

CHAPTER SAMPLER

HAYLEY
SCRIVENOR

GIRL
FALLING

QBD BOOKS

Finnlay Young and her best friend, Daphne, have grown up together in a small town in the Blue Mountains. Bonded by both having lost a younger sister to suicide, they've always had a close – sometimes too close – friendship. Now in their twenties, their lives have finally started to diverge: Daphne is at university and Finn is working in the Mountains, as well as falling in love with a beautiful newcomer named Magdu.

Unused to sharing Finn, Daphne starts to act up in ways that will allow her to maintain the control over her best friend she's always relished. Then, one fateful day, Finn, Daphne and Magdu all go rock climbing – and Magdu falls to her death. Is it a terrible accident, or suicide – or has something more sinister happened?

Bold, dramatic and utterly compelling, *Girl Falling* forces us to confront the stories we tell ourselves about the people we love. Displaying all of Hayley Scrivenor's razor-sharp skills for character, landscape and narrative, this is a breathtaking read.

Hayley Scrivenor is a former Director of Wollongong Writers Festival. Originally from a small country town, Hayley now lives and writes on Dharawal country and has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wollongong on the south coast of New South Wales. Her debut novel, *Dirt Town*, was a number-one bestseller and won multiple awards, including the ABIA General Fiction Book of the Year 2023.



Author photograph credit: Emma Leigh Elder-Meldrum

G I R L
F A L L I N G

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Why would my best friend want to destroy my life?

The cliff the three of us were standing on curved down to the valley the way your ear joins your neck, the rock shining yellow and blood orange in the sun. The smell of damp earth growing warm. I was doing everything I could not to think about the question that had been running through my head since the night before. I was pretty good at that: pushing stuff down. I reminded myself that I was in love, that everything was better since a woman named Magdu had arrived, slipping into my life, filling it, changing its mood and temperature. It made what Daphne had done harder to accept, I realised. Now I knew that things could be better, different than they had been.

I took five deep breaths.

On a day like this, you looked across the valley and

everything was too sharply in focus, all that detail demanding to be noticed at the same time. Bright blue sky that made you forget about mist and cold, a gentle breeze blowing.

‘Let me check your gear,’ I said.

Magdu turned to me, eyes wide, and raised her arms up and away from her harness. *My beautiful girlfriend*. I’d said it so often that now it just made Magdu roll her eyes. I tugged on the front loop, resisting the urge to stand closer, to make it an intimate moment. Daphne was nearby, though out of earshot.

Read the room, Finn, I thought.

‘Now, check mine,’ I said.

‘I don’t know what I’m looking for,’ Magdu said.

It wasn’t like her to be this nervous.

‘Yes, you do, Mags,’ I said gently.

She looked down at her feet.

‘This is your belay device,’ I said. ‘Your rope will feed through as I belay you down.’ We want to check that this’ – I pulled on the carabiner looped through the front of her harness – ‘is properly attached. It needs to connect these two loops together and be closed tight.’ I let my hand move from the harness to her hip, hooked a finger in her pocket. ‘All Daphne’s gear is self-closing, so I’ve put you on that. If you ever need to be rescued, the climber who rescues you will transfer you onto their gear by attaching to you here.’

‘Rescued?’ Her eyes were wide again.

‘Don’t worry, Mags. I’ve got you. Remember what we talked about.’

It was an easy climb, perfect for a newbie. I would set up two ropes and go down first, abseiling down from the anchor. Then

Daphne would come down at the same time as Magdu while I was on a fireman's belay below. It meant Magdu would always have someone with her, and I'd be right there, ready to take over and stop her descent if something went wrong. The cliff had a gentle angle, with good handholds. It'd been Daphne's idea: something fun for the three of us to do together. Now we were here, I wanted to make the best of it.

'There it is,' Daphne said from behind me, and I jumped.

She laughed and leaned down to rifle through her bag, then looked up at Magdu. 'You better hope Finn knows what she's doing,' she said with a wink.

Magdu stiffened.

'I'm just kidding! Finn's been doing this since she was little.' Daphne unfolded to her full height but still had to reach up to muss my hair. 'I mean, she may only be twenty-six, but she's got years of experience. Right, Finnbo?'

Daphne turned away and I let her go. I couldn't meet Magdu's eye. Magdu leaned close and squeezed my hand, and I was reminded why I loved her.

Men's laughter rang out. The sound of clinking gear. A group of them were setting up, prepping for a harder climb than we were doing. A whole cliff face for them to choose from, and they'd chosen the climb right next to us. One of them kept looking at Daphne. He was tall with dark hair and a deep tan I knew wouldn't finish at the line of his sleeve, because he looked ready to take his t-shirt off any second. It was important to carry a knife in case you had to cut a rope, but he didn't need one as big as the folded blade dangling from his belt. He had white teeth that flashed when he smiled. One of those men so

handsome they don't look real. I wanted to push against his shiny teeth with dirty fingers. I wanted to shove him into a shrub and watch him struggle to get out. The worst part was the suspicion that if he turned his charm on me, I could be won over.

I blocked out the men. Blocked the dull ache in my belly that told me my period was coming. My tooth hurt too, a throbbing that I ignored. Daphne's blue helmet, blonde braid snaking out from under it, bobbed in the corner of my vision. She was checking her gear, holding out her slings for inspection. She was the more talented climber, and she knew it. But I was more experienced, and we'd discussed the plan, had agreed how we were going to tackle the climb. We were here to get out of our heads and into our bodies.

I stepped into my harness and pulled the straps tight, and my belly and back felt better with the pressure. Locked in. Safe. Daphne sent me a meaningful look and I smiled at her, trying to refuse it, make it a simple thing. Daphne would always drag me into a secluded corner anywhere we went. She wanted to go deep, her hand wrapped around mine, her gaze steady on my face, her blonde hair in her eyes. I thought of what had happened the night before. Pushed it down. I didn't want to be drawn in by Daphne at Magdu's expense. Not again.

I strapped on my helmet and walked towards the cliff edge to check the ledge below for climbers. A sheer drop, rock surging down into the valley. A gut punch of fear, a pulse felt in your back molars. Who could stand here without imagining what would happen if you went a little bit crazy, for even a second?

Magdu kept well back, running her hand along the straps of her harness, not looking at me. She pulled her inhaler from a jacket pocket and sucked on it, back arching and hands cupped like someone trying to light a cigarette in strong wind. She turned back to face the gaping hole of the valley. The tension from the car, from the previous weeks, had followed us here. But it was going to be okay. It had to be.

I turned. Daphne had wandered closer to where the group of young men were setting up. The handsome man towered over her, a full two heads taller. He reached for something below her waist. I tensed. Then I saw that he was holding the knife that I'd bought Daphne in high school, the handle engraved with a pattern of leaves. It was on a cord, one end tied through a belt loop. I wanted to slap it out of his stupid hand.

I had to attach our ropes to the anchor that would hold our weight as we abseiled down.

'Daphne,' I called.

It took her a second to turn towards me.

'Can I grab the rope bag?'

The bag was Daphne's responsibility. She'd done a ropes course. It was one that I was qualified to teach, but she'd chosen not to learn from me. 'Teachers need authority, you know?' she'd said with a shrug. I understood. She meant she needed someone who wouldn't go easy on her like I would.

'Daphne,' I called again.

'It's by the boulder,' she yelled, without shifting her attention from the guy.

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There were permanent slings around two trees placed either side of a large rock. I checked the webbing on both for damage, but all the gear along this series of climbs was well used and well maintained. Our anchor would be equalised between the three points – the two trees and the boulder. Three points of contact to keep the three of us safe. I walked my red rope and Daphne’s blue rope, now both securely attached, to the edge. I called down, ‘Rope!’ and waited a moment before throwing them over one at a time.

Magdu was bouncing on the balls of her feet now. As if shaking off the heaviness I’d noticed in the car: a quiet sadness that scared me.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said. ‘Just beautiful.’ Her arms spread wide, indicating the landscape. Magdu ran towards good feelings: that’s what I loved about her.

Down at the first ledge, the sun was warm against my back, a stronger breeze now, caressing my sweaty neck. I turned to look over my shoulder, the incredible view stretching away from me, the rumpled edges of the valley crowded with bush. I breathed deeply, relishing the smell of eucalyptus and the feeling of calm I got on the rock. Here, I could focus only on what was in front of me.

When I turned to face the cliff again, some grit fell into my eye. I’d left my sunnies on the dash of the car. Rookie error. I blinked and looked down, my hands ready. I heard Daphne’s voice above me say, ‘Coming down,’ and I instinctively widened my stance, preparing for her and Magdu’s weight to come on

to the two ropes. I held one in each hand. ‘On belay,’ I called back, hearing my words bounce up the rock.

A gentle tug on the blue rope told me at least one person’s full body weight had gone over the edge. I closed my eyes, trying to squeeze out the grit. Then there was a snapping sound. A scream, a body moving towards me at speed. Instinctively, I pulled hard on both the ropes in my hands, but the body – no longer attached – was in freefall. Arms and legs flailing. Shiny black hair. Magdu’s orange jacket moving past me on the ledge. I grabbed for the detached rope without considering the consequences, wanting only to stop the body from falling. The heavy line whipped and thrashed on its way down. I was tied in at the bolt, or I would have tipped back and off the ledge. I twisted to look down, to follow the orange blur. I could no longer hear her.

It had all happened in the time it takes a door to slam closed.

From where I stand now, I picture the three of us still together at the top of the cliff. *Run*, I want to say. *Leave, while you still can*. I want to ask Daphne why she did all the things she did. I want to understand what happened. To smooth it out until it resolves, like a map on which you finally recognise the landmarks around you. I can’t go back to that moment, can’t change what happened. The best I can hope for is that I will find what I have always needed; what I realise I am looking for even now: a story I can live with.

