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**Opening Extract from...**

# Pillow Talk

Written by Freya North

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# Prologue

Something isn't quite right – I have a hunch about this. But I think I'll just tuck it into the back of my mind while I tuck my feet into my wellington boots. Now I'll open my front door and step out into the night.

I'm ready. Where is it I'm meant to be going? I can't quite remember. It'll come back to me in a moment. I'll just put one foot in front of the other and trust myself. I am turning left. If I am automatically taking this direction to Wherever, this must mean it is the right way to go.

Now where am I? I'm glad I'm wearing my gumboots. That was a good idea. I had to rummage for them as I can't remember when I last wore them. I can't remember when I last had a weekend away from the city. No one has ever whisked me away. Not that I've ever asked – that wouldn't be me. That's not to say I haven't daydreamed of it, though.

But enough of this mental meandering, I must walk on. This way. That way. I don't feel very comfortable. I'm rather cold and my feet feel – strange.

I'm hoping for the landmark to loom, to say to me that I've arrived at my destination. I know metaphysics would say that it's not the arriving but the journey that's the point – but I'm going to have to have a sit-down and a rethink if I don't get there soon. Perhaps I've gone the wrong way. I don't want to admit to myself that I don't really know the route

because that would call into question the destination which, actually, I can't remember at all. Well, I'll keep on walking this way. My feet are really sore. I'd love a bar of chocolate. I'm quite tired now. Sleepy, in fact. Something will jog my memory.

It was not Petra Flint's memory that was jogged. It was her slumber. By the police. She woke with a start and in a panic; for a split second she thought she was blind. Actually it was very dark and she was lying face down on the ground. Earthy, itchy ground, and wet.

'Are you OK?'

Petra lifted her head a little and glanced up: two police officers were looming over her. The sudden beam from a torch scorched her eye so she dropped her gaze and put her face back to the ground. She was wearing her nightshirt and her wellington boots, which were on the wrong feet, and she felt mortified. She also felt alarmingly cold. She spat. There was a tickle of grass and a crunch of soil in her mouth. The torch beam wavered. Shit. The police. She scrambled up, whacked by nausea as she did so. Disorientated, she still sensed an urgency to explain because it couldn't look good, to the police, that she'd been found sprawled on the ground in an oversized Snoopy T-shirt and wellies.

'Are you OK?' one officer asked, steadying Petra; the firm arm of the law surprisingly gentle at her elbow.

'Oh, I'm fine,' she told them, hoping to sound convincing but certain she sounded guilty. She looked around her. She recognized nothing. She didn't know where she was. A park. 'Where is this?' She caught the glance that passed between the officers. She just wanted to go home. Warm up. Tuck in tight for a better night's sleep. Better not ask any more questions then, better leave that to the police. Better still, give

them answers before they even ask. 'My name is Petra Flint,' she said clearly, 'and I sleepwalk.'

Oh my God, my grandmother is dead. The shrill of the phone woke Rob with a start; his ailing grandmother his primary thought. He grabbed at his watch, noting it was almost three in the morning as he said hullo. He listened carefully, soon enough faintly amused by how he could be relieved it was just the police. Grandma is fine, Rob thought, though he wondered whether he'd now jinxed her life by anticipating her death.

'Yes – Petra Flint,' he said with the measured bemusement of a parent being called before their child's head teacher, 'Petra is my girlfriend. Yes, she is known to sleepwalk – though usually she takes measures to prevent this, keeps herself under lock and key. You found her *where*?'

He scrambled into some clothes muttering that Christ he was tired. As he found Petra's keys and snatched up his own from the mantelpiece, he wondered why somnambulists never managed to subconsciously take their keys when they took off into the night. On one sortie, Petra had filled her coat pockets with onions. On another she had taken the remote control from the television with her, having first removed the batteries and placed them in a careful configuration on the kitchen table. In the ten months Rob had known Petra and on the many occasions she had sleepwalked, only a few times had she made it out into the night yet not once had she taken her keys. Or a penny. Or her phone. And, as he drove off towards Whetstone at the behest of the police, Rob decided that, in this age of mobile telecommunication, it was for sleepwalkers alone that phone boxes still existed, providing shelter and the reverse-charges call until someone arrived to take them home. This was, however, the first time he'd been called by the police.

Her sheepish expression could have been due as much to her Snoopy nightshirt as to the circumstance. Rob thought

she looked rather cute, all forlorn and mortified. If he ignored the wellington boots and the dirt on her chin.

'Petra,' he said, raising an eyebrow towards the duty officer, 'what were you *thinking*?'

He always asks me that, Petra thought petulantly. And he never listens when I say I *don't* think, I don't *know*. Somewhere, in the deeper reaches of my subconscious state which I simply cannot access when I'm awake, I obviously thought that this was a very good idea at the time.

She shrugged. 'Do you have my keys?'

'Yes,' he said, 'come on.' He put his fleece jacket around her shoulders and bit his tongue against commenting on her wellington boots. They certainly weren't Pinder's, they weren't even imitations. These were old-fashioned: shapeless tubes of black rubber reaching the unflattering point midway up her bare calves. Tomorrow, he'd see the funny side. Tonight he was tired and a little irritated.

'One day you'll get hurt, you know,' Rob warned her, before starting the car.

My feet really hurt right now, Petra thought, even though each boot was now on the correct foot. 'I'm sorry,' she said, pressing the side of her head hard against the car window, the judder at her temples convincing her she was truly awake, 'I can't remember a thing. I don't know where I was going.'

'So you always say,' Rob nodded. 'Do you mind if I don't come in?' he said, soon pulling up outside Petra's flat. 'I have clients from Japan first thing in the morning.'

'Sorry,' Petra shuffled, 'sorry.'

Rob looked at her, his exasperation softening a little. 'It's all right. It's fine,' he said.

'Goodnight, Petra – and lock your bloody bedroom door.'

# Chapter One

The first Wednesday in March was going to be a peculiar day for Petra Flint but it would take another seventeen years for her to consider how seminal it had been. Usually, school days were utterly dependable for their monotony, with daytime plotted and pieced into fifty-minute periods of quality education. The reputation of Dame Alexandra Johnson School for Girls and its high standing in the league tables was built on courteous, bright girls achieving fine exam results and entry into Oxbridge and the better Red Bricks. The school was sited in a residential street just off the Finchley Road, east of West Hampstead. It occupied four Victorian houses, somewhat haphazardly interconnected, whose period details sat surprisingly well with blackboards, Bunsen burners and the students' adventurous artwork. All members of staff were upright and eager, and it was as much the school's edict to impart a similar demeanour on the girls as to teach them the set curriculum. The headmistress, Miss Lorimar, was of indeterminate age, looked a little like an owl and could swoop down on misconduct or mess in an instant. She infused the girls and staff alike with a mixture

of trepidation and respect. *Ad vitam Paramus*, she'd often proclaim, in morning assembly or just along the corridors, *Ad vitam Paramus*.

Petra liked school. Miss Lorimar had only ever had cause to bark praise at her. Petra wasn't staggeringly bright, nor was she tiresomely popular but in keeping a naturally quiet and amicable profile, she was well liked by her teachers and classmates. She liked school because it provided respite from home. On her fourteenth birthday last year, she had been summonsed to Miss Lorimar's office.

'Sit.'

Petra had sat. She had sat in silence glancing at Miss Lorimar who was reading a letter with great interest.

'I see it is your birthday,' the headmistress had announced, 'and I see you are having a rotten time at home.' She brandished the piece of paper which Petra then recognized as coming from the pad of light blue Basildon Bond that was kept in the console drawer in the hallway at home. 'Your mother has disclosed the situation with your father.' Petra's gaze fell to her lap where she saw her fists were tightly clenched. 'I shall circulate this information in the staff room,' Miss Lorimar continued, as if referring to a case of nits. There was a pause during which Petra unfurled her fists and worried that her fingernails weren't regulation short. Miss Lorimar didn't seem interested in them. 'Happy birthday,' she said, her bluntness at odds with the sentiment. There was another pause. When Miss Lorimar next spoke, the steely edge to her voice had been replaced with an unexpected softness. 'Let school be your daytime haven, Miss Flint,' she said. 'You can be happy here. We will care for you.'

And Petra was happy at Dame Alexandra Johnson School for Girls and she did feel well cared for and now, a year on

from her parents' divorce, home was no longer a place to trudge reluctantly back to.

That first Wednesday in March, double maths, first break and double English were blithely pushed aside as Miss Lorimar strode into the Lower Fifth classroom after assembly.

'I wanted to call it Task Force,' she bellowed and no one knew what she was talking about, 'but the governors thought it sounded too military.' She narrowed her eyes and huffed with consternation. Twenty-eight pairs of eyes concentrated on the dinks and notches in the old wooden desks. 'So we are calling it Pensioners' Link instead. One lunch-time each week, you will go in pairs and visit pensioners in the locale. You will do odd jobs, a little shopping and, most importantly, you will provide company.' She looked around the class. 'The elderly have started to become forgotten, even disposable, in our society,' she said darkly. 'It's an outrage! They are the cornerstones of our community and much is to be learned from them. You will sit and you will listen. Thank you, ladies.' A spontaneous hum from girls desperate to chatter erupted, though a withering look from Miss Lorimar soon silenced it. With a tilt of her head towards the classroom door, a group of people filed in. 'We welcome members of social services who will be your chaperones today. You will be back in time for final period before lunch – and the concert.'

The concert. Oh yes, the *gig*. Noble Savages, the band made up from Sixth Formers at nearby Milton College Public School for Boys, were playing in the hall at lunch-break. What a strange day for a school day. Rather wonderful, too.

Petra had been paired with Darcey Lewis and they'd been teamed with Mrs McNeil who was eighty-one years old and lived on her own in a flat in the mansion block above the shops near Finchley Road underground station.

'I didn't know people even lived here,' said Darcey.

'God you're a snob!' Petra said.

'I didn't mean it that way,' said Darcey ingenuously. 'I meant that I haven't ever bothered to look upwards beyond McDonald's or the newsagent or the sandwich shop.'

'It is pretty spectacular,' Petra agreed, as she and Darcey craned their necks and noted the surprisingly ornate brickwork and elegantly proportioned windows of the apartments sitting loftily above the parade of dog-eared shops.

'This is such a skive!' Darcey whispered as the lady from social services led them into the building. 'Missing double bloody maths to chat with an old biddy.' Darcey's glibness was soon set to rights by the dingy hallway and flight after flight of threadbare stairs. 'Why do you make someone so old live up here?' Darcey challenged social services.

'Mrs McNeil has lived here for twenty years,' was the reply. 'It is her home and she does not wish to move.'

The walls were stained with watermarks from some long-ago flood and from the scuff and trample of careless feet. The building smelt unpleasant: of carpet that had been damp, of overheated flats in need of airing, faint whispers of cigarette smoke, camphor, old-fashioned gas ovens, a cloying suggestion of soured milk. Mrs McNeil's front doorknob was secured with a thatch of Sellotape, the ends of which furled up yellow, all stickiness gone.

'She won't let us fix it,' the social services lady told the girls, as she rapped the flap of the letter-box instead.

'Bet she smells of wee,' Darcey whispered to Petra.

'Shut up,' Petra said.

Mrs McNeil did not smell of wee but of lavender cologne, and her apartment did not smell of sour milk or mothballs. It did smell of smoke but not cigarettes, something sweeter, something more refined. Cigarillos in cocktail colours, it soon transpired. She was a small but upright woman, with

translucent crêpey skin and skeins of silver hair haphazardly swooped into a chignon of sorts. 'Hullo, young ladies,' her voice was a little creaky, but her accent was cultivated and the tone was confident, 'won't you come in?'

They shuffled after her, into the flat. Mrs McNeil's sitting room was cluttered but appeared relatively spruce for the apparent age and wear of her belongings and soft furnishings. A dark wood table and chairs with barley-twist legs jostled for floor space against a small sofa in waning olive green velvet with antimacassars slightly askew, a nest of tables that fitted together from coincidence rather than original design, a tall ashtray from which a serpentine plume of smoke from a skinny pink cigarillo slicked into the air. On the walls, pictures of sun-drenched foreign climes hung crooked. Around the perimeter of the room, butting up against the tall skirting boards, piles and piles of books, all meticulously finishing at the same height. Petra thought they looked like sandbags, like a flood defence, as if they were protecting Mrs McNeil and keeping her safe within these walls. Or perhaps they kept mice out. Perhaps the tatty patterned carpet simply did not fit properly wall to wall. Petra looked around her; there just was not the room for enough shelving to house that many books. And the walls were for those paintings of somewhere hot and faraway.

At that moment, surrounded by decades of life and so much personal history, Petra deeply missed having grandparents of her own. She took Mrs McNeil's bony hand, with its calligraphy of veins and sinews and liver spots, in both of hers.

'It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs McNeil,' she said, looking intently into the lady's watercolour-pale eyes. 'I'm Petra Flint.'

'You may call me Lillian, Petra Flint,' she said.

'Hullo, Lillian,' Darcey said slowly and loudly with unnecessary stooping. 'I'm Darcey Lewis.'

'*You*, dear, can call me Mrs McNeil,' Lillian said tartly.

And so began a friendship between Petra Flint and Lillian McNeil which, though it would last less than three years, was deep in its mutual fondness and, for Petra in particular, long-standing in its reach. On that first visit, while Darcey sat on the green velvet sofa and helped herself to ginger snaps, Petra asked Mrs McNeil if she would like her pictures straightened.

'I've never been abroad,' Petra said. 'Please will you tell me a little about them, as I straighten them?'

'Let's start here, in Tanzania,' Lillian said, peering up at a painting. 'I lived there forty years ago. I loved it. This is Mount Kilimanjaro at dawn. I sat beside the artist, under this baobab – or upside-down – tree as he painted.'

After that, whenever Petra visited, often twice or three times a week, the paintings she had previously righted were crooked again. Invariably one was more skewed than the others and that was the one that Lillian McNeil planned to talk about that day. Darcey rarely visited Mrs McNeil again. She swore Petra to secrecy, bunking off Pensioners' Link to meet her boyfriend for lunch at McDonald's instead.

From the tranquillity of Mrs McNeil's flat, Petra and Darcey walked straight into an overexcited buzz back at school. There was usually something going on in the school hall at lunch-times, but it was more likely to be drama or dance club or one of the classes practising a forthcoming assembly. In its hundred-year history, this was the first lunch-hour in which the school had been put at the disposal of five boys and their impressive array of rock-band paraphernalia. Miss Golding the music teacher, a sensitive creature for whom even Beethoven was a little too raucous, looked on in alarm as if fearing for the welfare of her piano and the girls' eardrums. While she backed herself away from the stage, her arms crossed and her eyebrows knitted, other members of staff bustled amongst the girls trying to calm the general fidget and squawk of anticipation. It was only when Miss Lorimar

introduced the members of the band that the students finally stood silent and still.

'These are *very* Noble Savages,' their headmistress quipped, tapping the shoulders of the singer and the drummer. 'First stop: Dame Alexandra Johnson's, next stop: *Top of the Pops*!' She made a sound unsettlingly close to a giggle before clapping energetically. The girls were too gobsmacked to even cringe let alone applaud. But before Miss Lorimar had quite left the stage, before Miss Golding had time to cover her ears, the Noble Savages launched into their first number and the varnished parquet of the hall resounded to the appreciative thumping of three hundred sensibly shod feet. Just a few bars in and each member of the band had a fan club as yelps of 'Oh my God, he's just so completely gorgeous,' filtered through the throng like a virus. 'I'm in love!' Petra's friends declared while she nodded and grinned and bopped along. 'God, I'm just *so* in love!'

*Nuclear no!* Arlo Savidge sang as Jonny Noble, on rhythm guitar, thrashed through powerful chords and Matt on drums hammered the point home.

*Government you are meant*
*to seek peace*
*not govern mental.*
*Time to go! Nuclear no!*

The girls went wild and the majority of them made a mental note to join CND at once. After thank-yous all round from the band, Jeremy skittled his fingers down the run of piano keys, took his hands right away for maximum drama and then crashed them back down in an echoing chord of ear-catching dissonance.

*Jailed for their thoughts*
*Caged for their beliefs*

*Imprisoned behind bars of bigotry*
*But still their spirits fly*
*Set them free*
*Set them free*
*We must*
*Set them free.*

The older girls were shaking their heads, while hormones and concern for political injustice sprang real tears to their eyes.

'Free Nelson Mandela,' Darcey said to Petra with a very grave nod.

Petra closed her eyes in silent supplication.

'Do you think the drummer would like to free me of my virginity?' Amy asked and her classmates snorted and laughed and gave her a hug.

'Do you think the one with the red-and-white guitar would like me in a big red bow and nothing else?' Alice asked.

'Shh!' Darcey hissed, beginning to sway. 'It's a slowy.'

'"Among the Flowers",' the singer announced, his eyes closed.

While gentle chords were softly strummed by Jonny, Arlo caressed the strings of his guitar. The sweetest melody wove its way through the crowd as 'Among the Flowers' floated like petals through the hall. The harmonies seduced even Miss Golding who tipped her head and appraised the band with a timid smile. When Arlo began to sing, it was without the strident, Americanized preach of 'Set Them Free' and 'Nuclear No!'; instead it was deeper and pitch-perfect, wrought with emotion and, one felt, his true voice.

*I see her walking by herself*
*In a dream among the flowers*
*Won't she wake*
*Won't she wake*

*And see how I wait*
*See how I wait*
*For her*
*Is she walking all alone*
*Is she lonely in the flowers*
*Can I wake her and take her*
*Take her with me through the flowers*
*Out of her dream*
*And into mine*
*Out of her dream*
*And into mine.*

He sang with his eyes shut, his mouth so close to the microphone that occasionally his lips brushed right over its surface. Arlo only opened his eyes when the piano solo twinkled its romantic bridge between the verses. All eyes were on the band but the focus was on Arlo who had eyes for one girl alone.

Is he looking at me?

No, he's looking at me!

Fuck off, it's me he's looking at.

*It's me*, thought Petra, *he's looking straight at me. Aren't you. Hullo.*

'Out of her dream,' Arlo sang to Petra, 'and into mine.'