People who knew each other compared what they'd got. I received my paper, turned to the back to check the mark, and stowed it away in my folder. For the rest of the lesson I seethed.

At the end of the class I stalked around the building for a while. Then, with fury making me uninhibited, I walked with determination up the stairs and knocked on the lecturer's door.

'I'd like a re-mark,' I said abruptly, handing over the paper.

The lecturer took it with a puzzled smile. She looked at it, flicking through the pages. 'I remember this essay well,' she said. 'But, Anna, you've received a high distinction – almost full marks. I don't think you can do much better than that.'

I snatched the essay and turned on my heel without a word, high on anger and injustice.

The point was, I didn't *deserve* a high distinction! I didn't want the essay marked up, but down. The lecturer had made a big mistake. I knew that I, of all people, didn't deserve to do that well!

I stormed home and threw the essay into a corner of my room. That night I shouted at my mother about something trivial, making Molly cry.

In the middle of the night I got up and switched on the light. I retrieved the offending essay, and with an energy that made me feel as though I was flying, ripped it into shreds until it was a pile of tiny scraps, like confetti. How exhilarating it felt!

I thrust the confetti into a plastic bag.

Early next day, with a feeling of heightened, glorious power, I marched to the lecturer's door again and knocked loudly. The corridor looked especially narrow that day, the fluoro lights especially bright. There was a girl sitting against the wall beside the door, writing a note. It was the girl from the Fenner car park, the one who'd so assiduously put on her make-up. She wasn't wearing the diaphanous dress, or make-up, but I recognised her lovely face.

'She's not in,' she said, leaning over and shoving her note under the door. She leapt to her feet and stood eye to eye with me. 'You'll have to come back another day.' With a smile, she turned and walked down the corridor without a backward glance.

My furious energy had almost dissipated. But as the girl disappeared around the corner, I remembered why I was there. I whipped out the plastic bag from my backpack and scattered the wreckage of my essay all over the floor.

## *Chapter Ten*

I REMEMBER ALTERNATING bouts of angry energy with fits of inexplicable crying.

‘Don’t patronise me!’ I shouted at Morgan, on one of the occasions when I couldn’t avoid visiting my father – it was his birthday, and I did not feel like celebrating with him. I stormed from the house and found myself in a park an hour later, crying my eyes out, my head against the rough bark of a tree.

‘You don’t know what I’m really like!’ I yelled at my mother, before taking myself off to the bookshop one Saturday. I cried angrily in the back room of the shop for a while and then went out to serve with a stony face.

Customers were such idiots! They insisted on buying crap

like Bryce Courtenay instead of brilliant stuff like *Crime and Punishment*.

‘Has this *anything* to recommend it?’ I wondered aloud, tossing one such book into a paper bag and throwing in the obligatory promotional bookmark.

‘Anna, I’m giving you a warning,’ said the manager, when the customer had gone.

So I perfected looking down my nose while maintaining a tight-lipped tact. I knew it merely made me look grumpy, but perhaps people expected that of the young.

I skipped classes at uni, staying home to weep in my room. I got into Josh’s stash of Southern Comfort, and did find it comforting, for a few hours. I was sick into the toilet during the night and woke up the next morning with a throbbing headache. How could he regularly drink such vile stuff?

I taunted him. ‘You’re just a layabout. Do you ever go to that Mickey Mouse course you’re meant to be doing?’

‘Do you ever go to yours?’

I flagrantly refused to hand work in. When a tutor asked where was an essay I replied, ‘Nowhere,’ and walked off, though I had it right there in my bag, and had in fact laboured on it far into the night.

My mother asked me to help clean up the kitchen one day and feeling suddenly angry for no reason, I swept the whole contents of the bench onto the floor, and laughed and laughed at the expression on her face. I didn’t find it funny at all – I was appalled and ashamed at what I’d done, but I just couldn’t help myself.

If I had a thought, no matter how stupid or hurtful, I blurted

it out at once. It was as though I had no control over my actions anymore.

That was why I stopped going round to see Michael, and when he visited me, found excuses to ask him to leave. I knew if he stuck around for long enough I wouldn't be able to stop myself hurting him.

I found myself waking at three in the morning and crying into my pillow, night after night. I was sad and confused, and I wanted it all to stop.

My grandmother took me aside one day. 'Anna, I'd like you to see a friend of mine. I think you might be depressed.'

Depressed! Didn't depressed people have no energy? Sometimes I had so much energy I shone with it; I could have lit up suburbs!

'I hate myself,' I sobbed to the woman my grandmother took me to see. 'Everyone hates me, and *it's all my fault.*'

I came out with a prescription for some antidepressants and a referral to a psychologist.

But I couldn't bring myself to take the tablets.

That was when I went round to see Michael at last, to tell him what the doctor had said.

'I'm a loony,' I told him in what I imagined to be a humorous way, holding out the tablets for him to see. 'If I start taking these, I'll be on them for years and years, and I'll turn into a zombie. What do you think? Maybe I should just throw them down the toilet.'

'Anna, I can't tell you what to do,' said Michael sorrowfully. 'But maybe the doctor knows what's best.'

My anger flared up. 'So you think I'm crazy too? I thought you'd be on my side!'

‘It’s not a matter of being crazy. And of course I’m on your side; I always have been.’

‘I tell you what! I *am* crazy, and I have been all along! I’m such a loser! I’ll tell you how big a loser I am – my only friend for years and years has been you! How pathetic is that?’

I saw with glee and dismay that I had hurt Michael at last.

‘Anna,’ he said, sadly. ‘That’s not you saying that. It’s the depression talking.’

I flung myself from his room, thumping my shoulder deliberately against the door frame on the way out. And it didn’t hurt, it didn’t hurt at all. I could have flung myself from the top of a tall building and it wouldn’t have hurt, compared to the way I was feeling inside.

In the end, I did take the tablets. It scared me, because what if they made me worse? There were all sorts of warnings on an information sheet that came with them, and some of the side effects sounded awful. I started keeping what I called my ‘Mood Diary’, noticing every little thing I felt, keeping it tucked under my mattress so no one would find it.

And after a few weeks, I did start to feel better. The tablets helped me to sleep. I could easily have kept going at uni, but I just didn’t want to. I kept up my part-time work in the bookshop, though, and over time, as my mood improved, I started to work full-time. Once a fortnight I went to see the psychologist. I learned new ways to think about my life and interact with people. ‘You should try to do things that give you pleasure,’ she told me. So I did.

In my lunch hour I sunned myself in the park. With the



money I earned I bought heaps of cds, and spent more time listening to music. I threw out all my black clothes, and looked for ones that I really liked. That's when I found the spotted red dress that was destined to be worn the first time Flynn invited me to her place. I hesitated over it in the changing room, but the shop assistant told me it suited me. I went to op shops and found bangles and handbags that went with my new clothing. Not wanting to ask Morgan to cut my hair again, I went to a hairdresser and had the style repeated.

And after almost a year, I began to feel that I was back to normal, if the word 'normal' could ever be used to describe me. The big thing that did make me sad was the rift between Michael and me. At the start of my illness (and it was an illness, I can see that now) I kept pushing him away until he'd stopped trying. I didn't try to heal our lapsed friendship. After all, I reasoned, he now had the other Anna.

I told my doctor I wanted to come off the antidepressant tablets, and she agreed that I should. I had felt fine for a long time. If I ever had a troubling thought I let it drift away, like a wisp of cloud detaching itself from a mountaintop.

Mostly I felt like the old me, but sometimes the medication just made me too tired, and I couldn't be bothered with anything. I was sick of feeling empty.

Coming off the tablets was as scary as going onto them. For two weeks I took a tablet every second day instead of every day. Then for the next two weeks I took a tablet every three days. I watched myself: every feeling, every reaction.

And then I was on my own.

I anxiously waited for the monstrous, angry Anna to reappear.

But she stayed away. There were no tears. I slept well. I felt that I'd been learning to fly a plane for the first time and had touched down smoothly and safely.

Before Christmas I had some holidays due, and my mother said, 'Let's go away up north. You and me and Molly.'

'A holiday!' I said.

'That's what they call it!'

We hadn't been anywhere since my father had left. I remembered us once all piling into the station wagon and heading up the coast, camping overnight in national parks, spending occasional nights in motels so we could have a proper shower, eating fish and chips while watching the sun go down over the sea.

'Let's do it,' I said.

This time I shared the driving with my mother. Not long before, with money I'd saved, I'd bought myself a small used car, but we took hers. It was wonderful being away from routine. Even though memories of those other holidays tugged at me all the way up the coast, as I'm sure they did with her, we were determined to enjoy ourselves.

On the way back we spent two days in Lismore, heading out to wander in the rainforests, and I loved the place. Driving along narrow winding roads like green tunnels through the trees, cresting a hill to be surprised by an unexpected view ... it was all so different to the south, where we came from.

Looking through the local paper late on our first afternoon there, I idly scanned the employment ads, and saw the bookshop job. For some reason my heart leapt. Here was something I hadn't even thought I'd wanted.

'Look at this,' I said to my mother, my voice quick with

excitement. 'I have all the experience they want. What do you think?'

'I think you should go and introduce yourself tomorrow morning, if that's what you want to do.'

We were heading home the next day. The manager asked me to send in a formal application when I got back. She interviewed me over the phone. And when the call came a day later offering me the job, I was surprised how much I longed for it. I was almost nineteen, and I wanted to get out and manage on my own. I saw myself wandering along the white northern beaches, meeting new people, shedding the layers of old Canberra skin.

'Do you think I should take it?' I asked my mother, with tears in my eyes.

'When do they want you to start?'

'Two weeks after Christmas.'

I knew that I would go.

Brushing aside my mother's offers to come and help me set up, I drove myself north with a few belongings, and stayed in a bed and breakfast till I found a flat.

And then I met Flynn.

## PART THREE

This page intentionally left blank

## *Chapter One*

THE NIGHT THAT I went to Flynn's place, the night after my mother and Molly left, we had the flat to ourselves.

If someone had stood in the street outside, they'd have seen a soft light, as if from a shrouded bedside lamp. The window stood open, and at some stage a dark-haired girl, a kimono flung round her shoulders and coming loose, appeared and stood for a while looking out. She turned, and said something to a person unseen, and then moved away from the window.

Much later, towards dawn, a girl with short red hair, dressed in the selfsame kimono, made her way gingerly onto the roof to retrieve a teapot. Later still, a cat jumped up from inside the room and perched on the sill, swishing its tail and looking out at the street, and then down into the room.

From the cat's vantage point, the room was strewn with clothes hastily discarded, and a tray with teapot and sugar bowl lay on the floor. An arm reached out from the bed to place a teacup onto the tray. A plate with toast crumbs soon joined it; the cat jumped down to lick up butter and crumbs.

Soon grey light crept over the back of the building, followed by yellow sunlight, which lit up the old red bricks. The dark-haired girl, naked, walked past and closed the curtains.

A shower hissed, and steam issued from another window. Someone sang, and someone else laughed.

They were happy, those girls who shared a kimono.

## *Chapter Two*

I HAD TO go to work that day, and I could not remember having slept. I served customers with my head blurry, gave the wrong change, crashed a pile of books over onto the floor and made a baby in a pram cry, and thought about Flynn every single moment.

I went over every little thing about her. There was so much to think about: the way she looked different up close, a new person altogether, but still Flynn in some mysterious, indescribable way. I remembered her newly browned skin, and a smile that I felt sure she'd never bestowed on anyone else. I had tenderly watched over her as she slept.

She was a couple of years younger than I was, but in many ways she seemed older. She knew so much about her own body,



and what gave it pleasure, that I felt I was being taught both about Flynn and about myself.

A little while before noon she came into the shop, her hair loose and unkempt; she was so beautiful that I was immediately filled with desire. I went to go towards her, but she warded me off with a warning, smiling glance, and continued to saunter among the shelves, picking up a book here and there, every now and then glancing flirtatiously towards me. I stood mesmerised at the counter.

I knew that she had to go to work in the café at midday, so I went there for lunch. Someone else at the counter took my order, but Flynn delivered it. She didn't say a word, but brushed her hand as though accidentally against my shoulder. It was a delightful game. I thanked her casually and smiled down at my plate. Flynn returned moments later with a cloth, and leaned close to me, needlessly wiping the already clean table. All without a word exchanged.

I finished work before Flynn did, and after shopping for food, went home to my flat to meet her, as we'd arranged that morning.

A little after six the knock came at the door and, with my heart pounding, I let her in.

She carried her guitar – held it by the neck, its slim, white body hugged close to her.

We were both nervous. I remembered that morning, the sun streaming onto her satin kimono tossed over the back of a chair. The thud of the cat as it jumped down into the room from the windowsill, the spidery cracks in the ceiling of her room. And now this: the actuality of her again.

‘Have you met Louise?’ she asked, holding the guitar up in front of her like a shield. She looked bright and hot; her eyes shone as though a fire was burning inside her.

‘I don’t believe I have,’ I said. She hadn’t told me that her guitar actually had a name.

‘Well, Louise is my best friend and bosom buddy.’ She spoke glibly, as though she often said this, and placed the guitar carefully onto the sofa, where it reclined, looking almost human.

We stood awkwardly. The ease we’d gained the previous night and this morning had dissipated by our being separate for the entire day. It seemed that each time we met we had to reinvent how we were with each other.

She went over to the window. Outside, it was still the bright light of a summer day. I wanted it to be night, stars overhead, the wingbeats of bats, creatures rustling in the pawpaw trees outside my window, everything secretive and unknowable. I didn’t yet know how to be with her in the daylight.

Flynn turned round to look at me, and her face was luminous yet hidden, the way the moon appears to get caught in the bare branches of trees before tearing itself free. Her eyes were unreadable and clouded with thought. I’d seen that look before – she wouldn’t look at me, but somewhere over to the left, where she saw something only she could see. I thought of the way she had come into the shop to flirt with me, and later at the café. She was so changeable – would I ever know where I was with her?

But hadn’t I wanted this? Wanted someone with whom falling in love would be a risk? All along, since I’d seen the diaphanous girl in the car park, I’d known I wanted someone

*not* predictable, *not* ordinary, and the problem with dangerous girls was that you might never be certain of them.

‘What are we going to do, Anna?’

Her voice sounded so lost and plaintive; perhaps she was already regretting coming back to me. There were dark rings under her eyes. Neither of us had had enough sleep. I felt tears well up, because I had no answer. As far as I could see we were in unmapped territory. Unmapped enemy territory. There were no street signs for what we were doing, and I saw that it would be easy to lose our way.

It was too much to think about right now. I was immediately aware of being tired and hungry.

‘I think we should cook dinner,’ I said. ‘An army marches on its stomach.’

We set to work. I’d bought thick lamb chops, and new potatoes. I put these on to cook while Flynn constructed a salad, making a game of all the things she discovered in my refrigerator. She threw in everything – snow peas, lightly blanched French beans, capers, tinned baby beets.

‘Pomegranate molasses?’ she said, wrinkling her nose. ‘What on earth do you do with pomegranate molasses?’

‘My mother bought that. She puts it in Middle Eastern stews. Or on ice cream. Not a salad thing.’

She put it into the salad dressing anyway.

We ate in the dusk sitting out on the wall overlooking the town. Ravenous, we used our fingers and tore the meat with our teeth. The grey cat appeared and cadged scraps. Replete, I sighed and licked my fingers.

## Chapter Three

**T**HAT NIGHT I woke to find her gone from my bed. I had a moment of panic thinking that she had left me again, that it would be a repeat of when she'd gone away to *think about us*.

I found her in the living room cradling Louise in her arms, and she looked up at me with such an expression of dreamy contentment that I knew she wouldn't be running out on me again – at least, not that night. I knew that the reason she'd brought Louise around and introduced her was because she wanted to show me what was important to her. It was a declaration of her seriousness about me, because she could have introduced Louise before, and hadn't.

'I couldn't sleep,' she said with a smile. And because I was

awake, she started to strum softly. An electric guitar played without an amp sounds like a guitar dreaming, it is so secretive and private. There is nothing to resonate, no shouting, only whispers.

‘I wrote a song about you while I was away,’ said Flynn. ‘Would you like to hear it?’

It was about that day on the roof, when she’d reached across and touched my hair, about knowing then that something would happen between us, about being thrilled and terrified at the prospect. It was a thoughtful, tender song, and it was the music that made it a song, because otherwise it was like a short story, with no verses or refrain. I like songs like that, and I told her so.

‘The thing you need to know about me,’ she said, ‘is that if I didn’t do this, I’d be really miserable. I don’t mean now, at this minute, but generally.’ She repositioned the guitar against her body and looked up at me so earnestly that a little crease formed between her eyebrows. ‘It feels like what I should be doing.’

I felt envious, because there was nothing that I felt I really *had* to do. Apart from be with Flynn.

I knew that she had only finished school the previous year, and was taking time off to write songs, working in a coffee shop to support herself. ‘I’m so sick of study. I know I’ll probably end up doing a degree one day – maybe in music – but for now I just want to write songs and perform as often as I can. And what about you?’ she went on. ‘Do you have a passion?’

‘I love *listening* to music,’ I told her. ‘Maybe I’m cut out to be a fan.’

‘No, but really. What are you going to *do* with yourself?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, and it sounded so feeble. Because

it seemed for years what I had longed for was to be with someone – just like this. I wanted somewhere in the world I could feel comfortable, and I didn't know if I would ever find that. I wanted not to feel so strange and awkward and alone.

'I tried uni,' I said, 'and I dropped out.'

'Why? Was it too much work?'

'No, it was too easy.' I thought of my high distinction. It was true that I'd worked quite hard on that paper, but no harder than I thought was needed to complete the task.

'I like working in a bookshop,' I said. 'It's every reader's dream, didn't you know? I'm out the back half the time with my nose in a book.'

'Does your mother miss you?' she asked, out of the blue. 'Mine does me. She keeps wanting me to visit – it's only thirty minutes away but I try to avoid it. I like being independent. Home is so ...'

She didn't finish the sentence. Her face looked downcast for a minute, but she seemed to pull herself together and went on, brightly, 'What about your little sister? Molly-who-got-grandmother Molly McGuire's-name. She's so gorgeous. You must miss her.'

'I can live without her,' I said lightly. I didn't say how jealous I'd once been of all the attention Molly got. It sounded so childish and petty. 'But I do miss her a bit, yes,' I admitted.

'What is it that's wrong with her?' asked Flynn. 'I'm sorry, but I did notice ...'

'That she's not quite right? That's okay – people *do* notice. She's just slow. "Special needs". You know.' I shrugged.

'And she's such a pretty little girl,' Flynn said, as though that somehow made it worse, or less comprehensible. 'You look so

alike! And tell me about this brother of yours, the one who's a musician.'

I felt an irrational stab of jealousy.

'He's useless,' I said abruptly. 'He's always talking about leaving home, but he never does. I think he just has it too easy there.'

'Ooooh ...' said Flynn, teasingly. 'Touchy!'

All this talk had woken me up slightly, but I was so tired, really, and I could see that Flynn was too. 'Come back to bed,' I said. 'Or we'll be useless at work tomorrow.'

Just as I was falling asleep, I felt the grey cat, which had apparently now moved in with me, jump onto the bed, make itself comfortable, and begin to purr.

## *Chapter Four*

‘**H**OW DO YOU write a song?’ I asked Flynn one day. We were in her room on a Sunday afternoon. Her cat, Timothy, lay at my feet, nibbling occasionally on my big toe. He was an affectionate, though sometimes surly animal, and had accepted me as though he’d known me for years. I was content to sit and stroke him as I watched Flynn hunch over her guitar, trying out chords, scribbling something down, seemingly unaware that I was there.

Though sometimes she shot me a glance that spoke of what now lay between us. ‘I’d like for us to be able to just sit around together, each of us doing her own thing,’ she had said a few days before. ‘You know – just to have that ease, of being together, not needing to talk or touch.’



‘Like an old married couple.’

‘Yes.’ Flynn smiled. ‘Is that so absurd?’

We had not, of course, quite reached that stage. Now I wanted to go to Flynn and sit at her feet, take away her guitar and lay my head in her lap in its stead. But I asked, *how do you write a song?*

Flynn stopped strumming and said, ‘Songs come in all sorts of ways. Sometimes there’s a musical phrase or a melody that comes into my head, and the song builds around that, often without me consciously thinking about it. Sometimes it’s a few words or a line that comes first, and I find some music in my head to fit it. But often it’s a memory, or a feeling about something that won’t go away, and it’s so insistent that I begin with that, and see where it takes me.’

She bent her ear towards her guitar again.

Stopping quite suddenly, she added, ‘It’s funny – sometimes songs come so quickly on the heels of each other it makes me breathless. And then I go without a new song for so long I start to fear I’ll never write another one again. I hate that. It makes me edgy and nervous. Because if that ability left me, what would I have?’

A teapot named Lavinia ... a guitar named Louise ... it makes Flynn sound like someone too cute and self-conscious for her own good. But it wasn’t like that. ‘Come *on*, Louise,’ I heard her say, tapping its body in frustration. ‘Now, we’ll start again. You can do it!’ And it appeared perfectly natural. I’m sure she spoke that way to Louise even when I wasn’t there.

I don’t think I’ve described Louise, an electric guitar with a white body, sprayed pale blue round the edges. There was some-

thing very lacy and feminine about her. She was rarely in her case; being shut away in the dark was not for the likes of her.

Louise almost always came to my flat with Flynn. And she (Louise, that is) would sit in an easy chair, lolling back voluptuously, like another person in the room. We drew her in that pose one day. 'Life drawing,' Flynn called it, and it felt almost voyeuristic, reproducing the curves of that guitar on the page.

In her bedroom, Flynn always had at least one single flower in a vase. Sometimes she had many, for she had lots of vases, bought in op shops, but only one specimen in each, ever. She didn't do arrangements. Selecting a vase to suit each flower was a ritual with her. Sometimes the flower was a weed; purple cat's paw was a favourite – each segment of the 'pads' was like a mauve sea anemone, waving tiny feelers, if you looked really close, she said, and I did. Sometimes her vases contained beautiful garden flowers.

I learned how she got them. One day we were walking down a suburban street when she stopped. 'Will you *look* at that colour?' she asked, cupping in her hand a red flower that nodded over a fence. 'Oh, I must have this. They won't miss it – look at them all.' And with that she plucked it and bore it away.

Back at her place she selected a tall, narrow blue vase to display it in. 'Flowers are the *only* thing I steal,' she'd told me earnestly on the way home. As though she didn't want me to think she was a habitual thief.

'Have you ever stolen anything?' she asked idly, arranging the flower in the vase, tilting it first to one side and then the other. 'Everyone does, don't they? When you were little?

A lolly? Or something small from a shop?’

‘I stole a book once,’ I admitted. ‘From someone I knew didn’t really want it.’

She looked at me and frowned. ‘Can you make judgements like that? How did you know? That they didn’t really want it?’

I shrugged. How did she know those people with many flowers didn’t miss the one hanging over the fence? And she didn’t even ask what the book was, which to me would be the most salient point.

For the record, it was *Steal This Book*, by Abbie Hoffman. And I’d stolen it from Michael’s father. After reading it I took it back; I don’t think he’d even noticed it was gone.

Flynn came to the bookshop, appearing at the counter where I was going through the computer catalogue for a customer. She waited until I took the order and we were alone before saying, ‘I’m looking for a book and was wondering if you could help me?’

‘Certainly,’ I said, in my best shop assistant’s voice, wondering what she was up to.

She leaned over and spoke in a stage whisper. ‘I just felt like seeing you again ...’

I stood behind the counter, embarrassed, but still amazed at the mere fact of Flynn’s existence in my life. We had parted only hours earlier.

It was a large bookshop, and the other assistants and the manager were otherwise occupied. I walked Flynn along the shelves, pretending to sell to her, and we ended up down the back in the Young Adult section. There Flynn put her hand at

the back of my waist, up under my blouse onto bare skin, and kissed me slowly on the mouth, sliding her tongue between my lips.

And then she departed, as abruptly as she'd arrived.

We almost always met at my place. Flynn liked it there because we had the whole flat to ourselves. I wondered whether it was because she wanted to keep the nature of our relationship from Caleb and Hannah, whom I still barely knew. Flynn was all contradictions. She was the one who had come to the bookshop and openly flirted, and kissed me so boldly that the manager had seen. The woman said to me discreetly, 'Anna, I think it'd be a good idea if you kept your love life away from the shop.'

But I was tired of us being exclusive and alone. I wanted to be seen with her, even if the nature of our relationship wasn't obvious to other people. So one Sunday morning I said, 'Let's go out today.'

She looked up. She was propped on her elbows sunning herself near the front windows, dressed only in a singlet and knickers, a cup of coffee on the floor at her side.

'Where?' she said lazily.

'To the market. I need some fruit and veggies.'

'You can get them at the shops anytime,' said Flynn. She rolled over and hugged a cushion to her chest.

'But I want to go *out* with you.'

'Oh, all right.' She finished her coffee and got dressed.

At the market, we wandered together the way two friends might, only occasionally linking fingers for fleeting moments. Even though I wanted to be seen with her, I was still shy about

being romantically linked with a girl, and I thought Flynn must be too. I don't know why – there were plenty of openly gay people around, men and women. Perhaps because this was my first relationship.

We filled our bags with vegetables and olives and bread, and playfully tried on dresses and hats we had no intention of buying. I was always overwhelmingly aware of Flynn's nearness; it was painfully difficult not to touch her. There was that line of smooth skin around her waist where her jeans and T-shirt didn't quite meet, her soft, bare neck just below her ear when she pushed her hair back. So I stroked the objects on sale instead, running my fingers over embroidered fabric or the smooth glazes of handmade pots, or nosed the fragrant, obscene mouths of orchids. Flynn ran into a few people she knew, and introduced me to them simply as *my friend*.

We bought paper plates of food and sat up under the trees to eat, tasting from each other's choice of lunch, leaning across to put spoonfuls into the other's mouth. Then, unable to keep our hands off each other, we ran to the car and drove back to my place at speed, giggling and jostling each other in our haste to get to the privacy of my flat, where the shopping was dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

## *Chapter Five*

I WENT TO an op shop to find things for my flat, to make it seem more homely. But everything I looked at held the scent of other lives, and I couldn't imagine making them my own. The one thing I did find I bore away triumphant, because it was perfect for Flynn – a really old plastic bangle, bright red, with waratahs and flannel flowers in relief all the way around it. My world was filtered through awareness of her, even when I was shopping.

When she arrived at my place I presented it to her, just handing it over unwrapped. 'I found something for you at Vinnies,' I said.

Flynn slid it onto her wrist and I could see that she was delighted, turning it round and peering at the perfection of

the moulded flowers. She kissed me quickly in thanks.

‘I have something for you, too.’

She drew from her bag a tiny, almost square paperback book of poems by Christina Rossetti. I thanked her with my heart singing (so Flynn had been thinking of me as well!) and turned to the back blurb at once. GOBLIN MARKET. FAIRYTALE FANTASIES, FABLES OF TEMPTATION AND REDEMPTION.

But it appeared she had bought it for the front cover – a painting of a girl with red hair, white skin, and the kind of white, swan-like neck you could imagine kissing, or biting.

‘That girl,’ she said, ‘has hair exactly the same colour as yours!’

I glanced at the image and turned automatically to the inside cover. It was from a painting called *Reverie* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

I went back to the picture. Long hair flowed over her shoulders, and her face had a look of unconscious voluptuousness, with a hint of bored scepticism. Perhaps she hadn’t liked posing.

‘She even looks rather like you, don’t you think?’

Were my eyes so blue? My mouth so full?

‘What you do with it is ...’ said Flynn, who had more of an idea of interior decoration than me. And she propped it up, face out, in front of all the Dostoyevskys and other gloomy black books in my improvised board-and-bricks bookshelf.

I found myself wanting to know more and more about Flynn; it was a feeling of wanting to possess her, or of wanting to possess her life. Sometimes I thought I wanted to *be* her, and my own life seemed to be lacking in comparison to hers. Hers

was so full – she disappeared sometimes to go and see her mother, and she was always either working at the café, or composing music, or getting text messages from friends. She didn't introduce me to many of them, and only ever as *my friend, Anna*. Our relationship seemed hidden from everyone. Even if we hadn't arranged to meet, she turned up at my place most nights, not always bothering to tell me what she had been doing. And I didn't often ask, because her answers were mostly vague. I had to accept her mind was tied up with music, and a complicated network of people that stretched back to her childhood.

But there were clues. Her room was full of trinkets. I wondered who had given them to her, and in what circumstances. One day in her room I picked up an old coffee tin and shook it.

'I've had that for years,' she said. 'I imagine I'll be taking it to every place I live until I die.'

'May I see what's inside?'

'If you like.' She smiled. 'You won't find the contents particularly spectacular. But that tin represents my childhood to me.'

I prised open the lid with a teaspoon. Inside I found:

*A single pearl earring.*

'That used to belong to my grandmother. She lost the other one, but loved them so much she kept this one in her jewel box. She used to let me look through it whenever I visited. I inherited this along with an extremely beautiful necklace my mother's looking after for me until I'm old enough and beautiful enough to do it justice.'

*An extremely tiny teapot from a child's tea set, minus the lid.*



‘The only thing that’s left from a tea set I got for Christmas when I was four. I don’t know where the rest of it went – must have lost it.’

*A yellow feather.*

‘My budgerigar. I let him go because I thought birds shouldn’t live in cages, but he kept coming back. He died three years ago.’

*A small blue button in the shape of a rabbit.*

‘Is this a kiss?’ I said, holding it up.

Her brow furrowed. ‘A kiss?’

‘You know – *Peter Pan*. Wendy asks him if he’d like a kiss, and he doesn’t know what one is, so he holds out his hand. So as not to embarrass him, she gives him a thimble. And then when she asks *him* for a kiss he gives her an acorn button.’ But I could see that Flynn didn’t know the book. ‘Just one of the books from *my* childhood,’ I explained.

‘Well, that’s just from a dress I had when I was a toddler. Apparently I loved the buttons, so my mother saved them – that’s the only one to survive.’

At the bottom of the tin lay a small piece of plastic. I shook it out onto my hand.

*A guitar pick.*

I looked at her for another explanation, and Flynn raised an eyebrow. ‘A guitar pick,’ she said casually, as though it was an entirely incidental matter that it was there.

She bundled the things back into the tin and pressed the lid shut. ‘There. I told you the contents wouldn’t be much. I need to go out for a few things. Just bread and milk and stuff. Want to come?’

Normally I would have relished the opportunity to wander

in and out of shops with Flynn. I spent as much time as I could with her. So why did I say lazily that day, 'I think I'll just stay here and listen to that new cd'?

It was the first time I'd been alone in her room for any length of time. At first I lay on the bed listening to music and looking around as though with Flynn's eyes, because places are different when their owners are absent. And then I sat up, and realised with a fluttering heart that if I liked I could look through her things. The thought immediately horrified me – it was so untrustworthy and secretive, but I realised that it wasn't just an option for me, but a compulsion. I might never get the chance again.

I turned the music off and listened at the door. Caleb and Hannah were out, as usual, and the flat was silent.

Beset with urgency, I flipped through Flynn's notebooks. I knew she didn't keep a diary, just a book with ideas and words for songs. I hoped, of course, to find references to myself, and I did. I found the words to the song Flynn had written about the first time we'd been alone together on her roof.

I wondered if she'd made up songs for other people she'd gone around with – she hadn't talked about her former relationships. There were plenty of songs that could be construed as love songs (a mainstay for musicians), but there were no names mentioned – the songs could have been about entirely imaginary people and situations.

Leaving the notebooks as I'd found them, I next opened Flynn's drawers, hot with shame and curiosity. At first I found nothing unexpected – the usual underwear, cakes of fancy soap, boxes of tampons.

And then in a bottom drawer filled mostly with socks,

I found something firm and hard wrapped up in a T-shirt.

It was a picture of a boy in a glass frame; he was a very beautiful boy, with short dark hair and brown eyes. And the shirt it was wrapped in was a boy's shirt – too large for Flynn, and not too clean. I sniffed it. It had a stale, boy smell.

My heart felt as though it was beating its way out of my body. Quickly, I wrapped up the picture and slid the drawer shut.

By the time Flynn came back I was sitting on the floor with the music playing again, but I scarcely heard it, because guilt and shame and curiosity almost overwhelmed me.

Surely there must be some way Flynn could tell what I had been doing. I waited fearfully to be denounced. And I thought I really *had* been found out, because she approached me with such gravity, her eyes on my face. She knelt in front of me. I thought she was about to accuse me, but she said, with a look of shy tenderness, 'I found something for you at the op shop.'

Her long, slender fingers held something tiny wrapped in blue cellophane. As she handed it to me, her eyes playfully told me to open it.

The blue paper crackled open and I found a button, a small, perfect, old mother-of-pearl button.

*A kiss.*

It gleamed with secrecy. It was as smooth as innocence. And its perfection was marred by the smallest crack at the edge.

## Chapter Six

I TOOK THE button home and put it away in a box with my earrings. Flynn had given me a token of her feelings for me at exactly the same time that I had betrayed her trust.

I know this now: I will never again pry into the past of someone I love. I will accept their feelings at face value.

But then: I couldn't help wondering jealously who was the boy in the photograph.

When you're *in love*, other people fall away. Her flatmates, Caleb and Hannah, were fleeting presences – clouds of steam from the bathroom or kettles bubbling dry in the kitchen. The front door slammed and they were gone again, the last CD they'd put on playing itself out in the living room.

Flynn and I took to sauntering round town together, whenever we were free from work (work: that wretched thing that keeps two girls apart), as carefree as kingfishers, our happiness in each other flashing out in shades of blue and gold.

One day we passed two girls walking with hands held, and Flynn shot me a look of delight and caught hold of my hand and kissed my fingers. The moment was as brief as a bird alighting on a limb but my happiness lasted hours.

Everything she did charmed me. No one else was like Flynn – *could* be like Flynn. Each day she would go outside and look up at the sky, determining what the weather would hold so as to choose the right clothes to wear. (As though weather forecasters did not exist, and girls must be like wise women who read the sky for Signs.) I loved to see her selecting items from her wardrobe – she would wear *these* green trousers with *that* apricot cotton top, and it was the perfect, the *only* thing to wear on that day.

Her favourite place for writing songs was out on her roof, the teapot Lavinia propped beside her. Hugging Louise to her chest, a pencil by her side, she would strum and scribble, pausing every so often to pour more tea into her cup till eventually every drop was drained from the pot. It was then that I'd quietly go inside and make another, her cat and I keeping each other company.

Early one Saturday afternoon, Flynn came to my door and said urgently, 'Come with me.'

'Where?'

'A surprise.'

'Should I wear a party frock? Or ...'

‘Bring a towel ... Do you still have those swimmers I lent you? – And we might need another blanket. I don’t suppose you have such a thing as a sleeping bag?’

She spoke with that frowning faraway look on her face, and she wouldn’t say where we were going.

When we got out to the car I saw that the back was filled with stuff. There was a sleeping bag, and pillows, and a box with a pan handle sticking out.

Flynn drove us to the coast, and along a sandy track through the scrub, parking behind some dunes; I heard the sound of the sea and the warbling of nectar-feeding birds that flapped clumsily along the branches of the trees. We got out and walked through a stand of banksias and casuarinas. At the top of the dunes we could see the sweep of a long stretch of beach; the only other people were a few lone fishermen standing with rods at the edge of the sea.

Flynn ran to the water and waded in up to her thighs. She was wearing khaki shorts, and the bottoms got wet. I walked down to join her, my dress tucked into my knickers.

Further up the beach, we discovered a kind of hut that someone had built, tucked into the edge of a dune. It had a low, domed roof made of palm fronds and casuarina branches, and the front was open to the sea. Flynn crawled in and said, ‘We don’t even need to pitch a tent. We can sleep here.’

I crawled in beside her. The roof had a few holes where some of the branches had come away, but it was shady, a contrast to the glare of the beach. Outside, the sun glinted off the sea. I lay back on the cool sand, and closed my eyes.

We spent the greater part of the afternoon patching up the roof of the shelter. With that done, we wandered along

the beach under the casual eyes of the fishermen, picking up shells and stones and putting them down again. Flynn could spend ages simply standing ankle-deep in water staring out to sea. She was so absorbed by her surroundings that I felt she didn't need me at all. I craved her touch, and her conversation, but she was as aloof as one of the seagulls that patrolled the shoreline.

Later, she collected sticks to make a campfire up behind the dunes; I could smell it as I stood at the edge of the water idly watching the last of the fishermen pack up and leave the beach. The sky had turned the deep blue that comes before the black of night. Turning around, I saw a few secret wisps of smoke.

'I bet you used to play cowboys and Indians,' I said, when I went up and saw Flynn fanning the flames and putting on some heavier wood. 'Let me guess. You were always the Indian.'

Flynn only smiled at me vaguely.

We put our bedding into the shelter while there was still enough light to see, and then Flynn remembered her fire, and raced back up to tend it.

Camping was new to me, but she had organised everything. There was plenty of food – vegetables and rice and tinned fish, with mangoes for dessert. We ate pretty much in silence, and I wondered why Flynn had invited me here.

When the fire died down, she threw her mango seed, sucked clean, into the coals, took a notebook from her bag and said, 'I'm going to sit on the dunes.' I followed her. Staring out to sea, she scribbled in the dark.

'What are you writing?' I asked.

‘I’m writing down what the sea says.’ She sounded passionate and energetic, a little off-kilter. I felt lost and irrelevant.

I sat with her and listened to the sea for a while, though I couldn’t have put what it said into words. After a while I got up and walked along the beach, thinking that I should not have come. I wanted to walk along the beach with her, to talk, simply to *be* with her. I stayed away for a long time, feeling unwanted, hurt, unloved.

But when I got back she said, ‘Where were you? I was starting to get worried.’ And she drew me to her and kissed me.

All my worries melted away. I held her close, listening to the roar of the waves, and it seemed that we were all in the world that existed, just the two of us.

‘Come to bed,’ she said. So we crawled into the hut, got comfortable under the blankets, and lay looking out at the light on the water. Flynn took my hand.

And all the time there was the throb and roar of the water and the scent of damp sand, so that I was enveloped by sensation.

In the middle of the night I got cold, and hunted in the dark for some warmer clothes. When I came back to bed Flynn’s arms folded me in, and I lay listening to her breathing. After a while, she rolled over and away from me, and I rested the side of my head on the back of her neck. I became aware that her breathing had changed, and knew she was crying.

But I didn’t ask why, and we fell asleep eventually, rocked by the rhythm of the waves, which sounded so close that we might be engulfed at any moment.



## *Chapter Seven*

**I**N THE MORNING, while Flynn collected sticks to start a fire, I stole a look in her notebook to see what she had written the night before. I still had the urge to know more about her than she ever told me, and after all, she had left it open.

I read:

a roar a roar arah aroo, gloom, boom, garoom

Shoo

Sham

shirsh

Plowsh

Shhh

Plosh  
Ah boom  
tears  
sorrow  
regret  
despair  
heartache  
loss

We made toast on the campfire, and ate it sitting at the top of the dunes, squinting our eyes against the glare. With the sun not far above the horizon, it felt new, like the first sun, the original sun, the only sun that had risen over the earth. When Flynn stripped off and ran down to the waves, I followed her, and met the icy water with a shudder. She went out so far for so long that I thought she'd floated away. Aware of people already walking along the beach, I put my clothes back on and waited under the canopy of our little hut. The day was already hot. From the shade, the light striking the sand was incandescent.

She came in as though washed clean of anything that had ever troubled her, and we stayed at the beach till it was almost night. We walked along the sand together, ate a lunch of tinned beans, bread and chocolate biscuits, slept it off in the shelter, and then went into the water again. Wind and water and sunlight swept over me, and I gave myself over to it all. I abandoned words, and allowed whatever I was experiencing to fill my head. I forgot to brood, worry, analyse – I forgot to think. I lived for the moment and in the moment. I was happy.

On the way home I looked across at Flynn. How I loved her! Her smooth brown skin and black hair caught up roughly in a ponytail, the intent way she kept her eyes on the road, glancing every so often into the rear-view mirror. She must have sensed me looking, because she glanced across at me and smiled. I thought about the words she'd scribbled last night in the dark and imagined the last ones, like a shopping list for grief, tattooed on my skin.

After we got back from camping at the beach, she became obsessed with writing songs. I knew that it was a private thing for her, and never asked to see what she'd written. But I remember her saying fervently, bending her head to her instrument, 'I want to do this as much as I can. Because one day I'll be dead, and I won't be able to do it anymore.'

She took great pains, and it irritated and tortured her, this getting a song right. In the end, no one might be aware of the time she had taken in creating it, but she would know – and she would know if she was pleased with what she had made. And perhaps this was the most important thing I got from Flynn, this knowledge that a song, or anything, is not a small thing for the person making it.

It was Sunday, a week after we'd camped at the beach, and I was lounging on Flynn's bed, headphones on. Flynn was on the roof, writing, strumming, then she appeared at the window. 'It's my mother. I'll have to go and let her in.'

'How do you know?' I pulled the headphones off.

'She came to the lane and called. She knows I'm often out on the roof when no one answers the door.'

Flynn leaned her guitar in a corner, pushed her hair behind her ears, and checked her face in the mirror, looking troubled. I straightened our tangled night-time bed of glee and bliss, straightened myself, and by the time Flynn came back with her mother I was perched on the windowsill, legs dangling, like someone popped round for a casual chat.

‘Mum, this is Anna. Anna – my mother, Patricia.’

‘Hello, Anna,’ Patricia said, shaking my hand. Hers was very soft, quite friendly. She had a kind, rather plump and pretty face, but there were deep lines at the corners of her mouth, and shadows under her eyes that make-up didn’t entirely conceal.

She looked at Flynn and smiled regretfully. ‘I called round last weekend but you weren’t here.’

‘You should ring first.’

‘Your phone’s hardly ever switched on.’

‘Hello? Message bank?’ said Flynn. She picked up her guitar from where she’d hastily left it and put it carefully on its stand. ‘We should go out for a coffee or something.’

‘Or breakfast,’ said Patricia. ‘Have you eaten?’ She turned to include me in her question.

We decided to head over to North Lismore to one of the few cafés that would be open on a Sunday morning. Flynn led the way and her mother and I walked along behind.

‘Are you a student, Anna?’ Patricia asked, as we crossed the bridge in blazing sunlight. The glare from the water made me squint my eyes.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I work in a bookshop.’

‘Is that interesting? I always thought I’d like to run a bookshop, but probably all passionate readers fantasise about that at some time.’

We talked on. Flynn's mother was the sort of woman used to making people feel at ease. Asking someone about themselves came naturally to her. And yet I was aware all the time of a weight inside her. Her face was deeply sorrowful, and though she responded to my answers as though she was listening, a part of her was absent. She seemed like someone to whom something dreadful had happened.

At the café, we sat out the back. Looking at the menu, I realised that I couldn't eat a thing, but I ordered a muffin anyway, for appearances' sake. Flynn asked for a muffin as well, without even bothering to look at the menu.

'Just a muffin?' said her mother. 'Two big girls like you? My treat. Look – free-range organic eggs on sourdough, any way you like.'

But we shook our heads, and she herself only ordered a flat white with skim milk.

Our order arrived. I sipped and nibbled, pulling the muffin apart and putting it reluctantly into my mouth. I couldn't help feeling that I shouldn't be there. I was just tagging along. Her mother had come to see Flynn, and I was somewhat in the way, though nothing she did or said implied that in the least.

I hadn't expected that Flynn would have *come out* to her mother, and told her that she had a girlfriend, but all the time there was an awful undertone of something kept hidden. I was *just a friend*, though I always wondered whether people could tell what was between us. That day I was very careful not to touch Flynn, or even look at her for too long, in case I betrayed something.

And I can't even remember much of what we said – it was

all just chat – except that at one stage her mother turned to Flynn and said, ‘When’s Rocco coming home?’

And Flynn just brushed it aside. She shrugged and said quickly, ‘I don’t know,’ and turned the conversation to something else.

All the way back to Flynn’s place I wondered, *Who’s Rocco?* He might have been some casual acquaintance. Or was he the boy in the photo?

When we got back to the flat, we stopped at the foot of the stairs and Patricia said she must get home. ‘It was lovely to meet you, Anna. Get Flynn to bring you out to our place some time.’ She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek.

Flynn gave me the key, and I went up to the flat so she could see her mother off. She took some time, and I had to fight the impulse to have another look at the picture of the boy in Flynn’s drawer. Impatiently, I looked around me. Seeing the guitar sitting there on its stand, I picked it up.

It had never occurred to me to even touch Louise. My brother played guitar, but they were a mystery to me. I stood there and hefted the guitar’s weight, felt the sheer mass of the solid body. It had a slight curve, like a human figure, but it did not easily fit with my own body. It felt awkward. And the strings: how did musicians coax a voice from these things? And yet I loved the music they made – it could be sublime.

‘I don’t know, Louise,’ I said. ‘I give up. How do you do it?’

Louise remained inscrutable. In some ways I felt that that guitar was my rival, vying for Flynn’s attention, whose ear was very often bent to listen with grave attention to what Louise said, rather than to what I was feeling.

Ridiculous to be jealous of a guitar! I put it back on its stand,

switched on the CD player and plugged in the headphones. When Flynn finally got back I was apparently engrossed in music.

## *Chapter Eight*

ONE NIGHT I found myself with Flynn and Caleb, driving down a dark country road to an old wooden hall on the ridge of a hill. On the way, the headlights cut a swathe through the tall nodding grass that lined the road. Caleb drove, and Flynn sat in the seat next to him and bit into her lips with anxiety.

‘So,’ said Caleb. ‘You’re playing the new song?’

Flynn nodded. I hunched forward in the back, listening to their conversation, which seemed coded: musicians’ talk.

The hall thronged with people, many of them clutching instruments. Each would play two songs, so it was clear that the session could go on all night. I sat in the dark beside Flynn while she waited her turn, watching the other performers.



When I placed my hand on her arm, I felt how her skin burned before she shook me away. I could see that she was preoccupied. *When I perform, I like to play each time as if it's my last*, she'd told me. *It's almost your sacred obligation to the people who've come to see you, put their trust in you.*

The various doors and windows were flung open, and a moon sailed in the sky. Inside, the squash of bodies created their own heat; I sat cocooned in it; I had a moustache of sweat on my lip. I was glad of the dim lighting; the darkness made it at least *appear* cooler.

At last it was Flynn's turn. She went and fetched Louise from the car. I watched her wait in the wings, guitar case hugged to her chest, looking so small and anxious and vulnerable. I loved her so much!

She walked onto the stage and clicked open the case. Plugging Louise into the communal amp, she tested the sound briefly, then sat down on a chair someone had placed for her.

Was it my imagination, or did she seek out my face to smile wanly at me before she started? The lights on the stage washed out her features.

The only other time I'd seen her perform, she had not introduced her songs, merely launched into them. But that night, looking out into the crowd, she said with that rueful pull to her mouth, 'This is Louise, my best friend and bosom buddy. Only she knows how difficult it is to write a song.' She tapped the guitar. 'So this one is called, "Come on, Louise".'

And there followed a song about her guitar, with Flynn talking to it and egging it on. It was sweet and funny and endearing. Everyone laughed at all the right places, and afterwards they whistled and stamped their feet.

Then Flynn said quickly, without even waiting for the applause to die down, “This next one is a very new song, and I’m not sure if I’ve got it quite right. I wrote it on the anniversary of my brother’s death – a lot of you will remember Simon?”

The hall became absolutely silent, and filled with an intense feeling of anticipation.

And I think I forgot to breathe. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. A brother who’d *died*?

‘Well, he was the one who taught me to play. He even went with me when I bought Louise – “That one,” he said, “is a little beauty.”’

A look of confusion and shyness came over her face, and she lowered her eyes and spoke to her lap, and if everyone had not been so still you might not have heard her. ‘Um ... on the anniversary of the day he died, I went to the beach and listened to what the sea was telling me, and wrote it down. So this song is about him – it’s *for* him. It’s called “What the sea said”.’

The song was about going to the place where her brother had died, hoping to speak to him, wanting to ask questions about how to live her life after such a loss. And even though her brother had not answered, the sea had, and one day, if she could ever understand the sea, she would know what the answer was.

And all I could think was, *so that was what was going on that day. And she never told me.*

I sat with my mind reeling. Then the song was suddenly over. ‘Thank you,’ she said, adding automatically, ‘I’m called Every Little Thing.’

A moment’s silence followed. And then everyone started clapping. As Flynn left the stage, people came up to embrace

her, and rub her back tenderly, or kiss her shyly on the cheek. She looked at no one, and used the cased guitar as a kind of buffer. She headed outside.

I'd thought that Flynn had privileged me with intimacy, but it had been an illusion. Did she really trust me so little?

The next item was a group playing a 1950s dance tune, and people got to their feet, almost in relief, and spilled out of the hall onto the grass, where they danced under the stars in the hot, still night.

There was so much I wanted to say to Flynn, so many questions. I had thought that she'd disappeared, but, having put away her guitar, she squeezed back through the press of people and took my hand. She took me outside where the others danced, and we jived to the rock and roll music, taking it in turns to swing each other round. When she swung into my arms, and pressed against me, I felt how warm she was still, how feverishly hot.

I did not have the heart, or the opportunity, to ask Flynn about her brother, or why she had kept him a secret from me.

We danced for ages under the moonlight – music floating from inside the building – doors flung wide – the moon and stars – candles lighting the shrubbery. Everything magic.

Flynn went to the tank at the side of the hall and drank direct from the tap, and doused her head with water, as others were doing. She drank and drank, as if she could not get enough. And then she said she felt ill. So Caleb drove us home, down the winding mountain road, stopping so Flynn could be sick in the grass. He drove us both to my place, carrying her guitar in after us. I put her to bed and crawled in with her.

## Chapter Nine

**F**LYNN BURNED IN my arms all night.

She sweated with fever, and I got up to fetch tablets and water. I applied a cold towel to her forehead. I wanted to be close to her, despite the heat of her sick body. Every so often, she'd push me away. Finally she slept, and I found myself at dawn out on the wall watching the sunrise.

I crept around the house and did a few things while she went on sleeping. The grey cat accompanied me, purring when it saw me opening a tin of food, winding round my legs and collapsing at my feet at every opportunity. I didn't feel that it was *mine*, in any way, and yet here it was.

When Flynn woke, I sponged her clean, changed the damp sheets, and put her into one of my own clean nighties, one that

my mother had bought for me. Perversely, it gave me pleasure tending to her small wants, anticipating her needs. Flynn was so weak, so helpless, so dependent.

Mid-morning, while I was offering her tea and toast, her mobile rang. I handed it to her. She looked at the screen and did not answer it.

‘My mother,’ she said, quietly. ‘I don’t have the energy to talk to her. If I answer she’ll work out I’m ill. She’ll want to come and look *after* me. She’ll want to come and take me *home*. Next time she rings, can you answer and tell her a little white lie? She likes you; she’ll believe anything you say.’

She sank back onto the pillows and fell asleep.

So her mother liked me! I felt obscurely pleased.

I took the phone outside where it wouldn’t disturb her, and sat in the shade against the side of the house and painted my toenails green. When it rang again, the screen said, *Mum*.

I answered it, saying, ‘Hello, this is Flynn’s phone. Anna speaking.’

‘Anna? Hello ... is Flynn there?’

‘No, um ...’

‘Is anything the matter with her?’ There was an edge of panic in her voice.

‘No! She’s fine ... she’s just ...’

Flynn hadn’t said what the little white lie should be, but I told her mother that Flynn was out helping Caleb with something that would take all day – that she’d accidentally left her phone with me and I wasn’t sure when I could get it back to her. I promised to tell her that her mother had rung – no reason, just to see how she was.

Soon after I'd hung up, the phone beeped. Message. Automatically I looked to see who it was from. It was from *Rocco*.

My pulse quickened. I heard the children next door calling to their father. A bird piped shrilly from a branch of the paw-paw tree. The morning was bright and ordinary but my belly felt heavy with dread and anxiety.

And then, idly, guiltily, I looked to see what the message was.

*Hey, Flynn, what's this people keep telling me about a grll?*

By Monday morning, she was still sleeping most of the time. I called the café to say she was sick.

Coming home at lunchtime (I'd driven to work so I could do this), I found her still asleep, but her temperature felt normal. I made myself a coffee and a slice of bread and cheese, fed the cat, kissed Flynn on the cheek, and departed, leaving a glass of lemonade and a stack of Sao biscuits next to the bed. When I got home that evening she was in the shower.

I remembered to tell her the story I'd told her mother. I didn't report how anxious her mother had sounded about her. I remembered her mother's sorrowful face, and it all fell into place.

After her shower, Flynn put on the clean clothes I'd brought up from her place, and started eating ravenously.

I couldn't forget that she'd not told me her brother had died. But I could see why she didn't like to think or talk about it; it was too painful. Singing a song about him was different – it was a way of making sense of her feelings.

I didn't even ask who this Rocco was, or about the text

message that seemed to be referring to me: *What's this people keep telling me about a grrl?*

I pretended everything was fine. I did not want anything to come between us.

When I remarked that I needed a haircut, she offered to do it, bringing from her own place a pair of haircutting scissors that belonged to Hannah. We sat on the wall in late afternoon sunlight, and as she clipped my hair I remembered Morgan, the day we had cut each other's hair, the thrill of being close to her, and later, the shame I had felt at my helpless desire.

## *Chapter Ten*

**A**ND THEN I spoiled everything.  
I keep remembering her in her kitchen, with her hands full of apples.

I blurted out, 'Who's Rocco?'

I couldn't help myself. It just came out and, once there, hanging in the air, couldn't be retrieved.

She tipped the fruit into a bowl. They might have been pomegranates, they were so round and red and unreal-looking. They might have been plucked from the underworld, the place where the dead go.

An apple tumbled onto the table. She picked it up and put it with the others. Flynn, the keeper of apples and pomegranates.



It was after work, almost dark, and the tai chi women in the room across the way were moving their arms in arcs, bending and twisting like old trees in the wind. I watched them. I wished, for a moment, that *I* was old, and all the difficult parts of my life, like falling in love – all the agonies and uncertainties – were over, and I could stand in a room and spread my wings like the white dove.

*Who's Rocco?*

'A friend,' she said. 'Just a friend of mine. Anyway, how do you know about Rocco?'

'Your mother asked about him, that day in the café.'

She laughed, without humour. 'You certainly have a good memory, Anna.'

Her sarcasm made me reckless, and I rushed on.

'Is he the boy in the photo?' I demanded.

'What photo?'

'The one in your drawer,' I said reluctantly.

Flynn's face looked incredulous, and then angry.

'You looked through my *things*?' She stood with one hand on her hip, furious, and I felt my heart contract with dismay.

Coldly, without looking at me, she reached for the bowl she'd been softening butter in and tipped in some sugar, added eggs, mashed some bananas with a fork. She automatically stuck a finger into the mixture and tasted it, then added some flour, not even bothering to sift it. Timothy put his paw into the bowl and hooked some out, but she did not push him away. She stood with her hands clutching the bowl as if it was supporting her, looking ahead, her eyes fixed somewhere on the wall.

'If you must know,' she said, 'The boy in the picture is my

brother Simon. I keep the picture in a drawer because I can't face looking at it all the time, just yet.'

The women next door had finished being white doves and were collecting their bags and hugging each other and laughing, preparing to leave. One day I would be an old woman, and all the painful parts of my life would be over. I would be a flying white dove.

'I'm sorry, because I should have told you about him, but I just can't, yet. That's why I wrote the song. It was a way of saying how I feel.'

She picked up the spoon and began mixing the cake batter.

There was a shabby kitchen at twilight, there was a table, and two girls, and a cat, and apples came into it somewhere. They looked like pomegranates in a certain light, if you squinted your eyes and used your imagination. They could remind you of death if you wanted them to, those apples, or pomegranates. They reminded you of folly.

There were bananas and flour and a cat licking cake mix from the bowl. There was a girl who knew about death and wouldn't say, and another girl who knew nothing. This girl could have gone to the other and said, *I am so, so sorry. I was completely in the wrong.*

But she didn't. She was like a car without a handbrake. She was on a hill and about to roll down, about to gather speed and crash. She was an accident waiting to happen.

'That message Rocco sent you ... *What's this people keep telling me about a girl?* Or something. Why should they think he needs to know?'

She put down the wooden spoon and shook her head, as if she couldn't believe it. 'You read a text sent to me!'

But I pressed on.

'You said a "friend". You mean, like a *boyfriend*.'

'Yes, if you must know. A *boyfriend*.'

The cat jumped down from the table.

The lights went out in the room across the way.

I looked at Flynn but she wouldn't meet my eye.

'But where *is* he, if he hasn't come back yet? And is he coming back to you? I mean, are you still on with him or anything?'

'If you *must* know, we're still *friends*.' Flynn spoke as if she was pounding rocks to smithereens. 'And because he was going overseas for a year we decided we'd leave each other free for that time. I mean, long-distance relationships are *difficult*, aren't they? And *yes*, when he comes back I'll *see* him. And I don't know *what* will happen! Does *that* satisfy your curiosity? Or do you want to control my *whole life*?'

She slammed the cake into the oven.

'Anyway, I bet there are things about yourself you haven't told *me*,' she went on.

I went to the window and looked out into the dark, narrow space between the buildings. It was so empty, so devoid of light.

'I'm sorry,' I said. Though what I was sorry for I didn't know.

That day I told her about my first year at university – about my *madness*, as I called it. I told her about my anger, my illogical fury at receiving a high distinction for my essay. I told her about Molly's accident and how it had been *all my fault*. I told

her about my father's defection from the family, but not about falling in love with Morgan.

And then I told her about 'The Tablets' that had worked such wonders, and made me not care about anything at all.

She looked at me rather dubiously. I'd suspected that she would, which was why I'd not said anything before.

She said, 'Don't people get addicted to those things?'

'Well, I didn't,' I said, defensively. 'I think they helped me a lot. They helped me to think clearly and rationally again. They got rid of all the static in my head.'

I teetered on the edge of hostility.

We looked at each other. Neither of us could think what to say. It was like some sort of standoff. I wondered if we could ever make each other happy again.

## Chapter Eleven

WHAT ARE THE words of that song? *Everywhere you go, always take the weather with you.* It has an upbeat tempo, but it seems to me to be coloured with sadness.

Flynn always had the weather with her. Or at least, I always noticed the weather when she was with me. She heightened my senses, caused me to notice things. She made me feel more alive.

Our argument in the kitchen made the weather irrelevant to me, because we avoided each other. I went to work and then home again, burrowed into books, and lived on comforting invalid food like tea and Vegemite toast. I was licking my wounds. I felt that I might never see her again.

I took out the mother-of-pearl button she'd given me. A

token, given to me on the day when I had abused her trust. (*But I was right, wasn't I*, said a little voice in my head. *There is a boy*. I was right about that, for the wrong reasons.)

I thought of the childhood trinkets Flynn kept in the little tin. The guitar pick, that she'd not told me the history of. Simon had taught her to play. He had helped her shop for Louise. *That one*, he'd said, *is a little beauty*. It must be one of his guitar picks.

And the day her mother had turned up, it was just after the anniversary of Simon's death. So that was the grief in her. I imagined my own mother if one of us had died. She'd be inconsolable, for years and years, perhaps always. That sort of thing must never go away. Flynn's mother said she'd called in the week before, but Flynn was at the beach with *me*, observing the anniversary with *me*, even though I didn't know it at the time. That must show how much she cared about me – mustn't it?

And then the voice in my head said, *And what about when Rocco gets back?*

She arrived unexpectedly on Sunday afternoon, with a bag full of groceries.

'Let's not quarrel,' she said, and went straight to the kitchen to make us a Japanese feast, little seaweed rolls with slivers of pink salmon and cucumber, and bowls of soupy rice.

We ate sitting on cushions at the coffee table, not saying much. We passed food across the table, spooned soup into our mouths, and nibbled fastidiously on the little rice parcels. I'd made a pot of green tea (I had bought a teapot, finally, in an op shop, a small Japanese-style pot with a side handle), and

I poured it into small glasses with thick bottoms and ridged sides. I spooned pale green wasabi onto my plate and dabbed a roll into it, savouring the fiery bite. I sat for a while without eating, and took in my surroundings. I took in the colours – the pink salmon in the white rice rolls, the translucent cucumber with its thread of dark green skin, the black seaweed wrapper, and Flynn's glossy dark hair.

The sky outside was a pure blue. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees.

The only sound was the clapping and chanting of my neighbour's children as they played handball against the side of the house.

At last, we had eaten enough. Flynn lay back against the sofa and said, 'I'd like to tell you about Simon.'

She went on without waiting for me to say anything.

'He was just the best brother. You know how siblings are not meant to get on? Well, we did. He was only three years older than me, and we were best mates. He was the one who called me Flynn – he said Rose was a sissy name. We used to go down to the creek in the paddock behind the house and make rafts out of drums and bamboo – they always sank. And he'd hoist me up trees with him and we'd sit looking at the view with the branches swaying underneath us. I broke *bones* playing with him. I have *scars*. But he was such fun to be with.

'He made his first guitar out of a biscuit tin, with a wooden neck and ordinary string. It sounded okay – or so we thought.

'So anyway, when he got a real guitar for Christmas, he let me use it, and then the following Christmas our parents gave me one – just an acoustic. And then we could be a duo!

‘Okay – he wasn’t perfect. He was really wild when he was a teenager – a risk-taker. He rode a friend’s motorbike when he was under age – not just once, but all the time – at speed, on public roads. Don’t know why he was never caught. Smoked dope. Drank spirits. Maybe it all went with his rock-musician image of himself. Got an electric guitar, then urged me to save for my own. That’s Louise – you see why I like her so much?

‘I called her Louise because he said Louise was an okay girl’s name. He said he always fell for girls named Louise – they were smart and sassy. It was sort of fatal for him to meet a girl with that name. I can only ever remember one – it didn’t work out. He wrote a song about her, of course.’

She sat for a long time without speaking.

‘How did he die?’ I prodded.

‘He drowned,’ she said. ‘Went out on a friend’s boat late one night. No life jacket. When he ... the *body* was found, the autopsy found he’d been drinking.’ She punched the cushion she’d been clasping to her chest. ‘Oh, he was so *stupid*! I *hate* him!’

She turned to me, her face smeared with tears, her lips curled with grief. ‘For ages afterwards, I kept saying to him in my head, *It’s just like you to leave me on my own! So how am I meant to go on?*’

She shook her head as though getting rid of images. ‘But he didn’t mean to die.’

Later, late that night, while we lay in bed in the dark, I told her about falling in love with Morgan.

‘I fell in love with my father’s girlfriend,’ I said. ‘My step-mother, sort of.’ Because it seemed important that she *know*.



‘Was she the first one?’ she asked.

‘I had a crush, that’s all. It didn’t even last for very long.’ All those days turning up breathless at their house, hoping that my father wouldn’t be there. ‘But no, she wasn’t the first girl I had a crush on. One of a long line.’

‘When did you realise that you liked girls?’

‘Oh ...’ I pretended to think. ‘When I was about six.’

‘Six!’ She laughed, incredulous.

So perhaps she didn’t know the feeling of always being alien in a world where what you saw and what you felt never added up.

I remembered my *black* period, when I read Dostoyevsky, imagining myself as a disaffected, subversive *raskol’niki* in a stinking, ragged black coat, stamping my feet in the snow, the steam of my hot breath, harnesses jingling in the frosty air. Telling myself, *Courage!*

I imagined my eyes red with anger and fury, scowling through the windows of a lighted ballroom at women with scented white shoulders, little feet in satin slippers. I was outcast and alone, because I had fallen from grace. And there were no street signs to show me the way.

I felt Flynn’s hand take mine.

‘Of course,’ I found myself repeating, ‘I knew when I was six. How about you?’

‘How about me what?’

‘When did *you* first know that you “liked girls”?’

I heard her sigh. ‘You know, I don’t think I do especially. Apart from you. You were the first. I’m usually attracted to men.’ She squeezed my hand.

‘Then why me?’

She was silent for a moment, but I waited. I really wanted to know.

‘I think it was the way you looked at me – that day on the roof. My heart went out to you, and I saw the possibility. Of something with you. And I thought – *why not?*’

I remembered her reaching over a fence to pick someone’s flower for herself. *I must have this*. Was I just something that she *must have*?

‘And you know, Anna, sometimes I wish I hadn’t allowed myself to think that. Because you can *choose* to fall in love. But the choice goes only so far, because once you’re in, it’s like quicksand. It seems irrevocable.’

At the words *fall in love*, my heart quickened.

I remembered the night – I must have been about fifteen – when I lay in my bed in the dark, curled up into a tiny ball. *I am this way, for ever and ever*, I thought. And falling in love, finding a life partner, was something I longed to do. But at the same time it filled me with fear and terror, because the world was not this way, and I was not the way of the world.

I had never felt so small and frightened and alone.

‘It doesn’t have to be quicksand. I’ll let you go whenever you want,’ I said, feeling such a wrench that I couldn’t imagine being alive if she accepted.

‘I didn’t mean that,’ she said. ‘It’s not you stopping me from leaving. It’s in *me*, the not being able to get out.’

But even though we appeared to have found a new openness and honesty with each other, there was a sadness there, and Flynn stayed away from me again for almost a whole week, and I from her. I wanted her to make the first move. I wanted

to know that she chose to be with me.

Then one night she let herself in with the key I had given her. I woke from sleep; in the illumination from the hall light I saw her dark shape next to my bed. She put a finger to my lips, and I nuzzled her hand. She undressed, and slid in next to me, running her hands up under my singlet. I felt her fingers play across the corrugations of my ribs; I imagined them white and bleached, like ghostly piano keys. And then the weight of her on top of me, the pressure of her lips on my mouth, so familiar and welcome.

I remembered how she had used the word *love*, about us. *You can choose to fall in love*, she said, and she'd fallen in love with me. I couldn't forget that. I nursed it and nursed it.

The next night, she came round again, and as we cooked a meal together, I said, as casually as I could, 'Hey, I've just had an idea. Why don't you come and live *here*? I mean, you say that Caleb and Hannah are never there anyway ... you could have your own room, and one for Louise as well.'

For a long time she said nothing, and the atmosphere in the room was thick, like molasses. 'What do you think, Flynn?' I said. 'Wouldn't it be fun? And you're here an awful lot anyway. It'd be easier, in a way.'

I waited to see what she would reply, and finally she said huskily, 'I'll think about it.'

That night I woke and found her gone. Going out to the living-room, I peered through the window at the grey light, and saw her sitting on the wall with the cat beside her. When I went outside, she turned her face to me, and there was no answer in it.

And I saw then that what I'd done was to invite her out into

the snow with me, and why would she want to stand outside the ballroom window with tattered boots and icy breath and no street signs? Because that was the way it'd be – of course she'd want to be in there, drinking wine and dancing with bare shoulders far into the scented night.

## Chapter Twelve

‘**T**HE RAIN IT raineth every day.’ Was it the Fool, in *King Lear*, who said that?

I trudged to work beneath an inadequate umbrella. There was something about being out in the unrelenting rain that suited my mood.

I hadn’t seen Flynn for five days, since I suggested she come to live with me. Her silence had become a kind of reply. There’d been no quarrel, just her withdrawal from me. I’d noticed the absence in her that morning when she sat out with the cat, and later on when we both left for work. I felt rubbed raw inside. I couldn’t eat. We hadn’t explicitly parted, but we didn’t seem to be together, either.

Customers told me that all this rain was typical Lismore

weather. They stood damply about in the bookshop, leaving puddles from their umbrellas. The place was uglier in the wet; the lights seemed brighter, the covers on the books more garish. I felt unutterably dreary. In an attempt to cheer myself up I'd bought a pair of red gumboots, and I saw them sitting in the stockroom, near the back door. If I put them on and clicked their heels, would they take me home? Wherever that was?

She came to see me late one night, saying nothing, and we slept curved together like spoons as the rain pounded on the roof.

Or at least Flynn slept. I couldn't. I kept thinking that I was surely and steadily losing her, drop by drop by drop. I knew I'd been too hasty in suggesting she live with me. We woke up face to face. I put my hand up onto her cheek and kissed her, looking into her eyes. Drawing away, I said softly, 'What is it that you're afraid of, Flynn? Committing yourself to me? Or embarking on a lifetime of loving women?'

She averted her eyes from my face and did not answer, and I saw just how unreachable, how clouded she was.

'I hate the way you come and go as you feel like it, as though you can't decide.'

I still spoke softly. I simply wanted to assert myself. But she shot me such an ambiguous, defiant look as she swung herself to a sitting position at the edge of the bed that I couldn't think what more to say. I only knew that I loved her and, perversely, probably wouldn't have her any other way. Perhaps deep down I liked her capricious and unattainable. I didn't want someone predictable whose every thought and action was known to me.

'You know how I feel about you, Anna,' she said, and with a baleful glance went off to the bathroom.

We parted that morning in the rain, and did not plan when next we would meet. And that was the last I saw of her for what seemed like a very long time, though it was really only a little over a week.

Without acknowledging that anything was amiss between us, Flynn turned up one afternoon, and we drove to the coast. The sky was a dazzling blue. It was as if rain had never existed. But we said very little to each other, almost as though it would be too dangerous to speak.

The sea had flung up great piles of kelp torn from the ocean floor; the roots still hung onto the rocks which had come away with it. The sand dunes had been chomped away as though by earthmovers, and thick yellow strands of the grass that once held the dunes together hung across the scars.

As we had on that long-ago earlier occasion, Flynn and I balanced our way along the trunks of trees that had been washed up on the beach, but there was no longer any joy in it. We were like oversized children who had lost the ability to play. I felt I was losing her, but in a strange way I had never felt closer.

'This is the beach where Simon was washed up,' she said, staring out to sea, her whole body utterly still. 'Some early-morning walkers found him.' It was as though she was talking to herself.

I wanted to go to her, put my arms round her, but I could see that nothing I could do or say could make her feel better in the face of all that grief.

As we kept walking slowly up the beach, I found ropes of seaweed beaded like a necklace, and looped them round her neck, but she only tugged herself free of them. Not wanting to see the expression on her face, I ran ahead, and then, unable to bear being separated from her, I waited for her to catch up.

Someone had taken long branches that had washed up with the tide and buried them in the ground like posts, and then threaded ropey lines of dune grass between them, making a kind of sculpture, or a primitive washing line. Working silently, as though by instinct, Flynn began to pick up the long strands of ragged kelp and hung them over the lines. Without her inviting me, I joined in, and we went silently back and forth with the seaweed, like creatures instinctively performing some atavistic ritual. And as I walked up and down the beach, my arms full of seaweed, I knew with dread that everything was hopeless.



## *Chapter Thirteen*

**T**HAT DAY, WE went back to her room and lay down on her bed. When we kissed, her mouth was not yielding at all, but hard and questioning. We grappled with each other for a while like wrestlers, until Flynn sat up. She pushed her hair away from her eyes, and said she would make a cup of tea.

I watched as she pulled on her clothes and went out to the kitchen. When she returned with the tray I followed her onto the roof. The galvanised iron creaked under my weight, and I knelt while she poured tea. I felt very sandy and windswept and primitive crouched there, in clothes still damp from salt spray. My hands smelled of seaweed, or of Flynn. It occurred to me that Lavinia was a very ugly teapot, and quite impractical. It poured very badly, and the lid never sat straight.

SHADOW, said the graffiti on the wall across the street. Timothy sat nearby, licking his haunches. We drank tea, and ate, without appetite, the inevitable banana cake. Everything was an echo of that first day. Only we were different.

She chose then to tell me that Rocco was finally coming home for certain. 'When?' I demanded, jealousy flowering in my belly.

'In a month,' she said.

'And what have you decided? Which of us do you want?'

She only shook her head miserably, and did not reply.

I had already decided what I would do – what I must do, for myself, if not for Flynn.

'Then I will choose for you,' I said, crumbling cake between my fingers.

She did not look at me.

'I will go,' I said, woodenly.

'Anna, don't do this. Please.'

She looked up, and I saw that she was crying.

'You know, Flynn,' I went on, sounding as hard as steel, but crumbling inside, 'you have a choice, but I don't. I like girls. Only girls.' ('Only you', I should have said, because it was true.) 'And I can see that if you have a choice, in the end you're going to choose boys. Why should you choose me, and make life difficult for yourself? But this is the way I *am*!'

I listened to myself, appalled.

'Anna. *Please. Please.* Don't do this.'

Awkwardly, making my way carefully across the iron roof, I went and knelt in front of her and kissed her most tenderly. I ran my finger over her lips, across the tiny dent above the middle of the lip that makes the mouth into a bow. I am

sure there is a word for that dent, but I don't know it. I don't think there is a word for walking away from someone when every part of you shrieks that you want to stay.

I finished with Flynn, that day on the roof, as though love were easy to come by. I walked away from her, just like that, climbing in through the window and not looking back.

I walked away like a dead thing, seeing only the walls, the floor, the stairs, the street.

Only then did I pause to take a breath.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

**A**ND THAT WAS how I lost her. When I opened the door of my flat, it was horribly silent. I walked to the windows and looked out, then turned my back on the offending, beautiful view.

An empty cup sat on the table. The cushions on which we'd perched to eat the Japanese food she'd made were still scattered on the floor. I ran a glass of water from the kitchen tap, took a sip, and tipped it out. There was a sharp pain in the middle of my body, as though I'd sustained a life-threatening injury.

I gnawed at my knuckles in an attempt to stop the pain. Pacing the room, I turned the CD player on, and off again at once. The music that had filled the room was wrong. All music

would be wrong. What could be right when you have lost the person you love?

I took up a book and let it fall to the floor. What do you read when your heart is breaking? How can you breathe? I sat on the sofa with my fists pressed to my mouth. I thought I was dying.

Outside, I could hear the children next door, calling and calling as though they had lost something. The innocent purity of their voices cut into my chest, and I picked up a cushion and clutched it to me, at the place where my life was leaking away.

When I heard a knock at the door I leapt up, hope flooding through me as warm as alcohol. But it was only the children. 'Have you seen our kitten?' they asked. Their faces, boy and girl, with identical blue eyes and high, smooth foreheads, were pale and serious and trusting. They looked up at me as though I might answer their prayers. The younger one, a boy of about six, took my hand for a moment. 'It's a white kitten,' he said, 'with a black nose. It's called Fluff.'

*Fluff*. Such a ridiculous name. But their anxiety was real. And I couldn't help them. I couldn't even help myself.

I sent them away with promises, and as I closed the door I wished I'd found an excuse for them to stay. I should have drawn them inside, given them a glass of juice, or gone out with them to hunt for Fluff. Alone, I thought that I might go under.

Of course, I didn't. I found that you don't die of a broken heart. You can lose an eternity of sleep, live for a time without food. The pain subsides to a dull ache. And then pure animal need takes over.

On the third day, I got home from work and was suddenly ravenous. I tore into hunks of bread and cheese and squashed a sweet, over-ripe tomato into my mouth, eating at the kitchen sink. I finally slept through sheer exhaustion, oversleeping because I found that when you sleep you are not thinking.

I did not dream of her.

In desperation, I made a list of things I could do to help me survive.

It said:

*Go for walks – or drive into the country*

*Buy new CDs*

*Enjoy your life! It's the only one you've got!*

Two days later I added:

*Go back and finish that university course (??)*

*Go home ...*

The idea lodged in my mind.

I gave two weeks' notice and resigned from my job.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

**I**T WAS SPRING.

I had spent more than six months of my life obsessed with Flynn. And when I got home to Canberra, there was my family, almost exactly as I had left them.

I found my mother barefoot, watering the front garden (though I could tell she was out there waiting for me to arrive); she was so pleased to see me it brought tears to my eyes. And then Molly came running out, bursting with news so that she forgot to even say hello.

‘The cat’s name is Puddy!’ she announced. ‘And it’s a boy. And Mummy’s going to take it to the vet soon, to ...’ Here she floundered.

“‘Get fixed up,’” said my mother, nodding discreetly at me.

I had sent the grey cat down on the plane a week before, and it looked very much at home already. It lay on the floor of the kitchen whisking its tail while we had afternoon tea. I felt like an important visitor – my mother and Molly had made scones with jam and cream. But then, I remembered that we always had nice things to eat.

‘Hey, Sis!’ Josh said, passing through the kitchen and stopping for a minute to grab a scone.

‘Still out in the garage?’ I asked.

‘Still there,’ he said. ‘Gig on Saturday night. Coming?’

‘Might.’

We brought all my bags and boxes in from the car, and apart from my clothes, I piled everything up in the corner of my old bedroom. I didn’t want to unpack it all yet, and really, there wasn’t a lot. Before I left, I’d sold or given away the old furniture and most of the crockery I’d been using.

Later, as I sat watching my mother make dinner (she in her northern sarong because of the warm day), she asked, ‘How are you really, Annie? You seem very quiet. And so thin!’

‘It’s nothing,’ I said. ‘I’m just a bit tired from the trip, that’s all.’

There was no way, yet, that I could tell her about Flynn.

I wanted to go and see Michael, even though we’d not contacted each other in all my time up north. I found that he’d moved out of home; his mother gave me the address and I went round at once – it wasn’t far. He lived in a flat at the back of a house a few streets away.

‘Hey!’ he said, when he came to the door, his face lit up with surprise. We stood there for a moment looking at each other.



He wore a T-shirt that said PAVEMENT, and shorts, and his face was unbearably sweet, the face I remembered from age eleven when he said, *Everyone's different in their own little way.*

'How about showing me inside,' I said, gesturing wildly to cover my awkwardness.

We went into a combined kitchen and living area. There were various shabby couches, covered by throws. 'Canberra, city of discarded couches,' said Michael, sitting me down and taking one facing me. We were silent for a moment, just taking each other in. 'Sometimes I thought I'd never see you again,' he said. 'Is this just a visit, or ...?'

'I've come home,' I replied, feeling a slight sense of shame, as though I'd failed at the whole leaving-home thing. 'I'm applying for uni here next year.'

He nodded. 'You need to get back to what you're good at.'

'I still don't quite know what I want to do with myself after that,' I admitted. 'But it's a beginning. Actually, I think I can't wait to start studying again.' But I was reluctant to talk about myself, so I changed the conversation. 'So look at you – your own flat!'

'I share with Anna ...'

'Your mum said.'

'I've been tutoring at uni in my Honours year, which is how I can afford it. And Anna's on a PhD scholarship – she's at uni today. I've a good chance of getting a scholarship next year as well.'

From Michael, it didn't sound like boasting. He got up and went to the fridge for juice. A half-grown kitten ran in and he lifted her up and draped her round his shoulders. 'This is Florence,' he said. 'She just came to us out of the blue.'

‘The best way to get a cat. I brought one home from up north, but I’ve given it to Molly. Him, I should say – his name’s Puddy.’

We couldn’t stop smiling at each other, but it still felt strained.

‘Hey,’ he said, putting the cat down. ‘Let’s go out for a walk to the park.’

We walked down familiar streets to the selfsame park we used to lie about in as teenagers and, as we reclined on the scratchy grass, our faces to the sun, eyes squinted shut against the glare, he murmured, liltingly, *‘Tell me about Anna Livia. I want to know – all – about – Anna – Livia.’*

‘You’ll die if I tell you. You’ll die when you hear ...’ I replied at once, feeling a great rush of love for him.

He opened his eyes and smiled. ‘Try me.’

At Josh’s gig, bodies crammed into a narrow, dark pub; I saw pools of light, people edging past each other with trays of drinks, elbows squeezed to their sides, getting into position for a good view. The band was still setting up. I watched Josh, his hips narrow in tight jeans, flicking back his hair, hauling his amp across the floor and plugging in his guitar, the quintessential rock musician.

The band seemed to have a good following, because certain songs were greeted with cries of recognition and approval. It was all their own songs, too – why bother otherwise, was Josh’s philosophy. I loved the music, so loud and rhythmic, melodic, danceable, though mostly people stood and swayed or tapped their feet. Josh had the right voice for rock music, husky, plaintive, yearning. I felt it tugging me towards him.

The music filled me with such longing that I suddenly wondered what Flynn was doing this Saturday night.

There was a girl on her own standing quite near me, a girl in ballet flats, a gypsy-like gathered skirt and plain black top, who held a glass against her chest though she seldom drank from it. She had a handsome face, and wore an intent, speculative expression. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and I could see she was listening to the words.

Again, I thought of Flynn, and saw how difficult it would be to find anyone to match her.

But this looked a nice girl, a bookish-looking girl. The sort of girl I could imagine having as a friend. Just a friend.

In a lull between songs we caught each other's eye and she smiled at me. Looking towards the band, she nodded and said covetously, 'He's beautiful, isn't he?'

'Yes,' I said, 'He is.'

And I did think my brother beautiful. All the energy and ardour of his performance marked him out as special. How had I ever thought he was just a layabout?

At the end of the gig the members of the band set up a table to sell their home-made CDs. I saw the girl who'd spoken to me approach Josh, and they started talking. I looked away for a while, and the next time I glanced over at them I was pleased to see him smiling and keying a number into his mobile phone.

## Chapter Sixteen

I UNPACKED THE boxes I'd brought back. My cds went back on the rack; the small group of favourite books I'd taken with me (mostly the black Russians) went back on the shelves. I found the slim book of poetry Flynn had given me (did I really look like that dopey girl on the cover?) and slid it between *Crime and Punishment* and a copy of *Notes from Underground*, which I'd bought from the shop before I left because I just had to have it. The Christina Rossetti book was so tiny it was all but invisible, a leaf caught between two rocks. One day I would decide what to do with it.

My mother came to the door. I knelt on the floor with things scattered round me.

'May I come in?'

‘Of course.’

She sat on the floor next to me. ‘It must seem as though you’ve never left home.’

I looked around at my unpacking. ‘No,’ I said. ‘It seems as if I did. I left home, all right.’

Then, as an afterthought, I said, ‘I kind of feel like a failure at it.’

‘Oh, why? You managed to get a job somewhere else, lived on your own in a flat ... you just decided to come back, that’s all.’ She had that bright, upbeat tone that parents often use.

‘You don’t think I should have stayed away?’

‘Of course not! And I love having you here. You’re still only nineteen, after all.’

‘I plan to get some part-time work after I settle in and start uni. And I’ll find somewhere to live – a share house I think. I don’t want to live on my own again. And besides, I couldn’t afford it down here, especially if I’m a student.’

‘Well, don’t feel you have to leave too soon.’ She reached over for an object swathed in newspaper, and automatically unwrapped it.

‘A teapot!’ she said. ‘You said that you wanted to get one when I was up there.’

‘I think it’s actually very ugly, don’t you?’ I said. ‘And it’s not that practical. The lid doesn’t fit properly, and it’s quite hard to pour.’

She put it aside. ‘That’s a pity. But I don’t think it’s all that ugly. Perhaps we could use it as a vase.’

‘It belonged to someone I knew,’ I said, forging on. ‘Her name was Flynn.’

‘Flynn! The girl I met when I came up.’

‘That’s right.’ I stopped to consider what I’d say next.

‘She was my girlfriend, actually. I don’t mean in a “friend” sense. I loved her. We were lovers. And ...’ I felt tears spring to my eyes, ‘it didn’t work out.’

‘Oh, Anna.’

I shrugged away her attempted hug.

‘And it wasn’t just some crush. I really did love her. And the thing you need to know is ... this isn’t some temporary thing with me – some whim. I’m just not attracted to boys. I never have been.’

‘Anna, come *here* ...’

And I became her child again. I put my arms around her, and closed my eyes. ‘Annie – I’m so glad you told me.’

‘Why?’ I sat up and sniffed.

‘Because it’s *you*, isn’t it? And I need to know. And ...’

‘What?’

‘Well, it fits a little piece of the jigsaw of *you* together, that I’ve been looking for for so long.’

‘You mean, why I’m so strange and peculiar?’

‘Yes, you goose.’

‘I really did love her,’ I repeated. It was something I’d been telling myself over and over. ‘And it was me who finished it. Maybe if I’d done things differently we’d still be together.’

‘Life is full of *maybes* and *what-ifs*. Some things just don’t work out. That’s life.’

I looked at her. She shrugged, and I saw that after all that had happened over the last few years, with my father and everything, she really was all right.

‘Don’t blame yourself,’ she said.

And I discovered in Canberra that spring a little half-sister. No – a little sister – how can sisters come in halves?

Her name was Freya.

My mother had let me know when she was born, four months before, but I'd been so tied up with Flynn that it had passed right over me. So I brought her a belated gift – one of my favourite books, *Mr Rabbit and the Lovely Present*, with pictures by Maurice Sendak.

She was a beautiful baby, solid and sure of herself. She had astonishing red hair, standing up on top in a bush, translucent in the sunlight. Like Molly and me, she had Molly McGuire's hair and skin.

Molly and I sat next to her where she lay in her baby bouncer on the back deck. 'All my girls,' said my father, fondly, as he walked past. 'Like peas in a pod.'

Freya looked at me, pursed her lips together, and looked away again. She caught sight of Molly, and smiled.

'Freya loves Molly,' said Morgan gently to her baby. 'Don't you?'

Molly smiled, and jiggled Freya's foot.

Morgan had cut all her long hair off so that it was short and spiky. She looked thinner in the face, and tired. With great tenderness, she picked up the baby and put her into my arms. 'Don't be afraid,' she said. 'Babies are fairly unbreakable as long as you're reasonably careful ... yes, support her head like that. Anna – you're a natural!'

I didn't know about that. I looked down at Freya. She had a face like the magnolia flowers in our garden, creamy and scented, unfolding very slowly and gracefully, all in her own time.

## *Epilogue*

I WRITE ABOUT my life, not because I think it is important, but because there are images I can't forget. I remembered what Flynn said about how she wrote a song – how she started with an image that kept returning to her, and saw where it led. And so I began with the night when I went to the gig and felt the music she made – and my heart opened up. And now I have something that resembles some sort of story, although perhaps it is only about a girl.

I will confess now that before I decided to leave Lismore I had gone looking for Flynn.

But she had already gone. Hannah opened the door and said peremptorily, 'She doesn't live here anymore.'



I thought quickly, and said that I'd like to go to her room; there was something I'd left behind.

Hannah watched me from the doorway of Flynn's room for a moment, then turned on her heel and left.

And I stood there wondering what it was I'd hoped to find – an answer to my misery, perhaps, a scrap of my broken heart, or some other indefinable thing that might help it all make sense. The room had the forlorn look of the hastily abandoned. A few confetti-like scraps of paper and balls of fluff lay sadly on the carpet. There was a wilted flower in a vase on the windowsill.

So this was it. I guessed that she'd gone to live with her parents again, but I wouldn't search for her there. Leaning my hands on the sill, I stared out over the roof.

And there was the teapot, Lavinia, in all her maiden-aunt glory. Impulsively, I clambered out of the window and scooped the teapot up, tipping out the contents before hiding it away in my shoulder bag.

And I left, climbing back through the window quickly, across the floor of the room that was no longer Flynn's, and out through the flat.

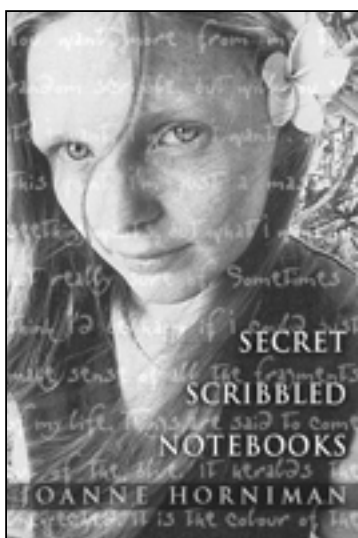
'Close the door after you,' called Hannah sardonically, from the kitchen.

Leaving it flagrantly open, I skipped down the purple stairs and away.

This page intentionally left blank

## *About the Author*

**J**OANNE HORNIMAN IS the author of numerous novels, including the award-winning *Mahalia* and *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*. She is the mother of two grown-up sons, and lives outside Lismore with her partner Tony, various chooks and ducks, and a grey cat named Tom.



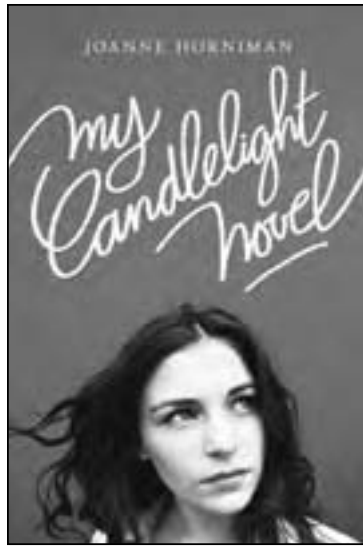
## *Secret Scribbled Notebooks*

WINNER OF THE QUEENSLAND PREMIER'S LITERARY AWARD;  
SHORTLISTED FOR THE CHILDREN'S BOOK COUNCIL OLDER READERS  
AWARD AND THE NSW PREMIER'S LITERARY AWARD

'A deeply satisfying novel on every level ... understated  
and beautifully written.' *Viewpoint*

'Kate's emotions, her thoughts and her honesty are transfixing.  
Horniman captures the anxiety and possibility of the cusp of  
adulthood, using elegant, evocative prose.' *Weekend Australian*

'The writing is beautiful ... brightened by shafts of humour ...  
romantic and introspective.' *Magpies*



## *My Candlelight Novel*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE NSW AND QUEENSLAND  
PREMIER'S LITERARY AWARDS

'This is a beautiful, lyrical novel that is a joy to read.'  
*insideadog.com.au*

'Quietly breathtaking... I love it.' *Phoebe Lines, 18*

'A collection of delicious stolen moments.'  
*Kate O'Donnell, 24*