

THE  
TIES  
THAT  
BIND

J U L I E   K A Y

# Chapter One

## *Anna*

Lying in bed, Anna could hear the worried voices closing in on her, the high-pitched concerns of her only daughter, mixed with her son's urgent whispers.

'What do we do, Molly? What's wrong with her?'

'She's just lost Dad, Nick. She's grieving, and she's shutting down. Poor Mum.' Molly turned to look out the bedroom window, tears sliding down her face.

'Well, I'm ringing Doctor Goddard, she needs help to deal with Dad's death,' replied Nick, picking up his Mum's mobile phone and scrolling through her contacts.

From outside the window, Anna could just hear the early morning sounds of the magpies warbling. Every morning, for as long as she could remember, she had woken to that sound. Pat would come in not long after with a nice hot cup of tea and the paper. He would put the cup down on her bedside table and say, 'Time to get up my lovely,' as he pulled up the bedroom blind to look out at the magpies sitting in the old elm tree by the agapanthus patch. Every morning, for as long as she could remember.

She moaned in her half-sleep. In her mind, she answered him as she always had. *You are too good to me, my love.*

Her children were worried about her, but they needn't have been. Even though he had been only sixty, she knew it was Pat's time. He

had been sick for only a short time, but it hit him hard. The cancer had been there too long, lying dormant, doing so much damage before they even realised he was sick.

She thought about all the plans they had made for their early retirement. Before he was diagnosed, they had booked a European bus trip for the following year, starting in England and ending up in the Greek islands, where they would leave the tour and do some independent travelling. Even now there were dog-eared travel brochures scattered on the dining room table, left there as a distant reward for the fight they both knew was ahead. They would now be moved aside to make way for the glossy Tudor-style funeral homes and leafy crematorium brochures that Molly had brought to the house earlier that day.

Like a tapestry, she saw the major parts of her life woven into the patterns and threads—her wedding, babies being born, their first home and then further back to her childhood. Her beautiful sister, Josie, standing on the old mullock heap with the wind blowing her curly blonde hair around her face. Her head thrown back, laughing her bigger than life laugh, every part of her alive and vibrant. Josie was motioning to Anna to come and stand beside her. Her mouth twitched into a smile, as it always did when she thought of her sister. In the background, the Wine twins dug in the dirt, sifting through the rubble, looking for the hidden treasure of leftover gold. They were all there together, as it should be. She reached out her hand to try to touch them, to hold them to her, but they disappeared before her eyes as she let out an involuntary cry.

‘It’s not fair,’ she wept. ‘You’ve left me here alone. You’ve left me again.’ Tears squeezed through her closed eyelids and she screamed out at the pain and injustice of being the last one left.

Oh, how could they have done this to her again? Why was life so cruel?

Someone else entered the room. She felt the gentle hands of Doctor Goddard lift off the covers and pull up her nighty, soothing

her buttocks with cool water before she felt the distant sting of a needle. She felt the medicine go into her veins, working its way steadily towards her heart. But she knew that when the liquid hit her chambers, aorta, and the valves that made up that organ, it would not heal her, it would not save her. And so she slept. She had no dreams, no memories, only blackness.



Two weeks later, she stood outside the whitewashed church of St Agatha's and went through the motions of thanking all the mourners who came to pay their respects. It was one of those rare Melbourne winter days she had always loved. The sun shone through the puffy white clouds, highlighting brilliantly with the blue of the sky. If this was any other day, she would be curled up on her camp chair in the backyard chasing the sunshine around, reading and drinking hot sweet tea. But it was not any other day, and here she was.

A small blue wren caught her attention as it jumped from bush to bush, balancing on thin branches, pecking at tiny thrips hiding between the leaves. The wind had died down and she could see some of the mourners pulling at their black starchy suits and plaid woollen skirts, uncomfortable in the winter sunshine. Molly and Nick stood either side of her, backs ramrod straight, like sentinels guarding the most precious of treasures. As the hearse that held her husband of thirty years pulled away, she felt the comforting hand of her daughter squeeze her elbow as if to remind her that she wasn't alone—she still had them.

The small party of mourners met back in the foyer of the church for finger sandwiches, lemon tarts, tea and coffee. Everyone had a kind word to say about Pat but all Anna could think about was going home, crawling into bed, pulling the doona over her head and seeing only blackness. As she sat on the hard grey plastic chair, her memory moved to another time, another funeral—one just as devastating...



When Anna was twelve, her mother died. Anna remembered the funeral more than she remembered her mother, which made her sad. She remembered standing between her sister Josie and her father. Her father's dark blue suit felt scratchy and stiff on her cheek. Josie was in her Sunday best, standing formally next to her, resting a thin arm on her shoulder. She had just turned fourteen. Her father was sniffing into a blue and white striped hanky. She had never ever seen her father cry; his tears scared her more than the prospect of not ever seeing her mother again.

Anna looked around at all the townspeople. Most were looking solemnly down at their feet. A few kept trying to sneak a look at the grieving family, without making it obvious, trying not to make eye contact, she noticed. The Wine twins were standing next to their father and mother. The smaller one looked bored, standing there in his cheap grey suit and starched white shirt. He kept pulling at the collar, wiping away the sweat that was pooling around his neck. The other one, the taller one, was looking at her. She lowered her head quickly in case he noticed that she had noticed him staring.

She didn't know much about the twins, only that they were a couple of years above her at school. The family had arrived in Daylesford six months ago from a neighbouring country town to buy a bed and breakfast in Hepburn Springs. The twins played every type of sport that the school offered and dominated in all of them, especially the taller one, Jonathan. They were not identical twins. Jon was tall and thin with sandy-coloured hair, with a smattering of freckles across his nose. He had blonde eyebrows and piercing blue eyes with a crooked, cheeky smile. Everyone liked him. The other one, Patrick, was about half a head shorter with a heavier build—not fat, just stockier. He also had blonde hair but it grew like a crazy bird's nest around his head. He looked untidy and restless all the time, looking around at everyone, standing from one foot to the other, swinging

his arms, moving his body, always on the lookout—though for what, she did not know. He had blue eyes that crinkled up at the corners when he bothered to smile.

‘Let us pray,’ the minister’s voice echoed through the stifling church as the congregation got to its feet.

After the funeral, the mourners went back to the parish hall for tea and sandwiches. The Country Women’s Association had organised the repast, realising that Bob Thorn would not be in any state to organise such an event. The hall, attached to the back of the church, was made of cream-coloured fibro cement sheeting. At the end of the room was a small stage where the children of Daylesford would perform Christmas carols to the elderly every year. All the times that Anna had been in this hall, she’d never imagined she would be mourning her mother in it.

She stayed close to her father, listening and watching as the townsfolk talked kindly about her mother. She looked over to where Josie was standing on the other side of the hall. Several local boys stood around her, hanging on to her every word. She was not her usual vivacious self—rather more subdued, as befit the occasion. Her beautiful, long blonde hair was a mess of wild curls that refused to be tamed. She was tall for her age and developing womanly curves that all the boys seemed to notice. She had bright blue eyes and long dark lashes that framed her almond-shaped eyes perfectly. In fact, Josie was perfect in every way, though the beauty she showed on the outside didn’t even begin to measure up to the beauty that was inside her.

Anna loved her older sister dearly. When things had gone terribly wrong at home and her mother had taken to bed more and more, it had been Josie who looked after her. It was Josie who made their dinner, did the washing, cleaned the house, and got her ready for school as their father spent more and more time away from home—most nights he could be found at the Daylesford Arms Hotel. Anything rather than face the accusations of his wife or the pleading gaze of his daughters. With their father absent, Josie even took on

the role of their mother's nurse, bathing her and keeping her fed and cleaned.

The girls did not know what horrible disease had taken over their mother's mind, but she became less and less able to communicate, eventually falling into a deep, dark depression she could not crawl out of.

On the morning that Josie discovered their mother's body, she tried to protect her younger sibling from the sight. But Josie could not close the door quickly enough and Anna got a glimpse of the horror in the room. She never told Josie what she had seen, instead letting Josie invent the fantasy of a mother who died of natural causes and loved them more than anything.

When the beer came out, Josie tapped Anna on the shoulder and led her away from the church, back home to the old miner's cottage they lived in. Their father was not a pleasant man to be around when he drank.

Away from the heavy atmosphere of the funeral and once again in the fresh air of late spring, Josie and Anna headed out the back of the property to the old mullock heap that lay behind their small piece of land. Josie sat down on the nearest log, pushing her long curls behind her ears. She looked as tired as Anna had ever seen her, but she put on a wan smile even so. Anna could tell she was trying to be strong and it gave her an ache deep inside that she didn't think tears could fix.

'So, Miss Anna, here we are,' said Josie, rubbing Anna's knee with a warm hand. 'Just you and me, finally. How are you feeling?'

Anna dropped her gaze. She had a lump in her throat that made it hard to speak. 'I don't know,' she said, her eyes pricking with hot tears. 'I just don't want things to change, but everything's going to, isn't it? Nothing's going to stay the same and I just don't know what's going to happen to us.' Her face scrunched up and she held back a sob, wishing she could be as strong as her sister.

Josie put an arm around her. When she spoke, her voice was soft

and full of a quiet confidence Anna did not feel. 'We'll be fine, Missy,' she said. 'I will always be here to take care of you, no matter what happens.' Josie squeezed her sister tight.

Anna's breath caught in her throat. 'But... if Mum could leave, then you could too,' she whispered. Her voice wavered.

'I'll never leave you,' Josie promised her. 'We will grow old together, and our husbands will just have to put up with the two of us.' She laughed, but Anna could hear the sadness behind her smile.

Anna grinned and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. 'Husbands! Yuck!'

'Oh, you have a lot to learn, Miss Anna!' Josie said, giving her leg a small pat.

She put her arm around her sister again and the two girls took solace from each other's presence as the hot November sun beat down upon them on their log. The sounds of the bush surrounded them and they lapsed into miserable silence, Anna's head on Josie's shoulder.

Something snapped in the undergrowth behind them and they heard a sharp, piercing whistle. They turned to see who or what was making the noise, in time to see Jonathan Wine step out from behind a bush. He seemed surprised to see the sisters there.

'Josie, Anna,' he said, nodding to them. 'Sorry to interrupt you, there. Have you seen a sandy terrier come this way? My old dog Billy's gone missing.'

In the distance, they heard the sound of someone calling Jon's name.

'That's Pat,' said Jon, looking down at them. But he didn't move.

'Help,' came another cry through the bushland. 'Billy's stuck!'

Jon grinned and excused himself, heading off in the direction of the call.

The girls looked at each other. They got up and followed.

Jon, Anna and Josie ran through the trees towards the sound of Pat yelling. They skidded to a halt by a giant white gum tree and



caught sight of Pat Wine on the ground, his torso half-hidden down an old mining shaft.

Pat's voice echoed out of the hole in the ground. 'He's down here, Jon, I just... can't quite... reach him.'

Pat heaved himself backwards out of the shaft and sat up, breathing hard. Noticing Anna and Josie, he gave the girls a nod.

'I'm... sorry about your Mum,' he said with a bowed head. They were distracted by the whimpering sounds of Billy the dog and they all peered down the shaft to look at him.

'Is he injured, do you think?' whispered Josie, as if she didn't want the old dog to hear her.

'Not sure yet,' said Pat, matter-of-fact as always. He looked Anna up and down contemplatively. 'Anna, you're quite little, do you think if we hold on to your legs you'd be able to grab old Billy? Then we can haul you both up again.'

She blushed under the gaze of the other three but, determined not to leave Billy stranded, quickly hitched her pretty black funeral dress into her underwear so as not to be hampered by the flowing material. She stepped forwards towards the mine's opening.

Jon and Pat held onto Anna's legs and lowered her into the mine. She tried not to think about the darkness all around her. She felt around blindly and, with some relief, felt the fur of the dog beneath her hands. She scooped her hands under his front legs and with an enormous effort, managed to haul him up onto her chest, yelling in a high-pitched voice, 'Got him!'

The brothers heaved with all their strength to raise the pair back into the light of day. They collapsed backwards onto the ground. Billy jumped up, licking Anna's face as though he knew that she had saved him. Anna giggled and everyone joined in, their relief palpable. Pat gave Billy a quick once-over with his hands to make sure there were no injuries or broken bones.

'He looks perfectly fine, thank God,' said Pat, grinning.

'I think you could do with a wash, Anna,' Josie laughed.

Anna looked down. She had the brown earth of the mine shaft all over her dress and dark smudges all up her arms. Her thick, dark curls were stuck with twigs and leaves from the Australian bushland. She blushed.

‘There’s a stream over there behind that mullock heap,’ said Jon, pointing in the direction of the mound. ‘You could wash off there.’

They walked to the stream surrounded by the sounds of the Australian bush. As late afternoon approached, they could hear the first call of the cicadas with their high-pitched buzzing and clicking noises, along with the screech of the black cockatoos who frequented the windbreak pine trees near the stream. Their feet bit into the crisp, dry leaves, breaking twigs and scaring small insects and lizards across the path. It was peaceful—the only noise, the noise of nature.

When they got to the stream, Josie got out her hankie and passed it to Anna. Billy jumped into the icy water, splashing them all, and then decided to roll around in the mud on the bank.

Pat and Jon rolled up their pants and waded out into the flowing stream, trying to catch the little river blackfish that hid among the weedy outcrops of the shallow waters. The sound of the kookaburras laughing echoed through the trees with the occasional warble of a magpie. This was their bush, this was their noise, and the children had grown up among these familiar sounds.

Anna and Josie lay on the bank looking up at the blue sky, feeling the warmth of the sun soak their faces. Jon came and sat down beside them just as Billy came racing back and plonked himself right on top of Anna.

‘Well, my dress is certainly ruined now,’ she laughed.

‘Er, will you get into trouble from your dad?’ asked Pat from the water’s edge. He sounded concerned.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ said Josie, rolling her eyes. ‘Dad wouldn’t even notice. Anyway, I’m pretty sure we won’t be seeing him tonight. He’ll be down at the Daylesford Arms Hotel drowning his sorrows... again.’

Anna thought Josie looked more upset than usual at this. Their father was spending more and more time at the pub these days and even when he did come home, he was in such an inebriated state that the girls would avoid him by hiding in their bedroom. She knew Josie bore the brunt of his bad moods. She hoped it wouldn't get worse now with their mother gone.



They stayed by the bank until the last of the November sunrays left their faces. As dusk spread across the property they started back for home, and when the group separated at the twisted yellow banksia bush that marked the edge of the Thorn girls' property, Jon called back, 'See ya tomorrow, girls. We'll meet you at the mullock heap at ten. I'll bring my fishing rods.' With a wave of his hand, they were gone.

Now they were alone again, Anna tried not to think about the empty space where their mother used to be, waiting for them at home. Her eyes stung with unshed tears.

Josie, too, was more subdued, though she did better at hiding it. 'Well, who would have thought that the Wino twins would be so nice,' she said, smiling. 'I don't know about fishing, but they are great company.'

The girls shut the door to the silent house behind them. It would be a long time before their father rolled in, if he did at all. Josie boiled up some water to put in the bath to soak Anna's dress, and then made them sweet tea and buttered toast for dinner.

'I'm sorry it's not much,' Josie sighed. 'I will get some food tomorrow.'

The girls sat in the cramped kitchen trying to eat their toast, though neither girl found it easy to eat. Anna was thinking about their mother and how their lives might change. Her chest felt like it was caving under the weight of her grief and she felt scared for

what the future might hold. The old wooden table, which Josie had scrubbed to perfection, felt empty, and the girls instinctively looked towards the spot where their mother would always sit when they were having tea.

Anna held back a sob. 'You won't leave me, will you, Josie?' she said, sniffing quietly. Her throat felt raw. 'I think I might die if you left me.' With that admission, the floodgates opened and she wept onto the tabletop. She couldn't see how life could ever be the same again, and the pain of loss felt almost too much to bear.

Josie got up and held her sister tight, stroking her thick, curly hair. 'I'm not going anywhere, I promise,' she whispered, rocking Anna back and forth as she sobbed. 'Come on, now, we're going to jump into bed, okay?' She smoothed Anna's hair back off her face.

Anna nodded, wiping the tears away. She felt clammy and broken.

'We have a date with the Wino twins tomorrow, don't forget,' Josie continued, ruffling her sister's dark curls affectionately. 'We'll be okay, I promise.'