

## **Songs for Beginners**

by Rachel McCarron

### One – Walsh and Thomas (Deceased)

Hannah's dad died the day her period started. The ache in the pit of her stomach on the discovery of blood in her knickers was calamity enough without the news which followed. At eleven, she was old enough, she supposed, but she hadn't anticipated the curse just yet, and she hadn't expected the death of her father at all.

Most of what Hannah knew about menstruation had been gleaned from the chatter of other pre-teens. Sometimes it seemed as though they talked about nothing else – girls desperate to start, and some claiming to have done so already. Hannah hovered on the edges and had nothing to contribute to the angst of the other first year girls, but she would listen and watch as she always did.

'It means you're a woman,' said Lorraine Barker in the yard at afternoon break. She pushed her chest out as if to demonstrate, and Hannah tried not to stare. She didn't want anyone to know she had started, but this was only the girls' usual menstrually-obsessed ramblings, and Lorraine ignored her.

'There's something wrong with you if you don't start before you're fourteen,' said Marilyn Shincliffe, who had announced the arrival of her period on her twelfth birthday. Marilyn had no need to emphasise the mountainous terrain of her bosom, and she revelled in the attention it drew from the boys. It drew Hannah's attention too and made her feel strange

in a way she couldn't quite identify. It might have been envy – a girl could be forgiven for envying that chest – but deep down, she suspected it was something more.

'I heard Shirley Bevan started in primary school,' said Alison Parr.

'Oh my God, that's not right. You're not supposed to start until you're twelve,' said Marilyn.

At almost twelve, here was Hannah, a woman, however flat-chested, and more than capable of walking home by herself. So, something must've been wrong for her grandmother to come and collect her after school.

'You're to stay with me for a bit, okay cariad?' said Nain.

'Why what's happened?'

It wasn't unusual for Hannah to stay at Nain's. She went there quite often for weekends or in the school holidays to give Mum and Dad some space, as Nain always put it. But Hannah could sense it was different this time. Unplanned. Urgent. Serious.

'We'll talk about it later, love. Come on, let's get you home.'

By home she meant her house, not Hannah's. But the comforting smell of baking and the cosy safety of Nain's plush red sofa was what she needed. Hannah's house was something of a disaster zone in those days with Mum and Dad both working shifts, and no one motivated towards housework. At Nain's she had the first decent meal she'd eaten in ages, the luxury of hot water for a bath, and clean clothes too because Nain had an automatic washing machine, not like the ancient twin-tub at Hannah's that kept breaking down.

The ordinariness of tea and television at her grandmother's house made Hannah wonder if she was mistaken about there being anything wrong, but then Nain explained, as gently as she could, that Dad had died.

'How?'

‘You don’t need to know, cariad. Just know that he loved you. And he would be here now if there was any way he could be.’

‘Did it happen at work?’ Hannah knew from television that being a police officer could be dangerous, but whenever she had asked Dad about it, he always said the crime in small town North Wales wasn’t that serious. Now she imagined a car chase resulting in a fatal crash.

But Nain evaded Hannah’s questions, apart from the one about who would fix the washing machine now. ‘I’ll show you how to fix it,’ said Nain.

The numbing unreality of the news plunged Hannah into silence. She settled onto the sofa and watched TV, trying to ignore the lurching in her stomach, until Mum arrived with a big bag full of Hannah’s things – clothes which Nain put straight in the wash, a few books and tapes gathered from the mess in her room, and the Etch-a-Sketch she’d grown bored with. Mum’s smudged mascara told Hannah she had been crying, but she wasn’t crying now. She fidgeted as she smoked a cigarette, and she sounded cross when she spoke.

There was something about *Top of the Pops* that granted a sense of normality to a Thursday evening however abnormal the day. She turned the sound down to listen to the voices of Mum and Nain behind the kitchen door while keeping an eye on the telly in case something good came on. The hit parade in the autumn of 1971 hadn’t fluctuated much, but Hannah waited to see Rod Stewart miming to *Maggie May* for the fifth week in a row. She didn’t especially like the singer, but something about the song got stuck in her head, and the story of a lad being lured away from school by an older woman intrigued her.

Hannah heard arguing, crying, whispering, then silence before Mum breezed back into the lounge, switched off *Maggie* mid-flow, and told Hannah that she wouldn’t have to go to school tomorrow. Like Rod playing truant, although he had other reasons. Her grandmother sat beside her and drew her in beneath a protective arm but didn’t say anything.

‘You’re to stay with Nain for a few days until I get things sorted,’ said Mum.

‘Get what sorted?’

‘There’s a lot to do, love, but nothing for you to worry about.’

Hannah’s stomach knotted as she shivered and sweated. She wanted to ask what had happened to Dad, but something about Mum’s brittle demeanour told her not to. She kept her confusion to herself because perhaps she didn’t want to know.

‘Mum?’

‘What, love?’

‘I started my period.’

‘Oh.’

‘Mrs O’Connor gave me some sanitary towels.’

‘That’s okay then.’

‘I don’t feel well, Mum.’

Hannah sobbed, and Nain hugged her while Mum stared at the blank TV and lit another cigarette, blinking back her own tears.

Hannah spent the next day in her pyjamas, clutching a hot water bottle and reading *Ozma of Oz*. She loved to read, especially stories about orphans like Dorothy Gale, Anne Shirley and Pippi Longstocking. These resilient girls were kindred spirits, as Anne-with-an-E would have put it, even though Hannah wasn’t an orphan, and her stomach cramps told her she wasn’t a little girl anymore. She should be able to look after herself, and she shouldn’t be reading childish books about Oz, however comforting.

‘How are you bearing up, cariad?’ Nain handed Hannah a packet of Dr Whites and showed her how to attach them to the sanitary belt.

‘I’m fine,’ she said as tears fell. The arms that enfolded Hannah were safe and warm and full of love, but she envied the girls whose mothers held them. Marilyn Shincliffe’s mum had probably gift-wrapped sanitary towels for her birthday.

Mum called round later, but she seemed distracted by what she called ‘arrangements,’ ignoring Hannah to talk to Nain.

‘I can help,’ said Hannah.

‘Be a good girl and go up to your room,’ said Mum.

It wasn’t Hannah’s room – just where she slept when she stayed at Nain’s – but she did feel at home. She had more space to sprawl out, and she liked the wallpaper, faded and unchanged in years, with cowboys and horses chosen by Dad when this was his boyhood bedroom. She listened to Radio 1 and sat at the desk by the window trying to read, but she became distracted by the constant comings and goings downstairs. She went to eavesdrop from the landing, desperate to hear what was happening, but knowing she would be sent back upstairs if she crept down to investigate.

It reassured her that most visitors in the days that followed were policemen. Some spoke to Nain at the door, and some came in for cups of tea while they talked in hushed tones. Dad’s work colleagues, Hannah supposed. She might know a few of them. She wanted to say hello, but she did as she was told and stayed out of the way.

A priest came and went. Nain slammed the door behind him.

‘What did he want?’ asked Hannah as she ventured downstairs.

‘I asked him to come, but he says we can’t have the funeral in his church.’

‘But we don’t go to church.’

‘No, but your dad and your Taid were Catholic, so I mistakenly thought a church funeral was the right thing.’

Hannah had a faint memory of her grandfather's funeral. She was four years old, and it went on forever while she sat on the floor between the pews, playing with a toy lion and fiddling with the tassels on Mum's shoes with no real awareness of the box at the front of the church. The obvious notion of having to face Dad's coffin hit her now with a gut punch that she couldn't pass off as period pain.

'I never knew Dad went to church.'

'I don't think he went since your christening.'

Hannah recalled the familiar, orange-tinged photograph of Mum holding her as a baby in a frilly white dress, Dad with his arm around Mum, his boyish face grinning with pride. They appeared so young and happy. She had never noticed that the blurred building behind them was the church.

'Is that why the priest won't do the funeral? Because Dad stopped going?'

'We don't want a church service. Not if the Church doesn't want us.'

'Where will it be then?'

'At the crematorium.'

Hannah had only a vague idea what a crematorium might be like, and she didn't want to ask.

'You don't have to go,' said Nain.

'But Mum will want me there.'

'Your mum doesn't want anyone there. Not even me.'

'But you're going.'

'He's my son.'

'He's my dad; I should go too.'

'A funeral is no place for children.'

‘I’m not a child, Nain. And won’t there be lots of people saying nice things about him?’

‘You aren’t an adult. And it won’t be that kind of funeral, cariad.’

Everything Hannah knew about funerals she had learned from television – from sitcoms like *In Loving Memory* and detective shows like *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*. But she doubted Thora Hird would be there, and she didn’t believe Dad would turn up in a white suit like the ghost of Marty Hopkirk, much as she wanted him to. Maybe Nain was right; maybe she shouldn’t go.

She refused to stay upstairs when Uncle Joe came round. He hugged her and kissed the top of her head, and Hannah clung on as if he were the only thing keeping her afloat.

‘Give the man some air, Hannah.’

‘How are you, Glenda?’ asked Uncle Joe, stooping to peck Nain on the cheek.

‘I’ve been better, Joe.’

He wasn’t Hannah’s real uncle, but he had known her as long as she could remember. She liked him because he brought her comics and books and didn’t talk down to her. He’d been her babysitter when she was little, while her grandfather was dying of lung cancer. She could hardly remember Taid, but she had memories of riding upon Uncle Joe’s shoulders in the park, reaching for the lower branches of the big beech tree, the sunlight dancing through the leaves onto her hands.

More recently there had been days out with Dad and Uncle Joe to Chester Zoo and Colwyn Bay, Mum happy to have the house quiet for a change. She always said when Dad and Uncle Joe were together it was like having three children in the house. But if having fun made you like a kid, it wasn’t a bad thing, and those were her happiest memories of Dad.

‘How are you doing, pal?’ said Uncle Joe.

‘I don’t understand any of it,’ said Hannah.

‘Nobody does.’

‘Mum doesn’t want me to go to the funeral, but I think I should.’

‘It’s okay, pal.’ He put his arm around her in a sideways hug. ‘She doesn’t want me there either.’

‘But you’re his partner. You’ve been together since you were rookies.’ This was the line Dad always used. She didn’t really know what it meant, but it sounded like something from an American cop show. It made Uncle Joe smile.

‘Yes, but we should respect your mum’s wishes.’

‘What about us? What about Dad?’

‘It’s your mum who needs support now, hon.’

‘She’s not even upset anymore, she’s just angry all the time.’

‘She’s lost the love of her life. We’ve got to let her do things her way.’

‘But we should still go.’

‘Oh yes, we’re still going.’

‘I don’t know about you, pal,’ said Uncle Joe outside the crematorium, ‘but I don’t think I want to go in.’

Mum and Nain disappeared into the stark, modern building that looked nothing like the chapel it was supposed to be, while Hannah and Uncle Joe took a walk in the ancient woodland surroundings. Uncle Joe nodded at the half dozen officers heading to the chapel but didn’t speak to any of them.

‘Why are they in uniform?’ asked Hannah.

‘It’s what police do when a colleague dies. It’s a mark of respect for your dad.’



‘Why aren’t you wearing yours?’

‘Because he was more than a colleague to me.’

‘Because you’re family.’

‘Thanks, pal. That means a lot.’

They strolled beside the lily pond, and Uncle Joe listened while Hannah told him about the book she was reading.

‘Charlotte’s not an orphan, but she’s all alone at boarding school, and she’s travelled back in time and swapped lives with a girl called Clare from nineteen-eighteen where the war is still going on.’

‘Sounds complicated.’

‘It’s good, though.’

‘I’m glad you’ve got something to take your mind off things.’

‘I think about Dad all the time. Do you?’

‘Constantly. He was my best friend, and I loved him.’ He bowed his head and hunched his shoulders, shaking gently. ‘I’m sorry.’

Hannah didn’t know why he was sorry except that it was what everyone had been saying to Nain and Mum, so maybe he needed to say it to her too. She took hold of his broad hand with her small one and squeezed it, determined not to cry because Charlotte didn’t cry. Charlotte was strong even when she thought she would never see her family again.

‘If he comes back like Marty Hopkirk, you will let me know, won’t you?’ she said.

Uncle Joe wiped his eyes and laughed. ‘Why would he come back to me and not you or your mum?’

‘Because you’re the one he was closest to, like Jeff Randall.’

That was the last time she saw Uncle Joe. A few weeks later, still at Nain's and with no word of going home, she asked why he didn't call round anymore.

'He's moved away, love,' said Nain.

'To a different force?'

'No, he's left the police. He's gone to live in Bristol.'

'Why?'

'He's got friends there; he's helping in their hotel.'

'Is he coming back?'

'I don't know, cariad. I doubt it.'

'He'll be home for Christmas, won't he?' There had never been a Christmas Eve without Uncle Joe being scolded by Mum for getting Hannah too excited to sleep.

'It'll be quiet this year, cariad. I'm sorry.'

In the silence that followed, Hannah itched to ask more questions even though Nain's sigh implied she was tired of her mithering.

'Did he leave because Dad died?'

'No, he had already planned to go. Your dad knew he was leaving.'

'Why didn't he tell me?'

'I don't know, love. Sometimes people move on, and they don't make a fuss.'

Hannah went upstairs and stared at the repeated pattern of the wallpaper – two cowboys riding their horses up a cactus-lined path to a distant ranch, a small dog trotting by their side. She pictured their home, dog curled up on the hearthrug, horses snug in their stable. She thought about Dad, staring at the same wallpaper when this was his room, until his childhood ended when he left home to marry at sixteen. Now he was gone forever. She cried and cried more than she had ever done in her life.

## Two – David Bowie Says He's Gay

She pestered for an address to write to Uncle Joe, but Nain said she didn't know it. The hotel was probably a cover anyway. He was more likely Joe Walsh, Private Eye, solving crimes and fighting injustice. She had a notion Dad might be there with him, having adventures. Partners. Best Friends.

Hannah didn't have a best friend. She didn't like other girls. She found them boring and silly, and nothing like her fictional orphan pals. So far at high school, they had ignored her at best and called her names at worst. To be accused of being a nerd, a freak and a loner – however mild the insult or true the allegation – filled Hannah with shame as she sat alone in the dinner hall or lurked in the changing rooms, last to appear on the playing field, last to be picked for teams. She didn't mind being called a tomboy, although she suspected it was for her appearance rather than her tree-climbing ability. The name Tommo stuck. It had been Dad's nickname too, and she wore it as a badge of honour.

After the funeral, the torment stopped, although she didn't know why. Her respite from insult was spoiled by the irritation of people trying to be nice to her. Now she understood Mum's short temper with well-wishers. Sometimes she wanted to slap their faces. And not one of them was suitable best friend material.

She longed for someone she could be inseparable from. Like Anne Shirley and Diana Barry. Like Dad and Uncle Joe. Like Janice Nixon and Bronwen Morgan.

Hannah presumed Janice and Bronwen had been told to be kind to her because Bronwen's mum knew Nain. But they were each other's best mate, and Hannah got the impression they found her as dreary as she found them dull.

It was Bronwen who told her that Dad had killed himself.

'No, he didn't. It was a car crash.'

'Honestly, Tommo, it's what my mum said.'

'I heard he was stabbed by a criminal he was trying to arrest,' said Janice. 'And the murderer is still on the loose.'

'Who told you that?' said Bronwen.

'Billy Carter's Auntie Noreen works at the police station.'

'But that would've been on the news, surely,' said Bronwen.

'It's all a pack of lies,' said Hannah.

But Noreen Carter did work in the canteen at the police station, so perhaps she knew something they didn't.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, and Hannah remained at Nain's. She tried going home around the time of her twelfth birthday in January, but Mum was back at work by then with long hours at the hospital resulting in constant exhaustion. When she wasn't on duty, Mum sat at the kitchen table, drinking and smoking and staring into space. She told Hannah to hush if she tried to cheer her up with jokes or by telling her about things she had been reading or thinking about. 'I'm too tired for this, Hannah.'

She tried to understand, remembering what Uncle Joe had said about making allowances for Mum, but she just felt starved of company and sick of making her own tea and eating it alone. So, she loaded Dad's record player and as many LPs as she could into the

boot of Nain's Renault 4 and went back to where she had the company of the cowboys on her wall and a grandmother who didn't mind her chatter.

'What do you do at the steelworks, Nain?' Hannah couldn't imagine her grandmother on a production line, nor did she think she was an engineer.

'I work in the office. Bookkeeping. If you're good with numbers, you'll never be short of work.'

'I prefer music.'

'Music is made of maths,' said Nain. 'Numbers are beautiful.'

Hannah helped in the kitchen, where Nain showed her how maths could make an apple pie. She taught Hannah to knit – 'it's more counting than actual maths' – and demonstrated how Dad's old record player worked when Grace Slick's voice deepened with slowing speed, and Hannah thought it was broken. 'It's engineering,' explained Nain as she showed Hannah how to replace the drive-belt.

In return, Hannah updated Nain on the books she was reading and the latest news from the *Melody Maker*: 'David Bowie says he's gay.'

She had tried to have this conversation with Mum but was told to, 'Shush with that nonsense.'

She raised the subject with Janice and Bronwen, but whilst they liked David Cassidy and Davy Jones, they considered David Bowie too weird to be attractive. And although they talked incessantly about boys they fancied, they were squeamish when it came to anything about actual sex.

'Bowie's a creep,' said Bronwen.

'It's disgusting and unnatural,' said Janice.

But Hannah thought it was an important conversation, and Nain was in no way prudish. 'It's a big scandal,' Hannah told her.

'It's a publicity stunt is what it is,' said Nain.

'Do you think he's lying?'

'I don't think it matters one way or the other as long as he sells lots of records.'

'It can't be true, though,' said Hannah.

'Why not?'

'Because he's married.'

'That doesn't mean he doesn't like men.'

'Doesn't it?' The idea hadn't occurred to her, but somewhere in the back of her mind, in a place she couldn't quite reach, it niggled like something she'd known all along.

'It's mostly convention that matches everyone up boy-girl,' said Nain. 'Musicians and artists don't worry about that kind of thing.'

'Why should everyone else?'

'Because if you want to fit in and get on in the real world, you've got to play the role assigned to you. Believe me, Hannah, being gay is not worth the aggro for ordinary people. Only the likes of David Bowie can get away with that malarkey.'

'I like him,' decided Hannah. 'He's unusual.'

'He's a businessman,' said Nain.

'But he's brilliant.' She cut out the article and pinned it on her wall next to a picture of Marc Bolan.

'When am I going home, Nain?' she asked one afternoon shortly before her thirteenth birthday. Dad had been gone for over a year, and Mum showed no sign of getting a grip.

‘I don’t know, love. Your mum needs more time. You’re okay here for now, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. I like being here.’

‘Why don’t we get some new wallpaper for your room? I should have changed it years ago. But your dad liked it, even when he was too old for cowboys.’

‘I like it too. I don’t want to change it.’

She had covered much of the wallpaper with pictures of her favourite singers and groups. They were mostly clipped from magazines, but she had spent her pocket money on two posters from John Menzies – one of Ziggy Stardust, and the other of Carly Simon from her *No Secrets* album cover. In the gaps between, she still liked to see Cowboy Dave and Cowboy Joe, with their horses and dog, riding back to their ranch up the winding path. Sometimes they would tip their hats to her and say, ‘Howdy, pal,’ and she felt less alone.

It would be a while before she plucked up the courage to ask Nain exactly how Dad had died, although not why. It turned out Bronwen had been right all along.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You were too young to understand, cariad bach.’

The truth made more sense somehow. She wished she had realised and been able to tell Dad to hold on, and to tell Uncle Joe not to leave.

By third year, Hannah found herself in a precarious position at school, clinging on to the shreds of her friendship with Janice and Bronwen because to let go completely was unthinkable. She wasn’t sure why they tolerated her, and she much preferred her own company, but she attached herself to the duo for sake of appearance and to make herself less of a target as the bullying crept back in. Icy whispers and cold shoulders forced Hannah into

retreat as insults stung like hailstones. She was variously referred to as gross, loser, dork, freak, weirdo, short-arse, psycho, bitch, and both frigid and a slut. That girls like Hannah were bullied for no reason whilst others escaped unnoticed, was an injustice she couldn't comprehend, and Janice and Bronwen couldn't save her from the cruelty of teenage girls en masse. There was danger in numbers, and for their own survival, they joined in at the expense of Hannah's dignity.

Her rescue came from the unlikely source of a fearlessly outgoing boy in her class.

'What's up, Tommo?' asked Gruff. She was round the back of the science block when he found her, half-turned towards the wall, shoulder leaning as if trying to disappear into it. 'Where're your mates?'

'What mates?'

'Thingamy and Whatsherface.'

Hannah gave a half-hearted laugh. 'They called me a loner lesbian.'

'Oh. Are you?'

'No!'

'Why did they say that then?'

'They saw me talking to Miss Jones. They said I fancied her.'

'Who could blame you if you did? She's bloody gorgeous, isn't she?'

Hannah laughed because she suspected Gruff had no more interest in their English teacher than he did in any women.

'I'm not, though,' she said.

'Not what?'

'A lesbian.' She whispered the word as though it were something shameful, which she supposed it was.

'What's it to them if you are? They're only jealous.'



‘Why?’

‘Because they’re boring and you’re not.’

‘I was supposed to be going ice-skating with them on Saturday, but it’ll be awful now.’

‘Sounds bloody tedious. Sack them off and come to the park with me and the lads instead.’

‘Really?’

‘Just to hang about and have a gas. It’s not a date, mind you; I’m not asking you out.’

‘I never thought you were.’

‘Howdy, pal. How was school?’ asked Cowboy Joe.

‘The girls are bitches, but Gruff’s cool,’ she said.

‘That kid’s alright,’ said Cowboy Dave.

Hannah considered turning back when she saw two of Gruff’s mates, waiting by the park gates on Saturday, with no sign of the boy himself. But they had spotted her.

‘A’right, Tommo?’ said Mike.

‘Yeah, you?’

‘Loving life,’ he said, offering Hannah her first cigarette. ‘Gruff said you might make an appearance.’

‘Where is Gruff?’ she managed to ask through a coughing fit she couldn’t stifle.

Mike slapped her on the back and instructed her to take a deeper breath on the next drag.

‘He’s running an errand for his ma, but he’ll be here in a bit,’ said Woody. ‘We’ve to entertain you ’til he gets here.’

She followed the boys to the big beech tree where they sat leaning against the trunk, smoking their cigarettes in silence.

‘Go on,’ said Hannah.

‘Go on what?’ said Woody.

‘Entertain me.’

‘Do your Frank Spencer,’ said Mike.

‘Only if you do Tommy Cooper,’ said Woody.

‘I’ve seen your act before,’ said Hannah. ‘Mike Yarwood’s job is safe.’

‘There’s only one thing stopping us from astounding you with our impressionist talent,’ said Mike.

‘And what’s that?’

‘Our complete and utter can’t-be-arsedness.’

By the time Gruff arrived, Hannah had relaxed, smoking Mike’s cigarettes and laughing at Woody’s pathetic jokes about chickens crossing roads to change lightbulbs.

‘I hope you’re not making a nuisance of yourself, Tommo,’ said Gruff.

‘I’m not, am I?’

‘No, she’s been disgustingly well-behaved,’ said Mike. ‘She can hang out with us again.’

‘Oh, can she now?’ said Gruff. ‘I’ll be the judge of that.’

Hannah returned Gruff’s broad grin. ‘I’m not being funny, like, but it’s up to me how I spend my Saturdays.’

‘The king is dead; long live the queen,’ said Mike.

‘Does that mean she’s in charge now?’ said Woody.

‘If you need to be bossed about, Woody-la’, she’s the one to do it,’ said Gruff.

Word got round at school that Tommo had been hanging out with the lads, but when one of the girls called her a slag, she shrugged it off. It made a change from being a lesbian.

‘Don’t worry about it, pal,’ said Cowboy Joe.

‘You stick with the lads,’ said Cowboy Dave. ‘They’ve got your back.’

Hannah overheard the girls bitching while she waited for Gruff at the school gates later that week.

‘What’s Tommo got that they’re so interested in?’ whined Lorraine.

‘It’s obvious, isn’t it?’ said Alison.

‘I heard she shagged Gruff Powell *and* Trevor Greenwood.’ said Marilyn.

‘What? Like actual shagging? Yuck!’ said Lorraine.

‘She can’t have done, though, coz she’s a lezza, isn’t she?’ said Alison.

‘That’s disgusting,’ said Lorraine.

‘Totally minging,’ agreed Marilyn.

Hannah resisted the urge to tell them she wasn’t a *lezza*, and even someone who did fancy women could still like boys too, but she knew better than to give them more ammunition. Nain was right; only David Bowie could get away with that malarkey.

They glared when they discovered she was listening, then turned away and sniggered.

‘What are those blockheads cackling about?’ said Gruff as they set off home.

‘They reckon you and me are shagging.’

‘And I didn’t think I could get any cooler.’

‘They’re saying I’m at it with Woody too.’

‘That’s ridiculous. You’re well out of Woody’s league.’

‘They don’t believe I can have male friends without getting up to anything.’

‘Zero imagination.’

‘A’right, Tommo, Gruff,’ said Mike as he caught them up.

‘A’right. Where’s Woody?’ said Gruff.

‘Detention.’

‘What did he do now?’ asked Hannah.

‘Nothing. Just a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. With my fags in his blazer pocket.’

‘You never made him take the rap for you?’ said Hannah.

‘I didn’t make him do anything. He could have dropped me in it, but he didn’t. He’s a proper mate.’

‘You’d have done the same for him,’ said Gruff.

‘Yeah, but I wouldn’t have agreed to mind his fags in the first place.’

‘I thought he’d been collared for the rumours,’ said Gruff.

‘What rumours?’

‘Tommo’s been shagging Woody, apparently. They reckon she did me too, but it can’t have been any good, coz I don’t remember.’

‘You haven’t, have you, Tommo?’ said Mike.

‘Of course not, what do you take me for?’

‘Good. I was starting to feel left out.’

‘It was just Mazzy Shincliffe and her crew of halfwits talking bollocks,’ said Gruff.

‘I should think Tommo’s got higher standards than you and Woody,’ said Mike.

‘Damn right,’ said Hannah.

She wondered if Marilyn and her posse were as loyal to one another as the lads were. She didn’t think so. She couldn’t imagine any of them going quietly to detention when they could point the finger at each other. But the cowboys were right; the boys watched out for one another and for Hannah too.

Neil Harper arrived on the scene at the start of fourth year. Janice and Bronwen took an interest, eyeing him up as potential prey before losing enthusiasm when he ignored their attempts to flirt.

‘The new guy is so dull,’ said Janice as they loitered outside the gates after school. She put a cigarette to her lips and wafted the smoke around without inhaling.

‘He’s not even good-looking.’ Bronwen held her cigarette at arm’s length, letting it burn down of its own accord. Such a waste, thought Hannah, who hadn’t been offered one.

‘Bye then,’ she said to the girls as Gruff arrived with Neil in tow.

Neil wasn’t dull, and Hannah didn’t think he was bad looking, but his glasses gave him a serious air, and he didn’t seem to smile much at first. It was hard to smile when you didn’t fit in. Hannah knew how that felt.

Neil’s family had moved to Hawarden for his dad’s work, and the tribal tendencies of teenagers meant his lack of Welshness was viewed with suspicion and derision.

‘My family is Welsh,’ was his ineffective protest. He was from Hereford – not only in England but *Down South* – and he didn’t know any of the swear words the other kids called him. But it was only for effect. In the mid-seventies, in that Northeast corner, so near the border, hardly anyone spoke the language – no one their age anyway. Neil said he had heard stronger Welsh accents in Hereford, and he won no favours when he pointed out they all sounded Scouse. And if the language was such an ancient tradition, how come all the gravestones in St Deiniol’s churchyard were in English? His comments nearly got him battered, so Hannah and Gruff took it upon themselves to rescue him.

Hannah spoke some Welsh, but even she hadn’t learned much from the uninspiring lessons in school and was mainly self-taught from watching BBC Cymru. ‘It’s *llawes goch* not laws gotch,’ she snarled at one of the bullies. She explained to Neil that this wasn’t even

swearing, just female anatomy. ‘And how can that idiot call himself Welsh when he can’t even pronounce *ll? Twll arswyd.*’ This too was an anatomical term but also an insult.

‘Tommo’s right; Steve Fitzwilliam is an arsehole,’ said Gruff. ‘He spells my name with an i instead of a u. Ignore him, Harper; his family’s from Runcorn.’

‘We need to form a band,’ announced Gruff.

‘Yeah, a rock band,’ said Neil.

‘I’ll play guitar, you’ll play bass, and Woody can be on drums,’ said Gruff.

‘No, I’ll play guitar,’ said Neil. He was the better musician, and they all knew it.

‘It’s not about who’s technically better,’ said Gruff. ‘It’s about attitude and confidence. I’m a natural performer, like Jimmy Page; you’re more reserved, like John Paul Jones. Anyway, I don’t know how to play bass.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘Yeah, but you’ll pick it up quicker than I could.’

‘Woody doesn’t know how to play drums either,’ said Mike.

‘How hard can it be?’ said Woody.

‘Who’s on vocals?’ asked Mike.

‘Harper,’ said Gruff.

‘Nope,’ said Neil. ‘Lead guitarist sings.’

‘But you’re a better singer than me.’

‘You’ll have to do vocals if you want to play guitar. I can’t sing and play bass; it doesn’t work.’

‘But everyone will think I’m gay,’ said Gruff.

‘How does singing make you gay?’ asked Hannah. ‘Robert Plant isn’t gay.’ But she thought Gruff might actually be gay, so she didn’t force the issue.

‘You be the singer, Tommo,’ said Gruff.

‘I can’t sing.’

‘You’re in the school choir, aren’t you?’

The thought of singing solo brought her out in a sweat, but Gruff was impossible to argue with.

‘What’ll you play, Mike?’ she asked.

‘I’m not musical. I’ll be the manager. That’s just as important.’

‘True,’ said Gruff. ‘You need to organise all the drugs and hookers as well as the gigs.’

‘You won’t need hookers,’ said Mike. ‘You’ll have groupies – loads of them.’

‘What about me?’ complained Hannah.

‘Don’t worry, Tommo,’ said Gruff. ‘There’ll be drugs and hookers for you too.’

Hannah was trying to think of ways to get out of it when Neil suggested they go through some songs in advance of their first rehearsal.

‘What about the others?’ said Hannah.

‘What about them? It’ll give you a head start. You’ve got to remember all the lyrics; it’s harder for you.’

Learning words didn’t worry her, but she agreed to go round to Neil’s after school on Friday for a pre-rehearsal run-through.

‘How have you got a girlfriend already?’ said Neil’s older sister as Hannah took her place between the siblings at the table. At Nain’s they ate in the kitchen or from trays on laps in front of the television, but the Harpers’ house had a proper dining room and lots of other rooms besides. As big as the place was, the two tall teenagers and their parents crowded the

space with noise and height in a way that Hannah and Nain could never fill their little two bedroomed terrace.

‘Don’t embarrass me, Vicky. Tommo’s just a mate.’

‘I’m one of the lads,’ said Hannah.

‘That’s a relief,’ said Vicky. ‘He’s moody enough since we came back without any extra hormones flying about.’

‘Came back?’ asked Hannah.

‘We lived here before,’ said Vicky. ‘We were only in Hereford temporarily.’

‘Temporarily for fifteen years,’ Neil corrected her, ‘and you were only two when you left. You can’t remember living here before.’

‘Yeah, but I’m Welsh, and you’re not. I was born in St Asaph.’

‘Me too,’ said Hannah.

‘All the best people are born in St Asaph.’ Vicky narrowed her eyes at her brother. Hannah felt sorry for Neil, being teased at home as well as at school for being English.

‘Stop bickering, you two,’ said their mother as she and Mr Harper brought the food from the kitchen. ‘We’re going to have a nice meal with no arguments for once.’

The lobscouse smelled delicious, and Hannah, hungry after school, was poised to begin eating when Mr Harper said, ‘Let us pray.’ The others bowed their heads, so she did the same as Neil’s dad continued, ‘Thank you God for this meal, for the hands that prepared it and the company who share it. We pray for those who do not have enough to eat today. Help us to make the world a fairer place. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ and the family all responded, ‘Amen.’ Then the table was a bustle of activity, chat and eating. Hannah never said grace ordinarily, but she liked what Mr Harper had said, especially the bit about making the world a fairer place.

‘What’s all this about a band?’ asked Mrs Harper. ‘Neil says you’re the singer.’



‘Yes, but I’ve only ever sung in the choir before. It’s a bit nerve-wracking singing solo.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ said Mr Harper. ‘All Welsh girls can sing. Isn’t that right, Vicky?’ His daughter shrugged.

‘Neil’s a brilliant guitarist,’ said Mrs Harper. ‘Lucky band to have him.’

‘Gruff’s the guitarist, Mum. I’ve got to play bass.’

‘Your dad played bass in his first band, and he was a better guitarist than the lead.’

‘It’s a time-honoured tradition that the best musicians play the instruments no one else can,’ said Mr Harper.

‘Have you still got your bass, Dad?’

‘No, I lent it to your cousin Jeff a while back.’

‘Jeff’s not in a band though, is he?’ said Mrs Harper.

‘No, his band didn’t last.’

‘I’m going to ask for it back. Our Neil should have it.’

‘I can’t see this band lasting more than five minutes,’ muttered Vicky.

After tea, Neil announced that he and Hannah were going up to his room to run through some songs. ‘Mind you leave the door open,’ said his mother.

‘It’s alright, Mum. She’s not his girlfriend; she’s one of the lads.’

Hannah couldn’t tell if Vicky was defending her brother or being sarcastic, but it wasn’t long before she came up to tell them to close the door because the noise was disrupting the telly.

Neil’s bedroom wasn’t the teenage boy’s room Hannah expected. It lacked the chaos of Gruff’s and the strange odour of Woody’s. Neil’s bed was neatly made, the pale blue counterpane smooth and still, and the room smelled of ink and beeswax polish, reminding

Hannah of the school secretary's office. The inky aroma came from his desk upon which sat a pile of notebooks, a Hereford Cathedral mug full of pencils and pens, a bottle of Quink and a sheet of pink blotting paper. Taking up the majority of desk space was a Smith Corona with clean, white paper wrapped around the platen, as if waiting for words to be typed. The chair tucked underneath the desk had nothing draped over its back, unlike the one in Hannah's room which was home to whichever articles of clothing she had recently discarded.

When she saw that his records and books were in alphabetical order, she realised he hadn't tidied up especially for her visit. His books had grownup-sounding titles like *Slaughterhouse Five* and *The Sentinel* whilst she was still working her way through the *Anne of Green Gables* series.

'I'm afraid I'm rather boring,' said Neil. 'I'm all about music and reading. I'm not into sports or cars like normal lads.'

'Gruff reckons normality is overrated. I like reading too.'

'Who's your favourite author?'

'Charlotte Brontë.' In fact, Hannah had given up on *Jane Eyre* and gone back to *Anne of Windy Poplars*, but she thought it sounded better than admitting she still read children's books. She would have to try *Jane Eyre* again to make it true.

'My favourite writer is Arthur C. Clarke,' said Neil. Hannah nodded as if she knew who he meant.

'I like your guitar,' she said. It was the instrument that smelled of lemony beeswax. She caught the scent as he sat down on his bed and began to play. She noticed a small ink stain between his right index finger and thumb, an incongruous blotch on his otherwise pristine presentation.

‘I love having my own guitar. I got it for my birthday. I learned on one of Dad’s before.’ The way he caressed it made her think he loved his guitar more than anything in the world.

‘One of your dad’s?’

‘He’s got three acoustics and an electric. Mum says it’s why we had to move – he needed the promotion to pay for his instrument habit – but Dad says what other blokes spend in the pub is what he’s saved for guitars.’ He played a little run which she thought she recognised but couldn’t place. ‘We’re Methodists,’ he added as if it explained everything.

Hannah regarded the space on the bed alongside him but pulled out the desk chair to sit down and watch as he played. Gruff was a competent guitarist, but Neil sounded altogether more accomplished. She listened, spellbound, but she didn’t recognise the song and had no idea how to start singing.

Neil faltered and stopped. ‘Maybe Vicky’s right. We’re not going to last five minutes with two warring guitarists and no actual bass or drums.’

‘You’re not at war with Gruff, are you? No need to take it seriously.’

‘He’s taking it seriously.’

‘He’s just excited, and he’s used to being the ringleader. Don’t write us off yet.’

‘What songs do you reckon he’ll want to do?’

‘Definitely Led Zeppelin. Maybe some Pink Floyd or Man.’

‘Oh, I love a bit of Man.’ He played the riff from *Spunk Rock* as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

‘I’m not sure how I’m supposed to sound like Micky Jones or Robert Plant, though,’ said Hannah.

‘Just be yourself.’ He moved seamlessly from Jones’ riff into Page’s familiar intro to *Stairway to Heaven*. ‘Gruff will want to do this one, right? Do you know the lyrics?’

‘I think so.’ But she plucked the album from the L section of his records for the words, just in case. Neil paused and nodded at her. Her voice sounded shaky at first but became stronger as she found her way, and by the time she reached the refrain, she saw Neil smiling. In the second part, where the bass and drums should come in, he kept the bones of the guitar part going and added the rhythmic bassline on the lower strings before launching into the lead guitar solo. Hannah couldn’t find her way back in for the last vocal section, and she gazed at him, wide-eyed. He sang the part himself in an exaggerated falsetto, and she joined in the final line.

‘I’ll have to work on it,’ said Hannah. ‘But the guitar sounded great.’

Neil shrugged. ‘We’re not bad.’

‘I don’t know if Gruff could play that. He’s good, but he’s not that good.’

‘He doesn’t know it yet, but he’ll be on bass.’

‘I don’t recommend an argument.’

‘Wait and see. He’ll be begging to swap.’

Neil played all the time he chatted – not anything recognisably a song, just little riffs, runs and noodles – a boy so relaxed in a room so rigidly ordered. Hannah scanned his alphabetised record collection while she listened. She examined his David Bowie LPs one by one, carefully replacing them in the correct order. She loved the songs she knew from the radio but didn’t have any of the albums. Neil had them all. She stared at the cover of *The Man Who Sold the World*. She hated wearing dresses, but she loved the one Bowie wore here. ‘He’s beautiful, isn’t he?’ she said.

‘I don’t tend to think of men as beautiful,’ said Neil, ‘but maybe Bowie’s the exception.’ Hannah laughed, although Neil appeared to be deadly serious. ‘I can tape it for you on my dad’s hi-fi if you like. And the others.’

‘That’s a lot of tapes.’

‘It’s my privilege to spread the word about Almighty Bowie.’

‘Aren’t you bothered by his sexuality?’ Hannah felt herself blush as she said it, but Neil didn’t appear to notice.

‘Bowie’s beyond all that.’

She continued along the alphabet, delighted to see the Joni Mitchell and Neil Young albums she loved alongside the Moody Blues and Yes records she didn’t like as much.

‘This is one of my favourites,’ she said picking out *Court and Spark*. ‘Nain got it for my birthday.’

‘Nain? That’s Welsh for Nan, right?’

‘Yes.’ Her voice cracked on the small word, betraying more anxiety now than when she had been singing. She didn’t want him to start asking questions about why she didn’t live with her mum. It wasn’t that she was embarrassed of Nain, but she longed for the normality she saw in Neil’s family and thought there must be something wrong with her that her own mother couldn’t raise her. But he didn’t say anything. He re-tuned his guitar and strummed an unusual chord.

‘Joni Mitchell never uses standard tunings,’ he said.

When he played *Just Like this Train*, Hannah didn’t need any prompting. She sang it as if she was living every word, enjoying every moment.

‘I don’t think Gruff will go for that,’ she said afterwards.

‘Well, it’s just for fun,’ he said, even though Hannah knew he took his music seriously. ‘What about *Heart of Gold*? A good one for the band, I reckon.’ Neil put the guitar back into standard tuning, and she lost herself in the song, no longer worried about singing with the band.

After Tommo went home, Neil put *Court and Spark* on the record player. Joni Mitchell sang about love coming to her door, but it was Tommo's voice he heard in his head as he lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. He loved playing guitar more than anything in the world. He never dreamed it could be even better with a girl like Tommo. As Joni sang about lovers completing each other, he indulged his private reverie. He was smitten but resolved not to let it show.

### Three – The Nowhere Boys

‘I hear there’s a new kid in town,’ said Cowboy Dave.

‘Who? Harper?’ said Hannah. ‘He’s been around for a while now.’

‘I heard he plays a mean axe,’ said Cowboy Joe.

‘He’s pretty good, yeah.’

‘And you’re the singer?’

‘Yeah, I’m the singer.’

‘Sounds like you’ll make a mighty fine team, the pair of you,’ said Cowboy Dave.

Hannah’s heart sank when she arrived at the Methodist church hall the following afternoon to find Gruff playing a faltering version of *Stairway to Heaven*.

‘Maybe we should try something easier,’ she suggested.

‘I can play it, you know,’ said Gruff.

‘Yes, but can I sing it? Let’s do *Heart of Gold* instead.’

‘Of course you can sing it,’ said Neil. Hannah glared at him.

Gruff had no trouble with *Heart of Gold*. Neil improvised a bassline on the lower strings of his guitar, while Woody played the makeshift percussion he had cobbled together from rifling through the cupboards of the church hall kitchenette. He had a pair of wooden

spoons, a saucepan, an almost-empty, catering-size tub of Mellow Birds with a plastic lid, and the back of a wooden chair with a hymnbook slot for a woodblock sound.

‘Wow, Woody. You’re a natural,’ said Hannah.

‘I’m pretty good, aren’t I?’

She let them play through another verse before she launched into the vocals. The surprise on Gruff’s face gave her a surge of pride as she sang, her voice resonating in the empty hall.

‘Bloody hell, Tommo, you’re amazing,’ said Gruff.

‘She’s brilliant, isn’t she?’ said Woody.

Gruff and Woody’s enthusiasm compensated for the faint praise of Neil who muttered, ‘She’s not bad.’

Mike arrived and demanded to hear what they had been up to, so they played the song again for their audience of one.

‘Wow,’ said Mike as he applauded their effort. ‘This band might actually be happening.’

‘We’re working on *Stairway to Heaven* next,’ Gruff said.

‘Important business first,’ announced Mike.

‘Have you got us a gig?’ asked Woody.

‘Not until you decide on a name.’

‘Nowhere,’ said Neil to blank stares from the others. ‘Name of the band. Nowhere.’

‘That’s rubbish,’ said Gruff.

‘But everybody will know us,’ said Hannah. ‘Because *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*. Like the Neil Young album.’ She looked to Neil for confirmation, and his smile told her she was right.

‘It’s clever, I’ll give you that,’ said Gruff.



‘It’ll never sell,’ said Mike.

‘How about Gruff and the Grifters?’ suggested Gruff.

‘Do you know what a grifter is?’ said Mike.

‘Not really. Do you?’

‘Not really.’

‘How about Woody and the Woodpeckers?’ said Woody to groans of disapproval.

‘Tommo and the Tossers?’ said Mike.

‘You lot may be tossers,’ said Hannah, ‘but I don’t want the association.’

‘You got any better ideas?’ asked Gruff.

‘I like Harper’s idea.’

‘Nowhere?’

‘Why not?’

‘What about Nowhere Man?’ said Gruff. ‘Like Man, you see, but Nowhere Man.’

‘They’ll be expecting Beatles covers,’ said Mike.

‘Nothing wrong with the Beatles,’ said Neil.

‘Not if you’re a teenage girl,’ said Woody.

‘You’ve got to appeal to teenage girls,’ said Mike, although this hadn’t occurred to the others. Hannah didn’t point out that she was a teenage girl herself because the lads seemed unaware.

‘We could be The Nowhere Men,’ said Woody.

‘You aren’t men,’ said Hannah.

‘Okay then, The Nowhere Boys,’ said Gruff.

‘In case you haven’t noticed, we aren’t all boys either.’

But it was the name they settled on, and Hannah was proud to be one of The Nowhere Boys.

‘Sorry I haven’t got drugs and hookers,’ said Mike, ‘but will booze and fags do for now?’ He pulled out a six-pack of cans and a packet of cigarettes from his bag. ‘Where are the ashtrays?’

‘There aren’t any, and you can’t drink and smoke in here,’ said Neil.

‘A church hall without ashtrays? That’s not right, surely.’ Mike began a search of the kitchenette.

‘It’s a Methodist church. No alcohol, no smoking.’

‘Makes Harper a dull boy.’ Mike pulled a can off the six-pack and moved to open it.

‘Don’t!’ Neil clenched his jaw and tightened his fists as if squaring up for a fight he expected to lose.

Mike laughed. ‘Alright, mate. Keep your hair on.’

‘Come on,’ said Hannah. ‘It’s a nice day; we’ll have them down the park in the sunshine.’

‘We’re not going to get pissed, you know.’ She hung back waiting for Neil to drop the church hall key through the letterbox of the Manse while the others went on ahead. ‘We’ll only have one each. It’ll be nice.’

They didn’t have alcohol often, and Hannah had never been drunk, but Mike’s brothers would procure a few cans of lager for them on special occasions. She had enjoyed a beer for Gruff’s birthday in the summer holidays, but that was before Neil arrived, and she could tell he wasn’t comfortable with the idea.

‘I can’t,’ said Neil. ‘I’m not allowed to drink alcohol.’

‘None of us are allowed to, but we still do. You can just have a sip of mine if you want.’

‘I might go home.’

‘Don’t go yet. We’ve got loads to talk about.’ Neil relented, and Hannah smiled that she could persuade him.

They found the others in their usual spot beneath the big beech tree. Mike handed the lagers round with a shrug of ‘suit yourself’ to Neil.

Hannah accepted a cigarette, although she didn’t consider herself a real smoker.

‘Smoking’s no good for your voice,’ Neil said.

‘Joni Mitchell smokes,’ she said. ‘And David Bowie.’

‘Robert Plant’s a smoker,’ said Gruff. ‘Never did his voice any harm.’

‘Jagger, too,’ said Woody.

‘Nobody smokes like Sinatra,’ said Mike. ‘Smokes on stage. While he’s singing. Cool as fuck.’

But Neil wasn’t swayed by peer pressure or celebrity example. Impressed by his resolve, Hannah nevertheless imagined herself on stage, cigarette in hand, *cool as fuck*.

‘I’m gonna ask for a drum kit for Christmas,’ said Woody.

‘Good idea,’ said Gruff. ‘I’ll get an electric guitar, and Harper can ask for a bass. Come January we’ll be up and running.’

‘I’ll have a bass before Christmas,’ said Neil. It was the one from Cousin Jeff, but it sounded like bragging, and Hannah felt sorry for Gruff whose single mum was unlikely to be able to afford an electric guitar.

There was still some daylight, but the October afternoon wasn’t warm, and when Hannah shivered, Gruff put an arm around her, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. It was a friendly gesture; there was nothing in it, but it prompted a flutter of jealousy in Neil’s chest. A cautious boy who rarely did anything without careful thought, he found himself reaching for Hannah’s can of lager. She smiled at him, and that smile was worth the transgression,

even as he realised the lager didn't taste nice, and he knew he shouldn't be drinking it. He handed the can back and took his guitar out of its case. He re-tuned the strings and played *Carey*. It wasn't one of the songs they had practised together, but she would know it, being a Joni Mitchell fan.

When she heard the intro, Hannah sat up and sang without missing a cue. Woody tapped out the rhythm on the empty guitar case, and Neil added a harmony on the chorus. Gruff joined in too, his voice cracking unselfconsciously, and Mike closed his eyes and nodded along to the music.

'When did you work on that?' asked Gruff.

'We didn't,' said Hannah. 'I've never sung it before.'

'Wow.' Gruff shook his head.

'You guys are gonna be huge,' said Mike.

It was a couple of weeks before Neil's mum went to Auntie Eileen's to get the bass.

Meanwhile, the band worked on *Heart of Gold* but abandoned *Carey* because Gruff insisted The Nowhere Boys were 'not about that folky shit.' He continued to stumble through *Stairway to Heaven*, getting it mainly right but with none of Neil's musicality. Hannah wished it was Neil playing and couldn't relax until the others joined in for the second half.

'We're getting good,' said Gruff.

Hannah omitted to tell Gruff she had been round to Neil's again, and that the two of them were progressing well without the others. Hannah was *all about that folky shit*, and although Neil preferred rock music, he played to Hannah's strengths and preferences, surprising her with Fairport Convention and Pentangle songs to sing. 'From my dad's records,' he explained.

She was welcomed at his house every Friday after school for a family meal and music, until Nain decided Neil should come to theirs for tea because it was high time she met Hannah's boyfriend.

'He's not my boyfriend. He's just a friend.'

'If you say so, love, but I still want to meet this young man you're spending so much time with.'

Under unnecessary but strict instruction from Nain, Hannah was not to take Neil up to her bedroom but to use the parlour for their music. The front room of the two-up-two-down was nowhere near as grand as the name Nain gave it implied, but she kept it spotless for guests, of which there were rarely any. Hannah tried not to think of the policemen and undertakers who had been in there, drinking tea after Dad died, and supposed it must be an honour to be allowed to use this special room.

Neil went straight to the piano and lifted the lid, wincing as he fingered the keys.

'Nobody's played it in years,' said Hannah.

'I can tell.'

It hadn't seen any use since before Hannah's grandfather died, but Nain couldn't bear the thought of getting rid of it. She kept it polished for appearance and sentiment rather than music. Hannah had ignored the piano at the Harpers' house as furniture too, never imagining it made a sound.

'I didn't know you played piano,' she said.

'Mum taught me. She plays classical. I just mess around.' He sounded a few arpeggios as he settled in with the out-of-tune instrument, then a sequence of jazz chords that displayed an ability far beyond messing around.

He paused and studied her. 'How about a Laura Nyro song?'

*Emmie* wasn't easy, stretching her vocal range, but she discovered a thrill in singing a love song about a woman written by a woman. How did Laura Nyro get away with it?

She stopped singing when she became aware of her grandmother's presence in the doorway behind her. 'I'm sorry,' she said as if they were doing something wrong.

'You must be Neil,' said Nain, ignoring Hannah's apology. 'I'm sorry my granddaughter hasn't the manners to introduce us properly, but at least she sings beautifully.'

'Pleased to meet you, Mrs Thomas. I hope you don't mind me playing your piano. It's a lovely instrument.'

Nain scoffed. 'It sounds like a honky-tonk saloon in here, but I daresay that's my fault for not getting it tuned. I'll have it sounding better next time you come.'

'I thought you said he wasn't your boyfriend?' said Nain after Neil had gone home.

'He isn't. We just do music together.'

'That may be true for now, but that boy is sweet on you, mark my words. If you don't feel the same, you'll break his heart, and you may as well forget about your music group.'

'Honestly, it's nothing like that.'

Hannah wondered if it might be like that, but although she liked Neil, she couldn't imagine kissing him. She couldn't envisage kissing boys at all. Instead, she thought about kissing Miss Jones and found herself fantasising about Carly Simon and Laura Nyro. She loved the images on their album covers and felt a stirring inside she never got from pictures of men.

Sometimes when she was alone in her bedroom, she stared at her Carly Simon poster for a long time. Carly was casually cool in her wide-brimmed hat with her bag slung across one shoulder. But it was the tight burgundy jeans and figure-clinging top that got to Hannah. She stared at the braless breasts, nipples erectly evident underneath the blue sweater, and she

allowed her hand to wander under her pyjamas to where she felt all fizzy, while Carly smiled down at her as if she were her closest friend.

It shamed her to admit, even to herself, that the accusation of being a lesbian was probably true, but if Neil were her boyfriend, they wouldn't be able to say it anymore. She didn't want to kiss him, but she craved his company and wasn't that what relationships were all about?

'It's about having a friend you can rely on,' said Cowboy Joe.

'A partner,' agreed Cowboy Dave.

They were right. She didn't need a boyfriend. She wanted a best friend, and perhaps she had found one.

When Neil brought the bass to band practice, something about Gruff's lack of comment told Hannah he was every bit as envious of the Fender Precision as Neil had predicted. Gruff smiled as Neil fumbled with the bass on *Heart of Gold*.

'That didn't sound as good as usual,' said Gruff.

'I'm not getting it, am I?' said Neil.

He was convincing, but Hannah didn't believe he could play so badly.

'Can I have a go?' asked Gruff. Neil handed the Precision over. Within minutes Gruff worked out a melodic bassline, and Neil picked up Gruff's guitar and played all the licks and runs Gruff couldn't do.

'You're much better than Harper,' said Hannah, wise now to Neil's plot. 'You should play bass, he's useless.'

'I'm not that bad,' said Neil.

'She's right,' said Woody. 'Gruff's miles better.'

'But I'm the frontman,' said Gruff.

‘Roger Waters is the frontman of Pink Floyd, and he plays the bass,’ said Hannah.

‘He’s not the frontman though, is he? It was Syd Barrett and now it’s Dave Gilmour,’ argued Woody. Neil and Hannah both glowered at him, knowing it was a contentious argument but the only one they had.

‘Roger Waters is the band leader though,’ said Neil, ‘because Gilmour’s not an original member.’

‘So I’d still be the band leader?’ said Gruff.

‘Absolutely. You can borrow it if you like – see if you get the hang of it.’

‘I’ve already got the hang of it.’

Woody got his Christmas present early, and in December they started rehearsing in the Greenwood’s garage where the drums were kept. It was freezing cold, but nobody cared, and when Mr Harper persuaded Mrs Harper to let him buy a Fender Stratocaster, Neil got his old electric guitar, and they sounded something like a real band.

‘We’ll do *Cinnamon Girl* instead of *Heart of Gold*,’ announced Neil.

‘But I like *Heart of Gold*,’ said Hannah.

‘It never sounded right without a harmonica. *Cinnamon Girl*’s better now I’ve got the Gretsch.’

Hannah foresaw problems if her female classmates heard her singing about being in love with girls, cinnamon or otherwise. They would tear her to shreds. But the boys just wanted to do songs they liked. When Hannah sang about a boy instead of a girl in *Jeepster*, Gruff argued with her to change it back because it sounded weird, and Neil told her to get over herself because it shouldn’t be an issue.

There was another disagreement about the Rolling Stones cover. ‘Why do we have to do a Stones number?’ asked Gruff.



‘Because they’re my favourite band,’ said Woody. ‘Just because I’m the drummer doesn’t mean I don’t get a say on the songs. Let’s do *Brown Sugar*.’

‘Everyone does *Brown Sugar*,’ said Neil. ‘Even my dad. We’ll do *Angie* instead,’ and as he played it, Hannah sang, knowing it was the perfect choice.

‘Tommo can’t sing a love song about a girl,’ said Woody.

‘I’m already singing about a cinnamon girl and the girl in *Jeepster*,’ said Hannah.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Woody, as if it hadn’t occurred to him. ‘But *Angie*’s a sexy song – it doesn’t seem right.’

‘It’s perfect,’ said Gruff, ‘but while we’re on, *Stairway to Heaven* has got to go.’

Hannah tried not to let her relief show. She loved the acoustic version she sang with Neil, but she had grown to hate playing it with the band.

‘Why?’ asked Woody.

‘Because you and I wait around with nothing to do for the first half. We’ll do *Whole Lotta Love* instead.’

‘Yeah,’ said Neil as he began the familiar riff.

‘I took the liberty of writing out the words for you.’

Gruff passed her a piece of paper, and Hannah squinted at the scrawled lyrics. ‘I can’t sing this.’

‘Why not?’ said Gruff.

‘It’s rather...’ she hunted for a better word but came out with the one that had occurred to her first, ‘...sexual.’

‘It’s rock ’n’ roll, Tommo; it’s got to be sexual.’

‘I can’t be anyone’s backdoor man. You know what that means, don’t you?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Gruff.

‘It means he goes in through the kitchen when he calls round,’ said Woody.

‘Something like that,’ said Gruff.

Hannah overcame her self-consciousness as she immersed herself in the song. Gruff was right; it was a strong number to showcase the strengths of all the band members. Hannah was loudly proclaiming she would give every inch of her love as the fifth Nowhere Boy arrived late.

‘Wow, Tommo,’ said Mike when the song finished, ‘smoking hot.’

‘Cool it, boyo,’ said Gruff. ‘Have you got anything lined up for us anyway?’ He asked this every week, and every week Mike insisted he was trying, but he hadn’t managed to book anything yet.

Instead, it was Neil, the only one of them doing O-level music, who secured their first public performance at the school Christmas concert.

‘But that’s for the orchestra and choir, isn’t it?’ said Hannah.

‘We’re on at the end,’ said Neil.

‘Headlining?’ said Gruff.

‘Of course. But I didn’t say a definite yes. I told Mr Hughes I’d have our manager confirm everything.’ Hannah sensed kindness in Neil’s deference to Mike but not humility.

‘I can’t be doing with the business side of things,’ he said. ‘I just want to play.’

‘What do you reckon, guys?’ said Mike. ‘Shall I make the arrangements?’

‘Are we good enough?’ said Hannah.

‘We’re more than good enough,’ said Neil, ‘and if they don’t like it, they can fuck off.’ No one had ever heard him swear before, and they all howled because it sounded odd.

‘Listen guys,’ said Mike, ‘I need a favour.’

‘Go on then,’ said Hannah.

‘This one’s not for you, Tommo.’ Mike turned to the lads. ‘Janice won’t come out with me unless I find a date for Bronwen; I was hoping one of you would oblige.’

Gruff and Woody regarded him as though he spoke an alien language, but Neil said, 'Okay, mate, I'll go with you.'

'Thanks, Harper, I owe you one.'

The lads never talked about girls, but Mike was already fifteen, and Hannah could see why girls would fancy him even if she didn't. But the idea that Neil would want to go out with Bronwen gave her a nauseating lurch in the stomach as if her period was early.

'I would have offered,' she said. 'She's a bit of alright is Bronwen.' It got the laughs she needed to cover her awkwardness.

'How was your date?' she whispered to Neil as she sat next to him in biology on Monday morning. 'Did you have to ask forgiveness at Church yesterday?'

'I'm not Catholic. But no, I didn't sin too much, thanks for asking. Mike likes Janice though, so I said I'd go to the pictures with them on Friday.'

'Are you going to invite Bronwen for tea and introduce her to your folks?'

'Good grief, no. Vicky wouldn't let me hear the end of it if I brought a girl home. You can still come round after school. I won't be going out until later.'

'It's alright; I'll give it a miss.' Her disappointment was only matched by the fury that he should think it acceptable to have her round for tea and then go to the cinema with another girl. She said little else to him for the rest of the day. That he didn't seem to notice, added to her annoyance as she sulked.

'Are you speaking to me again?' asked Neil the next day in the yard at morning break.

'I don't know what you mean,' said Hannah.

'You were mad at me about something yesterday, but I've no idea what I did.'

'If you don't know, it doesn't matter.'

‘It matters that we’re friends. Don’t ignore me without telling me what’s wrong. It’s not fair.’

‘You and Mike and your bloody girlfriends.’

‘His girlfriend. I’m only making up the numbers.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Anyway, why shouldn’t we have girlfriends? Just because you haven’t got one.’

She blushed, then laughed, then shoved him so hard he had to steady himself to keep from falling over. He grinned as he shoved her in gentle retaliation. Next push and he was down, and they were scrapping on the ground with the crowds gathering the way they did for any playground fight.

‘I don’t want to hurt you, but I won’t let you win.’ He gripped both her wrists to stop her hitting. He was bigger and stronger but not used to battle. Hannah had never been in a fight either, but she had witnessed the hair pulling and scratching techniques of other girls and knew tactics that would never occur to him. When she bit into his left hand, he cried out and instantly let go.

Someone hissed ‘scarper’ as Mrs O’Connor approached, and the crowd dispersed.

‘What’s going on here?’ she asked in confusion as Hannah helped Neil up from the ground. They were the last pupils any teacher would expect to find fighting.

‘Nothing, Miss,’ said Neil. ‘I fell. I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have been running.’

‘Someone said there was a fight.’ Mrs O’Connor scanned the yard for the culprits but saw nobody running away.

‘No fight, Miss.’ Hannah surreptitiously dusted down her school skirt.

‘Be more careful, Harper.’ And with that, the teacher headed back to the staffroom for what remained of her break.

‘Are you alright, Tommo?’ asked Woody.

‘What the fuck, Harper?’ said Mike.

‘Me? She started it?’

‘She always starts it,’ said Gruff. ‘You shouldn’t rise to it. Most ungentlemanly.’

‘But she hurt me.’ Neil rubbed his hand.

‘Oh, come on, it’s not that bad. I didn’t even draw blood.’

‘My hands, though. I’d sooner you punched my face.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Gruff. ‘We can get another guitarist.’

‘Sorry about your hand,’ whispered Hannah during maths when they were supposed to be working on quadratic equations.

‘I’ll forgive you if you help me with this one,’ he said.

‘It’s easy. Let me show you.’

‘Easy for you.’

‘You should be good at maths being a musician.’

‘I can’t be a musician now you’ve maimed me.’

‘Don’t be dramatic. I haven’t, have I?’

He smiled, and she knew she was forgiven. ‘Seriously,’ he said. ‘We shouldn’t be fighting over a girl. If you’ve got a thing for Bronwen, I’ll step aside.’

‘Is that what you think this is about?’

‘It is, isn’t it?’

‘Probably, but don’t let it stop you.’

‘Isn’t Neil with you?’ asked Nain when Hannah got in from school on Friday. ‘Did you break his heart already?’

‘He’s going out with Bronwen. You were wrong, he wasn’t sweet on me.’

‘I’m not wrong, cariad. That boy thinks the world of you. What’s he doing chasing other girls?’

‘He didn’t chase her. He’s double dating as a favour to Mike.’

‘Well, there you go. He’s not interested in her; he’s helping his friend out.’

‘He thinks I’m just one of the lads.’

‘You bide your time, my Hannah. The boys will notice you eventually. And you can afford to be picky, you know. You shouldn’t go out with someone because your mate’s going out with his mate. Poor Bronwen, that’s a terrible way to get a boyfriend.’

But Hannah had no sympathy for Bronwen, who was out with Neil whilst she was at home alone, reading *Come Back Lucy*, another children’s book about an orphan.