

Lost in time
or lost forever?



THE
MIRROR

GLASS



KATE CONSTABLE

TUMBLEGLASS






ALLEN & UNWIN
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

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In memory of my brilliant friend, Sandra Eterović, with love

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ash held up a square of coloured cardboard to her bedroom wall and frowned. ‘Maybe the green is a bit sickly. Do you think I should have gone with the blue after all?’

‘It’s too late now,’ said Rowan. ‘Mum’s already bought the paint – she’s on her way back. And I like the green.’

‘Not too much like smashed avocado?’ Ash scooped her long golden hair into a ponytail and tied a bandanna round her head. ‘Just to warn you, if you splash paint on my floorboards, I’m sorry, but I will have to kill you.’

Rowan was indignant. ‘As if! I’ll be super careful. And we’ve got a bazillion drop sheets.’

‘Did you know there’s wallpaper under here?’ Ash ran her hand over the plain white wall. ‘If you stand at the right angle – like this – you can almost see the pattern.’

Standing beside her elder sister, Rowan pressed her cheek to the bedroom wall and squinted. ‘Stripes ... and some kind of flower? Rosebuds?’

‘I bet it was pink. Imagine walking into the wallpaper shop and seeing stripes and rosebuds and saying, *yep, that’s the one for me, I’ll take it.*’

Rowan felt protective of the house. ‘Maybe it was the fashion back then. Fashion changes, you know. Someone in fifty years might look at your room and say *blerch.*’

‘No, they won’t,’ said Ash with certainty. ‘This room is *always* going to look good. Because I have amazing taste.’

Rowan said, ‘I wonder who did choose the wallpaper? I wonder who lived here before us.’

‘Mum knew them, didn’t she? Weren’t they friends of hers and Verity’s?’

Verity was their neighbour, a glass artist and their mother’s oldest friend. Over the years she had acted as a kind of unofficial godmother to the girls, and her house was their second home.

‘That was years ago, when Mum was a student,’ said Rowan. ‘And they didn’t own the house – they were renting.’

Ash shrugged. ‘They still lived here.’

‘I guess.’ Rowan wafted a drop sheet and adjusted it beneath the skirting board. ‘But a ton of people must have lived here. Verity says this house is about a hundred and twenty years old.’

‘Is it?’ Ash was busy spreading a drop sheet over her bed; she wasn’t interested in the past.

‘Do you think we’ve got any ghosts?’ Rowan looked over her shoulder as if a spirit might emerge from the fireplace. ‘In a hundred years, *someone* must have died here.’

‘No such thing as ghosts,’ said Ash briskly. ‘You should ask Verity. She knows the history of the whole suburb. The way she talks, you’d think she’s lived here for a hundred years herself.’

‘I have asked her. She says not ... But what about those noises in the walls?’

‘Mum thinks that’s possums.’

‘And Dad says it’s rats.’ Rowan shuddered. ‘I’d prefer a ghost, wouldn’t you? And what about all the things that go missing? Dad loses his keys about once a month. And my good drawing pens just disappear.’

‘My charger,’ conceded Ash. ‘Odd socks. But that could be Womble. Tansy reckons he’s got a secret stash somewhere.’

Rowan gave her sister a sceptical look. ‘He’s a dog, not a bowerbird. I’m sticking with the ghost theory.’

‘Ghost Theory,’ said Ash.

‘Band name!’ said Rowan.

‘Hang on,’ said Ash. ‘I’m texting it to Tom.’

Rowan gave a pleasurable shiver. It was fun to talk about ghosts now, in broad daylight, with the early autumn sun pouring through the window, but she knew she wouldn’t enjoy this conversation so much if they were talking at midnight, with the wind rattling the gutters. ‘If we *did* have a ghost,’ she said, ‘Verity would know what to do about it.’

Ash looked up from her phone. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Verity must know about a lot of things. Spooky things. Look at all that weird stuff she keeps in her studio. And in her house. Like the crystal ball.’

‘So Verity’s a witch, is she, just because she keeps a crystal ball on her kitchen table?’

‘*No*. Well, maybe. You’ve got to admit, if witches existed, Verity would be one.’

Ash looked up. ‘Mum’s back!’

Ash’s window looked out over the back alleyway. They heard the grinding of the roller door as their mother drove into the narrow car space at the rear of the house, and the welcoming bark of Womble, who had been lying with his nose to the door, waiting.

‘That green was *very specific*.’ Ash put down her phone. ‘I should have gone with her. She’d better not have stuffed it up.’

‘Ash doesn’t trust you,’ Rowan said as their mother staggered up the stairs with a tin of paint in each hand. ‘She thinks you’ve bought the wrong colour.’

Laurel set down the tins and rolled her shoulders. ‘Excuse me, I matched your swatch *exactly*. How dare you!’

‘Thanks, Mum. You’re the best.’ Ash dropped a kiss on her mother’s cheek.

‘Yes, I am,’ agreed Laurel. ‘You owe me. Hammerbarn on a Saturday morning – what a nightmare. It was as busy as a bee’s knees.’

Rowan grinned to herself. But she had given up trying to correct her mother’s mangled sayings.

Ash prised open one lid, and the smell of new paint filled the room. ‘Perfect. The green was the right decision. Good job, Mum. Sure you don’t want to stay and help?’

‘No, thank you. I’ve slapped enough paint around to last me for another forty years. You know when we did the renovation, Dad and I did all the painting ourselves?’

‘Yes,’ chorused Rowan and Ash in unison.

‘That was fifteen years ago,’ said Rowan. ‘You should be recovered by now. It was two years before I was even born.’

‘Four years before Tansy,’ said Ash. ‘Ten years before Womble. And I was only four.’

‘We should have waited till you were old enough to help out,’ said Laurel. ‘Never again. My back hasn’t recovered.’ She perched on the edge of Ash’s bed, which had been pulled into the middle of the room. ‘We were so lucky to nab this place before prices went crazy. It was a miracle. A Victorian terrace, so close to the city? *And* it’s the biggest house in the street. We thought we’d have to pay twice as much! Of course even when my friends lived here it was terribly run-down, it needed so much work ... But Verity persuaded us to take the plummet, she said it was a very special house, and she was right.’

Ash and Rowan rolled their eyes at each other; they’d heard all this before. Laurel laughed, and stood up. ‘Okay, okay, I’m off. I have to pick up Tansy from dance class, then she’s got Charlotte’s party. Maybe she could give you a hand later?’

‘No way,’ said Ash. ‘I don’t trust her.’

‘You trust me though,’ said Rowan.

Laurel raised her eyebrows. ‘I heard Tansy was asking ten dollars an hour.’

‘What?’ said Rowan. ‘You didn’t tell me that.’

‘Why?’ said her mother. ‘How much are you charging?’

‘Nothing! I’m *helping!*’

Laurel laughed. ‘Tansy did say you were a sucker.’

‘Huh!’ said Rowan.

Ash threw their mother an exasperated look. ‘I’ll buy you brunch, Ro, okay? Not as payment. As a thank you. It’s different.’

‘Yeah, okay ... Deal.’ Rowan picked up a roller.

‘You’re a star!’ said Ash. ‘And if Dad wants to help when he comes back from golf, I’ll let him.’

‘Don’t count your ducklings on that one,’ said Laurel as she left the room.

‘Okay, let’s do this.’ Ash poured a stream of thick creamy soft green paint into the waiting trays. ‘Ro, can you open the window right up to let these fumes out? And you’d better shut the door in case Womble tries to come in.’

‘He wants to help, he’s a helpful dog.’

‘Not today. Dogs and paint don’t mix.’

With some trepidation, Rowan gazed around at the expanses of blank white wall, until recently hidden under posters and strings of lights. ‘It’s weird how big this room looks when you know you have to paint the whole thing. And these ceilings are really high.’

‘That’s because it’s a hundred-year-old house,’ said Ash. ‘Chill babe, we won’t paint the ceiling. Here’s your tray.’

‘Maybe I’d better start in the corner,’ suggested Rowan. ‘Where the bed goes. In case I mess it up.’

‘Why would you mess it up? You’re amazing at art.’

‘No, I’m not,’ Rowan mumbled.

‘I’ve seen your drawings. They’re really good.’

Rowan shrugged. ‘They’re just cartoons. Caricatures. I can do faces that look like people, kind of, but I can’t draw *things* that looks like *things*. Like themselves. You know what I mean.’

‘You don’t have to draw anything now. Just put paint on the wall.’ Ash turned on the bluetooth speaker and dance music poured into the room.

Rowan loaded up her roller and swiped it tentatively over a section of the wall beneath the window. ‘Maybe we should make Tansy help when she comes home. There is a lot of wall in this room. She’d do it for brunch, too, wouldn’t she?’

‘No way am I letting Tansy loose with paint near my possessions.’ Ash rolled a stripe of green over the wall near the fireplace. ‘What if she splashed it onto my chandelier?’

They both paused to glance at Ash’s precious chandelier, cascading droplets of coloured glass, an eighteenth birthday present made by Verity.

Rowan said, ‘What about Tom?’

‘I might let Tom help,’ conceded Ash. ‘If he asks nicely.’

A quieter song came on the playlist. ‘So,’ said Rowan. ‘How’s second year uni going?’

There was a pause. ‘Fine, I guess,’ said Ash at last. ‘Honestly, it’s kind of lonely. Don’t tell anyone – but I have more fun working at Dusty Bells. I was thinking I might quit my course and work there full-time.’

‘*What?* Are you serious? Mum and Dad would freak if you quit uni to work in a cafe.’

‘Chill out, I’m not going to quit uni. Yet. I just said I was thinking about it. Not the same thing. Don’t tell Mum and Dad. Anyway, how is Year 8 working out for you?’

‘School’s a lot better since I made friends with Jarvis and Neela,’ admitted Rowan.

Ash waved her roller. ‘See, I *told* you! You just have to find your people.’

‘Okay, you were right. But don’t change the subject—’

‘What’s that?’ Ash cupped her hand to her ear as the quiet song ended and a jazzy track with a fat brass beat exploded from the speaker. ‘Can’t hear you!’

Rowan shook her head and turned back to the wall, relieved that she was only thirteen and didn’t have to make any big life decisions yet.

‘Hey, good job,’ said Ash after half an hour. ‘You’ve done heaps.’

Rowan sat back on her heels. ‘The green looks good,’ she said. ‘The house likes it.’

Ash laughed. ‘The house likes it? How can you tell?’

Rowan said nothing. Occasionally she did have these inexplicable sensations – a hunch that the house had moods and emotions, just as Womble did, even if the building couldn’t express itself in words. She would pick up a feeling of contentment or disapproval or a disturbance in the air. But she hadn’t mentioned those experiences to anyone, not even Verity. And now, behind the silent purr of approval, she could sense something deeper: like a whisper at the very edge of her hearing, like a glimmer of light in the corner of her eye, something trying to catch her attention ...

But then Ash spoke and she lost it.

‘First coat will be done soon!’ Ash pirouetted cheerfully back to her side of the room.

‘What do you mean, *first coat*? How many coats are there going to be?’

‘Only two. Probably.’

‘Oh.’ Rowan slumped. Her back and shoulders were already aching.

‘Are you okay? Not hurting too much?’

Rowan straightened up. ‘No, I’m fine.’

‘That’s good.’ Ash grinned at her. ‘Because I need you to help me move this bookcase.’



Rowan set down her roller in the tray and came over to help. Ash grasped one end of the bookcase and grunted, ‘One, two, three – heave!’

With a mighty effort, they succeeded in shifting the bookcase a couple of centimetres away from the wall.

‘You should take out the books first,’ panted Rowan.

‘Take too long. Too hard. Okay – heave!’

‘Couldn’t be harder than this!’

‘Oh, shut up—’

‘I’m slipping!’ yelled Rowan. She leapt out of the way, lost her balance and fell on her bum as the bookcase slipped from her sweaty hands and crashed to the floor, shooting an avalanche of books and papers across the drop sheets.

‘*Rowan!*’ shrieked Ash. ‘Look what you’ve done!’

Rowan didn’t care. She was dangerously close to tears. Wobbling to her feet, she felt herself all over, checking for injury. ‘I don’t think I’ve broken anything ...’

‘Oh, boo hoo. It’s your own fault for falling over.’

‘Lucky I didn’t land in the paint.’

‘Or gouge a hole in the wall—’

‘I nearly gouged a hole in *me*.’

‘At least we moved the bookcase.’

‘A bit.’ Rowan eyed the narrow gap with a doubtful eye.

‘You can wriggle in there, can’t you?’ said Ash briskly.

‘Can I?’ Rowan held her breath and squeezed herself between the wall and the overturned bookcase. ‘I mean, I can *fit*, but I don’t know if I can *paint*... Ow!’

Ash rolled her eyes. ‘Now what?’

‘I trod on something ...’ Rowan stood stock still for a moment. Her foot throbbed, her fingers tingled, her head swam, but not just with the shock of falling over. Gingerly she bent and groped on the floorboards. As she straightened up, she said in quite a different voice, ‘Oh, wow!’

‘Let me see!’

‘Let me get – out—’ Rowan extricated herself from behind the bookcase.

‘What have you got? Treasure?’

‘It’s a ring.’

‘Oh, wow, that’s gorgeous.’

The two girls bent over Rowan’s outstretched hand. Ash held the slim silver circlet up to the light, frowning. ‘The stone’s only glass. Not worth anything.’

‘Pretty, though.’

The blue stone looked like sea glass, a little larger than a thumbnail, softly opaque, rubbed smooth and cloudy by waves and sand.

Ash said, ‘Where did it come from?’

‘Fallen down the back of the bookcase?’

Ash shook her head. ‘I’ve never seen this ring before. I’ve lived in this room for fifteen years, I would have found it by now.’

‘Except you didn’t,’ said Rowan. ‘So if it’s not yours, and I found it, it must be mine.’

‘Do you think Verity made it?’

‘If you’d let me look at it—’ Rowan managed to wrest the ring back from her sister.

Sometimes Verity took Rowan to the beach to hunt for sea glass for her art pieces, among the shells and pebbles and washed-up shreds of plastic. *Wild glass*, Verity called it, coughed up by the waves, tumbled and smoothed, each piece as individual as a stone. *Made by humans, perfected by nature*, Verity said. Born from sand and fire, smoothed by sand and water, tumbled in the ocean for years. Verity always told Rowan, ‘Your eyes are sharper than mine,’ but Rowan didn’t think that was true. Verity’s eyes were very sharp indeed.

‘Verity doesn’t usually make jewellery,’ said Rowan. ‘And even if she did, what was the ring doing down the back of your bookcase? Maybe it’s Mum’s, maybe she lost it.’

‘Maybe your friend the ghost put it there.’ Ash plucked the ring from Rowan’s hand and slid it onto her own finger.

‘Give it back, Ash!’

‘No way, I’m keeping it.’

‘But I found it, it’s mine!’

‘You just said it was probably Mum’s.’

‘I said it *might* have been Mum’s. Someone must have lost it, someone who lived in the house some time. Maybe it came from the place where my good pens and the odd socks disappear to ... But it’s mine now.’

‘Er, I don’t think so. My room, my treasure. And you wouldn’t have even gone behind the bookcase if I hadn’t made you.’

‘You’re joking, right? Finders keepers, that’s the *rule*. Give it back!’ Rowan’s voice rose in desperation. She couldn’t say why, but she knew the ring was supposed to be hers; it called to her, her fingers itched for it. When she’d picked it up, she’d felt a tiny thrill, like the zing of an electric shock.

Ash slipped off the ring and dangled it just out of Rowan’s reach. She lunged, but Ash spun away. ‘Don’t be a baby, Ro.’

‘Don’t you be a bitch!’

Rowan grabbed for Ash’s hand, tripped over the spilled books, and the silver and glass ring spun up into the air. Both girls dived for it, and their heads collided with a crack. Rowan saw the room explode into coloured stars, and then a chasm of darkness opened around them and they were falling, falling into the black.



Rowan felt the rough texture of a cloth-woven rug under her cheek. The silver and blue-glass ring burned hard and cold beneath her hand; she closed her fist around it. There was still darkness all around her, but the room was naturally dark, night-shadowy. She was dimly aware of music throbbing from downstairs.

There was a groan beside her, and a groggy whisper. ‘Ro?’

‘I’m here.’ For some reason, Rowan whispered too. ‘What happened?’

‘I don’t know.’ Ash sat up, and gave a startled yelp. ‘What’s *that?*’

Rowan blinked. A cluster of headless figures reared over them out of the dark, mute and sinister. ‘They’re dummies,’ whispered Rowan. ‘Dressmaker’s dummies, like Mum’s. Four Mrs Kafoopses.’

Ash climbed unsteadily to her feet. ‘Is this a dream?’

Rowan’s tailbone still throbbed, and the silver ring was cool and smooth in her hand. If this was a dream, it was a very vivid one. She pinched her wrist between her fingernails. ‘Ow! Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m definitely not dreaming.’

‘It’s just – this isn’t my room.’

‘Yes, it is. The window, the door, the fireplace ...’

‘But it’s all different. The dummies. The bed’s in the wrong place. There’s a heater in the fireplace. And my window blind is made of fabric, not bamboo.’ Ash tugged on a cord and moonlight spilled into the room, and Rowan saw that her sister was right. The shape of the room was the same, but the furniture was all different. The bed was in the wrong corner, the drop sheets and paint tins had disappeared, an unfamiliar desk and chair stood against the wall, and the four dressmaker’s dummies loomed in the centre of the room. Ash’s chandelier was missing, replaced by a plain white paper sphere like a floating moon.

Ash swore softly. ‘Where’s my phone?’ She dropped to her hands and knees and groped across the rug.

‘Hang on.’ Rowan flicked the light switch; at least that was in the same place, though it felt subtly wrong under her fingers. The room sprang into light: apricot walls, a stranger’s furniture, the dummies clad in bright, extravagant gowns of green, yellow, red and white. Her hand closed tight around the blue-glass ring as if it were a miniature lifebelt keeping her afloat in a swirling sea.

Ash’s face was pale. ‘Rowan? What the eff is going on? Am I hallucinating? Have I got concussion? Am I dead?’

‘No! Of course you’re not dead!’ As Rowan spoke, a flickering theory took shape in her mind. ‘This might sounds nuts, but ... I think I know what’s happened,’ she said slowly. ‘Could we have travelled in time?’

‘Oh, yeah, that’ll be it,’ scoffed Ash. ‘Not that I’m dreaming, or that I’ve lost my mind. I know what your problem is. It’s all those time-slip books that Verity gives you – they’ve warped your brain.’

‘Verity *likes* books, I like books. There’s nothing wrong with that. And if you’ve lost your mind, I’ve lost mine too.’ Rowan dodged around the dummies to the desk. ‘Check out this old-style computer, lol.’

It was a bright blue, bulbous iMac. In its day it had probably been cutting edge, but now it looked hilariously retro. Rowan

poked an experimental finger at the keyboard, and with a whir, the screen blinked awake.

Ash peered over her shoulder. ‘This thing belongs in a museum. How could anyone actually work on it?’

‘Look!’ Rowan pointed to the date at the top of the screen. ‘I knew it! We’re in 1999.’

There was a brief silence. Ash said uncertainly, ‘Or it’s broken. Wasn’t there like a virus when the computers ticked over to 2000?’

‘There wasn’t a virus – that was the point. Face facts, Ash! We’ve gone back in time. It’s twenty years ago. Neither of us is even born yet!’

Ash sank onto the edge of the stranger’s bed. ‘I don’t believe you. It’s too weird. There must be some other explanation. It’s not *rational*.’

‘Verity’s always said this is a very special house,’ said Rowan. ‘What if this is the reason it’s special? Maybe this is where the ring came from! Maybe that’s why we never found it before. Maybe it appeared specially to bring us here, to show us the past ...’

Ash flopped backward and stared at the ceiling. Rowan perched on the chair at the desk, tempted to explore the computer some more. Had the internet been invented in 1999? Would she be able to search for instructions on how to get home? Except that they *were* home, in a way ... right place, wrong time ... It was still their own house, still their own home. Rowan had a strange feeling, as if the walls of the house were wrapping protectively around her. She slid the blue-glass ring onto her middle finger and it tingled there like a sour lolly on her tongue.

‘Listen.’ Ash sat up. ‘It’s a party.’

Rowan listened. Music pulsed through the floorboards, drifted through the crack of the open window. Shrieks of laughter and a babble of voices echoed between the beats. The bed, now that she looked at it, was awash with coats and wrapped presents. ‘It’s a *birthday* party.’

‘A real party, not a kid’s party.’ Ash stood up. ‘Come on.’

Rowan looked at her sister in alarm. ‘Come on where?’

‘Downstairs. We’re going to party like it’s 1999. Let’s go dancing.’

Rowan shrank back. ‘But – people will see us.’

‘What do you want to do instead? Lurk up here? Because you realise this is someone else’s bedroom now. What are you going to do when they come in and want to, I dunno, get changed or open their presents or go to bed or something?’

Rowan held up her hand to show Ash the ring. ‘I’m assuming this is what brought us here. Do you want to try going back?’

‘Sure.’ Ash laid one fingertip on the ring, squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them. ‘Okay, didn’t work. Come on, let’s go.’

‘But – how will we get home?’

Ash rolled her eyes. ‘You were the one who was so buzzed to be time travelling, don’t fold on me now! We didn’t have to *do* anything to get here – wherever here is – it just happened. So when it’s time for us to go home, that’ll happen by itself too. Or, more likely, we’ll just wake up. So meanwhile, we may as well enjoy ourselves, right? Chill, babe.’

Ash bent to examine her face in the stranger’s mirror, shook out her ponytail, helped herself to a swipe of lipstick from the dresser and skipped from the room.

Rowan hesitated, twisting the silver ring. Then she took a deep breath and plunged from the room after her sister, downstairs toward the noise of the party.



The house was shabby. The white paint on the banister was peeling, all the walls were the same nauseous shade of apricot as Ash's bedroom, and the floors were laid with frayed red carpet. Rowan tiptoed cautiously down the central staircase, the blue-glass ring snug on her finger.

Ash had already disappeared through the doorway at the bottom of the stairs that separated the back of the house from the front rooms. Rowan realised with a shock that, of course, this was the version of the house that existed before the major renovation her parents had undertaken, before the ramshackle back of the house had been knocked down and replaced with what her family called the 'big room', even though it wasn't really very big: kitchen, living and dining in one airy open space, a small laundry and bathroom tucked away in a corner, with Tansy's bedroom and the family bathroom above. The front of the house held the original rooms: Rowan's bedroom beside the front door, then the office next to the stairs, and above, Ash's bedroom, and their parents' bedroom at the front with the wrought-iron balcony – the room where Rowan herself had been born, because she was in such a hurry to arrive.

Here in 1999, a door with red and blue glass panels separated the front and back halves of the house, but it was standing wide open and the party was flowing out into the long hallway and the nook at the foot of the stairs. There was a lot

of noise, but not much light. ‘Scuse me, scuse me.’ Rowan was so much shorter than everyone else at the party that she was sure they couldn’t even see her; they gazed straight over the top of her head and kept talking (or rather shouting) as she squeezed past, trying to track Ash’s golden head as her sister bobbed and weaved through the small, crowded living room. A stereo and speakers balanced on a sideboard next to a vase stuffed with lilies and gerberas, people sprawled and perched on a sagging couch, and a kissing couple were entwined in an armchair. Rowan averted her eyes and plunged deeper toward the back of the house, through another doorway and into a tiny slip of a kitchen, packed with people drinking beer and eating Turkish bread and dips. Candles flickered from the benches and the top of the fridge. Rowan saw that everyone was young, students probably, like Ash and Tom, a few years older than herself but from a different generation.

She managed to edge her way outside, into the concrete backyard, which seemed huge in comparison to the narrow car space carved out behind the house in her time. This was the beating heart of the party. Coloured lights garlanded the high boundary fence, a fire blazed in a steel drum. The music was a deafening thump and wail, while people shouted earnestly into each other’s ears. The air was thick with smoke from cigarettes (and possibly something else); Rowan pulled up her T-shirt to cover her nose. And then she spotted Ash, her sister’s loose golden hair shining under the party lights. Ash was wearing a ratty old T-shirt and torn dungarees for painting, but she looked gorgeous, luminous, like a ragged angel. She was dancing, her arms in the air.

Rowan tugged at her sister’s dungarees and yelled. ‘Ash!’

Ash turned to beam down at her. ‘Having fun?’ she mouthed over the music.

‘I don’t know anyone!’ shouted Rowan.

Ash shrugged and smiled. ‘So dance with me!’ She grabbed Rowan’s hands and tried to draw her into the circle of dancers, but Rowan pulled herself free. She yelled, ‘I’ll come back later!’

Ash shook her head and cupped her hand to her ear, still dancing. *Can't hear you!*

Rowan shouted again, then gave up. She pushed her way back through the throng of dancers and talkers to explore the rest of the house. She'd always felt that this house belonged especially to her, because she'd been born in it; this might be her only chance to see how it had looked before that momentous day, and she didn't want to waste the opportunity.

At the back of her mind was a worm of worry, about how she and Ash were going to return to their own time, but she hoped Ash was right and the magic would take care of itself. She squashed the anxiety down into a small hard marble and tucked it away for later.

Back through the kitchen and the living room, and Rowan found some breathing space in the hallway, which was dimly lit by a lamp on the floor near a telephone. Random posters dotted the walls, pictures of Nelson Mandela and the Red Hot Chili Peppers and some other bands that Rowan had never heard of, and there was a cool collage of cut-up fashion magazine covers that she lingered to examine more closely. The telephone was cordless, with buttons, like the landline phone her family had recently discarded now that even Tansy had graduated to a mobile. Rowan had a sudden urge to pick up the white plastic handset and dial her own number. What would she do if she heard her own voice answer?

What she really wanted, of course, was to peek into the room that would be her own bedroom one day. She was creeping along the hallway when the front door burst open and two guests came barrelling into the house, bringing a gust of cold air with them. They brushed past Rowan without a glance, guffawing loudly, and vanished into the living room. Rowan's heart thudded, she lost her nerve, and she turned and scuttled blindly up the stairs.

'Hey, watch it!'

'Sorry!' gasped Rowan.

She'd collided with a young woman on her way down, who was also not paying attention to where she was going, because

she was arguing with a young man who seemed to be her boyfriend. The two of them were completely blocking the stairs, so Rowan had to stand where she was, pressed against the apricot wall, and wait for them to pass. The boyfriend had blond hair, shaved short at the back of his head and flopping long over one blue eye; the girlfriend had a dark fringed bob, bright red lipstick and Cleopatra eyeliner. There was something vaguely familiar about her, Rowan thought; perhaps she was famous. She was insisting to the boyfriend, 'I said I didn't mean it!'

'Then what did you say it for?' The boyfriend grabbed the girlfriend's arm.

'Hey!' said Rowan.

The boyfriend swung round to glower at Rowan. 'What did you say?'

'Nothing,' stammered Rowan, trying to retreat down the stairs. *Hey!* had been automatic, instinctive, and she had nothing to back it up with.

'She's just a kid,' said the girlfriend, slightly breathless, as if she'd run round the block. 'Leave it.'

But now a second young woman was trying to come up the stairs, and the four of them were jammed halfway up and halfway down, with Rowan trapped in the middle.

'Hi!' said the new arrival brightly. 'I'm Steph.' She had slicked-back platinum hair and dangly earrings, and she wore a shimmering silvery singlet top and low-rise jeans. She put her arm around Rowan's shoulders. 'Angie said you were coming tomorrow, but that's cool, you made it to the party! I'm such a dork, I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name.'

'I'm Rowan ...'

'Oh, that's so pretty!' said the dark bob girlfriend. 'I love it!'

'This is Angie's cousin,' Steph told her. 'Ange asked if she could stay here this weekend while her mum's away.'

'Oh, yeah, cool, okay,' said the girlfriend.

The boyfriend muttered, 'I'm getting a beer.' He pushed his way out of the tangle and thudded down the stairs.

Steph gave the girlfriend a look. 'You okay, Laurel?'

Rowan's heart skipped. She felt dizzy. No wonder the girlfriend looked familiar! She tried to look the dark bob girl in the face, but she – Laurel? Her mother? *Mum?* – was also impatiently disentangling herself. 'Yeah, it's all good. I'm cool pineapples.' She called, 'Damien, wait!' and stumbled after her boyfriend.

Cool pineapples? That *had* to be her Mum. Rowan wanted to chase after her, but Laurel had vanished into the dark living room, and Steph had her arm round Rowan's shoulders, chatting cheerfully, breathing warm beer and garlic into her face.

'It's Laurel's birthday. That's kind of one reason for the party – she can't have parties at her place. She lives with her folks and they're *really* strict, you know? It's a shame Angie couldn't be here, but I think most of her mates have shown up anyway ... Did you dump your stuff in her room? It'll be fine, we'll keep the door shut. You know her room, the one at the front?'

Rowan nodded.

'Awesome!' said Steph. 'Come and have a dance!'

Rowan tried to say, *is it okay if I stay up here?* but before she could get the words out, she found herself being steered back down the stairs and into the maw of the living room. The relentless thump of an INXS song was blasting through the house and then she was in the middle of the room next to Steph, dancing.

She was surrounded by girls, mostly, all singing along, laughing, bright-eyed, some holding beers. Once or twice someone locked eyes with Rowan and mouthed, *Angie's cousin?* and Rowan or Steph would nod *yes*, and then Rowan and the girl would do a little dancing duet together, shimmying into the centre of the ring, or spinning round each other. It was just dark enough that Rowan didn't care that she was a terrible

dancer (Tansy would laugh if she saw her) and that there might be boys watching, but not so dark that she had to worry about tripping over or crashing into someone. The room was small so everyone was basically dancing on the spot anyway, and she recognised most of the songs from that retro radio station her mum played in the car. Everyone was singing along, and it was fun.

She kept one eye out for Ash, and one for the girl called Laurel – if it *was* Laurel, maybe she'd heard Steph wrong? – but the golden head and the smooth dark bob were nowhere to be seen. She didn't see Damien the boyfriend either. Maybe they were in the backyard, by the fire, with Ash; maybe they were still quarrelling in a dark corner somewhere. Someone grabbed Rowan's hand and drew her into a kind of swaying contest, singing the lyrics of the song back and forth to each other until Rowan was laughing so hard she could hardly stand upright. *Laurel should be here*, she thought suddenly, dancing and laughing with these girls, not arguing with that mean boyfriend.

Rowan was thirsty, so when someone handed her a paper cup, she took it; but at once she recoiled at the sour sniff of the liquid inside.

'Uh-uh.' Steph wagged her finger *no*, half-joking, half not. 'You can't give her cask wine! Angie will kill us if we get her little cousin drunk!'

'Nobody's forcing her,' shrugged the boy with the cask, but Rowan stepped back, not pleased at being called *little*, but secretly relieved that Steph had rescued her. She'd try wine one day, but she had a feeling that combining it with time travel might not be a good idea.

Steph danced herself protectively close to Rowan, and called out to another girl with a mop of auburn hair and a nose-stud. 'Have you seen Laurel?'

The auburn-haired girl put her mouth close to Steph's ear. 'I was coming to get you! She's up on the roof! Crying!'

Steph swore. Rowan called, 'Did you say *roof*?'. In her time, there was no way out onto the roof; were they talking about

the balcony outside her parents' bedroom?

Steph jabbed her finger upwards. 'Up on the kitchen roof! Out the window of the back room!'

That was Tansy's bedroom. But Tansy's window didn't open onto the roof. Why would anyone want to climb out onto the roof anyway?

Before Steph could head upstairs, something smashed. Cries went up.

'Taxi! The flowers! Oh, no ...'

'Ste-eph!'

'Careful, there's glass everywhere—'

'I've cut myself!'

'Someone put the light on!' called Steph. 'Watch out for glass!'

Rowan seized her chance. In the confusion, she ran out of the room and leapt up the stairs, two at a time.



The upstairs bathroom was still in the same place. There was a queue outside but Rowan was able to squeeze past and into Tansy's bedroom.

She stopped short in the doorway. In her time, Tansy's bedroom was an airy space with a high sloped ceiling, built-in shelving and wardrobe, a strip of window along one side to let in the sky, and a view across the rooftops toward the Dandenongs. But Tansy's room was new, part of the renovation. The room that Rowan was standing in now was part of the old house. It was tiny, just wide enough to fit a couch along one wall. A boxy television on a rickety coffee table supplied a flickering light.

Two people were seated on the couch, deep in conversation. Rowan heard an earnest man's voice: 'If I thought he actually *cared*, you know? If he could bring himself to say, *I love you?* Just *once?*'

Rowan tiptoed past them to the sash window, which was pushed open to the winter's night, and peered out.

Beneath the window lay the flat roof of the kitchen. Rowan swung her legs across the sill and jumped out. She could see the suburbs spread out like a carpet of lights, the dark silhouette of the trees, the lines of streetlights climbing the hill. The lack of any kind of railing along the roof edge made her giddy and she groped behind her for the safety of the wall.

‘Watch it.’

Laurel was sitting with her back to the wall, almost under the window.

‘Oh, sorry! I didn’t see you.’

‘S’okay.’ Laurel’s voice was muffled, her knees pulled up to her chin. Rowan was shocked to see she was holding a cigarette. Her mother hated smoking. She’d been known to march up to strangers in the street and tell them to butt out. What a hypocrite!

‘I thought you were Steph,’ said Laurel dully. ‘I told what’s-her-name to find Steph.’

‘A vase of flowers smashed. Steph had to deal with it.’

‘My birthday flowers? That figures.’ Laurel heaved a deep sigh that turned into a sob.

‘Are you okay?’ Rowan slid down the wall beside her. ‘Do you want me to go?’

‘Stay if you want. I don’t give a butcher’s.’ Laurel took a drag on her cigarette, an expert-looking drag, Rowan noted. The mutter of earnest conversation drifted out of the TV room window above their heads. Rowan gazed out at the sprinkled lights, crisp as ice crystals in the dark.

Laurel followed the direction of her gaze. ‘You’re from the country, aren’t you? Bet you don’t often see a view like this.’

Rowan mumbled in vague agreement, wondering exactly where she was supposed to be from, and hoping she wouldn’t say anything too embarrassingly wrong.

There was a pause. Rowan knew she was wasting her chance, but she couldn’t think of what to say to this girl who both was, and wasn’t, her own mother. Somewhere down there in the backyard below, by the leaping flames of the fire drum, was Ash. What would Ash do if she were here? Ash had once given Rowan some advice about making friends with strangers: *Just ask questions. Everybody loves an excuse to talk about themselves.*

Rowan blurted out, ‘So – do you live here?’

‘Me? No. This is Steph and Angie and Margo’s house. And that boy, you know, with the freckles, whatever his name is. You know.’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘No, I guess you wouldn’t.’

‘This is a very special house,’ said Rowan.

Laurel gave her a startled look. ‘If you say so.’ She dragged on her cigarette and blew a long plume of smoke across the rooftops. She said suddenly, ‘Today is supposed to be a special day. It’s my birthday. This is meant to be my party.’ She gave a bitter laugh. ‘I’m not having much fun.’

‘Happy birthday,’ said Rowan. She didn’t dare to sing it.

‘Thanks.’ There was a pause. Laurel said, ‘I’d really like to move in here. Steph’s asked me to, a bunch of times. But Damien doesn’t like the idea.’

‘Damien’s your boyfriend, right?’ Rowan hesitated. ‘What’s it got to do with him?’

‘Good question.’ Laurel ground out her cigarette on the concrete and flicked the butt off the roof. ‘You got a boyfriend?’ ‘Me? No!’

‘Don’t get one,’ said Laurel. ‘They’re more trouble than they’re worth, trust me. Stay single. Keep your independence. Stay free. Free as the sea.’ She took a swig from a stubby, and Rowan realised that Laurel was slightly tipsy. It was very weird to be sitting here in the dark with her mum, drinking and smoking and talking about boys. Suddenly Laurel leaned over and rested her head on Rowan’s shoulder. ‘What do you think I should do?’

‘I think if you want to move in, you should move in ...’

‘Cos it *is* a special house ...’

‘Yes, it is ... How can he stop you, anyway?’ Rowan found herself indignant on her mother’s behalf; besides, she knew this Damien dude wasn’t part of Laurel’s future. Somewhere out there – maybe at this very party! – Ivan was waiting.

Rowan said, more firmly, 'Excuse me, but your boyfriend seems like a dick.'

'Bloody Damien. You're right. He can be a dick.' Laurel rested her face on her knees and her voice was muffled. Was she crying? 'He didn't even buy me a birthday present.'

Rowan said daringly, 'Maybe you should dump him.'

Laurel gave a shaky laugh. 'Yeah, right. That's easy for you to say.'

Rowan didn't understand what was so difficult about it. Ash had dumped plenty of boys before Tom came along. But she said nothing.

Laurel sighed. 'I'm so sick of it, you know? The jealousy, the questions ... but then he can be so sweet.'

'I don't know what to tell you,' said Rowan. 'I'm thirteen, what do I know?'

'But you think he's a dick.'

'Well – yeah.'

They both laughed softly.

'You're right,' said Laurel at last. 'Thousand per cent right. Out of the lips of babes.'

'Well, I do think I have nice eyes,' said Rowan modestly. 'But I wouldn't say I was a *babe*.'

Laurel burst into a hiccupping laugh. Rowan giggled, and they were still laughing when Damien poked his head through the window.

'Babe! There you are.'

Laurel and Rowan exchanged a glance, and burst into fresh giggles.

Damien said, 'What's so funny? I've been looking for you everywhere. I was worried.'

'Just admiring the view,' said Laurel. 'Chatting to my mate.'

Damien stared at Rowan with unfriendly eyes as she scrambled to her feet, straightening her clothes. She said awkwardly, ‘I might just—’ She gestured to the window, but it was blocked by Damien, who was swinging himself over the sill and then jumping down. He stuck out a hand to haul Laurel to her feet, but she ignored it and stood up without his help. Damien strode forward to hug her, but she sidestepped him.

‘Hey!’ Damien barked a laugh, but obviously he wasn’t amused. ‘What the hell, babe?’

Rowan whispered, ‘I think I should go.’

‘Good call.’ Damien didn’t look at her; his eyes were fixed on Laurel.

Laurel’s hand shot out and grasped Rowan’s wrist. ‘No, you don’t. Stay here – I want a witness.’

‘A witness? To what?’ Damien’s voice was sharp, any pretence of friendliness vanished.

Laurel lifted her chin. ‘I need to tell you something.’

‘Oh, yeah? What?’

Rowan’s heart was beating fast. This was supposed to happen, she reminded herself. Maybe this was the whole reason why she and Ash had been brought here, to make this moment happen.

Laurel said, ‘This isn’t working. I want to break up.’

There was a dreadful, weighty silence. Then Damien sniggered. ‘Come on, babe, what is this? You don’t mean that, you’re not serious.’

‘Yes, she is,’ said Rowan. ‘She does mean it. Don’t you, Mu — Don’t you, Laurel?’

‘I didn’t ask for your opinion,’ said Damien. ‘Come on, babe. Come downstairs and let’s talk properly. I’m sorry if you’ve upset yourself, I’m sorry I’m not perfect. I don’t even know what I said! You can’t threaten to dump a guy without explaining what he’s supposed to have done wrong. That’s not fair, is it?’

Laurel bent her head; she said nothing. Rowan said, ‘She doesn’t have to explain anything if she doesn’t want to. She doesn’t want to go out with you anymore.’

‘Who asked you?’ growled Damien.

Laurel’s head jerked up. ‘Don’t talk to her like that!’

‘I’ll talk to her any way I want. It’s a free country.’

Damien loomed over Laurel and she shrank from him; Rowan put an arm around her waist and pulled her back toward the wall. For a moment they all stood frozen, silent, breathing hard.

Damien snarled, ‘You’re gonna regret this.’

‘No, I won’t,’ gasped Laurel.

Damien bared his teeth, then he swung away and propelled himself through the open window. A second later, a door slammed so violently that Rowan thought she felt the walls shake.

Rowan said, ‘Do you—?’ but Laurel held up a hand.

‘Shh – wait a sec—’

They listened. From downstairs, from the front of the house, another door slammed. Laurel grabbed Rowan’s hand, dragged her through the window, through the empty TV room, along the top corridor and into the front bedroom. Side by side, breathless, they leaned over the wrought-iron balcony. Laurel clutched Rowan’s arm. ‘There he is!’

Damien’s pale hair shone under the streetlight, his leather jacket had a dull sheen. He yanked on a helmet, threw his leg over a motorbike and the engine exploded into noisy life. The bike shot down the narrow street; there was a squeal of brakes from a turning car. Laurel gasped. The driver yelled abuse, Damien revved the engine savagely and the motorbike swooped away into the night.



‘Yay!’ Rowan swung to Laurel, palm up for a high five. ‘He’s gone!’ But Laurel didn’t return the slap.

‘Rowan, I—’ She took a deep breath and mutely shook her head.

‘Oh.’ Rowan let her hand fall. ‘Are you okay? You haven’t changed your mind, have you? Cos there are lots of better boys out there. Girls, too,’ she added. ‘But you’re more into boys, aren’t you?’

In the dim glow from the streetlights, Laurel gave a wan smile. ‘Yeah, no, I’m fine. But I think I’d like to be by myself for a while.’

Rowan nodded, and then after a moment, realised what Laurel was saying. ‘Oh, you mean *now*! Sorry! Okay, I’ll go.’

‘Hang on a trick.’ Laurel pulled her in for a hug.

Without being able to see her face, it was just like hugging her mum; a skinnier version, maybe. Rowan clung to her mother, probably too tight, for a long moment, then Laurel gently released her.

‘Off you go. Thanks.’

‘No worries.’ Rowan withdrew through the tall window into the bedroom, then out into the hallway past Ash’s – no, Steph’s – room. ‘Sorry,’ she murmured as she pushed through

the knot of people at the top of the stairs, ‘Sorry,’ as she slipped down the staircase past a pair of floppy-haired boys on their way up – imagine if one of them was Ivan! That would be perfect timing! Rowan quickly scanned their faces, but neither of them looked familiar. But then, she hadn’t recognised Laurel straight away either. She couldn’t wait to tell Ash the whole story ...

Rowan was suddenly aware of how tired she was. She looked around the living room but there was no sign of Ash. She couldn’t see her sister in the kitchen, or out in the yard. Rowan stumbled back inside, yawning, barely able to keep her eyes open. In the living room, where the broken glass and flowers had been cleared away, Steph grabbed her arm and tried to drag her into dancing again, but Rowan shook her head and pulled away. She found a bottle of mineral water and gulped down the contents gratefully; she could almost have sunk down on the stairs and rested her head against the banisters, but she forced herself to continue down the hallway and opened the door into her own future bedroom at the front of the house, the silver ring clinking against the green glass of the bottle in her hand. *Just a little rest*, she thought, just a couple of minutes, then she’d go and find Ash.

She shuffled across the room and bumped into a double bed, not tucked into the corner by the fireplace like hers, but standing in the centre of the room with a headboard draped in fabric. Swathes of colourful cloth hung from the mantelpiece and the windows. This was Angie’s room, Angie’s bed; absent Angie wouldn’t mind if she just lay down for a few minutes.

Rowan toppled onto the bed and curled up, her eyes already closed. It was such blissful luxury to be lying down. She took one final sip of mineral water and let the bottle fall into the crook of her arm. The quiet dark wrapped around her like a blanket, the noise of the party ocean-murmuring in the background, and she plummeted into sleep.



Rowan’s eyes flew open.

She was lying on her own bed in her own familiar cluttered bedroom, fully dressed, shoes dangling off the edge. She sat up, wincing, rubbing her ankle where her foot had gone to sleep, twisted the silver and blue-glass ring off her finger and dropped it onto the bedside table.

Rowan flopped back onto the bed, her head spinning. Had she and Ash really gone back in time? Had she dreamed the whole adventure? No, here was the green mineral water bottle, digging into her hip; she'd definitely gone *somewhere*. She reached up to set the bottle on her mantelpiece as a souvenir.

The shadows in her room had changed; there was soft evening light now. She could hear voices from deep in the house, the mutter of the TV, Womble barking and scrabbling in the kitchen. Hours had passed, the whole day was gone.

Rowan rolled off the bed and staggered to the door, ran down the hallway and raced up the stairs. 'Ash! Ash!'

She skidded to a halt in the doorway of Ash's bedroom. The room was exactly the way they'd left it that morning, two-thirds painted, splashes of green swiped across the white walls, furniture pulled into the middle, the fallen bookcase and the books fanned across the floor.

But Ash wasn't there.



Rowan sagged in the doorway, staring blankly at the empty room.

Laurel's voice floated up from the big room below. 'Rowan!'

Rowan unglued her tongue. 'Yeah?'

'Don't make me yell like a fish horn. Come here, please.'

Slowly, step by step, Rowan dropped her feet down the stairs. Her mother stood chopping vegetables at the kitchen counter, twenty years older than when Rowan had seen her last, her hair longer and lighter, her face more lined. She wasn't young Laurel the birthday girl anymore; she was Mum.

Rowan leaned against the counter and picked at pieces of chopped carrot. She suddenly realised she was starving.

'Don't, Ro-ro, that's for dinner. Now, where did I put the salt? I swear it was right here ... Where's Ash?'

'I don't – I – she's—'

'Gone out with Tom?' Laurel sighed. 'Well, that's fine. But I'm not happy with you two.' Laurel pointed the knife mock-threateningly at her daughter. 'You can't run away when you get bored and leave the tins open and the rollers not rinsed and the trays full of paint. It was a cat's breakfast up there.'

'Oh! Sorry,' said Rowan. 'I'll clean it up.'

‘Dad’s already done it. But the point is, he shouldn’t have to. It’s okay, I’m cross with Ash, not you – it’s her responsibility.’

‘Well, sorry anyway,’ muttered Rowan.

Tansy came sliding down the banister, calling, ‘Ro, Ro, did Mum tell you? I’m dancing solo in the concert!’ She landed with a leap.

‘You won’t be dancing at all if you break your ankle!’ called Ivan from the office. ‘How many times have I told you not to slide down the banister?’

‘I’m polishing it!’ Tansy pranced into the big room. ‘Ro, do you want a preview? Mum?’

‘Not right now, sweetie, I’m cooking. Dinner’s in half an hour.’ Laurel scraped vegetables into the pot. ‘Ro, is Ash coming back for dinner? And what about Tom?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Rowan truthfully. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Can you text her and find out?’

Rowan’s phone was in her bedroom. Obediently, but with a sinking stomach, she sent a text to Ash, just as if everything was normal.

mum says are you coming home for dinner

There was a ping from upstairs. Her stomach sinking deeper, Rowan trudged up to Ash’s room and found her sister’s phone, abandoned on the mantelpiece, a string of unread text messages showing on the lock screen. She carried it downstairs and showed it to her mother. ‘Ash didn’t take her phone.’

‘What?’ Laurel tucked her hair behind her ears, and for a disconcerting second, Rowan caught a glimpse of young Laurel, Laurel from the party. ‘That’s not like Ash.’

‘It’s a miracle! I thought that phone was surgically attached.’ Ivan emerged from the office. ‘When’s dinner?’

‘I told you, half an hour ... Don’t eat biscuits, love!’

‘Maybe Ash wants to live in the moment.’ Tansy looked up from the rug where she was playing with Womble. ‘Mum, half an hour is enough to show Rowan and Dad my solo.’

‘I’ll wait for the show.’ Ivan took a step backward. ‘I’m watching the soccer ...’

‘Can I have one of those biscuits? I asked Mum to buy them. If you eat them all, it’s not fair.’ Tansy followed her father into the office.

Rowan said, ‘Mum, can I show you something?’

Laurel was rinsing the chopping board. ‘Is it that sheep that looks like a rabbit? Because Tansy already showed me that.’

‘No, it’s not that.’ Rowan ran to her room and brought back the silver and blue-glass ring.

‘Oh, that’s pretty! Where did you buy it?’

‘I didn’t, I found it ... So you haven’t seen it before? It’s not yours?’

‘I don’t think so. Found it where?’

‘In Ash’s room, behind the bookcase. Sort of stuck between the floorboards. So it could have been there for ages, I guess. Did it belong to one of those friends of yours who used to live here? You know, Steph? Or Angie?’

Laurel frowned. ‘I suppose it might have been Margo’s – she used to live in Ash’s room. Or no, it was Steph, that’s right. So I guess she’s the most likely suspect. But there was carpet down when they lived here, so it couldn’t have fallen between the floorboards. And I don’t remember her having a ring like that. Don’t give me that look, Ro. I’ve lived longer than you, I’ve got more to forget.’

‘It’s real silver.’

‘Mmm, but the stone’s only glass. Pretty, but not worth much.’

‘So I can keep it?’

‘I suppose so.’ But Laurel didn’t give the ring back; she stood by the sink, holding the ring in her rubber-gloved hand,

a faraway look on her face. Rowan had to pluck the ring from her fingers.

Laurel waited to serve dinner in case Ash and Tom came home; but they never arrived. 'They must be eating out,' said Ivan. 'Come on, I'm hungry.'

'She'll come back for her phone, surely,' said Laurel.

'If she's with Tom, they'll be all right,' said Ivan. 'She's nineteen. At her age I was working full-time and paying rent. She can't even tidy up after herself, but she'll be fine.'

Laurel gave Ivan a look.

'Don't pick on Ash when she's not here to stick up for herself,' said Tansy. 'It's not fair.'

Rowan forked through her food in silence. She knew that Ash wasn't with Tom. She knew her sister wasn't able to come back for her phone. She assumed that the same thing would happen to Ash as had happened to her: that she would fall asleep at some point and wake up back in their own time. She knew her sister would want to stay up much later than Rowan had, especially if she was having fun at the party. But she did wish Ash would hurry up.

Rowan tried to stay awake as long as she could, but when she finally fell asleep, Ash still hadn't come home.



Rowan woke up with her stomach churning. It took her a second to remember why then she threw back her doona and raced upstairs. But Ash's bedroom was still empty. Nothing had been touched.

Rowan sank onto the edge of her sister's bed and swallowed hard. It was all clear now. The ring had taken them to 1999; the ring had brought her, Rowan, home again. Without the ring, Ash was stuck, marooned in the past.

Without giving herself time to think, Rowan tapped on her parents' door. 'Can I come in? I need to talk to you.'

There was a pause, some sleepy murmuring, then Laurel's voice mumbled, 'Can it wait till I wake up?'

'No, this is important.'

Ivan grumbled, 'Come in then ...'

Rowan pushed the door open and perched on the edge of the big bed, near her mum. Laurel said, 'What's up?'

To Rowan's dismay, she found her eyes stinging with tears. 'Ash isn't home yet.'

'She must have stayed at Tom's, that's okay.'

'No. She didn't ...'

Laurel propped herself on her elbow. Ivan opened one eye. 'So where is she then, Ro-ro?'

'This is going to sound crazy, but – she's here. In this house. Except she's not ... Mum, you know that ring I showed you? When Ash and I found it yesterday, when we were painting, something ...' Rowan faltered. 'Something really weird happened.'

Laurel said, 'What are you talking about, sweetie?'

'We went back in time,' blurted Rowan. 'Ash and me. Back to 1999. It was a party, your birthday party, Mum. You were there too, only you were young ...'

Laurel lay down again and closed her eyes. 'I love hearing about your dreams, Roey, but not at six o'clock on a Sunday morning.'

'It wasn't a dream! It really happened! I came back but Ash is still stuck there.'

Ivan said kindly, 'Go back to bed, Ro. You're still dreaming now, probably.' He rolled over and hunched the doona round his shoulders.

Rowan looked desperately at her mother. 'Mum? You believe me, don't you?'

Laurel screwed up her face. 'I believe that *you* believe it. At least, you believe it now ... But Dad's right. It must have been a dream, a vivid, amazing dream. You can tell me all about it later ... Why don't you go and write it all down, or draw me some pictures, hmm? And you can show it to Ash when she comes home.'

'I'm not three!' said Rowan. 'I know what's real.'

Ivan groaned and put a pillow over his head. 'I want to go back to sleep! It's *Sunday!*'

Laurel pulled an apologetic face at Rowan, blew her a drowsy kiss, and shooed her vaguely away. Womble had nosed his way in, unsteady with sleepiness, and he gazed up at Rowan, his tail swishing hopefully. Rowan scooped him up and backed out of the room.

‘You believe me, don’t you?’ she murmured into his soft brown neck fur. Womble whined and twisted round to lick her face, which almost made her lose her footing on the stairs. She carried him back to her bed and cuddled up with him. It was nice to have Womble to herself for once. Tansy hogged him; Rowan never had enough Womble time.

The blue and silver ring was lying on her bedside table, on top of her sketchbook. Rowan picked it up and weighed it in her hand. It was as light as a leaf, as light as a blown kiss. ‘It’s the only way,’ Rowan told herself. ‘I have to.’

Womble’s tail thumped as Rowan slid the ring on to her finger and lay down. She was too awake to fall asleep again; she’d have to try properly tonight. She curled around the warm lump of Womble and closed her eyes ...

She was following Ash through the streets of their suburb, chasing her around corners, her sister’s golden hair floating in the shadows, always out of reach. Rowan called to her, but Ash never turned around, and at last she ran out into the middle of the vast, deserted cricket ground and began to dance. Rowan tried to run after her, but her feet were stuck like they were in concrete. *Ash!* she shouted, but Ash couldn’t hear, Ash couldn’t see her.

Ash! Ash!

Rowan woke up, prickling with sweat, in her own bed.

It didn’t work.

She pulled the ring from her finger and looked through the silver circle at her own familiar room. Why hadn’t it worked? Had she waited too long? Should she have tried it last night, as soon as she arrived home herself? Perhaps there wasn’t enough magic in the ring for three trips. When she’d first put it on, it had tingled on her finger, but she couldn’t feel it tingling anymore. If she had used up all the magic, Ash would be stuck in 1999 forever, and it was all her fault ... Feeling sick, Rowan slid the ring back onto her finger and threw back the covers.

It was late morning and Womble was long gone. Tansy was playing music downstairs, probably practising her dance solo

in the big room with the table pushed back. Laurel's sewing machine whirred from her worktable in the corner of the bedroom, in front of one of the long windows where the light was best. Ivan was washing Laurel's little car in the parking space behind the house, and Womble was hanging round hopefully for the chance of a walk. It almost seemed like an ordinary weekend.

The doorbell chimed and Rowan answered it.

'Hey, Ro!' said Tom cheerfully. 'How's the paint job coming? Nearly done? Is Ash ready to go?'

'To go?' echoed Rowan blankly.

'I promised her brunch if the first coat was finished. Are we close?'

Automatically Rowan stepped back to let him come inside. 'Ash is – she's not here.'

'Oh! Okay ... I did text her to tell her I was coming.'

'She hasn't got her phone.'

Tom mimed extreme shock, collapsing against the hallway wall. 'What happened, did aliens take her? Don't tell me she dropped it in the paint.'

Rowan felt sick.

Ivan came in through the back door, drying his hands, dodging Tansy who was working on a dance sequence in the middle of the room. 'Hi, Tom. How's the band?'

'Yeah, all good. We've got a gig tonight if you want to come along.'

'Thanks, but we'll pass,' said Ivan, and he laughed at Tom's fleeting expression of relief.

Tom said, 'I've come to pick up Ash for brunch before her shift at Dusty Bells, but Rowan says she's not here? Did she go out for more paint or something?'

Ivan said, 'We thought she was with you.' He looked at Rowan, puzzled. 'Didn't you say she was at Tom's place?'

‘No ...’ Rowan felt a flush creep over her cheeks. ‘I never said that.’

‘Oh, no, that’s right. You woke us up to tell us about some crazy dream – Tansy, can you turn that music down? I can’t hear myself think.’

Tansy kept dancing. ‘I was in here first.’

‘Tansy! Please!’

Tansy scowled and reached for her phone. There was a sudden, deafening silence, underscored by the distant buzz of the sewing machine.

‘Hang on,’ said Tom. ‘You mean you don’t know where she is?’

‘And you don’t know where she is either?’ Ivan went to the foot of the stairs. ‘Laurel!’

There was a sudden flurry of panicked activity. Rowan was sent upstairs to search for Ash’s phone until Laurel remembered it was on the kitchen bench. Tansy was dispatched to find a charger that worked, so Ivan could charge it and call Ash’s contacts; except that after the phone was charged, he couldn’t crack her passcode. Tom perched on a kitchen stool, thumbs feverishly texting everyone he could think of. ‘Sophie hasn’t heard from her, or Mia, or Ky, or any of my gang. Is she at Dusty Bells?’ he said. ‘Maybe they called her in early?’

Laurel chewed her thumbnail. ‘She’ll turn up soon. I’m sure we’re worrying for nothing.’

‘Of course she’ll turn up.’ Ivan’s voice was reassuring, but his expression was anxious.

‘They haven’t seen her at Dusty Bells,’ reported Tom. ‘But they’re expecting her for her shift at twelve.’

‘She’ll turn up for *work*,’ said Laurel. ‘Won’t she? It’s nearly twelve now.’

‘They’re going to text me if she doesn’t show,’ said Tom.

There was a helpless pause while everyone looked at everyone else, unsure what to do next.

‘Rowan,’ said Ivan. ‘What exactly did Ash say yesterday? Did she mention any names? Was she going out for dinner, or a gathering somewhere?’

‘*Gath*, Dad,’ said Tansy. ‘It’s called a *gath*.’

Rowan mumbled, ‘I think she *might* have gone to a party ...’

‘Where? Who with?’ asked Laurel.

‘Somewhere round here ... I think ... maybe ...’

Tom frowned. ‘She didn’t tell me anything about a party. I had band practice last night. I thought she was planning to paint straight through. I guess she might have gone out with some girls from uni? But if Soph hasn’t seen her ... And it’s weird she didn’t take her phone. Can I see her mobile, Ivan?’

‘Help yourself, mate.’ Ivan tossed the phone to him across the table. ‘Do *you* know her passcode?’

‘Oh! Um – maybe—’ Tom blushed.

‘Could you guys have your meeting somewhere else? I was practising in here.’

‘For God’s sake, Tansy! Not now!’ snapped Ivan.

‘Read the room, Tans,’ murmured Rowan.

Laurel said, ‘I wonder if Verity’s heard from her? Maybe Ash slept over? I might give her a call ...’

‘Do you want me to run over and ask?’ said Rowan abruptly. She was finding it almost unbearable to listen to this conversation, knowing exactly where Ash was, but unable to tell anyone (or at least, anyone who would believe her), and chewed up with worry about how her sister was going to find her way home. She had a horrible thought: what if Ash didn’t manage to come home, what if she was marooned in 1999 forever, what if she had just grown older and older, she’d be – Rowan calculated rapidly – *forty* by now. The image of Ash as some ancient forty-year-old, their *mother’s* age, wandering

around the shops in athleisure wear, made Rowan feel ill. She scrambled off her chair. 'I'll go over there.'

'What? Oh, thanks, Roey,' said Laurel absently.

None of them looked up from their phones as Rowan slipped out.



Verity's house lay in a cul-de-sac at the end of Rowan's block and a skip across a narrow dividing street that lay between them like a black asphalt creek.

Rowan knew Verity's house as well as she knew her own. Verity had been Laurel's friend for as long as Rowan could remember, almost like an aunt to the girls. She and Ash and Tansy had grown up shuttling between their home and Verity's single storey worker's cottage.

Verity's house was a cave of wonders, shimmering with reflections and rainbows from her pieces of glass art. The rooms of her little house were crowded with objects she'd made and collected. 'It's lucky I have a dark house,' she'd told Rowan once, 'because if it was better lit, I'd be blinded.'

A few blocks away, near the railway line, was Verity's studio, which was even more crammed with stuff. 'Where did you *get* all this?' Rowan had asked, mystified, and Verity shrugged and waved a hand.

'Here and there, here and there. Picked it up along the way. Think of me as a bowerbird.'

'But bowerbirds only collect blue things,' said Rowan. 'You pick up *everything*.'

Verity narrowed her eyes. 'That sounds like an insult. I'm choosing to ignore it.'

Globes of coloured glass dangled in front of the double doors to Verity's tiny backyard, which overflowed with plants and pots. Vivid prints and posters jostled on the walls, shelves swarmed with figurines and bars of soap in eccentric packaging and little wooden animals and other quirky bits and bobs that had caught Verity's eye. There were shelves of books of the kind that Rowan had never seen elsewhere, books about buildings and dust and Chinese history and advertising and art and hawks and knitting. But even though the tiny house was packed with things, unlike the studio it never looked untidy or haphazard; every room was beautifully arranged, curated with style and care. Rowan didn't know when Verity found the time to reorganise her artworks and knick-knacks, but there always seemed to be some fresh discovery to play with: an antique compass, an anatomical model, an old map, a string of glass fishing floats, a circular mirror in a tarnished frame.

But some items were always there. A green vase of flowers sat on the kitchen bench, beside a shallow glass bowl piled with fruit. There were the tall jars filled with pieces of sea glass: one for green pieces, one for white, one for brown, and one, the smallest, for blue. And there was the crystal globe that sat in the centre of Verity's round table. 'My witching glass,' Verity called it.

Tansy had once asked her, 'Can you see the future?' and Verity said, 'Yes, of course I can.' There was a long pause before Tansy decided that Verity was joking, and gave an uncertain laugh; but Rowan still wasn't sure.

Rowan loved to hang out at Verity's studio, too. The edges of the big space were shadowy, blurred with furniture and boxes and other odds and ends that wouldn't fit into her house; but in the centre was a cave of mysteries, a place of sharp and musty fumes, with its glowing furnace and rows of peculiar tools: punties and paddles, blowpipes and shears. This was where Verity danced with molten glass, stretching and pinching, snipping and twirling, tapping and blasting, where flames flared and a sudden crack and smash might announce disaster. Tansy thought Verity's workshop was scary, Ash found it chaotic, but Rowan was entranced; she could watch Verity working for hours and never grow bored.

About once a week Verity would bring round muffins and ice cream and wine, and they'd all eat dinner together. She was the person you could complain to when Laurel and Ivan didn't understand (though she was as likely to tell you briskly to get over it as she was to sympathise). She could help with homework, because she knew something about almost everything, or she could supply a book that did. She lent food and emergency money and spare keys if you were locked out, and if you needed a quiet place to hide for a while, she might consent to let you stay the night on the fold-out couch in her front room.

As Rowan approached the familiar faded blue door, she had a wild thought that perhaps Ash *had* actually been at Verity's all this time. She almost wouldn't have been surprised if Ash answered her knock.

But it was Verity herself who opened the door, wrapped in a peacock-blue silk dressing-gown. She was taller than Rowan and judging from Laurel's photographs, she never seemed to age. Her fair hair was piled messily on top of her head, and her sharp blue eyes gazed at Rowan over the top of narrow red-framed spectacles. 'Oh no, here's trouble.'

To her own surprise, Rowan burst into tears.

'Good lord,' said Verity. 'I didn't mean it.'

But before Rowan knew it, Verity had whisked her inside, plonked a plate of ginger biscuits before her, and was making her a mug of special secret-spiced chai tea. 'So. What's happened?'

Rowan hiccuped. 'Ash has gone missing.'

'Missing? What do you mean?'

'We can't find her. She left her phone behind. Nobody knows where she is. She was out all night. Mum and Dad and Tom are really worried.'

Verity sat down at the table. 'Weren't you painting her room yesterday?'

Rowan nodded. 'We did. We didn't finish.'

‘Rowan, look at me. Is there something you’re not telling me? Did you have a fight?’

‘No! Nothing like that.’

‘Ash just walked out?’

Rowan swallowed. ‘I didn’t exactly see her go ... I guess she must have.’

‘That doesn’t sound like Ash.’ Verity wrapped her broad, capable hands, flecked with the scars of tiny burns, around her mug. ‘She knows your mother gets anxious, though she tries to hide it. Ash has always been so good about letting Laurel know where she’s going.’

Rowan said, ‘Verity—’

‘Yes?’

Rowan fell silent.

Verity said, ‘You can tell me anything, you know. I have a very open mind.’

‘I know,’ Rowan whispered. Unconsciously mirroring Verity, she folded her own hands around her mug.

Verity said sharply, ‘Where did you find that ring, Rowan?’

Rowan glanced down; she had almost forgotten she was wearing it. ‘In Ash’s room ...’ For a moment she struggled; but if anyone was going to believe her, it would be Verity. In a rush, she let it all out. ‘We went back in time – me and Ash. We were fighting over this ring – not fighting exactly – we bumped our heads, and then we were in 1999 ...’

‘1999? You’re sure? Not 1900?’

‘No, it was definitely 1999. There was a party ... Mum was there ... Wait, you believe me? I tried to tell Mum and Dad but they thought I was talking about a dream.’

‘Yes, I believe you. So what’s happened to Ash?’

‘She got stuck there. I fell asleep and woke up back here, but – Ash hasn’t come back.’

Verity closed her eyes. ‘Damnation! I’ve been expecting something like this to happen. But I thought we would have more time.’

‘What? Why? You *knew* this would happen?’

‘Let’s say, I’m not surprised.’ Verity gave Rowan a stern look. ‘Perhaps this is my fault. I should have told you straight out. Too late now, the damage is done.’

Rowan’s voice was squeaky with alarm. ‘Told me what?’

Verity said, ‘Your house is not an ordinary house.’

‘You always say that. Our house is special.’

‘Yes, but I’ve never told you why. Are you going to be quiet and listen?’

Rowan subsided.

‘All right,’ said Verity. ‘Your house is built on ... let’s call it a crack, a crack in time, a vulnerable place, where the boundaries of time are thin. We call it *die Schwäche*.’

‘Dee Shwerker? What does that mean?’ With one corner of her mind, Rowan noted, *band name*.

Verity gave a rather grim smile. ‘It’s German. It means “the weakness”. It’s a place where things can slip through. Like your ring. Let me guess, you’re always losing things at home, aren’t you? Small things, keys, coins, earrings?’

Rowan gaped at her. ‘Like my drawing pens! Wait, are you telling me they’re falling into the crack? They’re going back in time?’

Verity shrugged. ‘Or forward.’

‘So is that what happened to Ash and me? We fell into the crack, through *die, die Schwäche*?’ Rowan stumbled over the word.

‘Not fell. I think you were carried.’ Verity took Rowan’s hand, slid the ring off her finger and inspected it carefully. ‘Interesting.’

‘Where did it come from? From 1999?’

‘No. Not 1999. That is what’s interesting.’ Verity narrowed her eyes to blue slits and regarded Rowan through her red-framed glasses.

Rowan swallowed. ‘Verity, are we talking about – magic?’

‘Yes. Call it magic if you like, if that makes you comfortable.’

Nothing about this situation made Rowan comfortable. She said, ‘Our house is magic? Our house is magic and you never told us?’

‘Don’t be slow, Rowan! Why do you think I give you all those books about travelling through time?’

‘What, you mean that was supposed to be a *hint*? I thought you just liked time-travel stories!’

‘I do.’ Verity gave her a disarming, crooked, sudden smile, and the anger went out of Rowan like a sigh. She fixed Verity with a glare of her own.

‘How come you know all about our magic house, and we don’t?’

Verity drew herself up proudly. Even in her dressing-gown and messy hair, she looked magnificent. ‘This is my duty. I am the guardian of *die Schwäche*. I have watched over this place for many years. That’s why I helped your parents to buy the house when it became available. I knew it would be in good hands.’ She gave Rowan a long look. ‘Perhaps my successor is already living there.’

There was a beat of silence. Rowan said, ‘You mean – me?’

Verity leaned back in her chair. ‘I thought I would have more time to prepare you, but yes, of course. You were born in the house, born into the embrace of *die Schwäche*. Who could be better?’

‘But – I don’t know anything about magic!’

Verity waved her hand. ‘We can discuss this later. For now, we have a more pressing problem: your sister.’

‘You can rescue Ash, right? If you’re a guardian or whatever? Can *you* do magic?’

Verity’s lips curved in a smile. ‘What do you think?’

Rowan’s mouth opened, then closed again. She knew she ought to be shocked, but somehow it was no surprise to learn that Verity was – a witch? A magician? ‘So you really can see things in your crystal ball ... Can you see Ash? No – wait.’ Rowan realised she didn’t want to see her sister trapped inside Verity’s witching glass. ‘Forget that. Just bring her back. Do your spell, wave your wand, say your magic words. Hurry up, do it now!’

Verity’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Do it now? I wish it was so simple. I think, I hope, I can bring Ash home. But it will need powerful magic. It’s not just saying *abracadabra*. And I will need your help.’

‘Okay,’ said Rowan. ‘Sure, whatever.’

‘Thank you.’ Verity’s expression softened. ‘It won’t be easy, Rowan. I wish I had more time to – prepare you. But I believe, with luck, and courage, that you will survive.’

Rowan gulped. ‘*Survive?*’

‘Survive is the wrong word,’ said Verity impatiently. ‘Succeed, pull it off, hit the target, kick the goal. But *I* will be doing the real work.’

‘Okay,’ said Rowan in a small voice.

‘Very well.’ There was a pause, while Verity sat with her eyes closed, drumming her fingers on the tabletop, thinking. Rowan waited, her heart beating wildly. At last Verity said, ‘I will need materials. Glass, naturally, is my preferred medium.’

Rowan gasped. ‘I brought back a bottle from the party, a mineral water bottle! Would that help?’

‘It’s almost as if the house knew what we would need.’ Verity gave a flicker of a smile and Rowan couldn’t tell if she was serious or joking. ‘Yes, that’s excellent. Good girl.’ Then, as Rowan leapt up to run home and fetch it, ‘Wait, wait, not yet. It’s a good start, but it’s not enough. *Die Schwäche* is

volatile, unstable, not safe. Before I try to bring Ash back, I will need to make the boundaries firm, to keep them anchored. Do you understand?’

‘Not really.’

Abruptly Verity pushed back her chair, rummaged in the kitchen and brought back a cloth napkin. ‘The magic I will weave is like a tent in a wind, Rowan. The fabric is strong – you see?’ Verity tugged at the napkin’s sides and the cloth snapped like a ship’s sail. ‘But now ...’ She draped it over the crystal ball, leaned over and blew hard. The napkin fluttered to the ground. ‘It needs to be pegged down, you understand?’ Verity picked up the napkin, replaced it over the crystal globe, and weighed down its corners with her chai mug, a banana, a book and the jar of blue sea glass. She blew again, and the edges of the napkin fluttered, but it stayed put. ‘Anchored, you see? The ring will be the first peg, your bottle will be the second, but I will need three more. Four would be better, but I can make do with three, if necessary.’

Rowan said uncertainly, ‘More bottles?’

‘It doesn’t have to be bottles. Any piece of glass will do for what I have in mind. Best of all would be something that’s a part of the house itself, a shard of mirror or piece of a window, but anything from inside the house will do.’

‘Okay, I can get that. Three bits of glass.’ Again Rowan jumped up, and again Verity stopped her.

‘Not from the house as it is now. From the house as it was.’

Rowan sank back into her seat. ‘What do you mean?’

Verity said, ‘I am going to send you back, into the history of the house, into the past, to collect what I will need to make this magic.’

‘Okay,’ said Rowan uncertainly. There was a pause. ‘Wouldn’t it be better if you went yourself? Not that I’m scared or anything,’ she added quickly. ‘But you know what you need better than I do.’

But Verity shook her head. ‘I would go if I could. Of course it would be better if I, an experienced magician, could do this,

rather than you, a novice. But I can't. That is why I need your help. You see, I am already there. I have been guarding *die Schwäche* for a long, long time. If I go back into the past myself, I will be doubled. That is extremely dangerous. I mustn't take that risk.'

'Right,' said Rowan. 'Okay, I get that ... How old *are* you, Verity?'

Verity wagged her finger. 'Don't you know it's rude to ask a lady her age? That is classified information. But it would be best if you avoid my past self, Rowan. Steer clear. It might make tangles.'

Rowan's heart sank. She had begun to hope that if she got into trouble, past-Verity might be able to bail her out, but apparently she'd have to cope alone ... 'Verity, what if I get stuck there too, like Ash?'

'That will not happen,' said Verity.

'How do you know?'

'I already told you, Rowan. You belong to the house. You are linked to *die Schwäche*. You will be taken care of.'

Rowan wasn't sure she liked the sound of that; but then she remembered the feeling she sometimes had that the house was protecting her, and she felt reassured. 'Will I go now? Or tonight?'

'No, no, not now. I need to make preparations. Perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow. As soon as I can find what I need. I will work as quickly as I can.' Verity lifted Rowan's chin and gazed into her eyes. 'Be ready.'

Shyly Rowan asked, 'Can I have the ring back?'

Verity frowned. 'I'll need it.' Then, as she saw Rowan's downcast face, she said quickly, 'But not yet.' And she dropped the ring into Rowan's palm and folded her hand around it.



Rowan walked back to her own house in a daze, replaying the conversation with Verity over and over in her mind, hardly daring to believe what she'd heard. She could have made that short walk in her sleep; in fact, she probably had almost sleepwalked it a few times, when she was little, coming back from a late night at Verity's: along the dead-end street, a quick glance up and down the hill, then a skip and a jump over the between-road, then along her own street, heading in the direction of the park and the cricket stadium. Past the low-roofed workers' cottages, past the two-storey terraces like their own. For the first time, Rowan noticed how the other terraces stood shoulder-to-shoulder, joined together, but her family's house, the special house, the house of *die Schwäche*, stood slightly apart, separated from the rest of the street, as if it were a little shy or a little prouder than the rest.

Two doors from home, one of their neighbours, grumpy old George, straightened up from the narrow strip of garden bed in front of his house and called out to her.

'Hey! I hear your dog again last night!'

George was always complaining about Womble barking. Rowan nodded and mumbled something apologetic but she hurried past without stopping, fumbling for her key.

As soon as she opened the door, she heard Laurel's voice. 'Ash? Is that you, baby?'

‘No, it’s only me!’ Rowan called back.

In the big room, everyone was still clustered round the dining table, like a war room in a movie. Dirty plates and coffee mugs had spread across the tabletop in her absence. Ivan and Tom glanced up, then went back to their phones. Tom had Ash’s phone, so it seemed he’d managed to get in.

Laurel said, ‘Where the heaven have you been?’

‘I went round to Verity’s to see if Ash was there.’

‘You should have told me where you were going! You can’t run out like that, Rowan, not today of all days. You must have known I’d be worried stupid!’

‘I *did* tell you.’

‘That’s not the point, you should have made sure I heard you!’ Then Laurel’s face changed and she jumped up and threw her arms around Rowan. ‘I’m sorry, Roey. I’m sorry for yelling. I’m just so— Where could she be?’

‘It’s okay.’ As Rowan hugged her mother, she had a sudden flash of the hug on the balcony, last night and twenty years before. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d be so worried.’

Tansy piped up from the couch. ‘Am I going to get any practice time in here today? Amber said to practise *every day*.’

‘Just wait, Tansy,’ said Ivan. ‘We’ve got more important things to think about today than your dance routine.’

‘But why? You said Ash would be home soon!’ Tansy’s voice rose. ‘You said she was fine! Make your minds up. If you really think she’s okay, why is everyone acting so weird?’

Laurel and Ivan exchanged a swift glance. ‘You can have the room when we’re finished,’ said Laurel.

‘How can you even think about dancing when your sister could be—’ Ivan’s voice cracked and he couldn’t finish.

Tansy turned bright red and burst into tears; she pushed past Laurel and sprinted up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door.

For a moment nobody moved; they were all frozen, turned to stone, turned to glass. Then Tom stood up.

‘I’m going to head to Dusty Bells,’ he said. ‘If she turns up there, I’ll text you. Obviously. Or if I hear from her.’

Laurel beckoned him into a hug, and when they pulled apart, she had tears on her cheeks.

‘So – if she comes home – *when* she comes home, I mean,’ Tom corrected himself quickly, ‘you’ll let me know?’

‘Yes, of course. Of course.’

Tom turned to Ivan. ‘Do you think we should, I dunno, report her missing?’

‘Oh, it’s too soon for that!’ cried Laurel in a frightened voice.

Ivan and Tom looked at each other. At last Ivan said, ‘We’ll give her another day. Then we’ll see.’

Tom nodded. ‘Yeah, okay. I guess. Your call.’

Rowan knew that Ash was safe, at least for now, trapped in the past like a fly behind a windowpane, but still her insides went cold.

Tom left. Laurel went upstairs to comfort Tansy, who was sobbing in her room. Ivan muttered something about work and shut himself in the office. Rowan spent some time hunting for Womble, and found him, at last, hiding in the corner of the laundry, which was his safe place when he was frightened by storms or helicopters or fireworks. She tried to coax him out but he wouldn’t come. At last she gave up, made herself some toast as a long overdue lunch and took it to her room. But her stomach was churning and she didn’t feel like eating.

It was up to her – to her and Verity – to bring Ash home. Rowan trusted that Verity knew what she was doing. It was only herself she wasn’t sure of.



Rowan spent most of Sunday in her room, trying and failing to distract herself with homework, drawing and the internet. Dinner was toast, or cereal. Sunday was usually Ash's night to cook, and no one else had the heart or the energy to prepare a meal, or the appetite to eat it.

Rowan was already in bed when Verity texted: *It won't be tonight, I'm not ready yet*

She felt her whole body relax, softening into the mattress; but she still lay awake for a long time, wondering where Verity's magic would send her, when the time came. As she lay there, twisting the silver ring round her finger, she seemed to hear all the small noises of the house more clearly than ever before: the creaks and groans, the muffled rustles and thumps. They seemed like friendly sounds, as if the house were trying to comfort her; as if they were both waiting for something.

Rowan woke early on Monday, and even though she hadn't been expecting anything to happen, it was still a relief to open her eyes to her own familiar bedroom. She crept upstairs, hoping against hope that Ash had returned on her own, but her sister's bedroom was still empty, with its sad streaks of green splashed across the otherwise blank white walls.

'Maybe she's run away to Sydney,' said Tansy, as she and Rowan walked to the bus stop. 'Or maybe she's gone to Croatia.'

‘Why would she go to Croatia?’

Tansy gave her a scornful look. ‘Because Dad’s family is from Croatia?’

‘I know that. I meant, why would Ash go there?’

Tansy shrugged. ‘I dunno, to explore her Markovic ancestors or whatever.’

‘I don’t think Ash has gone to Croatia.’

‘Why not? Why don’t you ever take me seriously?’

Rowan wasn’t in the mood for this conversation. She sped up so she didn’t have to talk, and when they reached the bus stop, Rowan’s friends Neela and Jarvis were there. Tansy had a gang of friends waiting for her, too. Why was it so easy for Tansy to make friends? It had taken Rowan a whole year to find Neela and Jarvis, but Tansy had only just started high school and she’d already gathered a whole tribe.

The day passed like a weird anxious dream. Neela waved a hand in front of Rowan’s face. ‘Hello? Why are you such a space cadet today?’

‘What? I dunno.’ For some reason she didn’t want to talk about Ash to Jarvis and Neela, but her thoughts kept swinging back to her sister like a compass needle toward north. She didn’t take a single note all day, just doodled in her sketchbook.

‘You want to come and get a milkshake after school?’ offered Jarvis, but Rowan said she had too much homework to catch up on, which was true, especially after she’d wasted the whole school day.

When Rowan and Tansy arrived home, they found Verity letting herself into their house with her key, juggling a casserole dish in the crook of her arm. ‘Quick, one of you take this before I drop it.’

‘Oh, yum, is it that chickpea thing?’ Tansy took the dish and peeked under the lid.

‘No, it’s lasagne. I didn’t have time for the chickpeas. Rowan, there’s a tin of biscuits in my bag.’

Rowan whispered, 'How did you have time to cook? I thought you were busy with ... you-know-what.'

Verity shook her head. 'I bought these from Dusty Bells. No home cooking tonight, I'm afraid.'

Tansy didn't care; she took two yo yo biscuits to her room to start on her homework.

Verity said to Rowan, 'Your sister is a popular girl. Everyone at Dusty Bells is worried about her.'

'Oh,' said Rowan. 'So—?'

Verity shook her head. 'Not ready yet. Still have to find a few things.'

'Okay.' Rowan traced the knots and whorls of the wooden tabletop with one finger. She wanted to ask, *do you promise Ash will be all right?* But before she could speak the words, the roller door to the alleyway began to grind upwards, and Laurel's little car nosed into the backyard.

When Laurel saw Verity, her face crumpled. Verity opened her arms for a hug; behind Laurel's back, she shooed Rowan briskly away down the hallway to her own room. Rowan lurked inside the open doorway, unashamedly eavesdropping.

'Frieda sent me home from the shop early. I was good for nothing all day – she thinks the same as you do, that Ash will come back when she's ready and there's nothing to worry about – oh, Verity, you shouldn't have, but thank you! So you're staying for dinner? I could kill a glass of wine. There's a bottle in here somewhere ... It's so unlike her. You know she's always been so good about that kind of thing, telling us when she'd be late. She says, *I know you're a worry worm, Mum ...*'

Laurel's voice was suddenly muffled, and Rowan heard Verity murmur encouragingly, and then Laurel blew her nose. 'Okay, I'm fine, honestly ... Is it too early for wine?'

'Yes,' said Verity firmly. 'I'll put the kettle on. I'm sure Ash is safe. She's much more careful than you were at nineteen. She'll be staying with a friend, someone crying on her shoulder.'

‘Of course. You’re so sensible. What would I do without you?’ Laurel hiccuped, and Rowan eased her bedroom door closed. At least her mother would be in safe hands for a while. Mechanically she sat down at her desk and opened her laptop, but she couldn’t focus any better than she had all day.

Rowan pulled her sketchbook toward her. She doodled aimlessly for a while: a portrait of Womble, a drawing of the headless dummies in Steph’s bedroom, dressed in all their finery. At last she took off the blue-glass ring and spun it on the page. Could she feel a tingle of magic? What if Verity popped in to say, *I was kidding before, tonight’s the night?*

A tap on her door made her jump. Just as she’d imagined, Verity’s head poked through the doorway.

‘Hello. What’s that you’re working on?’

‘Nothing.’ Rowan hastily flipped the sketchbook shut and snatched up the ring.

‘Don’t lose that, will you?’ Verity came into the room and closed the door behind her. ‘Preparations are taking longer than I expected. Won’t be ready tonight, probably not tomorrow either. Maybe the night after, if I can find everything I’m looking for.’

Rowan couldn’t suppress a groan. ‘Why is it taking so long?’

‘I’m working as fast as I can,’ snapped Verity. ‘You’ll just have to be patient. And I had to calm down your mother.’

‘We can look after her.’

For a moment they glared fiercely at each other, then Rowan dropped her eyes to her desktop. She mumbled, ‘I just wish I could *do* something.’

‘Your time will come soon enough,’ said Verity wryly. She reached out to ruffle Rowan’s hair. ‘There are preparations I must make alone. I know it’s hard to wait. I’m sorry.’

‘What if – what if I can’t do it?’

‘I wouldn’t have asked you to help me if I didn’t think you were capable.’

Rowan nodded, and tried to look brave and strong. But inside, she didn't believe it at all. She slid the ring back onto her finger, to wait until Verity gave her the word. The silver ring tingled, to let her know that it was ready for anything, even if Rowan wasn't.



Verity had gone home, leaving them with the lasagne and the yo yos, and everyone had scattered to their rooms after dinner, which seemed to be the new normal in their house now: Tansy upstairs, Rowan downstairs, Laurel at her sewing table, Ivan in the office, making phone calls to the Croatian relatives interstate in case Ash had turned up there. Restless Womble wandered up and down the stairs. He flopped under Rowan's desk with a heavy sigh, but he didn't stay there long. He was happiest when his whole pack was together, preferably in the same room.

When the doorbell shrilled, Rowan jumped up automatically, thinking perhaps Verity had left something behind. But when she opened the door, two police officers were standing on the porch. One had a moustache, but he didn't seem to be used to it yet; he kept touching it as if to make sure it hadn't fallen off. The other was an older woman, reassuringly broad and solid, like a firm armchair.

'Hello, love,' she said. 'Mum or Dad home?'

Even though Rowan knew that Ash was safe in 1999, and the police couldn't possibly be here to tell them that her sister was in hospital or had been arrested or run over or anything like that, she couldn't help her heart thumping like a drum and her palms turning slippery with sweat. She stepped back to let them inside and yelled, 'Dad! Mum!'

Ivan had already come out of the office. His face was grey. The woman officer said quickly, 'We don't have any news for you, good or bad, I'm afraid.'

'Then – excuse me for asking – but what are you doing here?'

'Ash Markovic is your daughter, yes? She's been reported missing. So we need to speak to the family. Thought we'd have a better chance of finding you all at home this time of the evening.'

'Who's reported Ash missing?' demanded Ivan.

The moustached officer flipped his notepad. 'Thomas Cavarra. The boyfriend.'

Ivan's face was flushed. 'He had no right to do that. That should have been our decision.'

'Well, it's done now,' said the woman cheerfully – too cheerfully, Rowan thought, considering the situation. 'May we come in?'

In a few moments they were all gathered in the big room. The woman officer ('Call me Wendy') settled in the armchair, with the young officer behind her, perched on the ottoman, balancing a tablet on his knees. Ivan and Laurel and Tansy were facing them, squashed on the couch, Womble protesting in Tansy's lap. Rowan sat on the arm of the couch. Ivan and Laurel groped for each other's hands.

'Just a few questions,' said Senior Constable Wendy. 'So your daughter – Ashley?'

'Just Ash,' whispered Laurel.

'We were told she's been gone since Saturday, is that right? Who saw her last?'

'Rowan did,' said Ivan. Everyone swivelled to look at her.

'You're Rowan? So where was that? What time?'

'Saturday ... afternoon,' said Rowan. 'I don't know what time exactly. It was here. We were painting her bedroom.'

‘So she said she was going out, did she? Got a phone call or a text or something? How did it happen?’

‘Um ...’ Rowan felt her face glowing guilty pink. ‘I can’t remember really. We were – we were having a break from painting. We were in different parts of the house. And then I went to look for her and I couldn’t find her, so I guess I just assumed she must have gone out. And then I fell asleep on my bed and then everyone came home and Ash was – she wasn’t here.’

Rowan stopped, and stared at the rug. She felt as if she must have a neon sign on her forehead flashing *LIAR!*

When she glanced up, Wendy was watching her thoughtfully. ‘Okay,’ she said at last. ‘Does Ash keep a diary?’

‘No,’ said Laurel, just as Rowan and Tansy said, ‘Yes,’ then both, separately, wished they hadn’t.

Wendy nodded. ‘Mind if we take a look at the bedroom?’

‘Of course,’ said Laurel, at the same moment Ivan was saying, ‘I’m not sure—’

They looked at each other. Tansy said, into Womble’s neck, ‘Ash would hate that.’

‘I understand,’ said Wendy. ‘But this is to help your sister, yeah?’ She gave a slight nod to the moustached officer, and murmured, ‘Hairbrush, too. For DNA.’

Laurel gasped. Ivan said sharply, ‘DNA?’

‘Just in case, just in case. I can ninety-nine per cent guarantee we won’t need it,’ said Wendy soothingly, taking charge of the tablet as the younger officer tramped up the stairs in his heavy boots. ‘Okay! Let’s talk family.’

Rowan saw her parents exchange a swift look. Laurel’s hand tightened in Ivan’s. Ivan said warily, ‘Okay.’

‘Any other siblings?’

‘Just these two.’

‘And what about your extended family? They live locally?’

‘All in New South Wales. My brother lives in Sydney, my mother’s in Newcastle. I have some cousins in Adelaide, but Ash doesn’t know them. All my other relatives are in Croatia,’ said Ivan.

‘That was my idea!’ said Tansy. ‘I told you, Rowan! I said Ash might have gone to Sydney. Or Croatia.’

‘Is that right?’ Wendy typed a note on the tablet.

Ivan said, ‘I’ve already contacted them. They’ll call us if they hear from her. Obviously.’

‘You mind if I grab some contact details, just in case?’

Unwillingly Ivan dragged his phone from his pocket and read out some numbers and addresses.

‘Great, thank you.’

They could hear Constable Moustache overhead, shifting furniture around. Laurel half-stood up. ‘I might give him a hand—’

‘He’s okay,’ said Senior Constable Wendy. ‘Sit down – Lauren, is it? What about your folks, any chance Ash might have gone to them?’

Laurel sat.

Ivan said, ‘Laurel isn’t close to her family. Ash wouldn’t even know where to find them.’

Wendy’s eyebrows rose and she made a silent note. ‘Okay. Any particular reason?’

‘No,’ Laurel whispered. ‘We’re just not close.’ Her foot jiggled; Rowan saw her make an effort to keep it still.

Ivan said, ‘Is this relevant?’

‘Everything’s relevant at this stage,’ said Wendy. ‘Till it isn’t. Of course, it would be better all round if your Ash has run off to visit her cousin or her aunty or whatever – that’s the happy ending, right?’

‘But she’s coming home,’ said Laurel, with a nervous laugh. ‘She’s staying with friends for a couple of nights. Someone’s

probably having a love drama. You know what it's like at that age – Ash will be helping out, giving support. She'll be home soon. I know it.'

There was a brief silence. Ivan said, 'I'm sure you're right, love.'

'What friends?' said Rowan. 'She hangs out with Sophie and Mia at uni, but they're not that close. Ash doesn't have friends like that. You might have, but she doesn't.'

'Of course she does!' cried Laurel. 'Everyone does!'

'Not Ash,' muttered Rowan.

'Hmm.' Wendy made another note on her tablet.

Constable Moustache trudged down the stairs. 'I found the diary.'

'The boyfriend said she left her phone behind,' said Wendy. 'That suggests she was in a hurry. Is she a forgetful kind of girl?'

'Yes, she is,' said Ivan eagerly. 'Always losing things.'

But Ash wasn't forgetful; not really. Rowan could feel the force of her father willing it to be true, shimmering off him like heat from a stove, just like Laurel was willing Ash to be comforting the best friend she didn't have.

'Or she had another phone,' said Constable Moustache. 'That would suggest she had something to hide. Secrets.'

'Ash doesn't have any secrets!' said Laurel. 'We're very close, we always have been. She tells me everything!'

Wendy said, 'She didn't tell you that she keeps a diary.'

Laurel pressed her hands to her face, and said nothing.

After the police had finished their questions and gone away, taking Ash's diary and her phone and her hairbrush with them in sealed plastic bags (Ash was going to be so furious when she came home, thought Rowan), Tansy crept into Rowan's room and threw herself onto the bed.

‘Ro, it is weird about Mum’s family, isn’t it? I mean, other people don’t just not see a whole half of their family for no reason.’

‘Maybe there is a reason,’ said Rowan. They were keeping their voices low, though Laurel’s sewing machine was clattering wildly overhead and there was no way she could have heard them.

‘Didn’t Mum say they were all dead? Remember when you had to do that family tree stuff in primary school, and Mum freaked out about it?’

Rowan did remember. By the time Tansy’s turn had arrived, Ivan had been ready to take Tansy aside and bombard her with so many relatives on the Croatian side, so many stories about wars and feuds and orphans and faithful dogs performing implausibly valiant deeds, she hadn’t even had a chance to ask Laurel about her ancestors.

Rowan said, ‘Mum did tell us about her family being named after trees. Her mother being called Hazel and her grandmother called Myrtle. That’s why we’re named after trees, too.’

‘I’m not. I’m a flower.’

‘I think Mum ran out of trees.’

‘Lucky she didn’t call me Gum. Or Lemon.’

‘Or Wattle. Wattle we do with her?’

‘She could have called me Olive.’

‘I don’t think she thought of Olive.’

‘I’m glad she didn’t. I like my name. I’m glad I’m not a tree, it makes me more special.’ Tansy slid off the bed. ‘See ya.’

Rolling her eyes, Rowan opened her laptop to try that English presentation one more time. But the light from her desk lamp kept glinting on the blue and silver ring, and she couldn’t concentrate.



Tuesday was a long, miserable day for everyone. Laurel said, ‘My nerves are frayed,’ and Rowan thought that was a good description, as if they were all unravelling at the edges. Rowan jumped at every notification on her phone, waiting for Verity to say *go*. Ivan was uncharacteristically short-tempered, Laurel wandered around the house with red eyes, Tansy complained about everything. Womble was uptight, exploding into shrill barks every time a car drove past or a bird landed in the yard, and even Tansy almost became cross with him.

Once Rowan dreamed that Verity had brought Ash home, and Rowan opened Verity’s faded blue door and Ash was there, glowing gold and laughing, and when she woke up and realised it wasn’t true, she rolled over and cried into her pillow.

On Wednesday, Verity did at last send Rowan a text. *Come to the studio asap, I need your help*

The text had been sent in the morning, but Rowan didn’t see it until after school, when students were allowed to retrieve their phones from their lockers. Hastily Rowan typed: *sorry didn’t see this I’m at school*

Come now then was the brusque reply.

At the bus stop, Rowan grabbed her younger sister. ‘Tansy! Tell Mum I’m going over to Verity’s.’

Tansy said, ‘What for?’

‘She wants me to help her with something.’

‘I want to come too!’

‘We’re going to the studio,’ warned Rowan, and Tansy’s shoulders drooped.

‘Oh. Okay. Never mind then.’

Rowan hurried through the back streets, past warehouse conversions and new apartment complexes, toward the last remaining block of industrial buildings that held Verity’s workshop. Once Ivan had asked, ‘What will you do when the developers buy that block too?’

Verity smiled. ‘That will never happen.’

At the time, Rowan had thought that was just Verity’s positive thinking; but now she wondered if there was some kind of magic at work. She banged her fist on the rusty door to the studio; if the furnace was blasting, it was hard for Verity to hear. But the door flew open almost at once, to reveal a dishevelled, cobwebby Verity. ‘Finally! What took you so long?’

‘I was at school,’ Rowan reminded her, stepping inside. The furnace was unlit, Verity’s glass-blowing tools neatly arranged in their places. Instead, big torches were trained on the piles of – not *junk*, Rowan corrected herself, they were Verity’s possessions. Clearly Verity had been searching for something, because the usually neat stacks of boxes, furniture, rag bags and bric-a-brac were scattered and flung aside.

‘Wow,’ said Rowan. ‘This place is a *mess*.’

‘I asked you here to help me, not for your unnecessary commentary,’ snapped Verity. ‘I’m looking for a trunk. You can start in that corner.’

Obediently Rowan stepped over a pair of snowshoes, a broken coffee table and a box of yellowing paperbacks to get to the far side of the studio, which was relatively undisturbed. ‘What does it look like?’

‘Brown tin, travel stickers.’ Verity was burrowing energetically into a tangle of cardboard tubes and stacks of

newspapers tied with string.

Rowan dragged aside a stained armchair with its stuffing spilling out. ‘Have you been looking for the trunk all this time?’

‘Of course not! I’ve been *extremely* busy.’ Verity threw a ragged blanket behind her.

Rowan wished she’d worn gloves. And a dust mask. After a few minutes she asked, ‘Is this it?’

Verity spun round, knocking her head on a hatstand, and gave Rowan a withering glance. ‘That’s an attaché case, not a trunk.’

‘It’s got stickers on it,’ muttered Rowan, and she sneezed violently. ‘How was I supposed to know?’

They searched on fruitlessly until Rowan had to pause for a rest. She said, ‘Verity, did you bring any food?’

‘No time to eat.’ Verity dumped a stack of ancient photo albums onto an old sofa.

Rowan sighed, and turned back to her corner. She was pushing her hair back from her hot face when she felt a strange fizzing sensation on her hand. She stood stock still for a moment, concentrating. It was the blue-glass ring (they weren’t supposed to wear jewellery to school, but no one had seemed to notice it), tingling on her finger. Slowly Rowan moved toward the pile of junk (yes, sorry, Verity, most of it *was* junk) and the tingling intensified. Warmer, colder ... Rowan made a fist and slowly swung her hand back and forth, letting the ring guide her, until at last she spotted it: a hard tin corner of *something*, almost buried under a pile of squishy vinyl suitcases. Without the ring’s help, she never would have noticed it.

‘Verity!’

Verity looked where Rowan was pointing, and ran over to lend a hand. ‘Good girl!’ Together they tugged and shoved until the tin trunk lay in the middle of the floor. Verity grabbed a pair of metal shears, knocked the bolt free and swung back the lid.

‘It’s just a heap of old clothes!’ Rowan was disappointed; she’d been expecting a jumble of magic-working tools at the very least.

‘*My old clothes,*’ said Verity reprovingly. ‘Exactly what we need.’ She rummaged among the frocks and skirts and hats, muttering to herself, and at last pulled out a stretched and discoloured T-shirt. Perhaps it had once been red but it was now a faded pink, and it bore the women’s symbol, the circle with the cross under it, and a fist punching up through the centre.

‘There!’ Verity thrust the T-shirt into Rowan’s hands. ‘Wear that to bed tonight.’

Rowan turned it over gingerly in her hands. ‘Do I have to? Can I wash it first?’

Verity drew herself up and her eyes flashed. ‘It’s perfectly clean. And we can’t waste any more time. Tonight, please.’

Rowan shook out the T-shirt and held it up against herself. If it had been the original red she might have felt more enthusiastic, but pink had never been her favourite colour. Doubtfully she said, ‘Okay, I guess. But why?’

Verity had turned back to the trunk and was busy delving through its contents, setting some garments aside, tossing some over her shoulder and holding others up to the light. She didn’t pause as she answered Rowan. ‘Firstly, it will help to take you to the right time. Secondly, it will assist with your disguise.’

‘Disguise!’ Rowan was alarmed. ‘Do I have to pretend to be someone else?’ Wildly she pictured herself in a fake moustache and a blonde wig.

‘No, no, the magic will take care of all that. But the people you encounter will see a familiar face when they look at you, someone they already know, someone who belongs there. That will prevent any awkward questions about who you are, et cetera. Nothing to worry about.’

‘So I’m going to swap places with someone from that time?’ Rowan’s alarm was increasing every moment.

‘Good Lord, no! Have someone from fifty years ago wandering around in our time, with no idea what’s going on? That would be a recipe for disaster!’

‘But if they’re still around? What if I bump into them?’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Verity briskly. ‘All taken care of.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ said Rowan; but she wasn’t convinced.



As Rowan walked home, the faded T-shirt stuffed into her schoolbag, she was thinking, *maybe I should do something to cheer up Mum. I could cook dinner or do some washing or something...*

As she neared their house, her eye was caught by the glorious roses in grumpy George's garden. Deep velvety red, blush pink edged with gold, soft buttery yellow – they seemed to glow as they tumbled over the low fence. A bunch of those roses would light up a room, they would make her mother smile.

Without stopping to think, Rowan seized one of the deep crimson roses and tried to snap the stem. Laurel had always told them that it was perfectly legal to pick fruit or flowers that dangled over the fenceline. Unfortunately the rose stem was tougher and thornier than Rowan had expected. If only she had a pair of scissors – no, wait, she *did* have scissors, in her pencil case—

‘Hey!’

Rowan jumped. A gnarled brown hand was gripping her arm, and grumpy George was glaring at her with fierce eyes.

‘What are you doing?’ he demanded.

‘I was just – just—’ stammered Rowan.

Old George gave her arm a shake. His fingers dug into her flesh. ‘You steal my roses?’

Rowan gaped at him.

‘Hah! You a thief, hey?’

‘No – I’m not! My mum always says ... if they’re over the fence, it’s okay to take them.’ Laurel’s familiar defence flew out of her mouth.

‘Hah! Your mum a thief too? Thief family? She send you here, steal my roses?’

‘No!’ To her horror, Rowan felt the sting of tears in her eyes. ‘Mum doesn’t know anything about it. You can ask her – I live just there, in the house with the red door—’

‘Oh, I know your house. Your house with the dog barking all day, all night. Okay, sure, we ask your mum, we ask her right now.’

Still gripping Rowan’s arm, he emerged through his gate and out onto the narrow footpath beside her, and marched her toward home. Rowan felt as if she were trapped in a nightmare. As if she didn’t have enough to worry about already!

George rang the doorbell, then used the knocker just to make sure he was heard. ‘Your house, your mum, okay?’ he muttered. ‘Hah! Nobody here, I reckon.’

‘I’ve got a key,’ said Rowan. Maybe she could wrench her arm free – break away, make a run for it, slam the door in his face—

But it seemed like George could read her mind: he tightened his grasp on her arm.

‘Someone’s coming!’ cried Rowan thankfully. Footsteps sounded in the long hallway.

Laurel opened the door. Her hopeful expression punched Rowan in the heart; then her mother’s face fell when she saw it wasn’t Ash, and she stood looking from Rowan to grumpy old George and back in confusion. Womble peered out from behind Laurel’s ankles, wuffing anxiously.

‘This your mum?’ George shook Rowan’s elbow. ‘This your daughter? This your thief girl, hey?’

‘It’s a mistake,’ whispered Rowan.

‘She steal my wife roses!’ roared George. ‘Look!’

Rowan was still clutching the broken red rose in her fist.

Laurel said, ‘Rowan?’

‘I only wanted the ones hanging over the fence ... I thought they might cheer you up.’

‘She thief girl! She take my Eleni roses! I call police right now!’

Rowan managed to wriggle free and darted under Laurel’s arm, breathless.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Laurel to George. ‘But I’m sure Rowan didn’t mean any harm.’

‘She take my damn roses!’

‘I only got one rose,’ said Rowan.

Laurel held up a placating hand. ‘She shouldn’t have done that, obviously. She’s very sorry. You’re sorry, right?’

‘Yes, I’m very sorry.’ Rowan added under her breath, ‘I’m sorry about giving you something else to worry about.’

Laurel clung to the doorframe. ‘I apologise, George, but our family is having a rough week.’

‘I thought Mum would like them,’ muttered Rowan. ‘They’re such beautiful roses.’

George’s scowl softened slightly. ‘Beautiful roses, yes.’ The scowl tightened up again. ‘But she not steal them!’

‘I *said* sorry—’ began Rowan, who was feeling that this conversation had lasted long enough. Laurel squeezed her shoulder and Rowan fell quiet.

Laurel said, ‘I’m sure if there’s anything Rowan can do to make it up to you, she’d be happy to do it. Maybe she could wash your windows? Or walk your dog?’

‘I got no dog.’ George pointed at Womble. ‘Not like this one. I hear him, night time, day time too.’

‘He only barks when he’s lonely,’ said Rowan. ‘Or when he sees a cat. Or a possum. Or when he’s upset ...’

Laurel shot her a *shut up* look. ‘There must be something Rowan could do, some kind of job? Go to the shops for you? Fork your compost? With those gorgeous roses, you must have a compost bin.’

‘Huh,’ said George grudgingly. ‘Yes, I got compost. No need her to fork it. I can do it. But—’ He raised one finger. ‘Maybe she can help digging. My back not so good. Eighty-five last birthday!’

‘Wow!’ said Laurel. ‘You look amazingly healthy for eighty-five. Fit as a fleabag.’

‘Grow all my own vegetable, eat my own garden, okay?’ George puffed out his chest. ‘Tomato, zucchini, broccoli, lettuce, basil, everything.’

‘That’s incredible. Good on you,’ said Laurel. ‘So I’ll send Rowan over on the weekend?’

George nodded slowly. ‘Okay.’ He backed off the porch and hobbled away, less like a furious avenger and more like a bent old man. ‘Okay, I see you Saturday morning, thief girl.’

As soon as he was out of sight, Rowan burst out, ‘*Mum!* Did you *have* to?’

‘He’s happy now, isn’t he?’

‘But I didn’t do anything wrong! I only got one crappy rose, and it was *way* over the fence—’

‘Yes, well, I’m not a thousand per cent sure that is actually the law. Or maybe it only applies to back fences? Where the owner can’t see you? Or maybe that’s just being, I don’t know, *sensible?*’

‘I was doing it for you, to cheer you up,’ muttered Rowan.

‘That’s very sweet, Roey, but why do you think I need cheering up?’

Rowan stared. 'Because of Ash. Ash going missing?'

'Oh! Yes, of course, Ash ...' Laurel pulled Rowan close and kissed the side of her head. 'Bless you, angel, and thank you. But next time, maybe you could buy some flowers from a shop.'



Wednesday night was half-price pizza night. Rowan thought back to last Wednesday, when Ash was preparing to paint her room, arguing about colours with Laurel, waving her slice of margherita around; Tansy secretly feeding scraps of crust to Womble under the table; Ivan shaking chilli flakes over his half of the veggie galore; Rowan grabbing the last slice of the seafood special that had a prawn on it before Laurel noticed. It seemed like much longer than a week ago. It felt like half a lifetime.

Proper dinners had stopped completely, except for the night when Verity had brought round the lasagne. People were making themselves toast or instant noodles if they could be bothered, and taking food to their rooms. So when Tom knocked at the door carrying a pile of pizza boxes, nobody quite knew what to say.

‘I brought dinner,’ he said.

‘Oh, Tom. You shouldn’t have.’ Laurel hastily switched off the kettle and hid the soup packet in the cutlery drawer.

‘Tom!’ Ivan stopped halfway down the stairs. ‘I didn’t know you were coming over.’

‘Pizza! Yum! Finally, a responsible adult has decided to feed us.’ Tansy gazed reproachfully at her parents.

‘Sorry,’ said Tom. ‘Is this okay? Tell me to get lost, if you like. I mean, keep the pizza, obviously. If you want it.’

‘Well, you’re here now,’ said Ivan.

Laurel pulled out some plates and she and Tansy helped themselves to pizza and sat down. But Ivan and Tom stayed standing.

‘You sure it’s okay?’ said Tom. ‘It seems like it might not be okay.’

Ivan said, ‘Why did you go to the police?’

Tom looked uncomfortable. ‘The true crime podcasts all say the first twenty-four hours is the most important. And it didn’t seem like you guys were going to, you know, *do* anything.’

‘You could have spoken to us first. You should have talked to us.’

Tom ran his hand through his hair. ‘Yeah, I guess I panicked? But hey, looks like panicking was the right move ...’

‘Who’s panicking?’ said Laurel, with her mouth full. ‘I mean, she’s coming back.’

‘Is she? Have you heard from her?’ Tom looked from Laurel to Ivan and back again. ‘Do you know where she is? Where she’s been?’

‘I have an idea,’ said Ivan.

Rowan exclaimed, ‘Do you?’ For half a second she almost forgot that she and Verity were the only ones who did know what had really happened to Ash.

Ivan looked darkly at Tom. ‘I’d rather not talk specifics.’

‘If you know where Ash is, then I think I have a right to know too,’ said Tom.

‘And if you were going to tell the police about her, I think we had a right to know *that!*’ said Ivan instantly.

‘Stop it, both of you!’ pleaded Laurel. ‘Sit down, eat the pizza before it gets cold.’

‘Maybe we should be out there looking,’ muttered Tom. ‘Not sitting round here on our arses eating pizza.’

‘Hey, you brought the pizza, mate,’ said Ivan. ‘No one asked you to.’

Tansy said in dismay, ‘We don’t have to give it back, do we?’ She crammed another slice into her mouth before anyone could take it away from her.

‘Looking where, Tom?’ said Laurel. ‘All we can do is wait.’

‘If I’m right, we’ll know soon enough.’ Ivan threw a brief glance at Rowan and Tansy on the other side of the table.

Tansy mumbled through a mouthful of pizza, ‘Okay, Sherlock.’

Rowan smothered a giggle.

But Tom wasn’t laughing. ‘What is it? What are you talking about?’

Ivan said, ‘It’s – family business.’

‘But Tom’s family,’ said Tansy in a small voice.

Tom’s face was pale. He said, ‘You trust me, right? I know the police think I might have had something to do with Ash disappearing, even though I was the one who reported her missing. They’ve talked to me twice.’

Laurel said, ‘Oh, Tom, no, we’ve *never* thought – I didn’t know ... That’s ridiculous! What next? That’s as bad as saying *Ivan’s* responsible!’

Ivan said, ‘Tom’s a more likely suspect than me, surely.’

There was an awkward silence.

Tom said, ‘I should go.’

Rowan said, ‘But you haven’t had any pizza.’

Tom gave her a weird, strained smile. ‘Nah, I’d better go.’

Laurel said, ‘Tom, don’t go. Ivan, this is just silly.’

‘Ash wouldn’t have gone off like that unless she was upset about something,’ said Ivan. ‘Had you two been fighting? Was something wrong?’

‘Not *fighting*. I did tell her to stay at uni,’ said Tom. ‘Not to quit and work full-time at Dusty Bells instead—’

Ivan’s eyebrows shot up. ‘What? What are you talking about?’

Tom looked helplessly at Laurel. ‘She was having second thoughts about her course ...’

Ivan swung round. ‘Laurel, did you know about this?’

‘Well, she did grumble,’ faltered Laurel. ‘But I didn’t think it was serious ...’

Tansy burst out, ‘Stop it! All of you! Stop saying *Ash was*, *Ash was!*’ She snatched up Womble and ran for her room, thumping up the stairs and slamming her door.

‘I’m going.’ Tom shrugged on his jacket and retreated down the hallway. Rowan followed him; she had no desire to hear her parents arguing over Ash. At the front door, Tom turned back. ‘Ro – you’ll let me know if there’s any news, yeah?’

Rowan nodded. She couldn’t talk past the knot of tears clotting in her throat. She closed the front door gently behind Tom, and shut her bedroom door to cut off the sound of her parents’ angry voices. And what on earth was her father talking about? What was his idea for where Ash might have gone, this mysterious *family business*?

She threw herself down on the bed and lay there for a long time, turning the blue-glass and silver ring over and over, sliding it on and off her fingers, watching as the light faded from her windows, until at last her parents fell quiet.

Ping from her phone. Rowan reached over to pick it up.

The message was from Verity. *Don’t forget to wear the shirt tonight. Do NOT bring your phone. And remember I need a piece of glass.*

As if she’d forget! And as if she’d be silly enough to take a mobile phone into the past. Rowan felt a flash of annoyance. She texted back: *i know*

Good luck replied Verity.

thanks

Rowan waited for a long time, but there was no reply to that. At last, numbly, she wriggled into Verity's old T-shirt, leaving on the leggings she'd pulled on after school, and lay down on the bed. She'd never fall asleep, she knew, she was too tense; the horrible argument at dinner echoed through her mind; the silver ring was icy cold against her skin.

She closed her eyes.



Rowan woke to the sound of distant music. She blinked as the room seemed to lurch around her. It was her bedroom – the fireplace, the windows, the door were all in their usual places, the mouldings of the ceiling rose were the same. But everything else looked completely different. She had travelled through time again!

But when was it? Not 1999. Instead of Angie's double bed, or her own single, she was lying on the floor on a hard, lumpy futon, strewn with blankets and multicoloured cushions. Tie-dyed cloth hung at the windows, and colourful posters plastered the egg-yolk yellow walls. Worn brown carpet covered the floor, scattered with toys and children's clothing. Bunk beds were tucked into the corner behind the door. The wood of the mantelpiece and the coloured tiles that surrounded the fireplace had all been smothered in blue paint. Rowan was alone in the room.

She sat up, heart banging. She could hear the thud of bass from deeper inside the house, and a murmur of voices, with an occasional burst of laughter. Another party? But it was daylight, not night-time.

Rowan looked down at her outfit of dark blue leggings and Verity's stretched, faded T-shirt, suddenly doubtful about whether it was suitable for wearing in public. But Verity obviously thought it would be okay, and anyway, it was too late now.

Tentatively she peeked out of the bedroom door, which was also painted blue. There were people in the house. How was she going to find a piece of glass? She supposed it could be another bottle, or a drinking glass, though Verity had said she would prefer a piece of window. As if! Rowan couldn't picture herself smashing the window, not even for Verity. What if she was caught in the act? That would be much worse than being discovered picking roses by grumpy George. How could she ever explain herself? Rowan scanned the room behind her, but she couldn't see a single other item of glass, not even a mirror.

She sucked in a deep breath and ventured into the empty hallway. A long striped rug ran the length of the hall, bicycles were crowded near the front door, and an old-fashioned green rotary-dial telephone sat on a small table outside the room Rowan knew as the office.

More posters were pinned crookedly along the walls. *RIGHT WRONGS, WRITE YES for ABORIGINES!* proclaimed one, with an image of a dark-skinned toddler. A green and yellow poster showed an archer pulling back a bow, and the words *Munich Olympics 1972*. And there was one picture she recognised – Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, like the face of an old friend in a crowd.

As Rowan lingered in front of the posters, the 'office' door opened and a crazy-haired, bearded, dark-skinned young man in a T-shirt and flared jeans slouched out and began to climb the stairs. Rowan pressed herself against the wall, but he didn't notice her. The stairs were painted white, but the paint was chipped and flaking. Somewhere overhead, a baby wailed, and two little boys came charging down the stairs, scampered past Rowan and ran down the hallway to the front room – Rowan's bedroom, Angie's bedroom – it must be *their* bedroom in this time.

She recognised the living-room door with the panels of coloured glass from 1999 (now that would be perfect for Verity, if only there was some way of freeing it). When she gingerly pushed it open, a scene of chaos met her eyes. The room was full of people. Music blared from a small transistor radio, furniture was pushed back against the walls, sheets were

draped across the floor. People were kneeling to daub red, yellow and black paint onto the sheets and onto cardboard placards. Rowan had just managed to spell out the upside-down words *LAND RIGHTS NOW* when someone jumped up with a shriek and dragged her into the room.

‘Ro! You came!’

‘H-hi!’ stammered Rowan. This curly-haired, brown-skinned girl in the striped T-shirt and paint-spattered overalls certainly seemed to recognise her; Verity’s magic must be working.

A kind-looking woman with her hair tied up in a purple scarf asked, ‘Who’s this, Linda?’

‘My friend Ro.’ Linda swung Rowan’s hand. ‘She’s come to help, Aunty Bet.’

‘Okay, bub. Well, there’s plenty to do,’ said Aunty Bet, and Linda tugged Rowan across the room to work on her banner.

‘Check this out. It’s groovy, eh?’ said Linda proudly.

‘The Aboriginal flag?’ Rowan gazed down at the half-finished banner, half black, half red, with the yellow disc of the sun in the centre.

‘How do you already know about it?’ Linda seemed a little deflated. ‘It’s real new.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Rowan hastily. ‘Can I help paint?’

‘Go for it!’ Linda handed her a brush, and once again Rowan found herself slapping paint around.

‘We’ve gotta hurry,’ she heard someone say. ‘March starts in a couple of hours.’

Some people seemed excited, even silly, flicking paint and giggling; others were more sober and serious, talking in low voices about *tactics* and *strategy*. Rowan kept her head down, steadily filling in the bottom red section of the banner while Linda painted the black. Rowan’s heart gave a sudden skip as she noticed the sheets of newspaper spread on the floor to protect the carpet. Without looking too obvious, she managed

to edge one sheet out from under the banner so she could see the date: *Friday 14th July 1972*.

Verity had sent her back in time almost fifty years.

‘Hey, it’s done!’ Linda dropped her paintbrush and stood back to admire the effect. Rowan carefully added the final touches to her half of the banner, and grinned up at Linda.

‘Looks awesome!’

‘Awesome?’ A small, puzzled frown flitted across Linda’s face. ‘Yeah, cool bananas!’

‘Good job, bub.’ Bet ruffled Linda’s hair. ‘You’ll be right to carry it? You and your friend?’

Rowan felt shy. ‘I’m not sure if—’

Bet looked disappointed. ‘Don’t have to if you don’t want to, bub.’

‘Oh, no, I want to!’ said Rowan. ‘I just don’t want to stop anyone else carrying it, if they’d rather do it.’

‘I want to carry it with you,’ said Linda. ‘You’re my best friend, and you helped.’

‘Okay.’ Rowan felt her face grow warm. ‘Thanks. That’s really – groovy. And you’re in charge.’

‘I wish my mum was here,’ said Linda wistfully.

Bet put her arm around Linda’s shoulder and hugged her close. ‘I know, bub. Me too.’

Rowan stared down at the banner until Bet let Linda go.

‘Hey, Ro, I made you this.’ Abruptly Linda tugged a friendship bracelet from her arm, woven with red and yellow and black threads. ‘It’s the same colours as the flag. I was going to explain to you what it was. I didn’t realise you already knew all about it.’

‘I don’t know all about it. I mean, I’ve seen it around, obviously ...’

‘Really? Uncle Gary told me it was brand new, from Adelaide. Where did you see it?’

‘Um, I don’t remember ...’ Rowan slid the bracelet onto her arm. ‘Anyway, thanks, I love it.’

Luckily for her, before Linda could ask any more awkward questions, somebody shouted, ‘Everybody ready?’ and the whole room stirred into action, shouldering up their placards, picking up the still-damp banners, making last minute dashes to the toilet, searching for lost shoes and jackets.

Rowan panicked. ‘I don’t have any shoes!’

‘I’ll grab you a pair of ours. Wait here.’

Linda hared off upstairs, leaving Rowan to wish she’d planned ahead a little better. She should have worn her runners to bed, and her winter coat, or at least a hoodie. *I’ll know next time*, she thought.

Linda ran downstairs. ‘Shoes!’ She brandished a pair of scruffy sneakers in one hand. ‘And something warm.’ She held out a thick, hand-knitted jumper to Rowan. ‘You’ll freeze in just that T-shirt.’

‘Thank you.’ Again Rowan found herself floundering for an explanation. She was too slow for this time-travelling deal. Turned out the books had been no preparation at all! She pulled the jumper over her head and said feebly, ‘I was warm before.’

Linda laughed. Rowan jammed her feet into the shoes (they were a bit tight), and then they were picking up the banner and manoeuvring it through the doorway, down the hall, and out into the street. Rowan felt a slight pang as she left the comforting shelter of the house and the magical tremor of *die Schwäche*. *I’ll be back*, she promised silently, but there was no more time to think – she and Linda were caught up in the excited crowd on their way to the march, and Rowan was walking through her neighbourhood in 1972. Not just the house, but the whole world outside was different, and she couldn’t believe this was really happening.



‘What do we want?’

‘LAND RIGHTS!’

‘When do we want it?’

‘NOW!’

Rowan fell into step with Linda, marching down the centre of the street among the hundreds, maybe thousands of others, hoisting the banner high and proud against her shoulder. It was heavy, but in a good way; Rowan felt as if she was properly working, earning the exhilaration of the peaceful protest, the surge of the chanting voices that propelled them along like a vast wind behind and all around them. She caught Linda’s eye and the two girls grinned at each other as they yelled at the tops of their voices: ‘LAND RIGHTS! NOW!’

The cricket ground had seemed much smaller than in her own time as they passed it on the way into the city. The buildings looked smaller, the cars looked bigger, square-cornered and lower to the ground. The whole city seemed slower, less frantic, less crowded than Rowan was used to. All the trams were the old green and yellow open-sided rattlers that she’d only glimpsed occasionally before now.

‘What do we want?’

‘LAND RIGHTS!’

‘When do we want it?’

‘NOW!’

They had already marched all the way down the hill and along the main city street. Rowan felt grand and important, seeing the traffic halt for them, watching pedestrians pause and stare as they paraded past.

Then Rowan caught sight of a face in the crowd that made her heart jump into her mouth. It was Verity – Verity with long fair hair swinging down her back, a floppy purple hat, and big dark sunglasses; unmistakably Verity, marching and chanting with the rest of them.

Rowan jerked her head away, her face flaming. But that was silly; Verity in 1972 wouldn’t even know who she was. It wouldn’t matter if Verity saw her. Tentatively she peeked back, then craned her head in vain for a glimpse of the purple hat. But Verity was lost in the crowd.

Linda danced a few steps, jiggling the banner, and flashed Rowan an apologetic grin. ‘Sorry, Ro, you know I can’t help dancing!’

Thinking of Tansy, Rowan almost said, *just like my sister*. But she bit it back. What if Linda’s friend Ro didn’t have a sister? It would be so easy to make a mistake like that. Rowan was starting to worry about being so far away from the protective embrace of the house. And seeing Verity had reminded her that she hadn’t collected a piece of glass yet – the one job she’d been sent here to complete. What if the magic suddenly whisked her away and she materialised in the centre of the city in her own time, with a tram bearing down on her, and worst of all, empty-handed?

She and Linda were slowing down, gradually falling back as the banner seemingly grew heavier and the girls became more tired. Rowan stumbled. She would have liked to hand her pole to someone else, but no one looked likely to volunteer to take a turn; all of Linda’s family and friends had disappeared into the crowd, like Verity. Hers and Linda’s chanting dropped out of sync; their volume sank; they fell silent. For what seemed like a long time, they trudged along at the back of the march,

their banner drooping. Rowan was sweating inside her borrowed jumper, and her feet hurt.

Linda shrieked. 'It's ripping! Look out!'

Startled, Rowan stepped back, but that was the wrong direction. The gash in the banner split wider. Linda dropped her end and Rowan stood on the flag, and somehow they ended up tripping over each other while the banner tore in half.

Rowan wailed, 'Our beautiful flag!'

'Never mind, never mind,' Linda comforted her. 'Lots of people saw it – that's the main thing. Did you see the photographer? We might end up in the paper tomorrow, hey!'

'I'm so sorry!' Rowan was almost in tears.

'It's only an old sheet. Don't cry, Ro.'

But somehow it felt like more than an old sheet to Rowan. She was proud of that banner, proud of the flag, proud of the march and the chanting. It would be so flat for it all to end this way. Linda picked up the pieces and draped one half around her shoulders like a cape. Rowan gave her a watery smile. 'You look like a superhero.'

Linda struck a pose, and tied the other half around Rowan's shoulders. 'Hey, we match now, we're twins.'

'Sisters – super-sisters!'

They giggled. More cheerfully, Rowan said, 'What do we do now?'

'Everyone's meeting up somewhere, I think.'

'Could we call them?'

'I don't think they'd hear us.'

'I mean, on the phone—' Too late, Rowan realised her mistake. When were mobile phones invented? Sometime between her parents being born and when she was born, she guessed vaguely. But seeing the confused expression on Linda's face, she was betting that 1972 was too early.

‘Uh-oh,’ muttered Linda, and she stepped closer to Rowan. They were near Flinders Street railway station now – that looked pretty much the same, at least, though Federation Square on the opposite corner was missing, and a pair of big ugly brown buildings stood on the block where it should have been – where it *would* be, Rowan corrected herself. She said, ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Police! Come on!’

‘What?’

Linda knocked the banner pole from Rowan’s hand and dragged her across the road. A car horn blared, brakes squealed. Across the tram tracks they fled, paused, darted across another two lanes of traffic; but Linda was still running, and because she was running, Rowan was still running too.

Running away from the police felt weird. Ivan and Laurel had always taught Rowan to run *to* the police if she was in trouble, but clearly Linda had learned the opposite lesson. Her new friend seemed truly terrified.

They pelted along a city block, past the big church, past the crazy old theatre with the fancy turret (one of the few buildings Rowan recognised). Now they were holding hands, dodging between pedestrians, almost knocking over one lady with a pram, running so fast that Rowan’s lungs were bursting. At last, sobbing for breath, sobbing with fear, sobbing with hysterical laughter, they slowed down and dared to look behind them. Linda gasped, ‘They’re coming after us!’

‘Tram!’ cried Rowan, and pulled Linda into another stumbling run. Their tram – it had the same route number as in Rowan’s time – was clanking and clattering toward the next stop, and the girls were just in time to hurl themselves aboard through the open doorway.

Linda pulled Rowan toward the back of the tram, and motioned to her to scrunch down in her seat. She whispered, ‘We’ll jump off before the connie sees us.’

‘The connie?’

‘There she is.’ Linda nodded to the other end of the tram, where a conductor in a green jacket and cap, with a leather satchel round her neck, was chatting to passengers and handing a man a cardboard ticket and some coins in change.

Rowan felt a sudden, burning desire to buy a paper ticket to take home as a souvenir; but she didn’t have any money. Lucky, really; what if she’d handed over a coin dated from her own time, maybe a coin they didn’t even have yet, and that gave her away?

She whispered, ‘Linda, what do you think those police would have done to us?’

Linda shrugged. ‘They beat up my cuz Warren. Better to keep out of their way.’

‘Oh. Really?’

Linda gave her a sideways look. ‘Yes, really. Happens all the time.’

Suddenly tired, Rowan sat on the hard wooden bench, gazing at the scenery rattling past the windows, so weirdly familiar and yet so strange, until Linda jumped up and yanked at the cord and they leapt off the tram together.



It was early evening as the two girls made their way through the maze of narrow streets back toward the house.

‘You going home? Or coming back to our place?’ asked Linda casually.

‘Your place,’ said Rowan at once – too quickly? But she’d been terrified that Linda might not ask her back to the house, because what would she do then, cut off from *die Schwäche*? Would she sleep on the street, in the park? Try to sneak back into the house tomorrow to find a piece of glass for Verity?

But it was okay, she was saved. Linda gave her a sympathetic look and a squeeze of the hand. ‘Groovy.’

Rowan wondered then about Linda’s best friend, Ro – Rosemary? Robyn? Rochelle? – whose face she was borrowing. Was Ro’s home unhappy? Did she spend a lot of time with Linda and her family? Linda hadn’t seemed surprised that she wasn’t wearing shoes. Poor Ro ...

Rowan jumped as she almost collided with a group of people, a family, walking the other way along the narrow footpath. ‘Oh sorry!’

‘Hi, Maria!’ said Linda.

‘Linda, hi!’ The daughter of the family, a girl of about Rowan and Linda’s age, stopped to talk.

‘How’s school?’

Maria rolled her eyes. ‘You’re lucky, you don’t have nuns teaching you.’

‘You know Ro, don’t you?’

‘Sure,’ said Maria, and she gave Rowan a smile. So Verity’s magic disguise did extend to friends of friends ...

Maria and Linda chatted away about girls they both knew, while Rowan tried to look interested enough to be polite, but not so interested that they might expect her to join in.

Maria’s family had continued up the hill and Rowan snuck them a glance. There was a little brother, a smartly dressed mother with her dark hair in a smooth beehive style, and a father wearing a jaunty hat. The brother turned around to call out, ‘Hey, Maria! Come on!’

‘Hang on, Michael!’ Maria called back.

The parents turned too, realising for the first time that Maria had been left behind. ‘*Ela*, Maria!’ called the father imperiously, and the mother beckoned.

‘Gotta go,’ said Maria. ‘Dinner at Aunty Zoe’s. See ya!’ And she ran up the hill to join her family. Rowan gazed after her wistfully. Maybe when Ash had been rescued, her whole family would go out for dinner to celebrate. Or lunch at Dusty Bells, with Verity and Tom ...

That thought reminded her that Verity’s house was just along the street. The temptation to creep over and have a peep was almost overwhelming ... But Verity had told her to keep away. Although surely if she got into *real* trouble, she could ask Verity for help ... But it was too late anyway. They were outside Linda’s house and Linda was retrieving a key from under the doormat.

Inside, the house was eerily quiet. As Rowan stepped through the door, she felt a rush of warmth, as if the house were giving her a welcoming hug.

‘Looks like no one else is back yet.’ Linda replaced the key. ‘Maybe we’re the only ones here! You hungry?’

‘Starving!’ said Rowan. ‘Can I use your toilet?’

‘You know where it is.’ Linda waved her hand toward the staircase. ‘Ugh, what a mess.’ All the paints and sheets and cardboard offcuts still littered the living room, and Linda skipped her way across to the kitchen as Rowan ran up the stairs.

Rowan hadn’t seen inside the bathroom in 1999, and the 1972 version gave her a shock: salmon pink tiles! Salmon pink basin! A salmon pink bathtub with the shower above, not separate as it was in her time. A creeper was growing through the louvred window and twining around the rail that held up a colourful shower curtain. Rowan was tempted to poke around inside the cupboards and see what weird things lurked inside a 1970s bathroom cabinet, but she wanted to sneak a look in Ash’s bedroom, too ...

‘Ro?’ Linda was climbing up the stairs, carrying a plate of bread and butter. ‘Come out on the roof.’

The roof! Rowan was irrationally pleased to discover that the little TV room from 1999 was Linda’s bedroom in 1972, with a single bed tucked beneath the window and posters of some liquid-eyed boy peering through curtains of hair that Rowan guessed must be a pop star.

Linda slid the window open and climbed out. ‘Come on, it’ll be too cold out here soon.’

They sat with their backs against the wall beneath Linda’s window, ate the bread and butter, and gazed out across the rooftops and back gardens as the sky darkened and lights twinkled on in the dusk. Downstairs, Rowan could hear sounds of other people returning home – doors banging, voices.

Rowan let out a long breath. ‘You are so lucky. This is the best view. I wish I had a private balcony.’

‘It’s not always private! But yeah ... I’m gonna miss it.’

‘What do you mean? Where are you going?’

‘I’m gonna run away.’

‘What? Did I know about this?’

‘Nah. I just decided today.’

‘Is everything okay?’ Rowan felt a sudden rush of panic. Linda seemed to be so happy, with her big family and her cheerful grin. But if she was secretly miserable – Rowan felt a lurch inside like missing a step on the stairs.

‘Nah, I’m fine.’ (So *that* was a relief.) Linda bit into another slice of bread. ‘But I want to find my mum. I love my aunties and my nan, but you know. Sometimes I just want my mum.’

‘Oh.’ Rowan was wary of asking too many questions, unsure how much of this story Linda’s best friend should already know. ‘Do you know where she is?’

Linda shrugged. ‘Still in Adelaide. I’m gonna hitch there.’

‘Hitch?’

‘You know, hitchhike. Thumb a ride.’

‘With someone you don’t know?’

Linda laughed. ‘Der! If you get a ride with someone you know, that’s just a lift.’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ said Rowan, alarmed. ‘It’s not safe. What about serial killers?’

‘What’s that?’ Linda giggled. ‘Someone who squashes their rice bubbles?’

Rowan couldn’t help giggling too. ‘You’ve never heard of a serial killer?’

‘No!’

‘Well, anyway, promise me you won’t do it. Please? Don’t —’ Rowan hesitated. ‘Don’t *hitch*.’

‘How am I going to get to Adelaide then? I can’t afford the bus.’

Rowan was silent, thinking of all the things that Laurel and Ivan were imagining might have happened to a runaway Ash, or a kidnapped Ash, or worse. And those things might really happen to Linda, unless Rowan could help her find another way. Perhaps this was why Verity had sent her here, now, to this time, to help keep Linda safe?

Rowan said suddenly, 'Have you got anything you could sell?'

'What, lemonade?'

'Maybe ...'

They started to giggle again, then Linda shook her head. 'I can't sell anything from here, it all belongs to family, you know? Anyway, who'd buy it? It's not like I've got jewellery, gold rings or diamonds or anything like your ring.' She nodded shyly at Rowan's silver and blue-glass ring.

'Oh! This isn't worth anything,' said Rowan hastily. 'It's just a Christmas cracker ring.' She had a feeling Linda's friend Ro wouldn't be able to afford an expensive ring either.

'Well, it's pretty.' Linda eyed it wistfully.

Impulsively Rowan twisted the ring off her finger and held it out to Linda. 'Here, you should have it.'

'Oh, no, I can't take that!'

'Please – go on, I want you to have it.' Rowan meant it; Linda had made her a friendship bracelet, lent her shoes and a jumper, and Rowan wanted to make some generous gesture in return.

'Well, if you're really sure ... I wouldn't sell it, though.' Linda slid the ring onto her finger and admired it in the light. Suddenly she clutched at Rowan's arm. 'I know!' She jumped up and scrambled back through the window, and Rowan followed. It was starting to get cold on the roof.

Inside, Linda slammed down the window and rummaged beneath her bed. 'Look, I've got all these shells from the beach and stuff. Do you think we could make them into something we could sell? Fifty-fifty split,' Linda added quickly.

'Something like what?' said Rowan doubtfully.

'Some kind of jewellery, maybe? Necklaces or brooches or something?' Linda plumped onto her bed and tipped out the contents of the ice-cream container. Fan-shaped shells cascaded onto the blanket, along with odd lengths of ribbon,

sequins, a silk flower, pebbles, feathers and a chunk of yellow glass ...

Rowan's heart leapt. While Linda sorted through the shells, she picked up the yellow glass and weighed it in her hand. Trying to keep her voice neutral, she asked, 'Linda, where did this come from?'

Linda glanced up. 'Oh, that was from the lightshade in Roy's room that fell down and smashed that time, remember? Right on his bed. He was lucky he wasn't killed, Nan said.'

Rowan curled her hand over the piece of glass, carefully, in case of sharp edges, and tucked it under her thigh. This was it, this was what Verity needed; this was what she had to take home. She glanced quickly at Linda, but her friend hadn't noticed anything. Rowan was glad that she'd given Linda the blue-glass ring; it felt like a fair exchange.

Relieved, Rowan raked her fingers through the cool, clinking shells, sifting them in order of size, nesting them, turning them over. She hadn't played with shells for years; she didn't even bother picking them up from the beach now, she was too focussed on collecting sea glass for Verity. It was soothing. She spread them across the blanket, not really thinking, enjoying their cool white colour against the dark tartan. Idly she formed half a dozen shells into a circle. 'Look, it's a flower.'

Linda looked up. 'That's pretty – could we glue them together like that? That could be a brooch.'

'I don't know. The gaps between the shells are too big.' Rowan rearranged them in her cupped hand, overlapping the shells into a tighter flower-shape. 'Maybe like this?'

'Or upside down?' Linda jumped off the bed. 'Wait here, I'll get the glue.'

Rowan sat on the bed, staring vacantly out the window. The darkness outside reflected her image back to herself, a ghost girl in a shadowy mirror. She wrapped her hand around the chunk of yellow glass, careful not to squeeze too hard.

Suddenly she was incredibly tired. Her face split with a huge yawn as she slumped back against the wall, toeing off the too-tight shoes. She could hear the busy murmur of voices downstairs, pots and plates clinking and clattering, the sound of a meal being prepared.

Finding the glue was taking Linda a long time. Maybe *die Schwäche* had swallowed it. Did she have a hot glue gun? Had hot glue guns been invented yet? Rowan yawned again, and let her eyelids fall closed. The shells tipped from her lap onto the blanket. Before Linda came back into the room, Rowan was asleep.



Rowan opened her eyes with a start. Womble was licking her face, very carefully and thoroughly, paying loving attention to Rowan's nostrils, her ears and the corners of her mouth.

Screwing up her face, Rowan reared upright, fending Womble off. She'd been lying on the floor – the floor of Tansy's bedroom, in her own time. Her younger sister snored softly in the bed in the corner, one arm flung out from under her tangled pink doona. Crumpled tissues littered the rug around the bed; Tansy had cried herself to sleep.

Rowan scrambled to her feet, tripped over the half-flag she'd forgotten she was still wearing like a cape, untied it and slung it over her shoulder, juggling the precious lump of yellow glass in one hand. With the other arm, she scooped up Womble and backed out of the room. Womble whined and wriggled, trying to pick up the face-washing from where he'd been so rudely interrupted.

'No – no!' Rowan whispered. 'Yuk. I don't like it.' She deposited him at the top of the stairs and went into the bathroom. She was busting for the toilet. No wonder, she thought to herself; she hadn't been since 1972. Ha ha. As well as the flag, she was still wearing the woolly jumper Linda had lent her, and the friendship bracelet in the colours of the Aboriginal flag was still tied round her wrist. The piece of yellow glass rested on the edge of the basin, glowing like a shard of petrified honey.

How weird was it, she thought as she washed her hands, that she'd known Linda for less than a day, but she felt like as much of a friend as Jarvis or Neela.

It was early in the morning, and no one was up yet. But as Rowan came out of the bathroom (considerately not flushing, so she didn't wake up Tansy), she heard her parents' voices, muttering low and fierce behind their closed bedroom door. Rowan paused, tempted to listen in, but then she decided that she didn't want to know. Womble had waited for her outside the bathroom; his tail thumped hopefully as he gazed up at her. Lightly Rowan ran down the stairs with Womble at her heels.

Her phone was lying on her desk. Was it too early to text Verity? No, she decided, this was too important to wait.

are you up? i'm back

She attached a photo of the yellow glass.

Verity replied instantly. *Good. Can you bring it over?*

As Rowan sent back a thumbs-up, she was already half out the door.

A few minutes later she was wolfing down toast and jam at Verity's table while Verity held the yellow glass to the light. 'Yes, this should do.'

'It was from a light fitting,' said Rowan with her mouth full. 'So it's really *from* the house. I hope that's okay.'

'Very good. Chai? Or coffee?'

'Chai, please.' Rowan didn't really like coffee yet. 'Hey, Verity, do you remember much about the 1970s? I think I saw you, when we were protesting for land rights. Did you have a purple hat?'

'*Such* a fabulous hat. I used to use it as a fruit basket.' Verity set the coffee pot on the stove. 'The seventies were an interesting time. All kinds of ideas were changing, society was shaking up. Australia had held a vote a few years before you visited, to include Aboriginal people in the census for the first time ...'

'Right wrongs, vote yes!' exclaimed Rowan.

‘Yes, and about time, too. The Land Rights movement was taking off, to give First Nations people more control over their own country. Everyone felt very hopeful that change was coming at last.’

‘But things haven’t changed that much,’ said Rowan. ‘How depressing.’

Verity looked at her severely. ‘It’s no use just waiting for the world to improve. We need to fight for it.’

‘I know, I know. Are you okay, Verity? You look tired.’

‘Perfectly well, thank you. Drink your chai quickly. Don’t you need to get ready for school?’

Rowan groaned loudly and lowered her head to the table. ‘I can’t go to *school*. I’m *exhausted*.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Verity, examining the chunk of yellow glass with an expert eye. ‘What a pity.’

Rowan became aware that Verity was, very politely, waiting for her to leave. She hastily gulped down her chai, burning her mouth, and jumped up. ‘So you’ll let me know when you’re ready for me to go back in time again? Will it be tonight?’

‘No, not tonight. I won’t be ready.’

‘Oh. Okay.’ Secretly Rowan was relieved; she didn’t feel ready for another trip so soon, either. ‘Well, let me know.’

‘I will,’ said Verity briskly, and then Rowan found herself standing outside in the street, not quite sure how she’d arrived there.

As she walked home, she was conscious of the bare place on her finger where the blue and silver ring had been. Suddenly she remembered that Verity had said she would need the ring to make her magic ... But Rowan had given the ring to Linda.

Rowan stopped on the street, feeling sick. Maybe it didn’t matter, she argued with herself. Verity had said she needed four ‘pegs’ to stabilise the spell; or was it three? Surely she could make do without one of them.

Or maybe, Rowan told herself as she slowly began to walk back toward the house, if it was really important, *die Schwäche* would find a way to return the ring to her ... Either way, there wasn't much she could do about it now.

Back at home, she almost collided with Ivan at the foot of the stairs.

'Ro! What are you doing up so early?' He was carrying an overnight bag in his hand.

'Where are you going?' said Rowan.

Ivan blinked and ran a hand through his hair. 'Er ...' He collected himself. 'To look for your sister.'

'What? Where?'

'Geelong. I have a hunch ... I'll let you know if it works out.'

'How long will you be gone?' Rowan heard her voice rising into a squeak.

'I don't know yet. It depends on how soon I can find her.'

Rowan threw her arms around his waist. 'Don't go,' she said, the words muffled in his shirt.

'Ah, Roey ...' Ivan sighed. 'That's life. You have to go to school, I have to go to work ...'

'To work? But you said you were going to look for Ash.'

'What? Did I?'

'You said you were going to Geelong.'

'Geelong? Why would Ash go to Geelong? She doesn't know anyone in Geelong, does she?'

'So you're *not* going to Geelong?'

'No, I'm going to work.' Ivan ruffled Rowan's hair. 'Are you still asleep, Ro? Get with the program!'

'But – what's with the overnight bag?'

Ivan looked down at the bag as if he was surprised to see it there. 'This? I'm just taking this upstairs.'

‘O-kay,’ said Rowan. ‘So – you’re not worried about Ash, then?’

Ivan set down the bag, took Rowan by the shoulders and gazed into her eyes. ‘Listen to me. I don’t want you to worry about your sister. Ash is fine. She’s gone off somewhere, for her own reasons, and she’ll be back when she’s ready. I don’t want any of that doom and gloom talk in front of your mother, okay?’

Rowan gulped. Of course, she knew that Ash was perfectly safe; but she wasn’t sure how she felt about Ivan being so relaxed about it. Still there was no way to explain that to her father. She nodded.

Ivan folded her back into a hug. ‘Sorry, love. But there’s no reason to assume the worst, is there?’

‘I guess not.’ Rowan rubbed her cheek against his shirt.

‘Now, you’d better get ready for school. Time’s marching on!’ Ivan turned and strode back up the stairs, with Womble eager at his heels, ever hopeful for a walk.

Tansy came bounding down the stairs, heading for breakfast. ‘Is that a new jumper?’

‘What, this?’ Rowan looked down at Linda’s jumper. ‘Nah,’ she said vaguely. ‘This is really old.’



The rest of Thursday dragged slowly on. On Friday, Tom texted Rowan to check if there was any news. She felt terrible having to reply *no*; but it was true, nothing was happening. By Saturday morning, Rowan still hadn't heard from Verity. No one seemed to be talking about Ash anymore, and while Rowan was relieved not to have to discuss such an awkward subject, it made her uneasy that her family seemed to have – almost – stopped caring about her sister.

Ivan disappeared early to play golf. Womble followed him to the door, wagging optimistically, expecting his usual Saturday walk. When the door closed in his face, he lay down, nose to the crack, and whined softly.

'Poor Womble!' Tansy crooned. 'I'll take you, poor baby.'

Laurel looked up from where she was listlessly toying with her cereal. 'You have to go to school, Tansy.'

'Not today.'

Laurel blinked. 'No, that's right, it's dance class today ... And Rowan, don't forget, you're helping George with his gardening this morning.'

Rowan *had* forgotten all about that. 'Oh, *Mum!* Do I *have* to?'

'Yes, you do. You promised.' Laurel gazed blankly around the big room. 'I think I'm getting a headache. I'm going back

to bed.’

Slowly their mother hauled herself up the stairs.

‘So ...’ said Tansy. ‘Who’s taking me to dance?’

‘I don’t know. Can’t you catch the bus?’

‘Not by myself. I’ve never done it on my own.’

‘You catch the bus to school. Just stay on longer.’

‘That’s different – you come with me.’

‘I can’t today. I have to do this gardening thing, apparently.’

‘I know. I’ll ask Verity.’

‘No! Don’t bug Verity, she’s – she’s super busy at the moment.’

‘But Mum and Dad always say to ask Verity if they can’t help. And she can always say no. You call her for me.’ Tansy held out her phone with Womble-eyes.

Rowan shook her head. ‘No way.’ She wanted to say, *if I can travel back in time fifty years on my own, you can catch the bus to the next suburb*. But of course she couldn’t. As she headed back to her bedroom, almost tripping over Womble on the way, she heard Tansy saying in her sweetest voice, ‘Hi, Verity, it’s me ... What? Oh, *Ash*... No, no news yet. Hey, can you do me a favour? Please?’

Rowan, outraged, changed into gardening clothes – the same clothes she’d last worn a week ago to help Ash paint, the clothes she’d worn when she travelled to 1999 – and she pulled on Linda’s jumper over the top.

Standing nervously outside grumpy George’s, Rowan could hear his feet shuffling toward her from deep inside the house. When the front door opened, she couldn’t see him behind the thick security door, but somehow she sensed that he was looking her up and down. ‘You ready to work hard?’

‘Yes,’ said Rowan cautiously.

He gave a grudging sniff, and pushed the security door open.

‘Okay. You come in.’

Rowan had expected to be digging around the rosebushes in the narrow strip of garden bed along the front fence. But instead George led her right through to the back of the house. Unlike their own house, George’s had not been renovated – not for a long time, anyway. Like Verity’s, George’s house was a long row of rooms on a single level – two bedrooms, a living room, another tiny bedroom, then the bathroom, and finally, at the very back, a scrupulously clean kitchen with orange benchtops, brown cupboards and beige tiles patterned with yellow and orange flowers. A spotless plastic tablecloth hung over a small table with two white chairs. Rowan lingered, gazing around with respect. George’s house was much tidier, and cleaner, than theirs.

But George was standing at the back door, beckoning her impatiently outside. ‘You come see my garden.’

‘Oh, wow!’ said Rowan. Outside their own back door was a covered concrete yard where Laurel parked her car, with ivy-covered walls to give them something green to look at. But George’s backyard was a real garden.

Every millimetre of space had plants squeezed into it. There were fruit trees and vines and neat rows of vegetables in raised beds. There were flowering bushes and thick green clumps of herbs and languid tendrils winding around stakes and feathery-topped plants that Rowan didn’t recognise. She leaned weakly against the doorframe, overwhelmed. ‘Did you do all this?’

George snorted. ‘Who else?’ But he was clearly pleased. ‘Come, come.’

Ushering her through the thick green foliage, he took her to the back of the garden (Rowan couldn’t even see the fence) and showed her a raised vegetable bed that was empty of plants. In the midst of such lush profusion, the vacant soil looked sad and forlorn.

‘Needs compost mixed in.’ George pointed to a row of black compost bins near the side fence. ‘This one here, ready to go.’ He handed her a pair of gardening gloves and a bucket.

‘You bring compost to here. Dig him in.’ He showed her a garden fork. ‘Okay?’

‘Okay,’ said Rowan in relief. She’d been afraid he might ask her to tackle weeding, when she had no idea of the difference between a weed and a proper plant. But on second thoughts, she suspected no weed would dare to poke its head above the surface in George’s garden, on pain of instant death.

George lugged one bucket over to the veggie patch for her, then stood there, wincing and holding his back, while she turned over the soil with the garden fork. After a minute or two, he nodded and said, ‘Okay,’ then headed back inside the house, which was another relief to Rowan, who had an unfortunate tendency to freeze when teachers or classmates hovered over her. Once George was gone, she attacked the task with more gusto. The compost was dark and rich and moist as chocolate cake, and the soil in the veggie patch was loose and easy to fork through. She let her mind fill with the rhythm of the job, fork and dig and turn, so she didn’t have to think about Ash or Ivan or Laurel or Linda or time travel or anything but dirt and plants and bend and swing and dig. She got so hot that she took off Linda’s jumper and tied it round her waist.

It seemed like no time had passed before George appeared again. She straightened up, feeling a pleasant ache in her arms and the backs of her legs. ‘Finished!’

George stuck the fork in the soil and turned it over, surveying her work. ‘Okay. Good.’

Rowan climbed down from the raised bed. ‘George, what plants are these? I mean, I know they’re herbs. They’re herbs, right?’

George clucked his tongue. ‘You eat, you tell me.’ He plucked a broad leaf from one bushy plant and Rowan cautiously tasted it.

‘Parsley? No, wait – basil?’

‘Yes, basil. This one parsley. You know this one?’

‘I know *mint*,’ Rowan assured him. ‘Everyone knows mint. Like chewing gum.’

But she failed to guess rosemary, dill or fennel, or thyme, or oregano. George shook his head sorrowfully. ‘Kids today, hey. Don’t teach them nothing! You never cook with these?’

‘My sister Ash is the one who’s into cooking in our family,’ said Rowan. ‘I bet she’d know them all.’

‘You send her round to me. I give her plenty for cooking, okay?’

Rowan swallowed. ‘She’s – away, at the moment. But when she comes back, I will.’

‘You work hard, work good,’ said George. ‘You thirsty?’

In the super-neat kitchen, he poured Rowan a glass of raspberry cordial, and offered her a plate of chocolate wafers.

She had just bitten into the first one when she saw the photo on the wall. She almost choked on her biscuit and had to gulp at the cordial to wash down the crumbs.

‘You okay?’

‘Yes, I just – is that your family?’

George swivelled in his chair to look. ‘Hah! Old photo, that one. Long time ago.’

It was the young family that Rowan and Linda had met in the street in 1972: mother, father, little brother, big sister, Maria.

‘You all look very handsome,’ said Rowan. *Handsome* was one of Verity’s favourite compliments.

George was pleased. ‘My Eleni very beautiful. Maria look just like her. Me – hmph.’ He shrugged one shoulder. ‘Not so bad back then, eh? Now, not so good!’ He pushed back his chair. ‘You wait here.’

He returned with an armful of framed photographs, which he spread on the table. ‘You look. This one me and Eleni, our wedding day ... this one Maria wedding – look at that, her and Eleni, they look twins, right? This Maria first baby, first grandson ... The girls, too ... This one, she marry last year, too! So sad my Eleni not live to see that day.’

Rowan agreed that it was very sad, and admired the photos of Maria and her children. ‘What about your son? Are there any pictures of him grown-up?’

George’s face darkened. ‘You want more drink? More biscuit? No?’

He swept up the photographs and stomped off to put them away. Rowan felt sick with embarrassment. She knew she’d said something wrong – but what? Oh, no – the little brother hadn’t *died*, had he? She scanned the other photos on the kitchen wall, but she couldn’t spot anyone that might have been George’s son. George hadn’t mentioned his name, but Maria had called to him ... Mitchell? Mark? No, Michael, that was it.

Rowan rinsed out her glass and turned it upside down on the sink, which was something she never would have bothered to do at home, but George’s neatness was infectious. She washed the biscuit plate, too, and dried it with a tea towel, then she stood around awkwardly for a while. Was she supposed to wait for George to come back, or should she just go? What was taking him so long?

At last she set off down the long, dark hallway and bumped into George coming back to find her.

‘Here you go.’ He presented her with some thorny sticks, wrapped in a plastic bag. ‘For your mum, okay? Eleni’s roses.’

‘Oh, sweet, thank you.’ Clumsily Rowan took the cuttings, careful of the thorns, though she wasn’t sure what Laurel would do with them. ‘So ... when do you want me to come back and do more gardening?’

‘No, no.’ George waved his hand to dismiss her. ‘We even now. All good, okay?’

‘Okay.’ Rowan was surprised to feel a pang of disappointment.



When Rowan arrived home, the house was empty, except for Womble, who greeted her with ecstasy, probably thinking he'd been abandoned forever. Even Laurel seemed to have dragged herself out of bed and gone off somewhere. *Without telling me where!* thought Rowan virtuously. And her car was gone, too.

So Rowan had to sit on the floor and play with Womble until he was comforted, and then she had to wash her hands and change out of her dirty gardening gear, folding Linda's jumper carefully and stowing it in her cupboard. She was about to make herself some toast when the roller door groaned and her mum's car inched into the backyard.

Tansy and Laurel pulled armfuls of plastic bags from the back seat and the boot and staggered inside. Tansy dumped her load on the couch and fabric spilled from the bags.

Rowan said, 'What's all this?'

'A whole load of extra work is what it is,' puffed Laurel, dropping her burden on top of Tansy's. 'I've been conscribed to make the costumes for the concert. As if I didn't have enough on my platter!'

'Look, look, this one's going to be for my solo.' Tansy drew out an arm's-length of white satiny material.

'Couldn't you tell Amber it's not a good time?' said Rowan to Laurel.

‘Careful, Tansy, don’t get it dirty. That stuff will mark if you breathe on it – I don’t think it’s washable, either. Tansy, put it back! What was that, Ro?’

‘I said, can’t you tell Amber it’s a bad time?’

Laurel turned to Rowan with a blank expression. ‘Is it? Why?’

Rowan gaped. ‘Because of Ash.’

‘Oh, yes, of course – but that’s nothing to worry about. She’ll be back soon.’ Laurel tipped the plastic bags upside down and began sorting through the lengths of cloth. ‘Look, Tansy, what about this yellow for the little ones? Nice and bright. And this blue for Olivia Wu?’

‘Blue, blue for Olivia Wu,’ sang Tansy, clasping the fabric to her chest and dancing round the room. Womble began to bark.

Rowan clapped her hands to her ears. ‘Mum – *Mum!*’

‘Tansy, put that back, and take Womble away. I can’t hear myself talk ... That’s better. What were you saying, Ro?’

Rowan leaned against the kitchen counter as Tansy and Womble thumped up the stairs. ‘Mum, can I hang something off the front railings?’

Laurel filled the kettle and flicked it on while she hunted for a teabag. ‘A *Welcome Home* banner for Ash? That’s a bit over the edge, isn’t it? She’s only been away for a week.’

Rowan felt like shaking her mother. She supposed it was a good thing that Laurel wasn’t fretting about Ash being missing, but at the same time it was somehow weird and upsetting that she didn’t seem at all worried about her oldest daughter. ‘No, not that ... I want to hang up an Aboriginal flag.’

‘Oh!’ Laurel blinked. ‘I’m not sure, Ro. That flag is copyright, for one thing. And it’ll look as if Indigenous people live here.’

‘They used to,’ said Rowan.

‘Well, yes, of course, hundreds of years ago. I’m not arguing with that ... But they don’t live here now.’ Laurel poured water into a mug. ‘I’ll think about it. I’m going upstairs to dig out some patterns for the costumes.’

Rowan found herself alone in the kitchen. She said aloud, ‘I guess there’s no lunch, then?’

Investigation revealed that they were out of bread, and noodles, and cereal: everything that might make a quick meal. Hopefully Ivan was picking up some groceries on his way back from golf, but meanwhile she was going to starve ... Rowan struggled briefly with her conscience. She knew she shouldn’t bother Verity. But then guiltily ran down the street to Verity’s house anyway.

Verity opened the door at the first knock, as if she’d been expecting her. ‘Perfect timing. I was going to text you ...’ She clapped a hand to her forehead. ‘I was supposed to pick up Tansy – am I too late?’

‘Yes, but it’s fine. Mum got her and they went shopping for costume supplies. They should have let you know. Sorry.’

‘Never mind, I’m the one who forgot about her anyway,’ said Verity breezily.

‘You should tell them that you saw in your crystal ball that she was already home, so you didn’t bother. Have you got any food? Our house is falling apart.’

Verity cast her eyes upwards and sighed. ‘I suppose I could make you a sandwich. Come in.’

‘You know the weirdest thing?’ said Rowan a few minutes later, swallowing a mouthful of bread, cheese and relish. ‘Mum and Dad don’t seem worried about Ash at all anymore. Mum just said, *she’ll be back soon*. And Dad seemed like he was going to go and look for her, but then he sort of forgot all about it. I guess they must have decided to stay positive? That’s a good thing, isn’t it? Better than getting upset about it. Right?’

Rowan hoped that Verity would say some reassuring words to drive away her uneasy suspicion that something deeper and

more fundamental was askew in her world. But Verity only bit into her own sandwich, frowning, and then sat there chewing in silence.

‘Verity?’

‘That is odd,’ said Verity at last. ‘I don’t like it.’

Rowan’s heart sank. Verity pushed her plate aside. ‘Never mind. I have something for you. Come with me.’

Verity led her into the front room and held up a blue frock with a nipped-in waist, ruffled sleeves and a white collar. Rowan wrinkled her nose. ‘What’s that?’

‘It’s for tonight,’ said Verity sharply. ‘I had to alter the whole thing myself. I don’t know how your poor mother does it. It took me *days*. As well as all the other preparations I’ve had to make. Specialists to consult, equipment to find, secondary spells—’ Verity broke off suddenly, as if she’d said more than she intended. ‘Anyway, here it is.’

Rowan took the dress, politely ignoring the crooked stitching of the hem and the mismatched buttons at the back. ‘It’s very nice.’

Verity sniffed. ‘I know it isn’t your cup of tea, but it will take you where you need to go. And here’s a hair ribbon to match.’

‘Oh. Thanks.’

‘I couldn’t manage shoes. Socks and sandals should be all right, from memory.’

‘Socks *and* sandals? Do I have to?’

‘If you don’t want to look ridiculous, then yes,’ snapped Verity.

‘Okay, sorry,’ muttered Rowan.

Verity said, ‘I apologise. But particularly after what you’ve told me today, there’s no time to waste.’

‘I know, I know, I’ll do it.’ Rowan darted forward and hugged Verity round the waist. ‘Everything’s going to be okay,’ she said. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Verity briskly. ‘Of course it is.’

But Rowan wished that Verity had said it first.

When Rowan arrived home, she dropped the dress and the ribbon on her bed, then headed straight upstairs to Ash’s bedroom. The paint tins and rollers and trays were still there, neatly stacked by Ivan, and he’d picked up the bookcase, too. Rowan prised up a lid and poured out a tray of green paint, took a deep breath, and kept on painting Ash’s wall. The contrast between the wet paint and the dried paint gave her a fright at first, but she forced herself to keep going. She painted as high as she could reach, all the way around, and as she painted, she felt herself growing calmer. She could do whatever Verity needed. She could find glass for the magic. She would bring Ash home.

That night Verity brought round a chicken curry for dinner. ‘I thought you might like a night off from cooking,’ she said. ‘But don’t get too excited, it’s only takeaway. I didn’t make it myself.’

‘That is so kind,’ said Laurel. ‘And I do appreciate a night off. I’ve volunteered to make about a million costumes for Tansy’s dance concert. What was I thinking?’

Verity looked at her carefully. ‘I have no idea.’

Ivan said, ‘You’re staying to eat with us, Verity?’

‘I can’t tonight, I’m afraid. I’m working to a deadline.’

‘Well, we’ll enjoy it anyway!’ Ivan lifted the lid of the container and sniffed. ‘Mmm, delicious.’

‘I’ll put on some rice.’ Laurel bustled around the kitchen.

Verity turned back as she was on her way to the door. ‘No news from Ash, I suppose?’

Laurel didn’t seem to have heard. Ivan echoed, ‘Ash? No ... no, nothing.’

‘Thanks for dinner, Verity!’ Laurel sang out. ‘You’re a cherub!’

Rowan and Verity had a whispered conference at the front door. ‘I wanted to check for myself,’ said Verity grimly, ‘and I see what you mean.’

Rowan clung to the doorpost. ‘So what’s going on?’

‘I’m not sure yet.’ Verity stared at Rowan over her red-rimmed glasses. ‘You do your part tonight and everything will work out all right. I hope. Enjoy the curry.’

Back in the kitchen, Tansy was complaining because Verity had bought a Thai green curry instead of chicken korma. ‘She *knows* korma is my favourite. She should have asked.’

Rowan rolled her eyes. ‘It’s practically the same thing.’

‘Don’t look a gift curry in the mouth,’ said Ivan, wagging his eyebrows at Laurel.

‘What does that even mean?’

‘It means don’t be ungrateful,’ said Laurel, banging the lid on the rice cooker. ‘I think it’s something to do with donkeys.’

Rowan couldn’t help herself. ‘That’s one good thing about Ash not being here – we can have chicken for dinner.’

‘What’s that, Roey?’ Laurel looked at her, puzzled.

‘Because she’s vegetarian?’ said Rowan.

‘Oh! I knew that,’ said Ivan.

Laurel murmured, ‘Vegetarian ...’

It was almost as if they’d never *met* Ash.

At bedtime Rowan pulled the blue dress over her head. It was tight and, most annoyingly, it buttoned at the back. She managed the top and bottom buttons, but there was one in the middle that she just couldn’t reach. Too bad, she’d have to hope that no one noticed at the other end – whenever that might be. She tied the blue ribbon around her hair like an Alice band and pulled a face at herself in the mirror. This had better be worth it. Last and most mortifying of all, she pulled on a pair of socks and then her strappy summer sandals. ‘Absolutely stupid,’ she muttered as she lay on her bed and

pulled the doona over herself. 'I have no respect for this time in history.'

After all this, she hoped Verity's magic wouldn't send her into mid-winter. At the last minute, she scrambled out of bed and pulled Linda's jumper over her head, in case she accidentally ended up in 1972 again and she could give it back.

She stuck her sandalled feet over the edge of the bed and lay down, expecting to lie awake for a long time in this absurd outfit, her heart fluttering. But almost as soon as she closed her eyes, she dived into sleep.



Rowan woke with a crick in her neck and a bump in the middle of her back. She sat up slowly, looking around.

She was lying on a lumpy couch covered in a scratchy maroon fabric. The fireplace looked the same (the tiles unpainted), as did the door and windows and the plaster ceiling rose, but in this time the room was being used as a living room. Two deep, shabby armchairs that matched the couch sat at an angle to it. There was a wooden cabinet and a polished sideboard bearing an empty crystal fruit bowl. (Could she take that back to Verity? It was rather large.) The whole room had a stiff, formal air, and it was extremely tidy, as if it were rarely used.

Rowan sensed that she'd travelled back further than she had before. The furniture was heavy and old-fashioned, older than that from the 1970s. Gingerly she grasped the doorknob and crept out into the hallway. Patches of coloured light on the floor and walls made her turn her head. The front door was framed with panels of coloured glass in red, blue and gold, rather than the plain frosted glass of her own time. It was so pretty she almost wished she'd defied Verity and brought her phone to take a photo.

Rowan tiptoed down the hallway. There was no carpet in this time, but a worn red-patterned runner along the centre of the hall. Coat hooks laden with hats and jackets hung beneath a wood-framed mirror near the door (also much too awkward

to be smuggled back to Verity), and a metal cage bristled with umbrellas. Now Rowan could hear a hum of conversation from beyond the stairs.

Just then, the door to the back of the house opened and the volume of noise increased. Chatter, music, the clink of plates and cutlery. Rowan pressed herself back against the wall as two kids of about her own age barged out, but it was too late – they’d seen her.

‘Annie!’ squealed the girl. ‘You came after all!’

‘Ma! Annie’s here!’ yelled the boy.

They were both beaming at Rowan as they each grabbed her by an arm and dragged her through the doorway and into what was apparently the dining room. They looked very much alike, with sandy-coloured hair, blue eyes and freckles. The girl’s hair was tied up with a ribbon, coming undone.

The dining room was packed with people and buzzing with conversation. A table had been pushed against the wall and it was loaded with plates of biscuits and scones and sandwiches, while at one end an old lady presided over a huge teapot and rows of teacups. Before Rowan knew it, she’d had a plate of scones and sandwiches thrust into one hand by the boy twin, and a brimming cup of milky tea forced into her other hand by the girl twin.

‘Janie, Harry! Give poor Annie a chance to catch her breath!’ scolded a stout woman in a slightly-too-tight flowered dress. She smiled down at Rowan. ‘I’m glad you could join us after all, dear. Have you said hello to Ernie? Doesn’t he look handsome in his uniform?’

The twins’ mother steered Rowan across the room to where a young man in a military uniform was holding court, surrounded by a group of laughing women. Helpless with the plate and cup in her hands, Rowan had to submit.

‘Here’s another sweetheart to kiss you goodbye!’ an older man guffawed, and Rowan was propelled through the gaggle of women in flowery frocks (she was grateful now that she’d worn Verity’s dress, however uncomfortable it was). Scarlet

with embarrassment, she fixed her gaze across the room as the young soldier, Ernie, laughed and bent to give her a brotherly kiss on the cheek. He looked about the same age as Tom.

‘Glad you could make it, Annie,’ he said. ‘You’ll keep an eye on those two rascals for me while I’m gone, won’t you?’

Rowan muttered something incoherent. Ernie smelled of leather and wool and cigarettes and boot polish.

‘Those mamzelles better watch out!’ boomed the hearty man. ‘Just like they had to watch out for his dad last time round, eh, Frank?’

‘Don’t tease him, Uncle Pete,’ chided one of the younger women, and in the ensuing laughter, Rowan was able to duck under someone’s arm and escape. She looked around for the twins but couldn’t see them in the crush, so she squeezed herself into a sheltered corner, wedged behind a chair, and slurped down her tea so she could set the empty cup on the sideboard. With one hand free, she could tackle the plate of egg sandwiches and scones. As she ate, she listened to the conversations batting back and forth above her head.

‘Young Jack will be next, I suppose.’

‘Don’t let Moira hear you say that. She’s hoping it will all be over by Christmas.’

‘That’s what we said last Christmas.’

‘That’s what we said in the last war, too ...’

‘Well, it can’t be worse than last time.’

So Ernie, with the lovely smile and the carefully slicked-down hair, was going off to fight a war. Rowan didn’t know much about the two big wars from last century, except that they’d mostly been fought in Europe and a lot of people died. This seemed like it must be the second war – that was the one with Hitler and the Nazis. She gazed across at Ernie, still laughing and joking with the girls on the other side of the room. Did he know what he was getting into? She supposed, if his dad had fought *last time round*, that he must have some idea. She spotted a gloomy-looking teenage boy lounging near the kitchen, who she guessed must be Jack. He caught her

watching him, and gave her a wry grin. She couldn't help grinning back.

But she mustn't forget why she was here: she needed something made of glass to bring back to Verity. Looking around the room, she couldn't see anyone drinking from anything but teacups; this was definitely an afternoon tea party. Maybe she could sneak a tumbler from the kitchen ...

But as she nerved herself to wriggle through the crowd, she caught sight of Verity herself, deep in conversation with a woman standing by the window. Her back was half-turned, but Rowan would recognise that silhouette anywhere, and the sound of her dry chuckle. Her hair was tucked into a smooth French roll, her mouth a red-lipstick kiss. Rowan spun on her heel and dived in the opposite direction before Verity could see her, heading for the stairs.

‘Annie! There you are!’

The twins bobbed up in front of her.

‘Come upstairs! We got something to show you.’

‘Show me what?’ Rowan said, but allowed them to lead her up the stairs.

‘We made surprises for Ernie,’ explained Janie.

‘We’re going to hide them in his rucksack,’ said Harry.

The rucksack was in Ash's room, in this time a bedroom that looked like it was shared by Ernie, Jack and Harry. The walls were painted a plain pale blue; no sign of wallpaper. Rowan looked around, admiring the model aeroplanes suspended above one bed, and the slightly wonky bookcase beside another that looked homemade, crammed with paperbacks.

The ‘surprises’ turned out to be a bookmark with black and white ribboned trim (‘Can't believe Ernie barracks for Collingwood,’ said Janie, rolling her eyes) and a tin spoon made by Harry in metalwork at school, bearing Ernie's initials (‘EJR, Ernest John Raymond,’ said Harry proudly).

‘What are you giving him, Annie?’ The twins stared at her expectantly.

‘I don’t know.’ Rowan felt caught out. ‘What does he need?’

‘Haven’t you thought about it at all?’ said Janie.

Harry folded his arms. ‘I thought you were sweet on Ernie?’

‘She never *said* that.’ But Janie sounded disappointed.

Rowan chewed the inside of her cheek; then she was suddenly inspired. ‘Janie, give me the bookmark. Have you got a pen?’

‘Will a pencil do?’ Harry fished a stub from his shorts pocket.

Rowan knelt on the floor and, with the twins breathing over her shoulder, sketched Ernie’s face with a few strokes on the bookmark, and, more laboriously, a magpie: the Collingwood team emblem.

‘Annie! I didn’t know you could draw like that,’ said Janie.

Harry whistled. ‘You’re a dark horse.’

‘It looks beaut! Better than your lousy spoon.’

‘At least my spoon’s useful.’

‘Bookmarks are useful, too. Specially for Ernie, always got his nose in a book. Put our names on the back, Annie, so he knows it’s from both of us.’

Harry sniffed. ‘Betcha he loses it on the first day.’

‘Betcha he loses your rotten spoon before he loses our bonzer bookmark.’ The twins glared at each other.

‘Okay, it’s done,’ said Rowan hastily, just as it seemed violence was about to break out.

Janie took the bookmark and tucked it deep inside Ernie’s unexpectedly small backpack. Rowan gave a sudden gasp, and tried to disguise it as a coughing fit.

Harry thumped her back. ‘You all right?’

‘Fine ...’ gulped Rowan. ‘But Janie – where did you get that ring?’

Janie glanced down at her hand. ‘I found it in Ma and Dad’s room, when we were spring cleaning. Ma said it wasn’t hers, so I may as well keep it.’

‘It’s not a sapphire or anything,’ said Harry. ‘It’s only glass. Came from the twopenny shop, I reckon.’

‘Annie, you look white as a sheet,’ said Janie. ‘You’re not going to faint, are you?’

Rowan whispered, ‘It’s just ... I used to have a ring like that.’

‘Oh!’ Janie stared at her finger. ‘But this couldn’t be yours. How would it have got into Ma and Dad’s fireplace?’

Rowan began, ‘I don’t—’ but Harry held up his hand, alert.

‘Listen! I reckon they’re cutting the cake!’ He scrambled up and charged out of the room. Janie seized Rowan’s hand and pulled her downstairs too.



In the dining room, Uncle Pete was giving a speech while Ernie smiled faintly and smoothed the back of his head, pink with embarrassment. Frank and Moira (Ma and Dad) stood close together, his arm around her waist; she was smiling proudly, but blinking hard. The middle brother, Jack, perched on the arm of a chair, moodily drumming his fingers, while Gran carved up the sponge cake and loaded it onto plates for aunts and nieces to distribute. Rowan made sure she kept behind the twins, safely out of sight of Verity. Not that Verity from this time would know who she was, she reminded herself; but it was safest not to risk drawing her attention.

It was Harry who cut the rambling speech short by launching into a shrill rendition of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow', which everyone joined in, some laughing, some crying. Uncle Pete kept ploughing through his speech up to the first chorus, then gave up, and toasted Ernie with a bottle of beer.

This was a happy family, thought Rowan. Like her own family had been, up until a week ago when Ash had disappeared and everything turned weird. She'd never understood before how fragile happiness was, how it could shatter so quickly.

Janie tugged at her sleeve and beckoned mysteriously. Rowan followed her out into the hallway where they joined a knot of giggling kids mostly younger than the twins – Rowan

guessed they were cousins – who hurried toward the front room. Harry was bearing the remains of the cake on a glass stand (a possibility? No, it was too awkwardly shaped to hide under her jumper), and when they reached the shelter of the parlour, Janie closed the door and the cousins clustered around the low table and dug in with spoons as greedily as if this was the last cake they'd ever see.

Rowan hung back; she wasn't a massive fan of cake at the best of times (Verity's muffins were a different story) and she felt shy about pushing her way into the scrum. She wandered round the room, looking at the pictures on the walls, inspecting the ornaments on the mantelpiece in the hope that one might be both made of glass and small enough to tuck into her jumper sleeve. But she had no luck there. All she discovered was Janie sitting next to a basket of wool in one corner.

Janie stroked a soft blue hank of knitting. 'Ma's making a cardigan. She's calling it her Last Hurrah before she has to start knitting socks for soldiers. And this is mine ...'

It was a perfectly recognisable beginning to a sock, a khaki-coloured tube suspended on four double-ended knitting needles. The stitches were even and neat. Rowan gaped. 'Did you make that?'

'Course.' Janie stuffed it back into the basket. 'It's not so wonderful. The socks you knit are better than that, all those fancy patterns.'

Rowan gulped. She could no more have knitted a fancy sock than flown to the moon, but clearly Annie was more capable than she was. In fact all the Raymond offspring seemed to be supremely talented – Janie's knitting, the bookcase carpentry, the fiddly model aeroplanes – Rowan felt hopelessly inept in comparison. She might be able to draw an okay portrait and a reasonable magpie, but that wasn't exactly a useful skill.

Janie said, 'I wonder how many pairs of socks I'll be able to knit before the war's over.'

'You won't even finish one sock before Christmas,' scoffed Harry.

‘It might not be over by Christmas,’ said Janie. ‘You don’t know everything, Harry Raymond.’

‘I know our boys can beat Hitler,’ said Harry.

‘Of course they can,’ said Janie. ‘But Mr Withers at school says it could take years and years and years.’

‘He’s right,’ said Rowan without thinking. ‘It will. Probably Jack will have to go and fight, too.’

All the faces turned toward her. ‘Oh, what do you know,’ said one boy with a snub nose and a belligerent chin. ‘You’re just a girl.’

‘I know about Hitler and the Nazis and the Holocaust,’ said Rowan, stung. ‘And I know about Japan, and the Kokoda Track, and the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima—’

‘What are you *talking* about?’ said Janie.

‘Ignore her,’ said Snub Nose. ‘She’s making things up.’

‘I am not! It’s true. England and Australia will win the war but it takes a long time – then there’s D Day, and that time the little boats go over and rescue the soldiers from the beach in France—’

‘You mean Dunkirk?’ sneered Snub Nose. ‘Everyone knows about Dunkirk.’

‘Oh, has that already happened?’ Rowan stopped, suddenly aware that she shouldn’t be telling them any of this. But on the other hand, none of them believed her, so what difference did it make?

‘What’s a new clear bomb?’ said Harry.

‘What’s a hollow cause?’ asked one of the girls.

‘What’s a cocoa track?’

Band name, thought Rowan.

‘Did you say Japan? Japan’s not even in the war!’

‘They will be,’ said Rowan recklessly. ‘They drop some bombs on America and then America joins in, too.’

‘You beaut!’ whooped a small, freckled boy. ‘America!’ He stretched out his arms and zoomed round the room like a fighter plane.

Snub Nose folded his arms. ‘She’s spreading lies and rumours and propaganda! She oughta be arrested!’

‘She’s just pretending,’ said Janie. ‘That’s not a crime.’

‘Yes, it is,’ said Harry. ‘Be like Dad, keep Mum.’

Rowan looked around at the circle of faces, accusing, puzzled, scornful, and wished she’d never opened her mouth. She really didn’t know much about the Second World War, just snippets she’d picked up from the internet and school and movies, without much of an idea about how they all fitted together. But it was good to tell these guys they’d win, wasn’t it? That couldn’t do any harm. Could it?

The wingtip of the freckled boy who was being an aeroplane clipped the ear of Snub Nose, who gave an outraged bellow and tackled him to the floor. With gleeful yells, the other boys joined in and suddenly there was a full-blown wrestling match rolling across the carpet.

‘Careful!’ yelled Janie. ‘Not in here! Ma’ll have your guts for garters!’

Somehow Janie managed to steer the tangle of flailing limbs through the door and into the hallway. Rowan felt a flash of inspiration. Everyone was watching the boys; no one was looking at her. She didn’t give herself a chance to think. She lifted her elbow, protected by the thick wool of Linda’s jumper, and drove it firmly into the pane of red glass beside the front door. There was a crash and a tinkle of falling glass. The fight fell apart instantly, the boys springing away from each other in guilty dismay.

‘Now see what you’ve done!’ cried Janie. ‘I knew this would happen!’

The boys protested, confused, checking themselves for injuries. Rowan dropped to her knees and began to sweep together the pieces of broken glass.

‘Now we’re for it,’ said Harry.

Janie pushed the shards out of the way with the side of her shoe. ‘You lot had better hop it before Ma sees ... I know, hide and seek. Harry, you’re it – count to a hundred.’

There was a stampede as the boys rushed away, the girls following more sedately, everyone except for Harry, who flung himself face down at the sofa and began mumbling numbers into a cushion. Janie and Rowan hurried down the hallway together, Rowan gingerly concealing the largest piece of broken red glass in one hand, her elbow throbbing.

‘Before, when you were talking about the war,’ whispered Janie, ‘what were you thinking?’

‘I don’t know ... I was trying to help morale?’

‘You’d better not do it again, Annie. You could get into real trouble. People get arrested for spreading rumours about the war.’

‘I don’t get why it’s a big deal,’ muttered Rowan.

‘It’s important. It’s our *patriotic duty*. You don’t want to go to jail, do you?’ Annie stopped. ‘Tell you what, if I give you my ring, will you promise to keep quiet?’

Rowan’s mouth fell open. So she’d been right all along – *die Schwäche* had found a way to give the ring back to her. But she heard herself saying feebly, ‘Are you sure?’

‘Here, take it.’ Janie tugged off the ring and thrust it at Rowan.

Rowan twisted the ring onto her finger. Did she imagine it, or was the silver circlet fizzing invisibly, delighted to be reunited with her? She closed her hand safely around it, and headed instinctively for the cupboard under the stairs, the Harry Potter cupboard, her traditional hide-and-seek spot.

‘Ooh, where are you going?’ whispered Janie. ‘Wish I’d thought of that.’ She gave Rowan a grin to show that they were still friends, then pelted up the stairs to her own hiding place.

Rowan pulled open the cupboard door and squashed herself inside. The cupboard held a tin trunk rather like Verity’s

(perhaps it was the very same one!) and a headless broomstick and some raincoats, but she was able to pull the door shut behind her. A chink of light came in through the keyhole, but not enough to see by. Folded in the dark, safe in her little cave, Rowan's breathing slowed and her heartbeat calmed. Her elbow was sore, but when she pushed up the sleeve of her jumper, she could feel that it wasn't bleeding. She cupped the precious piece of red glass in one hand.

Now she could hear the adults' voices in the dining room. People were starting to leave.

'Good luck, Ernie!'

'You'll show 'em!'

'God bless you, love.'

Rowan held her breath as she heard Verity's brisk voice. 'Take care of yourself, Ernie. Goodbye, Moira, goodbye, Frank.'

'Thank you for coming, Verity, dear ...'

Footsteps retreated down the hallway. Someone exclaimed and clucked over the broken pane of glass. The front door clicked shut; that noise was the same as in her own time. From far away, Harry called, 'Coming, ready or not!' His boots thundered straight up the stairs; perhaps he'd guessed where Janie was hiding. Rowan smirked to herself. In her time, Ash and Tansy had never checked the under-stairs cupboard, *the mouse cupboard* as Laurel called it, though Ivan had patiently filled in the mouse-cracks long ago. There wouldn't be mice *now*, would there? Rowan shuddered, and drew her feet up onto the trunk.

Upstairs, there were cries of triumph and dismay as hidings were revealed. In the dining room, there was a muted discussion about who would go into town with Ernie to see him onto his train. 'Plenty of time ... don't need to leave till half past.'

'Another cup, Dot?'

'Oh, thank you, Moira, don't mind if I do.'

Their voices were so comfortable and relaxed, they lulled Rowan like the sound of the sea. She let her eyelids droop closed. Such a nice family ... just as nice as Linda's family, in their own way. Her own family were lucky that their house had always been lived in by such good people ... Maybe the house itself, with Verity's help, chose who would live in it? Perhaps the families' kindness had seeped into the walls over the years; maybe that was why the house always felt so safe, in spite of *die Schwäche*... Even now, she felt sure that the house was doing its best to take care of Ash.

The comforting murmur of the house wrapped around her. She was warm, she was sheltered. She was asleep.



Rowan woke with a jolt in the darkness, stiff and sore and momentarily confused about where she was. She grasped the piece of red glass carefully with her finger and thumb as memory flooded over her. She stretched out her other arm, and pins and needles prickled in her fingers as she shoved the cupboard door open. The tin trunk had disappeared and she was crouched in a muddle of tennis racquets, a broken printer, boxes of jigsaw puzzles and an ancient pair of Tansy's rainbow gumboots.

She was back in her own time. But she'd wanted to stay longer; she hadn't been ready to leave.

She almost fell out of the cupboard, blinking in the morning light, gingerly testing her cramped limbs.

'Ro? What are you doing in there? What are you *wearing*?'

Tansy leaned over the banister, staring.

Rowan crawled out and dusted herself off. 'I was – looking for something.'

'For what? A Horcrux?'

'Ha ha. I was looking for – this.' Rowan reached in and grabbed the first object that came to hand, which was a balding old feather duster. Tansy gaped at her.

'I have cobwebs in my room,' said Rowan with dignity. 'Lots of cobwebs. It's like a haunted house in there.' Trying

not to wince or limp, she strode down the hallway to her bedroom, holding the feather duster aloft like a ceremonial baton, hiding the closed fist with the glass shard out of Tansy's sight.

In her room, she changed out of the now-grubby blue dress and the jumper, and into normal weekend clothes. She texted Verity: *got it, should i bring it over now*

What are you waiting for? was the instant reply. But Verity softened it with a blown kiss.

Outside the sky was grey and the air was chilly. Early risers walked their dogs or jogged around the park. Rowan jogged too; it felt good to stretch her cramped legs and pump the warm blood around her body. Soon she was tapping Verity's knocker.

Verity answered the door wrapped in her peacock dressing-gown. There were shadows beneath her eyes and her hair was scraped back in a dishevelled ponytail. Her hands were peppered with tiny burns. But she plucked the shard of red glass from Rowan's hand with an approving nod. 'Excellent, well done.'

'I had to break a window,' Rowan said, following her through to the kitchen. 'But it was only a little one.'

'Ah! So that's how that pane got smashed. I remember that day.'

'Yes, you were there again. It was wartime, the second war, you know, the Nazi one.'

'I am familiar with World War II.' Verity poured milk into a saucepan for Rowan's chai.

Rowan sat at the table with her chin in her hands. 'Verity, can I ask you something?'

'If you must.'

'You know Ernie, and Jack, and everyone? What happened to them?'

Verity, standing at the stove with her back turned, became very still. 'No. I'm not going to do that, Rowan.'

‘But I need to find out! It’s important. I met them. I know them now. It’s like walking out in the middle of a movie, or throwing away a book before you read the last page.’

‘And how would you feel if it was bad news?’ said Verity. ‘Sometimes it’s better not to know.’

‘You can’t say that!’ cried Rowan. ‘Now you *have* to tell me.’

Verity poured the milk into a mug. ‘I’m sorry, Rowan. I don’t remember.’

‘I don’t believe you!’ Rowan looked around wildly, and pulled Verity’s laptop toward her across the table. ‘If you won’t tell me, I’ll look it up myself, and you can’t stop me!’

‘I can stop you,’ said Verity.

They looked at each other for a long, dangerous moment.

Rowan said, ‘If you don’t let me do it now, I’ll just do it at home. What are you going to do? Break our computers?’

Verity raised an eyebrow. ‘Isn’t there glass in your computers? And your precious phones?’

‘You can’t break every phone and computer in the whole world, just to stop me finding out. I’ll find out *somehow*.’

Verity blew out a long breath of defeat. ‘Suit yourself. But don’t blame me for what you find.’

Rowan’s hands hovered over the keyboard. Maybe Verity was right and it would be better not to know ... But she couldn’t back off now she’d won. She typed in, *what happened to soldiers in ww2?*

She scanned the screen; but all the results that came up were about American soldiers, or British ones. Rowan added *Australian* to her search, and quickly found herself at a website for the Australian War Memorial, facing a warning notice that she might find the content upsetting. ‘You’re all ganging up on me!’ Rowan muttered. ‘But you’re not going to stop me.’ She glared defiantly at Verity. ‘If Ernie was brave enough to actually go to war, I can be brave enough to read about it.’

Verity shrugged. ‘All right.’ She leaned against the sink, her hands wrapped round her mug, watching Rowan.

Rowan poked around on the site until she found a link labelled *People*, which invited her to *Search for a person*. Without letting herself think too hard, she quickly typed in *Ernie Raymond*. No, wait. She remembered the initials on Harry’s spoon. ‘*Ernest... John... Raymond*,’ she murmured as she typed.

‘Have you found anything?’ asked Verity.

‘There’s one result for the Second World War. I’m going to click on it.’

Verity said nothing. Rowan glanced up at her, heart pounding, then clicked.

A black and white photograph of Ernie in his soldier’s uniform gazed out at her from the screen. ‘That’s him,’ she breathed. ‘Service, number, unit, rank – they made him a sergeant. Was that good? Blah, blah, blah – oh, no! *No!*’

‘I warned you,’ said Verity quietly.

‘*Date of death*,’ read Rowan, ‘*February, 1943. Place of death: Wau, Papua New Guinea.*’

Verity said, ‘I’m so sorry.’

Rowan couldn’t speak. She remembered exactly how it felt when Ernie had kissed her cheek: the bristly touch of his chin, his smell of leather and tobacco. She remembered his chestnut hair and his hazel eyes, and the sound of his laugh, the way he’d ducked his head and smoothed his hair. And if she was so sad, after only knowing him for one afternoon, how must his family have felt when they found out he was never coming home?

Rowan looked up at Verity. ‘What about Jack? Did he go too? What happened to him?’ She hadn’t liked Jack as much as Ernie, but she didn’t want him to die in the war.

Verity sighed, and rubbed her finger between her eyebrows. ‘Yes, Jack went to fight too. He did survive the war—’

‘Yay!’ said Rowan; but Verity shook her head.

‘It wasn’t all good news. Jack was wounded in 1944, and hospitalised in England. After the war ended, he was shipped back to Australia. He was suffering from what they called *combat fatigue*.’

Rowan frowned. ‘What does that mean? Everyone would have been tired of fighting by then, wouldn’t they?’

‘Combat fatigue was another name for what we now call PTSD. Post-traumatic stress disorder, I assume you’ve heard of that?’

‘Yes,’ said Rowan. ‘Paramedics get it, and police, and people who are in plane crashes and stuff.’

‘Correct. It’s common among soldiers, and has been for thousands of years. But in Jack’s day, it wasn’t well understood. During the First World War, if the soldiers couldn’t cope, they were called cowards. Some men were even shot for it.’

‘They couldn’t help it,’ whispered Rowan.

‘Yes, it was cruel,’ agreed Verity. ‘Eventually the authorities came to see that it was a genuine mental illness, not a weakness, no one’s fault. You’ve never heard of any of this? Don’t they teach you history in that school of yours?’

‘They can’t teach us everything,’ said Rowan. ‘What happened to Jack after he came back to Australia?’

Verity turned her head to gaze out through the kitchen window, away from Rowan. ‘He spent a few years at Bundoora Repatriation Hospital. That was a mental health hospital for returned soldiers. Then—’ Verity hesitated. ‘He died. It was the 1950s, not even ten years after the war ended. He was only thirty years old.’

Rowan felt a sob rising in her throat and tried to swallow it down, but it was too strong. ‘It’s not fair!’ she burst out. ‘The Raymonds lost Jack *and* Ernie. They must have been so sad ...’

‘Of course they were sad,’ snapped Verity. ‘We were all sad. I was there, remember? I knew those boys. Such a terrible, tragic waste ...’ She took a deep breath, retied her ponytail

and gave Rowan a level look. More gently she said, 'But it was a long time ago. They both would have been dead by now, even if the war had never happened.'

'It's not long ago for *me!*' cried Rowan. 'I only saw them yesterday!' She jumped up from the table and shoved at her chair so it clattered. 'I don't want to do this anymore. What's the point of trying to bring Ash back if all that happens is that I lose *more* people?'

Blinded by tears, she stumbled down the hallway. Verity tried to call her back, but she wrenched open the door and ran out into the cool morning air and the pale sunshine.

In her pocket, her phone was buzzing like a frantic bee. As she stumbled toward home, she saw a new message from Laurel. *where are you??*

Then one from Verity. *We need to talk, call me TODAY*

And an afterthought: *pls*

Rowan shoved the phone back in her pocket without bothering to reply.



Rowan swiped the tears from her face as she entered the house, already calling, ‘Mum? I’m back. I was just at Verity’s!’

Laurel appeared at the end of the hallway, phone in hand. ‘That was quick! You didn’t need to race home, Roey, I just wondered where you were.’

‘Oh – I thought you might be worried ...’

Laurel laughed. ‘You know I’m trying not to be a hovercraft parent.’

‘I just thought – because of Ash.’

‘Ash ...’ said Laurel. Then something seemed to click. ‘Yes, Ash, that’s right. But Ash isn’t here. Is she?’

Rowan didn’t know what to say. It was almost as if her mother had forgotten who Ash was. Mutely she shook her head. She turned to go into her bedroom, but Laurel called her back.

‘What are these?’ She brandished a plastic bag.

Rowan blinked. ‘Oh. Rose cuttings. From George. He said to give them to you.’

‘So why didn’t you? I found them in the laundry.’

‘I didn’t know what to do with them.’

‘Well, it’s lucky I found them before it’s too late. I hope it’s not too late.’

‘Sorry,’ said Rowan. She stumbled into her room, banged the door shut and threw herself onto her bed for a proper good cry. But though her throat was swollen and her eyes stung and her face was hot, the tears wouldn’t flow. She lay on her bed for a long time, hearing mysterious bangings and scrapings overhead, and the muffled voices of her family. In the end it was Womble scratching on her door that made her get up. He whuffled anxiously round her ankles, pranced a little way down the hall, then looked back to make sure she was following before he led her up the stairs.

Everyone was in Ash’s bedroom. Ivan and Laurel were holding either end of Laurel’s sewing table, edging it closer to the window, while Tansy, her arms full of fabric, made helpful suggestions. ‘What if you turned it the other way? What if you put the bed in the corner over there instead?’

Rowan said, ‘What’s going on?’

Ivan gingerly set down his end of the table and wiped his brow. ‘Mum’s going to make this into a sewing room.’

‘I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before!’ Laurel beamed. ‘There’s only one window in here but it faces north, which is much brighter, and what’s the point of keeping it as a spare room when all my sewing stuff is squashed up in our bedroom?’

‘But this isn’t a spare room,’ said Rowan. ‘It’s Ash’s room.’

There was a brief silence. A shiver of wordless dread ran down Rowan’s spine.

After a moment Ivan said, ‘Well, Ash can have it when she comes back.’

‘There’s room for both of us,’ said Laurel.

‘No, there isn’t. What about all her furniture? Her desk and the bookcase and the bed and the drawers? You might bang into her chandelier ...’

‘What chandelier?’ Tansy did a twirl, gesturing upwards. ‘There’s no chandelier in here.’

Rowan opened her mouth to argue, then shut it again. Tansy was right. Ash’s beautiful glass chandelier had vanished. A bare light globe dangled from the ceiling where it had hung.

Laurel put her arm around Rowan’s shoulders. ‘You can’t begrudge me more space, Roey. If I’m going to sew all the costumes for Tansy’s concert, I’m going to need all the room I can lay my fingers on!’

‘Fine,’ said Rowan. ‘Whatever.’

Tansy danced out of the room and reappeared lugging Laurel’s dressmaker’s dummy in her arms. ‘Mrs Kafoops will be much happier in here, won’t she, Mum?’ She dropped the dummy in the middle of the room, and Rowan felt a sudden lurch of vertigo, as if Steph’s bedroom from long ago had swum into focus then faded again. She staggered back against Ash’s desk, and clutched at the firm edge. At least *that* was still where it was supposed to be.

Ivan sniffed the air. ‘Smells like the cake’s done.’

‘Ooh, yum!’ Tansy charged for the stairs.

‘It’s not for you!’ called Laurel. Rowan followed her mother down the stairs.

‘What kind of cake is it?’

‘Banana.’

‘Ash’s favourite,’ said Rowan.

Laurel turned her head to give her a blank look. Rowan said, ‘Ash loves banana cake. You know that.’

‘Mmm,’ said Laurel vaguely. ‘Those bananas in the fruit bowl were just about to go off. So I made this cake to give to George – to thank him for those rose cuttings. Do you want to take it round when it’s cooled?’

‘I saw him yesterday,’ said Rowan. ‘You take it. You could use the fresh air.’

Laurel laughed as she opened the oven door. ‘I’d never knock back medicinal advice from my eldest daughter! All right, I’ll do it myself.’

Again that icy finger snaked down Rowan’s back. ‘Ash is your eldest daughter, Mum.’

‘Hmm?’ Laurel was checking the cake with a skewer.

‘*Mum!*’

‘What?’ Laurel looked round, surprised.

‘Tansy, you tell her!’

‘Tell her what?’ Tansy was playing tug-of-war with Womble and didn’t even look up.

Rowan looked at her sister, then at her mother; then she dropped her eyes. ‘Nothing. Never mind.’ Her knees felt shaky.

Back in her bedroom, Rowan sat down at her desk beneath the window. She knew she ought to start on her homework, but her brain was in too much of a whirl. She opened her sketchbook and doodled the bookcase and the chandelier. What if Ash’s diary and her phone and her hairbrush had vanished from the police station, too? Would Constable Moustache get into trouble for losing evidence? As Rowan sketched Constable Moustache, gaping like a goldfish, she saw her mother pass the window outside, carrying the cake in a big square plastic container. About fifteen minutes later, she came back, the empty box tucked under her arm.

Rowan stayed at her desk for a few moments longer, hearing her mother’s brisk steps overhead as she moved her sewing paraphernalia from one room to the other; then she pushed back her chair, ran to the office, collected some photo albums and ran up the stairs to Ash’s bedroom.

‘Mum.’ Rowan dumped the albums on the bed. ‘Look at these.’ She opened one volume at random. ‘See how cute Ash is with her pants on her head? And look at baby Tansy!’

Laurel paused with her button boxes in her hands. ‘Not now, Roey, I’m busy trying to sort all this out.’

‘Come on, Mum, who’s this?’

Laurel peered over at the photograph. ‘It’s you, isn’t it?’

‘No! Look harder.’

‘Then it must be Tansy.’

‘No, Mum, look at it properly. It’s Ash, isn’t it?’

Laurel stared at the photo. ‘If you say so.’

Rowan slammed the album shut. ‘Where’s Dad?’

‘Watching videos on our bed.’

Rowan ran into the next room and threw herself down on the bed beside Ivan. ‘Hey, hey!’ he protested, as his tablet slid from its perch on his stomach. ‘I’m watching a seminal war movie.’

Band name, thought Rowan automatically. She said, ‘Stop that for a second and look at this. Who is this a photo of?’

Ivan retrieved the tablet, pressed pause, and stared at the photo. ‘That is definitely a baby.’

‘Which baby?’

‘No idea. All babies look the same to me.’

‘It’s Ash,’ Rowan told him. ‘Do you recognise her?’

‘I suppose so,’ said Ivan doubtfully.

‘Does she look familiar?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Do you mean it, or are you just saying that to make me happy?’

‘Just saying it to make you happy.’ Ivan frowned. ‘But you don’t seem happy. So I’m guessing it didn’t work?’

Rowan slid off the bed, closing the photo album. ‘Never mind. Forget it.’

She could hear music coming from behind Tansy’s closed door, but she was too demoralised to try the photograph on her sister. She trailed heavily down the stairs, thinking hard.

It was as if the house – or rather, *die Schwäche* – had swallowed Ash the same way it had swallowed Ivan's keys and Rowan's good pens. It had even consumed Ash's bookcase, and her chandelier, and now it was chewing up the family's memories of Ash, too. *Not mine*, said Rowan fiercely to herself. *Don't worry, Ash, I won't forget you!*

In her room, Rowan sat on the edge of her bed, staring at her phone and wondering what to do. The long mirror behind the door reflected back the image of a hunched, uncertain figure. Rowan didn't enjoy being the eldest child around. She didn't want the responsibility. She didn't want to be Verity's helper, she didn't want a special connection with *die Schwäche*. She just wanted everything to go back to the way it had been before they found the blue-glass ring ...

Rowan twisted the ring off her finger and flung it across the room, then she fell back onto her bed. She was exhausted. Surely no one could expect her to go time travelling as well as dealing with her family and their bizarre Ash amnesia: Ivan not recognising a photograph of his own daughter; Laurel turning her bedroom into a sewing room; Tansy happily playing with Womble as if nothing was wrong.

But the longer Rowan lay there, the worse she felt. Refusing to help Verity wasn't punishing Verity; really, it was more like abandoning Ash. And because it was a choice, Rowan's abandonment was worse than her family's weird memory loss.

Rowan knew she should go back to Verity's, apologise, let Verity give her whatever peculiar outfit she would need for her next trip back in time. Or at least call Verity and talk to her.

But a stubborn kernel of hurt and misery stopped her from dialling Verity's number, kept her pinned to the bed instead of walking out the door. As the daylight slowly, slowly ebbed from the room, Rowan pulled the quilt over herself and turned her face to the wall.



Monday passed in a blur. Rowan hadn't slept well; even without a special outfit to wear, she was half-afraid that Verity might send her back in time anyway. They weren't supposed to look at their phones at school, but Rowan kept pulling hers out of her locker between classes, expecting Verity would have texted her. But Verity must have decided the best policy was to leave her alone.

'Are you sick?' asked Jarvis.

'Or depressed?' said Neela. 'Do you need to go to student welfare?'

'What? No, I'm fine.'

Neela and Jarvis exchanged a look. Neela said, 'Well, clearly *that's* not true.'

'Something's wrong,' said Jarvis. 'Is it us, are you peed-off with us?'

'No! It's not you guys.'

'Aha! So it is *something*,' said Neela triumphantly.

Jarvis said, 'Don't you trust us? I thought we were friends.'

Rowan swallowed. 'Okay. It's my sister ... not Tansy. Ash. She's – she's missing. She's been gone for over a week now.'

'Oh, Ro! That's terrible.' Neela slipped her arm round Rowan's waist and squeezed.

‘A week? Why didn’t you tell us?’ said Jarvis. ‘I’m cut, bro.’

Neela frowned at him. ‘It’s not about you, Jay.’

‘It’s okay. I don’t really want to talk about it.’ But Rowan did feel slightly better, knowing that her friends had noticed something was wrong. Even though they couldn’t help, it made her feel less alone.

It was impossible to concentrate in class. But when Cougar Wilson, tired of hissing for Rowan’s attention, threw a plastic model of Snickers the sausage dog from *Bluey* at her head, Rowan instinctively hurled it back. Her sporting skills had never been her strong point, and tiny Snickers bounced squarely off Ms Mayne’s chest.

If she’d been her usual meek, well-behaved self, she would have apologised; she could have talked her way out of trouble. But this was not an ordinary day, and Rowan was in no mood to apologise to anyone.

It ended with Rowan having to stay behind after school for a ‘talk’ with Ms Mayne, which was more of a mumble on Rowan’s part. ‘This isn’t like you, Rowan,’ sighed Ms Mayne, before giving up and sending her home. ‘I’ll expect better behaviour tomorrow.’

Rowan hadn’t really assumed anyone would wait behind for her, but she couldn’t help feeling slightly disappointed when she realised that Neela and Jarvis and Tansy had all caught the early bus without her.

She’d hoped to sneak into the house undetected, but she’d forgotten it was Laurel’s day off from work. The whir of the sewing machine rattled to a halt upstairs as she closed the front door.

‘Rowan? Can you come up here for a second, please?’

Rowan trailed up the stairs and presented herself in the doorway of Ash’s bedroom – she couldn’t bring herself to call it *the sewing room*, no matter what the other members of the family did. ‘What?’

‘That’s rude,’ said Laurel.

Rowan muttered, ‘Sorry.’

‘Tansy tells me you got a detention today.’

Rowan rolled her eyes. ‘We don’t call it that anymore. It’s just staying back. And how did Tansy find out, anyway?’

‘I think your friends told her.’

‘Jeez, thanks, guys, thanks, Tansy,’ muttered Rowan.

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No.’ There was a pause while Laurel and Rowan looked at each other. ‘Can I go now?’

‘You know you can talk to me any time you want to ...’

Rowan couldn’t help snorting as she closed the door, not as gently as Laurel would have liked, but at least she didn’t kick it on the way out, which was what she felt like doing. She couldn’t talk to her mother about anything that mattered – not at the moment, anyway. Of course she wanted to talk to her about Ash, but she couldn’t face that conversation again; it was like banging her head against a wall. Laurel was useless! If she’d had sons fighting in a war overseas, would she have forgotten about them, too? Why couldn’t Rowan have a strong, reliable mother? Why couldn’t Laurel be more like Mrs Raymond, or Linda’s Aunty Bet?

Rowan thumped resentfully down the stairs, but by the time she reached the bottom, she felt ashamed of herself. None of this was Laurel’s fault. It wasn’t Tansy’s fault either. Rowan sank down on the last step and buried her head in her hands. Everything was falling apart and no one was coming to the rescue. Not even Womble, sitting by her feet and helpfully kissing her face, could make her feel better.

She was still there when Tansy and Laurel came downstairs with outside shoes on.

‘Mum’s taking me to buy my shoes,’ said Tansy. ‘And then for an ice cream at Dusty Bells. But you can’t come, because you had to stay back at school.’

‘Tansy, that’s not nice!’ said Laurel. ‘Sorry, Roey, but I don’t think you can have a treat today.’

‘I don’t want to come anyway,’ said Rowan. ‘I don’t want a *treat*. I’m not three. And I’d rather eat worms than go shoe shopping with Tansy.’

‘Then it’s just as well you’re staying here,’ said Laurel severely.

Tansy poked out her tongue at Rowan as she waltzed to the car behind their mother, and Rowan, contrary to her assertion about not being three, pulled a grotesque grimace in return.

Womble settled down at the back door to await their return. Rowan kept on sitting. With Tansy and Laurel gone, Ivan not yet home from work, and Ash missing, the house felt empty, echoey and eerily silent. As if it were holding its breath, waiting for Rowan to make the next move.

Right on cue, Rowan heard knocking at the door. Her first thought, half-dread and half-relief, was *Verity!*

But Verity never banged bossily on the door like that, and she would wait longer before she knocked again. And if Womble could smell Verity at the door, he would be barking his *oh-my-God-how-exciting-a-friend-has-come-over!* bark, not his *Stranger! Alert!* bark.

When Rowan opened the door, she found old George standing on the porch. He was clasping a basket to his chest, piled so high with vegetables that Rowan couldn’t see his face. He peered around the edge of a head of broccoli. ‘For your mama! To thank her for the cake.’

This is getting ridiculous, thought Rowan. Standing in the doorway, she said, ‘Mum’s not here. She’s gone to the shops.’

George clucked his tongue. ‘Never mind. I bring these in, leave them for her when she get back, okay?’

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped inside and Rowan found herself following him helplessly down the hallway. He set the basket down on the kitchen counter. ‘You got spinach, peas, broccoli, passionfruit, tomato ... Just a couple things to say thank you, okay?’

‘You didn’t need to do that. But thanks,’ said Rowan hastily. She saw his dark bright eyes flicking over the normal chaos of

the big room, from the unwashed dishes in the sink to the discarded clothes on the couch, the dirty mugs and glasses clustered on the coffee table, the plates set on the floor for Womble to clean.

‘We haven’t had time to tidy up today,’ said Rowan.

‘Uh-huh.’ George shot Rowan a keen look under his bushy eyebrows. ‘Everything okay?’

Rowan opened her mouth to answer, *yes, of course*, but the pressure of the secret was too much for her. She heard herself blurting out, ‘My big sister, Ash, has disappeared. She’s been gone for more than a week and no one even cares.’

She didn’t tell him that her parents and younger sister seemed to have almost forgotten that Ash had ever existed, or how upsetting she found that, let alone that she was avoiding the responsibility of magically travelling through time to rescue Ash; but she had a feeling that the first part might be enough.

George shook his head. ‘I knew! I knew something is wrong! Hard for you, huh?’

Rowan nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. She said, ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘Sure, why not?’ George pulled up a chair and sat down while Rowan boiled the kettle and looked for biscuits in the cupboard. Of course there weren’t any.

When she’d given him a mug of tea (black, two sugars) and sat down at the table, she realised that she didn’t know what to say. But then George fixed her with his dark, shrewd eyes and said, ‘I tell you something, okay? Something I don’t talk about. But I tell you now.’

Rowan wrapped her hands around her mug. ‘Okay.’

George took in a deep breath, and blew across his tea. ‘I tell you about my son, my Michalis. When you come to my place, you ask about him, but I don’t like to talk about it. When he’s same age as you, little bit older maybe, we have a big, big fight. Oh, wow. *Big* fight. First one, same age as you. He get older, more argue. Always, always, him and me argument.’

George closed his eyes. 'I regret now,' he said quietly. 'I wish we never. But too late now.'

Suddenly Rowan understood why he was telling her this. 'Ash didn't argue with Dad – or Mum.'

'Okay, okay.' George looked at her kindly from beneath his eyebrows, and Rowan knew that he didn't believe her.

For a few moments they sat without speaking. At last George cleared his throat and took a few big gulps of tea.

Tentatively, remembering the lack of photographs in George's kitchen, Rowan asked, 'Did your son ... did he die?'

'Hah!' said George. 'No, not dead.'

'So – you could call him? If you wanted to?'

'No way!' barked George. 'Too late now. My Eleni, she try, when she was alive, she still see him. But not me, not never. Too late now.'

Rowan said, 'You could tell him you're sorry?'

'Hah!' George banged down his mug. 'If I could go back, I tell him I'm angry. I'm angry because I'm scared to lose him, you know? But too late, can't go back now. And now I lose him anyway. Lose him and Eleni both! Break my heart, break my heart.'

Rowan whispered, 'I'm really sorry.'

'Is okay.' George shrugged. 'Not your fault.'

'My sister didn't have a fight with anyone.'

'So why she gone?'

Rowan couldn't answer.

Eventually George gulped down the last of his tea and pushed back his chair. 'Everything will be okay. You let me know if I can help, eh?'

Rowan felt like hugging him. 'Thank you.'

'And you eat up all those vegetable,' he added as he made his way to the front door. 'I got plenty more.'



Lurel and Ivan were so excited by George's basket of vegetables, Laurel began preparing an elaborate salad, and Ivan dragged out the barbecue. 'One last hurrah before winter. I wonder if the good butcher's still open? I could pick up some of those kebabs.'

'I could make vego kebabs,' said Laurel, busy washing tomatoes and basil at the sink.

Rowan pounced. 'Who are you making those for, Mum? We all eat meat.' Laurel looked up, her face blank. 'Oh. That's right. We don't really need them, do we?'

'Ash is the one who needs vegetarian kebabs,' said Rowan. 'Remember?'

'Mmm.' Laurel shook out the lettuce vigorously. 'But she isn't coming ...'

Ivan dropped a hand on Rowan's shoulder. 'Want to come to the butcher with me? Choose some fancy sausages?'

It seemed to be the day for sausages and sausage dogs. Rowan said, 'I'll pass.'

'I'll come!' said Tansy.

Laurel and Ivan exchanged a glance. 'Go on, Ro-ro,' urged Laurel.

'Let's have some quality father-daughter time,' said Ivan.

‘Oh, I get it,’ groaned Tansy. ‘This is about Rowan staying back, right?’

Rowan sagged, but she submitted. Together, in awkward silence, she and her father walked down the hill toward the boutique butcher.

Ivan cleared his throat. ‘Want to talk about it?’

‘Not really.’

Ivan sighed. ‘Oh, well, I promised your mother I’d try.’

Rowan caught sight of a familiar figure striding toward them. ‘Tom!’ she cried. ‘Hey, Tom, hi!’

Tom slowed and he glanced at them, then looked away. As they drew level with each other, he gave them a tentative smile. ‘Hi ...’

‘How are you?’ said Rowan.

‘Yeah, good, good.’ Tom scratched his ear. ‘You?’

‘We’re okay, I guess ...’ said Rowan. ‘I’ve thought of some new band names for you.’

‘Oh, wow. Thanks for that.’ Tom squinted at her and gave an embarrassed laugh. ‘Sorry, this is so bad – I’m really crap at faces ...’

Rowan felt as if she’d been punched in the nose. ‘You don’t know who we are.’

‘No, no, I do,’ said Tom unconvincingly. ‘Is it from netball?’

Ivan took Rowan’s arm. ‘Maybe we’d better let this poor young man get on with his evening. Sorry, mate.’

‘No worries. See you round.’

As Tom strode swiftly away, Rowan shook her arm free. ‘That was Ash’s boyfriend!’

‘Oh, was it?’ Ivan turned to squint at Tom’s rapidly retreating back. ‘Ash has a boyfriend, does she?’ There was a brief pause. ‘Remind me who Ash is again?’

‘Your daughter Ash! My sister!’

Regretfully Ivan shook his head. ‘Nope, never had a daughter called Ash. I think I’d remember that.’ He began to grin, then saw Rowan’s face as she struggled to hold back tears. ‘Hey, hey, Rowan? Sorry, I don’t get the joke. You’ll have to explain it to me.’

It was no use. If the sight of Tom hadn’t reminded him, then nothing Rowan could say would work. She trailed Ivan the rest of the way to the butcher two steps behind, in silence.

When they’d arrived home, Rowan couldn’t face the feast. The sight of Ivan and Laurel and Tansy piling their plates with food made her feel queasy. Ivan put his hand on her forehead. ‘You’re not sick, are you?’

‘No. Just not hungry.’

‘Perhaps you’d better go to bed then.’ Laurel speared another sausage.

Rowan pushed back her chair. ‘Yeah, I will.’

Tansy mouthed at her across the table, *you’re in trouble*. . . Rowan ignored her as she left the room.

She planned to listen to music, but her earbuds had gone missing – *die Schwäche* must have struck again. In the end she let her phone play softly on her bedside table and drifted away on a tide of music that drowned out the voices of her family, stuffing their faces with kebabs and fancy salad.

Rowan was deeply asleep when the doorbell rang. She jumped out of her skin and almost tumbled out of bed, panicking that Verity had sent her back in time, then with a rush of relief, realised that she was still in her own bedroom. Meanwhile the doorbell kept buzzing, and the sound was soon joined by insistent knocking, and then tapping at her window. Rowan could see the blue and red lights of an emergency vehicle flashing through the cracks of her blinds.

She groped for her bedside lamp. Then she was out of the room and yanking the front door open. Laurel was just behind her, hurrying along the hallway in her pyjamas, blinking groggily, while Ivan followed, knotting the cord of Laurel’s inadequate bathrobe around his waist.

Two police officers were standing at the door. In between them, looking very small and shivery, like Womble after a bath, was Tansy.

Laurel sprang at her. ‘Tansy! What the *heaven?*’ She wrapped her arms around Tansy and glared at the police.

‘She was wandering around the city,’ said one of the officers. They were different from the two who had come to question them about Ash.

‘What? Why?’ said Ivan.

Laurel swung her glare to Rowan. ‘Didn’t you hear her go out?’

Rowan protested, ‘I was asleep!’

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ gulped Tansy, muffled by her mother’s pyjama top.

Ivan said, ‘But what were you *doing?*’

‘I was – looking for something—’

‘For Ash?’ said Rowan.

Laurel and Tansy and Ivan all turned to look at her with pale, expressionless faces. A shiver ran over Rowan’s scalp. ‘Ash!’ she said, too loudly. ‘Our sister, Ash!’

The taller policeman cleared his throat. ‘Your eldest daughter’s gone missing, isn’t that right? There was a note in the file.’

Laurel turned the vague beam of her gaze toward him. After a moment she said, in a flat, mechanical voice, ‘Yes. Her name is Ash. She’s nineteen years old. She’s in second year at university.’ She sounded as if she was reciting something she’d memorised a long time ago.

Ivan said, ‘Thank you so much for bringing Tansy home. She must have been sleepwalking. We’ll look after her now.’

The two policemen looked at each other. ‘Well, if everything’s okay here, we’ll leave you to it,’ said the shorter policeman.

When the door was closed behind them, Laurel gave Tansy another hug. ‘Hot shower, then straight to bed.’

‘Unless you want a hot chocolate?’ offered Ivan.

Tansy shook her head. ‘I just want Womble,’ she mumbled. Slowly she drifted along the hallway and began to climb the stairs.

Ivan pulled the too-short bathrobe around himself. ‘I’m going back to bed, too. Some of us have to work in the morning.’

Rowan caught at her mother’s pyjama sleeve. ‘Mum, you do remember Ash, don’t you?’

Laurel frowned. ‘Ash ... don’t tell me, it sounds familiar ...’

Rowan grabbed her mother’s elbows and gave her a shake. ‘She’s your child, you must remember!’

‘Don’t joggle me like that.’ Laurel drew herself away and wrapped her arms around herself in the chilly hallway. Her eyes slid away from Rowan’s. ‘Go to bed. It’s late.’ She turned and began to follow Tansy and Ivan up the stairs.

Rowan closed her bedroom door and sank onto the end of her bed. She sat there for a long time, thinking, then she stood up, pushed her feet into her runners, and pulled Linda’s jumper over her head.

A minute later she was racing along the empty street, then she was hammering at Verity’s door. And then she was sobbing in Verity’s arms. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m ready. I’ll go.’

Verity patted her briskly on the back. ‘I knew you’d see sense. That’s my girl.’

‘Tell me what to wear.’

‘Wait here.’ Verity disappeared inside and reappeared a moment later with an armful of pale ruffled cotton. ‘Don’t forget your shoes. Ankle boots would be best.’

‘I don’t have any—’ Rowan stopped. ‘Okay.’

As Rowan stumbled home, she knew that Verity was watching from the end of her street; as she opened the door, she turned and waved to let her know that she was safe.

In her bedroom, the bedside lamp was still alight. Rowan stood in the middle of the room and shook out the dress that Verity had given her. It was pale yellow cotton, ruffled at the hem, with a large white collar. Rowan pulled it over her head, leaving the T-shirt she wore to bed on underneath. The dress was long, reaching to her mid-calf. After a moment's thought, she left on her baggy leggings too, but pulled on a pair of socks and her high-topped runners. Then she crawled under her desk to retrieve the blue and silver ring from where she'd hurled it, and slid it back onto her finger. It clung there, as if it belonged.

Rowan screwed up her face at her own reflection. She knew she didn't look quite right but this was the best she could do. The dress was itchy.

Rowan climbed into bed and switched off the lamp. The shadows of her bedroom closed around her, familiar and reassuring. She lay down, staring into the dark, and folded her hands over the blue-glass ring. 'Okay,' she whispered. 'Here we go.'



Rowan woke as she crashed to the floor. She lay for a moment, stunned, and realised that she had slid off a slippery overstuffed sofa that stood across the corner that her bed usually occupied. Gingerly she sat up and looked around.

In this time, her bedroom was a front parlour, with an upright piano, two slippery armchairs to match the sofa, a potted palm on a tiny table, and lace curtains draped at the windows. Paintings of flowers and landscapes hung from a polished picture rail. The biggest surprise was the rich emerald paint on the walls, which made the room feel much smaller.

Rowan felt a strange sense of disconnection. The room had never looked more old-fashioned, further back in time, than it did now. But paradoxically, it had never seemed younger. The smell of paint and freshly sawn wood filled her nostrils. Even the sunshine streaming through the windows seemed golden and brand-new. This version of the house was so new it had barely been lived in. It hadn't had time to build layers of memory and history. Laurel and Verity had said that the house was over a hundred years old, so she must have been carried back at least a hundred years, if not more.

An experienced time traveller now, she glanced around for a newspaper or a receipt or a calendar that would give her the date, but there were no clues to be seen.

Rowan sucked in a deep breath, tiptoed to the door, and poked her head out into the hallway. Pale green paint, a line of

neatly framed sketches, an umbrella stand, a row of hooks with ladies' coats and hats. The house was quiet. To her left stood the front door, glossy with dark green paint, surrounded by its panels of coloured glass, including the ruby-red one that her own elbow was due to smash in a few decades' time.

Rowan couldn't resist. She eased the front door open and peered outside.

Her street, where she'd lived all her life, looked completely different. There were vacant lots and building sites where in the future, houses would jostle shoulder to shoulder. The narrow street looked raw and unfinished. Instead of cars lining the gutter, a horse and cart ambled past with a clop of hooves. The road was hard-packed dirt, not smooth bitumen. A small, ragged boy ran past, kicking up spurts of dust with his bare feet.

Rowan was tempted to go out and explore. She'd never have another chance to wander around in real olden-times history. It was like being at Sovereign Hill. And in Verity's long dress, she'd blend in almost perfectly ... apart from her shoes.

For a moment she hovered on the doorstep. Was the shop that would become Dusty Bells café built yet? Was Verity's house there, or her studio? What about the school? Were trams running? What did the cricket ground look like? So many questions ...

But then she heard a noise behind her, within the house. Voices upstairs: there were people at home. If she left now, she might never be able to get back inside, and then how would she find a piece of glass for Verity's magic, how would they bring Ash home? Rowan had been worried about being stuck without shelter in 1972, and she was certain it would be even harder in this time, whenever that was. She pictured herself marooned on the street, or at the cricket ground, trying to find somewhere to sleep, waking in her own time far from the house and empty-handed. She couldn't risk it. And her family was forgetting Ash; somehow Rowan knew that meant time was running out.

Gently Rowan closed the door and stood for a moment with her back to the warm wood. Then she ventured deeper into the heart of the house, along the pale green, brand new hallway, past the polished dark wood of the stairs.

This first incarnation of the house looked so different from how it appeared in her own time, even from how it had been – or would be – in 1940. Through an open doorway, Rowan glimpsed a kitchen tacked onto the back of the house and she made a mental note to explore this further when she had a chance. The room beyond the stairs was a dining room, as it had been in the Raymonds' time, but with deep crimson walls, a dark wooden table, a sideboard and dark, high-backed chairs. Rowan spied a newspaper on the table and hurried over to check the date. *Monday, 23rd July, 1900.*

Wow. Nearly a hundred and twenty years ago!

On the sideboard lay an untidy heap of letters. Rowan saw her own address on one unopened envelope, in beautifully neat handwriting, for Mrs T. Whitecross.

Outside, beyond the kitchen, in the yard, she could hear noises of splashing and grunting and sloshing. It sounded like someone washing an elephant. Rowan tiptoed as far as the kitchen door and saw a skinny woman, her face red with exertion and steam, stirring what looked like a copper cauldron with a broomstick. She looked much more like a witch than Verity ever had ... Just then the woman looked up and saw her.

Rowan gulped, but stood her ground. The magic had protected her so far; she had to trust that it had disguised her this time, too. And sure enough, the red-faced woman gave her a nod of recognition and called, 'They're upstairs, love.'

'Thank you!' called Rowan, and she turned and made her way back through the kitchen and the dining room and up the stairs. She could hear two voices, both women's, one adult and one younger. The wooden banister under her hand was unpainted, polished, smooth to her touch. The stairs were uncarpeted, her footsteps muffled by a red and gold runner, held in place with shining brass rods.

The voices were coming from Ash's room. Rowan stopped in the doorway and looked in.

She saw a girl of about her own age and a woman about the same age as Laurel. The woman was painting the bedroom wall, not just slapping on a colour like she and Ash had done, so long ago – was it really only just over a week ago? – but painting a mural on the whitewashed wall beside the door. The other walls were covered with pale pinkish wallpaper patterned with – *yes!* thought Rowan, *I knew it!* – stripes and rosebuds.

Rowan gaped at the exuberant garden that was unfolding across the blank white canvas of the fourth wall: flowers and leaves, trees and berries, vines and birds. The woman wore a loose, paint-smearred smock over a long dress, and her fair hair was pinned in an untidy bun on the top of her head. As Rowan watched, she stopped abruptly to cough into a handkerchief, so violently that she had to hold onto the back of a chair. When the coughing fit was over, her cheeks were flushed scarlet but the rest of her face was chalky pale.

The girl saw Rowan standing just outside the door, and a strange expression crossed her face, a mixture of annoyance, embarrassment and misery. She glared at Rowan almost as if she hated her, and Rowan took an instinctive step back. The girl said, 'Mama!'

'What is it, Flora?' The mother crumpled her handkerchief and stowed it in her pocket, and turned to Rowan with a quick, bright smile. 'Rowena! My dear! Come in! What do you think of our masterpiece?'

What Rowan thought was that she didn't care for the name Rowena; but she allowed herself to be drawn into the room, and she said truthfully, 'I think it's amazing. Really cool ... Mrs Whitecross.'

'Amazing! Cool! We can trust you to teach us the latest slang!' The fair-haired woman laughed, but the laugh turned into another cough, which she smothered hastily in the handkerchief. Flora shot Rowan a savage look.

'Mama? Would you like a glass of water?'

Her mother waved a dismissive hand. ‘No need – I’m perfectly all right. But Rowena, didn’t I tell you last time? Please call me Edith. *Mrs Whitecross* makes me feel at least a hundred years old.’

‘Okay – Edith,’ said Rowan.

Edith clasped her hands together, splattering paint from her brush across her smock. ‘You’ll help us, won’t you, now you’re here? Many hands make light work.’

‘If Flora doesn’t mind.’ Rowan slid her a glance.

Flora muttered, ‘I don’t care.’

Edith handed Rowan a brush, and directed her to a section near the skirting board – taking the same precaution Rowan herself had taken when she was painting Ash’s walls in her own time, making sure she didn’t mess up an area that was too visible, even though Ash had told her she trusted her ... Suddenly Rowan missed her sister so much that it hurt, a physical clutching in her chest. She concentrated on painting the broad leaf that Edith had assigned her, and after a minute, Flora picked up a brush too, and began dabbing at a scarlet flower beside the door. Edith filled the awkward silence with a stream of chatter.

‘Do you know, Rowena, I’m glad that Flora and I decided on the garden. I know it seems the obvious choice, given her name, but we had a quite a debate about it, didn’t we, Flora? We were considering painting a view of Paris rooftops, the view I could see from my garret when I lived in France. But I think the garden will be lovely ... Have I told you about my time in Paris, Rowena? What was that, Flora?’

‘I said, only a thousand times.’

‘Oh, you are cruel to me. Isn’t she cruel, Rowena? Never mind. I wonder if my favourite café is still there? I should like to take you both there, some day, and we shall order hot chocolate. They serve it in the most enormous cups, you know, more like bowls than cups. *Chocolat chaud* and a warm fresh baguette for breakfast – delicious! And the theatres – there is nothing in the world like the theatres of Paris. I saw Loïe

Fuller dance at the Folies Bergère. Have I ever told you about that, Flora?’

Flora shrugged, her eyes fixed on the petal she was painting.

‘Oh, she was extraordinary!’ sighed Edith. Her brush swooped across the wall like an independent creature, trailing birds and leaves and vines in its wake. ‘She danced the *Danse Serpentine*. She wore a costume of pleated silk – like spread wings—’ Edith lifted her arms to demonstrate, ‘—with coloured lights projected onto the silk. Shimmering and swirling, like an angel, like a flower in full bloom—’

Rowan was enchanted. She could imagine Tansy dancing like this Loïe Fuller; she’d have to tell her about it when she came home. Why was Flora in such a bad mood, she wondered; unless she didn’t want to share her dazzling, delightful mother with anyone? Or maybe Verity’s magic had made a mistake, and Flora and ‘Rowena’ weren’t friends at all?

‘You’ll join us for lunch, won’t you, Rowena? You must! We need you!’

‘I’d like that,’ said Rowan. This time she almost didn’t bother looking at Flora before accepting. She knew she’d have a murderous expression on her face; and she did.



Red-faced Bertha came huffing up the stairs to tell them lunch was ready. Edith invited her to admire the mural, but Bertha looked at it suspiciously and said that she supposed it was very nice, but she preferred the rosebud wallpaper, herself.

Rowan and Flora were sent to wash their hands in the bathroom, which stood in the same place at the top of the stairs, and contained a bath and a huge pedestal basin, but no toilet. Rowan wondered if she should ask Flora what was bothering her, but her nerve failed, and she followed the other girl down the stairs in silence.

Edith sat at the head of the table, with Flora and Rowan on either side. Lunch was cold meat and salad. The table was set far more formally than Rowan's family ever managed, with a spotless white tablecloth, folded napkins, bread and butter plates and delicate etched drinking glasses.

'Ah, well, washing day lunch,' sighed Edith, as if the meal were something to apologise for. 'I expect it's much the same at your house, Rowena? Flora, could you pass Rowena some bread and butter? My, what a lovely ring, I didn't notice it before.'

'Oh! Thank you ...' Rowan couldn't decide whether to say *I found it*, which sounded suspicious, despite being the truth, or *my sister gave it to me*, which might also be suspicious if Rowena didn't have a sister, and was also a lie. *A present from*

a friend was true, but might lead to awkward questions. Safest to say nothing.

‘Did you see Rowena’s ring, Flora? Isn’t it pretty?’

Flora muttered, ‘Very pretty.’

Edith was seized by another coughing fit, stifled in her handkerchief. This time, Rowan was startled to see bright spots of blood on the white cloth as Edith crumpled the handkerchief and hid it away in her pocket.

‘So!’ Edith turned back to Rowan, her eyes glittering bright, her cheeks a feverish pink. ‘Flora tells me you’re a bookworm. What are you reading at the moment?’

‘Um ... the last book I read was called *Fangirl*.’

Edith and Flora both gazed at her, Edith with puzzled interest, Flora with sullen resentment. ‘I don’t believe I’ve heard of that,’ said Edith. ‘What is it about?’

‘Um ...’ Rowan floundered, wondering how to explain the plot of a book that centred around a uni student who writes internet fan fiction in a way that Edith and Flora might understand.

A strangled sound came from the other side of the table. To her horror, Rowan saw that tears were flooding down Flora’s face.

‘Oh, dear,’ whispered Edith. She leaned across to grasp Flora’s hand, but Flora jerked it out of reach. Edith said to Rowan, ‘I’m so sorry, my dear. Flora has just found out ... some difficult news.’

Rowan started to stammer, ‘That’s okay—’ but Flora looked at Edith and burst out bitterly, ‘Yes, you’re *dying*. That is *difficult*!’

Horrified, Rowan stared at her plate. A segment of tomato, a lettuce leaf, half a hard-boiled egg, a dollop of salad cream and two slices of cold beef stared back at her.

Flora cried, ‘How can you sit and talk of books, as if everything were the same as before? As if the world wasn’t ending?’

She snatched up her glass of water and dashed it to the floor where it smashed into pieces. There was a shocked silence. The only sound was Flora's sobbing.

Bertha appeared in the kitchen doorway, her eyes wide with alarm, but Edith waved her away. Rowan sat frozen. She wanted to run from the room, run out of the house. But she had nowhere to go.

Edith rose from her chair and wrapped her arms around Flora, rocking her gently, murmuring too softly for Rowan to hear what she was saying. Rowan shrank back in her chair, wishing she was invisible. Flora pressed her face against her mother's paint-stained smock.

Rowan couldn't sit still and witness such a private moment. She slipped out of her chair, dropped to her hands and knees and began to quietly collect up the pieces of the smashed glass. The largest chunk was from the thicker bottom of the tumbler, with a long sliver curving up from it like a single sharp petal. Rowan set that one aside on the table for Verity and placed the rest carefully onto a bread-and-butter plate.

Above her head, she heard Edith begin to cough. But instead of managing to smother it again in her handkerchief, this time the fit went on and on until Edith was gasping for breath, staggering against the side of the table for support.

'Mama?' Flora's voice was shrill with panic. 'Mama? What can I do?'

Edith took a step backward, and Rowan heard her gasp out, 'A moment ... don't worry ... upstairs ... lie down ...'

Edith stumbled to the door and closed it firmly behind her. Rowan could hear the swish of her skirts as she slowly dragged herself up the staircase, pausing to cough every few steps. Flora fell back into her chair and buried her head in her arms on the tabletop. When Rowan dared to creep out from under the table, Flora's shoulders were shaking with sobs.

Awkwardly Rowan said, 'I'm so sorry about your mum.'

Flora didn't respond; if anything, she cried harder.

Rowan didn't know what to do. She rubbed Flora's back as she would have done for Tansy. After a few minutes Flora's sobs subsided. She pulled a grubby handkerchief from her sleeve and blew her nose. In a muffled voice, she said, 'Thank you for not saying *it's God's will* or *everything will work out for the best*.'

'Why would I say that?' said Rowan. 'It sucks, it's horrible.'

Flora spluttered, and blew her nose again. Rowan sat down beside her and waited. Without looking up, Flora said in a low voice, 'Do you know the worst part? I know I should be sad about Mama – and I am, I *am*!'

Rowan said, 'I believe you.'

Flora gulped. 'But I can't stop thinking about what will happen after ... I suppose I will have to go to live with my grandmother. And I don't *want* to live with Grandmamma.'

'Maybe you should tell your mother that?' said Rowan.

Flora shook her head violently. 'How can I? How can I let her think that I care about *that*, when I should be most upset about – about losing her?'

'I think your mum will know that you're upset about losing her,' said Rowan. 'I think that's pretty clear. But don't you reckon she'd want to know how you feel? She'll want you to be happy after she's gone – well, you know, not *happy*, but the least sad that's possible.'

'I'd rather go to the orphanage than live with Grandmamma!' declared Flora.

'Is there anyone else who could take care of you? Any other relatives? Friends of the family?'

Flora looked up with a sudden gleam in her eye. 'I know who I'd rather. Our friend, Miss Blaschka.'

Rowan's breath stopped. Her heart was beating hard. 'You mean, Verity Blaschka?'

Flora looked at her with what Rowan guessed was new respect. 'I didn't know that you knew Miss Blaschka. Have

you visited her studio? That's Miss Blaschka's work.' She nodded to a shelf above the sideboard that Rowan hadn't noticed. It held a series of glass globes, subtly coloured and arranged on stands, refracting the light from the dining room window into a scattering of rainbows, echoed and multiplied. Rowan recognised them; in her time, they hung at Verity's own front window.

'Verity would be a fantastic guardian,' said Rowan. 'That's who I'd pick, if I had to.'

'I agree.' Flora seized Rowan's hand. 'Did Miss Blaschka make your ring? It looks like her work.'

'I don't know who made it,' said Rowan.

'I'm sure she could make one like this. It's sea glass, isn't it?'

'It looks like sea glass ... I love sea glass.'

'Oh, so do I!'

The two girls' eyes met, and Flora smiled. Rowan found herself smiling back. Flora said with sudden decision, 'I'm going to ask Miss Blaschka to be my guardian, when Mama – when Mama is gone. And I'm going to ask her to make me a ring like yours. Could I borrow it, to show her?'

'Oh—' Rowan hesitated. Having already lost the ring and regained it once, she was reluctant to let it out of her grasp a second time. 'I could draw it for you?' she offered quickly.

Flora jumped up and fetched a pencil and one of the letters from the sideboard. Rowan sketched the ring, paying particular attention to the delicate silver claws that held the oval of pale blue glass in place. It did look like Verity's work ...

Rowan blinked as the rainbows from the glass globes seemed to catch on the plate of broken glass fragments she'd swept up from under the table. Rainbows winked and flashed in her eyes. A wave of fatigue crashed over her, so intense that her head almost dropped to the tabletop. She managed to scramble up, grabbing the largest chunk of glass in her hand.

‘Rowena?’ asked Flora in alarm. ‘Are you ill?’

‘Need to lie down,’ mumbled Rowan. She stumbled to the door, instinctively heading for her bedroom. Except it wasn’t her bedroom yet ... She was so exhausted she had to hold onto the wall. She was dimly aware of the sound of Edith’s racking cough from overhead, and of Flora following anxiously at her heels. She almost fell inside the room and staggered to the sofa, a huge yawn splitting her face. The sofa was too hard and slippery to sit on, so she sank onto the rug and leaned against it instead.

‘Rowena? Would you like some water?’

Rowan was too drowsy to answer, too drowsy even to sit upright. She keeled over to lie on the rug, her fingers curled loosely around the precious piece of glass, and plummeted over the cliff-edge of sleep.



Rowan woke on the floor of her darkened bedroom. Instantly the realisation crashed over her: Flora had been there when she fell asleep! Flora had probably seen her disappear into thin air. All the magical disguise in the world couldn't have hidden that. She would have to tell Verity; hopefully a witness to the magic wouldn't ruin everything.

She was cold and stiff and desperate for a pee. Rowan unfolded herself on legs that felt like jointed sticks, dropped the piece of glass onto her desk, and staggered along the shadowy hallway toward the downstairs bathroom.

But halfway down the hall, she stopped. A noise was coming from the big back room, a whimpering sound, as if their dog were trapped somewhere.

Rowan crept forward. 'Womble?'

But it was Laurel who looked up from the dining table, wild-eyed and weeping, her hair dishevelled, her pyjama buttons fastened in the wrong holes. For a second Rowan had a flash of Flora sitting in the same spot at the table, crying; the image slid in and out of focus. Then the shadow of Flora vanished, and it was just her mum sitting there. Laurel gazed at Rowan blankly, as if she didn't know who she was. A candle flickered on the table in front of her.

'Mum?' whispered Rowan. 'Are you okay?'

Laurel held up a hand. 'Shh! Can you hear that?'

Rowan crept closer. ‘Hear what?’

‘Someone’s crying.’ Laurel’s eyes were wide with fear. ‘Can’t you hear them crying?’

‘No, I can’t hear anything.’ But then Rowan thought she did hear a thin wail, distant and despairing. Was it Flora sobbing? With a tremor in her voice, she whispered, ‘It’s the wind, Mum. Or Womble ...’

But it didn’t sound like Womble.

Blindly Laurel groped and clutched at Rowan. ‘It’s a baby crying. Is it my baby?’

‘You mean Tansy? Tansy’s not a baby anymore.’

Laurel shook her head. ‘No, no, my other baby, my first baby. What’s her name? What’s her name? I can’t remember her name!’ Her voice rose in a terrified wail.

Rowan’s heart hammered; she was just as frightened as Laurel. She was frozen, her mother’s fingers digging into her arm like a bracelet of bone. The candle flame flared and guttered, sending their two shadows diving and swooping up the wall.

Rowan prised her mother’s hand free. ‘I’ll get Dad—’ She bolted for the stairs, where she collided with Tansy, halfway down.

‘What’s going on? Is Mum okay?’

Rowan whispered, ‘Everything’s fine ... Go back to bed. Have you got Womble?’

‘Yes, he’s here ...’

‘You look after him. I’ll get Dad.’

Ivan was deeply buried under the doona, snoring like a wombat. Rowan shook his shoulder. ‘Dad! Dad! Wake up. Mum’s being weird and I’m scared.’

Ivan groaned in his sleep and burrowed deeper, but Rowan was relentless. ‘Dad! You need to wake up!’

At last she succeeded in rousing him and making him understand that Laurel was downstairs.

‘Crying?’ he repeated blankly. ‘What’s she crying about?’

Rowan almost stamped her foot in frustration. ‘Ash! She’s crying about Ash because we’ve lost her!’

Ivan ran his hand through his hair. ‘What are you talking about, Ro? Are you sure you’re not dreaming? And what the heck are you wearing?’

‘Forget it! I give up!’ Rowan turned and sprinted out of the room, down the stairs, past the big room where Laurel sat, blocking her ears, moaning softly, rocking back and forth. Rowan ran along the hallway, flung open the front door and dashed into the night.

Outside, the air was chill and the streets were empty. Far away, at the top of the hill, she could hear distant voices and traffic and the beeping of a crossing signal. She ran down the middle of the narrow street, under the cold glare of the streetlights, across the between-road and down the cul-de-sac to Verity’s cottage. She banged on the door with her fist and pressed the doorbell. ‘Verity! Verity! Let me in!’ She didn’t realise until she heard her own voice that she was crying too.

The blue door swung open and there stood Verity, her hair loose around her shoulders, wrapped in her peacock dressing-gown. ‘Rowan? It’s three o’clock in the morning! What are you doing here?’

Breathless, Rowan gasped, ‘It’s Mum.’

Without another word, Verity pulled the door shut and together they hurried along the street back to Rowan’s house, Verity’s slippers tripping on the bitumen.

The first thing they heard as they crossed the threshold was Tansy screaming from upstairs. ‘Help! Quick, help!’

Laurel was trying to climb out of Tansy’s window.

Ivan had grabbed her round the waist and was trying to haul her backward as Womble barked hysterically and Tansy

shrieked in terror. Verity cried sharply, ‘Laurel! Stop that at once!’

Laurel shuddered, and stopped struggling in Ivan’s arms. She turned her head and gazed blankly at Verity, then shook herself free from Ivan and raised her hands to her forehead. She allowed Verity to lead her out of the room and down the stairs.

Ivan passed a trembling hand over his face. ‘I don’t understand – she just dived for the window. Not a word.’

‘Ivan!’ Verity called. ‘Come downstairs and help me.’

When their father had left the room, Tansy hurled herself at Rowan. ‘Why would she do that, Ro? What’s wrong with her?’

Rowan held her sister tightly. ‘I don’t know. There used to be a flat roof outside there. She must have been remembering that, trying to get out there.’

Tansy shivered. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I— I—’ Rowan floundered. ‘Mum must have told me.’

‘Dad was talking to her but she didn’t seem to hear him.’

‘Don’t cry. She’ll be okay now. Verity’s here.’

Gradually Rowan felt Tansy stop shaking, and relax in her arms. ‘Come on, let’s go down.’ She took her little sister’s hand as if she were four years old again and led her down the stairs. Womble trotted at their heels, stretching out to give their hands an occasional reassuring lick.

In the kitchen, Verity poured warm cinnamon-spiced milk into mugs. Laurel was sitting on the couch, a rug over her knees, looking slightly dazed, holding Ivan’s hand. He was saying, ‘But I don’t understand. What were you thinking?’

Laurel said, ‘I think – I think I was looking for *Damien*.’

Tansy flopped onto the end of the couch. ‘Who the hell is Damien?’

Laurel jumped. ‘Tansy! I didn’t see you there.’

‘So who’s Damien?’ Tansy persisted.

‘Never mind. No one,’ said Ivan sharply.

Verity set the mugs on the coffee table. Rowan slid onto the floor, her back against the ottoman. She didn’t dare look at anyone. Her heart was thumping.

‘Mum?’ said Tansy. ‘He must be *someone* if you were climbing out the window to find him.’

There was a long silence.

At last Laurel said, ‘Perhaps now’s not the right time to talk about this.’

‘There’s no need to talk about it at all!’ barked Ivan.

Laurel shifted in her seat. ‘He was an old boyfriend of mine.’

Tansy laughed. ‘So? What do you care, Dad? It doesn’t matter – you won.’

Ivan frowned. ‘Yes, I guess I did ... So why do I care?’ he added almost to himself.

Rowan kept her head lowered, twisting the blue-glass ring around her finger. Laurel reached out and lifted Rowan’s hand to peer at it more closely. ‘I remember that ring. Steph used to have a ring like that. Verity, do you remember Steph’s ring? I always coveted that ring ...’ Laurel’s voice trailed away, then she sat bolt upright. She cried, ‘I had a baby!’

‘Yes,’ said Ivan. ‘Two babies.’

Laurel gazed at Rowan and Tansy. ‘My two babies ...’

‘You had three babies, Mum,’ said Rowan. ‘Tansy and me, and Ash.’

‘Ash!’ Laurel’s face cleared. ‘Yes, Ash. This is about Ash. I should tell the girls. They have the right to know, too.’

‘No!’ said Ivan. ‘They don’t need to know—’ His face creased in confusion. ‘What am I talking about? Laurel?’

Verity shook her head. ‘Ivan, shh. Let her talk now. It’s time for Rowan and Tansy to know the truth.’

Ivan buried his face in his hands. ‘I don’t understand ...’

Rowan said, ‘Know the truth about what?’

Laurel looked at her, and for the first time that night, Rowan knew that her mother was really seeing her. ‘Your dad – your dad isn’t Ash’s father.’

The room was very still. Only the candle on the table flickered. Rowan sat stunned.

‘Ash?’ mumbled Ivan uncertainly.

Verity patted his knee. ‘Shh, Ivan.’

Tansy’s lips parted. ‘Ash ... That’s right, Ash. Where is Ash? Why isn’t she here?’

Rowan found her voice. ‘*What* did you say?’

‘Ash’s father was – is – a man called Damien. He was my boyfriend. A long time ago.’

Tansy jumped up. ‘That’s *bullshit!*’ She glared at Laurel. ‘You’re lying!’

‘It’s not true.’ Rowan’s mouth was dry. ‘I don’t believe it. Dad is *all* of our dads. We’re *sisters*.’

‘It is true,’ said Laurel. ‘But it doesn’t mean that you’re not still sisters.’

Tansy turned to Ivan. ‘Dad! It’s not true, is it?’

Ivan looked up, his hair on end, bewildered. ‘I don’t know what’s happening. Am I losing my mind? I don’t remember—’

Verity spoke to him briskly, ‘Ivan, don’t worry. Go back to bed. I’ll take care of everything here. We can sort all of this out in the morning.’ She held his gaze for a long moment, and at last Ivan gave a nod and groped his way toward the stairs.

‘See? It’s not true! If it was true, Dad would know!’ cried Tansy triumphantly.

‘Ash’s father is Damien,’ said Laurel wearily.

‘Shut up! Stop lying! Why are you doing this?’ Tansy fled up the stairs past Ivan. Her bedroom door slammed shut. Womble burst out barking.

‘Tansy! Wait!’ Laurel swung her legs off the couch to follow her, but Verity put out a hand.

‘I’ll talk to her. You drink your milk.’

Left alone, Rowan and Laurel sipped at their mugs in silence, listening to the murmur of voices overhead, shrill and indignant at first, then fading into quiet. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything,’ whispered Laurel. ‘Is that where Ash has gone? To find Damien? That’s what your dad thought, what Ivan thought. He was going to go after her, but then he changed his mind ...’

Rowan set down her mug. ‘Does Ash *know*? Did she always know? Why didn’t you tell *us*?’

‘I never wanted you girls to think there was any difference between you. It never mattered, not to me, not to your dad. I didn’t think it mattered to Ash, either, but perhaps I was wrong ... What do you think? Did she ever say anything to you?’

‘No, obviously she didn’t. I’ve only just found out about it this second! I can’t believe you didn’t tell us.’ Rowan was furious; but under her anger, a terrible thought was beginning to take shape.

‘Hmm?’ Laurel looked at her vaguely. ‘Tell you what?’

‘About Ash—’ Rowan stopped. She could see from Laurel’s face that she was forgetting again. ‘Never mind. It doesn’t matter.’

Laurel stifled a yawn. ‘I’m so tired.’

Rowan tucked a rug over her mother and smoothed her hair. ‘Verity’s here. She’ll look after us. You can go to sleep now.’

‘You’ll go to bed, too, won’t you?’

‘Yes, I’m going,’ said Rowan; but as Laurel’s eyes closed, she settled back on the floor with her back to the ottoman and her knees tucked under her chin, thinking hard, the blue-glass ring cool and smooth against her lips. Womble jumped up onto the couch, gave a sudden heavy sigh, and curled himself inside the crook of Laurel’s knees.

After what seemed like hours, the stairs creaked as Verity descended.

‘Tansy’s asleep, and so is your father,’ she said. ‘I’ve had to do some rapid magic there, I can tell you. We need to sort out this Ash situation, and quickly.’

Rowan unfolded herself. ‘You knew! And you didn’t tell me!’

‘Not my secret to tell,’ said Verity. ‘People don’t always follow my advice, unfortunately. If it had been up to me, it never would have been a secret in the first place.’ Her eyes swept up and down Rowan, the yellow dress, the high-topped runners. ‘Are you on your way, or have you come back? Did you bring me some glass?’

‘Yes, I’ve got it – but Verity, I need to talk to you first.’

‘Can’t it wait? I have to get on with this magic. You can see for yourself that our time is running out, though I don’t quite understand why.’

‘I think I know why.’

Verity’s eyebrows rose. ‘Indeed? Well then, you’d better tell me.’

They sat at the table, talking in low voices, so they wouldn’t wake Laurel.

Rowan picked at the wax drips from the candle. ‘So ... when Ash and I were at that party, in 1999, Mum was there too. She was young, and Damien was there. He was—’ Rowan hesitated. ‘He was a dick.’

A smile flickered across Verity’s tired face.

‘Anyway, Mum – Laurel – was crying and upset and wondering if she should break up with him. And I—’ Rowan faltered. ‘I kind of told her that she should.’

Verity’s smile vanished.

‘I mean, I think she was probably going to do it anyway ... But she did it that night. She made me stay. She said she wanted a witness. And then he left. He stormed off. He was

really mad. So I was wondering ...' Rowan swallowed. 'I think I might have stuffed up,' she whispered. 'What if they did break up then, forever? Ash was born at the end of 2000. So if Damien *is* her father, Mum and Damien should have stayed together until, at least, I dunno, March?'

'Laurel and Damien broke up after Laurel found out she was pregnant with Ash,' said Verity. 'He didn't want a baby. Laurel's family had very old-fashioned ideas about pregnancy outside marriage, and they were unforgiving. They cut her off, and she and Ash lived with me for a year, until Laurel and Ivan met at one of my exhibitions.'

'They lived with you in your little house? That must have been a squash.'

'It was.'

'So *that's* why we don't see Mum's family?'

'Yes.'

'Okay, right.' Rowan splayed her hands on the tabletop. 'That's what *should* have happened. But if Mum and Damien broke up on the night of the party instead, that means ... no Ash?'

'No Ash.'

'We're trying to go back and rescue her, right? But ...'

Verity finished her sentence. '... but if Laurel and Damien stay broken up, then Ash will never be born.'

'So what does that mean?' said Rowan. 'Is she, like, fading away? Will she stop existing? Is that why Mum and Dad and Tansy and Tom are forgetting her? Mum remembered her tonight, and Tansy did too, but Dad didn't, did he? And Mum had forgotten about her again by the time she fell asleep. Verity, what do we do?'

For a long moment Verity didn't reply. She stared into the candle flame, unblinking, for so long that Rowan began to worry that she'd gone into a trance. In the soft mysterious candlelight, her fair-silvery hair hanging loose and wild around her shoulders, and her peacock dressing-gown

shimmering, Verity looked thoroughly magical, like a witch or a goddess, an ancient priestess, a queen.

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ said Rowan, to break the silence. ‘If I’d *known* about Ash and Damien, I wouldn’t have encouraged Mum to break up with him, would I?’

‘It doesn’t matter who is or isn’t to blame,’ said Verity impatiently. ‘Bring me that piece of glass from your last visit.’

Rowan pushed back her chair and ran to her room. She picked up the long shard from Flora’s smashed tumbler and ran back to the big room. ‘Can you send me back right now? I’m ready to go. We can’t waste any more time. What if Ash fades away completely? What if everyone forgets her? What if you and I forget her too? What if she just drops out of history?’

‘You and I are not going to forget Ash,’ snapped Verity. ‘But this changes my plans. I’ll need some time to prepare. And you can prepare, too. I’ll send you back to the night of the party, and while you’re there, you must find a way to prevent your other self from making Laurel and Damien split up. Do you think you can manage that?’

Rowan nodded fervently, but she had no idea how she might achieve it. She said, ‘Verity, when I was in 1900, Flora was talking about you. She called you Miss Blaschka. Did you end up becoming her guardian after her mother died? Have you really lived here since 1900? How old *are* you?’

‘Rowan, I’ve told you before, it’s not polite to ask people their age.’ Verity shook her head. ‘Yes, poor Edith. I did become Flora’s guardian ... and, in time, she became the guardian of *die Schwäche*, guardian of this house. She lived here for thirty-five years. I had to explain to her about *die Schwäche* when she was still very young, not much older than you. She’d seen something that she couldn’t explain—’

‘I think that was me,’ said Rowan. ‘I fell asleep in front of her.’

‘Rowan, you will have to learn to be more careful,’ said Verity severely. She picked up the shard of glass carefully

between her forefinger and thumb, then she held out her other hand. 'And I'll need your ring now, too.'

Involuntarily Rowan clasped her hands together behind her back. 'Oh!'

'You'll get it back,' said Verity gently.

'Okay.' Reluctantly Rowan twisted the ring from her finger and dropped it into Verity's palm.

Verity nodded. 'And now I must go home. I have so much work to do.'

Rowan nodded back; her eyes were already closing. She laid her head on her arms, and by the time Verity had reached the front door, she was asleep.



It was Womble who woke Rowan, tapping her insistently with one paw and asking to go outside. Rowan stumbled to the back door and watched blearily as he bounded across the yard. The clock on the microwave told her that she and Tansy had already missed the bus, and for a moment she wrestled with herself. What a luxury it would be to crawl back into bed and sleep the rest of the day away ...

She tucked the quilt over Laurel and dragged herself up the stairs. She could hear her father snoring from her parents' bedroom, and she decided to let him keep sleeping. She tapped on Tansy's door. 'Tans? We're really late.'

Tansy shot out of her room, hair like a bird's nest, hopping as she pulled on her shoes. They made it to school; horribly behind schedule, but they made it. Under the circumstances, thought Rowan exhaustedly, that was a pretty good achievement.

Somehow they staggered through Tuesday. When they arrived home, Laurel had moved from the couch to bed. Ivan was in the kitchen, wearing a ratty T-shirt and tracksuit pants. He blinked as the girls came in. 'I feel weird. I think I must be coming down with something. Your mum's been asleep all day. I think I'll go back to bed, too – will you guys be okay?'

Rowan felt like crying, but she said, 'We'll be fine.'

Tansy disappeared into her room with an apple and a bag of chips and Womble; Rowan stood under the shower for a long time, not thinking anything in particular. Her brain had run out of thoughts, wrung dry like a limp rag. She stared at the TV, but nothing sank in; the coloured pictures danced on the surface of the glass and slid off her mind like rain down a window.

Just as Rowan was drifting around her room, getting ready to go to bed herself, Verity tapped on her window and made her jump.

‘Verity, you have to learn to text people,’ whispered Rowan as she let her into the house, ‘not bang on the window like a savage.’

Verity’s eyes flashed with impatience. Clearly she wasn’t in a humorous mood. There were dark shadows beneath her eyes and her face was grey with fatigue. She opened a small, embroidered drawstring bag and pulled out a metal tube, about the length of Rowan’s hand.

‘It’s a kaleidoscope,’ she said. ‘To bring Ash home.’

Rowan raised it to her eye. Chips of coloured glass, yellow, green, red, white and blue, tumbled into snowflake patterns as she turned the end of the tube. ‘This is what you’ve been making? This is why you needed the pieces of glass?’

‘Yes.’ Verity sank into Rowan’s chair, resting her head on her hand.

Rowan squinted into the kaleidoscope, where the chips of glass glowed as radiant as jewels. Green from the bottle from the party in 1999, yellow from the 1970s light shade, red from the Raymonds’ front door in the 1940s, white from Flora’s drinking glass in 1900: emerald and topaz, ruby and pearl. And soft pale sapphire ...

‘My ring!’ Rowan stared at Verity, stricken. ‘You broke my ring?’

‘I had to. That ring came to find you – it’s part of the magic.’

‘My ring ...’ mourned Rowan. A lump rose in her throat.

‘It’s the only way to bring your sister home.’ Verity lowered the embroidered bag around Rowan’s neck. ‘Put the kaleidoscope in here and make sure you keep it safe. Ash won’t be brought home automatically, the way you have been. She will need to be holding the kaleidoscope when she falls asleep. Try to come home together.’

‘Will Ash come back to the same night she left? So it’ll be like she never got left behind? Will that wipe out everything that happened last week?’

‘No, she’ll come back tonight,’ said Verity. ‘She will still have missed over a week of our time. Bringing her back to the night she left would have made too many complications, and there’s been enough of a mess created as it is, with Laurel and Damien breaking up. Don’t forget, Rowan, you have to stop that from happening, or there’ll be even more of a fiasco to clean up. Have you worked out how to do that?’

Rowan didn’t want to answer; she had no idea. She was hoping inspiration would strike when she needed it to. ‘But if Ash is using the kaleidoscope, are you positive that I’ll come back too?’

‘Rowan.’ Verity cupped her face in her hands and gazed into her eyes. ‘You don’t need a magic kaleidoscope or magic clothes or a ring or anything else to travel through *die Schwäche*. Not to come home, anyway. *Die Schwäche* will bring you home.’

‘But – do you have something for me to wear, to take me to 1999?’

‘What do you think the bag is for? I made it myself, all those years ago.’ Verity kissed one fingertip and pressed it to Rowan’s forehead. ‘That’s for goodnight.’ She kissed a second finger. ‘And that’s for good luck.’

Rowan closed the door behind Verity, her heart beating hard. She dressed in a proper party outfit, in jeans and her favourite top, the embroidered bag containing the kaleidoscope hanging securely across her chest. Her finger felt empty without the blue ring. She wished Verity had been able

to find a way to weave her spell that hadn't involved sacrificing it. But if it brought Ash back, it would be worth it.

She lay down on her bed and whispered, 'Hold on, Ash, I'm coming.' She clasped her hands around the tube of the kaleidoscope, and waited for sleep to wash over her.



Rowan burst through the surface like a swimmer exploding from water, instantly and completely awake. She was back in Angie's darkened downstairs bedroom, elaborately draped in colourful fabrics like a cloth-lined cave. Rowan struggled free from Angie's bed and crept to the door, listening to the noise of the party at the back of the house, the thump of the music, the shriek of voices and laughter. She touched the bag around her neck for reassurance and tiptoed out into the hallway.

But before she could reach the living room, she heard a pair of familiar voices descending the stairs. She ducked inside the office (in 1999, it was another dark, untidy bedroom that smelled of patchouli), just in time to avoid Ash and herself – herself from the first trip back in time – as they came downstairs and disappeared into the noisy swirl of the party.

Rowan's heart was beating wildly. It was so freaky to see herself – a past version of herself – that she could hardly bear to think about it. On the other hand, it was wonderful to see Ash, to know that her sister was okay. But she wished she'd spent the day working out an actual plan, like Verity had suggested, instead of nodding asleep on her desk or doodling. Finding Ash, giving her the kaleidoscope and bringing her home was the most important job, but she also had to stop Damien and Laurel from breaking up – or at least, stop herself from encouraging Laurel to take that final step.

She and Ash would be dancing now; she recognised the music. She had a little time before her other self climbed out onto the roof to sit with Laurel. Somehow she had to stop herself, but how? Rowan leaned against the wall of the darkened bedroom. If only she wasn't so tired ... if only she had more time to think ...

The best plan, the only plan, that she could come up with was to ambush herself before she could join Laurel on the roof. She wasn't sure what might happen when she encountered her former self; hopefully the universe wouldn't explode. Surely Verity would have warned her about that? Maybe they would merge horribly into one person, like drops of molten glass combining. Rowan shuddered. Probably best if other people didn't see them together, either. They'd have to pretend to be twins ...

Her mind churning, Rowan climbed the stairs and slipped into the TV room to wait. But she'd forgotten about the guy sitting watching TV on the couch; she tripped over his feet in the dark.

'Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't see you.'

'Don't worry about it. My fault for sticking my big feet in your way. You okay?'

'Yeah, I'm all right.' Rowan hesitated, then sat down beside him. 'What are you watching?'

He shrugged. 'Some comedy.' A beat. 'About a happy family.' Another beat. 'So unrealistic.' He swigged from the bottle in his hand.

Oh, dear. She said, 'My name's Rowan.'

He stuck out his hand. 'Michael.'

As Rowan shook his hand, an electric flicker of awareness shivered through her. Trying to keep her voice casual, she asked, 'Do you – do you live round here?'

'Huh! Funny you should ask that. Not anymore, but I actually grew up in this street, just over the road as a matter of fact.' He took another swig, turned the empty bottle upside down, dropped it on the floor at his feet, and opened another one. He squinted doubtfully at Rowan, as if seeing her properly for the first time. 'Aren't you a bit young for this party?'

'I'm Angie's cousin – that's why I'm here. Aren't *you* a bit old?' He wasn't a student, he was an elderly man, at least thirty, Rowan guessed.

‘Touché, Rowan – you did say Rowan, right?’ He toasted her gloomily with his beer bottle. ‘You’re right, I am too old, and I don’t know anyone here, and I should be ashamed of myself, crashing a party because I went home for dinner and had a fight with my dad, correction, *another* fight with my dad, and walked out and then I saw there was a party going on over here and like the fool that I am, I thought it might cheer me up to have a couple of drinks and a dance. Hey, I might even meet someone, who knows ...’

‘You’ve met me,’ said Rowan stoutly.

Michael laughed. ‘Yeah, thanks mate.’ He hung his head, dangling the bottle between his knees. ‘Thought it might cheer me up, that’s a joke. I think I need to go home.’

But he made no effort to stand up, and after a minute Rowan tentatively asked, ‘So ... what did you fight about with your dad?’

There was a burst of tinny laughter from the television. Michael stared unseeingly at the screen. ‘He doesn’t like the way I live my life,’ he said at last.

‘That sucks,’ said Rowan.

The door pushed open and a small figure stumbled into the room. Rowan and Michael automatically withdrew their feet to let them pass on their way to climb out of the window as Michael said, ‘If I thought he actually *cared*, you know? If he could just bring himself to say *I love you?* Just *once?*’

Rowan said, ‘Do you think he does love you, though? Underneath? Maybe it’s just hard for him to say it.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I guess it is. But that doesn’t help when we’re screaming at each other. And the worst part is, it upsets my mum. I hate that. She’s got enough on her plate already.’

Rowan chewed her thumb. She knew for sure now who Michael was. Should she say anything? Look what had happened last time she helpfully chipped in: Laurel and Damien had broken up, and she might have caused her own sister to never be born. But surely nothing bad could happen

from *this* conversation? And it might end up fixing someone else's family. Maybe this was what *die Schwäche* wanted.

She said in a rush, 'I know someone – this old man – he told me that he really loved his son, but they were always fighting, and he said it was because he was scared of losing him. I dunno, do you reckon it could be like that for your father, maybe?'

Michael sat silently, twiddling the bottle in his hands. After a long pause he said, 'Yeah. Maybe. I guess.'

Encouraged, Rowan said, 'This old man, this friend of mine, he said he always regretted fighting with his son. He wished he could go back in time and tell him how much he cared ...'

Michael snorted. 'If anyone could get my father to say he cared, I'd give them a million dollars.' He stretched, and carefully set down his beer bottle on top of the television. 'Time this old man went home. Thanks for the chat, though. You've given me something to think about.'

Rowan stood up, too. 'I came up here to find someone, but they're not here. I might go downstairs.'

Outside the room, in the light from the landing, Michael gave her a startled look. 'God, I didn't realise you were *this* young.' He edged away from her a little. 'Sorry.'

Rowan was offended; she tried to come up with a suitably cutting retort as they clattered down the stairs, but before she could think of anything, she heard the doorbell ring, and someone banging on the door. No one else seemed to be coming to answer it, so she darted ahead and threw open the door.

She recognised George at once. He was still old – not *as* old, obviously, but his hair was pepper-and-salt grey and his shrewd dark eyes were surrounded by wrinkles. She gasped, 'Hi!'

Behind her, she heard Michael swear under his breath as he hastily ducked into the shelter of Angie's room.

George didn't notice him, but he narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Rowan. 'You make all this noise! How we

meant to sleep, hey? You turn this music down right now or I call the police, I swear to God!’

Rowan held onto the doorframe and looked up at him anxiously. ‘I’m sorry, it must be really hard for you and your wife to sleep. I’ll get them to turn it down, I promise.’

This was clearly not what George had expected. He let out a breath like a deflating balloon and peered at her hard. ‘Not a kids’ party, hey? Not your fault, I bet.’

‘But you’re right, it is too loud. We didn’t realise. I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to upset you.’

‘Pfft!’ George flapped his hand. ‘Maybe I’m upset already. This noise come on top, too much, you know?’

‘Oh, no,’ said Rowan. ‘What’s wrong? I mean, I hope your family is okay?’

George heaved a sigh. ‘My wife, she sick, she worry about our son ... He come round, nice family dinner ... huh! We have big argument, he walk out! My wife worry, I worry too.’

Rowan heard a muffled noise from the room behind her. She said, ‘I’m really sorry your wife is sick. I hope she gets better soon.’

‘Me too, me too.’

‘And I’m sure your son didn’t mean to upset you both, either.’

George snorted, just like Michael had snorted upstairs. ‘Him! That one only care about himself.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ said Rowan. ‘I’m sure he cares about you, and his mum, a *lot*. But it’s hard to say that when someone’s angry at you and yelling and stuff.’ She saw the frown deepen on George’s forehead but she barrelled on. ‘I met an old man a while ago who was telling me *he* had big arguments with his son. He said it broke his heart. I mean, I know that won’t happen to *you*. Because you wouldn’t let it happen, you’re way too sensible ... and way too smart ...’

George’s eyebrows had risen during this speech, then his eyes started to twinkle, and at last he threw back his head and

roared with laughter. ‘You take the piss now!’

Rowan went on doggedly. ‘If your son was here now, what would you tell him? Would you say you were sorry that you yelled at him?’

George shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

‘Would you tell him that you worry about him? That you care about him? That you love him?’

‘He know that already!’ roared George. ‘Of course I love him! Is my son!’

Rowan thought how unbearable it would be to lose Ash, the horrible raw hole that would never leave. George said crossly, ‘Hey, you don’t cry.’ He fished an enormous handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

As Rowan blew her nose and mopped her eyes, Michael emerged gingerly from Angie’s bedroom. ‘Hello, *baba*.’

George’s mouth dropped open. ‘You listening? You hide in there to spy on me?’

But Michael swept forward with his arms wide and engulfed George in a huge embrace. Rowan heard an incoherent, smothered roar, then George’s arms gripped Michael and they staggered to and fro together, hugging and growling like bears. They slapped each other’s backs with a noise like cracks of thunder, hugged again, and then they swayed off the porch and into the street, their arms still tight around each other, so that a stranger would have found it hard to tell if they were hugging or wrestling. George twisted his head to call, ‘Don’t forget, you turn that music down, hey?’

‘I will,’ Rowan called back, scrunching the hanky into her pocket. Then she yelled, ‘You owe me a million dollars!’

But Michael didn’t look around. Rowan watched as father and son walked away toward the little cottage with the rosebushes, talking furiously, and then she closed the door.



There was a burst of wild applause and cheering. Half the party guests were crammed into the hallway, or leaning over the banisters, clapping and whistling.

As Rowan blushed, Steph fought her way through the crowd and slung her arm round Rowan's shoulders. 'You bloody hero! You vanquished the beast!'

'George isn't a beast, he's lovely.'

'Well, congratulations anyway – he's gone. He hates us. What did you do?'

'We just talked. He's worried about his son, and his wife, that's why he's so grumpy.' Rowan gazed at her anxiously. 'I told him you'd turn the music down.'

Steph yelled over her shoulder, 'TURN IT DOWN!'

The music abruptly switched off. There was a chorus of boos and groans, and after a second the music came back, but much softer than before.

'Did you get changed?' Steph stared at her. 'That gives me an idea. Come on, you deserve a reward for getting old Crabbypants off our back.'

'Oh, no, that's okay. I don't need anything ...'

But Steph was already dragging her up the stairs and propelling her into her bedroom, Ash's room, where Ash and

Rowan had first arrived. She flicked on the light. ‘Ta-da!’ She flourished her hand toward the dressmaker’s dummies, all adorned in their fancy dresses.

Rowan remembered that as far as Steph knew, she’d never seen them before. ‘Oh, wow!’

‘You should take one. We don’t need them anymore, they were experiments. Ooh, you should take the red one. It’d suit you.’

‘Um, okay ...’ Rowan wriggled out of her jeans and top and allowed Steph to lower the red cotton poppy-petal dress over her head.

Steph stepped back, clasping her hands, her mouth an ‘O’ of delight. Rowan reminded herself that Steph was quite tipsy. ‘It’s *perfect!* Do a spin!’

Rowan spun. The flimsy scarlet petals of the poppy dress flared out, and Rowan caught a glimpse of herself in Steph’s long mirror, looking like a Disney princess. ‘It does look good,’ she admitted.

‘It’s *stunning!* Careful though, it’ll tear pretty easily ... You’ll be the belle of the ball.’

Rowan checked out her reflection sideways, and secretly agreed. Hastily she grabbed the embroidered bag and slung it across her chest. Steph tweaked at the strap. ‘What’s this? It doesn’t go with the dress at all. Leave it here.’

‘No, I need it.’ Rowan clutched the bag protectively in front of her.

Steph threw up her hands and laughed. ‘Okay, suit yourself!’

As they emerged from Steph’s bedroom, Damien was there. He loomed over Rowan and she shrank back against the wall.

‘That’s a cute bag. How much do you want for it?’

Steph said, ‘Rack off, Damien, she’s just a kid.’

‘I wasn’t talking to you. Go on, how much?’

‘It’s not for sale,’ said Rowan.

‘You sure? I need a present for my girlfriend.’

Rowan felt such a rush of indignation for Laurel that she forgot to be scared. ‘I can’t believe you didn’t buy her a birthday present! Wow, you are such a crap boyfriend.’

Then she bit her lip. She’d forgotten that she was supposed to be keeping Laurel and Damien together, at least for a while longer, not trying to break them up even sooner.

But Damien didn’t care. His blue eyes blazed, he smiled a wolfish smile, and before Rowan could react, he’d flicked the bag’s strap over her head and vanished into the shadows with it.

Steph swore. For a second Rowan was stunned into immobility, then she yelled, ‘Hey!’ and charged after him. The red poppy dress caught under her foot and she lurched and almost fell, but thudded against the bathroom door and saved herself. Damien had disappeared into the TV room; she was just in time to see a long leg withdrawing over the windowsill as he climbed out onto the roof.

Rowan skidded to a halt. She couldn’t follow, because the first version of herself was out there too. Could she somehow entice Laurel to come back inside, before she had the final fatal talk with Damien? Rowan heaved up the end of the couch and let it thump onto the floor. Not enough. She switched on the TV and turned up the volume as high as it would go; she found a dirty plate under a chair and hurled it against the wall, but it didn’t smash, just rolled disappointingly away. In desperation, she even called, ‘Laurel!’ though she didn’t know what she would say if Laurel actually answered her, or worse, if she, the first Rowan, poked her head through the window. Would she be able to explain herself to *herself*?

It was too late. As she hovered there, Damien’s head appeared through the open window, wearing a smug expression; clearly the present-giving had gone even better than expected. He switched the TV off. Rowan hastily retreated into the bathroom and peeked through a crack in the doorway as Damien walked past, with his arm slung around Laurel’s shoulder, murmuring something into her hair that

made her laugh. She was holding the slim metallic tube of the kaleidoscope in one hand, and the embroidered bag hung from her shoulder.

Rowan hitched up her scarlet skirts and followed them down the stairs, keeping a discreet distance, but they never looked back. Well, it seemed as if the first part of her plan had worked, unintentionally; they were obviously still together. But Rowan had to get the kaleidoscope back – tell Laurel that Damien had stolen it, or maybe it would be more diplomatic to say he'd borrowed it. Laurel could lend it to her, just for tonight ...

Her mind was so busy that she hardly noticed that Damien and Laurel were heading for the front door until they reached it. Damien flung it open and he and Laurel walked outside. Oh, thank goodness, he was leaving. Rowan sagged against the wall in relief. Better keep an eye on Laurel, though; better be ready to pounce on her as soon as she came back inside to rejoin her birthday party ...

Rowan crept all the way to the front door and hid in the shadows to spy on them. Damien and Laurel were out in the street, talking, standing beside Damien's motorbike. Laurel laughed, and shook back her sleek black bob. She tucked the kaleidoscope into the bag and tugged it round to dangle in front of her chest. Rowan watched in an agony of impatience. Why didn't Damien just climb on his bike and roar away?

At last he pulled on his helmet and swung his leg over the saddle. The engine revved. 'Come on, come on!' muttered Rowan, hugging herself in the chilly night air. The thin cotton dress was no protection at all.

But then, to her horror, Laurel jammed a helmet on her head, too. She hopped up onto the back of the bike and wrapped her arms around Damien. The engine growled in the quiet street, the headlamp flashed out like a spotlight, and the motorbike sped away into the night.

Rowan's mouth dropped open. Without the kaleidoscope, Ash was still stranded here, and that meant Rowan was stuck here, too.



The most important thing to do next was to find Ash, and explain what was going on.

As Rowan turned from the front door, a sudden thought struck her. Quietly she eased open the door of Angie's bedroom and peeped through the crack. Her heart jumped as she saw a small figure curled on the bed, dressed in familiar clothes, hugging a green bottle – it was herself, from the first visit. Soon she, the first Rowan, would fall asleep and be transported back to her own time.

But she, the second Rowan, couldn't fall asleep. If that happened, Ash would be marooned here forever. All of hers and Verity's work would be for nothing.

Rowan gently pulled the door shut and slumped against the wall. She mustn't cry, she mustn't give up. The job wasn't done yet. She had to find Ash and make her sister understand what was happening. She'd start with the roof.

Rowan hitched up her skirts once more and bolted back along the hallway, leapt up the stairs two at a time, threw herself round the corner of the landing, past the bathroom, hurled herself into the TV room – and crashed full tilt into someone standing just inside the doorway.

Winded, Rowan fell backward onto the couch. The person she'd smashed into reached out to snap on the light.

Ash gasped, ‘What are you *doing*? What are you wearing? Is that one of the dresses from my room? Why are you—?’

Rowan jumped at her sister and squeezed her so hard that she heard the breath go out of Ash with a *whoosh*.

‘Whoa, whoa!’ Ash separated herself from Rowan. ‘Hold on, chill out. You’re like Womble after Dad’s gone to the shops. I’ve been away for *ten minutes*.’

‘No, you haven’t, you’ve been away for more than a week.’ Rowan’s eyes stung with tears as she clung to Ash. ‘You don’t understand. I’m not the same Rowan you came to the party with. I’m from the future.’

‘Well, duh,’ said Ash. ‘We’re both from the future.’

‘Yes, but I’m from *your* future. You got stuck here and I’ve come to rescue you with Verity’s magic. I’m helping her.’

‘Verity’s magic? I bloody knew it,’ said Ash.

‘I know,’ said Rowan. ‘How cool is that?’

Ash frowned. ‘Hang on, what do you mean, I got stuck here? How?’

Rowan gulped. ‘Verity says this house is built on a, a kind of crack in time. The blue and silver ring slipped through time – that’s what brought us here, the ring I found in your room.’

‘The ring *we* found,’ Ash corrected her.

‘Anyway,’ said Rowan hastily. ‘When I fell asleep, I went home – I’m downstairs now, the other me, I mean, maybe I’ve already gone. I woke up back in our time. But you were left behind. So Verity made a magic kaleidoscope, and if you’re holding onto it when you fall asleep, you’ll wake up in our time, too.’

‘But what about you? How will you get back? Do you have to be hanging onto the kaleidoscope, too?’

‘I don’t need it. I’ll wake up at home anyway. But the thing is,’ Rowan swallowed a sudden lump in her throat, ‘I’ve lost the kaleidoscope.’

‘What do you mean, lost it? Dropped it somewhere or what? Don’t cry, Ro,’ said Ash kindly. ‘We’ll find it. Where did you lose it?’

Rowan shook her head. ‘It was stolen. Damien stole it.’

‘Damien?’ said Ash quickly.

Rowan folded her arms. ‘Yes, Ash. As in, your secret father, Damien.’

‘He’s here? At this party? You’re kidding me. Where is he?’

‘He’s gone. He left with Mum.’

‘Mum was here, too?’ Ash sank onto the couch, her hand covering her mouth. ‘I can’t believe it. They were here. I could have talked to them. Maybe I did talk to them. What does he look like?’

‘He looks like you,’ said Rowan. ‘Blond, blue eyes, leather jacket.’

‘I didn’t notice him,’ said Ash to herself. ‘I can’t believe he was here and I didn’t even get to see him.’

‘What do you care?’ said Rowan. ‘You’ve never wanted to meet him before, why would you want to meet him now? You always acted like Dad was your father. Why are you so keen on this Damien dude all of a sudden?’

‘You can’t blame me for being interested,’ said Ash reasonably. ‘Ro, why are you crying?’

Rowan hiccuped. ‘I thought we were sisters. I thought we were a family.’

‘We *are* a family, you dingbat. Of course we’re a family. Of course we’re still sisters.’ Ash dragged Rowan down to the couch and gave her a rough hug. ‘Mum told me about Damien years ago, but he’s not my *dad*. He was just like a – sperm donor. Just because I want to have a look at him, if he’s here, that doesn’t change how I feel about our dad, or you and Tansy. Right?’

‘Right.’ Rowan sniffed.

‘So,’ said Ash briskly. ‘We get this kaleidoscope back, we go to sleep and we wake up when we first left? Is that the deal?’

‘Not exactly,’ said Rowan. ‘We’re supposed to get back when I left just now. That’s about a week after you left.’

‘Wait, so I lose a whole week out of my life? That’s not fair, that can’t be right.’

‘Verity said that’s just the way it is. You can complain to her when we get back if you don’t like it. But the point is, we won’t be able to go home at all unless we can get that kaleidoscope back.’

‘So where does Damien live?’

‘I don’t know. He rode off on a motorbike, with Mum on the back.’

‘Well, let’s ask around.’ Ash stood up. ‘If he came to the party, he must be friends with someone.’

‘He’s Mum’s boyfriend,’ said Rowan. ‘I don’t know if he’s mates with anyone else.’ She hesitated. ‘How much did Mum tell you about Damien?’

Ash shrugged. ‘Not a lot. He was her boyfriend, they were super young, she got pregnant, they broke up, he disappeared, she met Dad. End of story.’

‘Right. Because Damien ... isn’t very nice. Even if we can find out where he lives, I don’t like the idea of tramping across town and banging on his door and asking him to pretty please give our kaleidoscope back.’

‘Someone must be able to help us.’ Ash gnawed on a knuckle, frowning. ‘Wait a sec, you said *Verity’s magic*? And she’s organising all this? When did she move into her little house?’

‘She’s been there for ages, a hundred years at least ...’ Rowan saw what her sister was thinking. ‘Oh! But she said I should avoid her past self, in case it tangles up everybody’s lives.’

‘If she’s so good at magic, she can sort that out.’ Ash flipped her hand breezily. ‘I always thought Verity was magic. I’m so not surprised. Come on, let’s go and find her.’ Before Rowan could stop her, Ash flung open the door and raced down the stairs. ‘A hundred years!’ she snorted over her shoulder. ‘As if!’

‘It’s true!’ Rowan galloped close at her heels, full of misgiving, but determined not to lose sight of her sister again, even for a minute.

It was cold out on the street, the road slick with rain. Rowan shivered in her flimsy red dress as Ash led her down the dead-end street to Verity’s house. The front door was its familiar blue, the front garden neater than in their own time.

‘There’s no light on.’ Rowan hopped from foot to foot, hugging herself. ‘Maybe she’s not home.’

‘Probably in bed.’ Ash lifted the knocker and rapped it hard. But there was no movement, no sound from within. Ash banged again.

‘See, she’s not here,’ said Rowan. ‘Ash, she told me *specifically* not to do this. Come on, let’s go. I’m freezing.’ She tugged at her sister’s sleeve.

‘Maybe she’s working late.’ Ash cupped her hands on the glass of the front window and peered in. ‘We could go round to the studio and see if she’s there.’

‘It’s too cold!’ moaned Rowan. Where had she left her jeans and her best top? On the floor of Steph’s bedroom, that’s where.

‘Okay, let’s go back to the house. We’ll have to try again in the morning.’

‘You mean, stay at the party all night?’ Rowan screwed up her face. ‘I can’t fall asleep, though, Ash. Or I’ll just end up back home and you’ll still be stuck here.’

‘I don’t get that. Why do you get to go straight home and I don’t?’

‘Verity says it’s because I was born in the house. I’ve got a connection with *die Schwäche*, the time-crack. So *die Schwäche* will bring me home whatever happens.’ Rowan shivered. ‘So if I fall asleep here, I’ll go and you’ll be left alone, just like last time.’

Ash considered this. ‘Well, even if you did fall asleep and *desert* me, I know what to do now, right? Get that kaleidoscope back from Damien. I could do that on my own. If I had to.’

‘I guess,’ said Rowan doubtfully. But she didn’t want to desert Ash; she wanted to see this thing through to the end.

Ash put her arm around Rowan’s shoulders. ‘Wow, you are freezing. Come on, let’s go back. We can’t wait here all night. We’ll try again tomorrow. Verity has to come home some time, right?’

‘Does she though? Maybe in this time she’s got a boyfriend.’ Rowan and Ash began to walk, arms around each other, back along the street. Their hipbones bumped companionably. ‘Or a girlfriend. Maybe she’s gone away for the weekend. Maybe she’s overseas.’

‘Yeah, maybe. Hey ... you’re not allowed to fall asleep. But I can. Can’t I?’

‘Well, yeah, I suppose so. If you want to.’

‘There’ll be other people crashing there. It’s a *party*.’

‘You could sleep in Angie’s room,’ said Rowan. ‘My room, that is. Steph thinks I’m Angie’s cousin. I’m supposed to be staying there. That’s where I went to sleep the first time.’

‘Good.’ Ash yawned hugely. ‘I am so tired.’

The party was winding down, but the front door was still open. They slipped inside, but when they pushed open Angie’s bedroom door, they saw a couple perched on the end of the bed, holding hands. Two outraged faces turned in their direction and the auburn-haired young woman said, ‘Privacy, please!’ Rowan and Ash beat a hasty retreat. ‘They were quick!’ said Rowan indignantly. ‘I was *just there!*’

The couch in the living room was miraculously free. Rowan curled up in one corner. It was good that she was so uncomfortable, she told herself, because whatever happened, she mustn't fall asleep. Even so, it felt good to be back inside the protective walls of the house; something deep inside her relaxed. Ash stretched out and pulled a cushion under her head. The room smelled of beer and sweat.

There was a pause. The music cut off into an abrupt silence. In the backyard, someone was strumming a guitar.

'Hey, Ro?' said Ash sleepily. 'How long did you say I've been stuck here for?'

'A week ... a week and a bit.'

'What did Tom say when you told him what happened? I bet he freaked out. He does *not* believe in magic.'

'Well ... I didn't tell him. Nobody knows what really happened, except Verity.'

Ash opened her eyes and squinted up at her sister. 'But then where do they think I am?'

'They don't know. They think you must have run away, or – or something.' Rowan couldn't bring herself to tell Ash that the whole family, and Tom too, had been gradually forgetting that she even existed.

Ash rearranged the cushion under her head. 'Wow. That's brutal.'

'Mmm.' Rowan stared hard across the room. 'I'm not going to lie, it hasn't been much fun.'

'I bet. Poor you.' Ash sighed. 'I'm going to try to get some sleep. See you in the morning. Hopefully. Otherwise, see you back at our place, I guess.'

'Ash!' said Rowan in a sudden panic.

Ash opened one eye. 'What?'

'Nothing. Just – love you.'

'Love you, too.'

Ash closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed, her fist uncurled like a soft flower beside her cheek. Rowan sat upright, digging her nails into her palm to keep herself awake, staring into the dark.



The night crawled by. A mixture of sheer anxiety and horrible discomfort kept Rowan awake through the long hours, until the shadows in the room faded from black to grey, and at last bright spears of light thrust through the living room window and into her eyes. Rowan stretched her cramped limbs and blinked about her, double checking that she was really still here, in 1999. Beside her, Ash groaned and pulled a cushion over her head.

A shaggy young man and the red-haired young woman with the nose stud, the couple they'd disturbed the night before, stumbled into the living room. 'Hi,' mumbled the young man. The red-haired woman gave Rowan and Ash a doubtful look, but the pair shambled into the kitchen and began to make breakfast.

Ash was pretending to still be asleep. Rowan debated whether to nudge her, but after the couple carried bowls of cereal and cups of tea back to their bedroom (*my* bedroom, thought Rowan crossly), Ash opened her eyes and sat up, tousling her hair.

The doorbell rang. Ash and Rowan looked at each other. 'Not our job,' said Rowan. 'Not our house.'

'True,' said Ash.

The bell rang again, more insistently this time, and after a long moment, Steph came gliding down the stairs, wrapped in

a kimono. ‘Coming!’

Copying Ash, Rowan quickly lowered her head and feigned sleep. But she heard Steph’s bare feet patter along the hallways, and the rattle of the front door, and then a murmur of voices. Rowan found her heart beating faster.

‘Okay, sleeping beauties,’ said Steph’s wry voice. ‘Wakeywakey.’

Rowan and Ash guiltily sat up. Steph was standing before them, arms folded, and behind her stood a shy teenage girl with a backpack slung on her shoulder.

‘This is Amanda,’ said Steph. ‘Amanda is Steph’s cousin. So who are you?’

‘We can explain,’ said Ash.

‘Can we?’ hissed Rowan.

‘Just one question,’ said Ash, with her most charming smile. ‘There was a guy called Damien here last night. I don’t suppose you could give us his address, could you? Or his phone number?’

‘Are you kidding me? Damien is my best friend’s boyfriend. No, I will not give you his number.’

‘He took my bag,’ whispered Rowan. ‘You saw him.’

‘Yeah, that wasn’t great,’ said Steph. ‘But what’s with you impersonating Angie’s cousin? What’s that all about?’

‘That was a mistake,’ faltered Rowan. ‘A misunderstanding.’

Steph raised her eyebrows.

‘Okay, we’re going, we’re going.’ Ash stood up and brushed herself down. ‘Come on, kiddo.’

‘Don’t call me that,’ said Rowan automatically, but she hurried after Ash, down the hallway and out of the house. Steph closed the front door behind them with an emphatic bang.

Rowan shifted from foot to foot, shivering in the cold. ‘So, what do we do now?’

‘Well, even you have to admit we really do need Verity, don’t we? She can help us find Damien and get that kaleidoscope back. I’ve gotta say, he doesn’t sound like a great role model as a father.’

Rowan didn’t want to talk about Damien being Ash’s father, even if it was to discuss his personal deficiencies. And though she still wasn’t a fan of asking Verity for help, she couldn’t think of a better plan. ‘Maybe she’ll give us breakfast.’

They trooped off to Verity’s house. By daylight, their pocket of the neighbourhood looked slightly off, shabbier than in their time. Some houses were painted different colours, and the house on the corner was missing its big fancy renovation, just like their own house. Rowan imagined she could feel a faint tug from the house, or from *die Schwäche* itself, she supposed, reminding her not to go too far away. She said, ‘I’m not sure I like this century.’

‘At least we can say we partied like it’s 1999,’ said Ash. ‘That’s exciting.’

‘Not as cool as 1900,’ said Rowan, the seasoned time traveller.

They were both dismayed when brisk rapping with Verity’s knocker echoed into an empty house; there was still no Verity at home to answer the door.

‘She’s definitely living here.’ Ash squinted through the front window. ‘I can see her glass globes hanging up ... But all the plants in the garden look so small.’

‘I guess we’ll have to wait for her,’ said Rowan. ‘Maybe she’s gone to the shops or something.’

‘I’m starving,’ said Ash. ‘Oh! I was forgetting you’ve been home since we first got here! Did you bring some cash?’

‘I didn’t think of that,’ admitted Rowan. ‘I didn’t think we’d be here this long.’

‘Jeez, you’re not very well prepared, are you?’ said Ash. ‘You had a whole week to get ready. Poor effort, Ro. I guess we’ll have to stay hungry.’

They spent the rest of the morning waiting on Verity’s doorstep. Verity had thoughtfully provided a bench beneath the window that the two of them could squash onto, though Ash made frequent forays down to the end of the street to keep an eye on their own house, in case Laurel or Damien came back, and to check if Verity was coming home.

Rowan kept sneaking glances at Ash to make sure she was real, or grabbing her hand at odd moments, which made Ash look at her sideways and laugh in embarrassment. Rowan found this slightly hurtful at first, until she realised that while she was ecstatic to be reunited with her sister, from Ash’s point of view, Rowan hadn’t gone anywhere, and there was nothing to be so excited about.

Ash came back to swing off the porch post. ‘You don’t want to explore the city? Walk around in history?’

‘We shouldn’t go too far from the house ... Just a feeling.’

‘But how can we get that magic kaleidoscope back from Damien if we’re not allowed to leave the area? Magic kaleidoscope ...’ Ash shook her head. ‘I’m trying not to think about how weird all this is, and then I hear myself say *magic kaleidoscope*.’ She groaned and stretched her arms above her head. ‘Come on, Verity! Why don’t I have my phone, so we could call her? Hey, you didn’t bring my phone, did you?’

‘No, the police took it when you went missing. And even if I had, it probably wouldn’t work. This is 1999, remember. Also, we don’t know Verity’s number.’

‘Blah blah blah,’ murmured Ash. She marched to the end of the street and back, stepped onto Verity’s low wall and off again, pushed herself away from the porch post. ‘Okay, kiddo. I want to know exactly what’s been going on at home since I left. So the police came? Were Mum and Dad shattered when I didn’t come home?’

‘I don’t know if I should talk about that ... But I can tell you what Verity and I have been doing,’ offered Rowan.

‘Talk!’ said Ash.

It was a relief to finally tell someone about it all. She explained to Ash about her trips to other eras to collect pieces of glass for Verity: to Linda’s house in the 1970s, to the Raymond family in wartime, and to Edith and Flora Whitecross in 1900. Ash was especially interested in the last one.

‘Edith Whitecross. That name sounds familiar. And she actually lived in our house? That’s pretty cool. I’ll have to look her up when we get home.’

‘If we ever *do* get home,’ muttered Rowan, who was finding it harder and harder to struggle against the waves of sleepiness that threatened to engulf her. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could stay awake. Ash plumped down beside her and pinched her leg, hard. Rowan jumped. ‘Ow!’

‘Sorry,’ said Ash. ‘But I don’t want you vanishing on me.’

‘Maybe I wouldn’t vanish if I’m not actually inside the house.’

‘Want to test that theory?’

‘Not really ...’

‘Tell me more about home. Does Tom miss me? He doesn’t think I’ve gone off with someone else, does he?’

‘Oh, no, definitely not. He’s just ... confused. It’s like he’s got some kind of amnesia ...’

Ash stopped swinging her feet and stared. ‘Tom’s *forgetting* me?’

‘Not just Tom – everybody—’

‘*What?*’

‘Not forgetting exactly ...’ Rowan fumbled to explain, wishing she’d never mentioned it. ‘It’s more like you were actually disappearing.’

‘Disappearing how?’

Rowan swallowed. ‘This is hard.’

‘If it’s something about me, then I have the right to know. Why should you know, when I don’t?’

Rowan saw the trap she’d walked into; that was exactly what she’d said about Damien being Ash’s father. Ash’s accusing eyes were fixed on Rowan, huge and blue – *like Damien’s*, Rowan realised with a stab. ‘Okay, okay.’ She took a deep breath. ‘The first time I came, I stuffed up ... I kind of helped Mum and Damien to split up. That’s why you were fading, because they broke up too soon, and you were never born.’

‘Hold on, *what?* You sabotaged me being *born?*’

‘I didn’t mean to,’ said Rowan in a small voice. ‘And I think it’s fixed now, anyway. They seemed like they were getting on pretty well last time we saw them, didn’t they?’

‘Oh, this is unbelievable. You talked to Mum then?’

‘Yes, we ran into each other on the stairs. And then we talked on the roof for a while.’

Ash broke free from the porch, whirled around and began to pace up and down in the dead-end street. ‘You are kidding me. I literally do not believe a word of this.’

‘I’m sorry. But how was I supposed to know? No one ever told me about Damien!’

‘Don’t pull that one!’ Ash stormed away down the street, spun around and marched back again.

Rowan said, ‘Ash ...’

‘Don’t talk to me!’ Ash took off again.

‘Where are you going?’ Rowan jumped up and sprinted after her.

Ash gasped. ‘Oh my God, it’s them!’

Damien and Laurel were just dismounting from Damien’s motorbike. Laurel took off her helmet and shook out her black

bob. Damien lifted off his helmet, like a medieval knight, and the midday sun glinted on his golden hair, the same gold as Ash's. Rowan heard Laurel say something about '... my presents!'

'Right,' said Ash. 'I want to talk to these guys.'

'Just about the kaleidoscope!' cried Rowan. 'We need it back. And we have to be nice! We have to keep them together, remember?'

She slipped her arm through her sister's, and the two girls walked, side by side, toward the house.



Ash tapped Damien on the shoulder. ‘Excuse me, hi ...’

Damien stared back at her. ‘Do I know you?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Ash smiled, but Damien didn’t smile back.

Laurel moved closer to Damien. ‘Do you?’ she asked warily.

‘No! Never seen her before in my life!’

‘We were at the party last night. My sister and me.’ Ash nodded to Rowan.

Damien’s gaze flickered toward her and his lip curled in a sneer. ‘Oh, yeah.’

‘The thing is, you ended up with something that belongs to her,’ said Ash. ‘I’m sure it was an accident, but ...’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Damien instantly, automatically. ‘Her word against mine.’

‘It was an embroidered bag, with a kaleidoscope inside,’ said Rowan. ‘I must have put it down somewhere, and maybe you picked it up by mistake? And gave it to your girlfriend?’

Laurel tucked her arm through Damien’s. ‘He wouldn’t do that.’

Ash said to Laurel, ‘You trust this guy?’

Laurel's chin went up. 'Yes, I do. Why wouldn't I?'

But Rowan saw Laurel's hand dive into her pocket and clench something there. Rowan felt a wash of relief. She had the kaleidoscope!

Laurel said, 'Yeah, so?'

Rowan felt brave with Ash at her side. 'It belongs to me. He took it from me last night.'

Damien snorted. 'I don't know what your story is – I don't know why you're making up this bulldust – but if you think you're going to get away with telling lies about me, you've got another think coming.'

'Another thing coming,' said Laurel. 'That's the saying.'

Damien turned on her with a snarl. 'Don't tell me how to speak!'

'You can't talk to her like that!' flared Ash.

The front door opened and Steph emerged onto the porch. 'What's going on out here?' She caught sight of Ash. 'Oh, hi ... You're still here?'

'Do you know this girl?' said Damien. 'She's harassing me. Probably a stalker.'

'Is she?' Steph folded her arms and looked sceptically at Damien, whose blue gaze slid guiltily away.

'We just came to pick up the rest of my presents,' said Laurel. 'And I wanted to show you what Damien gave me ... We didn't expect to be attacked on the porch.'

'No one's attacking *you*,' said Ash. 'Though I would genuinely like to know what you see in this guy.'

'None of your bloody business!' snapped Laurel, and Rowan was struck by how similar she and Ash looked, in their stance, the jut of their chins; they were about the same age now.

Ash muttered to Rowan, 'No way I'm tracking down this doofus when we get back home.'

Rowan appealed to Steph. ‘You know he stole my bag last night. You saw him! He snatched it from round my neck!’

Laurel said, ‘He didn’t, did he?’

Steph looked uncomfortable. ‘Well—’

‘I could swap you something for it,’ offered Rowan desperately. ‘I could draw you a picture instead ...’

Damien laughed. ‘Nice try, Picasso.’

Rowan jumped as George shot out of his house, already yelling. ‘Party all night, now you fighting in the street? You want I call the police? I’m too soft on you last night, this is how you say thank you?’

‘Yes, call the police!’ cried Laurel, flinging out a hand toward Ash. ‘She’s dangerous! She’s a stalker!’

‘No way!’ Rowan was torn, but she couldn’t let that pass. She didn’t want Laurel and Damien to fight, she needed them to stay together to save Ash; but they also had to get that kaleidoscope back somehow. ‘He’s the thief! He stole my kaleidoscope!’

Now Michael appeared behind George’s shoulder. ‘Okay, maybe everyone needs to calm down—’

They all stared at him incredulously, then everyone burst out shouting. Steph pulled at Ash’s arm, Damien glowered at Ash, Ash shook off Steph and tried to drag Laurel aside, Laurel began to cry, Rowan asked her politely to return the kaleidoscope, George roared at them in Greek, Michael pleaded again for calm—

Out of the corner of her eye, Rowan saw a familiar figure at the end of the street, wrapped in a brown coat and red scarf, pausing to see what the commotion was all about. She yelled, ‘Verity!’ and pelted toward her.

Verity froze, her hands deep in her pockets, as she saw a total stranger, a wild young girl in a flowing red dress, shrieking her name. But to Rowan’s admiration, she stood her ground.

‘Hi, you don’t know me,’ Rowan panted, ‘but you’re Verity Blaschka, right?’

Verity looked her up and down. ‘Who wants to know?’

‘This is going to sound crazy, but I’m a friend of yours ...’ Rowan saw Verity’s eyebrows shoot up. Hurriedly she added, ‘I know you – I know you do magic. Real magic, with glass. You sent me here, from twenty years in the future. I live in the house, the house with *die Schwäche*...’

‘Go on,’ said Verity.

‘Please, help us! That’s my sister Ash. We were both sent back in time but she got stuck here, you sent me back to rescue her, but we need this kaleidoscope, you made it for us, but that guy—’ Rowan flung out her arm.

‘Who, Damien?’ Verity grimaced.

‘Yes! Damien! He stole it from me and gave it to Laurel for her birthday ...’ Rowan’s words tumbled out so fast she was scared that Verity wouldn’t be able to keep up. ‘If we don’t get that kaleidoscope back, Ash won’t be able to come home.’

A shout of outrage echoed from down the street. Verity glanced at the scene, then back to Rowan. ‘Did you say I made the kaleidoscope?’

‘Yes. It’s magic.’

‘Right.’ Verity shook back her hair. ‘You stay here – no, go and wait at my house. Do you know where that is?’

‘Of course!’ But Rowan didn’t want to miss the showdown. She hovered, watching, as Verity marched over to the group outside the house. A moment later, Ash had detached herself and was hurrying over to join Rowan. Verity’s strong, clear voice carried to them as she said to Damien, ‘You’d better return that kaleidoscope to its rightful owner, don’t you think?’

Laurel looked imploringly at Damien. ‘You didn’t really take it from her, did you?’

‘She offered it to me!’ said Damien. ‘I mean, I bought it from her fair and square.’

‘You did not!’ called Rowan from the end of the street.

Laurel took the kaleidoscope from her pocket and clasped it to her heart. ‘But I *love* it. It’s the nicest present I’ve ever had.’

With a shock, Rowan realised that she and Ash might have succeeded, not only in preventing Laurel and Damien from breaking up, but actually pushing them closer together.

Verity shook her head. ‘Sorry, Laurel. I made that kaleidoscope. It wasn’t Damien’s to give away.’

Laurel stood for a moment, holding the gleaming silvery tube. She turned it carefully in her hands, peering at it from every angle. In a low voice she said, ‘Verity’s mark is here. She did make it.’

‘Did she? Wow, that’s an amazing coincidence,’ said Damien; but Laurel wasn’t buying it. She pressed the kaleidoscope to her heart one last time, then handed it over to Verity.

Rowan pumped her fist. ‘Yesss!’

‘I just wanted you to have something beautiful, babe,’ said Damien.

‘I know ...’ said Laurel uncertainly.

Steph said, ‘Maybe you’d better go and find her something else for her birthday present.’

‘What a good idea!’ Verity folded her arms and glared at Damien. He muttered something that Rowan couldn’t hear, pulled his helmet over his head, threw his leg across his motorbike and roared away.

Steph and Laurel and Michael drew into a huddle, deep in conversation. George vanished back inside his front door, and then Verity was hurrying along the street toward Ash and Rowan, shooing them with her hands like runaway chickens.

Rowan grabbed Ash’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Everything’s going to be okay now. Verity will fix it.’

‘Good,’ said Ash. ‘I hope she starts off by telling me that dickhead isn’t really my father.’



Rowan said, ‘Can we go home now? I want to go home.’

The adrenaline rush of confronting Laurel and Damien and getting back the kaleidoscope was draining away, leaving her more exhausted than ever. It was taking every ounce of her strength to force her eyes to stay open.

They were sitting around Verity’s familiar round table, in her familiar living room, though the furniture was arranged differently and there were different pictures on the walls. Verity, reassuringly, was making them chai, the way she always had (or would), while Ash tried to explain, not very coherently, how they’d got here.

‘We don’t have to go yet!’ said Ash. ‘I want to stay longer. I want to make friends with Mum. I want to understand what she sees in him.’

‘No way!’ said Rowan. ‘That’s the mistake I made in the first place.’

‘Rule number one: do not make friends with a past version of your own parent,’ said Verity firmly, setting the mugs on the table. ‘It sounds to me as if there’s been enough damage done already. Not intentionally,’ she added, as Rowan and Ash began to protest. ‘But it’s time you both went home. Made friends in your own time.’

‘Huh.’ Ash looked thoughtful, fiddling with her mug. Suddenly she asked, ‘Are you really from 1999, or are you our

Verity? Because, no offence, you don't look that much younger than our Verity.'

'You look a *bit* younger,' said Rowan doubtfully. 'I think. Maybe.'

'I've been blessed with one of those faces,' said Verity drily. 'And what an absurd question. I stay in my own time course, thank you very much. I don't go dashing about like some sort of mosquito. Now, where did I put that kaleidoscope?'

It turned out she'd put it in the fruit bowl, nestling beside the oranges and apples. She twisted it in her hands and held it up to her eye, tumbling the colourful splinters. 'Nice piece of work, if I do say so myself. And powerful magic. It's good to see I haven't lost my touch. Where did the glass come from?'

'It all came from our house, but from different times,' said Rowan. 'From 1900, and the 1940s, and 1972. And the green pieces came from a bottle I brought back from last night's party, the first time. And you told me the blue glass came from a ring we found, made of silver and blue sea glass ...'

Verity's blue eyes widened. 'Flora's ring? The ring I made for Flora Whitecross?'

'It turned up in my room,' said Ash. 'We found it.'

'I found it,' said Rowan. 'You said – our Verity said – that the ring was looking for me. That the house was trying to communicate with me.'

'How do you know it was looking for you?' said Ash. 'What makes you so special?'

'I already told you, I was born in the house. Verity says that means we're linked together—' Rowan gave a huge yawn.

'There's no need to talk about me as if I'm not here,' said Verity tartly.

'Rowan said I need to be holding the kaleidoscope when I fall asleep to get back home,' said Ash. 'Does that sound right?'

Verity nodded, and handed the shining silver tube to Ash. Her voice softened. 'Look through it. Look at the glass. Twist

it, watch them spin, watch them tumble. Hold on tight. Not long now. The kaleidoscope holds a little of *die Schwache*, so you don't need to be inside your house to travel this time. When you wake up, you'll be back in your own year, and everything will be fine. At least, I assume so, if future me has organised everything properly, and I've no reason to think I would have messed it up.'

'I knew you could fix everything,' whispered Rowan. The warmth of the chai and the sweetness of relief washed through her as Ash's eyes closed and her head dropped forward, her hand tight around the kaleidoscope. On impulse, Rowan reached out and curled her hand around the other end. Even if she didn't need to hold onto it, it felt right to join her sister in the moment they were going home together. Rainbows were glimmering inside Verity's crystal ball, throwing their colours across the ceiling and walls, blending into white and then separating out again into their transparent stripes. Rowan's head dropped onto her arm and her eyelids, at last, fell closed. From far, far away, she heard her own drowsy voice.

'Verity, did you put something in this chai?'

'Shh,' murmured Verity. 'Of course not.'

If Rowan hadn't been so sleepy, she would have wished Verity goodbye, but darkness was wrapping itself around her like a soft shawl, and she was tumbling into sleep.



The next instant, or so it seemed, she jolted awake. Golden daylight burst over her as she sat up, let go of the kaleidoscope, shook out her feet and fingers, and blinked around her. She was still sitting at Verity's table, on the same wooden chair; but the pictures on the walls, the plants in their pots, the crystal ball and the books, were all the same as she remembered from her own time, the fruit bowl holding grapes and pears instead of apples and oranges, as if the room had rearranged itself while her eyes were closed. She cried, 'We're back!'

Ash lifted her head from the tabletop, looking dazed, still holding onto the silver kaleidoscope. ‘We’re home.’ She sounded slightly disappointed.

Rowan looked around and saw Verity, their own Verity, leaning against the kitchen bench, her face grey and bruised with fatigue. ‘You did it! You brought us home!’

Verity nodded, a single nod, as if she were too worn out for anything more. ‘You brought yourself home, Rowan. I only helped with Ash.’

Verity’s gentleness was more disturbing than her anger would have been.

Ash held up the kaleidoscope. ‘Can I keep this?’

Rowan felt a stab of dismay. She wanted the kaleidoscope; she was greedy for every souvenir of this adventure she could lay her hands on. Especially the kaleidoscope, with its chips of coloured glass, each with its freight of tears and laughter, the glass she’d worked so hard to collect. And especially now that she’d lost the ring that had started it all.

But Verity held out her hand. ‘You can have it back soon. But I need to keep it for a while first.’

Ash opened her mouth to object, but Verity raised her eyebrows. Mutely Ash handed over the kaleidoscope, and Verity turned it between her strong, deft hands. ‘I made this from the same piece of silver I used to make Flora Whitecross’s ring, before her mother died. She was very specific about what she wanted – oddly specific. If I remember correctly, she even had a sketch.’ Verity shot Rowan a keen glance. ‘Almost as if she’d seen one like it before.’

Rowan screwed up her face in bafflement. ‘But if it was the same ring, how could it be—? It’s like one of those Escher drawings that loops back into itself, where the stairs go up and down at the same time. Like a what-do-you-call-it, a möbius strip.’

‘So the ring first belonged to this Flora girl?’ said Ash. ‘And she lost it in my room?’

Rowan shook her head. ‘That can’t be right, because Janie was wearing it in 1940 ...’ She pressed her fists to her temples, working it out. ‘I found it in our time, I wore it on the first visit to 1999 and I was still wearing it when I went to 1972. And I gave it to Linda. But then when I went to 1940, Janie had it, and she gave it back to me. And then I wore it in 1900 and that’s when I drew it for Flora. But last night Mum said she recognised it, she said Steph had one the same. So maybe Steph found it in the backyard or somewhere ...’

‘Hang on.’ Ash grabbed a pen and flipped over a magazine to scribble on the back. ‘So Verity made the ring for Flora in 1900 – then say Flora loses it in the house—’

‘*Die Schwäche* probably had a hand in that,’ said Verity.

‘Anyway, Flora loses it, the 1940s girl picks it up—’

Rowan interrupted. ‘Janie said she found it in her parents’ room, the balcony room.’

‘That became Flora’s bedroom after Edith died. It was her room for many years,’ said Verity.

‘So Janie found it, gave it to me in 1940, then I gave it to Linda in 1972. Then Linda must have lost it, so that Steph could find it in the backyard or wherever – and then she lost it again, and it turned up in Ash’s room ...’

‘It works,’ said Ash. ‘It totally works.’ She and Rowan grinned at each other. ‘But Verity, why did Rowan have to go to all those different times? Why *those* particular times? Was there a reason?’

‘No, I chose them completely at random,’ said Verity sarcastically. ‘Of course there was a reason. I explained this to you already, didn’t I? In each of those times Rowan visited, the people living in the house were going through some kind of loss.’

‘The Raymond boys were going off to war,’ said Rowan. ‘And Flora’s mum was so sick. Oh, and Linda’s mother was gone, too.’

‘Lost people,’ said Verity. ‘Because Ash was lost. I needed glass from those times to give the magic its power.’

‘So why 1999?’ said Rowan.

Verity passed a hand over her forehead. ‘I’ve been thinking about that. I suspect *die Schwäche* thought that your family had “lost” Damien. It likes to tie up loose ends.’

‘Oh, that’s sweet ...’ said Rowan. ‘Even if losing Ash wasn’t exactly the best way to do it.’

Ash said suddenly, ‘What day is it?’

‘It’s Wednesday,’ said Verity.

Ash glanced at Verity’s clock, and hastily scraped back her chair. ‘Quick, Ro! If we run, we can make it before everyone wakes up.’

Rowan, refreshed as if she’d slept for two nights put together, was already halfway to the door. Together they burst out into the cool autumn morning and raced for home.



‘But where have you been?’ At the sight of Ash, the reality of her daughter’s disappearance seemed to have burst over Laurel in a single moment. Rowan supposed that now Ash’s existence was solidly confirmed, all the family’s worry about her going missing had also rushed into being.

Laurel stopped hugging Ash long enough to inspect her face anxiously; then wrapped her arms around her again. ‘Never mind, I don’t even care. It’s so good to have you home!’

‘I wasn’t away that long,’ said Ash, embarrassed; and of course, from her point of view, she’d only been away for a single night, and all this fuss was quite unnecessary.

‘Can I tell Tom you’re back?’ Tansy bounced on the couch, desperate to involve herself in the drama.

‘No, I’ll do that,’ said Ash firmly. ‘Where’s my phone?’

‘Here, you can use mine,’ said Ivan. ‘I’m afraid yours is at the police station. I can’t believe you left it behind.’

‘Me either,’ said Ash cheerfully, typing. ‘What a ditz, hey?’

‘We should tell the police she’s come back,’ said Rowan.

‘And Verity!’ said Laurel. ‘I’ll call her now. Where’s my phone gone? I swear I had it in my hand two ticks ago.’

‘She already knows,’ said Ash, head down, busy texting. Womble squirmed in under Ash’s arm to kiss her face, his tail

wagging hard.

‘What?’ said Ivan. ‘How?’

Ash looked up guiltily and caught Rowan’s eye. ‘Because – um—’

‘Knock, knock? Hello?’ Verity’s voice echoed down the hallway. ‘Door was open, so I let myself in.’

‘Ash is back. Ash is back!’ yelled Tansy, barrelling down the hallway to grab Verity and haul her into the big room.

‘Tom’s on his way.’ Ash put the phone down.

Ivan said, ‘But you haven’t told us where you’ve been. Or how Verity knew you were back already.’

‘What happened?’ said Laurel. ‘We were so scared.’

No, you weren’t, thought Rowan indignantly. *The only one who was scared was me!*

Ash was silent, tucking her hair behind her ears, her face blank, and Rowan, watching her, felt her heart beat faster. What was her sister going to say? Suddenly she blurted out, ‘Ash met Damien.’

Laurel gave Rowan a startled look. ‘What? What are you talking about?’

Ash put a swift warning hand on Rowan’s shoulder. ‘It’s true,’ she said quickly. ‘I – I ran into him, and we talked. It was all a big accident. We just ran into each other ... in the street.’

‘Oh, God.’ Laurel sank onto the couch.

‘It’s okay, Mum.’ Ash knelt beside her. ‘It just shook me up a bit, you know? I needed some time to get my head around it ...’

‘So she came to stay with me,’ said Verity unexpectedly. ‘She camped out in my studio. Perfectly safe.’

‘Yes!’ said Ash. ‘Verity knew where I was.’

Laurel swung round to gaze at Verity. ‘So – was it you who introduced them? Because Ash wouldn’t have known him

from a bar of chocolate.’

There was a brief pause, then Verity said, ‘You could say that I had a hand in their meeting. In a manner of speaking.’

‘But ... I don’t understand,’ said Laurel. ‘Why wouldn’t you tell me that Ash was okay? I was worried as a kitten.’

Rowan’s thoughts spun frantically. Ash’s mouth dropped open. ‘I asked her not to,’ she said finally. ‘I needed space to think.’

Verity drew herself up to her full height. ‘If there’s one thing I can do, it’s keep a secret.’

Yes, thought Rowan. *That’s true*. The realisation hit her like a blow to the throat. If Verity had told her about Laurel and Damien in the first place, she never would have put Ash in danger. Verity had never properly prepared her to deal with *die Schwäche*. Giving her books didn’t cut it when there was magic involved. In fact, this whole disaster had been Verity’s fault ...

Rowan pushed her way past Verity and blundered down the hallway to her bedroom. She heard her mother say, ‘What’s got up her nose?’

‘She’ll be okay,’ said Ash. ‘She’s just – tired.’

‘How would you know?’ said Tansy. ‘You haven’t even been here!’

Rowan banged her door closed to cut off their voices. She threw herself down on her bed and kicked off her shoes, crushing the fragile poppy-petal dress beneath her. After a minute she sat up and wriggled out of it, draping it over the back of a chair and pulling on a T-shirt and pants. Maybe Ash was right, and she was just exhausted after staying up all night?

But whenever she thought about Verity, a wave of rage crashed over her. It wasn’t fair to spring all this on her, to not explain anything properly, to order her around – *wear this, fetch that!* What if she’d been trapped in the past, too, like poor Ash? Who would have rescued her? But no, Verity didn’t

care about that, Verity didn't care about her at all, she only cared about the magic.

Rowan humped the doona around her shoulders and she surfed the wave of fury into sleep.



'Rowan?'

It was Verity's brisk voice in her ear, Verity's impatient hand shaking her shoulder. 'Wake up.'

Rowan groaned. 'Go away ...'

'Talk to me, please.'

'I'm asleep!' Rowan burrowed under the covers, but Verity mercilessly yanked them away. Rowan glared up at her, and Verity glared back.

'What's the matter with you? You should be happy. Ash is back and all's well.'

'I'm mad at you!'

'With me? Why? What have I done?'

The astonished look on Verity's face would have been comical if Rowan hadn't been so cross. 'You sent me back in time, you didn't tell me what to expect, you didn't tell me about *die Schwäche*. I wasn't prepared! You should have trained me properly!'

'There wasn't time for that.'

'You should have done it before.'

'I see.' Verity folded her arms. 'You know, you're being quite unreasonable.'

Rowan pulled the covers over herself again, turned her back to Verity and squeezed her eyes shut. She heard Verity mutter, 'Well, well. Suit yourself.' She raised her voice. 'When you're ready, you know where to find me.'

Rowan didn't reply, clenching herself into a tight ball of resentment. She heard the bedroom door open and close, then the front door, then the sharp tap of Verity's shoes on the

footpath outside the window. It wasn't until the sound had faded that Rowan realised she'd been holding her breath until Verity was gone.



‘But you never asked about Damien. I thought you weren’t interested,’ said Laurel for the tenth time. She was sitting on the couch with her arm around Ash’s shoulders while Womble tried to worm his way between them.

‘I wasn’t. It was just – running into him like that. It was a shock.’

‘I can imagine,’ said Ivan.

Ash looked at him. ‘I didn’t *like* him, you know. Don’t worry about that. He didn’t seem like a dad at all.’

‘Didn’t he?’ said Ivan, super-casually.

‘*You’re* my dad,’ said Ash. ‘No matter whose sperm helped make me. You know that, right?’

‘Right.’ Ivan reached out to rub her on the back and blinked a couple of times.

‘But you guys still should have told me and Tansy,’ said Rowan.

‘We didn’t think there was any need to tell you,’ said Laurel. ‘Damien was never going to be part of our lives. We were a family. It was easier just to—’

‘Lie to us?’ said Rowan.

‘No!’

‘Delete him?’ suggested Tansy.

‘I’d actually forgotten,’ said Ivan.

‘Dad! That’s so sweet!’

‘You still should have told us,’ muttered Rowan.

‘We didn’t want any of you to feel that there was any difference between you ...’

‘I don’t!’ cried Tansy.

‘We didn’t want anyone getting a complication, or thinking you weren’t loved the same ...’

Ash snorted. ‘I wouldn’t get a complex. Though I am slightly curious. Just about genetics and stuff. Where was his family from?’

‘I can’t remember. Maybe Armenia?’

‘Armenia? Seriously?’ Ash sat bolt upright. ‘Wow, that’s pretty cool.’

‘I want to be Armenian!’ cried Tansy.

‘Don’t forget, this is Mum,’ said Rowan sourly. ‘He was probably from Austria, or Azerbaijan.’

‘Rude!’ said Laurel.

‘I’ll take that on board,’ said Ash. ‘But I like the sound of Armenia.’

‘The Sound of Armenia,’ murmured Rowan. ‘Band name ...’

‘Maybe we should have talked about it more,’ sighed Laurel. ‘But it was a tricky conversation. And then we left it too long.’

‘And then it didn’t matter anymore,’ said Ivan. ‘Not to me.’

Laurel shifted to look Ash in the eye. ‘So, while you were at Verity’s, thinking about things ... Did you think about your course, too?’

Ash said, ‘What?’

‘Tom told us you were having second thoughts,’ said Ivan.

‘Oh, right,’ said Ash. ‘So I have no privacy, basically. Thanks for that, Tom.’

‘So are you going to drop out, or what?’ said Tansy.

‘No, I’m not going to drop out. Not yet, anyway. Though I did think I might check out some hospitality courses, as a backup. And I did realise ... I should probably make some more friends at uni. Hang out more with people from my course, not just spend all my time with Tom. It’d be good to have some girl friends. Girls are fun.’ Ash looked around at them all. ‘So ... nobody finished painting my room then?’

‘I did heaps!’ said Rowan indignantly.

‘Oh, wow, did you? I was kidding. That’s so cool. Thanks, Ro.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Rowan muttered.

With a jolt, she remembered the mural that Edith and Flora had painted on Ash’s wall. It was still there, buried under layers of wallpaper and paint. Perhaps it would be possible to strip back the wall to uncover it? She made a mental note to look up how to do it on the internet ... or Verity would know ...

Except that she wasn’t talking to Verity.

Rowan remembered something. She tapped Ash on the knee. ‘Are you aware that Mum’s turned your bedroom into a sewing room?’

‘Excuse me? You did what?’

Laurel blinked, then rallied. ‘Temporarily. We didn’t know how long you were going to be away. I’ll move everything out, I promise.’

No one went to school or work that day. Tom arrived, and he and Ash had a private reunion in the office, from which they both emerged red-eyed. Then Tom suggested they all go to Dusty Bells for celebratory ice cream. ‘And we could invite Verity – she’s family, right?’

Behind Tom’s back, Rowan shook her head violently at Ash, who raised her eyebrows, then shrugged. ‘Verity’s busy

today,' she said. 'Working on a commission ... Come on then, let's go. I want to check whether I still have a job.'

After ice creams, they took Womble for a run in the park. Ash dropped behind to whisper to Rowan. 'What's up?'

Rowan scowled. 'Nothing.'

'You're not pissed off that I've come back, are you?'

'What? No, of course not.'

'Just checking.'

'How could you even ask me that?'

Ash shrugged. 'I dunno, you're being so weird today.'

Tom threw the ball for Womble, turned around and walked backwards. 'Hey gang, should we knock this painting over?'

'Good idea,' said Ivan.

When they got back to the house, everyone ran upstairs to Ash's room, falling over each other to grab a brush or a roller or an armful of concert fabric or to remove Mrs Kafoops from the danger zone, Womble tangling in their legs and barking helpful advice. Rowan followed more slowly, wondering how she could tell them about Edith's mural; but she couldn't think of a plausible way to do it other than ripping the wallpaper from the wall. Maybe even that wouldn't work. And a mural wasn't exactly Ash's taste anyway, to be honest, even one painted by Edith Whitecross ... If only Edith and Flora had painted it on Rowan's wall instead ...

The doorbell rang. Rowan tensed like a meerkat with a hawk overhead. Laurel sang out, her arms full of half-made concert costumes, 'Ro, could you get that?'

'Can't Tansy do it?'

'I can't. I'm painting,' said Tansy.

'Ro, just do it, please?'

What if it was Verity? Rowan dragged her feet as she made her way toward the door. The bell shrilled again and Rowan braced herself as she inched the door open.

But it wasn't Verity. It was George.

'Hey!'

'Hi!' Rowan was so pleased to see him. She could feel a big ridiculous grin spreading across her face. 'Ooh, we forgot to give your basket back! Come in. And I've got one of your handkerchiefs, too.'

George flicked a hand. 'No worry about the basket. That's not why I come over. Forget the basket. And I never give you no handkerchief. Your mum at home?'

'Everyone's home,' said Rowan. 'Mum, Dad, Tansy, Ash, Tom – we're all here.'

Laurel leaned over the banister. 'George, hello! Oh God, the veggie basket.'

'Forget the damn basket!' cried George. 'I come over, check you okay.'

'Yes, everything's fine.' Laurel came down the stairs. 'Would you like a coffee? Ash came home, Ivan and I are having a day off. We're great, we're painting.'

'I don't want to stop the painting,' protested George, but Rowan dragged him into the kitchen. 'Okay, okay, coffee is good, thank you.'

'And here is your basket!' Laurel dropped it onto the counter in triumph. 'The veggies were delicious, thank you.'

George waved a hand. 'I got something to tell you.'

Laurel was busy preparing the coffee machine, pulling cups from their hooks, taking milk from the fridge. Rowan said, 'What?'

George beamed at her. 'Michael getting married! Big wedding! You all invited! I wish my Eleni live to see it. But hey, better late than never.'

'Oh, George, congratulations! He and Oliver are finally making it officious? That's wonderful!' Laurel rushed over to hug him. 'I'll have to call him. So exciting!'

Rowan said to George, ‘So you and Michael are speaking to each other?’

‘Of course!’ said George. ‘Why not?’

‘Well ... you told me you used to have big arguments.’

George laughed. ‘Yes, yes, all the time, argue about politics! But we don’t mind.’

‘You agree to disagree,’ said Laurel.

‘That’s right,’ said George. ‘Oliver, he’s a good man, he won’t let us shout too much. So! You coming to the wedding?’

Laurel said, ‘Wild cows couldn’t keep us away.’

So apart from Ash’s return, another good thing had come from Rowan’s visits to the past. She *had* been right to interfere between Michael and George. Rowan swelled with pride at seeing George so happy.

But a small voice inside her asked: *is that worth fighting with Verity?* And the same small voice answered: *no*.

Later, in her bedroom, putting away some clean washing that Ivan had dumped on her bed, Rowan discovered her favourite jeans and her best top, crumpled and dusty in the bottom of the wardrobe; as if they’d been there all along.

She wasn’t sure if that was Verity’s doing, or if *die Schwäche* had returned them to her. They still smelled faintly like beer and cigarette smoke. She rolled them up, thrust them deep into the laundry basket, and banged the lid down on top.



Tansy's dance concert was held in a local hall in a back street a few blocks away, not far from Verity's glass-working studio. Rowan was slightly regretting her decision to wear Steph's scarlet poppy dress. It was gorgeous, but it wasn't exactly warm. Luckily Laurel had lent her an embroidered shawl to drape over her shoulders, which also toned down the scarlet. Rowan hadn't fully realised until she went out in public in her own time just how bright the dress was.

Laurel asked, 'Where did you find that dress, Ro? The op shop?'

'It really suits you,' said Ivan.

Rowan smoothed down the skirt. 'It was a present.'

'From Verity? That's a good grab ...'

Not everything good comes from Verity, you know. But Rowan kept her face expressionless as Laurel went on, 'It's funny, there's something about that dress that reminds me of someone I used to study fashion with. Something about the style. She loved that waistline, that kind of thick belt ... I haven't talked to Steph in years. I must see if I can find her on Facebook.'

Rowan bit her tongue to stop herself saying, *you should totally do that, Steph was lovely. (Except when she was accusing people of being imposters.)* Instead she said, as neutrally as she could manage, 'Great idea, Mum.'

Laurel looked over Rowan's shoulder. 'Oh, good, Verity's here!'

Abruptly Rowan froze and looked the other way. She caught sight of Jarvis and Neela waving at her, and walked over to join them.

'What are you doing here?' said Neela.

'My sister's in the concert, and my mum made most of the costumes.'

'Same,' said Jarvis gloomily. 'My sister, I mean.'

'Cousin for me,' said Neela. 'At least we can sit together. Love your dress, by the way.'

'It's not too much?'

Jarvis leaned back and squinted. 'It's *slightly* too much. But in a good way, you know?'

Rowan laughed. 'Gee, thanks.'

Neela cast a critical eye around the hall. 'The décor in this place is looking kind of tired, don't you reckon? What's with all the lists of names?'

'They're honour boards,' said Rowan. 'They're all soldiers who were killed in wars.'

'Oh, wow,' said Jarvis. 'There are some all with the same surname. Were they related?'

'Maybe,' said Rowan. 'Maybe brothers, maybe cousins.'

'Look at that one – there's about six of them,' said Neela. 'All in one family? That's pretty sad.'

'Yeah, it is sad.' Rowan kept her head angled carefully away from the corner where Laurel and Ivan and Verity stood chatting as she scanned the boards until she found the golden letters on the rich mahogany background: *Raymond, E. J.* She and Neela and Jarvis stood there for a moment, gazing upward.

Neela decided, 'The boards can stay. But I'm def ditching that flower painting over there.'

Something about the style... The swirl of leaves and murky flowers tugged at Rowan's memory. With a bound she crossed the hall and peered up at the shadowy painting in the tarnished gold frame. Now she was up close she could make out the sheen of the fluted glass bottle, the soft fuzzy spikes of the flowers, their original redness dimmed by time, the green dabs of the leaves, the crossed dark slashes of paintbrushes on the table, and in the background, a pair of tall windows. Something about the fall of the light was instantly familiar to Rowan. It was her bedroom. These flowers had been painted in her room, in the front room of her house.

On tiptoe she leaned forward to peer at the signature in the corner of the canvas, but she couldn't decipher it. But then – duh – she noticed the title-plate set into the bottom of the frame. *Bottlebrushes — Edith Whitecross.*

Rowan sucked in a breath, and reached out a fingertip to touch the frame. Had Edith painted this after Rowan's visit, or before? How had the painting ended up here, a shadowy image on the wall of a local hall? Everyone else here had walked past it without a glance, except possibly Verity, and Neela, who wanted to throw it in the bin. But Rowan felt as if a window had eased open and a breeze from another century had breathed gently through the crack.

In that instant, Rowan made up her mind. Forget scribbling sketches in her notebook. She would paint a mural on the wall of her own house, the blank outside wall, where everyone could see it. And she would include portraits of Edith and Flora and Bertha, of the Raymond clan, and of Linda's family, and the share house mannequins, and her own family, too – the whole history of the house, the last hundred years. She would paint it all herself. Before her adventures, she wouldn't have dared to attempt such an ambitious project; but now she couldn't wait to get started. And it would be like a gift, too, an offering to *die Schwäche*, another step in getting to know each other.

She fought an impulse to rush over to Verity and tell her about it; but no, she hadn't forgiven Verity yet. That could wait.

‘What are you grinning about?’ Jarvis loomed behind her. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Nothing.’ But Rowan couldn’t stop smiling.

Neela beckoned; the concert was about to start. Lost in her plans, Rowan made her way to the seats Neela had bagged for them, and stared forward, unfocused, as people shuffled into their chairs, cleared their throats, shed their jackets and rustled through their programs. Tansy’s teacher was up on the stage, talking; Rowan didn’t really listen. Amber was introducing a middle-aged woman with curling silver hair who had come to launch the concert.

‘—always wanted to be a dancer myself,’ the woman was saying. ‘Unfortunately I didn’t make it. But I was lucky enough to realise a different dream, to create my own jewellery and design business—’

Rowan nudged Neela. ‘Who is that? What did she say her name was?’

Neela shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

Jarvis whispered, ‘Linda something?’

Rowan gaped up at the stage, unable to take in any more of the speech, but unable to tear her gaze away from Linda’s face. It was her, of course it was her. At one point, Linda’s eyes flickered over the crowd. Did she pause for a second when she saw Rowan’s face? Blushing hotly, Rowan bent her head over her program. But no, Linda wouldn’t recognise her, of course, she’d been in magical disguise as Linda’s best friend ... So there’d be no point going up afterwards to say hello. Rowan didn’t know whether to be relieved or sorry.

But when Linda declared the concert about to begin, and backed off the stage, applauding, Rowan clapped so hard that her hands stung. And from the corner of her eye, she could see Verity clapping, too.



Rowan was sketching with a pencil in her book, trying to solve the tricky section in the bottom left-hand corner, which for some reason just wasn't working, when her phone pinged.

Sidestepping Womble, she scrambled up to grab it from the table, and caught her breath when she saw the text was from Verity. She still hadn't spoken to Verity, even though she had come round for dinner twice. Only Ash had seemed to notice Rowan's determined silence, and her sister had apparently decided to leave her alone and let her get over it in her own time. *Not yet*, thought Rowan stubbornly. *Not yet*.

She didn't mean to even read the message, but her eye couldn't help taking it in from the screen. *Hi Rowan, are you busy? Could you pop over to my place for a few minutes?*

As if nothing had happened! thought Rowan indignantly. Her thumbs hovered for a second, then she typed, *i am pretty busy actually*

The reply came instantly. *I'm opening the door for you. See you in a minute.*

Rowan rolled onto her back and let Womble lick her face. She didn't *want* to go to Verity's; she wasn't ready. Maybe the next time Verity came around for dinner with a plate of muffins and a tub of homemade ice cream, she might be prepared to say *hi*. Not to totally forgive her, mind you, but

give Verity the chance to apologise ... It wasn't fair to *ambush* her like this.

Crossly she texted, *on my way*

She shoved her feet into her runners and slipped out of the front door. The winter sky was clear and crisp above the rooftops, and behind her, the house was curled in a patch of sun like a contented cat curled around its secret. But Rowan knew that *die Schwäche* wasn't asleep, just waiting.

Verity's faded blue door was ajar when Rowan arrived. She stepped inside, calling, 'Okay, I'm here!'

The hallway was stripped. All the artworks had been taken down, the funny little knick-knacks had disappeared, the floorboards were bare. The door of the front room gaped open and Rowan saw a forlorn huddle of furniture in the centre of the floor. The bookshelves were empty, the walls blank.

'Verity?' Rowan heard the note of panic in her voice, and then brisk footsteps echoed from the back of the house and Verity was walking down the hall toward her. For half a second Rowan felt a rush of relief. But then she saw that Verity was wearing an overcoat and scarf, and carrying a neat suitcase in her hand.

'What's happening? Where are you going?'

Verity set down the suitcase and adjusted her scarf. 'Away.'

'But you're coming back, right?' Rowan clenched her fists by her sides. 'You're not going away forever? Is this because I was mad at you? Because I'm not anymore – I'm sorry, I didn't mean it—'

'No, no. Listen to me, Rowan. This is not your fault, it's nothing to do with you.'

'But if it's not because of me, then why?' Rowan only realised she was crying when tears splashed down her cheeks.

Verity put her hands on Rowan's shoulders as she chose her words. 'There's trouble coming, Rowan. And it's coming soon. There is work I need to do, and I can't do it from here.'

Rowan threw her arms around Verity and squeezed her as hard as she could. ‘Do you mean magic work? Why can’t you do it from here? Why do you have to go away?’

‘Because ... the trouble that’s coming won’t be as bad here as it will be in other places. I can’t tell you more than that. Don’t cry.’ Verity tightened her arms around Rowan’s back.

Rowan wiped her eyes. ‘You can’t go. I need you. I’m painting a mural on our house. If you don’t help me, it won’t be any good ...’

She knew how pathetic she sounded. Verity said, ‘Yes, your mum told me about the mural. But you won’t need me. You’ve already started working on it, haven’t you? It doesn’t have to be perfect. That isn’t the point. The point isn’t what you end up with. The point is in the making.’ Verity detached herself from Rowan. ‘I have something for you.’ She dropped something small, silver and blue into Rowan’s hand.

‘My ring!’

The blue glass looked different; it had been carefully broken and then glued back together. A pattern of fine cracks ran across its face.

‘I’m sorry I had to break it,’ said Verity. ‘But it was the only way.’

‘That’s all right.’ Rowan pushed it safely onto her middle finger, where it gleamed, softly and satisfyingly, tingling faintly. ‘It just makes it more special.’

Verity tapped on the blue glass with one short, practical fingernail. ‘This ring found you, Rowan. *Die Schwäche* found you. You were born into it, you are connected to its mysteries. That’s why it’s up to you to take over now. You will be the guardian of the house while I’m gone.’

Rowan blinked at her.

‘It’s not unprecedented,’ said Verity. ‘I was away for some time after the war – the first war, that is – and Flora watched over *die Schwäche* till I returned. She was a little older than you are, of course, but she managed well enough. I’m sure you’ll be fine.’

Rowan found her voice. ‘But it’s just until you come back, right? And then – will you start teaching me about magic? Maybe I could, I dunno, be your apprentice or something?’

‘That was always the plan. I just didn’t expect things to go pear-shaped so soon.’ Verity sighed. ‘Let’s wait and see.’

Rowan had stopped trying not to cry. ‘Promise you will come back? After – after the trouble’s over, whatever that is? After things stop going pear-shaped?’

Verity didn’t answer. Instead she said, ‘Will you give my love to the others? This is for Ash, and this is for Tansy.’ She gave Rowan the kaleidoscope, and the crystal ball.

Rowan juggled them clumsily in her arms. ‘You’re not going to pop in on your way out? Not even to say goodbye to Mum?’

‘I hate goodbyes,’ said Verity. ‘And we are not going to say them now.’

Before she knew it, Rowan found herself outside on Verity’s porch while Verity locked the blue door and slid the key into her pocket. She ran her hand over Rowan’s hair, and kissed her on the forehead.

Rowan watched as Verity picked up her suitcase and began to walk away up the dead-end street, toward the gleam of the dying sun. Soon she was only a black silhouette against the gold, and that was the way that Rowan would paint her on the wall, a dark shape against the light.

The figure in the overcoat blurred as Rowan hugged the crystal ball and the kaleidoscope to her chest and scrubbed the tears from her eyes. But when she looked back, Verity was gone.

Back in her bedroom, Rowan carefully set the silvery kaleidoscope and the crystal ball on the shelf where she kept Linda’s friendship bracelet, the torn Aboriginal flag, Steph’s poppy dress, George’s hanky, the stump of Harry’s pencil: her keepsakes from her travels. She felt numb, cried-out. She wouldn’t tell the others yet about Verity leaving; she had a

confused idea that she ought to allow Verity a decent head start.

She sank down onto her bed, shifting her sketchbook and pencil to one side, and twisted the blue and silver ring around her finger. If Flora could look after the house while Verity was away, then surely Rowan could manage it. Verity hadn't said how long she'd be gone; it might only be a few weeks ...

But Rowan knew, somehow, that Verity wasn't coming back for a long time.

She realised that she'd been staring at her bedside table for several minutes without really seeing it. Among the jumble of water bottle, books, pens, phone charger, earbuds and hair ties, she saw something small, made of tarnished metal, about the length of two joints of her little finger.

It was a tiny folding knife; she could just manage to prise out the rusted blade. Squinting, she read the words *Rat Brand* etched along its side, with a line of miniscule rats carved beneath. She could swear she had never seen this object before, certainly not on her own bedside table ...

Then she whispered, 'Oh, I get it.' A gift from *die Schwäche*, an offering, maybe even a reward?

There was a slim metal loop attached to one end, where someone could thread the knife through a chain or ribbon ... Someone could wear it around their neck when they went to bed, and wake up in a different time, who knows when? And if that person 'borrowed' something else to wear while they were there, they might be able to make a return visit – or end up somewhere new—

Rowan closed her fist around the little knife, the blue-glass ring shining on her finger, and smiled.

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Kate Constable was born in Melbourne but spent much of her childhood in Papua New Guinea, without television but within reach of a library where she ‘inhaled’ stories. She studied Arts/Law at the University of Melbourne before working for a record company while she began her life as a writer. Kate had stories published in *Meanjin*, *Island* and other literary magazines before realising she was actually a children’s and YA author. Kate has written eleven novels for young people, including the internationally published Chanters of Tremaris series and the CBCA award-winning *Crow Country*. Kate lives in a northern suburb of Naarm/Melbourne with her family, a bearded dragon and a dog.