



# THE FANDOM ANNA DAY

Chicken  
House

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*For Ellie and Charlie*

 PROLOGUE 

# 

Exactly one week today, I will hang.  
I will hang for my friends, my family, and above all else, love. A thought which offers surprisingly little comfort when I think about the noose closing around my neck, my feet searching for solid ground, my legs flailing . . . dancing in mid-air.

This morning I was clueless. This morning I was at Comic-Con, inhaling the scent of hot dogs and sweat and perfume, taking in the brightly coloured costumes, the flash of the cameras, the bass drums and the violins. And yesterday I was in school, stressing over some stupid English presentation and wishing I were in another world.

Be careful what you wish for, because sometimes the reality truly blows.



## C H A P T E R

I begin to stand, realize my maxi skirt has stuck to my thighs, and subtly unpeel the cotton from my skin. ‘Go for it,’ Katie whispers.

I don’t reply. Why did I volunteer to do this stupid presentation? Public speaking: not my strong point. Let’s be honest, public *anything*: not my strong point.

‘Whenever you’re ready, Violet,’ Miss Thompson says.

I give the fabric one final tug and make my way to the front of the class. I suddenly feel very small, like my classmates have shrink rays attached to their eyes. Shrinking Violet. This makes me laugh – now I look unhinged as well as nervous.

Miss Thompson smiles at me from her crumbling desk. ‘So, Violet, tell us about your favourite novel, which is . . .?’

‘*The Gallows Dance* by Sally King,’ I reply.

A collective groan from the boys in the back row. But they’re only faking disappointment. I saw them at the cinema less than a year ago when the film version came out and, as I recall, they all left with suspiciously red eyes.

I take a deep breath and begin to talk.

‘*Once upon a time, there lived a race known as the humans.*

*‘The humans were smart and ambitious, but they were also greedy, a greed which extended to their ever-increasing*

*obsession with perfection – the perfect body, mind and life. At the turn of the twenty-second century, this obsession led to the first wave of genetically enhanced humans.'*

I leave a dramatic pause and glance around the room. I'd hoped they'd look enthralled, wide-eyed, but instead they look half asleep.

*'The Gems. Genetically Enhanced Man. Tall, strong, good-looking, Intellectual Quotas above 130. It wasn't long before the Gems moved to beautiful areas of countryside called the Pastures, free from disease and crime.'*

I shift my weight between my feet, sweep my hair from my eyes, and push that nagging thought that I'm making a giant twat of myself into the dark, unused part of my brain.

*'But what of the non-genetically enhanced humans? Normal men and woman like you and me. They became known as the Imperfects. The Imps. Sealed inside the old cities – London, Manchester, Paris, Moscow – rife with disease and crime, locked behind miles of snaking city walls and bombed into submission. Only the stronger and more able Imps were permitted to enter the Pastures, to serve the Gems as slaves.'*

*'The word "human" became unspoken . . . forbidden.'*

*'There were only Gems and Imps—'*

'So, I'm an Imp,' Ryan Bell interrupts from the back of the class. 'Is that what you're saying?'

Great. Just what I need – a heckler. And I wish I had the balls to point out that he must already know this, having sat through two hours of the film, Kleenex firmly clamped to nose.

'Shut it, Bell, you massive ding-dong,' Katie says. Her red bob whips in a perfect arc as she spins around to face him. I can't see her features, but I know she's giving him *that* look. The one where she narrows her pea-green eyes and presses her lips together.

‘There ain’t nothing imperfect about me,’ Ryan says.

Katie makes this strange noise, halfway between a laugh and a cough.

Miss Thompson frowns. ‘I think what Violet is trying to say is that we’re all Imps, Ryan. Unless you’re a superhuman from the future – which I highly doubt.’

Deep breath. Ignore the numb lips.

*‘To ensure the continued subjugation of the Imps, the Gems gathered every week in great Coliseums and watched the Imps hang, an event known as the Gallows Dance. But some of the Imps refused to accept their fate, forming a group of rebels, determined to reinstate basic Imp rights. The rebel leader was called Thorn.’*

I fumble with my papers and locate his picture. A printout from the film. Miss Thompson slides it from my clammy fingers and pins it to the wall. Thorn’s image completely fails to capture his power, his drive. This small, he just looks like a bondage-pirate-action-man, head to toe in black leather, eyepatch slung across his chiselled face.

*‘Thorn hatched an elaborate plan to obtain Gem government secrets, and asked his two most trusted rebels to recruit a young, female Imp.’*

*‘They recruited Rose.’*

Rose. The heroine of this tale. Passionate, impulsive, courageous. Every day, without fail, I wish I was her. And so far, here’s how I measure up . . .

Passionate: My nickname is Violet the Virgin.

Impulsive: I spent two days planning this presentation.

Courageous: My face has started to sweat.

In fact, the only thing we share is our pale skin and our taste in men.

I nod to Miss Thompson, who takes her cue and crosses to the interactive whiteboard. A YouTube clip launches into action – the opening scene of the film.

The camera zooms in on Rose as she scales the outer stone wall of the Coliseum. She looks awesome, her long dark hair tumbling down her back. She reaches the crest of the wall, accompanied by a swell of violins.

The camera switches to the spectators inside the Coliseum. A crowd of Gems – their beautiful faces baying for Imp blood. Nine condemned Imps are led on to a wooden stage, the nooses placed around their necks. I know they're only moments from being freed, yet I still feel this twist of anxiety in my stomach. I steal a quick look at my classmates. They actually look concerned, absorbed. A smile pulls at the corners of my mouth.

The Gem President appears on a giant screen behind the stage and introduces the condemned Imps by their alleged crimes: theft, rape, murder. The camera swings back to Rose, her dark hair whipping before her eyes – she knows the condemned Imps are guilty only of poverty and hunger. She pulls a grenade from her belt, touches it to her lips, and then hurls it over the crowd below.

The clip ends just before the bomb goes off.

I turn back to the class, bolstered by their sudden interest.

*‘While the Gems were distracted by the bomb, the rebels launched a rescue mission and saved the condemned Imps from the gallows. Rose slipped down the outer wall undetected, her worth as a rebel secured.’*

*‘So Thorn sent Rose on the most dangerous rebel mission to date: the Harper mission. Rose infiltrated the Harper estate deep in the Pastures, and posed as a slave for the master of the house – Jeremy Harper, a powerful Gem official. Rose quickly befriended Jeremy’s son so she could discover classified Gem information.’*

*‘Jeremy’s son was a Gem named Willow.’*

Willow. The main reason I wish I was Rose. And even though my hands still tremble, the residue of adrenalin moving through my veins, I keep gripping his picture, holding it up for the class to see. I just can't bear the thought of a drawing pin jabbing a hole in his perfect face. I've gazed at this poster for hours, memorized every contour of those features – all caramel skin and cheekbones. I hear a couple of sighs from the girls, a couple of 'phwoar' noises followed by a cluster of giggles. I tuck his image back into my pile of notes, a sense of possession gnawing at me.

*'Spying and relations with a Gem: two crimes punishable by death for any Imp unfortunate enough to get caught. But Willow was kind and beautiful, and Rose soon realized that her greatest threat was the strength of her feelings for him. Unable to betray him, she fled the manor without ever revealing her true identity as a rebel. She returned to the Imp city, informing Thorn that the Harper mission was a failure—'*

'Boring,' Ryan says.

'Ryan, seriously,' Miss Thompson snaps. 'Stop interrupting, you're in sixth form now and I expect better.' She turns to me and smiles. 'And I think we've just reached the midway twist, the turning point, is that right, Violet?'

I nod. 'Rose fled the manor to protect him, she prioritized Willow over the rebels. She chose love.'

'Yes. An example of how popular, modern novels still follow the traditional plot structure . . . carry on.'

*'Willow disguised himself as an Imp and followed Rose across the city, desperate to win her back. But he was captured by the rebels and, finally, he learnt of Rose's initial plan to betray him. Heartbroken, held captive, all hope seemed lost.'*

*'But Rose told him she truly loved him, and together,*

*they escaped from the rebels, determined to forge a new life together.*

*‘Sometimes, however, love cannot conquer all.*

*‘The Gem authorities tracked them down and Rose was taken to the Gallows Dance, accused of seducing an innocent Gem boy.’*

Another YouTube clip. Rose at the Gallows Dance, but this time, she stands on the wooden stage at the front of the Coliseum with a noose around her neck, the crowd of Gems chanting for her blood.

*‘STOP!’ Willow vaults on to the stage. ‘My name is Willow Harper. And the Imp you’re about to hang has a name. Rose. And she is the bravest, kindest person I’ve ever known. Imp or Gem, she is a human being. She isn’t a temptress or a criminal. She is my best friend. And I love her with all my heart.’ He gazes into her determined face. ‘I love you, Rose.’*

*‘I love you too,’ she cries back.*

I know what’s going to happen, of course I do, but I still feel the weight of tears on my lower lashes, this overwhelming urge to reach into that 2D image and snip the rope.

The trapdoor beneath Rose’s feet flies open. Her body drops, her legs twisting and kicking as she dances her final dance.

The clip ends. Nobody speaks.

Finally, Miss Thompson breaks the silence. ‘What a wonderful black moment the author created. But surely there’s some sort of resolution?’

I nod, and shuffle to my last page of crumpled notes.

*‘Willow cradled Rose’s lifeless body, his tears falling into her face. He berated the Gems for allowing government sanctioned murder to continue, he begged them to join him. So moved were the Gems by this tragic scene, they ripped the gallows to the ground.’*

*‘The Gallows Dance was finally banned.*

*‘Rose’s death sparked a revolution.*

*‘And the Imps and Gems called themselves humans once again.’*

The walls seem to absorb my final words, and I somehow manage to swallow even though I have no saliva in my mouth. Another silence. I wish Alice were here, she would clap and cheer and shout ‘encore’ . . . and everyone else would join in.

I catch Katie’s eye for a moment. She winks. Not quite the public display of support I’d hoped for, but it makes me feel better all the same.

‘Thank you, Violet.’ Miss Thompson peers at me from over her glasses. ‘What a wonderful presentation.’

‘Thanks, I wanted to do the book justice.’

Miss Thompson smiles. ‘I can tell from the amount of colour you put into it. We’ll make a writer of you yet.’

I flush with pleasure. Writing has always been Alice’s thing – I’ve never dared touch it, until now. ‘Thanks, Miss Thompson.’

*Kiss ass. Teacher’s pet.* Hisses from the back of the class.

I slide back into my chair. Katie nudges me and whispers, ‘That went really well.’ But I can still hear Ryan and his accomplices sniggering, the edges of their words blurring together, and my cheeks begin to feel hot and itchy again and the bastard notes won’t stop sticking to my palms. Rose wouldn’t have fallen to pieces like this. I let my hair fall in front of my face, providing a dark, wavy shield.

‘So there we have it,’ Miss Thompson says. ‘We’ve heard the plots of three very different novels, yet seen how they all follow roughly the same structure.’

The bell rings, accompanied by the scrabbling of books and pens and rucksacks.

Katie helps peel the paper from my clammy hands. 'God, you really love that bloody book.'

'Yeah.'

'You should have seen your face when you mentioned Willow.'

'That's just my face.'

She bats her eyelashes. 'But Willow was kind and beautiful, and Violet – sorry, I mean Rose – soon realized that her greatest threat was the strength of her raging hormones.' She puckers up her lips, making the freckles on her nose elongate.

'Sod off.' I laugh. Katie always makes me laugh. The tension drains from my body and I finally manage to stuff the disintegrating notes into my bag. Katie only moved from Liverpool to London last summer, so I haven't known her long, but we had this instant connection. She's got this dry sense of humour and she uses all these hilarious insults like 'turdweasel' and 'dumbledick', and she talks with a gentle Scouse accent which always makes her seem grounded – 'Salt of the earth,' my dad once called her. Yet she looks like something from a Jane Austen novel, with her doll-like features and light red hair . . . She actually plays the cello. The only thing I play is the Xbox.

'Don't worry about Bell, he just fancies you,' she says.

'Yeah, right. He's embarrassed cos me and Alice caught him blubbing in the cinema last year.'

She shoves her chair back. 'Come on, you know you're hot.'

I laugh. 'Yeah, I'm sweating like a pig after that car crash.'

'Just because you're not six foot and blonde like *some* people.'

She means Alice. I don't reply. It's hard when your

best friend looks like Britain's Next Top Model. A little kernel of envy lodges in my chest and I hate myself for it. We join the throng of students in the corridor, all hurrying to get home.

I change the subject. 'I can't believe you still haven't read *The Gallows Dance*, it's a rite of passage.' The crowd snatches my voice away, and I'm left feeling very small once again.

'Well I don't need to now. You should come with a spoiler alert.'

'You haven't even seen the film.'

'Again. Spoiler alert.'

We elbow through a group of Year Ten girls who don't seem to know the unspoken rule of moving out of the way for sixth formers.

I accidentally-on-purpose tread on a blonde girl's toe. 'Yeah, but Russell's seriously fit.' I'm talking about Russell Jones, the actor who plays Willow in the film.

'Really?' You've never mentioned it. Here comes Alice.' The smile never leaves Katie's mouth, but it slips completely from her eyes. Like me, she's learnt to tell when Alice approaches by reading other people. Every male glances over his shoulder, every girl falls silent, brow knitted in a tight frown.

Sure enough, the crowd parts like the Red Sea, but this Moses has long, bronzed legs that swallow up the tiled floor as she strides towards us. A smile lights up her perfect, oval face. She's always had that smile, ever since I met her on our first day at primary school – the kind of smile that makes you forgive her for being so beautiful.

She stops dead in the middle of the corridor, confident she won't get jostled. 'So how did it go?'

'It was a bag of crap,' I say.

Katie pats my back. 'No it wasn't, it was great.'

‘Yeah, a great big bag of crap,’ I reply.

Alice flips her pale hair over one shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, Vi, they clearly don’t get the beauty which is *The Gallows Dance* – philistines.’ She shoots a meaningful look at Katie.

‘It’s hardly Shakespeare,’ Katie mutters.

Alice sighs. ‘I wish I was in old Thompson’s class, you get loads better stuff to do than us. Plot structure, I could have really contributed to that.’ She loves reminding us she’s a rising fanfic star. She writes all this new material based on *The Gallows Dance*, messing with the plot, making the characters bend to her will. It’s ironic she feels the need to do this when she’s so accomplished at getting people to do what she wants in real life – perhaps writing is where she hones her art. I swallow down that little kernel of envy again.

‘Miss Thompson said Violet could be a writer, didn’t she, Vi?’ Katie says.

Alice looks at me and winks an inky-blue eye. ‘Bullshit. You haven’t got the imagination, you’d just rewrite *The Gallows Dance* again and again.’ She loops her arm around my shoulder and gives me a squeeze. ‘Which is a good thing, obviously.’ The scent of her hair – cherry blossom and lemongrass – fills my nostrils. I suddenly feel very special, Alice hugging me in public.

Katie glances at her watch. ‘Look guys, I’ve got to head, I’ve got a cello lesson in five, but I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?’

‘Comic-Con,’ Alice and I say in unison. We look at each other and smile. We’ve been waiting for this for months; we get to meet Russell. *Willow*. The dry mouth returns and I get this tremor of excitement in my belly, this feeling like my skin’s been briskly towelled.

‘We’re going as characters from *The Gallows Dance*, agreed?’ Alice says.

‘Yeah, Nate’s been planning his costume for days,’ I reply. Nate’s my little brother, he loves *The Gallows Dance*, more than me if that’s possible, and Mum insisted he tag along. Thanks, Mum.

Katie begins to walk away. ‘See you tomorrow, fangirls,’ she calls over her shoulder.