

A GRIPPING THRILLER FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE ACCLAIMED DEBUT NOVEL *ONLY DAUGHTER*

MERCY



POINT

ANNA SNOEKSTRA

MERCY POINT

ANNA SNOEKSTRA

 Angus & Robertson
An imprint of HarperCollins *Publishers*

Angus&Robertson

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, Australia

First published in Australia in 2018
by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited
ABN 36 009 913 517
harpercollins.com.au

Copyright © Anna Snoekstra 2018

The right of Anna Snoekstra to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her under the *Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

HarperCollinsPublishers

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
2 Bloor Street East, 20th floor, Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A8, Canada
195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 4607 5575 4 (paperback)
ISBN 978 1 4607 0988 7 (ebook)

Cover design by Hazel Lam, HarperCollins Design Studio

Cover image by Cosma Andrei/Stocksy.com/1485503

Author photograph by Heather Lighton

Typeset in Bembo Std by Kirby Jones

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

The papers used by HarperCollins in the manufacture of this book are a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable plantation forests.

The fibre source and manufacturing processes meet recognised international environmental standards, and carry certification.

PROLOGUE

They are all liars. He watches them from the shadows as they huddle together, arms folded against the cold. He hates them.

‘How long do you think they’ll be?’ one of them asks, voice angry. ‘I’m not waiting here all night.’ As if in answer, headlights slice through the blackness.

He flinches, draws back deeper into the shadows. The scrub he is hiding behind is thick, but he can’t be too careful. He doesn’t know what will happen if they catch him spying. He presses his weight into a thick tree trunk. Its damp bark is soft against his jacket.

A truck pulls into the clearing, tyres crunching on the wet earth. Its headlights turn off. He blinks to regain his vision in the sudden darkness. The door to the truck clunks open. A woman hops down. She reaches out, pulls two of the other figures into a quick hug.

‘You’re late,’ says the angry man.

‘Unavoidable. Are you all ready?’

The rest of the group nod and murmur, a few of them throwing shovels across their shoulders.

‘It isn’t far,’ the woman says and begins walking. The rest of them follow her, some pulling their jackets tight around their bodies.

He waits. Soon their footfalls begin to fade. He can hear the swaying of the trees again, his own shivering breath. A drop of icy water dribbles under his collar and down his spine, making him shudder.

He stands, shoulders rounded, head bent. Slipping easily between the trees, he treads lightly on the wet leaves, making sure to keep a large distance between himself and the group. They are easy to follow. Their torches are bright, they slip and swear and mutter loudly. Every animal around is probably hiding in its burrow.

‘Right here,’ comes the woman’s voice, sharp and clear.

He pauses mid-step. The group have gone so quiet even his light tread might reach their ears.

‘I found it when I was leading one of my hiking groups. I do the trail every Tuesday. It was never there before.’

‘Well, why didn’t you just fill it in then?’ He recognises the angry man’s voice.

‘Because it’s important for you to see it! Now you know we weren’t lying when we told you about the last one.’

Amidst the cloak of voices, he springs forward in the shadows, reaches the edge of the treeline and looks out. They are standing around a black hole: a gaping mouth of empty space in the earth.

The woman shakes her head. ‘Can’t you see what this means? There’s still something down there.’

‘Anything could have caused it — don’t jump to conclusions. Let’s just fill it in, alright?’ The big man stabs his shovel into the mud, tips soil into the dark. The others take their lead from him and begin to do the same. Rain falls in fat droplets on their backs as they work.

In the shadows, he pulls up his hood and takes out his phone.

‘We can’t ignore this forever,’ the woman says, her voice only just audible. ‘The mines have to close. We should have done it back then.’

‘There’s really no need —’ the angry man begins, but another one of them throws her shovel onto the ground. She looks up, the moonlight catching the tears on her cheeks.

‘They didn’t all have to die!’

‘They died because of those mines, and now we have to lie about it every day to our children. Tell them these ridiculous stories about a cave-in. We can’t lie forever!’

Another man cuts in. ‘It’s impossible. No one can ever know — it’s not safe. We all swore we’d never speak about it.’

‘We can’t go on like this!’

‘Of course we can!’

‘It’s better to forget!’

‘Stop yelling!’

But the yelling continues. No one notices the small light between the trees, the light from the mobile phone he is holding, recording every word.

CHAPTER 1

E M M A

Maybe we should meet?

The words hovered in the white box, the cursor blinking next to the question mark. Emma hit 'delete' and put her phone back in her pocket. If she sent that, everything would change.

'You shouldn't text and drive,' she said to her mother as their truck cut the corner onto the main street of Cameron. Emma's cereal from this morning swirled around in her stomach. Her mother didn't seem to hear her. Her eyes flicked between the phone and the road as she drove with one hand. The heater was on full-blast, and the windows were beginning to steam up. Emma noticed that the windscreen was all dirty where the wipers didn't reach.

'How was cooking class?'

Her mother's eyes flicked to her for a second. 'Okay. Turns out pavlova is a lot more tricky than I'd thought.'

'You got home pretty late. Why is the truck so muddy?'

Her mum laughed. 'You weren't waiting up for me, were you, honey? It's meant to be the other way around.'

Emma sighed. 'I didn't sleep very well last night.'

'Why's that?'

'I've been worried about something.'

In truth, what she'd been worried about was this very conversation. For hours, she'd played it out in her head. Debating whether it was a good idea to finally talk to her mum about the thing that had been plaguing her for the last year. It wasn't going to be easy to tell her mum she thought she was a liar.

When she'd woken this morning, it was with such a heavy feeling of loneliness resting on top of her that she'd made a decision. Today was the day that she'd talk to someone about it. Someone real. Someone who existed in her actual life, not just online.

'You'll be fine, Em. Honestly, you're such a worrier.'

'Huh?'

'Your science prac is today, right? I know group assignments aren't really your thing, but it's not worth losing sleep over.'

'What makes you think it's about school?'

'I know my own daughter.'

That shut Emma up. She stared at her knees, the wretched feeling even more painful than before.

Her mother put the phone on speaker and dropped it onto the dashboard. She turned off the heater and started talking snappily to the person on the other end of the line. Emma pulled her jacket tighter around herself and tuned out her mother. She took her own phone back out of her pocket.

Do you guys ever feel like you're not sure if there is any sound coming out of your mouth when you talk?

Instantly, the replies started appearing.

Twelve: Yeah, if no one hears you, how do you know if you even spoke?

M.Dot: Or if anyone is listening.

Emma smiled.

'I'll walk from here,' she told her mum.

'Hang on.' Her mum hit 'mute' on her call and pulled the car over. 'Are you sure, honey?'

'Yeah, I'm early.'

She gave her mother a kiss on the cheek and opened the passenger-side door.

'Have a good day, alright?'

Emma was about to say something, ask her to pull over properly, take her key out of the ignition, turn off her phone and listen, but her mother had already un-muted the call and continued talking.

The cold air pricked her ears and she tucked her scarf tighter around her neck. It always got colder up here in the mountains than anywhere else in the country. It was only June, but the mist was thick and white around her.

As Emma walked, she took out her hairband. She fluffed up her hair until it was a thick mop covering her ears. It wasn't that she was ashamed of her hearing aids, she just didn't need them to be on show all the time. Slipping her forefinger into the mini-pocket of her jeans, she pulled out a thin silver ring and threaded it into the hole in her left nostril. She'd got it pierced months ago and still neither her mum, nor her mum's partner, Ridha, had noticed. It was just easier to hide it from them; if they saw it, they'd ask her why. They'd say that to them she was perfect, and so why would she feel the need to mutilate perfection. It was another conversation Emma didn't really want to have.

Walking up towards the school yard, she watched her breath puff above her in a white cloud. She'd been early intentionally, of course, not that she'd tell her mum that.

She'd been hoping they'd spend the time talking, but deep down she'd had a feeling that probably wouldn't happen, so she'd made a back-up plan. It was strange to think that just a year ago, she didn't have any secrets from her mum. But now everything was different. Her phone vibrated against her hip.

OhSammyBoy: Who isn't listening? You can tell us.

Again, her fingers itched to ask them to meet her in person. But she stopped herself. As much as these people felt like her soulmates, she actually didn't know them at all. She had to talk to someone she knew she could trust first. She had to spit out everything, the whole truth of it, and maybe then the painful weight she was almost used to carrying with her would subside.

She put in her headphones and turned on her favourite Tame Impala album, then opened the school gate. There were a few people milling around, but Emma kept her head down. She didn't want to be held up, but also, she didn't want anyone to see that she was going towards the school counsellor's office. That was the sort of thing that would turn to gossip in the blink of an eye, and then everyone would be trying to guess what her 'issue' was. She remembered when Tessie Lin had been spotted there a few months back, and now everyone was debating whether she had an eating disorder or if her parents were splitting up. Personally, Emma thought it was probably the former. She'd noticed Tessie not eating anything at lunch a couple of times.

Opening the door to the school building, Emma pulled off her scarf. It was sweltering in here compared with outside. Usually, Emma liked heaters. At home she often cuddled up next to hers until her skin flushed a blotchy

pink. In here, she wished it wasn't so warm. The dry, fake heat made the hallway feel claustrophobic.

She wasn't looking forward to seeing the counsellor. It was definitely a last resort. On her very first day at high school she'd been summoned to the counsellor's office. She'd been petrified, sure that she'd done something very wrong without having any idea what on earth it could be. When she'd sat down in the chair in front of him, the counsellor had smiled carefully at her. He'd told her he'd made this appointment to let her know that he'd been informed about her home situation.

'My home situation?' she'd asked. 'You mean my dad being dead?'

'Well, yes, I suppose, but not just that.' He'd leaned forward. 'I wanted to let you know, first thing, that this school has a policy of zero tolerance for discrimination. You're the first student we've had here who lives in a same-sex household, so it's a bit of a learning curve for us too, but we want to make sure none of your peers give you a hard time. If anyone ever makes you feel uncomfortable, or singles you out, you come and let me know, alright?'

If it were now, Emma would have told him that the only person who was making her feel uncomfortable and singled out was him. She would have said that if this was the way he approached being sensitive, maybe he needed to consider a new career. But back then, she'd been just a nervous twelve-year-old on her first day of high school. So, she had nodded and smiled and promised herself she'd never set foot in that office again. In the four years she'd been at the school, she'd kept that promise. But now she was feeling desperate. She didn't think he could help her

solve anything, she simply hoped that, at the very least, he'd listen to her. That he'd let her spill her guts, purge herself of all the secrets and fears that she'd kept inside for too long.

Over her music, she heard the sound of a yell. She pulled out her headphones. She'd hoped she could dart into the counsellor's office without anyone noticing, but there was definitely the sound of other people around the corner. The sound of dumb laughter was echoing towards her.

'Is the little girly scared?'

'Just open it!'

Emma stopped. The counsellor's office was only a few steps away. If she went straight there, she would make it without anyone seeing. But it sounded like something was going on. The second voice had sounded upset, and Emma knew she'd feel terrible if she didn't at least poke her head around the corner and make sure everyone was okay. She knew she had a bit of a reputation as a busybody, but really, she was just trying to do what was right. Quickly, she walked to the corner and looked around. Michael Brighton was leaning against the janitor's closet, his skateboard under his arm. His miniature-brained crony, Tom, was snorting with laughter.

'What are you doing?' Emma asked. If these two were laughing, she knew it was almost definitely at someone else's expense.

Michael turned to look at her, and then grinned. He always seemed to smile when he saw her; she was pretty sure it was the same kind of smile a hunter would give a deer. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he did, she heard the muffled male voice again. It sounded more desperate this time.

‘Please let me out.’

Neither Michael nor Tom had spoken. She looked between them and then at the janitor’s closet door.

‘You’ve locked someone in there, haven’t you, Michael?’

As though in answer to her question, there was the loud sound of banging from behind the door, making Michael’s back bounce against it.

‘Nah. Do you hear something?’ Michael asked.

‘Nope,’ said Tom.

‘Well, I do,’ she snapped. ‘Why do you have to be such a fascist, Michael? Does it make you feel like a big man to behave like a spoilt brat? You’ve proved yourself to be absolutely pathetic now, so just let him out.’

Michael didn’t even say anything, just raised an eyebrow.

‘Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?’

‘Nothing is wrong with me.’

‘Yeah, it’s not us who are hearing things, Emma,’ Tom said. ‘Are you sure you’ve got those things on the right frequency?’

He was looking towards her ears. Before Emma had a chance to stop herself, she reached up to self-consciously touch her hair to make sure it was still covering her hearing aids.

‘That’s low, man,’ Michael said to him.

‘Don’t you dare stick up for me,’ she said, blushing furiously. ‘Why don’t you go away and find someone else to use to boost your already inflated sense of self-worth?’

He shrugged. ‘Fine, you just had to ask.’ He grinned at her and walked off, Tom on his heels like a dog.

Emma went over to the closet and pulled open the door. Inside, another boy was sitting on the floor. His head was on his knees so she couldn’t see his face.

‘You alright?’ she asked, not sure whether or not to approach him. She knew some guys didn’t like the idea of being saved by a girl, which in Emma’s opinion was at best completely ridiculous and at worst blatantly sexist.

He looked up. It was Fabian, which made Emma even angrier. Fabian was fine-boned and gentle. It was just like Michael and Tom to pick on someone who would never fight back.

‘Fine, I’m a little bit claustrophobic.’ Fabian’s breathing was rapid, but he still attempted to smile at her. ‘Thanks, Emma.’

Despite the smile, Emma could tell he wanted her to go. It didn’t matter anyway as, just then, the bell rang. Great. People came barrelling into the corridor to go to their classes. There was no way for her to duck into the counsellor’s office without being seen now.

‘See ya,’ she said to Fabian, then reluctantly headed towards her homeroom.

The morning’s classes went slowly. Emma tried to focus, but her mind kept wandering. More than anything she kept thinking about what her mum had said that morning. *I know my own daughter*. That was the whole point. The actual thing Emma had wanted to talk to her about. Because she didn’t. Her mum and Ridha didn’t really know her, not anymore. They didn’t know that she spent hours every night lying in bed in the dark with her phone lit up like a torchlight. Swapping stories, talking about every fear and secret, to a group of people she had never met. They also didn’t know that she could see through their lies and that she had been able to for a while. *I know my own daughter*. It wasn’t true. Emma had known it for over a year now. She wasn’t their daughter, she was adopted.

Throughout her classes, her phone kept buzzing against her hip. By the time she got to English class, she turned down her hearing aids. The English teacher, Ms Garret, had a voice like a bleating sheep. It was starting to grate on Emma's nerves. She snuck a look at the messages on her phone instead. It was almost like she could hear them, like they were speaking in the most intimate of whispers.

M.Dot: Or people do hear what you say, but they take it to mean something else entirely. It's like you're speaking a different language.

Twelve: Sometimes I think that I'm so different from everyone else. Like I'm in one of those movies where everyone turns out to be robots.

To begin with, the message board had made her feel so much more connected. Now, it was like a cruel reminder of what she didn't have in any of her real-life relationships.

Fontaine: Yeah. It's like people in movies understand what it means to be human, but people in real life don't. Shouldn't it be the other way around?

Twelve: You'd think.

Fontaine: I swear most of the monsters in movies are less cruel than people you have to see every day.

M.Dot: Agreed.

Emma felt an elbow in her ribs. She looked from the girl sitting next to her, to the teacher who was glaring at her, lips moving. Emma turned her aids back up.

'— your time is more important than everyone else's in the class? That there are some rules for you and different ones for everyone else?'

'Sorry,' Emma said and pushed her phone back into her pocket. She didn't usually care if teachers got annoyed with

her, but now, with everyone staring at her, she wanted to cry. It was all just too much, too hard. Ms Garret nodded curtly and went back to the lesson.

She hadn't been intending to talk to her friends about this, but now she decided that they were better than no one at all. If she kept going the way she was at the moment, she really would burst into tears in front of everyone. This would be the most hideously embarrassing thing she could think of happening to her.

At lunchtime, Emma spotted Rain and River sitting in their usual spot: against the red brick wall of the school building. From there they could see over the quad, the basketball courts and down to the oval. It was the perfect place to survey the rest of the students at Cameron High, not that they'd ever admit to being interested.

'Hey,' Emma said, collapsing down next to them. 'Ms Garret was being such a fascist. God, today feels like the longest day ever and it's only just lunchtime.'

'Come on, mate,' Rain said, 'don't let that bloody galah boil ya blood.'

'Yeah, pull ya head in, ya drongo!'

Emma groaned. Rain and River were her best friends, but they drove her absolutely crazy sometimes. They were twins, but not identical. Their mum wore long flowing dresses and talked about love all the time, and she had been the one to name them. Their stepfather was a banker and seemed to be in a suit all the time, even on weekends. Rain wore thick eyeliner and shaved off her hair last year to annoy her mother, and River had grown his down to his shoulders to irritate his stepdad. It was hard for them

to find things that irritated both their mum and their stepfather, but they were always willing to give anything a try.

Rain and River were forever playing characters. Sometimes Emma found it hilarious. Other times, not so much. Today they were being Bazza and Sheila from the outback.

‘Heard you gave old Micko a smack down this mornin’?’ Rain drawled.

‘What, you mean Michael?’

‘Yeah, you little ripper!’ River answered. ‘Though I seen the way he stares at ya, the bloody drongo wants to pash ya all the way to Darwin.’

‘To Darrrrwin. Bloody Darrrrwin,’ Rain said and started laughing.

‘Bloody oath.’

‘No, he bloody doesn’t!’ yelled Emma, and that cracked them all up.

She grinned at her friends, the weight she’d been feeling all day easing a little. ‘Hey, guys, can I have your opinion on something?’

‘Yeah,’ said Rain, talking normally again.

‘Bloody oath you can,’ River drawled.

Rain elbowed him. ‘Stop.’

They both looked at her.

‘It’s no big deal, really.’ Emma felt embarrassed all of a sudden. ‘Something happened, ages ago now, that made me think back on everything.’

They were still staring at her, listening. It felt good, so, so good, to be finally saying this out loud.

‘What happened?’ Rain asked.

‘It’s about my parents. Not Ridha, I mean my mum and my dad.’

They nodded. They were always a bit awkward when it came to talking about Emma’s father. He’d died in the cave-in just before Emma was born. She’d never even met him.

‘It’s sort of a long story and not really the point. The point is,’ she swallowed, ‘I think my mum’s been lying to me.’

‘What, you think that maybe your mum was having an affair with Ridha while your dad was still alive?’

‘I don’t think that’s what she means.’

‘No, it’s not —’

‘That would be salacious though, wouldn’t it?’ Rain cut in.

River grinned and put on a voice: ‘Absolutely scandalous.’

‘That’s not it!’

They looked at each other, then raised their eyebrows at her. She’d yelled. She shouldn’t have yelled, but, God, these two could be so annoying sometimes. They never listened.

‘Sorry.’

Rain shrugged. ‘So, what were you trying to say?’

She could feel it on the tip of her tongue. *I’m adopted. I think I’m adopted. No, I’m sure I’m adopted.*

‘Doesn’t matter.’ She turned to River. ‘Hey, have you got your notes and stuff ready for the science prac?’

‘Oh yeah, can’t wait until that’s over. Next time, let’s not get stuck in a group with Tessie. I swear, she hates both of us. Don’t you reckon?’

‘Hey,’ interrupted Rain, ‘have you ever noticed that Mr Pullman looks like a fat Ed Sheeran?’

‘You’re right! Oh, honey, darling, how had I not noticed!’

‘Oh, my sweet petal!’

‘Oh, my gorgeous flower!’

Emma leaned back against the wall. They’d keep going like this for the rest of lunch. Against her hip, she felt the comforting buzz of her phone.

She’d give it one chance, one last chance, she decided. She’d go home tonight and really try to talk to her mum. Really try to get the truth out of her. If she couldn’t, then she’d do it. She’d ask her friends on the message board if they wanted to meet her in real life.