

DANCING WITH DRAGONS

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“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*

Chapter 1

Goshawk 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 scarp. 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 sea-dragon. 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 sea-dragon. 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 sea-dragon, 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 sea-dragons 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 sea-dragon 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 sea-dragon 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 bumpest end.”

Chapter 3

December, 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.”

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