


Girlfriend *fiction*

Dear Swoosie

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ALLEN & UNWIN

Chapter 6

— POPPY —

The night before my detention, Mum had rung me on my mobile. She never rings the landline. She says it's because she doesn't want to tie up Charmaine's phone, but I know it's because she's worried Dad might answer.

'Hey, Poppy B.'

I wandered out to the courtyard for privacy. It was bracingly cold and the air smelt like autumn, like dried leaves and wood-smoke and Charmaine's lentil hotpot.

'Hi, Mum.'

'What's the weather like down there?'

'You know. Chilly.'

'Mm. I miss Melbourne in autumn. It's twenty-four degrees in Brisbane — a never-ending summer. You should come and visit.'

'No way. It's your turn to come here. You promised! You haven't been back to Melbourne in over a year.'

‘Oh, B. I don’t know.’ She suddenly giggled. ‘I got the invitation you sent. For the Reunion Ball.’

‘Are you coming?’

‘It sounds silly. Is your dad going?’

‘Would it matter if he was?’

‘Well, it’s just...I don’t want to... If he wants to go, he should.’ See that was the thing. If Mum didn’t have feelings for Dad anymore, why would she be so worried about seeing him?

‘He said he wasn’t,’ I half-lied. Well he had said he wasn’t going to go. It was just that after seeing India’s mum he seemed to be on the verge of changing his mind. I didn’t think it was a good idea to mention that to Mum though. I cheered up, remembering The Lovers card, and the other one, the union of opposites card. The question in my head during India’s reading had been crystal clear: *Will my mother and father get back together?* Those cards had said yes. I was sure of it, as sure as I was that the earth had shaken under my feet.

‘There are some people I’d like to see,’ Mum mused to herself. ‘Or one person. I wonder if she’ll...’

If I could just get Mum to Melbourne. That was the first step. I was sure if she and Dad and me hung out, like families do, Mum would see that we all belonged together, and we could move back to our little house in the mountains. ‘What’s her name? This friend? I can ask Ms Armstrong if she RSVPed.’

‘Swoosie,’ Mum said, and laughed.

‘Swoosie? Who’s Swoosie?’

Mum's giggles died away. 'Oh, no one. Don't ask Ms Armstrong. I'll think about the reunion, Poppy. I can't say better than that at the moment. I'm really getting lost in my work at the moment. I've got a big exhibition in August. I'm not sure if I can afford to take a break right now. Okay?'

Dad rode with me to detention. I think he was afraid I'd disappear off into the wilds of Merri Creek parklands without an official escort. Or maybe he was genuinely bummed about losing his Saturday market buddy. *He is lonely*, I thought. Which just proved that he needed Mum. I couldn't always be there for him.

'I can't believe you have a detention for practicing the dark arts during assembly,' Dad called to me as we rode. 'I thought you didn't believe in anything.'

'Who says?'

'You did, when you were five. You followed me around the garden listing all the things you didn't believe in, including magic, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, ghosts...'

'What else was on the list?' I asked.

'Organised religion. Seahorses.'

'Ha!'

We arrived at school. I got off my bike. Dad rode around me in a slow circle. 'Head down, bum up,' he said. 'Don't muck around, Poppy.'

With that he rode off, around to the front of the school, whistling far too cheerfully.

'I love you too, Dad,' I muttered.

I chained up my bike in the bike shed and went inside to find India.

THINGS I DON'T BELIEVE IN:

The Easter Bunny

Santa Claus

The tooth fairy

Organised religion

Organised sport

Anti-pimple cream

That these are the best years of my life

THINGS I DO BELIEVE IN:

*That there is some greater power at work in the universe
(God? Karma? The Celestial Seahorse?)*

Love

That my mum and dad belong together

That India can see the future

There were a couple of boys lolling around on the stairs. Usually I had no problem with boys, though they were definitely easier to manage one-on-one. Once they started pairing up, they were more likely to give me a hard time. One of them patted the step next to him, inviting me to sit down. I decided not to chance it. India would be there soon. Safety in numbers.

I walked around the walls instead, looking at all the photographs of past students. There was a hilariously clear imbalance. There were class photos of every graduating year since the school opened, starting off with the frowning, dour teenagers in the 1910s. But suddenly in 1989 there was an explosion of pictures – every sports team, every music group and dance committee, plus random shots, in a massive collage taking up most of one wall. This was Ms Armstrong’s graduating year, of course, and there she was, in at least half the photos: netball, hockey, water polo and soccer teams, the Winter Formal committee, the Leaver’s Dinner committee, the student council (Vice Captain, I noticed), the school newspaper, the choir... smile after beaming smile.

India walked in. I don’t know why, but I expected her to come straight over and stand with me. I mean we were in this together, right? I turned back to the photos, waiting for her, so I could show her the ludicrous ones of Nicole Armstrong in her heyday. The best years of her life. But India blatantly ignored me and sat down with the two boys. She muttered something to them and they all burst out laughing. I glanced over. I was sure they were talking about me.

I turned back to the photos. I’d spotted my parents already: Travis Finn with his softly curling eighties rock mullet, Mandy Goose with her gravity-defying fringe, her too-short skirt, her layered socks (neon blue underneath, white on top) and her blue mascara. But wait a sec. I looked at the Winter Formal committee photo. There they were again – Mandy and Travis.

Travis was looking directly at the camera. Mandy was leaning in to whisper something in another girl's ear, her eyes dancing with mischief. That was strange – until she went to Art School Mum hadn't really seemed to have any friends. Just Dad and me. It was only after she started studying that she began inviting people home, and wanting Dad to go out to pubs and exhibition openings and parties. Neither of them had kept up with their high-school friends.

Even stranger though, the girl in the photo was looking at Trav. How funny! And I mean she was *looking* at him. I'd seen girls look at boys like that before. *I'd* looked at boys like that before, willing them to meet my eyes, and then not being able to bear it if they did. There was something spookily familiar about this girl... I stepped closer and read the names underneath. Sarah Williams! India's mother!

Strong-Arm seemed more deranged than normal as she descended the attic stairs. Let it roll? Let what roll? India and I stared at each other, alone again. She narrowed her eyes at me, as if she were about to start another argument. I thought of the picture of my mum, Mandy, whispering intimately in Sarah's ear. Suddenly, inexplicably, my eyes filled with tears.

I began scrounging around in a box.

'My mum would say we should come up with some kind of system, instead of just diving in randomly,' India said gloomily. 'My mum loves a system.' Then she peered closer. 'Hey, are you okay?'

'It's just the dust. Stupid allergies.'

‘Are you sure?’ India inquired. ‘You didn’t have allergies the other day.’

‘I’m fine.’ By the time I’d dug down to the bottom of the box (mostly old soggy school magazines and discarded library books) I’d got myself under control. What was happening to me? I don’t cry. I turned to India.

She was rummaging around busily in the back of the room. ‘Hang on, close your eyes.’

I was instantly suspicious. ‘Why?’

‘Just do it. Please. Are they closed?’

She sounded so... eager. I couldn’t help but close them.

I heard more scuffling sounds. ‘You can open them now. Tada!’

She was wearing a yellow wig (it had probably once been blonde), a fluoro lycra dress and, stuffed down her top were enormous fake bazoonkas. She held cheerleading pom-poms. I stared at her. She shook the pom-poms over her head, plastered on a fake smile and shouted ‘Gooo-oooo sports team!’ She could not have looked less like India. She looked more like a demented Ms Armstrong. Bubbles of laughter burst out of me.

‘What else is there?’ I asked.

Together we rummaged through all the boxes trying on and discarding costume after costume, unearthing dubious treasures. We awarded each other trophies; we read out terrible poetry from school magazines (Dad was right, teen angst had been around since at least 1973); we chucked around some old maths exams.

We separated, hunting out more riches. It was India who struck gold. 'Hey, check this out!'

'What is it?'

'Letters. Look. They're all addressed to the same girl. Do you think it would be bad karma to read them?'

'Where did they come from?'

'A box way back there.'

'Way back?'

India nodded. 'Way, way back. Buried underneath all sorts of stuff.'

'So they've been here for a while right? Ages and ages. Years. Forgotten.'

'Oh, definitely. I mean if... ' India glanced at one of the letters, 'Swoosie... didn't want her letters read she'd have burnt them, right? Or she'd have thrown them away.'

'Swoosie? That's weird. My mum knew a Swoosie here.'

'Your mum went to this school?'

'Yep. So did my dad.'

'My mum went here too,' India said.

'I know. I saw you in Strong-Arm's office collecting an invitation.'

'Oh, yeah, that's right.' I was pretty sure she didn't have any recollection of seeing me there at all. She's kind of vague like that. 'Huh, that's odd,' India said, flipping one of the pages over. 'All the letters are signed by Swoosie too. They're to Swoosie and from Swoosie.'

'She was writing letters to herself?'

'I don't think so. There's different handwriting... See?'

‘So there’re two Swoosies?’

‘Doesn’t seem very likely. Maybe Swoosie is a codeword. Or a nickname. Ha! Check this out. *Knickers!* That’s what my mum used to call Nicole Armstrong. They’re writing about her spiral perm. Apparently it stuck out sideways.’

‘Let me look.’ I peered over her shoulder as she leafed through them. ‘Wait, give that one to me.’ I read aloud. ‘If Terra Fabula doesn’t ask you to the Winter Formal I’ll die!’

‘Terra Fabula?’ repeated India. ‘That’s Latin. It means land of fantasies.’

‘You speak Latin?’

India shrugged modestly. ‘I read a lot. I pick up a little here, a little there.’

‘Wait! Look at the initials. See how they’re etched in really dark? Maybe it’s not Latin. Maybe it’s a code, like you said.’

‘Oh yeah. Yeah, you’re probably right. Some boy’s name perhaps.’ India didn’t sound very interested. But that was because she didn’t know what I knew.

‘Okay. Sit down.’ I commanded. ‘Because I know everything. And this is going to break your brain.’

India seemed to take my word for it. She sat down, cross-legged on the floor, looking up at me.

‘Terra Fabula is my dad, right? Travis Finn. T.F.?’

‘Yeah? Oka-a-ay.’

‘And Swoosie... Okay, hold onto your socks. That means Swoosie is my mum...’

‘No. Are you kidding?’

‘...and *your* mum.’

‘No way!’

‘Yes.’ I nodded feverishly. ‘Way.’

‘How can it be?’

‘Downstairs in the photos,’ I gabbled. ‘Our mums are sitting next to each other, they’re friends! Maybe even best friends.’

‘My mum? Are you sure?’

‘You said your mum called Nicole Armstrong “Knickers”. And that’s right here, in the letters. My mum said on the phone last night that she knew a Swoosie. How would she know her if she’s a code word? My dad’s in there. The Winter Formal – both our mums were on the committee.’

‘It’s still a huge leap, isn’t it? I mean what does Swoosie mean? Unless...’

‘What?’

‘What was your Mum’s name?’

‘Amanda. Mandy.’

India mulled it over. ‘I can see where the S.W. bit comes from. They’re Mum’s initials. But...’

‘Goose!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Mandy Goose.’

‘Swoosie. S.W. and Goose. Swoosie...’ India yelped and covered her mouth. ‘By the goddess! I did this. We did this.’

‘What did we do?’

‘We completed the circle. This is Fate; this is Destiny. Don’t you see? We have a responsibility to read these letters. There’s

a message here. Swoosie needs us. She called – India! Poppy! – and we answered her call, don't you get it? Why else would you have come to me for a tarot reading, when you don't even like me?'

'Who said I don't like you?'

'Well...you said I don't care about people, and that I just want people to think I'm clever and interesting.'

'Oh, yeah. I was just being a cow. It doesn't mean I don't like you.'

India stared at me. 'I've been mad with you for getting the cards confiscated. But I see now. That had to happen too. It's all connected.' India glanced, panicked, around the attic. 'I want to read the letters. I really do. But if we don't clean up the attic, Knickers won't give the cards back.'

'Come on. Let's do the quickest, dodgiest clean up job ever, so we can read the letters and still look as though we're making progress if Knickers springs us.'

It was amazing how much cleaning we could get done in half an hour with a bit of motivation. The whole time I was bagging things up for the rubbish and labelling boxes of stuff that seemed worth keeping, my mind was in a swirl. What was Swoosie trying to say to us from the past? It was as if – this was something India would say – but it was as if Mandy Goose and Sarah Williams had stepped right out of that photo downstairs, and were in the attic with us, ready to deal out the best gossip ever.

At last we settled down side by side, the letters in a pile between us.

‘This first one is from my mum, from Sarah,’ said India. ‘That’s her handwriting. Cramped and tiny. She was repressed even back then.’

‘And this is my mum’s, I guess.’ I frowned at it. ‘Though her writing is more grown up now. This looks so adolescent, with its big silly loops. But yeah, I can sort of still see her letters in those squiggles. Yeah, it’s definitely Mandy.’

India nodded. We began to read.



Dear Swoosie,

I was thinking about what you said all the way home. Of course I trust you!!!! I can't believe you need to ask. It's just that after all this time, I'd almost given up hope that I would find anybody special. I'm so scared that talking about it, even thinking about it, will jinx it and it (he!!) will slip away before anything has a chance to happen. So please forgive me for not wanting to talk about it out loud. (Because you never know who might be listening!) But I know I CAN trust you not to tell anyone. So yes, it's true, (here goes, deep breath):

I think I might be in love!!

But you already guessed that.

Love,

Swoosie

