

DANCING WITH DRAGONS



JENNI OGDEN

“Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free.”

— ***Rumi***

"Do we really care so little about the earth on which we live that we don't want to protect one of the world's greatest wonders from the consequences of our behavior?"

— ***Sir David Attenborough***, *Save Our Oceans*, 2016

PART I



**“And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon.”**
— *Edward Lear, The Owl and the Pussycat*

CHAPTER 1



*G*oshawk Gardens, Western Australia, January, 1977

Even with the massive doors that took up most of the front of the barn wide open, Gaia's skin was slick with sweat. Feet sliding like oil inside her pointe shoes, she focused on Bron's straight back in front of her. On the back wall of the barn the blue sky filled a large window, also open and letting in the teasing salt breeze.

Her mother's hand, somehow always cool, grasped her leg and eased it higher. "This leg is as dead as a stick," she said. "Can you feel it?"

"No," said Gaia, careful not to shake her head. "Not the way you mean anyway. It feels more like a burning bloody log about to burn off a burning bloody tree. Can't we stop now?"

Bron snorted, and with his right hand resting lightly on the barre he stretched his long, already straight back even taller, his arched foot at the end of his perfect alive leg pointing at her.

Gaia grinned and Margot's firm grip on her leg softened. "You'll never make a dancer if you let a little bit of sweat control you," she said. But she didn't sound too mad and Gaia let her poor leg flop back down and turned around, swiping at

her forehead with her arm. Surely their mother would take pity on them. The temperature had been in the mid-thirties all week and even higher in here. All Gaia could think about was floating in the cool sea.

“It is a touch warm,” Margot said, her ballet-teacher expression changing into her mother look. “Do your cool-down stretches, both of you, and get a drink and some fruit and then scarper. Only in the reef shallows though, Gaia. No going out into the deep without your father watching.”

“Bron can watch,” Gaia said.

“Bron has to look after himself. He can’t look after you as well.”

“Come on Mum,” Bron said. “She’s not a baby; she’ll be fine.”

“You know the rules. If you don’t want to stick with them, by all means stay here and we’ll spend another thirty minutes working.”



GAIA LAY STILL ON THE SILKY SURFACE. IT WAS THE BEST feeling; the sun warm on her back while the cool water caressed her body, her arms, her legs, her feet; soothing her exhausted, taut muscles. If she turned her head to the side she could see the evening sun held like cups of gold in the dimples on the sea surface. It filtered through long strands of her hair, freed to float on the far side of the strap that held the mask over her eyes.

She returned her gaze to the gardens below. Most of the fish on the reef stayed in the same areas, around the same coral outcrops, whatever the season. But there were so many different species Gaia never tired of it. She loved seeing her old friends, the Squirrelfish, the Butterfly, the Moorish Idol, but with a flip of her feet she could be over another coral bommie and a fish she hadn’t seen in weeks would scurry by.

She could hear her quiet breathing through her snorkel and wished she could throw it away and breathe like a fish. Discard her mask and flippers, even her swimsuit, and sink below the surface where the mermaids swam.

She could never quite decide which she loved best; swimming over the reef flats in the late afternoon light or in that perfect hour after dawn. Only possible when the tide was well on its way to full tide. Sometimes she and Bron, occasionally with one or both of their parents, took a reef walk when the tide was out, but more often they changed direction and swam in the amber waters of the freshwater lagoon she could see from her bedroom window. That was water to float on up the other way; eyes to the sky rather than to the underworld. From a tree bordering the lagoon, clouds of iridescent green budgerigars might take to the air, turn as one and, in a chorus of twittering, settle back in the same tree. Then, as if they had been waiting patiently off-stage waiting their turn, hundreds of pelicans would startle and fly up from the lagoon as one giant white cloud, perform their synchronized dance through the blue air and skid back on the water, rainbow showers shooting out behind them. A few times they'd landed all around her, leaving again with a rush of wind and spray when they realized she wasn't a floating log.

It was almost high tide now, the tops of the coral a meter below the surface. Swimming over to a large patch of sand between the coral outcrops, Gaia forced her flippered feet to the bottom and pushed off, catapulting high in the air, her face to the sky. Nothing dead about her legs now. She could see Bron further out past the row of small breakers that signaled the reef drop-off. He was swimming laps, his long arms and strong feet propelling him forward almost without a splash. As if he were in a pool, not floating above a wonderland of corals and myriads of tropical fish going about their business. Bron didn't share Gaia's obsession with the creatures that hung

about in the coral. Scuba diving was more to his liking, preferably around spooky shipwrecks.

For a second Gaia thought about swimming out to him, but her mother's voice rang in her head. She was a good swimmer but Bron could out-swim her without even trying. He could have been a competitive swimmer instead of a ballet dancer if he wanted. But he'd made his choice and in three weeks he was starting his new life at the Australian Ballet School in Melbourne—leaving Gaia here in the middle of nowhere for another two years until it was her turn to follow him. She'd go when she was sixteen, not wait until she was seventeen like Bron. She'd miss him. Her big bro.

Gaia flipped further out as the sun's rays slanted lower, her eyes scanning the coral bommies as they graded into white sand covered by patches of waving seagrass. She grinned around her snorkel mouthpiece as a Green turtle swam below her, focused on filling its belly with seagrass, entirely uninterested in the human form above. Perhaps she would nest on their beach? Some years there were a few nests; not many. One January they'd been on a camping holiday further north, up past Ningaloo, and Gaia had almost decided to give up ballet and work with turtles. Such an amazing creature; climbing up a beach, digging a pit, depositing a batch of eggs, covering them with sand, and dragging her heavy body back to the sea before the tide went out. All to continue her genes without the pleasure of meeting any of her offspring.

What if she did forget the whole ballet thing? Melbourne was so far away. Bron was only going to get to come home once a year, and the flights between Perth and Melbourne cost a fortune. It was bad enough driving to Perth; over four hours south from here in their old 4WD. And there'd be no turtles on the beaches in Melbourne. No coral reef. Just skyscrapers and too many people. And if she ever made it through the program and was accepted by one of the ballet companies her mother deemed good enough — preferably the American

Ballet Theatre in New York where Margot had danced—she'd never be able to return to their patch. Gaia sighed into her mask. Is this what she really wanted? Or was it her mother's dream, not hers?

Below her the seagrasses swayed in the gentle current and she eyeballed a tiny blennie, only its head and eyes above the sand. Now she was over a small bed of kelp, bigger fish swimming in and out—a Spangled Emperor, a Spotted Boxfish. A different movement turned her head sideways and she blinked behind her mask as some long strands of seaweed seemed to pull away from the bottom and dance in a different direction from the current. Entangled with the weed was something else; red, yellow, blue. Then it clicked. She'd seen one years ago but never since. A seadragon. Her heart pounded and she held her breath, her hands flapping gently as she tried to keep her body from moving. More than half the length of her arm, the creature's long thin body had dark pinky-red paddle-shaped seaweedy-like appendages rimmed neatly in black sprouting from it, almost making it disappear. Gaia concentrated on the colors: a dark pinky-red body covered in yellow spots, yellow on its ventral surface, a long purple neck circled by a ring of vibrating yellow. As it moved away from the seagrass she could see its head; like a seahorse head but with a much longer red-spotted snout ending in a knob. Large red dragon eyes looked up and down, and the pointed crown of its head was capped with another frond of seaweed. A common weedy seadragon. Not so common here at the southern edge of the tropics, and even if they were present they were so well camouflaged it was magical to see one.

Not one, two! She'd been so focused on trying to remember the colors of this one she'd completely missed its mate. It was a color match for the first seadragon, and as one dragon turned on its side, swam in a circle, up, down, around, the second one mirrored its movements. They were performing their courtship dance.

Glued to their graceful display, Gaia almost leapt out of the water when something touched her side. Small white-tipped reef sharks were plentiful around here. They weren't dangerous but that didn't mean it was wise to swim into them.

"What are you looking at?" said Bron.

Gaia's heart slowed and she stuck her head up, her finger shushing him, then pointed down.



DARK CAME EARLY HERE, EVEN IN SUMMER IN MID-JANUARY. BY the time they got home, not long after 7 pm, the house was in darkness. Off-grid, with no electricity, they relied on kerosene lamps and torches. A hopeless phone was their only nod to the modern world, and connected them to the outside by a copper wire that often failed to work when they needed it. Even that was a party line, shared with their only neighbors, Dave and Ros Mason.

Their parents were sitting on the twilit verandah with cold beers. "About time," Margot said. "What did you find this time?"

"You'll never guess. It was amazing," Gaia said. "Two seadragons mating. Well not quite mating yet, but doing an incredible courtship dance, on and on for ages. They were still going when we had to get out because it was too dark to see them."

"It was bloody spectacular," Bron said. "If I hadn't seen it with my own two peepers I wouldn't have believed it."

"On the reef flats?" asked Joe. "That's pretty special. I've always wanted to see that. Was it the weedy seadragon or the leafy one?"

"The weedy one. I'm sure it was. I've seen pictures and the leafy one has lots more leafy things hanging off it. But this pair was so amazingly colored. Both the same. I think they change

colors and probably when they're dancing they change together. How do they do that?"

Joe shook his head. "Beats me. Bloody marvellous. Although I believe it's only the leafy seadragon that can change color. We'll go back at dawn tomorrow and see if your courting couple are still there. They can dance for days before they actually mate."

"I'll come too," Margot said. "This I can't miss. Do you think you'll be able to find the same spot again?"

"I reckon. We took careful note of the nearest bommies. What's the chance they'll stay in the same place?" Bron asked.

"We'll see," Joe answered. "They're about the slowest swimming fish on the reef, and I've read that they do their courting dance around the area they will actually mate; that's where the male will stay and incubate the eggs."

"What do you mean? How can a male incubate?" asked Margot.

"They're like seahorses. The male holds the eggs under his tail and the female disappears into the wide blue yonder, probably to knock up some other poor unsuspecting male." Joe winked at Gaia. "Way to go."



AFTER DINNER, MARGOT AND JOE DISAPPEARED TO HAVE A FEW drinks with Dave and Ros. They owned a small farm about two kilometers from their place. Like Joe, they grew vegetables and fruit for the farmers' market in Jurien Bay, forty kilometers south of here, although their gardens were three times the size of Joe's.

As soon as they left, Bron disappeared too, and Gaia stuck on her head torch and plopped down on the screened verandah with her book. An hour later she reached the satisfactory conclusion and closed it with a sigh. She sniffed the air. Bron was smoking. In the basement probably. If Margot

smelled it when she got home she'd be mad. Dancers don't smoke. Her torch shining her way, Gaia tiptoed down the stairs to the basement and threw open the door. "Ha. Caught in the act," she said, grinning as Bron turned around, his face lit by the kerosene lamp on the old metal table by his chair.

"Get a life," he retorted. "Little girls should be in bed."

"Geez, you stink. What on earth are you drinking?"

"Water."

"It's Dad's whisky, you toad. They'll both divorce you if they find out."

"They won't find out unless you tell them."

"Give me a puff and I'll keep my lips zipped." Gaia stuck her hand out.

"You'll hate it. Unless you've tried it before. Have you?" Bron's eyebrows went up.

"Nope. Where would I get fags from? Come on, let me try."

Bron passed her the smoke and she put it between her lips and breathed in...and spluttered it out again.

"Now you know," Bron said. "It's a nasty habit."

"So why are you doing it?"

"Bored. It goes with the whisky."

"You could try reading a book."



AGES LATER GAIA WAS STILL THERE. NOT SHARING THE WHISKY or the cigarettes but loving the chance to gossip with Bron, something he didn't do easily. The whisky had made him garrulous.

"I'm going to miss you so so much," she said. "You have to write and tell me what it's like. What if you hate it and decide you don't want to be a dancer after all?"

Bron shrugged. "I'll find another career I suppose. Go to

Melbourne Uni and do a degree. I'm not coming back here though, that's for sure."

"Why not? You love it here."

"Too bloody tense for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Mum and Dad. They've changed. Surely you've noticed?"

"That's because they've been married for ever. Look at Dave and Ros; they're always at each other's throats. All old couples are like that. That's why I'll never marry."

Bron looked at her as if he were about to say something. He poured himself another whisky, stubbed his cigarette butt out on the metal arm of his chair and fired it towards the ratty cane rubbish bin. Missed. Gaia rolled her eyes and stepped over to the butt, picking it up and examining it as if it might explode at any minute. They had been in drought for six weeks now. Satisfied it was out, she dropped it in the bin on top of the junk already in there. Old bits of metal, plastic bags, dried-up apple cores, screwed up paper. Margot never came down here and so the bin rarely got emptied out. Mostly Joe's rubbish. He had his tools down here and old bits of broken machinery, even the filthy generator and a petrol can. They should have been kept in the barn but that had been converted to the ballet studio, as empty and clean as this was cluttered and dirty.

"Mum and Dad will be home soon," Gaia said. "I'm going to bed. You should too or they'll catch you. They will anyway. This place pongs of smoke and booze."

"It'll be gone by morning if I leave the window open. Dad'll be too pissed to notice tonight. Close the door when you leave so the evidence doesn't creep out."

Gaia moved back to him, leaned over and kissed the top of his head, surprising herself as well as Bron. "Night bro. I really hope you love the ballet school. One day we'll dance together for the American Ballet Theatre. That's a promise."



SHE WOKE, SWEATING AND HEADACHY. VOICES. HER FATHER'S, shouting. He must be drunk. Poor Mum. She pulled the pillow around her ears. Then she heard another voice — a man, not her mother. It was the middle of the night. Who was here?

Getting out of bed she tiptoed towards the kitchen, her heart hitting her chest. The door was half open and she sidled up to it, her spine to the wall. Peering in, she could see her father's back and in front of him her mother's face lit by the flickering light of the kerosene lamp on the table. But Dad wasn't shouting at her; there was a man sitting next to her. Dave Mason. What was he doing here? Perhaps he drove them back from his place because Dad was too drunk?

"Get your filthy hands off her and get out of here," her dad roared.

"Back off, Joe. We need to talk this through. You need to calm down." Dave was shouting, standing up, her father was going towards him, grabbing him, Mum was trying to pull Dad off Dave, they were on the floor, chairs flying, the table screeching across the room, the kerosene lamp falling, Mum's clothes alight, screaming, Dad throwing himself over her mother. Screaming, screaming.

Dave yelling "Get the hose, get a bucket of water. Gaia, get the hose." Dave running water from the kitchen sink tap into a basin, throwing it over her parents, Dad on top of Mum, flames up the curtains, Dad standing, his arms around her burning mother, his hair on fire. Seeing her, shouting "Gaia, get out of here, get out, get Bron out, call 000, get out now."

Dad collapsing on the floor, Dave with the phone shouting into it, flames across the ceiling, running to get Bron, kicking shut the kitchen door, crashing open Bron's door, shaking him, screaming, "Wake up Bron, wake up."

Bron groaned and turned over.

“The house is on fire. Wake up, wake up. Bron, wake up.” Gaia slapped him hard on the cheek.

“Lay off. Whadda matter?”

“Fire, the house is on fire. We have to get out. Bron, wake up...”

“Christ...” Bron flung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up and grabbed Gaia’s arms. She could hear a roaring as he pulled her towards the closed bedroom door, Bron yelping as his hand touched the door handle. “I think the door is on fire. We can’t open it. We’ll have to get out the window.” He pushed her towards it, wide open above his bed.

“It’s too high. How will we get down?” She was screaming and sobbing above the roaring of the flames.

Bron shoved at the fly screen and it flew outwards, landing somewhere below. “Squat on the window-sill then jump as far out from the house as you can so you’ll land on the grass. You’ll be all right. Gaia, there’s no other way. When you land get away from the house.” He jerked as a window exploded below them and flames shot out into the night. “Hurry up, I’ll be right behind you.”

Gaia scrambled onto the window-sill, squatting in the big open frame. “It’s too far down, I can’t, Bron, I can’t. You go first.”

“Gaia, go. Jump outwards. Do it or I’ll push you.” She felt the heat as the door buckled and then she jumped, her scream echoing through the night. She fell through the flames shooting out the window below, the concrete rushing towards her...

CHAPTER 2



She was floating, floating over the coral gardens, her body wrapped in water.

“Gaia, open your eyes, it’s time to change your dressings.”

She shook her head. *No, no don’t wake me, leave me alone. I want to sleep.* She couldn’t hear her voice, she wasn’t talking out loud, it hurt her throat too much.

“Come on, there’s a brave girl. We have to clean those burns. I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

Push them open. The smell of antiseptic, the two torturers looming over the bed, only their glasses showing between their caps and masks. Every bit of their bodies covered up as if she had the plague. Gaia moved her left hand to her throat. Tubes snaked from her arm. Her right arm was tied down so she couldn’t move it, she knew that. Her left leg was in plaster and sometimes her skin under it where she couldn’t scratch itched so badly she wanted to die. Almost as bad as the pain from the burns on her other leg.

She felt the edge of the horrible compression mask over her face. She’d seen her reflection in the TV screen suspended from the ceiling over her bed, and it made her look like she was about to hold up a bank. It had holes for her eyes, nose

and mouth, and underneath it dressings covered half of her face.

The pain was boring back into her. That's why she wanted to sleep. She'd learned that. The only way out. "Can you pump up my morphine please?" Her voice hurt but she had to ask nicely.

"Hmm, better if you can hold out a little longer. How about it? Have a few sips of your water." The nurse held the glass near Gaia's chin and slipped the straw between her lips. The water was lukewarm but it felt good sliding down her raw throat. Ever since they'd pulled the tubes out of her nose, for some reason her throat burned like it had been scrubbed with sandpaper.

"Please give me a little shot of morphine. It hurts so much when you change my dressings. Tears pushed behind her eyes.

"What's your pain level?"

"Eight. Eight out of 10. Is that bad enough?"

"That's not good." The nurse fiddled with the slides on the tubes snaking from one of the bottles on the stand next to her bed. "There, that should make you more comfortable. I'll give it a few minutes and then we'll get this job done."

"Can I see?"

"Goodness, what sort of a question is that? All you need to know is that you're healing nicely."

"I want to see now. It's my face. I should be allowed to see it if I want."

"It'll only upset you, and we don't want that, do we?"

"I look like a monster, that's why. I can feel it. Half my face has been burnt off. It's not going to grow back, is it. So I may as well get it over with."

"Don't be silly. All your face is there. When the burns heal, the plastic surgeons will be able to make you look almost as good as new."

"Let me see then. If you don't, I won't believe you."

Her torturer sighed. "Nurse," she said, looking at the other

masked person, “Can you go and get the mirror? Wash it in antiseptic first.”

Gaia’s heart felt as if she had run a marathon. Her back rose like some sort of spooky machine as the nurse pumped the top half of the bed up. Then she stuffed pillows around her to keep her from toppling sideways. They treated her like a wooden doll, as if she were paralyzed or something, not just the right half of her body burned and her left broken leg in plaster.

She’d caught glimpses of the mess on her chest and leg even though they’d tried to hide them from her while they were tweezering away, pulling off bits of dead skin and flesh, but when they were changing the dressings on her face and cleaning the burns, they even turned the blank TV screen away to stop her using it as a mirror. It didn’t take an Einstein to work out what that meant. Her head injury might have dumbed her down a bit, but she hadn’t completely lost her ability to think.

The other nurse was back. They swung the table with its implements of horror on it across her lap and started on her face. Gaia squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think of something nice, but it wasn’t happening. The morphine helped; sort of made the pain float about somewhere else, as if it didn’t belong to her.

“There. We have the bandages off. Are you sure you want to see before we put fresh ones on?”

“Yes. Yes please.”

“The burns look much worse than they are, but that’s because they’re healing well. We’re lucky that most of them are second-degree burns and only small areas are third-degree.”

“That’s bad though. I’ll look like one of those fighter pilots in the war who had their faces burned, and everyone is scared of them forever more.”

“You’ve been watching too many horror films. Your burns

are nothing like that. The doctors will decide later if you need a small skin graft on the worst burn areas on your face. Then all you'll have is a scar or two that you can cover with makeup if need be."

"What about my arm and leg? I know they're worse."

"Later they will need permanent skin grafts and lots of physiotherapy to stop the contraction of the scar tissue and help you get good movement back. So don't get yourself all upset. You just have to be patient. Now, do you want me to hold up the mirror? I think it would be better if you waited another few days."

"No. Show me."



TWO WEEKS LATER

She'd asked about Bron, over and over, but all they'd told her was that he'd been able to stay in hospital in Perth as his burns weren't anywhere near as bad as hers. Gaia had been flown to the specialist burns unit in Melbourne, thousands of kilometers away from Perth. Gaia had no memory of the flight or anything about what happened before or after it.

Miriam, the psychologist, came to see her every day, and at least that meant she had a sort of a visitor, even if Miriam had to put on a mask and a gown over her ordinary clothes. Otherwise, the only people she'd ever see would be nurses and doctors. Miriam was the one who told her their house had burned down, and she and Bron had got out but their parents hadn't. Gaia couldn't get her head around that, and sometimes forgot and had to be told again. Then she'd get given another pill or sometimes a jab in her backside, and that would calm her down.

Miriam was asking her again what she remembered. She kept checking in case bits and pieces started coming back. She'd explained that it was most likely that Gaia's head injury

was the cause of her memory loss. “When you’re unconscious your brain is offline so it can’t consolidate or store properly any of the things that happened before being knocked out. And you were unconscious for two weeks because the doctors put you in an induced coma so they could treat you more easily. Some of your memory for the hours before the fire might come back as your brain recovers. We don’t even know that for certain. You could be suffering from traumatic amnesia as well. That’s how the brain protects you from reliving a traumatic event, like the fire. It blocks those memories out.”

“Well, I still don’t remember. Anything. I’ve tried and tried but it’s just blank.” Tears blocked her throat and she choked them down.

“Perhaps your brain is protecting you.”

“It’s a weird feeling, having blanks. What does that mean about my brain? How would you like to be brain damaged for the rest of your life?”

“Your brain is fine. I’ve seen the scans and talked to the neurologist. It just needs time to recover from having a big shake-up.”



THE POLICE CAME TO SEE HER AND ASKED HER WHAT SHE remembered.

“Nothing,” Gaia said.

“What about earlier on the day of the fire? It was a Wednesday. Your mother... you and your brother, Oberon, you were home schooled, is that right?”

Gaia nodded. “Yes. We did school work for three hours after breakfast, and after lunch we did ballet for the rest of the afternoon. We’d usually go for a swim or a snorkel after that.” She blinked hard. “It’s not Oberon. That’s his actual name.

After the ballet dude. ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream.’ But we never call him that. He’s Bron.”

“Oh. Yes, Bron is much better.” He looked down at his notebook and scribbled something. “Is Gaia a ballet name too?”

Gaia shook her head. “No. Dad named me. It was his turn, I suppose. Bron was born in New York but they lived in Australia when I was born. We’ve got a small market garden. I suppose that’s why Dad called me Gaia. The Earth Goddess.” She felt a little snort squeezing out of her facemask.

“It’s a very pretty name,” said the woman cop. She cleared her throat. “On that day, the day before the fire, is that the last day you can remember? What did you do?”

“We went snorkeling. I do remember that. I saw a pair of sea-dragons dancing. Bron and I didn’t get home until it was nearly dark. Mum and Dad went over to our neighbors’ house after dinner. I read for a bit on the verandah and then Bron and I hung out. He’s starting at ballet school in Melbourne in February and we had lots to talk about before he went.” Gaia paused. “Well, he was meant to go, but he won’t now. It’s already February and if he’d started he would be in Melbourne and would have come to see me.” She squeezed her eyes closed, feeling her eyelashes scrape against the holes on the mask. At least they hadn’t burnt off.

“I’m sure he would have been here by your side if he could have,” the woman cop said. “But he’s still in Perth. Haven’t you heard from him at all?”

Gaia shook her head. “He’s not much good at writing letters, but he could have phoned.”

“I’m sure he has a good reason. He’s probably struggling with it all himself.”

“He might remember what happened,” Gaia said.

“Yes, the Perth police have sent us his statement.”

“Why are you asking me then? What did he say?”

“It’s important that we get independent statements if we’re

to find out how the fire started. You said you were hanging out with Bron. Where were you?”

Gaia closed her eyes again, her head hurting, the smell of whisky and cigarette smoke flooding up her nose. “I can’t remember. On the verandah I suppose. I went to bed before Mum and Dad got back. Bron probably did too.”

“And you didn’t hear your parents come home?”

“I’ve told you everything I remember. The next thing I remember is being in here and that was weeks after I got here. Can’t you tell me anything? How did I get on fire and bash my head and break my leg?”

“No one has told you?” said the cop.

“I don’t think so. I forget things easily though.”

“According to your brother, you woke him up and probably saved his life. The only way you could get out was by jumping out the window.”

“From Bron’s bedroom? That’s upstairs.”

“The fire was right outside Bron’s bedroom door so you did what you had to do. You landed on the concrete and hit your head, and your nightdress caught fire. Bron landed better, on the grass, and he must have been very quick thinking and managed to roll you on the grass and suffocate the flames before they did more damage. Your neighbor...” she looked at her notes—“Dave Mason, he was the first on the scene and called 000. Apparently he tried to rescue your parents but he was beaten back by the flames.”

“Did Bron get badly hurt?” Gaia whispered. “You have to tell me the truth. Did he get bad burns too?”

“I believe he suffered some burns from when he was helping you, but I think he’s on the mend now. Your neighbor too; he had some burns, but not as bad as yours.”



THEY CAME BACK AGAIN TWO DAYS LATER AND GAIA TOLD them again she couldn't remember anything after going to bed before her parents came home.

"Never mind," said the woman cop. "But is it OK if we ask you a few more questions about the house? The Perth police are trying to put together a picture so they can work out how the fire might have started."

Gaia nodded, her heart thumping. She was glad she had the compression mask over her face; at least they wouldn't be able to read her expressions—if her face was even able to make them any more.

"Your house was off-grid so I believe your father had a generator. Do you know where that was kept?"

Gaia nodded. "In the basement. When he used it, he pushed it out the door onto the concrete."

"Where did he store the fuel for it?"

"Mostly in the garden shed. But I think he might have had one container in the basement. I don't really know; only Dad ever went into the basement."

"Was the generator going when you and your brother were hanging out when your parents were at your neighbors' place?"

"No. Dad only put it on when he needed it for some tools or something."

"So what did you use for light and your fridge and stove?"

"Same as everyone else off-grid. We used torches and kerosene lamps, and we had a gas fridge and a wood stove. The fridge was connected to a gas bottle outside, not in the house."

"Do you remember if you had a kerosene lamp on that night?"

"Only while we were having dinner. We used torches after that."

"What about the wood stove?"

"No. It was too hot to have the stove on. We had a salad

and cold sausages for dinner. I remember that because I don't like sausages."

"Can you think of anything else that might have started a fire? Did your parents smoke?"

Gaia shook her head. "No, Mum hated cigarettes. She was a dancer and you need good lungs to dance." She turned her head towards the window and tried to focus on the trees outside.

Miriam stood up from where she'd been sitting so quietly that Gaia had almost forgotten she was there. "That's enough of the questions. Gaia's exhausted."

"That's about it anyway. Thanks, Gaia, you've been very helpful," the cop said. "We'll let you know if we find out anything. You just concentrate on getting better."

FEBRUARY 20TH, 1977

Dear Gaia,

I'm sorry I haven't been able to get to Melbourne and see you but the police have told me you're doing good. My burns weren't too bad. My hands got burnt and my leg a bit, but they've healed now. Mum and Dad were cremated before I was even out of hospital. The ashes are in the Perth crematorium if you want to collect them when you come back to Perth. I can't face going there yet. It's not them, anyway.

I'm staying at the Perth YMCA and Mr Ludlow who was Dad's lawyer is really helpful and when you get back to Perth after you're better, he'll help you too. There's a copy of the property settlement in here for you. It just says you and I own Goshawk Gardens and Dad's bank account has been put in our joint names. It's only got about \$4,000 in it but it'll keep you going for a while. Dad didn't have any insurance on the house, but he didn't have a mortgage either so that's a good thing. At least Mum and Dad left all their important papers and stuff with Mr Ludlow, their marriage certificate and our birth certificates and even all our passports. The house is gone but the barn is still there. Dave and Ros said they'd try and keep the gardens from going completely wild. I signed a form to say

that you can do whatever you like with the money and sell the property if you want, without me having to sign anything. You have to go through Mr Ludlow to get money out until you're sixteen and then you can do what you want with it. I don't need any of it. I can earn my way.

The police haven't a clue how the fire started. They reckon it might have started in the basement because of the generator and Dad's petrol cans being stored there. I didn't tell them we were there and that I was smoking because you know what cops are like. They'd be knocking me around and making the fire my fault and I know bloody well I didn't leave any smoldering fag ends. I told the cops it was probably the pilot light flame at the back of the gas fridge. Mum was always saying that was dicey and we should get a new one. What's it matter anyway how the fire started? It's not going to bring them back or help you. The cops told me that you had no memory for anything that happened because of your head injury. I suppose that might be a relief. It must have been bloody terrifying. All I remember is being woken up by you. You saved my life. Mr Ludlow said you'll be looked after until you're sixteen and even longer if you stay at school. He said you would have to be in a rehab center for ages once they let you out of hospital, and then you'll probably live with a foster family. I know you think you'll hate it but you might not. Give it a chance. You can go to a real school and make friends. You'll be sixteen in less than two years and then you can do what you want. If I could I'd look after you but I don't think the social worker would be too happy about that.

The ballet school in Melbourne had started before I even got out of hospital but I don't care. A guy here at the Y gave me a heads-up about getting a deckhand job on a container ship. I'm going to give it a try. I've always wanted to do something like that and they pay quite well. I'll write to you when I get on a ship so you'll know where I am. I think you can even send letters to ships. I know you'll be mad at me, but I have to get away for a bit. I can't hack it here any more. I'll be back in Australia in a few months and you might even be well enough to come to Perth by then, or I'll come to Melbourne. I'm gutted about what happened to you. It's not fair that you got the bum end of all this. Love, Bron

“What about Mum and Dad?” Gaia whispered as she folded up the letter. “They got the bummiest end.”

CHAPTER 3



*D*ecember, 1978

Gaia had insisted she be freed from the Perth Youth Home before Christmas. After all, she'd been sixteen for a month so they couldn't legally stop her. Mr Ludlow was nice. She'd never met him before but he'd been the family lawyer for ever. He asked her if she wanted her passport or birth certificate or any of the other papers he had in his safe.

"Why would I need them? I'm not going anywhere. Can you keep them please?"

"Yes, of course. You know where they are if you need them. Your brother took his passport and birth certificate. Both your passports are valid until 1983. They're important documents, especially given how much was lost in the fire."

"Mum was always organized about all that stuff. Always ready to fly back to the States if she got a chance. She took Bron and me there when I was 11 to see her mother. She died while we were there, that's why we went, to say goodbye."

"I wondered why you and Bron had US passports rather than Australian ones."

"Well, Bron was born in New York but I wasn't and Mum reckoned it was always possible the States would stop allowing

kids like me, with an American mother but born in Australia, getting an American Passport. She had this idea we'd both go to the States to dance and she and Dad would move back there. She was always prepared." Gaia tried to laugh but it came out as a snort.

"Do you think Bron might have gone to America?"

"Why wouldn't he have written to me if that's where he is? He could be anywhere in the world. He was always on about seeing Africa and India and places like that."

"I'm sorry. It must be worrying for you not knowing."

Gaia shook her head, her long hair swishing in what felt like a who-gives-a-stuff manner. "He'll be all right. He'll show up one day. Perhaps he's making his fortune. Diving for lost treasure somewhere exotic. Probably got himself some other name by now. Neptune, likely." She tried to smile but knew it didn't reach her eyes.

"And now you want to go back to Goshawk Gardens? It could be very upsetting. There's not much left. What about waiting until we can find someone to go with you the first time? Perhaps your social worker? See how things are there."

"I'll be OK. I'd rather be by myself."

"You know the house was burnt to the ground. Where do you think you'll live?"

"The barn wasn't burnt. I'll stay there. It even has a shower and a sink. It's summer. It's easy to live there in summer. There'll be heaps to eat in Dad's gardens even if they are overgrown, and I do know how to fish. I did actually spend my whole life there."

"It's too remote. Where will you get basic food supplies? Isn't the nearest shop a long drive away?"

"Dave and Ros will help me. They live on the next farm. And Dave'll help me get Dad's 4WD going again. I knew how to drive by the time I was ten."

"Are you seriously contemplating living there permanently? What about a job? You could get one much more

easily here in Perth. Even better, if you stayed at school for another two years the government would support you. Perhaps you could even get into university after that.”

“I want to go home. I haven’t been back since the fire. I need to see it.” Gaia steeled herself against the tears that punished her whenever she thought of home. She had to show him, show her social worker, everyone, that she was tough.

“Well, you’re within your rights I’m afraid. Perhaps you could stay with your neighbors? Have a holiday there, see how things are, and then decide?”

Gaia swallowed and made herself smile. “OK, if that makes you happy. I’ll treat this as a reconnaissance mission.” At least that slammed a smile on the lawyer’s face.

“You’re not lacking in brains, that’s obvious.” He sighed. “You still have most of your parents’ savings as a backup, and you’ll be eligible for a government benefit until you can get a job. You’ll have to find a way to collect it. If there’s a post office at Jurien Bay—that’s the nearest town isn’t it?—you would collect it there once a month.”

“Can’t they post it?” Gaia asked, the pulse in her throat throbbing so hard he could probably see it.

“Possibly. I’m not sure. That’s one of the many things you’ll have to sort out.” The lawyer’s face softened. “Call me any time and I’ll do my best to help. No charge for phone calls!” He smiled. “You’ve got guts and I damn well hope it all works out for you. You’re way overdue for some good luck.”



THE BUS TOOK HER AS FAR AS JURIEN BAY. FIVE HOURS, stopping at every tiny wayside stop where one or two passengers would get off or on. From Jurien Bay it was forty kilometers to home. It was one o’clock in the afternoon so she had time to indulge herself. She sat on the beach and made a hole in the newspaper wrapping and pulled out crispy pieces of

battered fish and every last salty chip before she paused to lick her fingers and think about the next step in her new life. It was hot and she rolled up the thin material of her trousers. There was no one within screaming distance to see the scars on her leg. Not that she cared about those too much.

Gaia knew where the post office was. She'd been there many times with her parents on their fortnightly trips to get supplies. Perhaps they'd remember her? She touched her face, the familiar feel of the raised scars reminding her to keep her head lowered. She'd practiced moving her head so that her hair covered some of them. The plastic surgeon had done his best, but making a silk purse out of a pig's ear and all that. She'd tried using thick stage makeup; it felt like she had that disgusting compression mask back on and she couldn't hack that. It was strange to think that if the fire hadn't happened she'd be about to start at the Ballet Academy and be plastering her face with makeup every time they had a performance. And Bron would have graduated and perhaps be dancing in a company somewhere exotic—she shook away those musings.

She didn't recognize the girl in the post office, who, like everyone else, widened her eyes when she saw Gaia and then glanced down. But with the help of her boss she managed to sort it out so Gaia's unemployment benefit got posted on the Rural Delivery. Gaia told her that there was a letterbox at the end of the road where the driveway to Dave's farm began. It had Goshawk Gardens written on it. She didn't mention her worry that it mightn't still be standing, but she'd put another one up if it wasn't. The girl gave her a look and said she'd need to collect the envelope with the benefit money in it quick smart on the first Wednesday every month, and put a padlock on the letterbox because of the lowlifes around there. They'd pinch it before she had time to collect it.

“What d'you mean, lowlifes?” Gaia asked. The girl jerked her head and looked past her out the Post Office window. Gaia turned and saw a bunch of Aboriginal kids larking about with

a football. Stupid woman. Not once had they ever had anything stolen from their letterbox as far as she knew. “I’ll stick a padlock on it,” she said, pushing the form she’d signed in triplicate across the counter.

“You’re from the place that burned down.”

Gaia nodded.

“I’m sorry. That was terrible.”

Gaia nodded again.

“Where’s your brother now?”

“My brother? You know him?”

“He was nice. He came in here to get an envelope and a stamp ages ago. Perhaps a couple of months after the fire. Is he coming back too?”

Gaia looked down, closing her eyes for a moment. She looked up again, her hand covering her scarred cheek. “Perhaps later, when he’s back in Australia. He’s working on boats.”

“He was lucky not to get burned. He’s awfully good looking.” The girl’s pale face flushed pink.

“Did he say anything? Why he was back?” Gaia asked.

“Just that he needed to check the property. He posted a letter, that’s all. I never saw him again.”

The skin on her face stinging as if the grafts so painfully grown across her scars had been scraped off again, Gaia slunk into the small supermarket, grabbed a few necessities and paid, willing the kid at the counter not to ask her anything. He barely looked at her, his eyes flicking back to the comic he’d been reading when she interrupted him. She stuffed some of the groceries in her pack and the rest into two plastic carrier bags the boy gave her.

She started hitching, hoping her slim body and long golden hair would get her a ride, too late to drive off when they saw her face. But it was an hour before she was successful. Not because people were mean but because there was almost no traffic and what did come past—the occasional truck—

engulfed her in thick road dust before the driver likely even registered she was there. But an old 4WD finally screeched to a stop, meters in front of her. It was a woman, tough as shit, with long gray hair in a messy ponytail, a fag hanging out the side of her mouth.

“Christ, what happened to you?” she said, as soon as Gaia had closed the vehicle door.

Gaia told her. Not details, just the bare facts. If only everyone was as straight. It was the avoidance, the looking anywhere but at her, that was so hard to deal with. Unfortunately Thelma was on her way to a cattle station way past Ningaloo and Gaia’s property. Likely Gaia’d never see her again. “I’m on the way home to my property; it’s on a side road between here and Geraldton,” she told Thelma. *My property*. That’s how Gaia was making herself think of it. “It’s a market garden. Let’s hope we get some rain pretty damn soon.”



SHE TRUDGED DOWN THE OVERGROWN TRACK THAT LED FIRST to Ros and Dave’s house and then beyond that branched off to her parents’— her— property. The Mason’s two-story wooden farmhouse appeared through the trees, its verandah almost hidden by purple wisteria, its iron roof more rust than the green she remembered. She dropped her pack and bag of groceries on the cracked concrete path and walked up the worn steps. Paint was flaking off the once whitish walls and the front door looked very closed. Had it always been this uncared for? Perhaps she’d just never noticed before? She scrubbed the cobwebs and dirt from the window she knew looked into the front room and peered inside. Her eyes gradually accustomed themselves and her slightly panicky feeling calmed down a bit as she took in the same old furniture and the piano against the far wall. Tottering stacks of books and

magazines on the floor rang a wrong note, but how often had she ever been in the Mason's living room?

"Hey there, you want somethin'?"

Gaia spun around, her brain clicking into the past before her eyes took in the tall skinny black woman standing at the bottom of the steps. "Mary? Oh Mary, it's you." She felt her whole face scrunching up as tears pushed through her tiredness, and stumbling down the steps she folded into the old woman's arms.

"Gaia? Gaia girl, you come back. I know you would some day. You all growed up now, look at you, jus' like your mummy."

"I can't believe I'm seeing you. I was thinking no one was here and I'm so tired and I didn't know if I would even be able to get into the barn and if I did it would be full of rats probably."

"Well, here I is and Eddie here somewhere 'bout too so he get the barn fixed good 'fore you go stayin' init. Better you bunk down with us." Mary shoved Gaia out to arm's length and looked her up and down. "Crikey girl, you skinny as a frog. You need some good tucker. I got a rabbit stew fill you up a bit."

Gaia grinned and took the deepest breath she'd taken for a long time. "Where's Ros and Dave? This place looks as if they haven't been here for ages."

Mary shook her head. "Missus Ros left jus' after fire. Never come back. Mister Dave, he here sometime, and sometime he goes. Drinkin' likely in Jurien Bay or Perth even. Don't tell us when he show up. 'Spect us to look after him gardens for pretty much nothin'."

"That's awful. Why would Ros leave? I thought she liked it here?"

"Not after fire. Not before either I reckon. Fire give her reason to scarper. She gone when Dave get out of hospital."

"Oh no. He had burns too?"

“Some on arms and hands. Nothin’ too bad. Not like yours.”

Gaia felt Mary’s fingers like feathers on her face. “I know. I look like a monster.”

“Never seen a monster wi’ gold hair and them sparkly eyes. I see you had bad burns but they don’t look bad now. Just like the scars my mum had on her face so she be beautiful.”

“Really?”

Mary nodded. “Lot of our mob still make scars to show they brave. You been brave girl but now you back home where you meant to be.”

CHAPTER 4



“*Y*our bro came not too long after fire. He and Eddie make sure barn was locked up good and no rats or snakes gettin’ in,” Mary said as she filled Gaia’s plate with stew.

“Here? Did he say what ship he was going on?” Gaia held her breath.

“Didn’t say nothin’ much. Jus’ that he was going off somewhere and he write a letter for you. I get it after. It with the key to barn door padlock. Bron put the padlock onit,” Mary said.

“Was he OK? Did he have burns?”

“Nuh. Not like your’s. His leg bit of a mess and his hands still, but nothin’ worry him ‘bout that. Him worry ‘bout you though. Said you be back here when you better.”

Gaia blinked hard and forked a tiny bit of stew into her mouth. “Could I see it now? His letter? Please?”

“Course you can. You eat that tucker an’ I go get it.” She grinned at Gaia and shuffled out of the room.

Eddie looked up from his plate, already almost empty. “It be good and dry in the barn. Not too hot neither if you leave the barn door open a bit. Me and Bron give it a sweep. You be

right there. Good job it got water. I better look at that dunny. See what init. Might be rats.”

“Thanks Eddie. It was always a bit dicey; sometimes mice nested there. Not rats anyway. Shit, I hope that couch hasn’t been eaten by rats. I was counting on sleeping on it.”

Mary was back with an envelope. She handed it to Gaia before ladling out another pile of stew onto Eddie’s plate. Gaia’s hands shook as she carefully prized the flap open. One page, torn from a notebook.

Dear Gaia, I knew you’d come back here when you could. I’ve done what I can to clean up the barn and bung up anywhere that might be big enough for rats but the bastards can get in anywhere. Get Eddie to check for snakes before you stay there. I thought there might be something left of the house but it’s completely burnt out. I’m sorry Gaia. I know I’m letting you down going off like this. One day I’ll come back. You’ll be OK. You have more balls than I ever did. Love, Bron. xxx

The three kisses were the bit that choked her up.



GAIA STAYED AT MARY AND EDDIE’S THAT NIGHT, SLEEPING ON the narrow bed in the tiny second bedroom. She’d told them she’d be fine in the barn but it was almost dark by the time they’d eaten Mary’s jam sponge, and Eddie said he’d take her in the morning when they could see what was what. She thought she wouldn’t sleep a wink but she was wrong. As soon as she thought it, her eyes were open and light was coming through the window.

Mary as well as Eddie came with her, their rickety old truck loaded with four boxes of stuff: some crockery and old cutlery, tin cups, two battered saucepans and a frypan, matches, candles, and one of Eddie’s two precious gas bottles. Even a pair of worn sheets and a pillow and an old blanket. One box was full of fresh veges and fruit out of their garden. Mary had filled the last box with bits and bobs from her

cupboards; tomato sauce, salt and pepper, some tins of something, a loaf of bread, even a bag of flour and some milk powder. And a box of fresh eggs still with bits of straw stuck to them. On the top she'd placed a plastic ice-cream container filled with stew and a great hunk of sponge cake wrapped in greaseproof paper.

Squeezed into the cab of the truck between Eddie and Mary, Gaia's insides were quivering. How had she thought she'd even feed herself without all this? The two tins of smoked fish, bread rolls and butter she'd bought in Jurien Bay would have fed her for about two days. How the hell was she going to get supplies? Hitchhike into Jurien Bay and back whenever she ran out? She couldn't take Mary and Eddie's food again.

Her head ached with the whole craziness of it. Perhaps she could borrow an old fishing rod from Eddie or even Dave, if he ever came back? She shuddered. She'd fished when she was a kid, but by the time she'd got to twelve, she'd refused to have anything to do with it. Dragging those beautiful shimmering creatures out of the sea. With luck there'd at least be some greens gone wild in her dad's gardens, and perhaps some spuds. Lots of fruit, if the fruit trees hadn't been burnt. She might have to become a vegetarian.

"You gonna open that gate?" Mary said, nudging her. Stumbling from the truck, Gaia fumbled with the loop of wire that held the gate shut. Her hands felt like Melbourne in the winter, not the tropics in the summer. Then Eddie was beside her, lifting the wire free of the fencepost as if it were a piece of cotton and pushing the old wooden farm gate through the weeds.

Gaia started down the track, her eyes staring ahead, her heart shoving into her throat like a sledgehammer. She wanted to close her nostrils so the smell of burned wood, burned beds, burned bodies couldn't get into her head and start the dreams again. The psychologist at the rehabilitation center had told

her that her nightmares about the fire meant she must have memories of it stored in her brain. All she had to do was find a way to haul them out into consciousness. Apparently this would be good for her. Then she could remember the fire when she was awake and dream about it when she was asleep. Well, she wouldn't have to. She could see it for herself now.

The truck was crawling along behind her, and then Mary was at her side. "They beyond the sun now," she said. Gaia turned her head and her eyes connected with the dark pools in Mary's wise old face. Her breath slowed and her eyes spilled over and trickled down her cheeks, and she felt them finding a new way through the scars that were all she had left of them. Mum, Dad. Beyond the sun.



PAST THE BLACKENED PILE OF TIMBERS, OVERGROWN BY WEEDS and softened by the canary yellow blossoms of slender acacia saplings growing defiantly through the carnage, was the lake. Somehow, Gaia had almost lost the lake. But here it was, blue and sparkling in the sun, pelicans sailing over it just as they always had, a hawk gliding on the hot currents, a cloud of pink and gray galahs screeching from their favorite tree. And there, pasted like a child's drawing onto a grove of silver and green, was the barn. High and wide, red rust roof, soft gray timber walls, massive double doors, the windows so perfectly placed on each side a memorial to her dad's loving restoration of the utilitarian barn. His labour of love to make a dance studio worthy of his wife's grace. Her ambitions for their children.

The padlock securing the big doors was crusted with salt, bringing back the scent of the sea on the other side of the trees. For a moment, the sting of burned dreams vanished as the seadragons flickered through Gaia's head.

Inside, her hope dipped. Mary pulled the faded curtains

back from the windows and Gaia took a deep breath. This was it. She looked around. Dust covered every surface and spiderwebs almost obliterated the full-length mirrors behind the barre that stretched for six meters along the end wall. But the piano and long couch were covered with sheets. Bron must have done that. She walked over to the small kitchen tucked away behind a partition. The sink was bigger than she remembered, dwarfing the small gas stove beside it. She lifted her mum's old copper kettle off the hob. It was heavy with water. Did water go off? Could she boil it and make a pot of tea from the same water that made Mum's very last cup?

Gaia turned the big key in the normal-sized door next to the stove. It resisted, but only for a second. She pushed it open and walked out on the cracked concrete slab with its outside picnic table where they used to sit in the shade of the tall eucalypts that overhung this side of the barn. The table was white with bird droppings and the concrete thick with dry leaves. She'd keep the leaves.

Eddie appeared from the overgrown track that led to the outside dunny. "Bog's good," he said. "Dried up."

"What about spiders? Redbacks on the toilet seat?" She supposed Eddie would know the song.

"Won't know 'til you sit down init," he said, his grin flashing white.

"The broom over there, old man," Mary said. "Get you lazy butt over to it an' start sweeping. Then y'can clean them filthy windows. Me and Gaia is gonna wash out them cupboards an' stash the tucker init."



THEY LEFT GAIA THERE, ALONE, JUST BEFORE DUSK. DIDN'T ask if she wanted to come back with them for the night. She'd told them this was where she was going to live and they didn't question it. Just took her word for it.

She sat on the couch and bounced a little. Dust motes climbed through the last rays of the sun coming in the windows. Good job she wasn't an asthmatic. She'd sleep on it tonight and if it was too terrible she'd get a mattress from somewhere and stick it on the floor. She was used to a hard bed. Margot had brought them up that way and every bed she'd slept on since might as well have been a floor. But she wasn't a dancer now and a soft bed could hardly matter. Broken springs though?

Eddie had hooked up the gas bottle and they'd already boiled the kettle and made tea twice using the tea still in the cupboard. Tea lasted forever if it was in a good tight tin. They'd used fresh water though, just to see if the pipe from the water tank was bunged up. The water came out dirty for a while then changed to amber. Mary had drunk some cold and said it was good. "If I get the squits you'll have to boil it," she said.

It would be dark soon so she'd better sort out some candles. She went over to the giant cupboard in the corner of the barn and cautiously pulled open the double doors, ready to leap out of the way if a rat or snake had made it a cozy retreat. Nothing. She realized her heart was pumping. What a wimp she'd become, afraid of a rat. If there was a snake in the bottom somewhere he'd likely stay put and slither out later, when she was asleep. But she grabbed the broom anyway and poked it into the dark corners. Still nothing moved. Her pulse returned to steady, she stood back and gazed at her past; the things that once symbolized her two passions, ballet and snorkeling. On the right was a wardrobe space hung with Bron's body suits, and a crush of tutus and long ballet gowns, some from her mother's glittering past, and plainer, smaller versions that belonged to Gaia. She touched the yellow netting on the skirt of a tiny tutu; Gaia's very first. She can't have been older than three. She could still sense the bubbling excitement she'd felt every time she'd put it on. Most of the tutus and leotards

had been sent to the second-hand shop in Jurien Bay as she and Bron grew out of them, but her mother treasured that tiny first one. Two wetsuits, one black, one blue, were squashed in at the far end of the colorful array. On top of the wardrobe were two boxes, the first full of pairs of ballet shoes neatly circled together by their ribbons. Ballet flats, black for Bron, pink for Margot and Gaia, and pointe shoes. Only the last few pairs of those as they didn't last long with the hammering they received. But in the second box there were more, all new, waiting to be worn for the first time. Her mother ordered them by the dozen. On the right, the bottom shelf held snorkels, facemasks and flippers, hers and Bron's. They'd kept them here so they could go straight from ballet to the beach. Gaia closed her eyes, a sudden wave of relief almost bringing tears. The seadragon danced through her head. Thank god they hadn't kept their snorkeling gear in the house.

She flipped through the neatly folded clothes on the other shelves: leotards, knee warmers, sweaters, T-shirts, shorts, track pants. And on the top shelf, the tape deck and Margot's ballet tapes and her sheet music, and the candlesticks. The brass pair and the china pair, all still with candles in them. No candles stuck on saucers for Margot. There was a kerosene lamp behind them, but Gaia hated the smell of kerosene. Strange. She'd never realized how much. They'd always had kerosene lamps burning in the evenings in the farmhouse. She supposed she'd just put up with them because they'd always been there, like the rock-hard mattresses. At least in the farmhouse they'd had a flush loo and a bath with hot water from an actual hot water tank heated by the wetback in the wood-burner. There was an old clawfoot bathtub around the side of the barn though, the fire pit under it covered with sheets of iron to keep creatures and rain out. Sometimes in the winter they'd filled it with a hose connected to the hand-driven pump that sucked icy-cold water from a reservoir somewhere deep in

the earth. Then they heated the bath water by lighting a fire in the pit. That's one thing she wouldn't be doing, lighting any fires. If she wanted hot water in the sink here she'd have to heat it on the stove. She'd use the cold shower that spouted from the side of the water tank. She and Bron had used it sometimes to swill the sweat off after dancing, before they went swimming. More to cool down than anything. Then they dived in the sea and got covered in salt.

Tomorrow she'd go to the beach. Somehow there hadn't been time today. Then she'd see what she could do with the gardens. Perhaps clean the spiderwebs off the mirrors behind the barre and cover them with the sheets she had taken off the couch and piano. She didn't need a mirror staring at her all day and reminding her of who she had become.

CHAPTER 5



She had forgotten how idyllic the beach was. Remembering it and actually finally being here were poles apart. A bit like pain; recalling the horror of having her burns cleaned and the dressings changed was something she tried to avoid, but the memory was mild when compared to actually experiencing it. Gaia shuddered. So, nothing like burn pain other than the difference between memory and reality.

Bugger burns. Why did she even think about them any more? All that agony was over for good. She was home now. She stepped into the warm sparkling water, so clear that she could see the tiny pink markings on the pearl shells lying on the white sand beneath. Pure happiness. A feeling she thought was gone forever. No mere memory of how this sea felt on her skin had been able to give that back to her.

Gaia sat down in the sparkle, laughing as a river of tiny silver fish parted and curved around her, joining together again and swirling into the blue. She pulled on her flippers, a little tight but not uncomfortable, then spat into her mask, swilling it in the sea before she settled it in place over her eyes and nose. She closed her lips over the snorkel mouthpiece and finally she was home, floating over the corals, the seaweeds,

the clams, the fish she knew as well as she knew the color plates in her favorite book, *The Little Mermaid*. Burned in the tomb of their home along with all their other books, their photos, their pictures, their old toys. At least she could replace the book. Hans Christian Anderson would never go out of print. She'd write to every second-hand bookshop in Australia until she found a copy of the same edition. It wouldn't be the treasure that had been passed down from her grandmother, to her mother, and to Gaia, but she'd rather have an old, well-read and well-loved copy with the illustrations she remembered than a shiny new version.

Clown fish, angel fish, a glittering coral trout with its pink and green face, seagrasses waving, but no seadragon. She knew she'd see one soon if she came every day. It was the same time of the year when she and Bron had watched the dancing lovers; the last day her family would ever be together. She had to see the dragons again. She needed to know some things precious hadn't been lost forever.



GAIA'S DAYS TOOK ON A SHAPE, AND THE SHAPE KEPT THE loneliness in check. She woke every morning before dawn and went to bed when she was tired. All by the clock in her body. Her watch had stopped a few months after she had trudged down the track to Dave's empty farmhouse. She'd missed the feel of it around her wrist for a while but then realized she didn't need a watch to tell her when to wake up or eat or go to sleep.

Dave had come back a week or so after she'd arrived and had done his best to be courteous. Gaia supposed he felt embarrassed about looking at her. She had a couple of goes at thanking him for trying to save her parents, but he obviously didn't want to talk about it. It took her a while to get used to how different he seemed from before. She and Bron hadn't

known him or Ros especially well, but he'd been basically normal, and nice enough to them. He was mostly silent around her now; even Eddie got only grunts when he asked him stuff. Gaia found him a bit creepy. His once short hair was now long and greasy and he had a straggly beard that was going gray.

Mary said it was the booze. The fire and Ros giving him the boot had turned him. He didn't do a stick of work round the place, she said, and if it weren't for her and Eddie, his market garden would be in a worse mess than Goshawk Gardens was when Gaia first got home.



THE BARN MADE A GOOD HOME AND MARY AND EDDIE KEPT AN eye out for her. They didn't intrude like some neighbors would but seemed to know when she might be grateful for something. Eddie would leave a skinned rabbit or a piece of fish or a few eggs, and one day after she'd been there only a few weeks he showed up with a second full gas bottle and an old gas fridge on the back of his truck. "Mister Dave don't want it so you may as well have it," he said.

Gaia wasn't keen on it at first; she still felt nervous around fire, even the pilot light at the back of the fridge. She wasn't sure what burned their house down but it could've been their gas fridge. At least with the gas stove she could turn it off when she'd finished cooking or boiling the kettle. But she felt safer when Eddie put the fridge on the concrete outside the door and rigged up a sort of lean-to roof over it with rusty sheets of iron.

Mary showed up with some old stainless steel bowls and a pyrex casserole dish. "Heap of stuff in Mister Dave kitchen," she said. "Mister Dave say get whatever you want. He never use it." Then came an iron camp cooking pot that was good for rabbit stew slow-simmered on the top of the stove,

although Gaia was leaning more and more in the direction of eating only vegetables and fruit. When Eddie and Dave somehow managed to drag the old Aga wood-burning cooker out of the burned remains of the house and clean it up and get it going again, she appreciated it sitting there on the concrete slab looking comforting. At least she could make a fire in it and close the iron door so the flames couldn't escape. Winters here were mild, but the temperature dropped as low as nine degrees at night in July and August. On those evenings when dark came by six o'clock and rain pattered on the iron roof of her outdoor kitchen, it might feel less lonely sitting by a glowing stove with the smell of a rabbit stew giving her something to look forward to. Gradually, with a bit of help from Eddie, she built side walls from old bricks Eddie dragged over from a heap on Dave's farm, so that her outdoor kitchen was closed on three sides, only the side opposite the barn wall open to the bush.

She cleaned out the holes in the outside shower-head, and every time she stood under it, cold water cascading over her body, she remembered before, when she'd swill the sweat off after ballet. Usually those memories made her feel almost happy, but if a few tears squeezed out they got lost in the shower.



WITHIN A FEW WEEKS SHE'D GOT SOME OF HER DAD'S gardens to look tidier, so she had room to grow new seedlings. Some she rescued from the naturally seeded lettuces and tomatoes hidden everywhere in the gardens, and Mary gave her heaps more from their gardens. The fruit trees didn't need any help; they'd been there before she was born, some of them from the time her grandfather had started the gardens when her dad was little. She remembered her granddad. Perhaps it was better that he'd died

before his son did. Mary said it wasn't right if kids died before their parents. All four of Gaia's grandparents had stuck to the rules and died young. Sometimes she wondered if it would have been different if she'd had at least one grandparent to look out for her.

A while after she got home, Eddie said she should box up all her fruit and come with him to the Saturday Farmers' Market in Jurien Bay. She needed to get some supplies anyway; flour and yeast for a start so she could make more bread. She couldn't rely on Mary's pantry for ever. They had barely enough for themselves. Her first unemployment benefit payment had arrived on the previous Wednesday and she'd managed to get the brown envelope out of the letterbox before it was pinched by one of the lowlife types the post office girl had warned her about. She'd never got around to getting a padlock and she expected she never would. The only lowlife around here was Dave.

It was good to get away from the small world she'd been confined to, looking out the truck window watching the trees and farms go past, then the sea stretching out forever. Perhaps Bron was on one of massive container ships on the horizon. One day he would be.

The houses became more frequent and then they were in Jurien Bay. She went into the shop with Eddie and they each filled their trolleys and stashed their boxes of supplies in the truck. No one took much notice of her. At the market they set up their stall, her fruit at one end and Eddie's vegetables and fruit at the other. A little girl came up and grabbed a peach from one of her boxes, her mother, engrossed in conversation with another woman, not noticing.

"Hullo," Gaia said. "Those peaches are yummy."

The child looked up at her. She screamed and dropped the peach, then turned and ran to her mother.

"What's the matter, what happened?" her mother said, her arms gathering the child to her.

“She’s scary, I was just looking, I wasn’t taking the peach,” the girl cried, hiding her head in her mother’s stomach.

“Of course you weren’t. Let’s get a whole bag of peaches.” She looked over toward Gaia.

Her heart pounded as she watched the woman’s expression transform from pleasant to horror and she pulled her daughter closer. “It’s fine,” Gaia managed. “She’s welcome to the peach. I didn’t mean to scare her.” But the woman was already hurrying away, the little girl running to keep up.

“Can’t let them whitefella upset you,” Eddie muttered. “Plenty don’ come near me anyway. You sell your peaches, don’ worry.”

But the disturbance was infectious and it seemed to Gaia that their stall had far fewer customers than the stalls on either side of them. She stuck it for another 45 minutes and sold only three bags of fruit before she slunk off to the truck and hid, leaving Eddie to sell her produce as well as his.

That was the last time she went to the markets. Eddie didn’t seem to mind and from then on picked up her produce at 6.30 every Saturday morning and took it to the market to sell for her. Refused to take any of the proceeds for his trouble. He took her short list of essential supplies she needed as well and got those at the same time as he got his and Mary’s.



ONE DAY, AS GAIA WAS DIGGING OVER A GARDEN BED READY for a second crop of beans, she heard Eddie’s truck bumping along the track. Getting off her knees, she stretched her back, the familiar sensation of tired muscles spiking a fleeting regret as her body, so estranged now from ballet, remembered.

“Morning Eddie,” she called. “What’s up?”

Eddie put down the box he was carrying. “Mary think you might like company. Mister Dave shoot big roo this morning and joey already out of pouch. Him gonna leave her die but

you can feed her if you want. I been into town and got special kangaroo milk it need. Wambaroo it called. Mary know about joeys; she had ‘em before. They get sick wi’ cow milk. Got you special bottle and teat. Her already eatin’ grass so her be good.”

“Is she in here?” Gaia said, leaning over and opening the box. The little face looked up at her, its huge dark eyes with its long lashes melting her heart. She gently scratched the soft gray fur between its quivering ears, murmuring softly. “Shh, shh, little one, shh, shh.” It stretched up, its nose twitching.

“She like you. Keep her wrap in that towel so she think it pouch.”

“It’s a female?”

“Yeah. Male not so good when grow into buck. Better have a doe.” Eddie set down a paper carrier bag and pulled out a bottle and two packets of Wambaroo.

Gaia lifted the quivering little creature out, keeping the towel tucked around her. “Oh, she’s so pretty. Is she a Western gray?”

Eddie nodded. “They good pet. Once you give her bottle a bit she think you her mum. She probably gettin’ hungry. You need any help, jus’ ask Mary. ”

“I always wanted a joey but Mum didn’t even want a dog or cat around the place. Thank you. I love her.”

“You OK to sort milk out? It tell you what to do on packet. I better get back to farm. Mister Dave wonderin’ what’s got me.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll take her inside now and make up a bottle for her. I have to decide what to call her.”

“That the way. She need a good name. Mary say she come later and see how you two gettin’ along.”



RITA ROO SOON SETTLED IN AND BEFORE LONG WAS FOLLOWING Gaia everywhere, jumping along behind her, sometimes so close she almost tripped her up. At night Rita slept in a dog basket lined with a towel. The dog basket was another thing Mary scrounged from the piles of junk in the shed on Dave's farm.

The weeks went by and then the months and it got colder and lonelier. Even with Rita to talk to it could still feel lonely. Mary had given her a calendar from 1978, even though it was now 1979. Each month was illustrated with a photo of a tractor or harvester in a paddock somewhere in Australia. Gaia hung it on the wall by the sink and every evening after she brushed her teeth, she drew a diagonal line across the right day of the week on the nearest date to what it actually was this year. It was more important to know when Saturday was coming up and Eddie would collect her market boxes, as well as the first Wednesday in the month so she could rescue her benefit money from the letterbox before some mysterious lowlife pinched it.

By June it made her shiver to wash in cold water so she boiled it on the stove and poured it into the sink and washed in that. Every so often, when she was feeling extra lonely, she went to the trouble of bucketing hot water into the old bath outside, then lying in the amber liquid, the milky way stretched above her. Sometimes she imagined Bron somewhere in the Southern Oceans on his cargo ship looking at the same stars and thinking of her. She soon got cold though as the water was never more than forty centimeters deep.

CHAPTER 6



Every day except the very coldest winter days, Gaia swam, often twice. She swam in the lake when the tide was too low to swim over the reef, and she snorkeled over the reef flats whenever the water was deep enough. Every day she made a wish; that today she'd see the seadragons again. She was beginning to think she must have dreamed them. Perhaps they hid when they weren't mating? She might have to wait until November when the water became warm enough to start them dancing. But there were myriads of other fish and starfish and crabs and corals to watch. She began taking notes after every snorkel, listing and describing everything she could remember and sketching the color patterns of the trickiest fish with the color pencils she'd asked Eddie to get her. It almost brought tears when she thought of all of her dad's books on fish and plants that they'd used for identification. All burned. Then she'd remember everything else that was lost. The photos of Margot dancing Odette in *Swan Lake*, the albums of her parent's wedding in New York, Bron's baby pictures, her baby pictures. Would she forget what her family looked like as time went by?

Every evening she pasted a syrup made from honey and

water on the trunks of four eucalypt trees that stood no more than five meters from the open side of her outdoor kitchen. It took only a night for the first honey possum to find it, and within a week there were four or five of the cute little animals with their long twitchy noses running down the trunks so they could lap up the sweetness. The next arrival was another long-nosed visitor; a bandicoot about the size of a rabbit poking around the base of the trees, perhaps attracted by the drip of the honey syrup on the ground. Likely the roots and insects they preferred tasted better with a little honey. Sitting quietly at the picnic table with her mug of tea every moonlit evening and watching the show was better than the TV she'd sat dumbly in front of most nights in the Youth Home in Perth.



“IT A ZOO ROUN’ HERE,” MARY SAID, HER DEEP CHUCKLE, AS always, making Gaia laugh too.

“A kangaroo and two chickens? Hardly,” Gaia said. Mary had given her two chickens a while ago and they were pretty much full grown now. She was getting two eggs most days; that’s if she could find them.

“Them and that hawk. You wanna watch him or he take your chooks.”

“He’d better not. I think the hens are almost too big for him now. Anyway there’re plenty of mice and little creatures around to keep him happy.”

Gaia had found the young Goshawk crouching under a bush. It was feathered but not flying yet, and she watched it from a distance to see if the parent returned to feed it. By nightfall it was still there and getting weaker and she put a towel over its head and picked it up. The first night she fed it some of the meat from the rabbit stew that was one of her staples, holding small portions out to it on the end of a fork. It grabbed the meat hungrily and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Force feeding would have been a difficult task; its beak already looked lethal. After that she fed it on mice she caught easily in a couple of traps she set each night in her outdoor kitchen, and on raw rabbit meat when Eddie dropped one off. It seemed right to have a Goshawk at Goshawk Gardens. She called him Gos. Somehow it didn't seem fitting to give him a human name. She didn't try to tame him, but he was unafraid of her, and sometimes came inside the barn and perched on the back of a chair or on the ballet barre. She took down the sheets that covered the mirror and the hawk shuffled along the barre, his yellow eyes staring ferociously at his twin. Sometimes he flapped his wings and even did a little jig. Gaia wondered what he was thinking. Perhaps he saw the jigs and wing flapping of his new friend—or foe—as separate from his own efforts. Gaia knew only too well how easy it was to see the person in the mirror as someone else; someone you would never want to be.

One morning Gos flew away and didn't come back. Gaia missed him, but knew it was best. He needed to be wild. But a week later he flew through the open barn door as if he owned the place. After that she never knew when he might show up, but she kept some raw rabbit meat cubes in the freezer just in case he decided to drop by for dinner.

She didn't have to wait for long; whether he came back for the mice she caught for him or to make sure his twin in the mirror was still there, she didn't know, but whenever he showed up her heart sang. One day when Gaia was laughing at Gos's antics with his reflected friend, she felt the smooth wood of the barre warm beneath her hands. Shifting her gaze away from Gos and his twin, she saw a girl in blue denim shorts and a gray singlet, her body moving through a barre sequence Gaia had once found second nature: pliés, battements tendus, battement glissés, ronds de jambes, fondus, frappés, petits battements, développés, ronds de jambes en l'air, grands battements. Then Gos screeched and twisted on the

barre, his wing hitting Gaia's face as he took off and disappeared out the barn door. The mist that was shielding Gaia's gaze from the truth lifted, and the girl in the mirror covered her face with her hands and sunk to the floor.

Rolling herself into a ball, Gaia shivered, every muscle in her body aching, the scars on her leg and arm throbbing and stinging as they returned to the contracted ugliness they preferred.

Rita Roo found her there when she bounced in, looking for company.



AFTER A NIGHT OF DREAMS THAT WOKE HER IN A SWEAT, HER feet in first or fifth position, she made a decision. She would begin her physiotherapy exercises again. If she'd stayed lazy, if she remained in denial, she would end up as the physiotherapist had warned, with her left leg, the one that had been fractured, becoming increasingly stiffer and prone to rheumatism as she got older. And if she didn't stretch her burned limbs the scars would continue to contract. She would start making herself a good supply of aloe vera gel from the giant plants she had growing in Goshawk Gardens, and massage her scars as they used to do in the Rehabilitation Unit. They'd always be ugly, but if they were more supple they wouldn't sting and itch as much when she stretched her body.

The next nights, after her evening workout, sleep came quickly, and her dreams didn't linger when she woke at dawn. So she rose and did her barre warmup and then walked to the beach and began to dance.

