Opening extract from

Friday Brown

Written by

Vikki Wakefield

Published by

Hot Key Books

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

First published in Australia in 2012 by The Text Publishing Company

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0135-0

1

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
This book is typeset in Sabon 10.5/15.5 pt

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Then

My life has been told to me through campfire tales—stories that spill over when the fire has burned low and silence must be filled. They're like old coats hauled from the back of the cupboard. Dusted off, aired out, good as new. My mother, Vivienne, doled them out as reward or consolation, depending on her mood. And so I came to know myself—through the telling and retelling. They became as much a part of me as blood or bone. On the night of my eleventh birthday, Vivienne told me that I was cursed. It was her gift, she said. When she was gone the Brown women's curse would pass to me and, if I ever knew which way death would come, I should run hard in the other direction.

I listened to her with wide eyes, bitten nails and a delicious detachment, like watching a horror film and knowing it couldn't reach through the screen. I could leave her stories in the dark, remember them when I felt like it and forget them when I didn't. When you're eleven, you don't think of before or after. Only that moment and maybe tomorrow.

That night.

Vivienne was drunk. We were sleeping rough under a blanket of stars after leaving a hostel in our usual way: beds unmade, bills unpaid, through a back door. Vivienne

had outstayed her welcome again, had taken something that wasn't hers to take. In the morning we would leave our dusty campsite and hitch a ride to another four-syllable town. I knew the routine well.

It was cold. A mallee stump smouldered and hissed and I watched her through a veil of smoke and shooting sparks.

She was chain-smoking. Drinking from a bottle of vodka as she spoke. Stops and starts, like punctuation, she puffed and swigged.

'Corrie-anne Brown,' she slurred. 'Nineteen-oh-four. It was a Saturday. Corrie-anne Brown marched through the centre of town, a woman on a mission. Some said she looked like she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders that day. But no one stopped her or asked where she was going. She walked into the river, leaving her baby son abandoned in his cradle for two days. When they pulled her out of the river she was wearing every single item of clothing she owned—four skirts, seven blouses, three pairs of stockings and one Sunday hat.'

'Why?' I asked.

'So she wouldn't float, silly.'

'Did she die? Why would she leave her baby? Did he die?'

'Of course she died. She weighed more than a small elephant. And the baby was fine. Now be quiet and listen.'

'I'm listening,' I said.

'In nineteen-twenty-six, Marieke Brown went with her husband and three children to a country fair. She was bobbing for apples, going for the record, and there were people all around cheering as she went under for the ninth time in a minute.' Puff. Swig. Exhale. 'After two minutes

somebody thought to pull her out,' she went on. 'That record-breaking apple, only the size of a plum, was stuck in her throat. It was a Saturday.'

I remember finishing a bag of liquorice and feeling sick.

'Alicia Brown, nineteen-forty-two. She married Marieke's eldest son. Alicia was a Red Cross nurse in the Second World War. She couldn't pass a bundle of fur by the roadside without stopping to check for a pulse. One day she pulled over to drag a dead cat out of the middle of the road and she was clipped by another car. She landed face first in a ditch and drowned in a few centimetres of mud.'

'Which day?' I was dog-tired and all I wanted to do was close my eyes, but when Vivienne was on a roll, you had to play along.

'What do you think?'

'Was it a Saturday?'

'Now you're catching on.' She tipped the dregs of the vodka onto the hot coals and stared at the eerie blue flame. 'Belle Brown, nineteen-fifty-six. Saturday night, of course. Belle was going dancing with a nice boy from a good family. She ran a hot bath and stepped in . . .'

'She drowned in the bath?'

'No. Before she could sit down, the phone rang. Belle got out of the bath, went to the kitchen, picked up the receiver and slipped on the wet floor. She hit her head, the cord wrapped around her throat and she choked to death.'

'That's not drowning.'

'But there's always water. Don't you see?'

'Belle didn't have kids, then,' I said, yawning. 'So who was next?'

'Now we're getting to the good stuff. Belle had a younger brother. My father. He was only ten when his sister died and he never forgot about the Brown women's curse. He vowed never to marry—but he fell in love.'

'Who with?'

'Here's the amazing thing. She was an athlete, a swimmer. Arielle Dubois. She'd crossed the English Channel three times before they even met, and once after. If there was ever a woman who could beat the curse, she was the one.'

'My grandmother? How did she die?' I imagined a tall woman with gills and a pattern of shimmering, blue-green scales instead of skin. I still think of her like that.

'Well, they married late and Arielle Dubois stayed Arielle Dubois. She never took the Brown name. When my father became a judge they moved to a big house with no water, only what came out of the taps. But Arielle was miserable. She was dying inside. Like a mermaid out of water, she was shrivelling up.'

I could picture my grandmother so clearly: she was leaning, reaching towards the sea like a carved maiden on the bow of a ship. 'Did she run away?'

'No,' Vivienne said. 'He knew he was losing her, so my father dug up the backyard and put in a swimming pool.'

I drew in my breath. 'Did that make her happy?'

'She was in heaven. Arielle swam laps every day, even when she was pregnant with me. My first memories are of two worlds: a blue one that held my mother under it, and mine with my father, the house, a porch shaped like a hexagon, and a yellow sunhat. My father would pace while she swam the length of the pool and he watched me like

a hawk. But every time she'd emerge, sleek as a seal, and he could breathe again.'

Vivienne didn't speak for a while. She stood up, wandered away into the dark and stared at the sky. She lit another cigarette and smoked it, alone.

I waited quietly, as I knew I should. This was a new story and I wasn't sure how it would finish. I waited so long, my eyes closed, and when she spoke again she sounded like she was still far away.

'When I was five, there was a heatwave. The ground was baked hard and the pool had to be topped up every day. After many weeks, when it finally did rain, it poured for days, with thunder and lightning. Arielle had to stay inside. She sat by the window and stared out at the pool.' Vivienne sat down opposite me with her knees to her chest. 'On that first clear day—Saturday—Arielle peeled off her pyjamas and left them on the floor. She ran outside and dived in. Overnight, the pool had spilled over and the earth had swollen. A huge crack had appeared in the side of the concrete pool and all the water had drained away.'

Just then a piece of wood popped in the fire. Vivienne and I jumped. That's the noise I hear when I imagine my grandmother's spine snapping as she hit the bottom—that wood popping. *Crack*.

'What did he do? Your father?'

'I'll tell you what he did. He filled that pool up with concrete. Filled it right to the top using a hand-mixer. It took him over a year. I sat on the back step every day, watching my mother's world disappear.'

'How do you break a curse?' I asked.

I wondered why, if water was dangerous, she was so drawn to it. Every creek, lake or ocean we passed as we travelled, she'd shuck off her clothes and swim, even in winter. I wondered why she held me under every chance she got and counted a few seconds more each time, until I could hold my breath for a full three minutes.

Vivienne wedged her tongue between the gap in her teeth, something she did when she was thinking. 'The way I see it, you have two options. Run, run like hell,' she said. 'Or dive in.' She stood and leaned so close to the fire, I thought she might fall. As an afterthought, she said, 'That's why I called you Friday.'

She swayed like a strong wind had caught her, fell sideways onto her canvas swag, and passed out.

It was a story that left me feeling bereft. But in the end I was an eleven-year-old girl with a belly full of baked beans and liquorice; sleep won, and the next day the sun came up like it always did and we moved on like we always had.

When death finally caught up with my mother, it was no stealth attack—she knew it was coming. It started as a lump in her breast. The lump got bigger and she got smaller and smaller until there was nothing of her left. It seemed the Brown curse had missed its mark and plain old cancer had got there first.

Watching someone you love die is like driving through fog. You know you're headed somewhere but you can't see your hand in front of your face; you're so focused on steering without crashing that you never say the things you want to say. I'll tell you what else you don't do—you don't

laugh, you don't dance, you don't play loud music. You don't put on what she called 'your teenager face' and take food from her plate. You don't borrow her clothes any more because all you can think when you're wearing them is that she won't. Wear them. Again. And the most important thing you don't do is ask her all the questions you have racked up like flashcards—cards that you want to flip over and have her fire off answers so you can write them on the back for future reference.

Before you go. How do you get mascara off a white T-shirt?

Will I ever be a C-cup?

I knew she would probably have laughed at that, but I couldn't risk it going the other way.

How do you know when it's love?

Who am I, without you?

Touch was impossible. Anger ruined everything and our last conversations were thick with it. We kept inching forwards, through the fog, and we made the whole journey that way. Before we knew it, we were there. The lights came on, the fog cleared—and she was gone.

The night she died, I overheard a conversation between Vivienne's nurse and the doctor who came to sign her out.

'Cause of death? What gave out first?' the nurse said.

The doctor shook his head. 'It's unusual to happen so quickly, but her lungs were full of fluid. Out of the blue, just like that. She drowned.'

Chapter One

I left in the night.

The clock downstairs chimed the witching hour—*gong, gong*—and I used the sound to smother the grate of the zipper on my backpack. I laced up my boots and slipped on my fleece-lined jacket. I took only what was mine: my swag, my clothes and the photograph, because without it I had nowhere to go.

That photo was my one planned move—after that, life was a lucky dip. The edges were fuzzy and worn thin. One corner was peeling away. The faded image of the man with his arm slung across Vivienne's shoulder was familiar, not because he was somebody I'd met, but because I'd looked at it a thousand times, trying to picture myself as a hybrid version of the two of them. I looked like Vivienne. She would have been a couple of years older than I was then. Like me, she let her dark hair grow down to her waist and rarely wore make-up; unlike me she was tall and thin as a reed. We had the same grey eyes. But it was a bitter truth when I realised that I wasn't beautiful like her, that a millimetre here or there could be the difference between people staring or being indifferent.

That night, I left a room I'd dreamed about since I was

little. A doll's room, with white furniture and lace curtains. Innocent things. A bed and bookcase and desk that seemed like one creation, flowing from one to the other. You could run a finger along the surfaces and end up right back where you started.

I left the things Grandfather had given me in a sad pile on the desk—a watch that looked too big on my wrist, a laptop computer, a string of pearls, a set of keys.

Every step was deafening. My breathing was too loud, my jeans scraped as I walked. The corner of my jacket caught on the newel post at the top of the stairs. I flailed in space before my hand found the rail with a *smack*.

I waited for a long minute. From there I could get back to my room—any further downstairs and I risked discovery, and lockdown. I checked behind me, along the dark hallway. Nothing.

The house had wings. I'd never seen anything like it. The east wing, where Grandfather slept, was to my right. The west wing, all my own, to the left. There were seven doors off the west wing and I'd only ever stepped through two of them. The house was too still—it didn't sigh or shift its weight the way old houses should. It seemed to be holding its breath.

The staircase was a gauntlet of eyes: ancient portraits of men wearing flowing gowns and dusty white wigs. There was only one painting of a young woman. She had the glassy gaze of a reluctant sitter, pearls choking her throat, her nails polished and smooth. It was Vivienne, but from another time. Before. The Vivienne I knew had nails that were bitten and she wore junk jewellery with marbled stones

that were like tiny worlds. She never wore pearls. And she could never sit still that long.

At the bottom of the stairs was a room that used to be a sitting room. A lamp was switched on, an unblinking eye, watching. There was the bed where Vivienne had lain for three months while her spirit soared on a morphine cloud, a dent still in the mattress, a groove where her hip bones had dug in, the precious hollow in the pillow.

I couldn't pass it without looking—but there was nothing for me any more.

I stepped through the entrance hall on the balls of my feet. Into the dining room with its boardroom table, tinkling chandelier and an everlasting decanter of whisky. It seemed never to empty, though Grandfather filled his glass over and over.

For forty-two nights, he and I had sat at each end of the table, as divided as continents, pushing food around our plates. We went days without speaking. Vivienne had taken me back to her father's house so that she could die and I could have a future, but I wanted to be gone because, without her, none of it was bearable. Everything tidy and polished and civilised—even our grief.

I passed through the endless galley kitchen and slipped out through the back door.

The night air was cold and still. I hoisted my backpack and buttoned my jacket. Grandfather's cat wound between my legs and beseeched me with lime-coloured eyes. I ran my hand along its rippling spine. The feel of it—so *alive*—made my eyes ache.

I took my hand away and the cat wailed and slashed the air with its tail.

'Shhh!' I hissed and stomped my foot. The gravel crunched underneath.

I looked back at the house.

In another life it could be a country house from an Enid Blyton book—all rambling garden and dappled sunlight and hidden treasure. Fond cousins and lashings of lemonade with the odd mystery and midnight feast. It was a house made for happy endings, but there I was, standing in the dark with a yowling cat, everything I owned crammed into a backpack.

I was the sum of two people, one dead, the other unknown. I'd lived in a hundred small towns and I'd never known another person for my whole life, except Vivienne. Every memory before this was sweet and real. But now she'd got it wrong—this wasn't my future. Her legacy should be more than a string of pearls and a grandfather I didn't know. Vivienne taught me that life was short, and if it wasn't sweet you were in the wrong place with the wrong people.

Time to go, Friday Brown, she'd say, and so the next chapter would begin. Sometimes it would be a whisper in the dark and I would feel her broken heart beating against my back; other times, a casual aside in conversation, as if it had just occurred to her that she had somewhere else to be. We craved new beginnings.

Suddenly the sensor lights flicked on and I was drowning in brightness. I blinked and raised my arm over my eyes. An upstairs window flew up. For a second I saw my mother there, framed in a halo of light, but it was just him, Grandfather, with his old man's hair gone static and wild. He frowned, fists braced against the sill.

I had the sensation of time winding in a loop.

He stared at me.

I stared at him.

I knew I'd be away before he even got to the landing, but still I felt trapped in his glare.

He lobbed something at me. A bundle, the size of a half-brick, that fell short and tumbled to my feet. He nodded at it and regarded me carefully as if what I did next would give him some measure of me.

I picked it up, felt its weight in my palm, caught the scent of new ink. A wad of fifties, bound in rubber bands. Hundreds of them, probably more than ten thousand dollars. I thought of Vivienne—turned away from here with nothing, my lifetime ago—and I made my choice. It was a choice based on stupid pride and dumb loyalty, and it would change everything.

I threw the bundle onto the porch, turned my back and started walking.

I had a purse with my own money. Enough to start over. If there was one thing I knew—one thing I could do without a map, with my eyes closed and my hands tied behind my back—it was starting over. Except this time I had to do it on my own.

The sensor lights flicked off.

Clouds of breath, numbness in my fingers and toes. A pale slice of moon threw a sickly light, just enough to see by. When I reached the front gates, I looked back.

He was gone. The windows were dark and shuttered.

Grandfather was letting me go.