



SHE KNOWS  
HER FAMILY  
LOVES HER,  
BUT WHY  
CAN'T THEY  
LOVE EACH  
OTHER?

# ALLEGRA

IN THREE PARTS

Suzanne  
Daniel

*Self-knowledge is no guarantee of happiness,  
but it is on the side of happiness and can supply the courage  
to fight for it.*

Simone de Beauvoir



# Chapter One

I am Allegra on one side and Ally down the other.  
And sometimes I split myself in two.

Patricia O'Brien can keep a hula hoop going around her hips for nineteen minutes and Scott Perkins can ride his bike the entire length of Blair Street with both hands on his knees and a kitten around his neck. And me . . . well . . . my trick is: I can split myself in two. It's not really a trick, it's more my inside-out secret, something I have to do because of Joy and Matilde. They are my grandmothers and I love them both and they totally love me, in very different ways.

But they can't stand each other, not even for the count of one-apple-pie.

Sister Josepha has chosen me to read the prayer at today's Outdoor Assembly, our first now that I've moved up to Sixth Class after the long summer break. She said she was impressed by my papier-mâché of the Angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary. Then Kimberly from the Popular Group announced to the

class, 'It's not even dry!' but here I am, Sister nods and I know exactly what I have to do: deliver the prayer in equal parts to Joy and Matilde.

There's Joy – radiant – in a mauve sunhat on the lunch benches under the mulberry tree. She's sitting next to Patricia O'Brien's mother who all the Sixth Class boys think is a sort, especially after she showed off her own skills with Patricia's hula hoop at school pickup soon after Patricia arrived new to school last term. They're laughing about something hilarious and Joy's bright face is dancing in tune with Mrs O'Brien's multicoloured bangles. But the moment I step forward, Joy's head stops dead still and her eyes fasten, fully fixed on me. The prayer is asking the Dear Lord to give us the strength during Lent to resist what we've offered up. And as saintly as Joy looks now, and as prayerful as she may appear, I know she's probably thinking: *Why give up anything, sweetie, when indulgence is so delicious!*

Making Joy focused makes me feel alive.

Matilde is all in fawn at her post near the girls' toilets, alone. She doesn't cook her Hungarian meatballs on meat-less Fridays but I know that she's not a fan of Lent, or of God, for that matter. I think she's pretty mad at him after what happened to her family back during the war. And then there's all the things 'that man' did. I don't know who 'that man' was exactly, or what he did exactly, I just try to piece together what I can when Matilde's sister visits the first Wednesday of each month and I cup my ear against the closed door and catch every fourth word when they mix their mother tongue with English. It's like a jigsaw puzzle I've been putting together for as long as I remember. Aunt Helena always leaves looking triumphant while Matilde looks exhausted with her lips slightly pale and pinched.

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But this morning in the playground as I deliver the prayer in Matilde's direction, I see her lips relax and form a sort of proud shape and she looks almost S-E-R-E-N-E . . . that was a word on my spelling list last week.

Making Matilde exhale makes me feel calm.

So at eleven and a half this is what I know so far: Adults can love you and care for you in different ways that work for them and work for you. It's kind of like the soft drinks delivered to the Lucky Listers across the road, all different flavours but all really good. But while the adults love you in these different ways, sometimes they seem to loathe the differences in each other. They can be mad with their own grown-up children and those grown-up children can be mad with their parents, even though they're old. But all of them can keep on loving you, as long as you're just a kid, and you pretend not to notice this badness of feeling and you don't tell any of them straight out that you love the others very much, or even that you love all of them the same. But sometimes I really wish it were different.

I live in Number 23 with Matilde. Rick lives there too – sort of – he's in the flat above the garage. Rick's tall and strong and he's my dad which you would think would make Matilde notice him, but she's got a blind spot when it comes to Rick. She knows he's there because she plates up his dinner and irons his board shorts and ticks her tongue when she hears the horseraces coming from the radio inside his flat. Luckily Rick doesn't say that much so I can usually ignore Matilde ignoring Rick. Occasionally though, when I see that awful sad look on Rick's face, more banished-bold-boy than dad-sized-man, I feel a tightness in the part of my heart that lives behind my throat. And on those days, I am split in three.

Number 23 is sturdy and clean, dark brick on the outside and dark wood inside. Things are always in order because of Matilde, who spends hours dusting, polishing and mending; she never rests, just a couple of sips of black tea downed at the kitchen sink and she keeps going. My uniform is neatly pressed, hanging on the outside of my wardrobe every evening above my shined shoes and packed bag. My fingernails are cleaned every night and cut once a week and my hair is washed and inspected for nits on Sunday afternoons.

There's no getting out of piano practice with Matilde, she can call a wrong note from the laundry and the wrong metre while weeding the garden. She hears my spelling words on weeknights and gives me an additional list of her own. In Third Class I was the only kid in the whole school who could spell D-I-A-R-R-H-O-E-A and that earned me the pick from Sister Josepha's holy card drawer. As I was choosing between *Angels Point the Way* and *Mater Dolorosa*, Kimberly from the Popular Group announced: 'Let's call Allegra DIARRHOEA PANTS!' She's the meanest girl in our class and definitely disrupts my digestion.

After school it's Matilde's cooking that steadies my stomach and warms my world. When I get to the lane I know instantly whether it's chicken paprikas, pork sausage or goulash soup for dinner. It's all made from scratch using the choicest pickings from Matilde's garden and served with hot cheese bread. It's nothing like the chops, peas and instant mashed potato the Lucky Listers have most nights, but to me it smells like home and tastes like love.

Matilde's garden is as practical as she is. There are six raised vegetable beds with tomatoes, zucchinis, onions and beets, in fact just about every vegetable I can spell and some I can't. Beyond

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the raised beds is a chook pen with three laying hens which Rick and I have named Scrambled, Boiled and Omelette. He said it's best not to tell Matilde – she'd think naming the chooks is complete nonsense. I sometimes imagine that if the Holocaust came to North Bondi I could hide in the shed under the bench between the compost bin and the tools and I could survive for years on the fresh food in Matilde's garden.

Through the brown gate in our side fence and along the path is Number 25. This is where Joy lives and there's nothing remotely edible in her garden. It's been created, she says, to enliven the senses. On Joy's side, life is in full bloom. Colour and scent cocoon me and my heart always skips to a little trot. Orange and pink bougainvilleas, purple paper daisies, climbing jasmine and our favourite, the fuchsias: Joy is teaching me their names and how to care for each one. Painted rocks border a waterlily pond that is home to a penny tortoise called Simone de Beauvoir. Some nights when Joy gets home from Liberty Club she discusses issues with Simone de Beauvoir, I can hear her from my bedroom. It's kind of weird but mostly a funny sort of interesting. Wind chimes hang from all of Joy's frangipani trees that run along our fence line so that on a breezy afternoon we can hear their tunes from Number 23. It gives me little air bubbles up that part of my heart that runs along my spine. But if Matilde hears the chimes from next door she ticks her tongue and closes all the windows.



After sweltering through week one of the first term back at school it's Sunday, and I'm looking for Joy. I find her in the glasshouse dusting her emotions. Joy, you see, has kept every tear she's ever



shed throughout her adult life, all in coloured bottles, lined up, dated and labelled. Whenever she feels inclined we go through the bottles and she tells me the stories behind each one.

My favourite is ELATION dated 16 October 1962 – the very day I was born. Joy gives it a good dust and a little kiss. There's FORCED CHOICE dated 25 November 1943. That bottle was filled just after she told the persistent American officer with the navy-blue eyes that she had a responsible Australian fiancé her parents particularly liked who would be returning to Sydney very soon. There's SORROW dated 2 January 1954, the day her father, my great-grandfather, Albert, passed away. This stands beside one I don't really understand called SELF-ACTUALISATION, which is a purple glass bottle dated 8 March 1973, three-quarters filled after she went to her first Liberty Club meeting.

And then there's a whole row called DEVASTATION dated 11 August 1965. Joy goes quiet when she dusts DEVASTATION. Her chin drops down and her eyelids quiver like moth wings. Her hands become a little bit shaky and a big bit careful. DEVASTATION doesn't have a story.

'Let's have mint tea,' Joy says with a mood-changing grin. I follow her into the kitchen and get everything out. I boil the kettle, lay the tray and pour from the heated pottery teapot. 'Ally, you play Mother this time,' she says, as though she's never said that before. Joy talks some more about the American officer, his charming smile, beautiful manners and the jewelled box he so sweetly gifted to her.

'He was completely mad about me and *boy oh boy*, could that man make me laugh. He could play the harmonica, lift me with one arm and mimic any movie star – foreign accents – the lot!

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It's so important, Ally, to find a man with heart who provides spark. Responsible is important, of course, but it can be a little dull at times. But spark, my darling – *spark*, ignites and illuminates love every day.' The mint tea is steaming up her glasses.

After our tea it's time for Joy to get ready for Liberty Club and I lie on her bed looking at her feather collection as she changes. She's all bottle green and amber velvet, beaded bolero and sequinned scarves. I ask if she ever saw the American officer again and she says *good God no*, she was married soon after the war ended and her husband would never *in a month of Sundays* have allowed any contact.

'Although I did sneak off a couple of perfumed letters and even a photo of your father Rick when he was my bonny bouncy baby,' she says with a wink.

As Joy is powdering her face I see her glance at my birthmark and the flash of an idea appears in her eyes. 'Come here, Ally. Let's see if a bit of my matte makeup can help disguise that little birthmark on your wrist. There you go, pet . . . a little pat . . . almost gone . . . perfect. Here, you keep this compact so you can do it yourself.' She sweeps me up into her plump arms and I nestle into my favourite place in all the world: the harbour between Joy's mountainous bosoms. As she draws slow circles at the nape of my neck with her long, painted nails and hums 'Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral', I close my eyes and inhale her lavender-scented love.

I could have stayed there with Joy for hours but she was getting a lift with her friend Whisky Wendy in the V-Dub Beetle and I was getting hungry. There's never any food in Joy's house.



Matilde works for Bolton's Fashion House, though she never goes to their house, wherever that is. She is a seamstress and she cuts and pins and sews piecework in our front room at Number 23. Sometimes there's no work so she doesn't get paid, *not a red cent*, but then there's a big rush job that the factory can't handle and the sewing machine goes most of the night. I quite like the sound of that machine and lying in my bed across the hall I can make up little rhymes in my mind to match its march and stop-start throb. When the machine halts suddenly, and Matilde sighs, I have to start again.

The next morning Rick wakes me up for school. That doesn't happen very often. When I come into the kitchen he's there looking awkward like an unwelcome guest. He asks me to take a cup of tea into Matilde because she's worked through the night.

'Let her think you made it,' says Rick gently.

'Why?'

'Well, Al Pal, that way she'll actually enjoy it.' Rick passes me Matilde's mug, the one with the pink roses down the handle and the tiny chip on the rim, and I move off carefully towards the front room. 'And take her these biscuits,' he calls after me. I'm not sure where Rick got the Iced VoVos, certainly not from Matilde's pantry; she wouldn't dream of keeping *shop-bought* biscuits here in Number 23.

Matilde is in her day-before clothes – asleep, with her head on her crossed arms on the cutting table. Quiet-as-a-mouse I place the tea and biscuits down. She stirs, stretches, and seems pleased to see the tea. But then suddenly she moves the direction of her reach and takes hold of my wrist, firmly.

'What is this?' she asks.

'Tea, I made it myself . . . and biscuits.'

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‘No, this! This on your wrist! This nonsense covering your special mark.’ Her voice drops and her accent thickens.

What will I say? I don’t want to tell her it was Joy’s work, she won’t like that, not a bit, so I pick at my tunic and tell her I was just playing with makeup at Lucinda Lister’s house yesterday afternoon. Her lips pinch in and all but disappear; she sighs through her nostrils and takes her workhorse hands to her temples. There I see her own special mark: a number tattooed on her wrist.

When I was nine I knew enough not to ask Matilde why she always had numbers written in *texta* on her wrist, so I asked Rick instead. He said that bad people put it there when she was in a concentration camp during the war, but that it was best not to mention this to Matilde. I never do, but this morning I realise something, the way you can at eleven when suddenly you feel nineteen. Matilde thinks my birthmark is a match for hers. I see it too, a red stamp of nature on me in exactly the same place that the dark numbers have been forced onto her. Suddenly I dislike my little birthmark completely. Thank goodness for Joy, I’m going to powder it every morning with that matte makeup.