

Chapter 1

I hadn't seen Briony in years when I ran into her in Manuka. We'd been at university together, here in Canberra, then she'd lived in Sydney for most of her twenties with a guy called Tony, who'd suddenly had a crisis of commitment and gone off with a woman the same age Briony had been when they'd started living together. Briony went to England and after a few postcards we'd lost touch.

That was getting on for ten years ago now. I'd lived through a similar history with Bryce, and done a very nice job of training myself to live the single life. Telling myself that the tolling of biological clocks was no concern of mine.

I saw her coming out of the newsagent and at first I thought, No, can't be Briony, but then of course it was, and there we were giving one another hugs and sinking into chairs at the nearest pavement café.

You haven't changed a bit, I said, and she hadn't, as pretty as ever, in that pale blonde way. Not like me, I'm silver white really; my hair suddenly lost its colour at the end of my twenties and now it hangs in a heavy fall and is my one vanity. So I tell myself. Briony's eyes are grey, her

skin is rosy-fair, her hair ashy; she's a kind of rainy English beauty, like a medieval lady who washes her face in a spring and combs her hair by her reflection in it. And unicorns put their heads in her lap.

Blame Briony for these romantic notions.

You have, she said, changed. I nearly didn't recognise you. Your hair, that colour, it's fabulous. Is it ... hard work?

All its own doing, I said. For no good reason that I can see.

Oh Sandra, she said, it is good to see you.

I had to point out I was Cassandra now, I'd lengthened my name, just as my grandfather had shortened his, from Traverso to Travers. Thus we reinvent ourselves, with quick strokes of the pen, adding and subtracting letters of the alphabet and becoming different people.

Cassandra, said Briony. It suits you.

We talked for ages, over two cups of coffee and then a glass of wine. Briony had a job at Santa Sophia, teaching English to teenage girls, and was renting an apartment in Kingston. When I mentioned love life she gave a little purse-lipped smile and didn't say anything.

She came round for a meal some days later—Al was away on mysterious consultant's business, I don't ask though sometimes he tells—and we had rather a lot of champagne. She'd brought an excellent bottle and we sat on my chintzy old rose-patterned sofa and she told me that she was in love. With the most marvellous man. Everything she'd ever wanted in a guy. Tall, handsome, distinguished, sexy. A little older than her, a real man of the world.

Something about this catalogue of wonders made me suspicious. He sounds a perfect dream, I said.

Oh he is. One day you'll meet him.

Where did you find him?

In London. Oh, she said, seeing my quizzical look— I know I looked quizzical, I felt my face doing it. Oh, he lives here.

Is that why you ...?

Yes. Such wonderful luck. Getting the job here.

I know what's coming next. Why she isn't out and about and upfront with him.

He's married, right now, said Briony. He's very big in Defence and up for a top job. So we have to be secret for now. But when that's fixed he'll divorce his wife and we'll be married.

Oh Briony, I said, that's the oldest trick in the book.

No, Cass, if you knew him. It's true. We're going to be married. Just as soon as the job is secure.

I could see she was living her own version of the star-crossed lovers narrative, unique, tragic. Highly pleasurable in its way. Was it my role to warn her how commonplace the story is? And that it was likely to end in equally commonplace and not at all pleasurable woe?

It seemed hard to me, that, having lived through one of the great generic stories of our era, the commitment to a man you believe is faithful and honourable and your life-partner, and with the expectation that you will have children together and bring them up and maybe even grow old together, and then have him bugger off and take up with a woman young as you were once, she should have the awful bad luck to be living through another terrible generic narrative, the love affair with the married man who swears he will leave his wife, and is lying.

And who knows, maybe I was mistaken, maybe he wasn't lying.

And now I was with Al I knew that all that unconcern with biological clocks was putting on a brave face. Which made me think about Briony, and this guy stuffing up her hopes of having children.

Having started, Briony wanted to keep talking about him. How he came to see her between five and seven in the evenings, stealing a bit of extra time with her when he had to go away on business—even a day sometimes. Not very often, of course, they had to be so discreet, a breath of scandal and the top job would elude him forever.

I wondered about this; is divorce such a scandal these days? Would anybody even notice? He was more likely to miss out on promotion because he was distracted by Briony from doing the job he had properly.

She said she called him Carlo. Not his real name. He sent her cases of champagne—fine vintage stuff like the one she'd brought to me—and she always had bottles chilled for when he dropped by. Briony was starting to seem more and more like a medieval maiden, but enclosed in a tower awaiting her lord's pleasure, not washing her face in a spring and having a unicorn's head in her lap.

We saw one another from time to time through the winter, a coffee, or maybe a cocktail—Briony likes pretty coloured drinks in fishbowl glasses—a movie, though I was often busy with Al and the occasions tended to stretch apart. I noticed that she was getting slenderer. That her cheekbones had a polished look and her grey eyes were huge. Tragic love seemed to suit her looks, anyway. The top job seemed slow in coming.

Are you sure it's really love, I asked her, after yet another catalogue of his wonders. Not just lust?

Carlo adores me. And I adore him. We want to spend our lives together.

I'm not sure about this word adore. It's a word in a Christmas carol. It's not an earthly word. Do I adore Al? Of course. But I wouldn't say so. Somebody in a novel remarks in a plaintive voice: Men adore me, but they don't stay with me. Precisely so.

Then one night she rang me up, about half-past nine it must have been. She sounded upset. Could she come and see me, tomorrow, after school.

Come to my place, I said.

My place was where I worked. Al and I hadn't actually made up our minds where we lived. Apart from the coast house he had his pad in O'Connor and I had my duplex on the other side of the suburb and somehow we seemed to need all of them, extravagant though it was. We told ourselves we'd sort it out one day. The problem was each of us used our house as an office, mine especially was full of books and working spaces. Being freelance I need sitting spaces and lying spaces, sofas, chairs, desks; my sitting room is my working room. I thought of getting a tenant, maybe a student, and keeping it as a place to work during the day and living with Al at night, either in O'Connor or down at the coast. I have to say, I was luxuriating rather in this embarrassment of riches. Two people, three houses. A wickedly large footprint, my ecologically concerned friend Gavin would say.

Briony brought some more good champagne. He sends more than we drink, she said.

I had some smoked salmon and made nibbles with rye bread; I thought she'd need some food. But she didn't eat anything.

Last night was parent-teacher evening, she said.

At Santa Sophia?

Yes. I knew they were coming, I had them noted down on my timetable ...

They ...?

Carlo. And ...

You mean Carlo has a daughter at the school?

She nodded. In year twelve. I had an appointment with them, for quite late in the evening, for eight o'clock, and I was all prepared, I'd psyched myself up for it, what else could I do? She's not very good at English, of course they would want to talk to me. But ... she took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

But, she went on eventually, it was much earlier, and I looked up, and suddenly I saw them, when I wasn't expecting to though of course it was logical, they were standing in line for one of the other teachers, and oh Cassandra, they were just so there, so together, making such a couple, and it was as if they'd carved this space out in air for so long that they fitted together, perfectly, as if nothing would ever part them. They weren't standing particularly close—not touching, nothing like that—but they occupied this couple space, together, inviolable somehow.

I nodded. I remember reading a short story once, I forget whose, which said exactly that same thing; it made a deep impression on me, so that it's something I often notice. They would, I said; if you'd thought of it, you'd have known that.

I felt so hopeless. Her voice wobbled. I thought it is all just a beautiful dream, it won't ever happen.

I don't think anything's changed, Briony. You saw that, that couplehood, but it's always been there, your situation is exactly the same, your seeing it doesn't make any difference.

How's that for ambiguous comfort? But Briony took it in the way useful to her, her face brightened, and she smiled, and said, You're right, of course. She put her handkerchief away and sat up straight. The trouble is, he's off overseas for a fortnight, and I don't know when I'll see him again. It's so much harder, on my own for so long.

I wanted to go round right then and shoot Carlo. What frightful arrogance it is in a man to shut a woman up like this in an impossible love, while he goes on living his life, working, travelling, being conjugal, while she sits and pines. I resolved to try to get her out more, encourage her to find some other life apart from school and that tower of his imprisoning.

About seven Al came to pick me up. My heart gave a little jump, as it always does. I love looking at him, his long fingers, his smooth rosy cheeks, his neat ears. But start making a catalogue of these things and you might never stop. He glanced at Briony and decided we'd eat at my house tonight, and soon he'd cooked fat little fillet steaks rare on the griddle, with green salad and a pile of sugar snap peas. I know Briony hadn't meant to stay but somehow Al persuades. We had some red wine, not a lot but enough on top of the champagne to make it inadvisable for Briony to drive, so I fixed her up in the spare room.

We'd had a good time. Al had made her laugh which I don't think happened much in her life.

When we went to bed I told him all about Carlo. This is the bit of being with him that I love, cuddled up in bed, talking. Well, one of the many bits.

I hate men like that, he said, his voice softly vehement. So greedy. So narcissistic. Think they can have everything. Think they deserve everything. I bet he's quite happily married, very nicely settled there, thank you.

I was pleased that Al felt like this; I wasn't sure that male solidarity might not have come into play. I said, Of course, he may be telling the truth, he may be going to leave his wife and marry her.

At that moment a possum landed on the roof with a thump that shook the house. There, said Al, hear that? That was a flying pig crash-landing.

When I had finished laughing at that, at the possum's timing as well as the use Al had made of it, he said, Why do women believe men who tell them these things? It's such a famous lie, such a perennial lie. Surely mothers warn their daughters from an early age about married men bearing promises of marriage.

We all know it but somehow we all seem to fall for it. I suppose the thing is that when you love someone you want to believe that he's telling you the truth.

I can see that. But how does it happen in the first place, that a woman comes to love a man who is married?

You don't think he tells her? We're not talking honesty at any point here. Briony met Carlo (ugh, the name feels so sleazy, I bet he's not even a real Carlo, sleazy yes but not a

real Carlo). She met him in London, he'd have been single, glamorous, he'd have been out for a good time, no way he'd have mentioned a wife up front. Maybe he did fall in love with her, he certainly would have liked having a good time with her, and by the time she finds out it's too late, she's in love and it's tragic. And don't forget, tragic has its charm, for a bit.

You'd think when she finds out he's married she'd be so disgusted she'd throw him out.

Oh, by this time the thing is bigger than both of them. It's a grand passion. He can't help himself. It all obscures the fact that he knew what he was doing in the first place.

Adultery, said Al, in a musing voice. What an ominous old word.

It's funny that people never realise they are always wrong about it. They think it can be fun, a game, simple sexual pleasure, that they are too clever for anyone to get hurt, and they're always wrong.

Always, my prophetic Cassandra?

Always. Because there are always three or maybe four people involved, and it might be fun for two but not for the others. My dear promiscuous friend Justine would say it's because heterosexuals are so foolishly hung up on monogamy.

Maybe she's right.

Maybe. But the fact is we are monogamous and people are going to be hurt. Everybody, usually. Somebody has got to be betrayed. Look at this coil: Briony unhappy. Carlo seems to be having fun but I bet there are tensions. His wife ... even if she doesn't know about Briony she'll know there's

something wrong somewhere. The daughter, remember. And there's no way out without somebody and probably everybody being even more hurt.

You're wonderfully well informed, said Al. Is this personal experience talking?

Actually, I said, I seem to have avoided that particular folly. Entirely by good luck, I should think. But there's enough of it around. To look at, to read about. It's an evergreen narrative, and still the subject of a lot of novels, don't forget.

The trouble with being an unreconstructed reader like me is, your brain's full of other people's words. Shreds and patches of them. Hard to resist when they are so much better than your own. *The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics* ... That's Troilus raging over Cressida's faithlessness. Faithlessness. I just love the anger of those words, the way they spit out. *The orts of her love* ... Orts are refuse, scraps, bits of leftover food. We should never have lost the word. Even if only for describing the debris of dinner parties. But Troilus is talking about the debris of Cressida's love for him, the greasy scraps, now offered to another man. Dodgy leftovers. Put Carlo instead of Cressida, that's what you've got. Poor Briony being fed dodgy leftovers.

I'm newly married. And for love. I cannot envisage faithlessness, cannot conceive it. Al fills my vision. You can see I like to rehearse to myself the idea of marriage. Like so many women of my age, I had learnt not to expect it. Trained myself out of any hopes. So I am enjoying the unlikeliness of it.

Justine was a game, a game of my singlehood. You're no

Lesbian, she used to tease me, you're just greedy. I loved Justine, and we did have fun. But not like this.

I was quiet for a moment. Then I said: Do you really think Justine's right? That heterosexuals are stupid to expect monogamy? That we'd all be happier having it off with whoever offered and not minding?

Maybe we would be. But I don't think we can do it. Not humanly possible. And personally I'm into monogamy.

By this time we had rather lost interest in talking. Oh, I do like being in bed with Al.