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Sea Music

Written by Briege Brannigan

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Sea Music

BRIEGE BRANNIGAN



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In memory of my parents,
Vincent and Winifred

Part One

Chapter One

2001

Jess laid her vase of sweet pea by the remembrance stone. The inscription was succinct:

Anna Katherine Cooper
10 June 1944 – 21 July 1991

Seeing the bouquet of red roses, she knew that her father had been there already. She stood for several minutes in silent communication and as the heavy rain mingled with her tears, she wiped her face with the palms of her hands.

As she retraced her steps through the memorial garden, the rain stopped abruptly, the sky lightened and the sun came out. Walking between the horse chestnuts and sycamores she stared in wonder at the magical transformation that was taking place. Thousands of tiny raindrop jewels shimmered in the sun's rays, with all the colours of the spectrum and a group of blue tits flew in and out of the branches, feeding on some nourishment unseen by her. With renewed hope, she got into her car and began her journey to Northumberland.

It was the tenth anniversary of her mother's death and as she drove east and then north, she contemplated the life of the woman who had died at the age of forty-seven, wondering yet again what had changed her from the positive person she had

once been to the woman intent on self-destruction. She had asked her father this question many times over the years but he was reluctant to talk about it. All he disclosed was that Anna was unable to have any more children after Jess.

'She really wanted three or four children and she never came to terms with not being able to have more.'

Jess was satisfied with that explanation for a while but she had long suspected that there was something else. Her father, however, would not be drawn further on the subject.

For as long as she could remember, she had had an awareness of a void in her life. It was a strange, vague feeling that she couldn't put into words. Sometimes she put it down to the fact that she had no relatives. Neither of her parents had siblings and her grandparents were dead. But mostly she sensed that it was something much more profound than a mere absence of family. There were times when she was enveloped in a deep sadness and she would find herself so close to tears that, if she was in company, she would have to excuse herself and go to the bathroom or her bedroom to have a quiet weep. It was at these times that she felt as if a vital part of her had been torn out. She knew she was grieving but for what?

Early memories were sparse and for the most part, nebulous. Some friends had very clear memories of when they were three or four, but her clearest memories began when she moved from London to Manchester a couple of months before her eighth birthday. One substantial memory from London was of her mother teaching her at home. She knew she had attended school at one time, for she had a hazy but warm recollection of being in a classroom with her friend Cathy and other children. When she'd asked her parents why she no longer went to school, she was told it was because she had been very ill and needed to build up her strength before she returned.

'But I don't remember being ill. Was I in hospital? Did I nearly die?' she'd asked, wide-eyed with a delicious mixture of horror and glee. Her parents explained that part of the illness was losing her memory of it, hastily changed the subject and refused to discuss it thereafter.

They had arrived in Manchester in June 1979. The home-tutoring continued after the move because it was nearly the end of the summer term. Jess was happy with this for she was filled with fears, some indeterminate, others very clear, like the thought of facing a class of new children in a strange city. Lonely for Cathy, she created two playmates, Lily and Gwen.



Jess closed her reader and looked hopefully at her mother. 'Can I go out to play now?'

Anna smiled. 'Yes, I think we've done enough for today; your reading's coming on a treat.' Jess gathered up her books and having put them away in the sideboard, ran outside. Lily and Gwen were waiting for her by the shed at the bottom of the garden. She greeted them, folded her arms and screwed up her face. 'Now what are we going to play today?'

'What about shop?' suggested Lily.

Jess took on a superior air. 'As long as I can be the shop keeper. I'm a greengrocer.' And she set about collecting stones for potatoes, grass for spring onions, dock leaves for cabbage.

'Who are you talking to?'

Jess jumped at the sound of the voice coming from the fence. She had become used to her playmates sounding only in her head. Turning, she saw a mop of blonde curls, a pert nose and two big blue eyes staring intently at her. Embarrassed to

admit that she was talking to herself, she said nothing, wishing at the same time that she could disappear.

'Were you talking to yourself? I do that sometimes when I have no one to play with. My name's Tanya, what's yours?'

'Jessica,' she replied, thankful that she did not have to answer the girl's first question, 'but I'm mostly called Jess.'

'You've just moved in, haven't you? When we went on holiday your house was empty and now you're here. Can I come round and play with you? That's if my mum lets me. I'll go and ask her.' Without waiting for an answer, Tanya disappeared.

Jess had mixed feelings about the newcomer for, although she was lonely, she'd got used to being in charge of Lily and Gwen who joined in her games without demur. She continued her search for produce for the shop.

'Jess, there's a little girl here, she lives next door and she wants to play with you. Says she's already spoken to you over the fence.' Anna was halfway down the garden.

Entering the kitchen, Jess saw Tanya and a blonde woman, very like her in appearance, seated at the table.

'Hello Jessica, Tanya's told me you've already met. We're your next door neighbours. We've been away on holiday. Is it alright if Tanya plays with you?'

Stricken by shyness, Jess put her head down and made circles on the floor with the toe of her right foot before murmuring her assent.

It turned out that Tanya was also an only child and she and Jess forged a firm friendship that summer. Jess felt her shyness and fears diminish and she began to look forward to going to school, feeling very excited when she went with her mum to buy her uniform and other requirements.

But as the start of term approached, she began to worry about being disliked, bullied even, by the other children. Tanya

had a different way of talking; she sometimes said things that Jess didn't understand and she knew that Tanya didn't always understand her. What if the other children made fun of her because she was different? She resorted to biting her nails, something she hadn't done for several weeks, as she sat staring through the window, pondering these things.

'You all right love? Not playing with Tanya today?'

She jumped at the sound of her father's voice. 'No, she's gone to visit her gran.'

'Are you looking forward to school tomorrow?'

'Oh yes.' She knew it wasn't exactly a lie because, in spite of her anxiety, she had a certain curiosity about the place Tanya had told her so much about and she wanted to be with her friend.

At the back of the garden shed, she spoke to Lily and Gwen who had not been around since she'd met Tanya.

'I'm going to school tomorrow so I won't be able to play with you. I know I've not played with you for a while and that's because of Tanya. You see she doesn't know about you and I don't think she would like it if she did…because… she likes to keep me to herself, so I've not told her.' She looked sidelong at them to see how they were taking it and when there was no reaction, she continued. 'Tanya loves school and I want to go with her but I hope I won't get sick again like I did before and I hope the other children will like me.' Her voice quivered, then in a brighter tone, 'But Tanya likes me and Cathy, my friend in London liked me and you like me,' she gave a loud sigh, 'so maybe they will.'

She was interrupted by her mother's voice, calling down the garden. 'Jess, where are you? It's nearly teatime, come in and wash your hands.'

Her fears were unfounded. Tanya was very popular and her many friends gathered round the newcomer with interest, asking questions about London: Had she been to Buckingham Palace?

Had she seen the Queen? They commented admiringly on her 'posh accent'. Tanya was very assertive and fielded any adverse remarks with aplomb. Even the rougher boys appeared to be in awe of her. The teacher, Miss Harris was kind and welcoming and her work had in no way suffered in her absence from school. She was well ahead of many of the other pupils. At half-term, she and Anna spent happy days exploring their new area.

Just north of Leeds, Jess stopped to buy petrol, also picking up a sandwich and a bottle of water and as she continued her journey, she recalled the day she first became concerned about her mother.

As usual, she came in from school like a whirlwind, the latest happenings already on her lips. Normally Anna would be sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and eager to hear her news. Today the kitchen was empty.

'Mum?' She went into the sitting room. 'Mum?' She looked in the dining room, called up the stairs. There was no reply and she could feel her anxiety growing as she raced upstairs and burst into her parents' bedroom.

'Mum? Mum?' There was a note of panic in her voice. Anna was in bed and she opened her eyes as Jess came in.

'Oh there you are Mum, I thought you'd gone. Why are you in bed? Are you poorly?'

Anna sat up and gave her a startled look, shook herself and swung her legs over the side of the bed. 'No darling I'm fine, just a bit tired. Come and give me a cuddle.'

She put her arms round her mother but something was amiss. There was a very odd smell about her. She leaned back and looked closely at her.

'What's that funny smell? I don't like it.' She pulled a face.

'Oh, eh…it must be that stuff I was feeding the houseplants. Now let's go down and get you a drink and you can tell me about your day.'

On the landing, she noticed that the step ladder was in place under the open attic hatch, a cardboard box next to it.

'What were you doing in the attic Mum?'

'I was just looking through some business papers.' Anna hastily lifted the box and proceeding up the ladder, shoved it inside and slammed the hatch shut.

In the kitchen, Jess cuddled her again. 'I really thought you'd gone Mum.'

Anna held her tightly. 'I'd never leave you Jess, you know that, don't you?'

She nodded her head vigorously. 'I do know,' she said, 'I don't know why I thought that.'

She knew in her heart that her mother would never leave her, so it puzzled her that from time to time she had a fear of being deserted by one or both parents; at that moment, the feeling of an absence in her life was stronger than ever and despite what Anna had said about being tired, she had a niggling worry that she might be ill. She just wasn't her usual self.

That night she had a dream about a house of many rooms and stairs where she wandered about searching for someone. She had no idea who the person was, just that they were important to her. And, as she was neither able to find them or to find a way out, her frustration grew. It was a recurring theme in her dreams and she always woke in tears.

As the weeks went by and Anna seemed back to normal, her anxieties dissipated. Then in September she had the shock of her life. Returning from her dancing class one Saturday afternoon, she was met by her father, looking grave.

'I need to talk to you Jess. Let's go up to your room.'

She felt uneasy; something was wrong. Was her mum poorly after all?

'What's wrong Dad?'

'We'll talk upstairs.'

As they passed the sitting room, she thought she heard a sob. Was that her um crying? She sat on her bed and looked anxiously at her father who sat next to her. He ran a hand through his thinning fair hair, took off his glasses and held them up to the window, inspecting them for smears, rubbed them with a hankie, put them back on.

'There's no easy way to tell you this Jess,' he hesitated but his next words came out in a rush, 'you see, me and your mum, we've not been getting on well recently and… well… I'm going to move out for a while. I'll only be about a mile away. I've got a flat with two bedrooms and you can come and stay whenever you want. I love you very much Jess and I'm going to miss you but things are too difficult here and I think this might be the best way of sorting things out.'

Unable to believe she was hearing this, she stared at him, put her head down and began to pull at a loose thread on her cardigan, twirling it round her forefinger.

'I don't want you to go Dad. Don't you care about me and Mum anymore?'

John sighed. He reached over and stroked her long, dark hair.

'Jess, Jess have you listened to a word I've been saying? Of course I care, nobody could love you more and I still love your mum but, as I said, we've been having a difficult time and I think a separation might help us. I'm hoping it won't be forever.'

She looked up then. 'So I can come and stay whenever I want?'

'Yes, well at weekends of course when I'm not at work.'

She pulled the thread tighter until the tip of her finger went blue.

'Is Mum very upset?'

'Well yes, I'm afraid she is but she will be okay.'

'I wouldn't want to leave Mum too often if she's really upset but I would want to come and stay with you…oh Dad I'm going to miss you.' And she flung herself upon him as the tears began to flow.

John was crying too. 'Oh I'll miss you darling. And you know this has nothing to do with you. It's between me and your mum and…oh how I wish things were different.'

She had no understanding of what had happened between her parents. She had never heard them argue, never mind row; she'd always believed them to be happy and she had been so happy since coming to Manchester, meeting Tanya and going to school and her dancing classes. She'd had that period of worry about her mother's health but that had been short-lived. Now she felt as if her beliefs had no substance, like sandcastles she had built with pride and care, only to see them decimated by the in-coming tide.

After her father left, she sobbed herself to sleep every night for weeks, even though she did go to stay with him most weekends. This was not the complete desertion she had feared but it was bad, very bad. The dreams of futile searching haunted her regularly.

One day in February, Jess returned from school to find Anna sound asleep on the sofa.

'Mum! Mum are you alright?' Anna didn't stir. A little apprehensive, she went over and shook her shoulder. 'Mum?' There was still no movement and, as she shook her again, she noticed a bottle tucked between her and the sofa back. She picked

it up. It was empty. She read the label: Vodka. So her mother was drunk! She had never seen either of her parents drunk; had never seen them drink much. She shook Anna more forcefully and this time she opened her eyes and a look of horror passed over her face.

'Jess! Oh my God Jess! Is it that time already?' She groped for an alarm clock on the coffee table. Jess's face was furrowed in consternation.

'Mum why have you been drinking? I didn't know you ever got drunk.'

Sitting upright now, Anna patted the sofa. 'Come and sit next to me Jess.' She put an arm round her.

'As you know, I don't drink much and I certainly don't get drunk. I've not been sleeping well recently and I thought I'd take a nap. I thought a drink would help me to relax. I only had a couple – this bottle of vodka's been in the house for ages – and I'm so unused to drinking that it knocked me out. I was planning on being up before you got back but I even slept through the alarm. Just shows how tired I was. Well I won't be doing that again in a hurry.' She laughed.

Jess accepted her explanation but she wasn't completely satisfied and her mother's next words gave her more cause for anxiety.

'Oh by the way Jess, promise me you won't tell your dad about this. I know he would worry, even though he has no need to and he would be angry.'

Jess shook her head. 'I won't tell him but promise me it won't happen again.'

'I promise. I've learned my lesson.' Anna laughed again. 'Now what shall we make for tea?'

Jess said goodbye to Tanya and went round to the back door.

To her surprise it was locked. Anna never locked the back door unless she was going out and she was always in when Jess returned from school. She began to feel uneasy as she knocked on the glass and called for her mother. No reply. She was just going round to the front when Anna came through the gate.

'Mum where have you been? I was wondering why the back door was locked.'

'I just went round to the shop for something. I thought I'd be back before you got here but there was a queue.'

Ushering Jess inside, she asked her to go and change out of her uniform. Jess obeyed but she was puzzled. Her mum didn't usually ask her to change straight away and there was something odd about her. When she came down, she found Anna mopping the kitchen floor and there was a strong smell of disinfectant.

'Be careful not to walk in here in your bare feet Jess. I broke a bottle of milk and there may still be some small pieces of glass around.'

'Okay Mum, I'll be careful.'

After tea, she helped Anna to clear up and as she scraped the plates into the pedal bin, she noticed a jagged piece of glass behind it. Picking it up, she saw that it had a torn red label. There was something familiar about that label and then she recognised the letters – Vod…Vodka! So it wasn't a bottle of milk that her mother had dropped. She was still drinking and what's more she was lying about it.

Although Jess had previously had no experience of drunkenness, she'd heard rumours from girls in her class. When Tracey Carter came in with a black eye, it was whispered that one of her parents had done it.

'Her dad doesn't work you know. Neither does her mum. My mum says they spend all day drinking.' Arms akimbo, Jackie

Smith was censorious. Her friend Michele Edwards agreed.

'Yeah, that's right, my auntie lives next door to them and you want to hear the stories she has to tell. She says they're always fighting.'

Jess was appalled. And that was before she found her mother asleep on the sofa with a vodka bottle nearby.

A few weeks after the rumours, Tracey was no longer in school and those in the know spread the word that she and her younger brother Michael had been taken into care.

Jess's mind was in turmoil: would her mother start to hit her? She had never had as much as a tap from either parent. Should she now break her promise and tell her father? Surely if she did, her mum would be very angry with her and worse still her father would surely be very angry with her mum and maybe they would start to row. Should she tell her mum what she had found or would that also make her angry? She needed time to decide what to do. Lost in thought, she was still staring unseeingly at the shard when Anna turned from the sink.

'What have you got there Jess?'

She started, 'Eh…nothing…just some rubbish.'

'Let me see.'

She felt the heat rise in her face and cast her eyes down as she handed over the piece.

'Where did you get this?'

'Be…behind the pedal bin. I…I know it's part of a vodka bottle and I know it was a bottle of vodka you dropped – not milk!'

Anna threw it in the bin and led Jess into the front room.

'I think I have some explaining to do.'

She told her it was the first time she'd bought alcohol in ages and when the bottle had slipped from her hand she was glad. She would buy no more and she didn't want John to be worried or angry so she hoped that Jess would keep to her promise not

to tell him. It was their secret and from now on she would only have the occasional glass of wine in the evenings. There was no need for her to be concerned.

Jess was unconvinced. After all her mother had made and broken that promise before.



For a time it seemed that Anna was keeping her word. She was alert and cheerful when Jess came home but after a while, she suspected she was drinking again because sometimes her eyes were bloodshot and her speech sounded odd; she had taken to chewing gum, something she disliked in other people, but underneath the smell of peppermint, Jess sometimes got a whiff of that peculiar smell, like the stuff the doctor rubbed on her arm before giving her an injection. Often the kitchen was untidy with the breakfast dishes still in the sink, the bin overflowing. On one occasion she asked Anna outright if she was drinking but she quickly denied it.

'I'm just a bit tired Jess. That's why I'm not doing as much housework as usual. I think I must be run down.'

'Why don't you go and see the doctor Mum? I'm worried about you.'

Anna promised she would go soon and a few days later she told Jess that she was anaemic. 'That means that the iron in my blood is low. It's why I've been feeling so tired but Doctor Jones has given me some iron tablets and I'll soon be as right as rain.' She smiled.

Jess breathed a sigh of relief but one sunny day in late June, she came home to find her mother sprawled on the sofa once more. This time she was not asleep but her eyes were glazed and there

was a half-empty vodka bottle by her side. Her speech was slurred.

'Well Jesh you caught me out. I can't deny now that I've been drinking. I'm really sorry love.' She lay back and closed her eyes, then lifted her head again. 'What do you want for tea? Thersh not much food in, you might need to go to the shop.'

Jess was frightened and near to tears. What if she said the wrong thing and her mother got violent like Tracey Carter's mother?

'What would you like for tea Mum?'

Anna gave an odd-sounding laugh.

'I don't want to eat love I jush want to drink.' And she took a great slug from the bottle. Jess opened the fridge which was almost empty: a quarter bottle of milk, a piece of mouldy cheese, a wilted lettuce and some soft tomatoes. Well there was bound to be something in the freezer. Her mother kept a well-stocked chest freezer in the garage.

She lifted the lid to find that it was also almost empty and what was in there was at the bottom where she couldn't reach. She looked around and saw a plastic crate. Maybe if she stood on that she could reach. But what was the point? She knew little about cooking but she did know that some foods must be defrosted and that it took a long time.

Returning to the kitchen, she noticed an egg box on top of the fridge. She would try to make scrambled eggs on toast but was there any bread? Opening the bread bin, she found a mouldy end of loaf and two reasonable-looking slices. Now how did you make scrambled eggs? But when she opened the box it was empty. Well beans on toast would be easy and she knew there were tins of beans in the cupboard.

When she went back to the sitting room to see if Anna had changed her mind about eating, she found her fast asleep. She ate her beans on toast ravenously leaving some beans and a slice

of bread for Anna. She was still hungry so she helped herself to some cornflakes.

She knew now that her mother had been drinking for some time and it looked like it was getting worse. Her mind teemed with questions. Would she get taken into care like Tracey Carter or would they let her go and live with her dad? She didn't want to live with him; she didn't want to live with Anna. She wanted them all to live together. She wanted everything to be the way it used to be. When had her mum started drinking? Why was she drinking? Had her dad known all along and was that the real reason he had left? But surely he wouldn't leave her on her own with a drunken mother, would he? Should she now break her promise to her mother and tell him?

Unable to face sitting with her mother, she retreated to her bedroom, where she comforted herself by cuddling Danny, her favourite teddy and rocking back and forth on her bed. There was a tap at the door. 'Can I come in?'

Anna looked worse than she had ever seen her: dress crumpled, hair wild, eyes bloodshot and baggy, face white and drawn.

'Can I sit with you?'

She said nothing but made a space on the bed. Anna sat down and put her arms round her but she pulled away, partly because of the smell: that doctor's surgery smell again, mixed with sweat, but also because she was in two minds about being touched by her. Part of her longed to be held and loved, told that everything would be alright but another part felt angry and disgusted. Anna folded her arms and when she spoke, Jess could hear she was on the verge of tears.

'I'm so very sorry darling. What can I say? If I promise to stop, you won't believe me. But I'm promising anyway because this time I'm going to get help.'

Jess clutched Danny even tighter and turned her face to the wall.

'Look at me Jess.'

When she didn't move, she continued. 'I've found an organisation which helps people like me who drink too much.' She reached out and touched her lightly on the shoulder but she pulled further away. Anna began to cry.

'I'm going to ring them tomorrow and, if you don't believe me, you can be there when I make the call. I promise I'll be sober when you come home from school.'

Jess jumped off the bed, Danny still in her arms and stamped her foot.

'I don't believe you! Your promises mean nothing. I remember when I was little you told me you should never say *promise* unless you really, really meant to keep your word and all you do is go back on your word.'

She threw Danny on the bed and picked up a slipper which she flung at Anna with as much strength as she could muster. 'I hate you.' Several other objects followed the slipper, anything that was near to hand and she continued shouting. 'I hate you.' Then she crumpled in a heap on the floor and began to sob. Anna quietly left the room.

Jess was munching on a slice of dry toast when Anna entered the kitchen the following morning. There was no butter and she'd finished the milk with her cornflakes the evening before. Anna hadn't touched the beans or bread she had left for her. Ignoring her mother's greeting, she finished her toast, put her bag on her shoulder and went to call for Tanya without saying goodbye.

When she returned that afternoon, Anna was seated at the table in a spotless kitchen with a mug of coffee, looking better than she had seen her in some time. It was obvious she had been

to the hairdresser; her shoulder-length dark hair, which had recently often looked lank and dull, had got back its lustre and had been cut into a neat bob. Her brown eyes were carefully made-up and clearer than they had been for some time and she was wearing a cerise shirt that Jess had not seen before, over black trousers. She smiled as Jess came in. 'Hello Jess, had a good day?'

Relieved as she was, she hadn't forgiven her so she mumbled a reply and made her way upstairs to change, noticing as she did so that the transformation extended to the rest of the house and there were flowers in the hall.

When she came down, she opened the fridge, which was full of food, poured herself a glass of milk and was about to make her exit again when Anna spoke.

'I'm going to make that phone call Jess.' She fiddled with the silver chain and opal pendant she often wore. 'You can listen to what I'm saying so that you will know I mean to keep my word. But once again, I'm asking you not to breathe a word of this to your dad.'