

'When I finish a Vikki Wakefield novel I get a tiny ache in my heart because I'm already missing the gutsy characters.' MELINA MARCHETTA

# FRIDAY BROWN

## VIKKI WAKEFIELD

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING  
ALL I EVER WANTED



Vikki Wakefield lives in the Adelaide foothills with her family. Her first young-adult novel, *All I Ever Wanted*, won the 2012 Adelaide Festival Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction, was a 2012 CBCA Notable Book and was shortlisted for the 2012 REAL Awards (Children's Choice Book Awards).

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PART 1  
THE CITY

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*Who you are from moment to moment is just a story.*  
Chuck Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*

## CHAPTER ONE

I left in the night.

The clock downstairs chimed the witching hour—*gong, gong*—and I used the sound to smother the grate of the zipper on my backpack. I laced up my boots and slipped on my fleece-lined jacket. I took only what was mine: my swag, my clothes, and the photograph, because without it I had nowhere to go.

That photo was my one planned move—after that, life was a lucky dip. The edges were fuzzy and worn thin. One corner was peeling away. The faded image of the man with his arm slung across Vivienne's shoulder was familiar, not because he was somebody I'd met, but because I'd looked at it a thousand times, trying to picture myself as a hybrid version of the two of them. I looked like Vivienne. She would have been a couple

of years older than I was then. Like me, she let her dark hair grow down to her waist and rarely wore make-up; unlike me she was tall and thin as a reed. We had the same grey eyes. But it was a bitter truth when I realised that I wasn't beautiful like her, that a millimetre here or there could be the difference between people staring or being indifferent.

That night, I left a room I'd dreamed about since I was little. A doll's room, with white furniture and lace curtains. Innocent things. A bed and bookcase and desk that seemed like one creation, flowing from one to the other. You could run a finger along the surfaces and end up right back where you started.

I left the things Grandfather had given me in a sad pile on the desk—a watch that looked too big on my wrist, a laptop computer, a string of pearls, a set of keys.

Every step was deafening. My breathing was too loud, my jeans scraped as I walked. The corner of my jacket caught on the newel post at the top of the stairs. I flailed in space before my hand found the rail with a *smack*.

I waited for a long minute. From there I could get back to my room—any further downstairs and I risked discovery, and lockdown. I checked behind me, along the dark hallway. Nothing.

The house had wings. I'd never seen anything like it. The east wing, where Grandfather slept, was to my right. The west wing, all my own, to the left. There were seven doors off the west wing and I'd only ever stepped

through two of them. The house was too still—it didn't sigh or shift its weight the way old houses should. It seemed to be holding its breath.

The staircase was a gauntlet of eyes: ancient portraits of men wearing flowing gowns and dusty white wigs. There was only one painting of a young woman. She had the glassy gaze of a reluctant sitter, pearls choking her throat, her nails polished and smooth. It was Vivienne, but from another time. Before. The Vivienne I knew had nails that were bitten and she wore junk jewellery with marbled stones that were like tiny worlds. She never wore pearls. And she could never sit still that long.

At the bottom of the stairs was a room that used to be a sitting room. A lamp was switched on, an unblinking eye, watching. There was the bed where Vivienne had lain for three months while her spirit soared on a morphine cloud, a dent still in the mattress, a groove where her hip bones had dug in, the precious hollow in the pillow.

I couldn't pass it without looking—but there was nothing for me anymore.

I stepped through the entrance hall on the balls of my feet. Into the dining room with its boardroom table, tinkling chandelier and an everlasting decanter of whisky. It seemed never to empty, though Grandfather filled his glass over and over.

For forty-two nights, he and I had sat at each end of the table, as divided as continents, pushing food around our plates. We went days without speaking. Vivienne had taken me back to her father's house so that she could

die and I could have a future, but I wanted to be gone because, without her, none of it was bearable. Everything tidy and polished and civilised—even our grief.

I passed through the endless galley kitchen and slipped out through the back door.

The night air was cold and still. I hoisted my backpack and buttoned my jacket. Grandfather's cat wound between my legs and beseeched me with lime-coloured eyes. I ran my hand along its rippling spine. The feel of it—so *alive*—made my eyes ache.

I took my hand away and the cat wailed and slashed the air with its tail.

'Shhh!' I hissed and stomped my foot. The gravel crunched underneath.

I looked back at the house.

In another life it could be a country house from an Enid Blyton book—all rambling garden and dappled sunlight and hidden treasure. Fond cousins and lashings of lemonade with the odd mystery and midnight feast. It was a house made for happy endings, but there I was, standing in the dark with a yowling cat, everything I owned crammed into a backpack.

I was the sum of two people, one dead, the other unknown. I'd lived in a hundred small towns and I'd never known another person for my whole life, except Vivienne. Every memory before this was sweet and real. But now she'd got it wrong—this wasn't my future. Her legacy should be more than a string of pearls and a grandfather I didn't know. Vivienne taught me that life

was short, and if it wasn't sweet you were in the wrong place with the wrong people.

*Time to go, Friday Brown*, she'd say, and so the next chapter would begin. Sometimes it would be a whisper in the dark and I would feel her broken heart beating against my back; other times, a casual aside in conversation, as if it had just occurred to her that she had somewhere else to be. We craved new beginnings.

Suddenly the sensor lights flicked on and I was drowning in brightness. I blinked and raised my arm over my eyes. An upstairs window flew up. For a second I saw my mother there, framed in a halo of light, but it was just him, Grandfather, with his old man's hair gone static and wild. He frowned, fists braced against the sill.

I had the sensation of time winding in a loop.

He stared at me.

I stared at him.

I knew I'd be away before he even got to the landing, but still I felt trapped in his glare.

He lobbed something at me. A bundle, the size of a half-brick, that fell short and tumbled to my feet. He nodded at it and regarded me carefully as if what I did next would give him some measure of me.

I picked it up, felt its weight in my palm, caught the scent of new ink. A wad of fifties, bound in rubber bands. Hundreds of them, probably more than ten thousand dollars. I thought of Vivienne—turned away from here with nothing, my lifetime ago—and I made my choice.

It was a choice based on stupid pride and dumb loyalty, and it would change everything.

I threw the bundle onto the porch, turned my back and started walking.

I had a purse with my own money. Enough to start over. If there was one thing I knew—one thing I could do without a map, with my eyes closed and my hands tied behind my back—it was starting over. Except this time I had to do it on my own.

The sensor lights flicked off.

Clouds of breath, numbness in my fingers and toes. A pale slice of moon threw a sickly light, just enough to see by. When I reached the front gates, I looked back.

He was gone. The windows were dark and shuttered. Grandfather was letting me go.

## CHAPTER TWO

Hitchhiking was dangerous.

Vivienne had rules about it and, like the one she made about not calling her Mum, they were absolute. Never hitch alone. Never get into a car with a man on his own. Never get in with a man who makes his dog ride in the tray or has a crucifix hanging from the rear-view mirror. She reckoned people who dangled a crucifix needed absolution for something more than everyday sin. And never, ever, stay with a person who doesn't ask your name.

An old man in a blue ute picked me up on the freeway. I'd been walking for about an hour, blinking like a possum in the headlights. Huddled into myself from the cold.

The cab was stifling. Empty cans rolled on the floor. The man had lizard skin and fists like boxing gloves.

‘Shouldn’t be out here. It’s the middle of the night. I’ve got a granddaughter about your age,’ he said. Then, ‘What’s your name?’

I told him I was Liliane Brown but they called me Friday. I couldn’t remember who ‘they’ were anymore. I told him my mother was dead and I was going to live with my father. That I was seventeen. I asked him to drop me in the city so I could catch a train to my father’s house.

I pulled the photograph out of my backpack. *Prof. Green, Uni, 1994* was scrawled on the back in Vivienne’s handwriting. The man clutched a book to his chest, the word *Henry* just visible between his fingers. These were my only clues. He could have been nobody important, but it was his smallness, his dancer-grace that made me think there was more to him. Over time, Vivienne had discarded or lost the few old photos she’d had. Some were left behind; some were burned in fits of despair. But she kept that one.

I showed the old man the photo with its furred creases and he saw a resemblance, even though there was none. I said I was going to finish school and then go to university. That my father loved and missed me very much but my mother wouldn’t let me see him.

Not much of it was truth.

He clucked his tongue and I heard the pop and suck of false teeth. ‘I’ll drop you at the station,’ he said, and reached across my legs with his scaly arm.

I couldn’t help it, I shrank back.

He looked at me with pity and flipped open the glove box. A jumble of stuff fell out but he left it on the floor. He fumbled about and dropped a plastic-wrapped square onto my lap. A sandwich. Corned beef and pickle and something limp and green.

I hadn't cried for forty-two days. Not since the nurse had unhooked Vivienne, the day they took the last of her away and a half-empty saline bag dripped onto the floor. I hadn't cried since that night when I slept in her T-shirt so I could smell her, but all that was left was the scorching scent of bleach and Betadine.

But that sandwich did it. The crusts were off and the cling wrap had hospital corners. I blubbered the whole way.

The old man dropped me right out the front of the train station. He watched me as I walked into the station and didn't pull away until I waved.

It seemed the city had no curfew. I expected everything to be dead that early in the morning but there were people everywhere. Not just night-people. A woman pushing a covered pram shoved past me. Three guys with sullen faces squatted, smoking, by the doors. One flicked his butt at my feet and wagged his tongue. I looked away. Tall buildings leaned in and squeezed the air out; the dark there was more sinister than any dark I'd ever felt, even with a million pinpricks of light from windows and doorways. Give me the absolute dark of the outback

at midnight, where you can sense what's coming. The city felt alien and unsafe.

I found a bench inside the station and curled up on my side with my backpack for a pillow. A rain moth the size of a sparrow crawled out of a drain and headed towards the light, antennae twitching. I watched it for a while. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again, it was gone. My eyelids were so heavy. Trains came and went as sleep dragged me under.

I dozed. I cupped my hands over my ears to shut out the commotion, but most of the white noise was inside my head. Something fluttered near my ear and I slapped it away. I felt the dry brush of wings against my neck, but my hand closed over air. I grabbed again and felt something warm. Skin.

I snapped upright and my neck was cricked, my hip sore and stiff.

A boy was crouched next to me, stone-still, his hand outstretched. Part feral-child, part old man. Clear blue eyes and matted hair like silvery fairy floss.

'Hey, what are you doing?' I croaked.

He scuttled sideways like a sand crab. He could have been twelve or forty and he was strange-looking, other-worldly. Then he smiled and I saw that he was younger than I was because he didn't quite fit into his teeth.

'What are you smiling at? I haven't got anything. Look.' I wrenched open my pack and pawed through my things. 'See, nothing. I haven't got anything for you!' I yelled. 'Go away.'

He sidled closer and whipped out a packet of cigarettes. He shook one out and it fell to the ground. Nonchalantly, he picked it up and jammed it between his lips. He sat next to me with his back against the wall and smoked the whole thing without using his hands.

‘What do you want?’ I asked.

He shrugged.

I pretended to be busy rummaging through my bag. Early commuters were lining up along the platform. A train whooshed in and out. The platform was left nearly empty.

Still he sat there. He pulled his hoodie over his face, folded his arms, crossed his ankles. Appeared to fall asleep.

I could smell bacon or something greasy and good. I needed food. My stomach whined and the boy shifted. I jammed my backpack on, hoisted my swag and thought about what to do next.

Without thinking, I fished out a twenty-dollar note.

Everything happened at once.

The boy, not sleeping, darted in front of me, quick as a rat. I yanked my hand away and spun around. He was fast and fluid like a practised thief, except that he was past me and the twenty was still in my hand.

‘Hah,’ I gloated.

He was gone, empty-handed.

He bolted for the platform and I could see what had got him moving. The young mother, turned away from her baby in its pram, holding her phone up to the light.

The pram, rolling away, down towards the track. A pink fist waving. A woollen sock dangling from a tiny foot.

I went after him but my legs were stiff, my boots heavy. The boy got there as the pram tipped over the edge. He hesitated for a moment, then leaped onto the track.

‘Your baby!’ I screamed at the woman.

She was registering the vanished pram, the coming train, the gurgling screams from below. Her comprehension was slow and painful. The train screeched and slowed, but not enough, not in time.

I reached the edge of the platform and looked over the edge. The pram came back up, as if plucked by the hand of God. I grabbed the handle and heaved the pram onto the platform.

The mother snatched the baby up and crushed it to her chest. It was red-faced and screaming, but whole. Alive. The train lurched two, three times, hissed and stopped.

People came from everywhere. A security guard questioned the mother.

‘He’s still down there!’ I yelled at him.

‘Who?’ he asked.

‘The boy. The one who saved the baby! Move the train!’

The mother turned her white, shocked face to me. ‘I didn’t see a boy. Only you.’ Her voice was calm and she nuzzled her child as if memorising his smell. ‘I saw you pull him up.’

I wanted to slap her.

‘He’s still under it. Move the train!’ I paced along the edge of the platform, shouting, arms raised. Fistfuls of hair. ‘Pleeeaaase. Just move the train!’

After some discussion, the driver stepped onto the platform. He pointed at me. ‘I saw her pull it up. That’s it. There’s nobody down there.’

I paced some more.

The guard looked at me with suspicion. After long minutes, the driver moved the train.

I stared down at the rails. Nothing. No blood or pieces. No proof of a wild boy with silver hair. I wasn’t convinced until the guard jumped down onto the track and looked under the carriage. Still nothing.

I collapsed onto the bench and tried to breathe. Half the crowd was calling me a hero, the other half was saying I must be crazy, on drugs. A guy held his mobile phone in front of my face and took my picture.

The mother was escorted to an office, still clutching her baby close. The guard asked me to stay to answer some questions for a report.

‘It’s a miracle,’ said a batty old woman in pyjama bottoms. Her eyes were murky with age, but she was the only person who looked me in the eye.

I stared after the mother and baby. A group of people huddled around them, trying to touch the miracle baby.

This was not my miracle, it was theirs. I just witnessed it. Moments like that, I thought maybe there was a God, a fickle puppet-master who decided it was time to remind

us that life isn't just an echo of the Big Bang—that we're here, with beating hearts.

The guy with the mobile phone snapped another picture. I jerked my hand up to cover my face and the phone clattered to the ground.

'Hey!' he yelled.

The crowd turned to stare.

I grabbed my things, sprinted out of the train station and onto the street. A taxi driver swerved and swore. Pale fingers of morning light poked between the buildings, and the bacon smell made my stomach groan.

Life is full of wrong turns and dead ends and paths that peter out. They all count, even the wrong turns; they all add more to who you become. Nobody wants to be a one-way street. There are signposts if you cared to look, Vivienne always said. Something will always tell you which way to go. It could be a wet finger held up to the breeze, a scrap of paper caught underfoot, a too-bright star that calls you west.

I thought maybe I'd missed it.

I spun around. I looked up. It could be as simple as a feeling, or a sound. It could be something that would reveal itself in its own time and I'd just have to wait.

Or it could be a boy nobody saw.