


Girlfriend *fiction*

15 *love*

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ALLEN & UNWIN

One

MIA

Boys are immature. They only use one per cent of their brain. They only ever talk about cars or sport. They only ever think about sex. I read somewhere that boys think about sex – on average – once every fifteen seconds! That’s four times a minute! Two hundred and forty times per hour! I checked on my calculator – it’s a total of 5,760 times a day, assuming boys also dream about sex . . . If this is true, it is *a real worry*. Fifteen seconds is barely enough time to say hello. No wonder boys never make any sense when you talk to them.

There is one boy at our school who is not like the others. Will Holland definitely has something on his mind. Most lunchtimes he sits alone on the grass, wearing a tracksuit and looking very out of place. He eats his lunch, then he lies back on the grass, staring up at the sky for ages and ages. What does he see up there? What does he think about?

Is he interested in meteorology?

Is he worried about global warming?

Is he watching out for UFOs?

Will Holland is a mystery. My friends say he's either an escaped criminal or else he's suffering from some incurable, highly infectious disease. They think just because Will doesn't hang out with other boys, he must be hiding something. But I think he's interesting. I mean, boys don't *have* to play basketball, do they? They don't *have* to be the kind of nerd who lusts after computer-generated sex-goddesses with breasts made of high-density steel, and slobbers uncontrollably whenever a real girl walks past. Do they?

Will Holland isn't like that. I'm sure he has other things on his mind. I swear, even if I had a figure like Lara Croft, he wouldn't even notice me.

WILL

Mia Foley is not as pretty as she thinks she is. Without her long dark hair – which she keeps swishing around as if she's in some kind of shampoo commercial – she would be quite average-looking. Without her big brown eyes and long lashes, her smooth white skin and rosy-red lips, her beautiful smile and her perfect teeth, Mia Foley would be very ordinary.

Every lunchtime she and her friends sit together on their seat. Every lunchtime it's the exact same seat, as if there's a plaque that says *Reserved for Mia Foley and her two bimbo buddies*, then below in small print, *Guys please line up and wait your turn*. Every day I see new guys come along to try out. They stand there with their hands in their pockets,

pretending it's all very casual, when really they're pumped up and trying to make an impression. Then the hands come out of the pockets and the circus starts:

Roll up! Roll up! Pre-senting the a-maz-ing, the a-stounding, the death-defying des-per-adoes! They juggle! They swing! They spin basketballs on their fingertips! They throw things! They fight! Just sit back and enjoy the show, ladies, until the tightrope-walker falls flat on his face and the clowns come to take him away.

Mia and her friends like the attention. They smile and laugh, but they never ask the boys to sit down and join them. In the end, their eyes start to glaze over and it's time for the circus to pack up and leave.

When the guys have gone, the girls huddle together and talk in low voices.

I have no idea what they talk about.

I wish I was a fly on the wall.

I wish I had a tape recorder and a hidden microphone . . .

MIA

'The tracksuit is watching you again,' says Renata.

'No he isn't.'

'Mia! Are you blind?' says Vanessa.

'Just short-sighted, remember?'

'Didn't you say he was kind of cute?' says Renata.

'I never said that.'

'He's okay-looking. I'd lose the tracksuit, though,' says Vanessa.

‘Lose it? He lives in it. I don’t think he owns any other clothes,’ says Renata.

‘Pee-ew! Stinky!’ Vanessa screws up her nose.

‘Give him a break.’

‘I mean, a tracksuit is for inside the house, right?’ says Renata.

‘I’ve heard some people do *actually* play sport in them,’ I say.

‘Sport?’ says Vanessa. ‘How tiresome!’

Vanessa and Renata are my two best friends. We share our lunches. We share our Tic Tacs. And we share our troubles. Mostly, our troubles are boy troubles, and mostly they’re Vanessa’s boy troubles, because it’s Vanessa the boys are mostly interested in.

Vanessa is a big flirt, to put it politely. She wears cardigans that are three sizes too small, just to show off her pierced bellybutton and so she can push right up close to guys, as if she’s trying to pop the buttons. Vanessa has this way of looking at guys that she does without thinking. She does it to the ones she’s interested in, but she also does it to complete strangers – guys on the train who are ten years older, for example. Hence the boy troubles.

(My mum says I’m allowed to get my bellybutton pierced, but my dad says I’m not. He says there are ‘medical reasons’, and just because he’s a doctor he wins. The truth is my dad thinks having a pierced bellybutton is the same as having sex. Diagnosis: AIDS and/or an unwanted pregnancy. But I don’t care. One day, I’ll just go out and do

it anyway – get my belly-button pierced, I mean.)

Vanessa has two kinds of boy troubles. Either it's two guys fighting over her, or else one guy who's been driven to the edge and can't help making a fool of himself. Renata and I try giving Vanessa subtle hints. We tell her to tone it down if she wants guys to leave her alone, but then she gets her nose out of joint and won't talk to us. Vanessa is unpredictable when it comes to guys. She can spend weeks playing hard to get with a gorgeous boy, then suddenly go out with a serial killer.

Renata is like Vanessa in some ways, but in other ways she's the exact opposite. She's just as pretty as Vanessa and goes to the same trouble with her hair, but she's not so confident. Renata is Yugoslavian and her parents are pretty strict. She's been in Australia for ten years, but she still won't talk about the place where she was born. My dad told me Yugoslavia doesn't exist anymore. It's not a real country, he said. But if anyone ever mentions Yugoslavia – or Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo, any of those places – Renata goes a bit pale. I think some of her family must have got killed or something.

Renata says Vanessa is good for us. She's always telling us how nice we look and encouraging us to be more upfront with boys. Vanessa is the 'it girl' at our school, so there's never any shortage of boys around. The trouble is, boys are always at their silliest whenever they're trying to impress girls. There's no limit to the shameless depths they will go to.

WILL

Thank you for calling Girlfriend magazine. Please press 1) if you wish to subscribe. Press 2) if you wish to know what girls talk about. Press 3) if you only want to know what 'a certain girl' talks about. Press 4) if you really just want to meet 'a certain girl', but have no idea how to go about it.

Should I subscribe to *Girlfriend* magazine? Or should I buy a sample copy first? I could buy it from the supermarket. I could slip it in between the Nutri-Grain and the muesli flakes, so that no one would even see it.

'It's for my sister,' I could say, if anyone asked.

Except that I don't have a sister.

If I subscribed, the magazine would be posted once a month, hopefully in a plain brown envelope, clearly addressed to me, so that no one else would open it.

Because I do have a brother, and I don't want him getting the wrong idea.

I have heard that parts of *Girlfriend* magazine can be quite intimate. I have heard that the sealed sections are extremely intimate! I have glanced at the letters where girls reveal their innermost secrets. I want to know how girls think, but my real reason for buying *Girlfriend* magazine is less sleazy than that. I need *Girlfriend* magazine for research purposes. I need to know what girls talk about. If I'm going to talk to Mia Foley one day, I need to be prepared.

Mia Foley is an up-to-date kind of girl. She dresses like the girls in *Girlfriend* magazine. She is easily beautiful enough to be on the cover of *Girlfriend* magazine. But that doesn't mean

Mia actually *reads* it. And besides, *Girlfriend* is a magazine for girls. It's all about what girls say to other girls. It's probably about boys. And if I ever meet Mia Foley, that is one subject we are definitely *not* going to talk about.

The trouble is, when boys talk, we talk about *things*. We exchange information. We are interested in the facts. Girls may not want to know about carburettors or shock-absorbers, but they are impressed by boys who know stuff. Any stuff – magnetic fields, microbiology, hydraulic engineering – it doesn't really matter what. Girls like guys who know stuff. It makes them feel comfortable. They feel like the guy has other interests, that he's not in danger of getting hopelessly obsessed about them. Stalkers, I'll bet, have very little interest in the facts.

If, hopefully when, I do meet Mia, we should have one of those magical conversations that just click. *What a lovely day*, she might say.

Yes, I would reply. *The forecast top temperature is twenty-seven degrees, I believe.*

Don't you wish it could always be this nice, she might say.

Then I would explain how the earth tilts on its axis as it moves around the sun, so that the chance of it being twenty-seven degrees and sunny every day was pretty unlikely. *And anyway*, we would both agree, *life would be pretty boring without a change of season.*

Then Mia might say, *I read in Girlfriend magazine how the weather affects what we feel.*

Girlfriend *magazine*? I would say. *Isn't that mainly for girls?*

MIA

'You did WHAT?' I say.

'You did WHAT?' says Renata.

Renata and I are shocked and stunned. Vanessa has truly outdone herself this time.

'I sucked his toe,' she says.

'His *big* toe?' says Renata.

'Naturally,' says Vanessa.

'You took off his shoe?' I say.

'And his sock,' says Vanessa.

'Was it clean?' I ask. 'His toe, I mean. Not his sock.'

'Pretty clean,' says Vanessa.

'And what did *he* do, while you were sucking his toe?' says Renata.

'He went a bit crazy,' says Vanessa. 'He told me he loved me!'

'He DIDN'T!' I say.

'But he's not even your boyfriend!' says Renata.

Vanessa hides her face in her hands. 'He is now,' she says, softly.

I shake my head in disbelief. Renata can't stop laughing. She laughs until she has tears running down her cheeks and cramps in her stomach. There is something not quite right about the way she is laughing.

Vanessa and Renata are my two best friends, but even

best friends can be weird sometimes. Sucking boys' toes isn't something I want to leap straight into, I must admit. It might sound old-fashioned, but toe-sucking isn't something I want to rush right into. It's not something I would ever do on a first date. It's not my idea of romance. If you ask me, toe-sucking is something that should happen much later. It's something a girl should only do with someone she really loves, only if she really wants to, and only after he's had a long, soapy bath.

WILL

It all started in the woodwork room. The teacher wasn't there yet and my workbench was the only one with an empty seat. I was minding my own business – crushing my pencil in my vice – when I walked The Most Beautiful Girl in the Whole Wide World. There are beautiful girls in movies and in magazines, but this girl was something else. She was real! And she was coming straight at me!

The Most Beautiful Girl in the Whole Wide World sat down beside me at my workbench, as my pencil cracked loudly up the middle. She looked at me, then at my pencil. I was stumped. I didn't know what to say.

On the back of her hand she had written *Don't forget V!* in red biro.

Don't forget V!?? I have never seen anything so mysterious and exotic in all my life. But before I had any time to think about what *V* was, before I could think of anything to say, Mia had put on her glasses and realised where she was.

‘Whoops!’ she said. ‘Wrong room!’ Then she stood up and walked out.

That was it. Forget about *V*. The Most Beautiful Girl in the Whole Wide World was gone. *V* for Vanished. When I looked at her seat, I wanted to reach across and touch it, to run my fingers across the smooth, polished wood. It was all I had left.

V for Vacant . . . ? Vacuum . . . ? Vapour . . . ?

It ruined my whole day. Actually, it was longer than that. Woodwork classes were tragic for at least another month. I made a pencil-box and filled it full of broken pencils. The empty seat stayed empty, but I couldn’t give up hoping that Mia might make the same mistake again. I imagined she might come in and sit down on her seat again, just for old times’ sake. So I guarded it, just in case.

‘Is that seat taken, mate?’

‘Yeah. She’ll be back soon.’

Who was I kidding? Mia was never coming back.

V for Venus . . . Velvet . . . Visitor . . .

I started checking the timetable after that, to see where Mia’s classes were. Without really meaning to, I started wandering past her classrooms just to sneak a glance at her. It sounds like something a psychopath would do, I know, but I couldn’t help it. And every time I saw Mia, she looked even more beautiful than I remembered. Her hair was more shiny, her face was more perfect. Until, one day, Mia looked up and saw me staring at her. I tried to smile, but she acted like she didn’t even know me.

That's because she didn't even know me.

V for Victim . . . V for Vegetable . . .

After that, I gave up spying on Mia in class, but lunchtimes weren't so easy. I tried to act normal and just do the things you normally do, but out of the corner of my eye I was always looking out for her. If I ever did see her, or even someone *who might have been* her, my body felt like a robot being operated by remote control. My limbs would move in unexpected ways. My eyelids would twitch and my neck muscles would go into spasm. I have to admit it – I had a slight problem with Mia Foley.

WHO CAN YOU TURN TO?

**The school counselling service is
available for students who:**

- ✱ are having difficulty making friends ✱
- ✱ are experiencing disruptions in their personal lives ✱
- ✱ are having trouble studying ✱
- ✱ are uncertain about their future ✱

The school counsellor, as it turned out, was also the music teacher. I don't know if Ms Stanway has any counselling qualifications, but there's obviously a connection between psychos and music – just look at Marilyn Manson. It didn't matter, though, because from the moment I sat down in Ms Stanway's big comfy chair, I knew I couldn't say I was there because of a *girl*.

‘It’s spiders,’ I said, instead. ‘They make me feel . . . anxious.’

Ms Stanway had long white fingers with pale-pink nails. She pressed her index finger to her chin, as if she were trying to make a dimple.

‘How do you mean, exactly?’

‘Whenever I see her coming – the spider, that is – I have to walk away.’

‘Arachnophobia,’ Ms Stanway nodded. ‘It’s quite common.’

‘Actually,’ I said. ‘It’s more like an obsession than a phobia. I keep expecting her – it! – to appear from out of nowhere. I don’t know what I would do if it suddenly tapped me on the shoulder and said *Hi*.’

Ms Stanway’s finger started making a circular motion, as if it were trying to rub out the dimple. ‘Obsessions,’ she said, ‘are sometimes like phobias, and phobias often occur as the result of uncertainty or unfamiliarity. Often, when you have a phobia, it’s best to confront the thing you are scared of, face-to-face. If it is spiders, say, you could keep one in a jar on your desk. You should try to transform them from something terrifying into something familiar, if – as you say – it’s spiders that you’re scared of.’

‘Jar on the desk,’ I nodded. ‘Not a problem!’

Ms Stanway’s fingers joined to make a white church with a pale-pink roof.

‘Of course, if it was something else – a girl, for instance – then the same principle would apply.’

I wasn't quite ready to *meet* Mia Foley yet, so I opted for the jar on the desk instead. I would have had trouble finding a jar that was big enough, of course, so the only other way of not being anxious was to keep Mia under observation at all times.

That first lunchtime when I started watching her, I felt sick in the stomach. My skin prickled with sweat. If Mia looked in my direction, I had to look away. If she stood up suddenly, I felt a desperate urge to run and hide in the rubbish dumpster, to wait for the truck to come and take me away.

Maybe that's why they call it a crush.

Gradually, day by day, it got better. It wasn't long before I could eat my lunch in front of her. I could turn my back on her. I could lie down, defenceless, staring up at the sky. I could almost forget her, unless there were clouds shaped like angels.

V for Volleyball . . . ? Vitamins . . . ? Video . . . ?
Vanilla . . . ? Vegemite . . . ?

I was making good progress, until one day I overheard some guys talking about who the top ten hottest chicks in our year were. They all agreed on Vanessa and Renata, but Mia's name didn't even come up! I sat and listened for ten whole minutes, until I figured they must have just forgotten about her.

'What about Mia Foley?' I said, casually. 'She's a bit of a babe, isn't she?'

'Four-eyes Foley!' they all laughed. 'She's a rake, mate! A scrawny little chicken.'

Maybe it isn't a phobia or even an obsession. Maybe I just need glasses.

MIA

As soon as she hears the front door open, Harriet starts whining and scratching at the back door. When I let her into the house, she tears up and down the hall, slipping on the polished floorboards as she runs from room to room.

'Hello, girl! Did you miss me?'

As an answer, Harriet leaps kamikaze-style at my face, smashing into my jaw and almost knocking herself out as she tries to lick me.

'Down, girl! Down!'

Harriet was my birthday present. She's a pure-bred beagle – white, tan and black – with big loving eyes, saggy-baggy skin, soft floppy ears and long white socks. Technically, Harriet is no longer a puppy, but sometimes I wonder if she will ever grow up. People say beagles are smart in packs, but stupid on their own. Harriet has already flunked two obedience schools. At six months old she still can't be let off her lead. I don't have any brothers or sisters, so for years and years I campaigned for a dog. But by the time I got Harriet, it was more like having a reckless toddler than a substitute sister.

'Walk, girl?'

I slip on Harriet's lead and we go to the park. I tell her to stay by my side but she's too busy sniffing at trees and

fences to take any notice. At the airport they use beagles as sniffer dogs because of their excellent noses, so Harriet is in her element, searching relentlessly for doggy trails and illegal substances.

Harriet and I sit by the lake to watch the ducks. The ducks know that Harriet is too young and silly to be any real threat. Harriet sits when I say ‘Sit!’, but only if I push her back half down. She soon forgets, and is up and tugging on her lead again, ready to go.

If I had a boyfriend, I’m sure Harriet would be jealous. She wouldn’t let us sit alone by the lake. If we held hands, I’m sure she would leap into the water and attack the ducks, just to embarrass me. If I had a boyfriend . . . How can I contemplate having a boyfriend when I can’t even teach my own dog to ‘Stay’?

WILL

Imaginary Conversation # 216:

Thanks for the flowers, Mia would say. They were so beautiful!

And I would say, *It’s hard to believe the whole point of flowers is to attract bees.*

And Mia would say, *Do you think that bees know how beautiful flowers are?*

Maybe they do, I would say. After all, bees are very intelligent creatures.

Bees are very mysterious, Mia would say. Who knows what they think?

And I would say, *Did you know that they navigate by the angle of the sun?*

Yes, Mia would say. *And they communicate by dancing.*

They have their own secret language, I would say.

Did you know, Mia would say, that all the worker bees are female?

Very mysterious, I would say.

MIA

The truth is, falling in love is not high on my list of priorities right now. I have books to read and homework to do. I have Harriet to look after and orchestra practice twice a week. I don't have the time to fall in love and I don't have the right clothes. To have a boyfriend you need clothes for every occasion. One day you might get invited to the movies, then the next you might get asked to go ice-skating. I have nothing to wear to a cocktail party. I can't imagine what I'd wear to go skydiving.

Having a boyfriend means going places you've never been before. It means doing things you don't want to do, like sucking toes and jumping out of aeroplanes. I swear, I'm not ready for that kind of adventurous lifestyle.

WILL

I have discovered *V*! I have seen Mia Foley walking across the schoolyard and in her hand she was carrying a violin case. *V* is for Violin! *V* is for Victory!

Because of this, I have a whole new range of options:

- a) Walk up to Mia and say, *It's good to see you remembered your violin today. Remember me? The guy with the broken pencil?*
- b) Steal Mia's violin and deliver a ransom note: *Marry me, or else the violin gets it!*
- c) Plan an accidental, violin-related meeting.

Most days, Mia Foley is like a maximum-security facility. Every recess and lunchtime she sits on the same bench, guarded by her two warders. Except on Mondays and Thursdays, when Mia goes down to the assembly hall to rehearse with the school orchestra. Only the musicians are allowed in there, but I could go along, just to make a few enquiries. I might even say I'm interested in playing the triangle. I mean, how difficult can it be to *ting* on a triangle when the conductor gives you the nod?

In preparation, I go to the library and google *orchestras*. There's plenty about violins and not much on triangles, so I brush up on my basic musical terminology (notes, chords, time signatures et cetera) just to be on the safe side. But musical theory isn't really my scene. If Mia puts me on the spot, I'll tell her I have a jazz background, and that history is full of gifted triangle players who have learned to play mainly by ear.

MIA

What, in the name of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, is Will Holland doing here? Shouldn't he be outside on the grass?

Did something fall from the sky and hit him on the head? Surely he's not going to audition? What instrument does he play? Does he realise how surly Ms S can be? No one has *ever* turned up at rehearsal in a tracksuit before. I can't bear to watch . . .

WILL

Ms Stanway opens the door to the room where the orchestra is tuning up. If she hadn't already talked to me about arachnophobia, I'm sure she would turn me away. Instead, she gives me a 'knowing' look and invites me in.

When I tell her I want to audition, she looks sceptical.

'Can you read?' she asks.

'Of course,' I reply, showing her one of my library books.

Ms Stanway frowns and shows me a book of sheet music: *The Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi. 'Can you read *music*?' she asks. 'Can you read *timpani*?'

'Timpani? Hmm . . . I'm familiar with *some* of his work.'

Ms Stanway wags a long finger at me. 'There's more to playing percussion than just banging a few drums,' she says. 'You can sit beside Allan and watch, if you like.'

I'm in!

Allan is way over in the corner, about as far from the violins as you can get, surrounded by all kinds of junk. There are xylophones and glockenspiels, glockenphones and xylospiels, but no triangles. Allan is a weedy guy to look

at, but he can do an excellent drum roll with his big, fluffy sticks: *Brrrrrdummm . . . Brrrrrdummm . . .*

The orchestra tunes up and on the count of four they rip into 'Autumn'. It's all very windy and swirly as Ms Stanway bends and sways like an old elm tree, lifting up her arms and calling out in Italian: '*Allegro! More allegro!*'

I stand to the side, trying to look like Allan's drum roadie, when really I'm watching Mia. She's wearing glasses that make her look unbelievably cool, and the way her fingers slide up and down the neck of the violin is deeply disturbing. Trying not to be noticed, I inch myself slowly along the wall, hoping to get a better view of her.

In the second part of 'Autumn', the music slows right down and the wind instruments take over. I imagine Mia being buried under a pile of fallen leaves. I imagine getting one of those industrial-strength vacuum cleaners that gardeners use and sucking all the leaves off, until she's just lying there on the grass. I can't help it. It's in the music.

All of a sudden Mia looks up and smiles at me. It gives me such a shock, my foot kicks over a cymbal that is leaning against the wall. It falls with an almighty *CRASH!* and everyone looks at me. Mia laughs and Ms Stanway points to the door, with a frown that says, *Take your spiders and leave!*

As I stumble out of the room, Mia smiles and sneaks me a goodbye wave.

It makes me so happy, I turn like a conductor to take my final bow.