

Chapter One

Anna was in the habit of arriving early. It had become the part of her evenings with him she enjoyed most simply: this solitude in which she felt closest to the simple existence of knives and forks and spoons. To picture him walking into the restaurant now, walking with that loose kick from the knee, was to feel complications only loosely the same as pleasure. That was what she expected: when he came in she would trade this happiness for pleasure, but the happiness only occurred to her on such terms—

She had almost finished her drink. Outside her window, less than an arm's length away, the plane tree's leaves turned over in the dry air. She couldn't hear them. Coming here, she had walked upstairs to a different season: the room's wallpaper, even, plum-coloured, and embossed with a climbing pattern of vines. Ornate, decorative, it was not usually a style she could tolerate and yet they met here always; she insisted on it: a world away from her own taste. On the far wall a set of gilt-framed mirrors opened out another room of glassy air. She looked carefully at the middle-aged woman sitting there: a bland half-smile that she had not known she was wearing. Strange: that it would be *that* person he saw. Later, when the restaurant was full, she would forget those mirrors. Glassy and silent still, they would seem

to have fallen behind the noise and life of this room. At this hour, though, the empty restaurant appeared less real than that mirrored one. The light that came broken through the plane trees, and broke again over the table settings, became again one light there. Seeing herself stopped and remote, Anna felt as though she was looking back at something she had already done.

And there he was, down on the street – that navy-suited man darting in front of a car. She caught a flash of his hand as he thanked the driver who had slowed for him. To have seen him before she recognised him gave her a sense of detachment, but also of tenderness. She was at once conscious of how much world there was around them; how, lacking shared habits, they had sanctified familiar places: this restaurant, the river walkway to the Gardens, their Sydney hotel: places that lent the weight of fact to meetings that otherwise hung in memory like so many hallucinations. For that moment she was free of the compulsion to see him. The affair seemed no more than an attempt to give meaning to their betrayals: a strange mechanism that drew in their future to justify their past. Almost from the start, she thought, they had been looking back, trying to find out what had made them do what they had done. That first week, which had seemed an escape from time, was the one time they could live in. She thought how simple it would be to stop seeing him, to block his emails, to screen his calls; and felt elated, as though she had achieved this already.

He seemed to shake off the waiter as he crossed the room. Pausing behind her chair, he rested his hands on her shoulders and bent to kiss the soft indent between her neck and jaw. He dragged his chair

around a corner of the table before he sat down. His place setting, across the table from them still, marked the deliberateness of their intimacy. Always, when they met, there was this moment when they forfeited the intervening days; when, stepping out of their own lives, they seemed to step into a noontday glare of feeling. There was something posed about how, in this first moment, they held their gaze apart. She thought: This is how I know him: in three-quarter profile, his knee against mine.

In fact, he looked always a little different from how she had remembered him. Her memory kept still images but he had a thin, fine, mobile face. Five years younger than she was, his face was everywhere marked with wrinkles which, because they emphasised his expression of wariness, made him look younger than he was. He had the self-absorption of sensitive and ambitious people: he was forever watching people to discover what they thought of him. His hair, dark still, he combed back from his forehead. Only one curl, tumbling forwards, justified his nervous habit of brushing his fingers over his forehead.

She said, 'How was the flight?'

He shrugged, smiled and signalled to the waiter for a drink – gin and tonic, the same as hers; and another for her also. He lent across the table and looked at her. He was always in movement like this; he made a drama of every meeting. It annoyed her, suddenly, and made her brutal.

'So I've packaged her off.'

'Kit? To your parents?' He reached across the table. She looked down at his hand – its few black hairs, the fingers, wide-knuckled,

ending in yellowish, squared nails – and found herself resenting his gratitude: that he should make this matter of her daughter simply a tribute to him. She forced herself to turn her hand and gently tap the underside of his wrist.

‘All the way to the station I had this monstrous desire to be rid of her. I suddenly realised how demoralising these months alone in the house with her have been. We sit at dinner and silence comes out of the furniture. “What did you do today?” “Nothing.” What’s so galling is she then spends hours on her phone in her room.’

She caught him looking around for his drink. For all the agitation of his gestures, his manner of speaking was cool and ironic. He said: ‘She blames you for her father leaving.’

She shrugged. ‘Well but her attention to detail – really, from how much I spend on dry cleaning to how many fingers I use to type messages on my phone. At the station she ticked me off for being rude to the ticket lady. The truth is, I *was* rude to the ticket lady. I’m hypnotised by her contempt for me. I become as dreadful as she thinks I am.’

He smiled abstractedly. She saw that he had lived out this dinner, the start of their first full week together, already in his mind. This was not how it was supposed to start. Kit was not what he had meant for them to talk about. He had told Clare, he had moved out. *Now*, he wanted to say – now *we* start making plans. She went on: ‘The train pulled out and I discovered I was shaking. I had to sit down. Some little gnome of a man in a bowler hat stopped to ask was I alright. The sound of the train–’

‘Kit, though? She was happy to be going?’

‘Mostly curious, I think. She’s never been there. Delighted to escape from me, of course.’

‘To her grandparents? What do you mean she’s never been there?’

Anna heard disapproval behind what she thought of as the professional neutrality of his voice. Raised a Catholic, he could set aside belief itself, she thought, but not the habit of seeing every human decision in a moral light. For him every place – this restaurant, even, with its white napery, its thick carpet – resembled a Mantegna landscape, all stark outcrops and no shade. Strange, she thought, looking mockingly at him, that his disapproval never offended her. She had come to ignore his scruples, even to travesty a little what she felt. For all his nervy fastidiousness he was something of a masochist: he had forfeited self-regard to meet her here. It was almost flattering. Having always doubted what it was that people meant by feeling, he was reassured to find himself in love so much against his better judgement. Even here, in this room of muted good taste, they met intensely: his disapproval made them dramatic to themselves.

She said, ‘We went there once, years ago. I doubt she’d remember. Matt wanted to meet them—’

‘They didn’t like him?’

‘Darling, they don’t *like* anyone. They don’t register personality.’

‘But what did they say?’

‘Nothing. No one said anything.’

‘But you’ve kept Kit away from them?’

‘You’re looking for some hidden reason. The fact is I didn’t want to see them, not when I first got back from London, not till I’d set

up the gallery. By that time, I'd stayed away so long I would have needed a reason to go.'

The waiter appeared with their drinks – a movement so timed to Anna's own she realised he must have been waiting for a moment to break into their talk. Anna drew her legs away from Peter's, a withdrawal of physical contact which exaggerated their closeness. The waiter's deliberate innocuousness – his pale, slack, smooth cheeks, greenish-blond hair – insinuated that he noticed as little as possible. They knew the menu by heart. Sitting straight, she and Peter watched each other while the waiter took their orders. Unkindly, they turned to watch him vanish through a swing door, leaving them in the blank stage that is an empty restaurant, this one more implacable for its subtle richness, its impersonal good taste. Watching the door swing back and forth, Anna did not doubt that he had marked them down as illicit lovers – though, how? More than touching, their nervy antagonism declared it: secrecy created a need for outsiders. Only in opposition could the surrounding world exist for them.

She threw off, 'That waiter smiles while he talks.'

Peter paused, one fingertip rubbing condensation from the base of his drink. 'It's strange. I never thought of you having parents.' With a gesture of her hand she pushed the remark away. 'No, but it is odd,' he persisted. 'I don't think I even realised you grew up in the country.'

'Hardly the country,' she said. 'A seaside town.'

'Which you never go back to.'

'I created myself,' she said, smiling malignly. It was what she said

in interviews. All those self-consciously clever young men: they wrote it down without question. Remembering, she turned away to look out at the leaves: never still, how they suddenly lifted sideways and apart. She said, 'It might be the one thing we have in common, how we escaped our background.'

'I see my parents every month.'

'I can imagine. Sunday lunch. They spend all Saturday cleaning the house. Then for an hour they sit around the table shining lights at you, their successful son. Only when you leave they make a cup of tea and put their feet up.'

He laughed. 'Clare hates it.'

It had often struck Anna as the strangest thing: how little, till now, she had been jealous of Clare. She had pictured Clare as another of the wives at that first dinner party the night when she and Peter had met: couples talking of schools and football coaches and renovations with an iron complacency – talk in which whatever was giant in them, and desperate, was shut out; that night when, sitting side by side at that table, saying I and not we, she and Peter had come to exist for each other outside their social lives. She never had learned what had kept Clare away that night.

Crumb-hunters, she called them: people who spent too long saying good-bye, waiting around after openings for some intimate word, as though only lack of time had kept her from speaking with them. When at last they left she always put a red line through their names. At that dinner party, though, the idea of couples had so predominated she and Peter had found themselves the last to go. She remembered his face as she had seen it then: under a streetlight,

unnaturally shadowed, while the last of the couples' cars turned out of the street. They faced each other in that place where, if they had been a couple like the others, their true conversation would have started, the one in which they went over all the evening's talk and discovered for each other its scandals and hypocrisies.

Now, involuntarily, Anna imagined Peter and his wife, the two of them in their car together driving home from all their years of Sunday lunches. The hurt was physical: she had to catch her breath. She said: 'I wouldn't go with you.'

He said nothing; he looked at her hand on the table.

She said, 'You mean: they wouldn't have me.'

In a high voice he said: 'It may be the end of our Sunday lunches.'

'You haven't told them—'

'Not yet.' He looked across the room to their reflection in the mirror. Following his gaze, she saw the two of them in glass: shapes cut from the unstill green of the leaves. Turning from the mirror at the same instant, they saw each other with distance still in their eyes. Forcing a lightness, he said, 'I suppose your parents won't notice.'

'So long as you don't mind them calling you Matt.'

'I won't mind anything.' He looked away, down into the street. She saw his face in profile, thrown into relief by the light behind it. 'Why, though?' he said suddenly. 'Your parents...'

She looked across the table at him. It was not possible to tell him, to recreate in this place, how it had been. She could hardly believe now that it had been as she remembered, a feeling of dread even now bound up with the memory of waiting with Treen at the end of the drive. It had been a superstition she and her sister had

never discussed: they had always waited for the school bus to turn the corner before they started up to the house. In her memory it was always summer, that sudden quiet after the bus had left filling with insect sounds as they walked over the gravel. They were always walking out of wide sunlight into the permanent indoorness of the house. Always their father stood waiting in a front room, stepping out into the hall to meet them with his dazed formal look. Days when their mother would not have gone outside, whole days when she stayed in bed with one of her *Reader's Digest* conspiracies: the Bermuda triangle, Admiral Byrd, the moon landing.

'Oh! They have this grudge against the whole world,' she said. 'I suppose to that extent they've noticed they're obsolete; only it takes the form of hating the postman for letting the corners of an envelope get wet.'

She had been speaking with a brittle edge; she had meant to be amusing. Looking up, she was surprised to see Peter's eyes dark with feeling. And my daughter is there, she told herself. Had they made her go around the house at six closing the blinds? Circular crocheted handles hung on woven string, only the exact angle and flick would make those blinds stay down. Summer and winter, the blinds down at six. It struck Anna that if she could just see what Kit saw there, she would at last know the truth of it; she would know how it had really been, free from the exaggerations and distortions of her memory. In the same instant she thought: let that girl find it out: how easy, how free of humiliation, her own life has been.

She said, 'You think I exaggerate, which makes it impossible to explain. They never think anything. They never notice anything.'

They're rude the whole time – they're so frightened of making a fuss. Do you know, that whole week we were there they didn't once ask about London. The only way they even acknowledged I had a gallery was to make me go round valuing their horrible landscapes. The highlight of the week was telling them the eighteenth-century map they had thought so valuable was a fake.'

He tightened the skin around his right eye, a habit he had whenever someone's answer didn't suffice. Sceptical, precise – the law had made him careful even in thought. Characteristic of him to pause, frowning, in the middle of a sentence, trying to find the exact word. Yes, impossible to explain to him how it had been, the atmosphere of that house, at once overwrought and passive. The laziness of rubbish collectors, the rudeness of summer holiday-makers, the corruption of their local council, ticketed parking: for her parents these were not single annoyances: they opened into an entire rejection of what went on outside their property. Always formal with each other, her parents' only intimacy was a shared obsession with the past.

She said, 'Their trouble is they *were* rich. My grandfather must have been spectacularly incompetent, though when I knew him it was hard to see him as spectacularly anything, sinking into his armchair all afternoon. I have an uncle who inherited some property and promptly sold it off. I've never met him, no one has spoken to him since. It isn't property for them; it's history, so long as you take history to be a sort of borrowed self-importance. Have I really never told you how my parents met? He came to the house with an interest in early Australian cedar furniture. He was a Jesuit; he gave it up – *For love*,' she added, falsetto.

‘All our furniture was Ikea.’

She touched his cheek. ‘No, we grew up in a long dream. Really, I had no idea of other people. I arrived in London— I’m embarrassed even to remember. Amy would ask me about someone who’d come into the gallery and I’d say, “Oh yes, very nice.” Then she’d tell me their background and what they’d lied about and who they’d married and why they’d married them and how much their watch had cost.’

She saw him looking at her. ‘You’re thinking how much nicer I must have been back then. Actually, no. That sort of dreamer is absolutely ruthless.’

Anna thought of her daughter’s hands as she had seen them last, folded on a bare knee, she and Kit sitting side by side on a bench at that filthy station. With their slackness, their long tapering fingers, her daughter’s hands had reminded Anna of the hands in Byzantine icons. In truth, Anna felt an icon worshipper’s devotion to the physical fact of Kit: that colourless fuzz along the edge of her cheeks, the vertebrae rising against the skin at the back of her neck – these provoked a craving tenderness. But her comments phrased like questions, her way of hovering at the edge of conversations, made Anna set her jaw. What could be more demanding than all that hopeful reticence, that palpable and doomed wish to please?

‘So now Kit—’

‘Now Kit’s there. Yes.’

‘Have you told her about us?’

‘She can’t stand being in the house with me—’

‘She must suspect. It might help her to have it clear.’

‘She’s fifteen. She doesn’t even see anybody else. She went to

France last year for three weeks with the school and came back with a hundred photographs, all of churches. No, it is really impossible to realise how young she is. She worries whether shop assistants like her. Trying to have a conversation with her – you might as well be waving flags.’

She looked away at the next table, its cloth phosphorescent in the gathering dusk. At the back of the room the men finding seats had to be lawyers, she thought. The two women in the group were also wearing dark grey suits. The men called across the table to each other: the nervous charge of a group at the beginning of some willed celebration. They were choosing wine: extravagance was part of the ritual: a stocky, grey-haired man at one end of the table had the drinks list. Anna suddenly imagined them in groups of two and three veering along a dark footpath at 3am. By then the women, however much they might dislike each other, would have shared a taxi home.

‘Friends of yours?’ she asked.

He twisted in his chair. The first instant, he grinned: an expression of embarrassed conspiracy, quickly suppressed. Not his workmates but they could have been; not his dinner but it could have been. Turning back to Anna, he shook his head. This picture of the life he had apart from her made Anna push her chair back and set off across the room. Couples had been coming in without her noticing. One was young: the girl had had her hair done specially, though with her profile that chignon had been a mistake. The father of one of Anna’s school friends had categorised women as ‘girlfriend-’ or ‘wife-material’. A padding, complacent man...

Anna was not so much walking as steering across the room. Tables and corners kept looming up. Not that she was drunk, she thought, so much as caught up in the atmosphere their talk had made. She had been telling Peter the truth; though what she felt at the same time, and vertiginously, was that she could have been telling lies. This was why she and Matt had stopped going out for dinner, why hosts sat married couples apart at dinner parties: they had lost the ability to make themselves up in words, like characters in a book. The floorboard that sounded in the hall, the gate that needed to be lifted to the latch: talk had come to seem false against the tacit intimacy of their years together in the same house. Was that what I did wrong, she asked herself. Trust to that intimacy too much? The night after Kit flew off to France, she and Matt had sat down to dinner together. She could still remember the texture of that failure: not just how little they said but how little had seemed sayable. Years of unfelt action massed in them still: making Kit's lunch, shouting upstairs to her to get in the shower, clearing the breakfast things, remembering Kit's tennis racquet.

In the bathroom's rococo mirror Anna saw her face hovering oddly separate from thought. Eyeliner smudged under one eye... She ran her wrists under the cold tap, steadying one hip against the bench. In the too-yellow mirror she fixed her hair, redid her face. When she came back into the room Peter was sitting very still, staring at his hands with a slight frown as if thinking some problem through. She thought, I'll remember him like that. It was night outside – night had fallen while she was gone from the room. Behind him now the window indistinctly reflected their table: a structure of shadows, in

which the white napery gleamed. Through the window's reflection, Christmas lights: they were hung from wires over the street. Beneath them on the street, a white horse was pulling a carriage up the hill, traffic banking behind it. The sound of the horse's shod hooves came dulled like echoes through the double-glazed glass. In the carriage, a middle-aged couple was glancing back at the cars behind them, their flushed embarrassment a version of delight.

'The deliberate happiness of tourists,' she said. 'Finally getting enough attention.'

He laughed. This was their ease: her placid malice, the banter that modulated into contempt. 'I've got you something.' He set a navy box on the table. She knew he meant this gift to signal the event: his week in Melbourne, his advance into the house. Only this ceremoniousness marked him off from the social world that he inhabited, otherwise, like a native. A scholarship student at school, he had fallen in with the boys who spent their summers at family beach houses and their winters in the snow: an unassuming and, finally, inevitable guest. His clothes must have been a problem, she thought. Doubtless his success had depended on a readiness to disarm mockery by first mocking himself. What he had not managed to subdue, she thought, was this desire to mark occasions. He lacked that unconsciousness which, more than anything, marked the bounds of that inherited world, which had no end and no beginning for those who lived in it: it was outside history; it was how they knew each other.

Now he said: 'You're annoyed that I bring you a present every time.'

She had hurt him; she felt the dissatisfaction that was her version of regret. Reaching across the table, she pressed her fingers to his cheek. 'I'll open it at the hotel. Not here.'

The waiter brought their food and they started to eat.