



# I

SHEFFIELD,  
23 DECEMBER 1978

*There they go, at the beginning of it all, their younger selves, walking through the dark, winter streets of Sheffield: Daniel Lawrence and Alison Connor. He's eighteen, she's sixteen, it's Saturday night and they're heading together to Kev Carter's Christmas party, and nothing much has been said since he met her from the bus, but each is achingly conscious of the other. Her hand in his feels too good to be only a hand, and his presence, by her side, makes her mouth feel dry, and her heart beat too quickly, too close to the skin. They walk in step with each other along the pavement, and there isn't far to go from the bus stop to Kev's house, so it's not long before a throb of music fills the silence between them, and he glances down, just as she looks up, and they smile, and he feels that pulse of pure longing he gets when Alison's eyes alight upon him, and she . . . well, she can't think when she's ever felt this happy.*

Kev's front door was wide open to the night, and light and music spilled out on to the weeds and cracked flags of the garden path. Kev was Daniel's friend, not Alison's – they were at different schools – and she hung back a little as he walked in, so that Daniel seemed to be pulling her into the room after him. She

enjoyed that feeling, of being led into the room by this boy, so that everyone could see she was his, he was hers. There was Blondie on the tape deck, 'Picture This', playing too loud so that the bass distorted, vibrated. Alison liked this one, wanted to shed her coat, get a drink, have a dance. But then almost at once Daniel let go of her hand to hail Kev across the room, shouting over the music, laughing at something that Kev shouted back. He nodded and said, 'All right?' to Rob Marsden, and nodded and smiled at Tracey Clarke, who grinned back knowingly. She was leaning on the wall, on her own, by the kitchen door, as if she was waiting for a bus. Fag in one hand, a can of Strongbow in the other, dirty blonde hair with Farrah Fawcett flicks, plum lipstick, and kohl-lined eyes that cut a cool, considering gaze at Alison. Tracey took a long drag on her cigarette and sent the smoke out sideways.

'You going out wi' him?' she said, tossing her head in Daniel's direction. Tracey, older and wiser, no longer a virgin schoolgirl, money in her purse and a boyfriend with a car. Alison didn't know this girl and she blushed – couldn't help herself – and said yes, she was. Daniel was just out of reach now, so Alison just stared hard at the back of his dark head and willed him to turn around. Tracey raised one eyebrow and smirked. Smoke hung in the air between them. Alison's shoes were killing her.

'You want to watch him,' Tracey said. 'He's in demand.' There was a beat of silence when Alison didn't reply, then Tracey shrugged and said, 'Drinks in there.'

She meant the kitchen behind her, and through the open door ahead Alison saw a great crush of people around a green Formica table, and a mess of bottles and crisps and plastic cups. She slid away from the vaguely malevolent attentions of Tracey and pushed her way in, thinking Daniel could've got her a drink. *Should've* got her a drink. But, look, he'd been commandeered

by all these people that he knew, and she didn't. Now Jilted John was on the mix tape, so suddenly people were singing but nobody was dancing, and behind Alison there were even more people pressing into the tiny room. She didn't recognise a soul, although there must be somebody she knew here, because the place was packed out. She edged through to the table of booze, aware of a strong smell of cigarettes and cider, and, suddenly, Old Spice.

'All right, Alison?'

She looked round and saw Stu Watson, all cockiness and swagger in his denim jacket with an upturned collar and Joe Strummer's scowling face on his T-shirt. Pound to a penny he couldn't name a single song by The Clash, but anyway she was glad to see a familiar face. Stu's quick, narrow eyes swept over her with bold appreciation.

'You look all right, anyway,' he said.

'Right, well, you look pissed, Stu.'

'Just got here?'

'Obviously,' she said, pointing at her coat. 'But you've been here a while by the look of you.'

'Early bird, me,' Stu said. 'What you drinking?'

'Nothing yet. Martini, I suppose.'

Stu grimaced. 'How can you drink that shit? It tastes like fucking medicine.'

Alison ignored him. She was too hot but she didn't know what to do with her coat in this unfamiliar house, so she let it drop a little way down her back and Stu's eyes wandered down to the newly exposed skin of her neck and throat. Alison looked behind her for Daniel and she could see him, still in the living room, not looking for her, but talking to another girl. Mandy Phillips. Alison knew her from the school bus. Tiny like a child, henna curls, pixie nose, tipping her face up towards Daniel's

and all bathed in light by his attention. His arms were folded and there was a space between him and Mandy, but from what Alison could see, his eyes were all over her. As Alison watched them, Mandy reached up and pulled Daniel by the shoulder towards her, cupped her sweet hand, said something into his ear. Daniel gave her his trademark smile: hesitant, a half-smile really. His hair was dark and longish, falling into his eyes, and Alison wanted to touch it.

Stu was looking in the same direction. ‘I’m Mandy, fly me,’ he said. ‘Fuck me, more like.’

‘Oh, piss off, Stu,’ Alison said. She spun away from him and lifted a bottle of Martini Rosso from the table, sloshed a generous measure into a cup and took a deep drink. He was right, it *was* kind of disgusting, bitter, but also very familiar, so she took another swig, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, ditched the cup on the table and took her coat off, slinging it on to a chair. She was wearing Wranglers that she’d worn in a hot bath to shrink them down to a second skin, and a new shirt that looked good, looked bloody great; she should know, she’d spent long enough staring at herself in the bedroom mirror. It was white, looked and felt like slippery satin, and she’d opened one more button since leaving home. Stu couldn’t take his eyes off her but she didn’t even glance at him as she took back the Martini, had another swig and edged her way through the bodies, out of the kitchen.

Alison was talking to Stu Watson, a fucking wily ferret, a creep with hungry eyes, arms like wandering tentacles. Daniel could see them both in the kitchen, and he was stuck here with Mandy Phillips, whose own manipulative eyes were filling with tears as she told him Kev Carter had finished with her, tonight, at his own party, the bastard. This was what happened to Daniel.

Girls cleaved to him and spilled their souls. He didn't have to encourage them; they just sensed something about him, even he didn't know what it was, and they talked and talked. Only . . . Alison Connor didn't. He'd asked her to go out with him and she'd said yes, but in the day or two since then she'd hardly spoken to him in the brief times they'd been together, and yet he wanted her by his side, knew it was right, knew there was something about her. But she'd already said more in the kitchen to Stu sodding Watson than she ever had to him. Meanwhile Mandy was on the second telling of the same sad story and he knew it was all leading to a come-on, a why-not, a kiss and a promise. Kev was busy clowning around, catching his eye, giving him the thumbs up, as if Daniel might need his cast-offs. Life was just a big game to Kev Carter; of course he'd dumped Mandy tonight – he liked a bit of drama, and where was the fun in knowing whose knickers you'd be getting into later?

Now 'Night Fever' was blasting out through the speakers and Mandy was starting to move her shoulders in time to the music. There was a line of girls in the middle of the room working their Travolta moves, a line of boys watching them and arsing around, trying to copy. Mandy tugged on Daniel's shoulder and he leaned into her so she could cup a small hand round his ear.

'Do you wanna dance?' she whispered, her breath warm.

He didn't hear, pulled back and smiled at her. 'What?' he said.

'Do you wanna . . . ?' She paused and smiled. 'Y'know . . . dance?' She cocked her head and said 'dance' in a way that suggested much, much more. No tears now. Kev was ancient history.

'No,' Daniel said, and stepped back. He looked towards the

kitchen for Alison, but he couldn't see her now, or Stu. He should've stayed with her, taken her coat, fetched her a drink, and he cursed himself for being drawn into Mandy's crisis.

'What?' Mandy said, loud enough now to be heard over the music without breathing in his ear.

Daniel was distracted by Alison's absence and he cast his eyes round the room, but at the same time he said, 'No, Mandy, course I don't want to bloody dance with you.' He was panicking, wondering if Alison was even still here, at the party. She might have bolted. He wished he knew her better, knew how her mind worked.

'You're a bastard, Daniel Lawrence,' Mandy shouted, and she slapped him across the cheek, ineffectually because she was drunk, but still, her nails grazed his skin.

'Fuck's sake, Mandy,' he said, looking down at her in disbelief.

She burst into easy, meaningless tears and turned away, looking for another shoulder, and Daniel touched his cheek where it stung. Christ Almighty. And he hadn't even had a beer yet. Some fucking party. He moved towards the kitchen and, as he did, the Bee Gees came to a brutal halt because Kev ripped the tape out of the deck and put another one in, so suddenly the room filled with the insistent drum and bass opening of 'Pump It Up', and Daniel was rooted to the floor, waiting reverentially for Elvis Costello's voice to weave its way into his head.

And oh God, Alison, there she was. She was dancing, alone, in the crowd. She'd kicked off her shoes so she was barefoot, and she was dancing with her eyes closed, and she didn't move her feet at all, although the rest of her body was caught up in the music, and her arms made wild, wonderful shapes above her head. She danced like nobody else. She danced in a way that the others tried to copy, but each time they almost got it she

changed, shifted, did something different, but her feet didn't leave the floor. Daniel watched her, completely transfixed. He'd never seen anything so beautiful, so uninhibited, so fucking sexy, in all his life.



## 2

EDINBURGH,  
10 OCTOBER 2012

You could always spot a journalist at a gig. Standing at the back, no drink, an air of having seen and heard it all before, and straight off out of it the moment the set ended. Dan Lawrence was one of them, and there he was again, at the Queen's Hall, watching Bonnie 'Prince' Billy singing spry and catchy songs about the death of love. Dan never sat if he could stand. You should never sit at a gig; it wasn't sodding theatre, it wasn't cinema, it was music. Once, when he first came to Edinburgh, he'd come to the Queen's Hall on a free ticket to see Prefab Sprout and found he was marooned up on the balcony in a numbered seat, but he'd stood up anyway, looking straight down at the heads of the band, trying to read their set list, which was directly below him, taped to the stage. Tonight, though, he was in his favourite spot, leaning against the wall, as close to the exit as possible. Dan liked Billy – a grizzled alt-country geezer from Louisville – but you wouldn't know it from his expressionless face; he wasn't even taking notes, just absorbing precisely those elements of the set that would make good copy, and thinking about what else he could do with the material, what else he could turn it into, in exchange for money.

Afterwards, he walked out of the venue into Clerk Street, without looking for familiar faces or a sniff of a pint, and set off for home. Katelin would be in bed already, sleeping with deep and wild abandon, flat on her back, her arms flung over her head like a child. They often kept different hours, and when he slid into bed alongside her, her steady breathing sent him to sleep like a gentle metronome, and she rarely even stirred: she slept the sleep of the righteous.

He was entirely the wrong side of Edinburgh here, and it was already half past eleven, but there was something about this city that compelled him to walk through it, not take a bus or flag down a cab. He considered it the great architectural love of his life, austere and stately, but increasingly hip. It felt ancient and modern at one and the same time. Compared to Sheffield – the Sheffield he'd left behind in the early eighties, anyway – it was fucking Xanadu. Admittedly, Katelin had been the lure at the time, and without her the city might have seemed considerably less appealing, but still . . . Dan had recognised home when he saw it, and home it had remained.

He was crossing George IV Bridge now, head down, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his leather jacket, earphones in, iPod on shuffle, so he nearly died of shock when Duncan Lomax grabbed him by the shoulder, forcefully, like a policeman with an arrest warrant.

'Jesus, Duncan!' Dan said. He pulled the buds out of his ears. 'Are you trying to bloody kill me?'

Duncan laughed and punched Dan between the shoulder blades. 'Been following you for half a mile, man, catching you up. You running away from somebody?'

'Getting home sharpish, that's my only goal.'

'You been at Bonny Billy?'

'Yeah, you too?'

‘Aye, last-minute freebie. Jesus, he can be a miserable bastard, can’t he?’

‘Can’t we all?’

‘Aye, right enough. Look . . .’ Duncan shucked his army-issue rucksack off his shoulder and delved inside, pulling out a CD, no cover, no image, just a plastic case and a handwritten track list. Dan smiled.

‘What you got there?’ he said. ‘The next big thing? Again?’

‘Willie Dundas, an East Neuk fisherman, for Christ’s sake, plays the guitar like Rory Gallagher, sings like John Martyn.’

‘C’mon!’

‘Not a word of a lie. Have a listen.’

He handed Dan the CD. Duncan had a finely tuned ear for quirky, original, mind-expanding talent, and he encountered a lot of it in his failing record shop in Jeffrey Street: music nerds, too introverted to sing their own praises, writing lyrics and scores in their bedrooms at home, destined never to be heard were it not for Duncan. He was forever buttonholing Dan like this, not that Dan minded, because what was life if not a search for the one perfect album that was missing from their collections, recorded by the one genius nobody else had discovered? They dropped into step, Dan adopting Duncan’s more leisurely pace, walking alongside each other through the pleasant, mid-week, late-night quiet of Edinburgh’s Old Town.

‘Fancy a single malt?’ Duncan said.

‘You seen the time?’

‘Ah, don’t be like that, you know fine well there’s no such thing as after hours when you’re with Duncan Lomax.’ Dan laughed. Duncan nudged him. ‘A wee dram,’ he said, hamming up his solid-gold Edinburgh burr. ‘Och, where’s the harm?’

There was no harm, Dan decided, no harm at all, and they

changed course for Niddry Street where they ducked into the twilight zone of Whistle Binkies, open till 3 a.m., live music every night, and properly bouncing at just gone midnight when they walked through the door.

He'd got home at half past two in the morning and let himself into the still, silent front hall with the exaggerated caution of the mildly drunk, but he'd still woken up McCulloch, the doughty little Jack Russell, who'd then left his basket with the resigned air of an elderly retainer and followed Dan all the way to his office in the eaves, at the top of the house. It was an awkward room really, with sloping ceilings and only one small window, but it faced west, so on a cloudless evening it poured a gentle stream of sunshine on to the dark wooden floorboards. The room contained a chipped and scarred industrial desk and an old brass anglepoise lamp from the offices of an Edinburgh mill; an original Eames chair, black leather, metal frame; a turntable, a CD player and an iPod dock; three specially built steel cabinets for LPs and singles, and a fourth for CDs. He'd kept his cassette tapes too, hundreds of them, but they were in plastic crates in the basement. One wall was given over to books, another to a vast world map, and a third was plastered with memories, every one of which had a hold on Dan's heart. A signed black and white shot of himself with Siouxsie Sioux after a gig in Manchester in 1984. An official framed photograph of the Sheffield Wednesday League Cup winning team of 1991. A publicity poster for Echo and the Bunnymen's *Evergreen* album tour of the States – the tour he'd been on with them, like, *really* with them, researching and writing their authorised story. Photos of Alex, felt-tip and crayon pictures by Alex, and a densely illustrated poem by Alex, aged eight, for Father's Day:

*He plays guitar and drives our car and makes me  
chips for tea.  
He plays football, he's good in goal and his favourite  
person's ME!*

Photos of Katelin, holding Alex, pushing him on a swing, holding his feet while he stood on his head. A photo of the three of them wide-eyed with happiness the night Alex got his stellar Highers results. And there in the centre of them all, a snap of Dan and Katelin, looking like children, standing against a backdrop of bougainvillea in a shady alley in Cartagena, smiling not at the camera but at each other, like two people with a secret joke. They'd hardly known each other then. Dan couldn't remember who took it.

From behind his desk, he let his eyes roam over his past. It told the story of his life, that wall; it kept him steady in this house in Stockbridge, with its long back garden, its shed for the bikes, its front door painted Sheffield Wednesday blue. He and Katelin had been itinerants at first: moved five times in as many years. Then he'd written a brilliantly precocious and obsessive history of the *NME* and got a half-decent advance, the like of which didn't happen any more in music publishing, and suddenly gone were the days of dossing, the mattresses on the floor, the mildew on the ceiling, the naked light bulbs, the kilims nailed to their bedroom windows creating a permanent, seedy gloaming. God, though, those days were something else. She was studying Spanish at the university, and Dan spent his nights at gigs and his days writing unsolicited music reviews for the *Scotsman*. They'd lived on Katelin's grant and the occasional tenner that Dan made for his writing. They'd met in Colombia, a bar in Bogotá. Katelin was plucky, an intrepid, red-haired, sturdy girl from Coleraine, with skin as pale as milk, even

after two months travelling in South America. She spoke fluent Spanish, drank like a navy, and sang raunchy Irish ballads – folk filth, she called it – when she was hammered. For the first time since arriving in the country, Dan had started having a good time.

They stuck together. She'd gone back to university to finish her degree in the September, and Dan had called on his folks in Sheffield to fill them in on his future, then hitched and walked, with a rucksack and his guitar, all the long way to Edinburgh. By the time he knocked on the door of Katelin's Marchmont Road flat, he had holes in his trainers, blisters on the soles of his feet, and he hadn't eaten for a day and a half. He waited on the doorstep, light-headed, half-starved, and for the few minutes it took her to answer, he considered the possibility that she'd be horrified to see him, or – worse – that she didn't really exist. But then the door opened and Katelin was there, all the flesh and blood of her, assembled exactly as Dan remembered. She'd smiled and said, 'You took your feckin' time,' and that was that.

Long time ago now: long, long time. Dan sat at his desk, up in the eyrie, just a few minutes before 3 a.m., and allowed whisky-fuelled thoughts to cascade through his mind about the passing of time and its heedless, terrible speed. It was a shortcut to melancholy, but in the nick of time he remembered Willie Dundas, and he pulled the disc out of his jacket pocket and slid it into the CD player so that immediately his office was flooded with a guitar intro that made Dan smile: first, a single chord that hung in the air like a promise, then a quick-fingered bluesy riff and then Willie's voice, low, mellow, impressionistic, laying down his lyrics with careless flair, as if he might be drunk, or barely had the energy to articulate them. It was a kind of genius,

but Dan had been here before with Duncan's finds; so full of artistic integrity that you couldn't wrinkle them out of their fishing smacks, or their bedrooms, or their garden sheds. Dan let the music roll while he booted up the Mac for a quick, dutiful surf across Twitter, and he thought about Willie Dundas, singing on his herring boat in the North Sea, and wondered if he could be persuaded to sing in front of a room full of strangers at a place like Whistle Binkies.

Twitter bloomed bright blue on the screen in front of him, and a stream of tweets appeared in the feed, in all their self-referential glory. Twenty-eight notifications from people to whom Dan was barely connected. Seven direct messages from people he actually knew, but nothing that had to be dealt with at 3 a.m. You had to be careful not to appear unhinged, leaving replies in the small hours, under the influence of Laphroaig. He scrolled idly through the morass, with that glazed disengagement that Twitter always induced in him, and he was about to shut down and go to bed, when a new notification pulsed on to the screen. Kev Carter. Always worth reading Kev's messages, whatever the time of day or night. Dan leaned in closer to the screen, then immediately retreated, as if he'd been slapped.

Ey up @DanLawrenceMusic remember Alison Connor?  
Look what's she's up to . . . only bloody famous!  
@CarterK9  
@AliConnorWriter

Alison Connor. Jesus. Dan stared at her image.

Alison Connor.

Alison Connor.

@AliConnorWriter.

It was the first time he'd laid eyes on her for, what, thirty

years? God Almighty. She looked the same: older, obviously, but the same. He clicked on her name, and the screen changed to her page, then he clicked on her picture, and it filled the screen. His mouth went dry, and this astonished him, because he'd made himself get over Alison Connor three decades ago. But she looked so lovely still, so intelligent, so vulnerable somehow. God Almighty. He studied her face. Yeah; she looked fucking incredible. He clicked back to her profile page:

## Ali Connor

@AliConnorWriter

Writing my books, playing my songs, counting my blessings.

📍 Adelaide, SA

📅 Joined November 2011

Tweets  
**165**

Following  
**180**

Followers  
**67.2K**

Dan sat back in his chair, folded his arms, and contemplated the world he lived in: the same world as Alison Connor, who unbeknown to him had moved to South Australia and forged a career as a novelist. A bestselling novelist, if those stats were anything to go by.

‘Sweet Jesus, Dan, what do you need to do on your laptop at this hour?’

Katelin had left their bed, walked upstairs, opened the door and was now leaning on the frame watching him, evidently disgruntled, and he hadn't heard a thing. He felt obscurely guilty, then immediately defensive.

‘All sorts,’ he said. ‘You might be sleeping but half the world's awake.’

‘I'm not sleeping, Dan. Your music filtered into my dreams.’

‘Ah, sorry, did it wake you?’



She shrugged, relenting slightly. ‘Well, no, I needed the loo, but then once I was awake, I could hear it through the floor.’ She ran a hand through her hair and it stuck out at all angles, so that she looked comical standing there, slightly grumpy, in tartan pyjamas.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Sorry. Willie Dundas, fisherman from the East Neuk.’

‘Great. Well, can you switch him off and come to bed?’

‘You got it.’ He looked at her and smiled, but he didn’t switch off his Mac. ‘Just doing some notes on Billy.’ Jesus, he thought. Why am I lying?

She rolled her eyes. ‘Now? Really? Can it not wait?’

‘I promise I’ll be with you in five.’

‘God, McCulloch’s up here too.’

‘He followed me. I’ll put him back when I come down.’

‘In five.’

‘Yep.’

She looked at him as though he was a lost cause, and turned away, padding barefoot back downstairs. He really must go; there were no notes to be written on Billy. There was nothing to keep him up here, and he was dead beat. But he hung back anyway, considered @AliConnorWriter for a while, for just one more minute – two minutes – three minutes. She was hard to leave, so soon after finding her. For almost ten minutes, in the end, he looked at her face, scrolled through her tweets, then googled her name and saw a whole world of information on the rise and rise of Ali Connor. Then he thought: Fuck it. He went back to her Twitter profile, clicked on the ‘Follow’ icon, snapped the lid of his laptop shut, silenced Willie Dundas, and went downstairs with McCulloch.

### 3

ADELAIDE,  
12 OCTOBER 2012

Alison Connor's mum's friend was a Ten Pound Pom called Sheila; with that name, she used to say, she'd fitted right in in Australia. She'd sailed to Adelaide from Southampton in 1967 on one of those dirt-cheap assisted passages, following the promise of a new life in Elizabeth and a job at the Holden car plant, and there, she'd met and married Calvin Schumer, an engineer, a real Australian, born and bred in Adelaide to German parents and as fine and strapping a man as Sheila had ever laid eyes on. At weekends, he'd wooed her on long trips north out of town to the desert, shooting big red roos to feed to his dogs, and snatching up snakes from the red earth, cracking them to death on a rock, like a whip.

All this was in her letters, which for a while after she emigrated came about once a month, a conscientious and lyrical correspondence that really got on Catherine's wick. She'd known Sheila Baillie when they were girls in the same street, but then the Baillie family moved to Liverpool, and Catherine only saw Sheila once more, at her own wedding to Geoff Connor, but Sheila hung on to the friendship, never quite grasping either the extent of Catherine's indifference, or her relationship with the bottle, so she didn't know that her letters from South Australia, chock

full of verve and immigrant zeal, only shovelled further misery and bitterness into Catherine's soul by flaunting a vivid picture of the world, so different to her own drab orbit.

There was nothing drab about Sheila's letters, oh no. She detailed her adventures in a looping, gregarious hand and peppered the words and phrases with exclamation marks, as if the tropical climate and lethal spiders and vast horizons weren't exotic and surprising enough; as if she had to flag them up for her audience in case they missed the best bits. Her traveller's tales were read aloud to little Alison when the pale-blue, tissue-thin airmail letters arrived addressed to Catherine. If Catherine had ever written back to Sheila, doubtless the tales of life down under would've continued, but Alison's mum was a drinker, not a reader or a writer. She'd only paid any attention to the first letter, and it had made her very cross; Alison didn't know why. After that, she'd pick them up from the mat and flap them disparagingly, like used Kleenex, and say sour things such as, 'Heat and dust and bloody spiders. Does she think we're interested?' Then she'd drop the unopened envelope in the kitchen bin and later, when the coast was clear, Alison's brother Peter – older than her by six years – would fish it out from among the tea leaves and peelings, slice a knife through the seal with a piratical flourish, and hold 'story time' in his bedroom, reading the letter aloud to his sister, both cross-legged on his bed.

Sheila's letters filled Alison with a kind of courage and resolve. She kept them as totems, slipping each new one between the base of her bed and the mattress, and when the letters stopped coming, when Sheila stopped writing to Catherine, Alison felt bereft. It never occurred to her that she could have written back herself; well, she was so young, she didn't have the know-how or the confidence or the money for a stamp, and she was growing up with Catherine for a mother. But she treasured the letters,

read and reread them until all the best parts were memorised, so that even when Catherine found the stash one day and put them on the fire to punish her for treachery and deceit, Alison still had them in her mind and could recite whole paragraphs, reverentially, as if they were sonnets or psalms.

There are cockatoos in the trees here, white with yellow crests, and noisy devils! They eat the plums from our garden and stare at us with bold, black eyes. Koalas, sweet as pie, curl up in the boughs of giant gums, endlessly sleeping, like old men after Sunday dinner. The spiders are as big as a man's hand, spread out flat. Imagine that! But they're not the ones to worry about – the killers are the redbacks, much, much smaller, but lethal when rattled. Calvin says always look in the mailbox before putting your hand in!

As for the heat! The grass in our back yard steams in the mornings as the sun comes up and sometimes the road starts to melt! We grow flowers, though. Poinciana do well, but so do petunias and humble pansies, if they get plenty to drink. But the dust puffs up round my feet when I'm gardening and even though the desert's a long drive away, somehow it looms, hot and red, and I never forget it's there.

This is a wonderful country, Catherine, a lucky country, and you'll know what I mean when you come to visit. Do come!

Those words lived with Alison, once she'd heard Peter read them. *And you'll know what I mean when you come to visit.* Did this person, Sheila, expect them? Might Alison and Peter be given the chance to grow up in a faraway place called Elizabeth,

instead of Attercliffe? Peter didn't know, and their mother couldn't be asked: not this, nor anything else. Catherine Connor had no patience for questions. They reminded her of her responsibilities.

So these memories, all of them, the pleasure and the pain, bloomed in Ali Connor's mind every time a journalist, interviewing her about her new success, asked what had brought her to Adelaide. The climate, she'd say. The Adelaide Hills, the gracious city, the infinite ocean, the food, the rainbow-coloured parrots, the luminous sun-flooded early mornings, the inky nights, the space to write. And all these things were reasons she'd stayed, but none of them were why she'd come. She'd always kept those to herself, hadn't told her husband, hadn't even told Cass Delaney, who thought she knew every secret skeleton in Ali's closet. They were sitting together in a café in North Adelaide, reunited after Cass's working week in Sydney, and she'd heard Ali three times today already, twice on the telly on *News Breakfast* and *Sunrise*, and once on the radio, and soon Ali'd be back at the ABC studios for a pre-record with the BBC. Cass was buzzing from it all, getting a huge vicarious kick from her friend's moment under the media gaze – but why, she wanted to know, did Ali always sound so bloody cagey?

'All those platitudes!' Cass said now. 'Just quit the crap about the scenery, it makes you sound pretentious.'

'Don't listen then,' Ali said. 'I'd prefer it if you didn't anyway, to be honest. It makes me anxious.'

'You sound all uptight, like you don't wanna be there. You're an Aussie, girl! Behave like one, hang loose, spill the beans. Tell 'em about how you picked up Michael in Spain, and he followed you for weeks, like a sad puppy, before you caved in and crossed the globe with him.'

Ali laughed, then sipped her coffee. ‘Honestly, Cass, I’m just being myself, and if it was up to me, I’d say no to all this publicity. I’m only doing it for that nice girl Jade at the publishers. She’s making all this effort, I feel I have to turn up.’

‘Oh, c’mon, you gotta bask in the spotlight while it’s still on you.’

‘I wish you could do it for me instead. You’d be so much better at it.’

‘I’ve never been known to shrink from attention, this is true.’

‘I just like sitting alone at a desk, making up stories and not having to get dressed or wash my hair if I don’t feel like it.’

‘You gotta wise up,’ Cass said. ‘You’re famous now, whether you like it or not, and if you don’t start coming over as a warm human being with a story to tell, people might take against you. You don’t want the tide to turn.’

‘Rubbish. I’m not famous at all,’ Ali said. She looked about her, at all the oblivious people around them, eating and talking and ordering food. ‘See? Nobody cares. My *book*’s quite well known, but I bet half the people who’ve read it couldn’t name the author, and thank God for that.’ She leaned forwards, elbows on the table, resting her chin in two cupped hands. ‘So, how was your week?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, so-so,’ Cass said. ‘Mad busy, as usual. Wrote a big piece for the magazine, “Greed as the new economic orthodoxy”, if you’re interested.’

Ali shook her head. ‘Nah, not really.’

Cass laughed, and winked at her. ‘Hey, are you coming to Sydney any time soon? I’ve got a new squeeze, Chinese-Australian guy, a bit short for me, but they’re all tall enough when they’re lying down.’

‘Oooh, what’s his name?’

Cass pretended to think for a while. ‘No,’ she said. ‘It escapes me.’

Ali laughed and said, ‘Good-looking, though?’

‘Well, he wouldn’t set Sydney Harbour on fire, but he’s quite cute. Come and see for yourself, but come soon before he gets the flick.’

‘Well, I might just do that. My editor’s on at me for a date, she wants me to meet her boss and talk next book.’

‘And *is* there a next book yet?’

‘Nope.’

‘Still no ideas?’

‘Plenty, but none that relate to *Tell the Story, Sing the Song*.’

‘Ah, gotcha, they want more of the same?’

‘Precisely. I haven’t yet decided whether I’m willing to bend enough to keep them happy.’

‘You’ve written the new *Thorn Birds*, babe, you can do what you like. You not eating your cake?’

She shook her head. ‘I told you I didn’t want one. Coffee’s all I wanted.’

‘C’mon! We don’t want to hear your belly rumbling on the radio.’

Ali shook her head, then checked the time on her phone. ‘Look, I’m going to dash home before that interview,’ she said.

‘What? Why?’ Cass was supposed to be driving her up there. That was the plan.

‘I just want to, not sure why.’ Ali stood up and drained her coffee. ‘I have time: I’m not due at Collinswood for another forty-five minutes. I’ll drive myself there from home, don’t worry.’

‘You’ll be late.’

‘I won’t!’

‘Seriously, Ali, don’t be late for the BBC. They’re your people, after all.’

Ali laughed. ‘Cass, you talk such bullshit. Not five minutes ago you told me I was an Aussie.’ She slung a small black leather rucksack over her shoulder and pushed her hair away from her eyes, tucking a few strands behind her ears. Her lovely face was pale, Cass thought, eyes a little strained, and perhaps she was a little too thin.

‘Thank God it’s radio,’ Ali said, as if she could read her mind. ‘At least it doesn’t matter what I look like.’

‘Well, you look ravishing as usual,’ Cass said. ‘But a bit of lippy wouldn’t hurt, in case there are autograph hunters?’

‘Very funny,’ Ali said, and she blew a kiss and swung away.

Cass watched her go. In a desert island situation, if it came down to a choice between Ali Connor or a young Paul Newman, she’d have to regretfully push Paul back into the sea, because she couldn’t do without Ali, no way. Cass had heaps of friends in Sydney, women and men, and she loved the buzz of the city’s nightlife, but very often by Thursday or Friday she would fly home to her Adelaide roots, and Ali was top of the list of reasons why. She saw her friend thread her way through the busy café, open the door on to the street, step outside into the sunshine where she paused to put on her sunnies, then she was off.

‘I’m right behind you, sweetheart,’ Cass said, watching her go.

It was only just over a kilometre from Jeffcott Street to her house, but still, Ali walked briskly, knowing she was probably pushing her luck to get home and then across to Collinswood in time for the interview. She could have – should have – stayed put with Cass, had a second coffee, then be driven in her smooth, silent, air-conditioned company Merc up to the ABC studios, to arrive serenely on time. But she’d faced three presenters today already, and a whole battery of personal questions, and she had



an overpowering desire to shut the door on the world for a while, shut it even on Cass. She half walked, half ran, head down, full of purpose, through the streets of North Adelaide, and by the time she reached the house, her face and throat, and her bare arms, were covered in a fine layer of sweat, and she experienced a swell of pure relief as she put her key in the front door and opened it. Once inside, she closed it again and stood for a few moments on the burnished parquet floor of the hallway, breathing in and out, in and out, letting the house calm her, absorb and dissipate her tensions, hold her steady between its solid colonial walls.

This house was very fine: a stately bluestone mansion, Michael's inheritance. They were already husband and wife when he first brought her here to meet his family, but even so she had been promptly – and somewhat coldly – billeted by his mother in one of the spare bedrooms, and only after a full twelve months of married life did she permit them to openly share a room, and a double bed. Margaret McCormack had been a force of nature, an impossible, indomitable, high-handed martinet of a woman who believed her son had been hoodwinked by Ali, because after all, what did the girl have to offer? Margaret saw no cachet in the English accent, was unmoved by Ali's obvious beauty, and was maddened almost beyond endurance that the young woman quickly found herself a job behind a bar in a pub on Hutt Street. But the young couple toughed it out, and Michael told Ali that his mother would love her in the end, if they just played by her rules when they were in the house. Anyway, he said, this house was a treasure: why pay rent somewhere inferior, when they had no money as it was? So, for a year, Michael – an adult, a medic, a married man – crept across the expansive Turkish rug on the first-floor landing to find Ali, awake in her chastely single bed, waiting for him. Hard to

imagine, if you'd never met Margaret, that such a situation could go unchallenged, but they perfected the art of silent sex, and Margaret – who must have known what was going on, because only a fool could *not* have known, and she was no fool – seemed satisfied that her supremacy remained undiminished. A year after she arrived, to the very day, Ali had gone upstairs to find the single bed stripped of linen, and her belongings – clothes, toiletries, cosmetics – gone. Margaret, behind her on the landing, had said, 'Your things are in Michael's room. I had Beatriz move them while you were out. No need to thank her, she's more than adequately paid. You may, however, thank me.'

Now, of course, Margaret was long gone, but Beatriz was still here and she was sitting at the counter shelling peas when Ali walked into the kitchen. The old lady had her long grey hair piled into its habitual turban, and she wore a quaint, outdated housecoat, bright florals, gold buttons, to keep her clothes clean. Her fingers worked expertly at the pods and her broad, open face creased into an affectionate smile when she saw Ali.

'Ali, my girl,' she said. She held out an unpodded shell, and Ali took it, cracked it open, and tipped the row of peas into her mouth. Beatriz looked at her with love.

'I'm not here for long,' Ali said through the peas. 'I have to go up to Collinswood, to the studios.'

Beatriz shook her head sadly. She had such expressive eyes, thought Ali; they could communicate every emotion: joy, desire, sorrow, disdain, anger, amusement. Right now, they showed only pity.

'Busy, busy, busy,' she said. 'Always busy, always running somewhere, never time to sit with me and shell the peas.' Her Portuguese accent was undiminished even after nearly sixty years in Adelaide, but it was always only a question of tuning in, like learning to love a different kind of music.

She bent her head, getting back to the task in hand, and Ali watched her for a few moments, then said, ‘How’s your hip today, Beatriz?’

Beatriz looked up again and said, ‘No better, no worse.’

‘Don’t sit for too long,’ Ali said. ‘Have a walk, keep it moving. Have a dip, be a devil.’

Beatriz threw back her head and laughed, and said, ‘You know how I hate getting myself wet.’

‘It’s very therapeutic,’ Ali said. ‘And there’s a pool out there that nobody seems to use any more.’ She took a glass tumbler from the cupboard and poured water into it from the bottle they kept in the fridge. It was shockingly cold, and Ali felt a stab of pain at her temples, and in her teeth. Beatriz was involved with the peas again, and Ali wandered out of the open back door into the garden, where the irrigation system had turned on and was sprinkling the lawn. A small flock of rainbow lorikeets were dancing in the fine arc of drops, and when Ali kicked off her sandals and joined them on the damp grass, they eyed her beadily, and stood their ground. She walked across the lawn to the swimming pool – a narrowish rectangle of aquamarine, starting against the old stone pathway that surrounded it – hitched up her skirt, and sat down on the very edge, so that her feet and calves were submerged, almost up to the knees. Then she lay down, and let the warmth of the stone and the damp cool of the grass support her, while the water lapped, barely perceptibly, around her legs. She closed her eyes against the too-blue sky, and listened to the squawking chatter of the birds and the thrum of water from the sprinkler, and allowed her thoughts to float loose and free; then a shadow fell across her face and she heard Stella’s voice.

‘Mum, your skirt’s soaked.’

Ali opened her eyes. Stella, impassively beautiful, stared down

at her. She was seventeen, and she had Ali's dark brown hair, Ali's hazel eyes, Ali's nose and mouth and chin: but her attitude was all her own.

'What the hell are you doing anyway? You look so weird.'

Ali closed her eyes again. 'Cooling down, chilling out,' she said, and then, after a pause, 'Don't pass remarks, Stella.'

The girl dropped down next to her and crossed her legs, and Ali opened one eye to take a sideways look at her younger daughter. She was chewing the nail of her left thumb and staring at the pool water.

'You good?' Ali said.

Stella shrugged.

'What?' Ali pushed herself back up into a sitting position and noticed as she did so that Stella was right, her skirt *was* soaked. 'Stell, what's up?'

From the house, Beatriz called, 'Ali, Cass's here with her car, says she's driving you to Collinswood,' and Stella looked at Ali, and tutted and rolled her eyes.

'Cass can wait,' Ali said to Stella. 'She wasn't supposed to come here anyway.'

'Whatever,' Stella said. She turned away with a sort of gloomy fatalism. 'Just go.'

'Stella,' Ali said. 'What's wrong, darling?'

Then Cass's voice came, loud and clear, through the open back doors. 'Ali Connor, your time is now,' she shouted, completely misjudging the mood out there in the blissful perfection of the McCormack garden.

'Zip it, Cass,' Ali shouted.

'Don't try to be cool, Mum,' Stella said with that flat, teen-aged disdain.

'I'm not trying to be cool. I'm just pissed off with Cass. What's going on, Stella?'

‘Coo-ee, Stella babe,’ Cass called, waving wildly from across the garden, but Stella barely glanced at her.

‘Seriously, Mum, just go.’

‘Look, OK, I better had, but I’ll catch you, right? Later, or in the morning? I have to get to the studios again, it’s—’

‘—your book, I know, I know, off you go.’ Stella spoke with that toneless, disillusioned voice she used to communicate infinite ennui, and Ali knew there was no talking to her anyway now this mood had descended, so she left her by the pool, staring malevolently at the ripples in the water.

‘Uh-oh, trouble?’ Cass said as they left the house.

‘It’ll pass,’ said Ali.

The book. The book. A great big readable tome, 150,000 words, straight into paperback, and as far as Ali was concerned no better and no worse than her previous three novels, which had been modestly well received in Australia but were unheard of anywhere else. But *Tell the Story, Sing the Song* was officially a phenomenon. A quiet start after publication, then a speedy, influential burst of online reviews, a flood of sales, book club fever, and a scramble by the publisher to get the next print run out, then a phone call to her agent in early October from Baz Luhrmann’s office: name the price for the rights, they said; Baz wants this, Nicole’s on board, so’s Hugh. Thousands of books were selling each week around the world, and Ali’s paltry advance had earned out in record time. For the first time in her life she was making money from her writing, and Jenni Murray, in an interview for *Woman’s Hour* on BBC Radio 4, was asking her how this felt.

‘Unreal,’ Ali said, headphones on, alone at the green baize desk in an ABC recording suite. Through the glass wall she was looking directly at Cass who’d come into the studios with her and was sitting at the panel, reapplying her make-up and listening

in. A young studio manager chewed gum and looked thoroughly disengaged, but she kept a weather eye on the levels, and the mics.

‘Unreal, and slightly obscene,’ Ali added.

‘Obscene?’ Jenni Murray said. ‘That’s an unusual choice of word.’

‘Well, I find myself in an unusual situation,’ Ali said. She could feel it happening again; feel the drawbridge coming up. And the sound of her own voice in this situation stunned her. Her accent was considered very English, comically so, among her family and friends in Adelaide, but now she heard the broadcaster’s rich, modulated, faintly plummy tones and her own voice bore no comparison. It lacked substance, she thought: a thin, hybrid drawl. On her side of the window, Cass made sweeping gestures with her hands, urging her to expand. Ali nodded. *Yeah, yeah, hang loose.*

‘Does the money make you feel uncomfortable?’

‘It makes me think,’ Ali said, ‘about the arbitrary nature of success.’

‘So you didn’t know, when you had the idea for *Tell the Story*, that it might strike gold?’

‘Well, no, of course I didn’t,’ Ali said. ‘My three other books had done nothing of the sort, and to be honest I think they have no less merit than this new one. Sometimes a book just captures the public imagination, I suppose.’

‘So why do you think it succeeded in the way it has?’

‘Not sure,’ Ali said. ‘If I knew that I guess I would’ve written it sooner.’ This was meant to be funny, but as soon as the words came out she knew it only sounded rude. ‘No, seriously,’ she went on, trying to redeem herself, ‘I suppose it tells some truths about Australian life, about our collective past. And it’s accessible, but also thought-provoking; at least that’s what I

was aiming for. It reflects a lot of the preoccupations of right-thinking Australians.'

'The plight of the indigenous people, you mean?'

'Among other things, yes, and I've plenty to say about that, but it's poverty that my story addresses, and although that's predominantly and historically a black issue, it can cripple white people too, especially in rural parts of South Australia, and I don't know how much you know about the state, but the rural parts are vast-beyond-vast. We have a cattle station here that's bigger than Wales, if that helps paint the picture.'

'It does indeed, the mind boggles. And how much research did you have to do? It's such a multi-layered book, perhaps that's why it appeals to such a diverse readership.'

'Thanks, yes, I hope it does. I did heaps of research for some aspects of it, not much at all for others. The music, for example, the young Aboriginal singer, I had her in my head and ready to go.'

'She's a wonderful character. Is she real?'

'Yes, and no,' Ali said. 'Like most aspects of the book.'

'Well, I couldn't put it down,' Jenni Murray said. 'You've written a fascinating novel, and as I travelled into London by train this week, I saw so many people reading it.'

'I guess the rest of the world must be more interested in Oz than we realised,' Ali said. 'Also, it's set in Adelaide, and people don't hear so much about this city. I think that maybe makes the book different, and appealing.'

'Because Adelaide is different and appealing?'

'Yes, I think so. We get a lot of stick from Sydney and Melbourne for being boring, but I reckon that's sour grapes. To me, it's always seemed a kind of paradise,' Ali said.

'Gosh, praise indeed!' But because this wasn't a question, Ali said nothing, so Jenni Murray filled the silence. 'You've

lived in Adelaide for thirty years or so, but of course, you're a Sheffield lass by birth?'

'Yes,' Ali said. 'Correct.'

'And how have the people back home reacted to your success?'

'Home?' Ali said.

'I beg your pardon – I mean, in Sheffield, in Attercliffe?'

'Oh,' Ali said flatly. She hesitated, then said, 'I don't know. I mean, I'm not in touch with anyone there, not any more.'

'Family?'

'Nope.'

'So Adelaide really is home, in every sense?'

'Yep, one hundred per cent.'

Afterwards, in Cass's car, she dug out her phone and switched it on to scroll through the myriad messages and notifications waiting for her on the screen. She'd refused her publicist's suggestion that she join Facebook, but had begrudgingly agreed to be a presence on Twitter, and it still amazed her how something so essentially trivial and self-referential could be held in such fawning esteem by so many. However, each day she garnered new followers, and whenever she posted something it was immediately 'liked' and retweeted again and again, and if she didn't have a solid core of humility and good sense running through her, she might have begun to believe she was loved and adored by thousands. It was all cobblers, she thought, but needs must.

'I'm going to please Jade and tweet about the wonders of *Woman's Hour*,' she said to Cass.

'Good girl, that's the spirit. You did well back there, darling, you sounded *très* switched on.' She reached out and turned on the radio, and the car was suddenly filled with Motormouth Maybelle singing 'Big, Blonde And Beautiful'. Cass whooped and joined in; Ali groaned.



‘Really?’ she said. ‘*Hairspray*?’

‘All hail, Queen Latifah,’ Cass said, turning it up.

Ali laughed and said, ‘You really should do musical theatre,’ then she looked back at her phone, running her eyes down the list of notifications.

‘Oh,’ she said suddenly, and her voice was strange.

‘What?’ said Cass, immediately alert. ‘Trolls?’

‘No, no,’ Ali said. ‘No. No.’

‘That’s a lot of “no”s.’

Ali was silent. *Dan Lawrence followed you.*

‘Ali?’

She was looking at Dan’s face now – a straightforward photo, no gimmicks, just him in a white T-shirt, looking directly at her – and after all this time, after all these years, he was utterly familiar. Daniel Lawrence. Oh, heavens, she thought. She forced herself to take a long, deep breath, but it shook on the exhale and gave her away.

‘Ali? What’s wrong?’

She stirred herself and managed a smile. ‘Oh, nothing, nothing, a name from way back, that’s all. Took me by surprise.’

She tapped on Dan’s name to open his profile, and then stared at the screen of her phone.

## Dan Lawrence

@DanLawrenceMusic Follows you

Following  
825

Followers  
28.3K

I know, it’s only rock ‘n’ roll,  
but I like it. WTID.

📍 Edinburgh, Scotland

📅 Joined July 2009

‘I’m at a severe disadvantage here, babe,’ Cass said. ‘I can’t see what’s grabbed you.’