'Flight', a novel and 'Mapping the Journey to Self', an accompanying exegesis

by Rosie Dub

Submitted for the degree of PhD

2011
Abstract

This practice-led PhD consists of a novel titled *Flight* and an accompanying reflective exegesis titled *Mapping the Journey to Self*, which explores the motives, techniques and theoretical background to the writing of *Flight*. Through the inner and outer journey of the main character, Fern, the novel explores themes such as the power of words; the nature of story and its structures; psychological patterns of human behaviour; the age old journey of the soul, illustrated through shamanic initiation; the role of memory and imagination in creativity; and the legacy of memory, through personal experience, ancestral inheritance and through the repeating patterns of past lives.

The exegesis draws on a range of theory across disciplines such as psychology, anthropology and narratology. Following the work of Thomas McLaughlin, it also embraces the idea of the vernacular in order to give voice to the experience and theories of writers and psychologists who do not work in academia. The main thrust of the exegesis is an exploration of how the very structure of story provides a map of the 'journey to self' or the individuation process, as Jung called it. Drawing on Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler, I explore the notion that while stories do encourage us to conform by reinforcing the social order and prevailing attitudes, paradoxically they are also subversive, in that the very structure of story is a map of the process of becoming oneself, a state in which the individual may live freely within society.

My theoretical research and the writing of *Flight*, occurred concurrently and in the process I became intrigued by the possibility of illustrating theoretical ideas through the journey of the major characters rather than through exposition. To do this I had to digest the theory, rather than reiterate it, trusting instead that it would somehow transmute into fiction. In writing the exegesis I slowly made the process conscious, identifying the links and therefore mapping in my own way, the trials, tribulations and joys of the journey to self. What has emerged from this is a novel and supporting exegesis that have been deeply enriched by my theoretical research, practical experience and personal reflection.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Jason Bainbridge and Dr Carolyn Beasley for their skillful guidance, their patient reading of many drafts, their steady optimism throughout this long journey and for helping me with the submission process. Thanks also to Teresita White for her moral support and for her frequent reading and rereading of the novel. My husband, Tim, and my children, Nikita, Freda and Harry, have patiently waited for this moment, and I thank them for their support and faith.
Declaration by Candidate

I certify that the thesis entitled, “‘Flight' a novel and 'Mapping the Journey to Self', an accompanying exegesis” submitted for the degree of PhD contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and is not based on joint research or publications.

Full name: Rosemary Joan Dub

Signed:……………………………

Date:…06/09/2011……………………………
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Flight, a novel</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mapping the Journey to Self, an exegesis on Flight</em></td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One – Why I Wrote <em>Flight</em> – Story As Therapy</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shamanic Journey</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two – The Writing of <em>Flight</em></td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Creative Process</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact or Fiction: Where Truth Lies</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three – Mythic Stories</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Are Myths?</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Use of Myth and Fairytale in <em>Flight</em></td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Curse/Prophecy</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four – Mythic Structure - of Heroes and Journeys</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three-fold Structure</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Stages of the Adventure</td>
<td>338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Feminine Journey</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shamanic Journey</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five - Characterisation</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing the Wound</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focalisation</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archetypes</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six – The Use of Symbolism and Metaphor in <em>Flight</em></td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References/Bibliography</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix II</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Synopsis

*Flight* is a metaphysical novel in which the classic narrative patterns of the adventure story and the spiritual journey are intermingled. The protagonist, Fern, is a young woman so damaged by her past that she has withdrawn from reality behind closed doors. But reality has not abandoned her and soon comes knocking.

The story of how Fern learns to face the real world raises questions about the nature of reality itself and our perception of it. Her journey is played out against a background of myth and metaphor; sometimes eerie, sometimes earthy, always spellbinding.

*Flight* opens in Sydney where Fern has immured herself in the attic of a rented terrace house. When her house-mates pack up and leave, Fern is forced to face the outside world. But her past is waiting for her and Fern is soon running scared as her sanity and beliefs begin to unravel.

Beleaguered by memories and strange visions, Fern gradually learns to trust her own powers and perceptions. She discovers that she has an ancient enemy who in this life has incarnated as her father, but Fern was adopted at birth and has never met this father who wants her dead. Her instinct is to hide but when he begins to attack her through her dreams, she decides it's time to stop running and start looking for answers.

Together with Adam, an ex-soldier haunted by the past, Fern embarks on a journey which takes them from inner-city Sydney to the labyrinthine depths of the Tasmanian wilderness, where her wealthy father lives in a luxurious manor house. It is here, in the centre of the labyrinth that Fern must finally face down her demons.

In Fern's search for wholeness and self-knowledge, she learns that help can come from mysterious and surprising places, and that the greatest danger of all is the life unlived. As Fern herself soon discovers, in order to fly, one must first be willing to fall.
Flight

by

Rosie Dub
When I talk about the me that I was before that experience, I find myself saying, she, a third person. I understand that it's my personal history. It's not like a slate was wiped clean, but everything that plagued me before has been turned into compost out of which the new me was growing.

Luisah Teish

In the end the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one.

Carl Jung

The way of love is not
a subtle argument.

The door there
is devastation.

Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.
How do they learn it?

They fall, and falling,
they're given wings.

Rumi
I came early, slithering into the outside world and into safety, or so I hoped. But this was to be the first of many hopes, all dashed against the brutally sharp edges of reality.

As in all great myths, my birth was accompanied by a prophecy. I, it seemed, would be the death of my father. How this was to come about no one could say. But the prophecy was there, it escaped from the mouth of Simple Simon, the old gardener at the Botanic Gardens in Adelaide where my mother often went to sit in her lunch hour.

On this particular day she was waiting to meet my father. He was late and the pregnant girl felt a persistent nagging worry. There was something big hovering around the edges of things, a sense that life had woken up that morning slightly askew. Nothing she could put her finger on, but it was enough to make her nervous. And then there were the contradictions: worry that he would come, worry that he wouldn't. Fear and love tugging her between them until all she could feel was a tearing anxiety. You see, my father was a strong willed man, older than her, but still too young he said, to be tied down like this. He would have walked away but he was snared by his desire for my mother. She was beautiful and fragile and needy, easy to bully but also detached in a way that he could never put a finger on. This detachment was what kept him there, waiting, wanting her to surrender completely.

It was summer but there was an unexpected chill in the air. The wind was a fresh south easterly, not the usual hot northerly that stirred up dust and discomforts, and the sky was clear enough to make everyone's heart lift. Even my mother's, the seventeen-year-old girl with the rounded belly who sat on a bench chewing a deviled-egg sandwich and watching Simon methodically plant a row of violets, a flurry of chattering birds surrounding him.

When a magpie greedily pecked Simon's finger, perhaps thinking it a fat juicy
worm, my mother forgot her troubles for a moment and laughed. Simon looked up, directly at her, and her laughter quickly turned into a shudder. Where one eye should have been there was a socket, dark and deep. One eye looking out, the other inwards perhaps this was the secret of his second sight. Or then again, it might have been the snakebite all those years ago which left him hovering between life and death for weeks on end. When he finally woke he knew things other people didn't, but he had forgotten how to live in this world. No one knew how old Simple Simon was or how long he'd been working in the Botanic Gardens. He was a fixture, like the giant oak under which my mother sat.

Simon stood up straight, wincing as he stretched, one hand massaging the small of his back, the other leaning on his spade. 'Ah,' he said, shaking his head. 'That one will be the death of her father.' Wincing again at the creaking in his swollen joints, he walked over to my mother and poked his finger into her tight belly. 'Mark my words, the death of him.' While she sat staring at him, open-mouthed, he went back to his planting, still shaking his head, but with a gleam in his eye.

At that moment I moved. Well, bounced really. Did a somersault in a small space, causing my mother to double over in pain and think her time had come. It hadn't. I wasn't going anywhere. Safety, I thought, lay in the warm fluids that contained me. And I didn't want to kill anyone, especially my own father, even though I wasn't exactly fond of him. There'd been words already, white knuckles and fists, sending me curling up into a tighter self-protective ball. My father didn't love me. Even then I knew that. And he didn't love my mother. Like me, she stood between him and his plans. He wanted only to conquer her, in the same way he planned to conquer the world. You see, my father had big ideas swirling inside his head. Even then he loved power more than people. Even then he would let nothing stand in his way.

My mother loved my father but for all the wrong reasons. Love, hate and fear were all bound up together for her. She was young and weak and couldn't distinguish between these things. She wanted me and she didn't. She was afraid. It's not unusual. And Simon's prophecy had filled her throat with the burning need to tell. So when my father arrived a few minutes later, she laughed a kind of brittle nervous laugh and repeated what Simon had said. It was a big mistake, because more than anything my
father wanted to live. He was a rational man, or so he claimed, but underneath that rationality lay a deep-rooted superstition. Underneath everything, he knew the power of shadow.

At first he tried to laugh it off but my mother could see the discomfort in his eyes and the tension in his fingers, already bunching up into fists.

'You should have got rid of it,' he hissed. 'I told you.' Then he hit my mother hard in the belly, the shock and pain spreading through her thin skin and into me.

At that moment I decided it was safer out than in. I fled, bursting the bag that contained me, sending the warm liquid pouring down my mother's legs, soaking her pants and forming a puddle on the ground under where she sat, her heart beating in terror from the attack, her breath coming in quick panting bursts. Her fear spread quickly into me. In a panic I bounced my head again and again, pushing at her uterus, sending out waves of contractions. She ran, out of the gardens and onto the footpath, winding her way through other pedestrians, doubling over with the pain as another contraction hit, then running again, away from him, away from the agony that was me and that was tearing her neatly down the middle.

It was lunch hour in the city and there were lots of people about. She could see the concern in their eyes but her terror didn't allow her to respond. Like a panicked horse she bolted, not noticing where she was. It took a Don't Walk sign to bring her to her senses. Perhaps it was some instinct for survival, or the need to protect me. Perhaps it was fate, for the prophecy had been written in the stars and spoken aloud by Simple Simon, setting it in motion. Or perhaps someone reached out their hand and grabbed her arm or dress, yanking her to a halt. It could have been any of these things that made her stop, only a half-second away from the truck that muscled across the intersection, dangerously close to the kerb, making everyone step back and brushing the wind through her hair just as my head burst free of the birth canal, only to find itself imprisoned in her underpants as she slid, moaning, to the ground, hands reaching out to support her. And all the time my father stood back in the crowd, watching me emerge and wanting to stamp the life out of me but unable to come forward. Yet.

He was biding his time. My father wasn't an evil man but he had already done wrong, and this deed had set in motion others. Then it was only a matter of time, as the
prophecy ate away at him, turning him into its slave. Perhaps the seeds of madness had already been planted deep in his heart, in this life or another. Or perhaps they were sown later; I am not sure, for it is hard to see the beginnings of things.

People always say that children can't remember. That babies have no language and therefore no memories. That an abandoned baby can't be traumatised. They are wrong. There are many ways of knowing. The memories we carry in our consciousness are not the only ones. There are others, ones we can't relate in words, and yet their scar tissue builds up so that we live every day of our lives in reaction to them. I have learned first hand that we carry memory in our cells. Unresolved trauma acts like a cancer, scarring, mutating, warping our cells until they become sick. Remembering is implicit in the decision to enter the labyrinth, to look inside ourselves, at our wounds and our carefully buried strengths. It's there in the patterns we identify in our lives. And there too in the truths we discover and recognise as having always known. I know these things because I have looked deeply into myself and seen what needed seeing.

I was born in Adelaide on January 2nd 1989. From the beginning, life for me was a serious matter of survival, but it was also something I did not relish at all. There is a contradiction in this, I know, and one that tugged me this way and that, making me strong, yet fearful; determined, yet too ready to give up. A contradiction that for many years trapped me in a half-life, a twilight world of muted colours. A prison I didn't even know I was in until I made my escape.

I entered this world wearing my mother's blood and carrying the marks of my father's fist on my back. Within minutes of my birth an ambulance arrived, its siren sending my heart thumping too fast all over again. There were danger signals everywhere and I could no longer distinguish between what was safe and what was not. But I was a tiny baby, born a month early, and the hands of those men were gentle as they carried me to the relative safety of the hospital.

He tried one more time, in the hospital ward, his large hand grabbing me by the leg and swinging me up and out of the plastic crib and head first into the wall. One swing, but he hadn't built up momentum yet. My mother's loyalties were torn, but for that one crucial moment the hormones swilling through her body put her on my side. She screamed. Just once, but there was a tone in it, enough to bring people running. Before
the next swing a nurse appeared in the doorway and, reading the madness in my father's eyes, pressed the alarm.

Already a master of disguise, my father recovered quickly, cradling me in his arms, uttering comforting baby noises while I stared mutely up into his eyes, my heart thudding.

'I slipped,' he told the nurse. 'I almost dropped her. My God, they're so fragile.'

Then, as a nurse took her from him, 'She's alright, isn't she?'

Uncertain now, the nurse looked at my mother lying there in the crisp white hospital bed, wearing a white hospital gown because there'd been no time to pack, sobbing, milk leaking from her nipples.

My mother looked at each of us in turn, seeing the threat in my father's eyes, the bewildered fear in mine and the question in the nurse's. Then, stony-faced, she turned away from us all. She had made a decision.

'It was an accident,' she said. 'He slipped.'

But she did sign the adoption forms. To keep me safe.

Then she wrapped me tightly in a white blanket, placed me back in the plastic see-through hospital-issue crib and wheeled me into a room full of other howling cribs, setting me loose into a sea of indifference with no anchor and no oars, with only the sun, the moon and the stars to navigate by, and no lessons to help me decipher them.

On my original birth certificate there is a blank space next to Father. My mother's name is listed as Joan Childe. My name is listed as Erica. On my second birth certificate my father's name is listed as Richard Parsons, my mother's as Grace Parsons My adopted parents called me Fernanda after an evangelical missionary they favoured at the time. I called myself Fern. More than anything I wanted to fly. But in order to fly, one must first be willing to fall.

This is the story of my journey, following the clues back through the twists and turns that made me into what I was, searching for the moments of definition: the overheard sentence, the intention in another's eyes, a boy seducing a girl, a fist, a beating and a mother turning away. I had to go deep into the underworld and enter the labyrinth, with no guarantee of return, seeking the threads that I could weave into a rope thick
enough to haul me out again.

In this story there are those gifted and cursed with the power of prophecy. There's a young man haunted by the past and an old man haunted by the future. There is death and corruption and injustice. There is love and passion and hatred, all carried across lifetimes. Occasionally there is compassion. But more often, as in real life, there is fear.

I am there too. Haunted and hollow. An outline, waiting to be filled in. Poised trembling before the entrance to the labyrinth. A shadow of the self I should have been. A shadow of who I am now as I sit here looking for a beginning when there isn't one, when there never is, because life is simply not neat, and one story hardly ever ends before another begins. Instead they span time and space, reaching back into a past that extends beyond our first breath and into a future that extends beyond our last, through a multitude of lives and tied only by the threads of souls and their patterns.

In the absence of a clear beginning I will draw an artificial line through time and begin on that stiflingly hot afternoon, in the attic room of a run-down terrace in the inner suburbs of Sydney. . .

* * *
Chapter One

It had been days, possibly weeks, since Fern had ventured out of her attic. Her housemates had tried everything they could think of to get her to open the door: banged, shouted and cajoled, but they didn’t stop short of breaking it down. After all, it was her choice. Then they'd begged her to come out, telling Fern that it made them uncomfortable to have her pacing back and forth above them. They didn’t say it, but she knew what they were holding on the tips of their tongues. She could hear the unspoken words as clearly as the sirens that pierced the night.

Today was hot, a humid, smothering kind of heat. And dark. Though it was only midday, the clouds were brooding black behind the smoky orange haze. They were sitting too low, waiting. It was as if the world was paused, waiting for something to break. She felt it inside herself too, the tautness that comes when a rubber band is stretched too far. It made her anxious, this waiting. With the smoke and the pollution clinging to the wet air it was hard to breathe. It had been this way for weeks, and now everything was damp: green powdery mould clung to her shoes and bags, and in the drawers, her limp clothes smelled sickly sweet. Even the fan gave little relief, only pushing warm air around the room. She hadn’t become used to its constant whirring and the swish of air in her face as it passed, ruffling her hair for a second, the papers on her desk lifting and falling, her mosquito net billowing in gentle rippling curves. To some extent the fan was useful, keeping the mosquitoes at bay, exiling them into dark corners among her clothes and under her desk.

Fern felt she would suffocate if she didn’t get some air. Panicking, she threw herself at the window, struggling with the lock but the wood, swollen by the damp, had stuck. She tugged, feeling the desperation rising inside her, and at the very moment she opened her mouth to scream with frustration, the window suddenly gave, making her lose balance and almost fall through. Leaning out of the window as far as she could, she breathed deeply, sifting the air for anything cool and refreshing. Perhaps it was a fraction cooler but the pollution was worse out here and the atmosphere thick with smoke. She felt it settle on her skin, tickling her nose and making her sneeze.
The traffic noise was so loud: three lanes one way, almost constant, like a river. Everyone going somewhere, doing something. Unlike Fern, who had nothing to do. How did she get here, to this room, this afternoon, this state of mind? It wasn't sudden, wasn't dramatic, just a series of decisions she guessed, though she couldn't follow the mathematics. How one day off college had turned into two. How one skipped shift at the pub and one missed date had multiplied into many. Until here she was, unable to rouse herself from the torpor she had sunk into. Depression, Claire called it. 'Simple,' she'd said. 'Just get some pills.' But it wasn't simple at all. As each day passed, Fern could feel herself becoming lighter, more transparent, her strength seeping out of her, as if someone or something was sucking out her life force.

A siren started up in the distance, then another and another, rising into a frightening crescendo. It seemed as if the city was spiralling towards chaos, the air filled with smoke and sirens and the nervous tension of millions of people running one step ahead of themselves. Or perhaps chaos had already arrived, an unwelcome guest slipping in through a back door when no one was watching. And by the time anyone did notice it would be too late.

Flakes of ash were floating in through the window. They looked like snow, weightless and aimless, leaving gracefully curving trails. Fern watched them settle on her skin, landing so gently she could only imagine a sensation. She touched one, then ran her finger down her arm, leaving a dark smudge on her skin. Then she drew a line with another until it formed a pattern. For some time she stood looking at the ash spiral on her arm, wondering.

Leaving the window open, Fern climbed back onto her bed. The fractionally cooler air was worth it, even with the smoke, but the mosquitoes were buzzing around her legs and her ears, looking for blood. She pulled the mosquito net across, then lay watching the frustrated insects fly around and around, sometimes settling on the white mesh as if they might chew a way through. In the strange pre-storm light her room looked whiter than ever. Almost glowing. White walls, white floors, the mosquito net a white sail.

Downstairs, Pete and Claire were still moving about. Their busy activity had been going on for two days and Fern's initial alarm had dulled. Instead she was irritated and
bored. She supposed it was ironic that she felt trapped up here; after all, she'd chosen to stay in her room. But usually the others left early each day. When the house was quiet she could come out of her room, safe from questions and expectant faces. She would wash up a few things and wander about, even go down the street for supplies if necessary. Today was a weekday, probably Tuesday, and they were still here filling up the house with noise and breaking all the rules: clomping up and down the narrow staircase, negotiating furniture through doorways, issuing orders, laughing, moving on, leaving her behind.

It would be so easy to stand up, walk over to the door, unlock it, walk down the stairs, smile, speak... So easy, but she couldn't do it. She hardly spoke anymore, except to buy milk and bread and coffee when she needed it, though even then she could get away with barely a word. She just piled what she needed in a basket and paid at the counter. People almost never bothered with please and thank you in Sydney. They looked through you. She was used to it now, used to the contradictions it created inside her: an exhilarating sense of liberation and a howling loneliness that threatened to engulf her.

Fern tensed, hearing the sound of footsteps on the stairs to her room. Then a tap at the door.

Fern, are you there? It's me, Claire.

She didn't move. Claire meant well. She wasn't angry like Pete was. Sometimes she even left things outside the door: a hot meal, flowers, a book. At first Fern had spoken to Claire, even let her in. But Claire wanted answers to questions that had no answers. She wanted to fix everything, as if there were solutions. It made Fern feel like a stupid rebellious schoolgirl. So she had stopped letting her in and now she didn't even answer when Claire came up.

Claire knocked again and tried the door. Fern, you've got to listen to me. We're leaving. The house is empty. Jesus, Fern, you have to come out. Don't you understand? You can just stay here. The landlord will find you.

Fern felt the panic rising from deep inside her belly. She held her breath, waiting for Claire to give up and go. She needed to be still. If she kept still enough maybe they would all leave her alone.

Claire sighed. Our mum rang again last night. She's worried. I told her, Fern.
I'm sorry but I can no longer cover for you anymore. It has gone too far. Claire tried the door handle. Please come out,' she pleaded. 'I don't know what to do. I don't even know if you're alive.

There were more footsteps and then a new, heavier banging on the door. Open this fucking door.'

'Maybe we should force it open, Pete.

'Yeah right, so we break the door down and kiss goodbye to any hope of our bond. We need the fucking money.'

'But she might be sick or dead.'

'She probably moved out.'

'She's in there, I know it. Fern, please let us in.'

'Leave it, Claire, there's nothing we can do. She's bloody bonkers anyway. Let them come and take her away.'

Fern lay quite still, listening to their footsteps going back down the stairs, one flight and then the next. Her heart was racing, her chest and throat were cluttered with unspoken words. Pete was right, she was bonkers. It was only a matter of time before someone came and knowing this was all tangled up with relief and dread.

Sometime later, Fern heard Claire's footsteps again and then a gentle knock. There's some mail for you. There was a pause, as if Claire were listening, then she slipped some envelopes under the door. We don't know how long we'll be at the new place, but if you need anything, any help, or somewhere to sleep, let me know. Look after yourself, Fern, she added, and then quietly, I miss you.'

As Claire's footsteps receded, Fern glanced at her clock. It was 1.03 pm. She was all alone. Abandoned. Fern felt a surge of anger at the world. It wasn't her fault. She hadn't chosen this shadow life, it had crept up on her from behind. More tears came as she lay in bed wishing she could turn back time and engage with the world again, the way she used to. Life had once been full of hope. Wistfully, she remembered how they'd laughed together over long dinners of lentils and cheap red wine, had sunny afternoon picnics in Centennial Park, sat up nights moaning over assignments and woke in the mornings eager to step into a new day.

Downstairs the back door slammed and a few minutes later a truck started up in
the alley. The house went suddenly quiet. Fern waited five minutes, then another five, just to be safe, before unlocking her door and peering down the stairs. She listened, her ears alert to the slightest noise, afraid that it was a trick and someone would be lying in wait for her. But there were no human noises, only the familiar creaks and sighs of the terrace house below. After another few minutes, Fern crept down the stairs to the first floor, then down another flight to the ground floor. The house was completely empty. Her footsteps echoed loudly about the walls; even her breathing was louder, now there was nothing to absorb her noise. Already the house had taken on an empty smell, something indefinable, like the taste of water, more an absence than anything else: no wafting perfumes or ripening peaches, no floating trails of breath or burning toast. Only vacant spaces were left, waiting for new definitions.

Fern walked from one room to the next, amazed at how quickly life can go from a place. There were square white patches on the walls where pictures had hung, rectangles and semicircles of dust on the floor where furniture had sat, stained patches on carpets marking red wine spills, mould on the windows which curtains had once hidden. It was too light now, too quiet and too loud. Every tiny sound made her jump. A sudden creak sent her flying back up the stairs, two at a time.

With the door locked behind her, Fern stood in the centre of her room, catching her breath. She could feel the great space of the house underneath her, stretching, yawning into the distance as if she were standing at the top of the tallest tower. It made her dizzy. But it also made her feel safer, to be so far from everyone.

On the floor were three letters and a folded piece of paper that Claire had slipped under the door. The paper was from Claire, with her new address and phone number. Fern folded it and put it in her wallet. There was a letter from the college, one from Grace, and one with 祖 ard onlywritten in the corner. Fern ripped it open. A Christmas card from Auntie Alma, with a five-dollar note. Better than the oversized undies she used to give Fern each year. But surely it was too early for Christmas cards. Fern could hardly believe she'd lost so much time.

The letter from the college confirmed what she already knew. She had failed. Non-attendance, not handing in assignments. She had never got around to withdrawing, so now she was faced with a huge bill. For nothing. What had she learned? That she didn
want to be a fashion designer after all. There were people starving and tortured, left without homes, environments stripped and poisoned, corrupt governments. How could she justify designing clothes when there were so many more important things to do? Only she didn't know what or how or where to start and she felt powerless to make any difference.

Fern picked up the letter from Grace and sighed. This would be the most difficult to read. Already she could feel her mother's disappointment weighing her down. And the told you so because her father had never wanted her to do fashion design. Perhaps she should have heeded his advice and got a job in the bank, though even now she shuddered at the thought. The tedium of doing the same thing day after day, under fluorescent lights, gagging on customers' perfume.

It was a short letter, only a single page, with a cheque for one thousand dollars clipped to it.

Dear Fernanda,

I don't know what's happening to you but I'm terribly worried. I've been ringing but you won't answer. Claire has told me that you haven't been to college or work and that you won't come out of your room anymore. What's wrong with you? What has happened? Would you like me to come to Sydney? Or if it isn't working out for you, come back here. You'll always be welcome.

I've enclosed a cheque which should help you get by.

Please ring me, I'm so worried.

Love from Mum

PS See a doctor, perhaps it's chronic fatigue.

Fern laughed out loud at this. See a doctor. What doctor could she see for a sickness of the spirit? A priest? No, she wanted nothing more to do with that hypocritical crap.

Perhaps if her mother came here. It would be good to see her, and tempting to go home. She could move back into her old bedroom, let her mother fuss over her, cook her meals, do the washing... But Grace would insist on calling her Fernanda and denying
who she was until Fern would be forced back into the box her father had squeezed her into from the day they picked her up from the hospital. Wanting her to live out his long-lost dreams. And her father would be there, angry and afraid and controlling everything with his illness. He call her a bum and a failure, sigh and hold his heart, grind his teeth, suffer in his room for days on end. . . all because of her. No she couldn go back, couldn let him drain her life away anymore.

Fern slapped at the skin of her legs, hit herself on the cheek, the ear, the neck. The mosquitoes were having a feeding frenzy and even the fan wasn helping. She climbed into bed and lay watching the numbers change on the digital clock. Her stomach was growling with hunger, but she ignored it. Tomorrow she would deal with food; today she would savour the lightness of an empty stomach. At 3.59 pm the numbers on the clock disappeared and the fan stopped its whirring. Someone had switched off the electricity. Fern stayed in bed, trying to hold back the panic as her world closed down around her. She got up once to go to the toilet and drink some water, then went back to bed. Just before dark she got up again to look for her torch but the batteries were flat and she didn have any spare ones. Defeated, she went back to bed and waited.

As dusk was drawing the light from her room, there was a flash of lightning followed by a distant rumble of thunder. The possibility of a storm drew Fern out of bed and over to the window. Outside, the air was unnaturally still as the sky deepened into night. Fern stood in the sultry heat, watching the flashes, mainly sheet lightning, with the occasional fork shattering the sky. Looking up she noticed the silhouettes of fruit bats flying overhead in their nightly ritual. There were thousands of them, all heading in the same direction, encased in an eerie silence as their wings moved in unison.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, followed immediately by a sharp angry clap of thunder. A gust of wind blew in the window, sending the white curtains floating horizontally. The rain began, slowly at first, heavy drops beating on the roof just above Fern's head. Then a deafening roar as sheets of water bucketed down from the sky, lit by flashes of lightning and accompanied by rumbling thunder.

Fern leaned out as far as she could, letting the rain pummel her head. The air was fresh, washed clean already and dazzled by forks of lightning. She loved it, loved the noise and the power of it. It made her feel alive again, as if she were waking from a deep
sleep. Quickly the gutters began to run, then, blocked by debris, they spilled onto the road, until cars were swishing through deepening puddles.

In the flashing light of the storm Fern suddenly thought she saw a person standing in the shadows on the other side of the road. Her heart beat faster as she strained her eyes through the darkness, trying to make the figure out. Then there was a gigantic flash and she saw him, standing motionless on the footpath. His hair, shoes, trousers, shirt, even the raincoat hanging loose from his shoulders were all black.

As the rain pelted down, Fern watched, transfixed, as the man turned his head upwards and directed his gaze at her. She froze, her heart thudding in her throat as they regarded each other. He was wearing dark glasses and his face was very white, almost glowing, as if a torch were hidden behind those glasses.

Fern felt a thrill of wonder as he lifted the dark glasses away from his face. Underneath, his eyes were white-blue, their piercing light staring into her so that she was pinned, unable to move. The light grew until it was burning her retinas, pouring through her head and into her body, scorching her organs. The pressure was intense but painless. She should have been afraid, she should have been tearing herself free of these eyes, yet all she could do was surrender. It was as if there were two Ferns, one succumbing to the power of this experience, another detached and watching. Neither were frightened. She wondered vaguely if she was having a stroke, but it didn't matter. If she were to die, it would be worth it. A feeling of great joy spread through her, almost unbearable in its intensity, as she stood there, transfixed and wanting it to go on forever.

Then, too soon, the man covered his eyes once more with the dark glasses, leaving only a faint glow once more around their rims. Immediately the pressure ceased and Fern's joy drained away, leaving only a trace of itself. As she watched, he raised his hand and gave her a small wave. Instinctively she lifted hers to wave back, then left it there, hanging uncertainly. The gesture seemed both too much and not enough. It was strange that though streams of traffic were passing, their headlights didn't seem to illuminate him, nor did the streetlight two doors down. Any residual fear dissolved, replaced by a sense of inevitability and a stirring excitement. Feeling the sting of a mosquito on her leg, she looked down briefly. When she looked back the shadow man had gone.
Filled with a new energy, Fern paced the room, her thoughts chattering incessantly, trying and failing to make sense of what had just happened, who this man was and what he wanted from her. It was hours before Fern could settle. When she finally lay down in bed and closed her eyes, her pupils moved back and forth as if she were dreaming. The darkness behind her eyelids was filled with colour, an array of patterns kaleidoscoping into space. For hours more she watched, entranced, not noticing the passing of time.

When Fern finally slept, she found herself slipping in and out of dreams, through which a golden snake slithered silently. Fear and desire pulled her between them as she ran from the snake then, realising it was faster than her, she stopped and let it settle on her foot, only to wake with a gasp when it bit her, the poison seeping slowly into her bloodstream. Almost immediately, sleep tugged Fern back under and she felt a hand caressing her brow and then tracing a finger along the outline of her cheek and neck. The fingers were thick, coarse-skinned and speckled with pale hairs, but sensual too, and they stirred something inside of her that had been dormant for too long. She woke again, burning with desire, trying to clasp onto the hand but it had gone. Whose hand was it, she wondered, realising with a fleeting disappointment that it could not be the dark haired shadow man's.

Without the fan the humidity had seeped into everything. Fern was wet through and the sheets were damp and limp, but despite this she felt better than she had in many months. She thought about summer in Adelaide, its oven-dry heat so different from this stickiness. Remembered turning the pillow over and over looking for a cool patch, laying wet flannels on her face, sleeping on the bathroom floor, its tiles cool underneath her. And sometimes the exquisite joy of sleeping outside under the stars.

Disturbed by the heat and the incessant buzz of mosquitoes outside her net, Fern threw off her sheet and imagined herself back there, staring up at the Milky Way and savouring the gentle night breezes. After a time she slept again, undisturbed by the shadow man who hovered just outside of her dreams. Waiting.
They came for her the next afternoon. It was almost a relief. Fern was standing at the window watching the clouds build up in the north, and the sun fade once again beneath a pall of smoke, the surge of hope she'd felt that morning fading with it.

When she'd woken, the air had been fresh and the light had felt like an old friend, the sun streaking through the window and across her bed for the first time in days. Feeling full of the possibilities of life, Fern had ventured out, walking through the streets with a light step and sending tentative half-smiles to the people she passed. In the Botanic Gardens she'd found a sunny spot looking out over the harbour and sat on the damp grass, breathing in the fresh breeze mixed with the pungent smell of seaweed and watching the ferries plough back and forth, leaving temporary road maps in their wake. Filled with hope, Fern had made a promise to herself: I will start again, she'd vowed. And I'll do it on my own terms.

Yet now here she was, back in her attic; nothing had changed and her promise had a hollow ring to it. She was waiting for something but had no idea what. Even the strangeness of last night's experience was receding, albeit slowly. The waterfall of light that had poured through her seemed less real, though every time she shut her eyes, colours still flashed behind her lids and her eyeballs shifted back and forth beyond her control, as if she was dreaming. She felt dizzy, slightly off balance and light-headed. And there was the joy, a tiny residue of it still obstinately clinging to her.

Suddenly, Fern froze as the front door opened, the noise echoing through the empty house. There were voices, at least one man and two or three women. At some point she identified Grace's voice. Her mother, maybe a social worker, almost certainly the landlord. Their voices grew quieter as their footsteps approached. Up one flight of stairs, then another until she could hear them on the other side of the door, puffing and panting.

'Fernanda, dear, it's your mother. Are you in there?'

There was a pause while they waited for some response. Fern held her breath, resisting the desire to call out to her mother. The words were going around inside her
head, a kind of pleading neediness. Mum. Oh Mum.

'Please open the door, Fernanda. No one going to hurt you, just open the door. She sounded hesitant and self-conscious, an actor uncertain of her audience. 'You're not well, darling. You need help. Do come out.'

Fern felt tears welling up in her eyes. She had intended to submit, to let her mother hug her, bring her down from her attic, soothe her and sort her out. But remembering her promise to herself that morning, Fern knew with absolute certainty that she had to find her own way, that she mustn't let herself be rescued like this. In order to find herself she had to escape. She had already tried once: fleeing her childhood home, retreating to this attic, fleeing life, her body on automatic, a machine with no feeling. But instead of escape she'd ended up trapping herself in another box.

They were talking now in quiet voices, words she couldn't catch. Fern knew what they would do next. She had to get out. Forcing herself to act slowly and quietly, she pushed the window up to its highest point, grasped the frame and pulled herself through, then pushed it down gently behind her. Just then she heard a loud thud, followed by another. Panicking, she climbed onto the ledge above the window, making herself as small as possible. Looking down she felt the dizziness begin, a wave of vertigo bringing the ground spinning up close and then away again. She froze, eyes fixed on the ground below which suddenly disappeared. For a moment Fern was poised at the edge of a sheer cliff, the rocks below sharp and hard, waiting for her as the sound of a horse grew closer and the terror inside her grew . . .

Just as she felt herself slipping, about to fall, something dragged her gaze from the ground, breaking the spell. Perched above the neighbour's attic window was a giant bird, a white eagle, one fierce eye fixed on her. It was the first time she'd ever been so close to such a powerful bird and it was magnificent. But surely eagles wouldn't come into the city like this; perhaps it was a hawk or a kite? She shut her eyes in disbelief and then looked again: it was still there.

Behind her there was a splintering sound as the door burst open. They were through. Any minute now they would find her. Fern had to move. A sob burst out of her as she succumbed to her fear once again, imagining herself falling, her body splattering on the pavement below. With her eyes fixed on the bird she began to crawl across the
roof towards it, but the moment she moved, it took off. Momentarily forgetting her pursuers, Fern paused and watched it, hearing the whoosh of its powerful wings as it rose into the air. Mesmerised by the bird's beauty, Fern watched it fly higher and higher, until, catching an air current, it stillled its wings and soared out of sight. A single white feather floated gently down, landing outside her neighbour's window.

Filled with a confusing mixture of trust and fear, Fern crossed the steep roof as quietly as possible, wincing at every creak and trying not to imagine how easily she could slide off. It felt in some way as if the eagle had lent her its wings; she could feel them working in her shoulder blades, balancing and counterbalancing as she crawled, giving her the confidence to keep moving. But even so she'd never be able to get down off the roof. Her only chance was her neighbour's window.

Fern picked up the feather and tucked it into her bra, then turned to the window, which like her own, faced onto the street. It was open a fraction and her heart lifted in hope. She tugged at it, afraid that it would be locked in position, but it shifted just enough for her to squeeze through. A few metres away she could hear her own attic window sliding open and then voices, louder this time. 'She must be out here.'

Carefully pushing the window down, Fern locked it behind her then looked around the cluttered room. Hearing footsteps on the roof, she quickly hid herself behind a pile of boxes and peered out just as her landlord's face appeared at the window, his greedy eyes searching for her in the gloom. She held her breath as he tried the window but it didn't budge and Fern felt her body sink in relief as his footsteps made their way back across the roof.

Exhausted, Fern stayed in her dark, safe spot behind the boxes, waiting for her heart to slow down and wondering what she could do next. She couldn't face the roof again so she would have to get out through her neighbour's house without being seen. But what then, she wondered, badly needing a plan, something to keep the panic at bay.

She strained her ears, listening for sounds that would tell her if someone was home. If they were home, Fern had little chance of sneaking past them and even less chance of explaining her presence if she were caught. She didn't even know their names. The wife was mad. Fern had seen her before, standing on a milk crate in Taylors Square, an elderly woman ranting about the end of the world. Once she'd pointed her finger at
Fern and shouted that Fern had the power to change the course of history. Embarrassed, Fern had scowled, and walked away, wondering if the woman's husband knew what was happening to his wife. She was certain he wouldn't approve.

The husband wore a suit. Fern used to watch him stop outside the front gate each morning, set down his briefcase and straighten his tie before picking up his briefcase again and striding off down the street. The others used to laugh and think he was a pompous arse, but Fern always thought it was a little ritual, a way of shifting him from one world into another, like a duck shaking its feathers when it stepped out of the water.

It could have been ten minutes or an hour that Fern sat there among the dusty boxes, before the shuffle of footsteps on the stairs brought her back to her senses. The door opened and quiet feet walked purposefully in. As they passed her hiding place, Fern caught a glance of lime green thongs and livid, thickened ankles, before a friendly woman's voice, said, 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

Shocked, Fern stayed motionless, hoping the woman would go away.

'Come on now, I know you're there.' There was a pause. 'It's alright, I don't mind. It's quite exciting really, harbouring a fugitive... Do come out, you're making me talk to myself and we all know that's not a good sign.'

Despite herself, Fern nearly laughed out loud as a face peered around the boxes. There was no trace of the ferocious, desperate creature who'd confounded Fern in Taylor's Square. This was a different woman, with kindly eyes and a smile that made Fern relax.

'Ah, there you are. Come on out, it's perfectly safe.'

Fern stood up awkwardly, pins and needles rushing up and down her legs. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'How did you know?'

'Well, that's a hard one to answer. Let's just say I knew. I didn't expect you quite so soon, though these days, with time speeding up the way it is, anything can happen. It's just so hard to keep up.'

A look of exhaustion settled on her face and for a moment she seemed ancient. Then she drew herself up again, looking at the ceiling as if she was calling in energy from somewhere up there. As Fern watched, her face came to life again and it was obvious that once she would have been beautiful.
'Still, in the end it was easy. Someone from social services rapped on the door looking for you. So I knew you must be up here.' Seeing Fern's face, the woman quickly added, 'Don't worry, I told them I kept that window locked for fear of burglars and no one could have possibly climbed in.' She laughed. 'I also said I thought I heard someone shimmying down the drainpipe and was just about to ring the police. That should put them off a bit.'

'Thanks,' said Fern, wondering why this woman had helped her.

'Don't mention it.' The woman held out her hand. 'My name's Cass. Though Cassie's what everyone calls me.'

'I'm Fern.'

As they shook hands, Fern's attention was caught by the gleam of Cassie's rings: all silver, one woven into a Celtic knot, another carrying a rich purple amethyst, and another a chunk of golden amber. Around Cassie's neck hung a large blue stone, threaded with gold. Fern couldn't take her eyes off it.

'There,' said Cassie, breaking the spell. 'Now we know each other, let's have that cup of tea.'

Fern followed Cassie down a flight of stairs. It was strange to be in a house the mirror image of her own; she felt as if she'd stepped into the looking glass. Nothing was where it should be, especially the kitchen: a long thin strip of closed-in balcony which leaned precariously over the front of the house. It made Fern dizzy, as if she were perched on the roof once again, about to slide down to the road.

'You get used to the funny angles. Strange cooking in a crooked oven, though: cakes come out thick at one end and thin at the other. There's a real art to getting it right.'

Fern stared at the open umbrella suspended above the stove and then looked back at Cassie, a question in her eyes.

'Ah, that. It does look a bit strange, I guess, but there are some awful leaks in here and it stops the rain plopping in the dinner.' She sighed. 'You can't get landlords to do anything these days. And Hector's worse than useless.'

'Is that your husband?'

'Oh no, Hector's my brother. Completely mad, if you ask me. Goes off to work in
that office every day and sits there staring at a computer screen. Then he comes home and does the same thing.' She shook her head. 'Can't be good for you.'

'So you're not married?'

'Heavens, no. Good Lord, what would I do with a husband? . . . Mind you, I was attractive in my time. There were plenty of men who wanted me.' She looked sad for a moment. 'Trouble was, I didn't want any of them.' Cassie rummaged through a shelf cluttered with various sized jars full of dead leaves. 'Ah, here we are. How does chamomile sound? Nice and calming.'

Fern nodded reluctantly. She hated chamomile, it tasted like dried grass, but this woman had rescued her so the least she could do was drink her tea.

'And while we're at it, a dose of Rescue Remedy wouldn't go astray after what you've been through,' Cassie said, searching through what was obviously her medicine drawer, though there wasn't a Panadol or band-aid in sight. Instead there were ointments and salves and tiny dropper bottles, one of which Cassie handed to Fern. 'Here, a couple of drops of that should set you straight.'

Fern did as she was told, then offered it back.

'No, no, you keep it. I've a feeling you'll need it. Just a few drops anytime you've had a scare.'

Fern slipped it into her pocket, wondering how she could be rescued by a drop. Almost immediately, though, she felt her shoulders relax. Perhaps there was something in it after all. She thought of Claire, who was studying medicine and wondered if she'd approve of Cassie. Probably not.

Tea in hand, Fern followed Cassie into the dining room. In the corner was a television and a couple of faded lounge chairs with brightly coloured throws across their backs. A raggedy woven mat covered part of the floor and the rest was floorboards. Bunches of drying herbs were strung from the ceiling, along with ropes of garlic and onions. It was a comfortable room. Welcoming and calm. They sat down at a rough wooden table, its surface thick with wax from two dripping candle holders that had become a permanent fixture in the centre.

'Here,' Cassie said, handing a biscuit tin to Fern. 'Have one of these. They're date and walnut. I made them myself.'
Fern eyed Cassie across the table as they ate. She seemed so calm, a million miles away from the madwoman Fern had seen predicting the end of the world.

'I saw you.' Fern hesitated, not sure whether to go on, but Cassie was looking at her quizzically so she had to. 'Down on the corner of Oxford Street... You were...'

'On my soapbox. That's right.' Cassie sniffed. 'Oh dear, now I'm going to cry.'

Fern was alarmed. Sure enough, Cassie's eyes had gone all watery.

'I can't help it. I know things, they just come to me and it wouldn't be right to keep them to myself. I have to tell. It's the least I can do, don't you think?'

'Yes,' said Fern, nodding sympathetically and wishing she could find more words to say or at least the right ones. It had been so long since she'd had a conversation, she'd almost forgotten how. And she wasn't sure how to react to this strange woman unashamedly crying on the other side of the table. She ought to get up and comfort her somehow, give her a hug perhaps. But Fern had never been good at that sort of thing.

After a while Cassie sighed and wiped her eyes. 'I'm not mad,' she said, 'though sometimes I wish I was. Unfortunately, it's my fate to be excruciatingly sane. It's the rest of the world that's mad.' Cassie munched sadly on another biscuit. 'Oh well, enough of that. Let's have a look at you,' she said, leaning across the table and staring into Fern's eyes.

Fern felt more and more uncomfortable as Cassie stared into one eye and then the other, her sweet date breath mingling with the chamomile and coming in little rasps as she concentrated.

'Ahh, I knew it... I knew it.' She drew away, a triumphant gleam in her eyes.

'What?' asked Fern.

ou an old soul. You have the power to make things happen. Remember that. The power to make things happen. But you need to take the time to find out who you are.'

Confused, Fern pondered Cassie's words. Perhaps she meant that Fern needed to find out who her birth parents were, something she'd toyed with on and off for a few years now. She knew her birth mother's name and that she lived in Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains; Fern herself had spent the weekend up there once. It had felt odd, knowing her birth mother was in the same town. But she had never done anything more. It was
cowardice, she knew, but she'd made up all sorts of justifications, telling herself that on balance it was better not to pursue it, that just knowing her mother's name was enough. She didn't want another mother, she already had one who loved her with a touching loyalty. Fern loved Grace too and didn't want to hurt her, or at least no more than she could help.

Next, Cassie took Fern's hand and began studying her palm. Fern watched her, amazed by the intensity of her concentration.

'Mmm,' the older woman said at last, 'a messy hand, especially when it comes to relationships. You'll be hurt, girl, over and over. A strong fate line though, which might help keep you on track. But I can tell you one thing, there's travel there, and it's soon.'

'I'm not going anywhere,' said Fern, pulling her hand away abruptly.

Cassie looked up sympathetically. 'Dear, whether you like it or not, there's a big journey ahead of you. And I can tell you now, it's not going to be easy. Though at least you won't be alone.'

Fern had a fleeting glimpse of a face then, of tousled fair hair and eyes she couldn't read. For a second she felt the stirring of desire and remembered the fingers that had stroked her neck in her dream. 'No,' she said without thinking. 'Not him. . .' She stopped as Cassie looked at her curiously.

'Do you know him?'

'No,' said Fern, blushing. 'I mean. . . ' She searched for the words she needed. 'I don't want to be with anyone. It's better that way.'

Cassie smiled gently. 'In my experience it's better not to deny fate. Now, you'll need a few things,' she added, rummaging about in the medicine drawer again. 'Ah, here it is, some dragon's blood to stem any infections. . . And let's see. . . aconite for when the fear of death comes over you. . . arnica for bruising. . . And apis, that will have to do for bites.' Cassie handed Fern some tiny bottles with neatly written labels. 'Here, put them in this,' she said offering Fern a small velvet drawstring pouch.

'Thank you,' said Fern, slipping the bottles into the pouch and then into her pocket, the weight tugging at her shorts and making them lopsided.

'Use them wisely, they're hard to find these days and getting harder. The government wants to ban the lot of them. Too much like bloody magic they say - you
can't see it, you can't measure it, so it doesn't exist. More likely they're worried people will stop buying their own drugs. Put people on a cocktail of their pills and you've got them trapped, for life. . . and death.' Cassie practically spat out the words before taking a deep breath and calming herself. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't be shouting, you're frightened enough as it is. I just get so wound up when I think of it. How could they ban healing? Not again. We all know what happened last time. You picked a herb or helped a baby out into the world and they burnt you at the stake.'

Alarmed, Fern stepped back quickly, feeling a surge of dizzying nausea as a fierce heat seared her skin, its intensity agonising before it disappeared, leaving only a trace. Pulling herself together she searched for something to say, but the more she searched the more her words fled.

'Here,' said Cassie undoing her necklace and offering it to Fern. 'You'll need this too.'

'I can't take this.'

'You must. It's lapis lazuli, a protective stone with the power to reverse curses. It'll open you up so the guardians can contact you.'

'The what?' said Fern as Cassie put the necklace around her neck and did it up.

Ignoring her question, Cassie paused. 'What's that?' she asked, pointing at Fern's chest where the tip of the white feather was sticking out of her shirt.

'Just a feather.' Fern pulled it out to show Cassie, who held it reverently.

'Where did you find this?'

Fern briefly described the eagle on the roof, omitting the part where she'd felt the balancing strength of its wings above her, and her awe at the majesty of the bird. She was ashamed of the flatness of her words, the tone that said nothing special had happened, as if she were too urbane to appreciate beauty. Despite this, the excitement shone in Cassie's face.

'A gift from an eagle! That's incredible. Things have moved faster than I thought.' She handed the feather back to Fern. 'This is a gift of great power, you mustn't lose it.'

Fern held the feather close, feeling its softness stroking her face. It was just a feather, and yet. . .

Cassie's eyes took on a faraway look and her voice changed. 'You'll find out in
your own time. But I will tell you this, even though you might not want to listen. This feather will grant you greater perception and the ability to walk between worlds, with all the responsibilities that entails.'

Cassie stopped, her eyes refocusing, her face slightly bewildered as if she were stepping back into herself. Fern felt more confused than ever. She liked Cassie and wanted to trust her, but she couldn't understand what was going on. Fern's dull, hidden existence had been without magic, and now magic was being forced down her throat: dragon's blood, fortune telling, powerful feathers, stones that opened pathways for guardians. None of it could possibly be real, thought Fern. And yet there was something stirring about it. As if she had stepped into a story, equipped with all the tools and weapons for a journey. But Fern couldn't be the heroine of any story; if anything, she was the damsel in the tower, waiting to be rescued.

Cassie, went over to the window and peered down the street. 'They've gone. You'd better be going too.'

Fern felt her shoulders tensing up at the prospect of going out there again, but she knew there was no choice.

'Hurry now, I had no idea how quickly events were unfolding,' said Cassie, ushering her out of the room.

Fern followed Cassie down another flight of stairs to the ground floor. She didn't understand anything but she did trust this woman. Her unanswered questions were spinning around in her head but the trust was centred peacefully in her heart.

'This is Hector's bit,' said Cassie. 'Look at it, machines everywhere. How can he live among all that?'

It was almost as if the house was divided neatly in two: the top half organic, the bottom half high-tech, though the floor was also fraying around the edges, with peeling paint and dusty broken blinds. It was obvious Hector was no handyman.

'Wouldn't believe we were twins, would you?' said Cassie. 'There's nothing identical about us, I can tell you. Still, we need each other. . . And his heart's in the right place.'

Unlike Fern's, Cassie's tiny backyard was lush and green. She had planted every patch of dirt with herbs, and the concrete courtyard was cluttered with pots. Bees
clustered on the flowers and the dusk smells were intense: lavender and oregano, thyme and mint, and jasmine climbing the fence. Loath to leave this sanctuary, Fern paused. The world outside seemed dangerous and uncertain.

Cassie must have picked up her mood because she took Fern's hand. 'I can't ask you to stay, dear, though I'd like to. It's not your path. You can't hide away anymore, it's time to face life.'

'Thank you,' said Fern, recognising the truth in Cassie's words. 'Thank you for everything.'

'Oh, don't be silly, it was the least I could do. Everyone needs help sometimes. You'll find other helpers, but there'll be enemies too, and it won't always be clear which is which.' She patted Fern on the stomach. 'Trust your gut feelings, girl, they're the thread that will lead you through.' Cassie pulled Fern in close, giving her a bear hug that brought tears to Fern's eyes. 'Look after yourself... And watch out for traps, dear.'

She spoke lightly, like a mother reminding her child to take a handkerchief, but Fern felt a shiver run down her spine as she extricated herself from Cassie's arms and turned towards the darkening alley.
Chapter Three

The house felt different, sullied somehow. The intruders' lingering intent had caught in the atmosphere. Fern took off her shoes and quietly climbed the steps, avoiding every creak. When she reached the attic she cautiously stuck her head around the door, but no one was there. Her room looked the same but was somehow completely different, not hers anymore. She had to gather her things and get out as quickly as possible, before they came back and caught her.

On the desk was a scribbled note from her mother: Dear Fernanda, please ring me, with a phone number she didn't recognise. Her mother must have finally bowed to the times and bought herself a mobile phone. Fern stuffed the note into her wallet, then turned to packing, realising how little she could take. A suitcase would be impractical to haul around, so instead she emptied out her backpack, the one she'd used for college. It was like stepping back in time, she thought, pulling out notebooks and watercolour paints, an overdue library book, material samples, her good scissors and half a rotten sandwich.

Fern hurried around the room, starting at every sound and barely able to think. Quickly she pulled on a fresh t-shirt, one of the offerings Claire had left at the door. It had a Leunig cartoon on the front with the caption: Be Brave, life is joyous. She packed some silk pyjama pants that she loved to wear because they were big and loose and the silk felt sensuous on her skin, then a pair of shorts and a couple of skirts, light things that would crush but took up hardly any room. She stuffed in some t-shirts too, retrieved from the dirty washing basket, then grabbed a few pairs of undies and a spare bra, some sandals and a lightweight cardigan, her favourite one, with the pearl buttons. It was too hot to imagine it would ever be cold again, but even so she put in a pashmina shawl that looked good with her skirts.

Her bag already bulging, Fern stared wildly around the room, chewing at her nails. Spotting her tin pipe, she slid it into the backpack. It had been months since she'd played it, and yet suddenly she couldn't imagine life without music. Next, Fern stuffed in her knitting and then a hat onto the outside of the pack. It was cone-shaped and made of
bamboo, its brim so wide that it kept the sun off her shoulders too. She transferred Cassie's pouch of remedies to her pack as well, and at the last minute slipped the eagle's feather into the side pocket.

Fern hauled the heavy bag over her shoulders and took one last lingering look around her room, wondering what would happen to her belongings, then realised she didn't care. There was something appealing about the prospect of starting again. Quietly she closed the door behind her and, with it, the part of her life which this room had encompassed. Creeping down the stairs she felt vulnerable, like a creature emerging from its shell.

On the street, Fern paused for a second, wondering which direction to go and realising with a shudder how free she was to choose. She'd never been any good at making decisions; every choice closed doors and yet not choosing was itself a choice, shutting more doors than ever. She hesitated for just a moment longer, then turned towards the city, wanting to be near the relative safety of people and bright lights. The unfamiliar weight of the backpack tugged on her back, its loose straps slipping one at a time over her shoulders as she walked past row after row of terrace houses, three storeys high, warm yellow light finding its way out through curtain cracks and slicing through blinds and metal bars. The basement flats had windows below the footpath; most had their curtains drawn against the earth which threatened to engulf them. Fern wondered what it would be like to live underground like that, the lights on even during the sunniest part of the day, looking up to the footpath through a barred window and seeing only the legs of passers-by. How long before you developed your other senses: whiskers twitching, ears tuned to the slightest sound, sniffing your way around? And if it rained too much and the drains blocked, the place would flood and you'd drown.

One window was naked behind its bars, a light burning brightly through it. Looking down as she passed, Fern got a brief glimpse of a hand, the thick fingers clasping a glass filled with an amber liquid.

It's amazing what you can read in the pattern of feet, thought Adam, taking a sip of his bourbon. Catching a glimpse of Fern's feet, encased in soft gold slippers, he saw that she didn't know where she was going, saw that she was in no hurry and then forgot about
her. Adam took another, bigger mouthful from his glass, feeling the whisky burning its way down his throat as he watched a man's feet now, moving purposefully. Too fast and quiet. He wondered briefly when the girl would realise she was being followed, but the wonder was not strong enough to slip past a thought and into concern; murky and unfocused, he stared up at the street, trapped in his own private concerns.

After a while Adam put his empty glass down but he misjudged the distance and it landed too hard on the table, startling him with its loud crack. Swearing, he pushed himself out of his seat, gathered his keys and wallet, fumbled with the buttons of his crumpled shirt and ran his fingers through his messy fair hair. Then he climbed up the stairs and stepped out into the night, resigned to another evening at the Underworld, obliterating himself.

Fern was only a couple of blocks from Oxford Street when suddenly and for no good reason she knew she was being followed. She had seen and heard nothing out of the ordinary but could feel prickles of fear working their way up her spine. She forced herself to stop briefly, casually looking behind her, as if she was uncertain of her way. There were a few people littering the footpaths and she couldn't, in that small moment, separate her tracker from the others. She crossed the road and glanced back again, noting a thin man in a white shirt but unable to identify anything more to distinguish him. Fern fought her instinct to run, knowing that it would be better if she pretended she hadn't noticed. With this pack weighing her down she couldn't run anyway and she didn't have the strength to confront him. Instead she would have to use her wits.

On Oxford Street she felt safer. Dinner crowds were forming on the footpaths and the road was lined with traffic. Fern wove her way quickly through the pedestrians, hoping she'd lose the man this way. Her mind sifted through films she'd seen, stories she'd read, trying to remember how characters shook off the people following them.

Fern stepped into a bookshop, feeling the welcome blast of cold air evaporate the sweat and panic on her skin. She positioned herself near the window, partly hidden by a shelf of books, and surreptitiously watched the passers-by. The first two thin men in white shirts she dismissed. One was walking too intently, as if he had somewhere to go and the other was with a friend. But the third man was clearly looking for someone, his
eyes scanning the crowds. He paused outside the bookshop window and Fern's stomach plunged as he looked in. Heart thudding, she bent quickly, snatched up a book on golfing techniques from a lower shelf and began blindly flicking through its pages. At least now she knew what he looked like: pointed face, sharp nose and thin lips, but with long jowls that suggested he was older than he wanted to look. He reminded her of a bloodhound, sniffing the air for her scent. He had thinning brown hair too, and tight jeans sitting below a pot belly. Not someone who stood out in a crowd.

When Fern stood again and cautiously peered over the bookshelf, he was gone. The relief she felt was quickly overtaken by anxiety. Her instinct was to get away from here as fast as she could, but she was hungry and tired and common sense told her there was no point running without a destination. She needed to sit down somewhere and try to think through everything that had happened. And she needed to eat. Her stomach was empty, and when she was hungry she couldn't think at all.

Taking a deep breath, Fern slipped out of the bookshop, into the stream of people and then into the nearest cafe. Finding an empty table in a corner, she slid off her backpack and pushed it under the table, then chose the bench seat so she could sit with her back to the wall. The bloodhound man couldn't exactly confront her in here, unless he was an assassin, but even then he'd want to do it secretly. A sachet of poison dropped into her glass, or perhaps a gun with a silencer, so he could just stroll past and casually pull the trigger. She'd fold quietly onto the table and everyone would think she was drunk or asleep and look away, embarrassed. No one would realise until the blood formed a pool on the floor and someone stepped in it.

Fern's torrid thoughts were interrupted by a bottle of water and a glass being placed on the table. A waiter was standing over her expectantly with a pad and pencil.

'A latte and...?' Quickly she glanced at the blackboard on the wall, scanning it for something relatively cheap that would fill her up. 'Nachos, please,'

As the waiter stalked away to the kitchen, Fern berated herself sternly. She needed to pull herself together and stop her imagination running in ridiculous directions; she'd clearly been watching too many movies. But she was still afraid; her legs felt like jelly, her whole body trembling, inside and out. Fern poured a glass of water and drank it in one gulp, then poured a second. Feeling a bit better she leaned back and let the velvety
cushions comfort her. Dimly lit, the cafe had peaceful ambient music, real pot plants and
just enough people to make a buzz in the atmosphere without feeling closed-in and
deafening.

When the coffee came, Fern sipped it gratefully, feeling the caffeine jolt her brain
back into action. She went over everything that had happened, trying to arrange all the
elements into a pattern that made sense, but no matter how hard she tried it all seemed
absurd. Claire had been right, Fern couldn't stay hidden away in her attic forever, but
she'd never imagined how serious it would get, with people forcing her door in and her
mother here in Sydney looking for her. Perhaps Grace had called the police in to look for
her, or a private detective, which might explain the man who was following her. But
surely they wouldn't be interested: she wasn't even a missing person, at least not in the
literal sense.

And then there was the eagle. She kept coming back to that enormous, majestic
bird. It had bewitched her somehow, lent her its wings. Even now she could feel the tug
of muscles that had never previously been used. At least not in this life, she thought
suddenly, then stopped herself. This life was it. There was nothing else except dust and
oblivion, no heaven, and no hell, except on this earth.

Thinking about Cassie, with her garbled warnings and blessings, Fern wondered
who drew the lines between normal and mad. Sometimes it seemed to her that the
conventions of normality were like the walls of a prison keeping people in line. The
world seemed mad. Fern could see it, even here on Oxford Street with people staring
past each other, faces wrinkled with worry, bodies moving too fast, caught up in the pace
of things. Everyone wanting, wanting and never filled. Better then to ask what sanity
was. She took another sip of her coffee. It didn't matter what Cassie was, because Fern
trusted her and that counted for more than conformity.

The nachos were good. Crunchy and spicy, with plenty of melted cheese and sour
cream, every mouthful helping Fern's mind focus again. She pulled out her notebook and
pen, scooped up some guacamole with a corn chip and began a list of certainties.

I The man I saw on the street outside my attic is not the same man who is
following me.
The man who is following me is not my landlord.
Cassie is mad, but in the nicest possible way.

Fern read it over, shocked at how few certainties she could find. And even these were filled with unanswered questions. Neither 1 nor 2 actually helped identify the man who was following Fern, or the other one who had stared up at her from the pavement with eyes that had drained the fear from her. And 3 was completely unhelpful. Suddenly it all became clear in her head: the bird was simply lost, or had flown into the city to escape the bush fires; Cassie was just an eccentric old woman, kindly but crazy; and the bloodhound man was someone her mother had hired to find her. None of these things were connected. There was no mystery after all.

Fern was surprised to feel a growing sense of disappointment as she successfully reasoned away the events of the past few hours. Something about the magic of it had made everything seem fresh to Fern, the way life had been when she was a child. A world full of possibilities and wildness, with the prospect of adventure and a flight far from the mundane. Then Fern remembered the shadow man outside her window. She hadn't imagined him and she couldn't explain him away.

She scooped up the last of her nachos and began another list, headed: Who do I trust?

Mum

Fern paused, then reluctantly crossed it out. She did trust her mother's love but Grace was hardly ever strong enough to stand up to her husband who was a control freak. Richard would go to any lengths to make Grace and Fern conform to his narrow church bound world.

She tried again.

Cassie

But that wouldn't do. Cassie couldn't help her now, she'd said as much. She thought for a while longer, chewing the end of the pen and feeling more and more isolated. There were friends in Adelaide, but she needed someone here. Jeff? No, she couldn't ask her ex-boyfriend for help. Then she remembered the piece of paper Claire had given her and the invitation: If you ever need somewhere to stay... Well, now she
Claire's address was in her wallet, along with her mother's phone number. Looking at her mother's note again, she felt the familiar tug. Resisting the temptation she returned it to her wallet and instead looked at Claire's address: 53 Kent Street, Stanmore. She would be able to catch a train from Central. It would be polite to ring first, but her phone was out of credit and she'd never find a phone booth that worked. No one used them anymore and they'd become museum pieces, dotted around the city, smashed up and scribbled on, targets for vandals, symbols of another era.

Fern tucked Claire's address in her pocket, heaved the pack onto her back and wearily made her way up to the counter to pay the bill. After the quiet peace of the cafe, Oxford Street seemed madder than ever: too many people, walking fast, looking through each other, talking loudly on phones, oblivious, or strolling together, pausing in front of restaurants to read the menus; music blasting out of shops and cars; endless streams of headlights; shop windows filled with flashing lights and Christmas decorations. . . She felt trapped, a prisoner in a 3D movie. Every part of her ached to return to her attic, to the quiet and peace of her white world. If only she could shut the door on noise and colours and lights, but mostly on all these people.

The clouds had built up again, shutting out the sky and shutting in the heat. Now it was hot and damp, the atmosphere rippling with lightning and tight with expectation, claps of thunder adding to the noise. Fern looked around nervously, scanning the crowd for the Bloodhound but there was no sign of him. Perhaps she'd misinterpreted the incident; it might have been coincidence that he'd crossed the street behind her.

Fern was only a few blocks away from the station when the rain started. It was slow at first, a few gigantic drops, their size an indication of what was to come. Then all at once the clouds let down their load and the air became water, the street steaming and sending out fog and the smell of hot bitumen. Soon the rain was so thick Fern could hardly see in front of her. She could just make out the blurry outline of lights as her feet swished through puddles. There was no point trying to stay dry. The rain soaked through everything, and almost immediately her clothes hung heavily around her and the water ran in thick rivulets down her face, turning neon lights into sorry, faded beacons. It muffled sound, muting the music that burst through club doors and turning the swish of
tyres into the distant roar of a river. It sent the restaurant and garbage smells pouring down the gutter and filled her mouth with the smoky acid of city rain.

Then through the rush of the downpour came a sharp sense of impending danger. Pausing, Fern turned and stared behind her but could see nothing. Even so, she was certain the Bloodhound was there. She could sense his nearness in her spine, in the tingling of her scalp, and in her gut.

The crowded street had been emptied by the rain, so aside from a few scurrying people, Fern was practically alone with him. She picked up pace, running blindly, glancing wildly behind her, knowing he was getting closer and not sure now where she was going. Trapped and lost, going round and round in the wilderness of this city.

Then she saw him behind her. The pretence was over: he was running too. Fern's pack was slowing her down and he was gaining on her. Every time she glanced back he was closer. Please help me, please help me, the words a refrain in her mind, playing over and over. He was so close she could hear his feet thudding, imagine his panting dog breath coming in little bursts and his hand reaching out.

Panicking, Fern veered to the side, plunged through the nearest door and into a small foyer with a set of stairs leading down into the basement. Half blinded by the rain in her eyes and the newly sharpened edge of the lights, Fern couldn't stop herself in time. Her feet slipped from under her and she felt herself fall, bumping from one step to the next, before sinking into darkness.
Chapter Four

The first thing Fern noticed was the music, a kind of fusion band maybe: native American and reggae. At its centre was the sound of drums, their hypnotic rhythm drawing her to them. Then there were the smells: a carpet wearing a history of spilled drinks and sweat, a rich leathery scent and a pungent perfume she couldn't identify.

Fern tried to speak but her mouth wouldn't move and she could make no sound in her throat. She tried to open her eyes but it was as if they were glued shut. There was light here though, she could feel it on her eyelids and she wanted so much to stay near it but the rich beat of the drums vibrated through her, taking her down with them into a tunnel of darkness.

At some point Fern opened her eyes. She couldn't see the walls around her, but when she reached out her hands she felt a smooth cold surface on both sides. A part of her was afraid, not letting go, even though the rest of her was falling. But the fall went on and on, until Fern thought it would never end. Then she stopped being afraid and almost immediately the fall ended.

It was still dark, and cold now too. As her eyes became used to the blackness she could see enough to learn she was in a stone room of some sort, lying on thick slabs of rock. The cold seeping into her back forced her to move and she sat up, wincing at the bruises and the stiffness of her muscles. There was a large lump on the side of her head which she assumed came from falling down those stairs. It throbbed in a rhythm with the drums she could still faintly hear in the distance.

The only source of light was coming in under the door. Fern looked around, scanning the room for clues, but it was entirely empty and there were no windows. The door was made of heavy wood. Certain it would be locked, she reached out and grasped its dark wooden bolt. To her surprise it opened at her touch. Outside was a dimly lit hallway with ornate black metal candle holders studded along the walls at intervals, each holding a lit candle. They flickered as she moved past them.

The hallway went on and on, past a great number of identical doors. After a time Fern could no longer restrain her curiosity. She paused in front of a door, listened
carefully, then pulled it open and gaped in amazement. The room inside was large and plushly furnished. The floors were covered by colourful rugs, and the walls with tapestries; one depicted a fierce dragon breathing fire, another a lady in a long gown, with two unicorns kneeling at her feet. From the ceiling hung a wide circle of black metal, holding at least twenty candles. On the far wall was a fireplace so large she could have stepped into it, and a fire blazing within. Before it stood a long wooden couch, softened with cushions. Fern was so cold she walked quickly towards the fire, and so taken by this medieval room and its furnishings that she didn't see the gigantic black bear asleep on the hearth rug until she was almost on it.

Fear surged through Fern and she stood frozen to the spot as the bear opened one eye and watched her. Finally instinct overcame Fern and she shrunk away from the creature, taking backward steps towards the door. Instantly it was up with a roar, baring its teeth and charging at her. She screamed and ran back out of the room just in time, trying to push the door shut behind her, but the bear fell against the other side and she couldn't withstand its strength. Fraction by fraction the bear's paw reached around the doorway, followed by its snout. Sobbing, Fern called for help, even though she knew it was hopeless.

'You called?' said a man, his face framed by long blond hair. His dark eyes stared steadily at Fern but she couldn't take her eyes from his cloak whose colours never settled but shifted as he moved, shimmering through the warm golden colours of autumn. 'Allow me,' he added and Fern watched in amazement as he opened the door, stepped through and closed it behind him.

The door was thick and there was no keyhole, so Fern couldn't hear or see what was happening inside. Eventually, after her heart had settled back into an even rhythm again and her legs regained their strength, Fern's curiosity overcame her fear and she risked opening the door a crack. What she saw made her gasp, for the man and the bear were sitting calmly side by side on the wooden couch. She stared in disbelief: how could he sit fearlessly next to an animal that could rip him apart in a moment?

'You can come in now,' he said, turning to look at Fern, his lips forming a hint of a smile.

'Is it safe?' Fern called, hating how timid she sounded, how her voice wobbled
uncertainly, a high-pitched note of hysteria creeping in. 'It doesn’t look safe.'

'It is never safe, but please don’t let that stop you.'

Cautiously Fern opened the door further and stepped into the room, forcing her feet to take one step after another towards the strange pair. The man gazed at her steadily but the bear ignored her and Fern felt ashamed, as if she had failed a crucial test. She stopped just out of reach of the bear’s claws and in front of the man with the shimmering cloak and calm voice.

‘Who are you?’ she asked and the question sounded like an accusation. She knew she should have said thank you, but she was concentrating on keeping her body poised for flight.

‘I am the Bear Handler.’ His eyes were seeking hers but she refused to meet them, needing to stay focused on the bear.

‘Where am I?’

‘You are in the Underworld.’ Before Fern could ask what he meant, the Bear Handler spoke again. ‘You can stroke this bear, she will allow it now.’

His voice was gentle but firm, leaving Fern with no choice. Cautiously she reached out her hand to touch the bear’s fur. Her fingers sank into its softness and she was surprised at how thick it was. So warm. She felt a strength filling her and kept her hand there, wanting to reach deeper and further, wanting to step inside the bear’s skin, to be worthy of this creature that did not deign to notice her.

‘The bear is yours now, you must live with her always,’ said the Bear Handler. ‘If you risk her danger then she will help you find treasure. . . Remember that all worthwhile things hold danger.’

Then he was gone and the bear was gone and the warm fire-drenched room was gone. Instead Fern was back in the empty room, stumbling across the stone slabs before they too were gone and she was ascending the tunnel, not flying, but not walking either. It felt as if she were floating outside of gravity, only something was pulling her upwards - the drums, perhaps; their volume was increasing again. They were a powerful magnet and she the iron filing being drawn from a great distance, until finally she was lying on a soft surface, her head thumping as if her brain had taken on a life of its own and was trying to push its way through her skull. The drums had stopped and Fern could hear the
hum of voices in the distance, the clinking of glasses, and the breathing of someone very close to her. She became aware that a hand was lying gently on her forehead, its comforting warmth dulling the pain. Opening her eyes, she found herself lying on a leather couch, looking at the man who had stood gazing up at her window the night before.

His hair was dark and thick, falling in waves across his face. His jaw was strong and square, his mouth full, his nose chiselled a face from an ancient statue. He was beautiful and completely unapproachable. There was nothing to suggest how old he was, no traces of dye in his hair, no wrinkles. He looked old and young at once.

This was a situation in which Fern knew she should be afraid, but once again his eyes drained all the fear from her. All she could do was wonder at them. Up close they were even more beautiful. They glowed, as if there were tiny globes behind each pupil, and the blue was so alluring that she couldn't break free but instead found herself slipping into it, her whole self pouring into his eyes. A calmness spread through her, relaxing her adrenalin charged muscles.

It could only have been a matter of seconds before he slipped on his dark glasses and the spell was broken. Fern's rational self quickly took charge again, sending doubts and fears surging through her. Where was she? What was happening to her? She forced herself to take stock, to concentrate on one thing at a time rather than succumb to the flood of sensations that was threatening to overwhelm her. The room was dark, with a small bar in the corner, a few low tables, couches and large cushions scattered around. Wall lights glowed dimly behind shades in a variety of colours purple and red, blue and yellow casting deep shadows. It felt intimate - even more so with this man's hand still resting on her head and so different from the strange medieval place she'd just been.

She must have been hallucinating. Had someone slipped a drug into her drink? But she couldn't remember actually having a drink. Maybe there was a simple explanation after all. Nothing supernatural, no magic or kidnappings and no drugs. She'd been chased by some pervert, burst in the door, lost her footing, slipped down the steps and knocked herself out. The rest was all a dream.

Abruptly Fern pushed the man's hand away and sat up. She had to clutch the edges of the couch for a few moments as the blood rushed from her head and the room
seemed to spin wildly, before settling again into the right place.

'Ah, Fern, you're back.' The man smiled and his face became even more beautiful, taking Fern's breath away and most of her fears. Still, she resisted smiling back.

'Who are you?' she asked. 'And how do you know my name?'

'I am the barman,' he said, laughing, and his laughter made her want to laugh too, as if this was a great joke, despite the fact that he hadn't answered her second question.

'What's your name?' she asked.

'You have called me Shadowman and in your wisdom you were right, for I am that too. But my name is Shamesh.'

'It's not very polite to hang around people's windows.'

'No, and I apologise, but it was necessary to watch over you.' Shamesh smiled again. 'I think you already know that I am not the one you should fear.'

Fern shivered, thinking of the Bloodhound. 'There was a man following me...'

'He will not bother you again tonight.'

'But who...?'

'The man is only a servant, but one you must eventually face.'

'Why? Who does he work for?'

'That you will discover for yourself.' Shamesh glanced at his watch impatiently. 'We have a great deal to discuss,' he said. 'Though much of it will have to wait.' He stood up. 'Come, you probably need a drink.'

Fern couldn't take her eyes off him. The way he moved, so lithe and graceful, as if he were weightless, as if the air provided no resistance, as if there were no gravity. He wore pale blue jeans and a t-shirt, casual, but expensive-looking. The t-shirt had an image on the back, a golden disc with wings.

Fern followed him to the bar and perched on a stool, watching as he opened fridges and helped himself to their contents as if he owned the place. Perhaps he did. There was an air of authority about him, a confidence that came with money. There might be other ways to gain that kind of confidence, but Fern didn't know them.

'Champagne, I think... or would you prefer coffee?'

'Champagne, please,' said Fern, marvelling at how calm she felt, amazed that she would even consider drinking champagne at a time like this. She watched carefully as he
produced glasses and a bottle.

'Bollinger? Yes?'

Fern nodded as he deftly removed the cork, allowing only a little trail of vapor to rise. It had been a long time since she had drunk anything but the cheapest bubbly.

Shamesh filled the glasses and handed one to Fern. As he did so she noticed a ring on his middle finger: silver with a large stone set in it. A sunstone, sparkling seductively as it captured the light.

'Cheers,' he said, clinking his glass with hers. 'It's not every day you embark on a journey.'

Fern was startled. Cassie had said the same thing. 'What do you mean, a journey?'

He raised an eyebrow as if she should know the answer. 'The journey you must take to pursue your life's purpose.'

Until now Fern had been unaware that she had any purpose to her life. She took a large gulp of champagne, savouring the feel of the icy bubbles burning their way down.

'Where is this journey supposed to take me?' she asked, trying to sound blasé and cynical.

'That I can't tell you.'

'What if I don't go?'

'It's simple. If you refuse this call, then you will die,' he said, sending a shiver up Fern's spine. 'The call of the soul is not something to take lightly. And when you have been chosen there is no choice. You cannot change your mind.'

'But I don't want to go on a journey. Why me, anyway? I didn't ask for this.'

'Yes you did. Every day that you've been imprisoned in your attic, this is what you have been asking for. Your true self that is, not the thing you call you.' He finished his glass and poured another. 'Everyone comes to earth with a lesson to learn and with a task, a creative path they must follow. Not everyone finds this path. It takes great courage to remember who you are. To do so you must follow your heart and live without fear.'

'What's your path?' she asked.

Shamesh smiled but there was a great sadness in his voice. 'I stand as a witness on the side, teaching those who will listen to be flames that pierce the darkness. . . .'
Fern was beginning to suspect he was some sort of religious fanatic and she should get out of here as quickly as possible. But first there were questions to which she needed answers. 'What happened before? I hit my head. Was I unconscious?'

'You needed to go down into the underworld to find your power animal.' Shamesh's answer left Fern even more confused. 'I sent you there,' he said in response to her unspoken question.

'But where is this underworld?'

'That is difficult to explain. It's a parallel reality, if you like. One that exists both within and alongside this world.'

The bear had seemed so real. Fern could still feel how her hand had sunk into the depths of its fur. And when she shut her eyes it now felt, strangely, as if she was sitting inside the skin of the bear. She could see its black fur around the edges of her vision, feel its incredible strength. It made her want to roar.

'So you have met the bear,' he said, pouring more champagne into their glasses.

Fern glanced quickly at him. She hadn't mentioned the bear. The alcohol was mixing with Fern's weariness, she could feel it creeping up her legs, making them weak. She could also feel herself slipping away from the certainties she'd always lived with, deep into the realm of the impossible. If this were true and Shamesh could read her mind, then she would have to be careful with her thoughts. She blushed. Perhaps he already knew she'd thought him beautiful. Fern felt as if she was becoming public property her innermost thoughts scooped up and laid out for everyone to see, like useless trinkets at a market.

'The man said the bear was mine.'

'Yes, you have been given a great gift. But it is not yours in the literal sense. The bear is autonomous but will help when you are in need.'

'How am I supposed to call on a figment of my imagination for help?' asked Fern, trying to summon up enough of her normal cynicism to keep these possibilities at bay.

'Animals have qualities, symbolic powers if you like. On one level the bear is strong and loyal, but also playful. On another level it is a symbol of the unconscious. It hibernates, but only for a few months through the winter. Like the bear you need to enter the cave so as to awaken your power and then you must bring this power out into the
open. These aspects of the bear are both part of your journey.'

Fern shook her head. 'There was a man. The Bear Handler he called himself. . . .'

'Yes, you are very lucky. He is your guide in the spirit world. Not everyone will meet their guide so soon.'

'What's so special about me? Why do I get a guide?'

'Whenever there is a call for help, then helpers will arrive,' said Shamesh. 'That is the law.'

Fern looked at him, searching his face for a sign that he was having her on. 'I'm going mad,' she said, draining her glass.

He smiled and poured her another drink. 'Perhaps. Or perhaps you are only just beginning to find sanity. We'll see. These are risks you must take.'

'Why? Who says I have to take any risks? Isn't it my decision?'

Shamesh smiled. 'A decision you've already made.' His face became serious. 'A great part of you has already been taken. So much in fact, that if you do nothing you will die, or at least become catatonic - a state you will soon see first hand. . . . Your journey is to retrieve yourself.'

Fern couldn't understand his words, though she recognised something in them. For a long time she'd felt as if there was hardly any of her left, as if she was hanging onto her body by the finest of threads.

'That's enough for now. Come, I want to introduce you to someone before you go to your friend.'

Fern followed Shamesh, wondering only briefly how he knew about Claire. When he opened the door, waves of noise burst through, hitting Fern like a solid force, the temporary peace she'd felt fleeing in the face of this chaos. Surprisingly there was no live band in sight, though the instruments were set up on a small stage in the corner. Instead, recorded music was blaring out from loudspeakers. Normally the rhythm would inspire Fern to move, tapping and jiggling until she would have to dance, but tonight it was a shouting chaos that quickly became trapped in her head, banging angrily around the walls of her skull.

Following Shamesh, she wound her way between tables, mostly empty. There were a couple of solitary drinkers at the bar, and one girl was dancing, swaying
hypnotically to the rhythm, lost in her own world. There was no sign of the Bloodhound.

'It's just picking up,' said Shamesh. 'When the pubs shut in an hour or so it will really get going.'

Once again Fern could feel doubts slipping into her mind. Talking to Shamesh in the quiet of the other bar she'd almost believed him about the underworld and journeys and power animals. Back there she'd felt his power. But here, none of it seemed likely. Shamesh was simply a good-looking bar manager who was probably a complete lecher.

'Here we are,' said Shamesh, stopping abruptly. Following Shamesh's eyes, Fern was puzzled to see a young man slumped across a table littered with empty glasses, his shirt untucked and strands of messy blond hair sitting limply in a puddle of spilt beer. She couldn't imagine why Shamesh would want her to meet this snoring man who smelled of alcohol and something worse.

Adam was dreaming. In his dream a boy was looking at him with holes where his eyes had once been. Birds who cackled like old women, swooped down on him with hooked beaks, and claws with red painted nails. He ducked and dived for cover but they kept coming, laughing, and he knew they wouldn't stop until they got him. 'A life for a life,' they shrieked. 'A life... ' but then one had him by the arm, shaking him, and Adam jumped up, fists clenched, ready to fight. In an instant the bird women disappeared and instead Shamesh was standing there with those glasses that hid eyes Adam could never look into; and alongside him was a girl with a tough expression and eyes full of fear.

Adam sank back down onto his chair. He couldn't help it, his head wanted to rest on the table and his eyes kept shutting even though he didn't want to go back into that dream.

'Wake up, Adam. I want to introduce you to someone.'

'Yeah, what,' said Adam, his eyes struggling with a room that wouldn't stay still around him. The girl looked about twelve; she probably shouldn't even be in here. She was like an elf, he thought, so bloody fragile. He looked at her feet and wanted to laugh. Sparkling gold shoes. He knew them from somewhere but the effort to remember made his head hurt. Her legs looked good though, thin but there was shape to them. But he couldn't make out her edges, they were blurred. Trying desperately to focus, he searched her face again. She looked haunted, like someone with nowhere to go. Like him.
'Adam, this is Fern,' said Shamesh. 'Fern, Adam.'

Adam stood up shakily. 'Hey,' he said, reaching out his hand.

'Hi,' said Fern dismissively, ignoring his hand and looking instead at Shamesh with a question in her eyes.

'You two are going on a trip together,' said Shamesh.

'With him!' the girl said before Adam could even digest Shamesh's words.

With an appalled expression on her face she looked him up and down, her eyes resting for just a fraction too long on his groin, and all at once he could feel the wetness there, already spread in a dark patch across his jeans. The colour rose in his face. He stammered something about spilling his beer, but he was only making it worse and even as he spoke he could smell the warm piss smell. Suddenly he hated her. His fists were clenched and he felt an intense urge to smash her face. He tried to hold himself back but the anger was surging up and blinding him. When he couldn't bear it anymore he swept one arm across the table top, sending glasses crashing to the ground.

Fern flinched. 'I'm not going anywhere with him,' she shouted, and weaving through tables and chairs, she ran out of the door.
Chapter Five

Almost without realising what she was doing, Fern had run up the stairs, out onto the street and along the pavement for a few blocks as if all the forces of evil were behind her. She'd given no thought to direction, wanting only to put as much space as possible between herself and the madness of that place. The rain had stopped, though the gutters were still full and the roads had become mini rivers. Oblivious, she splashed through the dirty, ankle-deep water with its floating litter: cigarette butts, plastic wrappers and soggy food. She slipped once and fell, soaking her clothes and scraping her knee. A sharp pain shot through her ankle as it twisted under her. Flooded with adrenalin, she ignored it, leaping up again and running on.

Finally, out of breath, with her heart racing, Fern found herself near Central Station and stopped. She looked around for the first time, scanning the street for signs of the Bloodhound. It was still steamy hot but Fern shook with a mix of weariness and shock. The atmosphere on the streets had changed: after-dinner crowds and groups of staggering drunks charged it with a sense of menace. If she could just get to Claire's then everything would be okay. She'd be off the streets and safe - no more freaks or stalkers and no more talk of journeys or spirit guides.

As she turned into Central Station and headed for the suburban trains, Fern realised with horror that she'd left her backpack in the bar. She considered retracing her steps but the thought of going back was simply too much. It would have to stay there until tomorrow.

Fern searched her pockets for the change from the cafe and found enough to buy a train ticket. As she tried to find the right platform, people veered around her, leaving a space. Standing there, dirty and soaked through, Fern caught their disgusted glances, before they looked quickly away. In the space of a few hours she had turned into one of the people she used to avoid.

At Stanmore, Fern got off the train and realised she had no idea how to get to Claire's house. She hesitated, not wanting to engage anyone in conversation, then, her ankle throbbing now, she limped to the nearest convenience store and asked the old man
behind the counter for directions.

It had been months since Fern had ventured out of central Sydney and into the suburbs; away from the main street it seemed almost too quiet, with only the distant sound of sirens, the occasional flash of a television through a window and, just once, the roar of a plane filling the sky overhead. Walking the deserted streets, Fern was nervous, starting at shadows, her heart thumping at the rustle of the wind in a tree, the sudden bark of a dog. She was at the end of her tether and just wanted to lie down on the pavement and rest. It was only the fear that kept her going, following the old man's directions, limping along the street for two blocks, turning left and then right, past house after house of people, all locked inside behind security doors and metal-barred windows, safe from the night.

At the house, Fern picked her way through a mess of discarded shoes on the verandah and rang the doorbell, then waited until a light came on and a girl Fern didn't recognise opened the door and stared hard at her.

'Is Claire home?'

'Yeah, I think she's in bed though,' said the girl suspiciously. 'It's late.'

'Could you tell her that Fern's here?' Fern's voice was small and cracked, full of unshed tears. On the edge. The girl recognised it and nodded, but she didn't ask her in.

'Hang on a minute,' she said and shut the door in Fern's face.

When Claire appeared she was bleary eyed and yawning, but anxious. 'My God, Fern! What's happened?'

But Fern couldn't speak; her throat had filled with a lump she couldn't swallow away and her eyes with tears, which soon overflowed. Claire's pity had pushed her over the edge.

'It's okay. . . You'll be fine,' Claire said, pulling Fern inside. 'You're safe. . . You're here now.'

Fern's breath came in big sobbing gasps, the shaking, grasping fear that had dogged her all night, released at last. Her legs gave way beneath her and both girls sat on the floor in the hallway, hugging each other. Eventually Fern stopped crying, though she continued to gasp intermittently; inside she felt a huge emptiness.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that,' she said, throwing Claire a half-smile.
'It's okay. Now let's get you fixed up' Claire sounded bright and efficient. 'You'll feel better after a shower. I'll get you something to change into.'

Fern let the hot water wash the night from her and some of the tension. I'm safe, she thought, at least for now. She didn't want to think of the future, just bask in this temporary reprieve.

Dressed in Claire's pyjamas, Fern walked down the hallway. Hearing raised voices from the kitchen, she stopped outside the door, not wanting to eavesdrop or interrupt.

'It's just for tonight. I don't want to cause any trouble.' Fern sat down uncertainly on a chair.

'It's okay. Don't worry about it. Pete's not as bad as he sounds. He thinks I'm too kind hearted.' Claire frowned and pulled out the first-aid kit from under the sink. 'Your ankle looks a bit swollen, I'll wrap it up.'

'No, it's fine.'

'Are you sure? It'll swell up overnight and you won't be able to walk tomorrow.'

'No really, it's fine,' said Fern tucking her feet under the chair so Claire couldn't reach. She hated people fussing about her.

Claire seemed disappointed. She'd always been a good fix-it person, Fern recalled. She loved wrapping and mending, finding practical solutions to emergencies. But Fern doubted Claire would venture happily into the realms she would have to take her if Fern told the truth about the past twenty-four hours.

'So, what happened?' asked Claire, handing Fern a mug of hot chocolate.

'It's a long story,' said Fern, noting how lame that sounded. 'I don't know where to start.'
'Did the landlord find you?'
Fern nodded. 'He came with my mother and someone else. I had to climb out the window.'

'Why?'
Fern looked at Claire and suddenly the whole thing seemed absurd. Claire would never have climbed out the window. She would never have been locked in her room in the first place. 'I didn't want them to find me,' said Fern, hoping that would be enough but knowing it would not. She sighed and began her story, leaving out so many bits that in the end there wasn't any thread to it and none of what was left sounded remotely plausible. When she'd finished, the story hung suspended in the air, released in part, but not delivered, because Claire didn't believe her. Why would she? Fern's behaviour had been strange for months now and Claire had already been more patient than she needed to be.

Claire finished her hot chocolate, a sad expression on her face. 'I don't know what to say, Fern. It all sounds so strange. Are you sure you didn't imagine it? Why would anyone follow you? And this club - it sounds as if you've had some sort of hallucination. Did someone drug your drink?'

'No,' said Fern. 'Oh, I don't know. Maybe I imagined it all.'

'Look, it's nearly one o'clock,' said Claire. 'Why don't you get some sleep? We'll work it all out in the morning. I've made up a bed for you on the couch.'

Fern followed Claire into the living room where they stood facing each other awkwardly. Fern's story had come between them and neither knew how to step across the space.

Eventually Claire turned away. 'I'll shut these doors so the others don't disturb you in the morning.'

'Thanks, Claire. I'm really grateful.'

Claire looked at Fern, a worried frown on her face. 'It's okay. I just hope you can find your way out of this. You need to engage with the world again, Fern - the real one.'

Fern lay down on the couch and threw the blanket over her. It had been the longest day of her life. She was exhausted and needed to sleep. But she also needed to think. For a moment Fern fervently wished she'd told Claire less. But the next moment
she was drifting into sleep, accompanied by the crash of glass and the memory of a
golden-haired man, with dark eyes that saw too much. Fern hazily recalled the instant
Shamesh had introduce them. She'd had a wild urge to run. Adam mattered somehow in
her life, she could feel his importance. She didn't recognise him, but somehow she knew
him, and she knew those hands. With that came a surge of desire, swiftly followed by the
certainty that she mustn't let him get close to her. Having understood this, Fern allowed
herself to slip into a deep sleep.

In the morning Fern woke with a start to the sound of voices, the clatter of cups and the
rich aroma of brewing coffee mingling with the smell of toast. Other people's lives. She
was always on the outside, curious but detached. Once again she yearned to be back up
in her attic, floating on a sea of white, locked up and away from everyone.

The remnants of her dream flitted in and out of her consciousness, the swish of
fabric, a long cloak, its hood empty of everything but shadows and disquiet. Standing up,
she felt an acute pain in her ankle that made her gasp. Claire had been right: this morning
her ankle was twice its size and a deep purplish red all over. Unable to put any weight on
it, Fern clutched pieces of furniture and hopped to the kitchen, wincing with pain, .

Claire turned around, flashing a bright smile. 'Hi, did you sleep well? . . . Oh Fern,
that looks terrible. You should have let me wrap it up last night.' She took some frozen
peas out of the freezer. 'Here, put these on. It's a bit late, but it might help.'

'Thanks.' Fern sat on a chair and put her foot up, holding the peas in place. The
cold etched its way greedily into her ankle, sending a fresh ache into the bone. 'Where
are the others?'

'Pete's out cycling and Kate's still in bed, I imagine.' Claire poured herself a bowl
of muesli. 'Breakfast?' she asked.

Fern shook her head. She wasn't hungry. The anxiety she felt wasn't leaving room
for anything else. Tomorrow had come and it hadn't brought any answers. 'Coffee would
be good.'

'Sure, I'll brew up some more.'

While they waited for the coffee to bubble on the stove, Claire bandaged Fern's
ankle and Fern searched the phone book for The Underworld. 'It's not there,' she finally
admitted, anxiety surging through her at the prospect of losing her backpack.

'Never mind, you have to go back anyway,' said Claire, digging a safety pin out of the first-aid kit. 'It shouldn't be hard to find. . . There. How's that? It should be tight, but not tight enough to cut off your circulation.'

'That's great, Claire. Thanks.'

Fern watched Claire pour out the coffees. She envied her friend all those certainties which mapped out life in the clearest possible way. There didn't seem to be any murky areas in Claire's world, no swamps or quicksand, and no tightropes to balance on. Fern would drink her coffee, borrow a few dollars and then go back into the city and retrace her steps. After that? She didn't want to think. She couldn't keep running forever. Perhaps she should just let them get her, whoever 'they' were.

'Let's sit out the back. The courtyard's nice and sunny. Here, I'll carry your coffee, you'll spill it if you hop like that.'

The courtyard was small and private, surrounded by tall fences, and in one corner a glorious eucalypt swaying in the breeze. They sat on intricate white lace-work chairs, the metal already hot in the morning sun. The matching table wobbled on pavers which had lifted and subsided over the years with the shifting roots of the tree.

Fern sipped her coffee, savouring the surge of energy and clarity it brought. She lifted her face to the sun, loving the feel of it on her skin. Sitting here, she could almost believe everything was fine. That her life wasn't a mess after all; or at least not any kind of mess that couldn't be fixed with a bit of tidying or a fine tooth comb.

'So how's your study going?' she asked Claire.

'Good, only two more years to go. It's a long haul, but worth it in the end. I'm wondering whether to specialise. No one wants to be a GP anymore. There's more money and less pain in a speciality.'

Fern wondered if Claire really loved medicine, or if it was just the money that drew her to it. Did motivation really matter? For Fern it would. But maybe that was an excuse, concocted to hide the simple fact that she was lazy. Her father had said so, over and over - clutching his heart and calling her a lazy no-good bum. But medicine didn't interest Fern. Nothing did. That was the problem.

Fern's ankle was throbbing. She placed it gently on the chair next to her,
wondering if any of Cassie's remedies would help. Arnica was for bruising, she recalled. If only she had her pack. Her thoughts were interrupted by a harsh ringing sound.

'Hang on, that's the door,' said Claire. 'Horrible ringer, isn't it?'

A moment later, Fern heard voices in the corridor, a murmuring, getting closer. She knew who it was even before the figure stepped into the courtyard. Cassie had warned her of traps and here she was sitting in one. Her reprieve was over.

Claire stepped out into the courtyard first. 'Grace's here,' she said in her bright voice.

'Hello Mum,' said Fern, her voice heavy with resignation.

'Fernanda dear, are you alright? I've been so worried about you. Thank God Claire rang and told me you were safe.'

Fern wasn't angry, only disappointed. Sad, too, because something had just died in her friendship with Claire. Of course Claire had felt she was doing the right thing. And if Fern were honest with herself, the predominant feeling she could identify was relief. Perhaps she'd just needed someone else to make the decision for her.

She stood and let herself be hugged, felt her mother's parchment skin rub against her cheek, smelled the talc, the hairspray, even the washing powder her mother always used, all conspiring to make her a child again. The situation was out of her hands now. She didn't have to run anymore.

While Claire made more coffee, Fern stared at the walls of the courtyard. She was bricked in with this woman who both was and was not her mother. Funny how each time Fern saw her, she felt the force of her own strangeness battling with the familiar force of love. Perhaps it was simply the knowledge that the blood in Fern's veins was not her mother's.

Now that she had found her daughter, Grace's anxiety turned to anger.

'Your father's sick with worry,' she said accusingly. 'How could you do this?'

Fern felt the old weight of guilt and responsibility. Alive her father haunted her. Dead he would haunt her too. She'd be weighed down with guilt and the remorse that would come with never having resolved the issues between them.

Her father had been sick for so long. She'd been five, or maybe six, that first time when he'd come in from the garden and leaned on the piano right in front of her, his skin
pale and a weak trembly look about him. She didn't know then he was having a heart attack and neither did he. Even if she had known she couldn't have done anything. The next day he went to the doctor and when she came home from school he was in the hospital; her mum had left a note that she was to go to the neighbours, where she had fresh white bread with crunchy crusts, spread thickly with real butter and Vegemite.

Now her father was living a half life, too afraid to live and too afraid to die. He had them wrapped around his little finger, controlling them with his illness.

'Don't you get it?' Fern said. 'Dad's been sick forever.'

'All the more reason not to worry him.'

'He sent you, didn't he? You'd never have come yourself. You'd have been too scared.'

'He loves you, Fern.'

'Some way he's got of showing it.'

'He's not a well man.'

Fern opened her mouth and then shut it again. What was the point? It was the same old argument.

She sat through an awkward twenty minutes or so while her mother and Claire drank their fresh coffees and made small talk, every word, every question, every loaded look of her mother's emphasising the already well-established fact that Claire was something to be proud of and Fern was not. When her mother suggested they go back to her motel and 'freshen up' before looking for her bag and collecting her things from the old place, Fern smiled and nodded. She changed into her own clothes and then waited compliantly for the taxi. It felt strange leaving with nothing. No bag, no purse, not even a jumper.

In the taxi, Fern sat staring through the window. The pavements were teeming with people, the roads clogged with traffic pouring out stinking fumes. Everyone going somewhere. But she was going around in circles, back to her old life again and the box her parents had made for her.

'We'll stop off at the hospital and get your ankle looked at,' said Grace.

'That'll take hours. Can't we just leave it?'

'No, it might be fractured,' said Grace firmly. 'It's best if we get it checked.'
Fern sighed. There was no point arguing; her mother would do as she pleased. The taxi dropped them off at casualty and they made their way in slowly, Fern leaning on her mother for a crutch.

‘You sit down, I’ll go and talk to the nurses.’

Obediently, Fern sat on one of the plastic chairs and waited, her mind focussed on the regular throbbing pain in her ankle. Even when that had settled to a dull ache, though, Grace still hadn't returned.

Fern looked at the clock. Quarter past ten on a Saturday morning and the waiting room was almost full. She wondered if people had more accidents on Saturdays or if every day was like this. Bored, she studied the drinks machine, then looked longingly at the chocolate bar and chips machine, suddenly hungry as she realised she hadn't eaten since the nachos last night.

Glancing up at reception, Fern saw a blond-haired man standing with his back to her. Her heart beat faster and she felt a blush rising in her cheeks as the confusion she'd felt last night returned. It was Adam, she was sure of it. Once again Fern felt the tugging inside of her, wanting to go to him yet knowing she must keep a distance between them. But she needed to talk to him. Adam knew the Underworld really existed, and that Shamesh was real too. He would know that she hadn't been dreaming. He could vouch for her. She needed that reassurance for herself, and the proof too, so that Claire and her mother wouldn't think she was mad. Fern half rose, then quickly sat back down again when the man turned around and she saw that he wasn't Adam. Disappointed, she picked up a tattered magazine and tried to lose herself in old news about celebrities she'd never heard of. It didn't work. Somehow Adam's face had imprinted itself on her mind and she couldn't shake the memory of it. She had never met him before, yet she'd recognised him. It didn't make sense.

Her mother returned a few minutes later They sat side by side, Grace fussing and scolding and making plans, Fern distracted by the gurgles of her empty stomach.

Eventually her mother went and fetched sandwiches from the hospital canteen. Tuna, mayonnaise and limp lettuce on soft white bread. Fern swallowed hers in a matter of moments, followed it quickly with a lamington, then looked enviously at her mother's.

Finally a harassed-looking nurse called Fern's name. Obediently they followed her
through the doors and into a small cubicle. 'Just wait here,' she said. 'The doctor won't be long.'

Fern sat on the edge of the bed, her mother on a plastic chair next to the heart monitor. So many times she had visited her father in hospital and stared in fascination at the regular pattern of the heart monitor wired up to his body, searching for anomalies, wondering when it would stop and he would be gone. The ratio between dread and hope changing as the years passed and the distaste she felt for her father deepened.

Soon the doctor arrived. He was young, probably under thirty, with trendy red-rimmed glasses and pockmarks on his cheeks from a bad case of acne.

'Hello there, how are we today?'

Fern was torn between relief and irritation. She hated being addressed as 'we'. And what a stupid question, under the circumstances.

'We're fine,' she muttered with all the disdain she could muster, but the doctor was determined to be cheerful.

'So you've hurt your foot. Let's have a look.'

Fern held out her foot and watched him gently unwind Claire's wrapping. He whistled. 'That's some swelling there and a whopper of a bruise coming up.' Fern winced as he pressed his fingers into her ankle, feeling for damage. 'Sorry,' he said. 'You'll have to have an x-ray, I can't tell what's going on in there. I'll send someone with a wheelchair. Won't be long.'

Resigned to another long wait, Fern leaned back and shut her eyes, letting the hospital recede as she slipped into sleep. In her dream she was still in the cubicle but it was dark and a hooded man in the robes of a priest was standing next to her. Terrified, Fern forced her way out of the dream, opening her eyes to a fluorescent room, empty except for the heart monitor and her mother nodding off on a chair next to her. Only a dream, she thought, feeling her heart settle again into a steadier rhythm, but keeping her eyes open nevertheless.

Finally a wheelchair appeared and she was taken for an x-ray. Some time later the doctor reappeared carrying the results. Fern stared at him glumly, dazed by the long hours under fluorescent lights.

'It's looking good. No apparent fractures. Even so, it's a bad sprain. It will have to
be bound, and you'll need to get around on crutches for a couple of weeks. I'll organise hiring some from here if you like. Panadol will help with the pain.'

Fern nodded. 'Thanks.'

'Here, put your foot up, I'll bind it for you now.'

Fern did as she was told, staring out past his shoulder at the scurrying nurses.

'Your mother tells me you've had a time of it.'

Fern threw an accusing glance at Grace. But the doctor was looking at Fern questioningly, waiting for her to answer.

'A bit,' she said sullenly.

'Do you want to tell me about it?'

The sympathy in his voice made her want to crumble, but she resisted. 'No.'

'Okay, then what about telling me how you hurt your ankle?'

'I tripped.'

'When?'

'Last night.'

'Were you running?

Fern nodded, still holding out.

'Were you scared?'

She recalled the moment when she'd felt the Bloodhound right behind her, felt his breath on her neck, his hand reaching out through the rain and the darkness. She remembered the terror. Tears filled her eyes as she nodded once again.

'What happened, Fern? Was someone after you?'

'Yes,' she whispered. The floodgates opened then and she couldn't stop herself, the words coming out, one after the other, in a monotone, flat and empty as if there was nothing left inside her. 'He followed me all night. I don't know who he was. But I fell. Twice. Once down some stairs I think. Then later I tripped in the gutter.'

'What happened when you fell down the stairs?'

'There was another man,' she said. 'A bartender.' Fern stopped herself from saying anything more.

'Did he hurt you?'

Fern shook her head.
'What about your room, Fern? Your mum says you didn't want to leave.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know.'

'How long were you there?'

Fern shrugged. A lump had risen up into her throat and she couldn't speak.

'A month?'

She shook her head.

'Two months?'

Another shake.

'Three? Four?'

Fern nodded.

'That's a long time to stay in your room.'

The tears were running down her cheeks now and wetting her t-shirt. She didn't even try to wipe them away.

'Why did you run away when your mum came?'

She shrugged again and looked away, trying to pull herself together, but the tears kept coming and she had the strange sensation that there was a bottomless well inside her, dark and still, heavy with grief.

'It's alright, darling,' said her mother, dabbing at Fern's face with a tissue. 'The doctor just wants to help.'

Grace's face was drawn tight with worry and Fern felt a fleeting guilt that she was adding to her mother's burden. They were sitting so close and yet neither reached out to hug the other. Fern couldn't remember when this physical distance had grown between them or how they'd let it happen.

The doctor finished binding her ankle and stood up. 'There you go. Now don't you worry.' He patted her on the shoulder. 'You stay here. I'm going to have a quick word outside with your mother.'

Fern waited obediently for her mother and the doctor to return. She felt like a child again, passive and powerless, letting them mutter and mumble over her. It didn't help that she was so tiny; people were always talking to her as if she was still a teenager,
and asking for ID at the bottle shop.

She'd never been good at defying her parents and yet had felt compelled to do it over and over in so many small ways. It was a need and a relief, like opening a window in an airless room. Then there was the punishment. She'd hated the physicality of it, hated the wooden spoon, the broom, the slap of fingers... But it was the words that somehow hurt more than the smarting on the backs of her legs. 'Bad blood,' her father said.

Fern remembered her misdeeds well. Looking back they seemed so trivial, yet at the time they were monstrous things: an apple picked across a neighbour's fence, a slice of cake sneaked in the night, an hour at school spent hiding in the toilets, and forbidden but glorious visits to the local park. Then there was the tunnel, one end in the park and the other end unknown, and thus the source of much speculation. It was long, though no one knew how long, and it came with all the adult warnings of flash floods and strange men, designed to keep the kids away, but instead making it all the more alluring.

One day when Fern was about ten, a few of them had set out to find the other end. They'd walked out of the sun into the cool shadowy darkness, the tunnel walls covered with graffiti, the ground with cigarette ends. Behind them the patch of light shrank until they turned a corner and it disappeared altogether. Their voices bounced back at them from the walls, which made them whisper at first, then fall silent. No one wanted to be the first to suggest turning back, so they walked on, shuffling in the dark, ears alert, their fingers touching the walls for comfort.

It had seemed an eternity before they turned another corner and saw a tiny patch of light. Fern had been in front, she'd seen it first and called out. They walked faster and faster until laughing with relief, they ran the final hundred metres and plunged back out into the light. They all gasped then, because it was a paradise they'd entered: a creek, lined with willows and eucalypts, the sun filtering through the lush greens of a silent garden. Eden, Fern had thought, but known it couldn't be. She'd also known they were trespassing, so could only sit quietly for a few moments, soaking up the mysterious tranquillity before retracing their steps through the tunnel. Back to where they belonged. Only Fern didn't belong, she never had; not at either end. She'd felt the injustice of it then and swallowed it down, holding it in a place deep inside with all the other injustices.

Now sitting in this tiny cubicle while her mother and the doctor conspired
outside, Fern felt as if she were trapped in that tunnel, right in the middle, with no light at either end. The only thing keeping her there was the tiny and fragile hope that one day she would find an end, and with it something vital and beautiful which would be hers.

Fern's mother came in first, looking furtive. 'Fernanda, dear, the doctor wants you to stay here for a little while. He thinks it's a good idea to get another doctor to have a look at you.'

'Why? It's not even broken. The doctor said so.'

'Not your ankle, sweetheart. The doctor's worried about you.'

'What do you mean?' Fern could feel all her instincts rising up in warning.

'He thinks you might be depressed.'

'Depressed! Who wouldn't be depressed, spending an entire day sitting in a waiting room for nothing?'

'He's worried, sweetheart. He thinks you might hurt yourself. He just wants another doctor to take a look at you.'

'A psychiatrist? You're kidding.' Fern pushed herself off the bed and onto one foot, tugging at the curtain to keep her balance. 'I'm getting out of here.'

Her mother reached towards Fern as if to restrain her. 'Please, Fern, just for a few hours.'

'No!' She pushed her mother away, sending her staggering backwards into the doctor's arms as he entered the cubicle, still smiling determinedly.

'What have we here? I didn't know I had such an effect on women.'

Three things happened in quick succession: her mother burst into tears, Fern tried to duck around the two of them, and the doctor reached out, his strong fingers circling her upper arm and stopping her in mid-flight.

Normally when encountering authority, Fern would have succumbed and allowed herself to be led away, but this time something unexpected happened inside her. It started as a great pressure building in her chest. Then through the dull dread and the numbness of her world, came a fury so strong it felt too big for her, forcing its way out of the narrow confines of her body.

'NO!' she screamed, the force of it reverberating through the emergency ward and peeling the doctor's fingers from her arm.
Behind her the heart monitor, untouched, crashed to the ground. The doctor looked around in shocked surprise but Fern hardly noticed. Her mother was half-heartedly reaching out to Fern and uttering ineffectual 'sweethearts' and 'darlings'. The doctor pressed a red button as Fern started hopping out of there. Away from them all, before they locked her up.

She had almost made it to the exit when two security men intercepted her, taking Fern by the arm and turning her around to face the doctor and her mother, who had followed her. Fern struggled and kicked and bit, the surge of adrenalin obliterating the pain in her ankle. 'Take your fucking hands off me. Let me go. . . Mum, don't let them do this to me. Mum. . . what's happening?' And then came the realisation. 'You planned this, didn't you.'

A nurse hurried towards them carrying a syringe and gave it to the doctor who jabbed her in the arm. Fern tried to fight, tried to keep struggling, but knew she was defeated. Soon her muscles began to relax and all she could do was send a look of absolute hatred to her mother, before slipping into unconsciousness.
Chapter Six

Fern had no idea where she was. The room was dark and quiet, though when she concentrated she could hear the snuffling sound of other people's breathing and the restless rustle of sheets. She tried to concentrate, to focus her memory, but her body and mind were heavy with a deep lethargy that forced her eyes shut again, allowing sleep to reclaim her. From its depths came a terrifying shuffle of footsteps and once again the figure of a man appeared, wearing a long gown, no face visible under the cowl of his hood. Fern watched him, horrified. His hands were folded into the sleeves of his gown as he walked towards her. Like a monk, she thought, but reeking of evil. Trapped in her dream, Fern fought to open her eyes and succeeded briefly, only to helplessly close them again and sink back into sleep. All night the battle continued and the faceless man came closer and closer. Soon he would reach out and touch her and she would be lost.

Waking at last in the light of morning, Fern thought for a moment she was back in her attic. The wall behind her was white, the sheets were white, but the smells and sounds were wrong: sharp edged and unforgiving, with a bustling air of urgency. A white curtain surrounded her bed, not soft and transparent like her mosquito net but thick and heavy. It felt as if she were in a cocoon but there was no doubt she was in hospital.

When Fern tried to sit up a wave of exhaustion forced her back onto the pillow. There was still a residue of the terror she'd felt in her dreams but she was groggy too, as if awaking from a deep sleep, her brain not sending its signals to the right places. She tried again, more slowly this time, and managed to stay upright, though everything spun around her. Her mouth was dry, her lips cracked and she felt sick, deep in her belly. When the spinning stopped she slid her legs off the bed and tried to stand, but pain surged through her ankle, forcing her back down onto the bed, dread rising in her as she began piecing together the events of the previous day.

Her own clothes had been spirited away in the night and she was wearing someone else's nightgown, an awful old-lady one with a pink floral pattern. On the side table was a plastic jug of water, a plastic cup and a glossy magazine. Then she noticed next to the jug of water, the necklace Cassie had given her. She picked up the deep blue
stone speckled with gold, comforted by its familiarity, letting it soothe her and clear some of the fuzziness from her mind. It was a small thing but enough to anchor her.

Fern stared at the ceiling with its patchwork of white tiles and listened to the sounds of people waking around her. Strangers separated only by a curtain. She wondered briefly at what point a person could lose themselves entirely. Already, in the last forty-eight hours she had lost her attic room, along with all her belongings, her backpack and even the clothes she'd been wearing. She couldn't keep hold of the thoughts for long though; her brain felt heavy and sluggish. Had she lost her mind as well, she wondered.

With a violent whoosh, the curtain around her was pulled open and a round-faced nurse beamed at her. 'Good morning. How are you today?'

'Where am I?' asked Fern slowly, ignoring the question.

'In hospital.'

'Why?'

'You just needed a little rest, darling. Sit up while I plump the pillows. . . There, that's better. Now, a pill before breakfast and we're done.'

'What's that for?' asked Fern as the nurse poured a glass of water and offered it to her with a small white pill.

'Just to help you rest. There you go, pop it in. . . Good girl,' said the nurse when Fern swallowed. 'Now, how about breakfast? That ankle will keep you in bed for a day or two so I'll send someone in with a tray.'

Then she was gone, leaving the curtains open and Fern exposed to the gazes of the other patients, all women. Most of them were already up, some dressed, others still wearing nightclothes. They all stared at her, either directly or secretly, except for the young one at the end with a sullen dead face, who just stared at the wall. Fern felt her face going red under their scrutiny.

A square shaped nurse came in, pushing a food trolley towards Fern. 'Here we go,' she said, plopping a tray down on Fern's lap.

The ward quietened as the other women left for breakfast, leaving only Fern, the young girl in the corner and a nurse who was trying to encourage the girl to eat. Fern ate hungrily, each mouthful helping to remove the sluggishness in her brain. As she finished
her toast, a man and a woman, both in white coats and holding clipboards, entered the ward, carrying a palpable air of authority with them. They stopped at the end of Fern's bed and consulted their clipboards.

'Hello, Fernanda,' said the woman. 'My name's Dr Whittaker and this is Dr Greenacres.'

'Are you psychiatrists?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Am I in a mental institution?'

'No, Fernanda, you're in the psychiatric ward of a general hospital.'

'Isn't that the same thing?'

'No, not really.'

'Can I leave then?'

'Well, that's what we're here to discuss.'

'How are you feeling?' asked the man, speaking for the first time.

'Fine,' said Fern.

'We'd like you to tell us what's been happening in your life.'

So far, every time Fern had tried to explain something of what had happened things had become very much worse for her. And neither of these doctors looked as if they would believe a word she said. Dr Greenacres had eyes that were too big behind the thick lenses of his glasses, and scaly skin on his hands and neck that made him look like a fish out of water. Dr Whittaker was suspiciously normal, exuding common sense, right from her flat comfortable shoes to the neat sweep of her hair and the nicely sharpened pencil held poised and waiting. Fern was just one of Dr Whittaker's chores, to be dealt with as efficiently as possible. She was probably thinking about the lasagne she planned to make for dinner, wondering whether it should be meat or vegetarian.

'Well?'

'I always prefer vegetarian,' said Fern, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

Dr Whittaker stared hard at her. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Nothing,' said Fern quickly.

'Okay, let's be more specific,' said Dr Whittaker, consulting her notes again.
'Could you tell us what happened after you fell down those stairs at the club?'

'No,' said Fern, and just then her mother arrived, rushing in as though she knew she was late, as though this was a meeting to which she had been invited. For a moment Fern stared at her mother. The strain of having a daughter locked up in a psychiatric ward was obviously taking its toll. Fern wondered if she was being too tough on her mother who was after all only doing what she thought was best. But her resentment grew as she watched Grace listening deferentially to the doctors, nodding and smiling nervously, in league against her own daughter. She hadn't even greeted Fern, hadn't asked how she was.

After conferring briefly with Grace, Dr Greenacres turned back to Fern and repeated Dr Whittacker's question about the club.

'It will help us to know a bit more about you, Fernanda,' said Dr Greenacres. 'It will help us make some decisions.'

Fern pointed disdainfully at her mother. 'Ask her, she seems to know everything.'

The doctor sighed. 'Okay, Fernanda, if that's your decision, we'll have to reach our own conclusions.'

Fern watched them muttering to each other, consulting their clipboards, nodding. In collusion, she thought, their own self-importance the vital ingredient in this farce.

Dr Greenacres turned to Fern and smiled as if he'd only just noticed her. 'How about staying here for a few days? It will give you a chance to recuperate before we reassess your case... What do you think?'

Fern stared at them. As if she had any choice in the matter. She felt a mixture of relief and fear. A few days didn't sound like much but she didn't have the resources to convince them she was telling the truth and she was caught in a catch-22. Speak out or stay silent: either way she lost.

When the doctors left, Grace sat down wearily beside the bed and Fern wondered if their love and shared history would be enough to sustain her mother through the criticism and advice she would soon have to face. For years they'd made Grace pay over and over for her decision to bring a stranger into their midst. And although her mother had tried to shelter Fern, they'd trampled her too, seizing on every misdemeanour as proof of her iniquity: an impatient word to a cousin becoming a great sin, a broken plate
a tragedy not to be brushed aside.

Staring up at the white-squared ceiling, Fern remembered another hospital, a baby lying stranded in her crib. She could see it all so clearly, and smell it, hear the clink and clatter of trays and the squeak of nurses' shoes. How efficient the hospital system was, then and now. Like clockwork. The nurses feeding and changing her every few hours, then leaving her, neither her cries nor her first tentative smiles having any effect on the bewildering world she'd entered. The nurses' hands were gentle, but efficient, never lingering. And they smelled wrong. The bottles they pushed into her mouth smelled wrong too, but she sucked anyway, then screamed with the wind caught in her gut, sucked and screamed and vomited, sucked and screamed and vomited, an endless round of pain and frustration, until the day she opened her eyes and saw a woman's anxious face peering at her, beads of perspiration sitting around the roots of her hair which was pulled back tightly into a bun. Behind the woman stood a small man wearing a neat pressed suit, his hands clasped officiously behind his back. Grace and Richard Parsons had come to take her home.

Now Fern drew her eyes away from the ceiling and looked at her mother. 'Did you get me this?' she asked, pointing at the nightdress.

Grace nodded, clearly happy to discuss something practical. 'I thought you'd need something in here. And it was so pretty. Don't you think? You'll need a few more things, some day wear. Most people seem to be wearing their own clothes. And some slippers too. What size are you - a seven? Or is it six and a half? Your feet have always been so tiny. Not like my monstrosities.' Grace laughed awkwardly and looked down at her own feet.

Fern turned her eyes back to the ceiling as her mother tried to draw her into a conversation, her voice occasionally wafting into Fern's consciousness as if from a great distance. 'Father sends... the newsagent... something to read... Mrs Lindsay next door... what nice people... ' But Fern wasn't listening; long forgotten memories were bubbling to the surface, her mother's or her own, she couldn't distinguish. flashes and glimpses that blended memory and desire, past and present. Had she really heard the echoes of her birth mother's scream the day Grace and Richard had carried her out of the hospital? A scream that had brought a tearing in her own chest. She must have known
her mother well, must have recognised the rhythm of her heart, her moods, her voice, the
gurgling of her stomach, her sleep patterns. . . Perhaps, as Fern's new parents carried her
out of the hospital, her mother was only just realising that out of sight would never be
out of mind. That despite everything, Fern would always be her daughter.

Eventually Grace gave up trying to make conversation and left, promising to
come back. Fern dozed on and off, filled with an intense weariness and the need to create
a boundary between herself and the other patients. Each time she fell asleep she was
woken soon after by a nurse brightly fussing and checking and feeding her more pills, or
the desolate, slurred voices of the patients, or the gasping fear of a nightmare that
quickly passed out of reach. Then she would look at her window where the sky was
always the same sullen grey and she would know that hardly any time had passed.

The doctors came again, asking questions which Fern didn't bother to answer,
and telling her things she didn't want to know. They said she was depressed. That this
was the cause of everything that had happened. They used other words too, ones she
couldn't understand. Fern slipped away from them and into sleep once more, her dream
sending her into a lush dense forest which should have been beautiful. Instead, though,
the atmosphere was thick and heavy, forcing her to fight for each step, wanting
desperately to be away from the darkness growing around her. Then without warning a
strong hand reached into her dream, grabbing her ankle and trying to drag her out of this
world and into another. . .

Fern woke, gasping for air, her heart thumping, her throat tight as she struggled
against a heavy weight on her chest. She was becoming afraid to sleep and yet she
couldn't resist sleep's call. It was like a beautiful but deadly Siren, luring her onto the
rocks. There was a malevolence increasingly inhabiting her dreams, turning them into
nightmares. In her sleep Fern was helpless, and although she knew it was impossible, she
was beginning to wonder if some dark force was taking advantage of her vulnerability.

Her mother returned that afternoon with a bag of shopping and a fake happy
smile. She waved oversized undies in Fern's face, a beige bra, stretchy trousers she called
slacks, and a t-shirt. There were fluffy slippers and a pink dressing-gown, plus a couple
of magazines.

Fern watched her dully, remembering the day Grace and Richard had first taken
her home. The scream that had forced its way out of her as Richard had strapped her into the car seat. Then night after night, day after day she'd screamed, her stomach clenched in pain as she brought up milk. She'd been hurt and afraid and sick, a sickness of the spirit as well as the body. Now it was happening all over again, only she wasn't screaming anymore. Grace had seen to that, locking her up and feeding her pills. Fern remembered the tiny infant she'd been, whose screams had finally stopped after three months, to be replaced by a gaping silence. Exhausted, her head resting on the soft lace pillow that her new mother had made, Fern had slept as though she'd been pricked by a spindle, oblivious to the passing of time. For twenty years, bed had been her safe haven, the place where she could shut down, one bed replacing another until eventually she'd found her white bed in her white attic and become stuck.

Now, too afraid to sleep, Fern lay in bed for hours after Grace left, listening to the restless sleep of others. Somehow she had to find a way to engage with the world again. But which world? She could no longer tell what was real and what was not. Perhaps I imagined everything, thought Fern, perhaps none of them is real: not Shamesh, not Cassie, not even Adam with his golden hair and dark eyes.

Despite her resistance, sleep finally overtook Fern, dragging her down into a place so dark she felt she must be blind. She reached out her hands, looking for something solid to help guide her, but there was nothing, and she was afraid that if she waited, the terrible hand would reach out again through the thin membrane that divided worlds, or time, she didn't know which. She took one step, and then another, her hands in front of her. Then she felt a familiar softness and sank first one hand and then the other into the bear's fur, feeling its strength seeping into her bones.

When the bear tugged, she followed, knowing without words that the bear wanted Fern to come. After a while there was a glimmer of light and Fern could see they were walking through a narrow tunnel with a rocky floor. The rock became sand and they emerged into a starry night, the silvery moon reflected in a calm sea, lapping gently against the shore. Fern knew without knowing that the bear wanted her to enter the sea, so she did. The water was warm but dark and she wasn't afraid. She took her feet from the bottom as the bear wanted her to, and floated, surrendering to the sea's power, letting it rock her gently back and forth until, for a moment, Fern became the ocean. As she
woke, a single word found its way through the fog of her mind. Trust.

Fern lay cocooned in the crisp white hospital sheets, trying to hold onto the last vestiges of her dream. The tension in her chest had eased, she wasn't gasping for breath, and her heart wasn't pounding. Somehow the bear had given her strength and a little clarity, enough to remember she wanted to get out of here. They wouldn't let her out until she cooperated. So be it, she thought, I'll play their game.

As night settled, Adam sat in his darkened room, staring up at the streetlight outside and remembering the gold slippers he'd watched slip past only a few nights ago and the purposeful feet that had followed. She was in danger, he knew it. He'd known it then too, only he'd chosen to ignore it. Since then, Shamesh had charged him with the care of Fern and he'd let her slip away all over again. Over the past few months, Shamesh had done so much for Adam, giving the work he needed so badly. This was the only time Shamesh had ever asked anything of Adam and he'd failed him. He swilled the remainder of his drink in the glass, watching the amber liquid light up. Then he drained it. The bottle was empty; it was time to go.

Clumsily, Adam locked the door behind him and walked the few blocks to the Underworld where Shamesh was waiting in the empty bar. He couldn't have known Adam was coming and yet there was no doubt he was waiting for him. This was one of many things about Shamesh that perturbed Adam.

'I'm sorry, Shamesh, I . . . ' Adam shook his head, not knowing how to explain about Fern, about his own wariness and his need.

Shamesh smiled. 'There is a good deal between you and Fern already. This will confuse your responses but if you are careful it won't blind you.'

'I don't know where she is.'

'Only for now. She will find her way back to you.'

'How?' asked Adam, unable to mask the desperation in his voice.

Shamesh shrugged. 'It is written,' he said, handing Adam a coffee. 'Here, drink this. You need to prepare, and coffee will do you more good than whisky.'
Chapter Seven

In the morning a nurse with a bright smile whisked open the curtains.

'Good morning, Fernanda. Did you sleep well?' she asked, not pausing for an answer. 'I think it's time you had a shower, don't you?'

Fern let the nurse help her out of bed. She felt weak, both inside and out, and so dizzy she had to lean on the bed for balance. Her foot was stronger though and she could put a little weight on it. Nevertheless the nurse gave her crutches and Fern lurched after her to the shower room.

'You can have a nice hot shower and then breakfast in the dining room. How does that sound? Here, let me help,' she added as Fern fumbled with the buttons on her nightdress.

Fern obediently lifted her arms and let the nurse pull off her nightdress. Puzzled, she watched the nurse's smile turned into a frown.

'My, you're thin!' said the nurse. 'And look at those bruises. Did you get them when you hurt your ankle?'

Bruises? Fern looked at herself in the mirror, and saw what the nurse was referring to, a pattern of livid bruises on her chest. She shrugged, trying to look unconcerned, but she didn't remember hurting her chest.

'Never mind,' said the nurse, shaking her head. 'I'll come back in ten minutes and take you to the dining room for breakfast.'

Fern stood in the shower and let the steaming water pummel her back. Then she noticed another pattern of bruises, this time in a ring above her good ankle. She remembered her dream yesterday afternoon, that hand reaching out and dragging her with it into another world. Fern shuddered. No, it couldn't be. A hand in a dream can't bruise you.

She stepped out of the shower and stood looking in the mirror, shocked by how frail she was, her legs trembling with the effort of standing upright. She could feel the edges of her bones protruding through her skin, and her ribs were sticking out the way they had when she was a child. Fern hardly recognised herself. Her face was drawn, with
dark shadows under her eyes. She looked away; it was too easy to imagine the next step.

Fern dressed herself in the clothes her mother had brought. They made her feel like someone else, the bra gaping and loose, and the trousers too big, threatening to slip down over her narrow hips.

'That's better,' said the nurse when she returned. 'You look like a different person.'

Inside the dining room, the noise hit Fern with a jolt. There were too many faces, greedy eyes and open chewing mouths. Fern sat where the nurse pointed, at one end of a table of six. She ate her cereal slowly, trying not to notice the person slurping next to her with rice bubbles on his chin. Her hands were steady as she buttered a slice of toast and spread it thinly with honey, but inside she was fighting the overpowering urge to bolt.

Fern had just taken the first bite of her toast when a gaunt man with concave cheeks and a scar across his neck came and stood too close, his eyes staring intently into hers. Fern tried to ignore him, but she couldn't chew or swallow with him so close and when she looked up she couldn't take her eyes off that scar, so livid it looked painted on, and right across the artery, stitch marks neatly criss crossing its line. She shuddered, feeling the intent behind that wound, and the despair.

He leaned down even closer and whispered into her ear. 'Beware. You are in danger. Watch out for the aliens.'

Fern shrank away from him, feeling a cold chill running along her spine.

'Come on, Trevor,' said a nurse, taking his arm and leading him away. 'Sit down at your own table and leave this poor girl alone.'

'Don't worry about him, he's mad,' said the slurping patient, reaching over and taking Fern's toast. 'Hey, I'll tell you a secret: when the end of the world comes, I'm going to be king.'

Fern stood up and reached for her crutches. The gaunt man's warning had disconcerted her. She needed to get away from here, back to the safety of her bed and the relative quiet of the ward, where she could at least try to gather her thoughts. But there was no peace in the ward either. Grace was waiting by Fern's bed and wanting to chat.

'Hello, darling. How are you today? Better? Yes, you look much brighter. And you're dressed too. That's wonderful.'
Fern lifted her cheek obediently for her mother to kiss.

'Look, I've brought you another magazine. Vogue I thought you'd be interested in the fashion. Do you remember how you used to pore over those magazines, making your own sketches?'

While her mother talked, Fern listlessly opened the magazine and flicked through the glossy pages, glancing at the fashion and the models. She couldn't think why she had been interested in this. It all seemed so far away from her present world of pocket-sized patches of sky, oversized beige bras and mad people whispering warnings in her ear; and eons away from her beautiful white attic room with its floating muslin curtains and mosquito net.

She felt the weariness growing again, an overwhelming tiredness that forced her eyes shut and slipped her into the dangerous world of her dreams, where with just a flick of a malevolent finger her skeleton self collapsed in hundreds of pieces onto the ground. Horrified, she picked up one piece and then another, trying to work out how they fitted together, this joint with that, but getting nowhere. She woke briefly, only to slip back into the dream, still clutching her finger bone. It was the missing piece, but when she looked around, the other pieces had disappeared. Now this finger bone was all she had left of herself. In the distance she could hear the horrible triumphant echo of laughter.

When she woke, her mother had gone. Her chest throbbed, the pressure on it taking her breath away. She tried to recall her dream, but it slipped away through the pathways of her mind, lingering only on the edges of her vision and in the fear in her heart. Already the small reserve of clarity and strength the bear had given her was almost gone.

Wearily she closed her eyes and the Bear Handler was there, smiling. He held what looked like a roughly carved staff. 'This is for you,' he said, placing it in her hand. 'Use it well.'

Fern woke with a start, her hand grasping an empty space where the staff had been. The gaunt man from the dining room was standing next to her bed.

'Shhh,' he said putting his finger to his lips. He looked around nervously, then leaned in close so that Fern could feel his warm breath on her ear. 'Read this.' He pressed a magazine into her hand and then tiptoed out.
It was a journal of anthropology, dating back a couple of years. On the page Trevor had marked was an article called *Shamanism: The Old and the New* by Trevor Whiteheart, PhD. Fern could hardly believe that this man who talked about aliens was an anthropologist. She began reading at random under the heading 'Initiation'. . .

*The process of initiation is complex, but its patterns are repeated across many cultures. In fact, shamanism is a world-wide tradition. Usually the person becomes withdrawn and contemplative, sleeps for long hours and has powerful dreams.* . .

Too tired to make sense of the words, Fern closed her eyes again, the malevolent force in her dreams drawing her towards it.

This time she was woken by a voice she recognised shouting outside in the corridor. 'We are coming to the transition between worlds. The time has come. The earth is shifting to a higher vibration. If we don't shift with it we'll be lost. It's time. We must let go of all our negative energies. Release them so we can live in light. . .'

Fern pulled back the covers and grabbed her crutches, arriving in the corridor just in time to see two men holding Cassie while a nurse stuck a needle in her arm.

'Get your hands off me, you filthy man. How dare you! I know my rights. Can't you see? We don't have much time. It's in the sky. The warnings are everywhere. '

'Come on, love, settle down,' said one of the guards, struggling to keep hold of her.'

'No, no, no. . . Stop it. I don't want to go to sleep. I have to speak. I have to tell.'

'Jeez, she's as strong as a bloody mule this one. She should have gone under by now.'

'Cataclysm. We're on the verge of change. Gaia is breathing out. We have to act now. Can't you.- ' Then, mid sentence, Cassie folded over.

'There,' said the nurse. 'I'll get a wheelchair. Take her along to Ward C. I think there's still a spare bed in there. If we're lucky.' She rolled her eyes. 'God, if it doesn't rain it pours. There must be a full moon or something.'

Fern waited ten minutes, then made her way to Ward C where she found Cassie asleep behind drawn curtains, her face drained of all its colour. Aside from the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her chest there was no sign of life. Fern sat on the edge of the bed and watched her friend sleeping. It was strange, she thought, how Cassie said her
prophecies were all bad, yet compared to the news on television, they were full of hope. If Cassie was right, this was a new beginning, not an end. Though it all depended on the choices we make.

Cassie frowned and began mumbling incoherently, the prophesying force that appeared to have taken her over battling against the drugs. Realising the battle could take hours, Fern turned to go, but as she reached for her crutches, Cassie grabbed her hand, making her jump and almost lose her balance. 'Don't take the pills,' she whispered.

Fern waited to see if Cassie would speak again, but she was tossing and turning now, the words spilling out, jumbled and meaningless. 'Okay, Cassie, I won't,' said Fern reaching out and brushing a strand of hair from Cassie's face.

Later, when the nurse came round with her pill, Fern put it in her mouth and pretended to swallow. She was worried that the nurse would check, as she did with some of the other patients, the ones who said they didn't want drugs, but Fern's docile behaviour had disarmed the nurse's vigilance and she didn't even look up to see Fern swallow. When no one was watching, Fern spat the pill into a tissue and dropped it in the bin. The next morning she did the same and soon noticed that her thoughts were becoming lighter, the pathways clearer.

Her mother arrived after breakfast, carrying another shopping bag. 'Hello, dear,' she said, kissing Fern on the cheek. 'I've brought you a nice cardigan to wear.' She pulled out a navy-blue knitted cardigan with silver buttons and held it up for Fern to see.

'Where are my own clothes?' asked Fern, ignoring the cardigan. 'Why can't you bring me my things?'

'They're all in storage, Fernanda darling,' said Grace, looking uncomfortable. 'I didn't know what you wanted so I thought it best to pack up everything.'

With the new clarity Fern was feeling came a building anger. 'I hate these things. They're not me. None of this is me. And for God's sake will you stop calling me Fernanda?'

'It's your name, darling.'

'No it's not. It's your name. You chose it. Just like you chose these bloody clothes. I don't want it and I don't want these.'

'Calm down, you've been doing so well, darling. Don't spoil it now.'
'Doing well! I've been drugged up to my eyeballs, my brain not working and with nothing to say. Doing what I'm told! You call that doing well?'

Her mother was crying but Fern didn't care. Right now she didn't care if she never saw Grace again. Her fury was so big she couldn't contain it. Suddenly a magazine lifted off the bed, propelled itself violently towards her mother and hit her in the face. Shocked, they both froze. Fern knew it was her doing. She wondered at the power in her anger; the thought that it might be stronger than herself was frightening, and the prospect that it might act of its own accord terrifying.

Clearly deciding it would be best to pretend nothing had happened, her mother wiped her eyes and stood up. 'I'll go now, darling. You seem a little upset.' She hesitated, then leaned over to kiss her daughter. When Fern turned her face away she stood up and sighed. 'I do love you - please remember that.'

When Grace had gone, Fern felt sorry, as if she had broken something in her mother that couldn't be glued back together again. Grace had been doing her best. Even if she was wrong, she'd tried to be kind.

Ignoring her crutches, Fern got out of bed and limped barefoot around to Ward C, where Cassie was awake, the colour firmly back in her face.

On seeing Fern, Cassie looked dumbfounded. 'Fern! What are you doing here?'

Fern smiled. 'I was going to ask you the same thing.'

'Oh, me - it happens occasionally. I get a bit carried away and the police bring me in. Hector hates it. Says it's destroying his nerves, never knowing when he'll get a phone call. So tell me, are you a patient or a visitor?'

'A patient, I guess,' said Fern, puzzled. 'But you spoke to me yesterday.'

'Did I?' said Cassie, surprised. 'Can't remember a thing.' She reached out and took Fern's hand. 'What happened, love?'

Fern paused. She was daunted by the prospect of trying to explain it all again, but here at least was someone who would not think she was mad, and the irony of that almost made her laugh.

'Dear me,' said Cassie when Fern had finished her story. 'Poor thing, you have had a time of it. Exciting though.'

'Exciting! I don't call being locked up in a mental institution exciting.'
'It's not that bad, dear. In fact I think I might stay on for a time, try to help out some of the others. You know, a good number of these wackos are trapped in a dark night of the soul. That's all. If they had someone to lead them through they'd be fine.'

'Like Trevor,' said Fern scornfully. 'With all his talk about aliens.'

'Don't be hard on Trevor. His heart's in the right place, and he's got the gift of knowing, though he hasn't got his head around it all yet. He'll come through though. He just needs a push in the right direction. . . Oh dear, here come the doctors. You'd better go now.' She winked at Fern, 'I'll see you later.'

Fern couldn't help smiling as she made her way back to her ward. It was good to have Cassie around. She made everything seem possible.
Chapter Eight

Fern was bored, which was probably a good sign. Ignoring her mother's magazines, she half-heartedly picked up Trevor's journal and read some more.

Prospective shamans have described the next stage as a light or a strong force that comes inside their head, enabling them to see differently. They can then see through the dark, accessing the past and the future. . . She paused, amazed, before reading on with new interest. In shamanic lore there is an underworld, a middle world and an upper world. The shaman moves between these worlds, though not without danger. One of the roles of the shaman is to journey into these worlds and recover fragments of lost or stolen souls.

Fern read the last line again, her head spinning, then continued, wide-eyed. As part of their initiation, shamans are symbolically torn apart and put back together again. This represents a complete renewal or rebirth into a new way of being. Flicking over the page she spotted a single sentence that made her gasp: When the shaman descends to the underworld he is often accompanied by a bear spirit.

Fern read on, hungrily devouring the long article. The patterns are always the same. The symbolism of death and mystical resurrection. Descent to the underworld, followed by magical flight. . .

'Fernanda, dear. . .' Grace's panic-stricken voice jolted Fern out of her absorption. 'I have to go back to Adelaide. Your father's had another heart attack. I'll come back as soon as I can. Or should I speak to one of the doctors - wouldn't it be nice if you could come home for Christmas?'

Fern looked at her mother and felt remorse. Grace was torn between the needs of the people she loved, her face creased with worry lines and panic in her eyes. 'No,' said Fern. 'You go back to Adelaide, I'll be fine.'

Her mother's relief was evident as she leaned over to kiss Fern on the cheek. 'You mustn't blame yourself for his heart attack, darling,' said Grace. But they both knew who her father would blame: the aberrant daughter, her bad blood. What else had Fern done wrong? Got low marks in maths; not gone to church; stayed out late; come home
smelling of cigarettes; and answered back, just once.

When her mother had gone, Fern tried to sift through the confusion of feelings inside her, worrying that this new anger she felt had turned her into a monster, because nowhere could she find a trace of sympathy for her father. Seeking distraction she picked up the journal again and immersed herself in its pages. *The shamans often receive their instruction in dreams,* she read. Fern's dreams with the bear and the Bear Handler did feel like lessons. But the other dreams were different. Their malevolence wasn't teaching her anything; they were just nightmares.

Then she found a section of text that someone, presumably Trevor, had underlined. *Some shamans use magical darts that cause and cure illnesses. Bad shamans send these spirit helpers into victims' bodies to make them ill or kill them, while good shamans use their own helpers to suck out spirits.* Perhaps Trevor had underlined this section to warn her? It continued: *Most people are reluctant to become shamans. Often their acceptance only comes when they realise they will die if they refuse to follow this path.*

Afraid now, Fern heard Shamesh's words ringing in her ears. 'It's simple. If you refuse this call, then you will die.' Fern threw the journal down, rejecting it and its implications. She would not admit any connection between what she was experiencing and an academic article written by a madman.

'Knock, knock.' Cassie's smiling face appeared around the curtain. 'Are you open for visitors?'

'Sure,' said Fern, but her face was sombre.

Cassie picked up the journal. 'Trevor lent you his article,' she said, raising her eyebrows. 'He must like you.'

Fern scowled. 'None of it has any bearing on my life. I am not a shaman. I don't want to be a shaman. I don't even believe any of this.'

Cassie looked sternly at Fern. 'Are you denying your own experience?'

'Everyone thinks I'm mad. My dad's had another heart attack because of it. My mum's being torn in two. I've lost my friends, my boyfriend, my home, my fashion degree, even my job in the pub. I've lost everything I own. I'm not even Fern anymore - everyone calls me Fernanda. I'm wearing crap clothes. I don't have anywhere to go or
anyone to turn to and you ask me to believe in wizards.’ She sniffed and wiped her eyes. ‘And I’m not crying, okay? My eyes are watering.’

Cassie handed Fern a tissue. ‘It’s hard losing everything, Fern dear. I know it. But sometimes it’s what has to happen. All the doors need to close behind you before you find a way forward.’

‘You told me I was going on a journey. But practically the very next day Mum brings me here and they lock me up.’

‘This is it, or at least part of it,’ said Cassie, seating herself on the edge of the bed. ‘Sometimes journeys aren’t about going somewhere, not in the physical world anyway. You’re taking a look inside yourself. Finding your power and building up your strength for the real work. And that will take wit and strength and courage. More than you’ve got at the moment.’

‘I don’t want to go anywhere. I don’t want to be a shaman.’

Cassie laughed. ‘Don’t worry, no one’s going to make you beat drums or eat toadstools. You’re not a shaman but what is happening to you is a shamanic process . . . You do want to get better, don’t you? You want to live your life well?’

Fern nodded suspiciously.

‘The problem with most people is that they take all this stuff literally. The costumes are always metaphorical. It doesn’t matter what path you choose; shamanism is just one of many. And if you don’t get lost in all the rigmarole people attach to these things, then ultimately all the paths take you to the same place - back to yourself. A shaman’s just someone who has healed themselves and because of this, they can heal others.’

‘I know who I am,’ said Fern dismissively. ‘I don’t want to find myself.’

‘Sometimes you don’t have a choice,’ said Cassie, sighing.

‘What’s going on, Cassie?’ asked Fern, chewing on the remnants of a fingernail. ‘Why are there freaky things in my dreams and bruises on my chest and men following me?’

‘Bruises?’ asked Cassie, looking shocked.

Fern lowered her voice. ‘There’s something in my dreams. It’s getting closer and trying to draw me in further. When I was taking those pills I slept a lot and every time I
woke it was like someone was sitting on me, squashing my chest. There are bruises around my ankle too. Look... ' she lifted up her foot for Cassie to see. 'They appeared after a hand tried to pull me out of my dream into somewhere else. I'm scared, Cassie, I don't know what's happening.'

Cassie sat quietly for a moment. 'I don't know,' she said, shaking her head sadly. 'Someone wants to harm you. But the messages aren't clear to me. There are a mess of things from this life and from other lives too. Somehow they're woven together, though I can't see the pattern. But I do know you're waking up and that scares them. When you find your power they won't be able to stop you.'

'But who are they?' asked Fern, bewildered.

'I don't know. It should be one person, but it looks like there may be more... Oh Fern, I'm sorry. I can't help you with this, but you must resist these attacks at all costs.'

'I don't know how,' said Fern, groaning.

'You've got to stop running and you've got to stop hiding. Follow your intuition and you'll find a way.'

'But how can I? I don't even know what I'm running from! I don't even believe in this stuff!'

'Well, you'd better start believing, girl. Listen carefully. There are two ways of knowing. One's up here in your head. That's useful, but with this sort of thing it isn't enough. The other's in your heart. That's where your knowing needs to come from. You have to open your heart again and see what happens. It's about taking risks, Fern. Start trusting...'

Fern sighed. There was that word again. 'It's not that easy.'

'No, it isn't. And you've got a big journey ahead of you. Have you found the boy yet? The one you're travelling with?'

'Adam?' Fern felt a blush flooding her cheeks. 'I'm not going anywhere with him.'

'Why not?'

'He's a drunk. He's violent. He's... ' Fern stopped, not knowing how to explain that she was drawn to Adam but knew she mustn't let him get near her. There was no rational basis for this, just a knowledge in her heart. As if she and Adam had been here before.
'He is what he is,' said Cassie. 'In the end it's up to you.' She glanced uneasily at Fern's bruised ankle again. 'Listen, have you still got the stone I gave you? The lapis lazuli?'

Fern nodded; it was the only thing she had left.

'Good. Put it on. It helps to block psychic attacks.'

'What do you mean?' asked Fern, really alarmed now. 'What are psychic attacks?'

'Not every attack is physical,' said Cassie. 'Though as often as not the result is. A psychic attack is an amplified form of wishing someone ill. Sometimes we attack ourselves, sometimes the attack comes from elsewhere.'

Fern remembered reading about the poison darts in Trevor's article but couldn't imagine why anyone would want to hurt her.

'Ooh, heavens,' said Cassie, jumping up. 'I've forgotten the time. Hector will be looking for me.'

When Cassie had gone, Fern retrieved the necklace from the drawer and put it on again, feeling comforted by the weight of the stone against her skin. Then she headed to the dining room for lunch.

Leaving the dining room half an hour later Fern stepped into the corridor and looked up to see a familiar figure talking to a nurse at the reception desk. It was the Bloodhound! Heart thudding, she quickly stepped back into the dining room. Cautiously she peered out again just in time to see the nurse pointing up the corridor towards her ward. Fern waited a moment to see the Bloodhound walk away in that direction, then slipped out of the dining room, camouflaged by a group of patients, and quickly made her way to Ward C where Cassie was sitting up in bed looking radiantly happy and healthy. She had a visitor. A short round man, wearing a cheap suit and an embarrassed expression on his face. It was obvious he wanted to be somewhere else.

'Hello, Fern, this is my brother, Hector. I've told him all about you.'

'Hi,' said Hector, holding out his hand.

'Cassie, he's here,' said Fern, ignoring Hector. 'The Bloodhound.'

'Who?'

'The man who followed me after I left your place. He's here. I saw the nurse direct him to my ward.'
Cassie took a deep breath and waited for a moment, thinking, or maybe reaching out into the realms Fern didn't want to believe in. Then she looked at Fern, her face filled with concern. 'I don't know who he is, but I do know his intentions. I'm sorry, Fern, I know I told you to stop running but now I'm telling you to run. This isn't the time for a showdown. You're not strong enough to face him yet, or at least whatever it is that stands behind him, though honestly I don't know what I mean by that. . . Oh Fern, you have to get of here.' Cassie looked at her brother sitting by the bed, a confused expression on his face. 'Hector, I want you to slip out with her.'

Hector looked horrified.

'Don't worry, no one will notice. I'll make a scene and distract them.'

'I can't do this, Cassie. If they catch me. . .'  

'Oh shut up, Hector. Live dangerously for once. You'll love it.'

'But what will I do with her? I can't take her home.'

'Take her into town, she'll know where to go from there.'

'Cassie, this is ridiculous,' said Hector. 'Why don't I call the police? Or at least tell the nurses that the man's dangerous?'

'Don't be a fool, Hector. This is a psychiatric ward. No one believes anything we say. Now take that girl's hand and help her get out of here.'

'Okay, okay, but if I get caught they'll never let me keep my job,' Hector said miserably. 'It's bad enough having a mad sister, but colluding and assisting an inmate's escape, and one I don't even know. . .

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Hector, just shut up. Don't worry about him, Fern, he's got nerves of steel underneath that cowardly exterior.' Cassie got out of bed, took a deep breath and straightened her nightie. 'I'll go out and do my thing in front of the nurses' station. Fern, you get as close to the door as you can and then slip out with Hector just as soon as he gets the nurse to press that buzzer. It's not foolproof but it will have to do. Let's hope that man's already left for the day.'

But he hadn't. As Fern limped along beside Hector she saw the Bloodhound in the television room. Fern froze, terrified. At any second he could turn around and see her. Hector nudged her and she forced herself to move, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. She peered through the windows of the television room as they
passed, right behind the Bloodhound's back. Trevor was in there, and. Fern saw him look up and frowned at the Bloodhound, recognising an alien when he saw one.

'Looking for someone, are you, mate?' said Trevor calmly.

'Yeah, a chick called Fernanda. Though she goes by the name Fern. Know her?'

Trevor looked past the Bloodhound at Fern, his eyes blank. Please don't give me away, she prayed as Trevor rubbed his chin.

'Fernanda, Fernanda. . . ah yes, I think I've met her. Pretty young thing. The aliens are after her, though. I had to warn her. You know how it is. Hate to think what'll happen if they get her.'

'Know where she is?'

'Mmm, I think she might be in the exercise room. Here, why don't I take you down there,' said Trevor, leading the Bloodhound along the corridor in the opposite direction.

Thank you, Trevor, thought Fern, thank you. Her knees were trembling as Hector grabbed her hand and half pulled her along. Already she could hear Cassie's voice ringing out.

'I need to go now,' she announced to the nurse on duty. 'I have a message for the people. . . No, I won't go back to my ward. I want you to listen. Where's the doctor? I need the doctor. I want him to sign the papers. It's vital that I pass on my messages. The time is coming when human history will change more quickly than ever before. It's a time of great beauty, can't you see? The vibrations are getting higher and higher and lifting the people up with them. . . No, I won't be quiet. This is a message for the people!'

Hector winced. 'God, I hate that voice of hers,' he muttered under his breath. 'The trouble it gets her into. And me too, for that matter.'

Some of the patients were beginning to gather around Cassie who had already taken up her position at the nurses station. While Hector asked the nurse at the desk to let him out, Fern stood among them, trying to blend in and desperately afraid the Bloodhound would extricate himself from Trevor and find her. Cassie's ranting grew louder and more desperate, drawing more patients to her, along with the security guards and a nurse with a syringe.

'No, no,' she was shouting, 'don't touch me.'
Hector grabbed Fern's hand again and pulled her towards the door. 'Stand close,' he whispered.

Fern was almost blind with fear. In the distance she heard the buzzer. Heard Hector open the door. Heard his whisper. 'Come on, Fern.'

It took all her strength to respond, because the Bloodhound was walking back along the corridor, his eyes mercifully on Cassie and the security men. She couldn't tell if he looked up just as she slipped through the door, or if anyone else noticed as the door shut behind them.
Chapter Nine

Following the exit signs, Hector and Fern walked as fast as they could without running down one corridor after the next. Every few steps Fern couldn't resist glancing behind, expecting to see the Bloodhound.

'Stop looking around,' said Hector. 'You've got to pretend to be normal.'

'What?'

'I said, pretend to be normal.'

Normal! There was no way she looked normal, escaping from a psychiatric ward, barefoot and in dreary clothes at least three sizes too big. But suddenly she was excited. Life seemed worth living again. Fern felt the laugh rising all the way from her stomach, through her chest, into her throat and then bursting out her mouth.

'Shut up,' Hector hissed. 'We're not out yet.'

Fern laughed again. She couldn't help it.

Hector rolled his eyes. 'Jesus, you're as bad as Cassie.'

'You know, I think Cassie was right. You're loving this.'

'Rubbish,' said Hector, smiling in spite of himself.

Outside, in stark contrast to the chilled air-conditioned ward, the heat was a solid force blocking Fern's way. And it was so busy: traffic and people everywhere. Fern stopped for a moment, trying to orient herself. But Hector was impatient, still looking back for imagined security guards and nurses and the Bloodhound.

'Come on,' he said, taking her arm. 'The car's this way.'

The footpath was hot under Fern's feet, burning her soft soles, which were unused to the concrete.

Hector had the messiest car Fern had ever seen. It stank too, of greasy food wrappers and spilled drinks. She screwed up her nose. Horrible.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I don't usually have passengers.'

'Do you ever eat anything other than takeaway?' asked Fern.

'Not really. I can't cook and Cassie's food is too wholesome for me - buckwheat everything, and bloody pulses. It's enough to drive you nuts.'
Fern smiled. She could imagine Cassie might get on your nerves if you had to live with her. 'What do you do?'

Hector looked surprised, as if no one had ever asked that question before. 'Me? I'm a meteorologist. I predict the weather.' He laughed. 'It's ironic really. As Cassie says, we're both prophets, but she and her bloody muse are more accurate than I'll ever be with my computers and data and all the information I feed in about cloud patterns and humidity levels.' Hector started the car and switched on the indicator, waiting for a break in the traffic leaving the car park. 'Thing is,' he said, 'they all believe me and no one believes Cassie. Mine's a respectable science and she gets put in a mental institution.' He glanced at Fern. 'Not fair, hey. Whoever said the world was sane?'

'Not as mad as that place,' said Fern, leaning back in the seat and feeling herself relax. She was out of there. Hallelujah!

'So, where am I taking you?'

'Oxford Street, the Surry Hills end if that's okay.'

Hector pulled out and drove towards Oxford Street, but they were soon stopped by an amber light. Hector drummed his fingers on the wheel and checked his watch, muttering about being late back from lunch.

Fern looked up, and straight into the Bloodhound's eyes as he crossed the road in front of them. She saw the flicker of recognition and gazed at him in open fear. 'That's him,' she whispered.

'Hell, that's blown it.'

The lights turned green but the traffic was bumper to bumper and they had no choice but to inch their way along with everyone else, and head-to-head with the Bloodhound as he walked along the footpath beside them.

This was too much for Hector. 'My God, what if he comes looking for me? . . . He knows the car now: if he gets the rego it'll be a cinch to look me up. Oh dear, I won't be able to sleep at nights.'

Fern looked at Hector. At his neat grey suit, shiny at the elbows and too tight around the shoulders, too short at the wrists. Too tight round his beer belly as well. And the trousers, lifting high up his calves as he drove, revealing short brown socks and pudgy white calves. A shirt, a tie, thinning hair slicked down across his head. He was the
sort of nobody person she'd always scorned. She wondered how he dressed on the weekend but couldn't imagine him in a tracksuit or jeans. He was nothing like Cassie in looks or character, and yet he'd been brave helping her like this. He'd stepped out of his comfort zone and she was grateful.

'Hector, he's not after you. And even if he does look you up, just tell him you dropped me in Oxford Street, which is exactly what you're going to do.'

'This is the last time I do anything for Cassie,' said Hector, not listening. 'I mean it. The very last time.'

Fern sighed. 'I'm sorry, Hector, I'll get out as soon as I can. Okay?'

'No! You can't do that,' said Hector, looking horrified. 'You don't know what he'll do to you. I wouldn't be able to sleep with the guilt of it.'

Fern smiled. 'Okay, I'll stay until Oxford Street, but stop worrying. Honestly, there's nothing he can do.'

The car inched along for several minutes that felt like hours. When the traffic finally cleared and Hector put his foot down on the accelerator, Fern had to resist a crazy impulse to blow a raspberry at the Bloodhound as they shot off.

'Thank God for that,' said Hector. 'My nerves are completely shot. Look, my hands are shaking. Ooh, this is exciting.'

Everything looked different in the daylight, but near the bottom of Oxford Street, Fern thought she recognised the street where the bar was. 'You can drop me here.'

'Here? But where are you going? . . .No, don't tell me, I don't want to know. If he questions me it's best to be ignorant.'

Fern leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. 'Thanks, Hector. I really do appreciate what you've done for me.'

As he drove off, Fern was almost overwhelmed by loneliness. The relief she'd felt at getting out of that place was quickly replaced by uncertainty about what to do next. And she couldn't work out how the Bloodhound had found her. Only two people had known where she was - no, three: her mother, Claire and Cassie. Fern couldn't believe any of them would have told him. She walked towards the bar, retracing the steps she'd taken that night. How long ago she wasn't sure exactly, only a few days, but so much had changed since then.
There it was. A nondescript building, the walls covered in graffiti, a tiny sign saying *The Underworld*, and a red metal door which was locked. The place existed after all; it wasn't just a figment of her imagination. It was mid-afternoon, so the club wouldn't be open. Still, there might be someone about. She pressed the doorbell and waited.

After a minute the door opened and a guy peered out, wearing a t-shirt that was too small and muscles that were too big. He looked her slowly up and down, then raised an eyebrow. 'Two problems,' he said. 'One, you gotta be over eighteen. And two, there's a dress code. You ever heard of style? Nah, reckon not. Oh, and shoes are an essential item. Hang on, there's a third problem, or is that a fourth? We're shut.' He closed the door in Fern's face.

'Wait,' she shouted, pressing the doorbell again.

The door opened just briefly. 'Piss off.'

Determined, Fern pressed it again.

'What the fuck?' he said, opening the door.

'I need to see Shamesh. Tell him it's Fern. He'll want to see me.'

'Yeah right,' said the tough guy, emphatically swinging the door shut.

Fern waited. After a few minutes the door opened yet again. This time it was Shamesh.

'Ah, Fern, you're back. I knew you'd make it.'

'Make it! Do you know where I've been?' said Fern, her anger battling with the relief she felt at finding him.

'In a cave, I imagine, learning some lessons and awakening your power, or you would have come back sooner.' He bowed and swept his arm in a gesture of welcome.

'Do come in.'

Fern stepped through the door and carefully followed Shamesh down the steep flight of stairs. Last time she'd rolled down these stairs and landed in a heap at the bottom. It was a wonder she'd survived.

The empty bar looked sad, with just a drizzle of daylight slipping in through barred windows high up near the ceiling. No music, no people, no soft warm lighting; how bland it seemed in the daytime, its mystery dissolved.

Shamesh turned towards Fern. 'Would you like a drink?'
'I'm not staying. I just came to get my bag.'

'Ah, but first I have something to give you, and before I do that I would like a coffee. Can I make you one too?'

Fern took a deep breath, trying to quell her impatience. 'A coffee would be very nice, thank you.'

She watched Shamesh preparing the coffees, heard the hiss of steam as he warmed the milk. His movements were methodical and self-contained, yet graceful, like a slow dance, no sense of haste. His chiselled features and lean body were flawless. He was beautiful. For a moment Fern let herself imagine making love to him.

Shamesh looked at her quizzically and too late she remembered his skill at mind reading. She felt the blush flooding her cheeks.

He laughed. 'Don't worry, young women are not my area of interest.'

An image of the muscle-bound thug at the door flashed into Fern's mind. 'Are you telling me you're gay?'

He smiled. 'I'm telling you that I'm not interested in young women.' He handed her a latte, a serviette tied carefully around the hot glass, the spiralling pattern on the creamy top formed perfectly.

'Why do you wear dark glasses all the time?' she asked.

'Because some people find my eyes disconcerting.'

'Do they always have that strange light in them?'

Shamesh took off his glasses and looked at Fern. No light shone from them this time and nothing pushed down into the crown of her head. They were just blue eyes, though still the piercing sort, and she felt they were looking into places she didn't want anyone to go. Troubled, she turned away.

'See,' said Shamesh, putting the glasses back on. 'I take them off and quickly become a social outcast.' He reached into his pocket and drew out a stone. 'This is for you,' he said, handing it to her. 'The tempest stone. Pietersite is its scientific name, though its nature is the storm. This will help you on your journey, showing you how to break free of the contracts you have made in the past, in all of your pasts. It will reveal the power of the spirit world - and your own power. That's the hardest one for most people, coming to terms with just how powerful they are.'
Fern held the stone in her hand and gazed into the amazing richness it contained, whirlpools of colour, oceans, rivers and land masses snaking through it a world in itself. She could feel in it a power that was beyond sentiment, beyond good or evil; it just was. As Fern held the stone, two parts of her were battling. The part who felt and knew in a way that was beyond words, was telling her she must break free of the past, within this life and spanning all her lives through many thousands of years. The other part was the rational one who denied anything she couldn't see. For this side of Fern, life began at birth and ended at death, not spiralling in endless cycles like the seasons: birth, death and renewal, forever and ever.

Shamesh sat down, sipped his coffee and watched Fern staring into the stone's depths. 'This is a stone of vision,' he told Fern. 'Be careful how you use it.'

Feeling dizzy, Fern quickly put the stone down. It was too much for her, she could feel its energy swirling around her head, and there was terror in it too the same terror that sought her in her dreams. As she sipped the froth from her latte, swallowing its spiral pattern, she felt as if she was following it inwards on an adventure she hadn't asked for, into her very depths. 'What's happening to me, Shamesh?'

'It's an initiation, if you like. A time when you let go of the past and learn new rules for living. It isn't supposed to be easy, though for some it is easier than others.'

Fern sighed. 'Mine's not one of the easy ones, is it?'

'No, it isn't.' He paused, as if uncertain how to go on. 'You people come to earth heavy with the karma from your past lives and carrying the genetic inheritance of the family you choose to incarnate with. Then there's the environment you grow up in and the events that imprint themselves within you. All in all, there's a lot to clear. Most of you never do it, though that's changing now. Some do it instantaneously, but others are destined to peel it away layer by layer. And you are one of them.'

'Why?'

'Firstly, you're carrying too much grief and fear, and that's left you too weak to withstand a sudden transition. And secondly, for you to become a healer of others you have to understand and experience the processes they are undergoing.'

'What if I don't want to be a healer?'

'Then you won't be. Any more questions?"
Lots, thought Fern, so many she barely knew where to begin. 'You refer to us as you people,' she said. 'What does that make you?'

He smiled. 'I am Shamesh,' he said, draining his coffee. 'Now listen carefully. There are things you need to know before you venture out again. Your enemy is an ancient spirit, working against human evolution. You've had your head down, Fern, you were betrayed and you shut yourself off. For three lifetimes you've been closed. It kept you safe but neither could you live well. Now you need to face the thing that shut you down and you need to open up again.'

He stood up and paced back and forth along the length of the bar. 'This is not without its dangers. You open up and he'll notice you. He'll come for you.' He stopped for a moment and a look of concern passed over his features. 'Though that may have already happened. It seems he is already on your trail.' Shamesh took off his glasses and stared at Fern, reading her around the edges and all the way through until she squirmed.

'Can you stop that? It's making me uncomfortable.'

'You've already opened somewhat. Perhaps he's understood who you really are.'

'Who am I? Everyone else seems to know except me. Couldn't you fill me in,' she asked sarcastically.

Shamesh took her hand. 'You are an ancient soul. Once you were very powerful.'

'What do you mean? How was I powerful?'

'Power lies in the ability to live well, in action, not in reaction to events. And its source is the invisible world, if you like - the one most people dismiss. There is power in reason, and power in intuition. And when the two merge there is great power.' Feeling Fern's attention wander, Shamesh paused. 'This is confusing, I know, but please try to concentrate. It is very important. Intent is the wielder of power. It can be used for good or for ill. Your enemy chose to use his power for ill, but he is not as strong as he might be, for the greatest power of all flows through the heart.' Shamesh leaned forward. 'This was your power, Fern. Your enemy knew that and over lifetimes he worked on you and those closest to you, building grief and pain to such levels that your heart was forced to shut.'

As he spoke, Fern felt the dizziness again, then a stabbing pain in her chest and an ache that was heavy with sadness. A sense of despair so encompassing, she had to fight
to stop herself buckling under its weight.

'Yes, you are carrying it still,' said Shamesh, his tone gentle and soothing. 'You will find your power again but it will not be easy. In the meantime there are things you must learn and they are going to hurt. I can only tell you a portion of them. But in this lifetime your enemy has incarnated as your father.'

'My father?' Fern stared incredulously at Shamesh, trying to read his face, to see that this was all a joke. But he was serious. 'Which one?' she asked.

'Your natural father.'

Fern was confused. She had never met her father. She didn't even know his name, and seldom thought about him. Any memories she had were buried deep within her and yet to surface.

'It is difficult to believe, I know. But for your own safety you must believe me. Before your birth there was a prophecy. Your father is trying to break that prophecy and he believes the only way he can do that is to kill you. Until recently he only knew you as his daughter but he may now have recognised that you are also his ancient enemy. This means he will double his efforts. By running you give him power: now you must turn around and face him.'

Fern could feel the fear creeping in once again and taking her over, only this time it was manifesting as anger. 'How do I do that? I don't even know who he is. He's just a blank space on my birth certificate, a faceless bastard who made me and then left.'

'You will find a way. Tell me, has he entered your dreams?'

'I don't know,' said Fern and tried to describe the malevolence she'd felt in her sleep while she was in hospital.

'Yes, he's breaking through. This is dangerous. . . Fern, if you see something in your dreams, something frightening, you mustn't run away. That will give it power. If it is too much for you, then turn around and calmly reject it. Otherwise you must go towards it and touch it. Have you got a staff yet?'

'Well, yes, but only in a dream. The Bear Handler gave me one.'

'Ah, good. Take it with you wherever you go. You will need it.'

'It was only a dream, Shamesh. I don't have a staff. It's not going to rescue me from anything.'
'Trust me.'

There was that word again. Fern was sick of it. Everyone wanted her to trust them, but they weren't the ones being chased by Bloodhounds and they didn't have ancient spirits attacking them in their sleep. She didn't want to trust anyone and it was beginning to dawn on her that she wasn't safe anywhere.

'No,' she said and drained her glass, her head spinning from the coffee, her third for the day which meant she probably wouldn't be able to sleep. The thought crossed her mind that she didn't have anywhere to sleep anyway, but she pushed it aside. All she needed was her bag. There was money in it and clothes and a pair of shoes. Everything that said: 'This is Fern.' She would get changed in the toilets here and then at last she would be herself again.

'I don't have your bag,' said Shamesh, reading her mind.

'You're kidding! What have you done with it?'

'I asked Adam to look after it. Things tend to go astray here.'

Despite herself, Fern felt her heart beating harder. She ignored it, letting her anger rise instead and overwhelm her confusion. 'Adam? That drunken slob you introduced me to?'

Shamesh nodded. 'That's the one.'

'You trusted him with my bag?'

'I did.'

'Oh that's just great. Where do I find him?' she asked grumpily.

Shamesh pulled out a fountain pen and miniature notebook and wrote down an address in a beautiful flowing cursive. 'There, I imagine he will be at home. He will be your companion on this journey.'

'No he won't.'

'Your enemies are strong, Fern; you should accept all the help you can get. And it won't be as one-sided as you might expect. Adam is on his own journey - perhaps you can help him.'

'Sure, I can add him to all the others. A madwoman who can't stop prophesying, a gay bartender, or whatever you are, an imaginary bear and her handler, and now an alcoholic trying to redeem himself. What do you reckon my chances of succeeding are?'
Shamesh burst out laughing and slapped his thighs. 'I reckon your chances just
improved.'

Fern stuffed the piece of paper into her pocket and stood up. Shamesh held out
his hand and in spite of her ill temper she took it. It was warm and firm and she could
feel his strength. If she listened to her heart she would trust this man.

'Good luck, Fern,' he said. 'Here,' he added, holding out the tempest stone. 'Don't
forget this. It will provide the visions you need in order to remember.'

'Thanks,' said Fern, putting it in her pocket too.

'Adam will be a good companion. You each have something the other doesn't -
and you are both in great need of a friend. But you must avoid slipping into Adam's own
nightmares or letting him drag you along with his idealism, something not even Adam
knows he has. Not yet, anyway.'

'I told you, I'm not going anywhere with Adam,' said Fern, turning away.

Shamesh watched Fern limping up the stairs. 'One more thing,' he called out.

Halfway up the stairs Fern stopped and looked down at Shamesh.

'Remember, your journey is to heal yourself, not the world. The world will
follow.'

Fern scowled. Here were more cryptic words for her to untangle. She was tired
of being treated like a child. He was just a man who was too old for tight jeans; a
manager of a seedy bar; a little man who had no hold over her. She turned away again,
not willing to give him anything, not even a smile.
Chapter Ten

When Fern left Shamesh it was late afternoon and the sky was even heavier with smoke than before. Signs of Christmas were everywhere: tinsel in shop windows, tinny carols crackling over the traffic, and Christmas trees heavy with decorations, framed in windows. People rushed from one place to another, ticking off mental lists as they went. It was an energy that was hard to resist, a whirlpool that caught you and sucked you in. Stopping outside a newsagent's she checked the date on the paper: Friday, December eighteen. Only a week until Christmas. The thought sent her into a panic. She had nowhere to go. She couldn't go to Claire's, or home to Adelaide. They'd just send her back to the hospital. And she didn't even know if people would be looking for her. After all, she was an escapee from the psychiatric ward.

At least she was free. The knowledge of that freedom lightened her step but the tempest stone weighed heavily in her pocket, banging against her thigh as she walked. She didn't want to touch it again and risk that dizziness. She didn't want to admit that a stone could be anything more than a stone, that it could contain the past or act as a gateway to it. How could a stone prompt her memory?

Nervously, she scanned the crowds, afraid of the Bloodhound or whoever else might be out looking for her. But there was no sign of the Bloodhound and no one else showed any interest. Even barefoot and in these stupid clothes she was just one person among many. Usually people noticed her, especially men, but today, wearing these dreadful stretchy slacks and shirt, she might as well have been invisible.

Adam's address led her to a huge old terrace house divided into three flats: upstairs, ground level and basement. Fern pressed the buzzer to the basement and waited. There was no response. Impatiently she pressed it again. Shamesh had said Adam would be home and Fern hadn't even questioned how he knew this, or what she would do if he were wrong. She pressed the buzzer three more times in rapid succession long presses that brought no response. She would have to wait.

Fern had been walking on her ankle for the first time without crutches and now it throbbed angrily. She sat down on the steps, caressed by a mottled, shifting pattern of
shade from the giant plane trees that lined the street. The stone beneath her was warm from the sun. Leaning against the wall, Fern listened to the hum and roar of the traffic, the wail of sirens, and among all this the shrill calls of the birds in the trees. Fern always found it amazing that even right here in the city there existed stubborn pockets of nature. Maybe there were more birds coming in from the desert - refugees, like the rabbits and the country people. Towns shut down one after the other, with no water for years and then massive storms that flooded everything and washed away what crops were left; then the dry again, months or years of it, dust and wind and raging bushfires.

Fern felt like a refugee too, with nowhere to go and nothing to call her own until she retrieved her bag. Exhausted, she closed her eyes and let her mind wander, roaming freely until she slipped into a dream, glimpsing a flash of coloured robes, dark skin and fear.

"What you want, girl?"

Fern jumped awake, trembling, confused. A gigantic Maori man was peering down at her. His arms were at least twice as thick as her thighs, the muscles, worked on and taut, could crush her in a second, and yet his face didn't look dangerous. His expression was suspicious but not unkind. He ran his eyes up and down her arms, no doubt looking for marks, something to explain why she was sitting on these stairs.

"You alright?" he said at last. "You were twitching all over the place."

Fern nodded. "I'm waiting for someone. Adam. Do you know him? The guy in the basement flat."


"I rang," said Fern, "over and over."

"I rang," said Fern, "over and over."

The man smiled. "He'll be asleep. Here,' he said, putting a key in the lock. "I'll let you in."

Fern followed the man through the door into a dim hallway lit by a dusty chandelier, with only one of the bulbs working. It looked out of place surrounded by grimy walls and a torn lino floor. This wasn't somewhere she'd want to live.

The man followed her gaze and spat. "Bastard landlord, never does anything here. Adam's downstairs. Just bang on the door."

"Thanks." Fern made her way down the stairs and into the darkness of the
basement, running her hands over the walls for a light switch without success. The stairwell stank of garbage and the sweet stuffy smell of mice or rats. She knocked on the door and waited, then knocked again, louder this time. Eventually she heard movement behind the door. Someone fiddled with the lock and the door opened a little way. Adam peered into the darkness, puffy-faced and bleary-eyed.

'Hi, Adam,' said Fern. 'I think we've already met.'

Adam blinked, confused, and ran his hand through his hair, which was standing up in a riotous mess. 'Yeah, right... So what are you doing here?'

'I came for my bag.'

'Your what?'

Fern felt the panic rising inside her. What if he didn't have it? 'Shamesh said you were looking after my bag.'

The understanding reached Adam's eyes. 'Oh yeah.' He opened the door further, and Fern tried not to notice that he had on nothing but a pair of faded boxer shorts. 'Come in.'

The room was almost as dark as the stairwell, and stank of dirty socks, old alcohol and sweat. Adam pulled up the blind, letting a slither of light through from the footpath above. He pushed open the window, swearing as two crushed beer cans and a syringe rolled in through the bars, landing on the table.

'Bloody arseholes throw their rubbish down here.' He groaned. 'Shit, I've got a killer hangover.'

Fern watched as Adam opened the fridge, pulled out a two-litre bottle of tomato juice, poured it into a dirty glass, added Tabasco, then Worcestershire sauce, and drank it down in one.

'Ahh. Good stuff this, makes your eyeballs sweat.' Then, seeming to remember he had a guest: 'Want one?'

'No, thanks.' Fern paused. 'A glass of water would be good though.'

Adam rinsed a dirty glass, filled it with tap water and handed it over before pouring himself another tomato juice.

'Thanks.' Fern took a sip from the smudgy glass. She could smell the traces of last night's whisky blending with the tepid water.
Suddenly curious, Fern looked around the dingy room, searching for something that would tell her more about Adam. There was a double bed with a quilted cover, the stitching gone in most places; clashing floral curtains in a faded print hung crookedly over the window. The floor was worn lino, lifting up around the cracks. There was a second door, which Fern assumed led into the bathroom. And in one corner was the kitchen: a bar fridge with a television perched on top, a microwave, a kettle, and a small bench cupboard painted lurid orange. The table was pushed up against the window. On it were a bottle, glasses, an empty takeaway container, a mess of papers and a laptop. Beside the table was an overflowing bin.

Adam followed Fern's gaze and shrugged defensively. 'It's a shit hole, but it suits me.'

Fern nodded. It was a nothing room. There was nothing of Adam here, except maybe the guitar propped up in one corner. She felt her curiosity aroused even more. He was young but his eyes were old, like someone who'd seen too much too soon. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot, but the pupils were a deep brown, contrasting with his blond hair. His eyes made her nervous. She couldn't read them.

Adam was curious too. Fern was so tiny he could have crushed her with his hands but instead he felt an irrational urge to protect her. She was pretty, with huge round wary eyes, but she looked so young, like a helpless half-starved child. Close up, though, he could see Fern was older than she first appeared, late teens at least. And not helpless either. There was a strength about her that made him nervous. She was holding herself upright, her shoulders tense, the muscles in her neck taut, all her fight-or-flight reflexes on red alert.

'So,' he said, realising he'd been staring too long. 'Where have you been?'

'Just around,' said Fern.

'Shamesh said you'd come. He also said I had to stick with you.'

'Well, he was wrong,' said Fern crossly.

'That's what I thought,' said Adam quickly. 'But he also said I needed company. That we needed to stick together.' He stopped. He was nervous and saying too much and Fern still looked ferocious, making him want to laugh. He resisted the impulse, knowing that would be a disaster. He needed to placate her but placating wasn't his style. It would
be so much easier if she just took her bag and left.

He went on quickly. 'Look, I told him I thought it was bullshit, but there's something about Shamesh, you know. He's a weirdo but he gets things right.' He pulled Fern's pack out from under the table. 'Here's your bag. Take it. Shit, I don't care one way or the other where you go. I don't know why I made Shamesh a promise to stick with you.'

Fern picked up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. Adam was blushing and that made him seem safer somehow, softer and less certain. She wanted to trust Shamesh; she wanted to trust them both. But Fern was too tired and frightened to trust her instincts. No one knew she was here. Adam could murder her and chop her up into little pieces and no one would ever know, except maybe Shamesh, and the man who had let her into the building. She felt disconnected from all that was ordinary and routine. And she knew that whatever choice she made now would shift the scales one way or the other. There would be consequences and not just for her - for Adam too.

Adam watched Fern chewing her nails. Suddenly he really wanted her to stay. 'You know, when you're on the run from someone . . .'

Fern gave Adam a sharp look. What did he know?

'Don't worry, I can't read minds,' said Adam, seeing the suspicion on her face. 'Shamesh filled me in on some of what's been going on, and anyway, it's not so hard to pick someone who's being hunted. There's an air about them. You can smell the fear.' Adam hesitated, worried that he'd said the wrong thing again. 'Anyway, it's good to stop and think things through. Kind of gather up your defences and work out what's going on. Otherwise you make mistakes and eventually you get caught.' He paused, wondering who he was trying to convince. 'What I'm trying to say is you're safe here. Okay?'

Fern tried to smile but it came out like a grimace; she could feel it distorting her face. Adam was trying, harder than he wanted to, and she needed to give him something back. It was getting late and Fern had no idea what she would do when she walked out of here. He was right, too: she needed to think things through, to gather her strength and make plans. And if she took Shamesh's advice, she needed to turn around and hunt the hunter. Not a thought she relished.

She was intrigued by Adam, standing there all vulnerable in just his boxer shorts.
He had a great body: a clearly defined six-pack and muscly legs, the calves covered with curly blond hair. He didn't look well though. The alcohol hadn't reached his middle yet, but there was already a softening at the edges. And his skin was pale and sickly looking, as if he hadn't seen the sun for a long time.

'Well?' asked Adam, feeling naked under her gaze.

'Okay,' said Fern, putting her bag down again. 'I'll stay for a bit.'

Adam nodded, both relieved and irritated. 'Suppose I'd better get some clothes on,' he said, suddenly embarrassed. 'Make yourself a coffee while I have a shower.'

Fern didn't want another coffee but she was impatient to get changed back into her own things. She dug about in her pack and found fresh clothes: undies, a bra that fitted, a t-shirt, and her favourite skirt, the one with the dragonfly embroidered across the front. When she'd changed she rolled the dowdy clothes her mother had bought into a ball and crammed them into the bin with the pizza crusts and coffee grounds.

When Adam came out of the bathroom he stopped in his tracks, amazed at how different Fern looked with clothes that showed her shape. Hers was a kind of fragile beauty that made Adam want to tiptoe around it. So fine. Realising he was staring, Adam blushed again and then felt a surge of anger at how quickly Fern had got through his defences. 'You hungry?' he asked, tersely.

Fern nodded, unsure what to do next; she sensed Adam was angry, but didn't know what she'd done wrong.

'I'll get some supplies,' said Adam, grabbing his keys and wallet.

'I'll come,' said Fern.

'No, you stay here. It's best not to show your face for a bit.'

Fern nodded again, feeling an immediate sense of relief. When Adam had gone, she looked through her bag more carefully. Everything was exactly where she'd left it. She pulled out the supplies Cassie had given her and took a drop of Rescue Remedy. Almost immediately the tension left her neck and shoulders, a release that made her feel at once more lucid and sleepy. The feather was still there, so she hadn't imagined that great bird. Even now if she concentrated she could feel the places on her upper body where the wings had moved. How strange the world had become. Almost overnight it had transformed from a black and white place of logic and reason into a magical world.
filled with possibilities and a different way of knowing. She felt more alive than she had for many years.

Suddenly remembering the tempest stone, Fern pulled the trousers from Adam's bin and retrieved it from the pocket. She looked at it warily, aware that it was dazzling her somehow, drawing her into its rich veins of colour, rivers and islands, swirling strands. It was like the earth, yet it didn't look solid, at least not on the inside.

As Fern was about to put the stone in her bag, something happened that stopped her in her tracks. First the dizziness descended again, and then her vision filled with soldiers in a uniform she didn't recognise, knowing only that it belonged in the distant past. Their helmets where white with a blue pattern, a nose plate reaching down the middle, their tunics blue and white. She felt the soldiers holding her arms while she struggled, their grip painful. But there was something else, she knew, blocked from her view. She needed to see it but couldn't at first. Then, as she lifted her head, she caught a glimpse of a man, and the terror of his intent made her drop the stone as if it were on fire, burning through her palm.

It was hot in Adam's bedsit, but Fern was shaking, her heart racing. She couldn't explain what had just happened or comprehend the power that had drawn her into the stone, opening up pictures in her head.

Fern had always used music to calm herself. Now she pulled out her pipe and for the first time in months held it to her mouth and played, quietly at first, afraid of the notes that broke the silence around her. Then louder, more firmly as her fingers loosened. She played and played, mainly Celtic tunes she'd learned at school, weaving the notes together, slipping in and out of the music, the haunting tunes settling her until she lost herself in the playing and forgot to be afraid.

Something, a noise or a movement, made Fern look up. Adam was standing in the doorway, staring hard at her again. Confused, she stopped mid-tune with a jolting off-key note that broke the spell she'd woven. She felt herself blushing as though she had revealed too much.

"What instrument is that?"

'A pipe... well, actually it's called a tin whistle. It's a Celtic instrument. I heard a woman playing it when I was a kid and loved the way it sounded, so I bought one with
my pocket money and taught myself.'

Adam had never heard of this instrument that made notes so fragile they rose up
and hovered gently, before being dispersed by the tiniest breeze. 'You play well,' he told
her, because something needed to be said, and she did, she played with her heart. But the
music destroyed him. Those notes played havoc with his own heart, tugging at the
armour he'd surrounded it with.

'Thanks,' said Fern, as Adam reached out into the stairwell and picked up the
shopping bags that held a six-pack of beer, a bottle of wine, milk, ice-cream, a tin of
peaches and a family-size pizza.

'Here,' he said dumping the pizza on the table. 'Dinner. Get started, it's probably
cold by now.'

'How much do I owe you?' asked Fern, thrusting some money at him.

'This one's on me,' said Adam, trying to stuff the ice-cream into the tiny freezer in
the bar fridge.

'I'd rather pay my share.'

'Look, I'll pay for this meal, you do the next. It's easier this way. Okay?'

Fern hesitated, before putting the money back in her wallet. She didn't know how
she felt about Adam's assumption that there would be a next time. 'Okay. . . thanks,' she
added, hoping she didn't sound surly.

Adam opened a beer with his teeth and drank it straight out of the bottle. 'Ah,
that's good. You want one?'

'Yes please.'

They sat at the table eating soggy ham and pineapple pizza, Fern matching Adam
for every slice. She loved the sensation of filling her belly, loved washing it down with
cold beer. Perhaps it was hope that was giving her an appetite again, or simply the need
to replace the weight she had lost.

'Shit, you can eat,' said Adam after a while. 'I'd better go out and get another one.'

'No, no, I've had enough,' said Fern, restraining herself from reaching out for the
last piece. 'You have that.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah.'
'Here, have another beer.'

Fern sipped on her second beer, already feeling the effects working their way up her legs, turning her feet, her calves, her thighs into a weary weak jelly. But she felt better, stronger; it was wonderful to be out of that madhouse, with real food in her stomach and no one chasing her for now at least. Even if she was sitting in a basement flat with a stranger, even if no one in the world knew where she was, just for the moment life seemed almost normal.

'You want to talk about this bloke who's chasing you?' asked Adam.

At the mention of the Bloodhound, Fern instantly felt the tension return to her shoulders, her heart thudding and her brain racing. She took a swig of beer. 'Okay, I'll tell you some of it. But I'm warning you, it doesn't make sense.'

Adam opened his fourth beer and poured Fern a glass of lukewarm riesling. She told him about getting stuck in her attic for months on end. 'I don't know why,' she said, her eyes filling with tears. 'Something happened inside me and I couldn't manage anything anymore. I don't know . . . Maybe it was depression or a breakdown.'

'Yeah,' said Adam, 'it happens.'

Then she told him about the landlord breaking down the door, her encounter with Cassie, the Bloodhound chasing her and how she met Shamesh, although she left out most of what happened at the Underworld she wasn't sure what Adam would think of power animals and bear handlers. Fern stopped and took a sip of wine, her mouth dry with the effort of talking like this. She was aware that her voice had again become a monotone, reflecting the hopelessness of her life in the attic, and then later in the hospital, drugged and despondent.

Then she told Adam about her time in the psychiatric ward - only a few days but it had felt like an eternity. Fern shuddered at the memory of that dead space she'd inhabited and the nightmares that had forced their way through it. She avoided mentioning the dreams, instead telling him about the Bloodhound finding her this afternoon, and how Cassie and Hector had helped her escape. As she talked, Adam kept his eyes fixed on her. Not questioning, not judging. She was grateful for that.

'And here I am,' she said, flashing Adam an uncertain smile. 'Picking up my bag.'

So far Adam had followed the gist of it. As far as he was concerned, it was
straightforward: Fern was being stalked by a pervert. It was obvious, though, that she wasn't telling him everything, and neither had Shamesh. He would find out the rest, but for now he'd work with what he knew.

'You think you've shaken this bloodhound guy?'
'There's no way he can know where I am.'
Adam nodded and leaned back in his chair. 'So what next?'
'I have to visit my mother.'

Adam raised his eyebrows questioningly and Fern realised there was another whole story there. She felt weighed down by back stories and wished for a moment she could take a sharp knife and slice through all her ties and connections: to people and places; to memories, hidden and conscious; to fears, to guilt and to duty. Just sever the lot, and then she would fly, weightless like a balloon, letting the wind take her where it would.

Fern sighed. 'Not the one who committed me to hospital. I'm adopted. This one's my birth mother. She'll know things about my father that I need to find out.'
'Such as?'
'His name. And where he is. I have to find him,' she added, though she couldn't think of anything she'd less like to do.
'But what's your father got to do with this?' asked Adam, confused.
This was another story, one she didn't know yet. 'According to Shamesh, he wants me dead.'

Adam's beer stopped midway to his mouth. 'Shit... Why?'
'I don't know, something about a prophecy. Shamesh wasn't clear about that.'
Adam let that pass; prophecies belonged to a realm he didn't want to explore.

There was nothing you could do about a prophecy. 'So what's the connection between your father and the Bloodhound?'
'I don't know.'
'This is crazy stuff, you know that?'

Fern shrugged and looked away, wondering why she felt so disappointed at his reaction. After all, it wasn't surprising. She'd known he wouldn't believe her. Now she was relieved that she hadn't told him the rest of it.
'Sorry,' said Adam, seeing Fern retreat and realising he'd said the wrong thing. 'I didn't mean you're crazy or anything. I believe you, really I do.'

Fern poured herself another wine.

'Look, there's one thing I don't understand,' said Adam. 'Why are you looking for your dad? If he wants you dead, wouldn't you be better off going into hiding or something?'

'Yeah, you'd think so, but Shamesh told me to turn around. He said that running makes you lose your power.'

Adam nodded; Shamesh was right. Though sometimes there wasn't any choice., sometimes you had to run.

'Where does your mum live?'

'Katoomba.'

'Okay, not so far then. Katoomba it is. We'll head there tomorrow, and after that we'll go hunt down your father.'

'We?'

'Shit yeah, you need a bodyguard. . . Hey, how about some ice-cream?'

Fern was touched that Adam had offered to come. He didn't owe her anything. She watched him hunting around for a tin opener, swearing when he couldn't find one and picking up what looked like a hunting knife instead. He jabbed it into the top of the peaches, then cut around the lid in jagged cuts.

'So how about you?' she said.

Adam stopped spooning out the peaches and looked at her quizzically. 'Me?'

'Yeah. What's your story?' asked Fern, watching him shut down as the question sank in.

'Me? I'm nothing. A nobody. You don't want to know about me.'

Fern smiled. 'Okay then, mystery man,' she said, draining her glass. 'Can I have three scoops?'
Chapter Eleven

Early the next morning, Fern paused at the door and looked back at Adam as he lay snoring on the floor. She felt bad running away like this when Adam had been so kind, feeding her and letting her sleep in his bed while he slept on the floor. It wasn't as if she wanted to go back out there alone and risk being spotted by the Bloodhound or murdered by her father. But, more immediately, she was afraid of meeting her mother. Terrified of what she might find if her mother opened the door, and just as terrified of having the same door slammed in her face. Still, Fern needed to do this alone. It wasn't the sort of thing you shared with a stranger. And anyway, it wasn't fair to involve Adam in her story when he obviously had some serious issues of his own.

As she opened the door, Adam rolled over and started muttering, his arms waving around as if warding something off. 'No, no, no, get away,' he shouted as Fern quickly shut the door behind her and ran up to the ground floor.

Outside, the air was cool and relatively fresh, though smoke was already building in the sky, taking the glare from the sun but not its heat. By midday she would be choking on the smoke and the sun would be a gentle orange orb, like a fading torch. The morning was quiet, apart from the dawn chorus of birds ringing out invisibly from the trees that lined the street and the occasional sound of a siren. Everywhere there was evidence of the night before: empty cans rolling down the pavement; greasy pizza boxes; kebab wrappings blowing this way and that; puddles of vomit in splattery circles; and pigeons picking at crumbs, pizza crusts, bits of plastic, anything.

As she approached Taylors Square, Fern could see party goers still chatting and laughing in the early morning sun while the city slowly came to life. There were police too, at least ten of them, watching as glazed-eyed clubbers tottered out of nightclubs and onto the streets, shielding their eyes from the sun. For a moment Fern imagined they were pale-skinned vampires that the sun would reduce to dust, but they stayed intact as they staggered down pavements and reached out hopefully for taxis. Some called out to her. A lurching man wearing a Santa hat smiled a wide insincere smile, flashing white
teeth and hungry eyes.

Fern had intended to get some breakfast on Oxford Street but in an effort to get away from last night's revellers she turned down a side street instead, deciding to take a short cut to the station and avoid Taylors Square. But even here there were people. A man staggered past, his clothes thick and blackened with age and wear, his bones sticking out through skin which had become too small for his body. Two men in business suits, collars open, ties askew, studied the morning with bleary eyes, talking uncertainly on mobile phones.

It felt safer in Belmore Park, where a group were doing tai chi, their movements synchronised in a graceful dance, a contrast to the rigid shapes of high-rise buildings behind them. An old woman was feeding the pigeons, hundreds of them cluttering the path and hardly bothering to get out of Fern's way as she walked. On the grass a man was asleep, surrounded by his belongings, curled into himself, oblivious to Fern and the other passers-by, who all seemed to be going somewhere, who all had some purpose, no matter how futile.

On Eddy Avenue, a Chinese man sat on a milk crate, plucking haunted notes from an instrument she didn't recognise. Behind him was a sunlit wall, covered in graffiti and blackened by the grime of bus exhausts; at his feet the pavement was almost white with pigeon shit. But the notes he played made everything exquisitely beautiful. Fern found a coin in her pocket and put it in the plastic container that sat near his feet. He looked up at her briefly, stared solemnly into her eyes and then smiled, his face crinkling into a thousand wrinkles. Fern smiled back, then as he became immersed again in his instrument, she turned, the notes following her into the station.

The cafes were open, luring Fern in with the smell of coffee and bacon, fried eggs and toasted fruit bread. She bought coffee and a bacon and egg sandwich, hoping the grease would help with her hangover. Instead, the white bread turned into doughy balls that seemed to get stuck in her throat. In the end she gave up, leaving half the sandwich uneaten. She bought a bottle of water and drank most of it down in one go, then bought a return ticket to Katoomba and sat on the dreary platform to wait, already regretting that she'd left Adam asleep on the floor.

The previous evening kept slipping back into her mind. When the beer and the
wine had run out, Adam had poured himself a whisky, then picked up his guitar and started strumming. He held it tenderly, with reverence, and watching him Fern had realised that no one had ever held her like that. For the briefest of moments she envied that guitar. Then Adam had started playing 'Scarborough Fair' and she'd picked up her tin whistle and joined in, sending the notes out and across to the guitar, communicating with Adam in a way she hadn't been able to do with words. In the space of that music she'd felt completely at ease with him.

'G'day. Mind if I sit here?'

Fern's heart lurched at the sound of Adam's voice. She looked up at him. Despite his smile, he looked pretty rough, with dark circles under his eyes, and hair sticking up all over the place, wearing a grubby t-shirt, baggy shorts and runners without any socks. And holding two coffees in a cardboard tray.

'Well, do I have your permission?'

'Sure.' Fern smothered her own smile. She couldn't decide how she felt about this, whether she was pleased he was here or irritated that he'd found her.

'You left a couple of things behind,' said Adam. 'This.' He held up the pipe. 'And this,' he added, pointing at himself.

Fern bit back a laugh and reached for her pipe, but Adam dangled it just out of her reach.

'Uh-uh,' he said, shaking his head. 'Not until you admit you did it on purpose. You couldn't bear the prospect of never seeing me again, so you left it there, knowing I'd be forced to chase you through the streets at some God-forsaken hour on a Saturday morning when I'd only just gone to bed.'

Now she was really laughing. 'Never,' she said, jumping up and grabbing the pipe. But she couldn't wrest it from Adam, he was too strong.

'Come on, admit it.'

'Okay, okay, I confess. . . Happy now?'

'Repeat after me: I couldn't bear the prospect of never seeing you again.'

'I couldn't bear the prospect of never seeing you again,' said Fern screwing up her face and speaking quickly, so that the words ran together.

Adam grinned and handed over the pipe. 'I guess that will have to do. . . Here,
Fern sipped her second coffee for the day and wondered again about Adam. This was a different person from the withdrawn angry drunk she'd first met or even the gentle musician of last night. Perhaps they'd slipped past each other's defences. The thought of that made her afraid all over again. She felt too fragile to risk letting Adam in.

'Are you sure you want to come with me?'

'Yep.'

'But you don't know what you're getting yourself into. I'm depressed, I'm probably mad, I've got a bloodhound man chasing me and a father who wants to kill me.'

'Yeah, yeah, it's not a problem,' he said, then paused. 'Though when you put it like that . . . I'm joking!' he added quickly when Fern looked at him. 'You know, my dad told me once that everyone's wacky. They seem normal at first and then as you get to know them they get weirder and weirder. The only difference with you is that you started off weird. . . . Only kidding.'

As soon as the train pulled out of the station Adam leaned back in the seat. 'If I have a little doze will you promise not to do another runner.'

'I'm not about to jump off the train.'

'What about at a station?'

'No!'

'Okay. . . Night.'

Fern stared out the window as the train streaked past the backs of houses and offices, showing the dreary scribbled-on face of Sydney. The suburbs went on and on, kilometre after kilometre, until Fern thought the city would never end. Eventually, though, they reached Penrith and the train began its slow climb into the mountains, passing thickets of burnt-out trees, with houses perched precariously nearby and plumes of smoke dispersing into the sky. It didn't look anything like the last time she'd come up, a year and a half ago. A dirty weekend with Jeff, as he described it, though it hadn't felt dirty. If anything it was clean and bright, a memory that shone. It had been winter and they'd walked in the mist and rain, then dried out in front of an open fire in the hotel. Back in their room they'd made love, before going to a restaurant where they'd ordered
too much and ate it all. Then they went back to their hotel and made love and in the morning they'd made love all over again. The memory made her wince. It wasn't an unhappy memory but that weekend was the closest they'd been, and things had gone downhill after that. Fern wasn't sure why, but she suspected that the door she'd opened inside herself that weekend had simply clanged shut in panic. Perhaps this was her only response to intimacy.

Adam was snoring gently next to her. Occasionally the snores would rise into a crescendo and Fern would dig him in the ribs, making him splutter and the snores recede. Fern shut her eyes too but she couldn't quieten her mind. Her thoughts kept racing along with her heart at the prospect of confronting her mother. She wasn't sure if she could go through with it.

At Katoomba station they stepped out of the train into an atmosphere so dense with smoke it was hard to breathe. And it was hot, hotter than Sydney had been. Fern had always thought of the mountains as cold, but then she had only visited in winter, feeling the chill grow as the train ascended and then stepping out into the fresh icy mountain air. This was completely different, a dry heat, less oppressive than Sydney's polluted humidity, but harsh with smoke.

'Shit, it's bad,' said Adam, between coughs. 'They say the fires never go out these days, only die down when it rains and start up again at the first sign of a dry spell.'

Fern tried to imagine the flames roaring through valleys, leaping from one cliff to another, crossing roads, burning houses. In such a short time the area had turned into a nightmarish place to live, the air heavy with smoke, ash settling on gardens and washing lines, everyone on alert, ready to evacuate.

'It reminds me of Tassie,' said Adam.

'Tassie?'

'Yeah, where I grew up. In a hot northerly the bushfires are killers, sweeping through everything. Then in the autumn, Forestry light the fires. Burn-offs, they call them but really they're bloody infernos that kill everything...' Adam stopped, surprised by his bitterness. He hadn't even noticed a tree for the past two years. Still, he used to love the bush. A few years back when he was still in Tasmania, he practically lived out there, spending weeks at a time down the south coast, surfing and living off abalone and
oysters. His mum used to say the forest fed his soul.

They walked down the main street, passing cafe after cafe, the chairs outside empty, the people crowding inside, away from the smoke. With each step they took, Fern felt her feet dragging, growing more and more reluctant.

'Are you right from here?' asked Adam, stopping at an intersection. 'You know the way?'

Fern nodded.

'Okay then, I'm off for a bush walk. See you in a couple of hours.' He glanced at his watch. 'Say twelve thirty in that first cafe near the station.'

'Okay.' Fern took a deep breath and turned away. Well, she thought, Cassie said I needed to find out who I am. Here we go.

Her mother's house was in a deep valley. As Fern descended the hill she felt the warmth go out of the air. There was no wind, and the atmosphere felt unnaturally still. The sun hadn't reached into the valley yet and when it did it wouldn't stay for long. The sudden chill shuddered its way through Fern's spine. If there were good places and bad places on earth, this was a bad place. There was something toxic about it, as if the very earth oozed poison. Or perhaps it was a human legacy, the site of a murder or massacre, a place haunted by violence.

Fern could feel that she was changing. She could sense atmospheres and read people's moods as well as their intentions. Perhaps she was becoming sensitive, like the friend she'd had in school who was allergic to perfumes. Things Fern could hardly smell used to knock Jenny about. Change rooms were a nightmare, department stores impossible, and on the bus she would recoil from people as if they were poison, her eyes swelling, her mood souring. Back then Fern had found it hard to understand Jenny's extreme sensitivity but now she was getting an inkling of it as the world became more vivid, its colours richer. Even sounds were affecting her physically, her body responding dramatically to both discord and harmony. Fern shook her head, as if these thoughts were droplets of water she could simply fling off.

The houses on her birth mother's street were all similar, fake brick or weatherboard, and small, definitely not the homes of the rich or even the comfortably
well-off. But they were respectable: neat front gardens, a rope swing hanging from a tree, and Christmas lights strung across front porches. All of the houses, though, had For Sale signs out the front. She assumed they weren't foreclosures, simply people trying to get away from the fires. Number seventeen, her mother's house, was small, and a bit tacky, with a lattice framed front porch and a garish garden gnome on the step.

Before she could change her mind, Fern pressed the doorbell, hearing it echoing down the hallway inside. A dog barked, just once, then fell silent. Fern waited, her heart thudding in her throat, her palms wet, the sweat dripping down her sides; she wanted to run but forced herself to stay and take whatever came. She heard footsteps. The door had a spy hole in it and Fern sensed an eye behind it peering out. Then a key turned in the lock and slowly the door opened.

A woman stared at her, curiously, but with no recognition in her eyes. For a moment Fern thought she must have the wrong address. This woman seemed too young. She was short, like Fern, and wearing a faded blue dressing-gown, toast crumbs clinging to the front. Her features were fine, but her face was puffy. Her hair was short, cut into a bob that was longer at the front than the back. A stylish cut, but slept on and scruffy.

'Hi,' said Fern. 'I'm looking for Joan Childe.'

'Yes, that's me. Or it was, I'm McFarlane now,' the woman said guardedly.

Fern felt her heart lurch and her knees buckle. Of course, she reminded herself, her mother was only thirty-eight. She had known this, had done the arithmetic over and over, wondering what it would have been like to have a young mother. Her adopted mother was fifty-two, just old enough to be this woman's mother. But then Grace and Richard had always seemed old, the way some people do, as if they'd skipped their youth and moved straight into comb overs and grey hair, creaky joints and wrinkles.

'My name's Fern,' she said, forcing the words out. 'Fernanda Parsons.' She paused, finding it hard to shape her mouth around the next words. 'I'm your daughter.'

Joan recoiled, stepping back into the hallway, a look of terror on her face that was enough to send a knife plunging into Fern. 'No,' she gasped. 'You must have the wrong person.'

Fern shook her head, determined to finish what she'd started. 'I don't think so. I was born in Adelaide on the second of January 1989...'
'No, it can't be...'

'Your name is on my birth certificate, Joan Childe. You called me Erica.'

Joan breathed in raggedly and covered her mouth with one hand, the other blindly reaching out and grabbing the door frame.

'Erica! I can't believe it.' Joan looked around nervously. 'Come in, the kids are with their dad until lunchtime, so we're safe for a while.'

Fern stepped inside, wondering what the woman meant by safe. Then it struck her that Joan's husband and children probably didn't know about her. Until now she'd been nothing but an ugly secret fermenting inside her mother. Now Joan's secret had manifested in the outside world, threatening to throw her life into disarray. As she made her way down a dark hallway, Fern felt a chill moving so deep inside her that her bones trembled. The back of the house opened into a kitchen-cum-dining room. It was lighter here, but that only highlighted its drabness. The odour of dog's piss was almost masked by the sharp smell of burnt toast. Toys were scattered here and there, the carpet was stained, and dirty dishes were piled up on the kitchen sink. It was so unlike the ordered house in which Fern had spent her childhood; Grace fiercely conscious of the need to keep up appearances was always cleaning, ensuring that everything was in its proper place.

'Excuse the mess,' Joan said. 'My husband left twelve months ago. Just before last Christmas it was. The bastard, doing that to the kids.' She looked at Fern and sighed. 'Your dad was no better. I've never had any luck with men.'

In one corner of the room was a Christmas tree, a cut pine, decorated roughly with swathes of tired tinsel and an odd assortment of decorations. So unlike Grace's tree, the plastic one she folded open each year, with its tinsel and matching baubles hung so neatly.

In the opposite corner was a cane dog basket. A large old Labrador lifted its head briefly and wagged its tail before falling back into a comfortable slumber. Fern had never had a dog, although she'd always wanted one. Grace and Richard had once given her a bird in a cage: a budgie that didn't sing. But it wasn't the same as a dog.

'Benji's old now,' said Joan, reaching down to give him a pat. 'He doesn't do much these days. He's over fifteen, you know, and incontinent, but I couldn't bear to have him
put down.'

Fern could see out into the back garden, a wasteland of junk and long grass, so
different from the clipped lawns and pruned rose bushes in Grace and Richard's garden.
Joan followed Fern's gaze and sighed again. 'I ought to clear it out, it's a fire hazard, but
it's got out of control. I can't even let the kids out there now, there are too many snakes.
They come looking for water.' She filled up the kettle. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Yes, please.'

While Joan put on the kettle and gathered cups and sugar and milk, Fern studied
the photographs on the wall, a montage of smiling faces, bright colours, sandy beach
shots, wet dog shots . . . the stuff of families. Fern's family. On the large old-fashioned
television sat a couple of school photos: a pretty young girl with fine features like Joan's,
and a boy, neat in his uniform but with eyes that were too responsible. Those are my
brother and sister, thought Fern; the knowledge settled inside her, making her feel lighter
and heavier at once. She had a family, actual blood ties. It made her feel a connection to
life that had been missing. But it also meant she could no longer fantasise about her
perfect 'real' family. Looking at Joan and the heavy melancholy she carried, Fern realised
that growing up with her as a mother would not have been a bed of roses either.

'My children,' said Joan. 'Jack's eight now and Fi's just gone six. Aren't they
beautiful?' She talked on, her mood lightening momentarily. 'Fi's doing dance, she's like a
little angel, and Jack plays soccer. He's so good at it, a real sportsman. And so bright.
He's reading way beyond his age. . .' 

As Joan spoke, the pride in her voice was unmistakeable and Fern felt the knife
again, plunging deeper into her. Her mother hadn't connected with the fact that Fern was
her daughter too; she didn't seem remotely curious about her life.

Was it blood or environment that made a mother? If it was a combination of both,
then what were the proportions? Fern had asked herself these questions many times. As a
child she had been cast aside from blood ties yet accused of having tainted blood and
held responsible for her birth parents failings. It had left her confused and lonely. But in a
way this isolation had also been a blessing, giving her a potential freedom to construct
herself in the way she chose, not in the mould of her family. A freedom she had not yet
used well. If at all.
'Here, sit down,' said Joan, pushing a pile of papers to one end of the table and making a space for the cups. 'Milk?'

'Yes please.'

Fern watched Joan's hands shaking as she poured in the milk. They were slender, the nails chewed right down just like her own. She scrutinised her mother, searching for likenesses. The eyes perhaps? The hair too, thin and mousy like hers. But not much else she could pick. Joan must once have been fine, petite like Fern. Now she was all bosom and belly, with an extra chin.

'Sugar? . . . No, I didn't think so. That's how I have it, you know. Milk and not too strong.'

They sat opposite each other, their mugs between them, while Joan talked and talked, filling in all the spaces. Telling Fern about her life: how much work the kids were; her job in telesales down in Penrith, only part-time but the hours were awful so she had to juggle the children; the dreadful house she lived in because no one would buy it and why would they when there was so much else on the market and these bloody fires were draining the life out of the mountains. Where would she go anyway? They couldn't afford to move to Sydney, with only one income now her husband had left her, just like that, for another woman. How dare he!

While Joan talked, Fern sat and sipped her insipid tea with its skinny milk that was not how she liked it. She was only half-listening, knowing that this was just a prelude, an intricate dance as they circled each other, knowing there were more important things to discuss. But by the time her tea was finished, Fern had begun to wonder if they would ever move on from the mundane. Perhaps Joan was so caught up in being a victim that she had no room to think of Fern's needs. Perhaps it was her way of explaining, of evading her guilt. Perhaps she was saying: look, my life's been crap; it's not my fault; you were lucky to grow up somewhere else. Fern was torn. She felt for Joan, sensing how afraid she was. But Joan's lack of interest in Fern, her gabbling monologue and every question she didn't ask, twisted the knife that was already embedded in Fern's chest. Fern had a question on her own lips, but Joan wouldn't stop talking. On and on she went, throwing words out as if she was under attack, leaving no spaces for Fern to step through. In the end Fern just said it, throwing the word into
the air right in the midst of Joan's words.

Joan stopped in mid-sentence and looked at her, blinking, as if she'd only just realised Fern was there. 'Pardon?'

'I said, Why? What happened? Why didn't you keep me?'

Joan took a deep breath. 'I wanted you. I always did. Can you believe that?' She paused and stared at Fern with tears in her eyes, as if that was enough to make it true. Embarrassed, Fern shifted uneasily under her gaze. There was something inauthentic here. Something hidden. Her mother was not speaking the complete truth. 'Not a day passes when I don't think about you. When I don't wonder what happened.'

As Fern tried to untangle the double negatives, Joan started to sob.

'I took so long to get over it. You haunted me. I saw you everywhere, in every baby, every child. Even now. . . Oh God, you don't know what it was like.'

Fern wasn't a mother. She didn't know what it would be like to abandon a baby. She didn't know how heavy the guilt of that would be, though she had her own guiltst to carry. But she knew what it was like to be abandoned. She knew what it was like to live a life where you don't belong, not to family or place or even to history. She had an intimate and uncomfortable relationship with the word illegitimate. She understood the not knowing, the wondering, the waiting. And she also knew that Joan had never searched for her. But she couldn't say any of this, because if she started it would come out in such a rush that Joan would be struck dumb with it. Fern knew the power of words, she feared the consequences of speech. She would stay silent.

Joan's expression changed. 'It was him. . . ' she hissed angrily. 'I did it to keep you safe.'

The words echoed in Fern's ears. *To keep me safe.* She felt a strange satisfaction, as if a missing piece of a puzzle had found its place. And she felt a familiar fear rising. 'From what?' she asked, needing to be sure.

'Your father.'

'Why?'

'There was a prophecy; I can't remember the exact words. It happened just before you were born. A load of rubbish, I know, but your father took it seriously. I never could understand him, the way he dismissed important things and made mountains out of other
things.'

Fern felt a chill down her spine. 'What was the prophecy?'

Joan frowned, trying to remember. 'How did it go? That you would be the death of your father, something like that. Simple Simon said it. He was an old gardener at the Botanic Gardens, blind in one eye.'

'What did it mean?'

'It didn't mean anything. It was a stupid thing to say. But it caused a lot of harm because your father thought differently. He was furious. He... ' She stopped and looked at Fern, with haunted, fearful eyes.

'Yes?' said Fern, sensing Joan was shutting down again. 'What then?'

'Then you were born,' Joan said quickly. 'That very day. A few weeks early, it was - I didn't even make it to hospital. You were born on the footpath while I waited for the lights to change.' She smiled nervously, a smile that didn't reach her eyes. 'How's that? Not many people can say they were born on the footpath.'

Fern was certain her mother was holding something back. She could almost see it, almost reach back to the memory... There it was, a fist and a pregnant belly, stretched tight. It was too much and Fern tried to look away but felt hands on her face, holding her head still. You must see. The words came as the fist hit the belly. Fern shuddered, tears forming in her eyes. My father, she thought. He tried to kill me. Even then he had wanted her dead.

With an effort Fern pulled herself together and addressed Joan once again. 'What's my father's name?'

Joan looked startled for a moment. 'Of course, you wouldn't know. I didn't tell them.' She paused. 'Eric Hannson was his name. I never saw him again after I signed the papers,' she added, a bitterness creeping into her voice. 'He only stayed around long enough to make sure I wouldn't change my mind.'

Eric Hannson. Fern tossed the name around in her mind, testing it out. 'So that's why you called me Erica.'

'Yes. It was stupid really. I can't remember if I wanted to give you something of him, some link or clue to who he was, or if I was just being clever.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'I did love him you know, despite everything.'
Fern didn't know how to respond, so she waited, watching Joan chew her nails and glance around as if she was afraid of being overheard.

'Strangely enough, he rang just over a year ago. Just like that, after twenty years of nothing.'

'What did he want?'

'He wanted to know if I was in contact with you. When I said no, he tried to talk me into starting a search. He said he'd never had another child and felt bad about letting you go. I didn't understand it then. I said he should look for you himself, but of course he couldn't because his name wasn't on the birth certificate. Though I imagine he'd have his ways - that man could get around anything. Still, I didn't trust him, so I said I wouldn't find you for him, and if I ever heard from you I wouldn't tell him.' She bit her lip anxiously. 'You can imagine that didn't go down too well. He's a man who likes to get his own way.'

For a moment hope flickered inside Fern. Perhaps her father did want a daughter; perhaps he would find it in him to love her. Quickly she extinguished it. He'd tried to kill her and Shamesh said he still wanted her dead.

'Someone came here, you know. Just the other day. He asked about you. He wanted to know if you'd been in touch. And he said your father wanted to find you.'

'What did he look like?' asked Fern, already knowing the answer.

'Skinny and oldish, probably in his late fifties, with a pot belly and drooping cheeks. There was something about him. He frightened the kids.'

Now Fern knew for certain what she had already suspected. The Bloodhound had been sent by her father. 'Do you have any photographs?'

'Of that man?' asked Joan, looking surprised.

'No, my father.'

'No, I tore them all up when he left. I didn't want anything more to do with him. But you won't have trouble finding information about him. He's a powerful man and a rich one. He always was ambitious. Only I wasn't part of those ambitions.' She studied Fern carefully. 'You're like him, you know. You've got his features, and a strong will. I can tell. And there's a way about you as if you're seeing more than what's there, kind of otherworldly... That way of his always used to frighten me.' Joan shuddered. 'If I was
you I wouldn't try to find him. But if you must, then be careful. Don't trust him. He's a control freak. He forces people to do what he wants and then he drops them and never looks back.'

Fern pondered the surprising possibility that she was like her father. Strange how other people see you. A strong will was not something she associated with herself.

'Do you know where he lives?' she asked.

'I think he said he was based in Tasmania, running a guest house or something. It seemed strange. I expected him to be living in Sydney or New York, not Tasmania. Joan glanced at the clock. 'Heavens, it's nearly midday.' she added, standing up and collecting the mugs. 'The kids'll be back soon. I'd better get moving.'

Fern stood too, understanding that it was over. That this was all she would get, a name and yet another warning. On the front porch they were awkward with each other, not knowing how to say goodbye. Joan's stream of words had dried up now, leaving a silence that neither knew how to fill. In the end Joan spoke first.

'Come back again sometime,' she said, a pleading note in her voice. 'I want you to meet the kids. They're your brother and sister, you know. I'll tell them. They'll be excited.'

Fern smiled, recognising the intent behind her mother's words and accepting her gift. 'I'll come when I can.'

As she turned away, her mother finally asked a question. 'You were happy, weren't you?'

Fern stopped on the step next to the grinning garden gnome, and turned around to face her mother. Answers rushed through her head in a confused tangle. Happy? No, she hadn't been happy. She'd been alone, isolated, sobbing quietly in the backyard on her birthdays. She hadn't been happy but she'd been cared for, more than many other people. So what that Richard had kept accounts. So what that they never let her forget her origins. They'd fed her and Grace loved her, she knew that. An honest answer would be full of contradictions. She looked at her mother, waiting there framed in the doorway, a hungry look on her face. No, she hadn't been happy. But would she have been any happier elsewhere? Joan was so eager to hear that she'd done the right thing. Could she absolve her mother's guilt with a single word? No, she couldn't do that either.

In the end, Fern shrugged. 'I don't know.'
Chapter Twelve

Fern stepped into the cafe and scanned the tables for Adam. He wasn't there. The clock on the wall opposite said 12.35. Fern sat down at a table near the window and ordered a coffee and a piece of chocolate mud cake. All in all, she felt she'd handled the meeting with her mother quite well, stayed calm when Joan cried, asked the right questions and even drunk that awful tea. Yet now she was fighting back tears and trying desperately to swallow the lump in her throat. She had finally met her mother and yet in a way she hadn't met her at all. This mother she had just met was not the same as the one who had carried Fern in her womb and given her a name. She was not the same woman who had signed the piece of paper that had placed Fern in the arms of strangers. She'd lost that mother forever. Twenty years had passed since then and they had not shared the same path.

Behind her was a long table with a couple of computers. To distract herself while she waited for Adam, Fern moved over to one of the computers and googled Eric Hannson. There was a long list of hits. She opened the Wikipedia entry and started reading. He was born in Adelaide in 1960, to a Swiss German family. His father and mother ran a cafe in Hahndorf; Eric had helped out there as a child but at the age of sixteen he left school and took a job selling computers. While his peers were improving their minds at university, he was improving his bank balance. He started a small IT company in Adelaide, then expanded, buying up other companies until he'd formed a mega corporation. He'd made most of his money in the internet boom, then sold out before it all crashed. Intrigued, Fern read on. These days it seemed as if he was into everything: a CEO of a major corporation with a good many subsidiary companies, he was on the board of several others, including a mineral company. He was also a property speculator. She wondered if he'd lost some of his wealth in the recent recession or if he had managed to insure himself against that too.

Fern found a photograph on another site and studied it carefully. Joan had said she looked like her father but Fern couldn't see it. He had a strong jaw, dark hair, a slightly receding hairline and eyes that looked right into her. She tried to read their
expression - perhaps a mixture of amused and haughty? It was just a head and shoulders shot, one of those corporate black and white ones, taken at an angle, with careful lighting; the sort that make everyone look the same. Still, this one was her father. Eric Hannson. How strange that an hour ago she didn't know who her father was and now she was sitting here looking at a picture of him. And even stranger that an hour ago he could have been anything - a fisherman, an athlete, a carpenter, even dead - but now he was only one thing: a successful man, probably quite famous in the rarefied world of *Financial Times* readers. All this time he had been living his life and she had never known.

'An espresso thanks, mate,' said Adam, sitting down in the seat next to Fern and bumping his knee on the table top, his legs too long to fit properly underneath. 'Phew, that was hard work. Can't think what made me go bushwalking on a day like this. It's hellish out there.' He poured himself a glass of water and drank it down, then another, until he'd drained the bottle. 'That's better. I didn't take a water bottle or a hat. Pretty stupid, hey . . . How did it go with your mum?'

'She's not my mum, she's my mother, okay. . . She'll never be my mum."

'As bad as that?'

Fern felt the lump rising in her throat all over again. She swallowed, forcing it back down. 'No, it was okay,' she said. 'Just a bit overwhelming.'

'Thanks,' said Adam as the waiter delivered the coffees and cake. He spooned in three sugars, gave it a cursory stir and then downed his espresso in one gulp, holding the cup up and letting the undissolved sugar drip into his mouth. 'I needed that,' he said, taking his teaspoon and helping himself to Fern's cake. 'So, did you find out anything?'

Fern pointed at the computer screen. 'That's my father. Eric Hannson.'

'Where does he live?'

'He told Joan a year ago that he was based in Tasmania. He's got a guest house down there. But why would a financial speculator and CEO of a major internet company want to run a guest house, even an upmarket one?'

'Probably a tax dodge,' said Adam.

Fern clicked on another site and waited as a picture downloaded. It showed Eric's guest house: a historic mansion called Pine House, which, according to its caption,
offered exclusive holidays, golf, fishing, bushwalking, a restaurant and a bar stocked with 128 different whiskies. The grounds were spectacular too, landscaped, with a lake, a golf course, European trees and a perfect lawn. An aerial shot showed all this surrounded by bush.

'Where is it?' asked Adam, scanning the screen for something to identify its location. 'Somewhere in the west, I reckon, near Strahan. There used to be a load of mining going on over there. The house was probably built by some mining tycoon.'

'The website says the only access is by boat or helicopter.'

'Nah, I don't believe it, that's just to keep the plebs out. There'd have to be a service road somewhere.'

Fern yawned. The hangover, the early morning, the emotional roller coaster she'd been on all day were taking their toll. Outside the wind had started, blowing in short sharp gusts, swirling dust and ash around the street. The scene looked wild and hostile. There was hardly anyone out there, and the few that were, screened their eyes and closed their mouths against the grit and smoke and wind. A mother pushed her baby, the pram draped in muslin that was pegged on but still lifting at the corners; a couple of young girls tried uselessly to keep their hair in place; and a man strolled slowly past, wearing dark glasses as protection against the dust. As if aware that someone was watching him, the man turned his face towards the window. Recognising him, Fern looked away quickly, the colour draining from her face, the cake lodging in her throat and making her cough.

'You all right?' asked Adam, thumping her on the back.

'The Bloodhound's outside. He's seen me.' Fern's mind was whirling. How did he know she was in Katoomba? Someone must be telling him her movements. Was it Adam? No, she reminded herself - the Bloodhound had found her yesterday in the hospital but it couldn't have been Adam then. Nor would Joan have known she was there. Besides, she couldn't think of any reason why either of them would have given information to this man. But there was no way his presence here was a coincidence. The Bloodhound must have followed her to the cafe from Joan's house, or spotted her on the main street; maybe he'd even been following them from Sydney.

'Act as if you haven't noticed him,' said Adam, taking another mouthful of Fern's
mud cake and glancing casually out the window. Fern took a sip of her latte and tried to look unconcerned. 'Yep, I see him. He's crossed the road and now he's looking in a shop window. This is good. Obviously he doesn't think you've seen him. Let's keep it that way.'

"Why?"

Adam looked at Fern as if she'd just failed a basic maths test. 'Because it gives us the upper hand, of course. Okay this is what we're going to do. You go out there and make sure the guy sees you. I want you to lure him somewhere quiet. There's a park just around the corner, up near the station on the right. Go there. And make him think you don't know he's following you.'

"What about you?"

'Me?"

'You've just told me what I'm supposed to do. What about you?"

Adam smiled. 'I'm going to finish your cake and pay the bill. Then I'll wait up in the park for you and we'll have a chat with the Bloodhound.'

'What if he has a gun?"

'He won't.'

'He might.'

'Well, he won't use it.'

'How do you know?'

'Believe me, I know about these things.'

Fern saw the look on his face and for some reason believed him. 'What if I get to the park before you?"

'You won't. Just saunter along. Stop and peer in windows, buy some chips or something, then head for the park to eat them. But above all, don't look nervous.'

'I am nervous.'

'Well, try not to look it.'

'What if you don't come?' she asked, distrust creeping in again. Where had Adam really gone while she'd been talking to her mother? Had he been meeting with the Bloodhound? And had he gone out the night before while she slept?

'Of course I'll come,' said Adam impatiently.
Fern sighed. She didn't want to push Adam away but she had to ask. 'I don't know whether to trust you, Adam. How did that man find me? You and Joan are the only ones who knew I was here.'

'You think I told him?' Adam looked so astonished that Fern backed off a little. 'I don't know. I'm sorry. I had to ask.'

She expected him to be angry with her, storm out maybe, but instead he softened. 'It's okay, you're right to question me. None of this makes sense and you have to check every possibility. Look, Fern, I might be an arsehole in lots of ways but I wouldn't lie, not to you. I don't know how he found us but one thing I do know is that there's no such thing as a coincidence. Someone must have told him and we'll find out who. But I promise it wasn't me.' He put his hand on his chest. 'Cross my heart and hope to die.' He looked at her imploringly. 'Will you trust me?'

Fern nodded.

'Good,' said Adam, switching straight back into practical mode. 'Come on, he's watching. Give me a kiss, then stand up and leave.'

'What?'

'A kiss. We want him to see us saying goodbye.'

Fern hesitated, a blush rising up into her cheeks. Then she leaned over and kissed Adam on the mouth, a slow lingering kiss that tasted of coffee and last night's whisky. His hair and skin smelled of smoke and the bush, eucalyptus maybe. She liked it. Fern pulled away and for a second their eyes met, caught in the enchantment of that kiss.

'Mmm,' said Adam, 'that was nice. Now, see you later.'

As Fern stepped outside, the gusting wind blasted ash and smoke in her face and for a moment she was blinded. Heart pounding, she rubbed her stinging eyes, wondering where she would find the courage to go through with this. She could feel Adam watching, urging her on, but she could also feel the Bloodhound's eyes and in her newly sensitised state they felt greedy, fuelling her desire to run. Forcing her feet to move slowly, Fern walked up the hill towards the station. From the corner of her vision she saw the Bloodhound begin to follow. She paused, peered into a shop window, pretending to look at the crystal jewellery display but instead studying the reflections, trying to make him out. Then she moved on again, stopped in a bakery and ordered a pie, quickly
turning her head to see the Bloodhound crossing the road.

'Just meat,' she squeaked when the girl asked what type of pie she wanted. Fern handed over a note and forced herself to wait for the change, her fingers trembling so much she almost dropped it. The girl looked at her strangely.

Back outside, Fern crossed the road once more and the Bloodhound crossed with her. At the top of the road she turned right and walked into the park, aware that the Bloodhound wasn't far behind. If it hadn't been so hot she would have thought it was winter: the grass had a grey frosting from the ash, and the smoke hovered like mist.

Nervously she headed towards a cluster of bushes. To her left a wallaby calmly nibbled at the grass as if this manicured urban park was his home. Fern kept walking, hoping Adam was already in place, watching out for her. It was all she could do to stop herself from running. She could hear the Bloodhound, feel the triumph in him. He believed he had her.

Finally she couldn't stand it anymore she turned and saw his ugly face leering into hers. Just then Adam lunged out of the bushes and grabbed the Bloodhound by the neck. As Adam dragged him into the bushes, fear swept over the Bloodhound's face and Fern remembered from her school days how cowardly the bullies usually were, throwing stones and abuse and then denying it. They were easily defeated if you knew how - only back then she never had. Still shaking, she followed the two men.

'Right, mate, you've got some explaining to do,' said Adam, slightly loosening his stranglehold on the Bloodhound's neck.

'Let me go, I've done nothing. You got nothing on me...' Adam tightened his hold again and Fern watched the Bloodhound's face go red before a blackness entered the edges of her vision, spreading inwards and wiping out her sight. Her legs gave way and she slumped to the ground. She could hear Adam's voice, worried and then irritated. 'Fern. This isn't a good time to faint on me... Shit. Well, you have a nice rest while I get on with it.'

Adam squeezed the Bloodhound's neck tighter still, until the veins were swollen in the man's temple. 'I'm going to ask questions and you're going to answer them. If you don't cooperate I'm going to squeeze harder until you can't breathe at all and then you'll die. You get that? Just nod... Good.'

Fern lay on the grass; her vision was gone and she couldn't move but she could
hear everything. She felt as if she'd slipped into a movie, the sort with spies and underground mobsters.

Adam loosened his grip again and the Bloodhound gasped for air.

'Name?'

'Reg. . . Reg Blacket.'

'Okay, Reg, why have you been following Fern about?'

'It's my job,' said Reg, still gasping.

'Who's paying you.'

Reg paused. 'Dunno.'

'That's not good enough, Reg,' said Adam, with a squeeze of the man's neck.

'I dunno. Really! He just calls me and, you know, gives me orders.'

'Reg, I'm disappointed in you,' said Adam. 'Now, if I let go, will you promise to tell me the truth?' Reg nodded and Adam released his grip.

'I shouldn't be telling you this,' Reg said, groaning. 'He told me to keep it quiet. Mr Hannson his name is. Eric Hannson. He contacted me out of the blue, said he wanted someone followed. He told me where to find her, said he didn't want her hurt or anything. Just scare her, he said.'

Fern's vision was coming back, spreading in reverse from the inside to the outside. For a moment she continued to lie there, her face scrunched up on the grass, her senses vivid, hearing the roar of cars on the road above, the distant laughter of children, leaves rustling in the wind, the meaty smell of the pie she'd bought, which lay uneaten on the grass next to her, and the sharp burnt tang of the ash smeared on her face and hands. With a great effort she sat up and looked around, blinking, confused. The Bloodhound's last words were ringing in her ears.

'Ah, Fern, I don't believe you've been formally introduced. Fern, this is Reg. Reg, Fern. Where are your manners, Reg? Say hello to the lady.'

'Hello.' The Bloodhound's voice was sullen.

Fern studied him. Up close he wasn't so frightening. She'd been afraid of the Bloodhound, but it was harder to be afraid of someone called Reg. Desperately she tried to pull her thoughts together and make sense of what he had said.

'Okay,' said Adam. 'Let's get back to business. Any ideas why Mr Hannson
wanted Fern scared?'

'I asked him. Told him I wouldn't do it unless I knew. I've got standards, you know. He said he was her dad, and she'd run away from home. He thought if he gave her a scare she'd come running back. I understood. I got kids of my own, you know. It's not easy being a dad.'

'And you believed what he told you?'

'Course I did. He wanted her back. He just said to keep on her tracks. Make sure she was nervous, like.'

'Eric Hannson has never had the honour of actually meeting his daughter,' said Adam.

'You're kidding me,' said Reg, looking genuinely surprised.

Fern was still pondering why her father would hire someone to frighten her. It seemed pointless, but the little she knew of Eric suggested he did things for a reason. Fern felt the answer was already there, somewhere inside her, like a word on the tip of her tongue; as hard as she tried, she couldn't locate it.

'How did you find me today?' she asked, thinking a clue might lie in the answer to a different question. And at the hospital how did you know I was there?'

'I lost your scent a couple of times,' said Reg, looking embarrassed. 'Mr Hannson wasn't too happy about that. It was really weird, though - both times he came back and told me where to look.'

'How did he know?'

'I dunno - really I don't. He must know a lot of people. Maybe he's got someone else looking out for you.'

Fern tried to think it through. She couldn't fathom what reason her father would have to employ someone else to follow her. No, he had to be getting his information from someone she knew. She was going round in circles and getting paranoid all over again - Adam? Shamesh? Grace? Joan? Claire? But none of them had known where she was at each time over the past week.

'Where does Hannson live?' asked Adam.

'I dunno, he only rings me. He puts money in my bank account. There's no other contact. Honest.'
'Here, Fern, check his pockets, see if you can find anything.'
'I'm not putting my hands in there,' protested Fern, looking at Reg's tight jeans.
'Well, that's difficult, I don't have a spare hand. So you either check his pockets or take over from me. Your choice.'
Reluctantly Fern slipped her hand into Reg's back pockets, one at a time. She pulled out a wallet and checked its contents: a few dollars, some credit cards, a photo of two children, and a driver's licence, confirming his name. He lived in Strathfield. An ordinary wallet, an ordinary man.
'And the rest.'
Fern scowled at Adam and slid her hand into Reg's front pocket, quickly retrieving a mobile phone.
'Okay, check the directory, Fern, voicemail, texts, anything that might tell us where he is.'
Fern fiddled with the buttons, trying to figure out Reg's phone. There was nothing in the directory and no voice messages. But among the text messages she found one dated today, 7.35 am. It was short and to the point: *Visiting mother in Katoomba.*
'It's a mobile number,' she said, hunting around in her pack for a pen and writing the number on the back of her hand. 'It's useless. It doesn't tell us where he is.'
Adam seemed unconcerned. 'Give Reg back his wallet,' he said, 'but keep the phone. We're going to make a phone call.'
'No,' said Fern, as she realised what he was planning to do. 'You can't.'
'Watch me,' said Adam.
Fern felt profound terror surging through her. She didn't want to come any closer to Eric Hannson, not even over a mobile phone. 'No!' she almost shouted.
Adam spoke patiently. 'Fern, remember what Shamesh said? What we talked about? You've got to turn around and hunt the hunter. He'll find other ways to get you. Hunters always do.'
Fern sighed. 'Okay, but you do the talking,' she said, uneasily pressing the return call option and handing the phone to Adam, who switched it on to speaker and waited.
The ringing stopped and a man's voice came on, cultured and supremely certain of itself. 'Reg?'
'Ah, Mr Hannson, how are you today?' Adam said smoothly.

'Who is this?'

'I'm just letting you know that Reg won't be working for you anymore. We know who he is and we know who you are, Mr Hannson.'

'What do you mean? Who are you?'

Fern thought she could detect a note of fear in her father's voice but even so she writhed in terror, feeling the tentacles of his intent reaching out across space, blindly feeling for her.

'I suggest you stop playing games with your daughter and leave her alone. Because, if you don't, then believe me, we'll come and find you.'

There was a short barking laugh from Fern's father, just as Adam cut him off.

'Always best to have the last word in these situations,' he said.

'Hey, that's my phone,' said Reg as Adam shoved it into his own pocket. 'It's got all my contacts on it.'

'That's what comes from working for the wrong people,' said Adam, letting go of Reg and shaking his head sympathetically. Reg sighed and turned away, defeated. 'Uh-uh, not yet, you've got an apology to make.'

'Bullshit,' said Reg.

Adam stretched out a leg, hooked Reg's feet and pulled them from under him, sending him thudding to the ground face first. 'I want you to apologise to Fern.'

Reg groaned and rubbed his nose. 'Sorry,' he muttered.

'Not good enough. Repeat after me: I'm sorry for scaring you, Fern, and I promise I won't do it again.'

Reg repeated the words, his voice disgruntled.

'That's better,' said Adam. 'Don't you ever come near Fern again or I'll kill you. Got that?'

'Got it,' said Reg.
Chapter Thirteen

As they walked towards the station, Adam's mood darkened. 'Come on, quick, or we'll miss the next train.'

He walked briskly, Fern half running to keep up with him. She could feel his anger but couldn't understand where it had come from.

'You were really amazing back there,' she said.

Adam scowled. 'Yeah, I'm well trained in that kind of shit. It's the only thing I know how to do.' He spoke with such bitterness, spitting the words out and leaving them hanging in the air between them; Fern had wondered before but now she was certain that Adam had experienced something that had deeply wounded him. Perhaps it was the same thing that haunted his sleep.

A man wearing a white robe and carrying a wooden cross thrust a leaflet into Fern's hand. 'Repent,' he said, 'the end of the world is nigh.'

'About bloody time,' said Adam and the man sent a shocked glance at him before moving on.

Adam sat next to her on the train, his eyes closed, and Fern looked at him uncertainly. 'I just wanted to say thank you,' she said, hesitantly. 'I really appreciate the way you've helped me.'

Adam opened his eyes and looked at Fern but she felt he didn't really see her. He was somewhere else. 'Yeah, no worries,' he said and closed his eyes again.

Fern tried to relax but it wasn't easy. Her whole body was trembling from the combination of coffee and nervous tension. She forced one shoulder down and then the other, rubbed her neck and rotated her head in circles, trying to loosen all her muscles. Gradually she relaxed enough to feel the fatigue that was creeping up from her feet and into her legs, then her arms, before sinking into her chest. Her exhaustion was mixed with relief. She'd gone through with this, had met her birth mother and faced the Bloodhound.

Again she looked at Adam, sitting next to her with his eyes resolutely closed, blocking her out. Yet in the café he'd asked her to kiss him and the memory still lingered
on her lips. Maybe he was angry with her for drawing him into all this. Or perhaps he hadn't forgiven her for doubting him. He hadn't said it but she could sense the unspoken question: 'Do you believe me now?' Fern wished she could understand Adam, make sense of his moods. He was like a multi-faceted crystal, one minute showing one face to the world, the next another face. A dark crystal not letting anyone in, yet turbulent inside, all caught up in its shadow self.

Outside, the wind was whipping the dust, leaves and rubbish into furious eddies that buffeted the carriage. Sighing, Fern closed her eyes and tried to escape into sleep but her mind was racing, throwing up images of the Bloodhound, Shamesh, Cassie, her birth mother's face, that photograph of her father staring into her, and their voices echoed in her mind keeping her senses alert and buzzing: 'Just scare her,' . . . 'Adam is on his own journey,' . . . 'You're waking up and that scares them,' . . . 'This lifetime he has incarnated as your father,' . . . Fern opened her eyes again and stared through the window; where it seemed the whipping wind outside was calmer than her mind.

Remembering her knitting, Fern reached into her bag to retrieve it. She'd always used knitting to keep herself focused. It was like a kind of mini meditation. She loved the rhythm of it, the way it gave her an excuse to settle her mind. This was a straightforward piece, a tank top, pretty much up and down. The wool was six-ply, its colours a blend of royal blue and turquoise. Even the feel of it in her hands calmed her. But as she unrolled the section she had been working on, the tempest stone slipped out and landed in her lap. Fern looked at it warily, wondering how it had become caught up in her knitting. There was something about this stone that was both repellent and alluring. Unwillingly her hand reached out, her fingers clasping its smooth surface. Immediately she felt the dizziness again and then without warning the soldiers were back, as if a page were turning on a continuing narrative. This time she could feel their fingers clutching her upper arms and the bruises forming. She could see the blue and white of their intricately painted shields. Next to her was a young girl of about nine or ten and wearing a dirty shift, her dark long hair tangled. The girl was struggling and crying. Noticing this, Fern struggled harder, feeling overwhelmed by a great need to hold this girl in her arms, to protect her from the looming threat around them. They were linked in some way, mother and daughter perhaps, because the fear she felt was not for herself but for the girl.
An air of expectation arose among the soldiers and they fell back silently to make way for a man who walked between them. His movements were studied and powerful, almost hieratic. He was wearing a long gown, a cape of some sort with a hood that covered his face. Fern recognised it from her dreams. The material was thick and ornately embroidered in gold thread. It spoke of wealth and high rank. The fear she had felt for the girl turned into terror now and was centred entirely on this man. Fern tried to pull back but the soldiers' hands were unyielding. As he lifted his hood to reveal his face, the terror rose to an unbearable pitch inside her. She did not want to see that face, did not want to make the connections. She tried to turn her own face away but some power beyond hers pushed it back, forcing her eyelids open so that she must look.

It was the smile she noticed first. A self-satisfied smile, that of a spider who has caught its fly. Fern was mute, transfixed with horror; her gaze was released only as the girl struggled again, crying out. At this the priest man lifted a finger, sending a soldier's sword swinging. Where the girl's head had been only a second before was a severed neck, the bone gleaming white, blood fountaining, the body still moving. It had been too quick to comprehend, an irreversible action. Fern cried out in bewilderment and horror. It was too late. She had failed the girl. Yet before the grief could surge into her heart and merge with the heavy weight of her guilt, a spear entered her chest, propelling her backwards, jerking and twisting. Then, against her will, her eyes were drawn away from the girl and back to the priest man. In his face she could read an immense gloating satisfaction.

Adam watched Fern twitching about in her seat. At first he'd thought it was a dream but her eyes were open. Now he was worried it was a fit of some sort.

'You okay?'

Fern jumped and let go of the stone, the vision disappearing as the stone hit the floor.

'What's going on? You were thrashing about all over the place - and you look like shit.'

'Thanks,' said Fern, trying to smile through trembling lips. 'I must have had a dream.' But it was too real to be just a dream. Somehow this stone was taking her into
the past. Shamesh had said it would help her remember. Was she seeing herself in a past life? More likely it was genetic, a traumatic memory she'd inherited somehow, that had been passed down through generations and stored in her cells.

Adam reached down and picked up the stone. 'What's this?' he asked, turning it over in his hand. 'Hey, it's amazing, look at those veins, they look like gold.'

'Shamesh gave it to me,' she said. 'It's called a tempest stone.' She couldn't resist asking, 'Does it make you feel strange?'

Adam looked at her quizzically, then studied the stone again. 'It's beautiful,' he said after a pause. 'But it's only a stone.'

'It makes me see things,' said Fern without thinking.

'Like what?' asked Adam, sceptically.

'I don't know,' she said, backtracking. 'Nothing, really. I must have been dreaming.'

'Yeah, it must have been a dream,' Adam said, wishing he'd kept the cynical tone out of his voice. He understood that Fern had offered him something, a risky truth that left her undefended. Instead of accepting the gift, he'd thrown it back at her.

Adam gave the stone back to Fern and watched as she stowed it away carefully in her bag, then picked up her knitting. She seemed too young for such an activity. Knit one, purl one: it reminded him of his mother, knitting away every night in front of the television. The comforting click of the needles, making something from nothing. With the memory came a regret for a childhood that could never be reclaimed. And the guilt. There was always the guilt. It had been too long since he had seen her.

They stepped off the train into a muggy airless afternoon. A red-faced Father Christmas sat miserably on his temporary throne in the main part of the station, half-heartedly ringing a bell and muttering the occasional 'Ho, ho, ho'. In spite of his lack of enthusiasm, the smaller children were convinced, some standing back awestruck and clinging to their mother's hands for safety, others crowding around him, pulling his beard and shouting wish lists.

Every time Fern was reminded that it was nearly Christmas, she felt loneliness threaten to engulf her again. It reminded her that she needed to move on, find somewhere to stay. She couldn't let Adam get caught up any further in her mess. It
wasn't fair on him. She would have to act immediately. Fern stopped walking and stood watching Adam carry on for a few paces until he realised she wasn't next to him. He stopped too and looked back, then rolled his eyes.

'Don't even think about it,' he said.

'I can't lay my stuff on you anymore. It isn't fair.'

'Fair! Shit, don't be an idiot. Life isn't fair. And what are you going to do without me? Where do you plan to go? Back to the nuthouse?'

Fern steeled herself against Adam's words. 'I haven't a clue where I'm going to go,' she said, 'but I can't involve you in this any longer. I hardly know you. Look, you've seen off the Bloodhound and you were fantastic. I've met my mother. I've found out about my father. You've helped me a lot and I'm grateful but I can manage by myself now.'

Adam was really angry now. 'So, I'm just some jerk you can use when you feel like it and then dump?'

'That's not what I meant.'

'You still don't trust me, do you?'

'I do,' Fern protested. 'It's just that...' 

'I'm only here because I promised Shamesh, otherwise I wouldn't bother chasing you all over the place.'

Now Fern could feel her own anger rising. Adam didn't give a toss about her, he was just keeping a stupid promise. 'Then leave me alone. I can look after myself.'

Adam stepped closer to Fern, his voice quieter now. 'Do you really believe it's over? Do you really think that man is going to stop just because we caught his hired hand?'

Fern shook her head despairingly, feeling more and more like a trapped animal. 'I don't know. I want him to stop. I want all this to stop.' Despite the heat she was shaking, her teeth chattering and the tears threatening to spill out.

Adam put his arm around Fern, holding her close. 'Hey, it's okay. We're in this together.'

In Adam's arms, Fern felt her panic slowly subside. 'Why were you so distant with me on the train? Was it because you didn't want to do that with the Bloodhound?
Because I put you in an impossible position."

Adam sighed. 'I wasn't angry with you. I was angry with myself.'

Fern was baffled. 'Why? You were great.'

'Yeah, I was good. And I enjoyed it. You're not supposed to enjoy squeezing someone's neck until their veins pop out. But I did. Come on.'

He grabbed her hand and started walking again, so fast that Fern had to half run to keep up.

The flat stank. Even Adam noticed it.

'Jeez,' he said, embarrassed. 'This place could do with a clean.' He opened the window, letting in the heat but no fresh air. Then he stuffed yesterday's pizza box and a half dozen empty beer bottles into an overflowing garbage bag and dumped it outside the door. 'That's better. Want a beer?'

'No thanks.' Fern was desperately thirsty but the last thing she wanted was a beer. She dug around in the shopping bags looking for the juice she'd bought on the way back from the station, then drained two glasses in a row before she felt ready to unpack the rest of the shopping. Adam didn't seem to care one way or the other, but Fern had decided that, under the circumstances, cooking dinner for him was the least she could do. She was keeping it simple, though, spaghetti bolognese, just mince and a jar of ready-made tomato sauce, parmesan, and a salad with a bought dressing. She looked in his cupboards for a bowl.

'Where is everything?'

'What in particular were you looking for?' asked Adam, grabbing another beer from the fridge.

'You know, just the usual - saucepans, a chopping board, a wooden spoon, bowls, that sort of thing.'

'There might be something in that one above the fridge,' said Adam pointing at a cupboard out of Fern's reach.

She pulled over a chair and rummaged around in the cupboard, finding a small dented saucepan with no lid, a sifter, a cake tin and a plastic icy-pole maker, among a thick tangle of spider webs. 'Don't you ever cook?"
'Not often.'
Fern sighed and looked around the kitchen. 'Where's the stove?'
'There isn't one.'
'What! How am I supposed to cook?'
'In the microwave.'
'I can't make bolognese sauce in the microwave.'
'Course you can'. Adam opened another cupboard and pulled out a plastic bowl.
'Here, just throw it all in here and stick it in the microwave.'
When Fern looked at him, astonished, Adam grabbed the jar and the meat and did it himself.
'Don't you know those things are bad for you?'
'Yeah. If I'm really lucky it'll turn my brains to jelly.'
'Why don't you look after yourself more?'
Adam ignored her and switched on the television. Fern bit her lip and sat down at the table with the salad things. She pulled the lettuce apart and layered it in the plastic bowl, then sliced the cherry tomatoes in half, popping one into her mouth and savouring its sweet tartness. Then she cut the cucumber into thin slices. The snow peas were glorious, their flesh crisp and sweet. It felt good doing something normal for a change. After the past week, the simple routine of preparing food felt like a precious gift. In its simplicity she could almost forget herself for a moment. And in it she could find space for this sudden burst of happiness that had ambushed her so unexpectedly.
Fern finished the salad, put the pasta in a bowl of water in the microwave and then sat down with Adam to watch the news. She was reminded of the last time she'd seen it, in another era it seemed, when she'd been part of life and a future had seemed possible, sitting in the lounge room of their terrace house with her friends, drinking tea and discussing politics and the environment, as if there were some point to their conversations, as if they could make a difference. One day she'd realised how much she hated the news the feeling it triggered in her stomach, a twisted surging fear. She'd wondered then what point there was to watching it, whether it made her a conscientiously well-informed citizen or just kept her fearful. They'd argued about it, the others saying it was a responsible thing to do, that ignorance was dangerous. 'Don't you
care what happens in the world?' they'd asked, and Fern couldn't find the right words to explain that she cared too much. Now here she was, watching the news again with a near stranger in this smelly flat and nothing had changed.

Next to her Adam was becoming angrier and angrier as he watched. 'It's a fucking mess,' he said. 'The world's unravelling.' He drained his beer. 'Fuck it, who cares?'

'You do,' said Fern, seeing clearly the hurt inside of him.

Adam glanced sullenly at her. 'I don't give a fuck about anything.'

But Fern could see that, like her, he cared too much. Only they dealt with it in different ways.

She got up and drained the pasta, then mixed it with the sauce and put it on the table. She searched the cupboards for plates and cutlery, opened a bottle of white wine and found a couple of wine glasses. 'Dinner's ready.'

Adam turned off the television and promptly switched moods. 'Great,' he said, helping himself to pasta. 'Mmm, it's good.'

As they ate, Fern savoured the sense of safety in this domesticity. If they could just go on acting normal like this maybe it would be enough to keep out the demons.

'Guess we'd better talk about Tassie then,' said Adam, dispelling Fern's contentment.

'Tassie?' she asked, not wanting to comprehend what he meant.

'Yeah, isn't that where your dad is?'

'I don't want to go to Tasmania.'

'Got any better suggestions?'

Fern thought about it. There was nowhere she could go, except Adelaide. But what then? She had just over a thousand dollars in her bank account, no job, nowhere to live, and no friends - except Adam. But she couldn't stay in his basement flat indefinitely.

'We could tell the police.' Even as she spoke, Fern knew it was useless.

Adam laughed. 'Tell them what? That your father who you've never met, wants you dead? And how do you know that? Because Shamesh told you.' He poured another glass of wine. 'Oh, and you could mention the prophecy, that would go down well.'

'He had me followed.'

'There's no crime in that. He employed a private detective to find his long-lost
daughter. It's a heart-warming story.'

Fern sighed and pushed her food away, half eaten. 'You don't have to come with me to Tasmania,' she said.

'Will you stop trying to shake me off? . . . Anyway, it's a good excuse to visit the family. Christmas, too, they'll be pleased.'

'How long since you've seen them?'

Adam grimaced. He hadn't contacted them once in the past two years. His mum would be beside herself, he thought, and must feel trapped too, just her looking after his useless brother. 'Too long, probably,' he said, switching on the television again, its panicked blare cutting off their conversation.

Exhausted, Fern slipped into Adam's bed and went to sleep, while the television flickered and shouted and Adam sat up drinking beer after beer.

She woke into a nightmare. The room was dark, she didn't know where she was and had no space to wonder, because everything else had been pushed out by one simple certainty: she was dying. Fern leaped out of bed, rubbing her arm, trying to get some feeling back, but the whole left side of her body had disappeared into a numb and tingly weakness.

'Help me,' she cried in a hoarse whisper. 'Help me.' She was too far away from herself, a part of her caught in the world of her dreams. There was no way she could make it back, her body was panic-stricken. She'd gone too far. It felt as if something was stopping her, sucking the energy out of her.

'What's going on?' asked Adam, flicking the light switch and banishing the shadows. It should have helped but it didn't. There was no clarity or safety in the light because Fern was somewhere else, caught in a murky dark world where the air was as thick as quicksand.

'Help me,' whispered Fern, somehow knowing that she mustn't keep still. She had to keep moving her body. Rubbing. Pacing. Rubbing. It was the only way to bring herself back.

Adam was following her, trying to calm her. She could hear his voice, low and measured, though underneath he was panicking too, she could tell, could see right into him, into the black areas he tried to hide, and around him where the Furies lurked,
tormenting him. In that moment she knew him inside out, knew that he was haunted too. That something had to change inside him before he could be free of it. The knowing came from another part of herself that she'd never noticed before, a steady calm aspect that was watching, that knew exactly what was happening and what to do. But she couldn't speak except to keep mouthing the same words. 'Help me.'

'Should I call an ambulance?'

Fern shook her head impatiently, then pointed at her bag until Adam obeyed and brought it to her. Then she pointed at the pocket until he opened it. She gestured for him to pull out the little velvet bag Cassie had given her. He tipped out the bottles onto the bed and, not knowing how she knew, she pointed again, at the aconite and the Rescue Remedy.

Adam held her still for long enough to push an aconite tablet into her mouth. As it dissolved she could taste its sweetness. Then he squirted a couple of drops of Rescue Remedy, the brandy strong on her tongue. For a few minutes, Fern didn't think it would work. This was too much for a tiny tablet to fight, or a few drops. She pointed again, panicking, and Adam gave her another aconite. Then she felt it, the calming spreading through her, enough for her to stop pacing. She slumped on a chair, cold now, her whole body filled with a dreadful flatness.

'You okay?' Adam was rubbing her back. The warmth of his hand was welcome. She tried to nod but could only sit and stare ahead. She'd used every last scrap of her strength to come back. And now her whole body was shaking uncontrollably, her teeth chattering.

'It's shock,' said Adam, wrapping her in a blanket. He poured some whisky into a glass. 'Here, sip this, it'll warm you inside.'

Fern couldn't hold the glass, so Adam held it gently to her mouth and let her sip. His other hand massaged her shoulders until slowly the tremors eased and she was still.

'Are you okay now?'

Fern nodded.

'Do you want me to call a doctor?'

She shook her head.

'You frightened the hell out of me, you know that?'
Fern leaned her head on Adam's shoulder, overcome by the dread that still sat heavily inside her. 'Me too,' she whispered.

"What happened?"

Fern tried to think of a way to answer Adam, but she couldn't begin to explain what had sent her lurching out of bed, feeling her heart strained to breaking point. She ran through the possibilities: stroke, heart attack, or perhaps a nightmare . . . There was a tension around her heart, as if its edges were raw, but if anything her pulse was slow. 'I don't know. It was like I was stuck somewhere a long way away. I thought I was dying.'

'So did I,' said Adam. It had given him the creeps, seeing Fern like that. He couldn't tell if she'd looked like someone who was trying to get away from herself or someone who was trying to get back in.

Fern attempted a smile. 'Thank you,' she said. 'Again.'

'No problem. You can wake me up anytime. I don't mind. I can't think of anything more fun than chasing you round in circles while you shout for help.'

Fern could hear the relief in his voice, mingled with anxiety. He didn't understand what had just happened. Neither did she, though she was beginning to form a theory. 'I owe you a lot, don't I?'

'I'm not keeping count.'

'But I am. I feel like Lois, always needing to be rescued by Superman.'

'Shit, Fern, you can't tally things up like that. If you need help, I'll help you. Okay?' Adam met Fern's eyes for a moment and blushed. She had no idea how much she was giving him.

Fern smiled. 'Okay.'

'Good. At least we understand each other. Now get into bed, you're shivering again.'

Still wrapped in the blanket, Fern climbed into bed and pulled the duvet over herself. She curled her body up in the foetal position, trying to find warm herself but the shivering only got worse. 'I can't get warm.'

'Shit, your hands are like ice,' said Adam. 'Here, let me feel your feet. . . Bloody hell. Look I'm not trying anything on, I just need to feel your stomach, or your back, it doesn't matter.'
Fern nodded and let him unwrap the blanket and slip his hand down the back of her t-shirt. It felt burning hot against her skin.

'It's a hot night, you shouldn't be this cold. Maybe you're sick. Here, let me take that blanket. There's no point wrapping you up if you've got no warmth in you.' He stretched the blanket out over the duvet. 'I'm going to have to get in. Is that okay? You need my heat to warm you up.'

Fern nodded, half smiling at the blush that spread up Adam's cheeks as he climbed in, gingerly shifting his body against hers and drawing her close. She felt safer with him there, his warmth seeping into her, bringing her body back to life.

'You warming up?'

'A bit,' she said. Her eyelids were getting heavy, the way they used to when she was a child. She shuddered. 'I'm afraid to go to sleep.'

'It's okay, I'm here.'

'No, you don't understand. There's something out there. It's waiting for me. Next time it will get me.'

'Anything that's hunting you is doing so in the real world,' said Adam, trying to sound more certain than he felt.

Fern shook her head but she was too tired to try to explain. Besides, any story she could tell would be so fragmented and outlandish it would make no sense. 'He's reaching into your dreams,' Shamesh had said. And now Fern was certain it was true. This must have been how her father had found her. And this was why he'd wanted her frightened. It weakened her, and when she was weak he could get past her defences.

'Stop worrying, I won't let anything get you.'

'Even in my sleep?'

'Even in your sleep. Just call me.'

As Fern's eyes closed, Adam felt the weight of her trust and wondered if he was making promises he might not be able to keep. * * *
Chapter Fourteen

'Look,' said Adam, peering out the window. 'There's Tassie.'

Fern looked at the curved coastline extending as far as she could see, then back at Adam who was staring, transfixed, with something new in his eyes. A fierce joy, even pride. This was his home. She wondered at the strange twist of fate that had sent them to Tasmania. There was no doubt they both had something to find here. An ending perhaps, a conclusion of some sort. And maybe a new beginning.

'It's green,' she said, stating the obvious as the plane soared above lush farmlands and mountains. She'd almost forgotten what green looked like.

'Isn't it beautiful? The south is pretty special too, though it's much drier there.'

Fern shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It had been two days since the night attack, but she was still weak on her left side and experiencing shooting pains in her head and a rawness in her chest as if her heart was wounded. She'd wanted to get on a plane the next day but Adam said she wasn't well enough, that there wasn't any hurry. In the end she'd agreed to see a doctor, and spent an hour in a waiting room, before an ageing doctor told her she was too young to have heart problems.

'Probably just a panic attack,' he said, dismissing it as a small and embarrassing piece of hysteria. Women's stuff.

So it appeared that whatever was wrong with Fern was not measurable and therefore not serious. But her instincts told her that she'd been lucky to survive; that her heart had experienced a huge jolt, a giant rush of adrenalin; that something had temporarily cut off her life source. She'd fought back instinctively and now wondered if that was what Cassie had meant when she'd told Fern to follow her intuition. It was as if she had an innate knowledge inside of her and all she had to do was remember how to access it.

As a teenager the idea of astral travelling had appealed to Fern and she'd spent hours trying to clear her mind and imagine herself out of her body, each time slipping into sleep and waking with a jolt, or getting lost in her thoughts. In the end she'd given up. Now she wondered if she'd been astral travelling in her sleep the other night; it was
possible she'd met her enemy out there in the ether and he'd tried to kill her by severing the life cord that was supposed to connect the astral body with the physical body.

'See out there,' said Adam, 'that's the Great Western Tiers, some of the best walking country in Tassie. I'll take you there, you can see for yourself.'

'Great,' said Fern. She wasn't exactly familiar with camping, or particularly bushwalking in snake-ridden wilderness, but Adam's excitement was infectious. As she leaned over him to peer through the window, her arm accidentally touched his chest and she jumped as if she'd been shocked. This strange electric tension between them had started the morning after the panic attack. She'd woken late, to find the blankets thrown off and Adam lying stretched out on his back, one arm still pinned under her. She'd watched him for a while, studying the almost imperceptible pulse in his neck, his chest rising and falling, the blond hairs sprinkled between his nipples, the mole just under his belly button, the thick muscles of his legs, and his boxer shorts gaping just a little at the front. She had to fight a powerful urge to run her fingers down his chest and slip her hand into those shorts. She wanted him so much it hurt. Wanted to lean over and kiss him again, losing herself in his mouth, imbibing his strong smell of sweat and beer, her skin rubbing raw against the stubble on his chin. But just then Adam had opened his eyes and stared straight at her. First he gave her a sleepy smile and for a moment she thought he was happy to find himself beside her. But a second later, his eyes had clouded over with confusion and then embarrassment, and he pulled his arm out from under her and sat up.

That night had been torture for Adam. While Fern slept, he'd spent hours cradling her against him, letting his warmth flow into her, and trying not to feel anything or, more precisely, trying not to let her feel anything. The tension had built inside him as the night wore on. Her skin was soft and silken and he'd desperately wanted to stroke it but hadn't dared move. When he finally shifted one arm a little to try to ease the pins and needles, she sighed and snuggled closer to him, her face right up against his chest. Then it was all he could do to stop himself from bending down, lifting her chin and kissing her. Instead he lay statue still, staring at the ceiling and attempting to distract himself from thinking about her body. He replayed in his head every song he knew, then feeling idiotic, played a game he had used as a kid when he couldn't sleep, trying to think of every fruit or
vegetable starting with A - apricot, apple, avocado, aubergine . . . B, lots of berries there, blackberry, blueberry boysenberry, and so on through the alphabet. Then he started again on animals. It was only when he reached Q and dawn was approaching that he finally succumbed to sleep and then it seemed only moments before he opened his eyes again to find her looking at him. Her face was open, her eyes soft and with a yearning in them that made him want to reach out and enfold her. Instead he blushed and turned away, muttering something stupid about getting breakfast, and regretting the lost intimacy even as he spoke.

After that they were wary, holding their bodies away from each other. If Fern's hand brushed against his she quickly snatched it away, and when they came face to face in the tiny flat, they hastily sprung apart. Neither was able to step across the abyss they'd created between themselves.

Fern felt the pressure change in her ears as the plane began its descent. She hated this bit, flying through clouds until suddenly they were too close to the ground, the wings tossing one way and then the other. She did up her seatbelt and waited, feeling the nerves set in, exacerbating the rawness around her heart. The plane would land because it always did. And then what? A new place, new people, Christmas with strangers, and eventually a meeting she feared.

Adam was listening to his iPod as if he didn't have a care in the world. But he must be nervous too, thought Fern. Two years was a long time to be away from your family, especially when it was just his mum and his brother. There was something going on there, but he wasn't forthcoming about it. Despite her arguments, he'd insisted that Fern spend Christmas with his family.

'They'd want you to,' he'd said. 'They're like that.'

But Fern wasn't so sure. He hadn't even rung to say they were coming. When she'd suggested it would be a good idea to give his mother some warning, he'd shaken his head.

'Nah, it's easier this way. We'll just show up.'

Adam had kept his voice casual, but he was secretly worried. He didn't know how to face them, how to say sorry. He'd left it too long, so now there was nothing he could do to make it easier. If he could have left a message, just said, See you tomorrow,
that would have been okay, but his mother would want explanations, there'd be tears, and he'd change his mind about visiting. He knew it.

The engine noise dropped suddenly and Fern's knuckles whitened, then it roared again as the plane reached for the runway. She braced herself as they hit the ground, feeling the force of the brakes fighting the heavy machine that was propelling itself forward. For a split second the battle hung suspended. Then as the plane slowed, Fern relaxed, breathing easily again, and excited now. She'd never been to Tasmania before.

Heads down against the wind, they made their way across the tarmac and into the baggage claim area where they waited for Adam's bag. Fern had taken her own small backpack onto the plane with her. Most of her money was in it and she didn't want to let it out of her sight. Adam had booked the tickets yesterday and paid for them on his card, so no one could trace Fern's movements via her accounts. Then he'd made her take money out at a flexi-teller on Oxford Street this morning. 'Take as much as you think you'll need,' he'd told her. 'You don't want to be making transactions in Tassie.'

Fern had done as Adam had suggested, but wondered if it was necessary. Perhaps Grace would be pushing the police to start searching for her, trying to get her placed on the missing persons list, but she didn't think Eric would employ another Bloodhound to find her. There was no reason to attack her in the 'real' world when he could do it so much more efficiently in her sleep.

Even so, as they waited for Adam's bag, Fern looked around anxiously. A man standing a few paces away caught her eye, then looked away quickly, freezing her to the spot and sending her heart racing. Just then a child ran up to him shouting 'Daddy, Daddy,' and he scooped her up smiling. Relieved, Fern thought about her own fathers: one sick with a broken-down heart; and the other, Eric Hannson, a name that still felt strange to her tongue. In all the years she'd wondered about her birth parents, it had been her mother that she'd focused on, not her father. There'd been only a fleeting sense of disappointment when she saw the blank space on her birth certificate where her father's name should have been. Now Fern was on her father's turf, and she wondered if he could sense somehow that she was there.

'Shit, what's happened to the place?' Adam said as the airport bus drove them into town. They'd already driven past a tacky motel that looked grubby and ancient but had
only been built in the two years since Adam left. And now they were passing a sprawling shopping complex. 'Last time I was here, this was all just dirt.' Adam laughed. 'Tassie's really coming on, hey! It'll be on the map next.'

The bus turned a corner and a massive mountain loomed in the distance, the city of Hobart rising from its base. 'Mount Wellington,' said Adam. 'There are some great walks up there.'

Fern stared at the mountain as they approached. It looked stern and heavy, looming over the houses, overshadowing the city in the afternoon light. Even the way it was softened and split in two by clouds took away none of its certainty.

'In winter it's often covered in snow. Even snows in summer sometimes. Though most summers it bakes dry - it's a bushfire waiting to happen.'

They crossed a wide river, the bridge curving up and over it.

'The Derwent River,' said Adam as if just the name could describe the play of light on the water as the wind tossed the surface and the joyful triangles of sails as yachts tacked playfully to and fro. Beyond was the city, a collection of miniature high-rises reaching above period buildings, a cruise ship almost as tall as the high-rises, docked in the harbour, houses stretching from the water's edge, up the hills, and into the mountain. It was beautiful.

'Fucking log trucks,' said Adam, his mood souring again as a truck laden with gigantic tree trunks drove past them. 'I'd almost forgotten about forestry.' He scowled. 'That's how it is with Tassie, when you're not here you hardly think about it, but the minute you get back, the politics take over. . . You have to take sides about everything. Shit, I hate this place.'

'I thought you loved it.'

'Yeah, it's complicated. I hate it that I love it. You know, if you love something you want to protect it. And every time someone hurts it, they hurt you. Then you get trapped somehow. You're not autonomous anymore. You're not free. That's what Tassie does to me.'

Fern wondered if that conflict extended to all Adam's relationships. That is, if he had any. He hadn't seen his family for a long time and in the few days she'd known him the phone hadn't rung and no one had come by. He hadn't mentioned friends or
girlfriends. Maybe it was his way of trying to be free. But it didn't work. Running away was just another trap. She should know.

There was a two-hour wait for the next bus down the Channel Highway to Kettering, where Adam's mother lived with his brother. They passed the time down by the harbour looking in shop windows and browsing in a bookshop. As they walked through Salamanca Square, a guy with dreadlocks and an earring in his nose called out Adam's name.

Adam stopped, looking blank for a moment. 'Matt! I didn't recognise you,' he said, then gave the guy a big bear hug.

Fern liked the look of Matt. He was beautiful, with gentle eyes and an earthy feel about him. Perhaps it was the clothes, in shades of brown, or the mud-caked walking boots.

'What you been up to?' Matt asked.

'Oh, this and that,' said Adam vaguely.

'I heard you'd joined the army.'

'Yeah,' said Adam dismissively. 'A short stint, least it got me out of Tassie. How about you?'

'Been camping down at the Florentine for the past few months, trying to stop the loggers. . . You back for good?' Matt asked, all the while eyeing Fern curiously.

'Nah,' said Adam, looking uncomfortable. 'Just visiting the family.'

'Shame. . . Hey, I'd better get going.' Matt scribbled something on a piece of paper. 'Here's my number. You should come down and have a look. We could do with more people.'

'Yeah,' said Adam, pocketing the number. 'I'll try.'

So Adam had been a soldier. Fern felt a momentary satisfaction at having one question answered, but it only raised more. He didn't seem like the soldier type, but then again she'd never met a soldier before. At least it explained the way he'd handled Reg, as if he'd been trained for it. She looked at Adam, but the expression on his face was forbidding.

'Don't ask,' he said. 'Let's get a drink.'

They found a table in the sun, ordering a coffee for Fern and a beer for Adam.
Fern untied her hat from the back of her pack and slipped it on, holding it in place with a silk scarf that she'd hand-dyed in college.

Adam sat opposite Fern, drinking his beer and watching her dip her teaspoon into her latte and delicately lick off the froth. A week ago he would have laughed if anyone had told him he would soon be in Tasmania again, sitting in the sun in Salamanca, with a girl like this. She was beautiful, in a head-turning way. People looked at her, men and women. Adam felt a mixture of pride and jealousy welling up inside him as he caught another man glancing over at her. Fern seemed oblivious, occasionally giving him a small smile. A shawl was wrapped loosely around her shoulders and she wore a pair of flat sandals, the fine leather lacing up her ankles, a plain singlet top, a skirt that swished softly around her knees as she walked, and that hat. He couldn't decide if she was a hippy, a sophisticate, or maybe something else entirely. But whatever she was she made him feel like his brother - a stupid, clumsy, oversized oaf.

'Do you believe in reincarnation?' she asked suddenly, jolting him out of his thoughts. Great, he noted wryly, another weird topic he'd rather not consider.

'No,' he said, abruptly.

'Mmm, I suppose it doesn't make much sense, but then neither does just stopping. How can our life just stop? What would be the point?'

'That's just the way it is,' said Adam, dourly. 'There isn't any point. We live and then we die. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

Fern licked more froth from her spoon. 'In high school I did physics for a term. I was dreadful at it, didn't understand anything, but I'll never forget the teacher telling us that energy never dies, it simply changes form. That's when I started believing in eternal life. It was like an epiphany.' She smiled. 'Hey, maybe we knew each other in a past life. I could have been your mum or something.'

Adam laughed and ordered another beer. 'You! I don't think so.'

No, thought Fern, more likely a lover. There were things about Adam that she knew too easily. Connections already forged. And a strange reluctance they both felt. To accept destiny, maybe, because once they did there'd be no going back.

Fern shivered as a cloud crossed in front of the sun. 'What if you made an enemy and that hatred carried on through life after life? A very powerful enemy who wanted to
destroy you.'

'No way,' said Adam. 'Not possible.' But he'd felt the shadow cross into Fern and now her fear transferred itself to him. He couldn't fight Fern's demons, he couldn't even keep his own at bay. But it was different for him, his enemy was himself. Maybe that's how it went with enemies, he thought, that somehow they bring out the part of yourself you're afraid of and for that you can't forgive them.

He looked at his watch. 'Hey, we'd better hurry or we'll miss the bus.'

As the bus made its way down the Channel Highway, Adam withdrew further and further inside himself. Fern remembered how it was for her the first time she went back to Adelaide after moving to Sydney, everything sparking off memories, the joy of return mixing uneasily with the anticipation of seeing her father. She left Adam to his musings and stared through the window at the countryside. Some of the paddocks they passed were mown, dotted with round hay bales, but in most the grass was long and yellow, the wind brushing it this way and that like a gentle hand smoothing the finest velvet. A sweet grassy smell made its way into the bus, tickling her nose and making her eyes water. She sneezed three times with not even a 'bless you' from Adam, and dug around in her bag for a tissue. They passed through small towns, Margate and then Snug, then more countryside, nearly always with views of the water. Houses sat on large blocks, with sheep grazing in the paddocks, and orchards with ripening fruit. Fern felt something softening inside her as the bus made its way south. A vague longing, as if she too were coming home.
Chapter Fifteen

The dog noticed them first, setting up a riotous barking before hurtling down the hill to welcome them. They'd got off the bus at the shop in Ferry Road and were walking up a long steep driveway towards a white weatherboard house shaped in a broad V, as if it were opening its arms to embrace the view of the harbour below.

As they walked, a small group of sheep fled across the long grass, panicking at the intrusion. Fern counted five of them.

'Hey, Mutt,' said Adam, as the dog reached them and went into paroxysms of excitement, the back half of his body wagging so hard he looked as if he would snap in two. He gave Fern a half-hearted sniff, then returned to Adam, whining and whimpering with delight.

'Thought you would have carked it by now.' His eyes brimming with tears, Adam dropped to his knees and let the old dog lick his face.

Fern watched this reunion, wishing there was someone, somewhere, who would greet her like that. Dogs loved you no matter what. She'd needed that when she was a kid - something to cuddle and confide in. In the end she'd given that honour to a stuffed elephant Grace had made for her one Christmas.

Adam, stood up, laughing. 'Look at him, panting away. After this he'll probably need to sleep for the rest of the day.'

Fern reached down to stroke the old dog. His hair was grey in places, there were bald patches on his back and he smelled pretty horrible, but the love in his eyes made up for all that as he followed them, wheezing, up the hill to the house.

'Hello?' a woman called, a question mark in her voice.

Fern looked up to see a woman standing near the gate at the top of the drive. She was shielding her eyes from the sun, trying to make out the figures walking up the hill. As they got closer, Fern could see she was stocky, with thick solid ankles and sturdy calves below her dress. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail and streaked heavily with grey, and her face was weathered and heavily wrinkled, especially around the eyes. She looked as if she'd spent her life outdoors.
'Hey, Mum,' said Adam, a note of resignation in his voice.

There was a pause. 'Adam? Is that you, Adam?' They were close now and the woman let out a quick gasp and put her hand to her mouth. 'Oh Adam... I didn't... I didn't know what had happened to you.'

Adam and his mother stood facing each other awkwardly, as if unsure how to step across the space between them. Fern watched the flood of emotions cross the woman's face; love, excitement, joy, disbelief and anger, all in the space of a few seconds.

'You're safe,' she said finally. 'That's all that matters.' Then she stepped forward, taking Adam in her arms and holding him tight, the tears pouring down her cheeks and onto his t-shirt. 'Here,' she said eventually, pushing him away, 'let me look at you.' She stared at her son with a look of increasing concern. 'You've changed. Oh Adam, where have you been?'

Adam's voice was gruff, almost angry, as he spoke. Fern could see he was struggling to hold himself together. 'In Sydney,' he said. 'Hanging out.'

His mother looked puzzled. 'But why?'

Adam shrugged. 'Hey,' he said, glancing at Fern. 'Guess I should introduce you. Mum, this is Fern. Fern, this is my mum... Iris.'

Iris held out both hands and took one of Fern's, shaking it eagerly. 'You're tiny. And so beautiful. Oh Adam, I'm so pleased you've brought your girlfriend home for Christmas.'

Adam and Fern exchanged panicked glances. 'She's not... ' said Adam, and stopped. 'She's just a friend.'

Iris smiled. 'Yes, a special one. I can tell.'

Fern sent Adam a desperate look, but he just smiled fondly at her, a big open smile so his mother could see. 'Yeah,' he said. 'She's pretty special.'

The pause that followed Adam's pronouncement stretched too long for Fern's comfort. They all stood there: the dog panting, a long strand of saliva dribbling from the corner of his mouth; Fern blushing and wondering what the hell Adam thought he was up to; Adam smiling without a hint of embarrassment; and Iris's eyes shining with happiness once more.

'Come in, come in,' said Iris, pushing open the gate. 'Make sure you shut it behind
you, those bloody sheep keep getting in and eating the rhubarb. I thought the leaves were supposed to be poisonous, but those stupid creatures don't seem to care.’

They followed her into the back garden, which was dotted with outbuildings: a laundry, a dilapidated shed, and a chicken pen with a rusty galvanised iron roof. Behind the house an old station wagon was parked on a circular driveway, with fruit trees in the middle. Next to the back door was a rusty water tank on a stand, a profusion of mint growing underneath, and next to that a large, fenced vegetable garden. Iris rapped her knuckles on the water tank, up and down, listening for the change in tone that would tell her the water levels.

‘Almost out,’ she said sadly. ‘It'll have to be short showers till the next rains.’

Iris ushered them into the house. ‘Shoes off,’ she said apologetically. ‘I have to make that rule, otherwise Michael comes galumphing in still wearing his muddy boots and it takes me an hour to clean up after him.’

‘Where is Michael?’ asked Adam.

‘Oh, he's out somewhere, probably helping Stan on his boat. . . He's good with his hands,’ she added, her voice taking on a defensive tone that made Fern wonder if Iris was always having to explain away her younger son. Iris smiled at Adam. ‘He'll be so pleased to see you.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ said Adam, although Fern sensed from the look on his face that Adam's relationship with his brother wasn't straightforward.

They stepped into the lounge room, which was huge and lined with windows stretching from floor to ceiling. Fern felt a wave of vertigo as the vast, beautiful view spread out before them: the curved detail of the hills opposite, the flurry of colour from the hundreds of yachts moored in the bay, and the water, its sparkling silver blue filling the room and sending rippling shadows of light and dark across the far wall.

‘It's lovely,’ she gasped.

‘Yes, isn't it,’ said Iris proudly. ‘Even after all these years, I still love it.’

Fern looked around the large room with its polished wooden floorboards. At one end an ageing leather lounge suite was arranged around an open fireplace, a television and a colourful rug. At the other end was a dining table and chairs and a huge dresser. The middle of the room was taken up with an ancient slow-combustion wood fire; and
opposite that, double doors led out onto a verandah.

Her eyes were drawn to the mantelpiece, which was cluttered with framed photographs. One was of a young, beaming Iris with her husband on their wedding day; another showed what must have been Adam as a baby, bald except for a blond tuft on his forehead, his face round and dimpled.

'Cute,' said Fern, laughing as Adam winced.

Fern looked at another photo of Adam, in his school uniform this time and wearing a wicked smile, with his hair slicked down neatly as if someone had just wet the comb and shoved it in place for the photograph.

'He was such a mischievous little brat,' said Iris, smiling fondly at the photograph. 'Always getting himself into trouble.'

'Still am,' said Adam, putting his arm around his mother's shoulder.

'And that's Michael and his dad, just before... Iris's voice changed as she stared wistfully at the photograph Adam had lifted off the mantelpiece. It was easy to spot the similarities between Michael and his father. They had the same large mouths and open smiling faces. But while the man's eyes twinkled with humour, the boy's eyes were blank.

Iris sighed. 'Now, would you like a cup of tea, or a cold drink?'

'Tea please,' said Fern, leaving Adam staring at the photograph and following Iris into the kitchen, where a long row of windows looked out over the back garden. This had to be the sunniest house Fern had ever been in.

'You'll have to excuse the mess,' said Iris. 'I was just making the Christmas pudding. What luck you've arrived now, you can both give it a stir and make a wish.'

Fern looked around the kitchen. The floor was polished wood and the old fifties style cupboards were still in good order.

'Come on then,' said Iris, 'before I put it on the stove... Adam!'

Fern didn't know what to wish for, or at least couldn't formulate her desires into anything concrete. So she let Adam go first, watching him reluctantly stirring the bowl, and wondering what was he was thinking. Fern stirred next, suddenly overwhelmed with wishes. First she wished for a safe end to this journey, then for somewhere that she could belong and for a path in her life that she could follow. And, she added silently, she wanted to kiss Adam again.
'Now, where did I put the brandy?'

Iris opened a door and stepped into a large walk-in pantry. Fern peered in at the shelves lined with jars of jams and chutneys, rice and flour, lentils and chickpeas, oats, icing sugar, all neatly labelled. It felt safe and ordered. With a pantry like that you could never starve.

'There,' said Iris, when she'd put the pudding on to steam. 'Now let's have that cup of tea before I make the dinner. Adam, there's a beer in the fridge if you'd rather.'

They sat at the dining table in the living room, Fern's eyes straying constantly to the view while Iris poured tea from the pot. Her wrists were thick and her hands square, the fingers stubby and capable; the sort of hands that could open jars or stuck taps. Fern took a sip of her tea; it was strong, just the way she liked it. She began to relax, feeling almost as if she was on holiday. Christmas was so close, they'd need to stay with Adam's family for a few days and she could put off tracking down her father until later.

'How long have you two known each other?' asked Iris, and immediately Fern felt wary again.

'A couple of months or so,' said Adam, answering for her.

'Not long then,' said Iris, sounding momentarily disappointed. 'Still, love works in funny ways. When I met your father I knew. We both did. Six months later we were married.'

Blushing, Fern stared out the window, concentrating on the view.

'Are you from Sydney, dear?' asked Iris.

'No, Adelaide. I was studying in Sydney.'

'What were you studying?'

'Fashion design.'

Fern saw the look of surprise on Adam's face and then his attempt to hide it. This was a ridiculous farce: they hardly knew anything about each other.

'That sounds interesting. Very glamorous, I imagine.'

'Not really.' Fern didn't want to talk about herself, and anyway, she could see that Iris was itching to ask Adam questions - the important ones: Where have you been? Why didn't you get in touch? But she was too polite to do so in front of Fern.

'Ah, here comes Michael now,' said Iris.
They watched a giant of a man come striding up the hill and disappear around the side. A few seconds later a voice called eagerly, 'Mum, look at. . .'

'SHOES!'

Fern heard the thud of boots landing on the floor before Michael came into the living room, cradling something carefully in his hands, on which his eyes were fixed.

'Look, Mum. . . he said without looking up. He opened the palms of his hands to reveal a bird, carved delicately and with amazing detail, out of a single piece of wood.

'Oh Michael, that's lovely.'

All at once his face reddened and he snatched it away. 'It's a surprise,' he said.

'That's okay, sweetheart, I'll forget all about it, I promise. . . Look, Michael, we've got visitors.'

For the first time he looked up and noticed the other people in the room. 'Hello.' His face opened into a shy smile before he suddenly recognised his brother. 'Adam!' he cried and rushed to embrace him. Adam stood up and was engulfed by his younger brother, who sobbed openly, banging him on the back and squeezing the breath out of him.

'Hey, Michael, it's good to see you.'

'Adam, oh Adam.'

Adam could feel something happening inside of him. It had started when the plane landed at Hobart airport and it was getting worse by the minute. Now he felt as if his heart was tearing open. Unable to hold it in any longer, he dissolved into tears, his chest heaving as sobs racked him.

'It's all right, Adam, don't worry, I love you,' said Michael, stroking Adam's head while he cried.

Adam soon mastered his emotions once more, smiled and wiped his eyes. 'How are you, mate?'

'Good.' Michael nodded his head vigorously. 'Good.'

Adam was surprised at the sudden love he felt for this brother of his. He'd always resented Michael, the little brother who'd followed Adam around everywhere, scattered his toys, broken his favourite train set. The brother who never grew up. The one for whom Adam was always responsible. 'Adam, can you look after Michael?' . . . 'Adam, I
thought I told you to watch your brother.' And then that last time when his world had fallen apart forever: 'Adam, where is he?'

When Iris introduced Michael to Fern, he said hello and hung his head shyly. The small group sat at the table finishing their tea, somewhat awkwardly. Michael was silent, staring at his brother and at Fern in turn. Iris talked to fill in the spaces left by all those unasked questions.

'I didn't get any work in the shop this year,' she said. 'Sales are down. They're just hanging in there, poor things. Wouldn't it be a shame to see the shop close?'

'How are you managing?' asked Adam.

'Times are tight, but we're growing a lot of our own food and that saves on costs. And Michael's got green fingers, haven't you, darling?'

Michael smiled and proudly held up his hands to show Fern. They were big and grubby, with dirt under the nails. Fern smiled. He's a clay man, she thought, fashioned from the earth.

'We've just finished planting most of the summer vegetables,' said Iris. 'But the rabbits are out of control. Michael's had to dig the fence deep to stop them burrowing under. The rainfall's down this year too, so I don't know how long we can afford to keep watering the vegies as well as the fruit trees. As it is I'm carrying out the dishwater for the herbs.' She sighed and Fern could see how tired she was, drawn down with worry and responsibility. 'It'll be another month before we get the plums and nectarines and maybe another two before the apples start. They'll see us through the year if I can get all the preserving done.'

'You've still got the sheep, though.'

Iris nodded. 'They keep the grass down, but it's so dry this year I don't know if we'll have enough for them all. If I could catch one of the young ones, I'd send it down to the butcher's and have it brought back in a cardboard box. That'd be meat for a few months. Maybe you could do it, Adam. Michael's useless, he won't hurt a fly.'

'Sure, Mum,' said Adam, 'I'll do it.' He felt weighed down with guilt. It was obvious how much she needed someone to hold things together and he'd been too busy wallowing in his own concerns.

Iris smiled at Adam, her eyes filled with love. 'Oh well,' she said, gathering up the
teacups. 'I'd better stop my whinging and get on with dinner. Would you mind picking some cherries, Adam? They're just ripe in time for Christmas. I'll do us a cherry pie.' She smiled at Fern. 'That's always been a favourite with the men in our family.'

'Sure,' said Adam.

'I'll help,' said Fern, rushing out after him. She was afraid of being left alone with Iris. Of being asked unanswerable questions. If they were going to get through this visit they would need to work something out, make sure their stories matched.

'What are we going to do?' she asked when they were out of earshot.

'Do?'

'Yes, you know, about the girlfriend - boyfriend stuff.'

Adam smiled, then leaned over and pulled Fern close, kissing her hard on the lips. The suddenness of it surprised Fern into letting down her defences. She could feel herself melting into Adam, could feel the hardness in his groin as her hips rubbed up against him. In those few seconds she knew. They both did.

'Look, Mum, they're kissing,' shouted Michael, breaking the magic of that moment and bringing them back to their senses. Iris looked up from the kitchen bench where she was working and smiled through the window at them.

'There,' said Adam, releasing her. 'That should do it.'

'Do what?' asked Fern. This was ridiculous. Her heart was pounding in her chest, shivers were running up and down her body, and anger was rising inside her as she realised just how much she wanted him.

He looked at her with a strange smile and shrugged. 'I don't know, make it look real or something.'

'You can't do this to me,' she said, her voice sounding high and strangled.

'Shhh.' Adam put his finger against her lips.

Fern glanced back at the kitchen where Iris was still rolling pastry and smiling to herself. 'It isn't fair,' she hissed.

'What?'

'Don't act all innocent. One minute you kiss me and then. . .' She stopped, not knowing how to go on without revealing how she felt.

'Then what?'
'Then nothing,' she said savagely, grabbing the bowl from him and ripping cherries off the tree. They kept working until the bowl was full and Fern's anger had drained away. Then they picked more anyway, stuffing the sweet fruit into their mouths until Adam laughed and said she looked like she'd been sucking someone's blood.

'Why can't we have a serious conversation?' asked Fern.

'What do you want to talk about?'

'I don't know... How does it feel, coming home like this?'

'It's complicated.'

'See, you never say anything. You've got a beautiful home and a lovely mother and a brother who loves you to bits and all you can say is it's complicated.'

Adam sighed. 'Yeah, it's a great place, but things only ever look perfect from the outside. When you're in them there's always crap to deal with.'

'Like what?' she asked.

'This was never really my home. Physically yes, but that was all.' He leaned against the cherry tree and stared past Fern. 'When I was little we used to live on a sheep station up in the Midlands. It had been in the family for generations. I loved the place... I was supposed to take over from Dad, just like he'd taken over from his dad.' He paused. 'Only he went and died when I was eleven.' There was a bitterness in Adam's voice, as if he blamed his father for dying, Fern thought.

'What happened?'

'It was stupid. Michael went and ran in front of the tractor. Dad turned the wheel quickly, trying not to hit him and it rolled.' His voice broke. 'Right on top of Dad.'

Fern reached out and took Adam's hand. 'I'm sorry."

'Thing is, I was supposed to be looking after Michael.'

'You were a kid,' she said. 'You have to let that go.'

'Yeah, right,' said Adam, looking away.

'So why did your family move here?' asked Fern.

'Mum reckoned she couldn't manage the farm alone. I would have helped out, but she sold it anyway. I dunno, maybe her heart wasn't in it after Dad died. I never asked. We moved down here, nearer to her folks so they could look after us while Mum worked. Though they're dead now.'
Adam sighed again. There were too many deaths, too many disappointments. If only he could focus on what was here, now. A cherry tree, Fern, and the sun sparkling on the water. It would be perfect, if only he could banish the certainty that he didn't deserve such perfect moments. It wasn't just his dad dying like that, it was Michael too, born with a cord wrapped tightly around his neck and his face blue, his brain starved of oxygen too long. After that, Adam had always felt his own normality as a reproach. It was stupid to be alive and not live, but that was the way most people existed, day after day, year after year. And he was no better, running so hard from the past he couldn't embrace what was right in front of him.

'Ouch,' said Fern, jumping as something nipped her calf. Looking down she met the eye of a large white duck, its head cocked to one side as it peered up at her.

'That's Doreena,' said Adam, his mood lifting again. 'She's usually very friendly. Must have thought you were a worm... Here, pat her like this, she loves it.' Adam leaned over and stroked the back of the duck's neck. 'Hey Doreena, that's good isn't it,' he crooned.

It was as if he'd hypnotised the duck, her long neck was stretched out, the lids of her eyes folded upwards as she surrendered to an ecstatic trance. Fern smiled wryly, thinking how similar they were, she and the duck, helpless to resist the minute Adam touched them.

'I've been saving this for a special occasion,' said Iris, opening a dusty bottle of red wine. 'And I can't think of anything more special than this.'

Michael, his eyes fixed unnervingly on Fern, held out his glass and Iris poured in a small amount, topping it up with water. 'Just a drop,' she said. 'You know you're a useless drunk.' She held up her glass. 'Cheers. To a real family Christmas.'

'Are we going to Bruny?' asked Adam, when they'd all clinked glasses and drunk.

'Of course,' said Iris, as if she was shocked by the question.

'We have a shack over on Bruny Island,' Adam explained to Fern. 'It's where we always go for Christmas and Easter, kind of a family tradition.'

Iris spooned out lavish helpings of pasta with home-made pesto sauce and thin-sliced parmesan on top. 'We'll go Christmas Eve, I've got too much to do tomorrow we'll
have to go and get some supplies.' Iris rolled her eyes. 'It'll be chaos in town, everyone running around doing their last-minute stuff. But there's nothing for it, seeing as you insist on coming without notice. I can't have you starving now can I?'

'Don't worry, Mum, we'll help with the shopping, hey Fern?'

Fern nodded but she was feeling more and more self-conscious. Michael's eyes were still fixed on her and she didn't know where to look.

'Michael, it's rude to stare,' said Iris, noting her discomfort. 'Michael. . .'

Suddenly, mid-mouthful, Michael launched himself out of his seat and embraced Fern. 'I like you,' he said.

Iris laughed. 'Well, that's a compliment, Fern. The boy doesn't say much, but he means what he says and he's not usually easy with new people.'

Fern smiled. 'I like you too,' she said.

As the meal progressed and Fern downed a second glass of wine, she was able to relax. Adam cleared the table, then returned carrying a beer and joking with his brother. This was a whole new side of Adam, and one that Fern liked.

Iris came in, triumphantly carrying the cherry pie. 'Here you go, I haven't made one since you left, Adam. Couldn't bring myself to eat it without you.' Her eyes were brimming with tears as she cut the pie, doling out huge portions and pouring generous amounts of cream over each serving.

Fern only managed to eat half of hers, but Adam was a bottomless pit. 'I'd forgotten how good this pie is,' he said, reaching for a third helping.

Fern tried to stifle a yawn but failed. It had been another long day.

'Heavens, you must be exhausted, poor thing,' said Iris. 'You two can sleep in my bedroom.' She waved away Fern's wide-eyed protest. 'Don't be silly, of course you should. It's the only double bed in the house.'

'Where are you going to sleep, Mum?' asked Adam.

'In the little room. You know, the one that used to be my sewing room. I've got a perfectly good camp bed we can put up in there.'

'You can't sleep on a camp bed.'

'Of course I can.'

'I'll sleep in the sewing room.'
'Adam dear, I don't think Fern would want to share a bed with me.'

'Put Michael in it then.'

'He'd break it. Now I don't want to hear any more arguments, Adam,' Iris said, her voice becoming stern. 'It's not every day I get a surprise visit from my son and his girlfriend.'

'Yeah, I know. I should have rung.'

Iris kissed Adam affectionately on the cheek. 'Never mind, love, I'm just pleased you're here. This is the best Christmas present I've had for years.'

'This is creepy,' said Adam, as he shut the door behind them. 'I can't sleep in Mum's bed.' He looked at Fern. 'Not with you. I mean, shit, it wouldn't feel right.'

'It's your fault. Why did you let her think we're together?'

'What else should I have said? Hey Mum, I met this girl a few days ago, she'd just escaped from the nuthouse, thinks her dad's trying to kill her, thought I'd bring her for Christmas. . .' He looked at her sardonically. 'Should I go on?'

Fern laughed uneasily. 'When you put it like that, I guess we don't have much choice. I'll get changed in the bathroom.'

It was a big bed, but even with them both hugging opposite edges, the tension between them was strong. On the dressing-table a clock ticked loudly, Fern's heart beating in time with it until she could no longer tell them apart and she was afraid that if the clock stopped then her heart would too. Fern had always found it difficult to sleep with a clock in the room, but tonight it was impossible. She listened to the silence descend on the house as Iris switched off the lights and settled in her creaky camp bed in the next room. Outside was noisy by comparison: the occasional furious shrieking of the plovers as something approached too close, a growing symphony of frogs around the neighbours' dam; the scuttle of mice, a ghostly hiss of a possum, a sheep briefly left alone and bleating for the others, and sometimes the clear sound of voices rising up from the still valley.

After awhile Adam got up quietly and left the room, leaving Fern alone with the clock, its noise filling her head, her tension boiling over into anger. A great ball of energy rose inside her. It grew, swelling without direction, and she grew with it, feeling herself suddenly to be inside the skin of a bear, catching a glimpse of the soft black fur in the
corner of her eyes, as if she'd shape-changed, becoming huge and unstoppable. She directed all her frustrated fury at the clock, her anger surging, tumbling over itself towards it.

The ticking stopped.

At first Fern thought she must be imagining it; that somehow she shut out the sound, let it merge with all the other sounds of the night. In the dim light of the moon, she slipped quietly out of bed and looked closely at the clock's hands. There was no doubt about it: they weren moving anymore. She wondered if this was her doing, and remembered the magazine that had hurled itself at her mother, a small thing but not easily dismissed.

Wondering where Adam was, Fern lay down wearily and closed her eyes, feeling herself sinking into sleep, the remaining night sounds fading around her. Almost immediately she found herself climbing up some rusty metal stairs on the side of an old warehouse building, where she was met at the door by the Bear Handler. 'Come,' he said.

Fern followed him through the door and into a vast open room, the walls rough stone, the ceiling laced with giant wooden beams.

'You are in grave danger,' said the Bear Handler. 'It is time for you to learn how to let go of your fear and for that you will need to call on the courage and playfulness of the bear. You must face your enemy and be strong, or you will die.'

'But I don't know who he is. I don't know why he hates me. I don't know anything,' she said, wincing at the whining tone in her voice.

'We are all made up of many stories, but they are of no importance. The stories themselves will not release you from your prison. If you get caught in them they will provide new traps. Only the patterns matter, for it is in those that you will see the places that you are caught, repeating yourself, lifetime after lifetime.' He glanced past Fern as if he was expecting someone, his cloak shimmering softly in the light. 'There is time for one more warning. You are remembering many things that you had forgotten. Be wary of becoming absorbed in childish tricks.'

'Like the clock?' asked Fern.

He nodded gravely. 'You must look beyond these tricks, for they are only the side-effects of something far greater.' He took a step away from Fern. 'Now you must
learn to let go of your fear. Remember it is all in your breath... Prepare yourself.'

'Wait,' cried Fern, then gasped as the huge room filled with a sudden urgent sense of danger.

'Breathe out,' said the Bear Handler, and she did so, in a rush, breathing in and out, in and out, as the sense of menace grew. 'Slowly,' said the Bear Handler.

Fern tried to breathe slowly, taking her time, a long slow out-breath, rather than quick gasping in-breaths -the opposite of everything her instincts told her to do. As she breathed she felt lighter and lighter until she rose into the air like a hot air balloon. It happened slowly at first, just a few centimetres. She felt suddenly afraid and instantly landed with a thud. After a time she was doing it easily, sometimes floating, sometimes sinking, once rising high enough to touch the roof of the warehouse. The floating made her laugh with joy, but always she felt the danger there, lurking too close for comfort.

'Good. Remember, it's the fear that holds you down. Without it you can fly.' The Bear Handler smiled at Fern. 'Now, it is time. This you will have to do alone.'

'No,' she said, alarmed. 'I'm not ready.'

But he had disappeared, leaving Fern standing at the edge of a deep pit; below her a circular stone staircase led to the base. Fern knew without being told that the thing she feared was at the bottom. She also knew that if she went down there it would try to kill her. She wanted to turn away but knew she mustn't: that would be giving it her power and only deferring the moment when she must eventually confront it.

Reluctantly Fern began walking down the stairs. There was no banister to hold onto and she didn't know how long the drop was. She stepped carefully, feeling her way in the dark, leaning close to the wall for safety. The atmosphere thickened as she descended and her heartbeat grew louder and louder in the silence because even the sound of her feet was muted by the thick dust that lay on each step, undisturbed for many lifetimes. The air became dense, sucking her in like quicksand and sapping her strength. Her breath quickened as she struggled to find oxygen in the impenetrable darkness and felt the dread inside her growing with each step. This was madness, she told herself, there was something down there and she was walking into a trap.

The moment her foot touched onto the floor of the pit she felt its surging anger, not circling her, not waiting, just an awful intent, so focused it was impossible to deflect.
This was a monstrous creature she felt in the dark, its form not recognisable, but its intention clear as it surged at her, bringing a gigantic axe down on her head. Instinctively she crossed her hands above her head in a futile gesture and a second later it forced its way through her hands, splitting her head, the blood gushing. . .

Gasping, Fern opened her eyes and felt the place on her head where the axe had landed, fully expecting to feel the warm wetness of blood, but there was nothing. As her breath eased and her heartbeat slowed, the dread she felt was slowly replaced with an immense gratitude that she was still alive. The Bear Handler had given her a lesson, and then a challenge. She had lost this round, forgotten her staff again, but at least she'd faced whatever it was, a man or a monster, she didn't know. Despite her fear, Fern felt a sense of triumph. For the first time she'd chosen to seek it out.
Chapter Sixteen

They left early on Christmas Eve to beat the rush but the queue already stretched a long way down Ferry Road.

'The worst time of the year for the ferry,' Iris grumbled. 'You'd think they'd let residents on first, wouldn't you, but no, we've got to queue along with everyone else.'

Michael and Mutt were sitting in the front next to Iris. Fern and Adam were in the back seat, an esky between them, the floor packed with sleeping bags and presents, leaving hardly any room for their feet. The back of the station wagon was full too, laden with more eskies and bags, and a tent, because Iris had discreetly suggested it would be more private outside. Every spare space was filled with supplies, most of which they'd bought in town the previous day.

Fern had been surprised at how small Hobart was. The centre was tiny compared with Sydney but even so it was busy in the run-up to Christmas. They'd all separated, agreeing to meet two hours later. At first it had felt strange being alone again. Adam had stayed so close to her since the trip to Katoomba, never really letting her out of his sight. An unofficial bodyguard. Fern glanced around once or twice, but couldn't convince herself she would be followed here. The crowds were too intent, rushing past each other with lists running over and over inside their heads. Fern was swamped by the thoughts of the people around her; if she concentrated she could work out what was on each person's list. She tried to switch her mind off, but the impressions kept foisting themselves on her, leaving her tired and confused. The Bear Handler was right, this wasn't such a great trick. She had to pull herself together.

She only needed to buy three presents this year, Fern thought, trying not to imagine her mother alone at home in Adelaide, her father in hospital. Three presents but she knew so little about Adam's family. In the end she found everything she needed in a bookshop: a cookbook for Iris with recipes for garden produce, an illustrated book of birds for Michael, and for Adam she bought a book about the Tasmanian wilderness.

Now, on the ferry they left the car and stood at the front, the cold wind on their faces, water splashing up occasionally as the ship ploughed across D'Entrecasteaux
Channel. Feeling inexplicably happy, Fern licked her lips and tasted salt. Michael started dancing, jigging from one leg to the other, waving his arms. It didn't look clumsy, but fitting, a happy dance to the ocean and the sky. Adam was embarrassed, but Fern laughed out loud. She felt good here on the water, so far away from the tensions of Sydney. Then Michael took her hand and pulled her this way and that until she was dancing too, not caring about Adam's red face or the stares from people in the cars lined up behind them.

'An island off an island off an island,' said Adam as they drove onto Bruny Island. 'I always love getting off the ferry at this end. It feels like I'm leaving the world behind. Some people feel isolated here, but I never do.'

Fern nodded. As they wound their way along the narrow isthmus from north to south Bruny, she stared intently out the window. On her right was the channel, calm and still, and to her left was the ocean, its waves beating against the coast. One side was tranquil, the other wild: two faces of nature. Fern felt she recognised it all, that she was returning home. Her usual disquiet had been replaced by an unfamiliar sense of well being. Perhaps this was what it felt like to belong somewhere.

When they arrived at the shack, Adam showed her around, more enthusiastic than she'd ever seen him and filled with memories of his childhood. 'This was my grandparents' shack,' he explained. 'They built it years ago, when they were first married. I spent heaps of time here.'

It was a ramshackle place with crooked lines and a wobbly stone slab for a front step. The walls looked as if they had been built from driftwood, the planks weathered by the wind and the salt. Years ago someone had painted it the deep blue of a late afternoon sky, though that was flaking and now it was a motley mess of peeling blue paint, a creamy undercoat, and beneath that the variable tones of natural wood. Rooms had been added as needed. First a long kitchen running along the entire length of the front of the house, and two dark rooms behind, one stuffed full of junk, the other a small lounge with a fireplace and couch squeezed in.

'That's where everyone used to sleep when I was really little. Then later I helped Granddad build the upstairs bit. . . Come and see.'

Fern followed Adam up a wooden staircase that wound in a spiral from the lounge room. Upstairs were two tiny bedrooms, both with wide windows looking out
over the ocean and a sloping roof. Fern felt a twinge of envy, trying to imagine what it must have been like to grow up in a place like this. It felt organic, fresh and wild, yet safe from the elements, even with the wind creeping its way through the cracks. She liked the building's eccentricity too, so many styles and hardly any ninety-degree angles.

Outside one of the windows was a wide old rambling oak tree that dwarfed the house. 'I used to climb out this window onto that branch and sit there for hours, listening to the wind and the sea,' said Adam, smiling at the memory. 'Michael tried to climb out once and fell. He broke his arm, I think. After that he didn't try to join me again.' He sighed. 'It was the only thing that was all mine. Aside from the surfing... Michael couldn't swim.'

Adam thought about the hours he'd spent in the sea, sitting on his board waiting for the right wave. Only it wasn't about the waves: it was the space he'd wanted. Just him and the ocean and nothing to be responsible for. Standing in this room, immersed in his childhood memories, he felt a surge of pity for the boy he'd been, confused and moody. A boy without a dad. His granddad had tried to fill in the gaps for him, but Adam had resisted, building walls around the hurt and the loneliness.

'Come on,' he said, forcing himself back into the present. 'Let's unpack the car.'

Later that day Fern was standing in the kitchen peeling potatoes for tomorrow's Christmas lunch. Michael had disappeared hours ago, Adam was putting up the tent and Iris was next door chatting with the neighbours. Fern could hear the rise and fall of their voices, the odd burst of laughter, and behind it all the rhythm of waves breaking on sand. The view from the kitchen was even more beautiful than the one from the living room in Kettering. It looked out across Storm Bay to the wide open ocean, a headland at one end, the water changing colour and tone from one minute to the next. You could never be bored with this view. Fern opened the window and breathed deeply of the sea air, seaweed and salt mingling with the scent of thyme and oregano, parsley and basil from the herb garden, that ran along the front of the house.

Despite a blunt peeler and too many potatoes, Fern felt content. Her jaw had loosened and her shoulders too, while her feet had somehow rested on the ground as if they were supposed to be there. It was only by relaxing that she realised how tense she
usually was.

As Fern dropped another peeled potato into the bowl of water there was a creaking sound behind her like a door being opened. She looked up, trying to locate the sound, but it hadn't come from any door she could see. If anything it seemed to emanate from the middle of the room. Fern dismissed it and went back to her peeling, but seconds later Mutt turned up at her feet, whining, his tail between his legs.

'What's wrong, Mutt?' She reached down to pat him and he nuzzled into her, trembling. 'It's okay, boy, there's nothing to be afraid of.'

With the dog close at her heels, Fern walked to the middle of the room to investigate; peering at the floor she noticed a line of raised wood that suggested there had once been a wall here. The room must have been extended at some stage. She wasn't surprised; the shack had the organic feel of a place that had started as one thing, but had been reshaped many times according to the needs of the residents. With Mutt following, she checked in the tiny living room, then climbed up the curving wooden staircase to the bedrooms upstairs. They were empty, but the dog was becoming more nervous and making her uneasy. She led him downstairs and opened the back door. 'Out you go, boy.'

Mutt slunk out, leaving Fern alone in the house, but the atmosphere had changed. The sun had slipped behind a cloud, the sea looked ominous, the laughter next door was too loud. Fern dismissed the goose bumps on her arms and went back to peeling potatoes, occasionally looking around to check there was nothing behind her. She was relieved when Iris came in carrying a bowl, just as Fern finished the last of the potatoes.

'Are you coming or going, Mutt?' said Iris impatiently as the dog stood undecided in the doorway, whining. 'What's wrong with that dog? He must be going senile. . . .' She put the bowl on the bench and Fern found herself looking an enormous lobster in the eye. 'Rick gave us a Cray. What a beauty! We'll have it tomorrow night with the prawns.'

Adam came in, grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat down at the table.

'Christmas Eve,' he said. 'God it's good to be back.'

Iris smiled at her son and kissed him on the top of his head. Fern cleaned up the peel and wiped down the bench top, trying to find her way back to the relaxed space she'd been in only minutes before. But she was unable to shake the feeling of uneasiness. Though Iris and Adam seemed oblivious to it, there was a tightness in the atmosphere, as
if something was pressing in on her.

Then Michael came in, a broad smile on his face. Two steps inside and his smile disappeared. First he looked puzzled, then he cringed, leaning backwards as if he was under attack. 'Away!' he shouted, dashing towards Fern and standing, arms outstretched, between her and something she couldn't see. Still trembling, Mutt joined him in front of Fern and began barking.

'What's going on?' asked Iris.

'What is it, Michael?' asked Adam.

'Away!' shouted Michael again, pointing at the spot in the middle of the room where Fern had heard the creaking.

'Really, this is ridiculous,' said Iris, taking Michael's arm. 'Calm down, dear. And you,' she turned to Mutt, 'stop that barking.' Mutt ignored her, so Adam took him by the collar and led him outside where he started whining again.

Michael grabbed Fern's hand and peered intently into her face. 'It wants you,' he said.

Fern shuddered.

'Michael, stop it, you're scaring Fern,' said Iris. 'Adam, why don't you take him outside and show him the tent? I'm sorry, Fern, you'll think we're mad. Michael's just sensitive, that's all. One foot in this world and one in another. That's the way he's always been. You ignore him.'

'Come on, Michael,' said Adam. As he left he caught Fern's eye and raised his eyebrows in a question.

Fern shrugged and shook her head, but her instincts were screaming at her to beware. The malevolent force in her dreams had somehow stepped through and Michael could see it. Even here, on an island off an island off an island, she wasn't safe.

The rest of the day was awkward and strained, Michael and Mutt staying close to Fern, Adam looking puzzled and Iris trying to pretend nothing was wrong. Fern was relieved when she could politely excuse herself and go to bed.

The tent was tiny and smelled as if it hadn't been used for some time. Adam had called it a two-person tent but it looked only big enough for one. She unzipped the flap and crawled in, then got changed quickly into her pyjamas and slipped into her sleeping
bag. Fern could feel something hard pressing into her back through the thin mat. The
torchlight cast strange shadows on the sides of the tent, which billowed gently in and out
with the breeze. Just a thin piece of material between her and nature, but it felt safe.
Unlike the regular ticking of the clock in Kettering, the crashing of the waves calmed
Fern. She lay still, listening to the sounds, at first just a mass of noise, but after a while
she began to distinguish between them: the hum of insects, the hoot of an owl, the
occasional crack of the galvanised iron roof as it cooled in the night air . . .

  Fern jumped when she heard the sound of the zip, realising she must have dozed
off.

  'Sorry,' said Adam, as his elbow dug into her leg.

  They lay side by side, almost touching but not quite, both cocooned in their
sleeping bags and trying to ignore the electricity building between them. Fern knew his
kisses had been fronts to deceive, first the Bloodhound and then his mother, but surely
she wasn't the only one who'd felt that melting sensation.

  The tension was becoming too much for Fern. Tentatively she reached for Adam,
putting her fingertips lightly on his chest. She heard his breath catch and he turned his
head slowly towards her. It was too dark to read the look in his eyes, to know if they
held a question mark, disdain or desire. This time she took the lead, reaching for his lips,
pulling his head closer, and Adam responded hungrily, devouring her lips as if he'd been
waiting, poised and ready for this moment. They unzipped their sleeping bags, Fern's
hands sliding under Adam's t-shirt, feeling the light hair on his stomach, his soft skin, her
lips sliding down to his neck, his chest, as she took in the smell of him, memorising it.
Adam groaned and rolled onto his elbow, his hand running roughly across her breasts, his
mouth following, sucking her nipples, then moving down to her belly where he licked his
way across her hips. Her hands tugged at her shorts and then Adam's tongue searched
between her legs, probing deeper and deeper. Fern writhed and arched, trying to ignore
the sounds from outside - Mutt scratching insistently at the tent door, front paws
scratching up and down the material as he whined desperately to get in.

  'Go away,' growled Adam, but Mutt only became more insistent. 'Damn it, he'll
put a hole in the tent.' Adam sat up and unzipped the door, snapping, 'Piss off, Mutt,' but
the dog ignored him and darted into the tent, settling himself down next to Fern.
'It's pretty obvious who's boss around here,' said Fern, laughing and patting the dog. 'Peuw, he stinks.'

'Mutt. Out,' said Adam sternly.

Mutt whined but refused to move, so Adam pushed him roughly out of the tent before turning back to Fern. But the mood was dispelled.

'I need the toilet,' said Fern, filled suddenly with misgivings.

She made her way towards the outhouse behind the shack. The moon was high in the sky, casting a ghostly silver light across the ground, scored with deep shadows across everything. Mutt was at her side, staying close, tail right down between his legs and whimpering quietly to himself. Fern didn't notice. She could still taste Adam on her lips, feel his hands on her skin, her body still trembling from his touch. She left the toilet door open and peered out at the stars, the Milky Way so vivid and close it made her dizzy.

As Fern reached over to flush the toilet something surged towards her. She felt its impact though she couldn't see it. Mutt barked furiously, then howled briefly before cowering in the corner of the toilet and whining. *Turn away:* the voice came from within her, a deep certainty that this was what she must do. But it was too late, the thing already had her in its clasp. Fern was fighting against something she couldn't see, or even feel. There was nothing discernible, no hands, no outline, or perhaps only a hint of a shadow, shifting and changing, giving her fleeting glimpses of its various forms: a hooded cape, strands of black hair, dark eyes staring through her. Fern knew instinctively that she mustn't stare back. She closed her eyes against it, but that was all she could do. Its strength was immense and its attack focussed on her stomach and chest. She doubled over, trying to protect herself, but it was too late, she could feel it draining away her strength, as if it had a straw to her belly and was sucking the warmth from her body. First her fingers and toes turned icy, then her arms and legs, her head, and finally her torso. And all the time she could sense its triumph, the glee it felt in the knowledge that it had her.

Everything moved in slow motion, as, losing consciousness, she slid to the ground, a part of her lifting up and out of her body. Fern's fear was replaced by a detached curiosity. She could see herself from above, her body slumped on the ground, half in and half out of the outhouse. Then Michael was there, and Adam behind him.
Something cold and wet hit Fern's face, and she felt a huge jolt, drawing her instantly back to herself. She was lying on the ground, her clothes drenched, the water dripping from her hair and down her face. Shocked, she opened her eyes and saw Michael holding an empty bucket. He was staring at her intently, his whole body shaking with terror. Somehow he'd known what she needed, something to bring her back. Cold water was perfect. Michael had saved her.

Fern tried to thank him but couldn't find a way to form the words. She couldn't smile either, to reassure him, but her mind was crystal clear. Incongruously, a memory came of a time when she had been too frightened to go to school because some of the other kids had been teasing her, calling her names. Her teacher had come to visit, sending her mother into a nervous panic, clattering teaspoons and the best china. 'True courage,' he'd said to Fern when Grace was out of the room, 'isn't to live without fear. It's to recognise how afraid you are and do it anyway.' Then he'd drained his cup of tea and stood up. 'Don't let the bullies win.' The next day Fern had gone back to school; she'd decided to stop being a victim. She couldn't remember her teacher telling her that last bit, but she knew it for certain: victims make monsters, monsters make victims. Neither is completely innocent.

Now, lying soaking and shivering on the ground, Fern sensed that she had reached a turning point. She was more afraid than she could remember. This thing had already weakened her, and this time it had taken her to the very brink of death. It could come again at any time; it would come, she had no doubt about that, and next time Michael might not be there to help her. Fern had known for some time that she had to stop running, yet that knowledge had only been in her head, it hadn't penetrated into her heart. With Adam's help she'd turned around physically, catching the Bloodhound and tracing her father, but even so there was something inside her that was still running, still afraid. And this thing was feeding off that. Like a vampire it had taken nearly all her energy, stripping her of her life force. If it had succeeded, then she would be dead.

Until now a part of Fern had felt as if she was a character in a fictional story, caught in the pages of a book she could close whenever she wanted to. Now she knew in her heart that she had no such choice. She had to see this through. She had to stop running. From now on, every part of her and every moment of time would be imbued
with that knowledge. As she lay on the ground looking up at Michael, his head framed by the moon as if he were an angel, she knew without a doubt that she had to fight.

It could only have been a few seconds since Michael had thrown the water, yet it was as if Fern, Michael and Adam were caught, frozen in time. Then Mutt crept up and licked Fern's face, somehow releasing the spell that had held them all in place like statues in a children's party game.

'What the hell's going on?' asked Adam, staring from Michael to Fern and back again. Though Adam had seen more than he wanted to admit, to himself or anyone else. At first he'd thought Fern had gone mad, struggling like that against nothing. But as she'd fallen to the ground, he'd caught a glimpse of something: a flash of strength, the tilt of a head.

Michael dropped the bucket and sat down suddenly, crumpling as if a puppeteer had let go of his strings. The clarity Fern had felt now fled, leaving a space for shock to set in. She began shivering violently, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

Adam reached down and picked Fern up in his arms as though she weighed nothing. She felt hollow to him, as if the life had been sucked out of her. 'You're shivering, we'd better get you dry. . . Jesus, Michael, why'd you throw water all over her?'

'Had to bring her back,' mumbled Michael.

'What the hell are you talking about?' Adam's voice was harsher than he wanted it to be, but Michael seemed oblivious. He was rocking backwards and forwards, staring at the moon and humming to himself. Adam hadn't seen him do that since their father died.

Adam carried Fern back to the tent, tugging a beach towel off the line on the way. He stood her up outside the tent and handed her the towel. 'Here, dry yourself while I get Michael back into the house.'

When he returned, Fern was still standing in the same spot, motionless. She hadn't even begun drying herself. There was nothing left in her except the trembling that was outside of her control.

'Jesus, this is crazy stuff,' said Adam. 'Here, hold your arms up.' He, pulled off her t-shirt for her and tugged down her wet shorts, lifting her legs one at a time so Fern could step free of them. Then, taking the towel, he rubbed her down vigorously, trying to
get the blood flowing through her again. When she was dry, Adam reached into the tent and rummaged around for one of his shirts. He slipped her arms into the sleeves, then fumbled with the buttons, and rolled up the sleeves so her hands could find a way out of them. Then he helped her back into the tent. Mutt pushed in behind them but this time Adam let the dog stay.

He zipped their sleeping bags together, then climbed in next to Fern. She snuggled close to him, slipping her feet under his legs and her hands between his arms and his chest. He flinched from the cold but let her stay there, soaking up his heat.

Slowly her shaking subsided as the warmth entered her belly, working its way back in, her torso first, then her head, her arms and legs, though her feet and hands were still icy. Fern wanted to talk. Wanted to explain things to Adam, to use words to push away the menace of what had happened, but she couldn't make her mouth work. All she knew was she had to fight. Fight. The word kept repeating itself inside her head, a refrain that meant nothing because she didn't know how. She was afraid she might slip away again, up and out of the tent, dispersing into the sky, losing herself. She needed boundaries, edges, certainties to hold everything together. Fern snuggled closer to Adam, burrowing in like a mouse. She kept her eyes open, looking at Adam, seeking out his eyes to help her stay grounded.

He reached down and kissed her on the head, then closed her eyes with his fingers. 'Go to sleep. We'll talk in the morning,'

Fern didn't want to sleep, but found no solace in being awake. This thing had stepped through her dreams and into her waking life. Now she wasn't safe anywhere. If she didn't act, it would fill her mind and send her over the edge into insanity. It might have weakened her physically, but her resolve had strengthened; Fern was angry. She'd already used this anger to hurl magazines and stop clocks; now she would find a way to use it as a positive force. She might live or die but she had to see it through. That was all that mattered to her now. She would not let the bullies win.
Chapter Seventeen

'Leggings?' Fern disentangled a pair of yellow and black striped footless tights from the wrapping paper. Puzzled, she looked at Adam for an explanation.

'Thermals,' he said.

'Only you would buy that sort of underwear for your girlfriend,' said Iris, rolling her eyes. 'Really, the boy has no idea.'

'She'll need them when we go bushwalking,' said Adam defensively.

They were sitting in the tiny living room, surrounded by a growing mound of discarded wrapping paper. Proudly wearing a Father Christmas hat, Michael was handing out the presents, showing each one to Adam first so he could read the label. Aside from Fern's weariness and lingering sense of foreboding, it was as if the attack last night had never happened.

When she'd woken that morning, Adam hadn't been there. Fern had found him on the beach, sitting on a log and watching the sun rise. Even from a distance she could read the confusion inside Adam and felt it collide with the resolve she'd found the previous night.

'It's lovely,' she said, sitting down next to him on the log and gazing at the first rays of light on the horizon.

'Yeah, it's my favourite time of day. I'd almost forgotten - in Sydney I sleep through it.'

They sat quietly for a while, watching the smooth surface of the water shift through a multitude of luminescent colours. The ocean was peaceful now, the waves lapping gently against the sand, their sound a lullaby, though not soothing enough to calm Adam's mind.

'What happened last night?' he asked, breaking the silence.

'Something attacked me,' said Fern, then paused, wondering how best to explain it. 'I think it's the same thing that happened in my dream in Sydney, when I woke up in a panic. Only this time it stepped through somehow.'

Instinctively, Adam wanted to scoff, but he couldn't deny that he'd seen
something. 'What was it?' he asked eventually.

'I don't know. . . The thing Michael saw yesterday, whatever it is. The thing that's chasing me.'

'I thought that was your father.'

'So did I. And I think it's connected somehow. Maybe he sent it. Or. .' Fern stopped, wondering for the first time if the creature was linked in some way to her, that somehow she was giving it shape. But how could she be responsible for something she didn't understand?

'I don't get it. How did that thing find you?' asked Adam.

Fern shook her head. 'It's as if there's some kind of tracking device inside me, giving off a signal. That must be how my father found me when the Bloodhound couldn't.'

'That's crazy,' said Adam. 'It isn't possible.'

'That's what I thought at first.' She paused. 'But then things happened. . .' 'Such as?'

Fern sighed. She'd told him very little when she'd first met him. Now it was obvious that Adam needed to know more, but she was afraid that describing all of her recent experiences would drive him away. 'Okay,' she began reluctantly. 'I guess it started when I saw Shamesh one night, standing on the pavement outside my window. He took off his sunglasses and something happened; a kind of waterfall forcing its way through my head. From here,' she said, tapping the top of her head. 'It was so strange. It should have been terrifying, but it wasn't. I wanted it to go on and on forever.'

Adam nodded; he too had seen the strangeness of Shamesh's eyes, though that hadn't happened to him.

Then Fern told him about the vision she'd had when she fell down the stairs at the Underworld, and about the tempest stone and the effect it had on her. 'In broad daylight I was seeing things. I didn't understand at first, but now I'm pretty sure they were from the past. Scenes I'd experienced with him.'

'Him?'

'The thing that's after me. . . I don't know, but I think it's been after me for a long time. Shamesh said that in this lifetime it has incarnated as my father.'
Adam picked up a stick and started drawing lines in the sand, his name first, then circles, around and around. The thought of other lives stretching backwards and forwards in time made him dizzy. The stick snapped in his hand and he threw it away, then ran his fingers over his name in the sand.

'I've always had dreams,' said Fern. 'Anxious ones, the sort most people have. You know, being chased and not being able to move my legs, or trying to cross the road and the cars never stopping. But when I was in the psychiatric ward the dreams changed. Something started penetrating them. At first a hand grabbed my ankle, then I started to feel a terrifying presence or see a figure. And each time it appeared it was closer.' Fern paused, shivering at the memory. 'I can't describe how afraid I am of this thing. But there were other dreams too. Better ones. The Bear Handler came again and gave me a staff. He said to use it against the thing in my dreams but I was always too afraid. Then he came again and tried to teach me how to let go of my fear.' Fern glanced at Adam. His face was creased into a frown, not disbelieving, but not convinced either. She didn't blame him.

Adam looked at Fern, sitting beside him, the gentle light illuminating her skin as she chewed nervously at a fingernail. For some reason he trusted her more than anyone he could remember. Even so, he felt uncomfortable: the world he believed in was unravelling with every word she spoke. He clasped the log beneath him, reassured by its solidity. 'Why does this thing want you?' he asked.

'I don't know. I don't really have any theories yet, apart from the fact that it's got something to do with my father. But whatever it is, it has wanted me for lifetimes. I'm not sure how or why it's found me now, though Shamesh said something about me beginning to open up. He said that three lifetimes ago I shut down and that meant giving away my power. Opening up means I can find that power again, but it also means this creature can find me.'

'What power? Did he describe it?'

'I don't know. I asked Shamesh once and he said it was the power to live well. To be free of bindings. He said that each of us has the potential to create miracles but few of us know how.' Fern stopped and looked at Adam resolutely. 'A month ago I would have thought this stuff was impossible. But now I have to believe it. And I have to see it
through. I understand if you don't want to come with me.'

'I'll stick around,' said Adam, though he had no idea how to protect Fern from something he couldn't see.

'You don't think I'm mad?'

'Shit, the whole thing's bloody mad,' said Adam, trying to keep his tone light. 'I never told you, did I?'

'What?'

'That night, when you came for your bag, I went to the Underworld to see Shamesh and check up on you. Don't look at me like that - it was pretty obvious you were keeping stuff to yourself, so I was going to ask Shamesh.' Adam paused, not knowing quite how to explain what had happened. 'It wasn't there.'

'Shamesh had gone?'

'The whole bloody place had gone. I banged on the door, but no one answered. It wasn't locked so I went in. There was nothing there, just empty rooms, not a thing to say it had ever been a bar. It did my head in. I'd been drinking there the night before. Now who do you think is mad?'

Fern couldn't believe it. Shamesh gone, the whole place empty as if it had only been a figment of their imagination. Could it be possible for two people to imagine the same thing? Shamesh had introduced her to Adam at that bar. Fern reached out and touched Adam's arm. He was still there; he hadn't disappeared.

'Maybe we're both mad,' she said.

'Yeah, maybe we are.'

'But it's not fair on you,' said Fern. 'I've asked too much of you. I've even foisted myself on your family. There's no balance here it's just you always helping me.'

She was wrong about that, Adam wanted to say, thinking about the dream that had haunted him for so long: the bloody hags hounding him, scratching at his eyes, pushing him further and further towards the edge; the nights he'd sat up staring at the television trying to push sleep away; the amount he'd drunk, trying to knock himself into a state beyond dreaming. He shuddered at the memory. Then he'd met Fern and the dreams had stopped. He ought to tell her, but he couldn't because then she'd want to know why he was haunted by these dreams, and if he told her that, he'd lose her.
'We're not negotiating a trade deal,' said Adam, brusquely. 'Bloody hell, we're friends. At least I hope we are. You have no idea what you're giving me. I'd never have come back here without you. I'm not keeping tabs, so stop doing it yourself. Okay?'

As the sun finally slipped free of the horizon, Fern's eyes met Adam's. She saw the fire and the trust in his face and she felt ashamed. No tabs, she'd thought. If he can do it, then so can I. 'Okay,' she said, kissing him on the lips. 'Oh, and by the way - Merry Christmas.'

Now here she was, back in the shack with Adam's family, surrounded by discarded Christmas paper and kissing Adam again, as she slipped her new thermals on under her skirt.

'Cute,' said Adam.

'One more present,' shouted Michael excitedly.

'To Fern, from Adam,' Adam read out, blushing.

'Another one!' said Iris. 'You're doing well.'

Embarrassed herself, Fern unwrapped the final present. It was a thick Polartec jacket in a rusty orange colour. 'It's lovely,' she said, putting it on and giving Adam a hug. 'Thank you.'

She felt overflowing with gratitude, to all of them. These people gave her strength; their goodwill was a counterforce to whatever malevolent thing was out there. She ran her fingers over the smooth wooden surface of Michael's present. 'A wise old owl,' he'd said when she opened it. 'Can see in the dark,' he'd added, looking at her intently as if there was something she needed to understand.

Adam had given his mother a food dehydrator and now she was making plans to sell fruit leather at the local shop, and looking for ideas in the book Fern had given her. 'Lovely,' she'd said when she'd opened it. 'Lovely, thank you.'

Michael was humming as he shaped a piece of wood with the carving tools Adam had bought him. And Adam was poring over the photographs in the book Fern had found him. Each picture drew him towards it, tugging at his heart, as if the wilderness itself was calling. When he was a boy he'd played in the bush; just being out there had made his heart sing. But now these pictures hurt him in a way he'd never imagined would be possible. He wasn't innocent anymore. He knew what was happening out there and
instead of joy, he felt its agony.

Adam turned the page and gazed at a photograph of the Franklin River, the turmoil of its white water angrily splitting around boulders, then forming again into one. Its furious eddies and calm respites reflected his own heart. It had been years since he'd rafted the Franklin but he could still feel the excitement of it, the surrender he'd made into its wildness. That kind of surrender was beyond him now, thought Adam. He was tainted and the wilderness would know it.

Fern could read what was going on inside him, the hurt and the love all bound up together. She watched nervously as Adam closed the book. 'Do you like it?' she asked.

'Yeah,' he said. 'It's great.'

As soon as lunch was over Michael stood up, gave everyone a wide smile and left the house, still wearing his pink paper hat. Adam managed to clear the table before collapsing onto the couch. Soon his snores were floating in from the lounge room and setting a rhythm to the chores; Iris was washing this dishes and Fern was drying.

'I never did understand why Adam went off to the army,' said Iris quietly. 'It just didn't seem right. His father served in Vietnam but he hardly ever talked about it - said some things are better left unspoken. When he died, Adam kept his medals. Maybe he thought he could get him back somehow if he followed in his father's footsteps? Or maybe he was angry with his dad for leaving him. Sometimes kids do that, blame themselves. Adam always took too much on his shoulders. You can see it, can't you?'

Fern nodded and replaced her sodden tea towel with a fresh one. 'Yes,' she said, 'he's weighed down by the world, like Atlas.'

'Anyway, they sent him off to Iraq. I was beside myself. Can you imagine? We didn't believe in that war. Even Adam called it an invasion. But he went anyway. In the army you do as you're told. They don't teach you to be an individual.

'We exchanged letters for nearly a year, but then one of my letters was returned. I rang and asked where he was, but they said he'd been discharged. They wouldn't tell me anything more. When I rang again, begging for information, someone mentioned the discharge was on medical grounds. I was frantic, but what could I do? He just disappeared.' Her eyes filled with tears. 'It's horrible to feel so powerless.'

Fern watched Iris wiping her eyes with the back of her hand and thought of her
own mother, waiting for word from her, distraught no doubt. Spending Christmas alone if Richard was still in hospital, or looking after him if he wasn't. She knew she should ring. There was no phone at the shack, so she'd have to walk all the way down to the shop to find a public one.

'Something must have happened to him in Iraq.' Iris looked at Fern hopefully.

'Has he ever mentioned anything?'

'No,' said Fern, wishing she could offer Iris more. 'He doesn't talk about it.'

Iris shook her head sadly. 'Just like his father. . . Anyway, he's here now.' She smiled through her tears. 'And you too. It's nice to have another woman around the house for a change.'

'It's good to be here,' said Fern, smiling at Iris, her heart warming to this woman who had opened her home to a stranger.

'There, that's done,' said Iris, taking the tea towel from Fern and hanging it up.

'Now I'm going to get my head down for an hour. Christmas is so exhausting.'

Fern followed the winding road for a few kilometres to Adventure Bay. It was good to be out alone like this, the wind in her face, the ocean stretching off into the distance, the sound of gulls and the rhythmic crash of the waves all easing the tension inside of her. But as Fern approached the public phone the tension returned. Steeling herself for her mother's questions, she put her money in and waited as the phone rang. It was a relief when the answer machine switched on. Perhaps her mother was at the hospital.

'Hi, it's me,' she said after the beep. 'I just wanted to tell you I'm . . .'

A panicked voice broke in. 'Fernanda! Is that you, Fernanda? Just wait while I turn off the machine. . . Hello? Are you there?'

Already Fern was regretting her decision to call. 'Yes Mum, I'm here.'

'Where are you? Oh Fernanda, I've been so worried. I didn't know what had happened. They just said that you'd gone.'

'I'm safe, Mum. I wanted to wish you a merry Christmas and tell you not to worry.'

'Why did you run away from the hospital?'

'I didn't want to be there, Mum,' said Fern, her voice rising. 'So I left.'
'When are you coming home, dear?'
'I'm running out of change, we'll be cut off in a minute. I'll ring again soon.'
'Where are you?'
'How's Dad?' asked Fern. 'Is he out of hospital?'
'He's much better, they're discharging him next week. Where are you, Fernanda?'
'Bye, Mum. I'll talk to you soon.' Fern pressed down the receiver and stood for a moment in the telephone box, wishing perversely she had given her mother more. She sighed and stepped out into the cold air, hugging her new jacket close to her, the silk scarf Iris had given her floating backwards in the wind. The conversation had left Fern with a feeling of unease. Her old life was intruding again and the sense of belonging Fern had felt here on Bruny was fading. She plodded back along the road, each step thudding awkwardly into the ground, her chest heaving with the effort. The events of last night had left their mark on her.

Not ready to return to the shack, Fern decided instead to walk along the beach. She stepped out onto its southerly end and let her eyes feast on the long white stretch of sand, straight at first, then curving eventually into distant cliffs. She took off her sandals and let her feet sink into the soft sand, the grains squeaking as she walked. The wind was so strong it scooped up the sand and sent it whipping against her legs, fighting her at every step. But even so she felt better.

Further down the beach Fern could see something dark against the sand. At first she thought it was a piece of driftwood or a pile of seaweed, perhaps even a seal, but as she got closer she could see it was a crouching figure. It wasn't until Fern was really close that she recognised Michael. Curious, she walked towards him. He didn't look up but he must have noticed her because as she approached he put his finger to his lips. 'Shhh.'

Michael was sitting on the sand, bending down low over a tiny dead penguin, one hand hovering just above it. A moment later he gently picked up the bird and cradled its limp body in his hands. Fern watched him concentrating, his eyes closed as if in prayer. They stayed there like that for perhaps five minutes, the wind buffeting them, the sand whipping at their legs. Fern felt as though she was witnessing something private, some religious ceremony perhaps. She didn't understand what Michael was doing - perhaps it
was a burial ritual? Perhaps he was blessing the dead bird. She thought for a moment she saw its chest moving but that was impossible, it must have been the wind ruffling its feathers. Bit by bit, though, the faintest stirrings of life strengthened into movement. The penguin opened its eyes and Michael placed it back on the sand. It looked up at him as if to say thank you, and waddled towards the rocks.

Fern was astonished. 'What did you just do?'
'Sent it my life,' said Michael simply.
'Your life?'

Michael nodded as if already bored. But Fern needed to know more. She took his hand for a moment and looked at it, trying to see the force that must have moved through him and into the bird, but she could see nothing. She thought about the force that had stopped the clock in Iris's room the other night. Could it have been the same thing? Fern had used her fury on the clock, while Michael had used his love of living creatures to help the penguin. Perhaps that's what Shamesh had meant about finding your power. And once you did, there came a choice: to use it well or not.

'Fix you now,' said Michael.
'Me?'

Michael nodded.
'But I'm not dead.'
'Take out the bad things.'
'What bad things?'
'Inside.'

Fern didn't understand what Michael was talking about. 'Michael,' she said, trying to change the subject. 'I wanted to thank you for helping me last night. You saved me.'

Michael shook his head impatiently. 'Need to. . . need.' Frustrated, he hit his forehead with the palm of his hand, over and over.

'Stop it, Michael,' said Fern, taking his hand again.
'Make you strong,' he said. 'It wants you. . . wants to. . .' The effort was too much for him and he was trembling; white froth forming at the corners of his mouth, as he rocked backwards and forwards on the sand.

Fern put her arms around him. 'It's okay,' she said. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have
mentioned it.'

After a time the rocking subsided and he looked at her hopefully. 'Fix you now?'
Fern nodded. 'Okay, fix me.'

Smiling now, Michael sat Fern down on the sand and then sat in front of her, close but not touching. He reached out and closed her eyes with his fingers. 'Shh,' he said.

So Fern waited, listening to the sounds of the gulls and the waves. Soon she felt a strange wriggling inside her chest as if something was unwillingly unravelling around her heart. There wasn't any pain, just a slight nausea. For a moment she felt lighter inside, until the wriggling began again. Something was being tugged from her, as if Michael were hauling it out with a rope. There was a popping sensation and then a great vastness opened up inside her.

'Done,' said Michael, and Fern opened her eyes, dizzy now, the world spinning, her chest hurting, new pockets of air inside, her organs shifting... It felt as if there was suddenly a lot more room in her chest.

'What happened?' she asked.

'A snake,' he said. 'And a long black insect with lots of legs.'

'A millipede?'

He nodded, shuddering, and gestured as if he was pulling something long and heavy. 'And a grey lump,' he said, shuddering again. 'Ugly.' Then he smiled. 'All gone now.'

'Where have they gone?' asked Fern.

Michael shrugged and gestured into the sky. 'Just gone.'

'Why were they there?'

He frowned and shook his head, then stood up, stretching his arms into the sky.

'Why, Michael?'

He stopped for a moment and looked back at her, his face set into a scowl. 'Dark things to close your heart.'

Fern watched Michael lumbering down the beach. He reminded her of a bear, huge, childlike and loyal. His moods were as changeable as Adam's but any anger he felt was fleeting and played about on the surface, whereas Adam's anger was deep-seated and
not easily shifted. They both had a strong connection to nature, thought Fern, but Adam's was all mixed up with anger.

Michael had done something to Fern. There was a steadiness inside her chest that she'd never experienced before. She felt sturdier too, but there was also a new vulnerability, as if the shell had gone and her skin was fragile and sensitive, unused to the elements.

Fern found a peaceful spot in the sun and sat down on a rock, waves of exhaustion washing over her as she relaxed. Close by a bird sang, a gull dipping and diving on the wind. Higher still a sea eagle hovered, gliding in wide circles above the ocean. In the distance Fern saw a lone surfer, out beyond the waves, moving up and down with the swell, waiting. She wondered if it was Adam. She closed her eyes, trying to empty her mind of the thoughts that kept tumbling around, jostling for position. She was wearied by the need to unravel it all and understand. Perhaps she needed to do the opposite. Fern thought suddenly of her knitting: to simply unravel it would leave only a long crinkled strand that told her nothing. Instead she should create something from it. Turn it into something useful and beautiful.

The wind found her again, sweeping and swirling around her. Fern thought of Kali, the Indian goddess, who embraced both destruction and creation, dark and light. One unable to exist without the other. With that thought, Fern's world righted itself and she could feel energy stirring inside her.

When she opened her eyes a man was walking towards her. At the same moment as she recognised him, she realised it wasn't possible that she could see him in this place. It was the Bear Handler, his cloak shimmering too brightly in the sunlight, his long fair hair framing a narrow face. She couldn't fix on his features, couldn't say they were one thing or another. It was as if they were never quite still.

'How did you get here?' she asked. 'I thought you only appeared in my dreams.'

His smile was gentle. 'I am here but I am not here. Another paradox it seems. Like the creature of your nightmares, I too can step into your world, but only when the conditions are right.'

'What conditions?'

'Because you are relaxed. You are open. This creates a door between worlds.'
Fern thought about it, remembering how good she'd felt last night just before the thing had attacked her. 'So every time I let down my guard it can get me? Every time I feel good I let it in?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Fear too, weakens you.'

'Well, that's ridiculous.'

'Perhaps.'

'So how can I beat it?'

'You must relax.'

Fern sighed; it felt as if they were going around in circles. And besides, she couldn't possibly relax when this creature was trying to kill her. 'Any more useful tips?' she asked, not bothering to hide the weariness in her voice.

'You know already what you must do.'

Fern was about to emphatically deny this when she remembered the voice from the night before telling her to turn away. The creature had come unexpectedly and she should have turned her back immediately, before it got a hold on her.

The Bear Handler nodded. 'That's right. You must take the power into your own hands and allow your enemy to come only when you are ready.'

'Maybe it won't come anymore,' she said hopefully, but knowing that it would. Whatever it was had her scent now.

'It will come. Without realising it you have opened a part of yourself that has been closed for too long. You have lowered your defences, let the world, as you've known it, begin to unravel. As it should. But in doing so you have also given your enemy a ticket to come and go as he pleases, first in your sleep and now in your waking life. It is very important to have control of this opening. You need new defences, things of beauty and peace. Look for the paths that give you pleasure, things that take your mind from fear.'

'Who is my enemy?' asked Fern. 'Why are there so many manifestations?'

'He seeks to confuse you - and yet you already know his identity.'

As Fern pondered this, the wind whipped sand in Fern's face, stinging her skin, grit finding its way into her eyes. The Bear Handler was wrong, she had no idea, at least none beyond the obvious her father.

'You will remember each manifestation,' he continued, 'yet in the end it does not
matter. It is your task to make peace and sever the ties that bind you to it.’

'Why does he hate me?' asked Fern, realising as she spoke that it was not hate this creature felt, it was something else. Michael had been right. It wanted her.

The Bear Handler nodded again. 'Across time he has wanted you to surrender your power to him. To join forces with him.'

'Why?'

'Because together you could be monstrous in your intent.'

Fern flinched. 'Monstrous?'

The Bear Handler looked at Fern quizzically. 'Do you not feel its lure?'

Fern nodded reluctantly. She wanted to deny it, but in truth she could feel its draw, as if it were whispering promises in her ear. *Power.* How tempting it was: to slip into the minds of others, to move objects, stop clocks. . . And what else? She had a feeling there was so much more she could do, and the notion was both terrifying and tantalising. Was it true? Had she let the creature in of her own volition?

'That possibility is in you. It is in all of humanity. In the end it will be your choice. Once, long ago, you chose to surrender your power, but not to this demon. It hurt you and those you loved so much that you could not bear another lifetime fighting. So you closed yourself off, unaware that you would continue to live each life repeating the patterns that were already in place. To be free of these patterns you must reclaim that power. There is no other way.' He smiled gently at Fern, but his voice was stern. 'Reclaim it and use it well.'

Fern felt as if she were trapped in a dream and yet all her senses were awake and alert. She could see the waves, feel the wind on her skin, taste the salt on her lips, smell the seaweed, the freshness of the air. She was here, now, and so was Bear Handler, though the edges of him were becoming less distinct. Worried that he might disappear before she could ask all her questions, she hurried on. 'What did Michael do to me? Did you see that?'

'What did it feel like to you?'

Fern reflected on the strange wriggling sensation and the vast expanse that had opened inside her. 'It was as if he were extracting something,' she said hesitantly. 'Unwinding chains around my heart.'
'Yes, they were fetters.'

'Who put them there?'

'Some were put there by you, as protection, but too easily they became prison guardians. The rest were chains put in place by the thing which hunts you. All its energy has gone into keeping your heart closed.'

'Why?' As Fern asked this question she already knew the answer. The only way to access her power was by opening her heart.

The Bear Handler nodded once more.

'And yet it can't find me unless I open it,' said Fern, frowning.

He smiled apologetically. 'Yes, another paradox. Of course, there are degrees of opening. In the end the choice is yours. How do you want to live your life?'

'Well,' she said, without hesitation.

'Good. Michael has helped to unfetter your heart. Now you must find a way to open it.'

'Who are you?' Fern had asked this before, but she wanted a better answer.

'I am the Bear Handler,' he said, smiling. 'That is what you named me. It will do for now.'

'But what are you?' asked Fern, frustrated at his evasions.

He shrugged. 'It does not matter. I am here because you need me. Now, I have answered your questions; it is time for me to ask you a question.'

'Okay,' said Fern, cautiously.

'To whom are you bound?'

She frowned, puzzled by his question. The answer was obvious. She was alone, free of entanglements and obligations to others. 'No one,' said Fern.

He shook his head. 'You are wrong. Think about the promises you have made through this life and others. It is in releasing them that you will learn to fly.'

'Fly?'

But he was gone and Fern's question was carried away on the wind. As she sat listening to the roar of the waves and the cries of the gulls, the surfer who had been waiting out beyond the breakers, stood up and rode a wave, gracefully weaving one way and another, following lines only he could see, then slipped gently into the water before
paddling back out again.

The Bear Handler's words had confused Fern and yet she felt them joining together like a mosaic to form a pattern she recognised, its perfection taking the breath from her. Her tiredness was overcome by elation and a sense of lightness, as if her bones were hollow and at any moment the wind could lift her into the air. For the briefest of moments Fern felt she was seeing the world, not just looking at it. Everything was clearer and yet not so certain, as if one form could easily slip into another. Bit by bit she was releasing all those certainties that had constructed a version of the world that was no longer useful to her.

A surge of joy rushed through Fern, joy and gratitude because she felt as if she'd been given a great gift: perspective from which she could truly see the patterns of life. She stood up and began dancing, a slow free-form dance, mimicking a bird spreading its wings and taking off, the dance becoming faster until she was almost flying, the wind lifting her skirt, her scarf, tugging at the rest of her as if it too wanted her to fly. She could feel her chest expanding and the muscles in her upper back twitching as if she really did have wings. She remembered the eagle, soaring up into the sky from the roof of her terrace house. Oh, to fly like that. As a child she'd sometimes flown through her dreams, but never soared. Later, the air in her dreams had become so thick she could hardly move in them, let alone fly.

Fern stopped her dance when she noticed the surfer paddling back into shore. She stood watching as he undid his ankle harness, picked up his board and began walking in her direction. It was only then that she was sure, recognising the confident stride, the slight angle of his head and the strength of his body. As Fern watched, she felt a stirring of lust. Last night's attack had drained all feeling from her, leaving her without desire. A body, uninhabited by a self. Now she was fused into one again and every nerve was reaching out to Adam.

'I saw you,' he said, stopping in front of her. 'What were you doing?'

'Dancing.'

She was smiling at him, a wild joy in her eyes, her cheeks flushed in the cold air, her hair standing on end in the wind, her skirt flapping, the goose bumps just starting on her legs. Her whole being made Adam desperate. He reached his arms out and she
stepped inside them, snuggling up close to him, her face against the damp surface of his wetsuit. He bent to kiss her, sinking his lips into hers, then unzipped her jacket and slid his hands under her t-shirt onto her skin, bumpy with cold. She unzipped his wetsuit and helped him step out of it. Then they moved close together again, their skin touching, bodies pressing against each other. There was an urgency between them now, a need to complete the thing they'd been circling for days. She was stepping out of her underpants and he was lifting her skirt, lifting her whole body up to him as he pulled off his board shorts and she wrapped her legs around him, helping him to slide into her, their mouths, their tongues lost in each other as he pushed harder, desperate to do what he'd been wanting to do, since forever it seemed. And she was gasping and he was coming and the sea pounding, the wind and the sand biting against their legs and backs.

Adam kissed her head, her nose, her cheeks, her lips. 'You're so beautiful,' he said, his voice almost a groan.

Fern ran her fingers along his skin, memorising as much as she could, so that she could feel him always. They stayed like this, Adam holding Fern, her legs wrapped around him, until the cold crept in and Fern shivered, bringing them back to themselves. Then they got dressed, pulling away from each other.

'Come on,' said Adam. 'You're cold. I'll race you home.'

So they ran, Adam carrying his board, Fern with her arms spread into the wind, whooping and winding their way down the beach.

That night Adam built a bonfire and cooked prawns on the barbecue. They all ate on the beach, sitting on logs, licking the juice of prawns and crayfish from their fingers, the heat from the fire licking their faces as they sipped champagne. Mutt stayed at Fern's feet, munching prawn shells.

'That dog's really taken to you,' said Iris.

Fern patted Mutt, and Adam reached across and put his arm around Fern. She leaned into him, her hand resting on his leg. It was all perfectly natural, yet it felt strange. It wasn't just that they'd made love this afternoon, rather it was a surrendering to each other. An acceptance that yes, they were together. Fern wondered if she could bear to risk being hurt. She had always been so afraid of losing the people closest to her. This
fear had made her push away Jeff and the others before him. Now Fern made a vow to herself: she wouldn't let that happen again, no matter how vulnerable it left her.

Fern picked up a handful of sand, then let it trickle slowly through her fingers, a stream so fine it felt almost liquid as it caressed her skin. And yet there were thousands of separate grains in each handful. She looked at Adam staring solemnly into the fire, and wondered what their lovemaking had started. It must have redirected their fates in some way, closed off some possibilities, opened others.

Iris started singing: 'Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright', and one by one they joined in. Then they sang 'Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer', Michael enthusiastically doing all the actions, and then 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas', which made them laugh because even though Michael remembered only the one line, he sang it in a deep sexy voice that sounded just right.

Fern fetched her pipe and played along with the carols. Then when the others had finished singing she lapsed into a tune of her own, trusting her fingers, and sending the notes out to disperse into the night. Michael sat listening, a gentle smile on his face. Adam stared up at the stars, instinctively trying to keep the notes out, but they found their way past his defences, flowing through him, their purity bringing tears to his eyes.

'That was beautiful,' said Iris when Fern had finished. In the firelight Iris looked younger, her face softened by the shadows and the yearning in her eyes, the grey in her hair replaced by a flaming orange that highlighted her cheekbones and strengthened her jaw.

Fern wondered if this was what the Bear Handler had meant when he'd told her to follow her pleasures. Making love, knitting, playing her pipe, talking and laughing with people she cared for. Sitting here with Adam's arm around her and the warm flames on her face, she could almost believe these things would be enough to shield her. Make beauty, she thought. That's what I should do. It would hate that.
Chapter Eighteen

'Shit, even a four-wheel drive couldn't get through this,' said Adam. 'We'll have to stop.'

On the detailed map Adam had brought, this was classed as an unsurfaced track, but in reality it was deeply rutted and almost completely overgrown. Adam had driven in as far as he could, but right in front of them was a ditch too deep for the station wagon.

Fern reluctantly laced up her walking boots and shouldered her pack. This had once been a thriving mining area, so the old track would have been a well-used road. Now it had an air of sadness and neglect, memories of better times still hovering nearby, while the wind and the rain and the bush slowly reclaimed it. According to the map, the track would once have taken them past the abandoned town, now in ruins, and past the remnants of the railway line until they came to her father's front door. But the track had not been maintained. As far as Fern was concerned the reason was clear: Eric didn't want any uninvited guests.

As they walked away, Fern kept glancing back at the car for reassurance. It felt like a lifeline to safety. The bush was alien to her. Even on the track she could feel its vastness and ponderous weight. There were no houses, concrete footpaths, or cafes, just trees and dirt and sky. Fern felt a great loneliness, along with a sense of impending doom. She and Adam had disagreed about how to get to her father's place. Fern had wanted to fly in or take a boat. It made sense to her: the Pine House website said these were the only ways in. But Adam had objected.

'That's not so easy,' he'd said. 'First, we don't have a boat or a helicopter. Second we can't afford to hire either. And even if we did, we'd only be announcing our arrival to your father. Unless of course that's what you want to do.'

The last point was the clincher for Fern, who wanted to sneak up on her father if she could, do something he didn't expect in the hope that this would give her the upper hand. Though, given his proven ability to locate her, that might be impossible.

'We'll follow the track as best we can,' Adam had promised. 'But if it gets too rough we'll have to walk. After all,' he'd added, smiling, 'I promised to show you the
Fern had nervously agreed. She'd been on walks before but they were tame walks on good paths through pretty countryside, and only ever for a few hours. She had no idea what it would be like to immerse herself in the bush. The preparations alone had taken two days, during which Adam was withdrawn and focused, wanting only to talk about gaiters and sleeping bags, waterproof trousers and hats. He'd made Fern empty her bag out on the living room floor, then he sorted through it, a look of disgust on his face. 'None of this is any good... You haven't even got shoes. We'll have to start from scratch.' They'd gone into town and bought Fern walking boots in the sales, big heavy things that made her feel clumsy.

Then Adam had turned into a list fiend: compass, maps, band-aids. 'You're sure to get blisters.' Water bottles, cups, meths, trangia. . .'A cooker,' he explained when Fern asked. Long trousers for the evenings, two t-shirts, a warm jacket, only one spare pair of undies, . . . 'We're going to stink,' said Fern, horrified. Sleeping bags, mats, tent, torch, spare batteries, a trowel. . .'For shitting,' he said. 'Oh great,' Fern responded. Gloves, rain jackets, beanies, quick-dry shorts. . .

'And an EPIRB,' said Adam.

'A what?'

'An emergency position indicator radio beacon... Just in case.'

And then there was all that high-energy, lightweight food. Using Iris's dehydrator they'd dried their own vegetables and fruit, then prepared a dried fruit and nut mixture that Adam called scroggin. They'd also bought instant noodles and powdered milk, dried tofu and chocolate.

'Thank God for chocolate,' said Fern.

Iris made up some muesli: oats with cranberries, coconut, sunflower seeds and sultanas. Then she cooked oat bars heavy with seeds and honey. Adam made Fern measure out all the food into meal-size portions and put them in sealed plastic bags.

'They're tiny,' said Fern looking at the bags in horror. 'We'll starve.'

And all the time Michael was hovering. 'Take me,' he'd said, over and over.

'Not this time, Mike. Sorry.'

He'd hung his head and Adam had almost caved in but it would be hard enough
taking Fern, and besides, they wouldn't have enough gear between them. As it was, Fern was taking Michael's gaiters, though they almost reached her thighs, and his sleeping mat, as well as Iris's rain jacket. Michael's backpack had been too big for Fern so they'd had to resort to Fern's day pack. Adam had converted it, strapping a sleeping mat on the bottom and a sleeping bag wrapped in plastic, on top. Then he'd added side pockets so she could carry water, snacks and waterproofs. Even so, Adam was carrying much more.

When they were finally packed, Adam had gone through Fern's pack one more time. Scornfully he'd pulled out her knitting and her pipe, the pashmina shawl and a novel Iris had lent her. 'You can't take these. We're not going on holiday.'

In the end Fern had acquiesced on the knitting and the book but insisted on the pipe and the shawl, which hardly weighed a thing.

Now she was walking next to him, looking like a bumblebee, thought Adam, in her yellow and black striped thermal leggings under a pair of oversize silk shorts, a yellow thermal top under her t-shirt, and her pointy straw hat which she'd insisted on wearing even though they'd all told her it wasn't practical. Adam sighed; it was his fault, he'd jokingly told her that leeches jump out of trees onto people's heads, and that had done it.

Adam stopped and consulted the map, then took out the compass and did a reading. 'See,' he said. 'We're heading south west.' He picked up a twig and used it to point out on the map, where they were. It meant nothing to Fern, just different shades of green and brown and an intricate pattern of lines. 'This track we're on goes practically all the way to your father's but it's a lot further than if we cut across. See here, there's another, smaller track heading off from this one, into the forest. That's what I've been looking for.' He walked over to the line of trees. 'I reckon this is the one, it looks pretty overgrown.'

'Where?' asked Fern, not seeing any sign of a path.

'See,' he said, pointing in further. 'These trees are a bit younger than the others and there's just a bit more space between them. This must have been well used once.'

'Why can't we stay on this road?' She shuddered, not wanting to go deeper into the dark, still forest, away from the light and the clear markers that told her where she was going.
'Like I said, it's much longer,' said Adam. 'And even walking, these ditches and fallen logs would slow us down. It would take days.' He glanced at Fern. 'Ready?'

No, she thought. I'm not. I can't do this. I want to go home.

'Sure,' she said and followed him into the bush.

Immediately the atmosphere changed. The air was damp and still but fresh too. Fern took a deep breath, feeling it cleanse her lungs. The smell was pungent: damp earth and rotting humus. It smelled of dead things but the effect was a concentration of life. Fern had to watch her feet, which kept catching on tree roots, sinking into thick boggy patches or slipping on the wet uneven surface.

They weren't walking on any path Fern could see; instead they were climbing over and under fallen trees and rocks, as well as pushing their way through bushes. After twenty minutes or so, Fern could feel the strain in her leg muscles. She was sweating and tired, her shoulders and back were aching where the straps of her pack tugged and she was out of breath. Carelessly she misjudged the height of a root and stumbled again, nearly falling.

Adam found a knotted stick and handed it to Fern. 'There,' he said. 'That should help you keep your balance.'

While he checked the map and took another compass bearing, Fern pulled out her water bottle and drank greedily. When they were walking, the forest was filled with the sound of their boots, the rustle of leaves and snapping twigs. But standing still, leaning on her stick, the silence descended on Fern. It felt heavy and unbreakable. There was a stillness, too, as if the forest was waiting.

Fern jumped as the harsh shriek of a cockatoo tore through the silence. Another joined in and then another, until the forest was ringing with their noise. Searching among the treetops, Fern could see a black silhouette here and there, and the very tips of the trees illuminated by bright white sunlight. The trees were incredibly tall, their smooth trunks stretching upwards to the heavens. The branches began high above her head and only the tops had leaves.

'These ones are mainly stringy barks,' said Adam, following Fern's gaze. 'They grow pretty big.'

Swathes of bark were peeling off some of the trees, and hanging down like
Hawaiian skirts. The bark was piled up on the ground, curling like snakes. Fern picked up a long piece, surprised at how soft and pliable it was. The colours were exquisite, a deep burning orange, fading to cream in the drier places.

'This is a mixture of wet sclerophyll and rainforest,' said Adam. 'It's got a eucalyptus canopy, but there are still heaps of rainforest trees: sassafras, myrtle, King Billy Pine, man ferns...'

Adam knew so much, thought Fern, while she couldn't name or understand any of it. All she could do was appreciate its beauty. Giant man ferns were scattered among the tall trees, their fronds towering over her head, a soft dappled sunlight filtering through them. Luminescent green moss grew underfoot and on the trees, wet and soft to the touch. Moisture dripped down the tree trunks, and there were fungi everywhere, delicate golden toadstools growing in rings among the moss and jutting elegantly from the trunks of trees. Rocks were covered in moss and textured patches of white. Fern reached down and touched their rough whiteness.

'Lichen,' said Adam. 'It's two plants together. They have a symbiotic relationship... And get this,' he said, patting a rock. 'They draw their nourishment from these.'

'They eat rocks?' Fern was puzzled. It was hard to imagine a rock being nourishing.

'Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it? Everything's alive. Everything on this planet. Even the planet itself. A living, breathing organism. And we're just a tiny part of it... Except we've turned into parasites.' Adam felt his mood change as if a shadow had settled on him. Here he was in the forest, so beautiful it broke his heart. That was the problem: every time he thought about its beauty he worried about losing it. 'Come on,' he said and strode ahead, surprising Fern with his sudden anger.

For a time they walked more easily, their feet squelching in the soft ground littered with roots and leaves. They heard the stream before they reached it; a babbling, as if they had stumbled on a gathering of people all talking at once.

There was more light here, the sun finding its way through the trees, sending dappled patches of light and dark onto the water, highlighting a moss-covered boulder, a gleaming ripple, the smooth rounded rocks under the water. The edges were lined with man ferns, their fronds filtering the sunlight.
'It's so beautiful,' she said, running her fingers along a giant frond that arched over her head. 'Like I always imagined Fairyland would look.'

Adam stood gazing at it too, its beauty tearing at him. Fern leaned over and cupped her hands in the water.

'Don't drink it,' warned Adam. 'We're in forestry territory, so there are probably clear fells around here and plantations. It'll be full of chemicals.'

'But it looks so pure,' said Fern, jerking her hands out of the water.

'Yeah,' he said sarcastically. Then he stopped, holding back the bitterness that threatened to spill over. His anger would only confuse Fern and it didn't change anything. There would still be chemicals in the water. 'When we get in further the water should be cleaner,' he said, bending over and undoing his laces. 'Take your shoes off, we're going to have to wade through.'

When Fern stepped into the stream the water was icy cold on her bare skin. It reached only up to her mid-calves, but it was running quickly and she could feel its tug. The rocks were slippery and uneven and she had to concentrate to stay upright. The stick helped her keep her balance, but even so, when she was about halfway across, her feet slid from under her and she fell backwards, landing on her pack, her arms and legs waving like an overturned beetle's.

Adam wasn't impressed. He took off his pack and left it on the other side, then waded back for Fern, hauling her out by one arm. 'You should be more careful. What if you'd hurt yourself? We're in survival mode out here. No one knows where we are. If something goes wrong, we're stuffed.'

'Sorry,' muttered Fern, feeling stupid as she pulled on her wet socks.

'You can't wear them, you'll get blisters. Get some dry socks out of your pack.' Adam sighed, hating the carping sound of his own voice. Every word was pushing Fern further away, yet he couldn't stop himself. This place was getting to him.

'Lighten up,' said Fern, angrily reaching for her pack. 'This isn't the army. I'm not some new recruit you can bully.'

Adam clenched his teeth. 'Don't talk about the army,' he said.

'Stop treating me like a moron,' responded Fern. Once she would never have stood up to someone she cared about, worrying that if she did they would turn away
from her. But she was changing, becoming more certain of herself. The newly discovered
anger was there too, simmering in the background. Fern didn't want to be passive
anymore and she wouldn't let anyone walk over her.

As Adam looked at her standing there, her hands on her hips, her eyes flashing
with fury and fear, her hair dripping and her lips blue with cold, his anger switched to
concern. 'Okay, okay - truce?'

Fern didn't answer.

'Look, you're freezing. You'd better get changed.' He paused, then rolled his eyes.
'Okay, let's try it another way. . . Would you mind, if it's not too much trouble, putting
some dry clothes on?'

Fern still didn't move, though the corners of her lips were twitching.

'Okay, here goes. . . I'm going to say it. . . I'm sorry.'

'That's okay,' said Fern, smiling now. They'd had disagreements before, but this
was their first argument. It could have been a lot worse, she thought.

'We may as well have a break,' said Adam. 'I'll boil up some tea while you get
changed.'

Fern peeled off her wet clothes and left them in a pile on the ground, then put on
her only dry set. 'I'm stuffed if it rains,' she said, warming one hand on her mug and
popping chocolate into her mouth with the other. 'God, chocolate tastes good out here.'

After a short rest they packed everything up and walked on. The chocolate had
given Fern a boost and for a while she kept up with Adam. But gradually her energy
drained away and she slipped behind, Adam stopping occasionally to let her catch up.

Suddenly, at a stage where Adam had drawn ahead of her, a twig unrolled itself in
front of Fern and lifted its head, transforming into a snake. Heart pounding, she froze.
She could see its flickering tongue and the black depths of its eyes. One lunge of its head
and it would bite her. She wanted to call Adam but she couldn't speak. She wanted to run
but she couldn't move. It seemed forever that they faced each other like this: Fern poised
to run, the snake poised to lunge.

'Fern?' called Adam, appearing up ahead.

'Snake.' It was almost a whisper, but he heard.

'Don't move,' he said.
She nodded, unable to tear her eyes away from the snake's hypnotic gaze while Adam stamped his feet. Then, after what seemed like hours, the snake lowered its head and slid silently away.

Shakily, Fern followed Adam again, her eyes scanning the ground for any movement. Every twig, every curled-up piece of bark looked like a snake. Up ahead, Adam had stopped once more. Fern could read the tension in his stance, and even before she reached him she could see something of what he was seeing, from the images that were flashing in his mind. Fern felt the pain of them but for Adam they were deep stabbing wounds. Hurrying, she drew level with him and gaped at the devastation before her. The scene had an aura of immense loss and violence, like the site of a mass murder.

Adam jumped onto the stump of an enormous tree and pulled Fern up next to him. There was still plenty of room. It could fit twenty people in its radius, she thought. At least.

'Jesus, look at this.' His words were forced through gritted teeth. 'It takes hundreds of years to grow a tree this fucking big and minutes to cut it down.'

'Is this a clear fell?' asked Fern, already knowing the answer.

Adam nodded, his fists clenched as he stepped off the stump and paced around it. 'They come in with their bulldozers and cut the lot, then take out the useful ones, the ones they want to turn into woodchips. Most of the really valuable ones, like the Blackwood, get left behind.' He walked over to a tower of broken trees, their limbs sticking out in all directions. Fern followed him.

'See,' he said. 'There's a myrtle and a sassafras. There's blackwood too. These are the hardwoods, you can make furniture out of them, musical instruments, beautiful things.'

All at once a memory came to Adam. His father had been a mild man, but Adam remembered the shocking force of his fury when he'd found Adam tearing fronds off a giant man fern. 'For the roof of our cubby,' Adam had explained, but his father hadn't been moved. 'Give the forest its due,' he'd told Adam. 'If you love it you should look after it.' After that he'd started teaching Adam the lore of the bush and slowly the love Adam had always felt for the wilderness had widened to include respect.

'What will they do with this?' asked Fern, fingering a dead myrtle branch.
'Burn it. They use stuff that burns like napalm. You can see the mushroom clouds from miles away.' Furious, Adam kicked a stone, sending it thudding across the devastation. 'The fire burns so hot it kills all the seeds so nothing will regrow. Then they put down 1080 poison to kill off any creatures that survived the bulldozers and the chemicals. . . At least they do in the private clear-fells. The government supposedly only use it to poison of foxes thing is there aren't any foxes in Tassie.' He stopped suddenly, grief catching the words in his throat.

Fern was filled with the horror of what she was hearing. The insanity of it was beyond comprehension. 'Why would they want to destroy it?' she asked.

'Plantations. They're easier to manage. They'll replant all this with genetically modified seeds that grow quickly and produce a soft wood that's easy to chip. Trouble is they have to keep spraying it with pesticides to keep it safe. Then the pesticide runs into the waterways and we all drink it.'

'It's horrible,' said Fern, the sadness tugging at her heart, making her want to run away from this evidence of madness and greed. 'And it's too quiet. Where are all the birds?'

Adam shrugged. 'You kill birdsong and you kill yourself,' he said quietly.

Abruptly he turned away and started walking again as if eager to distance himself from this place. Fern followed as best she could. She was hungry now and despite all precautions, her feet were beginning to blister and her ankle was sore again. She needed to stop and rest and eat. But Adam was unreachable. She could see him ahead but even if she called him she doubted he would hear.

It seemed like hours before Adam finally stopped in a small clearing and took off his pack. 'We can camp here,' he said.

It was still early but already the light was dimming in the forest, and they needed to put up the tent and cook a meal before dark. Fern peered in the bag at the noodles, dried vegetables and tofu; the predominant smell was onions, while the orange stuff might be carrot but she couldn't be sure. It looked horrible, she thought, totally unappetising. When Adam soaked the vegetables and cooked them up with the noodles, however, the smell became tantalising.

'This is great,' said Fern, swallowing her first mouthful, then looking up, startled,
as a bird landed on a branch just above their heads. Kookaburras always made her smile. Lighten up, they seemed to be saying with their throaty laugh. But this one was not laughing. It had something in its mouth.

'Look,' whispered Fern, nudging Adam and pointing.

It was a frog, its two back legs dangling out of the bird's beak. The kookaburra looked at them for a moment. 'Take note,' it seemed to be saying, before it set about bashing the struggling frog against the branch with its beak. Then it paused to look at them again, and flew off, the frog still in its mouth.

There was a message there, though Fern had no idea what it meant. A warning: the hunter and its prey. And she was squarely in the role of prey.

'It's strange seeing a kookaburra deep in a forest like this,' said Adam. 'They're not native to Tassie you know.'

Neither are we, thought Fern.

'At least there are frogs around. That's a good sign.' He scraped his bowl with his spoon, then rinsed them out and packed them back in with the trangia. 'If the frogs die it means we've polluted the waterways,' he said, pulling a ball of string out of the front pocket of his pack and tying it around a tree next to the tent. 'One thing dies out and we get a plague of something else. Now the bees are dying. If the bees die, so do we. You'd think that would be enough to ring alarm bells, wouldn't you?'

'Yeah,' said Fern wearily, watching Adam tie the other end of the string to another tree. 'I guess you would.' She was confused. Adam loved the bush and yet in it he was filled with hate. Fern sighed, too tired to try sorting out that paradox. 'What are you doing?' she asked as Adam hung the food bags from the string.

'Keeping the food safe from rodents. The little buggers get into everything. They'll eat through the tent if we leave the food in there, or right through the pack if they get a chance.'

Great, thought Fern, rodents too. Suddenly the tent didn't feel so safe. If a mouse could nibble its way in, then maybe other creatures could too.

'Shhh,' said Adam as something moved in the shadow of a tree. They both froze and waited. Soon a strange spotted cat-like creature stepped cautiously out of the shadows and sniffed around, apparently unaware they were even there. Fern had never
seen anything like it. 'A quoll,' whispered Adam. 'Look,' he added, shining his torch up into a tree. 'We're being watched.'

The torch beam revealed a pair of disembodied red eyes glinting at them. Fern shuddered. What was behind those eyes?

'Just a possum,' said Adam, but it was little comfort to Fern, who was feeling increasingly oppressed by the night settling in around her. The forest was coming alive in another way as if, like a city, it housed different worlds. The birds were quiet now. Instead there were scuttling noises, the buzz of insects and the rustle of prowling creatures.

Fern stood up, sending the quoll scuttling into the bushes. 'I'm going to bed,' she said.

Filled with desolation, Adam lay rigid in his sleeping bag. The memory of the clear-fell had imprinted itself on his mind, affecting him more than he'd expected. He thought of Matt, his old school friend, who'd been camping out in the forests, living in the trees and chaining himself to bulldozers, while Adam had been hiding in his basement flat in Sydney and drinking. The thought filled him with guilt.

Fern could feel the barrier Adam was building between them. The anger in him was so strong. When she concentrated, she got flashes of images: bodies and blood, confused with the barren starkness of a clear-fell, broken trees piled high, fire and the flash of a face. Images she couldn't make any sense of. Adam felt the bush inside him; every hurt it sustained was his too. She understood that, but still his reaction seemed excessive. As if there were something else at work here, casting shadows over them and between them. Fern knew she should resist whatever force was pushing them apart, but she was exhausted, every muscle in her body aching and tight. Her blisters had burst, leaving her with a stinging, burning patch on each ankle. She wanted to reach out to Adam but instead, weary to the bone, she fell asleep.

In her dream Fern was lying on a bed in a darkened room with a large wooden shuttered window. She was alert, waiting for something; sure enough, a shadow soon crossed the window. Perhaps a second passed before the shutters burst open and something hurled itself through the window, a dark mass, inhuman, yet human shaped,
surging at her without hesitation, its intent clear. Fern felt a great swell of terror, along with the knowledge that she couldn't escape. But in that split second something in her understood that she could turn away from it, and with a great effort, she did.

'No!' She woke, struggling against Adam, pummelling him with her fists.

'It's okay,' he said, grabbing her hands. 'I'm here. It can't get you.' But he'd felt the flash of terror, a flicker of a shadow, and knew that his words were empty. He couldn't stop it, unless he found a way of following Fern into her dreams. And that was beyond him.

Adam's presence comforted Fern a little, but she knew she was alone with this thing, whatever it was. She tried to remember details of the figure that had lunged at her tonight, but the room in her dream had been dark and the figure featureless. It had a masculine energy to it, direct and certain. And hungry. But it was not the same figure as the cloaked priest who had walked through her dreams. The man who had given the order to slice the head from the child in her vision and who had looked at her with triumph in his eyes, watching as the spear plunged into her chest. His was a crafty, underhand energy. They had different forms, but the same intent. She had managed to turn away from its force tonight and that was a triumph of sorts. The next step would be to seek it out in her dreams but that would take a courage she wasn't sure she could muster.

Think beauty, she told herself, remembering the Bear Handler's words. If she could deposit enough beauty inside herself then it might act as a shield.

Adam was the most beautiful thing she could imagine. 'I want to see you,' she said, switching on the torch and reaching for him. The torch light threw shadows across them, highlighting a shoulder, a nipple, the curve of Adam's calf, his ear. Fern kissed the places where light fell, letting her fingers rove over the rest of his body in the dark. They made love, slower this time, without the ferocious urgency that had consumed them before. Now they explored each other's bodies, finding secret places: a birthmark on Fern's foot, the soft hair on Adam's ear lobes, a mole on his lower back. When they were finished, Fern lay sheltered in Adam's arms and slept a deep and dreamless sleep.
The next day Fern's teeth were furry and her hair greasy. She wanted a shower but all she could manage were fresh undies and a splash of water on her face. The porridge was burnt and stodgy; it would have been inedible except that she was so hungry. And to make it worse Adam was in a foul mood again. Thank God they were in a conservation area now, she thought. Though even this was under threat, according to Adam.

'Nothing's sacred in Tasmania,' he said. 'Only world heritage listing is enough to stop the bastards sticking their greedy noses into it.'

His fury was wearing Fern down. The devastation that people had wrought on the trees and the wildlife was heartbreaking but there was no point in Adam re-creating it in his own heart.

Fern watched uneasily as Adam stomped on ahead, then vanished from sight. Unable to keep up with him, she went at her own pace, doing her best to follow his tracks. They were winding further and further into the bush, following the easiest paths towards their destination, sometimes one way, then back the other. As far as Fern was concerned they could have been walking round in circles. She felt lost and afraid. Perhaps it was Adam's mood that had changed things, but today the forest seemed to barely tolerate her presence.

Adam was leading her through this maze with his life-saving gadgets: a map, a compass and an EPIRB. Without him, Fern would be lost. It was a labyrinth, she realised, as they penetrated deeper into the bush. There was no clear path, no easy way through, only her father waiting for them in the centre. Fern shuddered. She had an urge to leave a trail behind her, something she could follow back out again.

Adam was now nowhere in sight and the atmosphere was thickening into the slow sludgy stuff of her nightmares. Fern felt something watching her from behind - or was it to her left? There were voices, too, murmurings at first, then becoming louder and clearer so she could catch the odd word or phrase. *Beware*, said one, followed by the cackling wild laughter of an old woman. *Mother*; it was a child's voice, seemingly coming from far away, with an edge of panic. Fern turned quickly, trying to find its source but...
there were only trees and shadows. Help me. Fern felt helpless despair fall on her. She had failed her daughter. Centuries ago probably, but the despair was fresh. The Bear Handler had said this creature had got to her through those she loved. Perhaps it would try to hurt Adam next.

'Adam,' she called. 'Adam!' Fern felt her feet tense up with fear. They wanted to run, it didn't matter where, just away from this spot. With an effort she focused her will and resisted the urge. Instead she stood still and waited, hoping that Adam would retrace his steps and find her.

The sound of a man's mocking voice made her jump. You are mine. The words sent a chill down Fern's spine and she turned, trying to locate this new voice. Hearing a noise behind her, she whipped around, holding her stick as a weapon, and caught a fleeting movement before the stillness descended again. Had the thing stepped through again or was it just her over active imagination?

'Adam!' she called again but the sound could no longer penetrate the density of the atmosphere. It was as if she was caught in the voicelessness of her dreams.

Fern began to wonder if Adam would come back. Perhaps she had been wrong to trust him after all. She could feel the doubts rising with her panic and with an effort she pushed them away, remembering instead the intensity of their lovemaking, their laughter, the tears he'd let her see. . . With this, a calm descended on Fern and the atmosphere around her lightened a little. Adam would come for her. Of course he would. That faith was the thread that would help her find her way out of this maze.

'FERN!' She looked up and saw Adam crashing through the bushes towards her. 'Fern! Are you okay?'

She smiled. He'd come back. He'd found her. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I couldn't keep up with you.'

Adam took her in his arms, furious at himself. 'No, I'm sorry. It was stupid of me. I should never have gone ahead like that. I don't know what came over me. It felt like something was pushing me. All the time in the back of my head I was worried about you, but I couldn't stop or turn around. Then suddenly I was free of it. I raced back, but I couldn't see you. Oh shit, Fern, I nearly lost you.'

'It's okay,' said Fern, but Adam knew it wasn't. He didn't have any excuses.
Everything in his army training and his experience in the bush, told him you stick together. It was the golden rule. 'Do you think he knows we're coming?' asked Fern, reading the bewilderment and self-condemnation in Adam's mind.

'What?'
'My father. It's as if he knows and he's trying to stop us.'

Adam was uneasy with this idea. Sure, he'd felt like something had taken him over but that was just a bad mood. It must have been the clear-fell getting to him, that was all.

'It's just the place, Fern. Your father's not some wizard in a castle throwing spells at us,'

Fern nodded, wanting to believe him. They walked on, staying close together now, Adam adjusting his pace to Fern's. If there'd been a clearer track, he'd have made her walk in front of him. But he had to navigate their way along the overgrown path, so he went slowly, fighting the negative thoughts that kept taking him over. The idea of Fern's father somehow influencing their progress seemed more likely than he wanted to admit. It would explain the friction, the anger, the stupid mistakes... And their pace was slowing by the minute. It was as if there was a force here that was driving a wedge between them. Between them and within them.

As they walked, Fern could still hear the distant echo of the voices. *We have her.* She steeled herself to ignore the creeping shadows, the inexplicable voices, but terror and despair were creeping back. *I was innocent.* A shocked bewilderment rose in Fern as she listened to those words. This time, it was unmistakably her own voice. *I was innocent.* Then came another voice. *No one is innocent.*

'Let's talk,' Fern said to Adam, desperate to distract herself from these messages intruding from a past she didn't recall or understand.

'What do you want to talk about?'
'I don't know, anything.'

Despite his efforts, Adam too was withdrawing into himself, feeling the anger rise in him again. 'Okay,' he said. 'Tell me about your parents.'

'Which ones?'
'The real ones,' he said. 'The ones who brought you up.'
Fern thought about Grace and Richard. Were they her real parents? They certainly knew her better than her birth parents. And yet they were so different from her. 'My mother loves me,' she said. 'I'm grateful to her for that.'

'You're not supposed to be grateful for love.'

'I didn't get a lot of it as a kid. At least not from Dad. Everything had a clause. You know, if you do this then I'll love you, kind of thing. But Mum loved me unconditionally... I guess it's what saved me.'

'So what was your dad like?' asked Adam.

Fern stepped carefully over a fallen log, instinctively scanning the ground on the other side for snakes. 'I hated him for a long time. And I was afraid of him. Did I tell you he's in hospital? He had a heart attack a couple of weeks ago. His sixth, I think.'

'You don't sound too worried.'

'He always recovers. Then he blames me. I'm used to it now,' she said, then paused, wondering if that was true or simply wishful thinking. 'Once, when I was fifteen, something burst in his brain. An aneurysm, I think they call it. He'd been put in intensive care. When Mum and I visited, the doctors warned us that he needed to stay calm. He was in a darkened room, lying there attached to wires and machines. He looked shrunken and afraid and for a second I felt sorry for him, but then he turned his head and looked at me. You know what he said?... You tried to kill me.'

'Shit,' said Adam, stopping in his tracks and turning to look at Fern. 'That's a lot to lay on a kid. Why'd he do that?'

Fern shrugged. 'I don't know. I guess I wasn't doing what he wanted. Nothing I did was right, at least not in his eyes.' She remembered how the words had struck her like a punch in the stomach. She knew it was vital to hand those words back to him, to say no. But she couldn't. Richard had cursed her with them. Then a huge anger had risen inside her. She didn't remember feeling it before and hadn't let herself feel it again since. At least not until a few weeks ago.

'So what did you do?' asked Adam.

Fern smiled bitterly at the memory. 'I shouted FUCK OFF as loudly as I could, and then I ran.'

She remembered the emergency bell ringing, the sound of her feet pounding
along the hospital corridor towards the exit and the sound of doctors running. She'd found her own way home, coming back to the empty house, certain she'd killed him. Certain that those two angry words had sent him to his grave. When she discovered he was still alive, the relief she felt was entirely selfish: she didn't have to carry his death on her shoulders. She'd promised herself then that she would never use words powerfully again. That she would not lose herself in anger. But the accusation was still there, impossible to erase. It wasn't even the first time she'd become aware of the power of words, both good and bad. No, that had come much earlier; in her father's dismissive labelling, the cruel teasing of the kids at school and in the library where she'd borrowed book after book, the stories transporting her somewhere else for a time.

'Isn't it strange,' she said, 'how words can change the direction you go in life. We use them without thinking most of the time, yet they're really powerful.' Fern took a swig from her water bottle. 'Do you think it's possible to heal someone with words?' She recalled reading passages in books that conveyed a truth that hit her like an epiphany, a warming compliment given generously: surely these had as much power as an insult?

'Maybe,' said Adam, setting off again. 'I don't know. You can sure as hell hurt someone with them.'

Fern remembered again how a word that was well timed and sent with intent, could feel worse than a slap. And the pain lasted longer. Then there were the promises, formed and kept like spells, good promises and bad ones. She thought about the Bear Handler's question: Who was she bound to? Now, wherever she looked Fern could see bindings, like the promise she'd made the day her father had accused her. There were other promises too - I will never let myself be hurt again. . . I will always be nice, even at my own expense. . . each promise clamping another lock on her heart and sucking away her power until she was an empty shell with nothing left to give. No wonder she had withdrawn into her white attic room.

To be free of these bindings she would have to sever the connections between herself and those she'd given her power to, and then she would have to reclaim the fragments of herself that had been left behind, in a place, or with another person and maybe in another time. Shamesh had told her that she was almost empty, she'd lost so much of herself. But she felt less transparent now. Already she was reclaiming some of
those last pieces.

Fern looked at Adam walking just in front of her, his head at a slight angle as if he were bemused by the world. His blond hair was longer than hers, rough and unkempt after a day and a half in the wilderness. She longed to run her fingers through it, teasing out the tangles, feeling the roundness of his skull below. Each time Fern looked at him she memorised his features, the tilt of his nose, his certain chin, the cut of his ears, the way his hair framed his forehead. She held these memories close, along with the delicious smell of him and the taste of his skin. Yet when he was out of sight, or even with his back turned, the images fled, leaving her with an intense but unfocused yearning. The thought of losing Adam was becoming unbearable, creating an ache inside of her that was so strong she had to steer her mind around it. Already she couldn't bear to contemplate the possibility.

'Let's eat,' said Adam, eventually stopping in a small clearing. 'I'm starving.'

They sat on a log, in a patch of warm sunlight and ate chunks of cheese, slices of salami, dried fruit and some nuts. This was better than burnt porridge. For the first time that day, Fern felt good. 'Do you like being alive?' she asked between mouthfuls.

'What sort of question is that?'

'Sometimes you say stuff that makes me think you'd rather be dead.'

'Like what?' said Adam.

'Nothing specific. I just get the feeling you're suffering.'

Adam's instinct was to tell Fern to back off. But if he didn't want to lose Fern, he had to let her in. 'Sometimes everything hurts so much, you just want it to stop,' he said hesitantly.

'Like your dad dying?'

'Yeah, like that,' said Adam, looking away to hide the hurt in his eyes.

'I don't think I've ever been too keen on living,' said Fern. 'Otherwise I would have done it better.' She took another bite of her cheese and smiled. 'Though today just the taste of this makes me want to live forever.'

Adam laughed. 'I reckon you've got a healthy appetite for life,' he said, taking Fern in his arms and pressing his mouth down on hers.

She pushed him away. 'I haven't brushed my teeth.'
'Neither have I.'
'I can tell.'

Then they were peeling off each other's clothes, laughing and impatient as they fumbled with straps and zips. Shivering in the cold forest air they clung together, Adam's hands running along Fern's body, their roughness stirring her. Her nipples hard against his tongue. Fern lay back on the soft mossy ground, savouring the cool dampness as Adam pushed into her. She looked up into the treetops at the tiny patches of vivid blue sky visible through the canopy, then back at Adam moving above her, his muscles taut, his eyes looking through her. He pushed harder and harder, and she gasped, thrusting her body up towards him again and again, wanting him so much. Then, caught up in the ecstasy of orgasm, it seemed for a moment that there was no distinction between her and Adam and the forest or the sky.

Afterwards they lay still, their bodies warming each other as the cold seeped into their backs. There was something exquisite about making love outside. She could feel everything acutely: the roughness of the bark digging into her back, the damp moss under her; the dribble of semen down her leg, the softness of Adam's skin, the tightness of his muscles.

'There's only one thing that makes me want to stay alive,' he said, his voice almost a sob.

'What's that?'
'You.'

Fern felt her heart lurch in surprise. Speechless, she licked the salty tears off his cheeks, wondering again what lurked inside Adam, consuming him. He had given her a beautiful gift but she didn't know what to do with the responsibility that came with it.

Something was tickling her thigh, distracting her. She looked down and saw a black slimy thing attaching itself to her skin. 'Oh my God, a leech,' she shouted, pushing Adam away, jumping up and frantically trying to brush it off with her hands.

'Turn around,' said Adam. 'They're all over your butt.'
'Get them off, get them off,' screamed Fern, blind with panic.

Adam laughed, but his hands were working quickly. 'I wish I had a camera. Calm down. Keep still, will you, I can't get them off if you jump around like that. . . There,
that's most of them, just a couple of hangers-on.' He dabbed some meths onto them and they dropped away. Then he checked his own legs. 'I only got two. Your blood must be sweeter.'

Fern shuddered, her skin crawling at the thought of them sucking her blood.

'That's it, no more sex outside. Ever again,' she said, reaching for her clothes.

'Ow, shit, I've been bitten,' said Adam.

Heart pounding, Fern looked around for the snake.

'Bloody jack jumpers,' said Adam, rubbing his hand. 'I'd forgotten how much they hurt.'

'Jack jumpers?'

'Yeah, ants. See those black ones with the red legs? They've got a hell of a bite.'

'Thank God for that,' said Fern, relief flooding through her. 'I thought it was a snake.'

They got dressed, pulling on thermals and gaiters and boots. Adam was cradling his hand so Fern did up his laces for him. Then she took his hand in hers to get a closer look. 'It's swelling,' she said.

'Yeah, I always used to swell up with ant bites,' said Adam. 'There's some Stingose in the medical kit. Pity I didn't bring any antihistamines.' He rubbed some Stingose onto his hand, then stood up and swung the pack onto his back. 'We'd better get going.'

As they set off, Adam was overtaken by a sense of urgency. He would have run if he could, away from the pain increasing in his hand, but he contented himself with a fast walk. Puzzled, Fern followed as best she could. Even with fresh band-aids on her feet, her shoes were rubbing and taking up all her attention, so it was a while before she noticed that Adam was breathing heavily.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'I can't get my breath,' said Adam. 'My throat's too tight.'

The swelling had spread all the way up his arm and now his face was puffing up too. Fern remembered a girl at school having a reaction like that when she'd eaten a nut. She'd been rushed to hospital, but even so she'd nearly died.

'Sit down,' she said, pulling the pack off his back, her voice urgent.
Adam sank to the ground and leaned against a tree. 'I can't breathe,' he gasped, clutching his throat.

Fern could see the fear in Adam's eyes and knew it was mirrored in her own. The Stingose wasn't meant to be used for a serious allergic reaction and there was only one other thing she could think of. Hands shaking, she dug frantically through her bag for the little velvet pouch that Cassie had given her. Adam hadn't wanted Fern to bring it, telling her he had all the medical stuff they needed, but she'd slipped it in at the last minute, mainly in case she had another one of those night attacks. What was it that Cassie had recommended for bites? Apis had something to do with bees, so it had to be that one. There was no time for doubts.

'Here,' she said, opening Adam's mouth and squeezing four drops in.

'I'm sorry,' he said, looking at her without recognition. 'I didn't mean it.'

It was happening too quickly. Adam was gasping for breath, the swelling on his face was getting worse and now it was starting on his neck. Already he was practically unconscious, his eyes rolling back, his eyelids closing. Instinctively Fern knew she had to keep him awake. She shook him gently, then patted his cheeks. 'Stay awake, Adam, please stay with me.'

He opened his eyes, looked wildly around and then shut them again. Desperately Fern grabbed her water bottle and poured some of it onto his face.

'No, no.' His voice was a hoarse whisper. Then he opened his eyes and stared at something Fern couldn't see. 'Go away. Leave me alone,' he rasped, waving his arms as if fending someone off, and almost knocking the water bottle out of her hand. 'Why don't they kill me?' he whimpered, folding over as Fern held him, his neck going limp, his head heavy in her hands.

Desperately Fern squeezed more apis into his mouth. It was all she could think to do. 'Please, please, Adam, don't die... Stay here, Adam. I love you, don't leave me.' She kept talking and shaking him but his eyes stayed shut. Thirty seconds later she gave him some more drops, not knowing what else to do. The swelling was finally decreasing a little, but he was pale now, his body clearly shutting down. Fern checked for a pulse; at first she felt nothing and then she got it, such a feeble rhythm. She couldn't bear it if it stopped. Perhaps she should try mouth to mouth, but she'd never been shown how.
Otherwise there was nothing she could do, except pray. 'Please,' she begged. 'Please help him.'

Suddenly out of nowhere the memory came of Michael giving the penguin his life. 'Please help me,' she prayed again, not to any god she knew of, but to the life-giving force that had flowed through Michael.

Fern forced herself to stop panicking and as soon as she did, the knowing came into her. She put one hand on the bite and placed the other lightly on his neck. Then she waited. Innately she knew that the energy would only flow through her heart, but her heart was still closed. Despairing, she tried to open it, imagined it wide and vulnerable. However, it was only when she let her mind touch on Adam that Fern felt her love welling up and overflowing. She had the sense of the crown of her head opening and felt an immense pressure as white light flowed through her head and into her heart, then down her arms and into her hands. Fern could feel her hands throbbing, the energy pumping through her and flowing into Adam. Never had she felt more certain. There was no room for fear or panic, just the knowledge that Adam would live.

Fern didn't know how long she sat there bathed in the light as it poured through her and into Adam. Nothing mattered except that connection. There were flickers of visions, shrieking bird-like women with red-painted claws. And the word guilty, over and over. But this was different from the voices she'd heard as they walked through the forest. Now she was picking up the thoughts in Adam's mind. These creatures weren't here for her; they wanted Adam. She could feel the battle raging in him, one part of Adam submitting to them and another part fighting for life. Fern stayed focused. She felt a steady determination inside her. I know who you are, she thought, and you're not going to win.

Suddenly she was certain that she'd done this before, in another life, another time and place, using her hands, letting the energy flow, feeling her heart open and trusting. It was a beautiful certainty, a gift after all the horror.

After a time the swelling began to subside further. Adam moved his head, then opened his eyes and gazed up at Fern. She smiled, feeling an immense happiness washing through her as the energy stopped its flow. The pressure in her head and the throbbing in her hands receded, leaving her dizzy and weightless, and clean, as if she'd been washed
Adam smiled back. Their eyes locked for a moment in a gaze that had no defences. Fern felt herself falling into Adam as though they were one and the same person. It frightened her and she blinked, then blushed, overcome by shyness, as if Adam were a stranger she'd stumbled across in the forest.

As Fern moved out of his line of sight, Adam looked around him: at the trees, their trunks driving upwards towards the light; the sky, its blue offset by the clouds racing through the gaps in the trees; the fungi, glowing shades of orange and yellow and cream; and the iridescent green of the moss hurting his eyes. He could have been seeing for the very first time. I'm alive, he thought, his reaction a cocktail of relief and surprise, with just a tinge of regret. 'Thanks,' he said, taking Fern's hand. 'What did you do?'

'I gave you apis, a homeopathic remedy,' she said, showing Adam the bottle. 'But it wasn't enough on its own, so I copied Michael. I sent you my life.' That was how Michael had described it, though Fern realised it wasn't her life she'd sent. She'd been only a conduit. It was life itself that had flowed into Adam, through her.

Adam smiled. 'He's always fixing things - animals, tractors, cars - he's great at it but I never thought there was any magic in it. Though Mum used to say he had healing hands.' Adam's voice was still weak and hoarse. 'I've always underestimated my little brother,' he added.

'He's pretty special. You're lucky to have a brother like him.'

Adam thought about all the times he'd hated his little brother. The way Michael had smiled as he trashed Adam's toys, then looked at him as if he expected a pat on the back, until Adam had hit the smile off his face. Even then he'd come back, following Adam around adoringly. So many times Adam had wished his brother away.

'Yeah, maybe I am lucky. I've never thought of it like that.' He smiled at Fern. 'Looks like I'm safe then. A brother and a lover, both healers.'

A healer. The title felt strange to Fern, yet Shamesh had said she would become a healer, while Cassie had given her the potions and Michael had showed her the way. Together they'd made it possible for Fern to save Adam. One part of Fern resisted the idea that everyone had a predestined path in life but another part of her felt excited by the notion that each person's life was like a mystery in a detective story, laden with clues:
their task, to inhabit the mystery and solve it. It seemed that the clues lay in asking the right questions, in understanding one's passions and desires, and the patterns behind them.

Adam was shivering, so Fern pulled out his sleeping bag and wrapped it around him. 'I'll make some tea,' she said, setting up the trangia the way she'd seen Adam do it and filling the tiny kettle with water.

'You know, I felt the energy,' said Adam. 'It was strange. Your hands were warm and there was a light in me, I could feel it pulling me back.' He didn't add that something in him had wanted to let go; he didn't have to, Fern already knew.

'Here,' she said, handing him a mug of strong tea, sweetened with sugar.

'Thanks,' said Adam, the warmth of the tea thawing his frozen fingers. He wanted to hold onto his sense of wonder, to keep feeling the vibrancy of life around him and his connection with it.

'What happened in Iraq?' asked Fern.

Adam looked at her quickly, suspicion in his eyes. 'Did I say something?'

'You were shouting, get away leave me alone, as if something was tormenting you. I got a picture of the things. I know what they are, Adam. They're Furies. You know, from Greek mythology. They're the voice of your conscience. They latch onto people who have committed a crime and they drive them mad.'

Adam looked away, his heart thudding. He'd never told anyone about the hags in his dreams, had even refused to discuss it with the army psychiatrist.

'You should talk about it,' said Fern, sitting down next to Adam and slipping her arm around him.

Adam pushed her arm away. He didn't want to go back there, to that hell on earth. The dust in his mouth, up his nose, in his eyes, the cracks in his lips, the blood, and the heat beating down on him so hard he couldn't think. And never knowing who was who, just shooting. 'Kill 'em all,' one of his mates had said. 'Don't be an idiot,' he'd retorted, but he'd known what Fin meant. When he looked around again, he saw Fin go down, a bullet in his face and another in his neck. He'd tried to help, but it was too late and Fin had died in the dust, his blood drying almost as it dripped onto the ground.

Fern still sat next to him with her knees tucked up under her chin, waiting. Her
hair was sticking up all over the place but it made her even more beautiful. He didn't want to tell her what had happened, see her close off from him, but he knew he couldn't run from the truth forever. She'd trusted him, telling him things that left her vulnerable. She wanted to be with him, maybe even loved him. He owed Fern the truth. He had to give her the chance to leave.

Deliberately he sent his mind back to that afternoon: one o'clock, practically the hottest time of the day. He'd been exhausted and so thirsty there was no moisture left in his throat. His voice was hoarse, the way it was now.

'We were in Basra. There were snipers everywhere - us and them. It wasn't straightforward fighting, not the stuff we'd been trained for. It never was over there. I was getting spooked. Couldn't tell what was friendly fire and what wasn't. I shot a guy he wasn't in uniform, but that was the problem, most of them weren't.' Adam stopped and took a gulp of his tea, not caring that it was too hot, wanting to feel it scorching his throat. 'He was lying there and I was about to move on but then this kid stepped out of the shadows and walked over to the guy. I called out for him to stop, told him to move away.' Adam paused, his voice strained, almost a whisper. 'The kid looked up, but he didn't stop. I called out again but he ignored me and slipped his hand into the dead guy's jacket. He could've been pulling out a grenade or a gun, it could've been anything. Why didn't he stop? Jesus, I didn't know what to do. I was scared.' Adam was crying now, bent and broken. Helplessly, Fern watched him. 'I killed him,' he sobbed. 'I shot him in the chest. . .' He groaned. 'He was only nine or ten. Only a kid. And his sister was watching.

'I see it all the time, the boy looking at me, knowing what I was about to do. Knowing even before I knew. And the girl. . . there was no expression on her face. She gave one cry but then her face set like a marble sculpture. She just looked at me with those beautiful eyes and I knew what I'd done.' Adam was rocking back and forth now, trying to escape the ugliness of the truth. 'If I shut my eyes they come. These fucking old crones. It's like they're wearing me down, like they want me to kill myself. A life for a life, that's the law.'

'No, it isn't,' said Fern, reaching out for his hand. Impatiently Adam shook it away.
'They're illusions,' she said. 'They only have power if you give it to them. It's just your guilt talking.'

'Just!' said Adam. 'What do you mean, just? They're right. I don't deserve to live. You shouldn't have saved me.'

Fern was getting angry now. She was shocked by what Adam had done, shocked and disappointed, but it didn't change the way she felt towards him. 'For God's sake, stop wallowing in self-pity. Yes, it's bad what you did. Really bad, but how much worse would it be if you had died too? That would be another life wasted. So do something special with your life. Make up for it by living well, not by refusing to live.'

Abruptly Fern turned away and started packing up the trangia. Adam felt as if he'd been slapped. He didn't know what to say. Feeling weak, he stood up slowly. He'd been drained, physically and emotionally and now his legs were trembling with fatigue.

'Shouldn't we wait for a while until you get your strength back?' asked Fern.

'We can't. We're already behind. I packed six days of food, three in and three out - and that's assuming your father will feed us while we're there. We have to keep moving.'

Fern watched Adam hoist his bag onto his back. 'You know, since we got to Tasmania you've been different,' she said. 'Stronger somehow, as if the earth is feeding you. Or maybe it's in the way you love the wilderness. It's what gives you strength. . . Maybe this is where you'll find your redemption.'

'Maybe,' said Adam, feeling as if Fern had handed him a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. But he didn't know where it fitted yet. Yeah, he loved the bush and that's what Tassie was all about. But it was completely polarised. One battle after another. It would be impossible for him to live here and not take sides. And Adam didn't want to be part of another war. He stood for a moment gathering in his energy and then set off again. Fern lifted her own pack onto her shoulders and followed Adam. He looked terrible: his face was pale and he walked stiffly as if each step was taking a great effort. Yet as they walked, Adam felt a growing sense of relief. He could stop running now. Fern was right, if he wasn't to destroy himself he needed to find a way to live well.

Adam looked at his watch but it was only just after three, too early to stop for the day. The afternoon's walk had been gruelling, and he needed to rest. He considered stopping a
bit earlier than planned and making up for it tomorrow. If his calculations were right, they should reach the river in the morning and then it would be a direct line to Eric's house. In the meantime he was slowing down, Fern right on his heels.

"Why don't we stop for a bit?" asked Fern, sensing his exhaustion. 'You need to rest.'

'No.'
'It doesn't matter if we're a bit behind.'
'Not yet.'
'God, you're stubborn. What star sign are you?'
'Taurus,' said Adam.
'That figures. What year were you born?" she asked, wondering that she didn't know, that still they had so much to find out about each other.

'Nineteen eighty-five. Why?'
'Let's see, what happened in that year? That's right, they found the Titanic. And the French government sunk the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland. Remember, the Greenpeace boat?''

'How do you know that?'
'There was a serious shortage of books in our house when I was a kid, but I had two, an encyclopaedia of mythology and an almanac. I got it for my eleventh birthday and read it over and over. Now the whole thing's stuck in my head.' She laughed. 'Dates and the gods, that's all I know.'

'Anything else happen?''
'There was a cyclone in Bangladesh that killed ten thousand people, and it was the year of the first Live Aid concert. . . Maybe that's why you're like that.'

'Like what?'
'A fighter, an activist. Always pushing against things. It's like you were born for it.'

'There's plenty of things to push against,' said Adam.
'There are, but you're so angry about everything, you want to hurt yourself. What good will that do? Maybe if you gave something back. . . '

'Will you quit having a go at me?"
'I'm not.'
'You are.'
'Okay, okay, I'll shut up,' said Fern.

They walked on, Fern limping slightly, her ankle throbbing, her blisters rubbing, but compared with Adam she felt fresh. She could tell that willpower was the only thing keeping him going.

'When were you born?' asked Adam.

'Nineteen eighty-nine,' said Fern. 'The Chinese army killed thousands of students in Tienanmen Square, the Berlin Wall came down, the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize, Salman Rushdie was condemned to death for being rude about Mohammad, and the communist regimes in Czechoslovakia and Romania were overthrown.'

'A busy year,' said Adam.

'Yeah.'

A year of contradictions, thought Fern: free speech for some and not for others, the scales of justice squeaking into a new but not very different position. But maybe it had been the beginning of something bigger that, like most change, would be a blend of the gradual and the cataclysmic and only noticed in retrospect.

'Anything happen in Australia?' asked Adam, feeling his muscles straining under the weight of his pack. He couldn't go on much longer.

'Not much. An earthquake in Newcastle, Bob Hawke crying on television because he'd been caught cheating on his wife, university fees reintroduced. . . Pretty boring really.'

Fern didn't add that in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, Simple Simon had uttered a prophecy that set in motion a series of events, or that she was born on the footpath while her mother waited for the lights to change and her father waited for his next opportunity to kill her. If it hadn't been for that prophecy she wouldn't be hiking through this forest on her way to visit her father. She wouldn't have met Adam either, thought Fern, so there was no point wishing Simple Simon had kept his mouth shut.
Chapter Twenty

Fern was in two places at once. The gentle rise and fall of Adam's breath and the rustle of the night outside were welcome intruders in this dream, grounding her when every instinct was telling her to fly, her senses screaming DANGER as she cautiously peered into a small room. A place of worship, she thought, seeing flashes of a curved doorway, the intricate inlays on the walls. The room was empty except for a man sitting on a long bench, his back to her. Dark olive skin, colourful robes and power: he was a wealthy merchant, she remembered, but also more than that. She sensed some secret lying within him.

'You must go up and touch it,' Shamesh had told her but Fern's terror was so strong it almost overwhelmed her. Seeking to control her fear she took one silent step and then another, hearing a strange rhythmic gusting sound that she soon realised was her own breath. Instinctively she was using it to keep her fear down, the way the Bear Handler had shown her. Forcing her way through the dense atmosphere of her dream, she took another step, her breathing so loud she was sure the man would hear. Then Fern remembered the staff and it was suddenly there, her hand clasping its rough-hewn surface, its solidity giving her the strength to complete her task. She was almost level with him now. Musterling all her courage she reached out with the staff and touched it to his shoulder.

'Sattar,' she whispered, as she woke. 'Sattar.'

Fern opened her eyes to the darkness and in a sudden flash realised what had just happened. She had turned everything around, become the hunter and sought him out. You were hidden, she thought, and I found you. She had no idea who this man was. Another manifestation, she guessed. From the same being, incarnating in different forms for God only knew how many lifetimes.

She snuggled in close to Adam's chest, curling her body against his and feeling the strong muscles in his arms. She loved it that his hands seemed too big for gentleness, yet were tender. She felt safe with him, yet when she slept she went somewhere even he couldn't reach.
Since they'd entered the forest, Fern's waking life and her dreams were becoming increasingly indistinguishable. The visions and voices were coming thick and fast, like a volley of arrows. She had no doubt that her father was sending some of these dreams and visions, but this one couldn't have been from him. Fern herself had looked for Sattar, drawn him to her from memories that were stored deeper than her conscious mind. She was learning and becoming stronger. Each memory she faced and released solidified her in some way, planting her feet more firmly on the ground. But even so, her previous experiences left her in no doubt that her father was far stronger than she.

Outside the tent, the night was noisy: the loud humming of insects, the crackle of twigs, a creak of a branch, the ghostly cry of a possum, and in the distance the constant roll of thunder. The tent was lit up with stark and eerie flashes of lightning. Through the thin layer of plastic that divided them from the forest, Fern could make out the silhouetted shadows of the trees as lightning pierced the darkness. She smiled, remembering a line from one of Leonard Cohen's songs: *There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.*

Fern had always feared and avoided the cracks, suspecting that if she slipped down one she'd fall forever into an inescapable darkness. Lately though, she'd found that everywhere she looked the cracks were opening so wide she couldn't avoid them anymore. But now the light was finding its way through and she was beginning to realise that it was only her fear feeding the shadows.

In the distance Fern heard a roar, like a truck or an aeroplane. It was coming closer, the roar filling her ears until she was certain she and Adam and their tiny tent would be destroyed. When it hit, Fern realised it was the wind, gusting mightily above. She could hear the creaking and swaying of the trees and the rustle of the leaves, but no breeze touched the sides of the tents.

When the wind had blown itself out, the rain arrived, gathering first in the forest canopy, then large drops found their way through, thudding loudly onto the tent. Inside the tent, however, it remained peaceful and still. With her eyes closed, the sound of the rain was like a crackling fire, broken only by Adam's snores. As dawn approached, Fern finally dozed off, only to be woken shortly after by the sound of the zip opening.

'Shit, it's raining.' Adam fumbled around with his pack, and set up the trangia in
the tiny annexe where they kept their shoes. Fern sat up to watch him making the coffee, and gratefully accepted a cup. She sipped it, feeling groggy from lack of sleep. But alongside her tiredness was a new sense of clarity and even optimism. Unless they got ridiculously lost, they would arrive at her father's place today. On his website she'd seen pictures of the house and grounds. It was impossibly luxurious: gleaming marble, polished wood and velvet-draped four-poster beds. Six star accommodation he called it, though she had thought the maximum number of stars was five. Perhaps this was a category for the super rich. She didn't imagine she and Adam would be welcome but she looked forward to at least using the bathroom.

As the morning passed, Fern felt her optimism slowly diminishing, replaced by a returning sense of despair. It first flickered to life as she dressed awkwardly in the cramped confines of the tent; when she stepped out into the rain, her sense of hopelessness had grown. As they trudged along, her feet squelched on the forest floor, the rain seeping its way in through her rain jacket. Fern was soon completely soaked, chilled and miserable, and every step she took brought her closer to a confrontation she now felt too weak to face.

They walked for a couple of hours like this, without talking. Their faces were angled down, away from the rain, but it still poured off Fern's eyelashes, slipping into her eyes and making them sting. Fern began to feel that this was personal, that her father was sending the rain, the visions, the despair, deliberately wearing them down. He was winning, she thought, as they plodded miserably through the rain.

'Adam?'

'Yeah.'

'I want to go back,' she said, ashamed of her small, pleading voice

Adam stopped. 'You're kidding.'

'Please. I can't do this. I can't face him.'

'Course you can,' said Adam. 'Look, we're coming up to the bit I can handle. I can't help you fight this thing in your dreams but I sure as hell can manage your dad. He's flesh and blood.'

Fern sighed and followed Adam as he strode off again, her feet squelching through soaking moss and muddy puddles, the water seeping in over the tops of her
boots, numbing her feet. Her bones were aching with the cold. It feeds on my fear, she reminded herself. I have to find a way to stop being afraid.

The answer came in the sound of birdsong, the rain washing the notes clean so that each one hovered clear and strong. Beauty, she thought. Fern stopped and took her pipe out from a side pocket, put it to her lips and played. At first she drew tunes from her memory, playing with difficulty, her fingers numb and slow from the cold. The notes sounded tentative and mournful as if they were being suffocated, but soon she lost herself in the music, letting her fingers choose the notes, allowing the tunes to form and pierce through the thick atmosphere, resounding among the trees.

As Fern played, Adam felt his step lighten again. The rain didn't matter so much now, or the mud. They walked alongside a creek for a while, the water running wild, bubbling and frothing merrily. Then they heard the murmur of a waterfall and for a time the water and the pipe sang together in harmony.

Suddenly the rain stopped and the sun appeared, filtering through the canopy and lighting their path. Fern looked up and saw drops of water suspended and glowing under a patch of blue sky. We're fighting back, she thought, regaining ground. With that she played on, a happier tune now, the rhythm faster, the notes tripping over each other joyfully. The forest wasn't so dense here, and more sun found its way through the trees. She even felt a breeze caressing her skin.

As they walked past a pile of rocks, Fern heard a rustling sound and looked up in time to see a snake throw itself off the top of the rocks and grab something in its mouth. Then, still attached to the top of the rocks by its tail, it dangled precariously, grasping a mouse. She could see its fine long tail struggling in the snake's mouth. Fern stopped abruptly, watching the snake, absorbing its power, its intent, its patience. She could feel these qualities inside herself, the awakening of a latent force, a strength she must say yes to, or she would be destroyed.

Up ahead, Adam had paused, waiting for her in a patch of sunlight. 'Look,' he said as she caught up with him.

Fern gasped at the sudden explosion of space in front of them. They were standing above a wide river or bay, she wasn't sure which, but for the first time in three days she could feel the full strength of the wind on her face and see further than a few
metres ahead of her. She stared at the sky, amazed at its vastness. There was a break in
the clouds just above them, but beyond that the rain was falling in a heavy sheet, so thick
she could see where it began and ended.

'Macquarie Harbour,' said Adam. He consulted the map. 'It looks like we've come
out too far up but that's not a problem. We'll follow this track round the edge for a while,
then maybe cut back inland to your father's house.'

Stopping for lunch, they sat gazing out over the water, sipping miso soup and
finishing off the last of the chocolate. Then they set off once more, following the
contours of the harbour. The rain began again in surging gusts, and the track wound
down, almost to the shore, then up again before disappearing altogether. This forced
them to a standstill.

Fern waited while Adam looked for a path. They were high up, not exactly on the
edge of a cliff but higher than Fern was comfortable with. She could feel vertigo setting
in, paralysing her legs.

'This way,' called Adam, who had climbed a bit higher. 'There's a good path here.'

Fern looked up at Adam but couldn't see him. A dizziness descended on her and
she felt as if she was falling, her body tumbling through the air, anticipating the impact.

'Come on,' said Adam impatiently. 'It's not far up.'

'I can't do it,' she said, feeling another voice rising within her: a howl, a wail,
hardly human and heavy with grief.

'It's okay, just give me your hand,' said Adam, reaching down. He was baffled.
The height wasn't that great and the way up was easy.

'Keep away.'

'What?'

'Don't come near me,' she said in a voice that wasn't hers. Waves of vertigo
washed through Fern, forcing her onto her hands and knees. She clung to a shrub, but
the drop was suddenly vertical and she found herself perched on the edge of a cliff. From
far below came the crash of waves against rocks. Terrified, she felt herself slipping, could
feel her fingers loosen, her body slide. She was going to die, her body pulverised on the
rocks below.

As she clung there, Adam reached down further to help her. She tried to say no
but her mouth couldn't formulate the words, so she shook her head. The wind was picking up, blasting into her back and soon the rain would wash away her handhold. She realised now that she was stuck somewhere between the present and a distant past that was coming at her in glimpses of terror. This is Adam, she told herself. Only Adam. He won't hurt me.

'Calm down,' said Adam. 'You're not going to fall.'

She was about to reach out to him but his suddenly face changed into another's, her husband or lover, she couldn't remember, but the face was so familiar. He was a lord, she knew that much. Handsome but cruel, his mouth blood-red and thin, like the slash of a sword. She was afraid of him. And so was his horse, standing behind him, fretful and uneasy. He'd taken off one of his riding gloves and she found her eyes riveted by its elaborate design, deep red, with an embroidered golden dragon on the back.

Help me. The words sounded over and over in her head, but she couldn't speak them. She was mute. Literally tongueless, she realised with horror. Tongueless, by his hand. What had she been to him? The answer came unbidden: an acquisition, one that he was now discarding. Her gaze leaped unwillingly from his glove to his face. Their eyes locked and with a feeling of helpless dread she watched him smile as he reached down and stroked her hand before flinging her off the edge. She remembered it all: the certain knowledge of death, the dreadful dizziness, the sun flashing in her eyes, and him standing at the top of that cliff, a triumphant smile on his face. I was innocent, she thought. Innocent.

'Fern! Take my hand.'

She looked up and saw Adam's face again, his strong square hand, his kindness, his good intentions. She reached her hand out and took his, forcing herself to trust him as he hauled her up to where he was standing.

'What was that all about?' asked Adam. Fern shook her head helplessly. Her throat was closed, still muted. 'We'd better get moving then,' he said, giving her an anxious look.

Tears were streaming down Fern's face as she followed Adam along this new track he'd found. Still soaked through, she was chilled by the wind, her body shaking, her teeth chattering, as she cried out her grief over the tragic end of another woman's life.
Adam glanced back to check that Fern was still behind. 'Shit, your lips are blue. We'll have to stop and get you a warm drink.'

'I'm fine,' she said, wanting to keep moving. 'How long until we get there?'

'I reckon it'll take about another hour. That's if the track stays good. I wanted to double back and come in from the bush but this weather's crap. Maybe we just have to front up at the main gate.'

Fern nodded. It was pointless trying to sneak into her father's domain: he knew they were coming. He was playing with them, unearthing their fears and their deepest secrets, throwing stumbling blocks in their way. Every time she began to feel strong, something else would arise to crush her will. Fern didn't know how long she could keep treading the line between the physical world and this other, metaphysical world, both of them throwing up one challenge after another. It was taking all her strength. The sooner they got there the better, but the thought of meeting her father was terrifying.

'Let's keep going,' she said.

'No. You're getting hypothermia. We have to stop.' Adam lifted the pack off Fern's back, then rummaged about in his own for the trangia. While the water boiled he wrapped Fern up in her sleeping bag.

'What happened back there?' he finally asked when Fern was sipping her tea.

She shrugged, so tired she couldn't find the words for what she'd seen. It was more intuition than knowledge. 'I think it was a memory of a past life. I saw myself falling and you were someone else.' She shuddered, clasping her mug in both hands and letting the heat thaw her fingers. 'I think my father's taking images and memories from inside my mind, some that I wasn't even aware of. And he's using them against me.'

'The attack on Bruny wasn't a memory.'

'No,' she said, shivering anew. 'Michael could see it too. I don't know what that was. It wasn't my father though, at least not any version of him I'd seen before. It was something formless but powerful.' Fern put her face close to the cup, letting its steam warm and tickle her face. 'It could only find me when I was relaxed. But then my fear gave it power.'

Adam groaned. 'I can't believe we're even discussing this. Two weeks ago I would have put you in a loony bin. Now, I don't know. One minute I think it's crazy and
the next I'm not so sure.' He stood up. 'I guess there's only one way to find out.'

Fern followed him stiffly, her muscles aching even more after the brief rest.

Half an hour later, Adam stopped and inhaled sharply. 'That looks like it,' he said, pointing at a pier up ahead where four boats were moored, three giant motor boats and a yacht. He whistled. 'There's a lot of money in those boats.' He looked at Fern. 'Okay, how do we approach this? Are we sticking with the lost bush walker thing?'

'I don't think there's any point,' said Fern. 'He knows. Let's just walk in and see what happens.'

'What if he's not there?' Adam asked.

Fern looked at him, surprised. The possibility hadn't even crossed her mind. 'He'll be there.'

There was no one at the pier, just the boats bobbing gently in the water. A gravel road led into the forest. They turned their back on the water and followed the road for ten minutes or so, the forest drawing in closer and closer around them as they walked.

Turning a corner, they were suddenly standing before tall wrought-iron gates flanked by two ornate stone pillars, each bearing a statue of a lion. Behind the gates the gravel driveway continued between perfectly manicured lawns. Despite having already seen pictures of her father's property, Fern was taken aback by her first glimpse of Pine House. It stood solemnly, not attractive but solid, a pocket of order and control amid an untamed wilderness. On first sight it seemed audacious and wrong, out of tune with the environment, but Fern was tired, cold and dirty, and quickly its misplaced notes became intriguing, a promise of luxury and comfort, its pure cream walls seeming to defy the existence of mud and leeches. A two-storey square, with windows punched regularly in its walls, there was little that was soft about this building, except perhaps the delicate ironwork of the balcony that framed the second level of the house like an observation deck. Next to the house stood a helicopter, its gleaming metal looking out of place next to this historical building.

The gates were locked. As Fern studied their ironwork she realised with horror that each gate was decorated with the shape of a dragon; the design was identical to the embroidered glove she'd seen only an hour ago. Around the dragons were snakes, pointing up or down alternately, their tails or tongues becoming sharp spikes that made
climbing over the gate an impossibility.

'We're not getting past that,' said Adam. He walked around to the side of the pillars and inspected the tall fence. 'No chance of climbing this either.' He pointed at a bird lying dead on the ground at his feet. 'It's electrified. This guy's really into security.' Frustrated, he kicked at the pillar and then noticed the intercom attached to the side. 'We could always announce ourselves,' he said dryly.

'No need,' said Fern, as the gates slid silently open in front of them.
Chapter Twenty One

A man was walking towards them along the gravel driveway. He was carrying a large black umbrella with a curved wooden handle and he wore a formal suit which complemented perfectly the house behind him and its grounds, but was incongruous in relation to the wildness of the bush surrounding them. A wilderness that Fern was already beginning to believe she'd imagined. Or perhaps it was this place that had been conjured from fantasy.

Fern watched him strolling through an arbour of massive oaks. He didn't look like the monster she'd imagined or even much like the photograph she'd seen. There was something affected about him, though his walk wasn't mincing. It was more catlike and leisurely. Certain of itself. And of its prey, she thought with a shudder. The silk scarf around his neck made him look like a dandy, camouflaging the steel in him, though Fern felt the glint of it more and more strongly as he approached. Even from a distance she could see the purpose in him, and the control. She had no doubt this was her father.

'Hello,' he called. 'I'm pleased you could make it.'

It was a normal voice, friendly enough, though Fern thought she could detect a hint of sarcasm. Eric knew who they were. He was acting as if he'd invited them.

'My daughter,' he said, as if her coming was a great relief to him. 'Fernanda.' He held out his hand. 'Though I understand you prefer Fern.'

Fern was puzzled. There really was no pretence here. Or if there was, it was on a level she couldn't decipher. He was taking control, acting as if everything that was happening was his doing. His sense of certainty was frightening. But his hand was still poised in mid-air, waiting to be shaken. Trying to control the tell-tale tremor in her own hand, Fern reached out and clasped his, noting the long slender fingers, so like her own, and feeling the soft touch of his smooth, pampered skin. Her father.

The touch of his hand brought an immediate jolt of recognition, followed by a shockingly vivid image of him as a younger man, his face grim as he picked her up by the ankle and slammed her against a wall. She, a tiny baby, dangling helplessly in his hand. It was so sudden, and real enough for Fern to recoil, snatching her hand away as if it had
been burnt. It took all of her willpower to restrain herself from reaching up and cradling her head. She could feel the jolts of pain at the point of impact, the intense shock and the blood rushing to her head as she dangled there. She could hear an alarm, her mother's cry of anguish, the feet of nurses and then his silky voice, smoothing over everything as he cradled her, rubbing her head gently with his devious hands. 'I almost dropped her. My God, they're so fragile.'

*I was innocent.* There were those words again, thought Fern. They were becoming a refrain, the phrase echoing down the corridors of time and space, through lifetimes.

'No one is innocent,' said her father, watching her carefully. 'Though most are too cowardly to face what they have been.'

Fern was surprised. He'd read her thoughts so easily and hadn't even bothered to pretend otherwise. Suddenly she had a glimpse of something else; a panicked sense that there was a memory inside her she must avoid at all costs. Then fragments: a horse, a sharp curved blade, the crunch of bones under the horse's feet, the smell of blood. . .

'Oh yes,' said Eric, looking at her intently. 'We are all capable of anything.'

Fern was confused. She'd wielded that blade, felt it cutting through human flesh. Could this have been one of her own memories, or her father's? She hoped it was not her own, but she'd felt it so clearly.

Fern desperately tried to send her thoughts elsewhere, concentrating instead on the grandeur of the house, so different from her birth mother's dark, sad house in Katoomba, or Grace and Richard's tidy home in suburban Adelaide. For a moment she wanted it for herself and had to fight back a surge of resentment that she'd never partaken in this wealth.

'Yes,' Eric said, smiling and glancing behind him at the house. 'It is magnificent.'

Fern glared at him. He was playing with her, entering her mind without permission, showing off. So she would do the same. She concentrated on Eric, emptying her own mind, searching for the thoughts inside of this man.

She had no idea that someone might actually feel their mind being probed, but Eric must have seen it coming. She was surprised to find his mind emptied of everything except his own fierce will pushing her out. Remembering what her mother had said about
the way he bent people to his will, Fern retreated. Immediately he counter attacked, forcing his way through into her mind. His immense power was almost irresistible. Fern tried instinctively to build barriers against him, but despite her efforts her defences were crumbling.

Adam looked from one to the other, not understanding what was going on. It was as if he wasn't there, the way they focused on each other like this. He felt a twinge of jealousy. There was something between them, something he couldn't penetrate. But he also felt a growing concern.

He stepped forward and held out his hand towards Eric. 'Hi,' he said. 'I'm Adam.'

The spell was broken. Gratefully, Fern felt her mind relax as she broke free of her father.

He laughed. 'You truly are my daughter,' he said to her, a note of fatherly pride in his voice. Then he turned to Adam. 'And my name is Eric,' he said, taking Adam's hand and looking hard into him, making Adam feel as if his insides were being ripped out and inspected.

'You sure make it difficult to visit,' said Adam, extracting his hand and gesturing at his muddy legs.

'I value my privacy,' said Eric. Then he shivered dramatically. 'Now to practicalities. Come and get some dry clothes on before you both catch pneumonia.'

They followed Eric back along the gravel driveway towards the house, which seemed to grow larger in stature as they approached. As did the helicopter parked at its side.

'My preferred means of transport,' said Eric, motioning at it casually.

Passing a well-tended rose garden, Fern couldn't resist pausing to sniff the richly scented petals. Directly in front of the house stood a stone fountain. Its base was a half-open shell, and from it emerged a naked Venus surrounded by lichen-covered stone fish, water spurting from their mouths in a graceful arc.

The granite steps leading up to the front door had worn smooth with age and the tread of so many feet. Standing on a wide, covered terrace lined with flagstones, Fern looked at the heavy cedar door and its giant brass door knocker in the form of a wolf's head, its mouth open and its sharp teeth bared.
'Not very welcoming,' whispered Adam to Fern.

'It's a warning,' said Eric, turning towards them. 'To those who are uninvited, or perhaps not ready for what they will find inside.' . . He smiled but his eyes were cold.

'Like the demonic figures you find outside cathedrals. I do love those gargoyles, don't you?'

Fern paused at the door, feeling like an impostor, heavy and uncultured in her big boots and dripping rain jacket. She and Adam peeled off their wet jackets, their muddy gaiters and shoes, Fern's cold fingers fumbling uselessly with the laces, so that in the end Adam had to help.

'Leave them there,' said Eric. 'I'll get someone to attend to them.'

Nervously they followed him into a vast entrance hall. Even without her wet and muddy outers, Fern felt as if she were leaving a trail of grime in this house that gleamed with polish and care.

Eric stopped. 'Welcome to my humble abode,' he said proudly. 'The original owner had little taste and it's an odd mix of styles, though predominantly Victorian. I've kept as many features as possible - the original doors, brass chandeliers, marble mantelpieces - and the furnishings are in period style, though I couldn't resist mixing in a bit of modern here and there. I've played on the dissonance and created something new, an exciting and eclectic mix.'

Fern's eyes followed her father's to a large abstract painting on the wall. Its colourful geometry should have been awkward, she thought, hanging there among traditional portraits and antique furniture, but it was perfect. 'It's beautiful,' she said feeling the lure of this house again..

'Yes,' he said glancing around him with pleasure and then looking directly at Fern, his eyes piercing her. 'I'm a collector.'

Fern suddenly pictured him as a child, stalking butterflies with his net and then sticking pins into them. She stifled a shudder.

'Come along,' he said, climbing a wide wooden staircase up to the first floor. The carved rail gleamed with polish and vases of roses stood on plinths, their scent mingling with the polish, their gentle yellow tones highlighted by the cream walls behind them. 'I saved you a room, of course. Not the grandest, mind you. But we have a number of
guests and it was short notice.'

He opened a door and ushered them into a room. After the cold wind and rain outside, Fern noticed the heat first: a fire was raging in the grate, the walls were a warm yellow ochre, and the furnishings were mainly dark wood or deep red. The furniture was too ornate for her liking: the side tables with their curved legs and carved handles were ugly, and the bed had too many cushions. Fern felt a childish surge of pleasure at finding a flaw in her father's taste. She crossed over to the French doors, framed by heavy, deep gold drapes and leading out onto the balcony. Immediately below was the rose garden and further out the oaks, followed by what looked like a golf course; and beyond that lay the rim of the forest, its canopy so thick it looked impenetrable.

'You're just in time for our New Year's Eve dinner,' said her father as Fern turned away from the view. 'It's formal,' he added, eyeing their clothes with a frown. 'I don't suppose you've got anything appropriate tucked away in those monstrous bags of yours.'

'Nothing,' said Adam quickly, hoping to be spared the torture of a formal dinner.

'Sorry,' said Fern, who had completely forgotten that it was the last day of the year.

'Never mind, I'll send up something of mine.' He glanced at Adam disdainfully. 'It will be a bit small, but you'll have to make do. And for you?' he added, turning to Fern and running his eyes up and down her body as if she were a dummy in a clothes store. 'Mmm, I'm sure I've got something. I'll see you at six thirty sharp,' he said, closing the door behind him, then opening it again immediately, making them jump. 'Leave your wet clothes outside the door, I'll have them laundered.'

'Thanks,' said Fern, feeling more and more like a character in a play for which she hadn't seen the script.

She locked the door and leaned against it, breathing a sigh of relief. Her head felt as if it were going to explode: a new father, a glamorous house, a battle of minds or wills or something else she didn't even understand. . . and it wasn't over yet. He would get through to her unless she found a way to protect herself. But there was something else even more disturbing: Fern had felt the recognition between them in a way she hadn't with her birth mother. Joan was right, Fern and Eric were alike. There was a spark between them that filled her with excitement. She should hate him; she should be afraid
but instead she was excited.

Fern needed time alone to digest it all, but Adam was sitting on the bed looking positively sour. 'What was all that about?' he asked sullenly.

'What do you mean?'

'You know, the weird way you looked at each other. Something was going on.'

'He was reading my mind,' said Fern, slipping off her backpack and feeling instantly buoyant. 'I was trying to stop him.'

Adam could see the excitement in Fern's eyes and hear it in her voice but he didn't understand it. He could easily punch the guy in the face, but he wasn't built for mind games like that: he was out of his depth and he knew it. 'He's an arsehole. . . Don't trust him,' he said pleadingly.

Fern felt a strange desire to defend her father and a momentary urge to lash out at Adam. With an effort she stifled it. She knew Adam was speaking the truth. Eric had tried to kill her, she must remember that. She bit her tongue and concentrated on that knowledge, letting it chase everything else from her mind. The excitement drained away and left her weary, no longer floating. Suddenly her legs felt as if they would buckle underneath her. 'It's so confusing,' she said, sitting on the bed next to Adam. 'I'm scared.'

'Just don't trust him, not for a second. He's dangerous. . . ' Adam tried to pin down what Eric reminded him of. 'Like a cross between a viper and a fox.'

'I don't trust him. How could I?' said Fern, adding, 'Bags first shower.'

Despite Fern's reassurance, Adam still felt uneasy. Eric was clever and secretive but there was something else about him; he took peoples' energy, confused them, twisted them to his will, while all the time they felt privileged to be near him. Fern was his daughter. How could she resist it?

In the end they showered together, the steaming water stinging their cold skin as they soaped each other and made love slowly, lazily, almost asleep on their feet. Then, exhausted and still wet, they fell asleep, curled up together on the bed.

A knock on the door woke them. Fern threw on one of the thick white robes that lay on the end of the bed, then opened the door. A maid was standing in the hallway next to a clothes rack, from which hung a suit, complete with a shirt and bow tie, and a long shimmering silver evening dress. There were shoes too: a pair of silver stilettos for Fern
and glossy black pointed lace-ups for Adam.

'Thank you,' Fern said as the maid wheeled the clothes rack into the room and left, blank-faced. Fern felt stupid and embarrassed, wondering if she should have given a tip. She was sure the maid could see through her and knew somehow that Fern didn't belong here. She wasn't used to such luxury or standing on this side of the division between those who serve and those who are served.

But the dress was beautiful. Entranced, Fern lifted it up and ran her fingers along the slinky material.

'Either he cross dresses or keeps a mistress,' she said, unable to hide the glee in her voice. 'What do you think?'

'Cross dresses,' said Adam sourly. He disliked Fern's father intensely, hated the way he looked past Adam as if he weren't there, his eyes hooked greedily on Fern. Adam couldn't make him out. One minute he wanted his daughter dead, the next he was ingratiating himself with her, playing the prodigal father. 'Is there any way we can get out of this?' he asked.

Fern shook her head, still dazzled by the dress in front of her. 'No, we're on his turf, we'd better conform as best we can.'

Adam got up reluctantly, lifted the suit off the rack and inspected it. 'Shit, it's Armani.'

Fern threw off the robe, stepped into the dress and pulled it up, lifting the straps over her shoulders. It was too long, the hem trailed on the ground a little, but otherwise it fitted perfectly. Her father had chosen well, something clingy, so that it would sit properly even on her tiny frame.

'This looks ridiculous,' said Adam, trying on the suit. It was obviously expensive and well cut, but far too small; Adam's wrists and ankles were comically exposed. The shoes would no doubt be too small as well, and pinch his toes. 'God, I feel like a fool,' he grumbled, a suspicion rising in him that this was exactly how Eric wanted him to feel.

Fern kissed him, trying not to laugh. 'It doesn't matter what you wear, Adam, you look handsome to me.'

There was a bottle of perfume on the dressing-table. Fern took off the lid and sniffed, then, seduced by its delicate musky scent, rubbed a few drops on her chest and
her neck. She stood in front of the full-length mirror and contemplated herself, hardly believing that this elegant beauty was the same bedraggled person who had staggered into her father's house a few hours ago. Fern thought of all the clothes she'd left hanging on the clothes rack in her old attic room, none of them as beautiful or as simple as this dress. She would never have chosen it for herself, and yet it suited her perfectly. She loved the tantalising way it clung, making her feel sexy, sending ripples of anticipation running up and down her body. She didn't have any make-up but that didn't matter. Her skin was pale and smooth, her cheeks lightly flushed from the fire and her lips were full and dark without the need for lipstick.

'You look gorgeous,' said Adam, coming up behind her and running his hands up and down her body. He nudged his face into her neck and nibbled at her, inhaling the strange unfamiliar scent until she pushed him away, worried that he would leave a mark on her neck.

The outfit needed something else, something to make it her own. Fern dug around in her backpack until she found Cassie's lapis lazuli necklace tucked right at the bottom of the front pocket. As she withdrew her hand her fingers touched the tempest stone and for a moment she was tempted to hold it again. But no, she didn't want to open herself up like that. It would make her vulnerable and she sensed that her immediate challenge lay here with her father, in the physical world.

Fern hung the necklace around her neck, feeling the cool stone sit between her breasts. Then she threw her pashmina over the top. It was perfect for the dress, a mysterious midnight blue, with a silver streak running through it. *Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue*. She paused, wondering if she had heard the words or if they had simply arisen in her mind; it was becoming difficult to distinguish. As the words suggested, suddenly and inexplicably she felt like a bride dressing for her wedding, in new clothes and borrowed, an old shawl and a blue necklace.

Fern tried on the shoes. They were just a fraction too big, so her feet slid around a little. She tightened the straps and stood up, wobbling dangerously on the stiletto heels. At least the added height lifted the dress so that it didn't sweep across the floor so much. Still, if anyone trod on it, she'd be down in a shot.
She looked at the clock. Twenty-five minutes past six. Her father had said six thirty sharp. 'Come on,' she said, linking arms with Adam. Her voice was full of excitement and her eyes were sparkling. It hurt Adam to see Fern like this. Her father was making a bid for his daughter and Fern wasn't even aware of it. Adam had already imagined many ways in which he might lose Fern, but now, for the first time, he saw that he might lose her to Eric.

'If we must,' he said, sighing.

As they walked down the stairs, uncertainty swept over Fern. Every step felt precarious; one false move and she'd sprain her ankle again. She couldn't possibly be dignified in such ridiculous shoes.

The other guests were milling in the bar, sipping drinks, their voices rising and falling confidently. Only sixteen or so, though the noise would suggest more. The men were in dinner suits, the women draped in expensive evening gowns and eyeing each other surreptitiously. Fern found it hard to believe that only hours ago she and Adam had been tramping through the bush in the rain. They both hesitated at the door, watching the lively chatter. Neither Adam nor Fern knew how to step into the scene before them.

Fern's father rescued them. 'Ah, there you are,' he called, walking towards them, glass in hand and looking elegant in his black evening suit and velvet bow tie.

'Fern, you look positively beautiful.' He paused and looked at Adam, one eyebrow slightly raised. 'And you've scrubbed up well. Let me get you both a drink.' He stepped over to the bar and handed them crystal flutes filled with icy champagne.

Still clinging to Adam's arm for balance, Fern took a sip, the bubbles tickling her nose. She looked around again, listening to the booming voices of the men and the strained, barking laughter of the women. Everyone seemed animated, yet their features were expressionless.

'Botox,' whispered Eric, seeing her staring. 'Turns them into dummies.' He laughed gleefully. 'These women will hate you, Fern. You're so - how do you say it? - Fresh. And they'll want you,' he said, turning to Adam and squeezing his upper arm. 'All those real man muscles. You watch.'

Adam scowled.

'Are these your friends?' asked Fern incredulously.
'You're so innocent,' Eric said, smiling. 'I'm acquainted with them all. But friends? No, these people all occupy positions of influence. They are useful to me. That's why they're here.'

'And what use are we?' asked Adam.

Eric's smile turned to ice as he draped his arm around Fern. 'This is my daughter,' he said proudly, adding scornfully. 'And you are her current boyfriend.'

Fern heard the sneer in her father's voice and wriggled out from his embrace, making it clear whose side she was on. But still, she was irritated with them both. The amused expression on her father's face was infuriating, but so was Adam's bad temper. He needs to lighten up, she thought.

A large, round-faced man approached them, sweating in the heated room. 'Eric,' he said, clapping her father on the back and not noticing him wince at the contact. 'I meant to ask, how are you going with the negotiations?'

'A few hitches, I'm afraid. You know how it is. So many committees...'

'Anything I can do?' asked the man, looking concerned.

'Very kind, Andrew. I'm sure there is - let's talk about it later. Dinner is about to be served and I have an announcement to make first.' Eric picked up a bell and rang it, waiting patiently until the chatter died away to nothing and everyone was looking at him expectantly. 'As you all know, we are here to see in the New Year together. That in itself is worth celebrating. But for me it's a very special occasion.' Eric paused, savouring the moment. He was a man who relished surprises. 'I'd like you all to meet my daughter, Fern.'

Fern smiled nervously as everyone's eyes shot towards her. There were gasps of astonishment and raised eyebrows, while one or two of the women were clearly assessing how much of a threat Fern might be to them.

'They're so alike,' someone said.

'Yes, look at those eyes.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Andrew, grasping Fern's hand in his sweaty palm.

An elderly man approached and nudged Eric in the ribs, laughing wickedly.

'You've been keeping her a secret, eh Eric?'

One of the women sauntered up and kissed her on the cheek. 'You're a lucky
girl,' she said in an American accent. 'Having a dad like that.'

Fern smiled, not knowing quite how to respond to that one. Feeling like a mouse in a room full of cats, she glanced desperately at Adam, who was scowling behind her. In the end she was rescued by a waiter appearing in the doorway to announce dinner.

'Let's adjourn to the dining room,' said Eric, ushering them into the next room.

The first thing Fern noticed was the crystal chandelier, casting its sparkling patterns around the room. One end of the dining room was almost all glass, with doors opening out onto the terrace. Here, Eric had obviously succumbed to a more modern style, though the furnishings were still Victorian. The walls were cream, but their coolness was offset by richly coloured paintings, dark wooden floorboards and a Persian rug in deep burgundy tones. Like the bar, this room was warm, with a fire crackling at one end. A long table stretched the length of the room, covered in a starched white cloth and lavishly set with glistening silver cutlery, elegant white crockery and more crystal glasses. In front of each place was a place card, each name printed in ornate gold cursive.

Eric's place card was at the head of the table. 'You're sitting here,' Fern, he said, pointing at the seat next to his.

Fern took a quick glance at Adam, then acquiesced. This was Eric's show and he was playing his role perfectly, taking her arm and helping her into the seat, then pushing it in for her. He lifted the shawl off her shoulders and placed it on the back of her chair. It was warm in the room, but without her shawl Fern felt exposed, almost naked.

The room was a feast for the senses and Fern felt almost blinded by the glitter and the sophistication around her, so far from the suburbs where she'd spent her childhood. Eric's world made those suburbs seem even more like a wasteland, devoid of beauty or style.

'Do you like it?' asked Eric, leaning over, his mouth almost on her ear, one hand brushing her shoulder. She nodded and looked up at him, her eyes shining.

Adam found his own seat towards the other end of the table. Worried, he watched Fern sitting next to her father, laughing, drinking too much. Adam was immune to this man's charms but Fern wasn't. A woman sat down next to him; she was mid thirties, he guessed, and beautiful in the way of the wealthy and sophisticated: plenty of make-up, and a shapely, worked-on body extensively revealed by her low-cut dress.
Adam couldn't help glancing down. She had an amazing cleavage.

Noticing the direction of his eyes, she smiled. 'Well, baby,' she said, leaning in close to him and putting her hand on his thigh. 'Wasn't that nice of Eric to put us together?'

In front of Fern was a menu, a single sheet of paper with a gold embossed pattern around the edge. Oyster chowder for starters, followed by a choice of entrees, all seafood.

'I recommend the abalone,' said Eric. 'They're fresh today and the recipe is simple but superb.'

Fern had never tried abalone before and was grateful for the recommendation. There was also a choice of mains: pan seared trevally with fine herbs and balsamic reduction; crayfish, cooked with chilli, lemon grass, kaffir limes and coconut cream; or sirloin steak in a mountain pepper sauce, with caramelised sweet potato and onion.

'That's the one,' said Eric, pointing at the trevally. 'Again, simple but cooked to perfection.'

Fern felt a flash of irritation at the way her father assumed her ignorance, taking over so smoothly and leaving no space for her to choose. 'The abalone,' she said, when the waiter took her order. 'And the crayfish.'

A compromise, she thought, noting her father's fleeting scowl. Only a small rebellion but it made her feel better.

Each table setting had three spoons, two forks and three knives, and when the soup arrived, Fern had to watch Eric to see which spoon to use. The soup was exquisite, as was the abalone when it came, melting magically in her mouth and washed down with a cool riesling. The waiters kept hovering, filling up her glass, then whisking it away between courses and filling up a new one with a different wine. She hadn't realised what an art there was to matching food and wines.

After the entree came tiny bowls filled with something that looked like ice-cream. Fern looked at hers uncertainly.

'Lime sorbet,' said Eric. 'It's a palette cleanser.'

Fern tasted it, loving its sweet tartness, and glanced contritely at Adam to check how he was managing with the cutlery. She'd assumed he would be out of his depth here
but he looked quite comfortable, eating his sorbet with the right spoon and deep in
conversation with the woman next to him. At least, she was talking and he was ogling
her cleavage, thought Fern with a flicker of jealousy. Then, perhaps drawn by her gaze,
Adam looked up at Fern and their eyes met. She smiled, but he didn't return the smile.
When her father leaned close to speak to her again, Fern turned away from Adam,
relieved.

By the time the main courses arrived, the volume had risen substantially in the
room. The wine was flowing too quickly and people's faces were red and shiny, their
laughter too loud. It had become almost nightmarish.

Eric held up his glass. 'A toast,' he said and everyone held up their glasses
expectantly. 'To the bankers, the insurers, the heads of corporations, the movers and the
shakers, here they all are, shaking in their boots.' He laughed a loud wild laugh and
drained his drink. Obediently they drank, a few laughing along nervously, unsure how to
react.

'We'd better watch out,' Eric added. 'The scum are rising. They want a better
deal.'

'They want our arses,' said one man, prematurely bald with a shiny scalp.

'Pah,' said Eric, draining his glass. 'Give them some scraps, then sit back while
they kill each other for them.'

Everyone laughed this time, except Adam. And Fern. Thank God for that,
thought Adam, glancing at her shocked face. She didn't fit in here and the sooner she
understood that the better. He wondered where they had learned to despise people
without money. At their elite schools, possibly. Or more likely they had simply moved so
far away from the real world, and felt so safe in their prosperity and their exclusive clubs,
that they'd begun to measure value purely by money.

Furious, Adam cut into his steak. It was too rare, and the blood flowing out onto
the plate, made him nauseous. He put down his knife and fork, looking around in disgust.
These people and their cohorts had put the world in trillions of dollars of debt, they'd
brought the economy to its knees and here they were scoffing at the people who were
suffering.

'People want everything for nothing,' said the elderly man. 'We had to work for
what we got in my day, there was none of this social security propping up the lazy buggers.'

'Hear, hear,' said Eric. 'I'll drink to that.'

Fern looked at her father; his face was serious but his eyes were mischievous. She couldn't tell if he was playing some strange game or if he really believed all this.

'Look at Tassie,' said the prematurely bald man. 'Brought to its bloody knees by forest activists with nothing better to do. They're all living off us taxpayers and putting honest workers out of a job.'

Fern looked anxiously at Adam. His face was red, eyes fiery and his jaw set. 'The forests are worth saving,' he said between gritted teeth.

'Ah, we have a conservationist in our midst!' said Eric. 'Now Adam, tell us what you do for a living?'

Flustered, Adam paused for a moment. 'I save forests,' he said eventually, surprised at his words but realising in that moment that a part of him had already made the decision to join the battle. Eric's derision had only helped him along.

'Mmm, not too well paid, I imagine, but very worthy.'

Fern was horrified. Eric was enjoying this too much: she could feel the cruel streak in him, sharp and eager. She knew she should make a stand - say something, or at least walk out of this room with Adam by her side. She half rose, then sat down again quickly. Her mouth was clamped shut and it felt as if she were glued to her seat. Adam was such a great distance from her, too far for her to reach. She felt passive and helpless, drained of her will. She looked at Eric, begging him with her eyes to stop baiting Adam, but if he noticed, it had no effect.

'And where did you grow up?' Eric persisted, his voice smug.

'First the Midlands,' said Adam. 'Then in Kettering.'

'Ah, so you're a country boy from Tasmania. How wholesome.'

Adam nodded. 'My family's been here for six generations,' he said proudly. 'We owned a farming property in the Midlands. Until the drought... and Dad's death,' he added quietly.

'So you were landed gentry then.'

'You could call it that,' said Adam. 'We weren't convicts, if that's what you're
asking.

'Convicts! I'm sure you weren't, Adam. Though I understand they're all the rage these days. Simply everyone's related to one.' Bored now, Eric turned back to his dinner. But Adam wasn't finished with him.

'Where did you grow up, Eric?' he asked innocently.

Fern saw a flicker of venomous anger in her father's eyes, rapidly replaced by a calm haughtiness. Adam had got to him but Fern didn't understand why her father was upset. His background was public knowledge, on the internet for anyone to read.

Only the tension in Adam's jaw revealed his fury. This was a different Adam, honing his anger into a weapon and hurling it back at her father. Fern was proud of him but afraid too because she had no doubt that Eric would make Adam pay for this.

Suddenly she had a glimpse into another time. Of a man she loved being tortured, the sweat pouring down his naked chest as his muscles were stretched beyond their natural capacity. Fern tried to block it out, tried to turn her face away but felt invisible hands holding her head in place, forcing her to witness her lover's torment. Dizzy, she closed her eyes against the memory but she couldn't block her ears to his cries or the terrible tearing sound as he was pulled apart. With an effort Fern brought herself back to the present, to the strained silence in the room as the guests watched Eric, waiting for his response to Adam's taunt.

When Eric spoke his voice was unexpectedly sweet. 'Unlike you, Adam, I had humble beginnings. I am a self-made man.' He gestured around the room. 'But everything you see here is mine. Everything.' The gesture had included his guests and at that there was a ripple of unease in the room. Eric smiled at Fern. 'And now my happiness is complete.'

Feeling everyone's eyes on her, Fern blushed, discomforted. She tried to smile but her lips were drawn thin. Turning, she looked into her father's eyes. Where she should have seen paternal love she could discern only incipient madness, a craze for power.

When the dinner was over, they retired to the bar, their voices more subdued as they drank strong coffees and brandy in balloon glasses or smaller glasses of port. After all that food, Fern had become incredibly tired. She'd used up her tiny vocabulary of small
talk and wanted to slip upstairs and into bed. But it was New Year's Eve: she would have
to make it through until at least midnight.

When Adam joined Fern he was still fuming. 'Divide and rule,' he said. 'It's a
classic technique. Your father's trying to drive a wedge between us.'

'He just wanted to sit next to me at dinner,' Fern protested weakly.

Adam raised his eyebrows. 'How can you deny it? You're the one who told me
that's what he was doing. Out there in the bush. They're your words, Fern.'

Adam was right. She'd almost forgotten. Fern stifled a yawn. The forest seemed
so far away now. 'I'm not denying it, Adam,' she said. 'But he can only drive a wedge
between us if we let him.'

'You're being seduced by it all. The sparkling crystal and the costumes.'

'I am not.'

'You are.'

'When I was a kid,' Fern recalled, 'I imagined it was all a mistake, that somehow
I'd been mislaid and the wrong family had taken me home.' She paused and looked
around her. 'Now here I am, practically a princess.'

'Yeah, and that makes Eric the king,' said Adam. 'Just remember that kings are
ruthless. Watch your step.'

'I will.'

'He's playing games with us. Don't you get it?'

'I know he is, Adam, but he's also my father.'

'Some father! He had you followed, remember, Fern? He tried to scare you half
to death.'

'But he didn't hurt me.'

'I thought you said it was him attacking you, or something he sent... You nearly
died on Bruny.'

Fern looked away, not wanting Adam to see the uncertainty in her eyes. Walking
through the forest she'd been so certain of what she felt but now she was here, she
couldn't remember the connections. Her mind was fuddled. 'I feel safe here,' she said.

'Safe! He's looking at you like a viper, tongue flickering, getting ready to lunge.
God, Fern, can't you see it?'
Fern turned to look at her father, still immaculate in his formal suit, as he strolled over to them, glass in hand. Adam was right, he was a viper. She didn't trust him but she believed she could handle him.

'Come,' he said, taking Fern's arm. 'I'll show you some more of my domain.' Adam made to follow them but Eric stopped him.

'Excuse us, will you,' he said, the smile warm but his words unbending. 'I would like a private word with my newly acquired daughter.'

'It's okay, Adam,' said Fern. This would be a good chance to talk to her father and she was certain she could protect herself. Wobbling a little from the shoes and the wine, she climbed the stairs after Eric, all the time feeling Adam's eyes on her back. Upstairs, the air was still warm but despite this there was a chill in the atmosphere. Fern shivered, wondering if the place was haunted.

'These places are always haunted,' said Eric. 'It's convict built, you see. They were treated with extreme cruelty and that always leaves an impression on a place. We've had sightings: a servant woman on the stairs, a strange rattling in one of the bedroom windows, a dent that keeps appearing on a bed, as if someone is sitting there, strange smells... It's all part of an old house.' They walked past a number of closed doors, their footsteps muted by thick carpet. 'These are the guest rooms. All taken at the moment, I'm afraid, so I can't show you inside.'

'What do you charge?' Fern asked curiously.

'We start at four thousand dollars a night.'

'That's so much!' said Fern.

'It's loose change for these people,' Eric said dismissively. 'Of course, there are many ways of paying.'

Fern thought of the round-faced man who had offered to help Eric with his negotiations. Perhaps this group weren't paying at all, at least not in hard cash. 'What do they get for their four grand?'

Eric laughed. 'Style and good taste, the best of everything, silk-stuffed mattresses, designer furniture, good food and privacy. That's what they want - especially the privacy. And they want to feel special.'

'But why here?' asked Fern. 'Why wouldn't they take off for a tropical island or
They like it that I'm one of them. They can pretend we're all friends. I know their needs. I don't care who they bring, what they wear or what they do, here or anywhere else. I don't make judgements, I don't ask questions and I don't let the media in.'

'Do you take them bush walking?' she asked, finding it hard to imagine her father in hiking boots.

'Me! Heavens no. They come here because they like the idea of the wilderness. Some of them take a stroll or a short hike, but mostly they don't want to get their feet dirty.' Eric stopped outside a door at the end of the hallway. 'And here are my chambers,' he said, ushering Fern into a large sitting room adjoining a master bedroom.

The subtle lighting shrouded the room in mysterious shadows. It had an oppressive masculine feel, with dark burgundy walls, dark wood furniture, a deep brown leather couch and heavy velvet curtains. The smelled of heavy spices and cigars, as if they hadn't been aired for a long time.

'Here, let me get you a drink,' said Eric, picking up a bottle of champagne that had been chilling in an ice bucket on the bar.

Fern watched him expertly twist the bottle and take out the cork. It reminded her of that strange first evening with Shamesh, the way he'd clinked glasses with her; 'Cheers,' he'd said. 'It's not every day you embark on a journey.' Her life had changed so much since then. Only a few weeks ago she'd had not even an inkling that she would be standing here now, clinking glasses with her father.

'Cheers,' said Eric. 'To my daughter whom I have waited so long to meet.'

'Cheers,' said Fern. She looked up and noticed the king-sized bed through the doorway, then stupidly felt herself blushing. To cover her confusion she took a gulp of champagne. Adam was right, she was quickly forgetting her reasons for coming here. And forgetting how dangerous her father was. The champagne, the lighting, the door closed behind them... it all felt planned. She needed to be careful.

'Why are you so pleased to see me?' she asked, struggling to clear her head.

Eric looked shocked at her question. 'You're my daughter,' he said, as if that explained everything.

'You had someone follow me. You wanted to scare me. You wanted me... ' She
stopped, biting her tongue. She had no proof that he'd tried to kill her. How could she accuse him of attacking her in her dreams? It would sound ridiculous.

'Yes, I admit that at first I thought the best thing would be to have you... he paused, looking for the right word, 'terminated. Now don't look at me like that. It's only natural. After all, who wouldn't want to rid themselves of a dangerous opponent?'

'Me?' asked Fern in surprise.

'Yes. I assume you know about the prophecy; your foolish mother would have told you. I thought that you would fulfil it one way or the other. That is the way of fate. But now, I wonder. . . Perhaps there is another way.' He let his eyes wander over Fern's body, making her squirm. 'And I admit, you intrigue me. I hadn't expected paternal feelings, but it moves me to see someone of my own blood - my creation if you like. And what a fine woman you have turned out to be.'

Fern felt herself growing angry. 'Your creation? Where have you been for the past twenty years?'

'Ah, my dear, perhaps I was mistaken to abandon you like that. I had ambitions. Wealth to amass. Back then I had nothing for you.' He gestured around the room. 'But now - now I can give you anything you want.'

'So why don't you want to kill me?' she said.

'As I said, there may be other ways. And I realised something else: that you were not simply my daughter. You were also someone very dear to me. How could I miss the opportunity of reacquainting myself with you?'

Fern nodded, realising he was talking about that part of her that was constant - the soul, or whatever it was called. They had met many times before and each time it seemed to have ended badly for her. Now he was telling her that he didn't want her dead, yet their encounters had almost killed her.

'You were much stronger than I imagined,' he said, answering her unspoken question. 'You, how shall I say, survived certain challenges or tests.'

'Attacks, more like it.'

'Call them what you will. But you have proved your strength and that is enough for me.'

Fern was astonished. Once again he was acting as if everything she did was part
of his plan. 'What do you want from me?' she asked.

Impatiently he refilled her glass. 'Don't you see? I want nothing for myself.' He motioned around the room again. 'You are my daughter. All this is yours.' He leaned closer to her. 'And you have no idea how wealthy I am. If you stay, you could be rich beyond your wildest dreams.'

Fern sipped her champagne. She was really drunk now, her mind fuzzy and the room spinning ever so slightly. She couldn't credit her father's selflessness. It was obvious that he was a man who wanted something from everyone. Yet she was tempted. She'd never had money. She'd never had the choices money could buy.

'This house is only one of many,' he said, his voice as smooth and sticky as golden syrup. 'I have a penthouse in New York, a Regency house in London, a harbour-side apartment in Sydney, an island in northern Queensland and more. I own a computer company as well as restaurants, luxury hotels. I am wealthy beyond your imagination - so wealthy the last recession only touched the very edges of my interests.'

Their eyes met; Fern felt his searching hers, then going deeper, looking inside her. She shivered, feeling his magnetism and the lure of his money. She could do so much with it; there would be choices she'd never imagined possible. Fern felt herself melting into his eyes. This was her father. She was like him, so very, very similar.

'You are beautiful,' he said, reaching out his hand and stroking her cheek.

Fern felt the shock rush through her body. She turned her face away, the blood rushing to her cheeks.

'You could have anyone,' he continued. 'Do you understand? A man who can satisfy you in every way.'

'And who might that be?' asked Fern, trying to inject a scathing sarcasm into her voice, trying to bring the conversation back to solid ground. 'Not Adam, I imagine.'

Eric sighed. 'It is the plight of fathers all over the world, that no man is good enough for their daughters. . . No, not Adam, but I have someone in mind.'

She realised with a shock that he was acting like royalty, selling off his daughter, matchmaking for power. Even his daughter was an asset to be bought and sold. It was outrageous, yet there was something tantalising about it. He was pampering Fern and making her passive, a tool for his negotiations.
'But would he love me?' she asked, maintaining her sarcasm.

'Ah, love! There are other things more valuable than love.' His fingers stroked the soft skin above her breasts as he stepped closer to her. Fern wanted to push his hand away but found she couldn't move. Her feet were glued to the spot, one hand gripping her drink, the other stuck by her side.

'Like what?' she whispered.

'Power,' he said, his mouth tickling her ear, sending shivers down her spine. 'I could show you how to use yours. Imagine, a father and daughter team. We would be formidable.'

Fern couldn't think straight. What was he saying? She couldn't remember. Couldn't think of anything except his fingers on her skin. His mouth closed on hers and she felt her lips respond, her body arching towards him as he kissed her.

'Power,' he whispered, pulling back slightly. 'I will show you how.'

He took the glass from Fern's hand and placed it on the table next to them, then took her in his arms, his lips crushing hers, one hand on the small of her back, the other running over her dress, tracing the contours of her body.

'Yes,' she whispered as he pulled down the straps on her dress, revealing her breasts, the nipples hard as she surrendered to his touch.

He stroked her breasts, then slid her dress down further, revealing the skin of her belly. 'You are beautiful,' he said, kissing her again, his tongue reaching deep into her mouth. 'My daughter. My lover.'

Fern stirred for a moment. An image of Adam flashed into her mind: his worried face. 'Don't trust him.' But Eric's hands were running all over her body, and she could feel herself softening, opening to him. His fingers stroked her belly, then slipped lower, his fingers silken smooth, so different from Adam's. . . The thought of Adam made her pause again. Struggling to regain some lucidity, Fern instinctively grasped the stone around her neck. As she held onto the lapis lazuli, her mind cleared. She saw the lust in her father's eyes and felt a surge of revulsion.

'How dare you,' she hissed, pushing him away. There was nothing seductive in his smile now, only a leering ugly willpower that was concentrated on wrong ends.

'Dare!' he said, his voice as cold as ice, his face drawn into a disdainful sneer.
'You wanted it.'

Embarrassed, Fern pulled up her dress, lifting the straps back onto her shoulders. She fought the impulse to race back to her room and scrub herself, washing every last vestige of this man off her. Instead Fern faced him, her heart pounding, her body still trembling. She had already known that her father was using his power for gain, that he didn't hesitate to hurt others for his own purposes, but now, as her fingers reached again for the stone hanging around her neck, she could see much more. There were glimpses of his other faces - the handsome lord, the hooded priest, the Persian merchant, a creature of the dark - all leering at her, the same greedy expression in their eyes. But these incarnations were just transitory costumes. It was his constant spirit that was a force against compassion, a force that had been working against the waking of humankind for aeons and aeons, she had no idea how long. And he was immensely strong, though she sensed that his choices eroded and weakened him.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'Your father,' he said and she caught a flicker of uncertainty in his face before he was back in control. 'That's all.'

He was lying and they both knew it. There was more. Fern stared into his face, trying to see past the facade again, but now he was blocking her. Still she tried, testing her will against his in a battle that she had no hope of winning. He was wearing her down, she didn't have the strength to hold out, felt a sinking of her willpower, a surrendering, and then suddenly he was inside her head. She could feel him penetrate her mind, searching for something. Desperately she tried to empty her mind but he was deep inside, violently forcing his way into her memories. A confusion of images flashed past Fern: a toddler sitting in a paddling pool sucking her thumb, a classroom and her ten-year-old self copying something down in her exercise book, then a flash to her making love with Adam on the beach that first time. Remembering, Fern felt the pleasure again and the immense urgent desire. Then a hospital waiting room. Fern shouting, *Let me go*, as they injected her with something. A flicker of a different hospital bed and the words of her adopted father. *You tried to kill me.* His hand clutching his chest. . . And then Grace's voice. *Your father's had another heart attack.*

Eric withdrew so suddenly that Fern lost her balance and almost fell. Her mind
felt violated, traces of him still polluting its corridors. When she steadied herself, her father was staring at her coldly but there was a triumph in his eyes that filled her with suspicion and dread.

'Don't try to play mind games with me again,' he said, his voice filled with a mixture of malice and contempt. Taking up his glass he dismissed her with a wave of his hand. 'Go back to your coarse boyfriend. I'm disappointed in you.'

Fern stumbled out of the room, relief and disappointment flooding into her. She felt dizzy and sick inside. Her father had tried to seduce her and she had come close to letting him. It was disgusting. Completely unforgivable. She paused on the landing, not sure whether she could bear to join the others again but afraid to go back to her room alone and risk another encounter with her father. In the end she made her way down the stairs, tottering on the crippling heels he'd made her wear. Halfway down she stopped and pulled them off in a fury, discarding them on a step. Holding her dress up off the ground she managed the last steps more confidently. The sight of Adam in the entrance hall sent her body into a confusing combination of dread and relief.

'Fern! I've been looking for you everywhere. Are you okay? What has he done?'

Fern wanted to sob on Adam's shoulder, but she had to pull herself together. If she told Adam what had happened, he'd attack her father. And he'd lose. She couldn't bear that. 'He didn't do anything,' she said. 'He just showed me around. . . He wanted me to go into business with him.' Fern reached up and kissed Adam, hoping he couldn't taste her father on her lips, hoping that in Adam she could forget Eric's touch. But her father's fingers still burnt into her, his tongue still probed her mouth.

'Business?'

'Yes.' Fern laughed loudly. She felt reckless now, as if she'd survived a massive challenge. In her own way she'd won. 'He said we would make a formidable team.' She kissed Adam again, rubbing herself against his groin until he was hard and breathless. She knew she was using him, trying to erase her memories in Adam's body, making him desperate for her when her mind was elsewhere. But Fern didn't care. She was drunk and wild and angry.

'Let's go outside,' she whispered, almost groaning with desire. Eric's face, his tongue, his fingers, still caught in her memory, though now it was Adam she wanted.
Adam's body she remembered. Adam, she thought, reminding herself. This is the man I love.

Hand in hand they crept out through the front door and then around the back of the house where it was darker. The rain had stopped some time ago but the ground was still very wet. Fern let her expensive dress trail in the muddy puddles, not caring if it was ruined.

'Here,' she said, leaning against the wall and letting Adam lift her dress up to her waist. It wasn't making love: Adam knew it as he pounded into her and she pulled him in harder, crying out as she came. No, Fern was spurred on by a strange angry urgency. What had happened back there with her father?

Afterwards Fern was relieved to feel the fire and the anger abating. She'd survived her first encounter with her father and the pain of the memory was already receding, though not the wariness. He would never succeed in seducing her.

'I always wanted to make love to a man in a suit,' she said, playfully pulling at his bow tie.

'And I always wanted to make love to a barefoot woman in an evening dress.'

Arm in arm they walked back to the front of the house and into the bright light of a noisy party. It was almost midnight. The music was loud and jarring. People shouted over it, others danced, spinning each other from partner to partner. They were all laughing, their faces grotesque, red with heat and alcohol and exertion. Only Eric was calm and unruffled, standing next to the fireplace with a glass in his hand. He was smiling but his eyes fastened on Fern and Adam as they entered the room.

'Come on, join in,' said the elderly man, drawing Fern and Adam in among the dancers. Fern was soon enjoying herself for the first time that evening. She was drunk on expensive champagne, she was barefoot, Adam was with her and her father's spell was broken. He looks harmless, she thought as she twirled past him again and again. He couldn't hurt her now.

As Fern danced she found herself blocking out the ugly rhythm of Eric's music and the noise of his shouting guests, instead moving her body to a tune of its own. She imagined playing her pipe, remembered dancing on the beach, feeling the movement of wings on her back, the muscles tugging one way and another. Her notes wove their spell
and lifted her so that she was in two places at once, spinning and weaving among the
guests in Eric's house and at the same time soaring over and above the crowd, the house,
the grounds and the forest, her eyes scanning the land, searching, seeing, wondering. *I
am a patterner.* . . *I am a patterner.* . . The words repeating themselves in her mind,
while Eric stood watching, unaware of the power that was growing in Fern as she
danced.

A giant clock on the mantelpiece began chiming. At the same time waiters popped
bottles of champagne and people cried out, kissing and hugging and clinking glasses.

Adam took Fern in his arms and kissed her. A long sensuous kiss. 'Happy New
Year,' he said.

'Our first one together,' said Fern.

'The first of many,' said Adam, scowling again as Eric approached and grasped
Fern's arm. She spun around, her skin burning at his touch.

'Happy New Year,' he said, giving her a chaste kiss on the cheek. 'Any
resolutions?'

Fern hadn't even considered it. 'No,' she said. 'And you?''

'Just one.'
Chapter Twenty Two

Fern woke from a deep drunken sleep into a foul hangover. She lay still, listening to Adam snoring by her side and a chorus of birdsong outside. The rest of the house was quiet. She checked the clock. It was still early, only seven, but she was restless. The events of the previous evening played over and over in her head, making her squirm, wanting to get away from herself.

She slid quietly out of bed and peered through a crack in the curtains at a perfect morning, the sun already sending steam rising from the wet grass. It was the first day of a new year. She'd always preferred the first day of the year to the last. New Year's Eve was a time for retrospection, New Year's Day for fresh beginnings. But this morning her hangover dragged at her, along with the knowledge that her father had almost drawn her over a line from which she would not have been able to return. She felt another wave of shame wash through her. In the light of the morning it was hard to believe that she'd let it go as far as it did.

Fern went into the bathroom and turned the shower on hard so it sent jets of water at her. First cold, to jolt her out of her morning stupor, then hot, to wash away the memories. When she emerged, Adam was still asleep on his back, legs and arms splayed, his mouth wide open and trusting. She sat watching him for a few minutes, wondering if she should wake him. He looked so relaxed that in the end she decided against it, though she couldn't resist reaching down and kissing him on the lips. He responded briefly, then spluttered and rolled over.

Stepping out into the hallway, Fern walked quietly towards the stairs. Last night the house had been noisy and a little malevolent, but this morning, filled with sleeping guests, it was surprisingly peaceful. Downstairs she walked past the kitchen. The door was shut, but she could hear noises inside: the staff preparing for the day. She stepped into the empty dining room, looking for a kettle. The large table around which they'd sat the previous evening had disappeared, and now the room was furnished with smaller tables, each one set for breakfast. On the sideboard was a steaming hot urn and all the paraphernalia she needed to make coffee.
'Ah, Fern, you're an early riser, like me.'

Fern jumped as if she'd been caught doing something criminal. How could Eric's voice sound so fresh and hearty. She'd watched him drink copious amounts last night. Turning to greet him, she was surprised to see he was dressed in a tracksuit and running shoes. His shoes were wet, but that was the only sign that he'd already been out. There was no sweat, no messy hair, nothing to say that this man had exerted himself. In contrast she was blushing like a schoolgirl, only this time it wasn't embarrassment, it was anger. Impossible to believe that she'd let him touch her. Impossible to believe that he'd tried.

'I always have a morning run,' he said, answering her unspoken question. 'It's vital to keep oneself fit.'

Fern studied her father. This was another persona he was presenting to her. He was a shape shifter, she decided, seamlessly moving from one role to another. She couldn't trust anything about him. She shouldn't. But she also couldn't forget that he was her father. Once again she could feel herself being drawn to him, her anger beginning to dissipate in his presence.

'Come, have breakfast with me,' he said.

Suddenly, Fern's stomach was churning with hunger. 'Okay,' she said suspiciously.

He smiled. 'Don't worry, I won't poison you.'

Fern nodded, pushing down the plunger and pouring herself a coffee, then adding cream and sugar, making it as unhealthy as possible. She always craved sugar and greasy foods when she was hung-over. Now she wanted bacon and eggs and fried mushrooms and lots of slices of hot toast with too much butter.

Her father smirked as he read her mind. 'One moment, I'll let the staff know.'

Fern moved to the window and stood in the sunlight, letting it warm her as she sipped the coffee, feeling clarity return with the caffeine. She sifted through the few clues she had about this man. There was so little to draw on; instead she was relying on the few hints that Shamesh and Cassie and the Bear Handler had given her, as well as impressions from the few short hours she had known her father - in this life. That was the key. If only she could remember more, not just fragments, but whole lives.

Fern was beginning to understand what the Bear Handler had meant when he'd
told her that the stories weren't important but the patterns were. Like a stuck record, she had kept coming up against the same forces, life after life, year after year. In this life, injustice and terror at birth, abandonment and closing down. In other lives it seemed that events had inevitably forced her to an early and violent death: that push off the cliff, the spear in her chest, a burning at the stake. All were linked to the same person. Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something eluding her. Fear wasn't enough to establish a pattern like that. There had to be more: injustice, betrayal, guilt, grief and finally, terror. A combination that had scarred her so deeply she couldn't break free of the pattern.

'You have an individual style, like myself.'

Fern jumped, spilling some coffee onto her hand and scalding herself. She hadn't heard Eric return. Self-conscious, she looked at herself in the mirror over the mantelpiece. Her hair, roughly towel dried, was sticking up, her feet were bare and she wore baggy silk shorts with leggings underneath and a *Where the Wild Things Are* t-shirt over a long-sleeved thermal top. Individual? Suddenly she felt stupid. 'I didn't expect anyone to be up.'

'It wasn't a criticism.' He poured himself a coffee. 'To be successful in anything, to be truly creative, one must be an individual. If you run with the pack, you will never produce anything original in life, only reproduce what has already been.'

'And you call yourself a creative person?' asked Fern, thinking that everything he did was destructive.

'The two go together,' said her father. 'Creation, destruction - they are not so different.'

'It takes centuries to grow a tree,' said Fern, remembering what Adam had said, 'and only minutes to chop it down.'

'Ah, but that is not the point,' he said dismissively. 'The question is, what will you create from that tree?'

Fern shrugged. 'Woodchips?'

'Don't be so predictable,' said Eric, frowning. 'Use your imagination, that's where creativity lies.'

They were interrupted by a waiter pushing in a trolley laden with food: a jug of
freshly squeezed orange juice, a rack with slices of toast, steaming croissants and tiny bowls of butter, jam and honey. Fern's plate was piled with bacon, poached eggs, fried tomatoes and mushrooms exactly what she had been craving. Her father's mind reading didn't even seem strange anymore; it was quite practical really, saving unnecessary words. No wonder he did well in business: if he could read minds he would have the upper hand every time.

'A traditional English breakfast,' said Eric, 'though here we would call it something else, and charge accordingly, of course: sauteed field mushrooms, roasted baby potatoes with rosemary, traditional free range smoked bacon and crispy caramelised onions. Much more appealing, don't you think?'

Fern ignored him, taking a mouthful of fried mushroom. She didn't care how it was described, she just wanted to eat it.

Her father had a bowl of muesli and fresh fruit. 'I am watching my weight, while you could do with a little more,' he said, pouring them both an orange juice. 'You're too pale,' he added. 'You need to look after yourself. Especially now.'

Fern frowned again; the fatherly role didn't suit him. 'I think I can manage without your concern,' she said pointedly.

'Have it your way,' he said. 'Now, what more do you want to know of my affairs?'

'Why would I want to know anything?'

'If you haven't forgotten, tomorrow you will be turning twenty-one. Officially you will be of age. You are my daughter. As I said, much of this will be yours if you so wish.'

Fern had forgotten. All her life she'd planned to have a big party for her twenty-first, and now it was here it didn't mean anything. Most likely she'd be back in the bush eating dried vegetables and noodles with Adam. Suddenly, she couldn't think of anything nicer.

Something had been nagging her. 'If you're so rich, then why do you run a guest house in the middle of nowhere?'

'I spend very little time here,' he said. 'For the most part it runs without me. Personally I prefer New York. However, I wanted to meet you, and I'm developing a number of business interests in this state.'

'Such as?'
'You're curious. That's a good sign, perhaps you will be tempted yet to follow me into business.'

'But then I would only be copying you,' said Fern. 'I wouldn't be truly creative.'

'Touche.' He smiled, but as always his eyes were dangerous. 'Let me put it differently. Together we could create untold wealth and business interests.' He paused and slid a slice of mango into his mouth. 'Mmm, mango is such a delicious fruit, isn't it?'

'You haven't answered my question.'

'No, but I will. Tasmania has a great many natural resources.'

'The forests?'

'That's small fry,' he said. 'Wood and water, it's all anyone talks about in this state. No, it's what's under the ground that interests me. Oil and uranium.' His eyes gleamed as he leaned towards Fern. 'There are billions of dollars to be made here.'

Fern chewed on her bacon and studied him closely. In the cold light of day she could see lines on his face and grey hair creeping out from his temples. All that power and wealth wasn't stopping the onslaught of age. He was fallible after all. She had to concentrate on that, not lose herself in fear or admiration. Alarmingly there was still a major part of her that wanted what he had: money, power, but most of all, choices.

'You are like me,' he said.

Fern paused, fork in mid-air, shocked again by his assumptions. His mind was blinkered by greed. He couldn't understand internal conflict or the layering of personality. Of course she wanted his wealth and power - who wouldn't? - but she couldn't do what her father was doing, couldn't mine for oil or uranium without regard for people or the environment, couldn't scoff at the forests or refer to ordinary people as scum. She would rather walk away from it all.

'I am not like you,' she said and took a mouthful of egg and toast, wondering that she could eat so calmly in front of this man.

He sighed. 'Have it your way.'

'I still don't understand. Why haven't you killed me?'

'You are far more interesting to me alive.'

'But aren't you afraid of the prophecy?'

He smiled. 'I admit it did concern me for a time, but there's no need to worry
Fern felt a surge of alarm, a feeling that something had gone terribly wrong.

"What do you mean?"

He took a croissant, tore off a piece and dipped it in his coffee. "Mmm, this is the perfect way, don't you think? Just like the French. So civilised, those people."

"What do you mean?" Fern asked, more forcibly.

"It's simple really. I changed the prophecy."

"That's not possible," said Fern, wondering at her certainty. Only weeks ago she would have dismissed prophecies as nonsense, yet now she was convinced they were immutable, carved in stone.

"Of course it is. It has always been possible. One powerful person can change the future for many others. It happens rarely, because there are so few people with that sort of strength. I have it, Fern, and so do you."

"How have you changed it?"

"You will find that out in your own time."

Fern was puzzled. He seemed so complacent, sitting opposite her, delicately eating his soggy croissant and drinking his coffee with skim milk. She didn't understand how Eric could be so sure that he'd changed a prophecy he'd believed in enough to want her dead.

"So you were studying fashion design," said Eric, dabbing his lips with his napkin. "It's a strong industry. I could perhaps invest in a label, if that would give you a leg-up."

Feeling the tug of temptation, Fern hesitated. With money she could slip into the industry at the top. Once again Eric was trying to buy her, she realised, and he would most certainly expect something for his money. She shook her head. "I don't know what I want to do," she said. "I'm still working it out."

"Just say the word. Any university, any career, I'm sure I can help you."

But Fern was no longer listening, the pieces were coming together: last night the look of triumph in her father's eyes after he'd probed inside her mind; now she remembered what her last memory had been, Grace's words: Your father's had another heart attack. Simple Simon had said she would bring about the death of her father, but which father.
'My God!' Abruptly Fern stood up and pushed back her chair. She didn't care that Eric could see the shock on her face, or read the thoughts in her mind. It was too late. She knew that with a dull certainty. Even so, she had to talk to her mother, just to be sure.

She raced up the stairs and back to her room. Adam was in the shower. Desperately, Fern picked up the telephone and dialled out. Her hands were shaking and she tried to wish away the certainty, telling herself she was imagining it all. That her father would be at home reading the newspaper and drinking his first cup of tea for the day.

Her mother answered on almost the first ring.

'Mum,' said Fern, then stopped, not knowing what to say next, but her mother said it for her.

'He's dead, Fernanda. He died a few hours ago. They were going to let him out of hospital tomorrow. No one understands it. His organs just stopped working.'

Even though she had expected this, the shock still left her struggling for words. 'Oh Mum,' she said, finally. 'I'm sorry.'

There was a long pause while her mother cried into the phone. Fern waited, frozen in horror. Her father was dead and she had practically signed his death warrant.

'Where are you, Fernanda?' asked Grace.

'I'm in Tasmania, Mum, with a friend. I'm okay.'

'Please come to the funeral, dear. I don't know when it will be. I can't think straight. Oh Fernanda, I need you here.'

'I'll try, Mum,' said Fern, realising with a surprise that this was the first time Grace had said she needed her. The bathroom door opened and Adam came out rubbing his hair dry. 'I have to go. I'll ring again soon, I promise. It will take a few days but I'll be there.'

'Who was that?' asked Adam, when Fern put down the phone.

'My mother.' Fern's voice was flat, her face blank. She could feel the familiar, heavy weight of guilt settling inside her.

'Hey, what's wrong?'

'My father's dead. 'Richard, my adopted one. I killed him, or I may as well have. Remember what the prophecy said - that I'd bring about the death of my father.' Fern
looked at Adam. 'Don't you see? We all thought it was my birth father; I think it was meant to be. But somehow he shifted it. Eric did what he's best at, finding loopholes in contracts. And now my father's dead.' She sat on the bed, waiting for the grief to flood into her, but there was only a numb shock. It was all too simple. Last night, Eric had found the information he needed inside her own head, and he'd acted on it.

'How do you know all this?' asked Adam, confused.

'I just had breakfast with Eric. He was gloating over something. He said I wasn't a threat to him anymore.'

'We should get out of here,' said Adam.

'No, I have to talk to him.'

'He's dangerous, Fern.'

'I don't care.'

'Then I'll come with you.'

'No, Adam, please. I have to do this myself.'

Adam was torn. This wasn't his battle, he knew, but Fern was dealing with something so much stronger than herself. And he didn't want to leave her alone with this man for a third time. Last night he'd acted like a servant boy, doing everything he was told. Then this morning he'd slept through their meeting. He should be there this time. He was supposed to be protecting her.

'I have to, Adam,' said Fern.

'Okay,' he said reluctantly. 'I'll give you five minutes, no more, then I'm coming down.'

Fern found her father downstairs in his office, working on a laptop that looked incongruous in the old-fashioned room. The giant mahogany desk was illuminated by a brass lamp, the walls were lined with dark wooden bookcases, and on a sideboard sat a crystal decanter and glasses. Overnight, though, the house had lost its seductive power. Now it seemed nothing more than a cliched replica of another time.

Fern paused at the door and looked at her father. He'd changed again, into casual trousers with an ironed pleat down the front, and an open-necked shirt. 'Do come in,' he said, looking up as she entered. He shut the lid of his laptop. 'Isn't it a tragedy. I have to work, even on New Year's Day. Time is moving so fast now. Have you noticed? The
human race has sped it up so much, it's become impossible to finish everything in the
time available.' He sighed. 'What a quandary. 'Coffee?' he asked, pouring himself one
from a steaming silver pot on his desk.

Fern shook her head, her face steely.

'Come, come, don't look so upset.' He took a sip of his coffee. 'Ah, that's good.'
He leaned towards Fern. 'Good riddance, I say. He was a weak man: frightened and
cruel, a dreadful combination.'

'He was my father.'

'I am your father,' said Eric, his face twisting into sudden anger. 'He was an
impostor.'

'He brought me up. He looked after me.'

'Come now. How many times did you wish the man dead?'
Fern recoiled in shock. 'Never,' she said.

'Don't lie to me, Fern. I have no patience with dishonest people.'
Fern shook her head stubbornly. She hadn't liked Richard but she hadn't killed
him or even wanted him dead. Eric was twisting everything around the wrong way.

'Oh, for God's sake, Fern, why was he in hospital in the first place? It was you.
Your behaviour. Do me a favour and at least shoulder the responsibility.' Eric sighed
dramatically. 'I thought better of you.'

Fern felt her fists clenching. She wouldn't take responsibility for Richard, not for
his heart attacks, nor for his death. She was fed up with shouldering the blame for other
people's incapacities, fed up with tiptoeing through life weighed down with guilt and
afraid of the consequences of every action. 'No,' she said. 'Richard made himself sick and
you finished him off.'

The anger was rising inside her, but she tried to subdue it. Anger would make her
want to fight Eric and she couldn't win on his terms. She'd learned that already. Anger
was dangerous too, uncontrollable. Despite her efforts, she could feel the anger growing
until finally she could contain it no longer. First one book slid off the bookcase, and
another. Then it seemed as if they all came at once, hurling themselves at Eric, who
deflected them with hardly a glance. Fern wanted to stop but she couldn't. The anger was
unleashed and had taken on a life of its own. She was astonished by it, excited and
horrified by the power she'd discovered.

At some point she realised Adam was standing next to her, watching, his mouth wide open in shock. Fern knew she needed to regain control and put a stop to this, but there was so much hate inside her. More than anything she wanted Eric dead. She wanted to pull the walls down, smash the house onto her father. She imagined the way it would cave in and bury him among the dust and rubble of other people's dreams. The hate she felt was palpable, drawing itself together from a lifetime of buried fury, forming its own shadowy shape, its lines and contours telling the story of lifetimes of darkness and hatred. No. The word appeared in Fern's head but she wasn't listening. She felt hatred growing steadily, her own creation, a creature of destruction, a weapon she could unleash on her father. Stop. Fern could hear the walls creaking around her as her fury moved beyond the books and attacked the fabric of the house. This is not the way.

All at once Fern knew what she had already suspected. The shadowy figure that had attacked her on Bruny was her father's servant, constructed from the foulness inside him but feeding off the darkness and fear inside her. Fern knew too that she must rein in her anger before her own shadow creature became an autonomous and destructive thing that would control her because she didn't have enough power to command it. She reached out for Adam's hand, feeling his earth energy steady her. Then she breathed deeply, letting her out-breath dispel her anger, the way it had with her fear, and feeling herself deflate as the fury dissipated. But still the books came and the walls creaked and Fern couldn't understand why it wasn't stopping. She felt her anger turn back into fear as she realised this was already beyond her control.

'Stop it now, you're having a tantrum.' Eric's voice was steeped with contempt. 'You're playing children's games in a dangerous world.'

The books stopped immediately, some falling heavily to the floor, and to her dismay, Fern realised that Eric had indulged her, let her make a mess of his office, then switched it off when he'd had enough.

'You have the talent for it, of course,' said Eric, more softly. 'But you need someone to show you the rules.'

'No,' said Fern, her voice sounding strangely distant and uncertain, as if it had fled into the room's shadows and now didn't trust even itself. She was spent, exhausted by her
own fury, her knees buckling under her, but certainty was returning quickly, along with a new resolve. She'd used her power in anger and it had been destructive. In doing so she'd somehow joined forces with her father and let him dictate the terms. She mustn't do that again.

'Come on, Fern,' said Adam, grasping her shoulders. 'It's time to go.'

'That's right, run away,' said her father mockingly.

'No,' said Fern again, determined not to leave until she'd achieved what she'd come here to do. She grasped the lapis lazuli around her neck and waited while it cleared her mind. The anger had been replaced by a cold clarity. She stared at her father, seeing him properly once more. Last night she'd been trapped by whatever spell he had cast, the desire she'd felt for him and what he'd offered. Today she was free. Or she would be yet.

He was a sorcerer, a wizard, an occultist: the label didn't matter. And he was a businessman. That was all. The pieces were falling into place. He might be stronger than she, he might know the rules of his power and the extent of it, but his heart was closed. He relied on illusions and fear to bully and win. Shamesh and Cassie and the Bear Handler had all been right: hunt the hunter and you took away his strength.

The connection Fern had with him was strong. Doubly so. He was her father and she even looked like him. Then there was the other relationship, the one she'd never understood, that had carried across lifetimes: each time he'd wanted her and each time she'd resisted. This partnership he talked of would work only if she came to it of her own choice. And she never would. She never had. She might have died many times because of her refusal, but she'd never yet succumbed.

'Yes,' said Eric. 'Your own free will, that's what I need.' He glanced slyly at Adam, then back to Fern. 'You gave me your body so beautifully last night, Fern. Will you give me your partnership today?'

Adam looked at Fern, alarmed and uncertain. 'I did not,' said Fern. 'You tried to seduce me.'

Eric smiled, a slow, corrupt smile. 'Whatever you say, my dear.'

'Fern?'

Fern looked from Eric to Adam. 'Don't you understand? He's trying to drive a wedge between us. We've known that all along. I said it in the forest and you did last
night. He's divisive, that's how he works.'

Eric smiled and waited, looking from one to the other. Adam was confused. Of course he believed Fern but already the questions were entering his head, little barbs of distrust.

'I was trying to get rid of the taste of him. He kissed me, Adam, he touched me but he didn't do anything else. I didn't let him.'

For a moment more, Adam hesitated. Then he took Fern's hand. 'It's okay,' he said. 'I believe you.'

'How sweet,' said Eric.

Fern felt Adam's hand tense in hers. His other hand was clenched into a fist, the fury building in him. Any minute now he would launch himself at Eric.

'Don't,' Fern whispered. 'That's what he wants.'

'What a clever girl,' said Eric sarcastically.

Fern looked at her father's leering face and felt cold hatred once more. If she only knew in which life she had been forced to close her heart, then perhaps she could turn it around. She needed to peer into the stormy centre of the tempest stone and locate that life, but the stone was upstairs, tucked safely in her pack. Fern sent her need out to it now, imagining, remembering... and then had to steady herself as she slipped suddenly back into another time and place. She felt the chill first and the aching discomfort, then realised she was chained to a stone slab, the sharp metal cutting into her wrists and ankles, the cold creeping through her back. There was a shuffle of feet outside the door, as the blue-and-white uniformed guards stood to attention, then the creak of metal as the door opened and the hooded man stepped into the dungeon, his face in shadow, his arms folded, his hands tucked into sleeves. In the midst of her fear, she saw clearly the role he was acting this time around. A caricature of a religious man.

'You may go,' he said, dismissing the soldiers, who backed out obsequiously, closing the door behind them. He turned to her, his prisoner, and lifted the hood away from his face to reveal a hooked nose, a narrow face and an ugly crooked mouth. He stood for a moment before her, gloating, then stepped forward and tore her gown away, leaving her naked and shivering. A whimper escaped from her mouth before she set her face again. Proud and defiant as he took her there on the slab, coldly and efficiently,
almost as if it were a duty. She tried to send her mind away, tried not to feel.

Fern fought to bring herself back to the present, to this warm study with Eric safely on the other side of his desk, but she could still feel the cold and her hands were numb. Shivering at the memory she rubbed her wrists, trying to bring some life into her hands. Then spoke his name. 'Porteus.'

Eric looked up briefly, answering her summons and reading the knowledge in her eyes. 'Not my finest moment,' he said, his mouth twitching into a smile. 'Still, one can only work with what one has.'

But Fern remembered. And she knew that the remembering weakened him somehow, if only by giving her the power to resist him. Porteus, the priest man, taking her against her will - though that wasn't what had broken her. The vision had faded, both too late and too soon, but she already knew the rest. There'd been a baby, of course. And might easily have been again, Fern thought with a shiver, if she had succumbed to her father's seduction the previous night. Then there were the fragments the tempest stone had shown her that day on the train: the soldiers and Porteus and the young girl beheaded in front of her. Her daughter and Porteus's, but even so he'd coldly ordered the soldier to strike off the child's head. The image was still caught in Fern's memory, playing over and over, twisting her stomach and her heart. She couldn't believe that he would be so cruel, to kill his own daughter like that, without a backward glance. And all the time watching her, knowing it would destroy her. He'd waited until the knowledge and the grief had settled inside her and she'd felt her heart slam shut. Then, in triumph, he'd had her killed, letting her die slowly, in an agony of grief and guilt, all the time aware that she had failed to keep her daughter safe.

Fern looked at Eric, a small man sitting behind a giant desk, his open-necked shirt perfectly pressed. Her father and her enemy. Life after life he'd reduced her to poverty, destroyed the people around her and eventually murdered her for refusing to submit. All this and her will had never broken. In the end, though, he had succeeded in breaking her heat. Now it was mending, and that was the only thing her father feared.

'Oh yes, your heart. We'll keep it broken, shall we?' The menace in his voice was so strong that Fern had to force herself not to shrink from it.

She studied him, trying again to see past the monster she feared so much. He was
a small man, slender and without a great deal of physical strength. The power he talked of was vast in some ways but limited in others. He had money and connections, he had charisma and the courage to take risks, and he had psychic powers; there was plenty he could do to hurt her, but there was one thing he couldn't do: make her his.

It was beginning to make sense to her now. It was Fern's chosen path to oppose his spirit. Life after life she had done this but then, broken-hearted after her daughter's death, she'd closed herself down. It was time to change that. She wouldn't allow it to happen again. She wouldn't run and she wouldn't fight. She would simply be herself.

'I want you to understand something,' Fern said, leaning over the desk towards her father so that their faces were almost touching. 'No matter what you do, you don't have the power to break my heart. I am the only person who can do that.'

Fern had a New Year's resolution after all. It would be difficult to achieve, but nevertheless she would try. From now on, Fern told herself, she would let herself feel everything: love and grief, joy and sorrow. Anything that arose she would feel. Never again would she close herself off. Never again would she live in fear. 'It's my choice,' she said to her father. 'You will never break my heart again.'

He shrugged. 'As you say, it's your choice. You may go now; I have work to do.'

Fern turned her back on her father and walked towards the door, then turned and faced him again. 'You're right,' she said. 'I've been denying it all along, but I am like you. Which is why I won't hate you. Hating you means I hate a part of myself. And I won't do that anymore.'

'Good,' said her father. 'You're one step closer to joining me.'

Fern shook her head. 'No. There's one important difference between us. Your heart is shrivelled inside your chest. It's all dried out.' She paused, remembering the dried vegetables Adam had cooked in the forest and how perfectly they had returned to their original form. Even the taste and the smell of them reappeared. 'Why don't you try reconstituting it?' she suggested. 'See what happens.'

'That is not my path.'

'You choose your path.'

'No,' he said and for a moment Fern thought she saw a hint of sadness in his face.

'It chooses you.'
'You're afraid,' said Fern, in a moment of clarity, seeing for the first time how small he was, inside as well as out. She'd been wrong again: the shadow creature that had attacked her on Bruny wasn't Eric's servant, it was his master. Her father had lost control long ago.

Eric stood up, suddenly looming much larger than before. Fern stepped back involuntarily and banged into Adam.

'You are trying my patience,' Eric boomed. 'I am not afraid. Though you have every reason to be.'

Suddenly Fern felt him inside her mind again, probing, striding the corridors, turning over her memories, violating her. She pushed back at him, furious at this intrusion. Images flashed at her: Grace pushing her on a swing; her grandmother slapping her face; the minister at church talking about the sheep and the goats and her sinking certainty that she was a goat; the swish of muslin curtains in her attic; and Eric, his fingers stroking her breasts. Fern shivered and tried to push him out again, but without warning a part of him lunged at her. She felt his intention and the familiar terror and swayed back, as the power of his shadow engulfed her, swallowing her.

At first Adam noticed only that Eric and Fern were staring at each other. He almost laughed, remembering the game he used to play with Michael as a kid, seeing who blinked first. Then Adam felt the terror of the thing that had thrown itself on Fern. He could see more of it now than he had on Christmas Eve, as if it were solidifying. It's gaining in power, he thought, racking his brain for a way to break Fern free of it. He tried turning her away from Eric but her body was rigid. Fern and Eric were fighting in a place he couldn't go and Adam hated to be cut off from her like that. It was tempting to punch Eric in the face, but he resisted the impulse, knowing that he had to let Fern see this through. Instead, he reached out and placed his hand on her back. There was nothing more he could do for her. This was Fern's battle, not his. He had guided her into this place and he would guide her out. In the meantime he had to wait and hope that his touch would give her strength.

Fern felt the reassuring warmth of Adam's hand and his regular breath on her neck, felt it grounding her. New images flashed at her: Shamesh, his eyes pouring into her; and the bear, the feel of her fur in Fern's fingers. With it she felt herself growing
stronger, felt her father recede a little, only to return again stronger than before. But this time she was holding the staff. Instinctively she held it up and her breathing changed as she let her fear dissipate and the bear take over, her strength building within Fern.

The triumph was already in Eric's eyes. Too early, she thought and threw the thought at him, watching him flinch just a little. Almost instantly he was back, his mind trespassing in hers, trying to engulf and consume her. Fern struggled again, trying to use her will and her anger to push him away, but she was weakening.

Surrender. The word came from nowhere, surprising her by its simplicity.

Surrender.

Against her instincts, Fern stopped struggling. She let herself relax, letting go of the last of her fear and her anger. Feeling the flame of her hatred diminish and then die, she reached out with the staff and gently touched the surging intent that was consuming her. 'Eric,' she said, in a tone that was almost loving.

In that moment everything changed. Fern's mind was released, the atmosphere cleared and Eric slumped onto his chair in a crumpled heap as if someone had extracted his spine. Fern felt herself sagging, the last of her energy draining away. She would have fallen if Adam hadn't caught her.

'Do you think he's okay?' asked Fern, looking at Eric. 'Maybe he's had a heart attack,' she added, thinking how ironic that would be.

'Too much to hope for,' said Adam.

'What if he's dead?'

'Good riddance,' said Adam, though he was getting worried too. If Eric was dead they'd have to stay and answer questions. Adam picked his way among the books littering the floor and felt Eric's wrist for a pulse. 'He's alive,' he said, his voice a mixture of relief and disappointment.

Adam jumped as Eric moved his arm and then, with an immense effort, lifted his head. He looked old suddenly, and powerless, all the facades gone.

Watching her father use all his will to force himself upright, Fern could hardly believe that she'd stripped his power away like this. He looked beaten and small and she found herself feeling sorry for him.

Eric held up his hand as if to stop her. 'Don't,' he said. 'Pity is such a revolting
emotion. It doesn't suit either of us.' He stood up, leaning on the desk, the effort it was costing him showing in his face. 'You have performed better than I expected, but that is all. It would be dangerous to bask in your triumph.'

Already he was issuing threats and trying to take control again. Fern backed away, too exhausted to fight him once more.

'Don't worry, I won't hurt you. I have no desire to harm my granddaughter,' said her father, his face twisted into an expression she couldn't read. Was it a smile or a grimace? 'Yet,' he added, before abruptly turning away as Adam half carried Fern out of the study and up the stairs into their room.

Shocked by Eric's statement, Fern tried to look inside herself, to see if she could sense another living presence, but she could feel nothing as yet. Somehow she'd managed to reconfigure the pattern of events. In another life, Porteus had tied her to him with a baby. And last night Eric had almost done it again. This time she had resisted, so if there were a baby it would be Adam's. Fern liked the thought of that.

Back in their room Adam started throwing things into his pack. 'Come on,' he said, 'we're going.'

'Now?'

'It'll be safer out there than in here.'

Fern lay down on the bed. She was so tired. Too tired to move, let alone pack or walk. She just wanted to sleep.

'Come on, Fern,' said Adam impatiently. 'You've done what you came to do. We need to go while we can.'

'Okay,' she said, reluctantly sitting up and pulling on her boots. But Fern hadn't yet remembered everything. She now knew what had caused her to shut herself down; but weary as she was, she needed to know more, needed to truly understand the source of the conflict that had re-surfaced in this lifetime with her father. Otherwise she would never be free of it. Adam thought it was over, she could see that. But Fern knew better: she could feel the lingering malice, much weakened, but still there.

She reached into her pack and retrieved the tempest stone, hoping to find the answers in there. The stone looked different: it was cracked in places, while other patches had turned a dusky blue. It was as if each memory retrieved had depleted it in
some way. She peered into its depths, searching for the memory she needed, but nothing came. It was just a stone, sitting cold in her hand, heavy and closed to her. There was more in there, she could sense it, but it wasn't for now. This chapter was finished.

'Here, let me help you get ready,' said Adam.

'It's okay, I can manage.' Fern leaned over to tie her laces, but the lump in her throat made her helpless as the tears overflowed and she cried for the child she'd lost and the lives she'd wasted, helpless and hiding from Eric.

Adam wrapped his arms around Fern, and drew her to him, letting her sob onto his shoulder, her tears soaking through his t-shirt. 'You've done it,' he said. 'It's over.'

Fern nodded and wiped her eyes. For now at least it was enough. She didn't know all the answers yet, she might never know them, but she now knew that the life with Porteus was the source of the pattern she'd become stuck in. She was breaking free. Perhaps now she could unravel those patterns and find a better way to live.

She wiped her eyes, stood up and heaved her pack onto her shoulders, feeling herself bend under its weight. It seemed so much heavier than she remembered. Was it only yesterday they'd walked into this strange house? An oasis of comfort she'd thought it then, but now it felt more like the sticky centre of a spider's web. Adam was right, they needed to get out of here while they could. Fern had made a promise that she wouldn't let Eric hurt her. She didn't believe he could haunt her dreams anymore but she still wanted to put some distance between them. She had no idea how far his power stretched in the physical world but already knew how easily he could hurt the people she loved.

Fern took one last look at the room that only yesterday she'd found so luxurious. Now she would prefer a tent to this, any day. She picked up the perfume on the dressing table and put it down, then looked longingly at the evening dress. It was tempting to take something as a keepsake, but this house had woven its dangerous spells around her once and she'd nearly allowed herself to be seduced; she wouldn't let that happen again.

Fern followed Adam out the door and closed it firmly behind her. Together they walked down the hallway and then down the ornate staircase. The atmosphere in the house had completely changed again. Guests were emerging from their rooms, casting strange looks at Fern and Adam with their heavy packs and grubby walking boots. How
long, she wondered, since any of these people had carried anything heavier than a cocktail glass?

Fern glanced into the dining room as they passed. People were sitting at the tables, their noisy chatter accompanied by the clattering of spoons and cups, and the squeak of knives on plates. It was so different from an hour or two earlier when Fern had sat there with her father. How long ago it already seemed. She looked around the room, half hoping for one last glimpse of him making inconsequential small talk with his guests, something to remind her that he was just a man playing a role and no longer the monster that inhabited her dreams. But he was nowhere to be seen.

Near the front door Adam picked up a pamphlet addressed to 'Intrepid Walkers' and studied the simple map. It showed a path leading out to the north east through a small gate in the fence. The walk was only a few kilometres long before it looped back to the harbour, making a circular trip. Still, at least they could follow it for a while before cutting off into the bush.

They stepped outside into a perfect day, hotter than any Fern had yet experienced in Tasmania, the sun so fierce she could feel it immediately burning her. For once she didn't put her hat on. The heat felt good on her skin, as if she'd been caught in a long dark night and now the sun was burning away its lingering traces. This was real, she told herself, the heat of the sun on her face, the gravel crunching underfoot as they walked together along the drive, the solidity of the oak trees they passed, her hand caressing their rough trunks. These trees would have been there as long as the house, over a hundred and thirty years. And yet they were young compared to the forests around them.

Adam paused and half turned.

'Don't look back,' said Fern urgently.

Startled, he looked at her, a question in his eyes. But Fern had no idea why she'd said that. The certainty had arrived in her mind, unheralded, unexpected. *Don't look back.* What would happen, she wondered, if they did? She shuddered, afraid that what she and Adam had together was too tenuous, a fine thread that could be severed in a moment. Perhaps her father would simply bide his time before trying to break her again, and the easiest way would be to hurt Adam, she thought, or their baby.

*Don't look back.* The very thought of turning for one last glimpse was a
temptation, tugging at her head. But she had willpower. She could resist.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's get out of here.' They crossed the lawn, their footfalls suddenly muted as they headed towards the forest.

In the end it was Adam who looked, stopping in front of her and turning. Fern watched Adam taking it all in, committing it to memory; perhaps suspecting, as she did, that it wasn't over yet. That maybe it would never be over and that they would have to live with that uncertainty. Fern saw it then, a part of Adam left behind, a bond between Adam and that place, between Adam and her father. She wanted to take a knife and slice through it. But it was not for her to own Adam's choices. And she had no power to halt their unfinished business, for if Adam had known her in previous lives, she had little doubt that he'd also faced Eric.

Adam felt something too, a draining of his strength, a deep foreboding and a shuddering fear. He'd wanted to take one last look at the house, standing there defiantly, he thought, in the middle of the wilderness, money and staff all employed to fight off the creep of the wild, to maintain the property's manicured lawns, to cultivate order. For Adam it had none of the beauty of the forests; its very existence was a denial of nature. And yet it was beautiful too, in its own way.

He shielded his eyes against the sun, trying to see past the reflections in the windows. From here it looked as if the house was a shell, that the forest existed both within and without. There was a figure on the top verandah. Was it Eric watching them leave? Fern had won something in there, she'd weakened Eric and found some resolution. That was what they had come for. Adam dragged his eyes away from the house and looked at Fern, standing before him, her back turned squarely on her father's house. She was tired: there were dark rings under her eyes and her shoulders were tight as if she was holding herself together. But she seemed taller somehow and more solid. He'd been proud of her in there, standing up to her father. That took courage.

Adam had changed too, could feel himself turning towards life once again. He had a direction now, he'd made a decision. And if Eric was right, he had a daughter on the way. Adam felt a thrill of excitement at the prospect. He'd better get organised.

Adam turned his back on the house and took Fern's hand. Then together they stepped through the gate and into the cool twilight of the forest.
Within seconds it was as if the house had never been.
Epilogue

I am becoming a patterner. It is a strange title but I am not alone in this role. There are many patterners in this world, though most do not call themselves by that name and many would not perceive that this is what they do. There are other titles for this role, words loaded with the weight of history, prejudice and expectations: shaman, clairvoyant, magician, artist, writer, musician, politician, prophet, orator, historian, scientist - names that close the hearer's mind. A patterner is a name that does not cause discomfort. It is open not closed, broad not narrow. A name that crosses boundaries.

Labels are dangerous. They are binding and most often not self-applied. In truth they only reveal something about their creator. Definitions are dangerous too; like labels, they create boundaries, fix identity and work against change, which is part of the natural flow of life. Nevertheless there are times when it is useful to understand a word. In doing so, one must always remember that words carry power. In their interpretation, context must be taken into account, as well as gestures and intent. Literal readings cause misunderstandings and ultimately war. Destruction arises from the fixing of words, from the turning of transparent to opaque. Now, in this shifting time of endings and beginnings, it is more vital than ever that we learn once again to see beneath words to their deeper meanings.

For the sake of those who seek clarity, I will attempt to describe without definition. A patterner is simply someone who understands the shape of things and the relationships they bear to each other. Someone who can distance themselves from the everyday and move far enough away to see clearly, in the way perhaps that an eagle or hawk might circle higher and higher in the sky, ever broadening their view, seeking the movement of creatures below. For a patterner the motive is not to hunt, but to understand. Perhaps to unravel a pattern and weave a new one, though this is a dangerous act and must not be carried out impulsively, for the changing of one thing is the changing of another and consequences cannot always be anticipated.

To an outsider, a patterner's world appears a lonely one and not always easy. They stand detached from others and do not necessarily take part in the day-to-day life
of the community. A patterner is not often a social creature. There is scant time for that. From the outside it may appear that a patterner does little, but that is not the case. They see and hold the patterns of life. There are patterns in everything: in the events of this world; the cycles of the seasons; and in the behaviour of individuals, families and societies. There are patterns in communications and in the shapes of cells and shells. And there are patterns in words. Words that I weave into stories, whose meanings will shift and change over time and according to the ears of their audience.

My sanctuary is beautiful. I spend a lot of time in my garden, seeing the larger patterns reflected in the smaller patterns that I, in my small way, help to sustain. There are ponds with lilies, and tadpoles which drop their tails, grow legs and eventually emerge as frogs. There are tall ferns in the shadows, arching their fronds across the sky like wings, and trees that drop their leaves in winter, carpeting the ground and protecting it from frosts. There are bulbs that lie dormant through autumn and winter, then in spring, at some mysterious signal, push their way through the hard ground towards the light. There are flowers that bare their heart to the sun each day, following its path, their petals closing each night to embrace the darkness. There are trees whose blossoms become fruit that ripens and weighs down the branches, sending summer scents into the hot, still air. There are bees that lift pollen from the flowers, winds that lift seeds from their source, worms that labour underground, enriching the earth, food scraps that become soil. Everywhere in my garden are the patterns of life. I have only to use all my senses, to watch and listen, smell and touch, to taste, and to intuit. I have only to do this and I know what I need to know.

We will not live here forever but for now it is the right place. Freya does not need much. At eighteen months she is bewitched by the wonders of nature. For now, the boundaries of our garden are enough, and our regular excursions down to the beach. Here we walk along the white sand, Freya picking up shells and seaweed, a piece of broken glass worn smooth and round-edged by the sea, treasures she will fill my pockets with and then later arrange on the verandah, all the time talking to herself and to the objects as if they were friends, which I suppose they are. I think about her childhood and how different mine was. Then I'm glad. Glad that my childhood forged me and sent me on this path so that I can stand here now, watching Freya, and feel content.
Sometimes when I look at Freya I see myself, but more often I can see Adam, in a gesture, a brash smile, a sudden laugh, the line of her chin, a tilt of her head. And in her eyes. They are Adam's, dark, deep and unreadable. Adam has become a track worker and an activist. He spends weeks at a time in the forests, trying to save them. Like me, Adam has found his path, followed the clues: a nudge from Matt, Eric's scoffing voice at a New Year's Eve dinner party, a challenge from me.

I have not heard from my father, though I have heard of him. Not long after we left Pine House, a flash of lightning ignited the forest around it and a wild wind lashed the fire into a fury that consumed the house in minutes. Poetic justice, Adam called it, nature taking its revenge. My father was not consumed in that fire. He was already lying in hospital, weakened by a stroke that came only days after our confrontation. He had tried to outwit the prophecy and, in doing so, nearly brought about its fulfilment. Now his life hangs in the balance. Even so I prefer not to think of him. I do not want to tempt the fates, or to lose equilibrium.

My father is not a reflective man. If he were he might realise his own madness, perhaps even perceive the limits of his power. He is not reflective, but he reflects the worst in others, mirroring back to them their desires, their fears and their greed, using them to achieve his own desires. I don't believe he is evil, only that he works against compassion. But he is greedy, seeking worldly power, commercialism, materialism, endless consumption. He has powers that are beyond the five senses, and with them he wants to control all worlds.

I do not often leave the safety of our sanctuary, only making the occasional and necessary foray into the outer world. Sometimes we go with Adam into the forest. Like her father, Freya loves the wilderness, but there is anger and unnecessary violence between the protesters and the forest workers, so we stay only for a short time. We visit the local shop for mail and small groceries. Otherwise, if Adam is away, I rely on Iris for the shopping she brings over weekly, as well as the produce from the garden that Michael helps me with. We go to the city once a month or so, always unwilling, and always pleased to return.

In the cities, people, for the most part, are carrying on as if nothing has changed, pretending they can't feel the energy shifts or the pervading panic that makes them hurry,
faster and faster, checking watches, talking on mobile phones, reassuring themselves that all is normal, that time hasn't sped up after all. But it has and they are rushing to keep up. All they can feel is the fear, heralded and amplified on television, in the news and the dramas that feed them. Cassie was right, this is the ending of an empire, but it is also the beginning of something new. The world is changing and we are changing with it. It is too soon perhaps to see how.

In becoming a patterner I have become so sensitive that when I return home after one of my forays my head is buzzing, my heart palpitating, the things that I have seen and heard imprinted on the back of my eyelids so that they accompany me even when I close my eyes and slip into sleep, forming maddening and surreal composite dreams that force me to toss and turn all night. Freya is sensitive too. After an outing, she cannot sleep a peaceful sleep, but walks the rooms of the house, her eyes wide open and not seeing, calling for me and not hearing my voice, holding her arms out to be hugged, but not feeling my own arms enfold her tiny body.

On those nights, if Adam is away, I gently wake her. Then we lie down together and I tell her stories about her father. I tell her of his courage and his passion. I tell her that he was there when she was born and that he carried her into the forest proudly, his eyes shining with love. I tell her that he has a path to tread, that he makes a difference. The world is changing, I say, and the time has come to let go of the old ways, the ones that ensure the repetitions of history. Peace is a gentle thing that can no longer be fought for. Instead it will enter our hearts and spread from there like the ripples of a pebble dropped into our pond.

Freya watches me and listens. I don't know how much she understands of my words, but she hears my intent and is comforted. As Freya's eyes close sleepily, I tell her that the universe is filled with the beauty of paradox. We do not live in a world of black and white, but a world that comprises a multitude of colours and shades. It is for us to embrace them all.

When Freya sleeps I pick up my books again and read, learning all that I had forgotten. I have been studying homeopathy and the way of herbs, trying to understand the patterns of illness, trying to see its source which so often lies far beyond the physical. I have understood that true healing is not something you can do with a closed heart. It
must reach deep into the spirit and work its magic from within. True healing changes a person, clears scar tissue and the patterns of reaction that have formed their character. It is not an easy path to choose.

Sometimes Michael shows me his own way of healing, though he has no knowledge of how he does it. Since that time in the forest when Adam was bitten, I have not felt the flow of energy that Michael uses. I place my hands on Freya's feverish head and it cools a little, or I gently kiss a bruise and the pain eases. I don't know if that is healing or simply the love of a mother for her daughter. Perhaps the two are not so different.

My mother is coming to stay and Freya is excited. We pick parsley and basil for the pasta, then zucchini, beans and fresh cherry tomatoes, the sweetest sort that Freya can't resist. I will fry them lightly in garlic, then throw in the herbs and some rich Greek feta, before tossing it all in the pasta spirals. I watch Freya feasting on our garden, her face dripping with sticky juices, tomato pips running in a line down her shirt. I watch her and laugh as joy surges through me. A joy that comes with the knowledge that I am exactly where I should be, that Grace is coming today and that tomorrow Adam will be here. Then, still laughing, I hold Freya up high so she can pick apricots and nectarines, gently placing each one in the basket for her grandmother.

In the kitchen, I finely chop the garlic and parsley, then put the basil and olive oil in a pestle and mortar and let Freya work them into a paste. Occasionally I look out through the windows at the ocean in front of us. Today is warm, the air is still, the sky free of clouds and the water a rich turquoise that suggests a tropical paradise, not the cold waters of southern Tasmania.

My eyes scan the road below for any sign of a car. It is good to have company, though I am rarely lonely here. When Adam is away, Iris comes often and so does Michael. They love me as if I were their own and they love Freya. Especially Freya.

'Grace here,' says Freya, tugging on my skirt impatiently as a car pulls up.

My feet feel firm and steady on the ground as I watch Grace step out of the car. Freya takes my hand and we walk towards my mother, the one who took me into her home and nurtured me with all the love she could, the one who now accepts me as I am, and who I have learned to love without fear or guilt, without anger or resentment.
'Fern,' she says, reaching out to me and I feel her stiff body soften in my embrace, feel the warmth of her tears on my face, see the joy in her smile.

'And Freya! Look at you, so very, very tall,' she says, bending over to let her granddaughter plant wet kisses on her cheek.

My mother is here and I am happy. We walk up to the house together, three generations bound by love and shared experience. I have learned so much in such a short time. That blood is not thicker than water. That love comes as a gift and should not be turned away. That fences divide, and divisions kill. And most importantly of all, I am learning to fly.

I am truly blessed.

* * *
'Mapping the Journey to Self

an exegesis on Flight'
'We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path: and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; and where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; and where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the centre of our own existence; and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.'

(Campbell 1968, p. 25)
Introduction

Since ancient times we have told stories. We sit around camp fires watching the flickering flames and exchanging tales, or curl up in bed with our books, or gather in front of a screen. We read newspapers, listen to the radio and browse the internet. We make up stories for our children, or meet friends for coffee and swap anecdotes. When we sit down at the dinner table and talk to our family, we construct stories from the events of the day, shaping our ideas into a satisfying structure with a beginning, middle and end, creating a narrative flow, an atmosphere, tensions, hooks and characters.

Roland Barthes wrote that 'narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society. . . it is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself' (Barthes, cited in Sontag 1993, p. 251). If stories are a natural part of us, deeply embedded in our psyche, then what is their purpose? In setting out to explore the purpose of story, and in particular, the purpose of my own story telling, I discovered that stories have been told since time began for many reasons. Describing the power of story across its many forms, Josie Arnold writes that 'ritual and personal storytelling is the basis of cultural knowledge and hence education. . . the first member of the tribe who was 'kept' by the labour of the community was the storyteller, the shaman, the priest or priestess' (2003, p.83).

Fundamentally, stories help us to access and make sense of our memories, and in so doing, suggests narratologist, H Porter Abbott, they enable the human race to organise our understanding of time (2002, p. 3). In this way, stories help us to make life meaningful. We have been born and we will die. This is a frame that is too large to make sense of, so we use stories to create smaller frames, applying a narrative structure to both personal and cultural events, which enables us to interpret the lives of others and make parallels to our own.

Through story then, we can understand the transitions within our lives, by looking back to see the cause and effects that have led us through time. We can identify those dramatic movements from one stage to another: childhood to adolescence, to adulthood, marriage and the birth of children. We can also look forward and learn to
accept, through story, the inevitability of the transition into old age and ultimately, death.

Analytic psychologist, Juliet Sharman-Burke calls myth, fairy tales and folklore 'the original self-help psychology' (Greene & Sharman-Burke 2000 p. 8), while Jungian analyst and cantadora (storyteller) Clarissa Pinkola Estes, describes stories as medicine. 'They have such power,' she says. The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories' (1992, p. 15). Stories help us to understand and learn about the process of living, enriching and deepening our experiences, as well as enabling us to reach out and connect with each other.

At one level story is purely entertainment. On another level it can be a form of propaganda that reinforces the social order and prevailing attitudes, creating and making invisible those fictive boundaries that we risk accepting as real. Indeed, Barthes believed that myth has a purely ideological purpose and condemned it as a realist construct, designed to keep people unquestioningly obedient to a social system (1957). Stories can be read politically, interpreted differently according to their context and the numerous filters through which they are received. We can respond to stories from a Marxist perspective, give a feminist reading, psychoanalytic, realist, structuralist, and post structuralist, all of which are necessary and illuminating ways of reading narratives and understanding the culture in which we live.

As philosopher, Richard Kearney wrote, 'narrative provides us with one of our most valuable forms of identity, individual and communal' (2002, p. 4). Our stories provide us with ways of thinking about how to live within our society, helping people to place themselves in relation to their world but importantly, on another level, they also provide us with maps that allow us to develop as individuals.

Narrative theorist, Joseph Campbell, wrote extensively about this third level within story and this is the level in which I am interested and which my novel, *Flight* and this exegesis, explore. Although stories can and do encourage us to conform, paradoxically they are also subversive, in that the very structure of story is a map of the process of becoming oneself, a state in which the individual may live freely within society. Stories are maps of the journey to self. Using symbols to create a metaphoric bridge between the conscious and the unconscious, they give us access into a connotative understanding in which it is possible to express what cannot always be
expressed in concrete terms. In short, stories are metaphors for the inner journeys we all make.

In this exegesis I have predominantly used vernacular theorists. Writing in *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, Thomas McLaughlin describes vernacular theory as 'critical language grounded in local concerns, not the language spoken by academic knowledge-elites' (1996, p. 6). Many of these vernacular theorists would not even think of themselves as theorists but rather practitioners, who, says McLaughlin, 'devise a language and strategy appropriate to their own concerns' (1996, p. 6). According to McLaughlin, the term, vernacular was introduced by Houston Baker, in his *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and relates to both the language and the localness of slaves. Since then the term has most often been applied to 'theory that would never think of itself as theory' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 5).

In *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, McLaughlin wrote widely on vernacular theory, describing it as 'theoretical work practised in everyday situations by people outside of the academy (McKee 2000) and applying it to a range of subjects such as fan culture, teaching and the new age movement. Since then, his work has been cited by many, though most have applied his more general concept to their own specialist thinking, frequently in the discipline of cultural studies, and particularly in relation to fan culture and digital technologies (Hills 2002; Jenkins 2006; Whittaker 2004). Jean Burgess writes about the vernacular in her research on digital storytelling, defining vernacular creativity as 'the ordinary practices of creativity that are already embedded in everyday life' (2006, p. 1). Her focus is on the democratic potential of digital storytelling and ways in which to 'legitimate it as a relatively autonomous and worthwhile contribution to public culture' (2006, p. 1). I too am interested in breaking free of the sometimes stifling divisions between high and low culture though my focus is not on the so called 'ordinary' or the everyday but rather on the voices of those who are experts outside of academia. This is where my application of the vernacular differs from Burgess and others.

For the purposes of this exegesis I have extended the predominant application of vernacular theory. As a writer, a teacher of writing, an editor, a mentor, and a student, I
have a range of knowledge: personal, practical, professional and academic. In the writing of *Flight*, I drew on all this knowledge (much of it vernacular), and in the analysis of *Flight*, I once again wanted to draw on that knowledge, as well as the knowledge and experience of both academics and practitioners in a number of fields. In order to do so, I decided to accord personal and professional experience the same weight as extensive study and academic rigour. Some of the theorists I cite, work, or have worked, in an academic environment, some are both academics and 'expert practitioners' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 22), most have studied extensively, all are professionals in their fields and have written one or more books about their profession.

Much of the narrative theory that resonates with me has arisen from outside of an academic environment. Many practising writers develop theoretical perspectives on their own work and on the nature of writing in general. Borrowing from Michel Foucault, McLaughlin describes these ideas as 'subjugated knowledge', ascribing to them a validity that is not dependant on the approval of the established regimes of thought (1996, p.7). It is this kind of knowledge that has often been ignored or denigrated (McLaughlin 1996, p.7), as it is not necessary provable in a scientific sense and doesn't fit neatly within the boundaries of one theory or another. Sufi scholar Idries Shah, writes of two kinds of knowledge, 'the collection of information and the knowing of things through actual experience' (1964, p.xxvi), suggesting that argument might bring conclusions but it is only experience that can bring certainty. More often than not, as a practising writer myself, I found that the theories of writers had a validity that is based on experience rather than rigorous argument. It is this kind of experiential knowledge that I wanted to give more weight to, particularly because many of my own ideas have been formed through experience, therefore putting me squarely in the category of vernacular theorist.

Alan McKee frequently quotes McLaughlin in his own explorations of the changing boundaries between high and low culture, between the academic and the ordinary. In his paper, 'What Cultural Studies Needs is More Theory', McKee refers to 'the chasm that is insistently put up between the academy and other parts of culture by those who live outside the walls of the academy' (2002, p. 3), then goes on to criticise the way in which 'cultural studies insistently values high culture over low, stating that he was 'depressed to see how many cultural studies writers see intellectuals as being only
academics, literary novelists and performance artists' (2002, p.1). The performance artist is valued more highly than a talk show host (McKee 2002), a literary novelist taken seriously while a popular novelist is dismissed, Freud respected and Jung denigrated. As I see it, these are prejudices deeply entrenched in our society and often unconsciously enmeshed within each of us. Using vernacular theory has allowed me to treat all authors democratically, to quote commercial writer Stephen King's theories of writing alongside the ideas of the more 'literary', Margaret Atwood.

Much of my analysis is an exploration of healing and transformation in relation to story and hence is often labelled, New Age. This is a term I find disagreeable, partly because it has become a cliché and often invokes derision, but particularly as so-called New Age ideas generally apply to age old metaphysics. As McLaughlin writes, 'new age theory is vernacular in the sense that it does not consider itself to be a theoretical project' (1996, p. 83), rather it is based on experiences that cause a questioning of cultural assumptions (1996, p. 25). New Age ideas explore notions of transformation, identity, creativity, imagination, self, symbolism, metaphor, gender, language. . . all areas that McLaughlin points out are addressed in academic theory, however in New Age theory, there is a 'distinctive spiritual perspective that is absent from contemporary theoretical discourse' (1996, p. 26). It is this spiritual perspective which I explore in my novel, Flight, and in this supporting exegesis, another reason why I found it necessary to embrace the notion of the vernacular, therefore giving academic validity to my own ideas arising from experience.

'New Age writings have produced a vernacular theory of story', which does draw from some academic theories of narrative, 'most prominently from the Jungian tradition' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 82-83). Many of the theorists who inform this exegesis used the Jungian tradition as a starting point in developing their own theories and certainly Jung played a large part in informing my own ideas. However, in this exegesis there is a noticeable dialogic (Bakhtin 1930, 1975) relationship between academics and vernacular theorists, such as novelists, screen writers, transpersonal and depth psychologists, mythologists and anthropologists, all of whom contributed to what became a dynamic, holistic and broad ranging conversation around the story of storytelling.

I also draw heavily on the ideas of Joseph Campbell and Christopher Vogler.
Campbell's writings (in particular his first book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*), explore and interpret the relationship of myth, both to the developing psyche and to the structure of story. I was fascinated to recognise the parallels between his theories of the patterns of story and the structure of my own novels. Christopher Vogler has developed and adapted Campbell's theories in order to produce *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1998), a practical workbook for writers that has made an important contribution to understanding the structure of narrative. Vogler's interpretation of the stages of story was particularly useful in the editing of *Flight*, as I applied his model to my own story in looking for structural weaknesses.

In *Other Lives, Other Selves* (1988), Jungian psychotherapist, Roger Woolger, explains his attraction to Carl Jung, saying, 'I found in Jung a psychology that respected and nourished both my intellectual and my creative and intuitive being' (1988, p. 6). I too was drawn to Carl Jung's analytic psychology, for this reason and a number of others. Jung wrote extensively about the process of individuation or the journey to self, posited the idea of a collective unconscious, developed the concepts of the anima and animus, explored the importance of myth in relation to psychic health, researched the role of the imagination in the healing of the psyche and worked closely with narrative in his role as an analytic psychologist (Jung, 1956, 1964), all of which are useful concepts in the analysis of story and its functions, which I will develop later.

Interestingly, although McLaughlin refers to Jung as an academic, it is possible to argue that Jung himself was a vernacular theorist, as after his break with Freud, Jung abandoned his academic career, focussing instead on his personal and professional research (Brome 1980, p. 157). Campbell too, withdrew from his doctorate in 1929, when his advisors did not support his desire to broaden his interests. He continued his studies independently and up until the time of his death was insistent that he be called Mr Campbell, not Dr Campbell (Campbell 1991). Christopher Vogler is more clearly a vernacular theorist, in that he works as a Hollywood script analyst. However, Vogler now travels the world, lecturing on his theoretical ideas at universities. Therefore the lines between vernacular and academic theory are increasingly blurred, the largest difference lying in the amount of prestige they receive (McLaughlin 1996, p. 10).

My reading of Jung led me into the realms of more contemporary transpersonal
psychology, an area that McLaughlin would place under the umbrella of New Age theory. In Other Lives, Other Selves, Woolger defines transpersonal psychology as 'a general term for a number of psychological theories and practices that have in common the recognition of a spiritual component to the psyche; including studies of meditation, mysticism, spiritual awakening and development, psychedelic experiences, shamanism, healing, and traditional spiritual disciplines' (1988, p. 355/356). Psychologists working in these areas tend to work extensively with the stories of their patients, so I was able to discover a number of interesting narrative theories in their writings and found that these views were often similar to my own.

Researching shamanism, mysticism (Black 2007) and post Jungian psychology, I found theories that helped explain the process of writing, as well as going some way towards explaining the profound effect story has on both the writer and the reader. Reading the thoughts of other fiction writers, such as Franz Kafka (1904), Margaret Atwood (2003) and Isabel Allende (1994) helped me to find common ground with my own experiences as a writer, as did reading works by fiction writers who have developed their own narrative theory. Louise de Salvo's Writing as a Way of Healing (1999), Catherine Ann Jones', The Way of Story (2007 ), Julie Cameron's The Artist's Way (1995) and Jill Jepson's Writing as a Sacred Path (2008) enabled me to identify and analyse the techniques and devices I had used in the writing of Flight. Most importantly though, by describing writing as a journey into the unconscious, they helped me to identify the links between writing and transformation, as well as more personally, to understand and in a sense verify, my own experiences with the numinous, the transformations these experiences have wrought on me and the way in which I have woven them into Flight.

Chapter One of this exegesis explores my reasons for writing Flight, the themes of the novel and the therapeutic nature of story itself. In it, I analyse the way story works generally to rebalance individuals, and more specifically, how the writing of Flight had a rebalancing effect on me. Chapter Two goes further, analysing the process of writing in practical terms, as well as in relation to the creative functions of memory and imagination. In it I explore the nature of truth and the way in which I have woven together fact and fiction in Flight.

Chapter Three reflects on the nature of myth and fairytale, while also identifying
and analysing my frequent references to myth and fairytale in the content of *Flight*. Chapter Four further develops these ideas by exploring the mythic structure of story, both generally and more specifically in relation to *Flight*. In it, I analyse the potential differences between the structure of feminine and masculine journeys, as well as seek parallels between the traditional shamanic journey and the structure of *Flight*.

Chapter Five is an analysis of characterisation in *Flight*, looking at focalisation, the major characters' wounds and motivations and the use of character archetypes. In it, I also identify parallels between the character arc and the process of individuation, discussing the idea of transformation and its associated problems. Chapter Six further explores archetypes but moves from archetypes of character to archetypal objects and events by analysing the use and function of symbolism and metaphor in *Flight*. In this final chapter I also explore the notion that metaphor is the link between the structure of story, the character arc and the process of individuation.

In *Shaman: The Wounded Healer* (1982), anthropologist, Joan Halifax describes the common stages of shamanic initiation. 'The call to power necessitates a separation from the mundane world: the neophyte turns away from the secular life, either voluntarily, ritually, or spontaneously through sickness, and turns inward towards the unknown, the mysterium' (1982, p. 6). This was the process I unconsciously undertook in the writing of *Flight*, both in the journey of the protagonist, Fern, and in my own writing journey. In writing this exegesis I have again taken this journey, slowly making the process conscious, identifying the links and therefore mapping in my own way, the trials, tribulations and joys of the journey to self.
Chapter One - Why I wrote *Flight: Story as Therapy*

'Write to save yourself and someday you'll write because you've been saved.'

(Michaels 1997, p.165)

*The Shamanic Journey*

The first shamans, described by anthropologist, Joan Halifax as 'healers, seers and visionaries' (1982, p. 92), played multiple roles in society. Responsible for the health of the mind, the body and the spirit of their people, shamans journey into 'other' worlds, returning with stories to tell their patients in order to help them realign with the forces of the universe (Vogler 1998, p. 295). Today there are a plethora of narrative based therapies: 'programs of physical healing that rely on narrative, psychological therapies and spiritual practices that involve narrative work, and theories of creativity that see narrative as a way to gain a deeper and more authentic self hood' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 81). Most of these therapies encourage the patient to uncover their own stories, the therapists aware that within the stories or 'wounds', lie the clues to their patient's health. These wounds, according to psychologist, Bill Plotkin, must be uncovered, acknowledged and then released, in order for healing to begin (2003, p. 96).

Many years of teaching creative writing classes had led me to begin exploring the link between creativity and healing, and soon I became interested in the therapeutic functions of writing and of story generally. I was particularly fascinated with shamanism: the process a shaman undergoes for initiation; the journeys shamans take in order to heal their patients; and the stories they tell. I wondered if the shamanic journey could be used as the central theme and structure of a novel, and with this in mind, began to explore the nature of the shamanic journey and the way in which it functions as a form of narrative therapy, before considering how these ideas could intersect with and inform the writing of a novel.

From my own experience of writing, I knew the power of the imagination to step beyond the boundaries of the physical world in order to 'guide, heal and give meaning to life' (Vogler 1998, p. 295), so it was a natural step to begin exploring the parallels between the writing journey and the shamanic journey. In *Writing as a Sacred Path*
(2008), Jill Jepson argues that 'writers, like shamans have a special connection with the world. They view reality through the lenses of imagination, intuition, dream and myth' (2008, p. 124). This is a connection I recognise, not only in relation to the process of writing but to the 'call' that makes writing essential for survival, because, as Kafka once put it so succinctly, 'a non-writing writer is a monster inviting madness' (Kafka cited in Wagenbach 2003, p. 11). In shamanism, too, any shaman who resists the call will die, for as anthropologist, Mercea Eliade wrote, 'a shaman's vocation is obligatory; one cannot refuse it' (1964, p. 18). The call involves a descent into sickness and the only way to heal is to accept it, for the shaman is 'above all a sick man who has succeeded in curing himself' (Eliade 1964, p. 27).

Taking the shamanic journey as a metaphor for the process of writing as a starting point, I began work on my novel. The title came first, based on the idea of shamanic flight. Then a character. Even before I began writing, I had a sense of Fern as someone who is paradoxically, at once too light and too heavy. The heaviness is due to the amount of guilt, fear, grief and anger that Fern is holding, while the lightness is caused by that fact that much of herself is missing. She has left parts behind, possibly in other places, other times, other dimensions even. And other parts have been stolen. Fern must acknowledge and release the guilt, fear, grief and anger, whilst following the threads and reclaiming each missing part, in order to become whole once again.

Retrieving lost or stolen fragments of souls is an important aspect of shamanic work and is a large part of Fern's journey in Flight. However, it was much later in the writing process that I realised Fern's story could do more than mirror the journeys shamans take as part of their profession; it could also be a contemporary shamanic journey of initiation, as Fern moves, sometimes willingly and sometimes reluctantly, from ill health to vitality or fragmentation to wholeness. This realisation that the shamanic journey could provide more than structure to the story and that the central character herself could take the shamanic journey, opened exciting possibilities for the narrative. Both the story of Flight and the inner journey of the protagonists could follow the steps that Eliade writes of in Shamanism. This meant that at the beginning of the story, Fern is stricken with a sickness of spirit but as the story progresses she gradually becomes her own healer. In the end she will become a healer of others. A shaman of sorts.
Catharsis

Once I had understood the way in which I could use the shamanic journey in my novel, I began to think about some of the other elements in healing which might be connected to story, in particular in relation to key moments of change in the journey of the major characters. The term that came immediately to mind was *catharsis*. As a creative writing teacher, I had seen over and over again how the seemingly simple act of framing a story, or understanding the motivation of a single character can challenge the foundations on which a person has lived their life. Writing is a cathartic process for many people, a way of expelling or even just looking at the demons that haunt them.

Catharsis, meaning vomiting up, or purging, is a term associated with Aristotle and Greek drama, which was 'constructed with the intent of triggering a vomiting up of emotions by the audience' (Vogler 1998, p. 203). During the nineteenth century Franz Mesmer began to use hypnotherapy with his patients and discovered that part of the cure often involved a healing crisis in which blocked emotions rise to the surface. A century later, Freud began provoking catharsis in his patients, and now the concept is widely used in psychotherapy (Woolger 1988). In the writing of *Flight*, I could feel that cathartic process working its magic on me as I purged and released myself from a good deal of the past, just as the protagonist did. The process of writing, of weaving fact and fiction, memory and imagination into a story, helped me to learn lessons from the past, thereby enabling me to evolve as a human being. This process of learning is a journey towards individuation, as Jung describes it, a journey that is not taken automatically when someone reaches a certain age, but rather is dependent on our willingness to comprehend the duality of the psyche (Jung 1957).

In relation to Fern's story, the application of the idea of catharsis was a simple process, as the nature of Fern's journey and the nature of the character arc guaranteed a number of points of catharsis. Described in detail in Chapter Five, these turning points are common stages of story, such as the moment of decision to embark on a journey, the crisis (or inner cave, as Vogler calls it), or the climax. Turning points relate to the movement of plot but importantly they also relate to character development. This links back to the shamanic thread that runs through the novel, as each of Fern's emotional
breakthroughs is a reclaiming of a fragment of self, providing her with the opportunity to discover a new way of living.

Once I had understood the role of catharsis in the story, I was free to explore further the transformative potential of both the process of writing and of story itself. Catharsis provides an emotional clearing but the character must take the next step and integrate what they have learned in order for change to be possible. According to McLaughlin, the idea of transformation is a major element in New Age theory, which suggests we are living in a time of planetary transformation but also claims that in order for this to happen, 'transformation must occur first on a personal level' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 79). Many New Age texts identify narrative as a powerful catalyst for this personal change, believing that 'writing is a 'healing practice for the creator as well as for the reader or audience' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 88). Indeed, in A Short History of Myth (2005), Karen Armstrong writes that, 'a novel, like a myth or any great work of art, can become an initiation that helps us to make a painful rite of passage from one phase of life, one state of mind, to another' (2005, p. 148). Story then, can be transformative. As I wanted to explore the relationship of story to the idea of personal transformation, I was naturally drawn to further research in this area.

As discussed in the Introduction, Campbell believed there is an alternative knowledge structure deeply embedded within story, a structure that enables and encourages personal transformation and a structure that echoes thousands of years back to the first stories of the shamans and the ancient myths of indigenous peoples around the world, as well as being evident in many contemporary narratives. Vogler believes that people write, read and listen to stories, not because they wish to escape from themselves, but because they wish to find themselves (2007). This led me to wonder if the key to self transformation is embedded within story.

The idea that stories might contain hidden meanings is not a new one, stretching back to the interpretation of early religious texts and persisting to the current day through continued scholarly analysis of texts (Armstrong 2005). Much of the theoretical material related to these ideas is available only in the cultural theories of the New Age Movement, whose 'visionary practices challenge the assumptions that shape consensual reality and encourage alternative perspectives' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 78). However these
theories are rooted in mystical knowledge associated with Sufism and other esoteric
groups, such as Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy, some of this knowledge dating back
thousands of years (Black 2007).

As I read further, I became excited by the proposition that rather than reinforcing
blind acceptance of society's constructed realities, stories might use hidden meanings in
order to innately question them. I began to wonder how I could layer my novel in order
to enable different interpretations on the part of the reader. Campbell emphasised the
importance of poetic or connotative interpretation, as compared to literal or denotative
reading, warning that 'wherever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history or
science, it is killed' (1968, p. 21). Armstrong too, wrote passionately of the need to re-
engage with story, using 'intuitive, mythical modes of thought' instead of the 'more
pragmatic, logical spirit of scientific rationality' (2005, p. 121). In the end, I stopped
searching for a way to bury meaning within the text and trusted my unconscious to do
this for me through the use of symbols and metaphor, something which I explore in
Chapter Six.

Campbell went further than simply suggesting stories contain hidden meanings. In
his analysis of heroic myth, he suggested that the very structure of story has a hidden
meaning, that it is a metaphor for Jung's individuation process or the journey to self
(1968). This theory had a strong impact on my work. It was exciting, inspirational and
relatively easy to apply, both retrospectively and to a work in progress. When I wrote
*Flight*, I was attempting to create a story that would act on a number of levels. A story
that would entertain, but I also wanted it to be a psychological study, and most
importantly a document of a spiritual journey, one in which readers could *find*
themselves. In *Flight*, I wanted to hold a mirror up to readers and help them remember
who they are. However, my motives were not entirely altruistic, because first and
foremost it was myself I was finding, both through the process of writing and through
the mysteries of the unfolding story. It was my own past I was exploring and my own
scars I was acknowledging and releasing.

In *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999), Louise DeSalvo explains that 'we are the
accumulation of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. So changing our stories.
. . . can change our personal history, can change us. Through writing we revisit our past
and review and revise it. What we thought happened, what we believed happened to us, shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths' (1999, p. 11). So, in separating a story from ourselves, in writing it down, we are changing our perspective on it and are therefore able to see it differently, without the burden of emotions.

When I first began writing *Flight*, the characters, Grace and Richard were modelled very closely on my own adopted parents. In a sense I was comfortable revisiting the past but resistant to DeSalvo's idea of revising the past because it suggested a rewriting of history, a changing of facts. I wanted to write honestly and was also afraid my writing would become insipid if I took the sting out of it. So, I portrayed Grace and Richard as I remembered them, which meant that I was cruel in places. According to DeSalvo, 'the function of storytelling moves the writer from a position of detachment, the consequence of profound stress, to that of feeling for ourselves and for others' (1999, p. 167). During the writing of *Flight* my own perspective did change. Using both my memory and imagination enabled me to step into the shoes of my parents and in so doing, I began the process of forgiveness. As psychologist, Jean Houston wrote, 'the key to redeeming our betrayals is forgiveness' (1987, p. 116). According to Houston, forgiveness can have a 'momentous and evolutionary potency' and its roots are located in the discovery of the Larger Story (1987, p. 116). This is a process I have frequently observed with students when I run character workshops. The most profound exercises are always the ones in which I ask students to shift their perspective and step into the shoes of another character, usually someone to whom their main character is opposed. It's an excellent exercise in empathy and in developing an understanding of the (often unconscious) motivations behind behaviour.

Fern's healing represented a re-engagement with the world. To achieve this she had to let go of the negative emotions she was holding. But her healing was also a reclamation of power. Until Fern forgave her parents and in so doing, let go of their hold on her, she would be in their power, in the sense that her actions would be influenced by them. I began to perceive a distinction between judgement and condemnation. Fern could judge her parents' behaviour and respond to that judgement by removing herself from their proximity or trying to shift the balance of power between them. However, she could no longer condemn their behaviour because both her mother's and her father's
actions were unconscious and like most people, stemmed from complex motivations.

Initially, I had been confused by DeSalvo's idea of revisiting and revising the past but through the writing process had come to understand that it was only possible to revise the past after revisiting it. I had also been uncomfortable with the term revision but now realised that rather than altering the facts, I had instead, altered my interpretation of the facts. In the third draft of *Flight*, I felt compelled to soften the passages about my parents. There is still anger in the earlier sections of the novel but later that anger dissipates. Now, in the final paragraph, Fern is able to say: 'My mother is here and I am happy. We walk up to the house together, three generations bound by love and shared experience' (Dub 2011, p. 356).

What had started out as a story of alienation and anger, became instead a story of love and forgiveness. DeSalvo wrote that 'through writing, suffering can be transmuted into art' (1999, p. 41). I had achieved just this; created beauty from ugliness, harmony from discord, and in the process I had liberated myself from the past, and from the weight of unresolved memories.

**Themes**

My need to heal the past was the seed from which *Flight* grew. But on reflection it became apparent that the novel was also a natural continuation of my previous writing. As is the case with many writers, I explore similar themes in all my work, though there is a clear development of these themes sequentially through the three novels I have written to date.

*Nowhere Man* (1997) is an existential novel about being unconsciously caught in patterns of behaviour. Ivan, the central character, escapes his thirteen years of life in an unnamed airport, only to discover his need for the safety of a psychic terminal, which he finds on the streets of central London. The novel offers a stark and sometimes humourous critique of contemporary urban culture and explores the nature of self and concepts of nation and citizenship; themes which are increasingly relevant to the world in which we live.

My novel, *Gathering Storm* (2008) is a work of fiction, but many of its themes are ones that are close to my own heart. Storm is haunted by the secrets and lies that fill
her childhood as well as events that occurred well before her birth. In Gathering Storm, I explored identity and dislocation in a personal sense, through family history and genetic inheritance, but also from a broader cultural perspective, in relation to nationhood and citizenship. Like Ivan in Nowhere Man, Storm too is caught in patterns, but unlike Ivan, she is able to make them conscious and search for their source. Gathering Storm is very much about place and belonging. It also explores the nature of truth, the power of lies and the damage they leave in their wake. But probably, most importantly, Gathering Storm is about identifying and breaking free of negative patterns by turning around and facing the monsters in one’s life and taking the journey from anger to forgiveness and compassion.

Flight, is also about belonging and identity and like Gathering Storm, it documents the journey to become oneself and live one’s life in relation to that, instead of through the wounds that can be inherited from one’s ancestors, from one’s culture, and created through the experience of living. In it, I again set out to explore memory in a personal way: pre-verbal memory, as well as those memories which remain hidden in the unconscious. But this time I wanted to take it even further, venturing into the realms of mysticism, by exploring the idea of carrying memory from past lives, wounds that inhabit the deepest parts of ourselves and cause us to shut down. Two stories are woven through this novel, the title itself reflecting a double meaning one; of running away from something, the other of ascension. The outer journey is the one described in the synopsis and a metaphor for the inner journey towards self and the healing of old wounds.

It was only as I neared the completion of the first draft of Flight, that I discovered Roger Woolger's theories on past lives. Until then I had felt my way blindfolded through the novel, writing about past lives and their repeating patterns with no conscious knowledge of reincarnation or past life therapy. Jung had identified a collective consciousness which contained patterns and archetypes, including the journey of individuation. However, his preferred methods of analysis involved the interpretation of dreams and active imagination and he did not venture into the realms of reincarnation. In contrast, Woolger states that he approaches psychotherapy, 'through stories rather than dreams. . . It is through the stories that come through our other lives that we learn to accept the many selves that compose our common humanity' (1988, p. 17). Reading
Woolger helped me to understand the value of the psychotherapeutic approach to past life memories, with its emphasis on identifying and breaking free of the strong thematic patterns that according to Woolger are often repeated, life after life.

Woven into *Flight* and to a lesser extent, *Gathering Storm*, is a theme that explores the nature of words and their power. Fern is afraid of the consequences of words, afraid of their power and the potential they have to push people away. In the novel (as in my own life), it is apparent that in Fern's current life, she has been formed very much by the loss of her birth mother and the sense of rejection she feels from her adopted family. It is words that she remembers, words such as bad blood and illegitimate, words around which she created stories of her identity. Fern also carries a strong sense of guilt because her father blames her for his illness, accusing her of attempting to murder him. Woolger writes that guilt often relates to past life memories of feeling responsible for the deaths of others, while depression is associated with unfinished grieving, and abandonment is generally related to memories of literal abandonment. (Woolger 1988, p. 117-18). Fern is struggling with issues of abandonment, depression and guilt; all seemingly rooted in her early experience of adoption. However, as the story progresses, Fern realises that the guilt and grief she feels also extends into the distant past to a lifetime in which she failed to protect her daughter.

Like Fern, my childhood self was heavy with guilt and grief. I was often crushed by words; unjust accusations forced my silence, made me guilty and afraid and formed an identity I was uncomfortable with. In the writing of *Flight* I was confronting my own caution with words and pushing against the safety barriers I had put in place. It took a long time for me to realise that words can be used to create something powerful and beautiful. As Vogler writes, 'the healing power of words is their most magical aspect' (1998, p. 294). Words do not have to create wounds and scar tissue, they can also be positive gifts to be cherished; a blessing from a stranger can light up our day, and a word of encouragement can give us the courage to try something new.

Vogler suggests that when we manipulate letters to make words. . . we are in effect casting a spell, charging those abstract, arbitrary symbols with meaning and power' (1998, p. 294). But the promises we make to ourselves and others also have power.
Promises represent 'our word'. Even the smallest child knows they are sacrosanct. And yet some promises are better left unmade. Because Fern's adopted father has accused her of trying to kill him, Fern has made promises to herself which reduce her power, 'promises formed and kept like spells' (Dub 2011, p. 266-267). As the story progresses, Fern begins to realise how bound she has become by these promises and seeks a way of breaking free of them.

Woolger writes that in treatment a patient often discovers a promise made at the end of a previous life that has established a series of patterns in their present life. When the promise is revealed there is a moment of recognition. It becomes obvious that these promises had been metaphorically governing the life of a patient. In recognising them, it becomes possible to change them and the patient is no longer doomed to relive an old story' (Woolger 1988, p. 14). Part of Fern's journey is to rescind the promises she has made in this life and others, to open her heart once again and learn to live well without the weight of guilt, while another part of her journey is to reclaim words and learn not to shrink from the power of language.

In this chapter I have suggested parallels between shamanism and the process of writing, explored the therapeutic motivations behind the writing of *Flight*, and more generally, the healing power of story, which McLaughlin asserts is the 'real contribution that New Age writings make to our culture's theory of narrative' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 83). I have also identified the major themes in the three novels I have written to date, each novel representing a development of these themes. In the following chapter I will look at the use of memory and imagination in the writing process and the way in which I have blended fact and fiction in the novel.
Chapter Two - The Writing of Flight

'Writing is a long process of introspection; it is a voyage towards the darkest caverns of consciousness. I write, feeling my way in silence, and along the way discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit in the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world.'

(Allende 1994, p. 9)

The Creative Process

I don't plan before I write. Instead I start with an image that haunts me and perhaps a theme or two then see what emerges. The word imagination comes from the Latin word *imago*, which means image. According to psychologist, Robert Johnson, in his book, *Inner Work* (1986) 'the imagination is the image-forming faculty in the mind. . . it generates the symbols the unconscious uses to express itself' (1986, p. 24). Imagination is vital for creative life, for abstract thought, for the development of the sciences, philosophy, religion and even language (Johnson 1986, p. 24). 'Images are the language of the soul' (Jones 2007, p.131), and yet in popular modern terms the role of the imagination has been denigrated, coming to mean something fictitious or a daydream and often labelled as mere fantasy.

The word fantasy is derived from the Greek word phantasia which means 'a making visible' (Johnson 1986, p. 23). For the ancient Greeks, phantasia was much more than a daydream, it was 'the organ by which the divine world spoke to the human mind' (Johnson 1986, p. 23). For me too, the image making faculty is more than mere fantasy. Einstein once wrote that 'imagination is more important than knowledge' (Einstein, cited in Jones 2007, p. 125). I too believe that the imagination is perhaps the greatest gift humanity has been given. Its only limits are the ones we place upon it and ourselves.

Imagination is what makes us human, enabling us to experience events and emotions we might not normally experience, to reflect, to find commonality with others and thus understand ourselves. As writers, we can imagine fictional characters and in so doing, reveal and discover something about ourselves, for as DeSalvo wrote, 'storytelling teaches us or reteaches us empathy' (1999, p. 167).
In my eyes, imagination is also like the trickster gods of old - a powerful liberating force, cutting through what has been established, making strange what is normal, allowing us to step into the shoes of another, to break free of what we know and to fly. And yet, as writer, Carmel Bird writes, 'the worlds of the imagination are constructed from the things we find in the everyday world' (1996, p. 73). Therefore, the writing process is about taking the familiar and making it strange, letting the imagination create something new from what is known and thus venture into the realms of the unknown.

When I began the writing of Flight I did not know what it would be about and wasn't certain if it would become a novel or even a story. I did have a title and I knew that the story would somehow revolve around the double meaning inherent in the word flight. Aside from this, the only clue I had was an image of a young woman called Fern (her name in old English means wing), who had locked herself in her bedroom, an attic in a terrace house in inner city Sydney. From a single word and an image, a novel grew, slowly and mysteriously, and it is the mystery of that process, along with the pure joy that it brings, that draws me back to story again and again.

As Stephen King says in his memoir, On Writing (2000), stories 'pretty much make themselves. The job of a writer is to give them a place to grow' (2000, p. 188). King goes on to describe writing as an archaeological dig, a process of rediscovery (2000, p. 188), which suggests that the story is there all along, just waiting for its fragments to be found and pieced back together. In some ways this appears to contradict the notion of story being created from the imagination, yet in my experience the two are the same. Like Jung, and many contemporary writers and psychologists, I believe that stories inhabit the vast realms of the collective unconscious and it is our imaginations that take the necessary journeys to discover them. It is here that the shamanic journey and the writer's journey are closely linked. 'When we speak of the writer's shamanic journey, we are referring to that expedition into imagination or into what can be called the mythic realm. . . A realm of myth, memory, imagery, trope, and dream' (Jepson 2008, p. 127). It is here that we 'find' our story. In the writing of Flight, giving my imagination permission to enter this realm was an act of faith in the creative process, and like most acts of faith it was sometimes fraught with doubt. I had already written over 70,000
words before I dared describe *Flight* as a novel. Despite the doubt, it was an exciting process, filled with dangers and punctuated with miracles.

The word memory comes from the Greek word Mnemosyne. Born from the marriage of Uranus and Gaia, heaven and earth, Mnemosyne was personified as the mother of the nine muses and the patron goddesses of poets (thefreedictionary.com/Mnemosyne). As a fiction writer I spend a great deal of time inhabiting the world of the imagination, but I also draw heavily on my memory, for as Jones writes, 'memory is one of the primal sources for creative images' (2008, p. 134). I am fascinated by the memories we carry (often unconsciously) and the way they arise in the process of storytelling, make links between seemingly disparate ideas and provide significance and revelation. Imagination is not solely responsible for the mystery and magic of writing. Memory too, plays an important role. In the process of writing, a tension is created between the grounding nature of memory and the flightiness of the imagination. For me, the vitality of that tension creates meaning. It is the source of my stories. Trusting it, is an act of faith in the unfolding mystery of story. For as Lesley Glaister writes, 'memory is refracted through imagination, often unconsciously, into something new.' That, she says, is 'the real stuff of fiction, memory blended, refracted, transformed' (2001, p. 77).

As I write, I work closely with the unconscious; in the process taking my own memories and recreating them, usually in a fictional way, finding links and themes and connoting meaning through metaphor. Patti Miller explains in *Writing Your Life* (2001) that 'memory is a poet; it has stored experiences in imaginative patterns. . . connections are made through imaginative association rather than logic' (2001, p. 78). 'Memories,' she says, are not simply stuffed in like rubbish, but neither are they ordered under logical topic headings' (2001, p. 78). Miller goes on to distinguish between the left and right sides of the brain, suggesting that when people try to write from the logical left part of their mind, their stories become dull and flat, whereas the right side of the brain is where the imagination and poetry lie.

In her novel, *Fugitive Pieces* (1997), Anne Michaels writes that 'the memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens' (1997, p. 213). This is how memories arose in *Flight*,
spontaneously, from the right side of the brain, overtaking me with sudden revelations. In Chapter Eight, Fern's mother has taken her to the hospital to have her ankle checked but the doctor begins asking questions about Fern's mental health. As I wrote this scene I suddenly found myself remembering something from my own childhood, a day when I had explored a forbidden tunnel in the park opposite our house. At first the memory seemed out of context, but instead of dismissing it, I decided to trust the creative process and began describing the journey through the tunnel, its blackness and the fear, and then the wonder of the place Fern found at the other end. I took the bare facts and used my imagination to expand the memory and link it with Fern and the situation she was trapped in. Only then did I receive the gift that always comes with this connection, the hidden revelation, an understanding of its significance. 'Fern felt as if she were trapped in that tunnel, right in the middle, with no light at either end. The only thing keeping her here was the tiny and fragile hope that one day she would find an end, and with it something vital and beautiful for herself' (Dub 2011, p. 103).

As more of my memories arose and were given to Fern, I wondered if by giving my memories away I was in a sense emptying myself and in so doing, might in some way lose myself. In his book, Creativity, spiritual teacher, Osho, distinguishes between psychological and factual memory, stating that factual memory is necessary but psychological memory is not. 'Factual memory,' he says, 'is not a problem, it is pure remembrance. When you become psychologically affected by it, then the problem arises' (1999, p. 137). I realised then, that this was the essence of the healing journey I was exploring through the writing of Flight. I still had these memories and yet in some way I was releasing myself from their spell or 'curse' and thus the identity they had constructed. In writing about them in this way, I was liberating myself from them, not losing myself.

When the novel opens, Fern has unconscious memories: from the violence that occurred in the womb, from the violence she experienced at birth, from being abandoned by her birth mother, and from a childhood spent with religious adoptive parents and an extended family who were often cruel, treating her as a second class citizen because of her illegitimacy and 'bad blood'. But there are other memories too, ones that stem from other lives, the patterns repeating themselves over and over, a common tendency that psychotherapist, Woolger noted in his work on past life therapy (1988, p. 222). Through
the course of the novel, Fern begins to see these patterns and understand the way in which they have closed her down, something I explore further in Chapter Five on characterisation.

Throughout her life, Fern has unconsciously identified with her damaging memories and in so doing, reduced her capacity to live well. It is only in recognising this that she can begin the process of letting go that will allow her to regain her physical and psychological health. Then Fern is at last able to begin reclaiming her positive memories; the wisdoms, skills and talents that she has learned through many lives. She discovers once again her capacity to use her intuition, to love and to heal (Dub 2011, p. 338). My journey as an author paralleled Fern's journey in many ways. Not only did I uncover and clear a number of negative memories and patterns, and give myself room to begin reclaiming positive memories, but as discussed in the previous chapter, I also discovered within the negative memories, a positive aspect; an empathic understanding of the motives of others.

Despite being a novel, *Flight* is, in a sense all about memory, about the process of remembering the stories and the wounds that have acted as both blessings and curses in life. But as explained in the previous chapter, it is also about releasing them, bringing these wounds and gifts into the light and creating something beautiful from them. As I wrote *Flight*, my own memories arose from somewhere deep inside, my imagination gave them to another character in another time and place, placed them alongside or within entirely fictional scenes, and yet somehow with this fusion of memory and imagination, the story stayed true to the themes that are woven deeply into my own life. What emerged was a story that is not 'true' in the literal sense of the word, and yet hopefully resounds with emotional truth.

*Fact or Fiction: Where Truth Lies*

John Singleton, in *The Creative Writing Handbook*, explores the relationship between memory and imagination and between autobiography and fiction. The autobiography he says, 'only translates the past' while fiction 'transforms' it. 'The vital force in this re-creative process is the imagination' (2000, p. 101). Autobiography, 'describes the self as already known, or explains the self as presently understood. While fiction, on the other
hand explores the self as yet hidden, in the dark... Something secret is hitherto revealed which you sense you've known unconsciously all the time' (Singleton 2000, p. 102). Transformation, then, is made more possible by stepping into fiction, if only because the writer then gives their imagination permission to work with memory and transform it, thereby allowing true self reflection, that which comes as a revelation not simply an intellectual construct.

In a novel, the reader is often interested in how much is true, while in a memoir, the reader wants to know how much is untrue. 'There's a world of difference between truth and fact,' writes Maya Angelou. 'Fact tells us the data... but facts can obscure the truth' (Angelou 1993, cited in Epel, p. 28). Psychotherapists also recognise the complexities of truth. In Other Lives, Other Selves, Woolger states that, 'for the therapist there is another kind of truth, psychic truth: that which is real for the patient' (1988, p. 84). Jung also maintained that clinical material does not have to be historically true so long as it is subjectively true and filled with meaning for the patient (Stevens 1990, p. 263). For Jung, harmony is not achieved from realigning an individual to society, which is itself a human construct, but instead from realigning them to their self and hence, to life. It is in the inner or psychological journey of a character that an emotional, and perhaps a universal truth can be found; something I return to again in later chapters as these are important elements in relation to the writing of Flight and the fundamental shape of story.

'New Age believers,' writes McLaughlin, 'have had experiences that the old paradigm considers invalid... And instead of doubting their sanity, they have questioned the paradigm that rules these experiences out of bounds' (1996, p. 82). Jung, who preceded the New Age movement by a number of years, is a case in point. In his memoir, Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1967), he writes about his his inner experiences, including his dreams and visions, referring to his life as one that he could only map or understand through recording its 'inner happenings', his encounters with the unconscious. 'In the end,' he says, 'the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one' (1967 p. 4). Like Jung, when I sat down to write, I discovered that I had embarked on my own inner journey, a journey of the soul. As I worked on my novel, I was surprised to discover that I was unconsciously
writing about myself, drawing on my own past, my dreams and my numinous experiences and weaving them into a plot-driven fictional story.

Describing how she writes, Isabel Allende said, 'In the slow silent process of writing, I enter a different state of consciousness in which sometimes I can draw back a veil and see the invisible (1984, p. 284). The writing of Flight was just this, a stepping through the veils and a drawing together of numinous experiences. I wrote down the visions that had come to me unexpectedly, the glimpses of a past beyond the boundaries of my own life and the dreams which spoke to me symbolically. The writing process was both an arduous journey into new realms and a gift, both my own creation and an inspiration from a source beyond myself.

'All fiction is autobiography in disguise', wrote Jones (2007, p. 6). This is certainly the case with Flight, though if I had written it as a memoir I would not have been able to grant myself permission to explore my own past and thus transform it, at least not with the freedom I found in fiction. It is difficult to say exactly how much of Flight is true in the factual sense of the word. Like Fern, I was born in Adelaide and adopted by a religious couple. The house I grew up in is the same as I depict in the novel. The adopted mother, Grace, is similar to my own mother, whilst the adopted father, Richard, is identical, right down to his illnesses and accusations. I too lived in Sydney in an attic room and toyed with the idea of studying fashion design. The house Fern visits in Kettering, Tasmania, is a house I lived in for six years. These are factual truths and easily identified by those who know. There are other true events in the story that are not so easily identified as fact. The memories of childhood that I give Fern are all my own, as are the dreams and visions she has. Otherwise, the characters and events are fictional. Although fact and fiction are woven together throughout Flight, the themes are personal to me, as is Fern's psychological and spiritual journey. These are my truths, but they are also universal truths, referring back to a long tradition of storytelling that begins with humanity's first storytellers, the unnamed shamans, moves through ancient myth, to Dante's Inferno (14th Century 2006), Goethe's Faust (1976), Hesse's, Steppenwolf (1927 1982), Le Guin's Earthsea (1993) books and Murakami's Kafka On The Shore (2005), to name but a few. For as the great poet and Sufi master, Rumi once wrote, 'a tale, fictitious or otherwise, illuminates truth' (Shah 1964, p. 13).
In *The Western Dreaming* (2001), John Carroll, in asking what truth is, looks at the roots of the word. 'When the Greeks designated truth by their word aleitheia, they built in a narrative. Truth is that which is a-lethe, not lethe, Lethe being the place of oblivion or forgetfulness, later the river running through the underworld. To drink the waters of this river was to extinguish memory. Oblivion is thus the natural human state, one in which individuals have forgotten what they know' (2001, p. 4). Carroll then makes a further connection, one that is vital in an age where post-modernism would deny the validity of truth. 'Moreover,' he writes, 'as English has picked up, to be without Truth is lethal, death in life, its condition that of lethargy, a weariness of spirit in which all vitality has drained away' (2001, p. 4). This is the condition that Fern is in as the novel opens. She has forgotten so much and lost so much of herself, that there is very little vitality left and Shamesh warns her: 'If you do not take this journey you will die' (Dub 2011, p. 70).

A post modernist might say that it isn't possible to define truth, or at least that there are multiple truths. As Nietzsche wrote, 'What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms which after long usage, seems to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten they are illusions' (1909 173-188). So truth is not fixed, but instead changes according to who is telling it and the context in which it is told. It changes too, according to the unique collection of filters each individual applies to their reading of a text. As Walter Truett-Anderson writes in *The Truth About Truth*, 'truth is made rather than found' (1995, p. 8). Yet below this slippery world of relative readings, I believe, like Campbell, that there is another world, a more stable one of universal truths and themes. Not tribal or dogmatic 'truths' that are socially constructed and create divisions but truths which are beyond divisions, beyond polarities. This, for me, is where truth lies. As a writer I can only approach it through metaphor, story itself being a metaphor for the journey of the soul, the journey to that truth which is beyond language. It is a journey that must be taken over and over. Factual truth has little bearing on this journey, which involves a seeing through of ideology, as well as the acceptance and subsequent release of constructed psychological truths, in order to receive a remembering of something deeper and more sustaining. At the end of *Flight*, Fern becomes a patterner, and in so doing is able to step beyond constructed truths and perceive once again a vital universal truth that enables
connection and harmony and the innate knowledge that everything is one.

If there are truths which are absolute, there are also an indefinite number and colourful variety of paths to these truths. As Campbell warned, it is dangerous to believe in the paths as truths in themselves, creating dogmatic 'isms' that limit our perception and more often than not, cause great divisions (1988). Post modernity liberates us from dogma, which insists that the path itself is the only way to an inaccessible truth, that establishes twists and turns and dead ends to keep the masses away from this profound realisation that the path is constructed, it is a map, not the truth itself. In contrast, the journey of the soul is an individual and a universal journey, each person finding their own way, with their own unique signposts to guide them. The path is not important, as Cassie tells Fern in the novel. Fern's journey is not one any other character could take because it arose from her need to heal. Like each of us, Fern has her own individual stories to deconstruct; stories that have arisen from a multitude of factors: genetic, experiential, environmental, historical and cultural.

Much of our media celebrates violence and cynicism, anger and betrayal. A premium, it seems, is placed on ugliness, and stories that 'tell it how it is' receive accolades from critics. When I began writing *Flight*, I too was 'telling it how it is', depicting a dysfunctional character in a dysfunctional and disintegrating society. The world I created for Fern was a weary one, pessimistic and dark. However, as the story progressed and Fern discovered the existence of a metaphysical world, a note of optimism began to creep in and I found myself tending more towards telling it 'how it might be'. There are risks involved in this: the risk of putting one's head in the sand in order to hide from the truth; and the risk of being ridiculed, because words such as love, heart, empathy, compassion and soul, are so often labelled sentimental and derided in our society. And yet it is in the journey of the soul, in learning how to love and in discovering the capacity for compassion, that Fern remembers her self and in so doing, finds truth. Fern's journey is both actual and metaphorical. It is a journey into her self, plumbing the depths of her memory and retrieving what has been lost in order to become whole. It is a journey of remembering. A journey of the imagination. A journey to truth. And ultimately to a vital and connected life.
In this chapter I have discussed the processes involved in the writing of *Flight*, as well as explored the nature of truth and the function of memory and imagination in the creative process. The next chapter begins an exploration of the nature of myth and an analysis of the mythic and fairytale elements I used in *Flight*. 
Chapter Three Mythic Stories

'A myth is a story that is true on the inside but not the outside.'

(Campbell 1988, p. 5)

What are Myths?

After having examined the initial stages of the creative process, I considered the uses that myths might have for story. It was difficult to find a single theory that could satisfactorily explain the structure and the function of story in a way that related to the processes and the outcomes of my own writing. In the writing of Flight, I used mythic elements, drawing from both the content and the patterns of ancient stories. It is myth that forms the basis of most cultures' storytelling and as such has multiple functions that transcend mere entertainment. For me, myth contains vital truths and yet in our modern world, myth has come to be defined as something untrue, as seen in our phrase, 'exploding the myth'. As Karen Armstrong writes, 'we have developed a scientific view of history; we are concerned with what actually happened. But in the pre-modern world, when people wrote about the past they were more concerned with what an event had meant' (2005, p. 7). In our modern tendency to confuse fact with truth we are in danger of losing meaning. 'A myth is true,' says Armstrong, 'because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information. If it does not give us new insight into the deeper meaning of life, it has failed' (2005, p. 10).

In an effort to determine how I might use myth to give this deeper meaning to my novel, I searched for a definition of myth that I could relate to contemporary stories, and that would help me to understand my own writing, the commonalities between stories and the purpose of story itself. My reading began with structural narrative theorists but I soon found that most were attempting to apply a scientific analysis to a process that by its very nature resisted this analysis.

In his classic work, Morphology of the Folk Tale (1968), Vladimir Propp argued that despite surface differences it was possible to identify clear commonalities in the structure of folk tales. Yet, Propp studied his texts in isolation, disregarding their cultural context and was content to simply note the similarities between stories, rather than
attempt any interpretation as he believed that thematic interpretation was too subjective.

Taking a different approach in *The Structural Study of Myth* (1996), Claude Levi-Strauss stated that the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (1966, p. 105). For Levi-Strauss, myth was integrative, in that it helped balance opposing ideas and soothe contradictions between belief and experience.

Religious historian, Mercea Eliade was more concerned with the meaning and purpose of myths. He believed that myth helped to explain the world and to justify human existence, but its ultimate function was religious in that it brought one closer to God. Eliade studied myth, not as a fable or fiction, but as archaic societies saw it, as a true story that 'supplies models for human behaviour and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life' (Eliade 1964, p. 2).

These structural theorists went some way towards explaining myth, however their theories were too limited for me: at best their analysis extended to a consideration of cultural and social factors; at worst they measured and defined with no attempt to interpret, insisting on objectivity and believing they could make a science of story.

In *The Artists Way* (1995), Julie Cameron writes that 'creativity cannot be comfortably quantified in intellectual terms' (p. 132), while Catherine Ann Jones believes that 'to write from one part of your self, the logical mind, results in a fragmented story as well as a fragmented life' (2007, p. 169). Certainly for me the writing of *Flight* was not an intellectual process and therefore cannot be fully explained intellectually. In any analysis there must also be an understanding of the intuitive process or the mystery behind creativity.

Still seeking a satisfying narrative theory, I turned to post-structuralist theories of narrative and discovered a focus on difference rather than commonality. Post-structuralist interpretation is an effective method of breaking free of dogma. It is a blowing apart of old structures, a revealing of differences. At once, playful and serious, it plays the archetypal role of the fool or trickster (who embraces both wisdom and mischief), breaking through stereotypes and making strange what we often accept as normal. It also gives power and some autonomy to the individual, exposing dogmatic thought and institutions and therefore encouraging individuals to seek their own
meanings. If it is true, as Walter Truett-Anderson writes, that 'reality is socially constructed' (1995, p. 8), then post-structuralism becomes a liberating force, allowing us to accept all aspects of our selves, rather than squeeze into the one or two culturally acceptable and rigid forms, which inevitably cause repression and neuroses. In this context, the ideas of different ideologies can be accepted, not as mutually exclusive, but as inclusive.

At first, post-structuralist theories seemed appropriate for an analysis of *Flight*. In the novel, Fern had begun to see through the social and cultural structures that she inhabited. Her childhood was a religious one but she has turned away from the hypocrisies she perceived in the church. She'd left her job, her fashion design course and her family, knowing that they weren't right for her yet not knowing where else she could go. Instead she locked herself into her attic and waited until the time was right for her to embark on her own soul journey, following a path whose signposts are for her alone. However, post-structural analysis tends to deny the very existence of a single 'essential' self. According to Norman Denzin, 'people are constructed by the stories they tell... Material social conditions, discourses and narrative practices interweave to shape the self and its many identities' (2000, p. xi). Although in many ways I agree with these ideas, I would prefer to argue that we are not an essential self, or a constructed self, but paradoxically, both. In *Flight*, Fern's journey involved the discarding of constructed selves in order to reveal an essential self and gain the wisdom to understand that in the end 'it doesn't matter which path you choose, they all take you to the same place. Back to yourself' (Dub 2011, p.101).

There were other problems with taking a post-structuralist position, which argues that there are no universal truths, only various and ever changing constructions of reality (Truett Anderson 1995), and criticises the closure that is built into narrative, believing that stories reinforce restrictive meta-narratives,. This was a term first coined by Lyotard to describe those stories with mythic proportions, stories that are big enough to link all strands of society and create a strong directive thread (Lyotard 1984). This rang a warning bell for me, because although I accept that at one level stories are about conformity, I also believe that on another level they encourage true individuality. Once again, I found myself needing to embrace the paradoxical notion that these ideas do not
need to be mutually exclusive - not either or, but both.

The ultimate outcome of post-structuralist thinking seemed to me problematic, for if we have no essence and there are no universal truths, only relative truths, then certainly we can celebrate difference, we can agree not to fight over conflicting cultural stories, but ultimately we are alone, separated from each other and from the rest of nature. Inevitably this position leads to an existential crisis in which there is no truth, no value, no purpose, no depth, no meaning and no self.

Whilst accepting that truth is more fluid than many of us want to believe and that social structures and the limitations of language create artificial truths, I also believe that there are essential truths, just as there are essential commonalities between people. Like Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), I see myths as sacred stories which resolve contradictions and act as guides to life. Like Campbell (1968), I believe myths help to rebalance individuals, not in order to fit mindlessly within a social framework but in order for them to function autonomously. I was interested in mythic structure and the purpose of myth, in relation to the way in which I was using myth in my own novel, through the use of mythic references and in the very structure of the story. This meant that for the purposes of this exegesis, I needed to take a predominantly structuralist position, but one that both celebrates difference and explores commonalities. This position resonated with a major theme of the novel, which also explores the essentiality that lies underneath everyday events. It also fitted comfortably with my belief that in fiction (and in particular, heroic myth), the outer journey changes but the inner journey does not.

In seeking a definition of myth, I found many. Jung wrote that 'myth is more individual and expresses life more precisely than does science. Science works with the concepts of averages which are far too general to do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life' (1967, p. 3). In The Mythic Journey, Jungian psychologists, Liz Greene and Juliet Sharman-Burke write that 'myths have the mysterious capacity to contain and communicate paradoxes, allowing us to see through, around and over the dilemma to the heart of the matter' (2000, p. 8). Mythologist, Joseph Campbell writes that 'myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation' (1968, p. 3). While Christopher Vogler applied definitions of myth to contemporary stories, insisting that all stories are sacred, all have the capacity to heal
and all mirror the structure of their larger counterparts, the mythic heroic stories.

I found myself particularly drawn to Campbell's and Vogler's writings on the heroic myth. Their ideas resonated with me and I could relate them to my own experience as a reader, writer and teacher of writing. Campbell not only identified a common pattern in mythic structure but also interpreted what this pattern meant, socially, psychologically and to a certain extent, spiritually. Vogler both simplified and developed Campbell's work, in 'order to map the elusive borderlands between myth and modern storytelling' (Vogler 1998, p. xxvii). These maps of mythic structure are further explored in the following chapter.

Campbell was very much a structuralist because he examined the structure of stories, seeking an essential commonality across time and space, yet he also celebrated difference, reveling in the extraordinary array of cultural costumes (Campbell 1988, p. 11). His theories identify, illuminate and break free of the dogma implicit in cultural meta-narratives, such as religion and science. Whilst accepting (like Barthes) that mythology is a control system, which provides a social framework for society, Campbell's emphasis on metaphor and more poetic connotative readings of myth, rather than literal interpretations, allows for a psychological and metaphysical reading of myth which maps individual development.

Of all stories, Campbell believes it is the myth that speaks to us most strongly. And of all myths it is the universal story of the quest to find the essence of self, that appeals most to a modern day humanity in search of meaning in a world where meaning and identity has moved its focus from the group to the individual (Campbell 1988, p. 139). In the past, and primarily for survival purposes, the individual was first and foremost a part of society. Exile was a life-threatening break with existence and therefore the worst possible punishment. Yet exile (physical or psychological), is also the necessary first step on the heroic quest, a breaking free of the known or ordinary world and a stepping into the unknown. In the opening to Flight, Fern has unknowingly taken the first step in the quest, exiling herself from family and society.

The reward for this quest is self-knowledge, but the true hero will also ultimately return to society bringing back that which he/she has learned, and thus enriching the community. However, unlike fairy tales, which almost invariably finish with a version of
'and they lived happily ever after', myths embrace the possibility of tragedy and change. In myth, endings are not fixed and new quests are often necessary, the hero may die on his quest, or like Gilgamesh, return triumphant from the Underworld, only to have the elixir for eternal life slip through his fingers. Sometimes the hero may find that the metaphorical gold he or she found, has turned to dust, or like Buddha, he or she may return with their treasure, only to be faced with the difficult task of telling a story that is beyond words. In *Flight*, Fern is given information, allies and tools that she must integrate and begin to use, in order to overcome the obstacles and dangers. In the end, Fern uses these rewards well and returns to society carrying this metaphorical gold. In finding her path and in becoming a healer she is able to use these rewards to enrich her own life and the lives of those around her.

The use of Myth and Fairy Tale in Flight

According to Steven Swann Jones in *The Fairytale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination* (1995), 'the objective of the myth is oneness with the divine . . .The objective of the legendary quest is social harmony. . . and the objective of the fairytale quest is personal happiness' (1995, p. 16). So if, on one level, myths are the mega stories that societies tell about themselves, then fairy tales are the micro stories. Fairy tales address everyday problems in a fantastical way, giving a nudge to a child unwilling to move on to the next stage of life, providing guidelines for understanding the dangers one faces in life (Red Riding Hood) and exploring notions of good and evil. With their emphasis on moral behaviour and rewards, fairy tales both define the world and hint at the possibilities of breaking free of those definitions. Characters, such as Bluebeard's wife are both punished and rewarded for breaking the rules. In *The Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (1994), Marina Warner writes that fairy tales 'offer a way of putting questions, of testing the structure as well as guaranteeing its safety, of thinking up alternatives as well as living daily reality in an examined way' (1994, p. 411). Perhaps then, fairy tales are a way for us to understand and accept the paradoxes of life, small pointers to the lessons which are able to be learned through myth.

There are a number of references to both myth and fairy tale in *Flight*, most of which were not consciously intended on my part, only recognised by me when they
appeared, revealing how much my personal history is steeped in the stories and religion of my childhood. In the first draft of *Flight*, I signaled the use of these references as they arose but during a later edit, decided to cut out these signals, allowing the reader to identify the references themselves if they so wish.

Initiation is a common element in both myths and fairy tales. Jones writes that in the myth, the initiation is a spiritual one, whilst in the fairytale, the initiation is 'into a greater awareness of one's own desires and fears' (1995, p. 16). I would argue that it isn't necessary to distinguish between them in this way, as the fairytale initiation is a necessary part of the spiritual initiation. In *Flight*, Fern must face her fears in order to be initiated into the spiritual world. And indeed, in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), Bruno Bettelheim writes that myths and fairy tales 'derive from or give symbolic expression to initiation rites or other rites de passage such as a metaphoric death of an old, inadequate self, in order to be born on a higher plane of existence' (1976, p. 35). In *Flight*, Fern is undergoing an initiation as she is forced to let go of her old way of being, in a sense dying to her old self, in order to find a new way of living. This is an initiation of the soul but it can also be read as simply a rite of passage from one stage of life to the next, a coming of age.

Marina Warner writes that 'shape shifting is one of fairy tale's dominant and characteristic wonders' (1994, p. xv). There is much slippage between fairy tale and myth where shape shifting is a common element, the gods and goddesses frequently shifting form in order to confuse and dazzle humanity. Shape shifting is also an integral part of shamanism, with shamans sometimes transforming themselves into creatures in order to traverse the underworld. Shape shifting plays an integral role in *Flight*, with Fern at one stage slipping inside the skin of a bear, then later, growing wings and perceiving herself flying. The novel also contains shape shifting in the form of slippage between lifetimes, with both Fern and Eric maintaining their essence and their enmity whilst regularly shifting costumes. (See Chapter Five for an exploration of the archetype of the shape shifter in *Flight.*

Aside from these general themes of initiation and shape shifting, there are also references to three well known fairy tales. The attic is a reference to Rapunzel, a fairy tale usually attributed to the Brothers Grimm, though Warner attributes it to a much
earlier fairy tale of 1697 by Charlotte-Rose de La Force (Warner 1994, p. 222). It tells the tale of a child who is taken away from her parents at birth and then at the age of twelve, locked in a tower by a witch. A prince tries to rescue her and is blinded by the witch. Rapunzel is then cast into the forest where she wanders until the prince hears her singing and they are reunited, Rapunzel's tears bringing back the princes' sight.

There are some parallels between Fern and Rapunzel. Fern is a reluctant soul, not wishing to inhabit her body or this world, so in a sense, the tower, or attic in her case, is Fern's attempt to escape (Dub, 2011 p. 17). Paradoxically, Fern is also a prisoner. She might have chosen to stay in the attic but she is still trapped, held prisoner by herself.

Bettelheim explains Rapunzel as 'the story of a pubertal girl and of a jealous mother who tries to prevent her from gaining independence' (1976, p. 16). One of the numerous battles Fern must face in the story is an attempt to overturn her dependence on her mother. Though in the case of her adopted parents, Fern's true battle is with her sickly father because he is the one who would go to any lengths to make Fern conform to his world.

In a sense, Eric, as Bettelheim suggests, might represent the prince in Rapunzel (1976). Fern's desire for a fairytale ending temporarily blinds her to her father's true nature. Fern finds it difficult to believe that her father could want her dead. And when she finally meets him she remembers 'the fantasies she'd had as a child, the way she'd always imagined she was really a character from a fairytale, a princess, set adrift and rescued by a childless couple' (Dub 2011, p.312 ).

Rapunzel must literally let her hair down in order to find a new life. Fern is chased from her attic but she too must embrace life, and it is Adam, her true prince, who helps ground Fern and teaches her to live. In a sense, Adam too is blinded in the novel. He can't see what Fern can see, he can't look into minds or enter her dreams. Instead he must trust her and his own role in the story.

In Fern's penchant for sleep, there is a reference to Perrault's Sleeping Beauty. Bettelheim writes that Sleeping Beauty is the classic coming of age story, reminding us 'that a long period of quiescence, of contemplation, of concentration on the self, can and often does lead to the highest achievement' (1976, p. 226). In our modern world this has largely been forgotten and withdrawal from life is viewed with suspicion. After spending
months in solitude, Fern prematurely re-enters the world only to be forced into solitude again, this time in the psychiatric ward where she has been placed because her mother and society in general, misguidedly interpret her symptoms as an illness that must be treated, rather than as the welcome first steps in an initiatory process.

Bettelheim describes Sleeping Beauty as a tale of sexual awakening, as indeed it is. But Fern doesn't fall asleep in puberty, while waiting to find her prince who will awaken her. Fern has been asleep all her life (Dub 2011, p. 86) and her awakening doesn't come at puberty but when she is called to an adventure. Fern must reawaken sexually, as she does with Adam, but it is her whole libido that must awaken, not just its sexual aspect. Fern has used sleep as a way of seeking safety and escaping life, but in the psychiatric ward, sleep suddenly becomes dangerous when something begins reaching into her dreams. It isn't a man that Fern needs to bring her back to life, but it is the masculine. Fern is out of balance, overtaken by the shadow side of her feminine aspect and terrified of the masculine. Her journey is to seek balance. In a sense the prince is simply a part of herself, the active masculine side that she must embrace.

A reference to Cinderella is made when Fern is dressing for dinner in her father's house and slips on the stiletto shoes her father has selected for her. Warner attributes the original version of Cinderella to a Chinese story over a thousand years old which has its roots in the tradition of foot binding (1994, p. 203). Bettelheim suggests that the slipper in Cinderella is a symbol of the vagina (1976). Perhaps that is the case, but in Flight, I have used the shoe as a symbol of power, the power of a man over a woman, which in itself can be interpreted sexually. Fern tries the shoes on and to her surprise they fit almost perfectly. This suggests that Eric is Fern's prince, something that almost becomes the case, when he later attempts to seduce her. Fern obediently wears the shoes but can hardly walk in them. The stiletto heels are crippling for her, sending her off balance, which is exactly what Eric hopes to achieve. Later, after rejecting her father, Fern kicks the shoes off and frees herself from his influence.

Fern falls down the steps and descends into the underworld (Dub 2011, p. 47), just as the shamans do in order to retrieve souls, and as Lewis Carroll's Alice did when she fell down a rabbit hole and found herself in Wonderland. Like Alice, Fern finds that this world is very different from her own, with a new set of rules that are not entirely
rational and which she must learn in order to find her way.

Mythic references are also scattered throughout Flight, including references to religious mythology. The first reference was a conscious one. I wanted a Cassandra in the novel, a wise woman who was not believed. In Flight, Cassie and Hector represent Cassandra and her twin brother Helenus in Greek myth. As children they were left overnight at Apollo's temple, where serpents licked their ears, endowing them with the power of prophecy. Later, Apollo fell in love with Cassandra, who turned him down, igniting his wrath. Cursed by Apollo, Cassandra found that although her prophecies were true, they were not believed. Cassandra and Helenus share the power of prophecy, but their skills and methods are different. For Cassandra the prophecy is received intuitively, a force that takes her over. Helenus reads signs and portents in the things around him in the natural world, for example, the shape of clouds or the flight of a bird.

In Flight, Cassie and Hector also have different ways of approaching the same talent. Like Cassandra, Cassie is overcome by the knowledge she receives and is disbelieved by others, whilst Hector is a meteorologist, using computers and satellites to forecast the weather (Dub 2011, p. 108). In a sense, Cassie and Hector represent the extremes of the right and left brain modes, or intuitive and intellectual thought. Together they maintain a vital balance.

The Babylonian myth of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu is referenced in the novel, though I only realised the parallels later in the writing process. Enkidu is formed out of clay by the gods and intended to be a rival who will bring down the arrogant Gilgamesh. Instead, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends and fight many battles together, before Enkidu is killed and a shocked and grieving Gilgamesh goes looking for the key to immortality. In my novel, it appears at first that Adam is Gilgamesh and his brother Michael, is Enkidu. Adam is strong and a fighter, with the characteristics of Gilgamesh. His brother is a gentle man, connected to nature, but he is closer to an angel than a clay man, he is a healer and a source of light, his name a reference to Archangel Michael.

Adam means 'of the earth' and when he returns to Tasmania it is the wilderness that heals him. In the first draft of Flight, Adam (like Enkidu) was killed, though in Adam's case it was while he fought to stop old growth logging in the Florentine. Under
pressure from readers, I changed the end, allowing Adam to live. It was only in a later
draft that I realised that Adam had become Enkidu and Fern become Gilgamesh, seeking
the key to immortality, or at least to life.

In *Flight*, the labyrinth is represented by the wilderness and is predominantly a
reference to the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, although the Hansel and
Gretel fairytale carries the same theme. In the Greek myth, Theseus must enter the
labyrinth and slay the Minotaur. Although he has the courage to attempt this he does not
have the means, and it is Ariadne who gives him a ball of string to help him find his way
back out again. This is paralleled in my novel, when Adam leads Fern in and out of the
labyrinth.

Eric is not the devil, if anything he is simply one aspect of Ahriman or Satan, who
unlike hot blooded Lucifer, represents the coldness associated with extremes of scientific
materialism, the tendency to accept that reality is purely quantitative, not qualitative.
According to Robert Mason, in his essay called 'The Advent of Ahriman', his is the spirit
of untruth, 'promoting intelligence and science whilst opposing increased
consciousness. . . On the emotional level . . . he inspires fear, hatred, lust for power and
destructive sex impulses. On the mental level, he inspires rigid automatic thinking,' by
which Mason means literal thinking and purely denotative language (Mason 2006). This
Ahrimanic force only becomes evil when it is excessive. In Eric it has become excessive.

In *Flight*, there is a reference to a classic theme in mythology (such as in the
Greek myth of Orion and Oenopion), of the father who seeks to possess his daughter
and in the process destroys his daughter's lover. There are hints in *Flight* that Fern and
Adam have known each other intimately in previous lives. They are drawn to each other
but also wary of an unknown danger. It is only towards the end that Fern gets a glimpse
of Adam in another life being tortured while she is forced to watch, and understands that
Adam has more than once been a victim of the enmity between her and Eric.

Eric, who is obsessed with power and whose ego is seriously inflated, offers Fern
three temptations: lust, power and money. Fern is tempted and almost succumbs, but the
thought of Adam, gives her back the focus she needs to reject her father. It is only then
that she sees Eric clearly for the first time and realises what possesses him (Dub 2011, p.
320).
There are references to Goethe's, *Faust* in my novel. Many lifetimes ago, Eric sold his soul, allowing the Ahrimanic aspect to work through him. As Liz Greene and Juliet Sharman-Burke write in *The Mythic Journey*, 'power corrupts, a fact no less true on the spiritual plane than on the material one' (2000, p. 254). Eric's power turns into arrogance and hubris, which eventually brings him down. Faust is redeemed by his remorse but Eric is beyond remorse, he has been eaten away inside, his heart withered.

The age old battle between good and evil is played out over lifetimes between Eric and Fern. It is Fern's path to oppose the spirit that her father represents. But in order to succeed she must first open her heart and make herself vulnerable, and second, she must accept the aspects of herself that are like her father. Accept rather than resist. It is only then that she can defeat him.

When Fern and Adam leave Eric's house, there is a reference to the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus descends to the underworld to rescue his beloved, only to lose her again at the last moment when he can't resist looking behind him. In *Flight*, Adam is about to turn around and look back at the house but Fern stops him (Dub 2011, p. 348). Moments later, wanting one last look, Adam does turn around and in so doing leaves a part of himself behind (Dub 2011, p. 349). This is a closing reference in the novel and one of a number of elements left open for a sequel to *Flight*.

**The Role of the Curse/Prophecy**

Curses, or inherited patterns of behaviour are themes that appear in all three of my novels. In *Nowhere Man*, Ivan is psychologically trapped within patterns that he repeats over and again. In *Gathering Storm*, four generations of women have been trapped by a Romany curse, though in actual terms they are trapped in inherited patterns of behaviour. In *Flight*, the idea of the curse is explored in mythic terms, in relation to the classic pattern of heroic myths, identified by Otto Rank, a disciple of Freud (Rank 1909).

I did not set out with the idea of writing about a curse, instead it arose about halfway through the novel when I stopped what I was writing and wrote the prologue in a different voice and with an explanation of Fern's origins. Fern is born to a powerful man, her birth is accompanied by a prophecy, she is abandoned and brought up by strangers, unaware of her identity. Myths such as Oedipus and Perseus explore the
journey of the child (usually the son) to the father. This is generally an arduous journey, involving great dangers, but the greatest danger lies in the meeting with the father, who may or may not deem the child fit to accept. In myth, the child, if ready for the confrontation, generally brings about the death of the father, often without being aware of their father's identity. This is retribution for the father's unnatural desire to halt change. It is only natural for the child to step into the father's shoes in adulthood, or on a cultural scale, for a new king to step into the shoes of the old king. When this potential is denied by the father then the cycles of life have been denied and stagnation sets in. It is the child's role to force change.

Initially I felt there was a problem in the fact that I had a female protagonist, a daughter seeking her father, but eventually I found the solution in the Jungian idea of the masculine and feminine, or anima and animus, which was drawn from ancient Chinese philosophy and symbolised by the Yin and Yang (Jung 1967). This suggests that each of us needs a balance of the masculine and the feminine in order to live healthy lives. Fern is missing the masculine, active part of herself that is able to function out in the world. Unlike most heroes in myth, Fern has two fathers to contend with, both of whom are resistant to change and both of whom seek to maintain power over her. In this life, Richard has silenced Fern, making her afraid of her power. But it is Eric who represents the greatest danger. Eric who she must seek out and face down in order to awaken the masculine, active part of herself.

Freud concentrated on the early psychic development of his patients believing that we unconsciously repress material from our conscious mind, particularly in relation to sexual desires, hence his famous Oedipal complex (Stevens 1990). On the surface this would appear to sit comfortably with a reading of *Flight*, however I found Freud's theories too limited to apply to my novel for a number of reasons, only one of which I will explore here. I agree with Jung, who rejected Freud's idea that libido was purely sexual and instead posited the theory that the libido was psychic energy that manifested in various forms, including sexual energy (Stevens 1990). Although there is incestuous desire between Eric and his daughter, Fern, this desire is not repressed from early childhood but from the accumulation of many past lives. There are certainly issues in Fern's life from her early childhood and although they may have had an impact on her
sexuality they are not sexually based.

Like Freud, Otto Rank was interested in early psychic development but concentrated on the birth and childhood of the heroes in myth. I found his work useful in relation to the analysis of my novel as there were many parallels between my story and his analysis of myth. In *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909), Otto Rank identified a common pattern of events in the life of heroes. The hero is usually a child of distinguished or powerful parents, and a prophecy usually accompanies his or her birth, warning that the child will cause the death of the father. Sometimes the father attempts to kill the baby, always to no avail. The baby is then put in a box and set adrift in the water before being saved by animals or people of low birth and brought up by them, unaware of his/her origins. At some point the hero must go on a quest in search of his/her origins and take revenge on the father before being acknowledged by the people (Rank 1909).

For the most part, *Flight* follows Rank's pattern of heroic myth. In the opening pages, Simple Simon, a gardener in the Botanical Gardens, utters a prophecy, saying that Fern would cause the death of her father. The prophecy quickly becomes a curse as Fern's father, Eric, responds by trying unsuccessfully to kill his unborn daughter, the prophecy eating 'away at him, turning him into its slave' (Dub 2011, p. 6).

Although the curse is delivered to Fern and her mother, it is directed at the father. Fern is simply the arrow, charged with delivering the curse. Eric is a powerful man, born with great gifts, but he has abused these gifts and this is a crime for which he must pay. There is no humility in Eric, no respect for life, no compassion and no humanity. But there is pride. As always it is hubris which activates the curse.

Liz Greene identifies a number of features that appear consistently in myths about family curses. According to her, the curse is usually linked with the abuse of children in a pattern that repeats itself through generations. 'Each generation has the opportunity to reverse or transform the curse by perceiving and acknowledging the pattern of destructiveness and transcending it, but fails to do so because the individual cannot resist indulging in fear, greed, anger, or the desire for personal vengeance' (1999). Instead, the individual responds instinctively, refusing to acknowledge the pattern or take responsibility and transform it.
So, as Greene states, a curse can run its patterns through generations, both inherited genetically and taught through the behaviour of the parents. This is something I had already explored in *Gathering Storm*, but in *Flight* I looked at patterns of behaviour that have been repeated through many lives, ideas that are expounded by Jungian psychotherapist, Roger Woolger, who suggests that childbirth triggers karmic residue and the choice of parents reinforces the patterns from one life to the next until the person is finally able to break free of that pattern (Woolger, 1998). This is exactly what happens to Fern who finds herself abandoned at birth, threatened fundamentally by her birth father and psychologically abused by her adopted father, so that she carries a heavy burden of guilt and grief that parallels the burdens she carries from past lives.

Woolger wrote of 'patterns in remembered lives' (1988, p. 20), explaining that they can become compounded into a repetitive cycle of hatred and revenge, the players 'drawn to each other karmically' in roles from which they cannot escape (1988, p. 226). Fern and Eric are caught in a destructive pattern that has persisted for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, and which always involves an abuse of power and some form of injury to a child. In this life, Fern is once again given the opportunity to break free of that pattern. Through the course of the story, Fern is forced to face memories from a number of lives, but it is not the stories of these lives that are important for Fern's transformation. As the Bear Handler tells her, 'only the patterns matter, for it is in those that you will see the places that you are caught, repeating yourself, lifetime after lifetime' (Dub 2011, p. 207).

In an email responding to a reading of *Flight*, Teresita White pointed out the parallels between Greene's analysis of the family curse and the events in *Flight*. 'Paradoxically,' she wrote, 'any attempt to cheat the prophecy usually results in its fulfilment' (T White 2010, email 16 August). Eric tries to destroy his own daughter, which results in her mother hiding Fern from him, by having her adopted and not putting his name on her birth certificate. His violent attempt to kill Fern, results in the shutting down of her psyche, so she does not know who she really is. When Eric seeks Fern out he unwittingly awakens her spirit and bit by bit, her memory. When he attempts to frighten her, he awakens her courage. When he draws Fern to himself he unwittingly invites destruction into what he believes is impregnable. When Eric shows contempt for
Adam and his qualities, he sabotages his seduction of Fern. And when he causes another's death, believing he can sabotage the prophecy, he provokes the final confrontation in which he is destroyed. (White, T 2010, email 16 August). Although Eric is not dead at the end of *Flight*, he is hovering on the border of life and death and his power is spent.

For Fern, the prophecy is a blessing as it gives her an opportunity to free herself from a pattern of behaviour she has become enmeshed in, to find the courage to become a fully conscious individual and rediscover the gifts she had turned away from. In the end, following Ranks patterns of heroic myth, Eric is crushed and Fern is liberated.

As described in this chapter, *Flight* contains a number of elements from fairy tales and myth, some of which are obvious to the reader and others which are more hidden. However, the novel also mirrors in many ways the classic structure of heroic myth, which is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter Four - Mythic Structure - of Heroes and Journeys

'The Hero's Journey is not an invention, but an observation. It is a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world.'

(Vogler 1998, p. ix)

Three-fold Structure

Whilst sifting through definitions of myth and analysing the use of mythic references in *Flight*, I realised that I needed to go further and explore something even more fundamental to myth than themes and motifs. I needed to explore their structure. As Campbell asserted, stories wear countless costumes yet there is a fundamental commonality between them. Over time the costumes of stories have changed and certainly in western culture, stories are presented in a more complicated way than they once were. Frequent jumping between scenes and characters, and the juggling of time elements in plots presupposes a sophisticated audience with highly developed decoding skills. However, according to Vogler, the fundamental structure of stories hasn't changed. Though sometimes more difficult to identify, there is still a three-fold structure in story, as well as the basic components of change and conflict (Vogler 2007). No matter how sophisticated our storytelling has become there remains a basic structure to storytelling that can be traced right back to the earliest stories - and by implication, to blueprints of humanity's common psychology.

Although the terms they use are different, many narrative theorists refer to a three-part structure in story: beginning, middle and end; set-up, confrontation, resolution; and Todorov's, status quo, change, new status quo (Todorov 1977). Jung's theory of the process of individuation; ego, soul, self (cited in Stevens 1990), mirrors in many ways the basic structure of narrative, as does Eliade's map of shamanic journeying; middle world, underworld, upper world (Eliade 1964). In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell identified three major stages within the structure of stories - Separation, Initiation and Return - 'separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return' (Campbell 1968, p. 35). Campbell linked these stages closely to the world of spirit and ritual, while Vogler labelled them
Preparation, Journey, Return, recognising the potential for these stages to include a broader and more contemporary range of stories (Vogler 1998).

According to Vogler, most narratives mirror the heroic journey, in that the protagonist is forced out or willingly leaves their ordinary world and must undergo a series of adventures in order to attain a new status. The second stage of the journey involves accepting change, stepping into the abyss with no idea what lies ahead. Risks are taken and if successful there is a reward of some kind. The third stage involves returning to the ordinary world understanding and integrating the reward and using it as is appropriate. A new status quo is reached and the hero has changed in some way (Vogler 1998).

The plot of Flight is a linear one, the time line covering the space of a few weeks. There is a clear three-fold structure within the novel. In the beginning Fern has trapped herself in the attic and in so doing, separated herself from the world. The middle is an initiation of sorts, with Fern forced to undergo a journey and to confront her demons. The end is a resolution or a return but it is not circular. Fern is a different person than she was at the beginning and she will never return to the physical or psychological space that she left in order to undertake her journey. Instead she returns to the potential of a life well lived.

However, the structure in Flight is not as simple as the linear unfolding of the outer plot would suggest. The story reaches back across lifetimes and there are layers of themes and patterns that motivate both the plot and the characters. Information is fed into the story in the form of flashbacks and musings that explain Fern's early life and provide motivation for her actions as well as triggers for her development. There are also visions and dreams which are triggered mainly from past life memories and provide a building undercurrent of tension, as well as providing flashes of insight to guide Fern in her journey to release herself from the past and learn how to live again.

Within the three part structure there is inevitably a theory of progress towards a goal, but this is not a closure or end itself, rather it is only one of an endless series of journeys in a perpetual evolutionary process. In the novel, Fern progresses towards a goal, or more accurately, towards a number of goals. Fern is seeking her father, seeking to hunt the hunter and survive. That is the external story, the plot. But she is also seeking
to heal herself, to find her place and to live well. These are inner goals, relating to her own development. At the beginning she is unaware of her inner goals, knowing only that she is unwell and that things cannot continue as they have been. It is only through the outer journey that she is able to understand and achieve her inner goals.

At the end, Fern has finished an adventure but is about to start another, the adventure of childbirth and of living within a loving relationship. But eventually the wheel of fortune will turn once again and reluctantly or not, in the sequel to Flight, Fern will undertake another adventure. The universal theme of death and resurrection, of the natural ever-changing cycles of life, does not allow for stagnation. As Carol Pearson writes in *Awakening The Heroes Within*, ‘as soon as we return from one journey and enter a new phase of our lives, we are immediately propelled into a new sort of journey; the pattern is not linear or circular but spiral’ (1991, p. 3). The ability to accept and adapt to change is fundamental to all evolutionary processes, and thus this theme not only appears in the content of stories and myths throughout history and across cultures, but is written into their very structure.

*The Stages of the Adventure*

According to Campbell, the three stages of story, Separation, Initiation and Return, can be found in most heroic myths, many contemporary stories, and in the journeys of mystics, shamans and sages throughout time and space. Within each major stage Campbell identified a number of common elements. Separation includes: the Call to Adventure; Refusal of the Call; Supernatural Aid; the Crossing of the First Threshold; and the Belly of the Whale. Initiation includes: The Road of Trials; the Meeting with the Goddess; Woman as Temptress; Atonement with the Father; Apotheosis; and the Ultimate Boon. Return includes: Refusal of Return; the Magic Flight; Rescue from Without; the Crossing of the Return Threshold; Master of Two Worlds; and Freedom to Live (Campbell 1968). Appendix I provides an explanation of these stages.

In *The Writer's Journey*, Vogler describes a simple three-part, twelve-stage structure in stories, which incorporates and occasionally develops the stages Campbell identified. Act One or Preparation includes: The Ordinary World, The Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor and Crossing The Threshold. Act Two or
Journey, includes: Test, Allies and Enemies, Approaching the Inmost Cave, Ordeal and Reward. Act Three or Return, includes: The Road Back, Resurrection and Return with the Elixir (Vogler 2007). Appendix II provides an explanation of these stages.

Although Vogler concentrates on film his theories can be applied just as easily to a wide range of novels as there is a great deal of commonality in the structure of films and novels. Indeed many films are direct adaptations of novels. According to Vogler, all or most of these twelve stages are evident in a broad range of stories and genres, which he than goes on to analyse, applying his theories to films as diverse as Star Wars, The Wizard of Oz, Titanic, The Full Monty and even Quentin Tarantino's post structuralist film, Pulp Fiction (Vogler, 2007).

Critics have accused Vogler of concentrating on Hollywood films and creating a formulaic method for writing narrative and developing characters. Vogler does warn of the dangers inherent in following the twelve stages as a formula, stating that for the writer, 'the conscious awareness of its patterns may be a mixed blessing, for it's easy to generate thoughtless cliché and stereotypes from this matrix' (2007, p. xii). Vogler then goes on to answer his critics by demonstrating the vastly diverse array of factors that can be applied to each stage, creating endless possibilities for stories (2007, p. ix). Like Vogler, I believe that all good writing is informed by but steps beyond, technique or craft. If we write from our heart, if we allow our stories to lead us into the depths of ourselves, if we emotionally engage with our writing, then what emerges are living, vital stories, not clichéd market driven formulas.

As a writer, I found Vogler's theories fascinating because when I applied them to my own work, I could see that unconsciously I had created stories that fitted closely with his model. And when I applied his structure to my own writing life, I could identify the stages and the parallels between the story, the writing of the story and the themes in my own life, expressing themselves through Flight.

During the writing of Flight, I was already familiar with Vogler's twelve part structure but did not use it as a framework for my story as I didn't want my novel to feel formulaic or to be weakened by forcing it into an external shape. Vogler suggested that there are a number of variations on the order of the stages. 'The stages,' he wrote, 'can be deleted, added to, and drastically shuffled without losing any of their power' (2007,
I decided to write without a plan and it is only in retrospect that I can see where Vogler's structure does and does not fit in *Flight*.

*Flight* begins with a depressed Fern, self-imprisoned in her attic. She has been there for some months and this has become her 'Ordinary World'.

There are a number of 'Calls to Adventure', which are refused. Twice, Fern's flat mate, Claire, asks Fern to come out of her room as they are moving out of their rental house. Shamesh appearing on the pavement below her room is also a 'Call to Adventure', but not one that Fern understands. Even when Fern escapes through the window and into Cassie's house, she is still a reluctant hero.

There are crucial moments in every story, moments of decision that change everything: Billie Elliot (Daldry 2000) puts on a pair of ballet shoes and steps into his first dance class; in the *Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003), Robert Langdon decides to make a run for it with a strange woman. James Frey, the author of *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), enters a rehabilitation clinic. In *Flight*, Fern 'Crosses the First Threshold' when she leaves her attic room and steps out onto the street, knowing there is no turning back.

According to Steven Jones, 'the threshold crossing is a crossing from the conscious, rational realm to a fictional representation of the unconscious, non-rational domain of the individual's psyche' (1995, p. 16). Indeed, once Fern steps out of her 'Ordinary World', she finds that the rules and regulations are different. Reality is not what it seems and suddenly she is inhabiting a world of mind readers and power animals, visionary stones and stalkers. In a late night bar called the Underworld, Fern is taken on a shamanic journey where she meets her power animal, the bear, and her guide, the Bear Handler. She then meets Shamesh, who gives her advice and guidance, explaining some of the rules, but only confusing her further.

The 'Inmost Cave' comes early in the novel, when Fern is put into a psychiatric ward. Here she sinks again into passivity, allowing her enemy to access her dreams. But it is also here where she finds her power and undergoes initiation, a death and a resurrection. She emerges from the cave, not having vanquished her enemy, but having gathered some of her power and begun the process of opening. She is now fully equipped for the journey. The 'Inmost Cave' is the equivalent of Campbell's, 'Belly of the Whale', in that it is symbolic of the hero's immersion in the unconscious.
There are many 'Trials and Tribulations' in the novel, occurring both before and after the 'Inmost Cave'. These trials occur in the dream world where Fern must fight battles she doesn't understand. And they occur in the physical world where the rules are generally clear, such as her meeting with her birth mother and the confrontation with the Bloodhound. However, her meeting with her father does not have clear rules because in the centre of the labyrinth the rules are different. Here the physical world and the dream world meet and Fern finds herself fighting with her father on both planes at once.

Soon after Fern escapes from the psychiatric ward, she makes the decision to turn around and face her enemy, a decision that she acts upon by visiting her birth mother in Katoomba, finding the identity of her father and then, with Adam, visiting Tasmania and seeking him out. But it is only on Bruny Island, when the enemy that is attacking her, steps through her dreams and into life, nearly killing her, that Fern understands what is at stake and senses she has reached a turning point (Dub 2011, p. 220).

Perhaps this is a second 'Inmost Cave', a moment of realisation, when Fern is more afraid than she has ever been but has to act anyway. After this, Fern begins to track her enemy in her dreams as well as in the physical world, overcoming her fear and seeking him out. This is her reward - power and understanding.

The 'Road Back' is the trek through the wilderness with Adam, seeking the centre of the labyrinth and in it, her father. The 'Resurrection' is the final showdown that Fern has with her father, where she uses all her skills and knowledge, only to fail, before allowing a simple word to lead her to success - surrender.

As Campbell explains, 'the effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world' (1968, p. 40). This is the 'Return with the Elixir' and is depicted in the epilogue, where Fern, who now has a child, is studying the healing arts and living happily with Adam.

**Feminine Journeys**

Feminists are concerned that Campbell's model of the heroic journey excludes women, or at least doesn't allow for gender differences. Maureen Murdock, in her book, *The Heroine's Journey* goes some way towards addressing this problem by suggesting an
alternative model for women, Unlike Campbell's linear structure for story, Murdock proposes a circular structure more appropriate to the inward seeking nature of the woman's journey (1990). To me though, a circle represents the potential for nightmarish repetition; to end where you began is not what stories seek to do. As Woolger writes, 'psychologically, circles can represent every kind of self-perpetuating torment' (1988, p. 236). Perhaps then, it would be better to propose a double spiral structure, one that ensures a descent but also a return to a new position, expressing 'the death of the body in a symbolic sense and the re-birth of the Spirit through initiation, which gives access to the supra-sensitive world' (http://users.skynet.be/lotus/spiral/spiral-en.htm).

Murdock calls one of the stages, 'Initiation and Descent to the Goddess', using the Babylonian myth of Inanna's descent into the underworld, to visit her sister Ereshkigal who has been raped by the gods and exiled to the underworld. On her way, Inanna must pass seven gates, at each of which she surrenders more of her identity, until naked she arrives in the Underworld where she is stripped of her life and left to rot, before being released once again, reborn (Murdock 1990).

The myth of Inanna, is a beautiful story, a metaphor for initiation into the mystery of life. It also recognises the need to confront the darkness in our psyches. In Fern's case, this darkness is represented by the malevolence invading her dreams and threatening her life, as well as the surfacing of old memories, particularly of herself as a baby. There are parallels between the myth of Inanna and *Flight*, with Fern's stay in the psychiatric ward acting as a metaphor for the underworld. It is here that Fern begins to experience the malevolence attacking her. And here that Fern begins to surrender her identity, when in the mirror she comes face to face with her skeleton self. Later she dreams of her skeleton self collapsing into pieces (Dub 2011, p. 93), symbolising the death of her old self. From there she must face the darkness in order to begin the restructuring process and eventually give birth to a new self.

Whilst accepting that there are essential gender differences and that it can be useful to identify them, I believe, like Vogler, that despite historical bias in determining the content of stories, the structure of heroic myth maps a human process of evolution that exists beyond these differences (Vogler 2007). Most stories involve a character's descent into their psyche in some way and their ultimate goal is the balancing of the
masculine and the feminine. In some respects, men and women do have different journeys: the masculine journey is usually an active, goal oriented quest, whilst the feminine journey is more internal, like the story of Inanna, a descent into one's depths. As Bettelheim says, 'even when the girl is depicted as turning inward in her struggle to become herself, and a boy as aggressively dealing with the external world, these two together symbolize the two ways in which one has to gain self hood: through learning to understand and master the inner as well as the outer world.' (1976, p. 226)

Ultimately both journeys are a metaphor for the same thing, hence the 'active' and 'masculine' slaying of a dragon is a metaphor for inner change, for facing those things within us that we are most afraid of and for reclaiming our treasure (Campbell 1968). It is in these journeys that we reclaim our power, seeking to recognise and in a sense move beyond duality by balancing the masculine and feminine elements within ourselves.

The Shamanic Journey
As discussed in Chapter One, initially it was my interest in the the therapeutic nature of story that led me to explore shamanism. Unexpectedly, threads of my research began to appear in my novel in the form of references to shamanism but it wasn't until much later that I began to understand the shamanic journey as a metaphor for something that was reflected in the very shape of Flight, as well as the process of writing it. The shaman's journey into other worlds was also of interest to me; the descent or ascent as the shaman travels with the aid of allies and in danger from his enemies, on a quest that mirrored so perfectly the stories of heroes in literature throughout time.

According to Jungian analyst, Donald F Sandner in his Sacred Heritage: The Influence of Shamanism on Analytical Psychology (1997), 'the basic shamanic pattern is not a manifestation of a certain culture but rather an archetype, a constant and universal part of the human psyche' (1997, p. 4). Anthropologist, Joan Halifax refers to shamanic initiation as a metaphysical voyage (1982), while Jung saw the patterns in shamanism as a metaphor for the process of individuation (Sandner 1997). Like Campbell and Vogler who have identified the stages of story, I see the pattern of shamanism implicit in the structure of most stories. These patterns are always the same: the symbolism of death and mystical resurrection, descent to the underworld, followed by magical flight. It is a
turning away from what is known and a stepping into the unknown. It is a call to change and to adventure.

Religious historian Mercea Eliade, studied shamanism and myth and drew strong parallels across many cultures, parallels which are useful for exploring the relationship between shamanism and story. Of particular interest is his map of the structure of the shaman's world and the way in which shamanic journeying mirrors the structure of narrative (Eliade 1964). In shamanism there is usually an upper, middle and lower world. The middle world is the world we recognise, the world of ordinary events. The lower world or underworld is associated with death and shadow, as well as dangerous spirits. The upper world is associated with light and ascension, it is 'the realm of transcendent consciousness' (Halifax 1982, p. 17). It is possible, as Campbell did, to extend this idea of an upper, middle and lower world to the structure of narrative, with the protagonist beginning in the middle world, journeying into the underworld, then, if the necessary lessons are learned, ascending to the upper world, before returning once again to the middle world to share his or her rewards.

Whilst analysing schizophrenic patients, Jung observed that many of them had remarkably similar ideas and hallucinations and that these were also similar to mythologies and religious systems from all over the world (1967). Jung then became convinced of the existence of a collective or universal unconscious (Stevens 1990). Shamanic belief also presupposes the existence of a collective unconscious, or in shamanic terms, a spirit world. Sandner identified a number of connections between shamanism and analytical psychology, the strongest of which is the belief in a 'separate space to which the psyche has access. Shamans would see this as a world of spirits that is a mythic part of their cosmology,' writes Sandner. 'An analytic psychologist would see this as part of the deep unconscious that is collective and partially personified by such archetypal figures as the hero, the trickster, the Great Mother, and others' (1997, p. 5). In other words, the language is different but the intention the same.

Fern's journey in the novel is an initiation. I use the term shamanism and indeed, Fern's initiation pattern is very similar: a sickening, followed by a loss of self, then a journey into the underworld to face one's demons, followed by a regaining of power and flight. However, this is the journey of the soul and does not need to be labelled as a
shamanic journey. When Fern expresses a discomfort about shamanism, Cassie tells her that it is just one of many paths, all of which bring you to the same place, your self. 'A shaman,' she says, 'is just someone who has healed themselves and because of this, they can heal others.' (Dub 2011, p. 138) There are many ways to self, just as there are many paths to writing a novel. For each there are a multitude of guides, mentors and techniques acting as the threads to help us find our way blindly through the labyrinth.

In this chapter I have further explored myth by analysing its structure and the ways in which *Flight* does and does not fit into Vogler's theories of the twelve stages of story. I have discussed the potential differences between a feminine and masculine journey, analysed the ways in which Fern's journey in *Flight* fits into a classic shamanic initiation and identified links between shamanic initiation, the structure of heroic myth and Jung's individuation process.

In the next chapter I will concentrate on the individuation process by exploring characterisation, focalisation, the character arc and the functions of archetypes. I will also investigate further links between shamanism, characterisation and the healing power of story by exploring the idea of the wound.
Chapter Five Characterisation

'We must look at the intentionality of the characters and where they are heading, for they are the main influence upon the shape of the stories'

(Hillman 1983, p. 10)

According to Jung, it is character that drives plot, not plot that drives character (Hillman 1983). And Jones writes that 'it is the inner psychological state of the main character which fuels and drives the external plot' (2007, p. 79). Plot then, is secondary to character. Certainly in my own writing process this is the case; this is how I have always written, allowing the story to form around the characters. It is where I find the links with my own life and development, and where I attempt to write a 'living' story. I have found it vital to surrender to the process of writing and trust that a story will emerge; rich with character and complexity. To plot a story before it is written and then force the characters to act like puppets within the plot, is more often than not a recipe for unmotivated action and 'dead' implausible stories. As a writer it is playing it safe, refusing to respond to the call of adventure that signals the journey of story.

'To plot is to move from asking the question, and then what happened? To the question, why did it happen?' writes James Hillman (1983, p. 10). This is where character motivation begins to inform plot. An important aspect of character is motivation, the source of which often lies hidden within the early patterns of childhood, in the wounds and blessings that have formed a person. This is the case with Fern and Adam, though the key to Fern's motivations also lies within her past lives. In The Writing Book (1990), Kate Grenville warns against an over emphasis on motivation, saying that it can create characters that are 'too neatly motivated and too one-dimensional' (1990, p. 39). I found myself disagreeing with this statement of Grenville's, particularly in relation to the novel. As in life, a rich, plausible character should be motivated by a number of things, not all of them conscious. He or she should not only act, but also react to people, places and events, and these actions and reactions should have a convincing weight that carries and directs the story. When creating a three-dimensional character, I look for the factors and sometimes the patterns that motivate
that character and at the psychological reasons for that motivation (why they are motivated). It is here that internal and external conflict can be found. Jones writes that 'dramatic action is generated not only by tension between two characters but by tension within one central character' (2007, p. 107). Like Jones, I believe that from conflict comes story and within story lies the keys to the change and development needed in order to create a satisfying character arc.

As mythologist, Joseph Campbell asserted, the slaying of a dragon is a metaphor for inner change, for facing those things within us that we are most afraid of (1968). The plot then becomes a metaphor for character development. The outer passage of a story is incidental, the inner passage, fundamental. The outer passage the costume, the inner passage the essence. There is a tension there, because whilst the outer journey often follows a linear sense of time by moving into the future, the inner journey is often a movement into the past. This inner journey uncovers the fragments that motivate a character's actions and creates an opportunity for the character to eventually heal a wound. This is the case in Flight, as Fern must search the past in order to find the motivating factors that have forced her to act in certain ways. It is within the flashbacks to her childhood and the visions of past lives, that the clues and motivations to Fern's character are provided.

In writing about New Age theory, McLaughlin suggests that 'therapeutic theories of narrative promise more than they can deliver, a new self untouched by the old self' (1996, p. 92). Yet I believe it is not as simplistic as that, not black and white but endlessly subtle shades of grey. It is not a new self that is sought but a healthier self. The scars are there, circumstances will reignite them but they become less important, easier to shrug off. Transformation is a process, not a product, it is perpetual and vital, with moments of understanding followed by periods of integration of that new knowledge. A short story might simply show that moment of epiphany and suggest its potential, but in a novel, when a character learns something about themselves, the change that this knowledge brings should come about gradually otherwise the characterisation will necessarily be weak and the story formulaic.

Jung defines individuation as a coming to self hood or self realisation (1964, p. 395). In The Undiscovered Self, he writes passionately and urgently of the need for
individuals to resist the collective forces of society, saying that to do this we must face our fear of the duality of the human psyche, in other words we must accept our shadow selves (1958). This is the process of individuation, something clearly akin to the New Age theories that McLaughlin describes, in which individuals reject 'dominant paradigms' and begin a process of self transformation (McLaughlin 1996).

It is in the inner structure of the story, the character arc, that we can see the process of individuation at work. Individuation, or the Hero's Journey, as Campbell would call it, is simply another word for a process that is as old as humanity - the journey of the soul. It is a healing process, a journey of realignment which eventually enables an individual to live harmoniously in the world. This was the journey I sent my protagonist on in Flight, and it was the journey I would take in the writing of the novel from ego, to soul, to self.

Healing the Wound

'In many cases in psychiatry,' wrote Jung, 'the patient who comes to us has a story that is not told, and which as a rule no one knows of. To my mind, therapy only really begins after the investigation of that wholly personal story. It is the patient's secret, the rock against which he is shattered. If I know his secret story, I have a key to the treatment' (1967, p. 117). The story that Jung refers to is one that even the patient may not be consciously aware of. It often resides deep in the unconscious, buried under layers of scar tissue. The process of uncovering this wound can be long and arduous, but it is necessary, for it is the clue, or as Jung says, 'the key' to psychic health. In Soulcraft, psychologist, Bill Plotkin writes that, 'the wound does not necessarily stem from a single traumatic incident. Often, the wound consists of a pattern of hurtful events or a disturbing dynamic or theme in one or more important relationships' (2003, p. 97). This is the case with the two main characters in Flight.

For Adam, one aspect of his wound lies in the birth of his brother and the guilt Adam feels for being normal. Another aspect lies in the death of the father and the guilt Adam feels for his part in that tragedy, as well as the loss he felt, growing up without a father. Both of these wounds have created a series of reactions in Adam, sending him away from Tasmania and into the army, where he has tried to follow in his father's
footsteps. And it is in the army that Adam wounds himself so deeply he can only withdraw from society and from his family, hiding in a basement in Sydney and attempting to drink himself into oblivion.

Adam's healing begins when he meets Fern who takes his attention away from himself. The healing continues with his return to Tasmania and his family, and then with his return to nature. Adam is of the earth, the wilderness feeds his soul and it is only in the wilderness when he has been brought back from the brink of death by Fern, that he can tell his story. In the telling, Adam makes it conscious and begins to live again, bit by bit, releasing the guilt that he is holding.

Fern's wounds are even more deeply layered. The story opens with her having retreated to an attic room, where, like Adam, she is hiding from life. Fern is damaged by her childhood, by the callous treatment of her adoptive family and by the guilt she feels at being accused of trying to kill her father. Through the course of the story, Fern also uncovers pre-verbal wounds that occurred while she was in the womb and just after birth, the trauma of her birth father's violence towards her in his two attempts to kill her, and also the trauma of being abandoned by her birth mother. Then, as the story unfolds, Fern discovers that she has another connection to her birth father, one that reaches back through many past lives and involves a repeating pattern of abuse (Dub 2011, p. 327).

Psychologist and physical healer, Jean Achterberg, writes that, 'in traditional shamanic cultures, healing bears little relationship to the remission of physical symptoms. It refers, rather, to becoming whole or in harmony with the community, the planet and certainly ones private circumstances' (1988, p. 119). This attitude differs greatly from allopathic medicine, where symptoms are almost always treated before causes, and for which healing generally means, a 'return to normal where normal is culturally defined by some measuring standard created by society's members' (Achterberg 1988, p. 119). Achterberg cites a remark made by an Indian Medicine Man: 'With white man's medicine you only get back to the way you were before; with Indian medicine, you can get even better' (1988, p. 119). In a sense then, the writing of Flight was an exploration of Indian medicine, an attempt to truly heal a condition (Fern's depression), rather than treat the symptoms.

At the beginning of the novel, Fern has lost most of her self, something that in
shamanic tradition is considered a serious illness, leading eventually to depression, damage to the immune system, cancer and many other disorders. Soul retrieval is a major element in shamanic healing. In order to retrieve a fragment of the soul, shamans must travel into the upper world or underworld with the help of their power animal/s and find it, sometimes having to coax it back, sometimes having to fight for it. These fragments may have left the soul in shock at a violent action, or been taken by another person. Fern herself retrieves a part of her soul, the baby that had fled at birth, after being attacked by the father. Then, as the story progresses she retrieves more and more of herself and in the process realises how much she had lost.

Joan Halifax writes that 'the true attainment of the shaman's vocation as healer, seer, and visionary comes about through the experience of self-wounding, death and rebirth' (1982, p. 92). This is the process that Fern must undergo. In the novel, Shamesh tells Fern about the initiation process, which is a process of clearing the dense parts of the self. When Fern asks why the process is so slow he tells her that she will become a healer but must first experience the process herself (Dub 2011, p. 114). Fern only accepts the possibility of becoming a healer towards the end of the story, when she uses her hands to heal Adam and remembers that she had done this before. By the end of the novel, Fern has understood the true nature of healing and that it can only be done with an open heart (Dub 2011, p. 355).

According to psychologist, Jean Houston, we must be 'willing to release our old stories and to become the vehicles through which the new story may emerge into time.' (Houston 1987, p. 105) When Fern tries to tell her story to Adam, she realises that each story is linked to another and she feels weighed down by back stories, wishing she could sever them all (Dub 2011, p. 131). Through the course of Flight, both Fern and Adam reluctantly and painfully release their own stories. By the end of the novel, they are creating a new story, both together and individually.

**Focalisation**

In *A Dictionary of Narratology*, Gerald Prince defines focalisation as 'the perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented' (1989, p. 30). Mieke Bal goes on to distinguish between a physical and psychological perspective. 'A point of view
is chosen, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle' (2004, p. 142). Perception, Bal explains, is dependent on who is looking and from what position, both physically and emotionally (2004, p. 144).

Initially I chose to write *Flight* in a close third person point of view because I had used the first person point of view in my previous novel and struggled with the limitations this perspective presented, particularly in relation to stepping into the eyes of past generations. As Fern's story unfolded, I realised that there were other reasons why the third person perspective was appropriate for Fern. Firstly, she had lost many fragments of her soul and as a consequence was closed down and detached from herself. Writing in the third person was a device that helped add to that sense of detachment. It is only by making herself whole again that Fern can speak directly for and about herself. And secondly, the events that happen to Fern, both externally and internally, are difficult for her or the reader to believe. I wanted to hold a tension for the first half of the novel, a tension that would make it unclear if Fern was mad or if these events were really occurring. It was easier to maintain that tension from a third person perspective.

The prologue to *Flight* came when I was already half way through the story. Suddenly I found myself shifting perspective and writing in the first person and in a slightly different style, as if Fern was speaking to me from the future. It was then I realised it would be appropriate to sandwich the story between a prologue and an epilogue written in the first person. The point of view in the bulk of the novel would remain third person, a story told about Fern, by a more mature Fern who recognised but was distanced from her earlier self.

As I was analysing an early draft of *Flight*, I realised that the perspective and consequently the distinctive voices of Fern and Adam were frequently 'bleeding' into the narrative voice. It was only then that I realised the narrator in *Flight* was Fern but a more mature Fern from the future. I needed to distinguish the narrative voice more clearly from Fern's voice in the main part of the novel, and ensure that it was consistently similar to the voice of Fern in the prologue and the epilogue. It was a complex and difficult process to go through the manuscript, identifying and correcting these slippages. The result was a much improved draft in which Fern's and Adam's dialogue and thoughts are their own but everything else is clearly another voice, wiser and less reactive.
In Ego and Archetype (1990), Edward Edinger wrote that Jung's most important discovery was the 'collective unconscious or archetypal psyche' because it enabled Jung's further discovery of a 'structuring or ordering principle which unifies the various archetypal contents. This is the central archetype or archetype of 'wholeness which Jung has termed the Self.' (1972, p. 3) The post structuralist notion of many selves interpreting the world and expressing themselves in many forms, is in a sense, also a Jungian concept. However Jung calls these selves archetypes and suggests that they express facets of the human personality. Within the harmonious balance of these archetypes lies a true or essential Self which is the goal or outcome of the individuation process.

The word archetype comes from the Greek roots, arche, meaning the first and type, meaning imprint or pattern (Johnson 1986). 'Psychological archetypes, according to Jungian psychologist, Robert Johnson, 'are the pre-existing first patterns that form the basic blueprint for the major dynamic components of the human personality' (1986, p. 29). According to Jung, each one of us embodies a range of archetypes, and the pantheons of gods and goddesses found in many cultures are an expression of this (1964). According to Vogler, so too, are the cast of characters in any given story (2007).

Perhaps because archetypal characters have always inhabited our myths and fairy stories, they resonate deeply within our psyches. As Jones writes, 'if you can create a character which conveys a universal archetype, the collective will identify and respond more deeply to your story' (2007, p. 80). It is important, however, to ensure that what is produced is a character not a caricature. Johnson describes real human beings as 'combinations of many types that join together to form one rich, inconsistent, many-faceted human personality' (1986, p. 29). To avoid creating one-dimensional caricatures, Vogler suggests looking at the archetypes as 'flexible character functions rather than as rigid character types' (2007, p. 24). This way it is possible to see that a single character can encompass a range of archetypes through the course of the story, donning and changing masks as the story evolves.

In The Writer's Journey, Vogler lists the archetypes that are most frequently
found in stories: Hero, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, Herald, Shapeshifter, Shadow, Ally and Trickster (2007). Of these archetypes it is probably the hero that we are most familiar with. According to Vogler, we are all the heroes (albeit often reluctantly) of our own lives, acting as characters in stories whose plot points we may not even be aware of (1998). But the truest acts of heroism occur when we consciously turn to face our own monsters, entering the darkness within us in order to uncover the motivating stories in our lives.

Vogler wrote that 'the Hero archetype represents the ego's search for identity and wholeness. In the process of becoming complete, integrated human beings, we are all Heroes facing internal guardians, monsters and helpers. . . All the villains, tricksters, lovers, friends and foes of the Hero can be found inside ourselves. The psychological task we all face is to integrate these separate parts into one complete, balanced entity' (2007, p. 30). Fern is a reluctant hero, her psyche so shut down that she has retreated from life. She receives a call to adventure but needs to wait until she is pushed a number of times before responding. It is only her determination to break free of the stasis she is caught in, that forces Fern to respond to the call to adventure. At first, Fern runs, from her attic room, from her mother and from the Bloodhound, but eventually she understands she must stop running.

Adam is also a Hero in his own right, albeit a minor one. His character develops as he releases his own wounds and begins looking for new stories to live by. In this process it is Fern who becomes Adam's Mentor and Ally.

The Mentor is a guide or teacher and a giver of gifts, sometimes of this world, sometimes not. Vogler writes that 'mentor figures stand for the hero's highest aspirations . . . In the anatomy of the human psyche, Mentors represent the Self, the God within us, the aspect of personality that is connected with all things' (2007, p. 40). Fern has a number of Mentors: Cassie, Shamesh, the bear, the Bear Handler and even Michael, Adam's brother. These characters give her guidance, while some also give her tools she can use to protect herself and to learn more. Shamesh gives Fern the Tempest Stone, Cassie gives her remedies and the lapis lazuli around her neck, the Bear Handler gives her a staff, the bear gives her strength and teaches her to trust, while Michael shows Fern how to heal. Ultimately though, in her journey of remembering, Fern
becomes her own mentor, re-integrating that part of herself, so that in the end, she knows intuitively how to defeat her father.

In the physical world, both Cassie and Claire act as Heralds, delivering the Call to Adventure. In a sense another Herald is simply the impossible situation Fern finds herself in, stuck in an attic while her house mates move out. According to Vogler, 'Herald characters issue challenges and announce the coming of significant change' (2007, p. 55). In the end though, it is Shamesh who is the most important Herald, bridging both the physical and metaphysical worlds and directing Fern on her journey.

Threshold Guardians are like the demonic figures found around the doors of cathedrals that act as obstacles for those unworthy to enter. According to Vogler, their function is to test the heroes preparedness for the journey (2007, p. 50). Claire, Fern's mother, Grace, and the doctors in the psychiatric ward, are all Threshold Guardians, trying to stop Fern from continuing on her journey. But the most effective Threshold Guardian is Fern herself. It is her own fear, depression and uncertainty that makes Fern a Reluctant Hero. She cannot start her journey until she finds a way of sneaking past, outwitting or overcoming these internal guardians.

An Ally usually travels with the hero. They 'do mundane tasks but also serve the important function of humanizing the heroes, adding extra dimensions to their personalities, or challenging them to be more open and balanced' (Vogler 2007, p. 71). Although Hector, Claire and Cassie act as temporary Allies, it is Adam who is Fern's major ally. He travels with her, providing his physical strength to overcome the Bloodhound, his knowledge of the wilderness to find help Fern find her way to her father, and ultimately his love, which sustains Fern and gives her the strength to face down her father.

Vogler writes that 'Shapeshifters change appearance or mood, and are difficult for the hero and the audience to pin down. They may mislead the hero or keep her guessing, and their loyalty or sincerity is often in question' (2007, p. 59). Although a minor character, Claire is a Shapeshifter, moving easily between her roles as Herald, Threshold Guardian, Ally and Trickster. Adam is also occasionally a Shapeshifter, confusing Fern who can't make sense of his moods and twice questions his loyalty.

Eric too, is a Shapeshifter, with his frequently changing character and moods. He
is seductive and cold, flattering and condescending. Impossible to pin down, he confuses Fern, who knows he is dangerous yet wants to trust him. Eric's shapeshifting goes beyond his physical manifestation, into the metaphysical world, where Fern is confronted with some of his manifestations in past lives. This is why early in the story, Cassie struggles to understand the identity of Fern's enemy, 'It should be one person,' she says, 'but because of the layers it looks like there may be more' (Dub 2011, p. 101). Later, after Eric has unsuccessfully attempted to seduce her, Fern sees him more clearly for a moment and realises that underneath his shapeshifting, is the same dark spirit made manifest again and again.

As the story progresses, Fern discovers that she is also a Shapeshifter, in the sense that she too moves between worlds and like Eric, has many manifestations of the same soul. Most importantly though, she learns to fly, metaphorically in the physical world, but in the world of spirit, her flight is more actual (Dub 2011, p. 323-324). In both worlds it signals a coming into her power.

According to Jungian psychologists, we deny archetypes at our peril, for if one aspect of ourselves is buried or pushed aside, its power grows, and it becomes a Shadow. Often the journey of a character is to reintegrate or rebalance one or more of the shadow aspects within them. In *Flight*, the Bloodhound is a Villain or Shadow but a weak one, only the servant of Fern's father. It is Eric who is the true villain, an enemy of Fern's. Eric is the Shadow, he represents the 'energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealized, or rejected aspects of something' (Vogler 2007, p. 65). Eric represents the masculine, but in its shadow form. He is a successful businessman, immensely powerful but ruthless and arrogant. He is also greedy. When Eric realises Fern is more than just his daughter, he cannot resist tempting her to join forces with him and decides in his arrogance to rewrite the prophecy instead.

In a sense Eric is Fern's shadow self, as is often the case with villains in stories. The Shadow is the monster in the centre of the labyrinth, that which we fear and deny, but it can also represent positive qualities within us that we have denied. In the novel, Fern has rejected her power, closing her heart to life in order not to be hurt. She lives in a shadow world, immersed in the feminine in its shadow form, frightened and passive, immobile and shut down. Fern must open herself to the positive aspect of the feminine in
order to reclaim her power and access her intuitive self. But Fern has also rejected the masculine, represented in its more positive form by Adam, and in its shadow form, by her father, Eric. Unconsciously, Fern is seeking the balance that Jung referred to as Mysterium Coniunctionais, the inner marriage of the anima (feminine element of a man) and the animus (masculine element of a woman) (Stevens 1990). These are elements that have often been repressed within individuals at the insistence of society. In order to find harmony, a balance must be sought, and more often than not this means a confrontation with the shadow self.

Fern's journey is the classic journey in many heroic myths, the journey to the father or to the masculine, to external power and assertiveness. According to Campbell, the meeting with the father is an initiation in itself. In order to be worthy of adulthood, the child must pass a series of challenges. Campbell wrote that 'the problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror,' thus enabling the hero to transcend life. . . and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source' (1968, p. 147). This is Fern's journey and it is what she achieves when in her battle with Eric, she surrenders. 'Feeling the flame of her hatred smoulder and then die' (Dub 2011, p. 344). It is the laying aside of the will and an involuntary surrender that allows Fern to complete her journey.

In this chapter I have taken the idea of the structure of story as a metaphor for the individuation process and explored it in relation to Fern's character arc in *Flight*. In the process I have identified the underworld journey as the healing of the wound/s (motivating forces) that a character carries. This wound links back once again to the shamanic journey, an age-old metaphor for the journey to Self.

In the following chapter I will look at the nature and function of symbolism and metaphor in story and analyse the use of symbols in *Flight*. 
Chapter Six - The Use of Symbolism and Metaphor in *Flight*

'Reason, science and technology pin us down to the literal fact, but symbols nourish the soul by pointing to something beyond what is known. Symbols quicken reality with meaning'


According to Robert Johnson, archetypes appear in 'symbolic forms, in the dreams of individuals' and 'in mythology, cultural patterns, religious symbols and rites, and all are products of the human imagination' (1986, p. 27). In the previous chapter I described archetypes that relate specifically to human character traits, but as Johnson argues, there are other archetypes too, fundamental forms that are buried deep within our psyche, such as archetypal events and archetypal objects. As discussed in earlier chapters, the journey of individuation is an archetypal event and one that is implicit in the very structure of story. Archetypal objects, such as the snake, or the cross are symbols that carry a number of meanings, but both also symbolise death and resurrection and in so doing are metaphors for the process of individuation.

Unlike Freud, whose interest lay in signs and symptoms, Jung was interested in meanings and symbols. (Stevens 1990). For Jung and subsequently for Campbell, symbols and metaphors are bridges to the unconscious, a way of explaining what cannot be explained, expressing what cannot be expressed. They provide us with access to essential truths, those which are felt but not measurable or possibly even visible. Jung called this bridge building the transcendent function (1964).

In writing about New Age vernacular theory, McLaughlin criticises its narratives of transformation both on a broader spiritual level and in the case of personal healing, labelling them as 'linear, dualistic...constructed in the individualist, rationalist mindset that it rejects' (1996, p. 84). He then goes on to assert that this is also a problem that cultural theory faces, 'that the strategies that make their deconstruction possible are provided by the epistemological system they are criticizing' (1996, p. 87). I agree with McLaughlin that there are limitations in language and thought that inhibit the ability to express ideas outside the dominant paradigms, but would argue that the function of
metaphor and symbolism, is to help us transcend these limitations and find ways of expressing ideas that are outside of our ways of thinking.

In *Flight*, the structure of the story and the character arc are metaphors for the process of individuation, something I consciously set out to achieve in the writing of this novel. However, in relation to the details of the novel, I did not consciously use any symbols or metaphors and only began to discover their existence in the process of rewriting, and then again in my own analysis of the finished story. On reflection I see that it was this unconscious use of metaphor and symbolism that provided me with a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious, enabling me to access the story of *Flight* and ultimately to express what I had felt was beyond expression.

According to Stevens, 'the conjunction of sym (together) and ballein (to throw) emphasises the idea that the strange must be thrown together with the familiar to construct a bridge of meaning between the known and the unknown. . . resulting in the experience of a new meaning' (1998, p. 12-13). Hence we find the layering of meaning that enables us to reach beyond the merely rational and understand a process that works in a symbolic way. According to Jones, 'the metaphorical or symbolic image lifts the reader above the gross level to a realm of poetry where image and soul reign' (2007, p. 131).

Stevens distinguishes between metonymic and metaphoric modes of speech, between words and symbols, writing that 'symbols can combine many disparate elements into a unitary expression, while numerous words are needed to deal with one thought at a time. Symbols tolerate paradox and can combine contradictory ideas; words are about one thing or another. Symbols awake intimations; words explain. Like musical compositions, symbolic forms are psychologically more athletic than words: they leap across national barriers' (Stevens 1998, p. 29-30). In a sense then, metonymic language is the literal language of the head, whilst metaphoric speech is the symbolic language of the heart. As I see it, a synthesis is needed between the way of the head and the way of the heart; a synthesis that would create a more balanced means of interpreting the natural world and the human structures we have created.

Symbols are both universal and individual, specific to a culture and a historical context, yet also transcending these things. 'Even the most widely dispersed, most
indestructible symbols,' writes Anthony Stevens, 'will have different shades of meaning for each psyche in why they appear, for symbols. . . are polyvalent: they have more than one meaning' (1988, p. 39). Symbols cannot be pinned down to a single meaning because they are able to be interpreted according to the cultural, historical and personal context in which they are placed.

The spiral is a symbol that appears twice in *Flight*. On the first occasion Fern is standing at the window about to meet Shamesh, when a flake of ash lands on her arm and she draws a spiral with it (Dub 2011, p. 13). On the second occasion she is with Shamesh discussing the possibility of a journey. Shamesh makes Fern a latte with a spiral pattern on the top. 'As she sipped the froth from her latte, sucking the spiral pattern down her throat, she felt as if she was following it inwards on an adventure she hadn't asked for, into her very depths' (Dub 2011, p. 113).

Although some symbols have universal meanings, most are interpreted differently according to their context. Generally though, the spiral is a feminine symbol, often linked to the moon. *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* states that the spiral 'symbolises the soul's journey after death, along ways unknown to it, but leading by preordained byways to the central home of eternal being' (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p. 909). In *Flight*, this is the meaning I have given to the spiral, only the death is a symbolic one, not a literal one.

Like the spiral, the labyrinth is a symbol of the journey into self and as such a symbol of the individuation quest. The labyrinth is 'a complicated system of passages through which it is difficult to find ones way and from which it is impossible to escape without completing the journey' (Stevens 1998, p. 247). In *Flight*, the labyrinth is two-fold. On a metaphoric level it is the story itself, the path Fern must follow in order to free herself. On a symbolic level it is the wilderness that Fern and Adam must find their way through in order to complete Fern's journey.

Caves are the 'archetype of the maternal womb' and feature in 'myths of origin, rebirth and initiation' (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p. 167). Caves are also passageways to the underworld. There are a few metaphoric caves in the novel. The first is the underground bar, called The Underworld. When Fern falls down the steps she descends into the underworld and meets her power animal, the bear. The second cave
appears in Fern's vision when she finds herself in a dark place with the bear and must undergo a lesson in trust. In a sense both the attic and the psychiatric ward are also caves, for they are womb-like in the way they contain Fern, acting as 'incubation spaces' for her to prepare for the next stages of her journey.

There are animal symbols in the novel as well, which link in closely with shamanic power animals, used as helpers by shamans in many cultures. In *Flight*, the animal helpers are the bear, the eagle and the snake. The bear is a feminine symbol, associated with the moon and with the underworld (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p. 75). The bear is strong and loyal, but also playful. It is also a symbol of the unconscious, hibernating, but only for a few months through the winter. The bear teaches Fern trust and also gives her the courage to take the journey and seek out her enemy.

The eagle is a masculine symbol, associated with the sun and with the upper world. Universally it is the symbol of the father. (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p. 323) In the novel, the eagle gives Fern the gift of one of its feathers and lends her its wings, helping her to overcome her vertigo and cross the roof to Cassie's window. When Cassie sees the feather, she tells Fern that the feather will grant her greater perception and the ability to walk between worlds (Dub 2011, p. 34).

The snake is another powerful symbol. It is associated with healing and can give the gift of seeing. Early in the novel, Simple Simon is described as having second sight which was the result of a snakebite (Dub 2011, p. 4). In the *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, the snake is described as a 'basic archetype, linked to the well-springs of life and the imagination, whose 'channel is poetry, painting and medicine' (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996, p. 858). The snake can both harm and heal. It represents death and destruction, but also resurrection, in the way that it regularly sheds its skin. This makes it a strong symbol of the process of individuation.

Later in the novel, Fern applies her own personal meaning to the snake as she watches it capturing a mouse and feels herself absorbing its power, its intent, its patience (Dub 2011, p. 287). Two days previously, Fern had seen a kookaburra eating a frog and decided it was a warning from her father (Dub 2011, p. 257). Yet when Fern watches the snake catching its prey she decides it is a gift to her, not a warning. Fern has taken responsibility for the reading and interpretation of the symbols around her, and in so
In the *The Story-Shaped World*, Brian Wicker wrote that 'to adopt a metaphoric style is to adopt a metaphysical world-view' (1975, p. 4), suggesting that we can only approach metaphysical truths through metaphor. *Flight* is a metaphysical novel and I hope a living story that is rich in metaphor. It is only now, as I come to the end of my analysis of *Flight*, that I truly understand just how important the use of symbols and metaphors are in the novel. Much depth and texture were added by their inclusion, and they helped me to write about experiences that were difficult to evoke.

Symbols and metaphors enrich our lives, investing them with meaning and a sense of connection, enabling us to step beyond the limitations of language. Stevens argues that 'symbolism is a language that transcends race, geography, and time. It is the natural Esperanto of humanity' (1998, p. 17). Symbols are also the arrows that point us to the truths embedded deep within our psyche and our stories, and as such their value should not be limited to poetry, but instead be accepted as a valid way of interpreting the world in which we live. According to Jones, 'metaphor is the language of the soul' (2007, p. 137). This is a language that is fundamental for 'living stories' and one that is in danger of being lost in a world that tends more and more to a literal, denotative reading of story, rather than a metaphoric, connotative reading which allows for the transcending of difference and an embracing of the sacred. As a writer I hope I have done my part towards redressing this imbalance; the responsibility for the completion of this task must go to the reader.
Conclusion

'I came looking for the design principles of storytelling, but on the road I found something more: a set of principles for living. I came to believe that the Hero's Journey is nothing less than a handbook for life, a complete instruction manual in the art of being human.' (Vogler 1998, p. xiii)

Kafka once wrote in a letter to his friend, Oscar Pollack, 'a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us' (Kafka cited in Wagenbach 2003, p. 42). These are the kinds of stories that I search for as a reader and the ones I seek to write. Stories should stay with us, should linger in our conscious and unconscious selves, working their magic even after we have finished with their writing, or their reading. Because reading too, can be an act of creativity, a heroic journey, and as such, a healing process, a realignment of sorts.

In Negotiating with the Dead, Margaret Atwood states that she believes all writing 'of the narrative kind. . . is motivated by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.' (2003, p. 140). The underworld represents our unconscious self and the journey, a delving into what is long buried. This plunging into the darkness is an integral part of individuation. Much of my writing, and certainly the best of it, demands this difficult journey, on my part, the part of my characters and the part of my readers.

It is only in this descent that 'living' stories can be found and experienced; powerful stories that demand more from both the writer and the reader. In Shaman's Path, a collection of essays on shamanism, Jurgen Kremer discusses the need for a different type of narrative in Western society, in order to balance what has become the predominant story of science and to step beyond its limitations. He argues that shamanic tales may provide a 'starting point for the rebuilding of narratives in Western societies' (Kremer 1988, p. 190). Kremer calls these shamanic tales, Tales of Power, and argues that they are stories taken from events in the realm of the numinous and infused with meaning by the author. 'They are,' says Kremer, 'a response to a call, a decision for self transformation' (1988, p. 194). They are the 'means by which the shaman mediates and transfers power from the spiritual to the mundane world' (Kremer 1988, p. 91), and are
'used by the narrator to facilitate a process of growth and individuation' (Kremer 1988, p. 196). In many ways, Kremer's Tale of Power is equivalent to Campbell's Heroic Journey, as both document a process of transformation. This, writes McLaughlin, is an essential element in New Age writing, 'the creator of a narrative therefore has the opportunity for powerful self-knowledge, and writing becomes a healing practice for the creator as well as for the reader or audience' (1996, p.88).

In the writing of *Flight*, I set out to do as Kremer suggests, infusing my own experiences with meaning and structure, to make sense of seemingly separate events and to mirror the initiation of the shaman, both in the plot or outer story and the character arc, or inner story. In so doing, Fern's journey became a contemporary spiritual initiation, a metaphor for the death of the old self and the birth of the new. It is also a metaphor for the integration of the shadow, for the journey of the hero is metaphorically the journey into the cave, the labyrinth, or the wilderness, a journey in which he or she must face and acknowledge, release and integrate the lessons learned.

In Chapter Four, I explored the twelve stages of the Heroic Journey and in the process of that analysis realised that if there are crucial moments or stages within stories, these moments also occur in the writing of them. There's the Call to Adventure, when an idea comes. If the writer ignores that idea, the calls increase in volume and intensity until they're impossible to ignore. For as Kafka once wrote so succinctly: '...a non writing writer is a monster inviting madness.' (Kafka cited in Wagenbach 2003, p. 83) The author Crosses the Threshold the moment they tentatively put pen to paper. And of course, more often than not, there are Threshold Guardians; a lack of time perhaps, the fear of failure, or simply the certain knowledge that you're in for a very long haul, with no certainty of success.

According to Vogler, 'the Hero's Journey and the Writer's Journey are one and the same. Anyone setting out to write a story soon encounters all the tests, trials, ordeals, joys and rewards of the Hero's journey. . . Writing is an often perilous journey inward to probe the depths of one's soul and bring back the Elixir of experience' (Vogler 2007, p. 293 ). To write a novel is to descend into the underworld or step into the labyrinth, with only a few clues and no guarantee of a way back out again. The writer steps fearfully into the Innermost Cave where they face their greatest fears before
emerging, if they're lucky, to reap the Rewards; a first draft perhaps, a new direction, or even an understanding of what it is they are writing. To write a novel is to step beyond your limitations, embarking on a journey with no known destination and often no ticket. It's a dangerous process, exhausting and filled with apprehension, but it's also a magical journey in which a great deal is learned about one's self.

As I wrote my novel and then subsequently this exegesis, it became apparent to me that the Hero's journey applies not only to the structure of story and the journey of the writer, but also to the shape of our own lives and the journeys we take. Indeed, as Vogler asserts, the two are inextricably linked. The Hero's journey is our own journey, repeated over and over in a never ending spiral, each time moving us further along the path of our evolution. In our lives there are also crucial moments. A change of direction; perhaps a new job, the birth of a child, a marriage, a divorce, all of which involve accepting the Call to Adventure. For life, like story, is about change. So often we forget the cycles of nature, the waxing and waning of the moon, the course of the seasons, and the circular nature of our lives. Instead we cling to what we know, resisting the natural transitions in life, from child to teenager, to adult, to elder. Or more simply, we resist stepping from the known to the unknown. The wheel of fortune turns and we expend our energy on finding ways to stop it. Story is a reminder that change is natural, it helps us to link our lives back to nature and to understand that change is an intricate part of living. It also helps us to remember that life is a journey, which suggests movement, not stasis. By accepting the path of change we develop. Like the seasons, stories remind us that life is cyclic, that change is inevitable. Whether or not we accept it, embedded in story lies the invitation to adventure, to journey, to evolve as humans - it's up to us.

As with my earlier novels, the writing of Flight represented a stage in my own evolution as a person and a writer, a heroic journey of sorts. In the writing of my novel, I have attempted to guide the future reader in the hope that he or she will take something from my story. There are different ways in which it can be read: as an adventure story; as a psychological story; or as a journey of a soul. The challenge has been to write a story that will satisfy the reader in each of these readings.

I have an intimate connection with this story, but one that must be released in
order for the story to move on without me, for once it is complete it is no longer mine. Instead, it is released into the public realm to be interpreted and reinterpreted according to each individual, and to cultural, historical and social contexts. Despite this multiplicity of interpretations, a good number of the theorists I have examined in both the writing of *Flight* and in its analysis, believe, as do I, that there is an essence within story that is constant, an essence that will translate across time and space and that can be found, not through skimming the surface of stories but through delving into their depths. My decision to include both vernacular and academic theory in this exegesis and give personal and professional experience the same weight as extensive study and academic rigour has proved fruitful, enabling me to explore widely and draw parallels across disciplines. In so doing I have found a wonderfully varied array of costumes, and beneath these costumes some fundamental similarities that have confirmed my personal experience as a writer but also more simply, as a human being. McLaughlin writes that New Age writers often 'produce a theory of narrative cobbled together from many sources, some academic, some esoteric' (1996, p.83). The resulting narrative theory 'embraces programs of physical healing, psychological therapies, spiritual practices and theories of creativity that see narrative as a way to gain a deeper and more authentic selfhood' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 80). McLaughlin goes on to argue that the point of this New Age theory is not the 'disinterested study of cultural phenomenon, but a contribution within the community of believers to its understanding of an important transformative agent' (1996, p. 83). Perhaps this means I am a New Age writer, after all.

The process of writing *Flight* was similar to the symbolism of the double spiral; the in and the out breath, involution and evolution, the very breath of the universe. It was a going into oneself in order to release fears and uncover insights, to surrender an old identity and find the bones of the new. And then the coming out, in order to integrate and begin living the lessons learned. In New Age narrative therapy, 'the story must be kept open to revision, so that it can continue to respond to the needs of the emerging present. Holding onto one story leads to rigidity and oversimplification' (McLaughlin 1996, p. 99). Indeed, when one journey ends, another must begin, otherwise there will be stasis, and with stasis comes a loss of harmony. The publishing of *Flight* will mark a new stage for me, a letting go of the past and the first steps on another journey. There is a
sequel waiting to be written and I am curious to see where that will take me next.
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APPENDIX I

Joseph Campbell's Model from The Hero With A Thousand Faces, 1968

**Departure or separation** - This is the first stage of any story, where the hero receives a "call" to undergo a quest of some sort. She must then prepare by gathering knowledge and skills that will equip her to step into an unknown world.

**Call to adventure** - This signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred her spiritual centre of gravity from within the pale of society to a zone unknown (Campbell 1968, p. 58).

**Refusal of the call** - If the call is ignored then it will only become stronger and if the hero continues to refuse the summons then the adventure is converted into its negative.

**Supernatural aid** - When the hero agrees to embark on the quest to which they have been called, she will receive help in some way.

**Crossing of the first threshold** - Here the hero meets a threshold guardian who she must trick, overpower or convince of her suitability to pass. On the other side of the threshold is an unknown world (desert, jungle, space etc).

**Belly of the whale** - This is a universal symbol of rebirth. The whale inhabits the ocean, a symbol of the unconscious. If the hero fails to conquer or conciliate the power of the threshold, she is swallowed into the unknown. She descends into the unconscious, goes inward, to be born again (Campbell 1968, p. 91).

**Initiation or descent** - This stage involves a metaphoric descent into the depths of the hero's own fears. It is a stage that is fraught with dangers and sometimes the hero does not survive. The points that Campbell describes as possible representations of this stage are specifically related to the mystical path of initiation and are not always apparent within narrative (see Vogler's adaptation of Campbell in Appendix II). Certainly they are not all included in every story. The distinctions between these points are often subtle but all involve embracing duality on the path to unity. The subtlety of the following points also means that they are difficult to express with words and so historically, symbols, archetypes and stories have been used to illustrate their meaning metaphorically.
Road of trials - There are many stories where the hero is forced to prove her worth by undertaking difficult, seemingly impossible tasks. This is the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past (Campbell 1968, p. 101).

Meeting with the goddess - The Hindu Goddess, Kali is a good example here. She is at once creator, preserver and destroyer - uniting the good and the bad (Campbell 1968, p. 114).

Woman as temptress - Campbell uses the dark agony of Hamlet and Oedipus as examples here. This stage represents a turning away from the flesh to seek the life beyond life (Campbell 1968, p. 122).

Atonement with the father - Again there is the uniting of contradictions. 'All life is sorrowful', is combined with a recognition and celebration of the fact that 'life must be!' (Campbell 1968, p. 146).

Apotheosis - Moving beyond duality, the bringing together of the feminine and masculine principles, as in the ancient symbol of Yin and Yang.

The Ultimate Boon- Sometimes called the elixir of life. Immortality and the understanding that it is here and now in the very cyclic process of life symbolically represented by the still point in a turning wheel.

Return - After the hero has accomplished her quest, she must return with her reward in order to share it with the community, the nation, or the world. The return itself can be fraught with danger and the hero is not always welcomed or understood when they arrive home.

Refusal of the Return - This refusal frequently occurs and for a variety of reasons. The hero might be exhausted, or afraid to retrace their steps, or doubt their ability to share their reward.

The Magic Flight - If the reward has been stolen or opposed in some way, then like Prometheus who stole fire from the gods, the return may become a pursuit filled with obstructions and evasions.

Rescue from Without - Sometimes a hero is unable or unwilling to make the return to their own world and they need rescuing from outside or pushing from inside. When the
ancient Sumerian goddess Innana, descended into the underworld she was aware of its power and left instructions for her own rescue if she did not return.

*The Crossing of the Return Threshold* - Here the question arises: How to bring the knowledge gained on the quest back to the ordinary world? How is it possible to represent in a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional form? (Campbell 1968, p. 218). Somehow the hero must knit together the two worlds (Campbell 1968, p. 228).

*Master of the Two Worlds* - The hero gains the freedom to pass back and forth between worlds and becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment (Campbell 1968, p. 237).

*Freedom to Live* - A reconciliation of the individual consciousness with the universal will (Campbell 1968, p. 238).
APPENDIX II

Christopher Vogler's model from The Writer's Journey 2nd Ed 1998
Script analyst, Christopher Vogler took Campbell's model of the structure of story and simplified it somewhat. According to Vogler, all or most of these twelve stages are evident in a broad range of stories and genres, which he than goes on to analyse, applying his theories to films as diverse as Star Wars, The Wizard of Oz, Titanic, The Full Monty and even Quentin Tarantino's post-structuralist film, Pulp Fiction.

Act One or Preparation
Ordinary world - This represents the world the hero inhabits at the beginning of the story. Often there is some form of stagnation that needs to addressed.
Call to adventure something will occur to herald change. This may be in the form of a letter, a phone call, a death, an accident, a false accusation etc.
Refusal of the call - Change is not something most people choose willingly, so more often than not the hero is not inclined to accept the call. When this occurs then inevitably the call will become stronger, and life as the hero knows it will collapse, forcing him or her to accept change.
Meeting with the mentor - The mentor might appear in many forms: a map, a book, advice from an expert, a fairy godmother or a parent. The mentor will help the hero prepare for the journey.
Crossing the first threshold - This is that moment in all stories when there is no turning back: a plane takes off, the hero shuts the door behind her and is thrust into a new world.

Act Two or Journey
Tests, Allies, Enemies - When the hero leaves her ordinary world, she will find herself in a world in which the rules are not known. Along the way she must learn these rules, collect allies to help her, and inevitably make some enemies, either in the form of other characters or within herself: self doubt, destructive behaviour etc. The adventures she experiences are to test her readiness for the task ahead of her.
Approach to the Inmost Cave - The hero makes final preparations for the central ordeal
of the adventure (Vogler 1998, p. 145). Vogler uses the analogy of the mountaineer who has reached base camp and is preparing to climb the highest peak.

*Ordeal* - This is the inmost cave in which the hero faces their greatest fear. This can be physical, psychological or emotional, and can be represented by anything from fighting a monster, to standing up to a parent. But in some way the hero must die and be reborn. In Vogler's terms, this is the crisis, not the climax of the story, which comes towards the end. Success at this crisis point enables the hero to develop and change.

*Reward (Seizing the sword)* - After success there is a time of celebration, of taking stock and of recuperating in order to make the return journey.

**Act Three or Return**

*The road back* – This is a turning point, another threshold to cross. The hero must either decide to return or be forced to return to the Ordinary World. And they must take with them what they have earned, gained, stolen, or been granted in the Special World (Vogler 1998, p. 200).

*Resurrection* – This is the climax of the plot and it is also the climax of the hero's development as a character giving an outward sign that the hero has really changed (Vogler 1998, p. 217). It may come in the form of a final test, or a sacrifice on the part of the hero, and more often than not, something is at stake here for the wider community.

*Return with the Elixir* – The hero returns home or back to where she started and brings with her the Elixir. Depending on the genre, this can be anything: a new love, a medicine, wisdom, fame. . . But as Vogler states, the 'best Elixirs are those that bring hero and audience greater awareness' (Vogler, 1998, p. 227).