

Flight Lessons

Chapter One

The problem, one of them, was that circumstances had split her life down the middle. She was always of two minds, the hopeful half versus the skeptic, optimist against pessimist. Or maybe it evened out and what she was now was a relativist, a contingency artist. Either way, it didn't help that at this late date a theme was taking shape, a motif or whatever you called it, a pattern, consisting of Anna walking in on trusted loved ones in bed with each other.

Then again, two times probably made a soap opera, not a pattern. She tried to lift her situation out of the excessively banal by imagining she had a connection with Sylvia Plath. Not that Anna was suicidal. Over Jay? Please. But it did help to think that she and Sylvia -- she called her Sylvia; that's how bonded Anna felt -- shared a context, a setting. Really, if anything, her circumstances were worse, because that London winter of '63 could not possibly have been any colder than Buffalo after a blizzard in early April -- early April, for God's sake -- and poor Sylvia's flat couldn't have been any icier than the windy, rattling loft Jay had left Anna to huddle in by herself while he cavorted with the voluptuous Nicole, whose apartment had a fireplace and central heat.

Jay's idea, the loft. They'd lived in a scruffy corner of it during the first year, the happy time, while he'd used the drafty rest for a studio. Eventually his metal sculptures outgrew it, though, went from enormous to dinosaurian, the ceiling wasn't high enough for the really monstrous ones, they needed a barn of their own. So he'd leased space in an old warehouse on the lake for a studio, and since then, almost another year, they'd had the whole basketball court of an apartment to themselves.

Except for the summer months, they'd spent most of the time in bed. Sleeping, reading, eating, having sex, etc., etc., but mostly trying to keep warm. Had ice crusted on the insides of Sylvia's windows? Had she huddled close to a ticking space heater with a blanket over it and her like a hot tent, and worried about setting herself on fire? If so, Anna could see why the kitchen stove had started to call to her, whisper that it was the warm answer. Lay your head flat on the metal rack, like a turkey roaster, close your eyes. Try not to mind the gas smell. Go to sleep.

Again, not that Anna was contemplating suicide. But she'd been betrayed in the cruelest way a woman could be (no, second cruelest; that life-dividing time at age twenty, that was still worse), and at least Ted Hughes had had the decency to conduct his affairs out of Sylvia's direct line of sight, with women she wasn't friends with or employed by. Some decorum had been observed. A little British restraint, missing in her case. Anna had walked in on Jay with Nicole, her boss, tangled up together in her own bed, three hours after she'd woken up from a laparoscopy for an ovarian cyst. A hospital

procedure. Outpatient, yes, but still, she could've died from the anesthesia, people did. If Jay had been worried about her, he'd found a stimulating distraction.

Oh, it was such a stale, tired story, but here was another way she was trying to inject a little dignity into it -- by casting herself in the role of tragic heroine. In a play by...some Greek, Sophocles, Aeschylus, she was vague on her classical playwrights this many years after freshman English. Her mother had died of ovarian cancer at the age she was now, thirty-six, and Anna had discovered Jay's infidelity on the very afternoon she was fully, fatalistically, expecting a call from the surgeon telling her she had the same disease. She didn't, her cyst was benign, nothing to worry about, would probably go away by itself -- but she didn't know that then, and wasn't it all just too much, too full of awful significance, as if indifferent gods were playing with her life, making literature out of it, throwing in metaphors and parallels and corny portents--

No, it wasn't. It was just soap opera. Her life was like a Greek play only if you imagined a collaboration between Homer and Harold Robbins. And now here she was, trying to keep warm in the big, wide scene of the crime, listening to sleet peck at the frosted-over windows and wind slam them around in their uncaulked sockets, trying not to think about Jay and Nicole.

But it was hard when they'd been here so recently. Enjoyed themselves so thoroughly. They must've enjoyed themselves, otherwise they'd have heard the slow rise of the clanking elevator, at least noticed when the rickety metal doors squealed apart. The loft was wide open and wall-less, but Jay had built a two-sided partition to shield the bed from the view of -- well, people like Anna. Intruders. He'd made it from tall, rusting strips of steel, like tree trunks, and painted them with bright birds and winding greenery -- ah, a bower, you thought, how romantic. Until you went closer and saw that the birds had human heads with crazed eyes and mad grins, and they were doing lewd things with each other in the greenery. Then, how surreal, you thought, how sardonic and Boschian. How Jay.

She remembered very little, almost nothing of what she'd seen over the partition of the lovers in bed. Situational amnesia, no doubt, the way a car crash survivor can't remember a thing after the light turned red. Jay must've been on the bottom, because she had a vague picture in her mind's eye of his Rasputin hair crosshatching the pillow like an etching, black-on-white. But were he and Nicole visibly naked? Decently hidden under the covers? Blank. Mercifully blank: she had nothing to obsess about--this time--except the fact of betrayal, not the look of it.

She jumped when Jay's cat landed on the pillow and began to purr in her ear, kneading the duvet with his claws. He was only nice to her when he was cold. Chip off the old block. She lifted the covers, let him crawl down and curl up at her hip. "Miss your old man, huh?" she said, scratching him softly under the chin. "Tough."

The telephone rang. It couldn't be Jay; he'd already called, and the way they'd left things wouldn't encourage him to call back soon. Not for a couple of years. She grabbed the phone from the night table and pulled her arm back under the covers as fast as possible. On "Hello," she could see her breath.

"Hey, sweetie, me again. How're you feeling today?"

Big, huge mistake to tell Aunt Iris about Jay. But she'd caught her at a bad time last night, and Anna had blurted out the truth as soon as her aunt said, "Honey, you sound terrible, did something happen?"

Now she forced vitality into her voice and said, "Oh, hi, Aunt I. Much better. Much stronger, really. Much."

"Good, because I've got some great news. Your Aunt Rose needs a manager for the Bella Sorella."

"What? Say that again?"

"Yes, sweetie, she just told me. The old one quit over the weekend, apparently he wasn't any good anyway, so she's looking. Naturally I told her your situation."

Naturally. Aunt Iris was their go-between, since Anna and Rose didn't speak anymore. Well, not literally; in fact, they were excruciatingly cordial whenever Anna couldn't get out of going home-Maryland's Eastern Shore-for a wedding or a funeral; the last one had been about two years ago. They sent Christmas cards, too-"Have a wonderful holiday! Hope the New Year is your best ever!"-and Rose never forgot a birthday. Aunt Iris was the one who dispensed the lowdown on their real lives, though, or as much of them as they cared to share with her. Anna always weighed her words to Iris accordingly, and assumed Rose did the same. It was absurd, really, like a sit-com riff, "Tell your father to pass the salt," "Tell your mother to get it herself." Still: whatever worked.

"My situation," Anna said carefully. "So, what, you're saying Rose thinks I . . . she would like me . . . " She couldn't quite get the natural inference out in words.

"It's not just Rose, honey. Everybody thinks you should come home."

"Who's everybody?"

"The family. Me."

Anna smiled to herself, picturing seventy-year-old Aunt Iris's bony, bossy face, the total conviction in her gestures. She'd have the phone to her ear with her shoulder, because she'd need both hands to make her point. "But what did Rose say?" Anna asked. "About the restaurant."

"Well, she thinks the timing's perfect. You need a job, she's got a job, in fact she's in kind of a bind. Plus you've already got a house here to live in. A nice warm one," she threw in. "What are they having up there today, a cyclone? Typhoon? Quiet!" she called to the dogs barking in the background, the normal accompaniment to a conversation with Aunt Iris. Shenbred Labrador retriever-border collie mixes for a hobby.

"Tell Rose," Anna said, "that managing a full-service restaurant would be a little different from running a 40-seat coffee house." Aunt Iris made scoffing sounds. "But I thank her for the offer. If it was one." A little explosion had gone off in her chest, though. Her skin prickled in the aftermath; she had to work to keep her voice casual. The last thing she wanted was Aunt Iris reporting back to Rose, "She

sounded interested!"

"You're not saying no, are you? Come home and think about it, at least. That agent you got, the one that rents your house, he's let it go to the dogs. I'm not kidding, people are talking. You could get a citation. You need to come down here and take charge, some things you can't do by phone, not indefinitely. Now, listen, Anna, you know I would never tell you what to do."

"Never."

"When? When have I ever?"

"I said never."

"Sarcastically. You're a grown woman, far be it from me to give you advice about your life. But I have to say this for your own good. Leave that sciocco you live with and come home, where you've got people who love you and a job you could do with one hand tied behind your back. You're a Fiore, it's in your blood."

"Catalano, but-"

"Fiore on your mama's side, and Fiores run restaurants."

"You don't," Anna pointed out.

"I married too young, missed my calling. Honey, just come on home. It's time."

"Oh, God." Part of her wanted to. Part of her wanted to stay and make it up with Jay, part of her wanted to tear out pieces of him with her teeth, part of her wanted to leave him with no words at all, a silent, dignified exit. "I'm torn," she said.

"Be torn at home."

"Home, home-what makes you think I even-" She brought her voice down an octave. "Okay, I'll take it under advisement, but listen, I have to go, I've got another call on this line." She didn't even try to make that sound true.

"What do you want me to tell Rose?"

"I don't know. Anything."

"I'll tell her you'll think about it."

"You can say that if you want."

Frustrated silence. Aunt Iris would never say so, it might jeopardize her role as intermediary, but

Anna knew she was on Rose's side. Deep down, she thought Anna's lingering hostility was childish, she should've outgrown it by now, water under the bridge, her mother had been dead for seven years before her father and Rose finally found some happiness together. That's what Iris thought.

Too bad it was a closed subject; otherwise Anna could have enlightened her on a couple of things. Chronologies, sequences of events. Iris thought she knew everything, but she didn't.

"Theo's not doing so well," Iris said, instead of hanging up.

"Who's Theo, again?"

She clicked her tongue. "Now, Anna. You know who Theo is."

"Oh, you mean Rose's boyfriend? That guy?" She did know who Theo was, and she wasn't sure why she always pretended she didn't. Except that the whole idea of Theo offended her-and that made no sense at all. As if Rose should be faithful to Anna's father's memory, all these years after she'd stolen him away from her own sister. Honor among thieves or something-Anna couldn't even follow her own reasoning.

Iris said, "Theo's still living on that old boat of his, and Rose can't make him move. She's so afraid he'll fall."

Theo had Parkinson's or something. "Sorry to hear that," Anna said.

"She's spending a lot of time with him these days. It wears her out."

"That's a shame."

"Anna."

"What? You expect me to go home and run the Bella Sorella so Rose can have more time with her boyfriend?"

"Family pulls together in time of need."

"Oh-" Vulgarities piled up in the back of her throat, bitter as vinegar.

"But that's neither here nor there. This is where you should be, baby, not up there. We love you and we want you to come home."

She got off the phone by insisting she had another call and hanging up.

"I used to be a decisive person," she told the hot, disgruntled cat when it crawled out from under the covers. "I could make decisions. I took chances." Now it was too much to get out of bed and go to the bathroom.

She'd have to put on socks and slippers and her woolly robe, she'd have to sit on the frigid toilet seat, wash her hands in ice water afterward. Too much.

Easier to lie here and wallow in all the grievances against her. Funny, she couldn't picture Jay and Nicole naked together in this bed only two days ago, but somebody else's nude body was as clear in her memory as a photograph: Rose's, scrambling out of bed as twenty-year-old Anna pushed open the door to her father's bedroom. Sixteen years later, and she could still see the panicky blur of Rose's long arms and long white calves, her narrow back, the mad snatching up of a shirt from the floor to cover herself. She always wore her dark hair up, always in a bun, a twist, a chignon, she knew a million styles-but on that day it was down and disheveled, and somehow much more shocking than all her bare skin or even her tragic, appalled face.

The angle of her wrist as she'd pressed the collar of the shirt to her heart, that white-skinned clutch, the knuckles protruding like exposed nerves-I've seen that before, Anna had thought. And just then, the filmy curtain over a much older memory parted, and everything changed. That was the day disillusionment cut her life in half.

What was it Nicole had said when she'd seen Anna peering over the bower partition? Something, "Oh Christ," "Oh my God"; nothing memorable, definitely nothing mitigating.

Rose had said: "Oh, my dear, I am so sorry. This is-exactly what it looks like. But, Anna, it's never the way I wanted you to find out! We-Paul-"

That's all she'd had time to say before the squeak of Anna's father's footstep sounded on the staircase.

What had Jay said when he'd seen her? Nothing at all, she didn't think. Well, he wasn't stupid; he'd understood the futility of words, but even more, the potential for sounding foolish. Jay never wanted to sound foolish. So he'd kept a dignified, actually a slightly wounded silence.

Her father had stopped dead in the bedroom doorway. He'd had on maroon sweats and new blue running shoes, a newspaper poking out from under his arm; he'd had an oily paper bag in his hand, coffee and croissants from the deli up the street. Under his morning beard, his face was ashen except for a smear of pink on each cheek. He said: "Annie, hey, what a great surprise! I-I'm just getting in myself, been in Newport News since Thursday. Hi, Rose." Anna said, "Daddy," horrified, but he went right on, "No-Rose stayed here last night, I knew that. How's that bat situation? Can you believe it, your aunt had a bat at her place, maybe more than one, could be a nest-"

And then Rose said, "Oh, Paul. Don't," and that was the end of that.

Now Rose wanted her to come home. Just like that, pick up where they'd left off, let bygones be bygones. Why? Because she "loved" her? Anna's cynical half sneered at that. But the reluctant optimist pressed her hands together and speculated. Maybe Aunt Iris was right, maybe it was time. If not for a reconciliation, then a reckoning. How ironic-pattern or not, you had to give it that, at least it was ironic-that the same B-movie situation that had driven her out of town at age twenty was driving her back at

thirty-six.

Could she really do this? It went against the grain of everything, every finely sanded principle and prejudice she had. Well, it wouldn't be permanent-that was the key. That's how she'd get through it. She'd work for Rose while she got her house fixed up and ready to sell; shouldn't take more than a few months. Then she'd split. As long as everybody knew this was temporary, she could get through it.

It still felt like giving in, though. She tried to think of a way to glorify it, something to make going home feel less like defeat, but no flattering, humiliation-averting comparisons came to mind. Damn. She might have to go as a grownup, not a mortal besieged by capricious gods, not a fierce, romantic, suicidal poet. An adult. If not capable of forgiving old sins, then at least willing to pretend, for the sake of peace, that they'd never been committed.

Clever Rose. Anna hadn't given her credit for so much cunning.

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