A BOOK OF SHADOWS

A murder mystery novel and an exegesis

by

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Joanna Baker
26th February 2014
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ABSTRACT

In each of my previous murder mystery novels there is a scene in which a person who is not a professional detective finds a dead body. While writing these scenes I had a sense that there was something I was missing, that the scenes, the novels, should convey more than they did. I had a sense that a person finding a dead body has, in some way, encountered death and that I did not have a full understanding of what such a statement might mean.

Questions also arose from the novels’ moments of mystery, the points when a character, and the reader, is made aware that there is some piece of information, large or small, that is at present unavailable to them. Such a moment draws a reader forward into a novel and it also provides in itself a particular kind of pleasure. Again I felt that I did not have a full understanding of this, but I felt that it was related to my questions about death.

These two elements of my writing formed the basis of the current enquiry. In it I have been writing to see what I was thinking. More specifically my aims were: to elucidate my commitment to the murder mystery, to examine my vague intuitions about death and mystery, to articulate for myself and for others what it is I am hoping to achieve with my mystery novels, and to develop ideas about style and content that help me to better achieve my aims.

The methodology consisted of two parts: firstly, the writing and re-writing (and re-writing) of a fourth murder mystery, ‘To Deserve Such Pain’ (hereafter TDSP), involving imaginative projection into the thoughts of a fictional other. Secondly, readings in post-structural literary theory and post-phenomenological theories of being that specifically rely on the role of death to explain our being-in-the-world and the meaning it provides (or fails to provide) for us. The project did not evolve in an orderly procession in which writing, re-writing and editing of the novel was followed by reflection and analysis. Rather it was a continuous negotiation in which each source of knowledge resonated with and enriched the other. I describe this process in the exegesis and illustrate it with quotations from my writing journals.

My main discovery from this research takes the form of new ways of thinking about mystery novels. The idea of death proved to be elusive, a shadow, and as I approached it through reading and writing it became clear that what I was really reaching for was the shadow itself, and that this is a notion that lies at the core of mystery novels. I use the construct of the sublime and Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of the il y a to explain and illustrate this realisation of the shadowy nature of death and of existence itself. The sublime, the il y a and the shadow have become guiding images for TDSP and my future writing, in
which my aim is to create a sense that there are presences only half seen by the reader and half felt by characters.

Implicit in the work is a suggestion for a new approach to the study of detective fiction, one which focusses not on endings, solutions and answers, but on information gaps, on questions, on mystery.

Crucial to this project is the idea that there are places in the novel where the reader is aware that there is a piece of information, large or small, that is unavailable to them. Because of that, it is important that the novel be read first.
To Deserve Such Pain

by

Joanna Baker
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
I never saw a brute I hated so;
He must be wicked to deserve such pain

From ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ by Robert Browning
Prologue

‘What’s the worst thing you’ve ever seen?’

‘I’m sorry?’ said Paul. He looked again at the screen on his phone. Just a number. This person was not in his contacts. The voice had been tight, whining, hysterical.

‘What’s the worst thing a person could do?’

‘Who is this?’ But he thought he knew.

‘Paulie. Help me. Please. Help...’

A few minutes later there was a text message:

14/03/2013 1:16 am

Paul its Treen. Help me please please. Now urgent really really come now 52 Cooper St Mp

Two in the morning and moonless. Just sickly street light. Paul and John got out of the car and went to stand at the end of the driveway of 52 Cooper Street. The house was tiny. It was exactly the same as all the other houses in the street except that it was next to some kind of yard. Through a cyclone wire fence they could see storage sheds and piles of wood and iron. There was a faint odour, oil or something.

At the house all the lights were on. There was a lot of noise coming from it – crashing electronic music and over that the sound of shouting.

‘Call the police,’ said John.

John hadn’t been in Hobart very long. He didn’t know there were places like Mornington, and Paul had tried not to tell him about Treen. Paul wouldn’t have told him now, and definitely wouldn’t have come, but John had taken the phone and read the text. He had said, ‘What sort of monsters are we?’

But he didn’t understand. About people like this.

‘You stay there,’ Paul said.

But John followed him. As they started down the driveway, the music stopped suddenly, leaving a ringing silence. There was a blast of sound, quickly cut off again, and then a wild shriek that might have been rage or laughter.

Now someone started shouting. The voice was high-pitched and frantic. It was punctuated by a deeper one, shorter and sharper, angry shouts, three or four syllables at a time. Then there were a lot of voices all shouting at once, and some scraping, scuffling sounds, and thuds.

‘Paul. Call the police.’
A lot of people came out of the house. Paul and John stepped out of the way. Apart from some mumbled swearing, the people were hardly speaking. They kept looking behind them and shoving at each other. As they went past one of them grabbed John by the chest and leaned into him. ‘Do you want this? Hey, ’sa fucken Asian cunt. Woodsy!’ He looked around to show his friends, nearly fell, grabbed at John’s shoulder, pressed back into him. ‘Do you want some? Fucken ... want ...’

One of his friends pulled him away.

Inside the house there was one final anguished scream which broke into a series of high yelps and then, as if someone had seen Paul and John coming towards the door, it stopped. There was a crash of wood and metal, as if a lot of heavy things had been knocked down. Then silence.

A man came out of the door. He was tall with very straight shoulders and a hank of stiff hair sticking out over his forehead.

He said, ‘Oh here they come.’ He shoved at Paul and went up the driveway.

Inside the smell was sharper, chemical, like turps but dirty. The carpet and walls were thick with rubbed-in grime. On the left there was an open door and a bedroom. There was a woman asleep there, youngish by the shape of her. She was curled up on top of the covers, her back to the door. She was shaved up on top of the covers, her back to the door. Across the corridor there was a lounge room with bottles and cans and greasy wrappers everywhere, a couch lying on its back and, in the corner, a television, a table and some chairs all piled together. Above the pile there was a hole in the wall. Treen was in another corner, sitting on the floor with her head down and her hands over her hair. Near her on the floor there was a phone. Paul squatted by her.

‘Treen?’

She moved her hands outwards and looked up but she didn’t look at him. She focussed on the pile of furniture and the wound in the wall. Her hands stayed curled in the air beside her face.

It was four years since he had seen her. Katrina, Kat, Catty, Treenie, Treen. Her name had kept changing, had come to rest on the ugliest. And she was an uglier version of herself, too, although that could have been the greenish light, or whatever she had taken. Her face was puffy, rubbery. She had a swollen eye, a new bruise, not yet black. And there was dark eye-makeup smeared everywhere, so that you couldn’t tell what was paint and what was injury. Her whole face was like that, Paul thought. The lines were blurring. She was a form fading into background. Roland had drawn her like this once, in smudged charcoal.

Maybe he had seen it in her, all those years ago.

He didn’t want to touch her. ‘Treen.’

She straightened her fingers and then relaxed them again. She spoke quietly.

‘What’s the worst person you’ve ever known?’
A young woman appeared from somewhere, a plump little thing in an orange top, with teased hair piled behind a rag and big Amy Winehouse eyes. She ran over to Treen and started pulling at her.

‘Care for him.’ She trod on the phone. ‘He’s yours. Care for him.’

Treen whispered, as if hoping the girl might not hear her. ‘Help me, Paulie, Paulie, help me. Get Roland for me. Help me, get Roland.’

John opened a door from the back of the house. He was carrying a pale towel with blood on it. He said, ‘Paul.’

Paul went over there. At this door there was a different smell. Damp, something rotting. John already had his phone to one ear. He said to Paul, ‘Get a blanket. Keep him still. Don’t do anything.’

But Treen was standing behind Paul. She grabbed at his shoulder and said, ‘I don’t know. I don’t.’

John walked away from the noise, talking into the phone.

Paul tried to go to the back of the house, but Treen got in his way. Her mouth was a crooked gash, bloodless in a bloodless face. Her clothes smelled sour. She was whispering. ‘Paulie Paulie Paulie. Don’t, I don’t...’ Her eyes were wet and they looked dark, even the whites, as if all the black colour, all the bruising, had leaked through into the eyeballs.

She came nearer, put a hand on him. ‘What’s the worst thing you’ve ever seen?’
Chapter 1

There was something hard in the middle of the lawn. Veronica was walking there, heading up from painting the camellias at the north wall. She thought she heard someone at the bottom gate, turned to look, trod on the hard thing, stumbled and fell to the ground.

It wasn’t a bad fall, as these things go. She had time to throw her easel and the field box off to one side, and she managed to twist sideways so that her head missed the edging stones. The twist sent a shooting pain up her left side, but this didn’t matter. Fifty-eight and falling over – shooting pains were to be expected. She lay still, smelling dead leaves and water, and paint from the open box. Through blades of grass she could see a silver tube, its black and white label, its band of clean, warm, carnival yellow. She rolled onto her back.

Alan would have sneered at this, if he had still been here. The kids would have laughed. If they had still been here. They would have laughed, that way they did laugh when she was being weird, with a mix of embarrassment and exasperation, a different mix for each child. But they would have also been reassured by the fact that she hadn’t changed, would never change. Yes, she would have heard all that in the sound of the laugh. If they had been here.

This morning Veronica had been thinking a lot about absence – people who have left, the spaces between things.

The pine branches against the sky were charcoal, edged with smoky green. Usually, when she looked at her trees they were flicking around in a south westerly or a sea breeze. Today they were heavily, quietly still. In fact the whole day was strangely static. Something coming. That idea made her prop herself on her elbows and look at the gate again. The sound that had made her turn had been very quiet. There had been something stealthy about it. And it had been metallic, like the old latch. But there was no one at the gate. There was nothing growing down there because of the scraggy old cypresses that threw black shade and acid and killed everything underneath.

But there was something hard in the middle of her lawn. She looked over there and saw a stone, smooth and white, and large, the size of a softball. Where could that have come from? She looked behind her at the empty house and the garden.

There was something she had missed, something she had been about to see. She lay back down again. The sky was whitish, a thin veil of cloud which looked very high. It was textured, but too far away to get a focus on, so that as you stared at it it seemed to be constantly pulling away – thinning and lightening and lifting up, making way for something. And things felt suspended somehow, as if that thing that was coming would never arrive. She had read a phrase like that somewhere – something that was always yet to arrive.
The felted wool of her tunic was not waterproof. She could feel the cold of the lawn pressing upwards, and wetness was only a matter of time. But this was important. Veronica had spent years drawing plants, trying to capture them, the tensile forces, the padded structure of things. And lately she had been plagued by a kind of intangible doubt, a feeling that there was something she should be painting, and that she had been missing it. Maybe, instead of plants she should have been looking at this slipping sky. She squinted, tried to focus, lost it, closed her eyes.

When she opened them, Lesley was there, a silhouette against the white sky. ‘I parked in the street. There’s a great big pile of prunings blocking the driveway.’

Veronica sat up. ‘Sorry.’ In conversations with Lesley that was often your first word.

‘What are you doing?’ Lesley was wearing jeans, tastefully faded but spotless and ironed into boards, and a pale blue cashmere scarf and a pale blue parka. She was looking at the things on the lawn. ‘Are you painting?’

‘I don’t ...’

‘Now don’t you dare stop doing your little drawings. We’d feel so deprived.’ Lesley sold Veronica’s cards at the counter in her fine art gallery. Couldn’t help being condescending.

‘Lesley, what are you doing here?’

‘Oh heavens.’ Lesley gave her wide rueful smile. ‘You’re going to think I’m an idiot.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘It’s Paul of course.’ She locked her hands in front of her, pressed them back into her stomach. ‘Vee. What else would it be?’

Veronica didn’t like it when Lesley called her ‘Vee’. Something about the level of intimacy. They had known each other for twenty-four years, since the birth of Lesley’s son Paul and Veronica’s son Roland. The boys had been intensely close since they were five, spending all their time together, at school and after school, and staying in each other’s houses. When they were nine they had created a kind of fantasy in which they were related. They had called themselves third cousins once removed. And of course, with that level of closeness, the parents had been thrown together. And now that the boys were grown and gone, Lesley and Veronica still saw each other.

‘It’s not important. I can see I’m interrupting.’ Lesley started picking imaginary dirt off one sleeve of the parka, small fastidious flicking movements. ‘I just thought you might have seen him.’

‘Paul?’

‘Now that I’m here it seems ridiculous.’
‘It’s not ridiculous.’ You had to do a lot of this with Lesley.

‘It’s just that he’s been very peculiar, lately, very distressed.’ Lesley had rehearsed that word. ‘And look, we both know he can get into states, but this is worse. Something has really upset him. It’s been going on for almost a month. More than that. And of course, whatever it is it’s bound to end up being my fault. Well I don’t have to tell you.’ She gave a pained sigh. There was a Catholic background here, a remnant belief in the virtue of suffering. ‘And today he’s just vanished. I’ve got the display stand man coming at noon to talk about his posts.’ They were opening a new floor in the gallery in a few weeks’ time. There would be a ceremony, full of the worst of the Sandy Bay crowd, Paul and John’s pretentious friends, hoeing into canapés and pinot gris. ‘Well there’s no point in me talking to a welder, is there? I just wish Paul would answer his phone.’ Lesley looked strained today, the skin stretched tight over the cheekbones. She was rubbing her hands together, tightly, as if they were irritated.

‘I haven’t seen Paul for months.’

But Lesley was looking at the house now. ‘I see Mr Thing hasn’t bothered to turn up.’ This wasn’t sympathy. More an accusation. She gave another pained smile. ‘I don’t know how you bear it.’

They both looked at Veronica’s house, large and shabby, grey stone, with peeling window frames and broken mortar. There was scaffolding across the driveway side, and the wall behind the terrace was covered in skeleton stains where ivy had been ripped down.

‘People take advantage of you Vee. You can never see them for what they really are.’

She was right of course. And as it turned out, if Veronica had only listened to that statement, if only she had listened carefully to everything that was said that day, if she had only been able to see people for what they were, then things might have been different. But by the time she saw this it was much later, after two girls were dead and the world had shattered and rearranged. At that time, later, after it all, she would be able to reflect that the really important things – the moments, the words, the simple honest detail that could lead in a straight and logical line to understanding and order and safety – can so easily be missed.

But that morning in her garden she was distracted, by the easel and the basket and the stone on the lawn and the fall, by the cypresses and the sky, by the people who were there and the people who weren’t there and the people who may or may not be sneaking around near her bottom gate. And she didn’t see Lesley’s statement for what it really was. The key to everything.

Lesley’s clothes threw up a blue tinge, making her look serene, composed. ‘I’m just off to make a start on the convict piece. I hope you’re still going to help me with it.’
Two years ago Lesley and Veronica had written a play together and three friends had performed it at the opening of one of Lesley’s exhibitions. They had done other pieces together, too. It was a way of keeping in touch. ‘Oh yes. I...’

‘They’re so intense about it. I mean we all are. It will be crucial to the opening. Set the right tone of... seriousness, I suppose.’

‘They?’

‘Still we’d do anything for our boys, wouldn’t we? I’m just on my way now, to the library. You’re still all right to come to the Female Factory on Friday, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

Lesley bent down, picked up some of the paint tubes and put them carefully in the box, then straightened again. Her hair blew softly up and fell back into curves. Without looking at Veronica she said lightly, ‘So you don’t know what’s wrong with Paul? Roland hasn’t said anything?’

Roland. At the sound of his name Veronica experienced the usual complex set of reactions, a softening, an alertness, an urge to laugh, impotent rage. Roland.

‘I mean it’s as we used to say – whatever they’re in, they’re in it together. These dreadful boys.’

*These dreadful boys.* Lesley had been present thought all the boys’ – what was it she called them? – scrapes – the broken bones, the speeding fines, the joints on the Domain, the failed exams, the wild girls, the distraught girl, rejected by both of them. Veronica’s friendship with Lesley was based on a long history of shared difficulties.

Lesley said, ‘He hasn’t mentioned a child?’

‘A child?’

‘One who was hurt?’

‘What?’

‘Oh no. Never mind. I just thought he might have been here that’s all.’

‘Roland’s in Kandina.’

Roland lived in New South Wales. He was their fourth and youngest child, affectionate, creative, vague, the one her friends euphemistically – sardonically – referred to as a free spirit. He had been living on the mainland for four years, managing backpackers’ hostels.

Lesley’s eyelids lifted and fell. ‘Oh yes. I know. I mean on the phone.’ There was a dimple that appeared high on her left cheek, right up near the circles under the eyes. It meant the smile was forced.

Veronica knelt forwards and started picking up the paints and brushes. Water soaked her knees. ‘Just let me pack up this lot.’ The tunic was heavy and cold all down her back. ‘I haven’t managed to speak to Roland for ages, as a matter of fact.’ Veronica tried to
laugh at this. ‘I rang the lodge and got the usual thing – one of those dear little Tweety Pies – all caring and no information. But let’s try again.’ She clipped the field box shut, reached for the easel and stood up. ‘We can …’

But Lesley was already up at the driveway walking quickly away. Without looking back she turned and disappeared behind the hedge.
Chapter 2

Veronica stumbled on the front steps and bashed the easel into the scaffolding, jarring her hand. Just getting in and out of her front door had become a kind of farce, and with the easel and the paint box it was almost impossible. And what made it worse was that it didn’t make any sense, renovating this huge family home. It wasn’t as if the kids were going to come back.

She stepped over Ridley and dragged his feathery tail along with the feet of the easel. He didn’t move. The three southern rooms had been prepared for painting, all their furniture stacked in the hall. She edged past the drinks trolley, the sideboard and a pile of boxes.

Lesley had worried her, which wasn’t difficult. All it took was the mention of Roland’s name. He was her vulnerable one. She said this to her friends – there’s always one, isn’t there, and Roland is mine. The one who’s never safe.

It seemed a waste of time trying to manoeuvre the equipment all the way to the back room. She opened the dining room door. Lots of space here, just a floor covered in tarpaulin and the big table shrouded in drop sheets. She put the easel against a wall and the box on the floor and then, on the way out, stopped and looked back. The windows, tall and curtainless, showed grey-white sky and filled the room with an icy radiance. For a moment she felt it again. She had had an idea for painting the sky. Before Lesley had arrived.

But she couldn’t remember it. She went out and shut the door quietly.

The kitchen and family room were the only place she felt at home now, the only place she felt at home in her own home. The family room was crammed with stuff from the rest of the downstairs – furniture, boxes of crockery, cushions in plastic bags, the stack of prints, the Forrester in bubble wrap, a clothes horse – but at the end near the kitchen she had made a space with her desk and the laptop and an armchair and Tom’s little telly. There also was an armchair for Alan. Not that he had ever sat in here with her, even when he was at home. She threw the wet tunic on the arm chair, put on a jumper and went to the desk to find her visual diary.

As she went across the room she heard something behind her. Movement, somewhere in the house. She listened a moment but didn’t hear it again.

She found her diary and stared at the black cover, but there was no point opening it. She couldn’t concentrate on painting until she had done something about Roland. Roland swamped her. Thoughts of him made everything else impossible. She would try ringing him again, get it over with. He wouldn’t answer and then she could put him aside. She pulled out the phone.
But when she looked at the screen it was lit up. It said, ‘Georgie’. She must have put it on silent at some stage. She swiped the panel and raised it to her ear. As she did that she heard it again. Movement.

She said, ‘Georgie? Are you here?’
‘What?’
‘Doesn’t matter.’ Veronica went to the hallway, listened.
‘Hello,’ said Georgie.
‘Yes, hello, sweetheart. Sorry.’
‘I’m not ringing to talk.’

Veronica went to the kitchen table. It, too, was crowded with stuff – drawings and notes, placemats, a biscuit tin and a pile of cavolo nero on a board. ‘I think it was just noises in the house.’ In the dining room she had moved the tarpaulin with her foot and now it must be moving back. That room had a life of its own.

‘Mum.’ That word as only Georgie could say it. Short, impatient. And patronising. Always that.

On the top of all the stuff on the table, open, was one of her mother’s old wildflower sketchbooks. She could hear her mother’s voice. *Stay with us Veronica. This mooning about is not going to get you anywhere.*

‘Is Dad back?’ Alan was cycling in South Australia. That’s all Georgie knew.

She turned a page in the sketchbook, Tasmanian laurel, leatherwood. ‘They’re doing another loop. McLaren Vale. The mixed dozens have started arriving.’ Alan had the Ashton woman with him. He had sent Veronica a text. He was going to take another week and then come back to Hobart and find a flat to move into. A text. Georgie was too busy to hear this now.

‘How can he take so much time off all of a sudden?’

You pretended you didn’t love him. That was the trick. You told yourself you never loved him.

‘Anyway, I have to be quick.’ Georgie said that abruptly, as if it was Veronica who needed to be interrupted. ‘I’ve got the biochemists arriving today.’ Georgie was an event organiser – manager – an event manager. ‘I have to tell you about Roland.’

Roland.
‘He’s in Hobart.’
‘No he isn’t. You know what he said about Hobart.’

Roland had travelled the world for two years, searching for his true self. In the end he had found it, hiding with all the other true selves, on a beach in Byron Bay. He wasn’t coming home.

‘Allie Muir saw him last night. In Elizabeth Street.’
‘Doo lally Allie.’ But Lesley had been asking.

‘She saw him coming out of a pub. And there was a man standing in the doorway of the pub with his arms crossed, so she thinks he was actually getting kicked out.’

‘Obviously it was a mistake …’

‘And he was having some kind of argument with some awful old …’ Georgie searched for the correct term. ‘You know, like a homeless person.’

Roland. Veronica turned the pages of her mother’s book, Pepperberry, sassafras, nothofagus …

Georgie said, ‘And it’s worse than that. He had a bruise on his face. A big bruise, right across one cheekbone.’

Veronica felt a lurch at that – well, of course she did – a dragging down feeling, the deep pull of maternal fear. But that was a purely biological response. She mustn’t let Georgie know. ‘Oh well. Look. It’ll be one of his escapades, won’t it? There’ll be a girl lurking somewhere, and a big bag of hooch.’ Not that. He called it something else now.

‘Mum we can’t pretend it’s not happening. He’s smoked so much dope. And you know it makes some of them a bit psychotic. I’m starting to wonder if he’s heading …’

Suddenly Veronica was full of weakness, heat. The simple effort of breathing was making her throat ache. ‘Oh Roland’s all right.’ But he had never been all right. Veronica could see him the day he was born, the heavy lolling head, the little face, tight-wrapped and frowning, his gaze unfocussed, but full of a kind of deep concern. It had struck her then. He seemed to be gazing sadly around, already seeing how much there was that needed to be mended.

‘I think someone should try to find out, that’s all. I’ve tried ringing and Facebooking. I’ve tried Toby and Hillo and Yaz.’

‘Have you rung Paul?’

‘Paul lies.’

‘Yes.’

Lesley had known. There was something going on. But Georgie mustn’t get caught up in this. She had a career to worry about. ‘All right. Listen. Look, my big girl. Don’t you worry about Roland. I’ll find him.’ Her eyes fell on the blank page. She was holding a pencil. ‘Which pub was it?’

‘The Beaufort. Mum they won’t …’

‘Won’t what?’

‘They won’t get you.’

‘Oh well.’

‘Mum. Text me.’
Veronica went straight out to the car. On the way she found something strange – a piece of paper, placed carefully in the middle of her back steps, held down by a stone. So someone had been here, not in the house, walking around the garden. She hadn’t imagined it. The stone was the one from the lawn, large, white, smooth. The page was computer paper covered in text. A page from ABC News, a headline in bold: ‘Barn grave baby had bruises fractures.’ She saw other words. ‘… skull ... lacerated liver.’ There was a photograph of a woman, head down, hair over her face, pulling at a cheap cardigan.

Veronica looked up. She went to the end of the house and looked around her. There was no one in the garden.
Lesley was staring at a blank page. Beside it she had an old book and, in the corner of the
desk, a stack of photocopied papers – text, drawings, photographs, maps. She was getting
nowhere. She would have to wait for Veronica to help her.

She hadn’t even wanted to do this writing. It was something that had been imposed
on her. Paul had thought the gallery opening needed a performance piece about Hobart’s
female convicts. And he thought writing it would be good for her. He liked to think of her
doing creative things, and spending time with the wonderful Veronica. He obviously wished
some of Veronica’s marvelousness would rub off on his boring mother.

But she was going along with it. She had read the books, studied the drawings and
maps, made notes. She would see Veronica on Friday. But it would be nice to have made a
start before that. It would be nice if she could write just something.

It was no hardship being here. The History Room at the library was softly lit. It
had glass cabinets and shelving in chestnut coloured wood. A kindly room. She looked
again at her empty page. She had made one decision. They would base the piece on the
Female Factory. There was a lot of material about that. On top of her pile there was a
pamphlet with drawings of a lonely yard and small dingy buildings. There was certainly
plenty of drama about the place, with the damp cells and the treadmill and the iron collars.
Apparently half the babies died of dysentery and pneumonia.

So that was awful.

But what could you say about it? These women had lived almost two hundred years
ago, in circumstances that were nothing like Lesley’s own. Was she supposed to put words
into their mouths? What would they sound like? And how would they feel – about being
cold, about stuffy air and bad food? Surely not the same as she would feel. They, after all,
were used to it. They were toughened women, rough, hard. Even pain – surely pain isn’t so
bad, once you get used to it.

And what about the children? What do you feel when a child is taken from you?
What do you feel when you are told it – he, she – has died? Can you be hardened to that?

For a moment she felt something that was close to panic, one of those weird
moments of detachment, where everything begins to look strange. She looked at her pages
and for a second she could see only marks on paper.

She packed up her things. Paul would not be happy. He and John would glance at
each other, blank-faced, silently agreeing that they had known this would be beyond her,
silently wishing for Veronica instead. Paul’s expression would let her know that she – her
inability to understand these poor women, to understand people, to understand anything, to
understand him – that she was the cause of all his problems.
When really it was Paul that was the problem. How could she be expected to concentrate on anything with him behaving the way he did? And Roland, of course. He was the problem too. Lesley was worried about Roland, and what Veronica would say when she found out about him.

But there it was.

Lesley went to her car. She moved the white stone on the passenger seat to make room for her bag and started the engine.
Chapter 4

The Beaufort Hotel had brown walls, black-painted tables, square black stools and one bitter-white spotlight, flashing meaninglessly into a corner. It was empty except for a table near the windows where four young people sat slumped together. The barman was very young, dressed in a tight black denim jacket with a white scarf wound several times around his neck, the fringed end at the front. As Veronica came in he turned away and started moving bottles around.

Somewhere there was music, a hard grating sound with no echo. It wasn’t tuneful. It wasn’t even quite sound, more like something she felt, as if there was a creature scratching at the ceiling.

‘I wonder if you can help me.’

The barman had a pale sharp face, and a kind of unconscious fragility. In the metallic light over the bar she could see a hint of hair above the top lip.

‘I’m looking for my son.’

He made a weak hissing little laugh and let his gaze slip to the empty room. Then he looked behind him, as if seeking help from someone who wasn’t there.

‘He was in here yesterday evening. His name is Roland Cruikshank. He’s tall and athletic looking, and he would have been dressed like a surfer, except probably with an old jumper on. Wild hair, tangled, with blondy ends.’

She was practised at this. She had had to describe Roland before and his appearance hadn’t changed. But this time she felt it was hopeless. The generalities, the list of attributes, seemed only to emphasise his absence. She would have done better with a photo.

The boy picked up a glass and moved it to a lower bench where the light showed its smears.

‘He likes drawing.’ That sounded ridiculous, like the proud mother of a four year old.

But there was a flicker of recognition. ‘There was a guy in here last night. He left a drawing on the table. Jilly picked it up and she reckoned he was a real artist. She was going to put it up somewhere.’

Veronica looked around the dingy room.

‘It’s here.’ He turned around to a low shelf and pulled out a page torn from a paperback. The page had only a few lines of print on it, and under those there was a drawing.

It was Roland’s all right. In all of his work, through all its changes, there was something instantly recognisable, something that had been there from the time he was born.
This was a drawing of a girl, done with a blunt pencil, smudged with a hard rubber, the way he did them years ago. The girl’s eyes were focussed intently on the viewer, with a kind of insistent intimacy. One hand was lifted, as if she was trying to reach out of the picture.

‘Oh yes, that’s him.’
He didn’t offer to give it to her. ‘He’s your son?’
‘I need to find him.’
‘Yeah. You really do.’
‘What does that mean?’
‘They reckon he was in a bad way. Sounds as if he was on something.’
No. Roland, no. ‘Can you tell me what happened?’
‘He was with some kind of old woman, some old drunk. He wanted to get her a drink, but Gary kicked them out. They were both …’ Instead of finding a word he pushed some air out of his mouth and shook his head.

There was a burst of wild laughter from the young people in the corner. One of them grabbed at something in another’s hands and stood up, kicking his chair over. Then they all sat down.

The barman said, ‘Has he got a kid?’
‘A what? No. Why?’
‘Oh I think he said something about a little kid. Curtis said some people shouldn’t be allowed to be parents.’

‘Roland definitely doesn’t have a child.’
‘Just as well.’ He was looking at her more closely now, intrigued that she could be the mother of such a son, wondering what she was going to say about it. He was wearing eyeliner, which suited him. He had that delicacy you saw sometimes, the kind of beauty that transcended crassness, like that pop singer from years ago, the poster on Libby’s wall.

She wanted to ask if Roland had a bruise, but she couldn’t bring herself to mention it. ‘I don’t suppose he mentioned where he was staying?’

There was a tiny grimace and a head wobble.
‘The woman who was with Roland, do you know anything about her?’
Now he was able to help. He leaned forwards, looking pleased. ‘She’s an alcoholic. And crazy too. She comes and tries to get a pie but we chuck her out. She’s bad news. Always yelling and stuff, doing these long mad rants.’

‘And where does she live?’

Grimace, wobble. ‘She got upset with Curtis and she threw a book at him and the guy … your son … he kind of grabbed her.’

‘You don’t know where she lives, this woman?’
‘Gary reckons she used to have a bookshop. But there aren’t any bookshops any more, are there?’

‘What about the book?’

‘What?’

‘You said she threw a book. Have you got that?’

He blinked at her for a moment, frowning as if they’d never understand each other. Then he swung away, went out through a door and came back almost immediately with a waste paper basket, which he put on the bar in front of her. Veronica tipped it to look inside. There was a book in there, underneath some cellophane. She took it out. It was a thick paperback, the cover worn to softness and dog-eared. *Oliver Twist*. There was a stamp on the first page.

Josette LeFevre

Holborn Books

*Purchase Price ... Return Price ...*

No prices filled in, but an address:

340 Macquarie Street, South Hobart.

He said, ‘People like that, terrible things happen to them and then they blame everyone else and then they hit the grog or something worse.’

‘People like what?’

But he had turned his back.
Chapter 5

340 Macquarie Street was a Georgian building, built right up to both footpaths with the door across the corner. It was two storey, in soft apricot brick, with a low roof and, on the upper floor, twelve-paned windows. At street level there were larger shop-front windows but these were blocked with bookshelves. Beside the door there was a hanging sign with a painting of Dickensian London, crooked buildings and a carriage, and the words ‘Newman Noggs Books’. The name had been changed.

Macquarie Street was busy. A truck rattled past, pushing some exhaust her way. She watched it go, uphill away from town. Ahead of it, seeming to block off the road, was the mountain. It looked very close from here, vertical and purple-black, a large dark wall. As a child she had understood that the world must end there, that there could be no path through.

Above the door there was a bell on a bent stalk, but it had lost its donger and as she went through it made only a dead clanking sound. Because of the blocked windows, the shop was almost completely dark. It was crammed with shelves, close together and chaotically arranged. There were books held vertically, with more crammed horizontally on top of them, books stacked on top of the shelves, in places as high as the ceiling, and books in boxes on the floor and glass cases at the ends of rows, all full. And it wasn’t just books. There were pictures everywhere, prints and posters, photographs, some in frames, stuck on the ends of shelves or pinned over the shelves, some pegged to strings and strung across the room. It was impossible to make out the internal walls.

Veronica stood where she was and shouted. ‘Roland?’

The place had a breathless feel and the smell that all these places have, a combination of old carpets, dry dust, and silverfish. There was some light coming through the front door, and a few bright cracks around the books in the windows, but this penetrated only a short distance, serving not so much to illuminate the room as to darken it by contrast.

‘Roland?’

In the middle of the room, side on to the door there was a counter of scratched wood, with two posters on the front, a Miro, and an advertisement for Calvados, a girl in a bathing suit. There was no one there. A green glass lamp threw a ball of dim light but this was confined to the desk. She looked for a bell, put her fingers on the counter, felt something sticky and lifted them again.

Further back in the room there was more dull light from a standard lamp with a yellowish calico shade. And possibly a movement.

‘Hello.’ She had produced a high middle-aged voice, something from a pantomime dowager, nervous and silly. The room, all the waiting paper, sucked the sound away.
Someone said, ‘See or shut your eyes. ‘Tis the Last Judgement’s fire must cure this place.’

Behind the calico lamp, out of reach of its light, there was a lump of intensified darkness. Veronica moved forwards to where she could see more clearly. It was a woman. She didn’t want to be seen. What had she said? There was something familiar about it. But Veronica didn’t have time to think about that. ‘I’m looking for Roland.’

The figure had risen, surprisingly lightly, from her chair. She took a step, staggered, then half-fell sideways, turning just in time and coming to rest with her back against the bookshelves on the side wall. Now her body was in the lamplight. In one hand she had a glass with a tiny amount of golden liquid. She was dressed in some kind of shift, A-line, in a coarse plain cotton, a dress from the sixties or early seventies. Over it she had a chunky necklace, great blocks of black and brown wood.

Veronica said, ‘Odette.’ That wasn’t right. Something else. ‘Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim gaping at death …’

She was trying to frighten her. Veronica sucked in some of the papery air, hardened her lips. ‘I’m looking for my son.’ ‘… and dies while it recoils.’ ‘Roland Cruikshank. You were with him last night at the Beaufort Hotel.’

The glass moved, a tiny gesture. ‘What’s he doing in Hobart? How long has he been here?’ Sandrine? Juliette? If she could just remember the name, surely it would help, give her some authority, some kind of foothold. ‘How do you know him?’ ‘Roland, like all of us, is unknowable.’

Somewhere in the room there was a swelling of light. A door opened, and quietly closed. ‘Never mind.’ Veronica went towards the sound. She pushed into the nearest narrow space, went forward blindly, turned, and kept turning until she found the door. ‘Roland?’

Somewhere in a distant room there was the sound of another door closing. She went across a hallway, past a flight of stairs and down a corridor, narrowed by more shelves. There was a sitting room on the right, with a person she didn’t know. She went past it to the back of the building. A tiny kitchen here, windows above the bench. She could see a shabby verandah, wooden steps and, well below, a rubbishy yard with wheel marks where a car had been.

She went back to the sitting room and stood in the doorway. This room was also book-lined and not much lighter than the front. The person in there was a young mother. She
was sitting on an arm chair beside a child in a pram and looking down at her hands, as if she was praying.

Veronica said, ‘I’m looking for my son. Have you seen a young man?’

The woman stood up and came towards her, pushing the pram in front of her. She didn’t look well. Her hair was long and lank, sticky-looking, a lifeless yellow colour. She came too close to Veronica, looking as if she was about to say something, then she stepped aside and shoved the pram forward. ‘Look.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘This is Mason.’

Veronica looked at the child, pulled her head slightly back, said, ‘Hello.’

‘Mayson. With a Y.’


‘What?’

They were in a reading room of some kind. Three cherry red armchairs, a lamp over each, a window overlooking the side street. At one end there was fireplace holding, not pine cones or dry branches, but an ancient set of bellows and an old manual typewriter.

In a corner there was a small table holding books, a folio with a black plastic cover, a stack of paper, some Fusain pencils and scattered sketches. Veronica went over to it. Roland’s. Roland had been here, drawing and reading. There was a pile of paperbacks, *The Moonstone, Frankenstein, Tess of the D’Urbevilles.*

It was very quiet here, the sound of traffic muffled by the bulk of the books. More than quiet. It felt as if the air had thinned. Veronica had a sudden irrational sense of a space somewhere, as if Roland had been sucked away, leaving a vacuum where he should have been. Somewhere in the front rooms she heard the old woman cough.

She repeated herself. ‘I’m looking for my son. His name is Roland. He’s been here, drawing. These are his.’

The woman’s face was thin, the skin dull, too white in places, too brown in others, a dragged-down look around the mouth. She wore a lot of eyeliner which made her eyes look flat, like shapes drawn on a page.

‘Do you know where he might be?’

‘Look at him.’ She leaned forward over the back of the pram and lifted the boy’s hair. The boy slept on. There was a lump on his forehead, a cool violet and blue bruise with a red slit down the middle of it.

‘Oh,’ said Veronica stupidly. ‘That’s nasty.’

‘Roland knows about it. Ask Roland.’

So she’d picked up on the name. She was more cunning than she looked.

‘…around the church widdershins. Woe to the mother’s son who attempts it.’
The horrible woman – Charlotte? Maxine? – had come into the room. Veronica turned around, sweating. ‘I’m sorry... Colette, is it?’

Her face was long and thin, mannish around the jaw, the white hair dry and weightless. Her skin had an unhealthy drained look, stained yellow on the upper lip. She still had the glass, fuller than before. In this light the liquid looked brown. And there was a cigarette, too, newly lit, dangerously close to the folds of the baggy dress.

She said, ‘Judith.’ Her lips were wet and loose.
‘What?’ That hadn’t been the name.
‘Fuck the French.’ Judith picked up two books from an armchair and took them to a shelf.

The young woman grabbed Veronica’s arm. ‘He said you’d help us.’
‘What?’
‘Roland said you’d help us. He said to ask you.’
‘Oh I don’t think so.’

Now she began pulling up the child’s sleeve to show marks on his arm, long red lines, as if he’d been drawing on himself. Her eyes were watery, the lashes clogged with black, black makeup thickening in the corners. ‘You have to help us.’

Judith said, ‘He has been dragged into mud and slime and low passion and delusion ...’ She met Veronica’s eyes and there was a flicker of intelligence, more disturbing than the alcoholic stupor. Her eyes were set wide apart, light green. She was studying Veronica closely, as if she was assessing her capacity to perform some difficult task.

Veronica said, ‘You know Roland. I’m his mother.’
‘Every story begins with a mother. Many of them end with one.’

Veronica started to move away. But the woman with the pram grabbed her again.
‘I’m sorry.’
‘Roland wants you to help us. Please. Please.’

Veronica was frightened now, irrationally panicked. She yanked her arm away. As she went around them she tripped on a wheel of the pram and stumbled. The little boy’s head banged into the metal bar. She stopped long enough to look at him. He hadn’t woken.
Chapter 6

As Veronica hurried back to her car the fear didn’t leave her. It was as Georgie had said. Roland was in one of his messes and this one was bad. And people kept talking about children. Lesley had said something, ‘A child who was hurt’. And the boy in the pub. And that woman, showing her son’s bruised forehead ...

*Roland knows.*

She had to find him. And there was one person who knew where he would be, one person who always knew. Georgie said Paul lied, but she would make him tell her.

Lesley’s gallery was in Brooke Street, one block back from Waterman’s Dock, squeezed between an old flour mill, which was now a chandlery, and a low pub. It was a nineteenth century sandstone warehouse, square-roofed, four storeys, slightly crooked, with central windows where once there had been a pulley system. At ground level there was a new large window, and a sign by the door in tall bare letters: *Illumin.*

The door led to an airy room with a polished floor and, fixed into the rough stone walls, glass shelving holding jewellery, Jeroen pewter and inlaid myrtle boxes. Veronica normally found this room soothing – smooth glass against stone, the perfection of things. She enjoyed that feeling of clarity that came from precision of form and glossy surface.

Today she was preoccupied. And there was a jarring note. The woman behind the counter was new, and not the kind of person she would have expected Lesley to employ. She was fortyish and coarse-looking, plain rather than brassy, her hair scraped back into a tight pony-tail, her head big and round. As Veronica went towards the stairs she came hurrying across. ‘Can I help you?’ Her voice was hard. The room absorbed nothing of it, left the sounds ringing in the air.

‘I’m going up to see Paul.’

But the woman got in front of her. Her black t-shirt was fussy at the neck-line, pilling at the sides, badly stitched at the shoulder seams. ‘I’m sorry. What’s it about?’

‘I’m a friend. I just have to …’

‘I’ll take you up.’

‘I’m sorry. I haven’t … Who are you?’

‘Well …’ A pleasant, open smile, no malice in it. ‘I’m a friend too.’

It seemed doubtful. She had large heavy breasts in an inadequate bra, and a dry chest with faint vertical wrinkles which would have been better covered. As she led the way up the stairs, her plastic court shoes slipped on her feet.

The stairs were solid beams, suspended on an iron frame, and, as with the shelving there was real beauty in the contrast – the smooth heavy material against the powdery wall. They led to a small open area surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass partitions.
Paul’s partner John was here at a desk staring at a lap top. Without looking up he said, ‘Vicky you are the worst I.T. person we’ve ever had. This is completely fucked.’ Then he saw Veronica and rose out of the chair. Vicky moved in behind him and started pressing buttons on the keyboard.

After year twelve Paul had gone to Sydney for three years. He had returned with a Diploma in Fine Arts from UTS, a passion for inks and fabric painting, and with John Oh, artisan jeweller, Chinese, born in Hong Kong. John had shiny thick black hair which waved up at the shoulders. He was inclined to pallor and to floppy jeans-and-T-shirt ensembles that somehow managed to look both expensive and completely urban, and he had an urban air of patient condescension, slipping, in unguarded moments, into open contempt.

Veronica said, ‘I’ve come to see Paul.’

Vicky and John gave each other tiny blank looks and then looked back at Veronica. She left them to it, went through the glass doors into the gallery.

Over the last year Lesley and Paul had emptied out the first floor of the building to make one large space. The walls were bare, large lumps of uneven sandstone with thick mortar and holes where chunks had fallen away. The wall across from the door had iron things stuck into it, brackets and hooks from the original warehouse days, although Lesley might have added those herself. The space was dimly lit by windows at the front and back and today there were two halogen lights on, one over Paul at a long trestle table, the other over Lesley at a desk near the front window. Between them the floor space was filled with twenty or so square poles, waist high and painted black.

Paul was talking into a phone. On the table in front of him there was a photograph from the past – Paul and Roland aged about ten, sitting on an upturned dinghy with Paul’s father Gordon. When he saw Veronica, Paul put a sheet of paper over the photograph, as if he was ashamed of being caught with it, ashamed, maybe, of the sentimentality. She pretended not to notice, looked instead at the other things on the desk: a flat steel case, an array of silver jewellery, a friand on a plate.

Paul had thick dark brown hair and he was letting it grow to the same length as John’s. He did this, she realised, copied people. As a boy he had taken his lead from Roland. But the hair was crowding the shape from his soft face, and he looked tired, tight across the eyes and forehead. He knew exactly why Veronica was here. He held her eyes for a few long seconds.

She said, ‘He’s in Hobart.’

Paul turned away to finish his conversation.

‘Oh Veronica, thank goodness you’re here.’ Lesley called across the echoing room. She had her own laptop on the desk as well as piles of folders and books. ‘I am completely stuck with this performance project. I might need you earlier than Friday.’
Lesley twisted her hands together again, then stopped herself from doing it, put them flat against her thighs. Her knuckles were red. She turned to the table and started moving pages around. ‘I need some kind of thread to pull the whole thing together. I have so much material. I get lost.’

Vicky stuck her head through the door. ‘Can I make anyone a tea?’

‘Not in the gallery,’ said Lesley, thin-lipped.

Vicky went out again.

‘Who is that?’ said Veronica.

Lesley stared at the door. ‘Just one of John’s little schemes.’

‘Schemes?’ Veronica thought of Vicky’s broad face, the open smile. *I’m a friend too.*

But she had more important things to worry about. She went to stand in front of Paul. The photograph of the three men was still hidden, but there was something else on the desk beside the jewellery. She moved aside some rolled up papers. Underneath them, spread across one end of the table, there a poster showing details of the gallery opening, printed over a full length drawing of a woman.

The drawing was one of Roland’s.

The woman in this drawing had a thick body in a bulky dress and a cloth cap on her head, with her hair sticking out under it, looking as if it had been hacked off. She stood with shoulders hunched, hands locked in front of her. She had a strong square face with sunken cheeks. The light was dim and coming from directly above so that the downturned lines of her mouth were partly in shadow, and the lower eyelids exaggerated, making her look exhausted.

Paul hung up the phone and put it down. He looked at Lesley, then at Veronica. Black-brown eyes. *Look at those lashes, people used to say. Wasted on a boy.*

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He’s here. In Hobart somewhere. He was staying with Mum.’

Veronica turned to Lesley. ‘You didn’t tell me.’

Paul said, ‘He asked us all not to tell you. There’s something he had to sort out.’

*Dear little boy. He’ll break a few hearts with those eyes.*

‘I’m so sorry, Veronica,’ said Lesley, coming over. She looked at Paul. There was some kind of silent negotiation. ‘Roland stayed with me for a week and it was about a week ago. He has some giant mess to sort out and he just didn’t want to land it in your lap. He promised to tell you all about it very soon.’ She lifted her chin and pulled her head back, miming a laugh, the mouth rueful.

‘He did me these posters for the exhibition. He’s so talented.’ Lesley had always indulged Roland, issuing constant effusive praise. *Such a talented boy. Oh go on, Veronica,*
let him have another. What harm can it do? Always Roland and never Paul. ‘It was kind of him to help us out like that.’

‘Mum just stop it.’ Paul’s expression had changed from resistance to suppressed pain, as it often did when he was listening to his mother. Veronica wanted to reach across, to tell him not to worry, to get back to … something.

Lesley said, ‘I thought I was helping you. I thought when you knew you’d think, well at least it was Lesley. Because that’s a strength of ours, isn’t it? I know Paul has often confided in you and I have always been grateful. And Roland said it too. He said with the really big problems he needs both of us. We help him in different ways, complement each other.’

‘What really big problems?’

‘Anyway, he’s gone,’ said Lesley. ‘I upset him in some way. A week ago. There was a girl he was trying to help and I said the wrong thing … I … it doesn’t matter. He stormed out. We don’t know where he is. He’s still got Paul’s car, though. He hasn’t offered to give that back.’

Paul swung his head to the right and then back to the left, trying to shake this off.

‘Paul?’

Lesley said, ‘He’s staying with some dreadful old woman over a shop. So that just shows you, Vee. You needn’t think I have supplanted you in any way. Not that you would think that. But now we’ve both been thrown over for some ghastly old drunk. A real monster by all accounts.’

‘Paul, what’s going on?’

Paul went to the end of the desk. ‘Come outside.’
Chapter 7

Paul brought an umbrella and they walked across Morrison Street to Elizabeth Pier. It was unnaturally warm, with a wind on the water. Something coming. Instinctively, suspecting rain, they stood under the awning of a restaurant, looking back towards the ferries and the little gift-box ticket offices.

‘Paul I’m sorry. Roland’s obviously got you in some kind of ..’

Paul laughed sadly, moved the umbrella into one hand and tucked the other hand under his arm. Out here, in the tired grey light of late afternoon he looked older. There was a new looseness in his eyes and mouth and a plumpness in the cheeks, faint shadows of indulgence. Not just indulgence. There was something worrying him. Distressed. Lesley had said that.

‘I know he’s told you not to tell me. But I will help. It is possible to be too loyal. You have always...’

‘I adore him,’ he said easily. ‘Always have.’

‘I’m so glad. I am.’

‘It’s not hard to understand. He’s a wonderful person.’

Veronica sighed. That was what everyone said. Roland’s wonderfulness, his floppy charm, were what everyone noticed and what everyone remembered. They all forgot about how impossible he was, and remembered only that.

‘And as you know ... those school days...’

‘Yes.’

‘It formed a bond – with me being gay and everyone thinking he was.’

Veronica grunted. This was an old pattern. There was something Paul knew, something big, and he did want to tell her. But first he would play around, tease her. Paul, reaching for the old ways. She feigned surprise for him. ‘Did they?’

‘Still happens.’

‘I never knew.’

‘Veronica. You miss everything.’ His voice was flat. He was failing to find the right note of levity.

He laughed, but when he met her eyes she saw a familiar expression and it was only now that she recognised it for what it was, a kind of diffuse misery, and she had the new thought that whatever caused it had happened a long time ago.

She looked out over the water, the waves moving towards her. ‘Does your mother...’

‘Oh fuck.’

‘Paul.’
‘No. Really. Don’t talk about her.’
‘All right. In that case, are you going to tell me what’s happening?’

He blinked at her. ‘He’s been trying to help a girl. Someone we used to know when we were at school. You know, those kids from Clarence High we used to kick around with? You and Mum hated them.’

‘I don’t remember.’ There had been so many. Paul and Roland had gone to Fawkner School in Sandy Bay, but they had always had friends from other schools, kids Veronica and Alan didn’t know, from what Alan called ‘all walks of life’. There didn’t seem to be anything the parents could do about it. They couldn’t find out what the boys did with these groups. They would have liked to say their son had been led astray, mixed with the wrong crowd, but Veronica knew it wasn’t really like that.

‘Anyway, this is one of them. She’s … doesn’t matter. Treen. She’s got a partner called Dane and a little boy … and things are … not good …’ He spoke very flatly. ‘The kid’s getting hurt.’

* A child who was hurt.

* Look at him.

‘Treen’s been trying to get hold of Roland for a while now, trying to get him to come and help and now he’s come. He’s been trying to sort out a way of getting them away from Dane.’

‘Why did she ask Roland?’

‘Because he’s Roland.’

It was true. Roland had always been a fighter of lost causes. She could still see him, her gentle, plump boy, skin thin to the point of translucence, worrying about a sister’s cut knee, the neighbour’s wailing dog, a spider, endless questions about the goldfish Clinker – was he hungry, cold, hurt, lonely? Roland, hot, red, drained and unhappy, desperate to fix it all, exhausting himself.

‘There must be other people who can look after her?’

‘Well yeah, you would think so.’

‘And Roland’s been here for two weeks?’

‘He’s been trying to help, to just be, you know, a friend, while he thinks of what to do. He’s been taking the little guy for drives and things. I went sometimes, just to … I dunno. We even took him to Mum’s. That’s why Roland had to move out of Mum’s.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the kid had dirty feet and he jumped on the Chelmsford lounge suite. Mum went into one of her tirades. She took off his shoes and brushed them with some kind of brush. You know mum. But she was really freaked. It was actually pretty funny.’ The
smile became a laugh and his eyes looked sadder, really tragic now. ‘So then she and Roland had this huge fight …’

‘Fight?’

‘Well you know how mum fights. It was completely silent, but Roland knew. He moved out and went to the bookshop woman. But really he should just go away.’ His voice rose and thinned. He took a breath. ‘A few days ago he had some kind of run in with Dane and got punched in the face. He’s all right. But there’s no hope for the situation. Treen is ... really ...’ He couldn’t find a word for her. ‘I mean a lot of drugs and she was always ... you know. There were a lot of men. And the child is just a monster. It’s really a horrible child. But I suppose you can’t blame him for that. What hope does it have with such horrible parents?’

‘Not ‘it’, Paul.’

‘Huh.’ His voice was collapsing. ‘What would you know?’

‘Paul?’

‘No. You’re just as bad.’

‘I …’

‘I say “There’s a kid being hurt” and you go “oh dear that’s no good”. That’s what people say.’ And suddenly he was distraught. ‘We don’t think about it. When really … It’s the worst thing you’ve … It’s the worst thing.’

She thought for a moment, then said quietly. ‘Hurt in what way?’

Paul drew in a breath as if he’d been stung. ‘He had … The little kid had … There was a night when he got bashed, that’s all. I was the one who ... John and I ...’

‘Tell me.’

‘Oh … No ...’

‘Paul.’

‘It’s not something ... it’s not for you to …’

‘Paul.’

‘Ohhh.’

‘Paul.’

He drew a shaky breath. ‘A few months ago I got a phone call.’ He stopped to change the way he approached the story. ‘I mean I never saw Treen. She was trying to get Roland to come, but he was ... you can never get hold of him. And then things went really bad one night and she rang me.’

So many questions to ask. Veronica tried to keep it concrete. ‘This was when?’

‘In May. She panicked one night and she rang me. So we went to this house in the middle of the night. John came with me.’ His eyes slipped out of focus, one closing more than the other, so that they seemed to have different expressions, to be looking in different
directions. ‘It was in Mornington. They’d been having some kind of thing. I don’t know. But there were a lot of people there and the little boy had been hurt.’

It was after four, evening falling. Street lights were coming on, windows and signs being lit up.

‘John found him. He was in this horrible mouldy little back room. John had him lying down.’ His voice weakened again. ‘There was blood everywhere. Ahhh. The carpet was quite light so it looked ... awful, just bright red ... John had tried to wipe it off his face but ... I thought he was dead. And John was calling the ambulance, so I was supposed to just sit with him and keep everyone else away.

‘He started trying to get up. Meant he was tiny. Just this tiny … And then I touched him and he just screamed, so I didn’t do anything, and he got himself onto all fours. And then the blood started flowing again. He had this cut on his head and his head was tipped forward, so ...’ Paul’s face contracted. ‘It was dripping off his ... chin ... And he couldn’t get going. He just stayed there like that, swaying.’ Paul bent his knees, as if he was about to sit down, but then straightened them again. ‘Ohhh. So. Then I touched him again and he did lie down and he made a noise, but then he just lay there.’

On the dock there was a wooden block, trimmed in copper, a nautical seat for tourists. Paul went to it and sat down. As Veronica joined him he leant forward, knees apart. He had never spoken of this, she thought. He had thought about it constantly but never had the words in his mouth before.

Veronica stared at the tiny harbour. There was a movement of waves towards her, but over that the reflections of black pylons remained steady and the lights from buildings and signs scattered into broken lines and random flashes, red and white and yellow.

After a while Paul sat up. ‘He was all right. They got him to hospital. I mean ... all right ... God. It was the most terrible, terrible ...’ He looked down at his feet and then up, lifted his eyebrows as if to prevent tears. ‘Aaah.’

‘Oh Paulie boy.’

Treen. Mayson. Help me. Please. Roland said he wanted you to help us. She had tripped on the pusher and bounced the child’s head.

Paul took a shaky breath. ‘Mayson had been hurt before I think. This time he’d been thrown into something hard, like a wall. He had broken ribs and a fractured skull and concussion and ... I don’t know. But then while he was in hospital Dane went to Western Australia. And anyway they couldn’t prove he had done anything. Treen said Mayson had fallen off a cupboard.

‘So-o-o they released Mayson back to Treen and she was living with this friend, a girl, but then Dane came back to Hobart and moved back in with the three of them and they’re back where they started. And it’s started again. So this time Roland’s come down
and waded in. He should just walk away. But you can’t, can you? But you can’t fix it, either.’

‘I’ll help him.’

‘He should just give up on it and go back to Kandina. I don’t know what he thinks he can do.’ Paul’s voice began to weaken. ‘There’s no hope. It’s just ... a kind of hell.’

She watched the lights on the water, fragments, red, yellow. And blue. But that couldn’t be right. There was no blue here, nothing blue around the pier or the road. There was a sign on the chandler’s and a light on the angel at the Seafarers’ Mission but they were both too far away to be reflected here. Blue was impossible. Which proved in some way that none of this, this day, her standing here with Paul, Roland, the bruise, the little boy, none of it was real.

‘Roland won’t give up.’

‘You didn’t see him. That little guy. He was just ... swaying.’

‘Oh Paul.’

He rubbed his face. ‘And look. He’s right, I suppose. I’m not tolerant like that. I think some of these people are just bad people and they can’t be ... we can’t fix it and we should just walk away. But Roland isn’t like that. And that’s good. I know it is. He’s wonderful.’

This was like a conversation from years ago, Paul defending Roland to his parents, pleading his friend’s case. For a moment she felt herself slipping, didn’t know what year it was.

‘His only weakness is he doesn’t pick and choose. He cares about everyone. Even the lost causes. Especially the lost causes.’

She tried to help him, found something from the past. ‘Alan says it’s our fault. When he was little we said we’d named him after the fairy tale, Childe Roland. It’s not true, of course. We just liked the name. But it became a family joke.’ Roland had always been a self-appointed righter of wrongs.

‘I thought it was a poem.’

Yes it was that too. At one time or another they had read him all the stories. Childe Rowland, the young prince who had rescued the lost children from under the mountain, the knight in the poem, riding bravely forwards towards the Dark Tower, without hope, to fight where no one else had succeeded.

They thought he had forgotten about it. But now he was back. From the warmer lands. Childe Rowland, back from fairy land, from behind the church. Back from the Saracen wars. Back to save everyone.

Veronica looked out at the water, all the ridiculous, nonsensical light. ‘He wasn’t supposed to take it seriously.’
Chapter 8

That night the weather broke. The temperature dropped ten degrees in ten minutes and after that, for two days, a south-westerly blasted the town with fine stinging rain. On the mountain there was snow down to Ferntree.

Veronica could not contact Roland. Every time she checked the bookshop it was locked and dark. She kept trying his phone and rang every Hobart person who might have seen him. Tom, Libby and Georgie tried all the contacts they could think of.

On Wednesday morning Georgie rang.

‘So apparently Dad’s a slut.’

‘George.’ It was what Georgie did when she was furious. Found a word that would draw a response.

‘Lizzie said it, not me. I rang Dad to talk about Roland and there was a voice in the background. I mean you could just tell.’ She was talking quickly, her tone flat. ‘So I rang Liz and she said it’s been going on for years.’ She left a silence which Veronica failed to fill, then added, ‘Different women. Lots of them.’ Words as weapons. Send the pain on, send it outwards. ‘Liz said how come I didn’t know. She said he’s a useless prick and I said at least I had known that.’ Could they really be that severe? Could they really have forgotten all the good things? The walks, the books, the bird calls? And the money – the home, the trips, the degrees? Did that not count for anything? She couldn’t mention it now.

‘I’m sorry, George.’

‘Why would you be sorry?’

More silence.

Georgie said, ‘I better hurry or I’ll get fired. And, as you know, that isn’t a figure of speech. I really will.’ Georgie had two huge conferences to organise, back to back, and the firm was threatening to retrench half the staff.

‘Hopefully it …’

‘I have to go.’

On Wednesday evening an email came from Alan saying he had rented an apartment in Wapping and an agent had a key and she could move any of his things that were in the way.

She began to paint the sky, made great washes of transparent white and grey. They were all failures. By Thursday she had five pages, lying dry and lifeless on the trolley in the hall. That afternoon she drove past a bonfire and began to think about flame. She took one of Alan’s mountaineering books out to the terrace and set fire to it. She photographed it burning, to paint later, and went to get some more.
After a while she stopped taking photographs and just watched. As the books burned, the pages blackened and curled. New pages arched up to join the burning ones, sucked up, she supposed, by the heat. The paper turned silver, then white, then crumbled to powder.

She had read somewhere about a man burning holy books. When he threw the books on the fire the paper burnt away, but the letters, protected by some property of ink maybe, survived for a second. Instead of shrivelling they glowed, and then, swirling in the hot upward current, they rose into the air.

The letters in Alan’s books darkened, then became shadows on the silver, then they disappeared. Nothing rose.

But as she looked at the letters, changing and not floating, she heard some words again, *and dies while it recoils*, and she remembered where they were from. And she decided to try the bookshop one more time.
Chapter 9

There was less traffic in Macquarie Street today. Behind her a station wagon slowed and turned into a driveway. A wind blew a fine spray of rain at her. The wild weather was clearing, the snow mostly gone. The mountain had a half-cover of cloud, streaked, ragged-edged, with one corner of the Organ Pipes showing, hard and straight in contrast.

The door of the bookshop was locked and there was no sign of movement. Veronica hammered on it, then went to the steep side street. The back yard of the shop was hidden by a high paling fence and the gate was locked, but from Macquarie Street she could see over the fence into a corner of the yard. There was a car there. She could only see part of its roof. A small car, powdery blue, the Honda that Paul had lent to Roland.

She went back to the door and shook it.

A car door slammed, causing her instinctively to turn. Across the road was Sutton’s Hotel. There was a ute in the drive-in bottle shop and two people talking at the shop entrance. The ute came down the driveway and went past, the driver looking at her. She stepped back, glared again at the shop’s upstairs windows.

Her phone beeped. A text message. Roland.

I need you to go to two biscuit rock
Chapter 10

You can see the cold, in a black rock, in the tightness of heath, in curls of silent mist. Veronica was a thousand metres up, on the path across the front of the mountain, and the icy air was cutting into her, despite the coat and gloves. Above her was a fall of tumbled dolerite, large broken rocks spotted with lichen, and further up, the Organ Pipes looming forward, black and wet, their tops still streaked with moving cloud. She was well above the forests. Here there were just the rocks, a few spindly snow gums, and dead trees knocked down years ago. The slope was almost vertical, with the road out of sight a long way below. It was difficult to believe you would ever make it down safely.

She put a hand on a silver log to steady herself and looked outwards. The sky up here appeared not as a lid but as a great violet space. Somewhere in the south a break in the cloud allowed through a trail of pure light which, before it reached the land, dissolved into mist. And all that emptiness, for some reason, made her aware of the mountain itself, the immense unforgiving weight of it, the feeling it always gave her, that there was something she was supposed to know.

After the first message Roland had sent another.

Right now. Please. Mum please go to two biscuit rock right now.

She should be angry with him, should be burning his books. Roland had abandoned her in the same way Alan had, except that he wouldn’t let her be, found it necessary to haunt her, to worry her, to be seen, to appear in terrible stories and second hand reports. And finally to send this … a text.

The message was vintage Roland too – bizarre, operatic in tone, and nonsense. But it also conveyed, as far as anything could be conveyed on those tiny screens, genuine distress. He was mixed up with an alcoholic and a mother who took drugs. And there was Paul’s sickening story. A child hurt, dreadfully hurt, and Roland trying to help. So no, she wasn’t angry or even indignant. She was full of apprehension. Sick with it.

After the first two there had been another message. I’m so sorry.

The apology as afterthought. Another of Roland’s specialties. But then there had been a fourth, sent unfinished, possibly by mistake.

Mum I need

Veronica grunted at the memory. Mum I need. A tiny phrase and a huge one. Universal. A timeless imperative.

She had tried to be sensible. She had gone home for walking shoes and a coat before driving up here. Luckily, despite the wind and the remnant snow, the gate at the Springs had been opened. There had been nobody else on the road. She had parked at the
Chalet, climbed past the stone picnic shelter, under the prehistoric banksias and then through the snow gums, grey and white and peachy orange, and, for the first time in years, she had started out towards Two Biscuit Rock.

She couldn’t think what might be behind the message. It couldn’t be about the girl and the child. Treen. Mayson. Roland was trying to get them free of a violent man, but he wouldn’t have brought them up here in this weather, with the snow only just cleared. She was surprised to have found the road open. The most likely thing she could think was that there was going to be a message he had left here, some theatrical gesture. Maybe Roland himself would be here, wanting to talk to her in this beautiful place with its happy memories. Two Biscuit Rock, her children’s name for it, a reference to a memorable snack. It was a name from another world, from years ago.

As it was, she almost missed the little entrance. Not because it had changed. Nothing changed here. Maybe because she had. Or because of the eye-watering cold. But she saw the marker, the arrow-shaped rock, and stopped. This was a place Tom had discovered when the kids were young, a place only her family knew, a gap between two boulders, edged now, but not then, with a mountain pinkberry and a tiny candleheath. Roland used to chant from the fairy tale when he got here, ‘and the door did open and he went in and he was in darkness’. But instead of darkness the gap led to a channel of tumbled rocks, then a climb up to a flat place, surrounded by bushes and moss and open to the view.

Veronica found the gap narrower than before, found her hips brushed the sides, and when she heaved herself up the large steps there were complaints in knees and ankles and buttocks. She braced herself before the last one, stood waist high to the rock, gloved hands lumpen before her, and then she stopped.

In her early days Veronica had spent years managing a GPs’ surgery and after that she had raised four kids. She knew what to do with surprises, especially unpleasant ones. Slow down. Stop. Focus inwards. This time she had two reactions very quickly. First a startle, a catch of breath, a sting of nerve endings, then, instinctively and instantly realising the person on the rock presented no danger, she had a social response. Her mouth opened. It was possible she made a noise, but that was torn away by wind before she could hear it. And after that, as it became clear what it was she was seeing, both of those responses fell away and she was aware only of the growing, soaking cold.

On the rock in front of her, lying immobile in the frozen wind, there was a girl, a young woman. Nearest Veronica was a boot, plastic-heeled with a platform sole, cheap and cracked from the walk here. The other foot was bare. The girl’s arms were half bare too, and yellowish, her face was hard, mottled. Her eyes were open.
Very carefully, Veronica pushed herself up onto the rock. She took three small steps to stand above the dead girl, feet apart, looking down. There was a moan now, a high sad wail, echoing somewhere in her head. Very clear. It was almost a sound.

Long straight hair, blonde, darkened by moisture. It was Treen. Treen from the bookshop. Treen from Paul’s story. Treen with the injured child. Roland said you’d help me.

And at the same time, it wasn’t her, not Treen at all, but an object, something made to look like her, a shop dummy. The legs looked hard and thin. The boot looked fake, solid, like a block of wood. And the bare foot was greyish blue, plastic, with long, curled, inhuman toes, animal claws.

For a moment Veronica could not feel her own feet, her connection with the rock. She was aware only of the air around her, the immeasurable space. She put a hand out, into nothing. The wind here was treacherous. It felt hard, solid. You thought it would hold you up, but snatch at it and it would vanish. If you leant on the wind you would fall to the rock. Lie there. Like the girl. The body, the not-girl.

Somewhere a thought was trying to intrude. Roland. Roland had known about this. He had sent her here to sort it out. Oh Roland, what is this? What have you …? But she couldn’t afford this now. She pushed it away.

She gathered sensory details, placed them deliberately into her consciousness – vibrating bushes, the coarse grain of the rock, and behind her the sudden edge. She had found something terrible, and very large. She formed the word again in her mind. Large. Words could hold the mind. They could be clung to.

Treen – the body – Treen – had jeans that were low cut at the top, revealing some inches of hip flesh. Above that there was only a striped T-shirt. She was lying on her side facing the mountain, knees bent at different angles, as if she had been crawling somewhere and had toppled sideways. On one wrist there was a silver bracelet with links like a chain and a big clunky clasp. The other arm was above her head. Near that hand there was a jacket, a puffy synthetic thing. Treen’s face was tipped up towards the jacket, almost as if she was trying to catch it. Her hands were yellow-white, waxen and blotched, no sign of a vein. The finger ends looked torn, and stained with black dirt and with a lighter brown, blood maybe.

Not far from her hands, on the wall behind the rock, some stones had been dislodged. Most of the stones were grey, but there was one that was smooth and white. And there was a patch of moss that had been scraped away, exposing hard black mud.

Hypothermia. They did this. They undressed themselves. And they dug in the ground. Some kind of burrowing reflex. It didn’t bear thinking about. As she was dying, this girl, this poor young thing, had scratched desperately at the earth until her fingers bled.
There was a sudden space in the wind, a momentary stillness. A pool of mist came from somewhere, circled for a second, softly-bright, then rushed past.

*Please go to two biscuit rock right now.* Roland knew this girl was here. Had he seen her before she died? Had he been here?

The skin of Treen’s face was colourless, but not yellow. Not bluish either, no hint of marble. It was more a blighted grey, tinged, if anything, with orange. A kind of oyster. The silly word made Veronica want to laugh. She lifted a hand to her mouth, found that the other hand was already there. Now she was remembering mountaineering stories, some man who had been taken for dead but had come to life again and crawled into camp kilometres away. Veronica had to touch her. More than this, if she was alive, Veronica had to hold her, take off her own coat, lie down, share her warmth. She pressed her hands into her mouth, gave herself another second, then pulled off a glove and knelt down.

There was no snow here, or frost. No iced up eyelids, as in the films. Treen was just wet. Her face was threaded with tiny red lines. At the corners, the cracked lips were the same colour as the rest of the face, but in the centre they were black.

*Help me. Please.*

Veronica herself felt stiff. She felt that it would be impossible to move her own arm forward. But it did move.

The cheek was hard, not like marble, like rubber, swollen with water. But the membrane was delicate, as if at too much pressure it would shatter.

She pulled her hand back. Her knees were hurting on the frozen rock, but before she allowed herself to stand, she reached out again, put a finger to the pulse in the neck. Softer here, but no movement. She looked again at the eye slits, a dark dark red.

No hope, then. No need to do more. There was a flood of relief, immoral, unpardonable relief, and with it a full awareness, the horror of what she was seeing, what she had touched. This time she heard the noise she made, an ugly sobbing sucking sound. This would have to be controlled. She pulled her hand away quickly and reached for the phone.
Chapter 11

Veronica had hung one of her early drawings framed on her kitchen wall. It was a waratah, done in a forest near the Meander. She was standing in front of it now, mesmerised by it, the fine filaments, the Fibonacci curls opening with mathematical precision as if into a vacuum. Tonight she couldn’t understand it, that impossible delicacy, the stillness. She couldn’t remember drawing it, ever being that ... It seemed a long time ago. She tried to think about all the time between the drawing and this night in her kitchen, all those uncalculated moments. Here, standing at her bench in one little pool of light, with the dark house around her, looking at this picture, it didn’t seem to mean anything, to say that something had happened a long time ago. She had lost the ability to imagine time, lost the ability to divide it, to track things.

According to the oven clock it was eleven thirty. Had she spent hours at the police station, or hours here, looking at this drawing? She remembered coming home. The policewoman had opened her iron gate, driven the car into the garage, then walked back out towards a police car waiting in the street and closed the gate carefully behind her.

But when had that been?

It was only when Veronica moved that she realised how chilled she was. The downstairs heaters had come on at four but the cold of the mountain had stayed with her. She knew she had to act now, to think and to act. She had to remember what she had said to the policeman, Detective Sergeant ... no, the name had gone.

She pictured him, clear-skinned, muscular, voice and movements carefully modulated, podgy around the middle. He was in his late thirties. He had creases ironed carefully into his shirt sleeves. She kept wondering if he had just arrived or if he kept a clean shirt in the building for important interviews.

They asked her what she had been doing on the mountain and she told them a preposterous story – that she had gone for a walk, that she had been moved by some kind of misplaced nostalgia to drive up the Pinnacle Road into a gale and sit on a wet rock.

The policeman said, ‘On the mountain. In a blizzard.’

She didn’t correct the meteorology. She said something about being a keen bushwalker, which caused a movement of the policeman’s eyebrows. She no longer looked like a hardy outdoor type.

She was aware the whole time of the need to keep Roland out of it, not to provide any connection between him and the body. So she tried acting baffled, a pantomime of middle-aged befuddlement. She hoped she hadn’t mentioned him, couldn’t be sure, now. But even so it was plain that she was under suspicion herself. They left her in a room for a long time, had discussions somewhere before they let her come home.
Tonight they would surely watch her. She couldn’t go to look for Roland now. In the morning going around would appear more normal. They would follow her, possibly, but that couldn’t be helped. For now, tonight, she would have to stay put. She tried ringing him, and Paul, but neither answered.

Several times during the course of the evening, the police had offered to contact someone for her but she had declined. And now that she was home she still didn’t want to ring anyone. No friends or neighbours, not Alan, none of the three children whose whereabouts she did know. She couldn’t drag any of them into this. Not yet. She had been evasive with the police, probably lied to them at some point, she couldn’t be sure. She couldn’t expect her family to do that. This was something only for Roland and her. Roland was her problem. He always had been.

From here on she had to make sure she acted carefully, didn’t make matters worse. She had to think. She put a palm on her iron clay utensil pot, the brown-grey earth, hard, gritty.

Roland.
Roland and a dead girl.

*Mum, please go to two biscuit rock. Right now.*

He had known, then, hadn’t he? It was there in the urgency. Roland had known there was something important (an awful inadequate word for it) on Two Biscuit Rock. Someone had told him … or no, if someone had told him such a fantastic story, that there was a dead girl lying on his childhood picnic site, he would have gone to see for himself. He had seen it, then. Seen Treen. And she must have been already dead. If not he would have called an ambulance, waited, or carried her. Something. He would not have left her there.

So why had he run? Why had he sent his mother to the mountain? There was something she wasn’t seeing.

Veronica had to eat. She had to keep herself functioning because she was crucial to this now. She put some almonds in the microwave, mostly for the warm smell, went to the fridge and shovelled some of yesterday’s tagine into a pan.

Roland had seen the dead girl on the mountain. He wouldn’t have asked her, Veronica, to go there unless he had seen it for himself. He had seen it then. Seen her. He had seen the terrible skin, the black mouth, the blotchy waxiness. He might have felt her too. Yes. He would have touched her. He would have done that.

A wave of cinnamon-scented steam. The tagine was dotted with tiny vibrating points of colour, scarlet and yellow and orange, and little dots of glossy black.

Roland had seen the dead girl on Two Biscuit Rock, had stood looking down at her. He hadn’t felt he could call the police. Instead he had called the only person he could. And then he had run and hidden. Why? Could he be guilty in some way? Guilty of what?
Start again. Roland had found a dead girl on Two Biscuit Rock. What about Treen? How had she got there in the first place?

Another thought cut in. Treen. She was there somewhere, hovering somewhere at the back of Veronica’s thoughts, at a side curtain, in half-light, waiting to be allowed in. She remembered Treen alive, sick, poorly nourished, grimy. But young. Roland’s age. Not ready for death. Not ... timed for it. And with a child. Treen, with a yellow-grey face, hard tight skin, a girl reduced to surfaces. Unnatural. Black in the mouth and eyes, bleeding at the fingertips. Beneath all Veronica’s thoughts there was something still and flat and cold, something like nausea. It might be there forever, she thought, a new knowledge that young people, hard-limbed, foolish, angry, desperate young people, can die.

All of us.

*Roland wants you to help us. Please.*

Treen. What had happened to her? How had she got to the rock? The police hadn’t talked to Veronica about that. But they would be talking about it now, running through the possibilities. And she must do that too.

From Monday night to early Thursday the weather had been stormy and cold. The mountain had been blasted with snow and south-westerlies, the road closed. Treen must have got up there before that had begun. Veronica had seen her on Monday at lunchtime. So she went to the mountain on Monday afternoon. She had surely died of hypothermia. But how had she got up there? There had been no other car at the Chalet, and Veronica hadn’t seen one at the Springs. But Treen must have come from one of those places. The alternatives were to scramble over rocks and through bushes, down from the pinnacle or up from the road, both virtually impossible. And she couldn’t have walked up the Fingerpost Track. Not in those shoes. It was difficult to imagine her walking from the Chalet. But if she had gone there by herself there would have been a car. So no. Someone had brought her in a car and then driven it away. Someone had taken that poor girl to the mountain. It would have been impossible even for a strong person to carry her there. The path was too difficult. So they must have persuaded her to walk there, persuaded her to stumble along the uneven, treacherous path. And then, either deliberately or accidentally, they had left her there, either lost her on the mountain or left her sitting on the rock. And then they had driven away.

Roland wouldn’t do that. If he had lost Treen on the mountain he would have called for help and he would not have given up searching. It was impossible. This wasn’t the kind of knowledge the police would accept. It was the sort of thing all indulgent mothers said about wayward sons. But in Roland’s case it was true. She did know it. He simply would not have left a girl there if she had been alive.

But he had known she was there.
Move on. Or rather, move back, to the girl, lost and abandoned on a mountain. Why had she stayed? Why not get back to the road and walk home? Had she been asked to wait, or simply been so tired that she had gone to sleep and had frozen? Or had she decided to just stay there? Had she wanted to die?

Surely that isn’t how these things happened. Even people who believed themselves to be miserable would have trouble simply waiting to die. They couldn’t stand the suffering. It was a matter of human instinct. You woke up. You walked. You fought for life.

So had she been hurt in some way? Drugged unconscious? Had she drugged herself?

There was no way of knowing.

One more question, something Veronica had put aside until now because the implications of it were large enough to swamp all her other thoughts.

Two Biscuit Rock.

She took a chardonnay from the fridge, poured a large glass and drank. It left a chilled trail in her throat and chest, set an ache in the corners of her jaw.

Two Biscuit Rock was a place they had named once when the children were small. It was invisible from the path and difficult to get to, a place known only to Veronica, her children and a few childhood friends who wouldn’t remember it. A Cruikshank secret.

She remembered finding it. Tom, Roland, Paul, Libby and Georgie. The wide view, low grey curves of land receding into ocean, blue-grey water blending with blue-white sky. And Hobart flat and pastel, pinkish brown, pressed along the sides of the river and back against the hills. Everyone squabbling over the custard creams. The mothers sorting it out. *Oh Veronica, what harm can it do?* Two each, then. Brothers, sisters, Paul, the third cousin once removed.

Two Biscuit Rock. Treen had died within Cruikshank family space.

Veronica picked up a tea towel, pulled out the almonds, dished up her food and turned to the table.

And here there was a surprise. All the stuff on the table had been pushed back. In front of the pile, on her Irish linen mat amid a scatter of salt, there was a book. A paperback. Veronica hadn’t put it there. She put the plate down beside it.

It was *Silas Marner* by George Eliot. She put a hand on the book, rubbed it, pressed it, as if to confirm it was real. It was one of Roland’s, she was almost sure. It had been with his others on the shelves in the family room.

‘Roland?’

She had said it more quietly than was required. She went to the corridor and tried again, ‘Roland?’
No answer. She stood looking at the staircase, at the stained glass of the front door, lit by the porch light, and at the white door that led to the laundry and the Stuffy. She would take this slowly. When she had arrived home, the back door had been locked, the alarm system on. Apart from the family, the only person with the alarm code and keys to the house was Miriam, and she wouldn’t come inside when Veronica was out, and she certainly wouldn’t move a book. Alan and Tom were on the mainland, Libby was in the Netherlands and as far as she knew Georgie wasn’t even aware that the bookshelf existed. So it had to have been Roland.

Aching now, physically aching in muscle and joint as if she’d been working all day in the garden, she made herself check every cold bedroom, every bathroom, the junk-filled TV room. They were all empty and there was no answer.

In the family room there were boxes stacked against the bookshelves. She edged them back and looked at the books. In his later school years, his reading phase, Roland had filled the bottom three shelves himself, and he had arranged his books according to era. George Eliot would have been on the shelf at thigh height. Veronica touched the books there. They used to be tight and now they were loose. Roland had taken the book from here.

She went back to the kitchen and looked at it. Roland had asked her to go to the mountain. She had found a dead girl. And while she was up there he had come into the house and put a book on her table where she would see it. This book. She picked it up. It was very slim. The front cover had a painting of greeting-card gaudiness and sentimentality, showing an old man and a little girl sitting in filtered light in a room filled with pelargoniums and something that was almost but not quite vincas.

Roland hadn’t eaten anything. There would be signs. He had come to get this book and place it carefully in her eating space, where she was bound to find it. This was a message. There were no notes attached, nothing written on the fly leaf. The message was the book itself.

Again she turned it over. George Eliot. Silas Marner. She found her glasses, read the blurb. ‘... the linen weaver of Raveloe restored to life by the orphan Eppie …’

She couldn’t stand here any longer, feeling the rest of the house hanging heavily around her. She ate some tagine, refilled the glass of wine, and went to her corner of the family room. She got the chair with the flaking arms that Alan called psoriasis, dragged it over in front of the French window, then dug out Karen’s hand-spun, hand-knitted rug, scratchy and hot and coming apart in the stitching. She put a side table next to the chair and turned on the garden lights. Then she went back for quince and polenta tart, King Island cream, the wine, some cheddar and water, arranged it all within reach, and sat in her chair with the rug on her knees.
It was still windy outside. One of those southerlies that roared unimpeded across the river and slapped untidily around Sandy Bay before scattering against the bypass and the foothills. Despite the big stone walls, pockets of it were getting in here, making the bushes jump around.

The wine was one of Alan’s best, Giaconda, fresh and complex and wasted on her tonight. What was it you were supposed to taste? Toast? Grass? And what was the other one? The ludicrous ... gooseberry.

She had to think. Roland, and a book.

During his late teens Roland seemed to do nothing but read. He read hundreds of books, every book in the world. She used to joke about it. Apparently there were only twenty million books that had ever been written. Roland must have read them all by now.

Gooseberry. I ask you.

Over near the driveway her mother’s rhododendron, caught in a pocket of gusts and whirls, thrashed around. Not angrily, more with a kind of mad euphoria, as if it was trying to twist itself free of the earth and helicopter away.

She wasn’t thinking properly, was scarcely thinking at all. And, in a way there was nothing more to be thought. No way of knowing what Roland knew or what the book meant. All that remained was to worry about how he was. He had seen the dead girl on the mountain, the terrible skin, the black mouth, the waxiness. He would be stunned, sickened, as she was. And Roland didn’t have the inner resources for this. He would be ... She needed to find him. She tried his phone one more time. He didn’t answer.

And for now that was all that could be done. She pulled the rug higher on her chest, folded back the top row of squares, smoothed the edge. She needed to rest. Tomorrow she would tell her friends and her children what had happened to her. This would have to be done. They would find out eventually and not to have said anything would be suspicious. But she would not mention Roland. Instead she would look for him. She would go to the bookshop. If she couldn’t find him there she would go back to Paul.

The thought of tomorrow reminded her. She was supposed to be going to Jocelyn’s house in the morning, to meet her three gardening friends. They were supposed to be turning Joss’s compost and then having breakfast. She sent another text, saying she couldn’t come.

And then she stopped thinking. She stared at her garden, at the cracked blue pot with the echiveria, its one ungainly stalk of a flower. Further out she could make out the pale buds of camellias, fleshy white against the black garden. Behind them, faintly lit, clematis leaves shivering on her sandstone wall.

She closed her eyes.
And now, of course, as Veronica had known she would, the dead girl came back. It was another necessary thing, to feel what it had been like for that poor girl – the rock and the wind and the drop, the immeasurable emptiness, the cold. It was beyond bearing, but in some way it was owed. To the dead. By the living, the not yet dead.

Cold shrinks away from you, but it also clamps. It strips flesh and squeezes at bone. To die of cold would be to have no protection, to have all that emptiness press right in to the centre of you, to feel yourself dissipate … But was it like that? She had heard that people dying of hypothermia became warm. That’s why they undressed. They became confused, ceased to understand what was happening. She hoped that had come quickly.

Or was that worse than cold? Was it like burning? She could picture Treen now, uncurling, pulling off the jacket, crawling, thrashing in fury at the rock, scraping at the thin earth. But what happened after all that? After suffering? Dying – she had no way of imagining that. No way of even thinking about it. It was an experience she herself would have one day. But as she had it she would cease to exist. So death was always coming to her but could never arrive. She had been thinking about that this morning. Or was it yesterday?

Veronica wiped at her face. She rubbed at the rough wool of the blanket. She tried to empty her mind, to forget about the mountain and the dark bedrooms above her. She tried to think about her family – Tom in Brisbane, Alan cycling, Georgina with her corporate nonsense, Libby in Rotterdam with the pompous twit. All alive, temporarily alive. She pushed back into the mouldy, feathery smell of the cushion, trying to picture their faces, their shapes, trying to imagine them here, to hear what they would say about this, and wishing that one of them, any one, that just one of them would come home.
Chapter 12

‘What do you mean, “difficult experience”?’ said Miriam. ‘You’re showing your age, you know. No one texts words like that.’

It was eight the next morning and Miriam, Karen and Jocelyn were at the door. The gardening friends. Veronica heard herself make a strange sound. Not a laugh, more a cry of protest. Her head felt swollen, liquid at the back, a swimming feeling when she moved.

‘Come in Snarks.’ Tom had named them that. The Snarks. The Rule of Three. It wasn’t a friendly name. But if the Snarks suspected the venom they didn’t let on. They seemed to like it. ‘I said I’d explain later.’

They were supposed to be digging compost at Joss’s. But now they were here.

Miriam said, ‘We can’t let you just say stupid things and not explain. Living alone in this catastrophe with no husband to speak of. If you go ga ga people will say it was our fault. They’ll say “where were her friends?”’

‘But we have to be quick.’ She pushed past Veronica and stood in the hall. ‘Mrs Mussolini is coming at nine-thirty to complain about an evening jacket.’ For a second she was distracted by whatever it was she saw in Veronica’s face, but all she did was make an anxious little sucking sound and a pained grimace. ‘And I’ve got Dreepy Liz on this morning, so if I don’t get there it’ll be a blood bath.’

‘I have to go out.’ Veronica stood back for Jocelyn. Karen turned away, as she always did, and went to inspect a broken frame in the herb garden.

In the kitchen, Miriam picked up the bowl of half-eaten tagine and dumped it on the sink. ‘What have you done to yourself? You look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame. And not in a good way.’

Jocelyn put coffee in the plunger and Miriam pulled a jar out of her bag. ‘You’ve only had toast, haven’t you? I can always tell.’ She had brought greengages. Precious. Only four bottles left and summer months away.

‘If we must,’ said Veronica.

Jocelyn began making pikelets. She knew where everything was. Veronica watched her, a womanly woman, with a way of bending her spine and settling down into her hips, graceful to watch. Miriam swept aside the mess on the table. Among it all was the white stone Veronica had found on her back steps. Miriam gave it a curious look and put it aside. Veronica found the newspaper report about the barn grave baby and made sure it was face down. She put out four placemats. Miriam and Jocelyn talked about coffee and the old electric fry-pan and about the food for the barbecue.
Pikelets and plums, butter, vanilla, Demerara sugar, a rich golden taste. They scraped out what was left of the cream. They ate for a while and then looked at her expectantly.

Veronica told them about the girl on the mountain. At first they gasped and groaned, and then they asked questions and Miriam made several more conventional exclamations of horror, but by the end of the story, they had both gone quiet.

‘Black lips,’ said Jocelyn.
‘That happens, does it?’ said Miriam.
‘Something to do with cells freezing.’ Veronica kept her voice steady. She was used to thinking about this now, or possibly too tired to let it worry her. Numb. And she had to keep her wits about her, not mention Roland. Miriam, Jocelyn and Karen were people she had met six years ago, in a permaculture workshop. They were friends from a different world. Unlike Lesley, they did not understand Roland. They would judge and leap to conclusions.

‘Like lettuce at the back of the fridge,’ said Miriam, not intending to be funny, and quickly looking ashamed. ‘Oh.’
‘They do take their clothes off,’ Jocelyn had her fingers on her throat, but kept her perpetual calm. ‘I’ve heard that somewhere.’

When Karen came in, they sat through the story again. Miriam said, ‘It’s horrible. Horrible. You poor poor thing.’ She had her elbows on the table, fists in front of her chest, almost praying. She put a hand out towards Veronica. They all stared at her red nails.

‘Not me,’ said Veronica.

They finished the food. Veronica looked at the empty plate, cream streaked with yellow-green syrup, three golden crumbs.

‘You didn’t know her?’ said Karen, who had a knack for getting to the core of things.

‘No, of course not.’
‘You just happened to go for a walk up there?’
‘Yes.’
‘Just on a kind of a whim?’
‘Yes.’
‘And there she was.’
‘Oh,’ said Miriam.

‘Well.’ Karen pulled her hands back into her knitted sleeves. She was looking closely at Veronica’s face. She said, ‘That’ll teach you to have these ideas.’

‘Did it make it into the paper?’ said Miriam.
Veronica hadn’t thought of the paper. Miriam went into the family room to get the laptop.

‘So where are you going today in such a hurry?’ said Karen.

‘I have to ask someone about Roland.’

‘Is he still missing?’ said Miriam coming back with the laptop, the wine glass and a dirty plate. Without commenting she put them next to the bowl of coagulated tagine. She opened the laptop. ‘Really. That boy.’

‘Yes.’ Veronica tried for the sort of annoyed laugh she always made when Roland was causing trouble. It was all right to talk about this. The fact that Roland was missing was completely unconnected with the dead girl.

‘I’m getting a bit sick of the whole thing,’ said Miriam. But fortunately she was distracted by the computer. ‘Hang on.’ She touched the mouse pad and waited a second. ‘They’ve got a picture.’

The Mercury had acted quickly. The police must have got hold of Treen’s family overnight and released the name. Now, under a predictably sensationalist headline, Frozen girl found half undressed, there was a short article naming her as Treen McShane, twenty-four. Treen was thought to have spent three nights on the mountain and early indications were that the cause of death was hypothermia. Alcohol and prescription drugs hadn’t been ruled out as complicating factors but it was too early to report an actual cause of death. There wasn’t much more. The police wouldn’t say yet whether they were treating the death as suspicious.

‘Treen,’ said Miriam. ‘What sort of name is that?’

‘But they have these ugly made up names don’t they?’ said Jocelyn.

‘Who?’ said Karen.

‘You know … I mean, look at her.’

It seemed extraordinary, but somehow, in the middle of the night, reporters had found a friend or family member who was willing to talk and provide a photo of Treen. It showed her sitting on a chair with a small child on her knee.

‘Oh yeah. She’s a druggie of some kind,’ said Miriam.

Treen looked as she had looked behind the church – gaunt, grimy, with lank blonde hair, a tattoo on a shoulder. The child’s face was pixellated.

‘Still. So young,’ said Veronica.

‘Oh.’ Miriam was chastised. ‘Poor you.’

‘Not me.’

Treen had good cheekbones and thick eye makeup. She was laughing but not happy, her mouth forming a word. In one hand there was a cigarette, and she had the other hand around the stomach of the child, but she was turning away. She seemed to be telling
the photographer not to take the photo, which made the photo, its existence, its presence here on the screen, seem a violation. She was dressed in a sleeveless singlet which Veronica found unbearable.

‘Smoking, too.’

She wanted to protest. This was just a photograph. It didn’t give them access to anything. Veronica thought about Treen in the bookshop, help me, please, the rash at the corner of her mouth, the grip. That was the real Treen. Or no. That was just a memory. Treen existed now only in memories, in a collection of the memories of those who knew her – those who had known her – fragments of memory and those already fading.

‘I wonder what will happen to the little boy,’ said Jocelyn.

The child on Treen’s knee was identified by the caption as her son, two years old, but his name was omitted. He looked small for his age, plump, babyish, vulnerable. He seemed to be struggling to get down. One of his arms was in plaster, and there was a mark on the other arm, a dark crooked line. Even the pixellation of his face seemed a cruel act, a violation, a violence.

There was a link to a second article titled, A Terrible Act of Cruelty. That phrase was attributed to a friend of Treen’s, who had already been interviewed. She claimed someone had driven Treen to the mountain and left her there. There was a photo of the friend, a pretty dark-haired girl called Belle Ahern.

Veronica went back to the picture of Treen and her child. Next to the little boy’s legs there was a wall of glossy blue tiles. On two of the tiles corners had been cracked off, forming a grey V-shaped space. At the sight of it, Veronica straightened in her chair. She had seen this before, but she couldn’t remember where. It might be something she had known as a young child. Another memory, a sense memory, vague as a dream.

Outside a gust of wind blew tiny droplets onto the windows. Leaves rained down from the camellias and stuck on the sandstone.

‘This winter,’ said Jocelyn.

Veronica needed to leave. But she had thought of something she wanted to ask them. ‘What do you know about Silas Marner?’

They stared at her. ‘What?’ said Karen.

She waited.

‘It’s a Thomas Hardy novel,’ said Jocelyn.

‘George Eliot. Do you know anything about it?’ Veronica had googled it, but she wanted to see what her friends said. Maybe there was something she wasn’t seeing.

‘There was a movie,’ said Karen. ‘Ben Kingsley.’

‘I love him,’ said Miriam.
Now they were slipping into a kind of unconscious irony, into caricatures of themselves, the way old friends did, out of habit, or boredom, or, in this case, the desire to comfort each other.

Karen said, ‘It’s about an old man who saves a little girl. And then she saves him. You know. Spiritually.’

‘That’s what I thought.’

There was a silence. Suddenly no one seemed to know what they were talking about.

‘Why?’ said Karen.

‘Never mind. Just one of Roland’s silly things.’

Most of what Roland had done over the years defied explanation. Miriam allowed herself another small snort.

‘I do have to go.’

Caricatures – Miriam looking at her fingernails, Jocelyn nodding patiently, Karen silent and sharp. She was doing it too. Veronica the Vague.

‘Go where?’ said Karen.

‘Just a bookshop where he might or might not be staying.’ Veronica pushed her chair back and they all stood up.

‘Are you sure you’re up to it?’

‘The police have my mobile. And there’s nothing I can do for the poor girl. Treen.’

They should use the name.

‘That’s not what I asked,’ said Karen.
Chapter 13

Newman Noggs. Icy air, slipping down from the mountain. The blue car was gone and the
door was still locked. She banged on it again, shouted. She went to the window. There was
nothing to see but the backs of books. Not the spines, the raw edges, a dense wall of paper,
stacked page on page.

‘Roland! Judith!’

It wasn’t just the paper that was dense. It was the words. Words that didn’t rise. All
those millions of little black marks, the ideas they held, all that knowledge, all those
unwanted impenetrable stories, insulating the inside from her futile noise.
Chapter 14

Lesley held the iPad away from the light and looked at the photograph of the girl. The mother of the little boy, now dead. Apparently Lesley had met her once – when the girl had been still at school and a friend of Paul’s. Then the girl’s name had been Kattie. Now it was Treen. What sort of name was that? She had long pale cheeks and heavy eyeliner, which made her look secretive, and she was saying something, bad tempered. Her shoulders were turned away but she was glaring back at the camera. And she was dirty. A generally unpleasant person. Even the child was struggling to get away from her.

Roland had found this photo for her on a website. He had come this morning, had dug her out where she was trying to do some quiet work alone, in the gallery. Typical Roland, all caught up in his own concerns. He had bounded up the stairs, declared that there was something she needed to see, seized the iPad, found the picture and thrust it at her. And now he was sitting with her at her desk, watching her reaction.

He looked uncomfortable on the visitor’s chair. His limbs, normally so loose, were stiff, all tucked into his body. It was sad to see him like this, young Roland, her good friend, her second son, Paul’s third cousin once removed. Usually he was relaxed, with an unconscious grace that cut through the dreadful clothes. So many girls in love with him, that precious boy. But this morning his long mouth was shapeless, almost ugly. She had offered him tea, but he hadn’t seemed to hear. Instead he had started on some extraordinary story. He said that yesterday he had found a girl’s body on the mountain. This girl. He said it was the girl he had been going to see here in Hobart, the mother of the child. He said someone had driven her to the mountain and left her there. He said he knew who it was.

‘Who?’

He didn’t answer that. He said he had asked Veronica to deal with the girl’s body and she had called the police while he, Roland, had hidden.

‘Why did you do that? Why don’t you go to the police now? Why aren’t you talking to your mother about this?’

He never made anything clear, her maddening Roland. It wasn’t just that he never answered a question. Really he never listened at all. Conversations for him were simply an unrolling of his own ideas, interspersed with small bits of noise from the other person. Now, instead of giving her a straight answer to anything, he just looked immensely sad. He said he wanted her help.

‘Why me Roland?’ she said.

‘I thought we could do the writing together. That play about women, I know you wanted Mum to help you but she’ll be busy. So I’ll help you. I’ve got some ideas. Can we do that?’
His eyes were a light golden colour, with flecks of silver that were almost blue, or sometimes green, a mineral kind of beauty.

‘Of course, Roland. That sounds good.’ She hesitated and then said, ‘Has this got something to do with the girl?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Roland?’

‘Well perhaps we can tell her story too.’

‘Do you really know what happened to her?’

‘Maybe we can use the play to tell the story of a murder. Not literally, but obliquely…’

‘Was it a murder? Is that what you think?’

‘Oh yes. It was a murder all right. And I know who did it but I can’t explain it.’

‘If you know someone murdered that girl you must say who it is. Let the police worry about explaining it.’

‘No. I have to do it properly. It concerns me, us, our families.’

‘What?’

‘And it’s ... horrible. It’s going to be hard for people to accept. The police, the town, you, Mum, Paul, John … I must make sure this story is told properly.

‘Because people get it wrong you see. In the books. People think that the story of a murder is a story about a murderer. You know, they think it’s a matter of naming a motive – jealousy, revenge, hatred, anger. Or else they make it a story about the police catching someone. But that’s not the important thing. That’s not what it should be. The story of a murder should be the story of the victim. Do you see? We shouldn’t push Treen aside. We need to talk about her.’

There was a trick here somewhere. But Lesley couldn’t see what it was.

‘And it will keep me sane. I want to write with you Lesley. And I think you’ll do it well. You understand things. Because of what happened to you.’

‘Oh I don’t think …’

‘I think we could write something really insightful, Lesley, about women and their suffering. And that will help me to explain. About Treen.’

‘Nonsense, Roland. That doesn’t make any sense at all.’ How many times had she said that to him over the years? I’m Childe Roland, Lesley. Look. I’ll ask you a question and then chop off your head. I don’t care.

He was very upset, of course, about the dead girl. Distressed and illogical. Such a boy, to waste his time with girls like this. Maybe the kindest thing would be to go along with it.
‘Treen wasn’t perfect, I know. She did bad things. But she was also a victim. And the convict women’s stories are just right for this, do you see? You could approach Treen’s story through the story of another woman, a convict woman, someone who did bad things and was also a victim. See if you can untangle it.’

He wanted to spend time with her. And he was asking for a demonstration of commitment. This is what you had to understand with boys. Roland was confused and upset and he needed her to show him that she would do the things he asked. Small acts of devotion. Then, eventually, he would tell her what was bothering him. ‘All right. Yes. I think I see.’

He sat forward. ‘There’s a convict woman who died. Mary McLaughlan.

‘All right. Tell me about her.’

He looked pleased at that. He gave her a printout and a list of books but he outlined the details for her. Mary McLaughlan had been a convict in Tasmania in 1829. She was assigned as a servant to a farmer in the Coal Valley. She fell pregnant but refused to name the father. For punishment she was sent to the Female Factory and spent six days in solitary confinement on bread and water, and when the baby was born she strangled it. They hanged her.

He had done another drawing of a convict woman, dressed in one of those clumsy outfits they wore, standing outside a cottage. He had labelled it ‘Mary’ and added a second title over at the right hand edge. ‘Silent.’

‘It needs to be a monologue. Do you see? Mary McLaughlan was kept silent. She never got to tell her story. No one heard what her life was really like, for her, in her own words. I want us to write that for her. I want to write Mary McLaughlan’s own words, about how she was branded evil, and why she was killed. We can learn about her. Once we understand Mary we’ll understand Treen and then we’ll see why she had to die.’

‘Had to die?’

‘There’s a clue in Mary’s story. When we’ve done it we’ll see.’

The absurd boy. He wouldn’t say any more. So she made him promise. ‘All right. What about a bargain, Roland? If I do all this for you, then you promise to tell what you know?’

‘Yes. I will.’ He gave her the smile, then. ‘We should start at the Female Factory.’ He stood up. ‘Come on.’

Roland the charmer, the magical one, who could make her — make any of them, even now — do anything.
Chapter 15

The women’s prison, the Female Factory, was in South Hobart, up in the blue shadows of the mountain. At least it used to be. It didn’t really exist any more. All that was left were two yards, one transformed into a pretty garden for tourists to wander in, the other a bleak space of broken cement and scrappy grass, surrounded by stone walls.

Lesley shivered. It had been such a promising morning, one of those calm days when the air was full of pearly mist and the river was like a sheet of glass and all the colours were tinged blue. But South Hobart was harsher, the streets full of black dampness cut with ice-white sunlight. Here in the yards it was cold. Above the walls, Knocklofty looked heavy and black.

Lesley was supposed to write something. Impressions. She looked around at the empty yard. Among Roland’s notes there was a ground plan of the Female Factory. She pulled it out now and went to the corner where the privies had been. She didn’t know how high up they were. The walls showed traces of structures – horizontal lines, small openings which might have been windows, alcoves and ledges, but their purpose wasn’t clear.

Roland had told her to look for Mary’s own words, but his notes didn’t give her any of those. He had given her copies of prison documents and court reports. One of the reports said Mary was troublesome, but in other places she was described as calm and submissive. Lesley wondered what Mary would have said about herself. Roland had provided her with a copy of a newspaper article, which reported that, while pregnant, Mary had often said her child might be born dead, and that the only reason for that could have been malice towards the father. But this was a reporter, repeating what other women prisoners had said about Mary, and then guessing something. It couldn’t be what Roland had meant Lesley to find. It couldn’t be called Mary’s own words.

A wind pushed in off the mountain and scraped around the corners of the yard. Mary McLaughlan killed her baby here. Strangled it in a toilet. Lesley was supposed to imagine Mary living here, find things that she might have seen and felt – the texture of a stone wall, maybe, a dampness or a hardness in the ground. Or maybe there would be something in the temperature, moisture or its absence, or in air or the qualities of light. Hopefully she would find some point of contact, some small experience of Mary’s that she could share. As a way in to her, how she might have felt. And she was supposed to get to the truth of what really had happened here.

But Roland had been wrong about coming here. There was no access in these yards to the death of a poor little baby. All she had here were walls, made of sandstone, rounded on top, stained brown at the bottom.
Roland had written something else for her. A kind of creative piece about his own impressions. ‘The walls of the Female Factory are crumbling, lumps and layers, flaking away. It’s as if they were resisting, as if it was painful.’

Honestly. She read on. ‘That is the beauty of places like this. You can feel the time. All that time. All the things that have happened here and all the days, the hours, when nothing happened. It is terrifying, in a way. It makes you feel as if you might slip, just go around the church and slip away, and never be able to find the way back.’

Is that what Roland wanted from her? That sort of loose thinking? Lesley looked back at the yard. It was just a great space of shifting cold air. There was no sign that anything terrible had ever happened here, except perhaps the complete emptiness of the place. There was something terrible about that.
‘Of course I don’t think it’s got anything at all to do with the performance piece. I’m just going along with it because he obviously needs to say something. He wants to spend time with me until he gets around to it. That’s how they are, isn’t it, these boys?’

Lesley wriggled around in the driver’s seat, turning herself more towards Veronica. ‘Up until now it’s been practical help he needed — a place to stay, help with cleaning up that child he was minding. And I was happy to pitch in with that. Actually I wasn’t happy. I was very uncomfortable about the whole thing. But I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was helping you.’

Veronica had come to the gallery seeking Paul. She had found the place closed, but as she was standing there Lesley had pulled up in her car. She said she’d seen Roland and Veronica had got into the car to hear about it.

Late morning and here among the buildings it was very still. One side of the street was in deep shadow. On the other milky sunlight fell on brick, fading it to a pale ashy pink.

‘He told me he had dragged you into it. So that’s dreadful. And he’s so fragile, in his way. So if this writing charade is going to help ...’

Veronica looked at the windscreen. Tiny droplets were catching colours from the road and the sky. On the right each droplet had a crescent of brick pink. On the left they were icy silver.

‘Obviously this idea about convict women is just a way of talking about the dead girl. Working through his thoughts or something.’ Lesley sighed. ‘He always did have a fascination for these dreadful types of people, didn’t he? But of course it is Roland we’re talking about so nothing was explained properly.’

‘It’s not even a parallel, is it?’ said Veronica. ‘Treen didn’t kill her baby.’

‘Oh no.’ Lesley had a way of speaking, a slight hesitation before she answered. It was almost imperceptible. But it was frequent, part of the rhythm of her conversation. It made you feel that everything you said offended her in some way. ‘I can testify to that. The little monster is very much alive. Vigorously so. He jumped on my couch with dirty shoes on. So you’re right. The parallel doesn’t stand up. It’s just another of Roland’s muddled ideas. But as I said, I don’t think that’s the point. I think what is really going on is that there’s something he wants to tell me, about the girl’s death.’

‘Does he know who did it? Does he know how she got to the mountain and why she got left there?’

‘I don’t know what he knows.’

They sat in silence for a while. Veronica looked out at the gallery, a smooth grey window reflecting the smaller windows on the building across the street, a double door of
Lesley took a deep breath, let it out slowly. ‘But in the meantime we can only do what we can. I’ll keep seeing him if that’s what he wants.’

‘I don’t know why he’s picked on you.’

‘Well, it’s about women being unfairly branded as sinners. I’m sure he thinks I am qualified to talk about that. Oh here he comes.’ Lesley was looking towards the stairs that led up to Davey Street. There was a man coming down them. Nothing like Roland. ‘Oh no. Not him.’

‘In what way are you qualified?’

Lesley threw Veronica a pained glance, as if she was being made to repeat embarrassing and unnecessary details. ‘You know. Because I was such a sinner when I was young.’

‘What?’

Lesley put her hands on the steering wheel. ‘I told you about it.’

‘No.’

‘About the baby.’

‘No.’

‘Really?’ Lesley’s tongue made a small movement behind her teeth, the lips twitched together and then released. ‘Really? No. I can’t believe it. I can’t believe I haven’t said anything, over all the years I’ve known you.’ Her face was blank now. She spoke lightly. ‘Well that just shows you. It’s hard to grow out of. The shame.’

‘What shame?’

Lesley dropped the hands, looked at the side window, looked back again. ‘I had a baby. When I was very young.’

‘A baby?’

‘A little girl. I lost her. Or rather, to be perfectly accurate, she was taken from me.’

Lesley’s voice was flat, each word pronounced carefully.

‘What?’

‘I was seventeen. I had a boyfriend. Well that’s not really the way to describe it. It was ghastly. I was a stupid little girl.’ These were someone else’s words. She drew in a breath, absorbing the assessment, swallowing it. ‘And I fell. I fell pregnant. And, well, you can imagine what Mum was like. She scarcely spoke to me about it.’

‘Lesley, you had a baby? I never knew.’

‘I was packed off to Cressy. I had an aunt there. Not even an aunt. And not a nun. A sort of … church person.’ She drew in a breath. ‘I had the baby in a hospital up there and she was adopted out. And then I went home.’
‘I’m so sorry. I had no idea.’

‘Oh well. It happened to a lot of girls didn’t it? And it was a long time ago. I don’t really think about it these days. But the point is that after that I was a sinner. My mother never got over it. She used to say that I was put on earth to punish her. I caused her a lot of pain.’

‘You were always wonderful to your mother. You nursed her through that last illness, too.’ Lesley’s mother had had stomach cancer and died less than a year ago. She had stayed at home for as long as she could.

‘Oh yes. That’s the irony isn’t it? He ha. In the end she was in a lot of real pain, my poor old mother, and not just because of me.’ She laughed. A terrible failed joke. ‘And I was able to help her. So I suppose I made up for my sins. Although I’m sure she didn’t see it that way.’

Lesley straightened. She took off her seatbelt and turned towards Veronica as much as the seat would allow. ‘Anyway, the point I was trying so clumsily to make is that as far as I can tell that is why Roland thinks I have a chance of identifying with his friend Treen.’

‘Does he know about the baby?’

‘Yes.’ Lesley laughed, a light sound, no smile in the eyes. ‘Paul has told him. I can’t think why. But you know what they’re like. So Roland has decided I should be in a position to understand. And I suppose in his way he’s trying to reassure me, the lovely boy. Treen and I were not really evil, we were just misunderstood. We made mistakes. So he wants me to work on telling the stories, Treen, through Mary. And I’m going to go along with it. And I hope that eventually he’ll talk to me.’

‘About Treen’s death.’

‘Yes.’

‘Can he really not see how important this is? He’s twenty-four.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘He was seeing a lot of Treen before she died. The police will find that out very soon. There would have been phone calls and things. And he found her on the mountain. He’s going to be some kind of ... well not a suspect, surely ... Well, all right, yes, a suspect. A person of interest. And running around hiding is going to look suspicious.’

Lesley nodded. ‘He’s his own worst enemy.’

‘You don’t know where he went?’

‘No. He ... never says.’

Veronica looked at the gallery again. Wet stone, dark interior, the clean lines of the letters beside the door. And this time, simply and naturally, as if it had never been a problem, she remembered where she had seen the tiles in the photograph.
‘Veronica …?’ Lesley had been saying something. ‘Vee, what are you going to do?’

‘Well, as usual, I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. So I’ll just do something. I’ll talk to Paul and I’ll talk to Treen’s friends.’

‘Who are they?’

‘I don’t know. But I’ve just worked out where to start looking.’
Chapter 17

New Town. Pretty little cottages and horrible concrete boxes. Graceful stone houses marred with badly built dormer windows and ill-fitting porches, and bits of loose pipe – things that must surely have been done not only cheaply, but by people who had never seen anything beautiful.

She parked in Elm Street outside her grandmother’s house. It was a block-like brick place with a heavy arch over the door. It had never been a pretty house and now the new owners had added a carport and a clunky concrete path and let the garden wither. The weatherboard shed next door, where Mr Harris had planed his pine and shown Veronica how to make picture frames, was now painted pink, and labelled Conchita’s Hair Stylists. She allowed herself a moment of contempt, which didn’t quite erase the loneliness caused by the sight. She tried to remember what it was her mother used to say, as her grandmother aged and the suburb changed around her. Another poem. Something about the land of lost content.

Back on New Town Road the footpath was narrow, the traffic uncomfortably close, the air thick with diesel exhaust. There had been a corner shop here, where they had once bought Quality Street. She couldn’t remember why, just the glittering wrappers and the painted tin. The strongest of our childhood memories are often linked with sugar. She wondered if Roland remembered Two Biscuit Rock that way, by the custard creams.

She could remember the poem’s last line ... and cannot come again.

The shop she was looking for had been a haberdashers. Now it was empty, the display spaces behind the windows showing only carpet, some painted conduit down the wall, a few exposed wires, and a discarded Bic packet. The blue tiles were still here, only partly dulled by dirt and fumes. They went right up around the big windows and framed the central door. She inspected the broken ones, now at hip height. Yes, this was the place. Treen McShane had sat here, wishing not to be photographed, struggling with her child.

Now, near where Treen had sat, there was a drawing stuck on the window with sticky tape. It was one of Roland’s. Veronica pulled it down.

It was done in his Tenniel style, his Victorian pastiche, but hastily, a woman standing up against a bank of sharp rocks. She was thin and fair, dressed in a simple sleeveless dress, a nightie or a slip, and she had a strange posture, knees bent, one foot up, as if she were running on the spot. There was a wind. Her hair flew around her head, stringy and tangled. Her eyes were smudged patches of shadow, with dark slits visible within them. She had another garment, a jacket, but she had taken that off and was holding it above her head. It was swirling in the wind, hooked only on the end of a finger, so that you knew it was about to fly away. Her fingers were stained with something dark.
Underneath, carefully lettered, was the title: Molly. And underneath that, fainter and off to one side, as if he wasn’t yet sure of it as a title, the word ‘Silent.’

Veronica looked at the position of the woman’s legs, her stringy hair, the jacket on one finger. This was a picture of Treen. Roland had done it after he had found her. And he had come here and stuck it on the window.

But why that name? Why write ‘Molly’?

Veronica had assumed the shop was empty, but now as she stood there a light went on at the back, and she could see the shapes of furniture and two people. She folded the drawing, put it in her bag, and went in.

The door stuck slightly and made a grinding sound. Over that she heard someone say, ‘Have you given him one of your things?’

The voice was accusing, sulky. It came from a man standing to the right of the room. The woman he had been speaking to was further back, facing a small corner table, lighting candles. She didn’t answer him. At the sound of Veronica’s entrance she turned and they both stared.

Between them, along the right hand wall of the shop, there was a long table holding a gas cooker, a large boiler and a lot of small jars, all lit by a stained standard lamp. The only other light in the room came from the candles.

‘Hello.’ The woman came forward to stand beside the man. She was unsure of her right to be here, expected a challenge.

The man was wearing a rugby top, stripes of pale and dark blue. He was tall and square-shouldered and he had a kind of weird latent energy, which, even before he moved, seemed to saturate the room.

They were both glaring at her. Veronica recognised the girl from The Mercury. Treen’s friend. Belle. Beautiful. And she was pretty, in a way. Her eyes were very dark. Even in a lighter room they would surely have been nearly black. The lower lids were orientally straight, and the upper ones rounded, giving her a young, slightly startled appearance. But the photograph had flattered Belle. Her hair, cheaply dyed into a complete dead black, lay flat against the sides of her face, emphasising the puffiness of her cheeks and the suety texture of her skin.

Veronica wanted to ask them about Roland. But not yet. She needed a moment, needed to soften these hostile stares, and to do that she would have to behave as if she had come here for a reason, as if she knew what she was doing. She walked towards the table. The candle-light flickered yellow around the jars and through the empty ones. ‘Ah,’ she said absurdly, ‘here are the jars.’

There were maybe thirty, all identical and unlabelled. Some contained white cream. The air smelt of lanolin and beeswax, a fatty sugary smell.
‘We’re not open,’ said the man.
Belle said, ‘Dane.’
Dane. Treen’s partner, father of the child. Here with Belle. He had a heavy pink face, strangely flat, and a very small nose. His hair was a muddy colour, curling at the ends, greasy near the scalp, rising at the centre of his forehead into a sharp wave.

Now, without speaking he went behind Belle and put an arm around her, high across her chest. He pulled her backwards into him. His wrist had dark hairs and large knobby bones. Belle smiled, stood looking directly at Veronica with defiance, which was probably habitual, and also with satisfaction. She was happy, too happy, at the attention. Then, as he pulled her further back and she felt herself lose balance, she raised her arms with a small giggle, and, unable to struggle against the arm, shifted her own feet.

It was unnerving. Veronica had to get rid of the man. She said the first thing she could think of. ‘You must be Belle. I was told to ask for you.’ She reached for a jar. She had to concentrate to pick one up. In the unsteady light they seemed to be moving. ‘Is this the hand cream?’

Now the girl looked interested. ‘Body butter.’
Veronica unscrewed the jar and shoved her nose into it. The arm around Belle’s shoulders was loosening. She tried to think of some feminine words. ‘It smells divine. Lily of the valley?’

It did the trick. Dane gave Belle a tiny push and went out through a door at the back.

‘I know you make these here. Do you do it by yourself? Or with … your friend …?’

‘Treen.’ Belle didn’t know what to say about Treen. ‘McShane.’ Her face coloured with emotion.

‘Yes. Treen. I saw it in the paper. I’m sorry for your loss.’
There was an error here. Veronica’s lack of surprise was inconsistent with the big performance she had just done. Belle’s eyes became hot. She looked suspicious, then angry and then, immediately, panicked. Her gaze rolled away from Veronica’s face towards the door where Dane had gone out, and then back to Veronica.

It was dizzying, this rapid flick-through of emotions with none taking hold. And already she had changed again. She had forgotten about Treen, about acts of cruelty, and her eyes were sharp. ‘Have you got a shop? I can give you a sample if you’re interested.’

She picked up another jar and came around the front end of the table, holding it out, as if luring Veronica away from the back door. She wore a floppy white top, the long sleeves flared at the end, and over it a singlet of silver thread knitted into an open-weave
pattern. Under the clothes, the body was plump, tubular without curves. Belle was fat in the way a young child is fat. Which made her pathetic somehow, an object of sympathy.

And now Veronica realised there was a third person in the room. Near the end of the table an old chimney came out from the wall and in the small corner formed here, further shielded from view by a pile of cartons, there was a pusher, holding a child of about two. The same child. Treen’s. She realised now that the pusher was too small for him. One arm was pressed against his side and the other lay down the slanting chrome bar of the frame. He was asleep.

‘This is the patchouli.’ Belle seemed self-conscious, her attention still focussed on the door where the man had gone. Veronica could hear him moving about on a wooden floor.

‘There’s a rose one, too. I’ve got them at home. In a coloured jar. Rose something.’

The little boy looked very clean. The bruise on his forehead had already faded. Despite the apparent discomfort of his position, he was soundly asleep. Veronica remembered what she had heard when she had come in. Have you given him one of your things? It was hard to tell whether or not the boy’s colour was healthy. Up here, closer to the cloudy front window, the light was a dull grey. The corners gave off that old building smell, dust and damp and peeling lead paint.

‘You have to go.’

Veronica needed to ask her questions. ‘I’m looking for my son. His name is Roland Cruikshank.’ Belle’s face stiffened. For a moment her stare was so blank it made Veronica think of Treen, frozen on the mountain. She glanced at the back door and then quickly turned back again and took a step towards the front of the room.

‘Roland knew her. Your poor friend Treen.’ Veronica allowed only a small softening here and hurried on. ‘And I’m very sorry about what happened to Treen, but I think Roland’s in trouble and I can’t find him. He stuck a drawing of Treen on your window, last night or this morning. I wonder if you saw him. If you can tell me where he might be?’

There was a thick silence. Somewhere through the back door, Veronica heard a quieter step, stealthy and slow. Or maybe she had imagined it.

Belle said, ‘He better not come anywhere near us. You tell him that if you find him.’ The performance was aimed at the open door.

‘Belle, I’m so sorry about what happened to your friend. I am. So sorry. But I’m not quite clear. Do you know where Roland is?’

Belle smiled. A mean smile, small teeth. The eyes full of fear. ‘Treen went four days ago. Tell him I could say I saw what she drove away in.’

‘Where? To the mountain? Did you see a car?’
'I might have. I might have seen a blue car. A small car, mauvy blue.'

'It wasn’t Roland who took her to the mountain, if that’s what ...'

'Here’s your sample. That’s all you’re getting.’ She took Veronica by the arm and pulled her towards the door. ‘Don’t come to the market. Roland’s friends aren’t welcome anywhere near us.’

Then, as she pulled the door open, under the cover of the grinding sound, she added, ‘Someone is coming.’

It had been said so quickly and quietly that at first Veronica thought she was talking about someone on the footpath, alerting her to a possible collision. But there was no one there. The door closed behind her and she found herself standing in the street, trying to work out if she had heard it properly, what else the girl might have said, thinking of the girl’s awful, dull skin and the calculating, panicked look in her eyes.
Chapter 18

When Veronica got back to the car she found a missed call from Georgie. She rang back.

Georgie said, ‘Are you still looking for Roland?’

‘Well I …’

‘I rang Miriam. She said he was always going to be a problem for you and you should call her …’

‘Just let me handle it. You concentrate on …’

‘He is such a prick. He thinks he’s some kind of hero. But really he’s completely selfish. He’s just out to prove he’s something special, while we all run around fixing up the messes he leaves behind. And then he sails away, telling himself he’s better than all of us.’

‘Well, yes. But he’s also …’

‘You can’t see it. You think he’s fantastic. You buy the whole bullshit story. And then you run around trying to get him out of trouble.’

‘But that’s what mothers do.’

‘You can’t see him clearly. You can’t see anyone clearly.’

Veronica sat in the car and stared at the street in front of her, trying to put the phone call aside and think about what had happened in the shop. A small car, mauvy blue ... tell him we’ll say. It wasn’t possible of course, that Roland had driven Treen up the mountain and left her there to die. She wouldn’t – couldn’t – believe that. But she did need to think this through.

Somewhere there was an order. If she had been a different person, the person her mother had wanted her to be, the person her children needed, she would have found it. But as it was she had only disparate images, events, odd moments, single unconnected ideas. Two Biscuit Rock, a frozen foot, Silas Marner, Treen protesting about a photograph, allowing it to be taken, Judith throwing a book, woe to the mother’s son who attempts it, a drawing of a girl called Molly. A young child, drugged, thrown into a wall. Mayson with a Y. Someone is coming. Silent.

The fact was, she wasn’t capable of ordering this, of finding a pattern. All she could do was stick to her original plan. The tiles hadn’t led her to Roland. Now she would look for Paul.

Illumin was well named. Even with the sun higher, the alley was a cold place, and the window was a warm yellow rectangle, inviting you in.
As she approached it she saw that Roland had been here, some time since she had sat in the car with Lesley, less than two hours ago. There were four more drawings stuck to the gallery window. One was the same picture as before, titled ‘Molly’. Roland must have made copies somewhere. Another was a drawing of a girl falling from a bridge. This one was titled ‘Bertha’. And there were drawings of other girls, ‘Mary’ and ‘Rosanna’. She could also make out at the bottom right hand corner of each drawing the word ‘Silent’, but he must have changed his mind about this word, because before they had been photocopied it had been erased, leaving just a faint trace. Veronica took them down.

Inside there were three customers, murmuring quietly, looking at silver bowls. John and Vicky were here but they weren’t serving the customers. They stood facing each other, John arranging a silk scarf around Vicky’s neck. They stood close, heads tipped together, laughing like siblings. As Veronica came in they turned. Vicky gave John a push and he went out through a low door.

‘Hello, Veronica.’ The scarf was one from the gallery, screen printed silk, gorgeous. Above it a heavy friendly face.

‘I found some of Roland’s drawings, stuck to your front window.’

‘Oh.’ Vicky gave her a sympathetic smile, ‘Has he been back again?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He came and put some up earlier. Before we got here. Lesley took them down. So now he’s come and done it again?’ She looked vaguely at the window. ‘He’s a rummun.’ She laughed, more concerned with his cleverness than what the pictures might mean. ‘I didn’t see him do it. I would have told him to ring you. I know you want to catch up with him.’

‘I’m going up.’

Veronica tried to step around Vicky but she got in the way again. ‘There’s no one here. Just John and me. Paul’s in Deloraine, talking to a wood carver and Lesley’s out.’

An uncomplicated person who dealt in facts, in presences and absences, in simple actions. A person who didn’t question things.

She couldn’t help asking, ‘Who are you?’

Vicky gave her another warm smile, full cheeks, pushing up into small eyes. ‘I told you. I’m a friend of Lesley’s.’
Chapter 19

Veronica’s phone was ringing again. Georgie. She said, ‘I’ve just been talking to Liz.’

‘George I don’t …’

‘I can’t take time off. Someone is going to get retrenched and it could easily be me.’

‘I know.’

‘So I tried to get Lizzy to come home but she said it would be all over by the time she got here.’

‘She’s right.’ Lizzy lived in Rotterdam. Even if she started searching for flights right now it would still take three days for her to get here.

‘And Tom did the big surgeon thing. You can’t muck up the precious rosters.’

‘Well he’s right, isn’t …’

Georgie hung up.

If she was trying to find Roland, Veronica had run out of options. Paul was away somewhere and Roland … Roland had come to the gallery in the short space of time between her own visits there. It was almost as if he had been watching, avoiding her, as if there was something in his face he didn’t want her to see. She was tired, weighed down by what she had seen on the mountain, with a sense that all the running around she was doing was taking her not closer to the truth but further away, at least from the part of the truth that was important. And talking to Vicky, that wide implacable face, had drained her of any remaining energy. Now she needed to sit still and think, about Roland, about Treen, alive and dead. And about Belle. I know who drove her up there. A small blue car.

She drove to the casino and walked around the edge of the marina to Merchant’s Cafe. It was half past one. She had planned to order lunch and a glass of wine, but when she got there she realised she wasn’t hungry. She considered having just a glass of wine, thought about it, ordered a bottle. When it came she pulled out Roland’s drawings.

In the second drawing the girl, Bertha, was falling from an arched bridge. She had billowing skirts and a loose white bodice, and there was a shawl, fringed, flying up around her. The shawl was decorated with dragons and lotus flowers. Around one wrist she had a bracelet with a clunky clasp. Her name was written among the waves in the bottom of the picture. Bertha. And fainter, half-erased, Silent.

Roland was determined that these drawings were seen. They were photocopies. How many copies had he made? He had stuck drawings on the empty shop and the gallery and who knew where else. As far as she could see there was no sense to them. No one called
Bertha had died. No one had died falling from a bridge. This second drawing didn’t refer to anyone. At least not to an event that had happened.

There was something disturbing about it. Again it was in his Victorian style. Bertha had the same delicate features as Tenniel’s Alice and there was that strangeness, that sense of distillation, an impression of emotion observed in silence and from a distance, and the sense that there was more going on than appeared at first glance. For one thing, the girl didn’t look afraid, just vaguely interested, resigned to her fate, almost sleepy. Above her on the bridge, there were two men and a woman, talking. They were dressed in some exaggerated Victorian parody, the men in top hats, the women in bustles. One of the men had turned to watch the girl. His face was blank. He was holding one hand up, his fingers fastidiously spread, as if he was explaining something to her or maybe flicking her away.

And somehow it was those that you focussed on – the man’s blank face, the fine, careless hand. It was a horrible picture.


He was drawing attention to himself. It was typical Roland behaviour, theatrical, illogical, with no thought for the consequences. She had to stop him. Or if she couldn’t do that she had to find out how many drawings there were and get them down. How would she do that? Where would they be? Where would Roland be?

She looked out the window at the silvering walkways of the marina, the moored boats, the new jetty for the boat to Peppermint Bay, and Zac’s, a sleek white building behind shade sails. This was Hobart striving to be international – all yachts and aluminium and plate glass and prize-winning pinot gris, with clean silver light, and wharves and jetties hiding the real coastline, and holding the whole thing up off the mud.

She felt tired, tight-scalped, her eyes were stinging and when she closed them they burned. She poured wine, drank it, refilled the glass, drank that. She pulled out the jar Belle had given her, rubbed some cream into her hands. What had Belle said this was? Patchouli? She drank some more and thought about Belle, the puffy, unstable face, over-full of feeling. Not real emotion, but rather a nonsensical flow of shallow sentiment – calculation, uncertainty, fear, resentment, pleading.

I know who drove her up there. Belle was threatening to accuse Roland of killing Treen. She had said it either to repel Veronica from the shop, or to distract her from asking questions, or to please Dane, or for all of these reasons. Had Dane done it then? It didn’t seem right. If Dane was going to hurt Treen, then surely it would be more immediate than that. Or had Belle done it? She remembered the girl’s expression when she looked at Dane, the possessive pride. Belle had certainly got what she wanted. And presumably it would be easy enough for her to persuade Treen to take a lot of drugs. Or it may have happened as a result of an accident, a wild escapade, gone wrong, with Belle driving home again in a panic.
and hiding. And if Belle had taken Treen to the mountain herself it would suit her to accuse someone else, like Roland.

Or was she being unfair? Veronica had no basis for such thoughts. It was just that the girl repelled her. The way Treen had. Veronica had behaved unpardonably then. Treen had asked Veronica for help and she had said no. She had thought that finding her son had to come first. She had been repelled – by Treen’s skin, the dirt, the desperation. Roland would have helped her. He had been trying to help her.

But Paul said that was a mistake. Paul said Treen was a lost cause. It was what she used to say to him. Roland Roland Widdershins. You can’t save them all.

Round in circles. She filled the glass again, drank it quickly, looking out at the white Antarctic light. She remembered how lonely she had felt as a girl, when she had first come to Tasmania. Hobart, on the edge of the world, in danger of slipping off.

Round and round. Girls guilty, girls as victims. Worthy, worthy, evil, mistreated, unhappy. Drawings of girls dying. Silly meaningless drawings. Words written and then erased. The drawings weren’t helping. They were worse than useless. A distraction, an obfuscation. Nothing could be said for certain about Treen or Belle, at least not without talking to Roland about them, and Roland wasn’t talking to her. And even when she did find him, he wouldn’t explain. Nothing would be certain even then.

She tried to look at the drawing again but her eyes slid to the edge of the page, the white margin. She leant down and put the side of her head on the table, closed her eyes, opened them. It was surprising how smooth the paper seemed, even from down here. The page had texture. You could feel it, as a kind of warmth. But it was very fine. Even this close, looking across it, it was invisible. She found herself thinking of her own painting. Earlier this week, only days ago, she had been trying to capture something. Later she had had a feeling that the mountain had taught her something. She should try painting that. But how would you paint the empty sky, the weight of rock, Treen’s body. How would you paint the important things – a life that was gone, a texture you couldn’t see, the thinness of things, the mist that wouldn’t hold you, the treachery of air?

Somewhere behind her there was a voice she recognised. Paul was here. She sat up. He was at the counter, engaged in some kind of transaction. He finished it, said something to the man there, grim faced, and came towards her. Such a pale boy. Paul. In the waterside light she could see every whisker on his white face, new lines at his eyes. He was tired. Worse than tired. He was looking the way he could look, as if he was about to burst into tears, as if at any minute he might shatter into tiny fragments and fall into a pile on the floor.

But she knew Paul. He could look like this all afternoon and still manage to get his own way. He said, ‘I’ve paid your bill. I need you to come with me.’

Mum I need.
She said, ‘Where is he, Paul?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘For God’s sake.’ Her stomach rolled, full of riesling and no food. She pushed herself straighter in the chair, folded the drawings and put them away. ‘This isn’t a prank. This isn’t a rose bush or a broken headlight. That girl …’

‘Treen.’

‘Is dead.’

‘Yes.’

‘Paul.’

‘I know.’

His eyes could be so liquid. Dark, dark, blobs of ink, floating, slipping around. He leant on the table. He looked as if his bones were made of something soft. Little Paulie.

‘Roland found her up there, you know. The body.’

He sat in a chair. He hadn’t meant to do that.

She leant forwards. The world spun. She propped her chin on a fist. ‘All right. He doesn’t want to see me. He doesn’t need me. I’m drinking a whole bottle of wine. You tell him that when you see him. A whole bottle.’

Paul had the lid from the bottle in his hand. He put it on.

‘Where is he, Paul?’

No answer.

‘Look I know you think you’re helping him, but you are not.’ He might have been fifteen again.

He closed his eyes tightly, squeezed them shut. She had never worked out what that was when he did that.

‘I don’t blame you, you know, Paul. Ever. You know that, don’t you? You are one of mine. I include you in that. You have my undying ... support.’ Too weak. Bureaucratic. She laughed at the absurd inadequacy of words. Sounded a bit mad. ‘You lent him the Honda.’

He was looking at the table.

‘And I’ve just been talking to a young person who is going to say she saw Treen drive away in a small blue car and that Roland was driving it.’

‘He wasn’t. She won’t say that.’

‘For God’s sake. I have …’

‘How drunk are you?’

She looked vaguely at the bottle. The light from the window reflected on the green surface. She couldn’t see the level.

‘I actually can’t tell.’
‘Yeah.’
‘I might just be very ...’
‘You haven’t left much.’
‘Afraid.’
He stood up and pulled at her arm. It was uncharacteristically rough, a kind of anxiety. ‘I need you to come with me.’
‘What?’
‘There’s someone I need you to see.’
‘Paul! He’s going to be charged with murder.’
‘This is more important.’
‘What?’
‘This is worse.’ He was looking at her now. He held her gaze, his eyes smudges of shadow with blacker blots inside them. ‘I’m so sorry.’
‘A girl has died. What could possibly be worse?’
‘This. This is worse. This is the worst thing you’ve ...’ He sounded dazed, as if he was remembering something, repeating something he’d said before or something someone had said to him. ‘And it’s something you already know. That’s the worst part.’
‘For God’s sake, Paul.’
‘Just come with me.’
Suddenly she was too tired to think this through. She had no way of imposing her will on him. ‘I am drinking my way through a whole bottle of wine.’
He pulled her arm. ‘Bring it.’
Chapter 20

She was right to be angry with Paul. He was talking nonsense. *Something you already know.* *This is worse.* What right did he have to say that? She had found a dead body, and Roland was in danger of being arrested for murder or something like it. Manslaughter, action endangering life – what did they call these things? She tried to explain all this to him, tried insisting that he tell her something that made sense, but he refused. All he would say was that there was someone she needed to see.

She closed her eyes, let the movement of the car swing her head around, gave in to it. When they stopped they were in Lenah Valley, on the hillside above Augusta Road. They sat for a minute, looking over heavy houses and neat unimaginative gardens, across to Calvary.

‘I’m sorry about this.’ Paul’s lips were plump and beautiful. Lips that a girl, that Belle, would be pleased to own.

‘You’ve already said that.’

He didn’t explain anything and she didn’t ask. She felt tired, passive, half expected to find Roland here, despite what Paul said, couldn’t think what else this could be. They got out of the car and went up a driveway, across a tangled garden and through a hedge of hebe to the back of the house. Over the back door there was a lightly built wooden shelter, closed in with fly screens. Inside Veronica could see a long table covered in small tiles, separated into piles of different colours, and a table covered in a half-finished mosaic – something resembling Van Gogh’s sunflowers – and, in the middle of the mess, a large white stone.

The woman who came to unlock the door was wearing a floral shirt, a tapestry waistcoat, a scarf – some kind of Oxfam thing – and beads. And bangles in plastic and wood. She was older than her clothes would suggest, might have been nearly forty. Her hair was light, either grey or very bleached, and it had been cut with a razor – the kind of style that would have looked feathery if it had been cleaner.

Paul said, ‘Lissa has something to tell you.’

They went into a kitchen, where Veronica sat in a chair while Paul stood at the door.

Lissa managed to say, ‘Thank you for coming. I’m sorry about this.’

Paul went to Lissa and rubbed one of her arms, looked around into her lowered face. The gestures were borrowed directly from Roland. Paul copied Roland, his clothes, his movements, the things he said. She thought Paul had grown out of it.

When he let her go Lissa straightened. She had one of those gaunt faces – fine boned, fair, big violet eyes – that ages suddenly, from prettiness straight to exhaustion, a sort
of haggard-elf look. ‘I was going to come and see you at the house, but I … your house, but I …’

Veronica thought of Belle’s words. Someone is coming. Could this be what she meant? Could she possibly have known?

Veronica tried to help her. ‘Are you a friend of Roland’s? I do need to see him.’

Lissa made a funny, inadequate, fluttering movement with her hands, which seemed to mean this was very complicated but then, instead of elaborating, she went out through a door. Veronica followed her into a lounge room. In here there was a reading lamp throwing a pool of yellow light over an armchair, a couch and a coffee table with a bowl of quinces. An open doorway showed the deeper shadow of a passage. In a far corner there was a TV silently playing Time Team – Tony Robinson’s kindly goblin face, a hairy man crawling in mud somewhere. Paul stayed in the kitchen.

Lissa picked up a yellow envelope from the mantelpiece. But then, for some reason, this peculiar little woman didn’t seem to know where to sit in her own house. She looked at the couch and the arm chair and then knelt on the floor and put her folder on the coffee table. Veronica sat on the couch.

Lissa pulled a set of photos from the envelope and fanned them out, but held them up in front of her, their faces hidden, like a poker hand. She met Veronica’s gaze and held it. Her eyes had no flesh around them, so that you were aware of them as balls in sockets. They had a worn down, haunted look, a kind of universal sadness.

And then that changed. The sadness became personal, almost as if she was pitying Veronica.

She put one of the photographs face up, between them on the table. It was the face of a child. Veronica had to fumble her glasses out of a pocket before she could see more.

It was Treen’s little boy. Just the face in close-up, soft, smooth, unformed. One of his eyes was black – black, purple and red. And yellow. The skin around it was swollen shiny and tight, the eye itself almost closed. The side of his face was discoloured too. And across his forehead there was a brown mark, long and crooked, like a big scab, but wide.

Something had happened to the air in the room. Veronica stared at the photograph, hated it, couldn’t look away, couldn’t speak.

Lissa put down another photo. It was the boy again. This one was full length, and taken from behind – a little boy’s back with three long diagonal bruises.

Veronica looked at the table, rubbed her hands across its tiled surface, took a breath. She became aware of a seeping nausea, a big bubble lurching somewhere down in the riesling. Sweat broke out in her armpits, between her breasts. ‘I’m sorry.’ She pushed herself back in the chair, moved a leg sideways as if to get up.
But, ridiculously, farcically, Lissa had said the same thing at the same time. ‘I’m sorry, Veronica, to do this to you. But this is Mayson. He is two years old.’

‘Yes, I’ve met Mayson, I …’ *Help me. Please. Help us.*

Lissa already had two more photos on the table. Her last. One showed an arm, the other a fat hand, and there were more sickening injuries, a bent finger, a red mark edged with white flakes of skin.

‘Over his short life he has suffered burns and bruising. Two months ago he was hospitalised with a displaced fracture of the right arm, three broken ribs, and a hairline crack in the skull.’ This was rehearsed. Lissa was speaking quietly and steadily, reciting a script she, or someone else, had prepared. ‘Treen claimed he had fallen from a cupboard and no one could prove otherwise. On his release from hospital Mayson was returned to the care of his mother.’

Veronica moved again, ready to stand and go. What was she doing here, hearing this? She wasn’t in a position to help Mayson. His mother was dead, he was in danger of being harmed again, but it was not something she, Veronica, could fix. And she was being manipulated. This strange little person, for reasons of her own, had asked her here for something. Somehow she had persuaded the gullible and fragile Paul to help her. Veronica had been targeted at a time when she was vulnerable. Now she was going to be asked for something.

‘I’m sorry …’

She was angry with herself now – that she could allow this to happen, that she could keep saying that. She fought to gather herself, to regain the proper distance, control the shock. Yes, this child had been abused. She had known that. It was ghastly, but it did happen. People like Lissa, the soft-hearted, the fuzzy thinkers – well they were commendably concerned, but they didn’t help. They couldn’t help. If you were to believe what you read about it whole government departments were unable to help. There were constant failures. It was a complex, intractable problem.

She had to get out of here. ‘I agree with you.’ She moved sideways, but still couldn’t manage to stand up. ‘It’s terrible that this sort of thing goes on. Appalling. But my son is in trouble. I’m sorry. I simply can’t do anything about this at the moment. Paul would have explained that.’

Lissa looked at her curiously, allowing her to finish. Then went on as if she hadn’t spoken. ‘Mayson’s mother, Treen McShane, died on the mountain yesterday.’

‘Yes, I …’ Was it only yesterday? ‘I know.’

‘Her partner, Dane, was violent. Treen asked your son Roland to help her.’

‘Yes, I’m aware of all of this.’ In fact these pictures explained a lot. Roland wouldn’t walk away from something like this. ‘Treen asked him for help and he came.
That’s the kind of boy he is.’ And she, Veronica – Treen had asked her for help and she had walked away. What kind of person was she?

And now Treen is gone. ‘Dane has been very affected by Treen’s death. Treen’s friend Belle hasn’t seen Roland for a few days. Belle is afraid for the child. She has reason to be. She thinks, she knows, he will hurt the boy again.’

Veronica had known this too. She had seen the boy in the too-small pusher, squashed in, uncomfortable, deep in a drugged sleep. She had seen the man. She should have known about the danger. She had known.

The photographs had a magnetic pull. Veronica, determined not to look again, took her glasses off. She turned her eyes away, stared at the crocheted rug, the television, the quinces.

‘Belle asked me to come to you. She needs help.’

‘Well, I’m sorry but I’m not sure if that’s true. As a matter of fact, I saw her today and she didn’t seem to want my help. She didn’t want anything to do with me or Roland. She more or less threw me out.’

‘She’s afraid of Dane.’

Yes. Of course that was true. She thought of Belle, tipping backwards, ecstatically happy, and afraid. Belle, showing off her hand cream, aware the whole time of Dane moving around behind the open door.

‘Does he hurt her?’

‘He hurts everyone.’

‘Did he kill Treen?’

‘I don’t know.’

Veronica’s eyes fell on the photographs again. ‘Oh the poor little boy.’ That had come from nowhere. The pictures were somehow worse now that they were out of focus. The bruises across the little boy’s back were straight, parallel and evenly spaced. They had been aimed carefully. ‘Oh my dear.’

‘He needs to get away from him.’

‘Oh yes, he does. Yes, Lissa, he does. But …’

She needed to say more. To explain about her generous idealistic mercurial son and the promises he made, explain that they couldn’t always be met, that he simply couldn’t save everyone he felt sorry for. That there had to be a limit. But it was hard to find words, hard to find any words at all, sitting over these sickening photographs.

‘There are people whose job it is to handle things like this. Institutions.’ Not institutions. ‘Government bodies.’ This was dreadful. ‘I can help you find out who they are.’
Lissa’s eyes filled instantly with tears. The tears didn’t spill but were absorbed again as quickly as they had arisen. It was a cleansing reflex. After it the huge eyes were again clear, washed. Only the flesh underneath them showed traces of the rush of emotion, not in dried tears, but in a darkening under the skin.

‘I was a child protection worker. I am one. I’m on leave. It became too …’

That was it then. Stress. It was a horrible job. And now she had become involved in this nightmare case, in some kind of unofficial capacity. She should be treated kindly but firmly.

‘Do you think you should just leave this for now? Let someone else deal with it?’

Lissa picked up one of the photographs and held it up in front of Veronica. She was gripping it very tightly, bending the paper. Two of her fingers were stretched across it, nails broken, the skin cracked and grimy. Gardener’s hands. ‘Look at him. What do you see?’

The photograph was too close for middle aged eyes. The child’s face was blurred, a pale oval with phantom eyes and mouth. The clearest thing was the track across the forehead.

Lissa put the photograph down, put her finger on another, the arm with the red mark. ‘That’s a burn.’

‘Listen…’

‘Dane did it.’

Veronica tried to make her voice calm. ‘Look.’ She wasn’t handling this well, was issuing verbs.

‘With an iron.’

‘It’s terrible. I know this sort of thing goes on. But I’m not in a position to take on any … I have my own …’ She had been going to say ‘problems’, but swallowed the word just in time.

‘I need you to go and see them.’

‘Oh I don’t think that’s a very good idea. I’m not good at this sort of thing. Not in the way you want. I’m definitely not an activist. I don’t act. I have a daughter who does things like that. And friends. But not me. I make salads. I go on committees and write letters …’

‘He doesn’t need letters.’

‘But there’s nothing else …’

‘You have to see him.’

‘I haven’t got time to see him.’

‘He’s your grandson.’
Chapter 21

How quickly the world could change.

All it took was that. *He’s your grandson.* Veronica didn’t know how long she sat there looking at Lissa. She had a sense that there was a repositioning taking place around her, that things which she had previously assumed to be solid and fixed were adjusting their relationships, slowly at first, then faster.

A moment ago Mayson had been a dreadful story, something that upset and angered her, but he had been an imagined person, someone who was not quite in the room, essentially a distraction from the problems that were rightly hers. Mayson’s story had been something she had to deal with fairly and efficiently, and then to dispense with.

Well now he was in the room all right. He had come right into her circle. And the story that had been dreadful was now something else, something that, perhaps, it always should have been.

Unbearable.

This child – she touched the nearest photograph – this Mayson, this poor little boy, Roland’s boy, hers, had existed, had lived for nearly three years, had suffered and been afraid, and while that was happening, she, Veronica, loving, comfortable, vague, self-absorbed, spoiled, underused, bored, had been living in her big house, painting in her big garden inside her stone walls, pondering the sky, knowing nothing about him. Doing nothing to help.

Grandmother.

She could picture him, a small figure, curled over, receiving blows to the back, kicks on the side and underneath, being thrown into a wall. She began by wondering how that must be for such a tiny boy, and then, instantly, without wanting to, she knew. She found herself picturing it from within, a burn, a fist in the eye, the sickening brain jolt, the swelling socket, the fear. Pain. His pain. Hers.

For a fraction of a second, when she lifted her eyes from the carpet, she didn’t know where she was, couldn’t remember what she was doing here. It was as if the world had been spinning, and she had spun with it, and now that it had stopped she was facing in the opposite direction. Where she had been audience she was now actor, now the sufferer, brightly lit, a participant in a drama, a tragedy, an outrage, exposed and vulnerable, peering out into a darkness filled with people who silently watched, and wondering why no one helped.
Paul drove her home. He sat at her kitchen table and told her about it as quickly as possible and with little sign of emotion except a mild distaste, as if it was something that had happened to other people.

Treen McShane, when the boys had known her, had gone to Clarence High and had lived in Howrah. Since the boys had left for the mainland they had hardly seen Treen and her friends. But three and a half years ago, when Roland was in town for Alan’s sixtieth, they had met her again, at some wild party. There were drugs. Paul didn’t elaborate on those.

Paul had recently returned to Hobart with John but that weekend John was in Hong Kong. Roland and Paul went to the party to catch up with the old crowd. And somewhere in a back room, Roland had allowed himself to be lured into unprotected sex.

No. This was no time for clinging to comforting illusions. Roland was no angel and he was no fool. He had made choices. It was quite possible that all the luring had gone in the other direction. So let it stand. There had been drugs around and Roland had engaged in unprotected sex. It wouldn’t have been the only time. Roland was no fool, but he had always been an idiot.

Treen didn’t tell him about the pregnancy. She was already in a de facto relationship and she passed the child off as belonging to Dane, and they raised him, if you could call it that. Roland had returned to New South Wales and continued his bumbling existence, happily oblivious to the consequences of his actions and choosing not to reflect too hard on any of them. As was his way.

Treen and Dane were neglectful and erratic parents. Dane was violent and over the years Mayson and his mother had suffered repeated bashings.

Mayson. Her grandson. Had been hit. And burned. No amount of abstraction or redefinition was going to make this tolerable.

At some point Treen’s friend from school, Belle Ahern, had joined the household, but this hadn’t helped. The girls had tried to begin a business making hand and face creams. As there was no room for this at home they had used the empty shop in New Town Road, which may have been a squat or rented. Paul didn’t know.

‘But Treen was starting to see how dangerous it was for the boy and then, about three weeks ago I think, she suddenly realised it would be a way out for her, the fact that Roland was the father.’

‘It’s true then?’

‘Roland seems to think so. He must have ... He must know ... you know ... what happened that night. And Treen says she knows, because of the timing.’ Paul moved uncomfortably. ‘I can’t see a likeness but Roland said he could. In the eyes or something.’

She couldn’t see a likeness either. But then, she hadn’t had a chance.

‘Anyway, Treen finally managed to convince him and he came to help. He wanted to meet the boy and talk to Treen before he told you. So he stayed with Mum and visited them and tried to spend some time with Mayson and get to know him. Treen wanted him to take them to the mainland but I don’t know if that was going to happen.’ Paul was in difficult territory here. ‘I mean not Treen. He didn’t … He might have been going to take the boy.’

Take the boy? A son, a grandson? Just like that? The thought brought Veronica a rush of emotion, a visceral, biological need to hold him.

‘But then Dane found Roland at the house and punched him and scared him off.’

‘Not scared …’ Veronica stopped herself. She had rushed to Roland’s defence, when really that is exactly what had happened. Roland had been scared of physical damage. People were afraid of that in the normal world.

‘He made a strategic retreat. He stayed away for a few days but he was still planning something, trying to work out a way to get the little boy away from the Dane. But you know … how do you do that?’ Paul’s chin was raised. He was trying to make his lips thinner, pressing them against each other, determinedly holding her gaze, the way he used to look when Roland had done something wrong. ‘Then, the day after he got punched, Treen disappeared. And two days after that she turned up on the mountain.’

At some stage Roland had given Treen and Belle Veronica’s name and address and told them that in a genuine emergency, if they couldn’t find him, they should contact his mother. Now, with Treen dead and Dane becoming increasingly agitated, Belle wanted Veronica to take Mayson away. Veronica’s guess was that Belle would stay with Dane. She had looked pleased enough. Paul agreed that she was apparently hoping to clear the decks for a fresh start. Since Treen’s death she had been keeping Mayson doped up with adult sleeping pills, trying to keep him quiet, trying to keep him from angering Dane, but it was only a matter of time before Dane hurt him again. Belle had come to Veronica’s house, but hadn’t been brave enough to come in. Then she had run into Lissa in Centrepoint and asked her to act as intermediary, thinking Lissa might have more chance of being heard in Veronica’s world. When Veronica had arrived at the shop Belle hadn’t been able to talk and she had known Lissa was on her way.

When Paul took a breath, Veronica stood up, went to the sink, drank water, put some in front of Paul, found there were already two glasses there, and sat down again. She felt swollen in the eyes and neck. Under the table she rotated her ankles, curled and uncurled
her toes. She thought about offering food, there were bottled pears, or shortbread, but the idea of them made her feel sick.

A grandson. Her child, one of hers. Of her.

‘Where is he?’

‘South Hobart. A house across the road from the bookshop.’ Now that the burden of telling his story had left him Paul looked not relieved but miserable.

‘We have to go and get him.’

‘It’s not going to be that simple. Belle wants you to take Mayson, but Dane won’t. He still thinks he’s the father. I don’t know if Treen told him. He might be coming around to seeing the truth. Treen was pretty sure about the dates, but he’s angry about it.’

‘We really need to get Mayson away.’

‘Belle says that too. But is she right? Do we just take him? What will Dane do?’

‘We worry about that later. We get him into our world and surround him with family.’ As she said it Veronica was nagged by doubt. What family? She thought of her big empty house. ‘Family and friends, we make a plan. I don’t know, Paul. But we need to get him out of that house.’

‘We can’t go when Dane’s there, but he’s working tomorrow.’

‘Even now? With Treen dead?’

‘Belle says he is. Someone offered him a job delivering firewood.’

‘So we go then. Tomorrow.’

‘Belle wants us to go at nine. By then he’ll be well gone.’

‘All right.’

When Paul had gone Veronica made herself go upstairs and shower and put on a clean tracksuit. Then she went back and stood at her window looking out.

Bashed, burned. Bones cracked. She put her forehead on the cool white wood of the French windows, closed her eyes, but she could still see it, or rather feel it. She turned her back to the glass and sat on the floor. Somewhere in her thoughts there was a large dark space, something like fear, or repugnance, a deep gaping horror that life could deliver such things, a feeling that she would never understand, that she had never understood things, that she had been wrong about everything. And, lurking under all that, waiting to be released, there was rage. A deep deep rage against the world and its injustices, against the unfeeling evil capriciousness of everything.

She thought of the boy, podgy, lumpish, sleeping squashed in a chair. She had only seen him twice. And in the photographs. And in a newspaper photograph with a pixellated face.
Mayson. The name was foreign to her, not something she could hold close, but she could find another, a name that was her own.

There was no question of going upstairs to bed. She went to the back door of the family room, pulled out a mattress and dragged it down the corridor and through the kitchen into her little space. She laid it down beside her chair and got sheets and a doona.

As the night wore on her mind softened. Thoughts of Mayson pooled with others, memories of her own children, the accidents and falls, felt by her as physical sensations – Tom going backwards off a wall onto a concrete floor, Libby kneeling on glass under sand, Tom again, a hockey accident, ten stitches in his head. Hers. All of them hers. And in the moments when she finally did drift briefly into sleep, and memories met with the stretch and twist of dreams, the injuries became worse, lurid. There were screams, high voices shouting, images of suffering children, small bright moments from hell.

‘All right,’ she said into the darkness.

It was three o’clock. She climbed back into her chair and faced the window, looking at the garden. There was a tiny patch of frost in the middle of the lawn. The pear tree, whitish under some invisible moon was eerily still.

A grandson.

Tomorrow she would go and get him. Belle had summoned Veronica to help her. She had threatened to accuse Roland of killing Treen but that might have been an act for Dane. She had certainly seemed afraid of him.

This was complicated. Tomorrow she would sort it out. She would need to be clear. Daytime thinking. But for now there was nothing to do but wait.

She turned on the Indonesian lamp, a brownish paper shade patterned with black arcs. She stared at the arcs and then, for a moment she was simply seeing things, spaces, air, colours. She looked down at her own soft shapes under the blanket, thought, this is how a child is. Normally you don’t have time for this sort of thing, what a hand looks like.

And then there was a space. Not a sinking into darkness, simply a space in time, the way there is after surgery, because when she opened her eyes, the garden was light and there was a metallic sheen on the top of the escallonia, which meant it was after seven.

She stood up, went to the kitchen, ate porridge, then a poached egg, and then returned to the chair and watched as the frost melted, the sky became greenish, and cold light soaked evenly across her garden.
Chapter 22

Paul drove her up Macquarie Street, past the post office, the coffee roaster and the gourmet supermarket, and parked up in the domestic muddle of South Hobart.

In front of them was the mountain, very close, and very large. Not just high but thick, weighty, black. Veronica felt affected by it, heavy and reluctant to get out of the car, reluctant to face what the day would bring. She looked at a faded tray truck, a sloping telegraph pole, two weatherboard cottages with carefully pruned shrubs and an ugly block of apartments built in the fifties, painted mustard and a hot brick red. The light was soft here, the road uneven, the footpaths crooked and the edges of things, the lines of buildings, were all faintly blurred. It was a comfortable place, homely, not a place for those photographs, not a place to hurt a child.

And on the next corner she could see Newman Noggs, low-roofed, story-book windows, pink brick. A second-hand bookshop. You couldn’t get much more innocent than that.

‘Which house is Belle’s?’
‘That place.’

It was just ahead of them on their left, a brick cottage, small and low, raised slightly above the footpath on a cement wall trailed with woody rosemary. Tacked onto the near end of it there was a slumping box of weatherboard with a rusted roof and a glassed-in verandah with closed curtains.

‘Are you sure they’re home.’
‘Yes.’

‘We’re sure Dane ...’ The name felt rough in her mouth. ‘Would he really be at work? With Treen recently dead?’
‘Belle said he would.’
‘All right,’ she said. ‘We better go and look.’

There was no way of getting into Belle’s house from the front. At the side there was a driveway, almost blocked by the bare canes of a briar rose. The back yard was in deep morning shadow and it was very cold, a place of damp concrete with an over-large blue gum, a washing machine with its lid open, a mildewed pusher missing a wheel, and a pile of black rubber pipes, all tangled in weeds.

There was no sound from inside, but as soon as Veronica knocked a woman’s voice called from just inside the window, startlingly close, ‘Come in.’
The door led directly into a kitchen, tiny and warm. And spotless, eerily so, with the kind of absolute cleanliness you notice immediately, as if it is in the air. There was a fruity smell, something spicy that Veronica recognised from the shop, the table of creams.

Under the window, against the wall, there was a small table with a plastic cloth. Belle was sitting on the far side of it, watching them as they came in. Veronica had the impression she had been sitting there for some time. There was a sleepy blankness to her face. In front of her on the table there was a brown paper bag and a mobile phone. Nothing else. And no sign of the child.

‘Hello.’ Voice too high, nervous. Veronica left a space for an answer, then came closer. ‘How are you, Belle?’

‘Not good.’

Belle’s black hair was combed back today, pressed down behind an Alice band. On the band there was a pink bow with black polka dots. She had black tights and a white jacket with a star marked out in sequins – the kind of clothes a little girl would wear, although a little girl would have had a skirt over the tights. She wore a necklace made of white rope, with one end threaded through a silver eyelet, held there with a silver bar. In the pale side-light coming from the window, her face had the spongey quality of people recovering from a long illness.

Impatient as she was to get to the child, to sweep this strange girl aside as an irrelevance, Veronica knew that wasn’t going to be helpful. To be too forceful or impatient would only generate resistance. And it wouldn’t be fair. She could do better than that.

The window beside Belle had a curtain of brilliantly white netting with a frilled edge, pulled back story-book style, and tied with white ribbon.

‘This is a very clean room. You’re a very good housewife.’ That was banal, which probably didn’t matter. And patronising, which probably did.

The girl’s eyes went to the phone, and then to the paper bag. She gave it a small smile, simple, ingratiating, and, without lifting her gaze, reached into a pocket and pulled out a pot of lip gloss. Like her kitchen Belle was supernaturally clean. Her skin had a damp, swollen look, as if every speck of dirt, every trace of the outer world had been soaked gently away. But the silence, the studied blankness, was becoming belligerent. And somewhere there was the boy. The little boy. Veronica stepped towards her.

On the windowsill there was a tiny bunch of lavender in a glass jar. Veronica forced another smile. ‘I’ve always been fond of lavender. I see you have one in the garden. The tough kind, angustifolia. Lavender’s good for stress, isn’t it, good for when you’re feeling tired?’

‘I’m not tired.’ She had spoken without thinking, a stupid childish reflex.
‘Come on, Belle.’ Paul said from behind her, ‘You wanted us to come. Stop pissing around.’

But now Belle was looking at the window above the table. She tensed, as if she heard something outside.

‘What?’ said Paul, going back towards the door. ‘What?’

It was nothing. Belle’s face was blank again. Any tension in her expression had been illusory, one of those changes Veronica had seen in the shop, a simple twitch of nerves, without foundation in thought or genuine feeling.

Veronica had no idea of how to proceed. Partly it was the atmosphere. She realised now that she had been expecting something quite different – squalor, disease, dirt, injury, a distressed and noisy child – and this clean silent room had thrown her.

She would start at the beginning, state something they all knew. She sat down.

‘Belle.’ She stared until the girl raised her eyes. ‘Lissa’s told me about Mayson. Treen thought Roland might be the father.’ Roland. Father. Putting the two words together made her feel light-headed. She had a sudden mental image of him, looking older.

‘He is the father.’ Belle was screwing the lid of the lip gloss backwards and forwards, small pudgy hands, one tight signet ring with a tiny red stone.

‘When did you last see Roland?’

Belle dropped the lip gloss on the table and started making small weak-wristed flipping movements with her hands. ‘Last Sunday. I told Lissa. Dane found him here and made him leave.’

She looked back at the window, this time stood up to peer out there. She saw nothing, quickly sat down again. Behind her Veronica could hear Paul open the door and look out. And now Veronica was worried too. Dane was supposed to be working in a wood yard. But how definite was that? Especially as he was recently bereaved. And how dangerous was he really? Paul was right. They needed to get on with this. ‘Look …’

‘Do you want to see Mayson?’

Suddenly Veronica was sweating again, full of an urge to just rush in there, to charge through that blue door and sweep up the child and hold him. She had a physical sense memory of what it felt like to hold a small child – the soft heavy body, silky on the surface, firm underneath, hard wriggling limbs, the surprising strength of the torso, heat from the head.

‘Of course,’ said Paul. ‘We’re here to take him. Make him safe. You asked us to come here.’

‘Well yes that’s all very well.’ Belle’s voice was unnaturally flat. ‘But before we get to that …’ She had run out of rehearsed words now, hesitated, composing the rest. ‘You have to keep me.’
‘No, no, no,’ said Paul.

‘I’m like his auntie. I’ve known him the longest. I’m part of this. The child protection people would say he needed me.’

‘You’re having nothing to do with him.’ Paul had lost control of his upper lip. It was pushing down into his words. A young child, becoming teary. ‘I saw what you did to him. You stay right away.’

‘He fell off a cupboard.’

‘You were there. You were in the house.’

‘What if Roland was in jail?’

‘Don’t even …’

‘Then I’d be the next person to have him. Because I raised him.’

Paul said, ‘Fuck no. Fuck no.’

‘I know who drove Treen to the mountain. I saw the car and I saw who was driving it.’

Paul was coming closer to her.

Veronica said, ‘It wasn’t Roland.’

‘I’m going to let you see Mayson, but I’m keeping him. We’ll need a new place, that’s all. A safe place. Blackman’s Bay, somewhere like that. Somewhere with a lot of kids and pre-schools. Near the water. A house.’

‘A house?’

‘It just takes money.’

‘Well there’s the word we’ve all been waiting for,’ said Paul. He came forward and put his hands on the table, leaning over Belle. ‘Roland doesn’t want anything to do with you. He wants his child to be safe and he wants rid of you.’

He put a hand towards Belle’s collar. Veronica stopped him. But she felt it too, felt like dragging the girl to her feet, grabbing her by the neck of the nasty cheap jacket, shaking her. ‘Belle, I don’t know what you think you are going to achieve with …’

And then, when their attention was completely turned from the outside, when Paul was at the table with her, and they were both focussed on Belle, when they had all forgotten about the window and the door and sounds from outside, Dane arrived.

Nobody heard him come. It was as if suddenly the room had filled. His speed was too much for the size of the place. He came through the door and across the room in one movement, sending Paul leaping back, banging into the bench and swinging himself around. And, big as he was, it wasn’t his size that occupied the tiny space. It was his raw energy, the vibrating angry heat of him, beating up against the chairs, the furniture, the small window. Veronica saw it again, his uncontrolled vigour, something that could slip quickly into
violence, not as a conscious choice, or even with the crossing of a barrier, but simply as a natural extension of his normal way of behaving.

Belle picked up the lip gloss and held it in a fist, then stood up slowly and faced him. He was still wearing the rugby top, now under a corduroy jacket with a fake sheepskin collar. His face was wide at the cheekbones, strong in the chin, but there were pouches of fat in his cheeks, which gave him a boyish look and he had that ingrained grime of people who worked with machines. He stared at Belle for several seconds. She held his gaze blankly. Yes, drugged, Veronica thought stupidly. Sedated.

‘Who’s this?’ he said. His voice was hard, too loud for the room.

Belle twisted the lip gloss once, then put it carefully on the table, obediently, as if he had asked her to do it, then she locked her hands in front of her. She held his gaze again, and there was a new expression now, a kind of resignation, as if she knew she had been caught doing the wrong thing.

Veronica stepped forwards, to let him know she wasn’t afraid. ‘I …’

And there it was. The slip. Veronica’s movement and the tiny female sound propelled him into action. He whirled around, throwing one hand out, knocking the table aside, sending the phone and the lip gloss to the floor. He seized Belle by the pony-tail, used his other hand to pull a chair out into the room and forced her down onto it.

Veronica stared at them, wondering stupidly why the chair didn’t tip over, watching Belle’s legs kicking uselessly in front of her. Dane forced Belle’s head backwards over the low wooden back of the chair, bending her neck. She arched her back as far as she could, scrabbling for the table and the bench, not finding either, then gripped the seat of the chair, pushing up with her feet, trying to relieve the pressure on her throat.

‘It’s the woman from the shop. I’m not stupid. What are you scheming?’ He tugged downwards on the pony-tail again. The angle of Belle’s head had closed her throat.

‘Scheming. You think I’m stupid. That’s what I can’t stand. You don’t respect me.’

‘Just a minute,’ said Veronica, but against his voice it sounded weak, plaintive, and she hadn’t the courage to move forwards.

The girl made a strangled croaking sound.

‘You know I’ve got to work,’ he said. ‘Even after Treen. I’ve still got to go out there and earn the money. All you have to do is mind my boy. But I can’t trust ya can I Belle? You have secrets. You disrespect me.’

‘Leave her alone.’

Suddenly it was repulsive rather than frightening. Veronica’s shock had melted, not into fear but into anger. Not even that. Something more manageable. Indignation. Contempt.

She stepped closer. She was thinking clearly. First she had to make him release this poor
girl. She couldn’t physically tackle him. But she could distract him. ‘It’s not her fault. I came here looking for my son. Roland Cruikshank.’

‘Who’s that? Role?’ He repeated it softly nearer to Belle’s face, cooed it as if it was a term of endearment. ‘Roley?’ He jerked down hard on her hair. ‘You evil little bitches. You-evil-fuckin-little-witches. You did everything you could to destroy the little bastard, what are you doing now? Trying to give him away? No fun now, is that it? Not enough drama for you now that she’s gone?’

From somewhere behind Veronica there was a voice. A child, a tiny cry.

Veronica turned and took a step towards the sound. ‘I’m going to see him. I’m going to make sure he’s all right. And after that, if I have to, I’m going to call the police.’ It was only four steps to the door. She pushed it open.

It was the room she had seen from the street, the closed-in verandah – a tiny space crammed with furniture, bright with colourful fabric, a doona covered with planets, a couch full of stuffed toys.

And a child, black hair, sitting in the middle of the floor, surrounded by plastic things, boats, clocks, something with buttons. Also a scatter of Duplo blocks, and jewellery spilling from an upturned box – golden chains, bracelets, necklaces.

Then all she could see was the face turned towards her, mouth open, curious, the small lips wet and parted. There was a smear of something white on a corner of the forehead. But that was cream of some kind. And apart from that nothing. No bruises. No scars. The photographs were old. He was unharmed.

There was a sudden burning pain, starting near her waist, jabbing down into her left buttock, and up into the ribs. She was seized by a shoulder and turned, made to face Dane, smell him, and there was another pain, near her stomach going up through her throat. Then she was on her knees. Dane put his hands under her arms. He lifted her. She curled her legs as high as she could, protecting organs she imagined to be bleeding, feeling them soft and shattered. Somewhere above her he was shouting something. At Paul, at Belle. Veronica couldn’t understand it. She heard the words, ‘... ten minutes.’

He dragged her, swearing about how fat she was, cursing as she tried to curl. He pulled her up the one low step, through the door to the outside, and dropped her on the concrete. She caught herself on her hands, then allowed herself to fall sideways, curled up, feeling the cold of the ground on one cheek. She closed her eyes.

She opened them in time to see his feet, going back through the door.

Belle. Paul. The child. She had to stop him, find a phone, phone … who? Her thoughts stuck. Ahead of her there were two loops of wire that used to be part of a garden edge. Closer, a broken half-sucked life saver, and a mound of bright moss, some tiny green flowers rising from it.
Somewhere behind her in the house there was a high cry and then silence. The phone was in her handbag which was in the kitchen. She had to go back in there. She lifted herself onto one elbow, but the world swung around her. Her legs wouldn’t work. The muscles of her stomach contracted. She vomited onto the concrete, and, wondering vaguely what that would do to the moss, pushed herself back, away from the sour pool, lay down again.

‘Veronica.’

Paul was pulling at her arm, lifting it, letting cold air press into her side. He had her bag. ‘We have to go. Get up. Sorry. I know. Get up. He said I had to get you out of here.’

Veronica pushed herself up again, tried a laugh. It didn’t sound brave, more of a wail. ‘No.’ She forced a leg to move, put one foot on the ground, then another, pushed herself almost straight, felt her stomach stretch, shrink, tensed it, stopped it from heaving. ‘I’m going to get the boy out of there.’

‘We can’t.’

‘He’s a child.’ Her child. Courage, that was all. Paul had to be made to see. She took a step, went down on one knee again.

‘If you go back in there it’ll make it worse.’

‘Paul. What else can he do to me?’

‘No. You’re making it worse for Mayson. You. You are.’

Veronica pushed herself to her feet again. When she tried to lift her head the world lurched, so she kept it down and focussed on a stone. Half-bent like this, and with Paul holding her shoulders, she found she could move her feet, and they began the slow progress towards the street. It felt as if there was an iron rod pushed through her stomach and with each step it stirred her intestines. She stumbled on the rough driveway, felt the briar rose grab at her hair. Then she was on the footpath. She heard the roar of a passing vehicle, and lifted her head. The iron rod flipped and pushed her stomach up, and then her legs gave way and she was kneeling over the gutter, being sick again.

She said, ‘Get the phone.’

‘No police.’

‘Paul.’

‘He’s not hurting him. Mayson is all right if we stay away. He hasn’t been hurt. And we don’t want the police. We need Roland.’

Veronica stayed kneeling. She looked at a piece of slime in the gutter water, at an ice cream stick with the word JUMP burnt into it, and at something that might once have been a bus ticket. After a minute or two there were more noises from the street – a screech of tyres and an angry blast on a car horn. She tried to look up, set off a really frightening hot pain, and looked down again to anchor her gaze back on the bus ticket.
Paul spoke again, not to Veronica this time, to someone else. ‘Hello.’ The tone was uncertain and unfriendly.

A pair of black work boots appeared at the edge of Veronica’s vision, above them, tartan socks. She sat back on her heels, hurting her knees this time, but managed to straighten an inch, then another. She closed her eyes and pushed quickly back, waited while the world settled. Above the smell of vomit now, there were other smells, brandy and something else, something stale and sour, rotting daisy stalks, left in a vase too long.

‘We’ll get you to the car,’ said Paul.

Veronica opened her eyes, pushed her fists into her stomach. ‘Judith.’

Judith smiled at her, not nicely. She said, ‘She must be wicked to deserve such pain.’

There were voices now, inside Belle’s house, coming clearly through the thin verandah walls. A child speaking a short word, then another word. Not a cry, no sound of pain or fear, just saying something. And then a man’s voice, answering calmly. It sounded as if Maysen should be all right, at least for now. But Dane could be watching them. The curtains had parted slightly.

‘We have to go,’ said Paul.

Veronica stood up. It was a slow process accomplished mainly by pushing with her hands on her knees, and with Paul pulling at an armpit.

Paul said, ‘What are we supposed to do now?’

Judith and Veronica looked at each other. Judith said, ‘I know where he is.’
Chapter 23

Fitzroy Place was a short wide avenue of plane trees and large heavy houses, some converted into offices, others renovated and heavily curtained. Many looked empty. This was something about Hobart Veronica was beginning to notice – the people who could afford a big house could also afford to go far away and leave it. You never saw anyone in Fitzroy Place, working in the garden or walking. You approached if from one of the busy streets at either end and turned off into stillness and you felt conspicuous, the plane tree trunks acting like thick grey pillars, carefully placed, measuring your level of intrusion.

Arriving in Judith’s big noisy vehicle, Veronica felt doubly conspicuous. They parked outside Lesley’s house. The front garden had concrete Grecian urns painted white, budding camellias trapped by box hedges, lavender cut into blocks. The curtains in the front window were half-closed, showing thick creamy lining. The blue Honda was parked in the driveway.

Getting down from Judith’s high car brought Veronica a deep nauseating pain and she had to lean over again in the footpath. But she wasn’t sick. Judith followed her to the door. Out here in the daylight she looked even more unwell. Her skin was grey and thick, the upper lip almost orange. Veronica said, ‘I wonder ...’ Best to be blunt. ‘It might not help if you come in.’

Judith nodded towards Lesley’s front window. ‘This is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds.’ Veronica turned her back.

It was Gordon who answered the door. When he saw Veronica he put both fat hands out in front of him, shining with pleasure.

‘Well, isn’t this a nice surprise.’

She couldn’t take his hands. To lift both of hers would send her stomach into a spasm. She hoped he wouldn’t try to hug her, or pull her off balance.

‘And very early for a Saturday. Got you all hopping has he? Running around in circles for him?’

Did he mean Roland? There was no chance to ask.

He turned his head a fraction and raised his voice. ‘Lel!’ Then he said, ‘Or were you just passing?’ He guffawed, too loudly, maybe recognising the inanity of the suggestion.

Gordon was a big man, short-necked and powerful, gone fleshy. He stood with his shoulders back and his stomach out, carrying his fat with pride, as if it were still muscle. ‘How’s the batching going. Finally getting to you?’ He shouted again. ‘Lel! We should’ve had you out for a meal shouldn’t we?’ Gordon had a head-ducking way of talking, his voice
full of enthusiasm and also a kind of childish surprise, as if he was constantly discovering things for the first time. ‘You can bet your socks Alan’ll be doing all right, especially with Brian and Lofty Milliken along. You can bet he is. And why not, I say. It’s not as if he can’t afford it.’ This was familiar. Within five minutes of meeting Veronica and Alan, Gordon always managed to refer to money in some way. He was a real estate agent and developer, and a property manager, which was apparently something different, and still thrilled by his own financial success. She liked him, his naivety, his good-natured clumsiness, but standing here was making her stomach and back ache. She wanted to get inside and sit down.

Lesley had come up behind him now, wearing the expression she usually wore when Gordon was talking, a kind of pained forbearance.

‘This is great. We were just saying, weren’t we Lellie, that we hadn’t seen Vee for yonks and yonks.’

Yonks. No one ever said that twice. When the kids were little it would have set them giggling.

Lesley was wearing beige pants and a tunic top and waving a mobile phone. ‘Veronica. I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you coming.’ She looked for the car, saw Judith.

Judith said, ‘It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air.’

Lesley looked amused. ‘Is your friend …?’

‘This is Judith.’

Judith said, ‘There is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.’

‘Goodness.’

Veronica said, ‘Sorry. She wouldn’t tell me where we were going until we were nearly here and then she followed me to the door.’ She wasn’t explaining this properly. ‘ Doesn’t matter. She said Roland was here.’

Lesley dragged her eyes away from Judith. ‘Roland? No.’

Judith jostled Veronica from behind. ‘I’m sorry. I’ll just get her to wait …’

She turned but Judith pushed past them both, muttering something about a thief in the night, and went into the front room.

‘Oh.’ Lesley had enough grace to sound amused. ‘All right. We’ll go in the lounge.’

But before they went through the door, Veronica stopped. There was another woman here, standing in the shadows at the far end of the corridor. A large solid figure, sleek head.
‘Come on Vicks,’ said Gordon and he ushered her out a door at the back.

Veronica said, ‘Was that the woman from the gallery?’

‘Oh never mind her,’ said Lesley holding the door open.

Lesley’s house always smelt faintly of new carpet. The room they were in was full of polished wood and painted a creamy colour, with a hint of greenish grey for sophistication. It had a strange muffled feeling, a kind of extreme refinement that made it hard to breathe, as if some crucial element had been removed from the air.

Veronica didn’t believe Roland hadn’t been here. At least Lesley knew where he was. She was going to insist Lesley tell her, but she couldn’t accuse her of an outright lie.

Judith had gone to a sideboard. She had picked up a photograph in a frame but she was looking at the back of Lesley’s head. She said, ‘The desolation of boredom and the clutch of giant despair.’

Veronica and Lesley’s eyes met. Veronica spoke briskly. ‘Judith is the woman from the bookshop where Roland has been staying.’ She and Lesley understood each other. They needed to get rid of her. But they couldn’t very well manhandle her out. Lesley raised her eyebrows, pulled a face and then turned, smiling.

‘Well yes, Judith. That’s my mother.’ She took the frame and stepped back. Then, perhaps to explain that movement she held it out to Veronica. ‘You remember my Mum, don’t you? It’s quite a nice photo, this one.’

Veronica did remember Mrs Dowling, the smooth curl right in the front of her hair, her glare, the way her cheeks sucked in at the centre so that it was obvious that her teeth were shut tight.

‘Of course, this is before she became sick.’

Mrs Dowling always looked as if she was demanding something of you, but because her mouth was clamped shut, she couldn’t make it clear what it was that you weren’t doing.

Veronica was feeling weak and dizzy in this close air. She needed to get on with things, find out about Roland and get out. ‘That little boy. Roland brought him here once, I think? Did you know he’s Roland’s son?’

A real laugh now. ‘Oh yes. Thank goodness. I wasn’t sure if you knew.’ Lesley stepped closer, put her hands out as if to take Veronica’s, lowered them, left them curling near her thighs. ‘His own child, Veronica. Your grandson. It’s wonderful, really, isn’t it, in a way. But a problem, too. Such a mess, really. So if there’s anything we can do …’ She locked the hands again.

‘And the mother is dead.’

‘Oh yes. How awful. Where is he? The little boy?’

‘Still with Treen’s friends. I need to get him away.’
‘Well you’re not to panic. Roland wanted me to tell you that. He’s organising something.’

‘Where is he, Lesley?’

Lesley looked pointedly at Judith and shook her head. ‘It’s all so horrible, isn’t it? Such a disturbed little boy. Yes, Roland did bring him here. I told you that, didn’t I? Here, of all places.’ They both looked around the room, at the pink carpet and the couch, the polished fabric the cabbage roses in carmine and soft deep blue. ‘It was desperation, I think. Roland really had no idea how to deal with him. I changed his clothes, gave him a bit of a wash in the nether regions.’ She wrapped her arms across her stomach, clinking her silver bangles. ‘And let me just say that so far, you haven’t missed anything. You haven’t missed any lovely hugs and kisses. It’s going to take some work to civilise the poor little devil. He was very naughty, really quite a violent child. I know it’s not his fault. I know he’s been ill-treated in some way.’

‘I still need to see Roland.’

‘Oh yes. I will tell him that, if I ever see him.’ Lesley suddenly stepped around her. ‘Oh! Just a minute!’ Judith had opened a drinks cabinet. She reached into the mirrored interior, picked up a bottle and looked at the label. She took the top off and sniffed at it.

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea.’ Lesley sounded as if she was talking to a child, but uncertain. ‘I could make you a sandwich, Judith, if you like.’

Judith snorted and picked up a glass and poured two inches of whiskey. She took a step closer and gave Lesley one of the penetrating looks. She seemed to see something she expected in Lesley’s face and to be sad to find it there. For a moment she looked as if she was about to comment on it. But what she said was, ‘Blend.’ She turned away, drinking.

‘Oh all right.’ Lesley shrugged, stiff-faced. ‘Why not? Perhaps we should all have some.’ She picked up a red jar from the sideboard and rubbed some cream into her hands. Immediately the room had a perfume, an old-fashioned scent, pot pourri, geraniums. ‘Come over here.’

They went to a window at the side of the room and looked out at the driveway. Veronica moved too quickly and felt a catch in her lower stomach. She pushed a hand there. The pain rose, locking up her organs as it went. She felt herself go pale, a cold sweat.

Outside there was a breeze, channelled up the driveway, throwing flickering light and shadow. Pale sunlight glimmered on the chrome of the blue car.

‘Are you all right?’

Almost immediately Veronica’s stomach began loosening, but it felt large. ‘It doesn’t matter. Lesley, I need to find Roland.’

Lesley looked back to make sure Judith was at the other side of the room and spoke quietly, ‘I don’t think he’d want Judith to know where he is.’
‘No.’

‘He asked me to tell you not to panic. He’s found a place for Treen’s friend to take the little boy. She’s going to sneak away and hide there and then you can come and take the boy and look after him while you have a paternity case or whatever is needed. But the police have been here, looking for him.’

‘What?’

‘I’ll tell you in a minute.’

Judith had turned her back. Near her, propped on a table, there was a noticeboard with papers pinned all over it. She was staring at it.

Lesley hurried over. ‘Oh dear. This is embarrassing.’ She turned to Veronica. ‘This is for the silly investigation idea Roland wants me to do. You helped him provide all this material, didn’t you, Judith?’ She laughed uncomfortably. ‘I put all his notes up on a pin up board, the way they do on the TV. I mean how childish really. Gosh.’

Veronica rested her bottom on the back of the couch, relieving the pain in her back and stomach, and they all looked at the board. There were pages of script, typed, with changes and notations made in ink, notes on scraps of paper, photographs and drawings, and a cover cut from a book, The Graves of Hobart.

‘I’ve got so much material. I just get lost.’

Judith had her glass very full in her left hand. With her right she lifted a photograph of an old cottage to reveal a map.

‘He’s still talking to me about it, you know. He rings me up.’

‘Today? With everything that’s going on?’

‘Oh you know what he’s like. As I told you, it’s not me he’s interested in.’ Lesley waved at the board and the table. ‘There’s something he thinks he needs to tell the world. About Treen’s death. He said a strange thing. He said I’d find out why Treen had to die.’

‘He didn’t do it. He isn’t responsible for it.’

‘Oh no. I know.’ Lesley didn’t mean it. She put the hand up to her mouth again, lowered her eyelids. ‘But strangely this project is starting to make more sense. He said I am to look for Mary McLaughlan’s own words. What she really thought and felt. And strangely I think I’m starting to believe that there is something for me to find. Sometimes I get a glimpse …’

On the table in front of the noticeboard there was a pile of papers held down by a white stone. Judith picked it up.

‘Oh please don’t …’ Lesley’s hand moved but she didn’t stop her.

‘What’s that?’ said Veronica.

‘What? I don’t know. It’s just a stone. I found it.’

‘Where?’
‘Where?’ It was a stupid question. ‘I don’t know. On a path somewhere.’

Maybe because of her reluctance to share the scotch, Judith seemed to be trying to rattle Lesley. She picked up a piece of notepaper. Roland had drawn a scaffold.

Judith said, ‘My grief lies all within, and these external manners of lament are merely shadows.’ She put her glass on the table. Lesley moved to pick it up but Judith grabbed her forearm. Lesley shook her free and stepped away from the table.

Judith picked up the glass and took another gulp, then swept a hand across the notes, spreading them over the table.

Veronica said, ‘Judith could you …’

Judith looked at Lesley, stared at her, spoke intimately, watching the effect of her words. ‘The grief that does not speak …’

‘You don’t know. You don’t know me.’

‘… whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break.’

‘Now please leave.’

Judith looked grimly satisfied. She put her glass down, went back to the sideboard, picked up the red jar and the whiskey and left the room.

Veronica said, ‘She’s a terrible creature. I should never have brought her here.’

They went to the front window and watched Judith drive away. ‘The old witch. She took the scotch, you know.’

‘How frightful.’ Lesley laughed.

‘Was she was talking about your lost child?’

‘Yes. Maybe.’

‘How would she know?’

‘Roland must have told her.’ Lesley laughed. ‘I can’t think why.’

‘Sad to be like that. Poking away at other people’s pain.’

‘Well if that’s what she thought she was doing she was on the wrong track, wasn’t she. There’s no pain to poke at.’

‘Yes. No. Let’s forget her.’

But Lesley wanted to talk about this some more. ‘It wasn’t as if I wanted a child. Not at the age of seventeen. And it wasn’t as if they tore her from my arms or anything. It wasn’t even an event at all.’

‘Her? You knew it was a girl?’

‘It isn’t even a memory, so there’s no pain. At the most maybe sometimes I feel there’s a … a space, I suppose. A vague feeling that there’s something I have lost, or forgotten. Just an absence … under everything.’ She shrugged and wriggled. ‘Oh that sounds ridiculous. It must be Roland’s influence. I’m starting to sound like him.’
They were looking out at Lesley’s front garden, the bare branches of a magnolia, ending in buds, beds of pansies, planted in rows.

‘So … Roland?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘You saw him this morning?’

‘He wanted to stay for the night. But the police have been here. They were asking about the car, you see. Paul’s Honda. They were asking who might have been driving it on Monday night. They didn’t say it was in connection with that poor girl but what else could it have been? Maybe someone saw it near her place or something.’

‘And Roland had it that day? Did you tell them?’

‘I played dumb. Fortunately Paul brought it here yesterday. They usually keep it here and drive the Impreza. The Honda is a kind of spare for them. So I told the police that as far as I knew it was here that night.’

‘Thank you.’

‘But I don’t know how convincing I was. They’ll come back. Somehow they’re working out all the connections. Treen’s friends would have told them about Roland, and they’ve seen text messages or something. And they’ve worked out you’re Roland’s mother. No doubt they’ll be wanting to talk to you again. And they’ve worked out that Paul is a friend of Roland and that we’ve got a blue Jazz. It wouldn’t be that hard. It will be all joining up for them like a neat puzzle.’

‘Except Roland didn’t do it.’

‘Oh no, I know.’

‘So …’

‘This morning, after the Coal Valley, I lent him my car. I said he should go and stay with Georgie, but he wouldn’t. But that’s a shame because she’d love to help. She’s beside herself.’

‘So where did he go?’

‘He’s at the Shanty Shack.’
Chapter 24

When Veronica had gone, Lesley went to the Penitentiary Chapel in Campbell Street and looked at the original gallows, the one that was used to hang Mary McLaughlan. She had come to the last of Roland’s folder of notes. She sat in the car in Brisbane Street and read them. The hanging was described in the newspaper article. A large crowd turned out to see it. Mary wore a white dress with a black ribbon around her waist. The chaplain who had sat with her said she had confessed her crime and was calm and penitent. The reporter said she died contrite and resigned. He also said she suffered mental agony previous to the execution. Well, that wasn’t hard to believe.

But what had Mary said? Where were her words?

In 1838 the gallows had been at the original Hobart Gaol in Murray Street. After the Penitentiary Chapel, Lesley went there. There was no sign of the original gaol now, just some four storey town houses, one with little classical pillars and pediments and tall elegant windows, the other in dressed stone, glossy white, with black railings and red awnings. There was a brass plaque in the footpath telling passers-by that Mary was hanged here. Lesley had never noticed it before.

She went across the intersection to St David’s cathedral to sit on the low wall. She opened Roland’s file. He had given her a drawing of the Hobart Gaol. In it the yard looked grim and cold, although that could have been the way the drawing was done, the nature of the shading. It showed a high wall with a narrow gate, and a flimsy looking framework with some ropes hanging down. In the early days, men were hanged here, sometimes six at a time. Not Mary. From the sound of things, Mary was hanged alone.

According to the newspaper article, just before the trapdoor fell away from under her feet, Mary had said ‘Oh! My God!’ These words were heard by a crowd, so they were, as far as anything could be, verified. They were Mary’s own words. But they weren’t much help.

As an executed criminal, Mary was dissected in the cause of medical science. Roland had written some notes about it. Judith had dug out some books and worked out that Mary’s remains would have been buried in a graveyard that is now St David’s Park. The grave would have been unmarked.

In the last folder Roland had written that Lesley should go there, to St David’s Park. He had written ‘walk on the gra …’ and then the pen had hit a patch of oil. What had he meant to say? Grass? Graves?

At the park, Lesley walked up past the row of old headstones that had been built into walls. She sat on a bench, looking across the sloping lawns at the bandstand, the pines,
cypresses and spruces, the deep green of azaleas. Somewhere under all of this were Mary’s remains, a body cut to pieces. There was possibly her baby buried here too somewhere.

Roland had given her another page of his writing. There was a note that said she should read it when she got to the park. It said:

**Grotesqueness leads to woe, leads to grotesqueness, leads to woe.**

A woman harms her own child. All that can be known is that to do that she must have been wretched. But what about after she did it? How could she bear it?

Evil is caused by pain. And an evil act causes more pain. Not only in the victim.

In the actor. It isn’t even right to say ‘causes’. In a way evil and pain are the same thing.

Lesley looked up. In the middle of the lawn there were several women, standing in a circle, finishing some kind of meeting. One of them said a few words and they all began moving, saying goodbye, picking up bags. They didn’t know about the graves.

Lesley didn’t know about Mary either. She was supposed to have found something significant, something that would help her to explain Mary to the world, some perfect key that would help the world to understand not just Mary, but Treen. And why Treen had to die. There was some big clue here, in Mary’s life, in Mary’s words. But Mary kept vanishing. Any trace of her had been erased. She had once said, ‘Oh my God.’ These were the only words that were really, verifiably, her own.

But what did they signify? At first they appear empty. They are a text message now. OMG. But if you believe in God, which Mary surely did, these are important words. Especially if you were about to die. On the other hand, Mary might have said them to please the Colonial Chaplain, or because of ideas he gave her, thoughts he encouraged. The words are ambiguous, open, at once highly emotional and emotionally flat, they are empty and full. As a communication, as a means for Mary to show others what she was thinking and feeling, they had no meaning at all.

So it was left to Lesley to wonder. Mary killed her own child, chose to or was persuaded, or forced. Or else she watched him die and left him in the lavatory. How can a woman be brought to a point where she would do that? What has to be done to her, and for how long?

Lesley closed the notebook and looked up over her glasses at the trees against the sky. The frame of her glasses caught a thread of light from somewhere. It threw a band of colour across the bottom of her vision, brown, purple, yellow.

There was nothing to be gained by sitting here. There was no trace of Mary here, or anywhere. Even when Mary was alive there would have been no way of understanding her.
Maybe Mary didn’t understand her own actions. Maybe they didn’t seem real to her. Maybe nothing that happened to her seemed real.

*Oh my God*
Chapter 25

By the time Veronica got to the Prosser River her stomach had settled into a cold hard lump, but now her lower back was stiff, with a sharp ache that couldn’t be relieved by adjusting her position in the seat. She looked down at the rocky stream and then up at the thick bush rising on either side. There was mist sinking through the tree tops. She turned right at Orford, and went along the avenue of white wattles to Spring Beach. At the point where you first saw the bay she stopped. She thought about getting out and stretching her aching back but couldn’t bring herself to face it. She would deal with that pain when she arrived at the shack.

Today the water was grey, not overly rough but cloudy with churned sand and the mist was low, blurring the line between sea and air, so that further out the waves were just a mysterious movement in two shades of grey. There was no horizon and no sign of Maria Island.

The Shanty Shack was white weatherboard, with thick wooden window frames, needing paint. There were odd planks tacked on for no obvious reason, and its base was made of scraps of sandstone collected from a quarry. The garden was humble, too – echiums, cordylines, gazanias, all in beds with concrete edges, a concrete disc over the septic tank. Veronica was pretty sure Lesley never came here.

It had been years since Veronica had been here herself. It was familiar and at the same time changed. This wasn’t something she could put her finger on. It wasn’t that things looked smaller – that was for childhood memories – but it was as fundamental as that. There was a faint but all-encompassing wash of difference, as if someone had filtered the light.

In the carport she could see Lesley’s white Peugeot, on the back shelf a T-shirt and trousers screwed up into familiar balls.

Roland had heard her and come to the door. She put her hands to the side of her face, pulled the cheeks roughly up and down a few times. Then she pressed them into her stomach, trying to loosen the muscles and feel some blood flowing, wriggled some movement into her back as far as she could. Then, carefully, she swung both legs out of the car, bent forwards and straightened.

As always she was surprised at how tall he was. He was dressed in his usual way. A threadbare T-shirt and op shop jeans in a pale lilac colour, fading to apricot at the knees, droopy at the waistband, with checked boxers showing. There was a leather thong around his throat, holding three white beads, tied at the back. His face, broad across the cheekbones, thinner in the cheeks, looked older than his twenty-four years, bright-eyed with exhaustion.
The expression would never change. She wondered as she came towards him if everyone had this, an instinctive expression reserved for their mother, something that came to them in the seconds before they put up their defences and their justifications. In Roland’s case it was amusement, a light, finely tuned almost-smile which managed to recognise everything around and between them, to feel the importance of it, and then to laugh. It was weak today, struggling to find the humour, but it was still there.

The dizziness caused by standing up soon passed and she didn’t think he had noticed. She made sure she walked evenly. He glanced briefly at the green bag she had. She waved it. ‘I brought food.’

There was a second in which they looked at each other, recognised the ridiculousness of a bag of groceries, saw that the other saw it too, and smiled. The hug was awkward, in the way it had been awkward for ten years, because he was too tall to cuddle protectively and she couldn’t raise her arms, but she hated the feeling of his arms around her shoulders, the implication that he might be trying to comfort her.

‘Oh my big boy.’ He smelt of marijuana. A familiar, herbal smell, deceptively wholesome.

Roland was looking over her, at the driveway. ‘You didn’t see anyone follow you, did you?’

‘Who? The police?’

He moved his head, trying to see further up the road. ‘I dunno.’

There was wind rattling the lomandra at the side of the house, and black cockies in the trees making their rasping cry.

‘I wasn’t followed.’ She edged past him and led the way inside. There was recent smoke in here, and an ash tray with hand-rolled stubs. They stood in the kitchen beside the old green table. Veronica said, ‘Well.’

‘I just wanted to keep you out of it. I just wanted it to be OK. I wanted it to be a piece of OK news when I told you.’

‘I know.’

‘Because you know I’ve got a son.’

‘I know. It is OK.’

‘Oh it so isn’t.’

‘No.’

‘Is it?’

‘No.’

‘Paul said you’d been to see Belle. Don’t go there.’

‘I had to.’
‘Not any more, I found a place for Belle to take Mayson, where Dane won’t find them.’

‘All right.’ Veronica looked around. There was a lot that needed to be talked through, carefully. ‘Let’s sit down.’ She went to a tweedy armchair, stood in front of it.

‘I didn’t want to bring them straight here in case he followed. I want to keep this place secret. Gordon is in charge of a big old building and I copied one of his keys.’

‘Oh Roland.’

‘I had to find them somewhere. They’re going there tonight. Just before I came here I met Belle in the back of the Chemist Warehouse and gave her a key.’

‘Well, I suppose Gordon might understand.’

‘I’ll bring them here tomorrow night, when I know Dane isn’t watching. I’m going to meet them there tomorrow at half past three. I’ll give you the address.’ He took her phone and put the address in as he talked. ‘I’d really like you to come. If I’m taking the kid I’m going to need you. He’s a little bastard.’ He was still rushing, overwhelmed by it all, not thinking carefully, not steady.

‘Roland, let’s just slow down.’

They sat in armchairs, across a low table. Veronica lowered herself carefully into the chair, felt the contents of her stomach threatening again to rise and pressed her lips together. But Roland didn’t notice, and the pain was lessening now. She no longer imagined internal bleeding, felt only bruised.

He could only have been here an hour or so. He had been looking through photographs. There was an album open on the coffee table, family shots from the Sopels’ early days, Paul’s childhood. She touched the album. ‘What have you been looking at?’

‘These?’ He seemed to be seeing them for the first time. ‘Aah. Oh, I’m just... I thought I saw something. Once. But it was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter. It can’t be right.’ He closed the album and put it under the table.

Veronica said, ‘Roland we have to talk things through. You’re confident Mayson will be all right tonight?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then there are things we need to talk about.’ She sat on the end of her chair. ‘I need to piece this together, so we know what we’re dealing with. Do you see?’ He might not have heard her. ‘The police have interviewed me. They’re going to find out what happened to Treen – who drove her to the mountain, what she had taken.

‘Lesley told me they’d been at her place, asking about the car. Someone ... Belle I think, has told them that Treen drove away in a blue Honda. You’ll have to answer questions about where you were.’

‘Yeah.’
‘So where were you?’
‘God Mum.’
‘Look …’
He stood up. ‘Do you want a drink or something?’
‘Yes. All right.’

He made tea, dug in the bag she had brought and made a plate of bread, cheddar, butter, chutney and tomatoes. She waited on the couch, put her head back, thought nothing. When he sat down again she said, ‘We need to plan a story. We need to … Can we just go through it?’
‘Mum, this isn’t about me.’
‘Of course it is.’
‘Shit.’
‘Roland.’
‘You think you’re so caring.’
‘What?’
‘You’re so separate.’
‘Separate from what?’
‘From everything else.’ He was side-tracked, scattered. ‘You drive around in that Mercedes. You wear all that crafty stuff. You only drink expensive wine and then you talk about it. I wish you could see what it’s really like. What pain and problems would be like if you didn’t have those things.’

He had accused her of all this before, but there was more passion in it this time. Best to just let him finish.

‘There are just things you’ll never get. You’re not stupid. You’d just rather not look at them properly. You look the wrong way.’

Georgie had said the same kind of thing.

He raised himself in his chair. ‘What was that?’ He was looking past her out the window.

‘What?’
‘Something moving out there.’

Veronica stood up carefully and went to the window and looked out. On the right there was a bank of hydrangeas and then black cypresses and eucalypts and the thin heath beside the cliff path. On the left there was a wire fence and the road, the Hughes’s old place, and, rising behind that, wet bush.

‘What is it? What do you see?’

She said, ‘There’s a dog on the road, a young pointer of some kind. It might have been in here and jumped the fence.’
‘Sorry. I just keep thinking I can hear cars coming.’

She sat down again. ‘Well look. Belle is lying about the car. You’re innocent. They’ll find out what really happened.’ She wished she was as confident about that as she sounded. ‘We’ll get lawyers.’ She left a space and then spoke more softly. ‘But you’ll have to tell them what you know.’

‘I don’t know anything.’ He was lying.

She moved in the chair, loosening her back and stomach, and then said, ‘And there are other things we need to talk about.’

He picked up his plate as if he was about to leave, then stopped.

‘You’re a father.’

He put the plate down. ‘Shit.’

The light in the room was still and quiet, reflections of the grey sky and the grey water, soaking the room in silver.

‘It’ll be all right. We’ll make it work.’

‘You haven’t seen him.’ At the thought of his son, his energy left him. He leant back in his chair and looked at her from under lowered lids. ‘Am I supposed to love him? Because I don’t. He’s really mad and rough and he doesn’t listen to what you say. It’s like there’s nothing …’ He waved a hand in front of his face.

‘Roland.’

Out of habit, he slipped into that adolescent tone, exaggerated precision, mocking the words as he said them. ‘We don’t always do the right thing. I’m not pure. I was disgusted by Treen. I slept with her and then I couldn’t stand to see her. And Belle. I tried not to be like that, but I was.’

Another silence.

‘Well, let’s not forget he might not be yours. Treen claimed you to be the father but she had a lot to gain by saying that. And it hasn’t been verified.’

‘Well that doesn’t matter, does it?’

‘What?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘How can you say that?’

He stood up and went to the window, looked out, then turned and sat back on the sill, framed in white light. Now he had that other expression. The one he assumed when he was trying to explain a complicated and subtle moral point, and had no confidence that she would understand. ‘The thing is, he might be mine. It’s possible. So if he isn’t mine then all I’ve been is lucky.’ He was smiling again, the raggedy smile. ‘And if it’s just dumb luck, then morally I’m still responsible for it, aren’t I? On a universal scale.’

Raggedy boy. Raggedy thinking.
‘And anyway it’s not about that, is it? It’s not about the actual blood ties. They’re not the most important thing are they?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mum.’

This is what she wanted him to see. ‘You can’t fix everything. You draw a line around things. You decide what’s yours.’

‘Mum.’

So there they were. She was hopelessly simplistic. And Roland was looking at things from a point of pure idealism, the idealism of one who has never had children. For a moment she was desperately sad for him. Her boy, for whom nothing had ever been simple, who used to talk about trees and rocks as if they had feelings, who had seen meaning everywhere, was now an adult who struggles to fix everything and wonders why he can’t and then spends hours pontificating, arguing, ranting, chasing around after hopeless cases, drawing pictures that do not change the world.

‘I didn’t want you dragged into this. I wanted to get everything sorted and away from Dane first. I thought he’d be dangerous. He is dangerous.’

‘Yes he is.’

‘So I came down. Belle and Treen and Dane and Mayson were in a place in Cascade Road. I didn’t know what to do. I had to get them away from Dane. And Treen was getting really …’ He put his head down, rubbed at his forehead. ‘Aaah. She was being really … she gets crazy and sad and lost. So they were both drinking a lot, taking stuff.’

‘What happened to Mayson?’

‘He was around. I took him out a few times and Paul helped me. We took him to Bellerive beach. I was trying to get to know him and work out what to do.’ He sat down again. ‘I tried to talk to Dane and he belted me and told me not to come back. So I didn’t know what to do. And then I got this text from Treen. It said, “Guess where I am. Two Biscuit Rock.” So I thought Paul must have taken her up there, because no one else knew about Two Biscuit Rock.’ He picked up his bread, pulled a crust off and dropped it again. ‘But then I didn’t do anything about it. I was kind of sick of the whole thing. I’d tried to talk to them and got belted so I thought fuck it. Then two days later Belle rang me and said Treen was missing.’

‘All the texts and phone calls. They will have found it all on her phone.’

‘Yes.’

‘So on Thursday I went round to the house and Belle was there all kind of spitting because Treen had gone off and left her with Mayson and all the cream to put into boxes or something. She said Treen had gone off in a car and she didn’t know where she’d gone. Someone was going to give her some money.'
‘And the last I’d heard she was on Two Biscuit Rock. So I went up to have a look. I mean I didn’t really think she’d be there, but ... I don’t know what I thought, but I went to look and there she was.’

‘You don’t know how she got up there.’

‘No.’ Hesitation.

‘So the last thing we know is that Treen had told Belle she was going for a drive with someone and they were going to give her some money. And this person drove her up there and left her there. They drugged her.’

‘They wouldn’t have had to force her. I told you. She was in that kind of bad place. She would’’ve had a go at anything. They wouldn’t have had to hold her down.’

‘Roland it really does look as if someone did it on purpose. It had to have been deliberate. It was a kind of murder.’

At the word his head jerked up.

‘And it was very calculated. It happened slowly and took planning. It doesn’t seem to be the kind of thing Dane would do. Does it? To you?’

‘No.’

‘You do know who it was, don’t you?’

He thought for a long time. She was about to prompt him when he said, ‘I don’t understand. I can’t understand why it happened. There’s something about women. Women like Treen. I’ve got Lesley thinking about it for me.’

‘Roland that is just peculiar.’

‘No. You’ll see. I can’t tell this story. It’s too ... hard. Lesley will end up understanding it and she’ll help me explain it.’ He put his hand on the photo album. ‘And there’s something else that will help explain it. When I got here I remembered something.’

‘Here?’

‘See this. He picked up a photo and held it out to her. It was taken here, on the beach, a photo from a holiday, years ago, Paul and Gordon and Roland, all sitting on an upturned dinghy.

He touched the photo, wiping it with his finger, as if trying to wipe some of the sand off their feet. ‘I’ve been looking for this. I thought it would show me something.’

‘What? A photo of Spring Beach?’

‘I have to get back and ask some questions.’ He stood up suddenly and went to the kitchen table. He took a packet of Monte Carlos out of the bag.

‘Can we go down there?’
They went down the cliff path and through the scrub behind the beach. There was new orange tape lining the duckboard and, at the end, someone had stuck up a sign telling visitors to avoid walking on the soft sand where plovers might be nesting. They went to the south corner where bits of rock had fallen from the cliffs and scattered through the sand. The walk had done Veronica some good. Her stomach was feeling better already. She found a hip-high rock at the bottom of the cliff and sat on it. The air was surprisingly still, with the kind of dissolving light that shrinks the distances between things. Somewhere high on the cliff birds were making comfortable noises thickened by the mist.

Veronica’s rock was lumpy. Roland was sitting in the sand with his back to her. She moved to sit beside him, wriggling carefully to make a hollow for her bottom, felt the cold and the damp seep in. It had been years since she had sat like this. For balance she found she had to lean forwards to grasp her knees, and that put pressure on her stomach. She leant backwards and took her weight on her arms.

She said, ‘Tell me about the pictures. Molly, Bertha, Roseanne.’

‘Rosanna.’

‘Silent.’

He squinted at the sand.

‘What’s that all about?’

This position wasn’t working either. Now it was her wrists and arms that couldn’t take it. She pushed herself up and moved to a low rock.

‘Did that bookshop woman put you up to that?’

‘No.’

‘She’s looking for you, you know. Lesley didn’t tell her where you were.’

‘Don’t worry about Judith. She’s just an observer.’

‘A what?’

‘She understands people. She sees the way things really ... Doesn’t matter.’

‘You put the drawings up on shop windows. What are they meant to convey? Is it some kind of memorial? Because one is a picture of Treen. I see that. But what are the others?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Roland. You see how it looks, what it’s doing. It looks as if you’re involved. It’s like an admission that you saw Treen dead. It connects you to her.’

‘I am connected to her.

‘Well that might be true but it’s best left until it’s sorted out.’

Another sigh.

‘What does it mean, anyway? Am I allowed to ask?’
He hated this. They stared out at the grey bay and, beyond that, Mercury Passage. The mist had thinned. She could make out Maria Island now, but it was just a blue shadow. It looked like some other kind of land, something whose substance was not stone but concentrated light.

‘Who’s Molly?’

‘Molly.’ He sighed. ‘Molly is a girl in Silas Marner.’

‘But she isn’t. There’s no Molly.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Roland. Please.’

‘She only gets a few lines. She’s in there. She dies. No one remembers. And Bertha and Rosanna. It’s all the same. Their deaths are just there to make the real story happen for someone else.’

‘Oh Roland.’ Is this what it really meant to him, the death of Treen, the mother of his child? He saw it in those terms?

‘And it’s that other thing too. She must be wicked to deserve such pain. It’s like what they did to Lesley.’

‘Except Lesley is real.’

‘But what does that mean?’

Suddenly she felt tired. She didn’t really want him to answer. She just wanted to sit here in silence.

But Roland started on one of his strange speeches. ‘Look, you think, Treen is dead, and you think about the time after you’re dead. It doesn’t seem real, does it? And then you think, Molly was never real so when she dies, does that make her more real or less real? Then you think, what is real? Maybe we’re just ghosts. I mean I know that’s stupid, but it makes you feel that, doesn’t it?’

Stay with us Roland. Stay in the real world.

‘And then I draw her or I draw Treen and I think I’ve caught her on the page. So now she’s only drawn but does that make her less real?’

This was her fault. At the thought she felt physically sickened again. She had made him like this. She felt she should tell him not to be so stupid and at the same time she felt she should be listening, trying to understand what it was he wanted to tell her. And she had the sense she often had, that she was failing him and that she would go on failing. She remembered saying it to Alan. You spend your early life trying to outgrow what your parents did to you, then you try to teach your children things. Then you decide to learn from your children and you think that position is enlightened, and you tell yourself you will soon be wise. But you end up finding out you know nothing at all.
Chapter 26

The building Roland had directed Veronica to was in Davey Street across from the Royal Tennis Court and a row of genteel Georgian buildings converted into professional rooms. Veronica knew this building. It had been referred to by the media recently as the ‘Old St Mary’s hospital’. There had been a development proposal which had stagnated, as Tasmanian development proposals tended to do.

Belle was to bring Mayson here. She was anxious to find them and make sure the boy was all right. Like all Roland’s plans this one seemed ill-conceived, too vague on detail. She found it hard to imagine that Belle would be able to get here without Dane knowing about it. Roland had said Gordon’s key was to a back door and she had been intending to go back there but, driving past, she saw that the front door was standing open. She braked, reversed, parked and sat for a moment, massaging her lower stomach and moving her back. Her stomach was feeling softer now, after only a few hours, the ache in it had dulled to the kind of pain that seemed to indicate repair, rather than serious damage.

The July sun sat low behind the town, leaving the old hospital in cold shadow. It was a beautiful building, or at least it would have been once. It had tall windows set in graceful pairs and gateposts of iron lacework topped with little spiral spikes. But many of its windows were broken, some covered with paper, some with torn blinds, and the stone was crumbling.

Veronica didn’t like old stone. There was something about it that reminded her of the decay of human flesh. The processes were the same – injury, infection, spotting, flaking, scars. The stonework of the old hospital had pockmarks and stains and the window ledges were chipped and cracked. At the top of the building sunlight fell on crenellations and silly ornamented gables, showing up their powdery texture and the broken spaces where chunks had fallen to the street.

A change in the lights sent a group of cars past. When they had gone she got out of the car and walked towards the door. The doors were double, set in a nest of pointed arches, painted faded red and covered in graffiti and shreds of paper from torn off posters. The open door appeared to be undamaged. It must have been unlocked from inside. On the closed door, held with sticky tape across the corners, there was Roland’s drawing of the falling girl, a white bodice, a patterned shawl, a blank face. Veronica couldn’t understand why he would have taped it there, after everything she had said. It was some kind of message for her, a statement of defiance. She pulled it down, folded it and put it in a pocket.

And as she did that someone started screaming.

It came from inside the building, long distressed sounds, rising and falling in tone and speed, nothing approaching the rhythms of human speech.
Her son and her grandson were in there. She took a step forward and as she did that the shouting stopped.

In the silence, a voice said, ‘A savage, a sharp, a shrilly sound.’ Judith was here, standing near an iron railing. She had come from Murray Street somewhere, or from Franklin Square.

Veronica ignored her. She pushed the door, banging it against the wall, and she called out, ‘Roland?’

But now the screaming had started again, and there were shuffling sounds. It came from upstairs somewhere and echoed around the building, disembodied, the way voices do in nightmares. Finally there was a long shriek, a thin wire of sound, ending in hysterical laughter.

She went through a small panelled space to a dingy hall surrounded by doors. On either side wooden stairs led to an upper floor, open to the hallway. As she came in she had a vague impression of movement somewhere, fleetingly, in the shadows up there, but when her eyes had adjusted to the light there was nothing there.

‘To cross the silent hall. To ascend the darksome staircase.’

Veronica turned. Judith was standing in the doorway, in the white light of the street. ‘You stay out please, Judith.’ Her voice was hard in the empty building. ‘This is bad.’

Of course she was revealing her own anxiety, talking like that, as if Judith was stupid, as if she could barely speak English. In response, the blotched face was twisted by a spasm. Whether this was outrage or inward laughter, or just a problem with nerves, Veronica couldn’t tell.

Now Belle appeared on the high walkway. Without looking down she ran lightly across and started down the stairs. She looked excited, wildly madly happy. She was wearing a flimsy white dress and over that some kind of shawl, silk by the movement of it, and very fine. The shawl drifted up behind her making her appear weightless. But as soon as she saw Veronica she became heavy again. She stopped suddenly, gripped the handrail, swung forward over her hands.

She stared at Veronica, open-mouthed, and then gave a mad laugh. ‘Two grannies!’ A splinter of light fell from somewhere on her hair. Veronica looked behind her. Judith was just stepping in through the doorway. Surely Belle couldn’t have seen her. She must have heard her.

Upstairs there was a shout and a door slammed. Belle gave another wordless cry and ran back up there. Veronica went slowly and stiffly up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs she went through a door to one of the front rooms. There was nobody in here. There were high windows facing the street, with light seeping through the paper covers, and signs of pathetic habitation – a pile of tangled bedding, a cardboard
carton with a packet of biscuits beside it on the floor, a bowl with brightly coloured cereal, a plastic take away container and the remains of a pie, giving off the sickening smell of warm cheese. There was a hole in the window covering and a brighter shaft of light fell across two champagne bottles and two glasses.

She heard a noise and went up another flight of stairs and through a glass and aluminium door.

And now it was as if she had stepped through into a different world, a grey place of twentieth century bureaucracy. She was in an empty office, with just an iron table and three electric fans. Above her two rectangular fluorescent lights hung down on wires. There was a low ceiling, a sense of trapped air and years of plodding, joyless labour.

‘Roland?’

Through another door into a corridor, on the left a long wall of doors and interior windows blocked by Venetian blinds, on the right dirty windows that looked over a yard, and out there, across a narrow space, another building, more dirty windows, another blind caught in a corner, hanging down in a tatty fan. There was a door at the far end. She went through there to another corridor. And at the end of this one there was a pile of metal and black and yellow tape, as if a barrier had been pulled down, and a door standing open, a rectangle of light, painfully bright against the gloom. She went to look. There was nothing through the door. Just a drop. The building was on a slope and the yard behind it was four floors below.

She shut the door. It swung open again. The catch wasn’t working. There was a thick piece of wire stuck into it.

No time to deal with that now. Behind her somewhere in the building Belle had started shrieking again. ‘...he’s not here! He’s not here! Don’t go down!’

Veronica followed the sound back to the first floor landing. Somewhere below there were other sounds, someone dragging furniture, a rumble and a crash, and then voices again, quieter this time, a jerky conversation full of rage, two voices overlapping, broken by silences. Veronica went back to the ground floor hallway and down a set of dark stairs, then through deeper darkness and a choking smell of mould towards a lighted room.

Belle was here and Dane was here with her. At her entrance they both froze. Dane was behind Belle, one hand on her shoulder, one gripping an upper arm as if he was making her walk somewhere. He had a scratch at the corner of an eye, with blood flowing down and smeared across a cheek. Belle’s dress had blood on it, and it was pulled sideways, the shawl twisted on one arm, half on the floor. Beside them was a steel office chair pushed onto its side. And beside the chair was Mayson.

He was lying on the floor. Her first thought was that he had been hit with the chair, but there was no mark. It looked more as if he was asleep. Drugged then. Drugged again.
Behind him a set of steel shelving had been tipped over and had caught on a filing cabinet so that it was lying above him at an angle. It might not have reached him if it had fallen, but it looked dangerous there, heavy and dark, a threat. Veronica had to get him out of here. She wondered if she could bend or lift him. And where was Roland? He should be here protecting his child. If he wasn’t here he was hurt somewhere. And there were other people. There had been noise upstairs, footsteps, voices.

‘Where’s Roland?’

Instead of answering, Dane gave Belle a shove and went out past her towards the stairs.

‘They don’t listen,’ said Belle.

It was a sharp contrast from the way she had looked only seconds ago on the stairs. The euphoria had gone but her eyes were wild and hot. The white dress was twisted, pulled tight, and under it bra and pants were both visible, tight elastic cutting into the softness of her. Her hair was wet with something. She stood behind Mayson and she had her legs slightly bent, as if she were ready to spring away. Or forwards.

Veronica wanted to go towards her, to pull her back, away from the child, but she didn’t know if she could physically manage it without damaging herself or being sick, and she didn’t know how Belle would react. The boy was in a deep sleep, as he had been in the shop, mouth open, limbs slack, eyelids so heavily closed the eyes seemed to have sunken slightly into his head. She wondered what his pulse would feel like. Belle pushed him with her foot, looking at Veronica.

‘Belle ...’

‘I’m not having it.’ She spoke peevishly. These were just fragments of thought, unconnected. ‘People like you.’

‘Has anything happened to Mayson? Is he hurt?’

‘You can’t have him. You’re not getting him now. I’ve got a better idea, better offer.’

But now as she spoke, Belle was looking past Veronica. Coming through the door was the woman from the gallery. Vicky.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came with Roland and Paul.’

‘Paul?’

‘We’ve come to help.’

At the word Veronica felt a rush of gratitude and weak tears. She fought them down. This big strong woman. Thank God.

Vicky was looking at Belle. ‘Hello.’ She started coming forward.
‘Wait. Please,’ said Veronica. She heard her voice shake, raised a hand, let it fall. Vicky stopped.

Belle said, ‘If you try to get him I’ll kick him. I’ll kick his head.’ She took an unsteady step sideways, but she was still behind Mayson.

Somewhere in the building there were shouts. One male voice, footsteps, a door banging. Dane, Roland, Paul.

But there was no time to think about that. Veronica kept talking. ‘Kids. Things happen to them. Accidents.’

‘He’s so fricken out of it. Dane won’t have it. But he doesn’t know.’

Vicky was moving now, going around behind Veronica in an arc, hoping, maybe, to come in from the side.

Purposefully, as if she had planned the move, Belle took another step sideways and picked up the chair. It was hard-backed, with heavy iron legs. She straightened and held it in front of her, showing it to Veronica. Her eyes looked dark, dilated. Her mouth was drawn back into the puffy cheeks, her chin twitching.

Veronica spoke even more quietly, ‘Vicky. Paul is here did you say? And Roland must be here somewhere. Are they all upstairs?’ She took another cautious step.

Belle said, ‘Roland’s found an empty house. We’re going to the coast. Away from Dane. House sitting.’ She seemed to be pleading with them, trying to persuade them of something, but her voice had begun to rise and she was holding the chair out in front of her. Her arm looked spotted, diseased. There was a tattoo on the tender inner skin, a flower, a butterfly, a patch of blood red. On the other wrist there was a bracelet with a big clunky clasp.

Veronica said, ‘Belle. I’m going to look at Mayson. I want to check his pulse.’ Another step.

But her urgency, her fear, wasn’t hidden well enough, because suddenly Belle was screaming at her. ‘I need him. I’m taking him away!’ She was swinging the chair now, jerking it around, four legs sticking out at them. ‘I didn’t hurt him! It isn’t me! And Treen’s dead. Dane won’t have it. I was just trying to say goodbye to him. I shouldn’t of taken all the shit but it’s hard.’

‘Dane isn’t here. He’s gone.’

‘It’s hard. He’s a bad kid. You don’t know. He’s bad. But it wasn’t me. You saw.’

Vicky stepped closer. Veronica concentrated on both arms, every fingertip. She took another step, very slowly, rolling forwards onto the ball of the foot.

‘I’ll hit you,’ said Belle simply, trembling. ‘I’ll hit him.’ She stepped sideways again and held the chair over the small figure on the ground. ‘I’ll hurt him.’ She moved her feet. ‘I’ll jump on him. I will.’
‘Vicky. You get the boy,’ said Veronica quietly.

She stepped forwards. Belle banged the chair on the filing cabinet, a sound like a gunshot, then she raised it above the head of the child. The noise had woken Mayson. He pushed himself onto all fours and stayed there with his head hanging down. Belle swung the chair.

Veronica charged at her. She felt moving air on a cheek as the chair swung sideways, but her forward movement took her into Belle’s body. Belle threw the chair at the child. One leg hit him in the head as it went past. He didn’t make a sound, fell back to the ground.

Veronica and Belle fell together onto the lino, heads against the filing cabinet. Veronica felt a white hot pain shoot upwards through her body. She convulsed as if vomiting but nothing came up. She grabbed blindly, hoping to hold Belle back, or at least to keep her own bulk between her and the child. Vicky had gone forwards too. She curled over Mayson. He was bleeding. She clutched him to her body and clambered to her feet, blood on her chest, droplets of blood thrown out as she spun away.

Belle let go of the chair. She leapt lightly up, away from Veronica, snatched up the shawl and ran.

Standing half-bent, Veronica took off her cardigan. Merino. It was all they had. She rolled it into a ball, straightened, ignoring the pain and pressed it to the boy’s head. Vicky took it and held it there. They went out to the next room. Vicky moved easily, unbothered by the weight of the child. There was another door here, pale in colour with a bar across it. From the stairs they could hear voices. They heard Belle, shouting, ‘Give it back, give it back!’ and a shriek, maddened, delighted. It was a long way up.

Veronica was desperate to get outside, get some fresh air. Any moment she felt she could be sick. She pushed the bar on the door and it moved. Now they were outside in a deep alley, surrounded by the ugly backs of buildings, industrial windows with slanting panes framed in brown steel, the backs of fans, a lot of pipes. Everywhere there were iron staircases – one beside her coming from a low porch, and much larger ones, fire escapes, painted grey, rusted.

‘Wait. I’ll ring an ambulance.’

Vicky stopped.

They were at a point where the building ended and the yard widened. Here there was parking space, still with the backs of buildings on all sides. A road went under a covered walkway into a dark area and then out to Murray Street. Another led to a cyclone wire gate at Salamanca Place. Veronica fumbled for the phone.
But before she could get it she was seized by a shoulder. Dane swung her around then, as she toppled, pushed her up against the wall of the building.

‘Are you happy yet?’

He pushed her by both shoulders, made a strangled noise of rage, pulled her forwards and shoved her back again, banging her head on the bricks. It sent a pain around the inside of her skull, another explosion of pain through her stomach.

‘I have to …’

He slammed her back into the wall. More pain, something in her pants, urine or blood.

‘You see who it was now. You see.’

‘He needs …’ She looked towards the open yard. Vicky had gone.

‘You fucking people.’ Dane shook her again, this time not hard enough to hit her head, but sending a pain through both shoulders. She pushed back. He held her steady.

‘What did she tell you? That I hit him? Do I look like a man who would do that?’

‘Yes.’

‘You fucking smart cow. Why don’t one of you open your eyes for once? She took photos for fuck’s sake. Who does that? You didn’t know them. They’re mad skanks. They’re insane. They’d take anything. All that shit about hand cream, that was just shit. That was all bullshit.’

She really was going to be sick. He shoved his face closer, his chest pressing into hers. ‘All they ever did was fill in time until they could get their hands on something. Es and dope and mushies.’

Something about the body contact sent him on a tangent. ‘She liked it up against the wall you know. She liked it hard. So you get that?’ He grabbed the side of her face pulling down on the cheek. She was sweating, a cold sweat on her face, through her hair. He didn’t seem to see. ‘She liked a big hot hard cock. Eh? You fat cunt. She liked a big hot cock.’ She couldn’t tell now whether he was talking about Treen or Belle, or all women.

‘That’s what she liked and next to that she liked money.’ He tapped her head back on the wall again and then let her face go. ‘And then she’d get her hands on something …’ He was speaking precisely now, separating the syllables. ‘… and if you mix things with al-co-hol,’ He shook her shoulders with every syllable. ‘They go mad. They were both so ma-a-ad. She belted him with a mop. She pushed him into a wall. There were other people there and she reckoned she was out of it. But the iron was in the morning. It was turned on. So she was straight that time. That time I think she was just in a bad mood.’

A tendon was screaming inside Veronica’s neck and a bone in her shoulders was pressing back into the bricks. Her stomach had cramped into a rock.
‘I was going to take him away. I thought he was my son.’ As he said that his eyes, so close to Veronica’s, filled with tears. He didn’t notice. The vein down the middle of his forehead swelled and pulsed. ‘An iron for Christ sake. As if I’d pick up an iron. She burned him. Have you ever been burned?

‘And they were so cold. Belle said they’d take the photos to the police and they’d blame me and the police would believe them. Well the police would believe them wouldn’t they? Everybody does. And in the meantime they’d be there with Mayson and I wouldn’t be there to protect him. They took photos of that poor little kid. She stood him up and took off his clothes and took a photo. And he didn’t yell, because they kept giving him these fucking sleeping pills. The outright fucking whores. They’re witches. I tell you they’re fucking witches.’

He had lowered his gaze. He wasn’t seeing her. The grip on her shoulders had relaxed but he was leaning on her now. ‘I thought he was mine.’

‘He’s Roland’s. Let us take him.’

He looked up, shocked. ‘You fuckin’ cow.’ He said it quietly and quickly the way someone else would say shut up. ‘Was it you?’

‘What?’

‘You didn’t want her around. Is that how you do it, you people? You just get rid of people.’

There were sounds coming from the building. Footsteps, voices, a door slamming.

‘You mad fuckin’ ugly bitch.’ He was drained now. He pushed away from her, stood swaying, hands hanging limply. Then he went out under the building towards Murray Street.

Veronica started fumbling for the phone again.

There was a tiny sound above her. She looked up. The end wall of the building was covered in bolts and bits of iron and there were rust stains where a fire escape had been removed. Four floors up, she could see the open door leading to empty space. At the moment she lifted her head a figure flew out of it.

For a moment it seemed to stop there, but that was an illusion. The figure split into two. One part, darkly coloured, moved slowly, spread and curled and hovered, while the rest, something hard and white, fell. It hit the ground with a dull sound. Then, shockingly, there was silence.

Belle. The shawl drifted down and landed a few feet away.

She looked like a little girl, lying on her stomach, head turned to the side. A small girl in a white slip of a dress. A bracelet with a heavy lock. Her stringy hair was spread across her face, which was probably merciful. Veronica could see only the corner of a lip, too fat, and a jaw bone that was too high, pushed out of line. There was blood, of course, but
surprisingly little. And little else to see. All the real damage would be inside, broken bone, punctured, shattered organs, bleeding, all inside the little soft body, all hidden under a white dress.

Veronica went to stand over her. Belle’s head was in the wrong position, an impossible position, her neck badly bent. Dane had done that in the kitchen, he had bent that neck back until she couldn’t speak. And now something had snapped.

She had stood like this before. With Belle, over a figure on the ground. Just a few minutes ago. She had been speaking to Belle, asking her what had happened. She had been running up stairs. Up, and down, hearing things, not finding anyone. It was a nightmare. She kept repeating herself, cycling through sequences, asking people things, not understanding, not understanding where the voices were coming from, how people had got where they were.

A bracelet, closed with a lock. A necklace, a drawing of a noose.

More sounds from inside. A single voice, calm firm, confident, calling to the empty building. ‘Police.’

Her muscles were weakening and for some reason she had a terrible pain, deep in her stomach. Behind her there was a car pulling up to the wire gate in Salamanca and past the car she could see St David’s Park, impossibly beautiful, a deep, watery green.

One of Belle’s arms, the arm diseased with ink, was broken. There was a piece of jagged bone sticking through, tearing at the flesh. A compound fracture. Why did they call it that? What was compounded? Veronica was sitting on the ground. She leaned over the girl, put a hand on the broken arm, tried to cover it, pressed it into the soft body.

Behind her a voice said, ‘A moment you must and cannot have.’ Veronica turned as far as she could. There was only movement, the door to the building slowly closing. A smell of rotting lavender stalks.

A bit of Belle’s dress was out to the side. There was a lump, something in a pocket. Veronica put her hand there. It was hard and round. She put her fingers in. It was a stone, white, smooth. And not far from where she was sitting there was the shawl. Dragons and lotus flowers. Silk. Heavy, flowing falling silk. It had floated behind Belle on the stairs. For a moment she had appeared weightless. But now she had fallen. In her white nightie. Like the girl. There had been a picture of this. Roland had drawn it. The shawl was the same.

She couldn’t stand it. Belle lying like this. She would fix it. She wouldn’t have to look at the face. She got onto her knees, leant forward, lifted the girl’s head, the little girl’s hugely heavy head. She tried to put it back into line, into the right line, but there was nothing to help her, nothing in the neck at all. There seemed to be a space.

Later, in nightmares, Veronica would have a vision of this break in the young woman’s neck. It would come to her mixed with memory of her own pain. In the dreams
she would see it as an actual space, a place where the neck was held together only by skin, like a broken wire inside a rubber sheath. The image was to stay with her for years. Belle, the falling girl, this poor ruined girl, would return to her again and again, nightly, daily. In quieter moments she would wonder at this strange kind of immortality.

Someone was standing over her, then squatting, a police woman.

‘Don’t touch her please, madam.’ A young woman, a round, dimpled face. She was speaking softly, as if Veronica was the child, the hurt one. ‘Did she fall? Please don’t touch her. Can you just sit back, please, and let me see?’

‘No,’ said Veronica. ‘There’s no need.’ She didn’t need to see. She should be spared it. They should all be spared.

The young woman turned away, spoke into a radio.

Words came into Veronica’s head. Policemen are getting younger. It made her want to laugh. It was a joke she had with Alan. Not just policemen. Waiters, dentists, cyclists, receptionists … all getting younger. But this was a double joke because this really was a policeman. Like the original saying. Policemen. Policewoman. Child.

She had to pull herself together. This poor young thing had to be protected, from the arm, the face, the neck.

Because there was nothing to be gained. The blood had stopped flowing, had almost not flowed at all. And Veronica had seen two wet glints, Belle’s eyes, open slightly, shining in the sickly white and yellow light. And that was something that this kind stranger, this young woman, Georgie’s age, turning back to her now, squatting again, needed to know. There was nothing to be done.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. She wanted to spare her. She wanted to say, ‘You stand over there. I’ll deal with this.’ That is what she – old Veronica – would have said. But when she heard herself speaking it wasn’t that.

‘I don’t understand.’
Chapter 27

This time they kept her much longer. And they asked her about Roland. From somewhere she dredged up some intelligence. She was able to describe the events in the old hospital exactly as they had happened, except that she omitted Roland and Vicky and Paul. She said Belle had left Mayson and run upstairs and she had gone out the back looking for help and met Dane. Then Belle had fallen.

She said she didn’t know what had happened to Mayson. She had to trust that Vicky had looked after him properly, got him to Roland, got him to hospital.

As far as she could tell, the police hadn’t found anyone in the old building. It hadn’t been detectives who had come, just a couple of uniformed officers, sent to investigate reports of a disturbance. They had come in through the front door and straight downstairs to the yard and the security guards had come in from Salamanca. Whoever had been upstairs with Belle must have slipped out the front door.

Things could so easily be revealed, by a flicker of an eye or a hesitation, or a tone of voice. She didn’t mention the drawing stuck to the door, which was still in her pocket. She said she didn’t know who Judith was. She said she was just a mad old drunk, which was true. A savage a sharp a shrilly sound.

She said she had visited Belle, once in her shop and once at her house, out of a sense of connection and responsibility, having been the one who had found Treen, and out of concern for Treen’s child. Belle had asked her to come to the old hospital at three thirty, to help her to settle in and, despite the fact that she disapproved of squatting, Veronica had agreed to do that. She had not known what she would find. She had been hoping to find a way to help Belle look after the little boy.

Constructing all this had been exhausting.

She said that at the old hospital she had tried to talk some sense into Dane and Belle, but she had been swept aside. She assumed Belle’s death was a tragic accident, that the high door must have been accidentally left open by builders, that the builders would have had no way of knowing there would be intruders. But she was appalled by it. As a mother herself she felt sickened, and she would do anything required to help them find out what had happened.

She didn’t mention the bone, or the moment you must and cannot have, or the space in the neck.
Chapter 28

Lesley rang Roland to find out how the afternoon had gone and he told her the dreadful story. Paul and Vicky had come with him to the old building to make sure Belle and Mayson were all right, but Dane had already found them. They had arrived in time to see Dane running upstairs. Paul and Roland had followed him and found the champagne bottles. Vicky had heard noises downstairs and had helped rescue the little boy from Belle. Then the boys had tried to subdue Belle, who was in some kind of wild state. They didn’t see Dane again. Belle had run away from them through the building and at some point she had fallen from a high door and been killed.

Roland hadn’t known how the door had come to be open, and he didn’t want to discuss that. He was distraught, of course. No matter how dysfunctional the two young women had been, they had been his friends once.

Roland said he had taken the little boy to Miriam Coelli’s. At ten that night Lesley drove there, thinking there might be something she could do. But when she got there she could see Malcolm Norden’s car and Jocelyn Cartwright’s Peugeot and a square old ute that must belong to that farm woman from Cygnet. So she decided she probably wasn’t needed, not straight away. Her time would come later.

But instead of driving away, she sat looking at Miriam’s house. It was a pleasant enough place, quite attractive for this part of the Bay – white painted stone behind a black railing. The front garden had a birch, a willow and a Japanese maple, all delicately bare, and a set of that wiry white garden furniture that was often described as French. It was a kind place, a home that was cared for, in which the people would be cared for. She was a good sort of person, Miriam Coelli, in her way. Responsible and competent, carefully groomed. She ran a good solid business and she had raised three excellent children, all with decent careers. One was studying law. Yes. A good woman. A good mother.

And she still saw her children. Two had stayed in Hobart and the third, if Veronica was to be believed, was always popping down from Melbourne. Good children. Good relationships.

Not like Lesley. Not like Paul. Paul with his quick passions, his exhaustion, his resentments, his demons. Her mother had been right. Our children are put on earth to cause us pain. Paul had grown away from her. It had been a steady process, and a wilful one, from the day he was born. And now he was beyond her reach.

She opened her bag on the passenger seat and took out her notebook. She would wait a bit longer, just to see who went in and who came out, and to see if she might be needed for something and in the meantime she would think about her monologue. It wasn’t going to be a performance, now. That idea was gone. And, she realised – she had always
known – Roland had never intended that it should be. But there was something she had thought of now, something she could write that would help him. She would sit here and make notes, jot down an idea or two and then she would go and tell him. And Roland had been right about Mary McLaughlan. She was the key.

She looked again at Roland’s drawing of Mary. In it, Mary’s mouth was small and ragged, like a hole worn through old cloth, a rough, angry, unforgiving hole. Mary McLaughlan murdered her own child. There is nothing to be understood about that. Lesley didn’t want to understand her. Other women suffered and they didn’t do that. But if you thought about it, really thought about it, closely, in the way Roland had wanted her to, if you tried to live the sensations …

Mary killed her own baby. She put her hands on his tiny throat and squeezed, or she put a hand over his mouth and nose. What would that feel like? Or she had pushed his face into something. It was unbearable to think about this. Maybe that is why there were so many books about this, about prison conditions and chaplains and crowds at hangings and the things people said about other people. Because we can’t bear to think about what lay behind it all. The actual reality, the feeling of it.

But Lesley was thinking about it, as Roland had wanted. What is it like to seize a child’s throat and squeeze? The neck would have felt soft, and so tiny. That skin, those frail fibres. That hot hard silky head.

One night, when he had been staying at her place for a while, when was distressed and exhausted, Roland had told her something dreadful. Treen hurt the little boy herself. Hurt her own son. He didn’t know what to think about that. He said she was unhappy and unhealthy. That she deserved understanding. But that was because he wasn’t thinking about what it really was.

What is it like to hit a child with a broom, or burn him with an iron? What could it be like to pick up a little body and hurl it into a wall? How would it be to do something like that, what would it feel like, what would your hands actually feel?

Mary McLaughlan was treated badly but she made choices. Treen made choices. For these women to do something like this shows them to be something other than us. They are monstrous. Evil. ‘Evil’ is an old-fashioned, discredited word, an idea out of favour. But what other word could there be? Treen banged her child’s head into a wall, broke it, broke his ribs. What could be worse than that? It is the worst thing you can imagine.
Chapter 29

The police kept Veronica’s car and her clothes, with Roland’s drawing carefully folded in the pocket of her pants. They had her examined by a doctor, who said she was bruised but otherwise all right. Detective Sergeant Collins implied that he knew who had killed Treen and that there would be an arrest soon. He told her to stay at home and rest and not to interfere. Some time after midnight they brought her home and this time they came in, looking carefully around them, hoping, maybe to find Roland, or signs that he’d been there. She was sure that they suspected Roland. She couldn’t allow them to arrest him. If they did who knew how Roland would behave? He would make statements about oppression and stories and literature and silent women. He would reek of dope. Who knew what sort of trouble he would make for himself.

In the kitchen there was a note on the bench. It was from Miriam.

GNOCCHI IN THE FRIDGE.

Veronica didn’t know how Miriam had become involved in this but she had apparently felt the need for some kind of clumsy subterfuge. When the police had gone Veronica opened the fridge. There was a Pyrex dish in there, full of gnocchi. Stuck to the top of it there was another message.

YOUR GRANDSON. I’VE GOT HIM.

So there was no question of staying here and resting. Veronica scarcely waited until the police had driven away and then she took Alan’s car and went out.

She was tired and dazed. She had a stomach ache, a back ache and a headache, and now, for no good reason, even her arms and legs felt tender and sore, but it was all manageable. There was a lump on the back of her head, but it felt as if she had recovered from the brain-jolt caused by being bashed back into the wall. There were pictures that threatened to flood her – a steel leg going into Mayson’s head, blood on Vicky’s arm, blood dripping to the floor. Belle. These weren’t just static pictures. They were threads, tight-wound like springs held under pressure, ready, at any moment, to unwind into long trails – Belle in a white dress and a shawl, slipping from senseless euphoria into senseless rage, fighting with Dane, screaming at him, swinging the chair, then running, playing some kind of game, shrieking with excitement. ‘Give it back. Give it back.’ Then Belle coming to the
open doorway, laughing, tripping. Or being pushed. Or maybe at that point she had been running in terror, blindly. Or maybe she had been dragged.

Did she know what was happening? Did she have time to care? Veronica tried to picture it, the fall, the cold air, the lurch downwards. How much could a mind register? Had there been time for real fear? For regret? A second of wordless longing for life, for ... what?

There was no time for these thoughts. At least there was no time to stand still indulging them. They couldn’t be stopped. She would just have to be carry them with her. It was like the wine bottle, Paul’s dismissive solution. Bring it.

She drove to Miriam’s and pulled up, looking through the railing. There was one bedroom window softly lit, curtains closed. It was nearly one o’clock. She got out and started up the path, but before she got to the house the door opened and a young woman tiptoed out. She saw Veronica, made some incomprehensible hand gesture, shut the door quietly, then came closer and whispered, ‘Have you come to see the little kid?’

It was Liz from Miriam’s shop. Drippy Liz.

‘Is he all right?’

‘Don’t go in.’ She gestured meaninglessly again, pulled Veronica by the arm, back to the cars. ‘They’ve just got him asleep. They’ll kill you.’

‘He’s all right?’

‘He’s a nightmare. The doctor said he was all right. Malcolm. He’s gorgeous isn’t he? God. He gave him stitches. In the kitchen. It was like ... something on TV. Just with Betadine and things. We were all running around. Then he wouldn’t sit down.’

‘Who?’

‘He totally wrecked the place. There is stuff just everywhere and you know what Miriam’s like. I said the stitches would come undone but Miriam said they wouldn’t. In the end Karen and Miriam just basically sat on him and Jocelyn started singing. It was unbelievable. It ended up with all of us on the bed and eventually he went to sleep and everyone else did too, or Karen might have been pretending. But I can’t sleep. Jocelyn is snoring. It was just hilarious. So don’t go in there. They’ll kill you.’

‘All right.’

‘They told you about it, did they?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘They’re hiding him from his Dad. He’s violent. They can’t go to the police or he’ll end up in a foster home. In the morning they’re going to find his real Dad or his grandparents or something like that. Jocelyn’ll have to do it, though. Miriam’s got the shop. I’ve got a week in Noosa.’
'All right.'
'So don’t go in.'
'All right.' Veronica went back to the car, huddled into the car rug and her down jacket, and waited.

There was a hand on her chest. A voice spoke quietly. ‘Yoohoo.’
Veronica opened her eyes. Morning.
Karen said, ‘Come and see this.’
Chapter 30

It was painful getting out of the car but by the time she got to the house she was loose enough to move properly. Georgie was here. She was in the family room with Miriam. The TV was showing cartoons, muted. Georgie stood up, came straight over and threw her arms around Veronica, held her tight, squeezed, drilled her forehead into her shoulder.

‘Hi George,’ said Veronica.

‘This is …’ Georgie was teary, which wasn’t like her.

‘Yes. I know.’

Georgie was looking at her properly now. ‘Mum. What’s happened to you?’

‘I’m all right.’

Miriam stood up. ‘Roland brought Mayson here yesterday evening. He had Paul with him, and someone called Vicky. They did a lot of talking. Apparently the child is Roland’s – I don’t even want to go there. Apparently he needs to be hidden from a violent man. They said you’d be looking for him. So I rang Joss and Karen and we’ve been looking after him. We called Karen’s friend, the paediatrician. He looked at the cut on his head and put some clips on it and said he’d be all right.

‘But that’s a matter if opinion. He’s a little delinquent.’ As she spoke, there were noises from the kitchen – Jocelyn speaking quietly, trying to sound amused, then sounding worried, then a cry of alarm and a crash, breaking china.

‘Anyway, I thought Georgie should be here. I mean she’s the auntie, apparently. And also he’s one of those kids young career women should see …’ Jocelyn and Karen appeared in the kitchen door, holding a struggling Mayson. ‘… what we call a good contraceptive.’

The Three Snarks. Her friends were helping. A kind of family. Veronica had a rush of warm tears and felt her knees dip. She caught herself.

Mayson was wearing only underpants and a safety pin. Jocelyn sat with him in front of the TV and he began playing with a cardboard carton and some pieces of Styrofoam.

Miriam said, ‘We’ve given him other things to play with but every now and then he hurls something or whacks it into a wall. Joss thought this stuff would do the least damage. But now all he wants to do is break it up.’

Jocelyn pushed some crumbled foam behind her and Miriam swept it into a dustpan.

‘We’ve washed him. More or less.’

Georgie stood beside Veronica both arms still wrapped tightly around her waist. She was pressing on the sore stomach but if anything it seemed to be helping. There was a
silence in which they all smiled feebly at each other. There was a lot more to say, but no one knew where to begin.

‘His stuff’s in the dryer. I’ve sent Annie off to Target for some clothes and nappy pants. She’s happy. Any excuse not to do assignments. We’ve all had about four hours sleep.’

Mayson threw his Styrofoam down. He went up to Jocelyn and threw himself sideways into her back. The hair above one temple had been shaved. There was a row of white stitches there. It was a very short cut. No visible bruising.

‘We’ve tried avocado, cheese, pears and Savoys. We’re not getting very far. I said give him sugar but Jocelyn won’t let me.’

Karen picked up the pashmina. ‘Do you think he’s cold?’ When no one answered she added, ‘He seems all right.’ Then she looked at Veronica. ‘Are you all right?’

She couldn’t form an answer.

‘Veronica’s all right,’ said Miriam. ‘She has to go in a minute to find Roland.’

‘Yes, I …’

‘He’s with Paul. They rang and brought Mayson here. He said it’s his child. He said he can’t go to hospital because of some custody issue, is that right? Anyway, Mal agreed to stitch him up here. I don’t know what his legal position is. We didn’t talk about it. We thought we would just …’, she waved a hand at Mayson and Jocelyn and the TV, ‘… wait for things to sort themselves out.’ Miriam and Jocelyn looked at each other. Karen swept up some more foam. ‘Roland said something bad had happened. Another bad thing.’

‘I’ll go and find him.’

Everybody seemed to be in a daze. Mayson picked up his piece of foam, hit the carton with it and then began sliding it around on the walls. Veronica knew she should be going towards him, touching him, trying to generate some tender feeling.

‘It’s all I seem to do. Look for Roland.’ That sounded weak, teary.

‘I’ll come,’ said Georgie.

‘Oh Porge. I think you should stay here. At least he’ll have one family member.’

She looked at Miriam who understood.

‘Oh yes. You’re not getting out of this,’ said Miriam. ‘You’re the auntie. You can jolly well help with the monster.’

Veronica sat on a couch and Georgie sat beside her. The light from the TV was vivid, shifting, nauseating. Mayson put his polystyrene down. He leant forwards over his knees and put his forehead on the floor. Karen picked him up and took him to Veronica.

‘He’s got funny toes,’ said Karen. She put him on Veronica’s knee. Miriam came over with a small wooden box which he snatched and pressed to his bare stomach.
Veronica needed to look at him. Tired as she was – numb as she was – she had to make an effort. She had been so worried about him, desperate to get to him. He had been hurt in front of her. And now here he was. Her grandchild. It no longer seemed real.

‘Funny kind of webbed toes. Oh he is freezing.’ Karen sat next to her and held Mayson’s feet in her hands, trying to warm them up. ‘Not webbed exactly. Just two toes. The skin is longer and thicker than normal.’

Mayson leant sideways against Veronica. He closed the box, pushed the little catch down, struggled to open it again. A piece of dribble had fallen on his chest. Veronica wanted to wrap her arms tightly around him to keep him warm, but something told her this would be resisted. She put her arms either side of him, hands on her knees.

Karen said, ‘I had an aunt with a double little finger. I grew up knowing it was a bit shameful, that because no one else in the family had it, it meant she might not be one of us. Of course now I think maybe they were suspecting she had a different father. I remember Mum saying something about my Nan and her friend Dennis as if it was very significant, but I never found out who Dennis was.’

‘Oh. Ha…’

‘You don’t look like somebody’s grandmother,’ said Miriam.

‘Too young?’

‘You look like somebody’s nightmare.’

‘Oh well,’ Karen laughed. ‘The things we do, eh? The things life brings us.’

The weight of Mayson, the smell, the reality of him had Veronica thinking about Belle and Treen. If Dane was to be believed, and she couldn’t help thinking he was, they were the ones who had hurt the child. Roland and Paul had dropped hints, hadn’t they? She couldn’t remember. Maybe they weren’t sure. They had known that the two girls were wild and erratic, that the child hadn’t been looked after. But Treen hadn’t been just an unsuitable mother, but something much, much worse. She had hurt her little boy, thrown him around. This tiny, silky body. It was impossible to imagine. His left forearm still had faint marks, darker skin. Veronica wanted to look at his back to see if there were traces of the bruises. She looked at his head, fine dark hair. Somewhere under it there was a healed fracture. It was sickening, unthinkable, beyond her imagination.

But what did that tell her about Treen and Belle’s deaths? Dane had been trying to protect Mayson from them. That meant that he had a good reason to kill them both. But he had been with Veronica in the yard when Belle had fallen. And if he had wanted to kill Treen, he wouldn’t have done it by leaving her on the mountain. And he didn’t know about Two Biscuit Rock.
Dane thought Roland had killed Treen. Or Veronica. He thought Roland or Veronica had killed her to get to the child. He was in a rage, illogical, but that is what he had thought.

On the day she died, Treen had said she was going for a drive with someone. She was going to be given money. But it was Belle who had told Veronica that and she was unreliable. Or had Roland had said it too? She tried to remember. Treen had gone for a drive with someone and had texted him from Two Biscuit Rock.

What about Belle? Someone had unlocked that door, jammed the catch, removed the protective barrier. There had been footsteps in the building. Belle was a difficult person, unlikeable. She had been insisting on staying with Mayson. If Roland was to live with Mayson he wouldn’t want Belle around. She, Veronica, had felt that. Belle would have been a constant problem. Still not enough reason to kill her.

On the other hand she had been saying she knew who had killed Treen.

That was to be all the time she had to think. Mayson got off her knee and went back to Joss. He hit her back with the wooden box, put it down and picked up the carton. The TV was showing an animation of a barren planet. Large lumpy reptilian things were lumbering around on two legs, holding tennis racquets. There was a splash of water and one of them fell over. Mayson snapped a piece of polystyrene and took half of it to Karen, next to her on the couch. He tried to climb onto her knee and she helped him up. Veronica smelled Karen’s perfume, light, herbal, floral, a young fragrance for a young girl. She put the pashmina around him. Mayson snuggled into her soft chest and started crumbling the broken ends of his polystyrene stick. He looked the way he did when Veronica had first seen him, downy hair, his face smoothed and softened in concentration.

‘Don’t let him eat that,’ said Miriam. She picked up the dustpan.

Mayson’s feet were sticking out of the pashmina. For the first time Veronica realised what Karen had been telling her. She could see now, his third and fourth toes were joined to half way up. She had seen feet like this before. She tried to remember, and to work out what it meant, but her mind was soft. It wouldn’t go in a straight line.

She said, ‘I have to go.’
Chapter 31

As always, the best way to find Roland was to look for Paul. They had taken Mayson to Miriam’s together. So, find Paul. Veronica just had to keep going around in the same circles.

Paul and John had an apartment by the water in lower Sandy Bay, but they were having a floating myrtle floor put in, and they had been living behind John’s workshop. This was an old seed store at the top of Collins Street, a heavy building of red brick with black bricks making a diamond pattern. Veronica parked in a laneway beside a skip full of broken plasterboard. She had eaten a biscuit at Miriam’s and had moved too quickly to and from the car. As she approached the building she turned aside and was sick behind an old air conditioner. Then she hammered on a side door.

The door was opened by Vicky. She led the way to a large room with a concrete floor and two small arched windows, frosted and too high to see through. There was a large table down the middle. Around the walls were benches and shelves holding jeweller’s tools and rows of old clocks in wood and brass. The flat greenish-white light emphasised the stillness of everything, the way things sit and watch you.

John Oh was at a bench near the door. Beside him was a small block of grey stone with some tools and pieces of silver, all lit by a very bright desk lamp. There were pieces from convict range – necklaces fastened by nooses, fat round bracelets with clunky clasps. He had a magnifying glass on a head piece, but it was tilted up out of his vision. He watched Veronica come in.

‘Ah.’ He looked stunned, exhausted and more like Paul than ever. His hair had curled up under the band of the head-piece. His skin was tight, with dips in the centre of his cheeks and he was a bad colour.

‘What happened?’ said Veronica. ‘What happened to Belle? Who was there?’

He closed his eyes. ‘Paul isn’t here.’

Vicky moved to stand near John. In front of him, leaning on a set of tiny drawers, there were two coloured drawings in frames. They weren’t Roland’s. They were brightly coloured works in ink, thick black lines and vivid patches of colour, cobalt, green, vermilion, gold. A dragon and a lotus flower.

‘I’ve seen these,’ said Veronica. She shouldn’t be asking about this, couldn’t work out what it meant. ‘These pictures were on a silk shawl. Belle was wearing it last night. It fell. She died.’ The small heavy body, the sound.

John frowned. ‘It was an old shawl of Lesley’s. Paul copied the drawings.’ He didn’t know what this meant, either, or why they were talking about it. He looked around the room. ‘It was here somewhere.’

Behind her Paul said, ‘I took it away.’
Before she turned she saw John’s face change, from uncertainty to anger.

Paul was drunk. Not happily so – he was horribly, tragically, destructively drunk. His T-shirt was wrinkled and gaping at the neck as if he had slept in it, and a scarf of fine linen check had fallen from one side, so that it was slung across a shoulder and about to slip off altogether. He had high spots of colour on cheeks and chin, and his lips were wet and loose.

He came forwards unsteadily, passed Veronica with a smirk and went to stand where John had been working. He peered at the silver things under the bright light. ‘How’s it going, John? Not clocking today? Doing rings? What is it going to be when you’ve finished with the convict line? Not the Chinese stuff I did for you? Something simple?’ To steady himself, he put both hands on the table, then he tried to disguise the movement by studying the work more closely. ‘Something for old Vicky to flog to tourists?’

Veronica, John and Vicky stood in a row watching him. He picked up the picture of the lotus flower. ‘Do you know what I like?’ He turned to face them. ‘Buds. I like buds. They’re so full of …’ He stood back too quickly, took a step to keep balance. ‘… promise.’ Wet giggles.

‘You’re feeling guilty about something,’ said John coldly. ‘What have you done?’

‘Ooh, you’re a sly one.’ Paul knocked a small tool to the floor, didn’t notice. Vicky picked it up and replaced it. ‘Don’t be fooled by this modest exterior, Veronica. This confused, nerdy, picky and, if I may say so, rather pasty exterior. Forget about the artist stuff, and the whole Swiss clockmaker thing. He only went there to meet other little Swiss clockmakers. When I met him he’d just spent six months shagging his way up and down the Sunshine Coast.’

This was adolescent behaviour, the desire to shock. And Paul’s face wasn’t made for venom. It was a childish face, and as it had matured, instead of becoming defined, it had softened. It was a face for gentleness, for irony, a quiet joke. Not for pain. And that, the sight of all that pain in the wrong kind of face, in Paul’s face, was dreadful to see.

‘Paul, stop this.’ She went to a corner and dragged over a chair, then, sending Vicky stepping out of the way, grabbed him from behind, turned him around and pushed him into it. ‘John, I’m so sorry.’

Paul was grinning with what he hoped was defiance, but he was looking bereft. John came over and put a hand on his shoulder. Paul shook him off. ‘And he’s a hopeless businessman,’ said Paul. ‘So much for being Hongkongkenese. And he doesn’t love me anyway. He’s only here for the gallery and the workshop.’

‘No,’ said John. ‘I could make jewellery anywhere. I’m here because I love you.’ It was something he had had to say before, many times.

‘He won’t when he knows all my secrets.’
John took the picture out of his hands and put it carefully back in its place in front of the jewellery he’d been working on. ‘Where have you been all night?’

‘Over at Sandie’s,’ said Paul, suddenly morose. ‘So no need to be jealous. It was all totally innocent and sad and depressing. We were just boozing. And even poor old Sandoranda couldn’t stand me last night. She left me with a bottle of Delord Bas Armagnac and went to bed.’

Veronica said, ‘Paul. What happened yesterday? What happened to Belle? I know you were there.’

But he was talking to John now. ‘She wants a child. Can you credit that? PoorartyfartyfattyabuckleSandie.’

Veronica said, ‘Stop this.’ She took his chin in her fingers and tipped it to face her.

‘Just you listen to me. I don’t care what sort of petty problems you think you’re dealing with. Something terrible has happened.’

‘Something? Many things.’ The grin faded. ‘Many terrible things. Many terrible things before breakfast.’ His gaze had fallen to the floor. He swayed. ‘You used to read that, Veronica. Six impossible things. That was a long time ago.’ By some association of ideas he looked at the shelf of clocks. ‘Nothing ever comes back, does it? It goes around but it never ...’

‘Paul stop it. A girl died.’ It didn’t seem real. Belle. Paul looked confused, not just about what she was telling him, more deeply than that. It looked as if he didn’t understand what words meant.

‘You were there, Paul.’

‘She was evil.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Haven’t you got it yet? They hurt that child. Treen did it. But Belle was there too. They blamed everyone else. Treen didn’t even ever admit it, even to herself. But it was her. She hurt Mayson and she lied. She deserved to die.’

‘Paul.’

‘And Belle was no better.’

‘You know about her falling. You know who did it.’

He was sitting with his wrists along the wooden arms of the chair, a foot on each leg, as if ready for an execution. ‘I did it. You did it. You were there. You didn’t save her.’

‘It’s not the same thing. That isn’t an act.’

Paul’s chair was a heavy square thing, dark wooden arms, rattan backed, a corduroy seat. He stood up and grabbed it by the arms, as if he was going to move it somewhere.
Vicky began moving towards him. He looked up. ‘You didn’t save her, Vick. You were too busy saving the baby. Being a hero. A family hero. Which is hilarious. And horrible. Poor old Vicks. Maybe you’re the one who should be the mother. Maybe we should have a kid.’ His eyes filled with tears. ‘Oh no. We can’t do that, can we? You and me.’

Veronica pushed the chair to the ground and turned him to face her. ‘Where’s Roland?’

He nodded. ‘Family.’

Vicky came closer. ‘Paul.’

‘No. Come on. Tell her.’

‘No.’

‘No, you’re right, it’s gross.’ He put a hand on Vicky’s shoulder and pushed her.

Vicky said, ‘Sit down.’

‘No.’ He looked at Veronica. ‘She’s my sister.’ He pushed Vicky again. ‘No one’s supposed to know. Half-sister. She’s Mum’s daughter. But Mum’s ashamed of her. So we’re looking after her.’

‘That’s enough,’ said John. ‘This isn’t the time.’

‘Is it true?’

‘We’re just going to go.’ John picked up a lap top and a pair of sunglasses.

Paul said, ‘I don’t want to talk about it. I’m not supposed to talk about it.’

‘Vicky is your Mum’s child? The child she had taken away? You mean she found her?’

‘Vicky found us. Mum doesn’t want her.’

‘What?’

‘It’s all right,’ said Vicky.

‘Mum …’ Paul was running out of energy now. He sat in the chair. ‘She doesn’t like me, either. She likes John because he’s always so clean.’

‘We’re leaving.’ John took Vicky by the arm. They didn’t move.

Paul said to Veronica, ‘And you want Roland. I don’t know where he is.’

John said, ‘Roland’s gone to Lesley’s. Something about a photo.’

She should have known. She thought of the album at the Shanty Shack, the photo on Paul’s desk in the gallery, the boys on the beach – Gordon, Paul, Roland.

Paul was suddenly serious. ‘So you’re going there?’

‘Of course I am.’

‘Of course you are.’ For some reason the idea made him sadder than ever. And sour. ‘Roland’s your family isn’t he, Veronica? So now you go charging off to help him. Because he’s your family.’ He was exhausted. He sat back in the chair, hands on the straight
arms as if they were strapped there and as she left he shouted after her. ‘Is that why? Is that what you’re telling me? That it’s all about blood?’
Chapter 32

Nine in the morning. Gordon answered the door. He tried to assume his natural role as the gallant, the courteous man of the house. ‘Veronica. This is becoming a bit of a habit.’ But there was something wrong.

‘Gordon?’

‘The police have been here. A girl has died at the Davey Street buildings. She was a break in. But they used my keys. Someone got a key from my study and used it to let her in. And now she’s died there.’ He was red, sweating. ‘They were asking about Roland. I’m not going to lie any more. That was the last time. I said we hadn’t seen him. I don’t know why I’m still doing that. I’ve got a name in the town. I’ve got a family of my own to think about.’

‘Is he here?’

He stood back with a frustrated grunt.

Lesley was behind him. She said, ‘He rang. He’s coming here.’

‘I’ve just come from Paul.’

‘Oh Paul.’

‘What do you mean, Roland’s coming?’

‘He’s on his way. Walking. Or running, I think. He’s trying to stay out of sight. He’ll be here any minute.’

Veronica looked behind her. There was no sign of Roland in the street.

‘Come inside,’ said Lesley.

In the kitchen. Lesley moved nervously around picking things up. There was a laptop open on the table showing a page of text, but she quickly closed it. She started chattering meaninglessly. ‘I’ve bought some spanakopita. I know it’s more like breakfast time, but Roland likes it and I think he’ll need a good meal, don’t you?’

The kitchen was light and warm. There was a wisp of steam, strangely golden against the tiles, curling up from a bowl of risoni and the place smelt of butter. At the sight, the smell, the steam, Veronica felt sickened and unbearable heavy.

‘I know you make your own, Veronica, but this one is quite good. And we can’t all be kitchen whizzes.’

She wanted to stop Lesley talking about food, evading things. ‘Paul and Roland were there, Lesley. When the girl died. Paul is in a complete state.’

‘Well. Maybe now you see.’

‘She fell from a doorway.’

‘They police have been here. They told us some of it. I suppose Paul is taking it out on John. He always turns on him. His partner.’ It might have been a different word. Disease,
tumour. Lesley had a wedge of parmesan on a plate. She had pressed a knife into it and broke off some crumbs. ‘The worst part is it’s my fault. Everything our children do is our fault isn’t it. All the terrible things they do.’

‘Paul told me about Vicky. She’s your daughter’

Lesley crumbled the parmesan with her knife.

‘So I suppose I deserve her too, is that what they said?’

‘What?’

‘Well, she’s appalling. You’ve seen her.’

Veronica thought of Vicky, a large woman, a person of primary colours, glowing with a kind of immediacy. Even the idea of her was solid, vivid.

‘They let them find you, you see. Whether you want them to or not. She wrote letters. I didn’t answer them. I was throwing them away. But Paul found one in the bin. I should have burned it. But for heavens sake, I don’t know what he was doing grubbing through my waste paper basket. The boy is so odd. But he found it and made me tell him the story. And then he made this great show of not judging me, and being understanding and kind, although how could he possibly understand? Then he decided to go behind my back. He works against me all the time. So he met her and then insisted on being nice to her. They both do it. It’s some kind of evil game.’

‘Maybe they just genuinely like her.’

‘Oh Veronica. You’re so easily taken in. I don’t even necessarily believe she is who she says she is. She’s definitely here for what she can get. They’re all just trying to upset me.’ She had moved to the window and was looking out down the driveway towards the street.

There were voices now, at the front door.

Lesley spoke in a distracted way. ‘Do you ever get the feeling that you’re not living your real life?’ She began rubbing her left hand down the side of her right, rubbing hard, as if it was itchy. The right hand was red. ‘I always seem to be in the wrong place.’

But Veronica was already going out to the corridor.

Gordon was there. Veronica said, ‘Where is he?’

Gordon looked confused. ‘He asked me where the photos were.’

‘Where?’

‘I’ve been scanning them. Out in the shed. He went around the side.’

Veronica went back through the kitchen and out the garden door, across the paved area and down a brick pathway lined with stones, painted white. Gordon’s shed was a low brick building. A granny flat, never used, except as storage. The door was open.

Inside there was one room containing a table, a kitchen bench with no appliances and Gordon’s old desk covered in computer equipment. Roland was here. He was dressed in
some of Paul’s clothes – black jeans, and a pale blue shirt. Bare feet. He was pulling photo albums out of a green milk crate and flipping through them. He didn’t acknowledge her entry.

‘Roland.’
He ignored her.

Veronica touched a wrist. He shook her away. ‘Bad women, do you see? They were bad women.’ He slammed an album on the desk. ‘Is that supposed to make it OK?’ He pushed the album away and grabbed another one. ‘But we’ve been tricked. Paul. Fucking Paul.’

‘Roland honestly.’
He shoved an album at her. ‘Spring Beach. Help me find it.’

Other voices now, in the garden. Paul had followed her here and now he was coming across the grass, followed by Lesley and Gordon. Behind them she could see John and Vicky getting out of another car.

Paul came straight in without stopping and grabbed the photo album Roland was holding.

Roland said, ‘The Slithy Tove.’
Paul said, ‘Get out of here.’
Gordon said, ‘Come on buddy.’

John and Vicky came in but Paul turned to them, his face twisted. ‘Go out. Please. Just go.’ John didn’t move.

Roland had taken out another album and started turning pages. ‘Remember that Paul? The old dinghy?’

Paul tried to seize the album. They fought for it. Paul fell back hard into the side of the desk and rolled, colliding with the wall. He was about to push off and attack Roland again, but Vicky put herself between them. ‘Leave it, Paul.’

‘You don’t know. You don’t know. You don’t know what this is.’
‘I think I do.’
‘You don’t. It’s much worse than what you think. John will leave. John will hate me.’

‘John will understand. I’ll fix it.’ She took him by the arm and turned him around. ‘Come outside.’ She put a hand on John’s arm. Neither Paul nor John moved.

Roland was turning pages. ‘The Slithy Tove. We pulled it out of the water. Gordon had to help us. We turned it upside down and sat on it and had Violet Crumble.’ He had found the photo he wanted. He pushed it in front of Paul. ‘Remember that, Paul? Remember the Violet Crumble?’
The photo was not that much different from the one he had found in the Shanty Shack. Two boys, aged about eight, smiling. Bare feet hanging down over the side of an upturned dinghy. But in this one Gordon’s feet were clean. They nearly reached the sand, but hung just clear. And his toes were clearly visible.
Chapter 33

‘Apparently it skips a generation.’

Everyone had left the shed immediately and gone in different directions, Roland on foot, Vicky and John in one car, Paul, distressed, dishevelled, probably still drunk although not showing it, in another. Veronica had tried to follow him but lost him. She went to the workshop and the gallery found them deserted. Finally, after an hour and a half, she thought of looking at the empty apartment in lower Sandy Bay. She found it unlocked, with Paul inside, looking out at the river. The floors were finished and dried, and the furniture had been replaced. There was only a faint smell of floor polish.

They had left the heaters on and the windows open and came down to the path by the water. Paul was calmer now, all the panic and fury drained away, leaving him quiet, morose, unnaturally flat.

‘So it’s a kind of genetic trick,’ she said. ‘Your father has the webbed toes, but you don’t, but then they can still turn up again on your …’

‘Yes,’ he said quickly.

‘Your son.’

The path led to a small point, a bed of native grasses and beyond that broken rocks. They leaned on a rail looking out over the water. Behind them was Blinking Billy, the tiny old lighthouse, and up behind that Paul’s apartment block, three storeys of glass, looking down on them.

Veronica was feeling stronger. Her stomach and back had hardened to hold their injuries. There was no pain in her shoulder, and she couldn’t feel the lump on her head. She had toughened. But lecturing Paul wasn’t going to help. She tried to lighten the tone. ‘Well at least you know now that Gordon is your father. Roland said you always had doubts because he’s so …’

‘Masculine?’

‘Gingery.’

She got a pained laugh for that.

‘Well Paulie, look, it’s not necessarily a bad thing, is it? To have a son? John loves you.’

He made an unhappy sound, and looked at her as if she’d insulted him.

‘He does. And now you have a child.’

There was always more breeze here than you expected. The water was slate grey and choppy, slapping in an irritated way at the rock of the foreshore, the wind whirring in the needle grasses.

She spoke coolly. ‘Personally, I’d have to say it’s a surprise.’
It was a mad … It was just one of those parties …

‘Oh I don’t need to know.’

It was beyond her what anyone saw in the view down here. Across the water there were only low headlands, stripped of trees years ago and left as brown grass. Opossum Bay was a huddle of small houses that looked as if they’d slipped down the hill to lie on top of each other, crammed up against the water. And off to the south, the grey river, widening out to ocean. Hobart, the lonely edge of the world.

‘Roland had slept with Treen and then gone. She was angry with him. She started coming on to me. I … she knows I’m gay. Of course. She pretended she was playing, she pretended to think it was funny, but really she was being nasty. She was angry with everything, but now with Roland especially, and she was taking it out on me. She was really horrible. So I thought, all right, I’ll show you.

‘I think I was trying to imagine Roland. I spent a lot of time in my life doing that – try to imagine what it must be like to be him. You always said I copied him. Well, I did. And now I thought, he’s just done this. It was a kind of … It’s pretty sick, I know. I don’t know what you would call it.’

She didn’t want to call it anything.

The wind was whipping around, slapping at her, flipping bits of hair, goading her to leave, to run from this. But she was heavier than that.

‘So then …’ He drew the word out exhaustedly, as if only now realising how long this story was going to be. ‘I heard she had a baby, but that’s about it. Then one night the little boy got hurt and I went and helped … but I still didn’t think. I never even thought of it. And that was all so bad that night I didn’t have time to think about anything. And then Roland turned up at Mum’s …’ He stressed this word, recognising how strange it was that Roland should go to Lesley for help. ‘Treen had finally got him to come. He told Mum he had to help an old friend and told us all not to tell you until he had it sorted out.’

They heard a noise in the apartments behind them, but it was only a dog scratching at a window. The windows of Paul’s place reflected grey sky. It was hard to believe it was warm in there.

‘He came and went for a few days, and I went with him a few times to see Treen and the kid. And that was all horrible, and I was glad he was dealing with it. And then finally he told me the child was his son. I thought he was sure. So I didn’t really think it could be mine. I didn’t want to think about it at all.’

‘But you did find out.’

‘Yeah.’ He said that slowly, sadly. Then again, thoughtfully. ‘Yeah. So then one day we took Mayson out to Bellerive beach and he ran straight into the water with his shoes on. Roland went to get chips because that’s how you keep him quiet and I took his shoes off
and saw the toes. I went into this kind of trance. I just felt sick and I got his shoes back on without the socks. And of course Roland had no idea it was remotely possible that I could be the father. And he never changed his clothes or anything. He’d never seen the feet until after Treen died, and then it took a while to sink in.’

Paul seemed to feel the cold now. He put his hands in his pockets, shrugged into the collar of his jacket. They took a few steps around the circle until they were standing with their backs to the wind, facing the grass slope that led up to the apartments and two old concrete bunkers that had once housed guns.

Paul started defending Roland. ‘Roland always uses a condom. He always does, and he would have that time. But I don’t think he can remember much about that night. Anyway, Treen said he didn’t wear one and he had to believe her.’

‘He chose to believe her.’

‘Yeah. That’s it. He felt guilty anyway, because he’d had sex with her and didn’t like her, so then he thought he had to take her word for it, by way of making some kind of amends. I don’t really understand him sometimes but it kind of fits with him, doesn’t it?’

‘And when you saw Mayson’s toes? You realised he was yours but you didn’t say.’

‘Well, really, look, it would have been a lot better if it had been Roland’s. He is … good. He’d be a good father and he’s got the big family and he’s got you. You would have helped him.’

‘Lesley will help you.’

This saddened him more than anything.

‘She will, Paul. She badly wants a grandchild. She lost her first child. She’s very confused about that. But maybe that could all be fixed now. Maybe having Mayson will help.’

He went over to one of the bunkers and rubbed a hand across a concrete wall. Some old defences of the city, now hollow and eroding.

‘You could form a family.’

But he was feeling trapped now. ‘I don’t want him, you know. I don’t want him to exist. I didn’t want Treen to exist and I couldn’t stand Belle. I didn’t want any of it to ever exist.’

‘Be careful, Paul.’ This is what she had been suspecting, but now that he was about to tell her she found she wasn’t ready.

‘I told John about it. Just then. I found them at Vicky’s and told him it was all true. I’d slept with a woman and I’ve got a son. I didn’t have any choice, did I?’ He looked at her, wanting, as always, an answer.

‘What did he say?’
‘Nothing. I left him with Vick. If it was me I’d have gone drinking. John and Vicky are probably cooking.’

‘Cooking?’

‘It’s what they do. It’s some kind of thing for them, a statement of domestic bliss or something. They say it comforts them, whatever that means. I tell them it’s an orphan thing. They’re not orphans but they were both … they’re like orphans.’ He laughed, meanly. ‘And now they’ve found each other and they’re into this housey housey thing.’

‘Paul, it’ll be all right.’

He laughed sourly. ‘Are you going to tell me he’ll come round?’

‘Well, it might not even come to that, might it?’

‘What does that mean? You mean if John leaves?’

‘I mean there might be a lot more that he needs to forgive you for.’

He looked at her, not knowing what she was getting at.

‘Can we walk a bit?’ She led him around the point back towards Long Beach. At least here they were out of the wind. And it was nice here – a sheltered corner with a tiny beach, a diving raft, sports fields and a playground.

‘Paul that’s all extremely important, having a son, and I will help you with it. But there’s something else we have to sort out.’ She left another space, but this time he didn’t fill it. ‘We have to talk about what happened to Treen.’

‘Treen.’ He found the name as ugly as she did.

‘Ohh.’ She took a breath. She was so tired of this. Doing the hard thing. Jump in.

‘I’m going to run something past you and you tell me what it sounds like.’

‘What it …’

‘No.’ She had been too tentative. ‘On second thoughts you just listen. Let me get right to the end and then tell me what I’m supposed to think.’ Keep going. Just push ahead.

‘Belle said Treen had found a possible solution to her problem. Treen had been saying she’d found someone who might help her, and she said she was going to get some money.’ She wanted to look at him but knew it was best not to. ‘And that is the person who picked her up and took her to the mountain. In a blue Honda. The police are focussed on the car. I don’t think it’s only Belle who saw it.’

Paul was looking at her now, staring at the side of her face. He was starting to realise where this was going.

She said, ‘I wonder if you …’ No. Keep it very plain. ‘Treen was not likeable. She was violent, erratic, maybe sadistic. She hurt her own child. She lied and blamed everyone else for things. People might simply wish she didn’t exist.’ His words. She paused to let them sink in. ‘If Treen was the mother of your child you were going to have a lot to do with her for the rest of your life. What is more, as you yourself say, you didn’t want any of it to
be true. You didn’t want to be Mayson’s father. You certainly didn’t want John to know about it.’

‘It wasn’t me.’ He was shocked. ‘Veronica.’

He stopped walking and stood facing the water. There was a dog picking its way across the broken rocks beside the water, and a teenage girl with a bucket.

But she needed to press this home now, so that he could see there was no point arguing with her and they could get to the point where he was willing to admit it and accept her help. She pressed on. ‘Roland won’t say anything. But I will if I have to. Everything links back to you. Treen and Belle had jewellery from John’s convict range. Your Nan had those painkillers. They would have been morphine based. They were in your mother’s house. The person who drove Treen up the mountain knew about Two Biscuit Rock. Treen texted Roland about it, and she knew the name. Two Biscuit Rock. Paul. There aren’t many people who know that. I took you there. I took you.’

She could remember the day clearly. The day they named it. Lesley’s voice, ‘Oh what harm can it do? Let them have another one. They’ve walked so far.’ Everything had been bright, and the boys, flushed with the walk, sitting on a flat rock. The sun shining and a silver tree and the big blue empty sky.

‘Someone promised Treen money. They took her for a walk there with the weather closing in and they filled her with drugs and left her there.’

‘You’re wrong.’

‘Once Treen was gone, no one was going to know about your night together and John needn’t find out about Mayson. Unfortunately, Belle was still around, saying she wanted to stay with Mayson and asking for money. And she started saying she knew who had driven Treen up the mountain.’

‘Veronica this isn’t it. Not me.’

‘The door Belle fell through must have been opened with your father’s keys. Roland had taken a key from Gordon to get into the building, but there were a lot more keys left at the house. Someone bought her champagne. And someone put one of Roland’s drawings on the door. Roland didn’t put it there. But he had left pictures stuck on the gallery window. Someone took one and dressed Belle up as the girl in the drawing and they put the drawing on the door to frame him. It was all highly organised and calculated. The shawl was your mother’s. You and Roland had both been drawing it.’

Veronica’s hands were tingling in the cold wind. She took the hand cream out and put some more on. It gave him a moment to absorb all this.

She said, ‘I know she wasn’t pushed. I heard her shrieking and laughing. It sounded more like a game.’
She risked a glance. He was staring out across the beach and the parks, a lump at the corner of his jaw visible through the padded cheek.

‘All right. Well I simply don’t have time or frankly the energy to mess around any more. We have to go to the police. If you go to jail it won’t be for that long. At worst it has to be manslaughter. Most likely it will be classed as behaviour endangering life or even accidental death. In both cases. It won’t be too bad. And you have family. We will look after your son.’ That wasn’t well put. Presumptuous. She was not Paul’s family. ‘Your mother will do it and I will help her.’

He groaned and leaned down, put his hands on his knees, stared at the ground.

‘Jesus.’

‘Paul we have to clear …’

‘What about you?’

‘Me?’

‘When you thought Mayson was Roland’s. Think about that. You wanted him, you wanted him in your family, but you didn’t want Belle to be with him. You wanted her gone. And you were probably glad Treen wasn’t around. You didn’t want them to be here. You didn’t want them to be.’

‘Well, maybe, but what I might have wanted isn’t relevant. I didn’t do anything about it.’

‘You didn’t help her. You let her run around that building. I wonder if you knew about the open door.’ He saw that in her face. ‘Ah. Well then. And you didn’t chase Belle, try to make her safe. You were going to go home with Vicky and Mayson.’

‘Not doing something is very different from acting.’

He laughed.

‘Paul.’

But he was walking away from her. He went back into the wind, walked quickly around the circle of grasses, got to the end and stood, not knowing what to do. She stood back a little, giving him space to think it through. But as she waited, there was another noise at the apartment windows and this time it was from Paul’s. John had knocked on the glass. He was standing in the window, bright against the shadows of the room, gesturing with one hand holding a cardboard carton under the other arm.

Without speaking again, Paul went back to the path and up to the apartment.
Chapter 34

When everyone had gone, Lesley sat in the kitchen to finish her written piece. After about ten minutes, a voice spoke from the door. ‘The immortals have ended their sport.’

It was that alcoholic woman. Judith. She had let herself in the back door, as bold as you like, and now she was coming forwards. She put a stone on the kitchen table beside the lap top. It was one of the stones from the path, an edging stone, painted white.

‘You don’t know anything about this,’ said Lesley.
‘O you have torn my life all to pieces.’
‘I’ll call the police.’

Judith came closer. She leant over Lesley, peering at the screen. She said, ‘Sometimes I feel as if I am all sounds.’

Roland had run back to his mother’s house. Lesley went to look for him. She found him down by the low gate, under the cypresses, sitting on the dry dead ground, up against the stone wall. He had made Paul’s clothes dirty. He still had bare feet.

She said, ‘Sometimes I feel as if I’m all sounds.’

He didn’t stand up.

She had a memory stick in an envelope. She held it out to him. ‘It was going to be my first line but I took it out again. I don’t know. But I’ve finished the piece.’

He didn’t stand up. ‘I have to sort out the other thing. Mayson isn’t my son after all. I have to go and explain it to Miriam and Georgie.’

Lesley waved her envelope at him. ‘I finished my writing. And I can tell you that it has worked. I have been able to write something. And it is about Mary. And it is about Treen. Here it is. It will help you talk to the police. And it will help you talk to your mother. And maybe we can talk to Paul together.’

Roland put his head in his hands. ‘It’s acts that are evil, not people.’

‘You were right. The thing you wanted me to see. I think I understand it now.’
Chapter 35

When Veronica and Paul came into the apartment Vicky was standing at the windows with her back to the room and John was behind the kitchen bench, facing the door.

John said, ‘We’ve been to the sausage shop.’ He was pulling things out of his box, white paper packets and jars and take away containers with labels from the Hope Street Larder. ‘We’re planning the most wonderful old fashioned thing. Chicken with forty cloves of garlic.’ The playfulness was exaggerated, a pantomime intended to soothe Paul. ‘But then we just went and bought food. I’ve got some of the Lyric olive oil and a red wine vinegar from Westbury and a terrine.’ He was overdoing it. There was something he was trying to hide. ‘And Vicky is a terrible influence, because she doesn’t care about the size of her own arse. We’ve had eggs benedict and now I’m just all … grrr … antipasto.’ He made monster claws above the food.

Paul, still trying to come to terms with what Veronica had said, looked completely bewildered. He took a step towards the bench, staring at the food.

The wind had done something to Veronica’s hands and now, in the warm air, the itch was worse than before. She took the jar of hand cream out and put some more on.

‘And we got yoghurt. And banana. Vicky thinks little kids like mashed banana.’
‘Little kids?’
‘Our kid.’
‘No way.’
‘My kid then. Fuck off.’ John held out the yoghurt. ‘Put this away and get out some …’

There was a knock at the door. Too many knocks, five or six, followed by a short pause and then, as if the person knocking had only just found it, the doorbell rang.

Paul looked at John, who pressed his lips together. Vicky went to the door.

‘John no.’

Judith came in, followed by Georgie, holding Mayson.

‘Sorry,’ said Georgie. ‘I found Judith in the driveway. She’s led the way.’ She pulled a face, making a joke out of it.

‘Oh no. No no no.’ Paul was walking towards them, hands out in front of him, a double stop signal. ‘No. We cannot have him here. I’m not ready to do anything about this.’

Georgie kept coming, chattering nonsense to the little boy, and took him straight to the window to look out. He struggled to get down but she didn’t let him. Judith went to the TV and inspected it.

‘Get out!’ Paul focussed on Judith. ‘You have no business here.’
Judith reached into her large cloth bag and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. Paul snatched them, flung them towards the kitchen sink and said, ‘Get out of my home.’

Judith retreated to a corner.

John, Joss and Vicky were fiddling with the box of food. Everyone had expected Paul’s reaction. They had all agreed to ignore him. And as he realised this he became angrier. ‘We do not know how to look after a child! What are we supposed to do?’ His voice rose. ‘I’m not a father. All I’ll end up doing is wreck what I’ve got. I don’t want him. Not yet. Not ever.’

Mayson struggled again. Miriam and Georgie sat on the floor and pulled some things out of a bag. John and Vicky, in some silent understanding, went across the room and stood near them.

‘We want him.’ John looked steadily at Paul. ‘It’ll be like a joint project … a thing.’ He waved his hands trying to describe it. ‘A joint thing that isn’t really going anywhere and isn’t helping any of us, but none of us can escape from it.’ He smirked at Vicky. ‘Used to be called a family.’ They were smiling, trying to look hopeful, looking terrified.

‘For Christ’s sake, John,’ said Paul, but weakly.

Mayson had picked up a toy and now he began banging it on a glass coffee table. John and Vicky turned to look at him. Georgie had him trapped between her outstretched legs. She was trying to subdue the arm movements and talk to him. ‘Good boy. Being nice and quiet. She looked up. ‘He’s been screaming his head off. Just screaming.’

John locked his hands in front of him, gripped a wrist, pulled his chin in. ‘Vicky knows a bit about it.’

But if this was Vicky’s cue to move towards the child, she didn’t take it.

Veronica, out of habit, moved towards the kitchen. ‘Let’s just sit down and have some …’

There was another knock at the door. Only three knocks this time, but much louder than before and hard, made with a fist, moving the door in its frame. And then, just as he had at Belle’s, Dane seemed to be in the middle of the room before he managed to stop himself. Everybody else froze and looked at him.

With all their attention fixed on him, Dane didn’t know what to say. He said, ‘Fuck me.’

Georgie grabbed for Mayson but he struggled free of her and without a sound put his head and shoulders under the coffee table. He lay still with his back to the room. Georgie stayed on the floor and edged in front of him, one hand on his hip. Veronica and Paul were next to each other at the kitchen bench.
‘You wanna just let me have him,’ said Dane. ‘You don’t wanna do this. What’s coming. Ask her.’ He jerked his head to indicate Veronica. Then he went towards John and shoved him aside with no visible effort. John fell into the window frame. As he was getting up Dane picked up one of the dining chairs and swung it lightly. Georgie wriggled back towards Mayson’s legs.

John got up and went to Vicky and they moved together. They put themselves in front of Georgie and Miriam and stood, side by side facing Dane. Dane stared at them for a moment and then made a sound that might have been intended to be a laugh.

‘He could trace its shadow in the gloom,’ said Judith. ‘He could hear its garments rustling in the leaves ...’

It distracted him. He turned away from the child. ‘Fuck off.’

But Judith came towards him. She got very close, goading him. ‘... and every breath of wind came laden with that last low cry.’

Dane grabbed her by the throat, swung her around, pushed her away and at the same time lifted a foot to push it into her stomach. It sent her crashing backwards. Her head hit the wall with a thud.

Dane went to the kitchen bench and picked up John’s iPad and then turned to the room. ‘I don’t give a fuck. I’ll go. But I want five grand.’

There was a silence, then John said, ‘I’ve got a cheque book.’ He edged out through a door.

‘Five thousand dollars?’ said Vicky, stepping forwards. ‘How did you get that figure? Two women are dead. You thought he was your son. But now you’ve woken up and worked out the dates? So. Five grand? Is that enough?’

She was goading him too, taking his attention away from the boy. Dane turned and stepped back towards her. She lifted her chin. She was sweating, shiny, greasy. ‘I know you people. You like to think you’re hard done by, but really you’re just cheap thieves.’

He twisted sideways and for a minute it looked as if he might hit her. Judith stood up. ‘The hair rose on his head, and his blood stood still, for the phantom was always behind him.’

John came back and quietly gave Dane a cheque.

Dane said, ‘Fucken hell.’ He turned back to the people in the room. ‘You’re the ones hiding the murderer.’

Vicky didn’t know what he meant. She looked at Judith and then Dane, waiting for more. But behind her, John and Paul looked at each other, and they weren’t shocked or horrified by what they had heard. It was a knowing look, deeply troubled, and mutually accusing.
‘You fucking people,’ he said. ‘My two girls are dead. They are dead. I know who was in that building yesterday. So why don’t you just sort it out. Before I have to do something.’

His words were weak and he knew it. He stomped out slamming the door. There was silence, then they heard a car door up on the road. Then there was a low engine noise and one thin yelp from the dog next door.

With the relief, Veronica became aware of her itchy hands again. She rubbed them together.

Paul said, ‘You haven’t got five thousand dollars.’

John said, ‘I’ll make a phone call.’

‘He won’t give it to you.’

‘Not my father. Yours.’

Paul pushed out some air in a sad laugh. They stepped towards each other.

Veronica turned to them. ‘He’s right though Paul. It’s time this was over. These deaths are hanging over Roland. The police are going to find him any time soon.’ Paul and John were very still. Each seemed to be aware of the other, waiting for the other to react.

‘And Dane is right. Those two poor girls. It’s time we told the truth.’

Her hands were burning now. She looked down. Where she had put Treen’s cream on she had exacerbated the tingling rash. Her hands had patches of bright red. Someone else had a rash like this.

Behind them Georgie began rubbing Mayson on the legs, saying something to him, trying to get him to come out from under the table.

Veronica tried to concentrate. ‘People will understand, Paul. You had a child and you didn’t want Treen making his life miserable.’

But now Judith had come up. She put herself between Veronica and Paul. She was standing too close. She smelled of alcohol, rotting leaves, mildew, paper, dust. It was the complexity of the smell that made it so sickening. You couldn’t breathe around it. Every layer of the air was tainted by her.

She said, ‘Who had access to the car and the morphine?’

‘I know. We …’

‘Who had the drawing of the falling girl? Who took it down from her gallery window?’

‘Her?’

‘She put it up on the red door. She met Belle in the old building and gave her champagne.’

‘No. Just a …’
‘She knew Mayson was hers. She changed his pants and saw the toes. She wanted to keep her grandson for herself. She lured Treen to the mountain with offers of money. She wished the unpleasant mother out of the way, just as you had.’ A look of malice at this. She grabbed Veronica’s itchy hand and glared at it. In her other hand she had the red jar from Lesley’s lounge room. ‘She met Treen before she died and she was given some of the hand cream. They made her hands itch.’

There was something in Judith’s hands. A red jar. She opened it and Veronica could smell the old scent, the pot pourri she had smelt in Lesley’s front room, geraniums. The smell brought it back, as smells do, that feeling she kept having, that there was something she was supposed to be seeing. There was something she needed to know, just out of sight at the edge of things.

Judith took one of Veronica’s hands, put the jar in it. ‘Here’s a spot. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten it.’

Veronica thought of Lesley, rubbing her hands together. Lesley had a rash too. It had come from this hand cream in this red jar. Judith had taken it from Lesley’s house. A scent of geraniums. Belle had talked about different coloured jars for different scents. She had tried to remember the name of it, but her childhood had not contained such things. She had said ‘Rose, rose something.’

Rose geranium.

Lesley knew them.

Paul’s and Veronica’s phones both beeped. Text messages.

Judith said, ‘Mesdames et monsieurs. From the very beginning I felt that to understand this case one must seek the secrets of the heart.’
The messages were from Roland. Paul and Veronica went together to Veronica’s house. When they got there Gordon was in the driveway getting out of his car. Veronica led the way in through the scaffolding.

Roland was in the dining room. He had a lap top in front of him on the tarpaulin-covered dining table. There was a memory stick attached to one side. He said, ‘Lesley wants me to read you something.’

Gordon said, ‘Is she here?’ His face was ashen.

Roland looked towards the windows, the garden, the white sky. ‘She left, just then.’

‘We didn’t see anyone,’ said Veronica.

Roland said, ‘She has written something. She wants me to read it to you. To everyone.’ He sat in front of the lap top. Veronica sat beside him. Gordon and Paul stayed near the door. Roland began reading.

‘Mary McLaughlan killed her baby. Treen McShane hurt her little boy. The first thought, our first word, our thought before thought, is that these women were evil. Some of us will react and say they are not evil. They will say that these women were themselves mistreated, misunderstood, tormented, made miserable, that they had been taught fear, resentment, bitterness, loathing, and deep blind rage. People will say that in harming their children these women were simply responding to what had been done to them. They will say that a person cannot be evil, that only acts are evil.

‘But where is the line between the person and the act? This is what I have struggled to understand.’

The room was cold, with an intense, thick kind of stillness. Veronica wrapped her arms across her front and leant forwards, putting some pressure on her stomach.

Roland read, ‘Mary McLaughlan put her hands to the neck of a baby. She felt the hot sticky skin, the frail bones, the fragile breath, the push of blood through veins. She squeezed until the breath and the blood stopped. Treen stood in front of her little boy and swung a broom handle and an iron. She pushed him into a wall. She threw him. She must have thrown him quite hard because his skull was cracked.

‘At some point these women made a choice. But what does that mean? What is a choice? At the time of the action their muscles, their arms, their fingers, were under control of some part of them. And there was one small point, one infinitesimal fraction of a second, one tiny invisible point in time which acted as a gateway, a decision point, a division between the absence of the action and its presence. A point of departure.’

Somewhere in the house there was a sound, thin, electronic, a single beep, then a space then another. Alan’s heart monitor, running out of batteries.
'People will talk about whether or not Treen’s and Belle’s deaths were the result of an intentional act, but what does that mean? I cannot answer that.'

Roland’s voice broke off. He took a breath and went on. ‘I try to find my own point of decision. But if there was one it was obscured by all the other countless moments, and those moments felt joined together. The decision point must have been there somewhere, in that constant forward flow, but it wasn’t present to me. There was no point at which a choice was made. There was no identifiable intention.’

Paul moved his feet. The lino made a noise that seemed to go right across the floor.

‘Last Tuesday afternoon, after Veronica had left us at the gallery, I drove Treen McShane to the Chalet car park on the mountain and we walked along the path to a large rock. She died of hypothermia, because of a storm.

‘I try to find the point where I made a choice. Before we went I put a jar of pills in front of her and left the room. I offered to help her with the child. I offered to give her some money and a place to live. That made her happy. I drove her to the mountain. I told her about happier times when the children were young. She drank some of my wine and the morphine dissolved in the wine added to the morphine she had already stolen.

‘When she went to sleep, there was no choice for me. I simply couldn’t carry her. I went home. I didn’t know what to do so I waited. People will say I am evil or that the act was evil. But there was no act. It was an absence of action. If it felt like anything, it felt like waiting.’

Paul turned towards the door but then he stopped and turned back.

‘I went to visit Belle at the old St Mary’s Hospital building. She was pleased to see me. I offered her help and we drank champagne. She had accessed some kind of party drug herself. It may have interacted badly with the champagne but that is not something I would know about. Gordon had shown me around the old building a few days previously. I knew about the high door. I pulled away the barriers and unlocked it. I wanted to remind myself how precarious life can be. I wanted to remind Belle of that, but she was in no mood to listen.

‘Roland had put the drawing on the gallery window and I had kept it. I put it up again on the door of the old building. I had suggested Belle wear the white dress and I lent her the shawl so that she could look like the girl in the drawing. I cannot tell you what I had in mind, only that she was delighted by the idea. When Dane arrived I stayed quietly in a back room. And when Veronica arrived I didn’t want to be found in such a place so I stayed out of the way. Belle screamed about two grannies. I thought Veronica would know immediately that I was there, but she didn’t pay any attention.

‘Belle was in a wild and careless mood. She went downstairs and Dane and Veronica upset her and then Vicky took Mayson away from her. She came back upstairs.
She was completely out of control. I tried to retrieve my shawl from her but she snatched it. She was trying to be happy and carefree, but really she was careless. She was running around playing silly games and she had chosen a dangerous place to do it. Careless. A stupid girl.

‘I didn’t push her out. I was trying to get something back that was mine. To the extent that her fall was made possible by the open door, the person who opened the door was me. But all I did was wait. I opened a door and waited. It wasn’t an action at all. It was more like slipping.

‘Treen and Belle made Mayson miserable and they would have continued to do so. They have gone from his life and if I have sacrificed myself in that process then that is something a grandmother should do. But it’s best he never knows. It’s best he never knows about them. Or me.’

‘Oh, Lel,’ said Gordon.

Roland read on, ‘When I had my first baby I was seventeen. It was horrible. Much harder than with Paul. I thought I was going to die. But I didn’t hurt her. I wouldn’t hurt my own baby. I simply lost her.

‘After she was born they let me see her. I think it was a mistake. I don’t think they were supposed to do it. Because then I wanted to keep her. I really wanted that so badly that I argued with them, which I never did. I remember shouting at this little nurse person, and it really was nothing to do with her. I remember saying you can’t stop me, that kind of thing. Very rude.

‘At first they said I could keep her. At least I thought they said that. They took her away so I could sleep. I don’t blame them, anyone who was there. It was a long time ago. Different times. Nowadays you read about it. It was apparently happening all over the place.

‘They must have given me drugs, I think. I signed things. At least I think I did. But they didn’t tell me about any of it. They simply took my baby away for something, and I had a sleep and then I just sat there waiting for her to be brought back and she never came. At first they told me she had died. Or more precisely, my mother told me. My own mother. I knew she was lying because she looked me straight in the eye and it was the only time she ever did that. So that was the sign. That’s how I knew it wasn’t true.

‘And that’s all, really. I just waited and then I went home. So you see there was never an actual ... event. It was something that didn’t happen. In a way I feel as if I’m still waiting.’

Paul made a deep angry sound. Gordon went to stand near him. Paul stepped away from him and turned half towards the door.

‘After I had packed my things, when I was leaving the Cressy house to go home without my baby I found a white stone in the garden path. It was small, smaller than an egg
and it had a sort of fold in the middle with a yellow crack. I put it in my pocket. It wasn’t a substitute for my baby, not a symbol or a talisman. It was just something I could hold onto while I thought about her. I liked having it in my pocket. Nobody else knew it was there. Later, when I was older, I found I could put my stone in full view and nobody knew what it meant.

‘I was pleased at last that this new child, Mayson, was going to be mine. Other women were going to think he was theirs but they were going to lose him. I know what that feels like. I found some white stones and I gave them to the other women. I left Veronica’s on the lawn and later I moved it closer to her house. I put it on a piece of computer paper, something I’d printed out to keep. That was to make sure Veronica would notice her stone. I don’t know why. I just wanted them to feel what I had, to have a stone instead of a child. Nobody knew the stones were important. Except maybe that drunk woman. She saw the stone in my lounge room and she knew straight away. Not what it meant, but that it had meaning.

‘Over the years my heart shrivelled up. I know that is my fault. I had Paul who was so difficult, and Gordon to put up with. And then Vicky came, and I saw that my baby is ruined for me now. I feel as if I’ve lost everyone. My first baby and then Paul.’

Paul quietly left the room and Gordon followed him.

Roland paused and watched them go, drew in a long breath, and kept reading. ‘People will think that my baby came back but they don’t understand how impossible she is. By the time she got here my heart was just a little walnut. She was too late, and she’s all wrong.’

They could hear Paul and Gordon’s feet on the gravel of the driveway. But now there were other sounds. Vehicles arriving.

‘I’ve always thought that by the time I was in my fifties it would be different. I was expecting cohesion, less banality, less wanting things. I thought everything would be softly illuminated, like one of those impressionist river scenes. But instead I still feel that I am not living my real life. I feel as if I’m standing outside everything. I look outside and the wind moves the leaves and one of the leaves falls down and I feel as if it had nothing to do with me.

‘The old drunk said one thing that sounded right. It was one of those uncanny accidents, but it was one of those things that is so true it stays in your mind. She said there was something coming which could never arrive. That thought keeps repeating. It’s a thought that lies under and through everything I have done. That is how life feels to me. I feel that my real life is there somewhere, just out of sight. I keep looking for it. But it’s like one of those stars you see at the edge of the sky. When you look at it it vanishes.’
Doors slamming. Voices. Roland straightened in his chair and kept reading to the end. ‘And the moment of choice is the same. It is there somewhere but I cannot find it. People will ask me what I did and why. But there was no action, only a series of moments that led, one to the next. If there was a moment of intention, something which could be portrayed as a choice, a decision point – a point – then it is infinitely small. It is terrifyingly, vanishingly small.’
Chapter 37

Mid-afternoon and no wind. Flat, steady, light. Veronica walked with Georgie through Fitzroy Gardens. The day had that stillness, full of cloud and unfallen rain, where everything seems to have stopped, as if there was something thick in the air and time had to push through it. Beyond the houses of Fitzroy Crescent she could hear the big intersection where the Southern Outlet came roaring in from Kingston. There were two women on the Crescent, walking on the footpath in boots with heels. Against the ocean noise of the traffic their footsteps made no sound.

They had left Paul, John, Vicky and Mayson in the Parliament Street Reserve, to play on the long slide. Veronica and Georgie were going to Lesley’s house to clean up and see what food needed to be bought. Gordon was spending long days at the police station or waiting while Lesley talked with psychologists and lawyers. Georgie had been talking with the families of Treen and Belle, helping to organise memorial services while they waited for the bodies to be released. She was going to see them again this evening.

Ahead of them were the winter rose beds, all bare sticks and angles. There was one bright rose hip, missed by the pruners, sticking up on the end of a stalk, as if it was proclaiming something. At the sight of it Veronica stopped. She turned and looked back at the painted cottages of Pillinger Street, and the overgrown gully of the rivulet, then out across the backs of the Sandy Bay shops to the red rooves of Battery Point. Behind her over her left shoulder there was the mountain, the hulk on the horizon, drawing the eye, blocking the view.

She couldn’t see her people, or Mayson. By the sounds of things there were other children in the reserve. She could see a corner of it and there was a cocker spaniel, running around on the spongy grass appearing and disappearing. There were many voices coming from down there, pushed forwards by the moist air, sounding hollow and directionless, as if they came from some far off unreachable place. They made Veronica think of past years at swimming pools and sporting fields, lonely sounds, even now.

They started on the path across the long lawn.

Georgie said, ‘Tom lands at eight. Libby and Karen are making up beds.’
‘That will be lovely.’ She wasn’t sure if she meant it.
‘Trust him to come after you’ve fixed everything.’
‘Me? Hardly. It fixed itself,’ said Veronica. ‘All I did was run around trying to keep up.’

‘Jocelyn has brought cake. She’s amazing. And Miriam’s made ... I can’t remember what it’s called ... not cannelloni but like that. And I’ve got the week off now
because of the move.’ Georgie was being transferred to Melbourne. It was that or lose the job. ‘Napoleon’s handling the wind energy conference.’

Now there were voices behind them. Or rather one voice, an uneven monologue, muffled to unintelligibility by distance and moisture, getting closer. Veronica and Georgie stepped onto the grass to let them past.

It was a woman of sixty-something, white hair, dressed in a pilling track suit. With her was an elderly Asian man who stooped and watched his feet, so that she was addressing the top of his head. As they went past, Veronica heard her say, ‘… so when you multiply it out by the radius of the earth, we’re actually moving really fast …’

Below the park, a car went down Digney Street, the wheels clicking on the joins in the tarmac. Veronica stared at the two backs, the woman talking, the man deep in thought, or pretending to be. Georgie was grinning.

Her phone beeped.

‘What now?’ said Georgie.

‘It’s Paul. I have to go back. Apparently they need me.’
A Book of Shadows,
an exegesis
Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Death and mystery
Veronica Cruickshank, fifty-eight, water-colour painter, mother of four, is summoned by text message to the slopes of Mount Wellington. There, among eddying cloud, she finds a body.

What happens next?

This is a scene that occurs early in the murder mystery novel To Deserve Such Pain (hereafter TDSP). Veronica is confronted with the body of a young woman and an array of unknowns about how it came to be there. A body and a set of unknowns. These are two primary elements of murder mysteries and here, at the beginning of the novel, they are interconnected, inseparable. The body is mysterious, the mystery corporeal.

As a writer of murder mysteries, one who is interested in exploring the possibilities of the model and its limitations, I was both intrigued and challenged while writing the first draft of this moment on the mountain.

Veronica finds a dead body. What does it mean for her? How does she respond, in thought, in action, emotionally, spiritually? And what does this have to do with mystery, with the awareness that there are things she does not know? The purpose of this project was to explore the place of mystery and death in detective fiction. Here I examine what it means for a reader to be confronted with a piece of information that is missing, why this might be associated with a feeling of thrill and exactly what this thrill might relate to, and I provide a defence of my choice to write within the genre. I also interrogate the sense I have in writing passages like the mountain scene above, that a person finding a dead body has, in some way, encountered death.

What does it mean to say that a person has encountered death? In a way the suggestion is preposterous in its simplicity and its indeterminacy and in all that it might hold. In envisaging the mountain scene, in writing the first draft of TDSP, I had only a sense that there was something I was missing, without having a clear idea of what that was.

In terms of methodology, I approached this enquiry through a process which was ‘simultaneously generative and reflective’ (Gray, 1996, p10). In it I relied on two main sources of knowledge. The first was a subjective one, and this is a subjectivity that is central to the writing of fiction. In a way, the writing of a novel is a search for a particular kind of truth, or rather, it is a particular kind of search. It requires, as poetry does, a ‘bearing witness ... fine skills in observation and recording’ (Daley, 2001, p7). It also involves an imaginative subjectivity, the exploration of an author’s own personal responses to
hypothetical circumstances. And beyond that, it involves an active projection, entry into the mind of a fictional other, the conjuring and representation of their thoughts, feelings and perceptions and moving through a scene moment by moment from the point of view of that particular character. Many of the questions I had about the novel were investigated by close examination of scenes and identification with characters, by thinking carefully into the moments I was trying to depict.

Here I was seeking that particular intuitive ‘tacit knowledge’ (Bolt, 2010, p29) that arises through artistic practice and intimate connection with a work (see also Schon, 1987, Webb, 2012, Dewey, 1958). This is something akin to the kind of knowledge Heidegger described in Being and Time (1962), knowledge derived from being and acting in the world, rather than from observation or thought (Webb and Brien, 2008, Bolt, 2010). In this exegesis I have tried to illustrate something of the way this knowledge was developed by quoting passages from a writing journal.

I also present ideas from a second source of knowledge: reading and theoretical analysis and argument. In this exegesis I use these ideas and take an opportunity to ‘speak twice’ (Krauth, 2002, Conclusion) about the ideas embodied in the novel. Reading about death led me to the aesthetic construct of the sublime and ultimately to Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of the il y a. In this aspect of the project, some of the ideas I have found most useful have been drawn from bodies of thought which might be termed post-phenomenological or post-structural: the works of Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. These traditions, whose emphasis is not on reductive reasoning but on ambiguity and the fluidity and contingency of meaning, might seem fundamentally irreconcilable with the model of the conventional murder mystery, which emphasises and epitomises linear logical structures, ratiocination and closure in the form of the answering of a closed question, who? To this I can only say that the readings I have turned to were chosen because I found them directly relevant to my questions and enlightening for my writing process. Perhaps it is because of the foreignness of their approach that these ideas have enriched and clarified my understanding of my own writing.

An enquiry by writing is not a direct approach. I approached my questions by writing around them, by creating something with elements of its own, by exploring my instinctive choices and the texture and the breadth and depth of what I created, by feeling for echoes and resonances, and by following these to find out what they might signify. Much of the reading provided ideas which enlightened the imaginative process, and the progressive rewriting of the novel helped me to grasp and to form my own ideas about the ideas of others, and led to questions for further reading. While it was happening, this seemed an inefficient and clumsy method in which I was fumbling for my way. But, in retrospect, it is a process which has been described, interrogated and critiqued by others as a practice-led
research methodology (for example Hetherington, 2010, Webb and Brien, 2008, Bolt, 2010, Gray, 1996, Conrad, 1963). I feel I have drawn on what Dominique Hecq (2008) describes as the power of creative writing to function as ‘a way of apprehending, knowing and being in the world’ (p10) and to have created new knowledge through ‘accretion, oscillating between intuitive and reflective modes’ (Hecq, p10). This exegesis relates how this process played out and the conclusions I came to. Two notable predecessors in practice-led Australian PhD studies are Inga Simpson’s study of lesbian detective fiction (Simpson, 2008) and Rachel Franks’s study of historical Australian crime fiction (Franks, 2011).

This work as a whole portrays humans encountering unknowns at several levels: it examines a character investigating a mystery, but also presents ideas about what it means for a reader to encounter successive information gaps, the closing of some, the failure to close others. It also provides an illustration of me, as a writer, dealing with and investigating uncertainties about my writing and the vaguely formed ideas that lie behind it, illustrated through journal excerpts. The works form an exploration of the two notions of death and mystery and articulate a relationship between them that I find central to my work. But at one level this is the story of a writer asking impossible questions, weaving an elaborate pattern around the space where she had hoped the answer would be and developing a response to this void.

Below I describe the process of the enquiry, through the interaction of reading, analytical thought, imaginative creation and the insights gained, but the enquiry arose with my attempts to write detective novels, so that is the place to begin.

1.2 To Deserve Such Pain as detective fiction
Charles Rzepka (2005, 2010) defines detective fiction as that subset of crime fiction in which the puzzle element is paramount. In this exegesis I use the term murder mystery to refer to that subset of detective fiction in which the crime investigated is a murder. This is by far the majority of detective novels¹. The classical murder mystery model has been defined by P D James (2009) who believes mysteries must contain:

a central mysterious crime which is usually murder; a closed circle of suspects, each with motive, means and opportunity for the crime; a detective […] who comes in […] to solve it; and by the end of the book, a solution which the reader should be able to arrive at by logical deduction from clues inserted in the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness (p9).

For my part, for reasons examined in Chapter 4, I based TDSP on this model and at the outset of this project it was my intention to investigate ways of representing death within it. From a reading of TDSP, it will be apparent that the book deviates from the above definitions in certain important ways. One difference is that there is no detective who comes into the situation from outside the social circles in which the death has taken place. In this novel I am interested in close personal relationships. While in early drafts I had intended Veronica Cruikshank to act in a conventional detective role, it was important even at the beginning of the project that she did not ‘come in’ from some other community. Rather, I wanted her to be drawn into the mystery because of events which happened within her own circle of family and friends. A member of a police force, or a professional private detective investigates a crime at least partly because he or she has gone to work. No matter how much of the detectives’ private lives and personal thoughts are revealed, the story at one level represents an institutional response to a societal problem. Veronica is motivated to find out who killed two young women because her son is likely to be charged with their murders and she believes he is innocent.

Veronica is an amateur detective drawn into a mystery by events and circumstances within her circle of family and close friends. Previous Australian examples of mystery novels involving such detectives include: Susan Hopley: or Circumstantial Evidence by Catherine Crowe (1842), June Wright’s Murder in the Telephone Exchange of 1948 (Wright, 2013) and others featuring Mother Paul (see Groves, 2013) and Kerry Greenwood’s Corinna Chapman mysteries (Greenwood, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2011). Veronica’s primary motivation throughout TDSP is the protection of her family. Her investigation is conducted through conversations with her own family members and close friends, and through this, gradually, secrets are unveiled. The identification of the murderer arises through a confession, stimulated by the combined actions of people who are essentially participants in the drama. Two other characters perform functions of the detective role. In Chapter 25 Roland points to Judith’s skills as an observer and in Chapter 14 he asks Lesley to help him explain the murders, but even this turns out to be a sleight of hand, as Lesley herself is the murderer. Some clues which point to Lesley as the killer are recognised by Veronica immediately before the confession but they could also point to Paul or John. Others are only recognised during the confession. Veronica is left with a sense that there is much she will never understand.
TDSP is a murder mystery. It has been signalled as such from the first pages and, if it were to be published, this genre membership would be signalled on the cover. The novel begins with a death and ends with a murderer identified. It has a central mystery plot line, which follows a trajectory of information gaps highlighted by clues, and these pieces of information, when revealed, feed into the narrative of the murders. This project arose in questions about the place of mystery and death in such a novel: how can death be represented within the generic conventions of a murder mystery novel and what is the relationship between death in a murder mystery novel and the information gaps depicted?
Chapter 2
The Core Elements of TDSP

2.1 The thrill of finding out and the thrill of not knowing

The experience of mystery, the point when a reader becomes aware that there is information that is hidden, is central to my attraction to the murder mystery. In Chapter 4 of this exegesis I examine the murder mystery novel and present an argument for adhering (albeit not completely) to its conventions. This draws on theories of genre and the place of narrative in our thinking. But there is a simpler reason for writing within this model – or at least one which appears at first glance to be simpler – and this rests on the joys the mystery plot holds for the reader, and the kinds of satisfactions contained within it. Because this provides important context for what follows, and because it becomes central to my argument, I wish to describe a personal passion for the murder mystery and the thrills it provides.

A mystery plot involves the presentation of an array of information gaps and points when those information gaps are filled, and as a writer of detective novels I am constantly aware of the need to keep these two processes in balance, so that the reader is intrigued and drawn forwards through a plot, but not baffled. This involves a continual procession of concealment and revelation, until the end of the novel, when most or all of the questions, and in particular those relating to the identity of a murderer, have been answered. I aim, in a mystery plot, to provide a reader with two distinct kinds of satisfaction which I have come to think of as ‘the thrill of finding out’ and ‘the thrill of not knowing’.

The satisfaction that comes when a question is answered can occur in small moments of revelation through a murder mystery plot, but most questions are answered at the end. My term for this is ‘the thrill of finding out’. This is the satisfaction of solving a puzzle, of finding the hidden thread that pulls together an array of confusing facts, of revealing the hidden significance of things. It is the slap on the forehead, the surprise and the recognition of the rightness of the answer, of its coherence with everything that has already been told. In early mysteries, such as those of Agatha Christie and Carter Dickson, where the emphasis is on surprise and plot twists, the reader has an appreciation of the mastery of it, the skill with which the sleight of hand has been performed.

In _Crooked House_ of 1953 by Agatha Christie a man is murdered and suspicion falls on an array of characters, eventually landing on the governess, Edith de Havilland. There is a climax in which Edith drives off with the twelve-year-old Josephine and deliberately crashes her car, killing them both. The narrator finds Josephine’s diary and looks at the first page. Then he claims, ‘We’ve got it all wrong’. Josephine has written, ‘Today I killed grandfather’ (1953, p324). Many mysterious events in the book quickly fall
into place. In early Christie novels, endings are perhaps most satisfying when, after a
complex network of plots, subplots and suspicions and twists, the detective proclaims
everything to be actually perfectly simple. We have, we are told, been watching the
magician’s right hand swirling silk ribbons, while in his left he was swapping the cards
around.

From the opening of TDSP the book claims itself as a murder mystery. It sets up a
strong expectation that it will provide this satisfaction of finding out, and, while the
emphasis is not on surprise or sleight of hand but rather on psychological study, it delivers
the identification of a murderer.

The thrill of finding out is perhaps the most widely recognised element in mystery
fiction. Numerous attempts have been made to explain the appeal of mystery fiction in terms
of this thrill (for example Baker, 1994, Grossvogel, 1983a, Grossvogel, 1983b, Hartman
ideas are taken up in more detail in Chapter 4.

There is another thrill in a murder mystery and this is not confined to the ending.
Rather, it pervades the whole book. At the beginning of a mystery, as readers, we experience
the deep thrill of not knowing, the sense that we have been presented with a fascinating and
terrible picture, and that that picture consists mostly of holes, that there are great empty
spaces in our knowledge of what has happened. In Christie’s By the Pricking of My Thumbs
(1968) Tuppence Beresford, the amateur detective, is visiting a nursing home and sitting
with an odd old woman whom she does not know. The woman sits up and says, ‘I see
you’re looking at the fireplace [...] I wondered [...] Was it your poor child?’ (p22).

Information gaps can be represented by clues, which may take many forms, but
which consist of a piece of information, an object, event or utterance, which makes it clear
that other information is missing. Some information gaps are filled during the course of the
novel, others at the end, and to some extent the thrill provided by information gaps, large
and small, might be explained in terms of anticipation of having them filled. But I believe
there is more to it than this. At its most intriguing, a clue is something which appears at once
to be both incomprehensible and full of significance. Before it is filled an information gap
evokes a world of infinite possibility, a brief awareness of the infinite space of everything
we don’t know, and it supplies a thrill in itself, a feeling of intrigue, the state of not
knowing.
2.2 Closed and open questions

Information gaps can be expressed as questions and, as with questions, it is possible to make a distinction between those that are closed and defined, and those which are open ended. In Agatha Christie’s 1940 novel *Sad Cypress* (2004) there are many clues which lead to closed questions: a nurse finds a tube of morphia tablets missing from her case and the investigator must discover who removed them. A car with a particular number plate is seen outside a gate on the day of a murder and the question is: whose car is it? Some of the questions need answers that are longer and more complex. Two jars of fish paste are found in a kitchen and a scrap of a label is found between floor boards. Here the question is: how did these objects come to be here? The answer would consist of a series of events and actions by a particular set of people, but it is essentially finite. Many of the closed questions begin with the word ‘who’. Who removed the morphine? Who was driving the car? The question of who caused the deaths remains unanswered until late in a mystery. But this ‘who’ is essentially a closed question. It is answered with a name.

In TDSP some information gaps are finite and quickly filled. Veronica remembers where she has seen the cracked tiles. The car that took Treen to the mountain belonged to Paul. Other questions are left open for longer, but their possible answers are able to be clearly delineated. Who drove Paul’s car to the mountain? Whose were the voices in the building when Belle died? What photograph is Roland so desperate to find? The book ends with a clear identification of the murderer. There is a revelation of what has happened and some clues fall into place within this narrative.

There are other clues which point to open questions, to a range of information which is undefined. It is difficult to state exactly when such questions have been answered. In fact, answers can never be said to be complete. TDSP presents many open questions: What was Roland’s emotional connection with the two dead girls? Why do Paul and John employ Vicky in their gallery? Why is Paul distraught the morning after Belle dies? What is he thinking?

It might even be difficult to specify what questions are raised. A clue might be a strange object, a sideways glance. It represents hidden meaning. Some of what is missing cannot properly be described as information at all. In my own practice, I made a conscious effort to provide such clues – objects and events which appear significant and meaningful but whose possible meanings are infinite. Veronica finds a pile of drawings done by Roland with girls’ names and the word ‘SILENT’. Judith says, ‘Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim’. The words have echoes for Veronica. She has a sense that she might have read them somewhere, and this brings her an awareness – a half-awareness – of all the things she has and hasn’t read, of all the things she doesn’t know. In Chapter 2 Veronica finds on her steps a computer printout, held down by a white stone. She searches the page for clues. This page
is never revisited. Later Veronica (and the reader) encounters other white stones and she starts to suspect that the stones might be significant in some way. They seem to represent something. Veronica wonders what they mean. The white stones will participate in the murderer’s confession, but their meaning can never be completely explained.

Later, I began to see that these open questions were central to my aims in writing and this is described in Chapters 8 and 9. But as I wrote the first draft of the novel I was aware only that Veronica feels bewildered by the stones and that this is a pale echo of the bewilderment and disturbance she feels on finding the body. I felt intuitively that there is some common ground between mystery – finite and infinite information gaps – and our experiences of death. The rest of this exegesis will be concerned with elucidating that relationship.

2.3 Death

The other main set of questions I had on writing this and previous novels centres around the idea of death. How can death be presented in a detective novel and how might this representation be related to mystery, to instances of missing information? A murder mystery starts with a death and after this the central plot involves one or more detective figures noticing the effect of this death on others, collecting data about it and finding out what happened to cause the death and who was responsible. The end of the novel is largely concerned with describing a murder and the events that led up to it. The inescapable truth that life is finite underlies everything.

But is that what death is, in this first scene of TDSP, the large fact of human mortality? As I began to examine this more closely, this inescapable truth began to twist and smudge. I wanted my novel to describe in a meaningful way a woman’s confrontation with death, but what did that mean? What exactly was it that was to be represented – an abstract idea or a process, or an experience?

I first approached these questions through an examination of the mountain scene. Veronica finds a body. Soon she will think rationally. She will call the police and she will search for Roland and try to find out why he has sent her there and how much he knows. But this isn’t what happens immediately.

Excerpt from writing journal:

In the first fraction of a second Veronica is afraid. Instinctively she looks around her. Whatever has killed this girl might represent a danger to Veronica herself. After that she is shocked. But what is that shock? An excess of
reaction, a flood of possible responses resulting, momentarily, in no response at all. Soon reactions differentiate. There is a rapid flux of emotions—sympathy, sadness at another person’s suffering and at all that the other person has lost, at their loss of everything, their loss of life. There is outrage, from this mother of four, at the untimeliness of it, the injustice that someone young has died. There is also revulsion. Veronica is physically repelled by the appearance of this girl, this body, who ... which ... who ... has been on the mountain, frozen, for two days. And as well as all that there is an awareness of largeness. She has a sense, without having time to recognise it or think it through, that this is something immense and of profound significance, for her own life and for life in general. And there is incomprehension. There is something in the largeness that is unfamiliar, bewildering, beyond understanding.

I was aware at this point that Veronica has encountered something that represents a problem in her own life, a danger, and a deep moral challenge for her son. But she has also encountered something much more profound than that. She has found a physical manifestation of the fact of human finitude and a concrete, tactile reminder of her own personal mortality. These are explored in Chapter 3.

2.4 Landscape, literature, history

In this enquiry, through the drafting and redrafting of TDSP and through reading and analysis, I hoped to develop a murder mystery novel that would provide some meaningful representation of the idea of death. I began by examining my starting points for the novel, the three elements which I felt intuitively the novel must contain. These were: vast natural landscapes, allusion and reference to other works of literature, and stories from the history of Hobart. In my writing I have always had the sense that these elements somehow belong together, that they reflect and enhance each other in some way, and that in some way they belong with mystery and with the idea of death. Here I interrogate that idea.
From the beginning I wanted TDSP to be infused with an awareness of the vast natural landscapes that surround Hobart: the wilderness area of south western Tasmania, the southern ocean, the sky, and Mount Wellington. When Veronica finds the body, she does so on the slopes of the mountain. This was an instinctive choice of mine and this will be examined in Chapter 5.

The second foundational element of the novel was that I wanted to draw parallels between the actions of my characters and those of other novels, and to have references and allusions to other works of art, including poetry. As a physical manifestation of this I wanted to include a second-hand bookshop. If asked to explain this at the beginning of the writing I would have said that a bookshop is a complex, shadowy and mysterious setting, and that I wanted references to other works of literature to add texture, depth and resonances, to draw the scenes out from their immediate settings to wider contexts and possibly to wider significance of some kind. This element is examined in Chapter 6.

The third element I wanted to include was some sense of Hobart’s history, embodied in stories from the lives of the convict women of Hobart in the early nineteenth century. This is examined in Chapter 7.

2.5 A core idea: empathy and distance

The stories of convict women form part of a core idea that lay behind the conception of TDSP: the idea of empathy and psychological distance. From the 1830s to the 1850s convict women who were returned from placement with settlers, or who were to be punished, were housed at the Female House of Correction in South Hobart. Here cells were foetid, cramped, damp and flea-ridden and rations were meagre and monotonous. Punishments included hair cropping, the wearing of a fourteen pound iron collar with spikes, solitary confinement in dark cells and walking on a treadmill, which produced pain in buttocks, hips and legs, as well as haemorrhages and miscarriages. Convict women who fell pregnant while assigned as servants were returned to the Female Factory, allowed to breastfeed their babies for six months and then separated from them and punished with six months hard labour. If they were well behaved they were allowed access to their babies once a week, although the mortality rate in the nursery was very high (Beddoe, 1979, Rayner, 2004, Tardiff, 1990, Hyland, 2007, Frost, 2004).

One of the things that struck me about the stories of these women was the reported comments of others. Governor Arthur believed the women of the House of Correction were ‘accustomed to every species of immorality and vice’ (Rayner, 2004, p120). Lady Jane Franklin, wife of the Governor from 1837 to 1843, expressed willingness to be involved in helping female convicts but paid little attention to the high infant mortality rate and did not attempt to change the way women were treated. She complained that punishments for
pregnancy were insufficient and that the nursery system was too comfortable, believing that the women should at least have their heads shaved, have their rations cut, be put into punishment cells or be sentenced to hard labour (Alexander, 1987, Woodward, 1951, Fitzpatrick, 1949).

While reading about this, I was reminded of a novel by George Eliot. In Silas Marner (1993), a young woman, Molly Farren, addicted to opium, is abandoned by her husband. She walks at night with her young child in snow and freezing wind, sinks into a coma and dies. The novel concentrates on the stories of others. There is only passing reference to Molly Farren’s misery. She is described as vindictive and indolent, and her death is quickly passed over. Molly has died in someone else’s story.

In turn, Molly’s story reminded me of a series of newspaper articles. In 2009, The Telegraph newspaper (Cummings, 2010, Davies, 2009, Telegraph, 2009) had articles about two-year-old Dean Shillingworth, who was found dead in a suitcase which had been thrown into a duck pond. Dean’s mother, Rachel Pfitzner, was convicted of killing him by swinging him around, pulling on the cord of his hooded jumper. In a court case it was said that she had ‘loathed’ Dean and was ‘irrationally cruel’ to him. There was a headline calling her an ‘evil mother’ and a photograph of her looking haughty and malicious, being led from court in handcuffs.

Thinking about Rachel Pfitzner, and observing my own reactions to her, became one of the seeds of the novel.

Excerpt from writing journal:

A mother has hurt and murdered her own child. This is an evil woman. ‘Evil’ is an old fashioned, discredited word, an idea out of favour. But if we cannot use that word for this act, then under what circumstances could it apply? What could be worse than this? Reading the articles I feel that Rachel has been shown to be something other from us. She is monstrous.

I look at the photograph. Rachel has long pale cheeks. Her gaze is lowered and her face is set. She reveals nothing. She has protected herself.

I look more closely. Her head is tipped back slightly, the chin raised. Her jaw hangs down, but her lips are pulled closed, so that she looks
defiant and resentful. Or is that what I am seeing? I imitate the expression, pulling my lips together over parted teeth. It is almost as if Rachel has stifled a cry of anguish. Or it might be that what we are seeing is a refusal to speak, or a suppressed wince of pain. This is surely cause for at least an attempt at understanding. What would bring a woman to kill her child? What has to be done to her to bring her to that point? Somebody must try to feel this. What were Rachel’s experiences, as she experienced them? What is it like to seize a child by cords around his neck and to swing ...?

Here I stop. If Rachel has sought to protect herself from the gaze of others I am happy for her to have that protection. I am repelled. I have no desire to understand how things felt to her. If Rachel is experiencing pain of some kind, then surely that is deserved. The act of filicide marks her out as someone who cannot be understood. It is not only abhorrent, it is unthinkable.

While thinking about Rachel, and observing those thoughts, I came across a passage in the Browning poem ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’. On his way through a wasteland a young knight sees a horse that is sick and suffering. He says:

‘Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;
I never saw a brute I hated so;
He must be wicked to deserve such pain.’

There was something in my unease about Molly and Rachel that reminded me of the scenes in detective fiction in which a body is found. I was aware that my novel would foreground the experiences of Veronica. Treen’s experiences would not be directly represented. They might be discussed and described, pieced together through the course of the novel, but for much of a murder mystery the story of the victim is essentially absent (Todorov, 1981). Even at the end of a detective novel, the narrative of the murder may focus more fully on the experiences of the murderer than on those of the victim. To a greater or lesser extent, in TDSP, Treen dies in someone else’s story.
These threads, together – Molly Farren, the Tasmanian female convicts, Rachel Pfitzner, the role of the victim in a murder mystery – suggested to me a pattern that is prevalent in human interaction. For the Tasmanian women convicts as described by Governor Arthur and Lady Franklin, for Molly as presented by George Eliot and for Rachel Pfitzner as viewed by me, no consideration is given to their subjective mental states. They are encountered from a position of psychological distance, where they are perceived as different from the observer in important ways. From such a perspective people can be viewed in terms of abstract concepts, rather than with personal and moral engagement (Trope and Liberman, 2010, Liberman and Trope, 2008, Trope and Stephan, 2007). They have been dehumanised, objectified (Waller, 2002, Schinkel, 2010) and assigned to an ‘out-group’, which has meant that their experiences are thought of with reduced empathy (Tarrant et al., 2009).

These women formed the background for TDSP. I could have characters write a piece about a woman convict. My thoughts and feelings about Rachel Pfitzner were to contribute to the depiction of Veronica’s and Lesley’s attitudes towards Treen and Belle. Roland could draw parallels between the life and death of Molly Farren and those of Treen and Belle.

The four cases – Molly, Rachel, the female convicts, Treen – are not the same. In drawing on them in TDSP I hoped not to demonstrate clear and direct parallels but to have the similarities present as unarticulated background, creating resonances and echoes. But they all contribute to the idea of empathy and distance in the novel. Initially I did not see this idea as closely related to questions of death and mystery but by the end of this project it had become central, and this development is discussed in Chapters 8 and 9.

2.6 What now?
These, then were the elements I chose as essential to the novel TDSP. I constructed the first draft around moments of mystery: points where the reader is made aware that there is some information that is missing. This first draft was based around notions of empathy and psychological distance, and important building blocks were vast natural landscapes, literary allusion and referencing and stories of Tasmanian female convicts. At the outset, I had an intuitive notion that a novel constructed in this way could be developed to provide some meaningful representation of death and the purpose of this project, through reading and thinking and drafting and re-drafting the novel, was to articulate that notion more clearly.

The first task was to address more closely the idea of death.
Chapter 3
Death

3.1 Mortality as universal fact

Death: the inescapable truth that life is finite; the largest of facts, which brings all other facts to a close; the future event which is completely certain, whose time of arrival is always unknown. In one sense death appears to us as an abstract fact. It is a fundamental and universal defining characteristic of human life. This is the face of death represented in memento mori, the reminders of mortality and the impermanence of earthly pleasures, usually in the form of skulls, which appeared in early works of Christian art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is the death of Hamlet’s jokes at the graveside and his soliloquy on Yorick’s skull (although Hamlet’s contemplation of death also has a profound personal and emotional content). This death is a fact which could be stated. It is something for us to grasp intellectually, something of which we can remind each other: ‘to this favour (we) must come’ (Act V, Sc i).

Characters in a murder mystery novel could discuss mortality as a fact, mention it to one another, point it out. Or it could be represented in the form of something physically separate from characters, something tangible or visually symbolic. In Greek myth, mortality was represented as the daemon Thanatos. It has been personified in paintings and engravings with themes of the Danse Macabre or Death and the Maiden. In Howard’s End by E. M. Forster (1984), Helen talks of Death, referring to it with the pronoun ‘He’, claiming that death explains life and makes her aware of the ‘emptiness of Money’ (Chapter XXVII). Other authors have used simple metaphor – the resurfacing coffin in Moby Dick springs to mind, as do Macbeth’s ‘brief candle’ (although again, there is deep personal engagement here), the white grave-stone in the first chapter of David Copperfield and the graveyard in Bleak House – to gesture towards the idea of mortality. In all of these death is a generality, an abstract idea which lies behind an object, a vision, a word or an event, and which applies to all of us.

2 Notable examples include: The Ambassadors, Jean de Dinterville and George de Salve (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger; Youth with a Skull (1626-8) by Frans Hals; Vanitas (1671) by Philippe de Champaigne; Self Portrait (1680) by Thomas Smith and Damien Hirst’s diamond encrusted skull, For the Love of God (2007).
3 For example: Three Ages of Woman and Death of 1510 and Death and the Maiden of 1517 by Hans Baldung Grien; Death and the Maiden (1915-16) by Egon Schiele; an engraving, Death and the Maiden of 1894 by Edvard Munch and a drawing by Joseph Beuys of 1957.
But this is not what came to me as a fiction writer as I imagined Veronica finding a body. Rather than introducing death as a subject which can be named, symbolised or discussed as a separate entity, I wished to have Veronica’s personal experience of mortality somehow intrinsic to the novel, contained in the fabric of scenes and in the action, present in her thoughts and experiences. I thought again into the scene on the mountain.

Excerpt from writing journal:
Veronica has found the body of a girl. She is not going to sit back in a detached way or compose a message for all humankind. She will know, without thinking about it, that everybody dies. She already knew this. All humans die. I will die. If, as a result of finding Treen, Veronica is to engage with death in any way, it will not be with death as abstract fact but through strong emotion.

3.2 Death is personal
At first, Veronica is shocked, stunned by a rush of emotion. Later she is bewildered. She feels compelled to imagine the terrible experience of this young woman. This is not an intellectual recognition of an abstract fact. It is deeply, intimately, unavoidably personal.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, Sigmund Freud saw movement towards death as one of the fundamental forces which underlie the dynamics of human psychology. All organic life has a goal of returning to an ‘ancient starting point’, to an inanimate state (Freud, 1922, parag 8). For Martin Heidegger (1962) death is a horizon which forms a defining element of the nature of individual being. For Heidegger, a true understanding of all the possibilities of life requires a deep personal intimate embrace of death as the ultimate of all possibilities where one loses Being but also reaches ‘wholeness’ (p281) and ‘totality’ (p284, 286). The abstraction, the cognitive recognition of mortality as a general fact, acts as a deflection of full personal awareness. Death should be lived towards, related to as a constant imminence within life. Death is individuating, even isolating. One’s death is one’s ‘ownmost’, (p292) an experience that cannot be shared.

A similar notion appeared earlier in the writings of Soren Kierkegaard, of 1845 and 1846. Kierkegaard believed that a clear understanding of our own mortality ‘gives life force as nothing else does’ (2000, p166, see also Kierkegaard, 2009). Similarly Maurice Blanchot (1995) sees death as a source of meaning for human life, a ‘condition for all understanding’ which prevents life from sinking into ‘absurdity and nothingness’ (p324). For Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 2000), death is of profound significance in that it reveals to
us our responsibilities for others and a sense of the meaning of time. It also has significant ‘emotional and intellectual repercussions’ (2000, p10).

An embrace of death as a personal horizon may not necessarily bring comprehension or fulfilment. In contrast to Heidegger, Jacques Derrida (1993, 2005) believes that the ever present horizon of death is a source of anguish. As an unavoidable experience that cannot be lived, death for Derrida is an ‘aporia’, a contradiction in logic and language which contaminates life. Maurice Blanchot also saw death as exposing us to anguish, to the horror of meaninglessness, in which we feel ourselves dissipated and deprived of the ability to act (1995, 1989).

In other words, death as personal horizon is approached (and evaded) with powerful emotion. It might bring understanding of life, a sense of authenticity, or it might bring contamination, anguish.

But in the mountain scene Veronica does not experience a conscious realisation of death as a continuing possibility present in every moment of her own life. I took these ideas and thought through the mountain scene again.

On finding the body, Veronica is thrown into numbing horror, a deep physical revulsion and a rush of emotion. Her mind is full of questions, and none of these is clear. Any thoughts of mortality are suppressed, blended into the moment, tangled with sensation and action. Veronica cannot grasp these thoughts. She might feel the need to grasp them. She might feel an approach, something that is there, behind, above and through the moment, a shadow hanging behind the immediate experiences. But for now she has simply stumbled on a body.

Veronica’s reaction to the body is personal. Her primary reaction is emotional. She is disturbed. She is not thinking consciously about either her own or humanity’s mortality. She is reacting in an emotional and a physical way to the discovery of a physical object.

3.3 The body
In writing TDSP, I intended that Veronica’s response to the body was authentically, credibly human. As an author imagining the responses of characters to the finding of a body, I feel that these responses will vary widely from one person to another. Depending on our relationship with the person before they died (Veronica’s relationship to Treen will be
addressed later), we might be led to grief and despair, horror, anger, fear or guilt, in fact to any of an infinite range of emotional responses. How, then, will Veronica respond to the discovery of a body? In writing and re-writing the scene on the mountain, I found myself focussing on the physical presence of the body and Veronica’s direct sensory experience of it as an object, its surfaces and textures.

Veronica’s thoughts are pared away and replaced with heightened sensory apprehension. Fragments of thought appear, are distorted and then repeated. They break and fade. She experiences the body as an object of colour and texture.

I wanted, as an initial gesture towards some engagement with the fact of Treen’s death, to give the body a clear presence in the scene, to present the body entirely and in some physical detail. In rewrites of the mountain scene I increased the immediacy and the detail of Veronica’s sensory experience of the body.

But can the body bring to Veronica some suggestion of the experiences of someone who once lived and has now died? Can the appearance of a dead body represent the idea of death? Can it act as a reminder – to Veronica, to the reader – that we will all die, or present to an individual a trace of his or her own inevitable death?

There are works of visual art in which the *memento mori* function is performed by skulls or by depictions of actual corpses, sometimes placed adjacent to the living, sometimes decomposing. Garrett Stewart (1984) highlights a scene in D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1977) in which a body brings Lydia to the realisation that the dead person is ‘beyond change or knowledge, absolute, laid in line with the infinite’ (p 248). *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner (1958) and Graham

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4 The cadaver tombs of the fifteenth century have depictions of decaying corpses and Puritan tombstones in the early years of the U.S.A. depicted winged skulls or skeletons. Other examples are: *Dead Lovers* (1470) artist unknown, in the Musée de l’Œuvre Notre-Dame in Strasbourg; an illustration named *Enon Cemetery and Dancing Saloon* (1843) artist unknown, in the Edwin C. Bolles papers (MS004), Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University; Lucas van Leyden’s *St Jerome* (1521); Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793); James Ensor’s *My Portrait in 1960* (1888) and Edvard Munch’s *Self-portrait with Skeleton Arm* (1895) and *The Dead Mother* (1899-1900). In Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, the cadaver noticeably resembles the members of the audience (Quigley, 1996) and in Bartholomeus Dolendo’s *The “Theatrum Anatomicum” of the University of Leyden with a Crowd of Curious Spectators* (1609) skeletons dance around among the live spectators. There is also a real cadaver as centrepiece.

5 For example, Charles Baudelaire’s poems “A carcass” and “The dance of death”; Emily Dickinson’s ‘How many times these low feet staggered’ (p192) and ‘Safe in their alabaster chambers’ (p188) (2003); Sylvia Plath’s ‘Edge’ and ‘All the dead dears’ (Plath, 1981)
Swift’s *Last Orders* (1996) are two novels in which a body (or its ashes) are central to the plot line. In these novels the body and the urn of ashes act as silent counterpoints to the vividness of the lives of the characters who transport them and they lead characters to think of and discuss death and the possibility of afterlife. Death is not the subject of these novels, it hangs as a shadow over and behind the activities of the living and throws them into sharper focus.

The encounter with death through a corpse can be personal. Again this can be seen in some of the novels discussed by Stewart. In *The Rainbow*, Lydia sees a corpse as ‘Neither living nor dead [...] he was [...] inviolable, inaccessibly himself’ (Chapter 9). In James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (2008) Stephen Dedalus has a profound emotional and spiritual involvement with memories and dreams of his mother’s body, both dying and dead. In *The Nigger of the Narcissus* by Joseph Conrad, the dying Jimmy Wait, and later his corpse, lead a shipmate to feel ‘the anguishing grasp of a great sorrow on his heart at the thought that he himself, some day, would have to go through it all’ (Conrad, 1963, p128).

### 3.4 A resemblance with nothing to resemble

After considering these ideas, I attempted again to think into the scene in which Veronica finds the body and I found that, while Veronica finds the body disturbing, this is not because she is thinking about human mortality or her own eventual death. When she finds Treen’s body she is aware only of sensory impressions and unnameable emotion, and her thoughts are fragmented.

Veronica has a sense that the corpse in some way presents her with a difficulty. This girl who was once alive is now embodied in this awful object before her. This body was once Treen, and in a way it still is her, but at the same time it is something different entirely. Veronica cannot understand this. It makes her feel that there is something missing, something she should be seeing.

Veronica is stunned by a rush of emotion but she is also stunned by this strangeness. The corpse of Treen is both her and not her. It is a reminder of the living girl, but also an object of strange colours and textures and plainly not Treen. Treen herself is no longer there, and that means she is nowhere and no more.
Julia Kristeva (1982) has described this unsettling ambiguity of a corpse, its status as an object, but also as an image of a person who was once alive, and its propensity to show us what we ‘permanently thrust aside in order to live’ (p3).

I am watching a police procedural on television. The camera focuses on the foot of a corpse in a morgue. The toes are long and bent. They look more animal than human. Or no, not even that. The foot is grey. It looks hard, inorganic, like a waxwork. Treen should be missing a boot. The foot would seem to have become something other than human, a sculpture of a foot.

Maurice Blanchot (1999) also described the uncanny property of a corpse, its capacity to disturb. It is neither completely of this world nor completely absent from it. A corpse is a representation of the person who was once alive, but it is not them. It becomes a ‘resemblance which has nothing to resemble’ (1999, p423). For Blanchot, ‘The cadaver is [...] a shadow ever present behind the living form which now [...] transforms it entirely into shadow’ (p421).

Veronica is feeling something she cannot articulate. She has a sense of the body’s uncanniness. It disturbs. It makes her feel not at home. It is the unfamiliar within the familiar.

3.5 Death as event and puzzle
On finding the body, Veronica is disturbed. She has a deep, unarticulated sense that what she has found is profound and significant for her in her own life. But this is not clear in her thoughts at present. And her circumstances, the actions she is about to undertake during most of the novel, will leave little opportunity for such thoughts.

When the shock and the first rush of emotion clear, Veronica is engaged with this death. She is disturbed by the fact that Treen has died primarily because it threatens her own family. She needs to call the police and then she needs to find her son and later she needs to protect her grandson. In later scenes, when her mind turns to questions they
are questions about facts and events. She wants to know what happened.

In TDSP Treen’s body represents an event, an act of violence (or possibly of suicide or accident) leading to the loss of a life. This event is important in Veronica’s own life and it precipitates her into a series of actions. Here, Treen’s death is experienced by Veronica in what Heidegger and Kierkegaard would term an ‘everyday’ manner (Heidegger’s term).

In a murder mystery, while it may be many other things – a crime, an immoral act, an evil deed, a tragedy – a murder is primarily a puzzle. In the 1942 Agatha Christie novel, *The Body in the Library* Miss Marple is claimed to be ‘very good at murders’ (Christie, 1942, p14). In *Nemesis* (Christie, 1971b), Marple talks of an ‘unlikely and perplexing murder’ and a solicitor asks if she ‘solved it’ (pp 22-3). Emotional responses to the discovery of a body are sometimes noticeably absent. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie’s first murder mystery of 1921, Mrs Inglethorp dies of agonised strychnine convulsions in front of a roomful of servants, relations and doctors. Immediately afterwards, the narrator describes himself as having mind full of ‘wild surmises’. His first words are, ‘Do you know what I think?’ (Christie, 2008, Chapter III). In *Clouds of Witness* by Dorothy Sayers, a woman comes across the body of her fiancée and says, ‘Oh it’s Denis! … Whatever can have happened?’ (Sayers, 1926, p18).

It is true there are murder mysteries that are not quite so startling in their flatness of affect, and in the characters’ headlong rush, in the face of violent death, into ratiocination. But it is common among mysteries, part of the conventions of the genre, that, while it is acknowledged that there is some, often considerable, emotion attached to the event of a death and to the loss or the suffering involved, interest becomes quickly focussed on the rational process of solving a puzzle. In 1948, W. H. Auden suggested that mystery stories, in allowing readers to distance themselves from the suffering of characters, in particular from that of the murderer, necessarily fail as works of art. He was echoing earlier articles by writer and critic Edmund Wilson in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1944 and 1945 who insisted that characters in detective fiction are never fully realised, but are contrived to fit the plots (Wilson, 1944, Wilson, 1945). David Grossvogel (1983a) accuses Agatha Christie of drawing characters that ‘lay no claim to being people’ (p259) and Geoffrey Hartman (1983) claims that detective fiction is doomed to a level of artificiality because of ‘the ritual presence of the problem solving formula’ (p220).
3.6 The death of another

Reading these passages in early murder mysteries I was reminded of my theme of the lack of empathy, the objectification and dehumanisation that can develop when one person sees another as distanced or as radically different from themselves. I thought of Molly Farren, the female convicts of Hobart and Rachel Pfitzner. They are portrayed in the same way that the characters in these early detective novels encounter bodies, not as complete humans with experiences of their own, but as representations of something – of abstract concepts, of puzzles, of vice and depravity, or of evil.

As an author imagining Veronica’s emotional states, I felt that if she was to engage with the body as a complete person who was once alive and is now dead, she needed to have met this person previously, interacted with her, felt something, thought about the encounter and developed some sympathy or empathy for the girl, felt some trace of responsibility for her welfare. I inserted a scene early in the novel in which Veronica meets the living girl briefly. Treen asks Veronica for help which Veronica refuses. Now, when she finds Treen dead, Veronica not only remembers the girl alive, but feels some connection with her, some failed responsibility of care.

Shortly after finding the body Veronica remembers Treen alive. She remembers meeting her and feels, immediately and with force, their fellow humanity. She begins to recognise in the body the girl Treen used to be. She imagines Treen’s suffering, the sensations of being clamped with cold. She imagines suffering this herself, scraping at frozen mud, feeling herself dissipate.

Treen’s and Belle’s deaths are not Veronica’s own, they are the deaths of others. For Heidegger, the death of another cannot bring us into full authentic contact with the personal fact of our own mortality. We have no true access to their ‘Being-no-longer-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1962, p281) but can only be ‘there alongside’ (p282).

Others have thought differently about the death of another. In “On Transcience” (1915) Freud suggests that it is the transience perceived in objects and in others that gives us a sense of our own mortality. In “Mourning and Melancholia” he allows himself the conjecture that the death of a loved one can confront an ego with the ‘question whether it shall share its fate’ (Freud, 1917, p254). Paul-Louis Landsberg believed that it is through the death of another, especially that of a loved one, that it becomes possible for us to have an ‘intuition of the necessity of death’ (in Schumacher, 2011, p112). Emmanuel Levinas
believes that the death of another gives us a sense that we are left occupying a place that is rightly theirs and exposes us to the otherness of death (Levinas, 2000). Havi Carel (2006) has proposed a reconceptualisation of Heidegger and Freud to include the idea that the death of another could disclose one’s own finitude (p152).

With regard to novels, Garrett Stewart (1984) describes a process of ‘displacement’, in which the death of a character brings other characters and readers to a knowledge of death through a ‘mortal encounter outlived and assimilated’ (p11). Stewart points out that, in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus is haunted in a personal and sensual way by the horrific death of his own mother and the recent drowning of a man. In his mind he begs his mother, ‘Let me be and let me live’ (Chapter I). Later he imagines himself trying to save the man and going ‘with him together down’ (Chapter I). In *Howard’s End*, Helen responds to the death of Leonard Bast by feeling that ‘death were anything and everything’ and that she has caught a glimpse of ‘the divine wheels’ (p345).

Shortly after finding Treen, Veronica imagines Treen’s suffering but this attempt at empathy leads her to an impasse. The moment of passing from life into something else is beyond Veronica’s imagining.

In reflecting on Treen’s death, Veronica feels herself dissipate into the empty sky. She can imagine the suffering but she cannot reach what happens next. Below I demonstrate how this idea became central to my ideas about the mystery novel.

Veronica attempts to understand what has happened to Treen and Belle. All she knows is that these girls are dead, that they have died. She does not know death. Death is not present in the scenes. It is above and under and behind and through them.

In finding the bodies, Veronica has found a trace of the mortality of all of us, and she has been given a small suggestion of her own death, but these appear as shadows behind her thoughts. They are present only in a sense she has that behind the physical objects, the body, the facts and the questions, there is something else, something deeply personal and important. She feels there is something she should be seeing. But it is something she cannot grasp.

This was the next thing to consider. The radical unknowability of death.
3.7 The unthinkable

For Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Derrida, Blanchot and Levinas, finitude is a structuring component of all human existence. It is a parameter, a dimension of life which is ever-present, contained in every part of it.

On the other hand, death is unknowable.

Excerpt from one of my travel journals:

A surprise

There is a man on the train, sitting diagonally behind me, speaking to the woman beside him. His voice is restricted at the back of his throat. He says, ‘My mother passed away and my auntie asked me if I believed in God. I think we’re not meant to know.’

I sneak a look at the man. He has a red face and a head so large it appears swollen. The woman beside him is looking down at a paper. He says, ‘Trying to get your head around it. It just can’t be done. Everyone is born and everyone dies. It’s a bit like a surprise.’

There are two aspects to the unknowability of death. First and most simply, we cannot know the time of its arriving. Kierkegaard suggests that this uncertainty ‘enters into everything’ (2009, p139).

More fundamentally, death is something which is itself beyond understanding. Freud believed that each person has little conscious access to death as a force within life and for each individual there is no acceptance in the unconscious of his or her own impending death. In personal terms, ‘at bottom no one believes in his own death’ (Freud, 1918, par 2). Kierkegaard doubts whether we can have ‘any idea of death’ (2009, p140). This is an echo of a long line of thought dating back to Greek philosopher Epicurus who argued that ‘death is nothing to us’, because the two states of life and death are mutually exclusive, the presence of one requires the absence of the other (2007, p1). The idea appears again in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (2010), Immanuel Kant (2006) and Freud (1918). Simon Critchley speaks of ‘the radical ungraspability’ of death (Critchley, 1997, p71). Phenomenologically, death is the unknown. Death ‘does not have to do with an experience’ (Heidegger, 1962, p29).
Death is unavailable to experience but at the same time it is central to understanding life. For Jacques Derrida (1993), this ‘aporia’ leaves an anguish at the heart of life, in that one can never experience that which is truly one’s own. In God, Death and Time (2000), Levinas ponders the impossibility of reducing death to an experience. Death represents primarily a question (p14, p17). Death itself ‘is not a phenomenon: hardly thematizable, unthinkable—the irrational begins there’ (p70). Death brings us into direct relation with ‘the mystery’ (Levinas, 1987, p56). In describing Veronica’s confrontation with death I was trying to convey some of the disturbance that comes from the incomprehensibility of death, the sense that death is of profound significance to her life, but that it can never be known. In terms of experience, death was absent as primary subject matter.

Excerpt from writing journal:

A mountainside covered in rocks, with mist flowing through spindly trees. In front of Veronica is a body. This body is a concrete object and at the same time it represents something else. Behind the body is a ghost, a memory, the intangible presence of a person who was once alive.

Death is there too. But that is not ‘in front’ of her. Where then? Death has no colour and no physical manifestation. As I try to describe death’s presence, the words which come are visual, spatial. Death underlies the scene, it is in the air. It is in front, behind, above and through. It hangs back from Veronica, from the scene, back and behind, among the fallen rock and the trees and the mist. In a way it is thrown there, by the body, like a shadow. If Veronica is to see it she must turn from the body and look away. But when she does that she won’t see it. The shadow vanishes with the act of turning.

From Veronica’s point of view, death will be impossible to confront directly. It resides in what David Grossvogel called ‘dark regions’ that can only be alluded to (p253). Ronald Schleifer (1993) addressed the difficulties of finding a generalising representation or a conceptualisation of death. He suggests that death must be reached through allegory,
metonymy and analogy. In other words, death is something which must be approached through some kind of metaphoric ‘transaction between contexts’ (Richards, 1971, p94) in which elements of the novel – descriptions of objects, settings, or particular aspects of these, characters’ thoughts and dialogue, verbal style – are asked to release meanings which might be beyond the range of rational understanding.

On the other hand, reaching for death through metaphor would be problematic. The uniqueness of death and its unavailability to experience, constitute a problem for tropes based in similarity: for metaphor and comparison. Death is unreachable and unrepresentable. For Garrett Stewart (1984), death is a ‘referential blank’ (p4) which, in novels, requires ‘a specialized rhetoric and figural and grammatical devices to approximate the evacuation of its very subject’ (p7). Schleifer (1993) believes that representing death requires ‘a representational mode that avoids, to some degree, the reductiveness of representation’ (p322). Representing death could be approached by index and by trace, by descriptions of emptiness and silence or by seeking metaphors for hiddenness, for absence, for removal, departure, erasure.

For Veronica death is not something to be found, a skull to be pointed out. It is something to be lived, to be haunted by, to be taken with her into activity. It is experienced in affect, in grief, anguish and fear. And it brings bewilderment. Death provides a question without an answer. For Veronica, death is always there, in the corner of vision, behind above between words. It is in the spaces – thrown up by the world, but not of the world. It is in the missing information. In the mystery.

3.8 Approaching death through mystery

Maybe it is that – that elusiveness – that was significant for my purposes here. Maybe that was a clue to the possibilities of contact between a detective novel and death. The murder mystery. It was there in the name, hidden in plain sight. These novels are not called ‘murder solutions’. I had been reading about a connection between death and unknowns, between death and mystery. Possibly one access to the representation of death could be through the moment of mystery, the small questions and the larger ones (Who brought Treen here? What happened? Why?). Possibly gaps in information could have a metaphoric function in the novel, echoing the way we think about death and evoking the metaphysical uncertainties of
life and death. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I study the elements I had chosen for the novel – vast natural landscapes, a bookshop and literary allusion, stories from history. I describe my thought processes as I wrote and re-wrote scenes of the novel and as I read, seeking to articulate this relationship between death and mystery.

First I wish to examine the mystery model itself and my reasons for choosing to writing within this genre.
Chapter 4
The Murder Mystery

4.1 Unsuited to the great mysteries
TDSP is a murder mystery. It has been signalled as such from the first pages and, if it were to be published, this genre membership would be signalled on the cover. The mystery novel is a highly codified form of literature with a widely recognised series of conventions regarding plot structure and narrative devices, to the extent that it could be said to follow a basic formula (Freeman, 1924, Van Dine, 1928, Krystal, 2007, Ephron, 2008, James, 2009, Auden, 1948). Before continuing with an exploration of the possibilities for such a novel, I wish to take some space to examine both the limitations of the model and my reasons for adhering to it.

At first glance, the model might appear unsuited to a portrayal of ideas of death. Mystery novels are plot based. They consist of ‘long sequence[s] of logically interconnected human actions that succeed one another in time’ (Porter, 1981, p86). There is an expectation, across the genre, of narrative drive (James, 2008). For much of the novel Veronica will be concerned with asking questions of other characters, with uncovering their stories and examining and thinking about their lives. If the idea of death is to be present there is limited space for it to be brought into the novel through Veronica’s conscious thoughts.

It could be argued that there is a fundamental disparity between the idea of death and the mystery novel. A mystery plot is clearly directed and often linear. It moves from an opening question through a series of logically connected smaller questions and answers to a definitive ending. The idea of death is infinitely large, unable to be encompassed or limited, unable to be grasped. As Derrida argued, there is no direction in death. It is an impassable border, which involves only waiting (Derrida, 1993, 2000). The post-phenomenological thinkers I have found most enlightening in my reading about death follow traditions which emphasise ambiguity, contingency, relativity and undecideability and which are sceptical of binary categories and formal logical structures. To use a term of Lyotard’s, between the idea of death and the murder mystery there is a ‘differend’ (Lyotard, 1984a, 1988). The two entities have no common rules of judgement, no dimensions on which they can be compared.

David Grossvogel (1983a) suggested that the detective novel cannot be brought into contact with great metaphysical uncertainties. A murder mystery confronts readers with death, mortality and the great unknowns about the afterlife and then makes this comfortable by providing the illusion that all this has been controlled, by distracting readers with a
smaller mystery which has a definitive answer. He says, ‘the detective story … proposes only … that the mystery is located on this side of the unknown’ (p253). It takes the awesomeness of metaphysical unknowns and replaces them with a man in a false beard (p253). In other words, if my aim in writing TDSP is to produce a work that somehow contacts the universal and also deeply intimate fact of human mortality, the model appears to be working against me. The choice of a mystery as a vehicle to explore death needs to be interrogated.

4.2 Narrative: watching ourselves think

In Chapter 2, I gave some reasons for my interest in the murder mystery model, based on the thrills I have experienced, both as a reader and a writer of detective fiction, the thrills of not knowing and finding out. I will also be arguing that the experience of not knowing is related to our awareness of death.

There are other reasons for using the murder mystery to examine and represent questions of death and mortality. The first lies in its status as a narrative. Detective fiction has been proposed to be an exemplary form of the workings of all narratives (Kermode, 1967, Brooks, 1992). In fact, in the mystery plot there are essentially two narratives: the story of the investigation, which is present, uncovers and assembles the story of a crime that has taken place in the past, which is absent (Todorov, 1977).

In imagining Veronica, I find that the creation of narrative is one of the ways in which she will think about events in her life. When Veronica finds Treen dead, after the initial emotional reaction, she has a need to work out what has happened. Even if she was not concerned that Roland would be implicated in a crime, she would have an instinctive need to fill the large information gap that is the story of how Treen died and how her body came to the rock on the mountain. If the novel is authentically to represent Veronica’s response to finding the body it must show the need she has to form this story.

Jean-François Lyotard (1984) and Paul Ricoeur (1990) have both made claims for the importance of the construction of narratives in the formation of our understanding of the world and our sense of identity. Peter Brooks (1992) sees the structures of narrative as parallel to universal human needs and modes of thinking. Plot is ‘one of the large categories in which we think… the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless’ (p323).

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6 Although the piecing together of the narrative of a murder might be said to contain elements of both Lyotard’s narrative knowledge and also his scientific knowledge.
7 See also William Dowling (Dowling, 2011).
In other words, a narrative, especially one in which the discovery of a body leads characters into a search for a second narrative, that is into a doubling of narrative, reflects a general human response to an absence of important information.


4.3 Closure and death

Narrative is one way we attempt to reach a full comprehension of our life-span as finite. Frank Kermode in The Sense of an Ending (1967) suggested that the narratives contained in fiction are closely aligned with the way we impose a pattern on time. He described a basic human need to relate each moment in existence to a beginning and an end. Peter Brooks (1992) also argues that narrative, with a recognisable end point, is one expression of an awareness of mortality. Garrett Stewart (1984) speaks of an ‘inalienable bond between story and mortality’ (p51). He suggests that representations of death in novels act to reflect the structures and closures of narrative. I would argue that the reverse might also be true. I agree with Kermode and Brooks that the form of a narrative summons a sense of our finite life span. A narrative, then, can be seen as metaphoric simply because of its form. The notion of death is built into its very structure.

A murder mystery usually contains a very distinct closure which might be thought of as logical closure. This comes with the answer to the over-riding question of who caused the deaths. In TDSP, many of the small concrete questions raised during the course of the plot are answered and by the end Veronica knows how Treen and Belle died and who was responsible.

A narrative also contains a more general closure, a literary closure, a sense that the work has come to an end, and this relies not on the answering of all questions but on a sense of completion and stasis. Brooks describes the ‘structuring power’ of endings (p94). The end of a novel can ‘bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle’ (p19). It allows the identification of overall structure and meaning, and creates quiescence. ‘It suspends time in a moment when past and present hold together in a metaphor’ (p92) and this point constitutes the end of the narrative process. In TDSP, it was my aim that narrative closure was provided not only by the naming of a murderer but by a sense that in terms of form and content the novel holds together as a complete whole. Veronica has managed to bring a young child into a safe home, to prevent Roland from being arrested and to find a
young family who needs her help. She has gained a greater understanding of other characters and of her own needs and motivations. I aimed for the sense of wholeness and stasis described by Marianna Torgovnick (1981) who suggests that effective endings ‘create the illusion of life halted and poised for analysis’ (p209). Whereas there are many questions that cannot be definitively answered (the nature of death, the ambivalent relationship between Veronica and Roland, Lesley’s and Veronica’s feelings about motherhood, Veronica’s conflicted passions for painting and her family, Lesley’s thoughts and feelings about her children, Paul and Vicky and her motivation for the murders) this absence of an answer belongs with the ideas behind the novel. This sense of completion and closure in itself coheres with a sense of the finitude of life.

4.4 Genre facilitates communication

As discussed above, an emphasis on plot brings detective fiction close to important psychological processes and human responses to questions of all kinds. In its structure it acts as a metaphor for the limited human life span. This idea provides support for my choice to represent death within a narrative. But it does not in itself constitute an argument for adhering to the demands of a highly codified genre.

TDSP strongly proclaims its genre membership. In the opening chapters, where it is necessary to establish Veronica’s character and her situation before the finding of the body, there is a brief omnipotent authorial intrusion foreshadowing the deaths that will take place. There are information gaps highlighted in the first pages. Paul and John have found something terrible in a back room in Mornington, Veronica sees and hears that there is somebody moving in her garden. Somebody has left a message, in the form of a stone and a page of text on Veronica’s back step.

Writing within a distinct and well-recognised genre could be viewed as a restriction on the creative process (Hugo, 1826, Blanchot, 2003, Croce, 1909). Jacques Derrida (1980), in places, also saw genre as prescriptive, essentially constraining, and an imposition on literature.

However, all writing is generic to some degree (Todorov, 1973, 1981, Genette, 2001, Culler, 2002). Further, rather than being static taxonomies, genre systems are fluid, dynamic and overlapping (Derrida, 1980, p65). Genre systems are redefined with every new contribution (Dubrow, 1982, p23). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari speak of ‘repetition with a difference’, a process by which a work inhabits a traditional form but ‘detrimentalizes’ it, by introducing variation (1988, p305).

There may also be advantages to writing within genre. As a structure of conventions and expectations, a genre acts as a facilitator to interpretation and communication (Neale, 2000, Culler, 2002, Porter, 1981, p5). In this regard, the operation of
genres might be compared to that of schema. These are psychological structures which allow us to relate incoming information with information that is already known (Rumelhart, 1980, Brewer and Nakamura, 1984, Widdowson, 1983, Cook, 1994).

4.5 Genre membership of TDSP
As I have said, TDSP proclaims its genre membership clearly. No matter what else happens in the novel, what uncertainties remain, the novel begins with a death and ends with a murderer identified. It has a central mystery plot line, which follows a trajectory of information gaps highlighted by clues, and these pieces of information, when revealed, feed into the narrative of the murders.

The work portrays mystery of various kinds. There are many ellipses in information, moments in the novel where a reader becomes aware that there is information – a small detail or a long narrative – that is missing. Some of the clues correspond to closed questions and others represent open ones. There are scenes where a reader has a sense that there are thoughts and emotions that are not being openly expressed by characters, that there are events taking place that cannot be seen, that objects and utterances have meanings that are not yet apparent. Many ellipses are highlighted by clues. For example: the sounds of someone moving around out of sight, the white stones, Judith’s strange utterances, the strained atmosphere among the Sopels, the incongruous presence of Vicky at the gallery, the copy of Silas Marner, the cracked tiles, and Roland’s drawings.

Some of the information gaps are filled quickly. The address in the copy of Oliver Twist leads to the bookshop. Veronica learns that Roland has stayed with Lesley for a week. Veronica quickly deduces that Roland must have found Treen dead on the rock and that it could only have been he who left Silas Marner on the kitchen table. Other information gaps are left open for longer before being filled: Roland explains his reason for leaving Silas Marner on the table, and for writing SILENT on the drawings. Others are answered at the end of the novel and these answers are fitted into the narrative of the murders, and still others, such as the meaning of the white stones, are only partially answered. This forms an array of overlapping arcs in which separate small and large mysteries are opened and closed at different points of the novel.

Some of the information gaps in the novel centre around the deaths of the two young women. The plot leads a reader past a series of suspects, all of whom have opportunity for killing Treen and who were connected to her in some way, although for many of them possible motives remain unclear. Throughout the novel, the reader will, hopefully, be forming hypothetical narratives about the girls’ deaths in which one or another character causes them. There is also, in the last chapters, an identification of clues which
were present throughout the novel which point to the solution. At the conclusion, the murderer is identified and motivations are expounded.

Excerpt from writing journal:

Suspects: Roland, Dane, Belle, John, Paul. Lesley may already have occurred as a possibility in readers’ minds. When the true murderer is revealed the other possible narratives will vanish. Some will never have been articulated. They have existed only as shadows behind Veronica’s experience.

I adopted the mystery model not as a set of limitations, but rather as a framework for ideas. As already mentioned, I was not concerned with adhering to the convention that the detective comes from outside the community and actively interrogates its members with the aim of discovering a murderer. Rather the information arises through the interaction of characters within a circle of friends and family. Veronica wonders what has happened to bring Treen’s body to this rock on the mountain but this question is not her primary concern. She concentrates on finding Roland and helping him, and then on making Mayson safe. In fact, there are three women in the novel who perform the functions of a detective. Roland recruits Lesley to find clues. Judith identifies the significance of the hand cream and she has insight into Lesley’s character that help to provoke a confession.

Far from finding the genre conventions restrictive, I used them as a scaffold, holding as a guiding image in this construction the George Pompidou centre in Paris, where the structural elements and all services are in full view on the outside of the building, so that they can be, in a way, set aside, allowing clarity in presentation of the content within. TDSP inhabits the conventions of the murder mystery in the same way that the Pompidou Centre inhabits girders, pipes and wiring. They are stated openly, but they are transparent, something to be easily noted and moved past.

4.6 Throwaway literature

An argument for adhering to genre conventions in general does not constitute an argument for choosing this particular genre. There are those who would argue the murder mystery model itself has serious limitations. Indeed, there are those who have suggested it is scarcely literature at all. Murder mysteries rely on a problem-solving formula whose conventions are generally implausible and so are doomed to artificiality (Culler, 2002, Hartman, 1983). They provide ludic and intellectual pleasures and the satisfaction of a clear plot line (Krutch,

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976), in proposing an erotics of reading, Roland Barthes delineates a category of text, the *texte de désir*, to which he assigns detective stories. In these, he proposes, a reader ignores any pleasure to be obtained from verbal texture or play and simply follows a linear narrative driven by teleological desire.


On the other hand I would argue that it is possible for a mystery novel to contain pleasures other than a desire for an ending. Recently, after a study of Australian crime fiction from 1830 to 1980, Rachel Franks (2011) has argued that historical crime fiction does have ‘the capacity to engage with serious social and moral issues’ (p i). Raymond Chandler (1944) described his own novels as ‘uncontained’ and argued that they depict the corruption and incomprehensibility of society and provide a more honest elucidation of character than the classical Christie-style detective novel. Novels by James Lee Burke, P. D. James, Kate Atkinson and Benjamin Black, for example, have been enjoyed and admired for literary qualities – the aesthetic pleasures associated with words carefully chosen and arranged, the evocation of settings, detailed and credible portrayals of a society and characters that are rounded and believably human.

The thrills of not knowing and of finding out represent an important elements of human functioning and they are central to my aims. In fact, as I have suggested, this work as a whole provides several illustrations of encounters with unknowns: a character, Veronica, encounters questions and clues; a reader is made aware of pieces of information that are missing; a writer investigates her aims and uncertainties and reveals this process in journal
writing. I wished to further explore the idea that encounters with unknowns, represented at all levels, provide an echo, a small suggestion of something much larger, and that any smaller moment of mystery projects a character, a reader, a writer, towards an awareness of the radical ungraspability of death.

4.7 Postmodern detective fiction

David Grossvogel’s article would suggest my aims to be ill-conceived. It would imply that a representation of human contact with death and metaphysical uncertainty is best attempted through some other vehicle. Several postmodern authors have approached this disparity between the form of the detective novel and unanswerable metaphysical questions by writing novels and stories which appear to adhere to the rules of detective stories but which violate some of the most important conventions – that of rational exposition of a puzzle and the arrival at a definitive solution – in order to challenge assumptions about knowledge, narrative and the nature of reality (Holquist, 1971, Swope, 1998, Merivale and Sweeney, 1999). In doing this, they draw attention to the workings and limitations of linear logic and the way metaphysical questions elude clear answers.

I have argued above that genre conventions act as schemas, aiding interpretation and intelligibility and that the mystery genre provides a strong representation of human approaches to life and mortality. The genre contains strong expectations of logical closure – of a puzzle solved – and of literary closure, a sense of wholeness and stillness. A violation of expectations, operating within such a powerful and well-recognised genre as the detective novel, draws attention to the conventions themselves (Dubrow, 1982). It makes them one of the subjects of the fiction and distracts from whatever other aims the author may have.

The writing of TDSP was a different response to Grossvogel’s challenge. My aims were to contrast small closed questions and solutions with the broad infinite questions which can be neither stated precisely nor answered definitively. It was my intention that the murder mystery model acted as a firm structure on which to build such a work. It was an exercise in using the mystery model as a transparent scaffolding, a presentation of an array of intersecting and overlapping ellipses in information, and it was an attempt to use this to show, in some way, characters coming personally into contact with an awareness of humankind’s and their own mortality.

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Chapter 5
The Natural Landscape and the Sublime

5.1 Fullness and vacancy
I have argued above that in a mystery novel, instances of missing information and moments of narrative closure could be related somehow to human responses to the idea of death. Below I explore this further by studying some elements of the novel. The first of these is vast natural landscapes.

TDSP is set in Hobart on the estuary of the Derwent River. Behind Hobart is Mount Wellington, a monumental lump of dolerite thirteen hundred metres high. As a setting for the discovery of a body, the mountain was an immediate and instinctive choice.

Excerpt from writing journal
Mount Wellington is an imposing feature of the Hobart landscape, visible from virtually every part of the city and vast in scale, simultaneously blocking the view and drawing the eye. From high on its slopes the sky appears as three-dimensional space. Behind it stretches the wilderness of south-western Tasmania, rich, complex, glorious, lonely. To the south the river opens out between low peninsulas and islands to the southern ocean. Hobart is a town on the edge of things, on the edge of great fullnesses and great vacancies.

In this scene where Veronica finds a dead body she experiences shock, irrational fear for herself, then a more considered anxiety for her son, and she has a sense that there are things here that are powerful and beyond her control. The mountain was chosen as a setting because it reflected this in power, vastness and threat, through its great mass but also through the great emptiness of sky and ocean. As Veronica walks on the mountain path, she is aware of the volume and mass of rock, the breadth and emptiness of the sky, the light and the qualities and movements of air.
5.2 Fear and danger

On the mountain path Veronica feels unsafe and anxious.

Excerpt from writing journal:

The Organ Pipes Track is strewn with uneven rock and the mountain is steep and exposed. The path is treacherous. To step off it would be to get stuck or lost, or to fall.

It is widely recognised that one essential element of crime fiction is a vivid portrayal of settings, both urban and natural (for example Cole, 2004, Earwaker, 2002, Geherin, 2008, James, 2009, Sizemore, 1989, Porter, 1981, Knight, 1997) and sometimes the settings are large and wild and unsettling. The novels of P. D. James often take place within sight, sound or smell of the ocean and in places James uses threatening natural environments to create suspense by being in themselves actively dangerous. In the first drafts of TDSP the intention was not that the natural environment formed a direct physical threat. Rather I wanted it to intensify and reflect Veronica’s feelings of unease. The Tasmanian wilderness and the southern ocean were mostly hidden from view, but they appeared at the edge of Veronica’s awareness as a source of, and a reflection of, diffuse anxiety.

At Spring Beach Veronica and Roland know Maria Island is there, but it is hidden in mist. The coast is dry and harsh, with trees blasted by years of wild wind. There is a piece of coastal cliff which has broken off and fallen to the rocks below. It lies in one piece, a flat gravel plate, tipped towards the water.

At Blinking Billy point Veronica and Paul need to turn their backs to shelter from the wind. Veronica imagines the vast emptiness of the southern ocean, stretching away to the south.

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9 For example: Unnatural Causes (1967); The Black Tower (1975); Death of an Expert Witness (1977); Devices and Desires (1989); Original Sin (1994); A Certain Justice (1997) and Death in Holy Orders (2001).
Tasmania is sometimes imagined to be a place that is mysterious and sinister. Tasmania’s remoteness, its grim history concerning the treatment of convicts and Aborigines, and the vast stretches of inaccessible wilderness contribute to this idea, which has been termed the ‘Tasmanian gothic’ (for example see Davidson, 1989, Fitzgibbon, 2012, Gaunson, 2012, Britten, 2010). An important part of this notion is the landscape of south west and central Tasmania. Here there are large areas of inaccessible wilderness which are imagined as places that are dark, cold and dangerous.

The landscape does not present a physical threat to Veronica, but she often feels it as threatening.

Veronica’s stone wall fails to shield her garden from the wind. She looks at one of Hobart’s Georgian buildings, square, squat with thick stone walls, a low roof and a garden of lavender and roses. She thinks of early settlers, trying to create a comfortable, familiar European landscape. Their houses were full of fabrics, heavy wooden furniture. They wanted to protect themselves from the emptiness of the oceans they had crossed and the wilderness beyond the town. She imagines them closing their doors against this wind, this cold light, not against a real physical threat but against an idea, the image of a vast disquieting emptiness.

5.3 Something she was supposed to know

At one level, landscapes can engender a certain tone and reflect characters’ moods (Ruskin, 1856, Carroll, 1993, Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). In The Broken Shore by Peter Temple (2005) and the novels of James Lee Burke and Benjamin Black moods of melancholy and mystical wonder are evoked with descriptions of skies, air and weather. My choice of the mountainside as a setting, and references to oceans and skies, had been based on more than a desire to set a mood of melancholy, wonder or threat. When Veronica finds a dead body, the mountain and sky, their vastness, are reflecting not just her anxiety, but a sense that this event is significant, a feeling that there is more here than she can understand, and that this elusive thing is important.
Veronica walks on the mountain path. Around her the sky is a vast blue three-dimensional space. The air is an immense volume that sucks the heat away. She is aware of the great mass of the mountain, the immense unforgiving weight of it, and the feeling it always gives her, that there is something she is supposed to know.

As I wrote early drafts of the novel now recognised that this idea of immensity and significance in landscapes was central to the novel, and I kept it as a guiding principle in rewriting scenes. Veronica is often distracted by sky and scenery. In the opening pages, she lies on the lawn and looks at the sky. She feels it pulling away from the earth. When she sits on the beach with Roland, she is distracted from what he is saying by the view of the mist and the ocean and she searches for glimpses of Maria Island in the distance. She approaches scenery with fascination. She feels that there is something in it that has meaning, that this meaning is important, and that she is failing to grasp it.

5.4 Unimaginable power and the sublime
There are murder mysteries in which the description of skies and wild places is related to ideas of the infinite, and to something which might be thought of as great metaphysical uncertainties. In Ian Rankin’s Black and Blue (1997), Inspector Rebus travels to an oil rig, isolated in the vastness of the North Sea, and then to the uninhabited island of Mousa in the Shetlands, where he feels ‘it was like he was the first person ever to walk there’ (p421). In On Beulah Height by Reginald Hill (1998), detective Peter Pascoe looks at the mountains of the Yorkshire Dales and the golden light of the setting sun and feels that it could be the ‘last step afore heaven’ (p93). P. D. James’s books often combine descriptions of wild environments with religious and metaphysical ideas and with characters struggling to keep, or losing, their Anglican Christian faith. In Devices and Desires (1989), for instance, Inspector Dalgleish looks at the sky and feels ‘the turning earth beneath his feet and that time had mysteriously come to a stop, fusing into one moment the past the present and the future’ (p89).

It is an established idea that the representation of natural landscapes and skies in art and literature might be linked with ideas of the timeless and the eternal. In Imagined Country (1991), John Short describes an early Judeo-Christian view that the natural world is wild and dangerous and symbolic of God’s power. The pantheistic vision of Romantics held that all of nature was divine. In Mountain Gloom Mountain Glory Marjorie Hope Nicholson (1997) writes about the glorification of mountain scenery in British Romantic poetry and in
the writings of John Ruskin. She speaks of the ‘aesthetics of the infinite’ (p 271) and is led to the concept of the sublime and it is this construct of the sublime that I found an articulation of the connection I had felt between death, mystery and natural settings in my novel.

The notion of the sublime refers to qualities in landscapes and also to qualities in literature and visual art, of the immense, the irregular, the unfathomable, the awe-inspiring, transcendent and uplifting. It also refers to states of mind and emotion, a mixture of terror and pleasure, that encounters with such natural objects engender. The sublime is often contained in visions that are vast, unbounded, complex or obscure, to the point of being beyond the limits of our comprehension or imagination.

Many formulations of the notion of the sublime contain the idea that it is an emotional response evoked by descriptions of immense objects of nature, such as oceans and mountains. Thomas Burnet, John Dennis, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke (Burnet, 1691, Boulton, 1958, see Ashfield and de Bolla, 1996, Nicolson, 1997, Burke, 1958, Burke, 1996b, Burke, 1996a) all developed notions of the sublime (or, in Burnet’s case, ideas related to the sublime) in connection with emotions aroused by objects that were vast, irregular and massive. In 1790 Immanuel Kant (1790) wrote of the ‘dynamical sublime’ which comes from contact with the overwhelming forces of nature. He gave a catalogue of natural objects and vast landscapes including threatening rocks, thunderstorms, volcanoes, oceans and waterfalls (p120), suggesting that when we encounter these we recognise their potential to annihilate us and then recognise in ourselves the ability to form abstract concepts which encompass vast landscapes, and in this way to transcend their power.

Others have drawn on a sense of the sublime in landscapes as inspiration for the creation of works of literature, philosophy and painting. Landscape artist Peter Dombrovskis, portrays the Tasmanian wilderness in photographs that seek transcendence and recall ‘the universal sublime space of creation’ (McLean, 2002, p5).

Natural landscapes, then, have long been recognised as evocations of metaphysical questioning and confrontations with the infinite, and the conception of the sublime is a

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useful mediator of this relationship. For Burke and the Romantic poets, and in Kant’s
dynamical sublime, objects and prospects in nature inspire sublime responses not only
because of massiveness and power, but also because they are difficult to perceive or to
conceive clearly, because the senses, understanding and emotions are overwhelmed. For
Veronica, the mountain and sky, their grandeur and threat, bring anxiety and fear, but they
also give her a sense of something unattainable, an awareness that there is a knowledge she
needs, which is too large and complex for her to grasp, something for which she has no
points of comparison. The sublime incorporates the notion that infinite landscapes are
powerful and threatening but also that they are unknowable. They act as representations of
all that we cannot conceive, of all that is mysterious. This idea appears in the writings of
John Baillie (in Boulton, 1958, p.7), Shaftesbury (in Ashfield and de Bolla, 1996, p77) and
Burke (1958, p57). The sublime response occurs when the mind grasps for something ‘too
big for its capacity’ (Addison, 1891, par 2 line 4).

This was to become a central idea for Kant. Kant’s mathematical sublime is
experienced when we encounter something which is too vast or too formless for us to fully
apprehend it. Contact with such an object makes us aware of the limits of the capacities of
sensory experience, imagination and practical reasoning, of our inability to have a direct
intuition of reality through phenomenological experience. This brings a sense of threat. In
order to encompass such an experience we are led into abstract conceptual thought,
especially to the ideas of totality and infinity. Thus we recognise ‘a supersensible faculty
within us’ (Kant, 1790, Section 26), our own capacity for thought that surpasses the senses,
and with this mastery we gain a sense of transcendence.

In other words, if sublime experiences lead us to be aware of our own higher
powers, it is only after we are made aware of the failure of our lower ones. Words fail,
points of comparison disappear, and we surrender to the feeling of the sublime. As such, the
sublime marks the limits of reason and expression, together with a sense of what might lie
beyond these limits.

5.5 Death and the sublime

In TDSP I connected the discovery of a body and thoughts of death with vastness in the
landscape. Such a landscape brings Veronica to the instinctive realisation of the limits of
reason and imagination. The encounter with the dead body similarly brings her into contact
with the unknowability of death, with the fact that there is an experience she must have,
about which she can never know anything. The sublime describes our response to all that is
ungraspable and inconceivable and it may be used as a guide in thinking about our responses
to thoughts of death.
At first, while contemplating Treen’s body, Veronica feels overwhelmed by fear and horror. These come from the knowledge that there has been a murderer present and that this might represent a danger to her and to those close to her. For Edmund Burke (1958, 1996a) and for Kant, an integral part of the sublime feeling was terror. The first thing experienced in contact with powerful landscapes was fear of physical danger.

Veronica also has a sense that she has encountered something that is beyond her full comprehension, that there is something here that she will never understand. This, too, can be compared with the sublime response. The sublime is an emotional and aesthetic response to that which appears infinite, important and ungraspable. And death is something that appears to us in this way. Death is an aporia, something that must come to us and something we cannot experience. It connects us to everything we cannot know. For Emmanuel Levinas death is ‘something absolutely unknowable’ (1987, p58). Death ‘escapes understanding as an absolute limit’ (2000, p16). It is something ‘whose very existence is made up of otherness’ (1987, p63). For Levinas the event of death overflows with meaning and brings an experience of ambiguity that relates to a ‘deeper relation to the infinite’ (p17). Death brings life into connection with everything we cannot know, all that is undefined and undefinable, inconceivable. Thoughts of death connect us to that infinite space of all that cannot be known. They bring an encounter with the failure of apprehension and expression, a glimpse of the unbridgeable space between the phenomenological world and the supersensuous Idea and that brings the terror and the pleasure of the sublime. The notion of the sublime describes a sense we sometimes have that in order to live we have pushed something aside, that there is something beyond the senses, beyond the physical world, an area of the noumenal and also the numinous, the unimaginable, and this is where death lies. In a way, the sublime is a construct which describes our feelings about death.

I began considering how this idea of the sublime might inform the rewriting of scenes in TDSP. It could not be used in overt statements or be present in Veronica’s thoughts. If Veronica is to function effectively in protecting her family and discovering what happened to Treen and Belle, she must necessarily put aside any sublime feelings (as she must any prolonged contemplation of death or her own mortality). I decided to try to create an awareness of death, a sense of mystery and awe reflecting that awareness, somewhere behind the action of the book. I now saw that if death was to sit as a shadow through the action of the novel it might be echoed in aesthetic elements which reach toward the infinite and that this could be mediated by the aesthetic construct of the sublime. If I could imbue scenes with elements which reached towards the sublime, I might enhance the thrill of mystery and evoke some of the awe we feel about death.
5.6 The shadow
The witnessing of the death of another, or contact with a body which is a trace of such an event, makes us think of death – everyone’s, ours – and makes us aware of the fact that we cannot know anything of this experience.

With the writing and re-writing of the scene on the mountain, and with the reading about landscape and the sublime, I found that my enquiry had re-positioned itself. A vast natural landscape gives us an emotional response based on the fact that we have been confronted with things that are beyond our apprehension. The discovery of a dead body has elements of the same thing. Similarly a finite piece of missing information, small or large, a moment in which we are aware that we do not know something, is a small version of the large, the infinite pool of everything we don’t know. Possibly the smaller, finite mysteries could be used to evoke the infinite ones.

Roland writes the word ‘SILENT’. He draws pictures of girls dying and leaves a copy of Silas Marner out as if it explains something. These words and pictures convey an infinity of possible meanings. They convey to Veronica not the aporia of death, but an open and disturbing feeling of mystery. She is confronted with the impossibility of understanding.

Reading about death and the sublime led me now to a reconceptualisation of my project. It appeared at this point, not that mystery can suggest the way we think and feel about death, but that both of these, mystery and death, are things which we respond to in similar ways, with a feeling of the sublime.

It seemed to me after reading about the sublime that death and mystery might serve as instances of something else. From this point onwards, I was writing and rewriting sections of TDSP and reading further into the notion of the sublime, in order to find out what that is.

The notion of the sublime had illuminated the use of the natural landscape in relation to death and mystery. Could it illuminate the workings of other elements? I turned now to the second element in TDSP, the inclusion of literary reference and allusion.
Chapter 6
The Intertext and the Mathematical Sublime

6.1 Almost seen
The sublime arises in the unknown and the unknowable, in landscapes or objects that are too vast or massive for us to apprehend them fully and in the way these landscapes confront us with the limits of our own apprehension and imagination. I had developed the idea that Veronica’s encounters with death also confront her with this and that the awareness of smaller mysteries, of pieces of information that are missing, act as representations of this infinite field of everything that we do not know and thus serve as small evocations of the sublime. In a mystery novel, missing information is brought to the reader’s attention through clues. Next I looked at a particular type of missing information, represented by clues that refer to works of literature. This forms the second element which I had chosen as foundation of the novel TDSP.

6.2 The literary clue
In TDSP Roland is a passionate reader, familiar with many nineteenth century novels. He draws and describes the Silas Marner character, Molly Farren, and he describes to his mother the way in which Molly is objectified and dehumanised. He also draws characters from other novels (Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, Wilkie Collins’s The Moonstone and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein) in which a woman character dies as part of someone else’s story.

In early drafts of TDSP Roland describes parallels between these fictional characters and the experiences of the Hobart girls, Treen and Belle. But I was not satisfied with these scenes.

The drawings could be not literal representations of scenes in novels, but fantastical and emotionally charged, referencing the original novels only through the characters’ names. Roland could express his outrage at women being marginalised with the word ‘SILENT’.

Eventually he could explain something of his ideas about these drawings. But the experiences of these four women are not identical to those of Treen and Belle. They are echoes. Their power lies
in the parallels only vaguely felt, in variations, in the space between them, in the resonances.

The effect I was seeking here, with this oblique kind of literary referencing, rested in the nature of the clues themselves, in their openness. *Silas Marner* is full of characters, events, words, phrases. When Veronica finds it on her table it might bring to mind, for Veronica and the reader, associations with films, with stories of George Eliot’s life, with other books written by her, with other books of the era, with other books. Eventually Veronica will be told some of what Roland hoped to convey with the book and the drawings, but the meaning of these clues, their place in Veronica’s experience, goes beyond Roland’s immediate stated intention. At the time they are found, and for several scenes afterwards, the presence of the book and the drawings hold an infinite number of meanings and associations.

In the process of searching for Roland, Veronica is led to a bookshop. Here she finds Judith, perpetually drunk, malicious, shambolic.

Veronica is unsettled by the dimness of the shop and by Judith’s tone, and by the things she says that sound like quotations. But she is further disturbed by a sense that she has heard these words before, that she might remember something about them if she had time to search her memory, that they might mean something.

**6.3 Resonances**

One text can be present within another, either explicitly as overt reference and quotation, or implicitly as indirect allusion. Allusion need not be, as Harold Bloom (1973) conceived it, a process of direct and burdensome influence, in which work of a previous author is adopted and adapted under the assumption that it is superior. It is possible instead to see the process as an active one, a process of selection, aesthetic judgement, assimilation, revision and assembly, which creates something new (Rothstein, 1991, Friedman, 1991).

References and allusions to other works were included in TDSP partly to elucidate the character of Roland and to hold some thematic content, but it was also hoped that they could enrich the novel with a texture of ideas and images, with suggestions of other stories, of other settings and characters. Mary Orr (2003) believes that allusion and quotation are economical in that they provide an intensity of meaning through ‘concentration and

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11 For a description of Bloom’s and other theories of literary influence see Clayton and Rothstein (1991) and Mary Orr (2003).
crystallisation’ (p135) and a ‘distillation of sentiment’ (p132) and that, by connecting and interweaving contexts and contents of different works, allusion provides a work that is rich and strong.

There is more here than a simple summation of elements and meanings. Allan Pasco (1994) sees allusion as a process in which meaning is gained through a relationship, a series of ‘parallels and oppositions’ (p13) that is developed between texts. Mary Orr describes ‘pulsations’ (p131) and ‘reverberation’ (p137) which occur in a work when a previous work is alluded to. It is the interaction of a previous work with a new one that progresses, changes, enriches and strengthens a work’s meaning.

Many of the things Judith says, in the shop and in later scenes, have the appearance of quotations. It is my intention that, to the reader, they appear to mean something but that when they are focused on their meaning vanishes. They are not for purposes of communication, so much as for its opposite, a desire for obfuscation. My purpose for including them was to add to the scene a sense of mystery, a thrill of not knowing. In late drafts, I removed all identification. In the final version, any quotations Judith makes are unattributed. While they relate indirectly to some intention of Judith’s, their purpose is to help the scene to resonate with meaning, but with the kind of meaning that is not quite clear. They provide unarticulated reverberations and echoes.

Similarly, in revisions of TDSP, I removed the dialogue in which Roland connected his drawings with the four novels. At this point the drawings’ literary allusions were not clearly attributed, and their meaning was not clearly explained.

Roland could hand Veronica a page on which the stories are intertwined. The words on the page loop around each other, with each story written between the lines of the others, the ends and the beginnings overlapping. What Roland is trying to convey lies in the combination of the works, in the confusion and the parallels.

Eventually, I decided to delete even this page of tangled text. In the final draft, Roland simply fails to identify the novels he has drawn from. They appear only in piles and on shelves. They act as shadow, as suggested sets of ideas which sit behind the action and are never brought fully into view.

The literary clue can be thought of as an infinite clue. It cannot be stated at any point that its meaning has been completely described. These clues – the copy of Silas Marner and the drawings – contribute to an overall sense of mystery, a sense that there is
much happening around Veronica that she cannot understand. I was starting to see that such clues might bring Veronica, and the reader, a glimpse not just of individual works but of a body of literature which appears large, obscure and complex beyond comprehension. I had had a similar idea about Judith’s utterances.

When Judith speaks words from books she has remembered she is reaching into her memory, searching for meaning, selecting from a vast and un navigable network of ideas which she carries with her and expressing rhapsodic associations which form in her mind. Judith is haunted by an amorphous body of literature which both illuminates and obscures her thinking.

This idea led me to the construct of the intertext.

6.4 The intertext and the sublime

Models of intertextuality, first introduced by Julia Kristeva (1980), present the idea that any text cannot be analysed in isolation, but must be considered in relation to other texts, that, in fact, every literary text exists as part of a network of multiple anonymous influences and echoes from other texts that intersect and overlap. This intertext forms a field of unending circularity, in which each text provides intertext for every other. The idea was elaborated and developed by Roland Barthes, Michael Riffaterre, and Gerard Genette among others (see Barthes, 1975, Barthes, 1977, Riffaterre, 1980a, Riffaterre, 1980b, Riffaterre, 1990, Genette, 1982, Genette, 1979). Texts can be present within other texts as traces or fragments. They can include literary works, but they can also be any other manifestation of thought and social discourse which perform as texts, including ideologies, philosophy, science, history, works in the everyday media, anonymous cultural assumptions and commonplaces, traditional associations, folk wisdom and cliché (Culler, 2002, Frow, 1990, Culler, 1981). For theorists of intertextuality these crossings create the fabric within which a text is read, even when no specific allusion is made (Orr, L 1986).

In final drafts of TDSP the placement of a strange quotation or the unexplained appearance of a book suggests the presence of a wide body of works and ideas that can never fully be encompassed. Many allusions in TDSP are not to specific works, but to some kind of general world of literature, a field free of boundaries, undefined. Descriptions of this notional intertext stress the quality of limitlessness, and also of ungraspability. Roland Barthes has described the citations that make up the intertext as ‘untraceable’ (1977, p160).
In the mind of the reader, the many texts already read exist as traces and these are ‘infinite, or, more precisely, lost’ (Barthes, 1975, p10). The intertext is an unlimited and infinitely intertwined universe of literature and discourse that can never be fully encompassed or apprehended.

In this, there are parallels with the notion of the sublime. Jonathan Culler (1981) has also noticed the parallel between Kant’s mathematical sublime and the constructs of the intertext with its ‘perspectives of unmasterable series, lost origins, endless horizons’ (p122). Michael Riffaterre (1980b, 1990) describes the process by which a reader is led by elements of a text towards an awareness of a vast but hidden intertext. A reader may explore elements of the intertext to further understand the implications of the work at hand, but much of the intertext remains implied and out of reach.12 In later drafts I introduced scenes in which Veronica finds the bookshop impenetrable.

The cohesion between the mountain and the bookshop and their relation to death and mystery lie in this feeling both settings give Veronica, that there is something she is supposed to know. The construct of the sublime helps to illuminate these relationships. The second-hand bookshop, dimly lit, crowded with shelves and boxes, disorganised, might be thought of as a physical manifestation of a body of literature and thought which is immensely large, complex and interconnected. In other words, of the intertext.

Veronica has questions she can name: where is Roland? Who drove Treen to the mountain? She feels there are other questions, important ones. She finds books and words and these appear meaningful. They lead her onwards, to more questions. She has a growing sense that words are not going to provide the answer she seeks. She senses that neither her questions nor the answers can be contained in words. Words become shadows.

It became my intention that, in TDSP, the intertext appear as a vast shadow, imperfectly seen, too large to imagine; that it might be simultaneously significant and mysterious,

12 For Riffaterre this stage of an awareness of the intertext as infinite and unknown is only transitory. In subsequent readings the reader is guided by the text to find more defined referents and goes to these other relevant texts and this expands the original text’s meaning. Jonathan Culler also believes that a relevant intertext should be limited to the set of texts that are logically suggested by the text. But for my purposes the first stage is the important one. There is a sublime experience in this awareness, this sense of something that lies beyond apprehension.
something which when looked at closely, continually opens out into further associations; that it could contribute to a sense of something that is beyond our powers of apprehension, a sense of mystery that can never be resolved.

6.5 Death, the intertext, the sublime
In the final version of TDSP, I have emphasised the sense Veronica has that there is something she is almost seeing, something at the side of vision that vanishes with turning. She feels this thing is important. This is the emotion associated with the notion of the sublime. Veronica has this feeling when she finds Treen’s body. Death is an experience she must and cannot have, an experience that is coming which is unavailable to her, which cannot even be imagined. And she has the same feeling when a space in knowledge makes her momentarily aware of all the things she does not know, and when she looks at mountains and sky and realises the immense vastness and complexity of the physical world. And it comes when she feels a trace of the vast bodies of words, all the things she has read, remembered, half-remembered, forgotten, and all the things she will never read.

At this point in the rewriting of TDSP I was starting to sense something similar. It was beginning to appear that up until this point I had been looking the wrong way, or at least not deeply enough.

There is another shadow in the novel, behind the body, behind the idea of death, behind the small finite questions and even the large open ones. It is contained in every scene of TDSP and yet not contained in them. It is behind and under and within and through. It is beyond, beyond death as shadow. It is a shadow of a shadow, a haunting, and cannot be named.

Who is to say whether these feelings, this awareness, begins in a character or a writer? In a way the question is nonsense. The feelings of mine and Veronica’s are two sides of the same process. At this point, in later versions of TDSP, as I wrote about Veronica’s awareness of shadowy presences, I was, of course drawing on my own.

There is a movement at the corner of Veronica’s eye. When she turns there is nothing there. She participates in a conversation, inspects a place, watches an action, interprets what she sees. She
finds answers to some small finite questions. But she has a sense that behind every answer lies another question, that behind everything is an important presence that cannot be defined. She has a persistent feeling. There is something she is missing.

Maybe that is what a mystery novel can illustrate: not the triumph of the rational, the solving of a puzzle, the restoration of order, but the way we fail, the way we answer smaller questions but fail with large ones. A mystery novel holds this, behind the scenes, off to the side, just out of vision, the infinite field of everything we cannot know.
Chapter 7

History and Empathy

7.1 History in TDSP

The third of the three elements on which I based TDSP is the inclusion of stories of the female convicts of nineteenth century Hobart. Historical stories were to be presented in a manner that emphasised universal human habits of thought and attitude. I wished somehow to include in the novel descriptions of conditions at the Female Factory and attempts by members of Hobart society of the time to maintain a psychological and physical distance from the women there.

It took several attempts before I found what I thought to be the best way to go about this. In early drafts of the first chapter, Veronica meets friends who are rehearsing a play, dressed as convict women and warders, and they describe the conditions in the prison. Instead of capturing the experience of convict women, this scene represented them externally. It relied on the women’s physical appearance, and not even that, but the physical appearance of actors playing the women. The only words in the scene were composed by contemporary women and consisted of statistics about infant mortality, lists of punishment regimes, medical ailments and descriptions of the conditions inside cells. The scene was static and clumsy.

Other crime novels helped me to identify what it was I needed to change. P. D. James’s *Original Sin* (1994) centres on murders in a publishing house in London in the 1990s. Among much other intertextual detail, James weaves in a story from World War II, which took place in the past of one of the characters. There are reminders of the war at points in the novel through photographs, conversations and poetry, and a dusty archives room. In Ian Rankin’s *Mortal Causes* (1994) a body is found in Mary King’s Close, an ancient street now buried many floors under the centre of Edinburgh. Awareness of this street and events that took place there permeates the book. There are also conversations in which characters relate grim incidents from Edinburgh’s past – the throwing of witches from Witch’s Leap (p14), chimney sweeps bricked up into chimneys (p34). But historical events are not described in detail. Rather they act as a shadowy context within which the twentieth century action takes place.

I found another clue in the notion of the Tasmanian gothic. The brutal history of the treatment of convicts in Tasmania (along with cruelty and violence towards the indigenous population) forms an element of the Tasmanian gothic.\(^\text{13}\) The construct of the Tasmanian

\(^{13}\) For example convict experiences are described vividly in Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life of 1872* (2012) Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* (2000), Richard Flanagan’s
gothic presents an image of the island as a place of darkness, danger and evil even when no details are known. In these terms, the past exists not as overt content, but as a shadowy atmosphere.

### 7.2 Unplumbed depths

Eric Auerbach (1953) describes two different styles of text. In texts of a legendary style, exemplified by Homer, events and characters are presented as foreground, fully illuminated, as a ‘local and total present’ with ‘never a glimpse of unplumbed depths’ (p3). In the historical report style, which predominates in the Old Testament, details such as time and place and characters’ thoughts and feelings are presented only to the extent that is required for the narrative and much is left in ‘ obscurity’ (p6). In this ‘history’ style much is merely implied and much detail is left obscure. There is the ‘suggestive influence of the unexpressed, background quality, multiplicity of meanings’ (p12).

Rather than giving the lives of women convicts a weight equal to that of the contemporary story, I wanted it to exist in a shadowy way, as a past that is partly known but unarticulated. I wished to convey a sense of the distance between the contemporary society and the past, a sense of all the time that lies between, of all the information that has been lost.

One way of doing this would be to describe old buildings. In contemporary life, the existence of old buildings and ruins brings only a vague and fragmented awareness of past events. The past might be thought of as existing in buildings as a palimpsest, layered stories which have been written over the same settings, and which are now only partly revealed. Stories like this would appear to contemporary characters only as vaguely perceived atmosphere or in momentary glimpses, or in incomplete memories of stories once heard.

In *Original Sin* much of the action takes place along the River Thames and it is interwoven with stories from the history of sites and buildings there. In *Mortal Causes*, a sense of Edinburgh’s past centres around St Mary’s Close and other old buildings, evoked by their names rather than detailed descriptions. In these novels, the historical stories are presented largely in Auerbach’s second manner, as implied background, suggested in small vivid details, but left largely unelaborated, and this is what I initially aimed for in TDSP. In settings such as the Female Factory and the old St Mary’s Hospital, I sought to highlight those elements of the past that are pertinent to the novel, while allowing an awareness of a

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Gould’s *Book of Fish* (2001) Christopher Koch’s *Out of Ireland* (1999). The experiences of convict Alexander Pearce, known for being reduced to cannibalism in the south-west wilderness, have been the subject of several films including *Dying Breed* (2008) and *Van Diemen’s Land* (2009).
host of untold detail and of other stories that are left obscure, a sense of all the events that have happened there and of the countless moments in which nothing has happened.

The portrayal of historical events in this way, as unplumbed depth, can work in a similar way to the suggestion of a literary intertext, leaving a reader with a sense that behind the contemporary action there is a history of stories, lives and events that is unknown, complex, and vast beyond mastery. In imagining Veronica living through scenes in the novel, I had the sense that old buildings might bring her — and descriptions of them might bring the reader — an awareness, a half-awareness, a shadowy sense of all the things we do not, cannot, will never know.

7.3 Mary McLaughlan as embedded narrative

At the same time, in order to explore notions of empathy and psychological distance, the presentation of the lives of female convicts needed to be more vivid and focussed on individuals. I decided that it would be a more effective parallel to the story of Veronica’s investigation, if the history thread existed as a portrayal of the life of one woman, with some insight into the experiences of this woman as they appear to her.

As a second attempt, I replaced the play-in-rehearsal with scenes in which Roland is writing the play, researching the life of one particular convict woman, Mary McLaughlan. This allowed the inclusion of descriptions of some of the documentary evidence Roland finds and his attempts to transform this into a narrative. I wrote scenes in which Roland filled a notebook with drawings and passages of writing containing his own reflections.

The facts I wished to convey about Mary were slight. She was in Tasmania for little over a year, having arrived in January 1829, charged with theft by housebreaking. She was assigned to Charles Ross Nairne and his wife Katherine Stirling to work as a domestic servant in the Coal River Valley. In August she was returned by Nairne to the Female Factory, pregnant and refusing to name the father. She was charged with misconduct and placed in a solitary cell on bread and water for six days. In December, Mary gave birth to a boy and soon after the birth the baby’s body was found in the privies of the Female Factory. Mary was tried and convicted of his murder and hanged at Hobart Gaol in April 1830 (Tardiff, 1990, Female Convicts Research Centre, 2012, MacDonald, 2005).

I decided that Mary’s life could be a story which flowed alongside the main narrative rather than a block of description which stops it short. This secondary narrative could be embedded within the main story of Veronica’s investigation so that parallels became apparent between Mary’s experiences and those of Treen and Belle.

An embedded narrative can achieve more than straight comparison. The superimposition of two narrative threads can highlight similarities and contrasts between the historical and the contemporary but there can also be an effect that belongs in the spaces
between stories and the clash of narrative levels (Nelles, 1997). This is something that occurs in the jump, in the spaces between eras, in all the undescribed events, all the unrepresented time. The mechanism here is similar to the working of allusion, where the meaning gained is not simply a sum of parts, but something that occurs in the relationship between elements, in echoes and repercussions.

In early drafts, Roland attempts to write about Mary McLaughlan. He reads about women convicts and he draws individual women and buildings. In other words, he is still representing the women from the outside. At this point it occurred to me that Roland’s attempts to understand Mary McLaughlan might be used to highlight or resonate with the psychological distance between Veronica and Treen and Belle.

7.4 Stepping back
In early drafts, much of Veronica’s knowledge of Treen and Belle came from her experience with their external appearances. She saw their dead bodies and heard what other people said about them. In an attempt to give Veronica more insight into these girls as complex humans and to give Veronica more understanding and concern for their welfare, I restructured the novel to give her more interaction with the girls. But Veronica’s knowledge of Treen and Belle is not close or empathic. She has only a short encounter with Treen. She has three conversations with Belle but she considers what Belle says to be unreliable, and during all of these encounters she is concentrating on protecting the child Mayson. And Veronica has no time. She is concerned with those who are still alive, with trying to protect Mayson and keep Roland from being arrested. She sees the deaths of Treen and Belle as problems in her own life, something which endangers her family. She fails to see Treen and Belle’s lives as they are, to them.

And of course, the fault was mine. As a writer I had been viewing these characters from a position of psychological distance. These were characters who were responsible for the ill-treatment of a child. I had portrayed them with little insight into how their lives were for them. Veronica – that is, I – needed to focus more closely. It is revealed in TDSP that Treen is hurting her son Mayson. If the novel was to present some understanding of Treen as a fully rounded human being, I needed to look more closely at her life, to gain some insight into Treen, what her life felt like from her point of view. At this point I returned to the story of Rachel Pfitzner, and I read about other women who had hurt their children.

In 2009, a four-year-old boy was found dead, covered in bruises, in the home of a babysitter in Claremont in northern Hobart. The babysitter pleaded guilty to striking the child five times while in the bath. She was accused of having been in a drunken rage and of having kicked and bashed a puppy to death on the same night. She was accused of having a cold demeanour when the child was found, of lying about events, of neglecting an old dog,

In 2005, Zack Wayne Taylor, eight months old, died in a house at Sorell, near Hobart, from the inhalation of talcum powder. The powder had been used to cover bruises on his face and scratches and burns on his feet, which were inflicted soon before his death. At the time of his death Zack was under the care of his mother and her boyfriend, both of whom were affected by amphetamines and marijuana. There was a large amount of Zack’s blood on towels in the washing machine. The coroner found that Zack was also suffering gastroenteritis and conjunctivitis and that he had been left alone for long periods without anyone checking on him (ABC, 2012b, ABC, 2012a, Killick, 2012a, Killick, 2012c, Killick, 2012b).

In 2009, a two-year-old girl was admitted to hospital in northern Victoria suffering severe brain injuries after being bashed. She died a month later. Her father was accused but later suspicion fell on the father’s girlfriend (Lowe, 2011b, Lowe, 2011a, Age, 2011).

There is no thrill of not knowing here, no game, no puzzle. These stories are sickening to read, and to imagine.

A mother, a babysitter, a girlfriend. These are women who have hurt children. Evil women. I cannot write a scene in which a child is hurt from the point of view of the harmer. I give up before I have even attempted it. I look away, step back.

I look at a photograph of one of the evil women. She has hard cheeks and flat eyes marked out in sharp black lines. Like Rachel Pfitzner’s, her face is set. She reveals nothing.

If my original intention was to bring Veronica into some close personal empathic understanding of Treen and Belle, it appeared I was failing.

I look more closely, zoom in. As you focus in on a photograph, move progressively closer, structures disappear, then patterns. Colours change, then break into pieces, until everything you thought the photograph showed is no longer apparent, everything
you thought you could say about the picture can no longer be said.

Treen and Belle were to remain as characters who had hurt a child and who had died. The novel would provide no depiction of events from their points of view and Veronica would gain no intimate connection with them.

It occurred to me at this point that this failure could be highlighted by contrast, by the story of another person writing sympathetically about a female convict, making contact, gaining some insight into what Mary McLaughlan’s life was like, for her. In this century, from the distance of a hundred and eighty years we can see Mary as mistreated, abandoned, misunderstood, manipulated, branded as fundamentally different from non-convict women. We can deplore the way she was treated and believe that she was unhappy rather than evil. Studying Mary, writing about Roland writing empathically about Mary, might throw light, by contrast, on the way Veronica sees the contemporary women.

It was my intention that, in TDSP, the story of Mary McLaughlan was to go beyond documents and drawings and buildings. I felt it needed to present some idea of what Mary’s life was like, for her, and I wanted this story to be uncovered by someone as similar to Veronica as possible. Not by Roland, but by Lesley.

I began re-writing again, this time presenting the story of Lesley gaining some intimate insight into the experiences of Mary McLaughlan.

And it is here that I began to see what lay at the heart of my novel.
Chapter 8
Looking for Mary McLaughlan

8.1 Introduction
As an exercise in working towards the inclusion of the story of Mary McLaughlan in the novel, I wrote journal passages in which I imagined Lesley researching Mary’s life in the Tasmanian State Library, going to places where Mary McLaughlan had spent time and gaining some empathic insight into what Mary’s life was like for her. To do this I personally went to these places.

In the History Room of the library I paused from my research into Mary’s life and observed my own experiences of the room and the material in front of me, and how I felt about what I was doing. I also went to the site of the Old Hobart Gaol on the corner of Murray and Macquarie Streets. I thought about the sketches I had found of the gaol and other Hobart buildings around the time of Mary’s execution. I found maps of the property where Mary had been assigned as a servant in the Coal Valley, tried to match this to contemporary maps of the area and drove to a place I thought was near it. I walked around the Female Factory in South Hobart and sat in St David’s Park and imagined Lesley’s experience of doing these things, enlightened by my own experiences.

This process, this attempt to imagine Lesley finding some empathic contact with Mary in this way, led me to a discovery which became significant for this project and for my future writing. In order to demonstrate this, here I reproduce at some length excerpts from the journal.

8.2 Journal piece reworked from notes
Lesley wants to write about Mary McLaughlan, but not by describing her appearance, or by reporting what others have said about her. She wants to produce something personal and immediate, to give readers a sense of what Mary’s life was like, for her.

The record in the Female Convicts Database gives her some raw facts but books suggest that even some of these facts are wrong.

Lesley wants to present Mary as a flesh and blood character. Flesh and blood. Character. The
contradiction inherent in the term, the impossibility of the task, escape her.

Mary was five foot three and a half inches, had a dark complexion and was missing a front tooth. Her forehead was perpendicular. In places Mary’s behaviour is described as ‘troublesome’, in others she is said to be quiet. Lesley would like to see Mary, her face, the set of the cheek, the movements of the mouth, the light in her eyes. There is no photograph.

It is possible the father of the baby boy was Mary’s master, Charles Ross Nairne. It is not known how she felt about this. It is not known whether she was raped or coerced, or desired him, or if she agreed to sex with a man who was more powerful than she, in the hope of gaining some advantage.

In the History Room at the library there is a roneo copy of a letter from Nairne, in sloping handwriting, neatly placed as if written along a ruler. From the letter Lesley guesses things about Nairne’s personality, his habits and manners. But Mary has left no such trace.

In the Female Factory Mary made statements about hating men and the father of her child. It is unknown to what extent she was influenced by the women around her. It would have been at least possible for Nairne – if he was the father – to influence Mary to murder her child. It is also possible the child died of natural causes.

It is not known how Mary felt about this. It is not known how she felt about any of it.

A reporter described Mary’s appearance as she walked to the gallows in front of a crowd. Mary was quiet and walked steadily. Her hands were behind her. This was calmness and submission. Or else it was a parody of those things.
Lesley wants something concrete. She resolves to look at the buildings and places Mary has lived, to seek some sense of her in the world, some point of contact, to look at and feel things that Mary looked at and felt.

The hills around the Coal Valley are low and dry with scrawny, broken trees. Lesley always felt this was a lonely place. But this is not Mary’s experience. It is Lesley’s own.

Lesley visits the Female House of Correction. Its air of melancholy and loss is a product of time, all the time the buildings have stood here, all the time between Mary and her.

Mary was hanged at the first Hobart Gaol, on the corner of Murray and Macquarie Streets. There is a brass plaque but the Gaol has been demolished and new buildings built in its place. There is a sketch of the gaol in the State Library. Lesley sees a photograph of the sketch, reproduced on a computer screen. It looks grim, gloomy and cold, but this may be the way the drawing is done, the nature of the shading, or maybe it is the nature of the photograph.

After the execution, Mary’s body was taken to the Hobart Town Colonial Hospital, where it was undressed and dissected by doctors with a group of men watching. A historian suggests that Mary’s remains would have been buried in an unmarked area of what is now St David’s Park. The gravestones that used to occupy the park have been moved and assembled into walls for visitors to walk by and read. Mary’s grave had no marking. There is nothing to show it had ever been here.

The least intangible trace of Mary is her last three words. These were reported by others, but witnessed by a crowd. It is impossible to know
what they signify. It is said that when she stood on the gallows Mary said, 'Oh my God.'

Maybe Mary chose to kill her child or maybe she was persuaded, or forced. Or maybe she watched him die and left him in the lavatory. We can be certain of only two things. She was wretched. And they hanged her.

And there is no trace. The buildings Mary moved through have been torn down, crumbled, the traces of them built over or worn away or hidden behind new walls. Lesley has only drawings, photographs, photographs of drawings, photographs of buildings taken several decades after Mary was there. She has reports of incidents by people long dead, reports of conversations and conditions, photographs of other women, drawings of imagined women, records written and re-written in books and articles, extrapolations, speculation about what might have happened, what Mary might have felt. Lesley reads the books and feels only the presence of the author.

Mary herself is erased in the act of representation. Lesley tries to think of Mary, to see her, to see what she saw, to feel something of what she felt or what thoughts went through her mind. But instead she keeps thinking about Julia’s Eyes.

In the film Julia’s Eyes, there is a scene where a stranger is running away from us. We want to see his face, to identify him, but he runs into a dark corridor. The corridor is windowless, concrete and square, and there are movement-sensitive lights which come on as the stranger passes under them, but he is running just fast enough so that as each light comes on he is already almost out of its range. He appears for just a second, a thin, flailing figure. He even turns
once, so that we catch a glimpse of the side of his face, but then he immediately plunges on into darkness. We never really see him.

He escapes us.

8.3 Conclusion

Instead of finding some empathic understanding of what life was like for Mary, how she would have thought and felt about the places she lived and the events in her life, Lesley (imagined by me) has found only erasure and absence. Partly this is the result of all the time that separates the two women, but it also represents to Lesley, and to me, the difficulty of authentically contacting the experiences of another. This led me to see the difficulty Lesley has in authentically understanding even elements of her own experience. This idea became central to subsequent drafts of TDSP and to my understanding of the place of mystery in detective novels.
Chapter 9
The il y a

9.1 Unreachable
There is nothing in Lesley’s world which can give her authentic contact with Mary McLaughlan, her memories, intentions, emotions, thoughts. Mary is unreachable. In searching for her Lesley feels that there is something she should be seeing. But she finds that there is much that is not, can never be, known about Mary. As I wrote and re-wrote scenes in which Lesley tries to write about Mary McLaughlan, I began to see that the space between them consists not only of time, but of the spaces between people. Lesley begins to see that the experience of other people is essentially unknowable.

Partly this is a failure of representation. Lesley and, in earlier drafts, Roland try to create works which express something they know about other people but there is much they cannot represent.

In her attempts to reach Mary McLaughlan, Lesley is overwhelmed by the proliferation of material. She says ‘The truth is there somewhere. I become lost.’
Roland draws faces and hands. He speaks of trying to capture Treen on the page. He asks Veronica about the difference between the represented girls and the ones who were once alive.

9.2 The postmodern sublime
Roland and Lesley struggle to represent the experiences of another person, and their own. What they are experiencing might be thought of not only as a failure of representation and expression, but as a failure of awareness itself. In recognising the fact that she cannot grasp Mary McLaughlan’s experience Lesley is encountering what Emmanuel Levinas would describe as the ‘radical alterity of the other person’ (Levinas, 1969, p35-6), the fact that the other person always exceeds, destroys and overflows the ‘idea of the other in me’ (p50). I write Lesley so that she has encountered a stranger whose experience, subjectivity, consciousness will always escape her grasp. This brings her to the realisation that there is something, not just about other people, but about experience itself that is unreachable.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (2011) describes the inability of artistic representation to make true contact with the deep essence of reality. There will always be some element of events that exceeds representation. Reality possesses ‘an inherent thickness’ which is ‘not to
be read’ (p3). For Lyotard the sublime is a confrontation with that which lies beyond apprehension and representation. It is gained not from objects or experiences which suggest transcendence, but through immanence: this sublime is embodied within experience itself. Lyotard’s notion of the sublime reflects that of Kant, in that he describes the mixture of pleasure and pain that accompanies the evocation of the vast, the unlimited and the unpresentable. He writes of ‘the real sublime sentiment [...] the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept’ (Lyotard, 1984a, p82). But postmodern notions of the sublime reject the Kantian emphasis on the triumph of a higher mental faculty, instead stressing the inability of art or reason to encompass the unlimited (see Shaw, 2006).

In modern aesthetics the unpresentable is portrayed in suggestions of ‘missing contents’ (Lyotard, 1984a, p81) and through ‘indeterminacy’ (p101). Postmodern art provides allusions to all that ‘consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to compose itself’ (Lyotard, 1984c). An abstract work can only proclaim that an event, the event of the creation of a painting, has taken place and inspire the ‘wonder that there should be something rather than nothing’ (Lyotard, 1984b, p85).

Often this is done by the presentation of primary sensation. The visual art works of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and James Turrell have all been associated with a sublime experience, one that is immanent within experience, evoked through the presentation of elementary sensations such as experiences of light, unmediated by cognition (Berlin, 2001, Rosenblum, 1999, Schama, 2006, Adcock, 1990, Crowther, 1984). The paintings of J.M.W. Turner have been associated with the sublime through indeterminacy (Geldzahler, 1969) and luminous hazes and ‘the impression of drenching light’ (Schama, 2006, p252). These ideas of the sublime brought me to a new understanding of Veronica.

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14 The power of abstract painting could be conceived of as being associated with our inability to grasp some deep essence of reality. Robert Rosenblum (1999) describes Clifford Still’s paintings as being of ‘dumbfounding’ size. They are ‘bewildering’ and their effects are ‘mysterious’ (p75). The works of Mark Rothko carry us beyond reason towards a ‘remote presence that we can only intuit and never fully grasp’ (p76), and in viewing a Turner our minds cannot ‘provide systems of navigation’ (p77). The works of Jackson Pollock contain ‘sublime mysteries’ and ‘imponderables’ (p77), and the works of Barnett Newman ‘elude any rational system’ and provide ‘awesomely simple mysteries’ (p78). For Arthur Danto (2002), sublimity figures centrally in the art of Newman and is contained in formlessness, which corresponds with Kantian ideas of ‘disorder and desolation, chaos, wildness’ (p25). An exhibition of the work of Rothko, Yves Klein and James Turrell at the Berlin Guggenheim Museum was titled “On the Sublime” and the catalogue describes these artists as creating sublime experiences through an abandonment of representational models and a concentration on space, colour and light. The spaces in works become limitless and ambiguous (Berlin, 2001). The works of Rothko carry us beyond reason to the sublime by evoking a remote and ungraspable presence (Geldzahler, 1969).
Veronica is a painter. She works to gather her family around her but gazes constantly past and away from them, seeing or imagining landscapes, skies and light. In the opening pages she could lie on the grass, distracted by the appearance of the sky. In every scene she should be aware of light and the way it changes.

An important part of the scene on the mountain is the quality of light and the way sunlight falls through cloud to earth. At Spring Beach the sublime is present in Veronica’s awareness that the wider ocean exists, but the transcendental qualities of the scene reside largely in the colours of mist, sky and water. In late drafts, I emphasised Veronica’s constant sense that there are things hidden from her. She is mesmerised by the qualities of light. Studying light brings her a sublime feeling, a feeling that there is something she will never understand.

9.3 The *il y a*

Lyotard believes that the sublime feeling points to an aporia, a differend between the concepts we can form in our abstract thought and the images we can hold in our imagination. Veronica can form concepts about the mountain and the bookshop but she cannot imagine objects which encapsulate these concepts. She feels there is something behind the concepts and the things she sees. She feels there is something she is missing. For Lyotard, it is abstract concepts that escape presentation. But Veronica is not trying to capture abstract concepts in her painting. She is grasping for something that lies within (or behind or through) experience itself. Similarly, Lesley and Roland are not trying to grasp abstract ideas in their writing and drawing. They are trying to make meaningful contact with the experiences of another person. For all three there is a sense that what they are striving for eludes them.

For Levinas, experience of the unreachable other brings us into contact with infinity – that part of being that lies beyond the totalizing, generalising concepts of Western philosophy and history (1969, p26). The idea of infinity ‘overflows the capacity of thought’ (p49). It is reached through contact with death, that is with the death of another, and through realisation that the experiences of another person are unreachable and essentially other to us (Levinas, 1969, 2000).

This infinity is something we seek. In *On Escape* (2012), Levinas posits a human urge to exceed the limits of our physical and social situations, to reach something ‘other than ourselves’ (p58). He begins *Totality and Infinity* (1969) by describing a metaphysical desire,
or desire for the ‘Invisible’ (p33) and the ‘Infinite’ (p50), a sense that ‘true life is absent’ (p33) and a striving of consciousness for something which is not itself and which it cannot contain. This is desire ‘turned toward the “elsewhere”’ (p33) and to the ‘absolutely other’ (p33) and it cannot be satisfied. Levinas describes a sense we have that there is something essential about being that always escapes us, that is somehow always delayed, always behind the objects and sensations of the material world.

At the end of the novel, Lesley finds she is unable to communicate any truth about her own experiences. She feels there are things she will never be able to grasp, things no one will ever be able to grasp. And she feels this is important.

The final confession reveals her dissociation from her own direct experiences. She says, ‘I always feel as if I am standing outside everything.’

An earlier formulation of this idea was the *il y a* which refers to Being in general, a pre-linguistic real-ness which exists before concepts or language are applied, which precedes the existence of any subject or consciousness, which precedes materiality and all ‘existents’. It is that part of existence which would remain if ‘all beings, things and persons revert(ed) to nothingness’ (Franks, 2011, p57). The *il y a* is a construct developed between Levinas and Maurice Blanchot. It is experienced as a ‘kind of presence: an impersonal, neutral and indeterminate feeling that “quelque chose se passe”’ (something happens) (Critchley, 1997, p56). It unfolds through the absence of things. It is an experience of ‘(d)arkness, as the presence of absence’ (Franks, 2011, p63). For Levinas it is a notion of density and fullness. His is an idea that the silence murmurs, that the void is dense, that ‘(t)here is nothing, but there is being’ (p64). For Blanchot it is more horrifying. He describes our experience of the *il y a* in terms of a night of insomnia, an interminable experience of impossible dying, a yearning to reach beyond the material world and an exhausting condition of ‘being riveted to experience’. It is an ‘insatiable desire for that which is […] by definition denied to the movement of comprehension’ (Critchley, 1997, p32). But for both Levinas and Blanchot, the *il y a* sits in opposition to Sartrean or Nietzschean nihilism, as a declaration that behind being there is not nothing (Critchley, 1997).

To me, the writings of Levinas and Blanchot, with their descriptions of the fascination, desire, awe and horror with which the *il y a* is encountered, were reminiscent of the emotions associated with the sublime, particularly the postmodern sublime. We are
aware that there is something that lies behind material existence. We feel that this level of
being is of profound importance to us and we yearn to see it. But it vanishes as we turn
towards it. In a way, the *il y a* could be thought of as a description of something that
underlies the sublime, as the ontological face of the aesthetic experience. Now, in the final
development of my thinking about my novel, the notion of the postmodern sublime provided
a description of the emotional response of an viewer or a reader, when a work evokes a
sense of this *il y a*, this silent level of being that resides behind and within and through our
material world, that vanishes as we turn towards it. The notions of the *il y a* and the
postmodern sublime together provided for me, finally, an articulation of what I was trying to
represent in a mystery novel. I wished to convey to the reader – through missing
information, through characters encountering the death of others, through landscape and
history and suggestions of the intertext – this pervading sense that there is something
profound that is not quite seen, something that is never described, a level of existence that
exists above and behind and within and through the material reality being represented.

The *il y a* is a concept of being that has aesthetic implications. In the essay “The
Wall and the Books” (1975) Jorge Luis Borges seems to suggest that all forms contain a
mystery, and describes the beauty contained in a sense of revelation about to be made:

certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or ... are about to
say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps,
the aesthetic phenomenon (p 4).

For Maurice Blanchot the *il y a* resonates within – in fact resides within – literature
itself. In writing, the language used is fundamentally and inescapably ambiguous. It scatters
meaning. Because of this, a work of writing is always radically incomplete, and so it points
to an exteriority which Blanchot calls the Outside, the Neuter and the *il y a*. A writer is in
‘thrall of the image that grips her in its very ungraspability’(Daley, 2001, p67). Blanchot
uses the mythical figure of Orpheus to describe a writer reaching for what is ungraspable.
Refused direct contact with Eurydice, Orpheus is compelled to turn to see her, but in turning
he causes her to return to darkness. Orpheus has been compelled to turn not by desire for
Eurydice’s presence but ‘for the distance that separates them, and in that separation, it
paralyses while joining them’ . For Blanchot, writers are ‘not interested in the world but in
what there would be if there was no world’ (1995, p333). He says that literature arises in a
search for essential being before words were imposed, for ‘unknown free and silent
existence’ (p330). A writer comes into contact with a ‘vague, formless, proto-linguistic
sensibility’ that ‘precedes and exceeds the sign’s capacity to signify’ (Daley, 2001, p62). Thus
literature arises in the space between the pre-linguistic reality of things and any
attempt to recover this through language, in awareness of the impossibility of the task of
writing, and a desire to express that awareness.
These ideas recalled to me my early description of the thrill of not knowing. This, the feeling evoked when a reader becomes aware that there is information missing, could be a small incident of something larger, something that is fundamental to the workings of all literature.

The *il y a* and the sublime are the components that lie at the core of TDSP, its focussing ideas. There is something about our existence, about being, that always escapes us. There is something that lies behind experience – behind and through and within and above. This is something we continually seek and continually fail to reach.

In many scenes Veronica is distracted by light and shadow. She feels there is something she sees in the corner of her eye, but when she turns she finds she has missed it.

We sense the *il y a* in confrontations with death, or with indefinable information gaps, or with unimaginably large landscapes or with an infinite intertext, or with eons of lost time. And we sense it when we are made to feel the unreachable otherness of another person. At the core of Veronica’s desire to create art is Levinas’s metaphysical desire, the straining to find what is beyond experience. This desire is deepened as we strive to satisfy it. It is a yearning for something which always escapes us.

9.4 A book of shadows

None of these ideas appears in the novel. They hang behind scenes like shadows. In final drafts I have concentrated on evoking a sense that in every scene there is much that is not being presented, much that is not being said, that there are presences only half seen by the reader and half felt by characters. I began to think of TDSP as a ‘Book of Shadows’. Shadow is a word that has recurred at several points in my journals. The idea of shadows provided a guide to the final re-writing of the novel.

Shadows might be a sign of absence, a trace that is left when something has been erased. A book of the *il y a* would contain a sense of characters and events that are important, that affect what is happening, but that are not present. A murder mystery has dissolves and vanishings inherent in its structure. Hypothetical narratives, in which different characters perform the murder, are formed by the detective and the reader and are often not stated. As the book progresses many of these are abandoned. There are other elements of TDSP that have been deleted from early drafts. There was originally a scene in which a group of actors read a play about convict women. The novels from which Roland draws subjects for his drawings, and the sources of Judith’s quotations and misquotations are no
longer named. These erased elements remain behind the text, implied by what is shown, as suggestions, as shadow.

There are other important absences. The scene in which Mayson is thrown into a wall is fundamental to the plot. This event leads to Treen’s approach to Roland and his attempts to help her and sets in train events which lead to her death. Mayson’s past suffering is crucial in motivating Veronica’s and Roland’s actions. But this suffering is conveyed only in photographs and reports. Treen’s suffering as she freezes on the mountain is only imagined by Veronica.

There are characters that are spoken of but absent. For the first part of the book Roland appears only in second-hand reports, suggestions, glimpses and guesses. The young man in the pub fails to describe him. It was someone else who saw Roland. The fact that Roland has been in the house is conveyed only by sounds and empty spaces on the bookshelf. Veronica’s husband Alan and her children Tom and Libby are spoken of but never appear. When Georgie answers the phone, Veronica becomes momentarily confused and asks her, ‘Are you here?’ Veronica thinks she has been immersed in her children’s lives but, in a way, she is absent from them and Roland and Georgie both challenge her with this. She is committed to maintaining a home for them to return to, but in fact her children seldom visit the house. From the moment she dies, Treen exists only in the memories of people who had known her, in a photograph, and in Roland’s drawings. She is discussed in conversations. During her confession, Lesley is absent.

Shadows can also be signs of things that have been erased. Places Lesley goes to evoke memories of lost years. In the final version I removed parts of characters’ speech so that there are moments of obvious elision, where a sentence is left unfinished, or parts of it are not heard. People are interrupted or simply stop talking. Statements are made and then contradicted. Roland writes onto a greasy patch and the word disappears.

The notion of shadows also led to the idea of echoes. TDSP contains resonances – elements which are not identical but which have points of similarity. I emphasised these with repeated phrases. The lives of Molly Farren, Justine, Tess, Bertha, Rosanna, Treen, Belle, Mary McLaughlan and Lesley have elements in common. They have all at some point been considered to be wicked enough to deserve their pain. The lives of Judith, Veronica and Lesley have parallels. Paul imitates John and Roland in appearance and behaviour. Vicky and Mayson have both lost their mothers. Instead of naming these similarities I left them through the text as echoes.

Finally, shadows form the darkness and silence that lie around pools of light, sound and movement. In late drafts of TDSP I aimed for scenes that are bright and immediate but which are surrounded by emptiness, scenes that exist not as part of a continual flow but as isolated points of illumination in a field of darkness. On two occasions Veronica sits at night
aware of the emptiness and darkness of her house and garden. The timing of scenes is unidentified but inferred through the events that take place and the nature of light. Some scenes are sharply truncated.

9.5 Forgotten
The idea of the *il y a* is something that murmurs through TDSP. It appears in tropes and style, in the thoughts of the characters, and in the way the plot develops, but in order for the work to stand as a novel, the idea must be forgotten.

I look at Turner’s painting “The Thames Above Waterloo Bridge” of 1830. On the right I can make out a shot tower, and the bridge is visible in the middle distance, indistinct, a white shadow – scarcely even a shadow – a presence. The bridge focuses the picture. Without it the mist and the light would mean less, would mean something else entirely.

In a way, I may have set myself an impossible task – an attempt to portray, in a simple narrative something which is beyond words. In speaking of ‘existence without being’, Blanchot suggested that ‘poetry tries to recapture it behind the meaning of words, which reject it’ (1995, p334). As I have mentioned, this work as a whole presents encounters with unknowns, not just as experienced by a fictional detective or a reader but also as experienced by a writer. It describes a writer asking questions about her work and finding that the questions themselves vanish as she turns towards them. And it ends here, with the writer becoming aware that a novel contains elements that cannot be fully known. The *il y a* hangs as a shadow behind TDSP. The novel contains something that is in itself unknowable. At the end of the project I find I have arrived not at definite answers but at a new way of thinking about the murder mystery and, as Paul Magee (2010) suggests, at a ‘compelling, mesmerising question’ (p6). What I have achieved here is a version of ‘agnostic research’ (Webb and Brien, 2008), work undertaken in the awareness that ‘certain things are not, finally, knowable’ (p 3).
Chapter 10
Conclusion

10.1 Mystery, the sublime and the il y a

For the future study of detective fiction, this project points to the importance of the experience of not knowing, and calls for work which focusses on information gaps and mystery, alongside study of the solutions to puzzles and the social and moral questions raised.

At the end of the project, I find clarification of what are, for me, the important elements of a murder mystery novel and new insights into the way they should be represented. The elements are: information gaps, some of which point to open questions and some of which remain open at the end of the novel; the finding of a dead body which lead a character to thoughts and unanswerable questions about death; vast natural landscapes; suggestions of an infinite and unknowable intertext; the shadowy presence of the history of settings; attempts and failures by one character to engage empathically with the experiences of another and descriptions of the qualities of light. All of these elements have the possibility of evoking ideas and emotions associated with the construct of the sublime. These, in turn, are a reflection of the il y a, the notion that there is always a level of our own experience that forever escapes us. The il y a forms the underlying idea of TDSP, and its practical manifestation for me is the notion of shadows.

10.2 What is a murder mystery for?

Kermode and Culler have pointed to a reader’s desire for closure, for a sense that a plot has come to a logical end, and they have suggested that the classical murder mystery epitomises this closure. According to the Aristotelian ideal of cohesiveness, a work of art should appear as a unified whole. In this project, I have sought to produce a novel that is closed in this sense and also in the sense that honours the covenant in the genre conventions, that the murderer will be identified. But it is not my intention that the novel leaves a sense that order has been only momentarily disrupted and then restored. This is one convention of the murder mystery I do not seek to adhere to. Like Geoffrey Hartman (1983), I would wish the novel to present ‘a gap between a mystery and its laying to rest’ (p217).

I am tempted by the idea that any attempt to write something about death comes from a desire for Boethean consolation. This is consolation not for a particular loss or grief, but for human finitude, for our own. Barnett Newman seeks to leave evidence that something has happened. Blanchot believes that, in the face of mortality and the irretrievability of experience, a writer seeks to leave a trace – not an ideational
representation of the material world, but material itself, new material, placed in the world, material that ‘does nothing but come into being’ (Blanchot, 1995, p313). A writer has only language to express what cannot be expressed, but feels a necessity to keep writing. Simon Critchley (1997) suggests that when we think deeply about death we become aware that there is nothing to say about it, and yet we also find we cannot keep from saying it. Maybe the compulsion to read mysteries is some version of this. Auden has proposed that despite being aware of mysteries’ limitations, he constantly reads them. He finishes a detective novel, laments its shortcomings, fails to find meaning, picks up another. Mysteries are addictive.

You begin reading The Mysterious Affair at Styles. A woman dies. You know there is much that has not been shown. There is something hidden in the first scene, something the detective is missing. It is intoxicating.

I would contend that of these two thrills of mystery novels, the thrill of not knowing is the stronger and the most lasting. Further study of murder mysteries might profitably concentrate on this, not the conservative nature of solutions but the open nature of mysteries, the place of unknowns and information gaps in literature and their relation to the il y a, to that pervading sense that in life there is always something that evades us.

You come to the last scene of a mystery novel. Poirot gathers the group of suspects and explains which of them is guilty and how he knows. You close the book. It was the Nurse. Yes. You see the significance of the rose thorn. But you are not satisfied. You want it again, not the answer, the questions. You pick up another book. There is a body in the library.

Metaphysical desire is like sugar. The pursuit of it makes you want more. This is what Auden described, an addiction.

And now there is only repetition.

A reader reaches the end of a mystery novel. She has watched Veronica, the writer, herself, think.
She has found an answer to the question, ‘who?’ But she has also found that this was not the question she wanted answered. The answer remains, but the question dissolves, blends into larger ones. The reader finds that there are many questions, that it is all questions.

She begins again.

A writer reaches the end of a mystery novel. She has written about a woman and two dead bodies. She has written about death, motherhood, thinking, investigation. She has created only writing. She has sought answers but lost the questions. The work does not convey everything she wanted. She has failed.

She begins again.
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