

Praise for *The Consequence of Anna*

“An intense and emotional read!”

– ★★★★★ Rhys Bowen, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A superb, bittersweet story unlike any I have read before.”

– ★★★★★ Editor in Chief, *Publishing House*

“Above and beyond anything else I have read in this genre for a long time.”

– ★★★★★ *NetGalley*

“Gripping and intense, an emotional roller coaster. A masterpiece!”

– ★★★★★ *Readers' Favorite*

“Exemplary in its unique voice, writing style, and layered character appeal.”

– ★★★★★ *Writer's Digest*

“The characters come to life. Brilliant, beautiful, and poignantly written!”

– ★★★★★ *BookBub*

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– ★★★★★ *Amazon*

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– ★★★★★ *Amazon*

“Some writers have a special gift. This writer has it!”

– ★★★★★ *Amazon*

“Deeply moving story. Profound. Thoroughly an incredible read!”

– ★★★★★ *Goodreads*

“Absolutely brilliant. Never have I been so emotionally moved by words.”

– ★★★★★ *Goodreads*

“Incredible. Chilling. Earth shattering . . . just a few words to describe this amazing book and the journey it takes you on.”

– ★★★★★ *The Story Graph*

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Turlington Rose Press

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual organizations, places, events, or persons, alive or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For more information about Kate Birkin and her books, please visit <https://katebirkinbooks.com>.

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Dear Reader,

Wow, amazing grace and thunder and lightning! It's been an extraordinary journey since *The Consequence of Anna* first found its way into the world. What began as a simple curiosity about the life of a troubled young woman in a small Australian town more than a century ago has grown into a story embraced by millions. A dramatic, gothic-tinged tale woven with love and friendship, obsession and madness, betrayal and redemption, and all the emotions that make up the human condition.

From the beginning, I wanted the story to have a flavor of yesterday, like a book written a hundred years ago, found in the dusty attic of some grand, historic Victorian home, with its pages curled and yellowed. It was very important to me that readers didn't merely read about the past but felt as though they had stepped directly into it. I wanted the story to unfold around you like in a movie—vivid, immersive, electric and alive—as if you were literally living and interacting with its characters.

Oh, little Anna Shahan—what a spirited firecracker she is! And of course, her gifted but stifled Irish husband, James Shahan, and her demure, raven-haired mysterious cousin Rose, with those mesmerizing emerald eyes. I've received countless emails from readers who adore these complex characters and are deeply moved by their tragic and emotional love triangle.

I am proud of what this book has become, and even more excited about the projects that still lie ahead for this rare, beloved gem. I remember my editor telling me, "You know, *The Consequence of Anna* is truly something special. An unforgettable story that needs to be told."

He was right.

So cheers to little Anna . . . "Tonight, we are tasting the stars!"

Happy reading,
Kate Birkin



The Origins

I was in Mayfair, London, where old money and arcane secrets mingle. Out of my element, yet thrilled to be there. The first marquee auction I had ever attended was about to begin, and the catalog of trophy items read like a museum's wish list. Vintage art, antiquities, jewelry, period furniture, and other rare pieces with the kind of provenance collectors lust after—all up for grabs to the highest bidder.

Sitting there, looking around the large room, intimidated me. It wasn't just the high ceilings with crystal chandeliers, gold-framed master oil paintings hanging on the walls, polished wood and decorative trim, or rows of velvet-covered chairs perfectly aligned in front of the podium as if knowing the importance of behaving themselves. It was the people. The other guests, sizing each other up, making judgments, carrying on airs. I had already spotted a handful of celebrities, a prominent journalist, a politician (why was *he* here?), and a very famous author from the United Kingdom. The remaining buyers I didn't recognize, but with ornate necklaces and fancy watches worth more than my house, they were clearly high-net-worth individuals.

My editor was with me that day, and had been to several auctions before. He assured me that not everything presented during these premier events sold for sky-high prices, or even sold at all. "Besides," he added, "who else would want a diary of some inconsequential woman from a century ago except you?" But he knew the truth. Auction houses love items with a dramatic backstory. A connection to a crime, scandal, or tragedy. To collectors of dark history, psychological artifacts, or unusual ephemera, it was a coveted curio.

The auctioneer requested everyone take their seats, and the audience settled in. Nervousness and excitement coursed through my body, along with a little unease, but I kept my mind on why I was there. My aunt, who lives in Paris, had seen the pre-listing and noticed the unusual relic—the old diary—and immediately phoned me. This wasn't just any diary, but one written by a woman on a remote sheep station in Australia a hundred years ago, who'd been entangled in a tragic love triangle and later institutionalized for the attempted murder of her cousin and her baby. As a writer, the story intrigued me, grabbing hold of my imagination and compelling me to get my hands on this mysterious object from the past.

We waited as item after item was auctioned off. Mesmerizing things, most of which I could never afford. Then, at last, my “*article of vertu*” was announced . . . *Lot 63: A Diary Belonging to Anna Shaban, with Accompanying Letters and Documents, Early Twentieth Century*. To me, it was just as much an “*objet d’art*” as all the others.

Was it my imagination, or did the energy in the room suddenly shift when the handler brought it out? As if a strange presence had accompanied it. “Maybe no one else will bid,” I whispered wishfully to my editor.

He crossed his fingers and smiled.

The diary and related documents sat in a protective cradle next to the podium. I could almost smell the leather cover, feel the brittle edges of the yellowed pages, and see her cursive handwriting across the paper.

The auctioneer called the starting price, and I raised my paddle, placing the first bid. Immediately another paddle went up. Then another, and another, all outbidding me. Inwardly, I was spiraling in disappointment; but outwardly, I was as composed as the woman dressed head to toe in Louis Vuitton, lifting her paddle with casual confidence. Why did *she* want it, I wondered? I had the wild urge to chastise her, demanding she put her hand down.

After several rounds, we were the only two left. I leaned toward my editor and asked, “What should I do? Her outfit costs more than my car.”

“Keep going,” he said. “I know how badly you want this.”

And I truly did. I knew I’d deeply regret it if I didn’t get it, so I straightened my shoulders, lifted my chin, and bid again.

The other woman glanced my way, a subtle smile gracing her lacquered lips. Did I look desperate? Was my panic showing? Or did my determined eyes intimidate her? Whatever the reason, she did not counter my final bid.

“Fair warning,” said the auctioneer . . . “Last chance . . . Sold, to paddle 122.”

I couldn’t believe it! *Lot 63: A Diary Belonging to Anna Shaban, with Accompanying Letters and Documents, Early Twentieth Century*, was mine!

And that was only the beginning . . .

Inspired by true events . . .

It had become a thing of legend. Everyone in the Shire of Esperance, Australia, knew the tragedy of Anna May Shahan and her English cousin, Rose Charlotte Moss. The saga of two women—one driven by passion to do the unthinkable, the other plunging into insanity—and a man bound between them.

In recent years, on learning of the tale, two historical writers researched the actual account, attaining all the existing documents, including court evidence, witness statements, medical notes from a psychiatrist about a young mother committed to an insane asylum, love letters, photographs, and a diary dating back to the 1930s. They pieced together the tragic and compelling chronicle, titling it, *The Consequence of Anna*.

This is that story . . .





“Shamed be the woman who alloweth such a sin . . .”



There's something wrong with Anna . . .





Anna May Shahan (née Polston)



Rose Charlotte Moss

She was beautiful.
In a movie star kind of way.
With clear, radiant skin; thick ebony hair; and brilliant, flashing, dazzling green eyes.

Green eyes like two shimmering emerald pools.

Green eyes that spoke with no words.

Green eyes that laughed as you cried.

Green eyes like a serpent, hiding, waiting, slithering, lurching, fangs ready to puncture its prey . . .

The Kalgoorlie Miner Newspaper

Monday, April 10, 1933

ESPERANCE WOMAN ATTACKS FAMILY MEMBER

COMMITTED TO PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL

Anna May Shahan, a thirty-two-year-old wife and mother of three-year-old twin daughters, attacked one of her family members with intent to kill, also threatening harm to a newborn infant in a fit of rage. The incident took place Friday morning at the Shahan family sheep station known as Sugar Alexandria outside the town of Esperance, south of Kalgoorlie.

Senior Constable Daniel Higgins stated he was notified but did not arrest Mrs. Shahan, as she suffered a mental breakdown and was committed to the Pleasant Skies Psychiatric Hospital. Sources say she will remain there for evaluation and treatment prior to appearing before a judge. The police gave no other statement.

Immediate family members

refused to comment. However, several members of the community were aware of the event and provided their own statements. "It was a love triangle with the most tragic of endings," Father Lothbrok lamented. "Sweet Anna did not deserve such a harrowing fate." Clarion Firestone had a differing opinion, though: "It served her right after what she had allowed. What good Christian wife would scheme such a thing for the happiness of another woman? It just wasn't natural." Yet Hazel Smuckers argued otherwise: "It's all the cousin's fault. Anna was a good girl. If that English tart with the gimp leg hadn't come here, none of this would have happened."

No other information or statements were given.

PART ONE



Excerpt From Anna's Diary
July 12, 1933

“**T**his is all twisted,” I said, narrowing my eyes at my cousin from the other side of the visiting table. “I shouldn’t be imprisoned here.”

“Anna, please listen to me,” Rose pleaded, a sincere kindness in her voice that at one time would have made me move mountains for her.

I shook my head. “I should be at Sugar Alexandria with my husband and daughters. I should be with them, loving and taking care of them instead of here in this asylum.” I pointed my finger at her. “And *you* . . . you should be far away on the other side of the Indian Ocean.”

“Anna, you’re precious to me. You have always been precious to me,” Rose said.

“Precious?” I scoffed. “If I am so precious to you, why have you done this to me?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. You’re my best friend; you’re like a sister to me.”

“No, you’re not my cobber, and no sister of mine. You’re a liar, a thief, and a trollop,” I continued, seething with indignation.

She stared at me in shock, as if looking into the face of a lunatic uttering unholy nonsense.

“As for James, you have bewitched him,” I said, thinking how she had poisoned his mind and soiled his sheets.

An eerie silence followed, both of us feeling it. Despite knowing each other all our lives, we were strangers meeting for the first time. The grim reality was that I was no longer the Anna she knew and loved. What had happened transformed me, infected me. Inside and out. As if my bones had been broken and mended back together with pieces of wire.

Sitting there, I studied my cousin, her flapper bob done in perfect finger waves, her lips and nails crimson red—the same hue she always wore. The maternity dress—lavender, her favorite color—silky and expensive looking, bringing out the emerald in her eyes. She reminded me of cool vanilla ice cream, of decadence, of an evil Siren. As her pale hand began to caress her

stomach, my eyes gravitated along. It was apparent the bairn within was kicking. “Look, the baby is upset,” I said, breaking the silence. “Even your unborn child knows what you have done to me.”

“Anna, I never meant to hurt you,” she sniffled, wiping her nose with a handkerchief. “I love and miss you.” Yet as her words left her lips, she glanced over at the white-uniformed attendants. Was she frightened? Was she shaken that I no longer saw her as I once had? The truth was, I hoped she was scared, as all affection for her had been carved out of me like a gutted pig.

“Love me?” I sneered, appalled at the lie. “You only love yourself.”

“Anna,” she continued to entreat, trying to assuage my anger. “I do love you, and I came here to make peace.”

“You have destroyed me, and now you want peace,” I laughed.

“Please, let me explain,” she said with desperation. “If you listen, you’ll understand, and then maybe you can forgive.”

“You want me to forgive? How dare you!” I yelled, choking back my tears. Rising to my feet, I leaned across the table and slapped her face. In a rage, I cursed in Danish, “*You once came to me for help, which I gave. And how did you repay me? By killing my soul and abandoning me. I curse you for what you have done to me!*”

“Anna . . .,” Rose said, holding her cheek, weeping.

Her display of emotion meant nothing to me. Once more, I slapped her as the attendants came running to intervene, curling their thick hands around my thin arms, dragging me away from her. “*I curse the very ground you slither on!*”

CHAPTER 1



*Anna May Polston &
Ambrosia (Rose) Charlotte Moss*

Fifteen Years Earlier . . . December 14, 1918

“**T**his is your last summer here,” Anna said, wearing a white slip, looking at herself in the vanity mirror as a sea of freckles stared back at her. Freckles, freckles, freckles everywhere, she thought. Applying crimson red lipstick, she concentrated on not going over her lip line, just as her cousin had shown her.

Rose had been her mentor, her teacher, and her best friend since they were children, and Anna loved her like a sister, affectionately calling her Lottie at times—a shortened form of her middle name Charlotte. She thought Rose was beautiful, witty, and brave, walking tall and confident with her cane, and she would do anything for her. Anything in the world.

“Did you hear what I said, Lottie?” she asked. “This is your last summer here. I’ll probably never see you again after you return to London and marry.” Anna frowned, saddened by her certainty of it. No more knitting quilts together; baking Danish pastries; taking hot, soapy baths at the side of the house, shielded by white sheets hanging from the clothesline; having tea in her childhood secret room, reading and laughing; or spending the day outside, picking mushrooms, herbs, and spices for dinner. “I’d trade my healthy leg for your sick one, if it would make you stay.”

Rose, already dressed in her finest chiffon lace net gown, was waiting for Anna to finish. As she lay on her stomach on the four-poster bed, reading a

magazine, she looked up at her younger cousin, so full of quirky bravado. “Oh, Kitten, don’t say such things. I’ll be back.”

“You pinky swear?” Anna asked, voice cracking, glossy eyes meeting her cousin’s in the reflection of the mirror.

Rose lifted her pinky, and Anna walked over, interlinking hers. “I swear,” said Rose. The young women remained that way a moment, fingers tightly locked, grinning at each other.

Each summer, Rose would make the long trip from England to Australia to stay at Sugar Alexandria, a remote sheep station outside the town of Esperance. Her mother allowed her to go when Anna’s father first suggested it, seeking to soften his tomboy daughter by having her associate with his girlish niece. He was fed up with Anna’s behavior, always worried sick whenever his inquisitive and fearless child went missing. Yarrajan, the Aboriginal nanny, usually found her little white rabbit in the neighbor’s elaborate garden, playing with her invisible friends among the flowers, trees, statues, and ponds.

“Miss Anna, you come down here right now,” the Aboriginal woman would demand, looking up at Anna’s legs dangling from the branch of a beech tree. “You be too old to be actin’ like this, and your daddy’s spitfire mad. It’s time you be wearin’ a dress and some shoes, learnin’ to be a lady.”

Anna would only giggle, dropping leaves or bugs on her nanny. But in truth, she loved the woman dearly. Yarrajan had taught her all about the land and the food that grew on it, enabling her to survive in the wild if need be. Showing her which plants, mushrooms, berries and seeds to eat, and which to avoid. She also shared her captivating stories about her people, their gods, and their customs. To Anna, Yarrajan wasn’t just her nanny but her surrogate mother.

“Don’t you make me come up there, ’cause if I do, you be gettin’ a good beatin’ with a switch!”

Anna would eventually crawl down, her feet covered in mud, her pockets full of frogs and other gifts from the land, and the two unlikely yet allied bedfellows—a yellow-haired child and a taller indigene—would walk hand in hand back to Sugar Alexandria to cook dinner.

When Rose first arrived in Australia, Anna was there waiting at the train station with her father. Mesmerized, she stared at her cousin with raven hair that gleamed a hue of blue, emerald eyes that sparkled like shining gems, and pale skin that never saw the sun. She reminded Anna of Snow White. Rose, on the other hand, saw a wide-eyed, freckled little girl in pigtails—spunky,

adorable, and full of life. She reminded Rose of a kitten.

Anna ran right up to her, no introduction needed, sisterly love at first sight, wrapping her arms around her and squeezing. “Lottie!” she said, as if officially stamping her claim on Rose.

Rose kissed the top of her little cousin’s head. “Kitten,” she replied—a pet nickname that stuck ever since.

From the bustling city of London, England, Rose now found herself in the quiet town of Esperance, Australia. Just a flyspeck on the map, Esperance sat on the southwest coast near the Archipelago of the Recherche, or Bay of Isles, that sheltered fur seals, sea lions, and whales which came in from the farthest depths of the sea. It was beautiful with its white sands and endless turquoise waters of Lucky Bay, Thistle Cove, Blue Haven, and West Beach. The town itself was named after a famous French ship, *The Esperance*, meaning hope, earning its fame through Bruni d’Entrecasteaux’s 1792 expedition of the scenic waterways and estuaries in the area. There was even a glorious pink salt lake—the color of fuchsia bubble gum—where the water was smooth as silk.

The shire exemplified the quintessential land Down Under. A mysterious dimension of red earth, blue skies, and exotic wildlife where the girls went into their own enchanted world together. They spent their carefree days riding horses to the shoreline, having picnics on the beach and searching for mermaids as they ate chocky bickies and drank strawberry lemonade. Or playing inside the ramshackle of a pirate shipwreck that had crashed on the rocks and been abandoned there eons ago, the wood of which had been used by some unknown fisherman to build a small cabin nearby. They walked through the tall cornfield until they found the perfect spot to make corn husk dolls with angel wings, and tiptoed through their agoraphobic neighbor’s splendid, statue-laden garden. And they played in the three mammoth windmills in the stockyard, pretending they were in their secret castles. Large-bellied cattle, submissive sheep, horses and camels, vibrant narcissistic peacocks, and various other animals—some tamed, some not—all became companions of the two. The sprawling station in the Outback wasn’t just a large farm by the sea anymore but a never-ending fantasy realm of anything and everything they could imagine. Elves, fairies, mythical beasts, a place of dragons and unicorns where they were queens ruling on their thrones made of beech tree branches held together by the gum of eucalypts. Rose’s wooden cane—her beast of burden, a necessary evil to support her underdeveloped left leg—would become their magic wand. Whatever they wanted, she would

simply point it, and their wishes would come to pass.

Every corner of the endless Outback around Sugar Alexandria was an opportunity to venture out and find some new, unfound treasure. A full day of frivolous fun would invariably end with a swim in the ocean, and hunger would bring the cousins home for dinner. Yarrajan would serve their favorite meals and French braid the girls' damp hair, adding her colorful tribal beads to the braids. Nighttime would arrive, and in their long, matching, white cotton nightgowns, the two best friends would sneak out the bedroom window onto the roof of the farmhouse and stare up at the coruscating luminaries of the Milky Way, pointing at the constellations and whispering about boys and all the things that made young girls giggle. Then by candlelight, they'd tell scary stories to each other, or read from Anna's favorite tales—*East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Secret Garden*, or one of her beloved Jane Austen books, most notably *Emma*.

The reality, however, was anything but a fantasy world. Outside the boundaries of Sugar Alexandria were other sheep and cattle stations where red-faced farmers plowed the lands, grew their crops, and raised their livestock. With thick accents—a mix of Aussie and European descent, sounding like a language all its own—stern faces and thin, wiry bodies, slits for eyes from prolonged squinting at the blaring sun, and callused hands from endless work in the fields, the men would afterward pack into the local pub like sardines, drinking too much ale and toasting the land, the sea, and whatever else fed their families.

Wives—sometimes more than one—stayed at home waiting for them, washing the vegetables, the clothes, their babies, and their own bodies in the same outside water trough, then cooked for hours, only to wait some more for their blokes to return. These were the women of Australia. Their mother's mother's mother had lived the same life, in the same house, doing the same chores, barefoot and rawboned, sometimes caught out in the fields birthing children, other times burying a stillborn. They pushed themselves to support their husbands any way they could to eke out a living from the land, and didn't have time to nurture a loving family but only help with the workload. The more children, the more hands to tackle the burden of it all.

Anna and Rose did not see the harsh realities of life on a station in the Outback. Instead, they fashioned their own creative playground, and over the course of their wonderful visits each summer, from the first day to the last when Rose would return home, the girls became more than cousins and best friends . . . They became close like sisters.

"You two almost ready?" Anna's father asked, poking his head into the room. "We leave in an hour." Clean-shaven, exposing smooth, pink skin—a rarity since he usually wore a full beard—with hair sleeked back, he had replaced his worn-out dungarees with his only suit, a blush-colored carnation pinned to the lapel.

Anna went over to the mirror again and began taking out her curlers. "Rose is ready; I just have to finish my hair."

"Well Lordy, look at you," her father said, admiring his teenage daughter. He was used to seeing his princess in braids, overalls, and muddy boots.

Anna giggled. "I'm hoping to fetch a bloke today, Daddy."

Her father only shook his head. "Don't take too long getting ready, love. I'm not going to be late for my son's wedding."

"I won't; I promise." After her father left, she turned to her cousin. "You'll be getting ready for your own wedding when you return to England. Except I won't be there."

"Anna, your dad is right," said Rose. "You're too young to travel that far alone."

"It would only be on the way back to Straya. Besides, you traveled here by yourself."

"I'm older than you, though."

"Not that much older."

"Old enough to travel across the sea on my own; whereas you are not."

"Soon I will be."

"Yes, and you can come visit me then."

"Even then my daddy probably won't let me go," Anna said, frowning. "He'll never let me grow up, or leave Straya."

Anna's father had lost his wife during childbirth, and five years later, Anna's twin sister to pneumonia. He kept a tight rein on his only living daughter—the long journey across the Indian Ocean from Esperance to London and back, was out of the question for a seventeen-year-old girl.

"I wish you would just marry a bloke here," Anna said, removing the last curler and unfurling the tight coils in her tresses with her fingers.

"Paul William Montgomery is a nice, kind bloke."

Anna crinkled up her nose, thinking of the photo Rose had previously shown of her fiancé. "If you ask me, he looks like a donkey."

"Don't be cheeky, Anna. This man is going to be my husband in a matter of months."

"Your parents arranged the marriage, Lottie, and only because he's

wealthy. You don't even know him, let alone love him."

"He has qualities that I love."

"What kind of qualities?"

"He's gentle and kind."

"How do you know?"

"Umm . . ." Rose hesitated, unsure of what to say. "We've written to each other for a year now. He's an intelligent gentleman, and he accepts me for how I am."

"You mean your leg?"

"Yes."

"Your leg is apples, if you ask me. Besides, it's because of your leg that we have our magic wand."

Rose grinned. "It's a cane, Anna, and I need it to walk most of the time."

"So?"

"So some men don't like that. Some are even afraid our children would suffer the same curse if we married. Remember Triston Miller? I was crazy for him, and he straight out told me I had a beautiful face, but . . ."

"But what?"

"He wanted a woman with two normal legs."

"He was a drongo."

"Paul doesn't seem to be bothered by it, and I consider that a blessing."

"You're marrying a bloke just because your leg doesn't bother him?"

Rose looked away.

"Don't marry because of that, Rose. You're a beauty with a heart of gold; you deserve someone better."

"I'm not a child anymore, Anna. Far from it, even though I get to act like one when I visit here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that I'm a woman now." She marked the page of the magazine displaying the wedding dress she fancied. "And that's what women do at my age—get married and have babies."

"I'll only marry a bloke I love, who I'm absolutely mad for," Anna said, clutching her chest.

Rose picked up the locket hanging around her neck, examining it in her palm. Anna's father had bought the girls matching friendship necklaces that summer, each containing the other's picture inside. I'll grow to love him, she assured herself.

Anna noticed her staring at the locket. "Every time I look down at mine, I'm gonna miss you terribly."

"I said I'll be back, so you won't have to miss me for long. We pinky swore, remember?"

"That's right, and everyone knows that once you picky swear, it's for life." Anna stepped into her dress and twirled, her mood shifting from melancholy to excitement. "I'm gonna dance with every bloke tonight," she giggled. "How about you, Lottie?"

"I'll dance with some, I guess. Until my leg tires."

Anna glanced over at her cousin's cane propped against the bed. Without her walking stick, Rose's leg would become painful as it fatigued. Like a bad toothache, the small muscle fibers in her thigh always spasmed if she overworked it. "Does it ever feel like your bone is breaking?"

"My goodness, Anna May Polston, where's your couth?"

She laughed. "Sorry, love."

"Liam is here to see you sheilas," Yarrajan said, walking into the room and placing their clean white gloves on the bed. Both girls put them on. "Want me to tell him you be leavin'?"

"No," said Rose. She loved children and enjoyed their company. "We still have time; send him in."

Liam Herdsman, an eight-year-old boy who lived on the neighboring station across the river, walked into the room smiling ear to ear, holding one of Anna's corn husk dolls he had found on the ground. The deaf, intellectually disabled child had suffered a severe bacterial infection a few years back and almost died, leaving him with his disabilities. He could read lips, however, and his speech hadn't yet changed to the point of being unclear. Often he would visit Anna and her cousin, hoping they would play with him, whether board games, hide-and-seek, or anything else they would entertain.

"Can we go to the garden again today?" he asked, his words forced and loud. Just the day before, Rose had indulged Anna by playing out a scene from the beloved children's novel, *The Secret Garden*. Anna was Mary Lennox, Liam played Dickon Sowerby, and Rose became the robin—the gatekeeper to the enchanted garden. Though Rose had all but grown out of theme playing, Anna and Liam loved it, so she went along, knowing her youthful days of fantasy lore were fast approaching their end as she would soon be getting married. Besides, the neighbor's garden where they acted out their roles was so grand and lovely that she didn't mind.

"No, Liam, we can't go there today," Anna said, primping in front of the mirror. Her friendship with Liam was both hot and cold, depending on whether she wanted to play or not.

“Why, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Getting ready to go to my brother’s wedding.”

“Can I go?” He tried to smooth down his dirty blond hair.

Anna shook her head. “No.”

“Why not?” asked Rose. “He won’t be any trouble.”

“Because we’d have to babysit him.”

Liam stared down at the handmade doll in his hands. “I wouldn’t be any trouble; I promise.”

“No,” Anna said again. “Not this time.”

“What are you going to do there?” he inquired.

“Dance and eat cake,” said Anna, brushing her hair.

“What? Let me see your lips.” Liam frustrated easily, especially when he could not see someone’s lips, or failed to read them properly.

Anna frowned, then turned to him so he could see her enunciate. “I said dance and eat cake.”

“I love cake!” he exclaimed.

Rose waved at him to get his attention. “I’ll bring you back some. A great big piece.”

Liam smiled, clapping his hands.

“Anna, have you ever slow-danced with a bloke before?” Rose asked.

“A couple of times. I mean, I did with Daddy and my brothers in the past, if that counts.”

Rose got off the bed and put a record on the gramophone. “Come here, Kitten. Let’s practice before we go.” Pulling Anna in close, they both swayed to the music. “See? It’s easy.”

Anna gazed up at her cousin as they danced. Rose had the prettiest, greenest eyes she had ever seen, and the kindest smile. “Yes, it is.”

“Me next, me next!” Liam chirped, dropping the doll and opening his arms.

Rose let go of Anna and brought the young boy into her embrace. He could not hear the music, but he had an idea of what they were doing. Being small, he leaned his head against her chest, closing his eyes in ecstasy.

Anna plopped onto the bed, stuffing two sticks of gum into her mouth, observing her cousin cradle the deaf, mentally challenged boy in her arms. What a strange pair, she thought. Rose, with her flawed leg, lacking muscle and shape; and Liam, intellectually slow and unable to hear. Yet as they danced there in her room, on the hard wooden floor under their feet, they took on such a graceful, beautiful form.

Anna's heart ached. Her beloved cousin would be going back to London right after her brother's wedding, getting married to an Englishman and most likely never returning. Silent tears streamed down her face as she stared at them both, Rose gently swaying back and forth, her lavender chiffon dress softly flowing as she moved, Liam swaying with her to music he could feel but not hear.



Liam had never seen Anna look so grown up as she did standing in front of her mirror in her ruffy dress, hair flowing and lips stained with red. Where did little Anna go, he wondered? Where was the girl who spat water through the gap in her front teeth, who kissed frogs for good luck, played hide-and-seek with him in the neighbor's garden, and ran barefoot with him through the fields? She was changing, right before his eyes.

As he walked home that afternoon, he thought about how his friend seemed increasingly annoyed with him these days. Over-pronouncing her words so he could read her lips had become such a chore, and she played with him less and less. Even when she sang to the livestock through the haunting, high-pitched sounds of kulning—an ancient Scandinavian herding call she had learned from her Danish grandmother—to summon them home, she no longer let him feel her throat to sense the beautiful vibrations. Everything was now an irritation and a bother to her.

"Checkers, Anna?" he would ask.

But she would only shake her head and want to brush her hair, try on a dress, or listen to a record on the gramophone.

The gramophone. A gadget that was foreign to him. A box that everyone sat around, enthralled, listening to with undivided attention as a flat disc spun on its surface. He had no clue of its magic or thrill. Anna loved the gramophone as all the adults did, slowly slipping into their world—a place he did not belong, nor ever would. At least Rose will always care for me, he thought, unaware she was leaving Australia and might never return.

His mind shifted back to the dance they shared earlier in Anna's bedroom. He could almost taste her perfume, becoming lost in her beauty as they danced, the only music being her heart beating against his cheek. Yes, Rose—one of the few people kind to him, patient with his disabilities—would always have a place for him, he resolved. Hoping, longing, consoling himself as he crossed the bridge and climbed the fence, petting the sheep on his way home.

CHAPTER 2



Anna and Rose sat in the pews, waiting patiently for the ceremony to begin. The day was hot and sticky, and as Anna leaned her head against her cousin's smooth shoulder, Rose gently waved a feathered fan between them, cooling their warm, flushed skin.

"What's taking so long?" Anna asked, sitting back up and yawning.

"They're still getting ready, Kitten," said Rose, looking about the room. "It's a big deal getting married. It changes your whole life."

Anna, chewing on her gum, blew a large bubble and popped it, annoying the elderly couple in front of them. Rose apologized for her ill-mannered cousin's behavior, discreetly chastising Anna as she giggled.

"How does it change your whole life?" she whispered.

"Your spouse becomes a part of you," said Rose. "They become your best friend, and from that day forward, they're always with you. Life is more fulfilling when you have someone to share your special moments with."

"Sounds like you're looking through flower-colored glasses. Yarra says marriage is just a bloke being gifted with a hardworking maid and cook."

The elderly woman turned and put her finger to her lips to shush them.

Rose tried not to laugh. "It's rose-colored glasses, Kitten, not flower-colored," she whispered. "And marriage is a beautiful union when you find the right person."

"You'll always be my best cobber, Lottie, no matter who comes into my life."

"It's not the same thing." Rose was going to clarify the difference between a platonic relationship and a romantic one, but the bagpipes commenced, followed by the piano music, and the bride began advancing down the aisle. A shiver ran through her entire body when the bride and groom stood face-to-face in front of the priest, smiling and holding hands, their eyes silently confessing their love for each other before stating their vows. She too wanted to gaze into the eyes of a loving man and glow. To love someone passionately, faithfully, with everything that she was, and be loved the same way in return. But deep down she knew her fiancé was not that man. He did accept her disability, though, and her life would be more than comfortable, even lavish, living in a fancy house in London, dining in the finest restaurants, shopping in the high-end boutiques, enjoying the opera and ballet, and all the other privileges financial security bestowed. Yet somehow it still felt as if she had an open wound festering inside. A woman absent of true love, paying a heavy price for settling. A burden she would have to endure, just like her underdeveloped leg, learning how to live with it.



The wedding reception commenced, and with most of the men more interested in the free grog available, Anna and Rose slow-danced together, just as they had rehearsed earlier in the day.

"You're getting good at this," Rose said, taking the lead.

Anna giggled, paying close attention to her feet. "When I dance later with a bloke, I'm gonna kiss him. You should too, Lottie, with some bloke you fancy. Just for the fun of it."

"Don't be cheeky, love. I'd never do that, and neither should you."

"Because you're prim and proper, aye? An English lady."

"That's right," said Rose, slowly spinning her. "Ladies don't go around kissing strangers."

Several children ran past them to the refreshment table. Rose watched as they eagerly received some cake and soda. "We should have let Liam come. He would have loved it."

"Bah!" Anna sneered, scrunching up her freckle-covered nose. "We would have had to watch him the whole time. He probably would have stuck his face in the cake and ruined it, too, having such a wicked sweet tooth."

"Don't be so hard on him, Kitten. You have a sweet tooth as well, and it can send you into a real tizzy."

"That only happens if I get too excited or upset."

"Or when you've had too much sugar. I've seen it change you."

Anna looked up into her cousin's green eyes. "You make it sound as if I'm a werewolf."

"Sometimes you are," said Rose, thinking of her little cousin throwing tantrums so violent and extreme that she had to be held down by her brothers until it passed.

"Hey, let's go get some punch. We can sneak some grog, too, and spike our drinks with it." Anna gave her shoulders a shake. "I wanna get on the tables and kick up my legs. That oughta drive the men crazy."

Rose shook her head. "You are a wild one."

Anna lowered her chin and batted her lashes. "Then I'm gonna pick a bloke and kiss him until he begs for air!"

"Oh, Anna, bold and sinful you are!" said Rose, and both girls broke out into laughter.

Poppy Buttersmith espied the two young women walking across the dance floor to the refreshment table. She was the town gossip, and proud of it, turning it into an art form. Over six feet tall with Argentium silver hair piled up on top of her head in a Victorian-style bun that made her appear even taller, she talked about anyone she fancied, doing so with such zest and charm that one would think it was her profession. Her style was to compliment first, followed by either an insult or a private revelation.

Narrowing her eyes at the two cousins—Anna, excited and animated, pouring a cup of the cherry-colored fruit drink while Rose, shy and quiet, waited for her, leaning on her cane—Poppy motioned in their direction. "There's Anna Polston and her pommy cousin, Ambrosia Moss," she said. "Aren't they looking lovely today in their beautiful chiffon dresses?"

All the women at the table turned to stare at Anna and Rose.

"Now here's a story for you . . ." Poppy became sympathetic, yet her glistening eyes betrayed her. "Ambrosia comes here every summer to spend time with little Anna. Has now for years. Poor child not having a mother, then her twin sister dying, it's no wonder she whispers to herself and has those fits she throws."

"I heard her mum talked gibberish to herself too," Beatrice Waterloo said, a brooding expression on her face as she sipped from her punch, "and that she'd run barefoot in the cold wearing only her nightgown, wandering off into the bush in the middle of the night. Strange one, she was."

"Too right," said Poppy, feigning a visible shiver. "Crikey, the stories I

could tell you about Elsa Polston would make you shudder.” She lowered her voice and kept her eyes on Anna. “My Aboriginal nanny is friends with their nanny, Yarrajan, who confided in her that something evil would take over Elsa. Completely different personality inside her.”

“My mum said the same thing,” added Wednesday Motherland, throwing more fuel on the gossipmongering, “that Elsa was crazy.”

Poppy nodded, her stacked steel-wool coiffure wobbling in the air. “Crazy as a loon. Completely mad. Round the twist. All the Aboriginals who worked for them said she had the mulga madness. I’m surprised that bloke of hers kept having children with a sheila not well in the head as she was.”

“He had a station to manage—that’s why,” said Drusilla Esmeralda.

Her sister Lilith supported her. “That’s right. He needed sons to help him with it.” Lilith was a little person, having been born with achondroplasia. No more than three feet eight inches tall, and more impertinent than her normal-height sibling, the two went everywhere together.

Poppy smirked. “Elsa was a pretty blonde thing, too. I suppose he was in love with her even though she was insane.”

“I hope Anna doesn’t end up like her poor mother,” Beatrice tsked.

Hulga Schaefer scoffed, her tired eyes waking up in a galvanized stir. She was the oldest in the group—in her late nineties—and rarely spoke, but when she did there was always truth in it. “Don’t feel sorry for Anna,” the near-centenarian muttered, holding her sleeping grandchild in her arms. “Feel sorry for the bloke who someday falls for those freckles and flaxen hair, ending up with a mentally sick sheila.”

“Bloody oath,” said Poppy.

The committee of busybodies simultaneously nodded in agreement.

With the nuptial vows over, dinner eaten, cake and punch consumed, and dancing well underway, the Aussie wedding between a Danish groom and his Irish bride moved into the customary bouquet toss. Anna and Rose had danced until Rose’s leg hurt, and when they stopped the music for the bride to throw her posy into a group of young women on the dance floor, Rose stayed behind, grateful for the break. Besides, she was already engaged. Hiding in the shadows, leaning against the wall with her cane, scanning the crowd of people in the room, her eyes settled on a handsome bloke sitting at a table with his fellow war Diggers. He was the one who had played several songs on the piano that evening, and his rare talent had made her cry. Homing in on him from across the room, she watched as he laughed

and joked with his mates. My, my, she thought, inwardly smiling. Now that's one good-looking Irish-Aussie . . .



James Ragnar Shahan

“Crikey, did all of Straya come to this shindig?” Peachy Jones asked, scanning the extravagant reception hall. “Never been to a wedding this grand; it’s like a battalion in here.”

“More like a brigade,” Slim Stavin said, lighting a cigarette. “I haven’t seen this many people together since they saw us off to war.”

“Weddings, births, and battles—that’s where folks gather,” laughed Dewey Silkwood. “And of course, funerals.”

The men at the table went silent. Dewey realized his error when he saw them all staring at their drinks with long faces and troubled eyes, each recalling their fellow soldiers and friends who didn’t come home. Though the insanity of the Great War had ended, the haunting memories were still raw. Innocent young blokes who marched off to the unknown had come back humbled, wiser men; but also scarred and sullied.

“I wanna make a toast,” said Bowie Jenkins, endeavoring to brighten the mood. “To new beginnings and a ripper life ahead of us.” A peaceful mien shadowed his features and his voice moderated as he looked at each of his friends. “May the sun always shine on your face, the wind be at your back, and blessings fall at your feet.”

All the men raised their glasses and cheered.

The Aussie Diggers, grateful to be home in one piece, resumed celebrating and chatting on endlessly. Especially one: James Ragnar Shahan. His sister Josephine was the bride, and she insisted he be in the wedding party and play the piano as she walked down the aisle.

Originally from Dublin, Ireland, James had moved to Australia with his family when he was a boy, like many families who sought to cash in on the gold rush at Mount Charlotte in Kalgoorlie. Instead of finding gold, however, they settled on the southern coast and found ivory sands, emerald waters, and the biggest fish they had ever seen. Being born in the land of Éire wasn’t the only thing that made James unique among his friends. He was meek, slow to anger, kind and articulate with his words. He listened more than he spoke, and most days when he did speak, it was about his music. His love for the piano drove aspirations of becoming an acclaimed

pianist, and he possessed the talent to underpin his dreams.

But the war had not left him unscathed. He was now partially deaf—only his right ear still functioned—and his left iris had been torn after being hit by shrapnel from a bomb. Though he could still see through it, the resulting misshapen pupil would never regain its full capacity. For a man who adored music, who was going to be a professional pianist when the madness was all over, it was a severe blow to have both his sight and hearing diminished. And yet, at the very heart of him, he was still a gifted musician despite his physical maladies. Nothing was going to deter him from pursuing his goals. In fact, even as he sat there, he was thinking of when he would be leaving for London soon to attend the Royal Academy of Music, and all the things he needed to do before he left.

While contemplating his bright future, James let his eyes float around the large, dimly lit room, and that's when he saw her: A young woman leaning against the wall across from them, supporting herself with a cane.

Slim Stavín followed his gaze. "Forget it, Shahan. I already asked her, and she bloody shot me down."

The other men stopped to look.

"She's a beauty," said Bandy McRoe.

"Look, she's using a cane," Peachy Jones noticed, lowering his voice. "Must have a broken leg."

James stared at the young woman looking directly at him, releasing a subtle, soft smile, making him feel as if the sun had just come out.

"Anyone else here brave enough to give it a burl?" Bowie Jenkins dared.

Maybe it was the strong Irish whiskey he was drinking, or that he was home safe from the war, or that she looked like a lost angel, but the usually quiet and reserved James acted first, deciding to make his move. He stood and walked toward the girl, ignoring the other men jeering him on; before he knew it, he was inches away from her. Her eyes are blue, or maybe green, he thought, and her face as if a light shining in the dark. "G'day, my name is James. May I ask you for a dance?" he asked, his voice rather shaky.

As they met eyes, something jabbed him in the deepest parts of his gut, and his surroundings blurred. Why is my mind so blank, he wondered? Unable to muster any other words, he stood there smiling like a lovestruck teenager.

"I've been on my feet all night," she said. "Not sure if I can even dance, now that my leg has tired." Yet she too had felt the electricity. Pink, green, and gold sparks flashed through her mind as she slightly trembled.

"Ahh, an English girl," he said, recognizing her accent. Leaning forward, he extended his elbow to her. "C'mon, love, let's give it a go."

Her gaze was cautious, yet curious, and she consented, leaving her walking stick behind, stepping into his embrace. He took her hand—how perfectly it fit into his—wrapping his arm around her waist. The song was slow and dreamy.

"So what's your name, love?" he asked, looking down into her face.

As she was about to speak, he tilted his good ear in the direction of her words—a habit that began soon after losing his hearing in the other. "I don't give my name to strangers," she said, her eyes evincing a coquettish grin.

"If you give me your name, we're no longer strangers."

She bit at her lower lip. "Charlotte," she said, offering only her middle moniker.

"Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte," he softly whispered into her ear as they danced cheek to cheek. "It's a lovely name for a beauty of a sheila."

"Thank you." Her heart fluttered. "I was really moved by your piano playing earlier," she said, trying to subdue her butterflies. "One of your songs even made me cry."

"Ta." He was pleased she had noticed.

"Where did a soldier learn how to play like that?"

"I was a pianist before I was a Digger. Played since I was a boy. Now that the war is over, I'll be going to London to pursue a career in music."

"London? That's where I'm from."

"Perfect, I can bring you home," he said, gently spinning her, pulling her back into him. "The only problem is, being in the same city together, I'd never want to attend class."

She blushed, floating on a cloud, her entire body warming to his touch. "I'm actually a musician too."

"Oh yeah? What do you play?"

"The violin. In fact, I noticed you were a little off key during one point in Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.21*," she teased.

"Is that right," he laughed, impressed she knew the opus. Taking her hand, he stripped the glove from it, smoothing over the callus on her string finger. "Yep, there it is."

"What?"

"The sign of a true violinist."

She leaned back, narrowing her eyes at him. "You didn't believe me until you felt my callus?"

"With a face like yours, my sweet Charlotte, I would believe just about anything you said."

She stared back at him, deep into his eyes. I really like this man, she thought, and I can see he fancies me too. But I'm already betrothed to another. Besides, look how lovely he is; he probably already has a girl—a beautiful one with two normal legs. "You must be wondering why I need a cane," she said, timorous over what he was thinking.

"As pretty as you are, I figured you sprained your ankle, running away from all the blokes chasing you."

She smiled so hard it hurt. "Well, no, nothing like that. I was born with a special leg; it's different. The muscles are underdeveloped and weak, so they tire easily."

"I never would have noticed," he said, dipping her, breathing in her scent—Chypre de Coty—intoxicating his senses. The pianist was completely besotted, fancying the violinist so much he never wanted to let her go.

"Most people do."

"I'm not most people," he said, a glint in his eye.

They danced in silence for a moment, the music quickening in pace. She followed his lead, barely aware of her impaired leg.

"Let me ask you something, Charlotte," he said, a flirtatious grin tugging at his lips.

She flashed her green eyes up at him.

"If I asked you to marry me right now, what would you say?"

"You're being silly," she laughed.

"Am I?" He took off his pinky ring, once owned by his great-grandfather—a single band of gold with a Celtic design—and placed it on her ring finger.

"You're mad," she said, playing along with his theatrics.

"Look at that—it fits. Whaddya say, love? Wanna spend the rest of your life with an Irish pianist? I'll be traveling the world performing in fancy auditoriums, and a beauty like you by my side would be grand."

"Oh, stop," she laughed again.

As they continued to dance, she relaxed in his embrace, and he gently pulled her close, enjoying her warm, soft body against his. Moving in unison like two lonesome shadows across the room, the world around them faded . . .

"The song is over," she whispered against his ear.

James, transported to another place, gave himself a mental shake and

loosened his grip on her. "Sorry, I didn't realize."

"Thank you for the dance," she said, trying to read his expression through the faltering light. They were now standing in a more dimly lit area of the dance floor, and most people had already returned to their tables. James continued to hold on to her hand and wouldn't let her go, and just when he was about to release her, he pulled her in instead, giving her a kiss she would remember for the rest of her life.

Suddenly a young boy waved his arms and yelled, "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Everyone stopped socializing, scanning the room for evidence of the alarming exhortation. When the banquet hall manager opened the door leading to the kitchen, a billow of smoke entered the reception area. Gasping could be heard and people panicked, rushing onto the dance floor, pushing and shoving to exit the building. In the chaos of the situation, James' grasp on the hand of the Englishwoman he had just kissed broke loose, separating the two. By the time he was outside, she was nowhere in sight.

"Oh, pardon me," Anna Polston said, bumping into him. "I was looking for my cousin."

"No worries," replied James, his eyes sweeping the crowd for the pretty brunette who simply vanished.

"Hey, aren't you the bloke who played the piano tonight? You're James Shahan-Josephine's brother, aye?"

"Yes."

"I'm Anna Polston-Christian's sister. Isn't that funny; we're practically related now," she chortled. Giving him a coy look from the top of her eyes, she twiddled a tendril of her hair, hiding something behind her back. "You know what I did earlier?"

He shook his head.

"I caught the bride's posy; that's what I did," flinging a bouquet up in his face.

He looked down at the arrangement of clustered roses. "Swell."

Anna let out a giggle. "Now that your sister is married to my brother, wouldn't it be something if we got married too?"

James couldn't hold back his laugh.

"What's so funny?" Anna asked, scowling. "Plenty of blokes would want to marry me."

"I'm sure they would; you're a beauty," he said, winking at her, seeing her more as a child.

The banquet hall manager came outside, informing everyone that the fire in the kitchen had been put out. He apologized and invited all the guests back inside, urging them not to let this ruin their night.

"I sure would like a dance from you, James Shahan," Anna said, hearing the band playing again.

Disinterested, James paused, still distracted over the woman who had bewitched him moments earlier. "I would, Anna, but I actually have to go find a mate of mine," he said, taking a step back, intending to search for Charlotte.

Anna's smile disappeared, looking as if she might cry.

"All right, one dance," he said, giving in, rationalizing that he would go find Charlotte as soon as he could break free from freckle face Polston.

Inside the banquet hall, she stood on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around him so tightly his lungs fought to breathe.



James

Charlotte had simply vanished.

After dancing with Anna Polston, I looked for the pretty English lass who reminded me of the women in the paintings of Alfons Maria Mucha and Gustav Klimt. But I could not find her. Even the people I asked could not tell me who Charlotte was.

Had she been a ghost?



The night before Rose left for the train station, the two cousins went inside Anna's secret hideaway. Her father had built a room inside a room for his daughter to play in as a child, and even now as a teenager, she'd often use it, shutting the door to the outside world to be in her own little sanctuary.

The entrance to the room was disguised as a grand-looking wardrobe made of dark walnut wood. When you opened the double doors and pushed aside the clothing, however, a second door revealed itself, leading to the covert chamber. Inside were shelves with Anna's favorite books; a small, tangerine Victorian velvet sofa; a square table and four chairs, adorned with a rose-covered tea set; and a grandfather clock that tick-tocked in the corner.

Lying on the round, colorful rug on the floor, surrounded by candles, eating lollies and watching Rose as she read from *The Secret Garden*, Anna tried hard not to think of the following morning when her cousin would be leaving to go back to London.

“Lottie, can you read me a different one now?” she asked, rolling onto her stomach, her chin propped up between her hands.

“Which one?” asked Rose, closing the book.

“*East of the Sun and West of the Moon.*”

“Kitten, not again. I’ve read that too many times to count.”

“How about telling me a story, then? Something spooky.”

“The *Black Shuck* folklore tale?”

Anna nodded exuberantly. “That one scares the skirt off me.”

Rose laughed. “It’s pants, Anna . . . It scares the pants off you. And yes, the *Black Shuck* is a creepy tale.” She picked up a candle and held it close to her face for dramatic effect, the flickering flame casting shadows on the wall behind her. “The year was 1577,” she began, lowering her voice and slowing her speech, “in Suffolk County of East Anglia. A huge black wolf roamed the countryside, terrorizing the people, killing anyone who crossed its path. No one dared to venture out at night.”

Already frightened, Anna crawled closer to her cousin, her eyes growing wide. “What did he look like?”

“Oh, but it was not a ‘he’. It was a she-wolf, with midnight black hair, razor-sharp teeth, and red shining eyes so terrifying that if you saw them once, you would die of fear.”

A tree branch, pushed by the wind, scraped along the small window, sending chills down Anna’s spine.

“One early morn, a sheep farmer’s wife went outside to collect eggs from the chicken coop, and when she didn’t return, he went looking for her. In a panic, he followed the trail of blood on the ground, finding her lifeless body at the edge of the woods. After burying his wife and grieving, the farmer swore he’d find the evil creature and exact his revenge. Day and night he searched the land, setting traps and tracking the beast. Eventually he caught sight of the enormous black wolf standing on a hill, howling at the moon. He shot it, and the animal ran off into the darkness to die.”

“What happened next?” Anna asked, engrossed in the story as if hearing it for the first time.

“Satisfied he had killed it, the farmer set off home, and the next day he found a woman lying naked in his field. Oh, she was a stunning beauty, with

long ebony hair, skin like white satin, and beautiful dark eyes. He took her home, nursed her back to health, and fell madly in love with her, convinced his life had turned for the better. But then one night, under a full moon again, she changed.”

“She turned into the Black Shuck!”

“That’s right,” said Rose, the candlelight reflecting in her eyes. “And as she was killing him, he cried out, ‘But I loved you! I cared for you! Why?’ And she replied, her eyes turning bloodred, her teeth now sharp and long, ‘I’m a wolf. What did you expect?’”

“Knock, knock, knock!” suddenly came through the hidden door. Both girls shrieked, then laughed.

“You two go to bed soon, aye?” said Anna’s father on the other side. “We’re not missing the train in the morning.”

“All right, Daddy!” Anna replied.

“Good night, Uncle Polston!” said Rose.

“Sweet dreams, girls.”

Anna turned to Rose. “How could she do that? He had done so much for her. He loved her.”

“Because a snake is always a snake, a scorpion always a scorpion, and a wolf always a wolf. You can’t change who you are, no matter how kind the other person is.” Rose noticed Anna turning glum. “You look sad, Kitten. What is it?”

“It’s just that nights like this are over for me. You’ll be gone tomorrow.”

“I’m just getting married; I’ll be back. We pinky swore yesterday, remember?”

Anna looked as if she were about to cry. “You’re going to forget Sugar Alexandria once you leave. You’re going to forget me.”

Rose scanned the hidden room, admiring its whimsical charm. “No, Kitten,” she said, looking back at her little summer companion who made her laugh and helped her feel like a child again. “I will never forget you, or this magical place called Sugar Alexandria.”

Anna smiled, dimples popping, gap between her teeth showing.

“*And as long as I am alive,*” Rose continued in Danish, “*when I need to get away, I will always return to this sanctuary. Always. Remember that, my precious Kitten, because it is my solemn pact with you.*” As she said those words, for a flicker of a moment, she thought of the handsome soldier she had danced with and kissed, hoping the life that lay ahead of him would be a happy one.



Rose was leaving the tiny woop woop town of Esperance, with its red earth, blue skies, pink lakes, and turquoise bays. She was leaving the animals she loved—the kangaroos, koalas, and quokkas—and the carefree life she embraced at Sugar Alexandria. Worst of all, she was leaving her sweet cousin Anna.

She would travel by rail to Fremantle, then board a ship and sail across the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean Sea, and back home to England where a new life awaited her. Standing with her suitcase by her feet, a brilliant purple scarf wrapped around her head, she smiled at Anna through tears under the bright Australian sun. “Kitten . . .,” was all she could get out.

Anna had already sobbed so much her throat was sore, her eyes swollen. She handed Rose her carry-on bag as the train approached, its brakes hissing and screeching as the engine chugged and clattered to a halt.

“If you don’t write me, I’ll come and hunt you down,” Anna jokingly threatened, her voice quivering.

“I will; I promise,” said Rose. Images of her last day at Sugar Alexandria flashed through her mind. She and Anna had woken up at the crack of dawn that morning, zipping through their chores as usual, milking the cows, feeding the animals, even helping a sow give birth. Soon life would be so much different, living in a big city again, far from the wild and wondrous Outback.

Observing that Anna still had blood and dirt under her fingernails from delivering the piglets—something that always went unnoticed by her cousin, living and breathing farm work, cognizant of little else—Rose smiled at her. “Make sure to wash your hands better, Kitten, like I showed you,” she said over the sound of the train. “All the way to the elbows, and don’t forget to scrub your nails.” She scanned Anna’s unkempt locks. “And make sure to brush your hair every night so it won’t get so tangled that your dad has to cut it off. Don’t fall asleep in the cherry trees at Cassandra’s garden, either, for fear of falling to the ground and breaking your arm. Remember, too, that if you accidentally hurt someone’s feelings, you have to say you’re sorry. And try not to fidget so much, Kitten. Or when you have another one of your whispering spells, take deep breaths to calm yourself. Oh, and tell Liam I said goodbye! And, and, and . . .,” Rose said in a rush of motherly words, trying to remember all the helpful advice she wanted to give before leaving.

“All right, Lottie,” Anna kept saying, her chin quivering. “I’ll try; I promise,” she whimpered.

Rose leaned in and whispered, "And when you see the lady in black, or hear the voices, what do you do?"

"Run to the garden," said Anna, suddenly wide-eyed and looking confident. "It's my safe place."

"That's right." Rose smiled and pulled her little cousin into her arms like a puppy, her cane clanking to the ground. Anna squeezed back with all her might.

"You sheilas finish up, now. No need to make the conductor wait," Anna's father said, standing a few feet away, holding his hat in his hand while drinking a cold soda he had just bought from the dime store inside the station.

Anna picked up Rose's cane, handing it to her, and Rose kissed Anna's damp cheek. "Abyssinia, Kitten," she said, tears now streaming.

"Until then, Lottie Dottie," replied Anna, tears of her own falling at will. "Have a bee's knees time back in London."

Rose walked over to the passenger train.

"Lottie!" Anna called out one last time. "*You'll always be a sister to me,*" she cried in Danish. "*You're my best cobber, and I will always love you. I will count each day until I see you again next summer,*" she said, her father holding her back from running to her cousin as she embarked the train.

Rose briefly turned, parting her lips to say something. But what was there left to say? Instead, she stopped and gave the conductor her luggage, choosing to say nothing and simply wave. Perhaps because she knew, deep down, that she wouldn't be coming back. Not for a very, very long time, anyway.



Anna

That night, I go into my magical childhood hidden room and weep. Feeling like shattered glass, I open one of my favorite books, *The Secret Garden*, hoping it will ease my sadness.

"Would you like me to read that for you, love?" asks a kind voice in the darkness. The candlelight flickers, and a beautiful, feminine hand emerges out of the shadows, unfurling its long fingers at me.

In a daze, I stop weeping and hand the book over, anticipating the story to begin.



The trapper, Glenda Trufflepig, who ironically, bred pigs and sold them to the local farmers, was hiking up the road when she ran into Anna and Liam heading over to Cassandra Fancy's garden. Glenda was the older sibling of Poppy Almira Buttersmith, and lived in a rustic cabin in the bush. Over six feet tall like her sister, she had fire-engine red hair, a stark contrast to Poppy's dark hair that turned silver. There was bad blood between the sisters, too. They hadn't spoken to each other in decades because Glenda's sweetheart left her for Poppy when they were young.

"G'day, Miss Trufflepig," Anna politely greeted. "Where you headed?"

"Lookin' for one of my sows," said the older woman. An experienced trapper and taxidermist, several dead rabbits hung from her shoulder. "She escaped under the fence this mornin'."

"Want us to help you find her?" asked Anna.

"No, you run off and play. I'll track her down." Glenda noticed Rose wasn't with them. "Where's your cousin Lottie? You two never leave each other's side."

"She went back to London," said Anna.

"She's getting married," Liam added loudly.

"Oh, caught herself a bloke, did she?" Glenda smirked. "Men—more trouble than they're worth, and that's no lie."

Anna frowned, fearful their wonderful annual adventures were done. "I already miss her terribly."

"No worries, love. I'm sure Liam will keep you company."

Liam read her lips and beamed, nodding vigorously. He loved Glenda Trufflepig. Sometimes she'd let him tag along when she checked her traps. Other times he'd bring her his own catch—usually just snakes because the rabbits he'd pet and let go.

"Liam's all right," said Anna with a shrug, "but he's nothing like Rose." Pulling on his arm, they ran off toward Cassandra Fancy's garden. "I hope you find your pig!" she yelled over her shoulder.



Anna hoped the exquisite garden would help distract and comfort her, but all she found was immense emptiness instead. As she stood among the glorious flowers, the resplendent foliage, and the impressive ivy-covered statues, she grieved that her beloved cousin was not there. Rather than a place of magic and wonder, the garden was now an abandoned, overgrown coppice, the pond a dirty swamp, the sculptures sad ghosts.

“Let’s go home, Liam,” she said, walking dolefully toward the gates. “Yarra made chocky bickies this morning; let’s go have some.”

Liam, with his crown of wildflowers on his head, happily followed close behind his friend.

Halfway there, Glenda Trufflepig’s potbellied sow emerged from the bushes, snorting gleefully. Anna and Liam cornered it, grabbing hold of the miniature pig so it couldn’t escape again.

“Miss Trufflepig will be rapt when she sees us bring her back,” Liam said.

“I’m not bringing her there,” said Anna. “She’ll just be sold off and become someone’s brekkie.”

“What are you gonna do, then?”

“Take her home where she’ll be happy.”

Liam clapped his hands. “She’ll make a bonzer pet!”

“Too right. She’s lovely.”

“She’ll need a name, though.” Liam thought of the beautiful sunrise that morning. “I know—Lovely Dawn!”

“I like it,” said Anna.

Liam clapped again, excited and proud that Anna allowed him to name the potbellied pig.

“Well what are you waiting for? Gimme your belt so I can leash her!”

He obliged, and together they confiscated Lovely Dawn, leading her back to Sugar Alexandria.



The Voices

Soon Anna’s loneliness propagates. She knows the anathema well. It is a vicious monster, and sadness is its best friend, sorrow its lover. Like a cancer eating at her joy, it disseminates with a vengeance, bringing with it her undiagnosed delusions of paracusia.

First Genevieve, the lady in a black Victorian dress, appears, motionless beside a tree. Then a little girl who resembles her deceased twin sister emerges, giggling as she dances in the yard. Finally, the whispers begin, faintly, like the first drops of rain from an overcast sky. Building momentum, they encircle her, becoming clear and concise, and Anna does as Rose had instructed, running back to Cassandra Fancy’s garden. But the incantations only grow stronger, more familiar. With her cousin not there to strengthen her, the invisible forces she battles with finally win over. Anna

stops running and her eyes become glazed.

“Love, come visit me,” the many voices intone, blending into one.

Anna identifies it as her mother’s voice. “Rose said I shouldn’t listen to you.”

“Don’t turn me away, Turtle Dove. Come visit me.”

“Leave me alone!” she shouts. “Rose told me you’re not real!”

“I love you, Anna. You’re my baby girl,” the auditory hallucination cuts through the air. “You’re my little sunshine, and I miss you. Please don’t hurt me like this.”

On hearing her mother’s pleas, Anna’s trepidation slips away, and she accepts the invitation, slowly walking to the family burial plot overlooking the station.

Inside the low, brick-encased cemetery, with fancy wrought iron gate, lies her Danish grandparents, her mother, two of her brothers who died in the war, and her twin sister. Someday she will be buried there too. Almost in a trance-like state, as she has done innumerable times before over the years, Anna does what gives her comfort, lying facedown across her mother’s grave, her stomach adjacent to the earth, her arms spread out, and her head turned to the side with her cheek against the ground as if to touch her mother’s face sleeping beneath her. “Mummy, I’m here,” she says, eyes brimming with tears.

Just then, a cold breeze swooshes through the air; loose leaves and dried flowers float around before settling back down.

Anna closes her eyes and cries. “If only you would have lived.”

“Why are you crying, Turtle Dove?” Elsa’s kind voice travels through her consciousness.

“Rose is gone, and once more I’m alone.”

Again the wind dances across the ground, rustling the loose foliage.

“Since she’s getting married, I doubt she will ever return. Next summer I will ride the carriage down to the train station and wait for her, knowing she won’t be stepping out to greet me. I am beyond sad. Heartbroken. She has gone and done what all sheilas do—marry a bloke and his life becomes hers. How will I ever recover from this grief?”

“Find a bloke of your own, dear,” Elsa lovingly encourages. “Find a grouse bloke, fall in love, and build a grand life together.”

“Yes, Mummy. That’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“Good girl.”

“Love you, Mummy.”

“Love you too, Turtle Dove.”

Anna goes to her secret shrine, her personal altar that no one knows about, deep in the thicket next to the cornfield. Several precious mementos hang from the branches of a tree—her corn husk dolls, Aboriginal beads from Yarrajan, and a couple of photographs. Items of clothing once worn by her mother and twin sister are buried at the roots. She puts on her goose-feathered crown and decorative wings, kneeling before the reliquary to pray. Afterward, she converses with her mother and sister as if they are there. “I’ve missed you both so much,” she says, tears running from her eyes. “And I have so much to tell you . . .”



Anna indeed does hear and see things that are not there. They come on soft. A gentle murmur. A quiet breeze. Like the hot breath of a lover on your neck, only to turn incredibly fluid, clear, and assertive. They have caused her no harm, though, never telling her to hurt anyone or herself. On the contrary, they love and guide her as no one else can. But the narrative is waiting to become nefarious. Itching to turn on her.

As we hazard deeper into the depths of her mental illness, the light begins to scatter, the shadows deepen, and the whispers grow strong. All indicative of a mysterious and otherworldly existence. Through the voices of her imagination we are learning about a woman who is an adult child, dancing in and out of her own dreamworld, still longing to be loved by her twin sister who died when they were five years old, and her mother who died giving birth to them, as she has been told.

Venturing deeper still into Anna’s thoughts, into her psyche—a place of strange cogitations and potentially dangerous intentions—a mind touched with madness is unveiled. Unknown, undiagnosed, underestimated, and unwelcome. A mind where everything outside of sane is allowed . . .

CHAPTER 3

“A face with no freckles is like a flower with no bloom.”

– Irish Proverb 

After Christian and Josephine’s wedding, when Rose had returned to England, Anna set out to cure her loneliness by finding a bloke of her own, just like her mother had advised. Believing she made a connection with James Ragnar Shahan, the pianist she had met at her brother’s wedding, she became obsessed with him, following him around like a little bird following its keeper, sneaking around corners and watching him go about town.

At first James didn’t pay much attention to the teenage girl who fancied him, pestering him with her questions and adulation. But eventually he found her to be precious and charming. Five years younger than him and quite overbearing at times, she had a way about her—a quirky personality that made him laugh—and she pulled him out of his somewhat shy and introverted shell. Instead of spending most of his time playing his piano or reading his books, she would coerce him to the local theater, or to a diner for lunch or dinner. They had been on several dates, but he kept it mostly platonic.

“Show me your Celtic tattoo, James,” Anna said one evening as they walked along the shoreline. “I wanna see it.” She had lured him over by promising he could have any book he wanted from her father’s library—he chose Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*—then afterward took him to the beach, bringing a bottle of her father’s best Irish whiskey.

“How do you know I have a Celtic tattoo?”

Anna laid a blanket on the sand so they could sit and watch the calm waves rolling in. “Bethany Weaver told me. She said she saw it when you changed your shirt before going into the Bijou Theatre last week.”

“Did she, now.” James indulged her, pulling off his top, exposing an

ornate Celtic knot that covered his entire right chest, curling over his shoulder like a living vine.

"I've never seen anything like that before," Anna said, reaching over and touching it. "Where did you get it done?"

"In Turkey, during the war." After being nearly killed by a bomb, sustaining his permanent injuries, James was inclined to doing something else permanent, symbolically reclaiming his body and soul as his own instead of a living weapon of war against another man. The allegorical imprint was a hieroglyph of redemption for him. An ineffaceable mark to remind him of who he was and where he had come from. Even weeks after the Celtic artwork had been done, he would often place his hand over it, feeling a sense of comfort, family, and home.

"Did it hurt?"

"Didn't feel good."

"What's it mean?"

"It's a nod to my Gaelic heritage."

"It's rather gnarly looking." Anna glanced down at the bottle of whiskey he was holding, noticing he hadn't touched it yet. "An Irishman who's not drinking—go figure. Who'd have thought I'd have to twist your leg to drink my daddy's whiskey."

He chuckled. "Me arm, not me leg." Opening the glass bottle, James took a swig. "This is pretty good," he said, examining the golden fluid more closely. "Haven't had a whiskey this smooth in a while." He handed it back to her.

Anna took a sip herself, coughing at its strength. "Here, keep it," she said, shoving the bottle into his hands. "Drink as much as you like."

James grinned. "Are you trying to get me blotto, Anna Polston?"

"I just want you to have a good time, that's all."

He looked down at the liquor again "Won't your dad miss it?"

"No, he's got plenty. He makes his brew in his hidden distillery."

"Ahh, good on 'im. My uncle in Ireland does the same. He calls his little operation Ugly Agnes."

"James . . .," Anna said, pouting her lips. "Don't you like me?"

"Of course I do, love."

"Don't you wanna get married and have a family?"

He laughed. "In the future, yes. Right now, I have big plans for myself."

"Your piano music?"

"Yes."

"Can't you do both?"

James threw her a side glance. How could he explain it wasn't so much he didn't want to get married as it was he didn't want to marry her? "I just don't have the time for a wife right now," he said, giving her a soft smile. "A career like the one I'm pursuing takes years to become successful at, and there's no room for anything else. Not for a while, anyway. Does that make sense, love?"

"What about having someone by your side at night? A warm sheila to share your bed with."

"In due time," he chuckled.

Anna persisted. "I would make the best wife for you. I wouldn't even care if you were away a lot, being a pianist, as long as you came home."

"No, love, I'm just not that bloke. You need a man who loves station life, and that's not me. I'm going to tour the world playing the piano."

But Anna May Polston was not one to take no for an answer, her determination brewing into a festering, iniquitous plot. She could hear the whispers in the back of her mind again—the ones that directed her, guided her, always there when she needed help. "All you have to do is get him drunk," the voice postulated. "Really pissed, and he won't even remember. Get yourself pregnant, and he'll have to marry you."

Going forth with her scheme, Anna tried to make James relax so he would imbibe until inebriated. "Tell me all about your dreams, James. I want to know everything."

He smiled up at the sparkling diamonds in the sky. "Well, the Royal Academy of Music in London has accepted my application to advance my studies there."

"Ripper," said Anna, maintaining her masquerade of polite interest.

"Too right. I'm going to train with the best, learn new techniques, and sharpen my skill so I can excel in my craft. I hope one day to play professionally, touring the world with a symphony orchestra. Crikey, Anna, I'm so excited. I have so much to look forward to, so much ahead of me. I can't wait."

Totally wrapped up in chatting about his career aspirations, James slowly began to consume the alcohol, without even noticing how much. Anna watched in delight as the tea-colored liquor went from full bottle to half empty.

"Look at you," James said, smiling at his date through glazed eyes, now slurring his words. "With the moon shining on your face like that, makes me wanna kiss every freckle."

“You like my freckles?” Anna beamed.

“Tá aghaidh gan uimh freckles cosúil le bláth gan uimh faoi bhláth.”

“What’s that mean?”

“A face with no freckles is like a flower with no bloom. That’s what my grandfather always said about my grandmother.”

Anna knew it was time, and she started to kiss him. He reciprocated. Passionate kissing turned into heated touching. At one point, James pulled away, trying to focus his eyes under the moonlight, but Anna continued to kiss him, touch him, seduce him.

And then it happened . . .

Like a bull to the slaughter, he rolled on top of her, and so easily it was done.



Genevieve

“Well you’re no longer an innocent now, are ya.”

Anna sits up in bed to find the lady in the black Victorian dress standing there in the dark, her face hidden in the shadows. Genevieve is her name—a hallucination Anna has seen since childhood. Dressed in proper 1800s attire, she seems to care about Anna, looking out for and nurturing her, acting as if her nanny.

“I’m still innocent,” Anna defends. She lights the candle on her bedside table, making the room swell with a warmth of honey-colored light.

“Not after what you’ve done with that bloke,” Genevieve tsks.

“We’ll be married soon, though. He’ll marry me once he finds out I’m carrying his child.”

“What makes you so sure you’ve conceived?”

“I just know. A woman knows these things.” Anna snuggles back under her blanket. “Tell me a story, Genevieve.”

“Which one, Sweet Pea?”

“The *Black Shuck*.”

The woman from the 1800s sits in the rocking chair beside Anna’s bed. “The year was 1577 in Suffolk County of East Anglia,” she began, just as Rose always had. “A large, black wolf with bloodred eyes and razor-sharp teeth was terrorizing the village . . .”

Anna listens to the story as the dramatic words from her imaginary friend lull her back to sleep. Slipping into her slumber, she mumbles, “Genevieve, I’m so thankful I have you . . .”

"You'll always have me, Sweet Pea," says the illusory woman. "I'm here to protect you."



Anna was very pleased with herself, how she had cleverly seduced the pianist. Who would have thought that would be so easy, she laughed? She could not stop thinking about that night James took her virginity down by the shoreline, her hair tangled from his hands, her neck sensitive as he feasted on her skin. He had been so gentle with her, almost as if it were one long, passionate kiss. Yet it wasn't just a kiss. They had made love, and it lifted her spirits, offering tremendous hope for the future.

The days turned to weeks, and as Anna waited for her body to give her the wonderful news, she went for a long walkabout to the shoreline one day, even letting Liam tag along.

"You seem different," he said as they moseyed down the beach, noticing her cheery mood and overly pleasant disposition toward him.

She picked up a seashell, ignoring his observation.

"You're keeping secrets, aren't you," he added. "Secrets, secrets."

Still she didn't answer, a perma-smile on her lips.

Liam didn't persist further, just happy she had let him come along. "This is how it used to be—you and me," he said, skipping a rock across the calm ocean surface. "Remember all our adventures?"

Anna rolled her eyes. She didn't have time to reminisce about childish escapades. No, she was a grown woman now, and she'd soon be getting married and having a child of her own. A child with the handsomest and smartest bloke in the entire Shire of Esperance!

Seeing how happy she was, Liam tried his luck: "Sing to the animals, Anna. I wanna feel your throat when you make that noise you do."

She hesitated.

"Pleeease?"

Anna reluctantly agreed, and as the haunting, high-pitched sounds resonated from her vocal cords, Liam held his fingers gently across her throat, smiling with excitement. Anna wondered if the baby inside her could hear her kulning too. She sang so loud and strong that several wild horses approached from the bushes up ahead.

When it was over, they both teared up for different reasons . . . Liam, ecstatic she had let him once again feel her mellifluous kulning, experiencing the vibrations deep within his bones; and Anna, blissful in her belief she was pregnant.

Alas, however, she was not.

The very next morning while she bathed, she saw the bathwater turning pink. The unfairness of it! The travesty! As the water removed the blood of her menses, she sobbed. James would be leaving for London soon, and she had lost her chance to cure the heavy plague of forsakenness she wore like a second skin after her mother and sister were taken from her.

Yet not all was lost.

Lying on her bed, sulking, it dawned on her that she could still tell James she was pregnant. After all, they had indeed been intimate; she could just fib and speak contrary to the truth.

A lie.

But it would be a sugarcoated lie that would better her life. Help her. Give her what she desired.



Nervous and excited, Anna was on her way into town. Not to buy lollies, a magazine, or material for a dress like she usually did, but to tell James she was carrying his child.

Well, his imaginary child.

He would never have to know that, though. Once they were married, she would get pregnant for real, and then it wouldn't matter anyway.

What would James say, she wondered? What would he think once she told him she was pregnant? As Anna drove the horse and carriage down the long dirt road, she anxiously bit at her nails. She did not see the beautiful blue sky above, the enormous plush gum trees dominating the landscape, or the kangaroos hopping on by. She only saw James' face and tried to imagine how he would react to the news.

Pulling up in front of the music store, Anna commenced her flagrant ruse . . .

"You're pregnant?" James asked, his complexion paling under the warm Australian sun. Everything around them seemed to go strangely quiet as they spoke in whispers beside the carriage.

Anna nodded.

"Are you sure? I mean really certain?" Never had he been so afraid in his life, pinioned by words coming from this young woman's mouth.

"Of course I'm sure. This isn't something you guess about. I haven't had my period since that night on the beach, and I've been feeling crook most mornings lately."

"Have you been to the doctor, though?"

"Um . . ." Anna quietly panicked. She hadn't thought of him asking that. "Where do you think I just came from?" She lied.

His shoulders visibly sank; his mouth went dry. "Crikey, I don't believe this!"

"I'm a good Christian girl, James. I can't have a baby on my own."

Holding a roll of several sheets of his music, he tapped it against his thigh. "To be honest, I barely even remember that night. I was so sloshed."

Anna put a hand on her hip. "I certainly remember. And don't you dare ask me if I'm sure it's yours. You know you're the only bloke I've been with."

James appeared as if a deer caught in the bright lights of a car. Frozen. He still had another girl on his mind—an English violinist named Charlotte he had met at his sister's wedding. Just earlier in the week, when he couldn't get her out of his mind, he had decided he was going to try to find out who and where she was. He thought of her in that moment, too, with Anna leering at him, recalling her green eyes and angelic face. There would be no prospect of searching for her now.

"I'll be ruined, you know," Anna lamented. "No other decent bloke will have me now. And my father will kill me when he finds out . . . He'll kill you too."

His eyes flashed up at her. "Bloody hell. I'm sure he and your brother will hunt me down, skinning me alive for this."

Anna slowly nodded.

James raked his hands through his hair. "I'm supposed to be leaving for London next week to find a place to live," he said, distraught.

Anna folded her arms across her chest. "You're going to abandon me and our child?"

He looked astounded. Physically ill.

Anna studied his face. Before her eyes, he appeared to be shrinking. Slowly vanishing. Guilt enveloped her for lying, but with her mother, sister, and now Rose, gone, the hollowness inside her was so vast and starved for love she just couldn't tell the truth. James was the remedy to fill the void.

"Buggers, I don't know what to say or do!" he exclaimed. "I've worked so hard for this, too. I've always wanted a career in music and teaching."

"I'm not asking you to give that up."

"It would have to be put on hold, though."

"So you'll do the right thing, then?"

“Buggers, I don’t know what to do!” he repeated, giving her a serious look. “Crikey, what should we do, Anna?”

“What should we do? . . . What do you think we should do!” she almost shouted. “Get married as soon as possible!”

James stared off into the distance, far away, until his eyes watered. Or were they tears? Anna couldn’t tell. Looking down at the roll of papers in his hand, still tapping against his thigh, she asked, “What is that, anyway? Those papers.”

“Music I have written.”

“You write music, too? I didn’t know that.”

He locked eyes with her. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

Anna gave him a wide smile. “I guess I will know soon enough. You’re gonna be my bloke, aye?”

James crumpled up the handwritten sheets of music, throwing them inside the carriage. He reached over and grabbed her hand. “Yes.”

“We’re gonna get married?”

Stunned, he had no idea what he was getting into with a girl he hardly knew. Nevertheless, he surrendered, accepting the honorable thing that came next. “Yes, Anna, it’s the right thing to do.”



The Voices

Anna’s late mother calls out in her mind again, disapproving of her daughter’s egregious trickery . . .

“Oh, Anna, I told you to find a bloke of your own, but not through a crook lie.

“You’re stealing his life from him.

“His talent.

“His dreams.

“You’re playing with his heart, manipulating his world.

“You’re denying him, deceiving him . . . and yourself.”

But Anna doesn’t listen.



“What are you still doing here, mate?” Peachy Jones asked, drinking a longneck at the pub with Dewey Silkwood. “Shouldn’t you be in London by now?”

James sat next to the two men and ordered a whiskey from the bartender. "Plans have changed. I'm getting married this month. You and the rest of me mates are invited."

Peachy gave him a congratulatory handshake. "To that pommy sheila you kept talking about, I reckon?"

"That pretty brunette with the broken leg, aye?" added Dewey, leaning back on his stool, flashing his crooked smile at James. "You lucky bastard!"

"No, I never saw her again after my sister's wedding."

"That's a pity," said Dewey, taking a swig of his beer. "You two seemed smitten."

"We were." James downed his shot and asked for another, inwardly frowning, wishing he had tried harder to find her.

"Who's the skirt, then?" asked Peachy.

"Yeah, who got James Shahan to give up his precious London dreams?" Dewey asked.

"Anna Polston," James said with little enthusiasm.

Peachy laughed. "Her? Freckle face Polston? I would have thought you'd nab a tall poppy, with how debonair you are." He looked at Dewey with surprise, then back at James. "Instead the pianist is marrying the daughter of a station owner—go figure."

"I'd marry her," said Dewey. "I've been looking for a sheila ever since we got back from the war."

"Good luck with that, mate, 'cause you've got a face not even a mother could love," Peachy joked.

Dewey laughed. "I think Anna's a beauty of a lass. A little strange at times, maybe, but she'll make a grouse cook."

"I've worked at Sugar Alexandria before," Peachy said. "It's a grand property but bigger than most, which means nonstop work."

"I know," said James.

"You'll be slogging those fields for the rest of your days, mate. And I'll tell you another thing . . ." With his beer he pointed at James' fingers. "You can kiss those baby soft hands of yours goodbye. That's no lie."

James tossed back his drink. "It'll only be for a short while. I plan on pursuing my music again later."

Peachy shook his head, imagining all three of them sitting there years from now, covered in red dust and drinking side by side. "With as good as you are on that piano, though, it's kind of a shame, don't you think? Can't you two wait until you get back from London?"

James only stared down at the bar, and from the look on his face, Peachy understood. His cobbler didn't want to get married . . . He had to.

"Well, it happens to the best of us, mate. Every single one of us eventually walks that plank," Peachy said, clicking beer bottles with Dewey.

James ordered a third shot. "Walk the plank . . . Fair dinkum, mate. That's a beauty of a way of puttin' it, too," he said, tossing back his whiskey."



Anna felt as if the entire world were cheering for her, and the heavenly angels were smiling down. For some odd reason, however, she thought of Rose's folklore tale, the *Black Shuck*, and how the man trusted the she-wolf, only to suffer her betrayal. I might have lied, but I will never betray him, she promised herself. I will never hurt James Shahan.

As she strolled down the pathway to the ocean that evening, she became lost in her happy thoughts over her future with him. Oh, how lucky she was! She was going to be the most perfect wife, too! She'd cook stacks of yummy pancakes for breakfast, make him hearty sandwiches that would choke a horse, and bake all kinds of fancy Irish dishes like his mother did. And after a long workday, she'd rub his aching feet while he relaxed and drank his longneck by the warm fire. They'd be the happiest couple in all of Esperance!

"But you got him through a lie, Anna! A bold-faced lie!" a voice shouted from nowhere.

"Who's there!" Anna asked, panicking, thinking someone had found her out.

"How could you scheme such a thing? You're a pretty enough girl, too, with your flaxen hair and deep blue eyes. You could have easily gotten a bloke without the falsehood."

"Who's there!" she demanded again, squinting into the tall grass. "Is that you, Genevieve?" Anna looked around for the woman wearing the black Victorian dress who often appeared from thin air and followed her everywhere. "He's mine! All mine! I own him now, and you nor anyone else can stop me!" she shouted, throwing her fist up at the sky.

But there was no answer. The voice simply vanished, carried off with the wind, back into the fields from where it came.



“Wanna go to the garden?” Liam asked the next day as Anna held a little lamb with white curly fur in the paddock.

“No, I really shouldn’t anymore. I’m getting too old to play there now.”

“Aww, c’mon, Anna. Pleeease?” He pulled on her arm. “Let’s go to our secret place.”

Anna kissed the furry baby sheep. “I’m getting married soon, and I have to start acting like a mature adult.” She put the tiny lamb down on the grass and ran with Liam to the enchanted garden anyway.



Genevieve

“If you come to the wedding, you can’t wear that dress,” Anna says, sitting in front of her vanity, looking at the woman only she can see. “No one wears black to a wedding.”

Genevieve doesn’t answer. She only picks up a brush and begins brushing Anna’s golden hair.

“Can you imagine the looks you would get?” Anna laughs. “Victorian dresses are out of style, too.”

“Tell me about your plans, love,” says the woman from the 1800s. “Tell me everything.”

In a rush of words, Anna excitedly chatters all about her hopes and dreams, how she’s marrying a handsome Irishman and they’ll be raising a family together, and how she’ll never be lonely again. “Genevieve, he’s tall and handsome with blue-gray eyes, a soft-spoken demeanor, and he’s super smart. Oh, I just love him so.”

Genevieve continues brushing Anna’s long, flaxen-colored tresses. “But does he love *you*, Sweet Pea?”

Anna, staring at her reflection in the mirror, her braids undone and framing her round, cherub face, her countless freckles dotting her skin, her scarlet lipstick glistening in the natural light, responds confidently, “He will learn to.”



James Ragnar Shahan married Anna May Polston at Sugar Alexandria, the glorious sheep station owned by Anna’s father outside the Shire of Esperance. James waited until a week before the wedding to notify the Royal Academy of Music in London—the hardest telegram he ever sent—canceling

his invitation to the esteemed conservatoire. He did it, though, and promised himself that when he was situated, he would arrange to pursue it again.

He had a conversation with his parents, too, the night before he got married. His mother Beulah, who spoke no English, disliked Anna, telling him there was something not right with her. His father Riordan, however, saw things differently. Smoking his corncob pipe, he said to James in Gaelic, *"Anna will be good for you. You need some responsibility to save you from these silly dreams of playing and teaching music."*

"Music is a part of who I am, father. It will always be there, one way or another," James replied in the Goidelic language. In his heart he was forever a pianist, always waiting to play the next song. *"It's what makes me happy."*

Riordan exhaled a billow of smoke, frowning at his son. *"I see you still have a hard time letting go of the boy inside you. Real men don't play the bloody piano, lad. They get a decent job and get on with life. It's time for you to grow up and be a real man."*

James filled with indignation. It had always hurt him how his father said he wasn't a real man for wanting to pursue a career in music. *"So I'm just supposed to sacrifice my happiness now? Is that it? Give up on what I love?"*

Riordan pointed his pipe at him. *"After tomorrow, you're going to be married with a bairn on the way. Your happiness is of no mind. Taking care of your family is what's important now, not chasing some cockeyed dream."*

On their wedding day, James watched Anna Polston saunter down the aisle in a borrowed dress too tight and too long, proceeding through the motions of exchanging vows with a girl he did not love but felt responsible for. Following the nuptials, he was numb. He stood off to the side, watching the festive celebration, loosening his bow tie, holding a longneck and staring into nihilism. In his mind he heard two things: Anna's voice telling everyone she had landed James Shahan, and the priest saying, "Till death do you part . . ."

CHAPTER 4



It was the Roaring Twenties—a decade on fire. A period in which a sense of cosmic order prevailed. When the earth was full of sugar and spice, and all the flavors between. Exuberant. Prosperous. Unrestrained. Pushing and yearning, stretching into the dawn of a new era.

The War to End All Wars had just come to an end, and the people, the cities, the towns, and even the sky full of twinkling stars above lit up in an extravagant surge of blazing promise. A time of passion, change, and innovation, bursting with delicious possibilities. Women earned the right to vote; mass media was born; Art Deco style flourished; the newly formed League of Nations vowed peace and security worldwide. The stock market skyrocketed; bankers and traders became wealthy. Prohibition began; bootlegging gave rise to organized crime. Americans called it the Jazz Age, Germans the Golden Twenties, and the French, *Années Folles* (*Crazy Years*).

And it *was* crazy.

Uninhibited. Wild. Free. Socially exploding, culturally dynamic, and artistically genius. Women cut their waist-length hair into short, severe bobs, styling it sleek and straight as a razor, or in intricate Marcel waves. They traded their corsets and floor-length skirts for spangled satin dresses, doing the shimmy on top of tables while kicking up their bare, thin legs. They wore fake eyelashes, beaded headbands, waved colorful feathered fans, smoked cigarettes in jeweled opera length holders, and made sure their lipstick was bright bloodred to match their dancing shoes. Farmers' daughters became babes, dames, broads, Shebas, bearcats, flappers, and choice bit of calico. Quiet evenings spent at home changed to swing dancing all night, doing the Foxtrot, the Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Lindy Hop, and various others at the local nightclubs and juke joints. They were liberated, and they loved it, giggling and flirting, drinking champagne until zozzled, celebrating whenever they could, living each day as if it were their last.

Oh, and let's not forget the men. Economic prosperity boomed; mass consumerism thrived. They traded their boots and overalls for silk shirts and tailored suits—pinstripe, plaid, or linen. They wore raccoon fur coats, two-tone shoes, and fedoras tilted across their brows. They flocked to the cities, bought homes, replaced horses and buggies with Henry Ford's Model T, or if they had the cabbage, a Rolls-Royce Phantom I Jonckheere Coupe, a Bugatti Type 35 Grand Prix, or a Duesenberg Model J. "Swing dance with me, babe," they would say to their dates. "Let's drink some giggle water and neck in the back of my new Model T, and maybe, just maybe, I will buy you some ice to put on your little finger."

James Ragnar Shahan was one of those men who wanted to partake of what life had to offer a young bloke in this new golden era. He had dreams. Big ones. His goal was to become a professional pianist and music professor—something he had aspired to since childhood—but instead of residing in London and pursuing his career, he was now tied to his new wife, Anna May Shahan, and the burgeoning sheep station she inherited in the Australian Outback when her father passed away, succumbing to a long battle with tuberculosis.

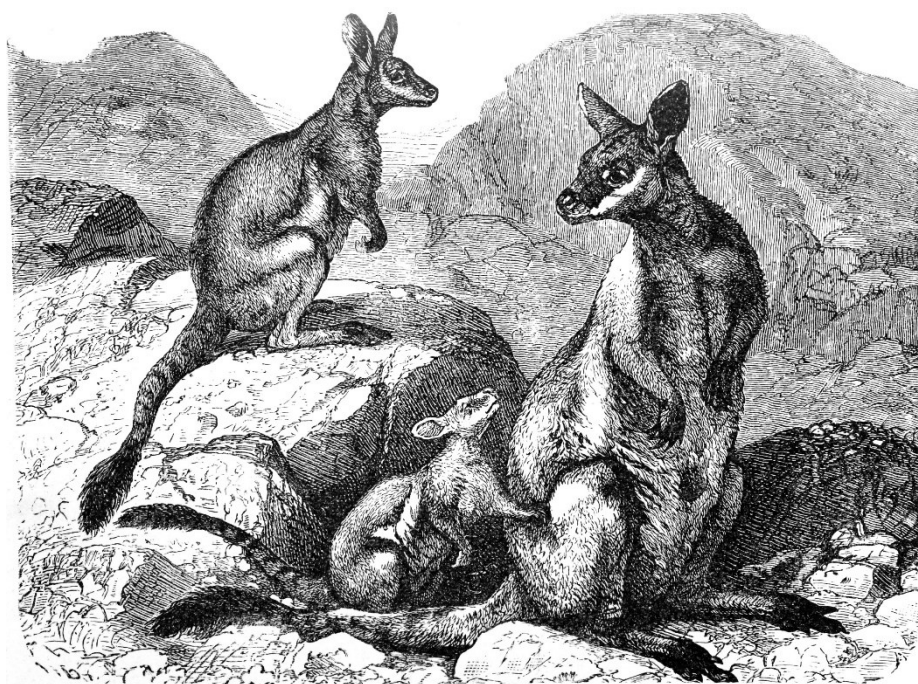
Living at Sugar Alexandria was as if he had opened a door by accident, only to be locked inside. Trapped, like an insect caught in a spider's web. And in truth, he was. Fooled into marriage; yoked together through moral chicanery; the product of Anna's lie and his own virtuous belief that he was doing what was right. Collectively, those irrevocable verities shackled him

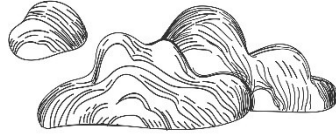
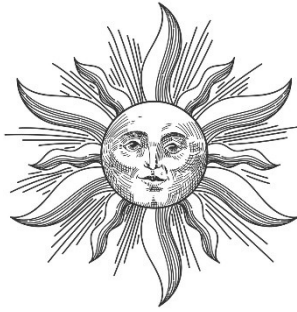
to the land, and a life Anna worshipped yet he despised.

During this stretch of time, late at night as he lay next to his wife, his body aching from the rigorous day's work, red earth staining his callused hands, his mind would sometimes wander to a different place. A place laden with dark, lyrical notes on alabaster paper, freshly ironed dinner jackets, and a stage with a black grand piano where he'd play for the masses. He would think of other things, too, like the sheila he had met at his sister's wedding—the beautiful stranger from England with bright green eyes who used a cane. He wondered what became of her, and hoped the life she had chosen for herself made her happy, as the life he had been forced into had not.

PART TWO







*Sugar Alexandria Sheep Station
Shire of Esperance, Australia*

CHAPTER 5



Ten Years Later . . . November 15, 1929

Ten years had come and gone since their wedding, and James had transformed from a cultured would-be pianist into a rugged, red-skinned, blond-bearded station owner, all thanks to his wife's caper. Shearing sheep, branding cows, feeding livestock, fixing machinery, and tending the unruly land were now his daily life. He was different from the other station owners in the territory, though. Kinder to the animals and fairer to the stockmen and ringers who worked for him, including the Aborigines. Unwilling to exploit them, he treated the natives the same as the other men, even learning to speak their language of Nukunu so they could communicate with each other more effectively. Likewise, he would teach them and their families English, setting up a makeshift classroom in the back of the barn.

After a long workday, James would often sneak out to his Ford Model TT Huckster pickup and head down the road to visit a pub called the Blue Lizard Cave. There he would socialize with other locals in the area—miners,

fishermen, lumberjacks, and graziers—all congregating to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Despite the worsening economic climate, the regulars at the Blue Lizard Cave always seemed to find enough coin for their grog.

Inside the pub was an intricate oak bar with twisted posts that ran the length of the room, facing a wall-to-wall mirror. Several paintings of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie hung on display throughout—the previous owner was a Frenchman—accompanied by an oil painting the new owner had commissioned of his wife. In the corner rested a Steinway piano that a barmaid used to play to entertain the guests; these days, it usually sat quiet, unless James was there—after a couple of shots of whiskey they couldn’t drag him from it. The centerpiece of the room was a striking ballerina fountain, surrounded by a dozen wooden tables and chairs. But most of the men, sweaty and dusted with red earth, sat in succession at the bar, drinking grog and discussing their day’s work, their families, and their concerns over the Great Depression now sweeping the land like a deadly virus.

The pub was owned by James’ good friend, Casper Cotton Fancy—an older unconventional man and a free-spirited maverick. Casper traveled the world to seek his fortune when he was young, and when he returned to Australia, he bought a small mine near Kalgoorlie that struck gold. With his earnings he bought the Blue Lizard Cave for fun, and renovated an old castle near a cliff overlooking the sea into a home for his new bride Cassandra. For the next thirty-plus years he spent his days loving his wife, who for some unknown reason, after giving birth to four healthy babies, developed agoraphobia, never leaving the large estate. Ever. But that didn’t stop Casper. Genuinely one of the most easygoing chaps around, a natural expression on his face of continual amusement, he ventured out daily, visiting friends, smoking his favorite cigars, and telling stories in his pub about all his travels around the world.

The double doors of the Blue Lizard Cave flapped open, and in walked Anna Shahan, a flash of outside light illuminating her entry. Curious eyes looked up from their mugs and the voices hushed for a brief moment, agitated to see a sheila—women weren’t allowed in the pub.

Anna scanned the room for her husband. Wearing her lavender velvet cloche hat tight over her ears and her new dress that had just arrived in the mail, she elatedly waved something in her hand when she spotted him.

“Jimmy, your cook is here,” Casper Cotton Fancy said from behind the bar, puffing on a stogie as he handed James another mug of beer topped with frothy foam like shaving cream, “and she looks like she has fire in her eyes.”

James looked over to see his wife approaching, ignoring the sneers and grumbles from the male patrons as she beelined toward him.

Tilly Barlowe, a tiny Irishman and the town drunk, shook his head. "The poor bloke's c'mere to wet his whistle and forget his problems, and his cook's c'mere to remind him of 'em," he slurred, trying to focus his double vision on James.

"Ahh, ya bloody larrikin, you're just sour 'cause you miss havin' a cook yourself," teased Casper Cotton.

Tilly's wrinkled face scrunched up into a funny, toothless grin. "Smelly, hairy beast, she was."

"Didn't she run off with your brother?" goaded another man at the bar.

Tilly feigned heartbreak. "Bloody oath, she did. And I sure do miss . . . me brother!" he exclaimed, bursting into laughter and slapping the bar.

"G'day, Casper Cotton," Anna greeted when she reached them, giving James a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Anna, you know you can't be in here, love," said Casper.

"That's right," James said, surprised to see her there. "You should be with the twins." After Anna's blatant lie about being pregnant, a decade later they indeed had a child. Two, in fact. One-month-old twin girls—Scarlet Rose and Mabel Blessing.

"They're with Yarra, Sugar Bear."

He could see the glee in her face. "Well what's so bloody important that you had to drive all the way over here, aye?"

Anna handed him a telegram with an excited giggle. "My cousin Rose sent me this!"

The pale, small note, originating from the metropolis of London, England, had been transmitted across a riotous ocean and the red, unending Outback, hand-delivered to its final destination at Sugar Alexandria. James took the paper and read it . . .

THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY

December 20, 1929

From:

Rose Charlotte Moss
7089 Willowbrook Ave.
London, England
NW1 4NP

To:

Anna May Shahan
501 Abbey Rd.
Esperance, Australia
11529

THE CONSEQUENCE OF ANNA

Dear Anna,

I write to you from a convent in London. My husband Paul has committed suicide after the terrible stock market crash. I was hoping to find solace with the nuns, but I still feel so empty here.

Please let me travel to you.

Love,

Rose

“Crikey, that’s terrible,” James said. “Her bloke killed himself.”

“And she’s wanting to come live at Sugar Alexandria.” Anna beamed underneath her hat. “You know how much I love her, James. How much I miss her. She needs our help now.”

“No sheilas in the pub!” someone shouted.

“Yeah, that’s right! Git ’er outta here!” a second voice demanded, followed by the men murmuring among themselves.

“Ohhh, go eat your grubby shoe, you dirty horse!” Anna fired back, feisty and ornery as always, shaking her balled fist at him. “All you blokes care about is whiskey and whores!”

James pulled his bantam wife into his arms and covered her mouth.

She pushed his hand away. “I’m not afraid of a bunch of filthy drunks.”

“You know the rules, love,” Casper Cotton said.

“Since you’re here, we might as well eat tucker at The Flame Tree Grill,” said James. Christian and Josephine owned the small diner in town, named after Australia’s beautiful Illawarra Flame Tree, with its bright coral-red blossoms that grow in clusters at the end of its branches. “Let me finish my drink, and I’ll meet you there, aye?”

Anna scowled at the men.

James gave her a pat on the bum. “Go on before you get into a fistfight,” he teased.

Anna headed for the door, and just before she stepped through the exit, she stuck her tongue out at the group of men sneering at her.

Casper Cotton and James laughed.

“How’s Anna and the little ones doin’, mate?” Casper asked, cleaning shot glasses.

“Babies are grand,” said James. “Anna, on the other hand, has her good days and bad.”

"I had a fear her spells would get worse after the babies arrived." Casper Cotton was the one who had found Anna running down the dirt road a year earlier, naked and crying. He had put a blanket around her and taken her back to James.

"Me too."

"She seems all right now, though."

"That's just it. She's fine for a while, then suddenly it hits, and she gets bloody hysterical. Then she goes right back to being Anna again as if nothing happened."

"How often does it occur?"

"Hard to say. Could be days, weeks, or even months before she has another relapse."

"The doc ever give a name for it?"

James shook his head. "And now her pommy cousin wants to come stay with us." He was less than thrilled with the idea.

"I remember her as a teenager," said Casper. "She used to come visit Anna in the summers, and the two of them would play in my wife's garden. A sweet lass she was; it's sad to hear she's a widow now." He served drinks to a couple of other men before returning to James. "You gonna be all right with another sheila under your roof?"

"Not sure I have a choice in the matter. You know Anna when she sets her mind on something."

"Don't worry, mate. From what I remember, she wasn't just sweet but pretty too. Dark hair, green eyes 'n all. She'll find a bloke soon enough and be married off."

James thought of the English violinist he had danced with at his sister's wedding years ago. It had been a while since he thought of that night. She too had dark hair and the greenest eyes he had ever seen, and he wondered whatever became of her.

"I can help ya, mate," slurred Tilly Barlowe, leaning too far to the left.

James pushed him upright so he wouldn't fall over. "How's that?"

"When the sheila gets here, just introduce her to me and I'll sweep 'er off her feet."

"How you gonna do that, mate?" asked another man, egging him on.

"I'd show 'er what a true bloke is, not like all these boys nowadays." He squinted his squinty eyes at James. "And the stories I could tell her 'bout me youth—I was like thunder. She'd hear 'em and fall in love, and that's no lie."

All the men at the bar roared with laughter.



Anna held the telegram close to her chest as she sat in the booth at The Flame Tree Grill, waiting for her husband. Unlike the pub, it was scarcely busy, and Christian and Josephine were not there, leaving the diner in the hands of an employee. Overwhelmed by the news, Anna's mind wandered to the time when she was a young teenager, listening to her daddy explain to Yarrajan why Rose was coming to the station that first summer . . .

"Anna needs female companionship to help her grow out of this tom-boy stage," her father had said.

"She be a free spirit, Mr. Polston. That's all it be," Yarrajan replied. She liked Anna the way she was.

"The girl won't wear shoes, dresses in her brothers' overalls, and rarely brushes her hair. Crikey, half the time she's covered in mud. No, she needs a female cobbler now. Someone who can influence her to become a lady. That's why I've sent for her cousin Ambrosia from London. She'll come and stay the summer, and it'll do Anna a world of good."

Mr. Polston was so right. Rose coming to Sugar Alexandria did change Anna's life, and from that first summer to the last, Anna always cherished those memories she had with her beloved cousin. Every night since then, she included Rose in her prayers, hoping that someday life would reunite them.

And now her prayers had been answered . . . Rose was coming back!

In that moment, a brilliant idea materialized in Anna's head. Something magnificent. Something so grand her beloved cousin would never leave her again!

James came into the restaurant, and they both ordered their dinner.

"You've got that twinkle in your eye, love," he said. "Like you're up to something. Should I be scared?"

"Always," Anna giggled, grinning at him as she sipped on her soda through a straw.



"So you'll build it, aye?" Anna asked when they were home, a wide smile flaunting the gap between her front teeth. "Or do I have to twist your leg?"

"It's arm, Anna. Twist your arm," said James. "I've told you that countless times, now."

"Bah, same thing."

Anna and her husband stood in front of the center windmill—the largest of the three Goliaths that resided at Sugar Alexandria. She had come up with the marvelous idea to convert the regal edifice—a sacred entity that represented her grandparents, her mother, her childhood, and her beloved cousin, all within the walls of the complex wooden formation—into a maisonette for Rose. Inside the massive structure was a great deal of room, and if James agreed, he and the men could do all the carpentry work in time for her arrival. What a wonderful gift that would be!

James touched his beard, thinking. Though he was fine with Rose coming to Sugar Alexandria, he was against his wife's idea to renovate the center windmill into a home for her. The last thing he needed was more work, not to mention destroying a good, functioning windmill. Nevertheless, fearful of Anna spiraling into another emotional episode, he reluctantly considered it. "I've never done such a thing," he said as they stood there, staring up at the spinning sail.

"Yeah, but this way she'll have her own place. Something to call her own. Oh, Sugar Bear, please?"

"Couldn't she just stay in the spare room down the hall?"

"No, that's too small."

"Not if you add the space in the secret room."

"You can't be serious. You'd have her walk in and out through a door at the back of the closet and stay in a room with one small window? Like in a dungeon? Absolutely not; that was just a playroom when I was a child."

James was still unconvinced. "Even if I agreed, I'm not sure it would be ready in time, love."

"You patched up the second floor of the house pretty quick after the fire, and it looks grand."

"I only fixed the outside. The inside is still a bloody mess."

Anna looked deep into his eyes. "I won't ask for anything ever again; I swear. This would be so wonderful for her, like her own private castle."

"A castle in the bush, aye? In the Outback of Straya. I don't think she'll be expecting something that extravagant, Tin Tin." James had nicknamed her Tin Tin from *The Wizard of Oz* story—another one of Anna's favorite books—teasing her that she was like the Tin Man character with no heart because she could be so insensitive, ornery, and stubborn at times.

"Think of it this way: If she has her own place, we'll keep our privacy," Anna reasoned. "Pleeease?"

"I just don't know, love," he said again, unsure if he was skilled enough to do the job. "Let me think on it."



The following evening, Anna prepared a delightful meal for her husband, being overly attentive and pampering toward her bloke. She wanted to butter him up so he'd be more willing to move forward with her plan to renovate the center windmill into a home for her cousin.

"Thanks a million for tucker, love," James said after dinner. He kissed Scarlet Rose and Mabel Blessing, sleeping in their bassinets, then put on his Akubra hat and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Anna asked.

"The Blue Lizard Cave."

"What? You're always going over there."

"C'mon, don't get onto me about that again, aye?"

"But I thought we could start planning how we're going to renovate the mill."

"I told you I needed to think on that. It's a waste of a windmill, for one, and not an easy thing to do."

Anna became angry. "You're a waste of a bloke if you don't build that for my poor widowed cousin!" she shouted, balling her fists and glowering at him. "That's what you are!"

James sighed. "Stop talking rubbish, Anna."

She began whispering to herself, wringing her hands as she paced around the kitchen, engaged in a trance-like conversation with someone not there. The murmuring became more agitated, growing into a vociferous argument.

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of James' stomach. This was not the first occasion he had witnessed such peculiar behavior in his wife, yet he never grew used to it. He simply made himself pretend that Anna was normal and would have emotional outbursts like everyone else from time to time. That is until she would have one of her more severe episodes.

With her back turned to him, the ire toward her husband continuing to build, Anna grew more animated in her conversation with no one. Even her pet cockatoo, Moby, appeared nervous and aware of the change in her demeanor, bristling his wings and his crest as he watched from his cage. James stood there listening carefully, trying to discern the manic whispers flowing from her lips. Was she going to settle down this time, or fly into a rage? The wind pushed against the house, its sad, lonely whistle mixing with her haunting undertones creating an eerie atmosphere.

Anna turned to face him . . .

Her expression, distorted from madness, and her breathing, labored from anger, incited him to action, running to get the medication Dr. Crawford had prescribed to keep her calm. Just as he opened the cabinet drawer, a dish flew past his head, barely missing him. "Bloody hell!" he exclaimed, ducking as the second one followed close behind. "Anna, the babies! For God's sake, you could have hit one of them! Don't you dare throw another!" No sooner had he said it than a third plate zoomed past, this time clipping the side of his head, almost knocking him to his knees. He winced in pain as he barreled forward, grabbing hold of her while she fought him, pounding his chest with her fists. Her screaming became so loud and fierce that he tried to cover her mouth, but she only bit his hand. Wrestling his out-of-control wife to the ground, he pinned her there. "Anna, calm down!"

"*Jeg kommer aldrig min vej (I never get my way)!*" she screamed in Danish, her lungs hyperventilating. Extremely upset, Moby screeched and thrashed about in his cage.

"Listen to me, Anna! You need to calm yourself, right now!"

"If you love her, James, you'll do it!" Anna yelled, speaking as if in her mother's voice, her face warped into a heavy frown.

"Stop that!" he demanded, holding her in his arms, aware that under extreme stress, excitement, or anger, his wife would sometimes take on other personalities. "You're Anna, and you know I love you!"

"My daughter wants Rose to have her own place!" she screamed into his shoulder.

James held her tighter. She hadn't had a spell this bad in a while, speaking as if she were Elsa Polston. He had no idea what caused the delusions; he only knew how to calm her, console her, until it passed.

"The shadow people will help me build it if you don't!" she screamed out. "They do anything I ask!"

He had heard her speak of the shadow people in the past, how they followed her and sometimes she would follow them, only for the mysterious figures to vanish, just like Genevieve. "Who are the shadow people, love?"

Anna began to laugh through her tears, staring up at the light from the kerosene lamp, unblinking and disoriented. "They know me better than I know myself," she said. "And there are many."

A shiver ran down James' spine. He said a quick prayer, hoping she would snap out of her paroxysm of delirium, and moments later she pacified, her breaths calming, her pulse rate regulating. James tenderly kissed her sweat-laden forehead. "I'll build it, love," he said, sitting her up on the floor,

rocking her to keep her placated, as he always did. “I’ve never built something like that before, but I’ll do it. Crikey, consider it done.”

Both physically and emotionally exhausted, they sat there for a long while as the shadows crept along the floor and stretched up the walls, a deafening silence settling in.



Anna

Doesn’t he know by now, I always get my way?



That night as he lies next to his wife in bed, a strange sensation creeps up on James while a thousand words accumulate in his mind, wanting to be released into sentences that convey how her illness worries him. Terrifies him, even. There are times when he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to control the next outburst, and that exacerbates the fear. What if her condition worsens? What if someday he has to commit her? How can someone with such a vexatious mental ailment raise children, as they are now doing? Dr. Crawford has said it’s a harmless condition, prescribing medication that will calm her, but James isn’t so sure. Under the right circumstances, one day she may snap and become dangerous to herself or others.

Perhaps even lethal.

Anna’s affliction—unforeseen and undiagnosed, yet clearly there—manifests when she is stressed, eats too much sugar, doesn’t get her way, or becomes overly emotional about something: Whispering to herself, throwing truculent fits, and most discomfiting of all, hallucinating. Generally her tantrums and odd proclivities are benign and disappear as fast as they occur, but there are moments when she frightens him. As if demon-possessed, her words and behaviors in that state are tumultuous and petrifying, sending chills down the spine of a grown man who has even experienced the horrors of war.

Her sickness has no logical reason or explanation for it, either. Like the time he found her kneeling at an extraordinary and bizarre—if not freakish—shrine in the bush, crying and talking to a tree that hung colorful beads and numerous corn husk dolls from its branches. At first he could only stare, seeing his wife wearing a crown of white goose feathers on her head and matching wings on her back. Never before had he seen such a thing. “What

on earth are you doing?” he had asked, grabbing her up from the ground and almost shaking her. She swore the tree held the souls of her mother and sister, and there she could visit them whenever she wanted. James, of course, tore the altar down, but no matter how many times he did, Anna only built it back up.

James wants to express his concerns, discuss things further with his wife, but she has already fallen asleep. Only the candlelight remains, giving off a warm glow in the room. He stares at their two shadows cast against the wall—the curve of her body on the left, his head and shoulders on the right—then looks at the space between them. It seems larger than normal, as if the distance is growing by the second. Rolling onto his side, he stares at the candle. It is low, and he watches it burn until the wick is no more.

Then the light extinguishes.



Anna

There are three of me. Three persons in one. A farmer’s wife, a wild woman, and something else that has no name . . .

As the devoted wife and mother, I scrub the wooden floors, polish the furniture until it shines, wash the clothes down at the river, knit quilts of different patterns and colors, and bake fresh bread and bickies for my family. Things that any wife and mother would do.

As the wild sheila, my free-spirited nature rules, and I become a nymph inhabiting the woods, a queen of the elves and fairies, a maiden in my secret garden. Often I wear no shoes and dance naked under the stars.

And there is another part of me, as well. A darker side. The part of me I hide. The part of me that, if I were to tell you about, you’d be afraid.



With work done the following afternoon, James rode his favorite black stallion named Ireland to the top of the hill overlooking Sugar Alexandria. Gazing down at the station, his eyes zeroed in on the livestock, the Danish-style farmhouse, the large barn, the three colossal windmills, and everything that surrounded the property. From where he stood, the parcel of land resembled a miniature model—a tiny gingerbread house with adjacent structures and animals that all appeared like mere toys. Such a contrast to the reality of what was actually involved in running the station. Once inside the

gates, everything was as large as life. And as heavy.

In many ways, the oil from his soul lubricated the wheels of life at the station, as if an unholy theft from his body poured into the land. Day in and day out, a continuous taking, giving nothing back but aches and pains and ridicule the minute he dreamed of something more. And now to add to the weight of his responsibilities, James was also a father to twin girls. He thought of that night his daughters were born, when he lay on the bed next to Anna, their babies sleeping between them. It reminded him of when his mother had given birth to his sister when he was a little boy, and how his father had lain beside his wife too, with their newborn between them. For a moment James felt as if he had traded places with his dad, and that his father's life was now his. It made him shudder. Regardless, whatever reservations he had about his marriage to Anna before, after the birth of his daughters, those misgivings were annulled.

Anna's voice belted out from the front porch—a high-pitched sound that faintly reached his ears—bringing him back to the present. It was time for dinner, and a welcome sign that he had made it through another day. He rode Ireland back to the barn and went inside to eat.

Back to her normal self, wearing her favorite homemade apron, Anna busily worked in the kitchen. Her lime green jadeite dishes were already set on the table, and as she completed the finishing touches to the dinner she had prepared, she spoke to her pet parrot on her shoulder.

James sat patiently waiting for her, bottle-feeding little Scarlet in his arms. He stared at his wife with candid eyes, bewildered over her transitional moods and what seemed like honest-to-God possessed behavior, influenced or controlled by something unknown. "We need to talk about last night," he said to her.

Anna took Scarlet from James and placed her in the bassinet next to Mabel. "Is this how we're gonna start dinner—you chastising me?"

"I'm not chastising you. I'm just . . . concerned, is all. Concerned for you and our girls."

"I'm all right, James. No different from the sheila you married."

He disagreed. "It seems to me these fits are getting worse. They trigger more easily, too, and when you have them, it's like you're losing your mind."

Anna flashed her dark blue eyes—the color of the bottom of the sea—on her worried husband. "I'm not insane, James. I just get too riled up sometimes, that's all."

"Insane!" Moby squawked, ruffling his feathers. "Bloody bogan!" The

two-year-old pet cockatoo, hot-tempered and feisty like his owner, adored Anna but had a dislike for James, often jumping on the kitchen table, puffing up his chest and calling him names.

Anna kissed her bright pink galah's beak and put him back in his cage.

"These are more than mere tantrums, love."

"It was just another spell," Anna insisted.

"Well these spells you have . . . something's not right."

"Sugar Bear, I'm sorry about last night; I really am. But there's nothing to worry about. Genevieve says all women get stressed from time to time."

Aware of his wife's imaginary friends, James went silent.

"She was rather talkative today. I asked her to stay for dinner but . . ."

"Stop it, Anna. Stop that rubbish right now," he said, setting stern eyes on her.

Anna's demeanor changed.

"She's not real, and you know it. You're a mother now, and those silly delusions need to stop."

In her moments of clarity, Anna knew the woman in the black Victorian dress and the voices she would hear were not real. "I imagined her again, didn't I," she said on the verge of tears. "But she always seems so real to me when she appears."

James got up and walked over to his wife, kissing her on the forehead and wrapping his strong arms around her, letting her know that everything would be all right.

"I remember the first time I saw her," Anna said, feeling safe and secure in her husband's firm embrace. "I was just a little girl, and Yarra had taken me outside to play in the yard. Genevieve appeared from behind a tree, and we played hide-and-seek. I thought she was my second nanny. Ever since then, she has always kept a watchful eye on me."

"What did Yarrajan say when you told her about this woman?"

"She had the elders from her village come and pray for me."

"Did it help?"

"No, I still saw her. Yarra said if I talk about her again, though, she'd take a switch to me, so I never spoke a word of it."

"Were you ever hit on the head, love? Maybe it's from an injury. After the war, I would see things sometimes too."

"No, I was never hit on the head."

James studied her face a moment, as if searching for a diagnosis in his wife. "Aside from last night, you've been doing grouse lately, Tin Tin. Let's

just keep taking it one day at a time, aye?” Kissing her on the forehead again, he went over to the bassinets to see his two Sleeping Beauties.

“Don’t wake them, James. I have a terrible time getting them back to sleep.”

Picking up little Mabel this time, James gently cradled his daughter in his arms. “They’re identical, yet I can easily tell them apart.”

Anna agreed. “From the day they were born, I could too.”

“Was it like that with your sister, love? Could people tell who was who?”

“Most times, no. We looked too much alike,” Anna said, taking the baby from him and putting her back in the bassinet. “But Yarra could always tell.”

“It’s that sixth sense of hers, aye?”

“Too right. I think Liam has it too. He’s always been a little special in that way,” Anna said, placing the food on the kitchen table.

James settled down to eat. “He was over by the family burial plot today.”

“Really? Why?”

“He likes to put flowers on the graves,” James said, digging into his food. “He even puts flowers on the one with no tombstone.”

Anna flashed her eyes up at him. “I thought we weren’t going to talk about that. Ever. That was our promise to each other, remember?”

“We’re not.” He paused, his expression shifting from relaxed to something more troublesome. “But maybe we should. It bothers me how we act like it never happened. It bothers my conscience, Anna.”

“It was a wolf, James. The Black Shuck.”

He stopped eating and stared at her. If only that were true, he thought. He would like to think it was just a wolf, to pretend along with his delusional wife, allowing the lines of reality to blur.

“Anyway, enough,” she said, pointing her fork at him. “I prepared a grand meal for you; let’s enjoy it in peace.”

But James wasn’t done with their conversation. “Hold on; we’re not finished yet.”

“What is it now, Sugar Bear?”

“A couple of times last night, you spoke as if you were your mother. You’ve done that before, too,” he said, recalling the occasions he had seen and heard her take on a different persona. “To be honest, it scares the bloody hell out of me.”

“Imagine that—li’l ol’ me scaring James Ragnar Shahan.”

“I’ve seen some things in my life, having been to war ’n all. But nothing like when you . . . change like that.”

Anna seemed disinterested, taking a bite of corn bread.

"You also mentioned the shadow people again." It always elevated James' fear of her disorder when she spoke of the enigmatic beings. "How long have you been seeing them, anyway?"

"Since I was a girl."

"Did your dad know?"

Anna didn't answer.

"Tin Tin, listen to me."

"I *am* listening," she said with irritation.

"Did your father know about these hallucinations?"

Anna nodded.

"And what did he say?"

"To ignore them."

James was thinking, trying to piece things together. "Are these shadow people also the voices that you hear?"

Anna found his question amusing. "No," she chuckled.

"Are you sure?"

"I think I would know the difference, James."

"Are they always just shadows or do they sometimes change?"

"Just that once."

James again recalled that mortal day from the past, about what had happened and what he had to do. The unspoken secret cast a pall on his mood. "So who do you think these shadowy creatures are?"

"I don't know who they are. I just see them sometimes," she replied, as if it were perfectly normal. "Don't you ever see things that are not there?"

"Flashbacks from the war, maybe. Now and again."

"Then why am I any different?"

"Because you haven't been to war, Anna," he said, putting his cutlery down, having lost his appetite.

"No. But my mother and sister were taken from me, and that's worse than war."

James stared at his wife with curiosity. There was such an innocence about her; yet at the same time, a darkness. He knew, deep down, that someday—maybe years from now—her hidden demons would let loose. God help him then, he thought. "Love . . ."

Anna looked up from her plate. "What."

"Your dad was right. When you see the shadow people again, ignore them. Pay them no mind."

“James,” she said, a seriousness in her eyes. “That’s what I’ve been trying to do my whole life.”



James

And so I go on pretending.
I pretend I am in love with my wife.
I pretend I enjoy the work at Sugar Alexandria.
I pretend Anna is sane . . .



When Anna May Shahan smiles, anyone looking upon her melts. Such a precious woman, they think. Batting eyelashes, round angelic face, lips turned up into a charismatic grin with an adorable gap between her front teeth. Yet underneath that cherub exterior is a woman with deep layers of complexity. Signs that our little Anna is not well. A sweet adult child with random emotional outbursts and perplexing mental issues, living with several false personalities that exist on the inside waiting to be introduced, if not rule. It is almost incomprehensible that a woman so small and harmless could become so ferocious, but she can . . . And she will. At Anna’s core there is a storm brewing, strong enough to level a town.

But there is another side to Anna, as well. Her face of normality, where she desires a loving family, a nice home, and a thriving sheep station. Once her housework is done for the day, she often inspects the farm, the stockmen, and even her own husband, making sure everyone is doing their job. And if anyone isn’t, they will experience firsthand the wrath of a tiny female Napoléon. She rules Sugar Alexandria like a diminutive tyrant carrying a loaded six-gun on each hip.

Beyond the boundaries of her empire, however, Anna can be quite different. Howbeit still feisty, she lacks the same autocrat confidence she wears like a garment at the station, appearing awkward and inept in the outside world. Nervous and fidgety, offended easily, she will curse in Danish if someone upsets her. James finds it rather endearing, seeing her vulnerability as the true Anna—soft and sweet inside the despot veneer.

There is no one quite like Anna May Shahan. Depending on her mood, she can be sweet as a cherry or a fractious bitter bane. James has learned this the hard way, knowing to always let her win.

Or else . . .

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