

Searching the Silences of War: A Creative and Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract

Searching the Silences of War: A Creative and Theoretical Exploration consists of two parts: Part One, the creative component *Finding Sophie*, is a young adult novel and Part Two, *Searching the Silence*, is the accompanying exegesis. Both the novel and the exegesis explore the Anzac myth's impact on war narratives, the omission of women's experiences in those narratives and silences in official versions of Australia's history of war presented to young adults: the truth of the war experience; the Defence Force's strategy to present only a favourable image; the censorship of the media; the hero myth; the impact of war on women and families; and the lack of representation of, and writing by, women about the Vietnam War.

Part One, *Finding Sophie* the novel, set in Werribee in 1997, is told from the perspective of seventeen year old Sophie recovering at her grandparents' farm after a serious illness. Her grandmother was a protestor during the Vietnam War, her great-uncle, who also lives on the farm, fought as a member of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam. Unexpected events lead to a questioning of the family's highly regarded military history, the shattering discovery of a World War II family secret and the voicing of silences and shame with a particular focus on the Vietnam War.

Part Two, *Searching the Silence* the exegesis, explores young adult fiction dealing with war and its repercussions and the use of narrative devices which engage and influence young adult readers. It documents the challenges associated with being a woman writing a young adult novel about war, a novel which subverts the traditional war narrative and aims to address the issues of invisibility and omission, the gaps and slippages in popular war narratives. *Finding Sophie* is based on extensive research on Australia's involvement in war and on the way that involvement has been narrated – some aspects mythologised and silenced. In this exegesis those aspects of the research that have shaped the novel are discussed: official history and the 'hero myth'; emotional repression; between generations, shame and guilt; the lack of agency and repression of women's stories.

Declaration

I, Margaret Campbell, declare that the Master by Research entitled *Searching the Silences of War: A Creative and Theoretical Exploration* is no more than 60,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, reference and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this exegesis is my own work.

Signature: Date:.....

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Part One

Finding Sophie

Chapter One

I wake to pain. From out of the blackness I open my eyes to stark white – white walls, white sheets and a nurse's white hospital gown with a stethoscope dangling over it.

‘Hello, Sophie.’ The nurse's eyes are brown and he is smiling.

I try to move my tongue but the words stick in my mouth like chewed sawdust.

His hand is warm as he holds my wrist. ‘It's good to see you coming back to us.’

Back? I close my eyes against the white glare and his welcoming smile and wonder where I've been. I remember voices curling like fog in the shadows.

‘I'm just going to give you an injection, Sophie.’

‘We're going to turn you, Sophie.’

‘Sophie, I'm going to wash you. You'll be more comfortable then.’

‘You're in hospital, Sophie. In intensive care. You've been here...’

I open my eyes again. I'm in a hard bed, unable to move.

He's still smiling. ‘Move your fingers, Sophie.’

I look down at my right hand, at the tube sprouting from my arm. My other arm is the same, the tube snaking behind me.

‘Sophie, can you wriggle your fingers for me?’

I look at my fingers and try to concentrate, wondering what I have to do to make them move. Do I just have to imagine it? I seem to be distanced from them,

almost as though they belong to somebody else. At last they move. His hand closes warmly around mine.

‘Good girl. Now what about your toes?’

He pulls the sheet aside. I look down at my painted toenails, miniature blue flags against the white. It takes ages, but at last my fogged brain responds and I wriggle my toes.

‘Good girl,’ he says again. ‘Now on a scale of one to ten, how’s the pain?’

That’s much too hard to think about. I groan and close my eyes again. The cold swab shocks and the needle prick stings. I breathe in the blackness...raggedly... slowly...evenly...

I surface from the needle-prick fog to a buzz in my head like the angry crackle of a badly tuned radio.

‘It’s already arranged, Greg. Frances is taking over from me.’

‘That’s bloody ridiculous and you know it. You’ve got the Canada conference. You can’t take months off, just like that.’

‘Of course I can. I’ve got my long service leave. And Sophie needs me.’

‘She needs me, too. I’m her father, damn it, and we bloody nearly lost her. I can take time off easier than you. Go to Canada and I’ll stay home with her.’

‘I’m a nurse, you idiot. She needs me.’

‘Ellie, she needs someone there, and that’ll be me.’

‘Me. Her mother. It’s done and that’s it.’

They’re at it again. Mum and Dad held each other, crying and smiling, as they worried over me when they brought me into hospital, but not today. I open my eyes to lines of worry on Gran’s usually smooth face, her hands cooling my forehead with a wet facecloth. The usual cloud of White Diamonds perfume surrounds her, and from the end of the bed the unrelenting buzz.

‘She’s seventeen for God’s sake. How are you going to look after her? That’s my job.’

‘There’s nothing you can do that I can’t, Ellie. It’s only common sense, and she’s my little girl, too.’

Gran’s hands are suddenly still. I look at the wall, the ceiling, the rigid stance of Gran’s slim figure, anywhere but at Mum and Dad because I know what I’ll see – Mum in her black suit, hands on her hips, and Dad, lips drawn in a tight line across his tanned face.

‘Right, you two. Out!’ Gran’s voice cuts through the charged air; she jerks the facecloth from my forehead and waves it like a matador’s cape. ‘What are you trying to do, finish off what the meningococcus started? I’ll look after Sophie. Now get out of here and back to your important lives. When Sophie comes home, she comes home to Prospect Park with me. Out! Out before I call the nurse. And pull that curtain closed behind you.’

For a moment, silence, and then the curtains swish. It’s some time before I realise I’ve been holding my breath. Gran folds the cloth with steady hands, her long nails splashes of red against the white fabric. I look up at her smug smile and familiar tumble of bright red hair and the tears of relief overflow.

Chapter Two

Prospect Park, my grandparents' farm, is my favourite place. For as long as I can remember I have loved the grassy plains, the cypress pines along the gravel drive and the pepper trees at the back of the house where Alec, Gran's brother, built me a rope swing. I was three then, but I still swing there in the shade and breathe in the sharp scent of the leaves and of the crackling pink berries that I roll between my fingers. I love the creek that runs in a stony course to the Werribee River – sometimes so dry it disappears, and sometimes a wide sweep of brown water that slices the paddocks in two. I love the feeling of peace when I sit in the open hay shed not far from the house, and Big Tom, the ginger cat, keeps me company in the sun.

Somewhere back in the past the Woiworung hunters speared kangaroos here, and down by the river there are still scarred trees, but the people have vanished, and only the tales of poisoned flour and massacres remain. There are other stories, too, of squatters, shepherds, bullock drivers, men with wheelbarrows walking across the plains to Ballarat, and the women and children who lived through depressions and world wars. On quiet nights, when there is no breath of wind, I sit on the back verandah and watch the moon rise thin and silver as a wafer in the black sky – wishing moon, Gran calls it – and I always make the same wish. I wish I could stay on the farm forever. Those are the nights, too, when the spirits seem to whisper old memories as secret as the river that has eaten its way through the flat, stony soil.

The house is full of secrets; I can feel them in the stone walls, in the stables and, in the storeroom, where the dust gathers on the clutter of generations, every trunk

or mirror or chest of drawers holds some story to itself. The old photographs can only hint at them and I often imagine how the days must have been – slower, happier, more peaceful than any I can remember.

‘You were born out of your time,’ Mum says, as though it’s not quite nice to look back on the past. ‘And who with any sense would rather live on a farm?’ She’s tall and always trim, her blonde hair a neat, shiny bob. She’s a no-nonsense businesswoman – a nursing background, but now an administrator.

‘Too slow, too quiet,’ says Dad with his usual quick smile. ‘I couldn’t get away fast enough to uni. Engineering is much more civilised than farming.’ He certainly doesn’t look like a farmer, his dark hair groomed and gleaming, his neatly filed nails and hands as smooth as Mum’s. Together they love the slick city pace and the fourth floor unit at Hawthorn, the weekend latté and cappuccino mornings. Not me, it’s only here with Gran and in the warmth of this shared history that I feel I belong.

‘I don’t know what you see in that woman,’ Mum says. ‘She’s a zany sixties coffee house singer and a protester. She’s never grown up.’ She always refers to Gran as ‘that woman’ and ‘a protestor’. She sounds the words like a death sentence on a war criminal, but not when Dad can hear.

Mum’s mother, Nanny Charlton, is much the same about Gran; and she’s told me of her family’s proud military history that goes back to the Boer War. She took me to Gallipoli to visit her mum’s uncle’s grave – all those white gravestones, all those young men. Now when we go to the Dawn Service I cry as I remember them. Nanny cheers and claps the Anzac Parade; she wears her great-grandmother’s war brooch with a bar for each of her three sons who fought – two of them died – and tells me about the proud women who sent their sons off to war.

Gran is so different. She never talks about her dad's time in the Army – I never knew him, but I know he fought in New Guinea. We learned about the Kokoda Track at school, and I often wondered about him – was he there? And no one mentions the Vietnam War.

No one talks about Grandad either, and his black moods that seem to spring from nowhere, the only thing to spoil the perfection of the farm, but I suppose his moods are like crutching sheep or sending hand-reared lambs to market – not enjoyable, just a part of life.

School has finished. I was there for the last class, but I missed speech night. I don't remember that night at all; and I was in hospital when my best friend Mai left soon after to go to Vietnam. I remember Dad and Mum arguing at the hospital; I spent a few days at home, and they argued again when they brought me here to the farm. Now I'm doing as I'm told – by Mum, by Dad, and then by Gran – I'm resting.

How much time can I spend resting?

'The sane and sensible thing to do, Beth,' Mum told Gran when they came to say goodbye before she went to Canada and Dad flew up to his project in Queensland. 'Not only that, it's essential for her recovery.'

'I know that, Ellen.' I grinned at the glint in Gran's green eyes.

Then Dad put in his few cents' worth. 'Mum, you'll take good care of her, won't you? She's very precious, you know!'

'No, I don't know,' said Gran. 'What do you take me for, Greg? I managed to get you through scarlet fever and God knows what else. Of course I'll look after her.'

'She's had a near-death experience,' said Mum in that Director of Nursing voice that raises Gran's hackles. 'She needs rest. No tearing around the countryside.'

I kept out of it and I don't know how Gran kept her cool, but finally they went back to the suburban smog and I could breathe in the clear farm air.

When they brought me here I was as weak as one of Grandad's new lambs and just as wobbly on my legs. At first Gran was subdued; she treated me like rare porcelain, but at least her idea of recuperation isn't the same as Mum's and now she doesn't treat me like an invalid.

I've been for my morning walk. Some walk, down to the front gate and back – well, I suppose it is a long way down through the cypress pines. I've chatted with Alec – he's my great uncle but I've always called him Alec, everyone does. I've watched Gran paint her nails – I've even painted my own. I spread my fingers out in front of me to look at the new green polish. My toes match. Okay, I suppose, and different from Gran's red, but I'm bored. How much more time can I spend resting?

My diary is open and dated, but the page is blank. It's hot. The air is still. Even the ferns banked in terracotta pots on the shelves beside me look miserable. If only there were something...

'Sophie!'

The sound of Gran's voice bursts into the heavy air. 'Sophie Louise Branston. Get yourself inside and see who's here and what they've brought. Double-quick!'

Hooray! Insanity at last. I wonder what Gran's up to now?

Chapter Three

‘Look at what Melva found, Soph.’ Gran greets me at the kitchen door swishing a bright pink duster. Little dots of dust dance in the light.

I’m looking. At a huge wooden trunk with a domed lid. It’s the biggest trunk I’ve ever seen, and it looks as though it hasn’t seen daylight for the last hundred years. Melva and Gran stand together in front of it – Melva tall and slim as a breadstick, dressed in her almost uniform slacks and floral blouse, and Gran, small and shapely, passing for half of her fifty-nine years, in jeans and a cropped top.

Melva Browne’s name suits her perfectly. A nurse at the local hospital, she carries a calm that must be a treasure to her patients. She is nothing like Mum. She is nothing like Gran either, and yet the two of them are great friends.

Gran grins as though she’s found the twin of the Welcome Stranger Nugget. Melva seems unsure if that’s a good thing. There are questions I want to ask – Whose is it? Where did it come from? But before I can form the words Melva answers them.

‘It belonged to your grandfather’s cousin. It’s been packed away in our old stables since the 1940s.’

I do a bit of mental arithmetic – this is ’97. ‘That’s over fifty years!’

Gran frowns. ‘He’s never talked about a cousin,’ she says. ‘But since the accident he’s never talked about anything much, I suppose.’ She shrugs as though that doesn’t matter, but I know it does. ‘Oh, well, let’s see what we’ve got here.’

I stand close as she tugs at the metal clips. She turns to me with a sly grin.

‘Look out, Soph! You never know what might jump out at you.’

I leap back imagining a white misty shape rising from whatever has been hidden for all those years. Gran laughs and tugs harder at the clips.

How could Melva have found a trunk belonging to Grandad’s cousin? Once again Melva answers the unspoken question.

‘My mum had it, Sophie. Before she was married she used to work here for the Branston family.’

‘Oh. That explains it.’ But it doesn’t explain it, too. ‘How come your Mum had it and it was packed away for so long? Didn’t everything burn in the bushfires?’

It’s Melva’s turn to frown. Her pale blue eyes hold the same doubts. ‘I was sorting through the junk in the old stone stables, and there it was. I don’t know why, and Mum wouldn’t talk about it. She said it belonged to the Branstons and that was all.’

‘Stubborn,’ says Gran, ‘just like this lid. It doesn’t want to budge. Come on, you pair. Put your muscles into it.’

Melva shrugs. ‘All right, you poor weakling, I’ll have a try.’

Gran thumps her, but together they push and tug until at last the trunk jolts open. A faint scent of lavender rises like a prayer. The domed lid falls back and I wonder who glued the sheets of wallpaper inside to line it. The tiny flowers have long since lost their colour; everything is in faded shades of brown and cream. There is nothing to see of the contents, only layers of yellowing tissue paper shaped in a mound over them.

‘A bit like a time capsule, isn’t it?’ says Gran, her hands over the paper. She seemed so eager I’m surprised at her hesitation, the shadow of concern in her eyes. ‘Well, here goes.’

The paper rustles as she spreads it carefully on the slate floor. My imagination runs wild. I try to remember the dresses I’ve seen in old movies, and I know that whatever we find in the trunk will be older than any in the op shop. Maybe it won’t be dresses at all – it could be linen or papers or toys.

‘Wow! Look at this.’ Gran’s voice is almost a whisper. The papers float to the slate floor and she lifts a dressing gown from the trunk, rich velvet, edged and sashed in satin, the colour of blood. She holds it against herself and the extra length drags. ‘Here you are then, Soph. Try this for size.’

I slip my arms into it and wrap it around. It’s as soft as the fur on my old Pooh Bear and the wide sleeves hang loosely. I tie the long satin sash and dance around in it, imagining myself as some old movie star swanning around. When I stand still my green toenails peep out from under the hem.

‘Length’s just right,’ says Gran. ‘She must have been as tall as you.’

Now she lifts out dresses. ‘Oh, look,’ she says, burying her face in the soft fabric. ‘Voille, georgette, silk.’ She unfolds them, soft pastel colours and pretty floral, and spreads them across the paper. Next are linen and woollen skirts, blouses trimmed with lace and hand-knitted jumpers.

‘They’d fit you, Melva.’ Gran winks at me.

‘I don’t think so,’ says Melva.

I can hardly wait to try them on.

Gran burrows into the trunk again. ‘Look at this, even her underwear.’

The undies are stacked neatly, beautiful shades of pink and cream all edged with lace. Strange, that after all this time they look as though they were ironed yesterday and packed away. And so light and soft.

‘Hey,’ says Melva, ‘aren’t we lucky we don’t wear these any more?’ She waves a heavy pink bra and something else. ‘Corsets,’ she says as she holds them against herself. I stare at them, the boned high-waisted shape and the suspenders dangling, thinking they’d belong with crinoline skirts, not 1940s’ dresses. I’m glad this is 1997.

A parcel, tissue wrapped, is tucked in a corner. Slippers. They match the dressing gown.

I try to slip them on. ‘No good for you, Bigfoot,’ says Gran, laughing.

Shoes are also tissue-wrapped. Melva and Gran unwrap them, suede and leather, all beautiful and barely worn. I feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland, as though I’ve stepped into a wardrobe and suddenly it’s a changed world.

Gran frowns at the pile of clothes beside her. ‘This looks like everything she owned. I wonder why they were packed away? It was wartime, or just after, and you needed coupons for clothes then. And the fabrics – georgette, voile and crepe. Silk, too. That was as scarce as hen’s teeth, and these undies are all silk.’

Melva shrugs. ‘Who knows? Mum shut up like a clam when I asked her.’

Amidst the rustling of more paper, Gran almost disappears into the trunk. When she stands up she’s like a Greek diver holding the ceremonial cross; in her hands, a rectangular wooden box.

‘Sophie!’ she says, entranced by the letters carved into lid. ‘It’s you!’

The top of the box is inlaid with different coloured woods, and in the centre, a name in old-fashioned letters – *Sophie Anne Branston*.

‘Sophie Anne, Gran, not Sophie Louise.’ But still it’s a bit scary to see it there on someone else’s property, stranger still to see all these clothes that belonged to her, clothes that will probably fit me. I could be a ghost, looking at the remains of myself. That *is* scary.

The lid of the box is unhinged. Gran lifts it and passes it to Melva. Inside there’s a tray, a top layer, and in it several small velvet boxes.

Together we move to stand near the kitchen table. Gran places the large box carefully on the polished wood and, one by one, she lifts out the small ones and opens them. The treasures rest on satin, some of it stained with rust. Gran takes them out – rings, a pearl brooch, a gold bracelet, earrings with pearls and cloudy white stones. They are delicate pieces, out of place next to Gran’s long red nails. She holds one to the light, a gold ring with a series of stones set across the top.

‘A DEAREST ring,’ says Melva as Gran slips it on to her own finger.

‘It’s beautiful, but why ‘dearest’?’

Gran holds out her hand and Melva taps the stones. ‘Look – Diamond, Emerald, Amethyst, Ruby, Emerald, Sapphire, Turquoise. That’s how it gets its name. It’s a lover’s ring and the ‘DEAREST’ is the initials of the stones.’

‘Must have been from her boyfriend or husband.’ Gran looks smug, as though she’s stumbled on the romance of the century. ‘Of course if she was married, she wouldn’t have been a Branston then. I’ll have to ask Norman and look it up.’

The next box is rose-pink velvet. Gran opens it to reveal a yellowing satin lining and, lying in the folds, a triple string of pearls, creamy and lustrous, and a bracelet to match. ‘What do you reckon about these?’ she says and takes them out of the box, lifts the necklace up to her mouth and rubs the pearls across her teeth.

‘Gran, what are you doing?’

‘Hey, they’re gritty. They must be real!’ Her eyes are wide as she runs the pearls through her fingers. ‘They must be worth a fortune. What else is there?’

I’m quicker than Gran and I grab the last box and flick it open. ‘Oh, Gran. A locket!’ It’s gold; such a dainty heart-shaped thing on a fine gold chain. *Sophie* – the name is engraved on the front in a circle of flowers. I take it out of the box and try to open it, but it’s stuck; maybe a lock of hair in there, or a picture of the man she loved. How could she leave it here? I hold it against me and shiver as a sudden sadness envelops me.

I’m so engrossed in the locket that I don’t notice what Gran is doing until she says, ‘Hey, look what I’ve found.’

She has removed the tray, and in the lower part there’s a bundle of letters tied with blue ribbon. The envelopes are brownish and the ribbon is so tight it has cut into the edges. Gran takes them out. She handles them almost reverently, and as she does, I notice a photograph in the bottom, a photograph of a young woman, smiling.

I look into her face and the floor seems to move. It could nearly be a picture of me. Her eyes are wide-spaced, her lips have the same turned-up corners, an almost permanent smile, only her hair and eyebrows are different – short dark curls that would push against a brush and eyebrows thick and curved. My hair is long and blonde, held up in a bunch with glittery clips and hers is held down with bobby pins. There’s the locket, and shadowed in the photograph is the faint engraving of her name wreathed in flowers.

I am drawn to this image of her. I focus on the shape of her face, her eyes, the curve of her lips. I want to smooth my fingers over the soft folds of her dress, lift the locket on the chain from around her neck to look at the photograph or the lock of hair

I'm sure is in there. I want to touch her, to draw her to me. But it is she who draws me.

Down. Down. Down until I'm swirling in a black whirlpool. There's a roar of blood in my ears.

'Sophie...'

The voice comes from far away. I close my eyes and shake my head.

'Sophie, are you okay?' Melva's concern is in her voice.

I open my eyes and stare again into Sophie Anne's face. There is nothing, just the flat black-and-white surface of an old photograph. I shiver as Melva takes me by the arm and guides me to the rocking chair beside the window. I slide down onto the wooden seat and lean against the carved back. My legs are soft liquorice.

'I'm sorry, Sophie.' Gran hovers like a guardian angel, a frown creasing her face. 'I was having such a good time I forgot how sick you've been.'

The chair seems to rock by itself. Melva leans over me, her hand firm and cool on my wrist as she takes my pulse.

'I'm all right, Melva.'

She gives me that nurse's no-nonsense look and ignores me.

Gran fills a glass with water and sits it on the table in front of me. 'I think we'll call it a day,' she says. 'That's more than enough for Sophie.'

Melva and I watch as she repacks the trunk – shoes, underwear, and the delicate colours of the dresses spread carefully across the top. She closes the lid with a thump and looks at me. 'I'm sorry, Soph.'

'Gran, I'm okay.'

She's not convinced. 'You can try those on when you're feeling better. I'll keep the photo. We'll frame it and hang it with the others.' She picks up the box and

holds it like a trophy. ‘I think I’ll just quietly check on those pearls. And you can keep the locket. It’s got your name on it. I know Grandad won’t mind. After all he’s never even mentioned her.’

I’d forgotten the locket. I uncurl my fingers against the rich colour of the dressing gown. An engraved gold heart, *Sophie*, circled in flowers, the locket glows in the palm of my hand.

Chapter Four

‘Geelong or Melbourne?’ Gran’s eagerness is reflected in her green eyes. Her earrings match the season: bronze, green and gold. They swish above her shoulders like miniature bead curtains. Her fingernails are bronze today, like her toenails glowing against the hem of her long black dress.

We’re at the round wooden table in the kitchen. Grandad’s already gone with his dogs but Alec, Gran and I linger over pancakes and the rich butterscotch sauce I love.

I don’t know what would happen on the farm without Alec, he’s been here as long as Dad can remember. When Grandad goes off in one of his moods he doesn’t care about anything except his dogs. And I don’t know how Gran’s coped all these years since the accident. She never talks about that – no one does. I remember as a little kid I always called him Grumps. Years ago I asked her why he was always so grumpy.

‘He wasn’t always like that,’ she’d said.

‘What happened, Gran?’

Her eyes lost their sparkle and I could sense a sadness that she seldom allowed to surface. ‘An accident with the tractor, that’s what happened. A fractured skull and twenty-four hours pinned under the tractor before he was found. I don’t know what damage was done, but they didn’t have the skills that they do now. And now he won’t agree to any further investigation. Twenty-four hours that changed our lives. Oh, well,

that was a long time ago and you can't live in the past, can you?' She smiled then, but it wasn't her usual megawatt variety.

There are sometimes flashes of the man Grandad used to be, the man she must have fallen in love with – his gentleness with the dogs, and the way he stresses over birds that Big Tom catches – and I wish I had known him back then.

I look at Alec and Gran together and it amazes me that they are brother and sister. Gran's so small, so bouncy, her fine-boned face full of expression. Alec's tall; he walks slowly and easily, despite his slight limp, and always, I sense his self-containment. He's older than Gran and his hair is sprinkled with grey, but his black bushy eyebrows and slim face make him look younger.

'Earth to Sophie, come in please.' Gran waves her hands in the air. 'Where are we going, Melbourne or Geelong?' One night's pampering me is enough for Gran; we're back to recuperating.

'Melbourne, Bethie,' says Alec. He spoons the last bit of pancake from his plate. 'I'll chauffeur. I've got some business to attend to.'

'What business?' says Gran.

Alec wipes the white linen napkin across his lips. 'My business,' he says. 'So don't bother asking.' That sharp look passes between them, as it often does, and I can feel the air electric, ready for a storm.

'Humph!' Gran says. 'Typical.'

I cringe, and wish she'd take the hint and be quiet. One thing I know, he'll tell her when he's good and ready – maybe.

'Well, we've got business, too. And if he's driving, Sophie, I suppose we'll have to go in the ute.'

‘Plenty of room in the ute, Bethie, and plenty of room in the back for your bags. You’ll probably buy half of Myer’s as usual.’

‘Humph!’ says Gran again. ‘Well, if we have to sit cramped in the ute, you can buy us lunch. And that means at the Hari Krishna’s.’

I relax as Alec grins. ‘You drive a hard bargain, girl. I’ll have to eat those awful fresh vegetables and lentils. That’s a real sacrifice.’ He scrunches up his face. ‘But for you I suppose I can.’

Gran’s smile is triumphant. ‘Thirty minutes, Alec. You be ready. And make sure that damn ute doesn’t smell of dogs or sheep.’ Her earrings flash as she accentuates each word and pins Alec with a hard green stare.

‘Yes, Ma’am.’ He pushes back his chair and raises his hand in a lazy salute as he saunters out of the kitchen.

Thirty minutes later we’re at the front door. So is Alec, dressed in his charcoal suit and with the shiny black BMW. He opens the back door with a flourish. ‘At your service, Ma’am.’

I can’t stop laughing as Gran shoulders her bronze crocheted bag. Her hair is a fireball in the sun. She stomps towards the car and her rings glint gold and silver as she whacks Alec on the arm and leaps into the car in a flurry of black skirt and tinkling bell above the straps of her shoes.

‘In the front with me, Sophie; we’ll let Ma’am languish in the back in style.’

‘And that means we have to buy our own lunch,’ says Gran in disgust.

‘You can’t have everything, Bethie. You should know that by now.’ There’s an edge to Alec’s voice and a flash of hurt across Gran’s face.

‘I should know lots of things,’ she mutters as she straps herself into the back seat.

It's a surprisingly easy trip from the farm to the city, just over half an hour. Once Grandad's farm spread across the plains, the paddocks surrounded and divided by stone fences. Now his few hundred acres are all that remain of his great-great-grandfather's original property. Five acre blocks and hobby farms crowd against one side like mustered sheep, on the other sides the roads chequer the paddocks and the old names mark them like pages of history – Derrimut, Doherty, Leake, Davis and Robinson, to name a few. I like how we travel over the gravel roads. Alec sticks to the back roads and in the distance the city stands on the horizon like a cluster of miniature tombstones. At the edges of the road the grasses sway with the breeze. Above us a few puffs of clouds move lazily across the sky. The sun is already warm through the windscreen and gradually the tension eases.

'You're quiet in the back, Bethie.' Alec glances in the rear vision mirror and I swing around to look at Gran. She's belted in, but her feet are up along the seat and she leans back into the corner. She smiles quietly to herself.

'I don't make idle chat with the chauffeur,' she says.

'What's got into her?' Alec raises his eyebrows.

I shrug. I know what Gran's grinning about but I'm not allowed to say. It's a trip to a jeweller to check out her theory on the pearls.

Alec pulls up in Elizabeth Street; here we are in the centre of the city.

'Two o'clock on the dot,' he says. 'I don't want to tangle with the traffic.'

Gran and I tumble out of the car. 'And don't *you* be late.' She shakes a finger at him. 'We don't want to stand on the street corner like shags on a rock. The cops'll pick us up for loitering.'

Alec's laugh echoes as he drives off into the traffic.

By the time we finish with the jeweller it's almost one and I'm famished. I think Gran's forgotten my supposedly fragile state. She's flying high on pearls – on a rose-pink velvet box in her bronze bag containing a necklace and bracelet worth thousands of dollars.

‘Someone must have loved her, Soph. Imagine, all that money for a string of pearls.’

‘Triple string, Gran. And a bracelet.’

‘Well, triple string.’ She shakes her head as though to clear her mind; and she must have because she looks at me seriously. ‘Not that I’d wear them, of course. They’re not my style.’

No, I can’t imagine Gran in pearls, not those that look like the Queen’s anyway. ‘They could have been left to her. And anyway, they wouldn’t have been worth that then, Gran.’

‘Of course not. I know that but, relatively speaking, there was a lot of love in those pearls.’

‘I suppose.’ I can’t help wondering what makes me so unsure. I touch the gold locket, warm against my skin and, even though I can’t open it to see what’s inside, somehow I know it’s far more precious.

We don’t go to Gopals. The food hall at Melbourne Central is crowded but we find a table in a café not far from the clock. Gran loads the tray with focaccia and cheesecake and two mugs of hot chocolate.

‘Have to fatten you up again. You’re too fashionably thin.’

Me, I'm happy the way I am, even if none of my clothes fit. Sometimes a crisis can be a good thing but, then again, I'll need a bit more body when I get back on the netball court.

'I can't believe it.' Gran pats her bag and the contours of the velvet case. 'All that money for pearls. Wait until I tell Grandad and Alec.' Her eyes take on a faraway look. She's making plans.

I cut into my focaccia. The grilled vegies have that nice burned taste and the cheese is melted out at the edges. I look around as I chew. I like being part of this anonymous crowd – men and women in black suits, almost a uniform in the city – and such a mix of cultures and languages – saris and the rich Indian accents, the short but endless stream of syllables of Chinese and the hand-accented sounds of Italian and Greek. Gran's still dreaming about her pearls. I smile at her but barely listen until I hear her say, '...for your wedding'.

'Wedding?' I drop my knife and fork with a clatter, wondering where she slotted all my dreams of uni, the big dreams Mai and I have talked about so often, and then the hurdles of marks, and which uni I'll actually get into. 'Wedding, Gran? I'm only seventeen.'

Gran smiles and nods. 'I know that, Sophie. Your mother was twenty when she married Greg.'

The clock chimes and 'Waltzing Matilda' rings out in clear notes. I'm glad when the music and the scene catch Gran's attention. Along with a railing full of tourists armed with cameras she gazes at the gold hands and the koalas and cockatoos on the see-saw in front of them.

Something else catches my attention – a familiar shape in a charcoal suit. It's Alec, and he's walking past with an elderly Vietnamese man. They seem comfortable

together, like old friends out for a stroll. Alec's looking steadily at me and I raise my hand to wave. As I open my mouth to speak, he gives me a slight shake of his head. I lower my hand to my head and check the dragonfly clips. Alec smiles, so do I; Gran has her back to them and I know she has seen none of this little exchange.

'Oh, never mind about pearls now.' She picks up a plate of chocolate cheesecake and plops it in front of me. She sets her own down on the marble-topped table and scoops the strawberry from the swirls of cream.

I watch Alec disappear down the walkway, pacing himself slowly with the old man. It makes me think of Mai.

I've had one postcard from her, lucky to get that I suppose after the row we had the last day I was at school. I look at the card sometimes, at the stilted touristy message with no return address and wonder about her, how her holiday is going, and how she's coping with meeting all her relatives near Ho Chi Minh City. She was scared about that; scared that her name was the most Vietnamese part of her; scared about how it would affect her parents going back. It's strange that even with her family's losses during the war and their experiences as refugees, she still has more relatives than I have. I wish she was back. I wish I could ring her and apologise for the things I said.

We must have caused a sensation – tiny studious Mai, and what do they call me, quiet and refined? We weren't studious or refined that day and we certainly weren't quiet.

'He's using you, Sophie. Wake up, girl! He's not worth the risk.'

'You're a stupid little cow, Mai. What would you know anyway. You never go out with boys.'

I can still hear her gasp and wish I couldn't remember the pained look on her face.

'And you're a selfish bitch. You don't care about how anyone feels,' she yelled at me and turned away.

I can't believe it when I think about our raised voices and the shocked faces around us. Exam nerves? End of year stress? No, I suppose it was all because of Stuart. But I can't apologise yet, not until Mai comes home. There was no address on the card so I'll have to wait.

I've thought about Stuart. I've thought about who he's chatting up at the pool. Not me anyhow. Josie Simmonds, I suppose. Oh, well, he might be the best- looking guy at Melbourne High but Mum and Dad would have given him a hard time anyway, just like they've always done. Neither Chris nor Matthew could take it, and I want to curl up and die when I think of David's last date – Dad waiting up in the study right near the front door and Mum peering through the bedroom curtains at the car. So obvious, and so embarrassing. All their sermons about protection and being careful mean nothing. You have to have action to need protection.

A wedding, Gran? That's a joke. No boy's good enough for Dad's little girl. That's why it's so good having Mai as a friend. She's too busy being top student to be interested in guys and, when I really consider it, there isn't one worth all the interrogation and pressure from Mum and Dad. You were right about that, Mai, and I'm sorry.

'Come on, Soph, eat up.' Gran's voice startles me and I reach for my piece of cheesecake. It's rich and creamy and the strawberry is fat and ripe. She doesn't have to remind me again.

As we sip our hot chocolate Gran glances at her watch. ‘Just time to pick up some ham from Myer’s and then meet Alec.’

Alec. Alec, the Vietnam veteran, and the elderly Vietnamese man.

‘I wonder what business he had in town?’

I want to smile at Gran’s frown, but I’m not game. I remember Alec shaking his head, that unspoken request. Alec with a secret. But I can’t help wondering too.

Chapter Five

It's fun to hide in the hay from Normie. I burrow into the rich smell of it, curl up in the golden strands, the prickly bits of pasture Uncle Edward cut with Matilda harnessed and plodding. No tractor now with petrol rationing, and he is cranky about the war; cranky about the farm hands who enlisted, and the Land Army girls replacing them. Bessie's our girl, and she's wonderful.

'Sophie!'

'Find me, Normie! Find me!'

And so he does. He hurtles into the haystack, scatters hay as he searches, and here we are rolling and giggling and tickling. Me and my little cousin Normie. My best mate.

'Sophie!' Uncle Edward's voice is loud and demanding. Normie and I lie still, hardly breathing. Are my eyes wide and scared as his?

'Confound that wretched girl. Sophie!'

My heart thumps as I wake, but there's no one else here, only Big Tom and me. There's the sweet smell of dry hay and the solemn stare of Big Tom's yellow eyes. I shake my head and blink at him, reassuring myself that I'm in the hayshed; the haystack was only a dream. I've been thinking too much about Sophie Anne.

Big Tom is one of the biggest cats ever and, if you can believe Alec, the oldest. No one can remember when he came and no one knows where he came from,

but for as long as I can remember, this big ginger cat has been part of the farm. He's a farm cat, not a house cat, and always keeps me company here in the hayshed, he on his patch of hay and I on mine. I wish I could pick him up and cuddle him, but he's not like that.

It's so quiet here, so peaceful. I lose track of the days, but it's much better losing track than being in hospital. That's a place I never want to go again, out of my mind with pain and with the drugs to get me well. Christmas has been and gone – Mum and Dad both stayed at the farm. Now this is the first of four weeks of real recuperation before school starts again, four weeks without them. Four weeks of Gran's love and care. Even Grandad is attentive. Alec is his same contradictory self – so often sharp with Gran, sometimes quiet and withdrawn, and sometimes with that fresh sparkle of lemonade.

Mum and Dad can't even come at weekends. I'm so glad Gran convinced Mum she needed to keep her booking for the nursing conference in Canada and the trip she'd planned in the Rockies. And with Dad in Queensland, a consultant for some new bridge, the only disturbances here are their phone calls.

'Are you resting properly, Sophie?'

'How's my little girl? I hope Gran's looking after you.'

I'm restrained. I don't answer with the obvious –You bet she is. And, Dad, I'm not your *little* girl. I'm seventeen and I'm a hundred and seventy centimetres tall. That's five feet eight to you, Dad.

How did I get such parents? Sometimes I think the stork was like those kids delivering newspapers, dropping them anywhere. Why couldn't he have dropped me with someone like Gran?

I suppose I can understand Mum and Dad. They're over-protective because I was the fourth baby, and the only one to make it full-term and survive. Understanding is OK, but putting up with being the only one drives me crazy. Lucky Mai, at least she has her brother Dinh to share the attention. Unlucky me, with two bodyguards watching everything I do – or stopping me from doing what I want to. That's why it was such a shock when they finally agreed to let me recuperate with Gran. Me here with Gran and neither one of them close enough to check on me. Free, lucky me for the first time ever!

'That's it, isn't it, Big Tom? My own personal bodyguards. You should be so lucky.'

Now that I'm awake he curls into a ball and goes to sleep. Lucky, lucky cat. I lie back on the baled hay and look up at the sky. It's cloudless. Out here, where the land is so flat, the sky's a huge expanse and I wonder, as I always do, what lies beyond it. I remember asking Alec once, and I remember his odd reply – 'Perhaps it's everything we ever dreamed of, everything we hold precious and can't reach'. A crow carks loudly and flaps across the blue.

'Same to you,' I say as I watch the fluid movement of his wings.

'And to you,' says Alec.

'Where did you spring from?'

'I bear a message from the lady of the manor. Afternoon tea will be served on the back verandah in ...' he looks at his watch, 'exactly fifteen and a half minutes.' With that bit of information passed on, he sits himself down beside me on the hay.

I expect him to continue talking, but he sits there, his legs stretched out in front of him, his dusty Blundstones toes-up on the hay. His hat is tipped back, the dark shape of his face silhouetted against a patch of sky. He's thinking; I wait.

‘Thanks for not giving me away.’ It’s the last thing I expect to hear.

‘Who was he, Alec?’

I feel the tension about him. ‘Just someone I know.’

We sit quietly. I’m sure his mind’s not quiet and there are things I’m longing to know. The Kokoda project we did last year stirred up questions about other wars, questions I’d never thought of before, and with Mai’s parents’ experiences, and Alec’s, especially about Vietnam.

Mai has told me about her family, about how her parents fled from Saigon – they met on the boat coming here. It must have been a terrible journey on the open deck of a boat; the women were raped and their wedding rings all stolen when the pirates attacked. Mai’s father’s cousin was beaten and thrown overboard to the sharks. I know, too, that they arrived here starving, since the pirates also stole their food. But I’ve never heard her family talk about that, or the war. Maybe they do when they talk Vietnamese – what does Alec say when he talks to Mai in her own language?

Now I want to know about Alec, his experiences in the Army, and why he’s meeting with someone Vietnamese. Is it because of what happened in the war?

There’s so much about the Vietnam War I want to know. Dad can’t or won’t tell me, and Gran never talks about it either, but I want to know more than Mum’s low-voiced words – ‘He came back to the farm to hide after Vietnam’. There’s more to it than that. I hear his nightmares, the yelling that sometimes wakes me and that everyone ignores. I see him when the helicopters fly over on their way to the Air Show at Avalon, standing with his eyes closed and his jaw clenched – when the police helicopter flies low too – and I often see him sitting on the verandah, his mind turned in on itself and his big hands held together as though he’s holding something he doesn’t want to let go.

‘Alec, tell me about Vietnam.’

He turns to look at me and I’m shocked at the depth of sadness in his eyes. ‘Ah, Sophie. The things you don’t know – couldn’t possibly know.’ He shakes his head and his lips curve into a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. ‘The war...the fights Bethie and I had...You don’t know, Sophie. And how can I tell you?’

He looks out over the paddocks; Grandad’s coming back with the dogs. ‘Come on, girl.’ Alec’s hand is calloused, hard on my palm, as he takes mine. ‘Bethie’s waiting with the tea.’

We’ve demolished the scones. Alec has gone back to the shed. Gran, Grandad and I sit together on the back verandah in the warmth of the afternoon. The sun patterns this end of the table through the wisteria, the rest is in shadow. Grandad’s in his usual corner, his craggy face relaxed but, without his hat on, clearly marked by a long wide scar curving above his right eye. What’s left of his grey hair is short and spiky like the paddocks after they’ve cut the hay. He’s ready for the daily ritual of reading the news but he hasn’t opened *The Age* yet. A crow sits on the machine shed. It sidesteps across the roof, black feathers gleaming, smooth as patent leather. Big Tom tenses, watching, but the crow ignores him. Somewhere in the distance a small plane drones and I look up and see a flash of silver light. Through the thinning wisteria the sun dances on the left-overs of afternoon tea and on the bundle of letters from the chest. Gran and I are on a mission together; we’re trying to unravel the past.

Gran’s full of questions – Who was Sophie Anne? When did she come? Why?

‘She was good to me.’ Grandad speaks softly, almost to himself.

‘Yes, Norman, but who was she?’

‘She was my cousin. Dad’s brother’s daughter. I was only a little tacker when she came.’

‘Why did she come?’ Gran’s onto a story and she won’t be satisfied until she knows it all.

Grandad sighs, but he answers, ‘Uncle Fred and Auntie Maud had lots of kids, and their farm in the Mallee wasn’t doing well.’

When he pauses Gran prods. ‘And?’

‘Sophie came to us. There was only me, and Mum always wanted a girl.’

Gran frowns. ‘How come you never mentioned them?’

Grandad looks out to the pepper trees. The feathery green leaves sweep the ground, a few chooks scratch lazily around them. ‘Family drifted apart. I dunno.’ He adds, almost as an afterthought, ‘Sophie married some bloke from Hamilton, Jack ... Donaldson or something. Loaded, he was, and damn near old enough to be her father. I remember that.’

Gran nods. ‘That explains the pearls.’

She’s talking to me; Grandad’s not even listening. He flicks open the paper and leans back in his chair. That’s it. Question time’s over.

‘Mmm,’ says Gran. I can almost hear her brain ticking over, but she knows the signal. She picks up the bundle of letters and taps her fingers on them. ‘Mmm.’

I feel like a kid in front of a mystery parcel; will the anticipation be greater than the revelation? ‘Come on, Gran. What are we waiting for?’ I’m eager to find out all I can about the girl who shares my name.

Gran unties the faded blue ribbon; the length of it springs back to the letters, holding the shape of them after such a long time. She puts the ribbon aside and takes

the bundle in both hands. She stacks them, a card player ready to deal, and then lays them, one by one, on the table's slatted surface.

'Miss Sophie Branston,' she says. 'All of them. Love letters to your grandad's cousin Sophie. What do you reckon?'

I look at the letters as she puts them out, brownish envelopes bent at the edges, not creased, but slightly crumpled as though they've been handled often.

'What are these, Gran?' I slide my fingers across the stamped words, *OPENED BY BASE CENSOR*.

'They used to check the mail during the war, especially from the servicemen. You know, chop out the bits that might be military secrets; anything that might inform the enemy. Her husband must have been in the Army. Was he, Norm?'

Grandad rustles the paper and grunts.

Gran gives up on him and holds out the last letter. 'What's this?'

This one is different. It is not the brownish office looking envelope, top torn as though Sophie had been impatient to open it. This one is thick textured paper, like linen, and the writing's different, too, round and clear, precise as the letters from a computer. Gran turns it over, studies the broken seal. I imagine the edges being lifted carefully to prevent tearing. Sophie must have treasured this one. Gran opens it and takes out a single page – a matching creamy-coloured linen finish. My heart sinks as I look at the page as she reads.

'Clarendon'

via Jondaryan,

Queensland.

30th December 1943

My Dear Sophie,

This is a very sad duty which I perform as Stephen requested should it become necessary.

Today I received a telegram from the War Office. My dear, there is no easy way to tell you this. My son Stephen is missing in action, presumed dead.

I am sure you understand that my pain is great and I can write no more. Think of me in your prayers.

Yours in sadness,

(Mrs.) Gwendolyn Adams

Gran looks puzzled. 'Who is Gwendolyn Adams from Queensland, I wonder? And who was Stephen?'

I pick up one of the letters and turn it over. '406751 Sgt. Adams S. J.'

'From Queensland?' says Gran. 'I wonder how she met him?'

'He was a stockman.' Grandad's words come as a surprise. 'He worked over at Lacey's before he joined the Air Force.'

Gran raises her eyebrows. Grandad doesn't move from behind his paper.

'You knew this bloke, Norm?'

'Yes, I knew him.' Grandad flicks the paper. I'm surprised to see his knuckles white and tight on the pages.

Gran's oblivious; she charges ahead on her quest. 'Well then, Norman, don't just sit there. Tell us about him.'

'Geez, woman. Do you never give a man any peace? I don't want to talk about him.'

But Gran can't leave it alone. She leaps out of her chair to haul his newspaper away and dump it on the table.

Grandad scowls. He grabs the paper and rattles it noisily as he sits back behind it. 'Can't you leave the letters alone, Beth? They were Sophie's and Stephen's. They're none of your business.'

'They're fifty years old for heaven's sake, and they're here in my house. They are my business.'

'Well, read the damn letters if you must and work it out for yourself.' He pushes his chair back as though to distance himself; and it's like a door closing.

Gran mumbles, 'Cranky old beggar.' She slides the letters back into a pile. 'All right, Sophie, let's get the dates in order and we'll look at them.'

It's not an easy task. Many of the postmarks are smudged and faded, but Gran's like a bargain hunter at Myer's.

'Norman.' She slaps her hand on top of the letters. 'At least answer me this. Where's Sophie now? Why do you keep changing the subject when I mention her?'

Grandad gets out of his chair and bundles up the paper. He flattens the untidy pages against his chest as he shuffles towards the back door. When he turns to us I can't help thinking that he looks like a distressed little boy.

'She's dead.'

Normie is on the ground crying, his puppy's limp body bundled in his arms.

Uncle Edward's voice is raised and angry. 'You stupid bloody kid. You can't even control a puppy. What sort of farm boy are you?'

Normie turns his tear-stained face up to me.

'Sophie...'

I want to run to him and hold his shaking little body, but Uncle Edward stands over him, yelling, and I am too scared to move.

‘Well, stop blubbing like a baby. There’s only one thing for you to do now. Bury her.’ He turns savagely away. ‘She’s dead.’

I try to stand, try to make sense of the scene flashing before me, and fall back into the chair. There’s a bit of *déjà vu* about Gran’s worried expression, but it’s still the back verandah at Prospect Park, the ferns and begonias are in the big terracotta pots. The crow’s still on the machine shed roof and Big Tom’s asleep on the step. It’s an ordinary afternoon.

Chapter Six

Being sick was scary. The pain was scary, and so was the thought that I might die, but far, far worse than dying was the thought that I might live, damaged in some way, and for the rest of my life be Mum and Dad's burden. Mum would be brisk and efficient. I'd be Dad's 'little girl'. I shudder and rub my arms to smooth away the goose bumps. Thank you, thank you, whatever God or Being is up there pulling the strings. Please let me live long enough to be me – Sophie Louise Branston, free and independent – just me.

I'm resting. This is the third day. Gran ordered a few days; she's always telling me that a few is anything between three and a hundred and, as I see it, any more than three days of doing nothing again is a few too many. I suppose it's peanuts when you think of what it would be like with Mum and Dad.

I could be reading my novels for Year 12 – I should be. I've read *Shallows*, but Dickens and Euripides don't seem appealing when I'm out of contact with everyone from school. My choice; it's another world, but I miss Mai. She loves it here with Gran, too. It's diary time and I click my pen to write:

Today the sky is blue gauze. The sun is still climbing upwards. No clouds, no breeze, only an unusual freshness in this late summer morning. Gran has pots everywhere – the back verandah is stacked with them and they cluster here on the front verandah, too, the plants making different shades of green that add colour to the black and white tiles. The verandah posts are covered in Boston ivy – green in summer, bare in

winter, but the autumn leaves are brilliant. They are turning now, bright splashes in different shades of red.

I read over what I've written – boring! I lean back on the cushions in the cane chair. There's a sudden cloud of dust at the end of the drive and I peer through the shadows of the cypress pines to see a dark blue four wheel drive bumping over the corrugations towards the house.

'Who's this, Big Tom?'

Big Tom isn't interested. He opens his eyes and closes them again; he's a big orange ball trying to hide himself away between the terracotta pots and the ferns. The outline of the driver is dark against the open window. It's nobody I know. The Pajero slows on the gravel and comes to a stop in front of the house. In front of me.

'Hi.' His voice is deep and clear. His hair is short and dark brown. He opens the door and steps down into the sun. I can't see his eyes – they're behind silver-banded Oakleys – but I can see how tall he is in jeans and boots, and how tanned he is against the white of his open-necked shirt.

'Hello,' I say. I want to hide under the chair. I'm in my daggiest shorts and this Tweety Bird top I love but should have thrown out ages ago. I look as though I've just climbed out of a St Vinnie's bin.

He takes off his Oakleys. He's about twenty or so. He smiles and the lines crinkle from the corners of his eyes. 'I've come to see Mr Branston.'

My mind's racing in circles. Who is he? What does he want with Grandad? I sit like a store dummy.

He's all movement, an easy swing on long legs to the steps, his arm thrown casually across the rail. The sun flashes on the silver buckle of his belt. 'I'm Tim Scott. Vic Lacey said I would find Mr Branston here. Is he in?'

‘I – I – um...’ Is that me with the voice of some stuttery little kid? ‘I’m Sophie. Sophie Branston.’ At last! ‘Grandad’s not here.’

He leans forward. ‘Do you know where he is or when he’ll be back?’

‘Um...yes.’ I point to where Grandad and Alec are repairing some rotting fence posts. The ute is a dirty cream blob against the pines in the distance. ‘He’ll be home for lunch.’

He stares out to where I point. I take note of him. His eyes are blue and edged with thick dark lashes. When he turns back to me my face burns. Caught looking.

‘Thanks,’ he says with a knowing grin. ‘I’ll head up there and have a chat with him.’

He walks back to the Pajero and slides in behind the wheel. Oakleys on, he belts up and the gravel crunches as he waves and drives away. I stand there feeling like that stuttery little kid and wave back.

‘Who was that?’ Gran opens the security door and joins me on the verandah. She doesn’t miss much, but she missed him.

‘He’s gorgeous.’ Did I say that?

Gran raises her eyebrows. ‘Is he now? But who is he?’

‘His name’s Tim Scott. He’s looking for Grandad.’ I sigh as the Pajero rattles over the grid and turns left down the road. Pity. I wish he was looking for me.

When Grandad and Alec come back for lunch we’re not quite ready. The hot bread’s on the table but Gran’s still slicing the tomatoes. I’m at the sink, washing the lettuce and capsicum as the ute pulls up outside. I look up in time to see Grandad jump out and slam the door. He bolts towards the house as though someone is chasing him.

Alec gets out more slowly. I forget about him as Grandad storms down the hall, boots still on. They make a clattering over the tiles.

‘What the...?’ Gran drops the knife onto the chopping board and goes chasing after him.

Alec is splashing water in the laundry, the usual stop to take off hats and boots and wash up for lunch. It’s not long before he comes into the kitchen and sits down in his place at the table.

‘Alec, what’s going on?’

‘Nothing much,’ says Alec. ‘Young bloke came to talk to Norm. He sent him off with a flea in his ear.’

‘What did he want?’

Alec reaches for the mail and shuffles through it. ‘Looking for someone. You know your grandfather. Not much of a talker.’

‘Well, what’s he stroppy about?’

Alec doesn’t answer, so I guess it can’t be too important. He seems more interested in the mail than my question. He shuffles the envelopes with his brown farmer’s hands and stands them in a pile against the salt and pepper grinders.

I slide the bowl of green salad on the table and finish cutting the tomatoes. I’m slicing the meat when Gran returns.

‘What happened out there, Alec?’ Her voice is strained, her face crinkled in a frown.

‘Why? What’s the matter, Bethie?’

‘Something’s upset him,’ she says. ‘What did that young bloke want?’

‘Nothing much. He was asking about someone. Norm told him to shove off.’

‘Who was he looking for?’

‘No one I know,’ says Alec. ‘Before my time. A young bloke that used to work for old Charlie Lacey. Wouldn’t be a young bloke now; it was before the war.’

‘Can you remember the name?’ says Gran. The words are hesitant as though she’s reluctant to ask, her fingers clutched tightly together.

I sit waiting, holding my breath, knowing the answer somehow, knowing that the saying of it will affect us all.

‘Adams,’ says Alec. ‘Stephen Adams. Used to be a stockman for old Charlie.’

Chapter Seven

‘What did you open the bloody letters for?’ Grandad’s voice is loud enough to reach us from the bedroom.

‘Calm down, Norman. They’re fifty year-old letters, not some black curse let out of the box.’ Gran reminds me of a mother trying to placate an upset child. If she went in to calm him she’s not doing a very good job.

‘Might as well be,’ says Grandad. ‘And Sophie’s locket...’ his voice fades into a stream of angry words, and so does Gran’s.

Alec looks up from his plate of salad and shrugs. ‘Dunno what’s eating him.’

‘He got upset when we started reading Sophie Anne’s letters. Told Gran to put them away.’

‘That’s like a red rag to a bull with her,’ says Alec with a wry grin. ‘Might as well tell her to stop breathing. I found that out years ago.’ He slices the warm bread and loads it with butter. I’m fascinated by the yellow chunks; they’re like hunks of cheese. He looks up to see me frowning. ‘Don’t let it bother you, love. They’ll work it out.’

I put my hand up to the gold heart sheltering under my tee-shirt and run my thumb across the engraving, my fingers over the smooth back. As I touch the name and the flowers, I wish again I could open it; and I wonder what it is that they have to work out.

By the time Gran returns, Alec has eaten his way through several thick slices of bread and who knows how much butter. His cholesterol count must be over the top and I don't know how he stays so slim. It must be the physical work. Gran picks at her salad and ignores the bread.

'Don't let it get to you, Bethie,' says Alec as he gets up and takes his plates to the sink. 'He'll get over it.'

I expect Gran to make one of her usual smart remarks but she just looks daggers at him. She gives up all effort at the salad and pushes her plate away. Grandad takes off with a gruff 'See ya' and Gran watches from the window as he walks to the kennels. Alec goes back to the fencing.

The box from the trunk is on the table. Gran has waxed it and the colours of the wood shine with a soft lustre. I'm waiting to read the letters but I don't want to appear too eager. Gran turns from the window and tries to smile.

'Coffee and chocolate, Soph. I think we need a pick-me-up.'

It's not long before we have the plunger and cups and saucers on the table, fine bone china decorated with violets. The edges are trimmed with gold. She's definitely upset when she treats us to these. They belonged to her mother and she only uses them when she feels the need; her security blanket I guess. Peppermint creams from the hiding place in the unused oven, our private treat. I pick one up and bite into the smooth dark chocolate.

'What did Grandad say about Tim?' All I can think of is that sexy hunk, but Grandad's opinion is obviously different.

Gran's expression is troubled. 'Wretched man!' she says as she reaches for the box and slams it down in front of us. 'Not a damned thing!'

Oops! Wrong thing to ask. I look down at the box and hope the letters hold some answers to our questions since Grandad obviously doesn't want to tell us.

'Well, Soph,' says Gran, her voice crisp with determination. 'Let's see what we can find.' Then she grins at me. 'And maybe we'll catch up with that 'gorgeous' young man.'

I smile back at her and open the lid. Gran sips her strong black coffee and watches me take out the tray of velvet boxes. The pearls aren't there any more, Grandad has them in his safe.

The letters are tied with new white ribbon. The fragile blue satin is rolled up in the bottom of the box. The new ribbon springs open as I pull the end, the nylon still holding the shape of the bow. I drop it on the table and Gran picks it up and rolls it around her fingers. I turn over the first letter and read out the name.

'Sgt. Adams, S.J. That's got to be him, Gran, Stephen Adams that Tim was looking for?' I slap the envelope on the table in front of her and she grins.

'That gorgeous young man, Soph?'

'Give it a rest, will you, Gran.'

'Mmm....'

'Gran...'

'OK, OK! The date's smudged. It's hard to read it. The King on the stamp then, Sophie. King George VI.' She traces her fingertips on the censor's words. 'King and country, that's what they fought for. Not like Vietnam.'

I look up from the envelope. I can't read Gran's face. She's miles away. I pick up the second letter. 'This one's clear. It's 20.3.1943.'

Gran comes back from wherever she was. 'March 1943. I was a little tacker, and you weren't even thought of.' She smiles that Gran smile that tells me I'm special. 'Come on then. Let's open them.'

There's one sheet of paper in the first envelope. I slide it out and pass it to Gran. The paper is a creamy colour, an old colour I suppose. It's thick and lined.

'He used a fountain pen. Look at the handwriting.' She holds out the open page, faded blue ink but the shape of the writing is clear and round.

'How do you know it's a fountain pen?'

'Look at those lines.' She traces the unfamiliar shapes of the words, the downward strokes wide and the others fine and curving.

'It's beautiful writing, but I don't know how much of it I could read.'

'Copperplate. I've got a friend who writes like that,' says Gran. 'And they didn't have ballpoints then.'

I try to imagine a world without ballpoints, and the magic of felt tips, but I can't. Gran's reading. The round letters are like another language to me. It's only a short letter, two paragraphs on the page and then his name, Stephen. I can read that.

'Not much in that, just that he's in at last and training. Don't know what he means by this, "Some things you learn on an outback property are useful on aeroplanes."' Then she laughs and reads some more. "'I am shorn like one of your Uncle Edward's sheep. The barber gave us our short back and sides but Clarry's red curls still push his hat sideways". Mmm, and now "Yours sincerely". Not really a love letter, Soph.' She sounds disappointed. A true romantic, that's Gran.

We open the envelopes one after another. They are all simply reporting, almost a diary of each day with bits where we laugh at his pranks with "my mate Clarry".

The fifth one is more promising. “‘My Dearest Sophie’”. Gran reads and her eyes light up. ‘Now we’re getting somewhere.’

We lean together to read the words. It’s difficult for me, but Gran reads them out easily. Her voice is gruff when she comes to –

You honour me, Dearest, when you say you are proud of me, but ask any one of the boys here and they’ll tell you we are doing what we are proud to do – fighting for our country.

Gran stops there and takes a deep breath. I continue –

It has been hard – closed camp and our leave cancelled for the last month and not seeing you, even if we are so close. I know we’ll be moving out soon, and then there will be no more dances and you in my arms. Will you wait for me, Sophie? Will you be my girl and wait until I come home?

My voice croaks over the lump in my throat. He didn’t come home, and she married someone else.

‘I wonder where he went? The Pacific somewhere, I suppose.’ Gran frowns at the page. ‘May 1943, this letter. Well after Pearl Harbour. That was in December 1941. After they bombed Darwin too.’

‘How come you know so much, Gran?’

She looks up from the page and I’m shocked by the bitterness in her voice.

‘Family conditioning, I suppose.’

‘Family conditioning?’

‘Well, when war’s a background to everything you know, I guess you’d call it conditioning.’

‘But there was only Alec...’

Gran shakes her head. ‘No, Soph, generations.’

‘But you never said.’

‘What didn’t I say? My grandad’s brother fought at Gallipoli. Great-uncle Harry met his wife there. My mum was—’

‘Met his wife there there? But there weren’t any women at Gallipoli. We did a project on the Anzacs and I went there with Nanny.’

‘Is that so, Soph? And who were on the ships tending all those men wounded in the carnage, my great-uncle Harry among them?’

With World War One and Two veterans and their stories on Mum’s side of the family, and having been to Gallipoli with Nanny, I thought I knew a lot of history; but even so, history is one thing, seeing all the names and ages of those young men at Gallipoli, young men killing each other – and respecting each other as enemies – it was something else – horrifying and crazy. And now to know Gran’s family’s side of the story.

Gran keeps on talking. ‘I was a little kid when World War II ended, but I never got to know my Dad. The RSL was his second home when he came back from New Guinea. You don’t win a medal and then turn your back on your mates, I know, but it was hard on the rest of us. When he died they gave him a hero’s send-off – guard of honour, a bugler, The Last Post. We learned a lot from the RSL, more than we did from Dad. Or Mum. The boys did the fighting, she’d say. We were behind the lines – patch them up and send them back – that was us. No one ever asked how she coped – with her own memories or with the man my dad became after he fought. And I didn’t hear any of that until just before she died.’

‘Your mum was a nurse, too?’

‘She was. Here in Melbourne.’ She takes a deep breath and lets it out again ‘Then Alec joined up; and there was Vietnam. When you’re up to your ears in one war you learn a lot about the others. Vietnam was a very steep learning curve.’

I wait for her to continue but she’s lost in her own thoughts. She looks down at the page of writing but I know that’s not what she’s seeing. She sighs again and spreads the paper on the table. Her nails flash as she smooths the page.

I want to ask about Vietnam. There’s so much I want to know about Alec. How old was he when he joined up? And if their father was the way he was, why? I know Alec was in the Army, but what did he do – a medic maybe, or did he kill people too?

Why do he and Gran act almost like enemies at times, and why do they never talk about it? But when she looks up her eyes are misty and I know this isn’t the right time.

‘We all learned a lot, Soph. Those boys were over there fighting the Vietnamese. Soldiers are taught to kill and they were told to hate the enemy. We hated communism, not the Vietnamese. And all I could do was march and sing protest songs. How much effort is there in a song?’ She folds the letter and slides it back into the envelope. ‘You can look at these if you want to, kiddo. What with the Second War, the Vietnam War and now the Branston War here, I don’t think I’m up to reading any more of them today.’ She pushes herself away from the table. ‘I think I need a dose of Mills and Boon – nothing like an M & B fix to lighten the day. Happy endings, that’s what I need.’

This isn’t the place to read the letters, not with Gran feeling the way she is, so I stack them together and wonder about Sophie, about the young woman who waited

for them, a young woman who thought them precious enough to keep, even when she was married to someone else.

What was Stephen like? A young man, I guess, and judging by his letters, anxious to go to war. And Sophie. What did she write to him? Did she promise to wait?

I repack the box and my thoughts whirl as I carry it down to my room. Sophie. Sophie. So long ago. Sophie, who wore the dressing gown. Sophie, whose locket I wear. I touch the small gold heart, feel the shape of the flowers and slide it along on the chain around my neck. I think about the photograph and wonder about the girl we never knew about, the girl who looks a lot like me and whose name I share.

The red velvet dressing gown is draped on my chair. I stroke the soft fabric and put the box down beside it.

'Now, Sophie dear. I want you to have this dressing gown. I won't be wearing it again.' Auntie Em's smile is weary on her pale face.

'Oh, Auntie Em, you will. You will.'

She reaches out her hand; it is cold as she holds mine. How can she talk like this? I can hardly bear to look at her. Auntie Em dying soon? No, I can't even think about it.

The satin sash is shining; the red velvet is soft and beautiful. Beautiful like Auntie Em used to be. She pushes the dressing gown into my arms and I can smell her perfume. I can smell Auntie Em, and I remember the warm, soft feel of her, how she comforted me after I left our farm.

'Look after little Normie for me will you, dear? He's such a little boy.'

'Oh, Auntie Em...' I sob into the rich red velvet.

‘Sophie...’

It’s there again, the sadness, and the voice running around in my head. How can I dream when I’m awake? I think I’m going crazy.

Chapter Eight

All through summer, when the sky blazes across the plains, the thick stone walls of the house keep out the heat. Perhaps that's why the dressing gown appeals. The soft red velvet is soothing as I fold it over my faded Tweety Bird top, wrap the richness of it around my bare legs. Over fifty years ago the other Sophie wrapped it around herself, too. Sophie Anne and the dressing gown...I smooth it with my fingers and wonder why I feel so sad.

A screech of tyres and a scattering of hens. Big Tom streaks by my window. Melva. I can't see her car from my room but I know the little Alfa's arrived at the back of the house. Cool and calm as Melva is, she drives it like a rally driver.

'It's all the things I wanted to be and couldn't' – her words explaining her choice of car come back to me as the voices drift up the hall. Yes, she and Gran are a good pair – two parts of a whole.

I curl up on the patchwork quilt that Melva made in the seventies, the box beside me. Such a beautiful box, the intricate inlaid pattern and the name – her name – my name – carved on the top.

The edges of the words are sharp, the letters curved and angled like small creeks across a plain. Perhaps the box was a birthday present, a Christmas present. We'll never know, but we will know about the letters in the box. I take them out and untie them – one, two, three, four, five – we're up to number six. So many pages in each one, how did he find time to write? This is how a code-breaker must feel –

deciphering blue curls of ink on a white page; but it's not too hard to read when I understand Stephen's name at the bottom. It's slow checking the words but I can make them out. This one is only a short note compared with the others.

My Dearest Sophie...

It will be lights out in fifteen minutes and I have time to write only a few lines. It is strange to be here, close to you, and yet so far away, and in a uniform and marching instead of riding a horse. All this marching is wearing me out. I joined the Air Force to fly overseas, but they assure us, we will be flying out soon. I could navigate anywhere now, in daylight or in darkness. No, I am not boasting, my dearest, just intensive training and a great crew.

Keep waving when the Wirraways dip their wings over the farm. The boys look for you when they come back from their training runs, as I always do, but I made sure they know that you are mine. How is young Norman? It will be some time before we can go rabbiting again. We are not due for leave for a couple of weeks so I will not be able to see you until then. Will you miss me? I miss you.

Lights out now. Write to me soon.

Love,

Stephen

Number seven. Number eight. I read a few more; although they're three and four pages they don't say much, just his determination to join the fighting and asking about people at Lacey's and about 'young Norman'. I guess that's Grandad.

I fold the pages carefully along the creases. They're knife-sharp after all those years of being pressed together. Another one; the same brownish envelope, the same old cream-coloured paper, creased and folded, the same writing, neat, and now, not so difficult to read. There are chunks cut out of this one; the yellow and brown flowers on the quilt show through. The censor. I wonder what Stephen said that he shouldn't have? I struggle through the first pages and reach the last few lines...

I think this will be my last leave. We will make it special; memories to last until I hold you in my arms again. Can you come to the dance at the Mechanics Hall on Saturday? Just us on Sunday, my dearest. Would you like to take a picnic down to the river?
.....and the chaps are all eager to fight. I don't know if we'll be going to Wherever it is we're ready.

I love you, Sophie.

Stephen

Outside, the afternoon is full of birds and sky. A slight wind is stirring the pepper trees. The branches move gently like dancers.

I can imagine Sophie and Stephen at the hall. There would have been soldiers and airmen there, farmers too, and the girls in pretty dresses like those in the trunk. Waltzes, I suppose, and some of those old dances that Gran talks about – the Pride of Erin, the Gypsy Tap. Around and around in each other's arms, counting the hours that they could spend together. Dreading the hours apart.

I close my eyes to picture them – the woman at the piano, the men with sax and drums, maybe a violin. The floor is smooth and shiny. And the dancers. The soldiers and airmen on leave and the girls they would leave behind when they went away.

Clarry and Stephen are crazy. We leap and slide in the Gypsy Tap and I'm giddy in their swinging and laughing. Clarry's girl is a WAAAF, laughing and crazy as they are. There's Terry, tall and slim and shy, another Queenslander, wearing his wings now, dancing with the WAAAF he's engaged to. And Ian, with the girl from Signals, so serious watching his steps. Then the music stops.

A waltz.

'Sophie...' Stephen's voice is a murmur and I lose myself in that wonderful smile. The music sways and the dancers swing around and around and around. A strong smell of sawdust and kerosene rises from the floor and we glide across it together, in love, in each other's arms.

'Tomorrow,' he says, but I want tonight to last forever.

Sunlight, and the water dancing over smooth rocks. The grass is long and the afternoon is a shimmer of sky and blue feathers of fairy wrens. Sandwiches and maderia cake wrapped in linen napkins, a thermos of tea. The rough feel of his blue serge jacket, the soft fall of his brown hair, urgent fingers through my un-pinned hair, on the buttons of my dress...

I am jolted by the sound of Grandad's ute. I don't know where I am. The box is on my lap and the letters spread across the bed. I blink and stare at the shadows in the room.

I push the box aside and the letters scatter as I jump down from the bed and dash to the window. I gulp air and push my fingers through my loosened hair. The stone window ledge is cool as I lean against it and my heart pounds a drumbeat.

Sophie. I trace the letters of our name on the small gold heart of her locket with trembling fingers.

There's a wonderful normality about Melva's voice in the kitchen, and the smell of coffee. I walk in the door and everything's the same as it always is – the bright day shining through the window above the sink, the big maidenhair fern on top of the fridge, Gran busy with mugs and plates, even Melva, still in her navy hospital uniform, taking the chocolates from where they're stashed in the oven.

'Good heavens, child. You're a walking ghost. What have you been doing to yourself?' Melva pulls out a chair and pats the seat. 'Here, sit down before you fall down.'

'I feel like a...' I don't know what I feel like. I seem to spend my life sitting on chairs lately – in the kitchen, on the verandah – trying to get back to feeling like me. Me, Sophie Louise Branston who lives in a unit in Hawthorn and goes to Mac.Robertson Girls' High.

'I think I'm going...' I can't tell cool calm Melva there's a voice in my head and there are dreams driving me crazy.

'Coffee, Soph?' Gran turns from the bench with the plunger in her hand. She stops mid-stride as she catches sight of me. 'Are you okay, kiddo? Didn't you have a rest?' She puts the coffee down and walks around to me. Her hands are cool on my face as she clucks over me like a mother hen.

‘Gran, I...’ How can I tell her I’ve got this voice in my head, someone calling my name? What will she say about the dreams when I’m wide awake, when I tell her what I feel? ‘I went to sleep. I just woke up.’

‘Oh,’ says Gran, as though that explains everything, but it certainly can’t explain anything to me.

Gran pours the coffee and passes me a mug. I breathe in the aroma. Is there anything better than the fresh smell of coffee? I reach for a biscuit and take a bite. It’s a mixture of crisp biscuit and vanilla icing, nothing like the buttery taste of madeira cake. Madeira cake? I’ve never tasted it. No icing, a rich slab of yellow cake with a smooth evenly browned top. Square pieces wrapped in a linen table napkin.

‘Gran, what’s madeira cake like?’

‘Madeira?’ says Gran. ‘What on earth made you ask that?’

‘Oh,’ I fumble for words to explain. ‘Read it somewhere and wondered.’

‘Madiera,’ says Melva, her face alight. ‘That takes me back. No one could make it like Mum – rich and yellow and buttery. Spread with butter when she wasn’t looking. She hasn’t made it for years.’ The spoon clacks against the sides of her mug and Melva watches the fragrant black liquid rippling against the blue china. ‘I don’t think she’ll ever make it again.’

‘Is she that bad, Melva?’ Gran’s at the table now and her green eyes are clouded with concern. ‘She’s been fine when I’ve visited. A bit spacey sometimes, but no more than me.’

It’s dangerous to laugh with a mouth full of biscuit.

‘Watch it,’ says Gran.

‘No, it’s not really that bad. I suppose I’m looking for symptoms; when you know what’s coming every tiny lapse seems magnified. She comes and goes, Beth. At

times she can remember forty years ago but she has trouble remembering yesterday. An then she seems quite normal.' Melva sips her coffee. Elbows propped on the table she stares into the mug in her hands. 'Funny, isn't it? I've nursed plenty of them, but dementia's different when it's threatening one of your own.'

'It's always different when it's someone you love.'

'Yes, it is.'

There's a smile of understanding across the table and, for some reason, I know that for each of them this conversation is on another level. I wonder what they're really talking about that they don't want to share with me.

'How's work, Melva? Busy?' At least this is a safe subject, and something they know I understand

'Always busy. Different now, not like the old days.' Melva's eyes light up and she laughs. 'The ward sisters used to be like generals, and Matron was a dictator. I remember when I was training, clearing up after one old bloke. Emptied the bedpan, picked up all the bowls – little one to soak his teeth, big one to wash from – and emptied them, too. Trouble was he'd forgotten his teeth. I had to fish around in the slop hopper to find them.'

'Oh, Yuk!'

'No worries. Nothing a good soak in bleach couldn't fix. I didn't tell him, but I was terrified the ward sister would find out.'

'And now you're a ward sister.'

'Mmm, and your mum is what we used to call matron.'

I think about Mum, how she bosses Dad and me around. I look up at Gran and she winks at me. 'Yep, matron and dictator,' I say, and we both laugh.

Chapter Nine

‘Guess who Melva had a visit from, Soph?’

I can read Gran like a book. That look in her eyes says I know something that you don’t, Soph, and it’s something good.

‘Who?’ And then I wake up. There’s only one person it could be. ‘Tim Scott.’ When I see the expression on Gran’s face I feel mean. ‘Just a lucky guess. Did your mum know Stephen Adams, Melva?’

Melva puts her mug down carefully. There’s a question in her eyes. ‘She did. Yes, Sophie, she did.’ She pauses for a moment. The question is still there as she looks at me and then at Gran. ‘There’s something strange about all this. I knew it the moment I mentioned his name. And that young Tim, when he started asking questions she shut up like a clam again. Poor Tim, he was uncomfortable. I didn’t have to ask him to leave – he looked at how distressed Mum was, apologised and took himself off.’

‘That’s two of them upset. Norm’s been unbearable since that young feller came.’

I’m surprised at Gran’s tone. It’s as though she blames Tim for the way Grandad is instead of blaming a tractor that overturned twenty-odd years ago.

‘He’s a nice young man, Beth. All he wants to do is find out what happened to his mother’s uncle. The RAAF says Stephen Adams came back from the war, but he went AWL and they couldn’t find him – of course, after the war I don’t know how

hard they looked. He didn't go home to Queensland. This is the last place the family knew he was – working for old Charlie Lacey before he joined up.'

'Why would he go AWL if he'd come back from the war?' says Gran. 'That was a pretty drastic thing to do.'

Melva shrugs. 'Who knows? Mum knows something but she's not talking.'

Gran frowns. She's obviously turning facts over in her mind. She takes another chocolate – her third – now I know she's upset. We're all silent with our own thoughts for a while; mine are at a dance, Stephen and Sophie together and in love, dancing.

Sophie in her voile dress, and that eerie feeling that it could have been me. And the river...

Gran thumps her mug on the bamboo mat. 'I think we need to look at those letters.'

Letters from Stephen. Letters that say 'I love you, Sophie'. A dance and making love by the river. Where did that come from? Something stirs inside me and I'm scared. I know I don't want to look at the letters again. 'Not me, Gran. I'm off for a shower.'

'Where are they, Soph?' She stands up with a purpose. That's Gran. She's on another mission.

The water slides over my skin, washes away the stickiness of the hot afternoon, streams through my hair and crashes at my feet. I lift my face into the flow and the warm rivulets are soft and warm as fingers – on my closed eyes, my cheeks, my

shoulders, all over my bare skin. Like Stephen's fingers... I jerk away from the water and reach for the taps. My heart pounds as I remember the river, the water there tumbling over the rocks and the green pillow of grass under the rug, an Air Force blue uniform and the pale flowers on a voile dress. I wrench the silver taps to a stop. Down the length of the glass shower screen the water runs like tears.

Outside the shower everything's normal – well, as normal as anything can be in Gran's bathroom where the walls are covered with a mural of mice in hot air balloons. I rub myself with the towel. That's normal. Normal. It's big and fluffy, bright pink to match some of the streamers on the balloons. I wrap myself in it and sit down on the wooden stool in front of the vanity basin. I can see myself in the mirror, my hair flattened by the water, but not for long. Soon it will be dry and pinned up – not pinned down like Sophie's.

Meningococcus is a physical disease. I know what it did to my body and I know how lucky I am. I could have lost fingers, or even limbs; I could have died and I have Mum to thank for her quick thinking and demands on the doctors. I know the pain. But that's all gone. I look okay. There are no black marks under my eyes and my skin has colour from all the lazy hours in the sun. All I need is time to get well and strong again. But now I'm beginning to wonder if it did something to my mind. Perhaps it's too much sky – no, it could never be that. I'd swap a Hawthorn flat for Prospect Park any day, any extraordinary day at Hawthorn for an ordinary day with Gran. Not that any days with Gran are ever ordinary. She's no ordinary gran.

I remember once in primary school, it was Grandparents' Day and the kids climbed over her like ants. She had pink hair then, and long, long nails with tiny pictures painted on them. Now she likes to tell us she's more subdued. I don't know how she came to that conclusion. I've never seen her subdued; she's always been my

bubbly gran, so loving and so much fun. It's only lately that I've wondered about her. Was she always like this? Did she change after Grandad's accident? How did that affect her? No, I'm not going there. There's enough to think about here and now.

Clean shorts and clean shirt; that feels better. I toss the towel over the rail and a family of mice waves to me from their multicoloured balloon. This is subdued? I laugh as I plug in the dryer and attack my hair. With the familiar buzz comes a sense of calm; this is something I know and understand. I anchor my hair with clips, one last look in the mirror and I open the door to Gran tearing past, her bare feet slap-slap-slapping the tiled floor. She's back before I step out, a bundle of X-rays in her hands. 'It's Alec, Sophie.' The words trail after her as she races towards the back door. 'He's hurt his back again.'

I follow Gran out to the verandah and straight into a battle zone. 'Here's the X-rays. Take him into the hospital.' That's Gran as she shoves the X-rays at Grandad.

Grandad's half in and half out of the ute. He doesn't take the X-rays and Gran waves them in the air like a banner at a battle.

'He won't go to the bloody hospital,' says Grandad. 'Reckons they'll keep him for hours in Emergency.'

'Course he'll go. What choice has he got? Look at him.'

Alec's in the front of the ute. His face is white and there's a sheen of sweat across his forehead. His eyes are closed and his mouth's a tight line holding in the pain. 'Just help me out to bed.' His voice is harsh, the words grinding out through gritted teeth.

'No way,' says Gran. She slaps the X-rays at Grandad. 'Into the hospital, Norm. Get going.'

Grandad gets down from the cabin and shoves the X-rays away. 'He won't go, Beth. You heard what he said.'

Gran almost shouts her frustration. 'Damn you, Alec. You've never changed. You're still as stubborn as you were thirty years ago. Go to the hospital.'

Alec is incapable of anything and I recognise the pain. Why can't they just take him? If I had my licence I'd jump into the ute and take off. Gran and Grandad stand apart watching. Alec grasps the dash and the pain shudders through him as he tries to move.

'You stupid bastard, you can't get out. Serves you bloody right for doin' those damn posts on your own!' Grandad walks off scowling.

Gran turns on him like one of his dogs on a troublesome sheep. 'For God's sake why weren't you helping him with the posts? Cranky bugger, off sulking on your own again!'

'Jesus Christ, somebody help me out.'

I jump down from the steps and start towards the ute but Melva's ahead of me. She holds me back and walks up to Alec.

'Alec.' She puts her hand on his arm.

He opens his eyes and looks at her. 'Thank God, Melva. Someone with some sense. Help me out.' His eyes remind me of the dog Grandad picked up from the side of the road after it had been hit by a car. Pain and a plea for help.

'We're going to the hospital, Alec,' says Melva. She closes the door gently and takes the X-rays from Gran. 'Ring Emergency, Beth. Merle's on duty today – tell her we're on our way.' She climbs into the cab and switches on the ignition. Alec sighs and closes his eyes. As Melva moves the gears she looks down and speaks to

him. I can't hear the words, but I'm stunned by the expression on her face, by the tenderness in her eyes.

It's dark when Melva returns. When the headlights glare through the cypress pines Gran and I leave Grandad asleep in front of the television and go out to meet her. The stars stretch across the sky like fairy dust, and the crescent moon is tilted above the pepper trees. The crickets are holding a concert.

‘What’s the bet she’s brought him home, Sophie?’

But it’s Melva on her own who climbs wearily out of the ute and joins us by the back steps.

‘Well, you got him to stay,’ says Gran.

Melva laughs. ‘Don’t expect it to last. The only reason he stayed was because he couldn’t get up off the trolley after he had his X-ray. He’ll be raging tomorrow.’

‘Oh, well,’ says Gran, ‘that’s nothing new. We’ve been there and done that, haven’t we?’

‘Sure have,’ says Melva. ‘Lucky I’m off for a few days, and I’ve already contacted Graham. He’ll come and do some physio. It’s the old injury and since he won’t have the operation, he’ll have to suffer a rest and a bit of TLC.’

‘And how will he cope with that?’ says Gran. Arms around each other they walk inside laughing, like a pair of conspirators. Poor Alec, I wonder if he knows how they’ve planned his life?

Chapter Ten

For as long as I can remember Gran and Grandad have told me stories, shown me places: Cobbledick's Ford where the river has eaten so far into the land that from a distance you'd think there was no river, only the flat rocky plains; the stone fences where the old craftsmen stacked the stones as intricately as mosaic; the bluestone ruins and the cellar where the first white people barricaded themselves from the Aborigines; paddocks where the chips from ancient tools surface with the plough; the haunted place, too, where someone's buried by the creek – an Aborigine, a bushranger, no one knows the truth, only the fear passed to Grandad by his father.

Gran has bits of history all through the house and when I was little I used to trail around them all. 'Tell me the story of the churn, Gran,' and Gran would tell me how my great-great-grandmother churned the butter, how it was yellow as the sun and she used to sell what she couldn't use to the grocer. 'Tell me about the lamp with the diamonds, Gran,' and Gran would tell me about the old days before electricity when the beautiful lamp with the crystal drops around the shade sent prisms of rainbow colours into the room.

And the photographs and paintings Gran has – some of the walls are like a gallery. I stand now in the passage opposite the room where Alec is resting and I can follow my history for over 200 years. I am safe here, because when I look at the faces I can see bits of my face – my grandmother, my great-grandfather, Grandad and...

She's there in a gold frame – the turned up smile, the curls pinned down, the dark eyes that smile into mine.

'Sophie!' I say her name in a rush of air as though someone has winded me. This is crazy. The floor tilts. I grab at the wall and my fingers clutch the edge of the frame.

'Sophie...' It's there again. The voice that comes into my head.

'Sophie...'

My knees buckle.

I am going down...down...down...

The blackness swirls and there's a roaring in my head. I claw my way up into the air.

The picture crashes from the wall, and I land on the floor, my fingers tight on the frame. I push the picture away and sit up leaning against the wall. The tiles are cool on my bare legs, the stone wall solid against my back. I take a deep breath and my lungs ache as I cough.

'Sophie, is that you out there?' Alec's voice is muffled.

'Yes.' Is that my voice breathless and strained?

'Are you okay, Sophie?'

'Yes.'

'Sophie, what's wrong? Damn this stupid bloody back!'

I scramble up from the floor and struggle to keep my feet straight on the square pattern of the tiles as I walk across the passage to his room. Alec's flat on his back, the light blanket covering him littered with books, farming magazines and newspapers.

‘I’m all right, Alec.’

He looks me over and I must look pretty ordinary because he frowns.

‘I knocked a picture off the wall. I’m okay.’

I try to avoid his eyes but he keeps staring at me; at last I give in and I’m sure he can see inside my head.

‘Sophie – ’

The mobile phone on his bedside table rings. Saved by a telephone. I pick it up and pass it to him. I can feel him watching me as I escape.

Gran and I are on our way to Footscray.

‘It’s a mystery,’ says Gran. ‘What’s Alec up to now?’

Poor Gran. She hates to be excluded, and Alec is good at keeping himself apart. I wonder were they ever close? Alec never talks about himself at all. It’s as though he’s closed some part of himself away, some part that’s too private to share. When I watch him at times, still and thoughtful, I know he is distant, not only in his mind, but somehow, too, in the deepest part of his heart.

‘Why does Alec want me to collect a man called Mr Ng from a Vietnamese restaurant in Footscray and bring him home?’ Gran frowns at the road as though the bitumen we’re now on can answer her question.

Vietnamese? I remember the day in town, the old man walking with Alec at Melbourne Central. Perhaps now that mystery will be explained. Trust Alec. He’ll have to tell Gran eventually; he’s stringing her along, but I can’t say anything.

‘Well, Gran, you’ll find out in the end.’

‘Hmmp!’ says Gran

Footscray streets are crowded with colours and smells, the pavements cluttered with boxes of fruit, dresses on racks and all sorts of baskets of kitchenware and rolls of material. The people bustle past in a mixture of cultures and ages – mothers with children, old ladies pushing loaded shopping trolleys, office workers and students.

We pass the restaurant. There’s no parking. Gran mutters and drives around to the street behind and a parking lot. It’s not far to the restaurant and we walk quickly through a lane and then the crowded street. We push through the beaded curtain at the door and make our way through the spicy aroma of food. I suddenly feel hungry for Mai’s mum’s Mi Thap Cam; and Mai. I wish she was here.

The girl at the counter smiles beside a huge arrangement of flowers. The red ribbon is printed in gold characters; the cellophane shines under the lights.

‘We’ve come to collect Mr Ng,’ says Gran.

The girl’s face is suddenly solemn. ‘Please come this way.’

We follow her to a corner table and there’s the elderly gentleman from Melbourne Central. They speak in a fast exchange of Vietnamese and the old man gathers a silver-topped walking stick and a shabby black briefcase as he stands to greet us with a small bow.

‘I am Ng Van Dong,’ he says. He is as short as Gran. I feel like a giant standing there with the three of them

‘I am Beth Branston, Mr Ng. Alec’s sister.’ Gran bows slightly in return. ‘This is my granddaughter, Sophie.’

I bow too, and smile.

We leave the table escorted by the young woman and a flood of her Vietnamese words to Mr Ng. Then she speaks to Gran. ‘Thank you caring for old gentleman. Very

sad time.’ She stands at the door swathed in bronze beads as we make our way down the street.

Mr Ng is quiet. Gran settles him in the front seat and I slide into the back. I can see Gran’s bursting to find out what’s going on but this old man seems clothed in silence. His face is composed; he sits still, staring ahead. I glance at his hands folded over his stick and I’m reminded of Alec – that same distance and depth.

I can sense Gran’s frustration; she doesn’t ask any questions. The trip home is mostly silent and I sit back in my seat; Gran’s covered the weather and the traffic – there’s nothing sensible I can say.

Back at Prospect Park Gran helps Mr Ng from the car and up the few back steps. They disappear into the house. I put on the kettle and set out mugs.

‘Cups and saucers I think, Sophie,’ says Gran as she comes into the kitchen. She opens the cupboard and soon the bone china cups and saucers are on the table. Gran takes tea down to Alec’s room, fine cups and saucers, silver teapot on a polished wooden tray. She feels it, too, this sense that there’s something special about Mr Ng. When she doesn’t return I go out to my place on the back verandah. Big Tom joins me, an orange bundle curling up on the step below me, and the chooks cluck and peck across the gravel.

Out here the afternoon looks the same as it always does at this time of the year, the sun in a harsh glare of light across the outbuildings and the usual farm clutter. I can count all my years in the cast-off cars and utes and I don’t know any farm that doesn’t have petrol drums and bits of farm machinery in all different stages of rust. Same old, same old.

I have an odd feeling about today, and about Mr Ng, a scary feeling inside me as though something's going to happen, something inevitable, and I can't begin to imagine what it could be.

Chapter Eleven

‘So what’s going on, Gran?’

‘Alec had to sign some papers – permission for hospital treatment for a Vietnamese boy in Footscray Hospital. He’s his guardian.’

‘Oh.’ That’s all I can manage to say. Who is the boy? Why is Alec his guardian? I don’t have to wait long to find out.

‘Do you know what Alec did, Soph? He established a foundation. It pays for young Vietnamese students to study at uni here in Melbourne. He’s been involved for years. Never said a word – I can’t get over it. All this time he’s been putting money and time into it and he never mentioned it.’

Gran seems a bit peeved about it. She frowns as she watches the usual gathering of chooks scratching in the dirt.

‘He’s a private person, Gran. You should know that.’

‘It’s not just that.’ She looks so hurt and I can’t help wondering why. Alec’s business is his business, but I don’t tell her that. ‘All these years, and then to find out it’s just like the war all over again.’

I want to ask her how a boy in hospital in Melbourne is like the Vietnam War, how Alec establishing a foundation and keeping quiet about helping Vietnamese students can cause her such distress. I’m trying to get my head around how to ask the question when Gran sighs. She seems intent on the chooks and I watch them too; it’s a whole little society there going about its business. The rooster struts in like an Army

general, his tail feathers flying in the breeze like service Colours. He orders the chooks around and they get out of his way, squawking.

‘It was a dirty war, Sophie. *All the way with LBJ.*’

‘LBJ?’

‘That’s what our prime minister said; fighting communism with Lyndon Baines Johnson, President of the United States. We followed America and sent our boys over there to be killed. It wasn’t our war, damn it, and it wasn’t theirs.

‘Alec wanted to go. He and I were almost on opposite sides. He was there fighting and I was here protesting. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven me.’ She brushes her eyes with an angry slash of her hand. ‘They thought we were letting them down, some of them. We were trying to get them home.’

I know so little about the Vietnam War, I don’t know what to do or say, so I sit on the step waiting.

When she speaks again I’m shocked by her voice, harsh and indignant, ‘And then when America knew they couldn’t win, our boys *did* come home. They were treated like criminals. Kids, most of them, conscripted into something they didn’t understand, and then back to a hostile homecoming. We copped it, too. We were trying to make a difference.’

‘Gran...’ There are so many questions I want to ask – Was Alec a conscript? What did he do in the Army? Is his back the result of a war injury? How long was he in Vietnam? But Gran is too upset and I can’t interrupt.

‘And then when Alec came home...’ She closes her eyes and bites her bottom lip. Her hands are clenched together; her red nails a sharp contrast to the white of her knuckles. ‘He wouldn’t talk to me, Sophie. My brother, and we used to be so close. He wouldn’t talk to anyone. He came back here to us and it was terrible. Norm was

just out of hospital and Alec was just out of the Army. It was terrible.’ She looks at me; her voice is almost a whisper, almost as though she’s talking to herself. ‘I was trying to help.’

‘Gran...’ I stand up and put my arms around her. She’s like a little girl who can’t understand why she’s been punished, a little green-eyed girl with her eyes full of tears. She’s quiet in my arms. I lean my chin on top of her head; her red hair smells of sunshine and shampoo. This is a different Gran, one I’ve never seen before.

‘And I could have made a difference with that student now!’ She pushes herself out of my arms. ‘Money, that’s all it would have taken. Money for kids. Why couldn’t he have told me?’ She stands beside me on the top of the steps and looks down at Big Tom. Big Tom stares back. He doesn’t have an answer either.

‘Gran, what happened to the student?’

‘He was attacked in the street – stabbed. He’s in intensive care. Damn it, Soph, he was in Footscray. We could have been looking after him.’

‘You couldn’t have been with him every minute. You can’t help what happens on the street.’

Her shoulders droop and she sighs. ‘I suppose you’re right.’ But it doesn’t take long for the Gran spirit to surface again. ‘But I can help somewhere – money, time, medical care. Damn Alec! From now on I *can* do something.’

Melva arrives to look after Alec. She and Gran are in deep conversation. About Alec, of course, and about the reason for Mr Ng’s visit. As the two of them sit on this familiar back verandah, this small oasis of potted ferns and begonias and the

comfortable spread of weathered cane and wooden furniture, I look at them both in a new light – Melva, calm, unassuming, ordinary – and after her treatment of Alec a few days ago, not ordinary at all. Has Alec seen that tenderness that I glimpsed, that look in her eyes? She comes each day to care for him, to bathe and change him – a nurse, but in her feelings for Alec, much more than a nurse, and I wonder does he know?

Gran waves her hands in a flash of bright nails. I've never seen her perform, but now as I look at her from this distance I imagine the slim young woman with a cause – a singer, a demonstrator, a protestor. I've seen pictures of the moratoriums, the students dragged from the street, but I've never connected those things with Gran. Now it slips into place and I glimpse the courage and the pain. Would I have had the courage to protest? I can't help thinking how easy everything is for me, how sheltered Mum and Dad have made my life.

Big Tom blinks up at me. I move down beside him and scratch him behind the ears. He purrs like a miniature chaff-cutter and rubs his head against my legs. You, too, Big Tom. Life's easy for you, isn't it?

A car crunches on the gravel. I look up, expecting to see Grandad.

Sexy tanned legs. No, that's not Grandad.

'Hi,' says Tim Scott.

'Hello, Tim.' Gran and Melva are a duet.

'Come and sit down,' says Gran.

I slide across the step to let him pass. Why is it that my tongue's stuck and my mouth won't open?

Tim grins down at me as he passes. 'Hi, Sophie.'

Somehow my tongue moves to answer him, 'Hi.'

‘How about putting the kettle on, Soph?’

I scuttle into the kitchen, glad to make an escape. As I pass the hall mirror I take a long look at myself. Yuk! My hair looks awful. Is that a red spot coming up on my chin? At least I’m not in the daggy Tweety Bird top he saw me in last time. A skirt and top today that doesn’t quite make me look as though I’m dressed in a tent.

I load a tray with glasses and mugs, and rattle the ice cubes in a jug of Gran’s homemade lemon cordial. A plunger full of coffee, shortbread biscuits Gran and I made this morning, milk, and a bowl of square white sugar cubes. I’m too busy with the tray to look in the mirror on the way back – why kid myself anyway? A hunk like Tim Scott isn’t going to look at me.

Mr Ng is at the table. He refuses coffee but says yes to a glass of lemon. So does Tim.

‘Well, Soph,’ says Gran, ‘are you ready for a ride back to Footscray?’

I could do without it, but I know Gran likes company and she’ll want to talk. We’ll have the whole Vietnamese student community organised by the time we drive home. I can’t deprive her of that.

‘Sure, Gran.’

‘Good,’ she says. Poor Mr Ng; he hasn’t been exposed to Gran’s organising yet. It should be an interesting trip.

‘How about a drive with me one day, Sophie?’ Tim’s leaning back against the dark wood of the chair. ‘You could show me around.’

Gran grins like the proverbial Cheshire cat. I want to jump up and wave my arms and yell Yes! Yes! Yes! Turn cartwheels! Instead I try to concentrate on clear squares bobbing in lemon liquid. The ice cubes clink in the glass as I hand it to him.

‘Okay. I’ll give you the guided tour.’ I’m surprised at how calm my voice sounds, and I hope he doesn’t notice my hand shaking.

Chapter Twelve

It's cool in the car. Outside, a late sun beats against the rear window but it doesn't worry us. The air conditioner purrs, just like the car. I figure Gran will do all the talking so I relax against the soft leather seat.

Gran and Mr Ng talk about Manh, the boy in hospital. I knew it wouldn't take her long to have some input to his affairs. I'm more interested in Tim. A drive with Tim to show him around. What will he want to see? He's a vet student, Melva says, starting third year at Werribee. I know the place; I've been to the Melbourne Uni clinic with Grandad and the dogs.

Will Tim live there I wonder? When does he start – the uni year in March or do they have different times? Will he be here while I'm here? Will he come to see me? Who am I kidding? He's only interested in finding out about Stephen Adams.

Why aren't you here, Mai? Talking to my diary's not like talking to you. So many questions running around in my head and my diary can't answer any of them. Well, maybe you couldn't either, but at least we could share them. I miss you, Mai. I hope you are enjoying yourself visiting the rels.

I tune into the conversation in the front seat.

'...better forget. Forget about boat; forget about war. Australian now. This good country.' Mr Ng is looking out the side window.

I catch a glimpse of Gran's expression in the rear vision mirror. She's bursting with questions. We're at Braybrook; she hasn't got long to ask them.

‘Alec never talks about Vietnam. He didn’t tell us about you either.’

Mr Ng turns to look at her. I can read nothing on his face. He waits. Gran’s not usually lost for words but I can see it’s hard for her to ask. I watch the houses slip by, the factories, the Western Oval. We’re on the edge of Footscray now; she’s chewing her lip. We turn down Barkly St; still Mr Ng says nothing and Gran’s questions are still unasked. I lean forward so they can hear me.

‘Mr Ng, how did you meet Alec?’

He turns to me. I can feel Gran tense in front of me.

‘I am interpreter with Australian Army. I meet Alec that way.’

The questions hover between us. Gran’s intent on the traffic. There’s not a chance of a parking space in front of the restaurant; she drives into the street behind and into the familiar car park. She stops the car but she doesn’t open the door. Mr Ng waits. I think he knows what’s coming.

‘Mr Ng, there’s so much more than that.’ Her voice has a pleading tone.

‘He’s my brother,’ she says, ‘and I love him.’

Mr Ng nods. He looks at Gran and looks at me then he turns his face to stare at the people hurrying past; so many are Vietnamese. He reminds me of Alec and the way he sits looking at something so far away, looking into himself. What is it that he knows? So much that Gran doesn’t know and wants to understand.

Mr Ng’s voice is clear when he speaks. ‘He is good man, Alec. Very good friend. Long time ago Alec and my daughter, they make child, not born, you understand?’

Gran’s gasp is like a sob, or was that me?

‘In our village only women and children, old men. Young men fighting. Alec...we come together to village, bring present for children, Army food.’ He pauses

for a moment, still looking away from us, and I wonder what he sees. It's not the people on a Footscray street. I try to imagine his village, and the women and children. Alec's little baby waiting to be born. What was she like, the young woman he loved?

His next words slash the air and I hear Gran's sharp intake of breath. There's an awful pain in my chest. But Mr Ng sits with his hand resting on the silver-topped cane. On his face the years of experience are in deep lines, but his quiet composure shows none of them. Even his voice, as he continues his story, has the calm acceptance of what he has seen. 'No one to say who do this thing, who use knives and rifles, who torture them – women and children, old men. How can we tell? Only burned village and dead people with no voice.'

'Dear God!' Gran's voice is husky. We both struggle with tears.

'Mr Ng...' I can't even think what I can say to him. How can I tell him how sorry I feel. There are no words.

'You not even born then, Sophie,' he says.

I don't know what to say, and I'm sure, neither does Gran.

Mr Ng's quiet voice breaks the silence. 'My daughter...'

We sit there, each of us with our own thoughts. I think of Mr Ng and all he has lost, and Alec. The wound is huge.

Chapter Thirteen

At breakfast this morning Grandad drops a bomb into the quiet of scrambled eggs on toast.

‘I’m going to look around the top paddock today, Alec. You want to come?’

If there is one thing certain about Grandad, it’s uncertainty. Gran has tried everything and she hasn’t been able to coax a word out of him about the past, or even have him appear interested, but last night he went to the historical society meeting. All it took was a couple of beers and a few words from Vic Lacey, then they were off together to the meeting in Werribee.

Alec’s eyebrows nearly hit his hairline. Gran’s knife and fork land on her plate with a clatter, and it’s lucky I’ve just swallowed my toast.

‘You’re what?’ says Gran.

‘I’m looking around the top paddock. Vic reckons there’s probably an Aboriginal midden down there by the creek.’

Gran and Alec exchange questioning glances. I’m a mouse; this is too good a discussion to miss.

‘Your dad always said that paddock was spooked,’ says Gran. ‘A bushranger or an Aborigine or someone buried there, Norm. Why the sudden change of heart?’

‘You’re always asking questions, woman. Vic says his dad reckoned that was rubbish. His family came here the same time as ours, and old Charlie never heard about it. Old Charlie knew everything. He was a walking history book.’ Grandad plonks his empty

mug down on the table and gets out of his chair. 'Well, are you coming or not?'

'Yeah, all right,' says Alec. 'Easier on the back than fencing. See you for lunch, Bethie. I'll look after him and make sure the spooks don't get him.'

He gives Gran a wicked grin as he joins Grandad at the door. I'm surprised that he's working again already. Good nursing, I suppose.

Grandad turns back to smile at me. 'You want to come, too, Sophie?'

'Sure, Grumps,' I say, and I'm a little girl again following her Grandad around the farm.

Gran sits at the table shaking her head. 'The Three Musketeers,' she mutters so that only I can hear her. 'Brain, back and body – talk about the walking wounded.'

Grandad, Alec and I pile into the front of the ute, Phoebe and Bullet in the back; Grandad doesn't move in the paddocks without them. Phoebe's the mother, a border collie, and Bullet's a mistake – that's Bullet, because he's quick, and because Grandad says he should have used one on him when he was born. We never did find out who the kelpie father was but Bullet's cute with his collie markings and tinges of kelpie brown.

Alec drives out through the cypress pines and up to the front gate. Lacey's paddocks stretch out along the road, opposite Grandad's. We drive for a bit and turn on to a dirt road to reach the top paddock. Grandad climbs out at the gate and rattles his set of keys. The lock's stubborn, rusty I suppose, but it opens at last. He closes the gate behind us and climbs back into the ute. The dogs jump around on their leads, eager to be off and running.

'Down there, below those trees, Alec.'

This is the boundary of Grandad's land; I've never been here before, too scared by Grandad's threats, and it's strange to look across the dead grass and piles of rocks at a paddock that has always had that air of mystery. It looks no different from any of the others.

We bump across the grass and pull up beside a dry creek. It doesn't look like a creek really, more like a wide deep furrow with rocks and grass scattered through it; the only sign of water is a couple of deep holes where the grass around them is long and green instead of the brittle clumps that have dried and broken in the hot north wind. Further along though, near where the road dips right down, there's still some water, and the fence at the end of the paddock curves out of sight over the creek.

Alec eases himself out of the ute; Grandad's slower. He sits frowning, seemingly uncertain, staring at the creek. The dogs kick up a fuss in the back until Alec talks to them. I climb over the gears and join them. Grandad doesn't move.

'Changed your mind, Norm?'

Grandad turns at Alec's voice at the window, eyes widened as though he's surprised to see him there. He lifts his hat and pushes at his spiky hair under the stained brim. 'No, just thinking.' He steps out and slams the door.

'Come on, Phoebe, old girl.' His voice is a caress and his hand is gentle on the dog's head. Her brown eyes are adoring. Bullet yelps for attention and strains on the lead. 'All right, Bullet, you bloody menace, you can come, too.' Freed, the dogs leap out and rush around his feet then ahead of us down to the creek.

'It's too hot for you here, Sophie,' says Alec. 'You hop over there under the trees while we look around.'

'But I want to look, too.'

‘Up in the shade.’ Alec takes me by the arm and I have no choice. He escorts me over the creek like a bouncer evicting a troublesome drinker, firmly and without fuss. ‘You can see and hear everything from here. You won’t miss a thing.’

‘I hate recuperating. It’s probably 25° and I’m considered too fragile to walk around in the sun.’ I know I’m whinging but I can’t help it.

‘Anyhow,’ says Alec, ‘what do you think Bethie will do to us if we let you frizzle?’

I raise my eyes to heaven and plop down on the dry grass. I can hear Grandad grumbling.

‘All right, nursemaid, if you’ve finished your babysitting duties perhaps you can get down here.’

‘I’m all yours, you cranky old bastard.’ Alec marches up to Grandad and gives him a quick salute. It’s like watching a circus act.

I settle myself in the shade; the ground is hard and dry but at least I can watch the performance from here. Grandad pushes aside the long grass with the stick he carries in the ute – snake protection he calls it. He’s used it a few times, too. Gran tells him snakes are protected; he just scowls and whacks his stick. ‘Yeah, well this is my protection,’ he says.

Alec stamps around the clumps of grass and complains. ‘Damned serrated tussock here, too. We’ll have to clear it.’

‘Bloody stuff’s everywhere. Wish the South Americans kept it to themselves.’ Grandad pulls aside a couple of rocks and rolls them into the creek bed. He kneels and scrapes at the exposed soil with his fingers and pulls out some of the grass. There’s a pile of fairly big rocks; he sits on them and looks around. ‘My dad always called this

paddock cursed. Mum and I tried to talk him into selling it, but he reckoned there was no point spreading the curse to someone else.'

'You know, Norm, you picked a heck of a time to look for a midden. Everything's dry and hard. You'd be better off after the rain.'

'Maybe,' says Grandad, 'but I want to look now.'

'Well, if there's a midden here it's been here for thousands of years. It's not going anywhere.'

Alec may as well save his breath. Grandad's not listening.

I lean back against the rough bark of the pepper tree. It's introduced, too, but there must be clumps of them on nearly every farm on the plains. From here I can see across the paddocks to a cluster of them, and behind them Lacey's roof, bright green between the darker shade of the leaves, a patchwork of corrugated iron and trees, and I can't imagine Gran and Grandad's place without them either.

It's a clear day, mild really, with only a breeze stirring the grass, much better than the hot north wind. We've had plenty of that, but plenty of changes, too, when the wind turns south and brings a storm and the smell of dust in the light rain. Grandad's been moaning about the unseasonable and unpredictable weather all summer.

Today suits me fine, a couple of clouds skidding across the sky and the sun without that fierce heat. I've slip-slop-slapped in any case but I hardly need it under the trees. Phoebe and Bullet run up to sniff me and then race each other back to the creek bed. Grandad has rolled the big rocks he was sitting on and Bullet goes crazy digging at the exposed soil. Grandad shoves him aside and orders him to sit. Bullet doesn't look happy.

It's almost a tent of green here; the pink berries are scattered around the tree, miniature nuts in pink shells that remind me of tiny prawn shells. I crush them in my fingers and the fine shells crumble in a sharp scent.

'Sophie...'

It's there again. My heart jumps like a kitten after a moth.

'Sophie...'

I must be going crazy. My heart is pumping; I feel as though I've run a cross country race.

Oh, God! The swirling darkness and the roaring in my ears. Whip-crack of pain. The darkness is pulling me down...down...down.

My lungs drag air. Is that me screaming?

Is that me screaming? I gasp and shudder, claw at the air.

Alec's voice reaches me. 'Sophie! Sophie! For God's sake, what is it?' Alec's arms are around me. There's a huddle of dogs and Grandad under the low branches of the pepper tree.

'Christ!' says Grandad. 'Let's get her out of here.'

I take a deep breath and it doesn't hurt this time, but I feel sick and I know I'm shaking; my legs are wobbly as Grandad and Alec take an arm each and get me to my feet. We stumble over the rough ground, down into the creek bed.

As we stagger up the other side towards the ute Grandad says, 'What are we going to tell Beth?'

'No, Grandad! No! Don't tell her anything.'

Chapter Fourteen

‘Car’s gone,’ says Grandad as the ute crunches to a stop on the gravel by the back door. ‘She’s not home.’ What’s that in his voice? Relief?

‘I reckon we could all do with a cuppa. I’ll put the kettle on.’ Alec pushes his door open and leaves Grandad and me in the ute. The dogs jump around in the back and push their noses against the back window.

‘Come on, Grandad.’

‘We didn’t find anything in that paddock, did we?’ There’s a question in his eyes but it’s not the one he’s asking.

‘No, Grandad. Nothing.’

‘Are you okay, Soph?’

‘Yes, I’m okay.’ I know my eyes don’t give the same answer.

We look at each other for a long moment. ‘I don’t know...’ Grandad shakes his head and sighs.

‘Alec will have the tea ready, Grumps. Do you want me to give Bullet and Phoebe a drink?’

‘You’re a good girl,’ he says, and there’s that sadness again, the little-boy-lost look. ‘A good girl, just like Sophie.’ He climbs out of the ute and walks towards the house. I watch him walk up the steps, his shoulders hunched, his hat shading his face, and I realise that I’m watching an old man. He sits in one of the chairs and puts his hat underneath it, stretches his legs out in front of him and leans back with his eyes closed.

I fill two dishes for Bullet and Phoebe and leave them to splash the water as they drink. I follow Alec into the kitchen.

Gran's kitchen is like a security blanket. Everything is familiar; nothing changes – not the rocking chair that belonged to Grandad's mother, not the earthenware canisters, and not the cupboards with flower patterns in stained glass. The same pattern is repeated on the narrow window above the sink.

The big wood stove is black and shiny. It's closed up and looking as though it's asleep, waiting for someone to open the doors and to work all the complicated bits. Gran never uses it, except to store our treats, but somehow it seems to anchor everything, holding the space together. I imagine the comfort it would have given on winter mornings when the frost crackled across the paddocks.

It is that comfort I feel now as I sit at the heavy wooden table – it's been here as long as I can remember, the timber dark and shiny with the rubbing of years of elbows and hands.

'Note for Sophie.' Alec slides a piece of paper across the table – Gran's neat writing in purple ink. Well, that's a comfort, too. No plain black or blue for Gran.

Gone shopping. Guess what you're doing this afternoon, Sophie?

Tim's coming to take you out. Pretty yourself up – I'll be back to get lunch.

'Off gallivanting with the young bloke, eh? Are you up to it?'

I look up at Alec's expression – concerned, and something else.

‘I’ll be fine. Nothing a cuppa won’t fix.’ I can’t look away and Alec’s expression doesn’t change. He leans back against the kitchen bench and rubs his thumb across his chin. When he opens his mouth I know what he’s going to say.

‘So what *did* happen out there, Soph?’

Something clenches in my stomach. I can feel the colour drain from my face. What can I say? I don’t know what’s happening myself; so how can I put it into words? It’s crazy – a voice calling my name; a swirling feeling and a roaring in my head; my arms dragging, and fighting to get my breath.

‘I don’t know. It’s – it’s strange. It’s almost like...’

‘What’s the hold-up? I thought you were making tea?’ Grandad’s voice cuts across mine like a wave across rocks. He comes into the kitchen and drags the chair out to sit down beside me.

Alec waits for a moment. I shake my head; I can’t say anything now.

I’m the tourist guide, Tim tells me. He drives off into the sun. Gran always moans that she’s too short for the sun visors to block out the sun; I’m glad I’m tall.

Tim’s tall, too. And tanned. And good looking. He’s a hunk. Josie, you can have Stuart, I don’t care. I’m sitting here next to Tim. Gran checked me over and approved of the new top she’d bought me – I love the soft lilac colour, it will go with my favourite skirt and it fits; I’d forgotten how good that feels after all the sloppy tee-shirts and shorts I’ve been wearing. Now I’m wearing it with a pair of three-quarter pants that tie on my hips. Not too bad – you can’t really tell they’re a size too big.

‘So, how are you feeling now, Sophie?’

How am I feeling? I'm sitting next to you, Tim Scott, and you ask how I'm feeling? 'Melva said it was meningococcus.' Oh, God, he's talking like a doctor – and I'm fantasising about a sexy hunk. He glances at me with a grin. 'You're lucky to be here, eh?' No, he's nothing like a doctor.

I grin back, no sunnies. It's all on my face for him to see.

'Yep, pretty lucky, I'd say,' he says. I wish I could see his eyes but they're hidden behind those Oakleys. His grin widens as he turns his attention back to the road.

Along the edges the stone fences are in ruins; barbed wire rises above them threading the kilometres, and what's left of the stones are scattered towards the road. Often they find their way into suburban gardens. If only stones could talk, the stories they could tell about the days when the bullockies and gold diggers walked the plains.

'Reminds me of Queensland where Mum comes from.' Tim's voice jolts me back from history. 'Only the plains there are black soil and not the rocks like here. Flat though, and paddocks of grain.'

'I love the flatness. In the old days, Grandad says, they could see the ships coming into the bay. When they saw the sails they headed into Melbourne for flour and mail. Imagine pushing a wheelbarrow over those rocks all the way to town – or even worse, from Melbourne to Ballarat.'

'Keen on history, are you?'

'Mmm.'

Tim glances at me and I wish once again I could see his eyes. 'I am, too. That's why I'm looking for my uncle.'

'Stephen Adams.'

'That's the one.'

‘And Grandad doesn’t want to talk.’

‘Do you think he will?’

I look out over the plains, over this place that has been Grandad’s life. I know what he’s like; it depends on his mood. When he wants to talk it’s as though the floodgates open, but when he’s gruff and self-contained there’s no use trying.

‘It depends.’ How can I explain to Tim the pain I saw in his eyes, that expression like a little lost boy’s? ‘I don’t know, Tim. There’s something about Stephen Adams. Something about my Grandad’s cousin Sophie.’

‘What do you mean?’ He turns towards me but once again the sunnies keep his eyes hidden and I can only guess at his thoughts.

I change tack. ‘Did Melva tell you about the letters?’

‘Stephen’s letters to Sophie? Yes, and all the more reason to speak to your Grandad. Your Gran hoped he’d talk to me tonight.’

‘I don’t like your chances, but good luck.’

‘I’m an optimist,’ he says and shrugs.

‘You’ll need to be.’

‘Well, we’ll worry about that later.’ He knocks me senseless with that megawatt smile and then turns his attention to the road ahead.. ‘I’m all yours for the afternoon, Sophie. What are you going to do with me?’

Chapter Fifteen

The afternoon is slightly clouded, but still summery and bare-shouldered warm, perfect for my new top. Tim's in shorts and a plain white Jag tee-shirt; nothing like Stuart's black shirts with their 'in your face' messages.

We do the grand tour through some of the new estates spreading around Werribee – I'm used to them, but now I see them through Tim's eyes.

He looks at row on row of brick houses sprouting like square red mushrooms. 'Ugly, aren't they?' he says, pointing to miniature bare gardens, and garages almost as big as supermarkets.

'Mmmm,' I agree, thinking of the old homes on the outskirts surrounded by trees. 'Tidier than the farms, I guess, but...'

Tim grins. 'Yes, but...'

We eat waffle-coned ice creams and wander along the River Walk behind the Watton Street shops; the asphalt path edges the river, on one side of it the quiet flow of water and, on the other, the backs of the shops graffitied and on high stilts.

'Skimpy little river here,' says Tim as he plops a stone into a pool where the water is only a trickle over the rocks.

'You should get Gran to show you pictures of the floods. It's been up in the main street a couple of times.'

'You're kidding!' says Tim, disbelief clear on his face.

'A bit further down almost a whole family was washed away once – back in the old days – and the bridge too.'

Tim looks from the height of the bridge to the stones that make a crossing over the trickle of water and shakes his head.

‘Gran and I walk here when we come to town. When I touch the old trees, their trunks all gnarled and silver, I get goose bumps sometimes, thinking of the stories they could tell about the past.’

Tim stands still, listening, so I keep talking. ‘I don’t mean *our* past – you know, less than two hundred years ago – I mean before my ancestors came here, thousands of years ago. There’s a spiritual feel to the river somehow, but no one to tell the stories.’

Tim nods and murmurs something I can’t hear, and we watch the soft ripple of the water over the rocks; no need of words now, only magpies and ducks calling, and the soft voice of the river. Tim takes my hand and together we walk to a table on a grassy area up beside the bridge.

I wish you could see me now, Mai. Tim and me. Of course it doesn’t mean a thing; all I’m doing is showing him the Werribee sights. And then he takes off his sunnies and I’m lost in those eyes.

Tim’s only request is to visit the RAAF Museum; I suppose I should have guessed he’d want to go there after all the interest in Stephen. The guards check us at Point Cook gates and we drive through an avenue of cypress pines into the base.

The airstrip is on the left with planes dotting the edges like sheep around a dam and, further along, the bitumen road winds out from under the pines until beyond the huge hangars it disappears in the dried grass. In the distance there are more hangars and beyond them the pier juts out into the bay; calm today, no white breakers, only the rippled surface of blue and, I suppose, the usual squadron of seagulls riding

the current. A crash boat is moored by the pier, prepared for any emergency on the water, and across the blue expanse a few fishing boats drift lazily.

Tim drives in from the road and parks under the shelter of the cypress trees. I know this place; the parade ground is nearby, and I remember David's cadet squadron competing here last year. I came here, too, with Mum and Dad, to watch the Roulettes doing aerobatics for some RAAF Air Display. I look up at the sky, remembering the loops and dives and it's a surprise when Tim speaks through my window.

'Been here before?' he says, his face level with mine, and I almost jump out of my seat.

My breath catches in my throat but I manage to answer. 'On the base, yes, but not to the museum.' Tim opens the door to help me out. It's the fright that makes my heart beat fast; of course it is.

My heart's still bumping as we reach the building; Tim's still holding my arm. He opens the museum door and we enter another world and a sense of the past hanging from walls and on models. The years crowd around us in pictures, posters, uniforms, flags and glass cases filled with papers and all sorts of mysterious things. Where do we start?

'I'm looking for a photo,' says Tim.

'A photo?' I glance around me. 'There are hundreds of them here.'

'A specific photo,' he says.

'Oh?' Getting information from Tim is like looking for the end on a roll of sticky tape. 'What photo?'

'A photo of Stephen.'

'Stephen?' Calm down, Sophie. That was a shriek.

'Someone told Vic Lacey there was a photo of Stephen here.'

‘Oh.’ What else can I say? A face to the name. A face to the words in the letters: Will you wait for me, Sophie? Will you be my girl and wait for me to come home? I rub my arms. I know what Gran means when she says someone walked over her grave.

Tim leads; I follow. We glance at the early history – grainy photographs of Army-uniformed men and of single and double-winged aircraft so tiny and frail they look like dragonflies; but it’s the World War II display that draws him, the dark blue uniforms with brass buttons and the distinctive folding caps. He pores over photographs and the contents of the glass cases – diaries, letters, all sorts of certificates, cards and personal effects; and I feel sick when I see included with matches and water purifier in a fraying khaki material roll, a cyanide pill.

‘Tim, look at this.’

He stands beside me and looks through the dusty glass. Our shoulders touch and I can feel the warmth of his skin. He nods. ‘I’ve read about those. If you were taken prisoner and knew too much, interrogation could be brutal and a cyanide pill stopped you giving away secret information and informing on your mates.’

Sickened, I turn away. ‘EATS’ catches my attention – The Empire Air Training Scheme. I smile at the letters, and then I read the details – aircrew trained in Australia and Canada to fight with the RAF Squadrons. When I come to the list of deaths for the Bomber Squadrons I’ve had enough – 9,897 Australian aircrew from the 27,387 fighting with the British Air Force killed or missing. Was Stephen one of those? I can’t bear to read any more.

Uniforms are on display – goggles and flying caps, gloves, scarves and fur-lined boots. It must have been cold in some of those planes.

Tim's still searching for a photograph. At least it's not so painful to look at those, until I realize how many *young* men there are, proud in their flying jackets, posing against the planes – Tim's age, or not much older than me. I try to imagine Stuart fighting, or any of the cadets from Melbourne High. Flying a plane maybe, but would they be prepared to risk their lives in those little planes and fight for Queen and country? How old was Stephen?

'He's not here, Tim.' I don't know how I know this, but I do.

Tim's reluctant to leave the last display. 'His name's not here, but he could be in one of those group photos.'

'Come on, Tim. Do you know what he looks like? And anyway, in those old photographs how could you tell?'

I move away towards the door but he doesn't follow me. He frowns, a desperate look on his face.

'I need to keep looking for Stephen. He's here somewhere. Will you wait for me, Sophie?'

Will you wait for me, Sophie?

Always questions. Where are you, Stephen? How can I live without you ?I need your arms around me and the reassurance of your cheeky smile.

'When's he coming back?' Normie asks me every day, and I ask the same question, but who can answer?

When I help Mrs Lacey with knitting socks for the Comforts Fund, I pack the parcels and wish I could send one to you.

I feel so tired and sick as I drag myself through the days, cooking, milking the cow and feeding the chooks. Ordinary things, my darling, but nothing now is ordinary and never will be again.

Uncle Edward scolds and all I want to do is cry.

‘What’s the matter with you, girl?’ His voice is rough. How can I tell him?

Stephen, I’m waiting for you. I know you’re coming home.

I hug myself, suddenly chilled in the stuffy room. ‘I’ll wait outside in the sun.’

The clouds dangle over me like question marks, but the sun warms me. My mind is filled with Stephen and Sophie Anne, with images of planes and of Point Cook and those first airmen who were challenged by adventures in the sky; the contents of those glass cases, the memorabilia on display from World War II. The war Stephen fought in.

A small plane takes off from the airstrip; I watch it rise and circle, land again and then take straight off. Up and down, up and down again. Practice for landing I suppose. How different to be up there now for pleasure.

‘Well,’ says Tim, breathing out heavily as he joins me. ‘No luck. I’m beginning to think I’ll never find him.’

‘Don’t give up.’ The words seem important to say.

‘No, I’m just having a whinge. Anyway, what did you think of that?’

I answer slowly, thinking of Sophie Anne and Stephen. ‘I don’t know what I expected...’

‘But that wasn’t it?’

‘No. I expected pictures of planes and things. Like school project books, I suppose.’

We don't speak as we walk to the Pajero. Tim opens the door and I climb in. He walks to the other side and climbs up beside me. His hands are on the steering wheel but he sits quietly, thinking. I watch the clouds – my thoughts are as woolly as they are – and wait for him to speak.

'It's all that personal stuff that overwhelms you,' says Tim at last. 'You read about the men and the planes, but when you see the photographs...' He shakes his head. 'It's the contents of their lives: the clothes and who actually wore them; the things they carried with them, theatre tickets, good luck charms – a rabbit's foot for God's sake – the diaries, letters, matches, small everyday things. That's what gets to you.'

'I can't help thinking of the aircrew killed or missing. The numbers...so many of them.'

Tim sighs. 'And then there's Stephen.'

A breeze from the sea now, and a tangy salt smell; overhead the seagulls dip like miniature planes.

'There's so much I don't know about him.' Tim turns towards me, frowning. His sunnies are still in his pocket so I can see his face clearly. 'When Auntie Gwen died they didn't keep any of her papers. Some family feud. And nothing about Stephen.'

'Didn't he have brothers or sisters who'd have wanted them?'

'No. He was the only child.' He smiles and shakes his head. 'And would you believe it? She'd never changed her will. Grandma was only a girl then and she doesn't remember much; just that Stephen wanted to see Australia after he finished his studies and before he took over the property. She remembers he was here with

Charlie Lacey when the war started and he joined up from here. He sent her a card that she kept.'

'What about the Air Force, they'd know something, wouldn't they?'

'He was reported missing in action, presumed dead, and then the Air Force advised that he was coming home. But he never came.'

'But she'd have contacted the Air Force. Didn't they look for him?'

Tim sighs and rubs his fingers over his forehead. 'They found no trace of him. He was listed as AWL. A family shame'

'And Vic Lacey sent you to Grandad.'

'Yes.' He rattles his keys, searching for the one he wants. 'Yes,' he says again as he slips it into the ignition. 'I need to talk to him.' He fishes his sunnies out of his pocket and slips them on. That's it. I can't see his eyes again.

'To the left, Tim,' I direct him as we drive through the shadows of cypress pines leading to the main gate. 'If you go down Aviation Road then we can take the beach road and drive past the mouth of the river at Werribee South.'

The breeze sighs sadly through the open window as we drive along the edge of the beach; the pines bend their gnarled trunks away from the sea. There are fishermen on the pier at Werribee South, and tractors busy on the market gardens. Tim drives slowly over the muddy roads that curve near the farms on the river and past the K Road cliffs where gums cling to the red soil with exposed roots. The planes would have flown over here from Point Cook. What would the pilots have thought about, flying over the farms, over the sea? Would they have been scared, or excited? Soon so many of them would have been leaving Australia and flying over a bigger expanse of ocean.

‘Was Stephen a pilot?’ After reading about all those killed and missing aircrew it’s suddenly important to know.

‘He was an observer, a navigator. Apparently he did a lot of boundary riding, so I suppose that suited him.

I nod in agreement. ‘Yes, “Some things you learn on an outback property are useful in aeroplanes”.’

Tim looks across at me and raises his eyebrows.

‘A quote from one of his letters.’

‘Will your grandfather let me read them, Sophie?’ Tim looks uncertain, and I wish I could tell him yes because I know how much it means.

I shrug. ‘Who knows?’

We’ll soon be back at Prospect Park. I can’t help wondering what Grandad’s mood will be and how he’ll respond to Tim’s questions.

I lean back against the smooth leather seat and try to relax. How can I, with Tim so close beside me in this confined space? Dream on, Soph. It’s only until we get back home and he talks to Grandad; after that, chances are I won’t ever see him again.

Then I remember the letters, Stephen’s words – ‘I think this will be my last leave...I love you Sophie’. I shiver and blink away tears.

Chapter Sixteen

I don't know if it's the roast dinner Gran cooked or the bottle of Grange Tim brought. Maybe it's Tim's attitude, his respect for an old man. Whatever it is, Grandad's lost his gruffness and seems to be content sitting out on the back verandah with Tim and Alec, chatting over a glass of port. Gran and I finish the dishes and join them.

'Well, young feller,' says Grandad as we flop into our chairs. 'So you're going to be a vet.'

'That's right, Mr Branston. This is my third year so I'm at Werribee.'

So formal. Alec raises his eyebrows at me and grins.

'Mmm, the vet school.' Grandad stares out past the pepper trees and takes a sip of his port. 'Used to be lots of dairy farms around here when that opened. Cattle, horses, sheep. Look at it now; I reckon all they see is dogs and cats.'

'Horses, too, and the animals from the zoo,' says Tim. 'I'm interested in those.'

Gran fidgets. She taps her blue nails on the wooden arm of her chair. I listen to the clicks and wonder how long she can last before steering the conversation to Stephen. Alec leans back in his chair, legs spread as though he's quite relaxed, but there's a glint in his eyes as he watches.

'So what zoo animals are you interested in?' says Grandad.

'Well, I always thought the big cats would be a challenge.' Tim's reply is polite. He glances at me and I can see he's biding his time, trying not to upset Grandad.

Gran's not so caring. 'Oh, for heaven's sake!' she says, bouncing out of her

chair and over to Grandad's. 'What's the matter with you, Norman? The boy's here to find out about Stephen Adams. Tell him what you know.'

The calm disintegrates. Grandad's out of his chair like a racehorse out of its starting gate. 'You're never satisfied, are you, woman? You can't leave anything alone. First the trunk, and then the letters and the locket. And now this.' His voice shakes and the words sound dragged from him. 'I was eight years old when Stephen came. I can't remember anything!' He pulls the back door open and disappears behind it as it slams.

We sit there, stunned. Alec's first to move. He levers himself out of the chair and walks out to the shed without a word. Big Tom bounds out to greet him.

Tim stands and picks up his sunnies and keys. 'Mrs Branston, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset him. I just wanted —'

'You just wanted to know,' says Gran. 'And you have every right.' She puts her arm around him and pats him as though he's a child. 'Don't give up.'

'I'm not sure. I don't want to cause any more trouble.'

She smiles at him, her face alight with resolve. 'Don't you worry about it. Sophie and I will work out something. Won't we, Soph?'

Grandad's right. She never gives up.

I look at the uncertainty in Tim's expression and I can't help myself. 'Sure, Gran.'

Tim smiles his thanks, his relief. I smile back like a stupid kid. What have I got to lose?

'Come on, Soph. Up and at it.' Gran's voice disturbs the morning like a kookaburra's call.

Heavy with sleep, I groan. 'Go away, Gran. You're a pain.'

'I know,' she says and pushes the sheet back from my face. There she is with orange juice and crumpets, her eyes gleaming with determination, her hair fluffed up in its usual brightness.

'Gran...'

I close my eyes and slide back under the lavender-scented sheet wishing I could stay cocooned here like a moth.

'We're going to Melva's. I want to talk to her Mum.' She pulls down the legs of the tray and plonks it over my knees. 'Eat up, kiddo, and don't be long.' Up goes the blind and out she strides with a swish of her long skirt. Crumpets and orange juice, and I'm not even properly awake yet.

I struggle to sit up and balance the tray. I look out the window at the day. The pepper trees hang lifeless under a sky still bleary with sleep. It's a breathless morning, one of those mornings when the clouds crowd the sky, reluctant to move aside for the sun. A daylight-saving morning when the day pulls its head under the doona and says, 'Go away, it's too early to get up.' Just like me.

Oh, well. No use arguing with Gran. Wake up, Sophie, it's breakfast time.

Melva's family has been here as long as ours and, Gran told me, when her mother's great-great-grandmother gave birth on the ship, Grandad's great-great-grandmother delivered her son for her. Poor little baby, he lived for only hours; his tiny body was wrapped in calico and thrown overboard. It wasn't long before his mother followed.

The past is filled with stories like these. The present has its stories, too, and Melva and her mum are survivors. When the bushfires came through thirty years ago, Melva's dad died fighting to save a neighbour's property while his own house burnt

and only the stables were saved. Gran's house is old and filled with history. Mrs Browne's house has nothing to remind her of her own or her ancestors' lives. The lounge suite and nest of polished tables, the rose-patterned curtains and the few vases and ornaments scattered around are definitely late 20th century, not like some of Gran's that came over last century with Grandad's ancestors.

'Do you miss all the old things, Mrs Browne, all the furniture and pictures the fire destroyed?' I can't help asking as we sit in her lounge room sipping tea.

'I don't need reminders. It's all here,' says Mrs Browne, her fingers knobbly with arthritis, curled over her heart. In her grey and white floral dress she's almost lost in the grey vinyl chair. 'The fires did me a favour; now I'm not responsible for all that history.'

Melva shakes her head but doesn't say anything. What's the use? No amount of discussion will bring back all that was lost.

Gran's not so restrained. She leans forward, her dress a splash of orange and blue on the pale grey. 'A lot of people like to have all that history,' she says. 'Look at young Tim, trying to track down his uncle. He'd like a bit of history.'

Mrs Browne sits erect in her chair. The light streaks in through lace curtains and on to her white curls. Her eyes are wary as she looks away from Gran.

'What's he got a bee in his bonnet for? Chasing around the district, stirring up the old people, looking for Stephen Adams. He didn't even know him.'

'You knew him though, didn't you, Mrs Browne?' I ask. Melva gives me a warning frown but I can't help myself. 'You knew Sophie, too.'

Mrs Browne hunches in her chair and pulls a pink velvet cushion into her arms. She holds it as though she's shielding herself. The light catches her glasses, so I can't see her eyes.

‘It’s all right, Mum.’ Melva looks daggers at me and hovers over her mum like Phoebe keeping watch on a jittery sheep. ‘You don’t have to talk about it to Sophie.’

‘Sophie?’ says Mrs Browne, popping up in the chair again. Her face is gentle, the skin pale and almost smooth, so soft-looking that I want to touch it. ‘Young Sophie? She was my friend. Nothing hoity-toity about Sophie. We used to knit and sew together – handkerchiefs for the soldiers, and khaki socks – for the Comforts Fund, you know? She was a treasure. Such company for Mrs Branston. Just the thing she needed, what with that husband of hers. Good Christian man. Huh! Him as mean as they come. Poor young Norman; Sophie was so good to him when his mum got sick. Poor little boy.’

‘How did she get sick?’ I ask, almost afraid to move or even breathe in case this changed Mrs B disappears. I can’t look away but I can feel Melva and Gran, still and alert, listening.

‘She was a lovely lady, Mrs Branston. So kind to me. She was so scared that Manpower would take me away to work in a factory, but they never did.’ Mrs Browne sits rubbing her fingers over the velvet and looking towards the lace curtains. It’s as though we are not here at all and she’s looking into the past. She sits quietly. We watch as she visits her memories. It doesn’t feel right to prod her any more. I smile at Melva and shrug, but there’s that glint in Gran’s eyes. I can almost hear her mind ticking. I want to tell her it doesn’t matter if we find out about Stephen or Sophie Anne, and to leave this fragile old lady alone.

‘So kind,’ says Mrs Browne, sighing. ‘And then so sick.’ She’s suddenly bright again, straight-backed in her chair, sliding the cushion unheeded to the floor. Melva picks it up and replaces it on the couch.

‘They couldn’t do much for cancer then,’ says Mrs Browne. ‘And that must have been what it was. So sick she was, and Dr Crane used to drive out in the jinker to see her. And young Sophie was like a daughter to her, so good. And Stephen; he used to bring her flowers, and books too, from the little library in the Mechanics Hall in town. And Mrs Lacey used to send over some baking. Such lovely madiera...’

From Gran, Melva and me, there’s a collective in-drawn breath.

Madiera cake wrapped in a linen napkin ...

Deep breath, Sophie. Take a deep breath. I don’t want to remember, but I can’t help it.

‘...going out together for very long?’ Gran’s voice is insistent.

It’s like having someone switch channels; Mrs Browne suddenly withdraws into her own space, her eyes wide and filled with confusion.

‘I don’t know, dear. I was only the maid.’ Her voice is shaky and old.

Gran’s like a deflating balloon. She sinks back into her chair and sighs.

Melva frowns and shakes her head and mouths the words, ‘No more.’

Gran nods. I breathe out relieved, and fish around on the carpet with my bare feet to find my scuffs.

Gran looks longingly at Mrs B but, poor old lady, she has retreated inside herself. She reminds me of the little rabbit I once found cornered in a feed bin at Prospect Park. I can’t bear to look at her any longer.

Gran follows me reluctantly to the door. ‘Goodbye, Mrs B. We’ll see you later.’ She could be talking to a little child.

Outside the air is humid; the clouds gather, grumbling, in the west. Bordering the wide brick path, purple and white agapanthus stretch upwards from wide green

clumps. Gran and I walk to the car parked under the pepper trees. I breathe deeply, and even the hot air is a relief from that upsetting room.

‘Well, Soph.’ She stands beside the open door and speaks across the dusty roof of the car. ‘Home for lunch and then we’ll look at the letters.’

Something knots in my stomach. The world tips for a second and then rights itself. I wish I could say no, but this is my gran, and I can’t refuse her anything.

Gran’s quiet on the trip home and I can’t help wondering what she’s planning. What will be in the letters? I try to think of an escape, but nothing short of death could save me from one of Gran’s plans.

‘Look who’s here!’ Her voice lifts with excitement, rouses me from my thoughts of letters. Heart thumping, I expect to see the Pajero, and Tim. Instead it’s Alec and Mr Ng sitting together on the back verandah as we drive in.

‘Well,’ mutters Gran as she removes the key from the ignition and reaches for her bag. ‘I wonder what Alec’s up to now.’

Mr Ng, casual in his short-sleeved shirt, is composed; Alec, in boots and khaki overalls, unsmiling.

‘He’s not always up to something.’

‘Hmph!’ She slams the car door and walks towards the steps, skirt swishing, gold bracelet gleaming on her tanned ankle.

Mr Ng stands and bows. ‘Good morning, Mrs Branston.’

‘Please, my name is Beth.’ Gran shoots a glance at Alec and her smile falters. ‘This is a surprise.’

Alec grins. ‘Sure is.’

Gran waits for an explanation. She’ll wait a long time to hear it from Alec.

‘You’re home early,’ Alec drawls. ‘Didn’t expect you back yet.’

‘Obviously.’ Gran’s bursting to know but she knows better than to ask.

‘Hello, Mr Ng. Has Alec made you tea?’

‘Yes, we drink tea. Thank you, Sophie.’

Gran’s lost for words, something unusual for her, and at last Alec relents.

‘Mr Ng was dropped in Werribee by a friend doing a quick trip to Geelong. I have to have him back to Deneys Corner at 12.30 to be picked up. Had some paperwork to catch up on.’

‘Oh,’ says Gran. ‘It’s a pleasure to have you, Mr Ng’

Alec’s eyes gleam as he watches Gran disappear through the back door. I expect it to slam, but instead she closes it too quietly, as though she’s holding it and herself in check.

‘Such control,’ says Alec, and we burst out laughing.

Nothing’s lost on Mr Ng. ‘Your sister good lady,’ he says, suddenly serious. And so is Alec.

Silence. I look away from them, at the sky, at the clouds in the distance rolling together like wrestlers. I hadn’t noticed them lowering, blocking the sun completely, and the pepper trees hanging forlornly in the heat. The paddocks beyond are yellowed and dry, despite the odd storms and showers. There’s no sign of the sheep.

In the winter the wind rushes through like a train; it bites with Antarctic teeth and slanting rain, and the sheep cluster, sheltering each other in the bare open spaces. The dogs sulk in their boxes, glaring at the misery that turns the stubbled grasses green. I’m startled by the chill of thinking about it. Alec’s voice drags me back into the heat.

‘... if she could be persuaded to mind her own damn business.’

I'm stunned by the bitterness in his tone, and when I look at him, by the hard set of his jaw.

'You her business, my son. You family.'

'Yes.'

There's that pain in Alec's eyes, and I'm reminded of the family he lost, the girl he loved and their unborn child. Mr Ng's grandchild. Here on this quiet verandah I sense such loss; and for just a few moments the weight of it is exposed on Alec's face. I search Mr Ng's face; there is nothing on display, and I'm profoundly moved by his composure. Tears well in my eyes and I turn away to look at the clouds, the crows flying above the pepper trees, at Big Tom stretching as he wakes, anything rather than that sadness I sense in them.

'I know I should let it go...'

'The past is other country. We leave behind us.'

A chair scrapes on the bare boards. Alec's voice is gruff. 'I'll get the rest of the papers.' He calls to me over his shoulder, 'Let Bethie know we're about to leave.'

Gran meets me at the kitchen door with a box of plums. Her treasures, plump and purple, the insides golden and juicy, they are special treats. Only a few chosen people receive them. I raise my eyebrows in question.

'Some plums for Mr Ng,' she tells me. 'It must be nearly time for him to leave.'

'Wow! What an honour!' I call out to Mr Ng as I trail Gran out to the verandah. I'm glad of an opportunity to lighten the mood, but there's nothing light about Gran's voice as she places the box on the table.

'Some plums for you, Mr Ng. They are just ripe and picked this morning from my tree. I hope you enjoy them.'

‘Like getting gold.’ I try again, anxious to lift this tension that surrounds us, but they take no notice.

Mr Ng rises from his chair and bows. ‘Is honour this gift. I unworthy. You must keep for family.’

Gran picks up the box and holds it out to him. Time seems suspended until he has no option but to place his hands next to hers to take the weight.

Head bent, Gran speaks quietly and with respect. ‘You are family, Mr Ng. Your daughter was my sister-in-law, her child my niece or nephew.’

It is only then that I notice Alec standing in the doorway, his face contorted, holding himself as though someone hit him in the chest.

Chapter Sixteen

There's no communication over lunch. Gran's distracted, Grandad wears a face to match the weather; the sky has more conversation than he does. I know better than to try and speak to him when he's like this, and for once, Gran doesn't try to niggle and stir. It might be quiet, but there's something rumbling beneath his bleak exterior.

Alec comes late. After a quick ham sandwich and a mug of his swaggie-strength black tea, he plonks his dishes in the sink and retreats. He pauses at the door and looks meaningfully at me.

'I'll be in the machine shed. Gotta look at the clutch on the tractor.'

I don't hang around for dishes. I figure it's time to leave Gran and Grandad to whatever devils are plaguing them; and I just know that one of them is called Stephen Adams, but I don't want to be there when the storm breaks.

Stephen Adams. Stephen Adams. It's amazing how a person I'd never heard of a couple of weeks ago can impact so much on our lives. And Tim Scott. The handsome, blue-eyed vet student. The drop-dead gorgeous male.

And Sophie Anne. It's strange to find a distant relative with my name, someone Grandad obviously cared about; to stumble on some secret that causes so much pain. There must be a secret. Grandad can't remember – or won't – and Mrs Browne's all mixed up at the mention of Sophie Anne's name.

Sophie Anne and Stephen. But she married someone else.

I lean on the verandah trying to catch a breath of air, but it's hot and humid and the only movement is in the clouds. There's not even a bird moving; the chooks are exhausted under the pepper trees.

The locket swings as I move. I know Grandad's upset about my wearing it, but it seems at home around my neck. It needs to be loved, and I can't imagine it back in that cold chest, or even in the box that Gran takes such care to polish and protect. I hold the locket still for a moment; I wish I could open it.

The chain tumbles in my hand as I undo it. I read our name – *Sophie* – in its ornate circle of flowers. My fingers are clumsy as I try to open the clasp but it's still stubborn. Was it from her husband? What was he like, the man she married? If she used to live here, why haven't we heard about any of them? The questions crowd, but there are no answers.

The sky grows; a sudden puff of wind stirs the wisteria and dies again in a moment. I clip the locket back around my neck. Why did she leave it here? I slide it along the chain; it feels so special, so sad –

'Sophie.'

I close my eyes and the voice calls again, *'Sophie.'*

I hear him calling me. In my hands the letter from his mother. I trace my fingers over the linen-finish page, her beautiful writing, and that terrible message – missing presumed dead.

He's not dead! He's not dead! He promised to come back to me.

What would they do if they knew I kept his photograph in my locket, that it was Stephen I wore over my heart?

Auntie Em, I wish you were here. Normie and I need you.

Stephen, come back and save me!

The darkness swirls. My lungs beg air. My arms are so terrifyingly heavy.

Voices rise in the blackness.

‘Please Norman – ’

‘How could you, Bethie?’

Eyes open, I gasp hot air. The wind turns suddenly, gusting from the south. Leaves scatter and the pepper trees bend. Phoebe and Jack yelp as a plastic bucket bumps and crashes past their kennels. The chooks flutter and squawk and a loose piece of corrugated iron on the hay shed lifts and clatters.

Legs shaking, my heart pounding, I run. Away from the verandah and Gran and Grandad’s raised voices; away from the voice calling me, and the flashes of dreams; away from the sadness that overwhelms. By the time I reach the machine shed the wind is wild and unstoppable and the sky explodes.

I bolt inside the shed in a flash of light and a crack of thunder that would wake Tutankhamen. Flash! Crack! Rumble! I’m blinded for a moment, running, stumbling, and then I’m airborne over Alec’s legs that are stuck out from under the tractor. The oil-stained concrete lifts up to meet me and I turn my face in time to hit my cheek instead of my nose.

‘Bloody hell!’ Alec’s shout is barely audible as the rain strikes the iron roof like gunshots and I’m sprawled, helpless as a shot rabbit, on the dusty floor.

By the time Alec crawls out to reach me I’m choking and sobbing. And I’m so scared I’m shaking.

‘Hey, Sophie. What’s up, girl?’ He pulls me into his arms. I push my face against his rough work shirt and he holds me safe from the world.

By the time I stop crying the wind has settled and the rain is a steady throb on the roof. I hiccup, and scrabble in my pocket for a handkerchief. There's blood on my hand and as I blow my nose my cheek stings. Alec's khaki shirt is covered in tears and blood.

'Hell,' says Alec when he looks at me. 'What would your mother say?'

I imagine Mum's reaction and shudder.

Alec laughs. 'Come on, kiddo. Let's get you cleaned up.' And he leads me to the rough cupboards that back against the corrugated iron.

There's a first aid kit in the shed so we don't have to brave the rain. Alec's gentler than Mum. He wets one of the clean rags from a bag near the sink and bathes my face and hands; I flinch as he dries the wounds with gauze and applies aloe vera gel.

'That'll do that bit.' He fixes me with a questioning stare and I dread what he's going to ask but I can't turn away. 'No more evading the issue. What's going on?'

My heart thumps. I try to run but Alec's ahead of me. He grabs me by the arms and walks me a few steps backwards to the rough wooden seat against the iron wall; so cold as I lean back and I can feel the rain drumming down the corrugations. I close my eyes and cover my face with my hands.

'Oh, God. I'm a mess.'

Alec takes my hands in his and holds them firmly. I can't pull away. I look up at the concerned but determined expression on his face and burst into tears again.

It's a few moments before Alec speaks; he doesn't let go of my hands.

'Come on, Soph. Spill it. There's something happening and I want to know what it is.'

The words are out before I can stop them. 'It's the...the...voice.'

Alec's eyebrows rise in unison. He waits.

'I'm going crazy.'

There's no change in his expression and he doesn't speak. He just keeps watching me.

'I...I keep hearing a voice.'

'What voice?' He doesn't sound as though he thinks I'm crazy.

Outside the rain falls steadily and the temperature's dropped. I shiver. Alec puts his arm around my shoulder and drags me against his warmth. He squeezes my hand. 'All right. Now let's have it from the beginning.'

I take a deep breath and the words float like the voice. 'Someone keeps calling my name.'

'And...'

'And I'm scared.'

'What are you scared of, Soph?'

I pull away and flare up like a Roman candle. 'What am I scared of? What do you think I'm scared of? Some weird voice keeps floating around in my head and I ... I'm going psycho.'

Alec grabs me by the shoulders and turns me to face him. His look is intent, his dark eyebrows drawn together, his tanned skin taut around his mouth.

'Now you listen to me, Sophie. You are not going crazy.' He gives me a slight shake. 'Do you hear me? You are *not* psycho or weird or crazy.'

'But the voice...'

'Never mind the voice. There are plenty of those around here. This is a spiritual place, full of history and full of spirits.'

I can't believe what I'm hearing. From Alec?

'You heard it up in the top paddock, didn't you?'

My chest tightens as I remember the terrifying blackness, and the voice. I try to scramble to my feet but Alec's hands are firm.

'Didn't you?'

I can't speak. He gives me another shake.

'Didn't you?'

'Yes.' My voice is a whisper. 'And in my room, and at the RAAF base, and on the verandah. I told you I'm going crazy.'

'You are *not* crazy! Do you hear me? Put that thought out of your head. You are recovering from a serious illness and you are vulnerable.' He watches me for a few seconds and I try to hold myself together, try to believe what he says, hoping he won't ask any more questions. But I should never discount Alec and his quiet persistence. 'But there's more, isn't there?'

I can't take any more. I don't want to talk about the dreams. About the darkness and the pain. I shut my eyes and cover my face. 'No. No, Alec. No more.'

'Okay, Soph. We'll let it rest.' He hugs me again and his voice is gentle above the sound of the rain. 'I'll make us a cuppa and you can sit here for a while until the rain stops.'

I breathe a sigh of relief, but then he speaks again.

'But there's something going on and I want to know what it is.'

My heart does a somersault and I can't look at him because I know he'll read the fear in my face, and then I'd have to tell him. Why should I be surprised? This is Alec who has nussed secrets out of me since I was a little kid. He knows me better than Gran does. Alec really wants to know, but all I can think is, *do I?*

Chapter Seventeen

The rain pounds on the iron roof. The fresh smell of soaked paddocks reaches us in the dim interior of the shed. There will be water in the creeks after this and maybe some of the algae will wash down the river.

Primitive tea-making facilities here – an old china electric jug without a lid and a tube of condensed milk to make mine milky and sweet. Perfect for a day like today. That's how Grandad likes it too, but the tube doesn't last long when he dribbles it out and eats it by the spoonful. Mugs in hand, Alec and I sip the hot brew and there's no more mention of voices.

'That was a surprise to see Mr Ng today.'

Alec glances up from his tea. 'Saved me a trip into town when his friend was coming through this way.'

I remember the trip with Mr Ng to Footscray, the revelations about Alec and how kind he was speaking to Gran. 'He's a lovely old man.'

Alec grins. 'Mmm, mostly he is.'

I think of the support Alec gives to the young Vietnamese students, and about the young boy in hospital. 'It's a good thing, what you do for the students, Alec.'

'Yes, well...' He's about to say more and stops himself. I watch him drain his tea and lean over to place his mug on the workbench behind him. It's now or never.

'Will you tell me about Vietnam? I really want to know.'

Alec stiffens. The cup stops in mid-air, clenched tightly in his strong tanned hand. At first I think he's not going to answer, but then he turns to confront me.

'You won't talk, but I'm supposed to. Is that it, Soph?'

I'm caught by the accusing look in those eyes, but I don't back down.

He slumps back on to the seat and sighs. 'What do you want to know?'

'What can you tell me?'

'What can I tell you? I was in Vietnam for three years altogether. Training the South Vietnamese.' I wait for more and it seems ages before he adds, 'How can I tell you about the hell and madness over there?'

The rain eases a little. Alec sits still and silent. I give up on hearing about Vietnam. There's a dusty window high above us and I concentrate on a spider as he crawls out from his web in the corner. I guess he's disturbed by the cold rain on the other side of the window. He's out of his comfort zone. I turn to Alec to tell him but at the look on his face the words die on my lips. He's not here with me; he's somewhere in his mind that only he knows. Vietnam, I suppose.

I wait, my own mind going over the little I know about the war. Everyone knows 'I was only nineteen', and when we studied Bruce Dawe's poem, *Homecoming*, we talked a bit about Vietnam at school. I never asked Alec then. He was in one of his distant moods and I wasn't game to ask. Mai has told me about her parents' experiences as refugees, but nothing about their lives before they came, about the war. I remember in a class discussion Lien and Kim Chi, the other Vietnamese girls, were the same. No one spoke of the war.

It's a jolt when Alec speaks again. 'I wasn't a boy, Sophie. I was a man. I wasn't a boy of nineteen who lives in the myth. And we weren't all picked by ballot, you know. I wanted to go.'

I catch my breath, wondering what he's going to say, and Alec stares out past me through the open shed door.

'I was a nasho, like we all were at twenty, forced by the government into the services for a while, but a long time before the war. And then in the CMF. We played every week at being soldiers. We thought it was fun. We rocked up on Wednesday nights in our starched drill uniforms and our blackened webbing – polished by their wives, most of them – and we played at manoeuvres and gun drills. We went on bivouac, up at Jamieson in the bush, and we thought the cold was hardship.' His laugh is harsh, no humour in it.

'We offered ourselves. Big heroes to train the South Vietnamese. Off we went with our modern weapons, our superior skills and communications. We were going to show those poor buggers how to win a war. Well, we got in the damn war all right. Signed, sealed and delivered to hell.'

He shakes his head as though denying his thoughts. The words rush out. 'You've seen the pictures of the Somme? You've seen the Kokoda Track. The mud and the blood. Well, they were clean wars. Gentlemen's wars compared with Vietnam. At least in those you knew your enemy.'

'Change it to red mud, red dust, that bloody jungle smell. The helicopters. The guns. The noise. My god, it never goes away. I think we were the enemy. Dogooders like me who thought they could save the world. Jesus, we didn't know who to save – the young women in the bars, the kids on the street, the old men in the villages. And we killed any and all of them, and we trained the Vietnamese to kill each other. You know, they put the bodies on display in the marketplace. Whoever came to mourn, they picked them up.'

‘The streets and that bloody jungle crawled with fear. Even the villagers didn’t know who to trust. And I’m telling you, Soph, you think My Lai was one of a kind. Not on your life it wasn’t. And we were just as much to blame as the Americans. Just as vicious when it came to fighting old Charlie.’

It’s as though he’s unleashed a flood and now he can’t hold it back. ‘What do you do when some little kid comes up with a grenade? What do you do when you know those bastards have got everyone in the village turned against you?’ His eyes are wide and questioning as he turns to look at me. Is he asking me or himself? He looks out the wide shed door and I don’t think he sees the rain. His hands are clenched, white-knuckled against his faded Yakka work pants. ‘And then only because they’re scared shitless. I don’t know who we were fighting, and I don’t know how many I killed.’

I think he wants to shock me. He studies my face, maybe waiting for me to say something. What can I possibly say?

‘You’ve seen napalm, haven’t you? Of course you have. That picture of the young girl gives me nightmares. Over and over and over. She’s only one. Multiply it. Multiply the kids, multiply the villages burned to the ground – and everyone in them, or raped and butchered or blown to bits. Multiply the jungle – and those bare bits of it left after the chemicals – and the bombed streets. And for God’s sake don’t forget the tunnels and mines ... or the dogs and the Viet Cong prisoners testing the minefields ... and the kids... and my beautiful ...’ The words stop abruptly. Alec’s face is dragged into lines of almost unbearable pain. ‘Ah, yes, we were saviours. Until we came home and they spat on us and threw blood at us. Protestors lining the streets shouting abuse at us.’ He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. ‘And Bethie was one of them. We were no different from my dad and his mates – we were soldiers doing a job – but

they were heroes, and they wouldn't even let us in the RSL. You don't know the half of it. And I'm damned sure I'm not going to tell you.'

This is an Alec I've never known. Now I know the places he disappears to when he goes inside himself, and what troubles him when he shouts out during the night, and when he physically removes himself from the family without explanation. I suddenly think of Mai, and what her family must have endured. How much does she know?

Outside, the rain falls quietly and steadily, so do my tears. Here, we're in shadows and I'm lost in Alec's pain, the recollections spilled out in a torrent of words. What can I possibly say to him?

'What was her name, Alec?' The question's a whisper.

'Minh Le,' he murmurs. The lines of pain soften and I suddenly feel an intruder on his memories, but he speaks again. 'We *were* married, in a Catholic ceremony, but the Army wouldn't recognise it.' He pauses for a moment, shakes his head slowly. 'My beautiful Minh Le. I remember her belly warm and round with my child –'

Gran's an intruder as she rushes in the door, shaking her brolly and stamping her rubber boots. I leave Alec and hurry to meet her.

'I thought I'd find you here,' she says. 'Took off to miss the fight, did you?'

I don't say anything. I don't get the chance.

'Well *he* couldn't take off in all that rain and I talked some sense into him. He says Tim can read the letters.'

She's talking about Grandad, and why am I not surprised? What did they have in there, the Battle of Waterloo? I glance back at Alec; he sits there muttering and shaking his head. I guess he feels the same.

Gran doesn't even notice Alec, and she doesn't notice my tears or my face. She takes my arm and tries to steer me towards the door. 'Come on, Sophie. We need to ring Tim.'

'In a minute, Gran. You go ahead.'

'Don't be long.' She sails out the door, her boots splashing in the puddles.

Alec's on his feet, tools and rag in hand. 'Back to work, kiddo. Off you go and help Bethie. She's got someone to organise again.'

'You came here when you came home from Vietnam?' I frown, questioning.

'I was a mess. There was only Bethie and me. Where else could I go?'

'But you never told Gran. She didn't know about... about...'

'About Minh Le.'

'She didn't know until Mr Ng told her.'

'We never talked about the war. I was a soldier. She was a protestor. What was there to say?'

Chapter Eighteen

Phoebe's miserable, curled up in her kennel trying to ignore the rain. Not Bullet; his chain drags in the mud and he rushes around outside his kennel, wet and exuberant. When I bend to make a fuss of him I'm surprised to see I'm nearly as wet and dirty as he is. He jumps and licks and yips. Phoebe looks on disgusted – at the weather and at Bullet's behaviour.

The sky is still overcast but the rain has eased to a drizzle. I stand, face turned up to the sky, and let the falling drops cool my eyes and wash away the tears. When I kneel to talk to Phoebe she nuzzles my hand and her eyes tell me she understands.

Big Tom greets me on the verandah, stretching and scratching, stirring himself after a lazy self-indulgent sleep under Grandad's chair. He has more sense than any of us, keeping out of the weather.

Gran's on the phone, the sound of her voice carries out here, full of excitement as she makes plans. It's just too much at the moment. I head for the shower. I hurry past the photo gallery, eyes averted, past Grandad's lair – the study – with its door shut and uninviting. I wonder how wounded he is after his battle with Gran. Too bad we had a storm, he couldn't escape with Phoebe and Bullet.

When I step in the bathroom door I'm confronted by myself in the mirror – wet and bedraggled, my cheek a raw red graze, my hair hanging around my face like stockings around a shower rail. Tim Scott, I'm glad you can't see me now.

It's reassuring to look at the bright-eyed mice, at their tiny paws clinging to balloon baskets, their whiskers twitching over the edge of the wicker and the multi-coloured balloons and ribbons streaming through the sky. Thank you, Gran.

I'm showered, shampooed and changed. The rain has stopped and there's a widening patch of blue on the horizon. It's time to face Gran in the kitchen.

'Sophie! What have you done to yourself?'

Yes, exactly on cue. I cover my cheek and Gran pulls my fingers away.

'What did you do?'

'I dashed into the shed out of the rain and fell over Alec's feet. He was under the tractor.'

Gran fusses with more aloe vera and tut-tuts away as she spreads it with cool fingers.

'It's only a graze.'

'What would your mother say?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake, Gran, she's not here. What *can* she say?'

She backs off and studies my face. 'You've been crying. What did Alec say to upset you?'

I consider evasion, but it's no use trying to dodge Gran and her questions. 'We talked about Vietnam.'

She gasps and the tube of gel clatters to the floor. '*He* talked about Vietnam?'

I nod. Gran's face is a fast forward of changing expressions – shock, fear, disbelief. 'But he *never* talks about Vietnam.' Her voice is almost a whisper.

I'm suddenly brave with words. 'Did you ever ask him?'

Oh, God! It's Alec all over again. The pain in her face – are those tears?

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...’

‘It’s all right.’ She bends to pick up the gel and replaces the lid, but she doesn’t put it down. Eyes cast down, she screws and unscrews, the blue nails like flashes of sky against the green tube.

‘You don’t know what it was like. He was a mess when he came home.’

‘That’s what he said.’

The tube skids across the table’s polished wood and she dashes her hand across her eyes. ‘We were all a mess – Norman after the tractor rolled on him and me full of guilt over it.’

‘You, Gran? How could you have stopped a tractor rolling?’

She leans back against the table and covers her face. ‘It will never go away. Never!’ She uncovers her eyes; they’re filled with tears and regret. ‘I wasn’t here, Sophie. I was in Melbourne with friends; Greg in his pusher and me, marching against the war. Norman was here on his own.’

‘Oh, no...’

‘That’s right. There was no one here to find him. Now you know why he was pinned there for twenty-four hours.’

I can almost see the memories running through her mind. So much I want to ask. She looks fragile, my strong resilient Gran, and yet distant, her arms crossed over her chest as though she’s holding herself together. I’m afraid that if I touch her she’ll crumble.

‘When Alec came home, Norman was still in hospital – been there for weeks. Greg was a little tacker and I was recovering from a miscarriage. Shock of the accident, I suppose.’ Her voice is flat, lifeless, as though speaking without expression can deaden the pain. ‘Alec wouldn’t speak at all.’

She pauses to take a deep breath. I realise I've been holding mine.

'Of course we know now it was post traumatic stress. Nobody knew then, and there was no one to ask for help.'

I remember what Alec said about the protestors, and I have to ask. 'Gran, you protested –'

'Of course I did!' There's life in her voice and a light in her eyes. 'We saw pictures of the war – in the papers, on the television. It was terrible. I couldn't think of Alec over there, know what was happening, and do nothing about it. It might only have been black and white TV, but it was graphic. God knows what it must have been like to be there, for our men *and* for the Vietnamese. Melva planned on going, nursing. I thought she and Alec ... but after the bushfires she stayed with her mum. I sang protest songs – regular little Joan Baez I was.' She grins suddenly. 'You wouldn't even have heard of her.'

'No, I haven't.'

'That's how I met Norman. Singing at clubs. Guitars and flowers and hippie gear.' She sighs. 'It was a long time ago.'

'And when the troops came home, did you... were you one of the protestors there when they marched?'

Gran looks at me steadily, without blinking, without expression. 'You mean did I spit on them? Did I throw blood on them and abuse them?'

I don't know what she sees in my face but I'm afraid. Afraid of her answer. Afraid that the Gran I love so much could do such a thing.

'No, Sophie. How could I do that? They were men and boys sent by our government to do a job. I wanted them home with their families, to love and be loved, not over there, in an unjust war killing and being killed.' She shrugs and flashes a lop-

sided smile. ‘Songs, the odd march, and cheering the likes of Jim Cairns at a moratorium. Pretty effective protestor, eh?’

I smile back, relieved. ‘Every mickle makes a muckle, said the old woman when she peed into the sea. Isn’t that what you taught me, Gran?’

She laughs and relaxes. Her gold bangles jingle as she hugs me and begins to sing, ‘The times they are a-changin’.

I lean my face into the familiar softness of her brilliant hair – my diminutive Gran, my little fireball of a grandmother, and I know why I love her as I do.

The words of the song fade; she straightens and moves away. ‘To answer your question, did I ever ask Alec? No, I never did. We were trying to put ourselves together, each of us, when he came back.’ She shakes her head as though trying to clear her understanding of the past. ‘He was so angry, so moody, so distant. I couldn’t help him any more than he could have helped me. And Norman...’ She sighs.

‘You know, Alec came back on leave once and he heard me sing at the club. I didn’t want to upset him so I was careful about what I sang. He had mates with him – not in uniform, you know. They wore civvies on leave, but you could always tell by the way they walked; the short back and sides. Anyway, a university group was there. They knew me, of course, and they yelled for my usual protest songs. And they hassled the boys. Alec and I had a terrible row about the war.’ There’s pain and confusion in her lovely green eyes and she adds quietly, ‘He said he felt betrayed – his sister, a protestor.’

A hint of sunshine slips through the clouds. A magpie calls as it flashes past the kitchen window and Jack and Phoebe bark impatiently from their kennels. Here in the kitchen everything looks the same – the same old blackened stove where we hide our chocolate treats, the wooden table and chairs worn smooth and shining with use,

and the flower-patterned windows where the grey sky is brightened through the red petals. But it's not the same. Everything's different somehow, changed by Alec's and Gran's revelations.

'Now, Soph.' Gran pops the tube of gel on to the shelf by the sink and claps her hands together. 'Norman and Alec are going to an estate auction in Ballarat tomorrow; they'll be gone all morning. We'll have Tim to ourselves to look at the letters.'

She's back on track. It's inevitable, searching through those letters, but I can't look at the smug expression I know I'll see on her face. I'm suddenly drained of energy.

Gran gives me a little shake. 'I'm going shopping. Off you go and lie down for a while. That must have been a nasty fall you had in the shed and you look tired.'

I nod and murmur, 'Yes, Gran.' It's easy to agree.

Chapter Nineteen

‘Sophie.’ It’s spoken softly, but it’s not *the* voice. ‘Sophie.’ Grandad’s at my door.

I must have fallen asleep as soon as I curled up with Sophie Anne’s dressing gown like a kid snuggled up with a security blanket.

‘This used to be her room.’ That’s not what I expected to hear, and I certainly didn’t expect to sense the sadness surrounding him.

Bleary-eyed, I struggle for something to say. ‘Grandad, I know you’re upset about the locket. If you don’t want me to wear it I’ll give it back.’ As I say the words my fingers tighten on the little gold heart.

Grandad’s smile is gentle, his lined face softened by the curve of his lips. ‘No,’ he says quietly. ‘I’m sorry, I wasn’t angry with you. She’d have liked you to have it.’ Then he murmurs so that I can barely hear, ‘Someone to care for Jimmy.’

‘Jimmy?’

Grandad nods. ‘She always carried a picture of him in her locket. She was so proud of her little boy.’

I’m not bleary-eyed now. ‘She had a little boy? You’ve never mentioned either of them. Where is he now?’

‘He died.’

It’s as though a door closes, on Grandad’s voice and on my breath.

I clutch the dressing gown like a life-jacket and try to surface from the sadness. I swing up off the bed, relieved when my feet hit the floor; I take a deep

breath and let it out again. I want to know more, but when I see Grandad's face I know that there's no use asking.

He's suddenly business-like. 'I came to tell you Alec and I have to go and round up some sheep. Beth rang on her way to town – a tree fell on the fence and there's a few of them on the road. Better get 'em back in before some silly bugger hits them.' He looks intently at me, as though he's making a decision. 'You look a bit pale, girl. Stay here and rest, we won't be long.'

I'm not capable of arguing. 'Ok, Grumps.'

He raises his eyebrows in surprise at my easy answer. 'Good girl,' he says as he moves off from the door. It's not long before Phoebe and Bullet yap and yelp and Alec's and Grandad's voices rise above the din. Doors slam, a crunch of wheels on the gravel and they're off.

I slide my arms into the smooth warmth of Sophie Anne's dressing gown and pad bare-foot out to the kitchen. No use trying for sleep.

It's so quiet now the rain and wind have passed; so quiet with no one here but me. The electric kettle sounds noisy as I turn it on. Hot chocolate with marshmallows, just what I need. The rich smell of chocolate rises as I pour the water and stir the brown liquid. I watch the swirls uneasily. It reminds me of something...

A couple of pink and white marshmallows fly out on to the floor as I tear open a new packet. I pick them up and dust them off – Gran's floor is clean, not like the workbench outside, and we eat our biscuits from there. That's two extra. I pop them in my mouth and chew as I carry my mug outside to the back verandah.

Grandad's chair is comfortable with two old tattered cushions that Gran's not allowed to throw away. I sink into them and curl my feet underneath me. The clouds are clearing – there's a wide stretch of sunny blue sky; the sheds are still wet and

gleaming and the raindrops still drip from the leaves of the wisteria and pepper trees. The chooks peck in the muddy yard; no doubt there are bugs and worms just floating in a banquet. I wonder if the spider in the shed has gone back into his corner. There's no rain to disturb him now, he's safe.

I wish I felt safe. I don't know how I feel after talking with Alec and Gran. And then Grandad...

The locket feels suddenly alive around my neck. I pull at it, my fingers like bits of lead as I struggle with the catch. Jimmy. Sophie Anne's little boy. Why won't the heart open? I push and pull; I want to whack it against the verandah post. No, Grandad would never forgive me if I wrecked it.

Sophie Anne, Sophie Anne, what have you done? Leaving us with a puzzle we can't work out? Only Grandad and Mrs B can help us, and they won't. Or can't.

Sophie Anne...

'Sophie...'

I'm out of the chair fighting for breath.

'Sophie...'

I grab the skirt of the dressing gown and hitch it up against me and run. Over the gravel, splashing the puddles, past the shed...

Run, Sophie, run!

Under the pepper trees. I grab a low branch.

Crack! The pain in my chest. The darkness is swirling, dragging me down. My arms are heavy with my precious bundle...

Crack!

Chooks squawk and scatter.

I fall to the ground with a thump. Breathe, Sophie, breathe! My heart's like a galloping horse. I'm wet and muddy, and in my arms, the muddied skirt of Sophie Anne's dressing gown and a small branch of the pepper tree dripping with berries and rain. My fingers are tight on the locket in my hand.

I breathe in the air like someone rescued from drowning. I know I'm going crazy. Great sobs rise. I'm shocked to realize they're from me, and I sit shivering in the mud, howling into the lonely afternoon.

Chapter Twenty

I couldn't sleep last night. I scooted off to bed early when Alec noticed I was quiet and pale. I couldn't tell him about the voice and...

I couldn't bear to think about it but I kept waking up after mixed-up dreams that made no sense, and then unable to go back to sleep for thinking about the voice... and that awful darkness...

Thinking too, about Alec over in Vietnam and falling in love. I can't imagine how he must have felt when he found Minh Le and their un-born baby dead. Alec and Minh Le married. And poor Mr Ng, it was his family too.

Thinking about Gran, singing and marching; about Grandad's accident. All these years and she and Alec have never shared their experiences. It hurts past tears and I wish... I wish... but what's the use of wishing?

The rain is pouring today, with a chilly south wind knocking the trees against the side of the house. When I hear Grandad with his usual moans about the weather, I pull the doona up around my ears and try to go back to sleep.

How did your family survive, Mai? How much more is there to the stories you told me? I never really thought about that. Oh, Mai, I'm sorry I was so mean to you on that last day at school. I miss you. If only you were here and I could talk about all this with you. There's so much to tell you – being in hospital, too, that was scary – and about the blackness that swirls and drags at me; that voice calling my name. And the dreams when I'm awake. I'm scared. Am I going crazy?

I could talk to you about Tim. He's so sexy with those blue eyes – when he doesn't hide them behind his Oakleys. I know he came looking for his uncle but... Oh, Mai, could he be just a teeny bit interested in me?

What's the use of trying to sleep?

Tim arrives right on time, nine o'clock, with a bunch of flowers for Gran – bright-coloured gerberas. I feel like 'death warmed over' as Gran says, but she's been busy for ages and the kitchen table is set with coffee and her special three-choc muffins – it's Gran's and my secret that they're made out of a \$1.99 packet from Not Quite Right.

I'm not up to this today; I shrink back into my chair but Gran doesn't notice as she tempts Tim with coffee and muffins and glows at the usual praise. It won't be long before she produces the chocolates from their hiding place in the oven.

'Right, Tim. Let's have a look.' She pushes cup and saucer aside and reaches for the letters. I want to put them back where they came from, to leave the rest unopened, but I know how much it means to Tim. Maybe there *will* be some clue to finding Stephen.

Tim is in Grandad's chair; what would Grandad say if he knew? But he doesn't know, and he doesn't know what's in the letters either. Gran and I know some and, like it or not, we are about to find out the rest.

Tim glances at me with a question in his eyes. 'You okay, Sophie?'

Thumpety-thumpety-thump – that's my heart. I manage a wavering grin. 'Sure.' I try to sit up straight. Gran's hands pause on the letters. She stares hard at me. I widen the grin. 'Just tired,' I tell her. 'Couldn't sleep last night for the rain.'

Relief flashes across her face. She's glad not to be distracted from her mission – find Stephen – and she opens the first letter and hands it to Tim.

At letter number three he looks up and smiles at me. 'See what you mean about some things you learn on an outback property being useful in the Air Force. He loved boundary riding, Mrs Branston. No wonder he became an observer.'

Gran nods; she's busy opening letters.

It doesn't take long to reach, 'Will you wait for me, Sophie. Will you be my girl and wait for me to come home?'

'Oh, look at that,' says Gran. 'She didn't wait.' She looks forlornly at the creased page, touching the paper thoughtfully, fingers smoothing over the words as though she could change things.

'She was told he was missing, presumed dead, Gran.'

'So she was.' She lifts the linen-finish envelope from the back of the pile and opens it. 'This would have been from your mother's Auntie then.' She passes the open page to Tim.

I watch his hands as he taps the creamy-white paper. 'Yes. Auntie Gwen. She was a widow and there was only Stephen. She went to pieces after this apparently and never recovered.'

The other letters are still stacked in a pile. I look at them and clench my fists under the table. I didn't read past the next one about meeting at the dance on his last leave, and the plans for a picnic.

Madiera cake in a linen napkin...blue serge tunic...a voile dress...

I grab the edge of the table and take a deep breath. Breathe, Sophie, breathe.

Gran pours more coffee and passes Tim the muffins; he's already had two, but I know how addictive they are. I can't eat anything. Gran doesn't notice. I sip coffee,

hoping the warm milky liquid will settle my stomach. With Tim here in our kitchen, smiling at me, questioning me with those gorgeous eyes, with those letters holding who knows what secrets, there's nothing to be done for my heart. Thumpety-thumpety-thump. I close my eyes and take another deep breath.

'Sophie?' Tim's voice is quiet. His hand over mine is warm and comforting. I do the wavering smile again, but Tim's eyes still hold a question. Luckily Gran's busy reading.

'I'm all right. Just tired, that's all.'

The question is still between us but I don't mind; he doesn't move his hand from mine.

'Love letters.' Does Gran feel guilty about reading them? I know how reluctant Grandad was, but it hasn't stopped Gran. 'Nothing so far,' she says, disappointment heavy in her voice. 'And there's only a few left.' She pushes aside the letters they've read and flips through the last of the pile. 'Six,' she says. 'That's not many. We don't even know where he was.'

'Mum thought the Pacific somewhere, but I've never checked, I could get all his papers but that still wouldn't say where he is now. He came home according to the Department of Defence, on July 15th 1945. He didn't come back from leave and they had him listed as AWL. Mum said the family acted ashamed and they wouldn't talk about him.' Tim frowns. 'He was an only son; it doesn't make sense. He would surely have contacted his mother? Anyway, he should be remembered. He fought for Australia, and I want to clear his name.'

'Absent without leave,' Gran murmurs. 'What on earth could have happened to him?' She opens another letter and begins to read.

Tim slides my hand from the table on to his knee and curls his fingers around mine. Thumpety-thumpety-thump! I try hard to relax. How can I?

Gran's voice intrudes. 'Oh, for goodness sake. Listen to this,

Are you wearing my ring? I wish my nana could have known you. I know how pleased she would have been. Do you remember the story? Grandpa bought the ring for her and it was very special. I made her a promise that I would give it to the girl I intended to marry. When I come back, my dearest, I will buy you a wedding ring, but until then, Sophie, it's Nan's DEAREST ring that tells the world you are mine.'

Gran's out of her chair in a flash. Tim raises his eyebrows and watches her hurry from the kitchen.

'She's gone to get the ring.'

'You've got it here?'

'Yes, and a whole trunkful of her belongings. That's where we found the letters.'

Gran carries the box into the kitchen like a waiter with a *bombe Alaska* and puts it on the table with a flourish. She puts the lid aside and I read the name on the polished wood – *Sophie Anne Branston* – amazing that I'm Sophie Branston too, and we didn't even know about her.

'The DEAREST ring, just like he says.' I imagine a magician producing silk handkerchiefs from a hat as she takes the ring out of the faded velvet box and hands it

to Tim. ‘Look – Diamond, Emerald, Amethyst, Ruby, Emerald, Sapphire, Topaz – DEAREST. A lover’s ring.’

Tim takes it and turns it around looking at the stones, a gleaming mix of green, purple, blue, red and a diamond’s clear sparkle. ‘I wonder if it was his grandmother on my side of the family?’ he says.

‘Oh!’ says Gran. She looks at Tim and back at the ring. ‘Oh!’ She says again, her eyes alight with surprise. ‘It could have been your great-grandmother’s!’

Tim smiles. ‘Not that it matters, it was just a thought.’

All I can think about is Sophie Anne. ‘It’s so old, and such a long time for it to sit there in its little box. Poor Sophie Anne, waiting...’ I look up to find Tim watching me, understanding. Such beautiful eyes. I’m lost in an ocean of blue.

‘And this is Sophie!’ Gran’s voice rings with triumph. A rabbit out of the magician’s hat; but this isn’t a rabbit, it’s a nightmare.

I can’t bear to look, but I can’t bear not to, and there she is – her curly hair, her dark eyes – in those caramel colours of old photos. The corners of her lips turned up just like mine. Grandad’s cousin Sophie Anne Branston.

‘Sophie...’

My breath catches in my throat and I gasp, clutching at the table to keep my balance.

‘Sophie...’

The darkness again...

My arms ache. I clutch at air... swirling...

‘Sophie!’

Crack! Fear like a fire in my chest. A whiplash of pain ripping at my head, around my neck. Darkness roaring, dragging me down, drowning me...

‘Sophie!’ Gran’s voice, hysterical.

Arms lifting me, strong and caring. Tim.

Breathe, Sophie, breathe! I’m gasping, the air burning my chest.

‘Oh, my God, Sophie! Look at your head!’

I am in the rocker in the kitchen. Gran dabs a wet towel; blood stains the blue of her nails. Gran’s pale face close to mine. Tim’s hands holding mine and my fingers clinging.

‘You might need stitches. I can’t stop the bleeding. You need something. I’ll call Melva.’ She’s away to the phone and I’m left with Tim leaning over me, pressing the towel against my head.

‘That wasn’t just a faint,’ he says. He doesn’t ask the question, it’s a statement, and I’m caught again in those eyes. I close my eyes to escape him, but he doesn’t give up. ‘It wasn’t a faint. What was it?’

I don’t want to go to that scary place, to the roaring, and that awful darkness. And the voice calling my name. I *am* going crazy. I try to think, try to make sense of it all.

‘Oh, Tim. I’m scared!’

His arm is around my shoulder, the towel pressing against my forehead.

Gran comes back, babbling, ‘Melva’s in town with her mum. They’ll call in on their way back. I hope that’s soon enough. Maybe we need to go to Emergency.’

All I really hear is Emergency. ‘I’m not going to the hospital!’

‘Look at you! You’re grazed on one side and bleeding on the other. Just think what your mother will say.’ She’s almost crying. ‘And for God’s sake what’s that on your neck?’

I reach up for the locket, scrabble my fingers around my neck searching for the chain, but it's not there, only a raised ridge that stings when I touch it.

'Sophie's locket. It's gone!' I can feel the tears coming.

Tim takes the towel away. 'Don't panic about the cut. Head wounds always bleed a lot. I've got some surgical strips in my first aid kit. I'll go and get them.'

Gran pulls a chair across from the table to sit beside me. I close my eyes and lean back. I'm a mess – one side of my face from the shed floor, the other from the kitchen, and now a mark on my neck. Who knows what I hit?

'Sophie,' her voice is gentle, concerned, and I brace myself against what's coming. I know what she's going to ask. 'What's happening? It's serious, sweetheart. Don't keep it from me.'

'Oh, Gran, I don't know.' The tears well.

Gran's quick to hold me. Her bangles rattle, the familiar sound reassuring, and she pats me like a baby. 'There now, don't cry. After Tim puts those strips on we'll have a nice quiet talk.'

I feel such a fool when Tim comes in with the strips; he doesn't say anything, just cleans the wound, and in a couple of minutes I'm all doctored up. Lucky dogs and cats and horses having him for a vet.

'My God, the locket!' Gran's on her knees staring at the burst-open locket on the end of its broken chain. She picks it up and, without a word, passes it to Tim.

It's like one of those old movies when there aren't many words – Gran waiting, watching; Tim looking intently at the tiny heart in his hand. He looks down at Gran, and then at me, and his smile widens. He nods, and the words rush out in a sigh, 'My Uncle Stephen.'

‘That’s what marked your neck,’ says Gran. ‘You must have caught the chain on the chair and broken it.’ She’s half-standing and stops. ‘What’s this? Another photo?’

Almost hidden under the table is a tiny heart-shaped picture lying flat on the tiles. She picks it up and gasps.

‘A baby,’ she says in a hushed tone. ‘Look, a dear little baby.’

My heart contracts. I know his name. ‘Jimmy.’

Gran looks up at me in surprise.

‘It’s Sophie Anne’s little boy. Grandad told me.’

‘That’s strange,’ she says. ‘And Stephen in there, too. She turns the photograph over and reads the fine writing from the back. ‘James Edward, son of Stephen and Sophie 12.6.44.’ Wide-eyed, she holds the picture out to Tim. ‘Stephen and Sophie! But she married Jack Donaldson.’ And then the thought hits her, just as it does Tim and me. ‘Oh, my God! There’s no mention of the baby in the letters. I wonder if he knew?’

It’s suddenly all too much to bear. The sobs rise. Tears rush. I can’t stop them. Somewhere in the fog I can hear voices – Gran fussing, Tim trying to calm; but my chest is almost bursting with the pain.

Gran with Rescue Remedy. Tim with comforting arms. Gran dabbing my eyes, trying to calm me, but I can’t stop. I’m lost in a huge emptiness of grief.

Chapter Twenty-One

Resting in my room, I toss on the bed, listening to the wind and longing for an end to this dark afternoon. The tears are gone but I feel drained and I wish I could sleep. If only I could close my eyes and forget; I wouldn't have to think about the letters and those pictures of Jimmy, such a sweet little baby with the curl on top of his head, and Stephen, so serious in his Air Force uniform. Father and son, their faces cut into heart shapes to fit in Sophie's locket. My locket and, thanks to Tim, the chain mended, warm now from my skin, and so precious.

I think about how Sophie Anne must have felt, married to Jack, but with Stephen in her gold heart, warm from her skin, Stephen and Jimmy together. I'm lost in the puzzle. Why did she marry Jack when she loved Stephen? And what about Jimmy?

What did Alec say? I'm vulnerable after being so sick. Maybe I am, but the voice, and the terrible feeling of emptiness. And why is my heart bursting, and my tears heavier than the rain?

Rain. Rain. Great streams of the sky falling. It pounds and splashes against the stone walls, drumming, drumming; drumming me to sleep

'Sophie...'

His voice reaches me in sleep. I wake to the sound of the south wind flaying the branches of the pepper trees and voices crashing into the afternoon; Gran and Grandad arguing.

‘...asking about Stephen Adams. He wants to see Sophie.’

‘No!’

‘For goodness sake, Norman, be sensible.’

‘No!’

I wake to loud voices, Uncle Edward’s and Jack’s.

‘Stephen Adams. Charlie Lacey says he’s back.’

‘He’s not coming here!’

‘Charlie says he’s coming to see Sophie. He’s coming for Sophie.’

‘No!’

Stephen, so long gone. Stephen, presumed dead. But I never believed that.

‘Stephen.’ His name on my lips, my fingers on the locket. Stephen.

*Jimmy is sleeping, his small hands opened like petals on the blue eiderdown,
his brown baby curls spilling across the pillow.*

*‘Jimmy.’ I know he can’t hear me but the words flow like the tears on my
cheeks. ‘Jimmy, your daddy’s back.’*

*Time doesn’t matter any more; nothing matters, not this travesty of a forced
marriage, not Jack’s violent words or the heaviness of his hands, and not Uncle
Edward’s bitterness. There’s only one thing that matters – Stephen’s back.*

*Outside the day is grey. In the paddock next to the house the horses have
turned their backs to the wind; the dogs shelter in their kennels; everywhere the
bitterness of winter.*

*‘Stephen!’ The word crashes on the glass, a caged bird beating against bars. I
open the window. ‘Stephen!’ His name flies through the grey air, and over there,*

across the stone fences, across the rain-soaked paddocks, beyond the creek to Lacey's, to Stephen.

I drag my coat from the wardrobe. My fingers are clumsy on the buttons and the smooth velvet collar. Thick woollen socks from the wardrobe, I tug them on. Now a cot blanket for Jimmy, soft cream wool to wrap my little boy. Jimmy stirs, he opens his eyes and smiles, reaches out his chubby arms. He is warm as I lift him from the cot and he buries his face against my neck. I press my lips on the softness of his hair, hug his precious familiar body close. He smells of Johnson's baby soap and talcum powder.

'Daddy's back, my darling. Daddy's back!' I sing the words to him and he claps his hands as I change him. Now his jacket and cap, and his warm knitted socks, his brown lace-up boots. I wrap him in the blanket, a snug little papoose.

The raised voices carry along the hall from the kitchen. Past the open kitchen door, my socks silent on the tiled floor – I could be a ghost – down to the back door, to my boots on the back verandah.

Out into the air! My boots crunch on the gravel – please don't let them hear me – past the machine shed and down under the pepper trees, sharp-scented and dripping. Past the hayshed and out into the paddock. The wind at my back, in front of me the stone fences, the paddocks green after the rain. And Stephen.

'Stephen, I'm coming!' The words rush ahead of me, rushing to meet him as I always did, by the bridge on the path to Lacey's.

Run! Run! My breath catches in my chest, grabs at my lungs, and my feet are clumsy over the scattered stones. Fear is an eagle's talons clutching my heart, but there's nothing behind me, only the rush of the wind. My arms ache. Oh, my darling, your daddy's back.

'Stephen!'

The first fence. I stop to get my breath and rest Jimmy on the top of the stones. He doesn't struggle to free himself; he watches me with bright eyes. I kiss his cold little face.

I clamber over the fence and gather Jimmy to me again.

Come, Stephen, come. I need you. Oh, please Stephen, come.

Lacey's seems so far away – another fence and then the footbridge. The wind pushes me on. I stagger the last few steps and lean against the stones to get my breath.

Over the fence, and I fall into the mud, but Jimmy is safe and cushioned from the rocks.

Up again and Jimmy tight against me; the cream blanket is muddy and my coat is heavy and wet around my legs.

Oh, my God! The creek is a sheet of brown water, and in the middle of it, seemingly afloat, is the bridge.

'Sophie!' There he is, up on the rise on the other side. Just as I knew he would be.

'Stephen!'

'Sophie!' Jack's voice is a whip-crack behind me. I turn and the nightmare is real – a black horse and a black-hearted man galloping towards the fence.

Run, Sophie, run! Closer, closer to the creek, to the bridge. To Stephen.

'Stephen!' His name is a ragged breath.

'Run! Sophie, run!'

Crack! The whip slices the air behind me. Jimmy's scream rises above the wind.

Run! Sophie, run! The thud of hooves is terrible behind me, but Stephen is running down the slope. Slow, so slow. Almost to the bridge; the water tugs at my boots, pushes against my legs.

Crack! The whip lashes around me, sharp and hard through my coat. I stumble against the stones, my boots losing grip against the water.

Crack! The pain across my face and around my neck! Crack! Around my legs. I tumble, grabbing for the bridge, grabbing at the freezing brown swirl, holding on to Jimmy, and together we are dragged into the torrent of the flood.

Somebody's screaming. Is it Jimmy? Rush of water! Tearing of air! Tumbling. Turning. Swirling in the angry rush of the creek.

'Sophie!'

'Stephen!'

A roaring in my ears. Jimmy! Jimmy! A galloping black horse and a madman. Stephen running beside the water, shouting.

Water surrounding us, swallowing us. Stephen jumping, splashing, reaching us. Stephen's arms thrashing against the water. Stephen holding us. Together.

Together in the angry flood. The blackness drags like a nightmare. I clutch at his jacket, clutch at Jimmy, clutch at air, but I'm going down... down... down... Jimmy. Stephen. The blackness tearing us apart...

'Sophie!'

The water is muddy and flowing and cold.

'Sophie!'

Hands drag me. Strong arms support me, carry me away from the creek. Dogs barking. Men swearing.

‘Jimmy...Stephen...’ I open my eyes and stare at the two men, at the fear stark on their faces

‘Alec? Grumps?’ I’m under the pepper trees above the creek, shivering. Bullet and Phoebe are licking my face, and in my arms, the dripping bundle of Sophie’s dressing gown.

‘For God’s sake, Sophie. What the hell were you doing?’ Are those tears on Grandad’s face?

Rain. Rain. The sky is weeping.

‘Get the ute, Alec. Bring it around this side so she doesn’t have to walk.’ Grandad takes his jacket off and wraps it around me and holds me to protect me from the wind.

‘Jesus, Sophie, what are we gunna do with you?’

With Phoebe and Bullet dashing ahead, Alec makes his way over the slippery ground towards the rocks at the edge of the creek. Water gurgles over the stones, fills the holes and joins them in a brown rippling flow.

‘Grumps, the bridge is gone!’

His body tenses, his arms tighten around me.

‘Sophie, there hasn’t been a bridge there for more than fifty years.’

I shake my head, trying to remember what is me and what is the other Sophie – the weight of a child in my arms and a whip. ‘What happened to –’

‘Norman, get down here, quick!’

‘What the hell?’

Alec is tearing into the mud with his bare hands. Bullet barks and scratches beside him. The wind grabs me as Grandad leaves; I hunch into his jacket and shiver against the tree trunk. The wind whistles around the tree, around me, and I close my eyes and try and make sense of what has happened – the baby, the man on a black horse, the

crack of a whip, and the water roaring and swirling. The brown water dragging...Oh, my God! Now I know what happened to Sophie and Jimmy and –

‘Christ! It’s Stephen!’ Grandad reaches down to drag something from the mud.

‘Stephen!’ I’m running again, stumbling, rushing wildly down to the creek, down to Alec and Grandad where they stand, stunned, beside the loose rocks above the edge of the water, Phoebe and Bullet alert beside them.

‘Go back, Sophie. Go back!’ Alec’s voice stops me, but not before I see what he has found. Poking out from the wet loosened earth is a scrap of a boot, the sharp outlines of bones. ‘Back under the pepper tree, both of you, until I get the ute.’ He shepherds us up the slope and pushes us under the protecting branches. ‘Stay,’ he says. He could be talking to the dogs. Teeth chattering, I huddle into Grandad; the dogs sit obediently beside us, tongues lolling, and the wind thrashes the leaves around us.

‘Stephen Adams.’ Grandad says his name like a prayer. ‘The poor bastard.’

‘It might be the bushranger. It might be...’

‘No,’ says Grandad. He pushes me out of his arms and holds out his hand. A disc, the lettering indistinct, but I can just distinguish a couple of numbers –51, and initials *SJ*.

Stephen.

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘Call that young feller, Beth. Young Tim Scott. Get him over here.’ Grandad’s like a drill sergeant barking orders.

‘I’ll do that,’ says Alec. ‘Bethie, you get Sophie under a hot shower.’

The look on Gran’s face as we stagger in from the ute, soaking wet, shivering and covered in mud. She doesn’t say a word; she stands there at the door like a Myer’s dummy.

‘I c-can run a sh-shower.’

‘Don’t muck about, Soph. You’re cold and shocked’ He turns me towards the bathroom and pushes past Gran to call into the kitchen, ‘Melva! Come and help Sophie.’

Melva is her usual calm self, no questions, no comments and I’m relieved to have her help me slide out of Grandad’s jacket and peel off my wet jeans and top. Even though they’re loose they stick to me and I feel like a snake shedding its skin.

The shower’s running; teeth clenched to stop them chattering, goosebumps all over me, I step into the steam. Bliss! The water sprays in pin-prickles of heat, over my shoulders, my head, my whole body. I stand there soaking up the warmth. Absolute bliss.

Safe behind the glass screen, lathering myself with Gran’s perfumed rose-petal soap, I don’t want to think, but the thoughts keep running through my mind. I think back over the last few hours. Hours? I don’t even know what time it is, how long it’s

been since... Since what? Since I left the house and went down to the creek? Since I heard voices and Stephen's name? Since I became Sophie Anne and ran with my baby to Stephen?

Became Sophie Anne? That's spooky. Yet it doesn't feel spooky. It feels right somehow; crazy as it seems, it explains the darkness and that terrible feeling of drowning. Sophie Anne telling me something. Sophie Anne, scared and running – running through the bitter winter afternoon, running away from a nightmare – to a triple tragedy.

I stop lathering. A triple tragedy? How can I know that? The thoughts whirl again. Were Sophie Anne and Jimmy found? Were they washed out to sea or caught in the rocks by the creek somewhere like Stephen was? I can't bear to think of her and her little baby lost somewhere in the ocean, separated by the force of the water. Poor little baby, poor Sophie Anne, so afraid, and too painful to think about.

I'm a lobster when I turn off the taps and step out of the shower into a huge pink towel. Melva wraps me up like a parcel. Bit by bit I'm dried with a towel and then the hair dryer and folded into a robe. She leads me to my room and there's Gran fussing with underwear and jeans.

'Sophie! What happened?'

'Not now, Beth,' says Melva, brisk and efficient as she helps me to dress. 'Hot sweet drink and a rest first.' She pulls a windcheater over my head and zips and buttons my jeans as though I'm a toddler. She sits me down on the bed and pulls on a pair of socks.

'I don't want to stay here.' I am suddenly afraid of being on my own, being here in Sophie Anne's space.

Melva slides on my scuffs. ‘No, Soph. Down into the lounge with you. Beth, off you go and make her a drink. Hot chocolate and lots of marshmallows.’

Wide-eyed, Gran stands as though she’s going to argue. Not now, Gran, please.

‘Beth!’ says Melva, and off Gran goes without a word or backward glance.

Gran’s tapestry cushions are soft at my back and I am snug under an old crocheted rug. The hot chocolate is sweeter than I’ve ever made it and I sip and sip the rich brown liquid. At last I am warm, both inside and out. I lean back into the little nest of cushions with a sigh and close my eyes.

‘Feeling better, love?’ Mrs Browne’s in the corner sipping tea from one of Gran’s violet cups. ‘You gave everyone a nasty fright.’ She looks steadily at me and before I can recover and answer she adds, ‘And you found Stephen.’

I nod; after the reaction last time we held a conversation I’m unsure what to say, but I don’t have to worry about that because she keeps on talking.

‘They found Sophie and poor little Jimmy. Did you know that? Yes, washed almost down to the river. Buried at Trug they were, but they never found Stephen. Mr Hamilton and Mr Branston swore they never saw him – he wasn’t here they said. But I knew better.’

‘So did I,’ says Grandad. I hadn’t noticed him come in the door with Alec. ‘I saw him that day, on my way home from school.’

Gran gasps. I look around and everyone is here – Melva with Gran, and Tim in the doorway behind them. My heart’s hammering as we wait for Grandad to say more. Has he ever talked about this before? I don’t think so.

‘He said it was a secret. I wasn’t to tell Sophie. He wanted it to be a surprise. He was my friend. I waited for him, but he never came.’ Grandad sounds like a disappointed little boy and I want to cry for him.

‘He was on his way, Grandad, but he drowned in the creek.’

Stunned silence. Nobody moves.

‘He and Sophie and Jimmy.’

Alec is the first to recover. ‘OK, Sophie,’ he says as he shepherds Gran, Melva and Tim into the room. ‘I think you’d better start from the beginning.’

‘Are you up to this, Sophie?’

‘I’m all right, Melva.’ But I don’t know if I am. What do I tell them? Will they understand?

Gran is on the arm of Grandad’s chair. Mrs B and Melva in armchairs together, Alec on a stool beside the bar, and Tim – Tim sits beside me on the couch. I study the mixture of expressions on their faces – expectant, frowning, uncomprehending – and I’m confused and scared. I hold my hands tightly together; I am searching for the words. How can I explain?

Tim’s smile a banner to support me. ‘Come on. You can do it.’ And then he leans close and holds my hand.

I think mine is a smile in answer. I look up at Alec; he nods. I nod in agreement and the words tumble out.

‘I kept on hearing a voice. Someone was calling my name. And the dreams...’ And suddenly I know that it *is* in the past. It wasn’t my name. It was Sophie Anne’s name.

‘Stephen!’ I say in a rush of surprise. ‘It was Stephen calling Sophie Anne!’

It is easy to find the words now, to make sense of it all.

‘It started with Sophie Anne’s photo; when we opened the trunk.’

‘I saved it,’ says Mrs Browne smugly. We all stare at her in astonishment but Mrs Browne doesn’t notice. ‘And she had all those lovely things in her trousseau that Mrs Branston had made from her precious materials she’d saved. For Stephen. Mother and I laid her out, poor little thing. We saved her locket, all her jewellery, too. That wicked man burned everything – hers and Jimmy’s, but he didn’t know about her trousseau. She wouldn’t wear those lovely things for him.’

It’s as though a weight lifts from my chest and the air rushes into my lungs. At last I can tell about the man with the whip, and the fear; about the water that swirled and dragged them all into darkness. It wasn’t me. It was Sophie Anne. The relief is enormous.

‘He came into the shed that night with a lantern and a pick and shovel.’ Grandad’s voice is so soft I can barely hear the words. ‘And such a terrible look on his face.’

Sophie Anne’s words, ‘a black-hearted man’. I shiver. Tim squeezes my hand and the warmth runs through me.

‘He and my dad were arguing about something. “They’ll never find the bastard now”. Yes, that’s what he said. When my dad saw me he grabbed me and shook me. “If you say a word about this I’ll kill you,” he said. I didn’t understand.’

‘Oh, Norman. You poor little boy.’ Gran leans over him and hugs him, her bright red curls soft against the grey spikes of his hair.

‘And they buried him by the creek.’ A statement from Alec. ‘You had an idea, Norman, didn’t you, that day we moved the stones?’

But Grandad can’t speak any more.

‘No wonder Bullet was going crazy. And now after all the rocks we loosened, and the rain...’ Alec doesn’t need to say any more. It all makes sense – the forbidden paddock, the story about an Aborigine or a bushranger; and no wonder Grandad’s father refused to sell the land.

But something keeps nagging. ‘I can’t understand it. If she loved Stephen, and she was having his baby, why did she marry that awful Jack?’

Gran’s quick to answer me. ‘Think about it, 1944, you’re pregnant and unmarried. That was a terrible family shame then; and remember what Mrs B said about Grandad’s father – good Christian man. No doubt he arranged it since Sophie Anne married his friend.’

I wonder how that makes Grandad feel, and just what does he remember about his father? He never mentions him, except for the secret in the paddock, and look how that turned out. I’ve been so immersed in Stephen and Sophie Anne I didn’t think about Grandad; how he was a little boy with such a father. It is then I remember Sophie’s words – travesty of a forced marriage – to a man old enough to be her father, Grandad said. Poor Sophie Anne.

When Tim speaks, I know exactly how he feels. ‘It’s strange how you get involved. It was a bit of history when I began, you know, tracking down the facts, but the family had virtually banished him and I wanted to clear that AWL shame.’ His voice lowers as he continues, ‘But I know Stephen now, I’m close to him. I feel I know the person he was.’

My heart swells. I look at him with tears in my eyes. ‘I know. That’s how I feel about Sophie Anne, too.’

‘I think we’d better call the police,’ says Alec.

‘They called the police,’ says Mrs B. ‘Do you remember that, Melva?’ There’s that vacant expression again, that confused voice. ‘And after the fire they found your daddy was burned. Do you think the police will find Stephen?’

A flash of pain crosses Melva’s face but she answers firmly, ‘Yes, Mummy, I remember. And yes, one day they’ll find Stephen.’

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sun and a clear sky at last. It seems an ordinary summer Saturday, sticky after the rain, but the chooks are scratching in the dirt, a crow perches on the roof of the machine shed, and Big Tom is curled up asleep on the bottom shelf of the back verandah. But it's not ordinary – Alec and Grandad have taken the day off and they're sitting quietly in the sun with Gran. It's the quiet that is not ordinary.

Alec and Grandad choose their days off according to the seasons, and on those days they often sit here squabbling over the paper and voicing their opinions on the news. Gran fusses with coffee and muffins, and eventually they head off, each on some personal mission. Gran breathes a sigh of relief, clears the dishes, and busies herself with her latest project.

She didn't wake me with crumpets and orange juice today. Each time she came to my door she just stood there. I pretended to be asleep, I wanted time to think, to turn the events of the last few weeks over in my mind, and she walked away. And here she is now at eleven o'clock, sitting quietly on the verandah watching the chooks. No, today is definitely not ordinary.

'Good morning, everyone.'

'Sophie!' Is that relief in Gran's voice? Now I feel mean about pretending to be asleep.

'Had a good sleep, Soph?' That's Alec.

‘Like the dead.’ Oops! Not a good response. Alec grins but the others don’t seem to notice.

‘I’ll get you some breakfast. What would you like? Muffins? Crumpets? Toast? How about some scrambled eggs?’

Oh, no, what have I done? ‘I’m not hungry, thanks. I think I’ll just soak up the sun.’

‘You have to eat something.’ And off she goes.

‘Gran...’

‘Let her be, kiddo. She’s been worried sick about you.’ Alec laughs. ‘I think she’s scared of your mum.’

There’s even a chuckle from Grandad.

I think Gran’s a magician; it seems only a minute before she comes back with a tray.

‘There you are. Now eat up. You have to get strong and well again before your mother comes home.’

Laughter this time, from Alec, Grandad and me.

‘I love you, Gran. Thank you.’ And I know I will do my best to eat my way through buttered crumpets, Melva’s home-made strawberry jam and a mug of hot chocolate – and don’t forget the extra marshmallows.

She checks me over like a prospective buyer eyeing off a car. She nods. ‘Good. Now here’s a letter that came yesterday for you. And by the way, Tim’s coming this afternoon.’

This is my old familiar Gran who smiles at me, and she has that smug gleam in her eyes. Thumpety-thumpety-thump. When my heart stops jumping I look at the

letter in my hand. Air mail. A Vietnam postmark and stamps, and readdressed by our neighbour at Hawthorn. A letter from Mai.

I am reluctant to open it. After her card with the stilted touristy words I'm not sure I want to read it, but a letter, thicker than a postcard, and maybe with a photo. I try to lift the flap without damaging the stamps because I know Dad would like them, so I struggle with the top of the envelope.

'Here,' says Alec, reaching out to take it from me, a Swiss Army knife in his hand. A smooth slice from corner to corner and there they are, folded pages and a photograph.

I look at the photo first – a small unfamiliar house and, in the front of it, some trees, and Mai and Dinh surrounded by kids and a couple of adults with bikes. I turn it over. The back is empty. I unfold the pages of thin air mail paper to read Mai's neat writing.

Dear Sophie,

I miss you. Can you forgive me?

Are you stuck out there on your grandparents' lovely farm with dogs and sheep and that big orange cat? Lucky you! I wish I could join you and pig out on your Gran's triple-choc muffins. We've had nothing but Vietnamese food since we came here, a treat from my aunties for us. I am going to buy Maccas at the airport on the way home!

We are *Viet Kieu* here, overseas Vietnamese, and you won't believe this, everyone thinks we are rich! Imagine! I correct myself. We are rich by comparison. We are all here, *Ba Ngoai*, Mum and Dad,

Dinh and me. You know Dinh, a brother time-bomb ready to explode when he gets excited. He is having a ball. I am not so sure about *Ba Ngoai*. She keeps criticising and complaining that things have changed.

We are north of Ho Chi Minh City – the locals don't call it that, it is still Saigon – and the paddy fields her family owned and she worked in are gone. Lots of houses now. We are crowded into a tiny house (it has mango trees, yum-yum) with aunts, uncles and cousins, and if I hear an older relative say one more time, *Cha me dat dau mgoi day* (Sit where your parents place you) I will scream. I thought Mum and Dad wanted to control me. Believe me, they are neglectful parents compared with parents here. I promise, I will never complain again.

Have you read the set VCE novels yet? I read *Shallows* on the plane but haven't had much chance here – so many rels and so many stories! Secrets no one's talked about in years, and I never dreamed of. My heart aches for all they went through and could never tell because they were afraid of repercussions. So much to tell you – and Alec too. I have stacks of photos. Viet Nam is so beautiful! I can't wait to see you. I will call you as soon as we get back. We leave here just before Tet and will celebrate at home. Home! What a wonderful word. Home in dear old Springvale!

Love and big hugs,

Mai XXOO

I fold the pages and look at the photograph again. There's Dinh, that sparkle in his eyes, and Mai. Oh, Mai, I forgive you. Please forgive me, and I can't wait to see you again.

'From Mai?' Alec's words are a surprise.

'Yes. She went to Vietnam with her family to visit the rels – their first time back.'

Alec is looking at the photograph and I pass it to him. He stares at it – the little house, the children and adults, and the mango trees. I watch the emotions flicker across his face and can't help asking, 'Did you ever go back?'

Such sadness in his eyes. 'No, Sophie. What was there to go back for?'

And then I remember Mr Ng's words – The past is other country. We leave behind us. Maybe we do, but sometimes it leaps right into the present to find us.

Morning slips into early afternoon. We are all recovering in the quiet. That is until Dad rings and Gran answers the phone. By the time it is my turn to speak Gran has given him as much of the story as she thinks he should know. He's upset and adamant.

'I'll finish here a few days early. I'm coming to take you home.'

'But, Dad, it's only Saturday and Mum's not due home until Friday night.' I can almost feel the walls closing around me – Dad taking his 'little girl' home, smothering me with attention, watching my every move, worrying about whether I am recovered enough to do *anything*.

'Dad, I'm not due to go home until next weekend.'

‘Sophie, heaven knows what you’ve been through with all that happening around you. We agreed to leave you with Mum because we thought it would be restful there.’

I want to laugh. Happening around me? I’m glad Gran was restrained.

‘I’ve rested and rested and rested. I’m well enough for school in just over a week.’ Or I will be if I can stay at Gran’s until the bruising and the mess on my face disappears, but Dad doesn’t need to know that. ‘Dad, it’s your choice if you want to come back early, but I’m not going home.’

I don’t think Dad can believe what he hears. I listen to silence until he says, ‘Look, Sophie, I have to go. I’ll call you later.’

I breathe a sigh. ‘Bye, Dad.’

I hear a distracted, ‘Bye Soph,’ on the other end and then nothing.

When I turn around I almost bump into Gran. ‘Well, well, well,’ she says. ‘Who’d have believed it? Finding your voice, Soph?’

My voice? I think of Sophie Anne, forced into something she didn’t choose. How would her life have been if she could have waited for Stephen? And Mai; will her parents be even more strict with her when they come back home? I know Dad loves me, Mum too, but sometimes I wonder just who I really am. Am I a *real* person – Sophie Branston – or am I always going to be their ‘little girl’?

‘Yes, well. I’m seventeen, Gran, nearly eighteen. Maybe I’m finding myself.’

Chapter Twenty-four

Tim's taking me home. After lots of hugs and a teary goodbye, we drive away from the house; Gran, Grandad and Alec stand waving on the front verandah; and Big Tom is a ginger garden statue in the dark green clumps of agapanthus. We turn into the long, straight drive. I wave until there's nothing to see but the shadows around us and the overhanging branches of the cypress pines. The road is bumpy. Soon Grandad will be grumping, remembering the old days when he could leave a few bottles of beer on the fencepost and the council grader would level the corrugations.

The Pajero rattles over the grid and we turn from the gate and onto the bitumen. The paddocks around us are green, that lovely, fresh colour that springs up after rain. Past Lacey's, and ahead of us is the creek

I think of water and I think of Sophie Anne. I curl my fingers around the locket; different photos are in there now, or rather, an extra one. Stephen and the baby are still there, but so is Tim, and Gran has copies of all of them on the wall. I suppose it's odd to have three different generations in a locket together, but that's where they belong.

Tim swings suddenly from the road and I realise we are at the gate to the top paddock. He pulls up on the gravel.

'I've got the key.' He takes my hand and holds it firmly. 'We need to lay some ghosts to rest. All of us.'

My heart is hammering. I could have been like Sophie Anne. I could have drowned here. I could have been swept down to the river, out to the sea. Except for Grandad and Alec. The fear on their faces flashes across my mind and I shiver.

‘You’re okay, Soph. I’m with you.’ He gives my hand a squeeze and jumps out to walk towards the padlocked gate.

The lock is stubborn. He fiddles with the key and it clicks at last. Tim turns and gives me the thumbs up. He rattles the chain through the cyclone wire and loops it over the fencepost, and the gate creaks as he drags it across the gravel and clumps of weeds.

I watch him walk back; he’s wearing his RM Williams hat, but I can see his face clearly and my heart stops for a moment soaking up this sight of him, blue eyes alight with purpose, the firm set of his jaw, his face and arms browned from the summer sun. I think of Stephen, his figure tall and lean in his RAAF blues, and his kitbag heavy and waiting. The planes Sophie Anne must have watched, wondering if any of them would bring him home.

Tim drives in and stops to close the gate. I want to tell him not to go back there, that I can’t bear to see where Stephen lay for all those years. I want to tell him it’s over, but I can’t, and I know it’s not.

He reaches for my hand as he drives. There are signs of an old track and recent tyre marks on the damp earth. We bump over the rocks now and I can see the clump of trees on the other side. The creek is lower, but still flowing after all the rain. We stop beside it. On the other side a patch of earth is brown against the green.

Tim gets out ahead of me and helps me jump on the rocks to cross the water.

‘*Sophie...*’ The voice echoes across the creek.

I close my eyes and wait for the familiar pain, for the whiplash that I know tumbled her into the water, for the baby crying; for the wind and the cold rain slashing. There is nothing. I open my eyes to the summer sun and a magpie calling from the pepper trees.

Tim is on his knees, scraping away the earth. I run to him and grab him by the shoulders.

‘What are you doing? There’s nothing there.’

He falls back against me. ‘I wanted something here to remember him,’ he says, and on the damp scraped earth I catch a glimpse of something shining.

Tim picks it up and turns it over in his hands. Stephen’s meat ticket, his number and name on a silver chain.

‘I polished it for him and put it on a chain. Your grandad said it would have been on a cord, but it was rotted away.’

I flinch at his words and remember the scrap of boot and bones.

‘He won’t be in that cemetery, Sophie, not in a wooden box. He’s been here for fifty-two years.’ Tim speaks softly; when he looks up from the tag his eyes are misted.

Sunlight shimmers. I close my eyes against my own tears and the voice calls again.

‘Sophie...’

And the stillness.

‘Sophie, give me a hand will you?’ Tim places the tag on the ground. Around us rocks are scattered like confetti. I know what we have to do. Together we shape a cairn, the round base first, circling the tag. The magpie struts around us, a black and white guard.

‘Sophie...’

The voice circles in my head, a voice that has called for fifty-two years with no one to answer.

‘Wait!’ I reach for Tim’s hand as he spreads the soil on the tag. ‘Undo the locket for me.’

‘Soph, no!’

‘Please, Tim.’

His fingers are gentle at the back of my neck. I hold the gold heart with a steady hand. The chain drops loosely and I pile it into my palm. The name shines in the sun – *Sophie* – in a circle of flowers. I reach across the stones and drop it, a shimmer of gold beside the silver.

Together we spread the loose earth and cover them. Tim places a rock carefully on top. On our knees, we pile the rest of the rocks, large ones, small ones, odd shapes and sizes fitting together like a jigsaw.

‘I feel I should say something,’ says Tim as we stand hand in hand beside the cairn. I turn into his arms and lean against him; I can feel the steady beat of his heart.

A young man in uniform, arms outstretched, a girl, her curls flying as she runs. The magpie carols as they meet.

The vision is gone.

‘They’re together now, Tim. There’s nothing to say.’

We leave the cairn to the magpie and the pepper trees. Tim holds my hand as we balance on the rocks to cross the creek and then, arms around each other we retrace our steps across the newly sprouting grass.

Part Two

Searching the Silence

Introduction

It could be said that silences are to war as political censorship is to government; and war, government, politics and silences are inextricably bound together. Silence is also bound to myth, for while creating a myth elevates or glorifies one aspect of an event, it ensures the others remain in the shadows. War has repercussions, not only on those who fight, but on women and families; it forces societal change, including women's roles, and it shapes a nation's view of itself. The politics of the Defence Force, educational institutions and social organisations such as the RSL play various parts in creating Australian war legends and young people learn about them through school-planned pilgrimages and fact and fiction included in the school curriculum.

The novel can be a powerful vehicle for perpetuating myths; however, it also offers an opportunity for novelists to challenge them and to give voice to the silences engendered by their creation. Good young adult fiction, now aimed at a more mature, sophisticated readership, encourages readers to immerse themselves in new experiences and to search for understanding in the complexities of the protagonists' lives and choices. War, its repercussions, its silences and its heroic myths have echoed throughout my life, and I have drawn on my own experiences of war to give authenticity to my written text.

Born in 1936, I was a child of the war years; war was vividly etched in my growing consciousness. My father, of fighting age but medically unfit because of polio, suffered the shame of being rejected when he volunteered for the RAAF, as these lines from a fictionalised verse novel of my childhood, *Cecilia's War*, demonstrate:

...Now he wears a badge
that says *Rejected Volunteer* –
it saves him from the white feather
they give to cowards.

Dad's in the VDC –
the Volunteer Defence Corps;

he marches with a broomstick gun
and his polio-stooped back.

...Mum says it's shameful
he can't fight in the war.

...But when Dad stands on the beach
staring out over the sea
he's like a prisoner-of-war
at home. (Campbell 2007, p. 15)

On the home-front, posters and news shorts at the movies urged support for our servicemen 'over there'. Children hemmed handkerchiefs at school, wives and mothers rolled bandages, baked fruit cakes, knitted scarves, jumpers and socks to send to the troops and raised money for the Comforts Fund and Red Cross. We were taught to hate the enemy and I have a vivid memory of a Brisbane street parade featuring Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo caged in Hell and the Devil prodding them with his trident.

The war impacted on everything: food, clothing, furniture, housing, transport; there were blackouts and rationing. In the country, food was grown for the war effort, and prisoners of war and Land Army girls replaced the men who had gone to war. At boarding school we practised evacuation drill in the trenches; one of our teachers became an American war bride. An uncle fought in Tobruk, another in New Guinea, and a grandfather fought in the Middle East. Another uncle worked on the wharves unloading and loading naval ships, a 'reserved occupation'.

In the women's services, women supported the men, travelled to the battlegrounds with the men (Adam-Smith 1984); at home, their offers at first refused, women undertook men's roles – in taxis, in munitions, on the trams, in factories. The Americans, considered our saviours in the Battle of the Coral Sea, wooed the women and were deemed heroes – but not by our servicemen (McKernan 1983). Radio, women's magazines, newspapers, all contributed to stories of heroic men and stressed women's patriotic duty to encourage them to fight and to support them, either in the services or at home.

For the final two years of the war, my father worked in army barracks Post Offices at Enoggera and Grovely. At war's end, returned servicemen received a hero's welcome. Adding to my father's shame, he was sacked from the PMG, his job given to a returned soldier. Later, re-employed by the PMG he was, for the duration of his employment, the honoured poet at their Anzac Day service reciting one of his own tributes to the fallen. On the Anzac Day following my father's death, my brother rang to tell me he'd listened to

presenter Garry Ord read Dad's poem, *To a Fallen Soldier*, acknowledging him on the Brisbane ABC television news.

Women, whose lives and attitudes had inevitably changed, were expected to return to pre-war submissive roles and home duties and, once again, returned servicemen and women, widows, fatherless children, were expected to get on with their lives (Adam-Smith 1984). Many of the returned men were soon at war again in Korea. My friend's brother was killed there in 1952 and the poem I wrote on a card of sympathy encapsulates the general attitude of that time: '...When you think he fell as he fought/The thought that he fell that way/I hope will ease the heavy ache/You feel in your heart today'.

In 1954 my WRAAF¹ (Women's Royal Australian Air Force) enlistment was an exciting adventure, a four year contract to serve in Signals as a telephonist, a support role for the more important men's roles. The Korean War was over; 77 Squadron enjoyed a heroic reputation and, at Point Cook and Home Command Headquarters at Penrith, I worked with high ranking officers who were legends within the RAAF. The Malayan Emergency continued; RAAF personnel were posted to Penang, but we were distanced by miles and lack of information about the action.

By 1966, I was married with four young children; my husband, a former national serviceman and now a Warrant Officer in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) volunteered for the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV), a chance to transfer to the regular army while retaining his rank. He was rejected on medical grounds. My father's rejection echoed in his bitterness and shame. I had no objection to our men fighting; according to the government, Australia's contribution was necessary and the servicemen and families we knew supported that. However, I was shocked at the young men's conscription for Vietnam and the unfairness of the ballot – both my brothers had registered, one volunteered for Vietnam but was rejected as medically unfit, and the other was not called up – and soon TV war footage images caused me to question the 'all the way with LBJ' promise. The Training Team was the most highly decorated unit in the Vietnam War (AWM Australian Army Training Team 2009, p.1); where were the

¹Women's services with the Australian Air Force were WAAAF (Womens Auxiliary Australian Air Force) formed in 1941 and disbanded in 1947 and the WRAAF (Womens Royal Australian Air Force) formed in 1951 which was integrated into the RAAF in 1977 (Women in Air Force: Royal Australian Air Force (2009).

accolades on their return? Why were so many Vietnam veterans, servicemen and nurses, returned late at night to empty airports and refused entry to the RSL? I supported the withdrawal of troops but, despite my services' connections, I had no realisation of the veterans' post-war problems, nor did I, until years later, become aware of the true facts of Australia's role in that war. In 1980 my 16-year-old son applied for an apprenticeship in the Army. He was rejected as being too young; later we discovered the Army had made an error in recording his birth date. My son was devastated, but I was relieved.

In 1984 the ex-WRAAF marched in Melbourne's Anzac Day parade, a small contingent behind the WAAAF, carrying the banner I had designed and made. The authorities expressed outrage – WRAAF were post-war. Like our WAAAF sisters we had provided critical background support, ours for Korea, Malaya and Vietnam but that was not considered. Later, as I stood in front of the Shrine welcoming the remaining marchers, I was for several minutes the only person clapping the Vietnam veterans.

In 1997 I co-edited *Keeping the Home Fires Burning*, oral histories of women at home during WWII (Campbell, Rolfe & Clark 1997). The women's countries of origin and where they experienced the war were diverse: Australia, Scotland, Turkey, Egypt, Poland and Germany, as were their wartime experiences: mothers, factory workers, a dairy farmer's wife, a guest house proprietor, a driver and a teenaged slave labourer for the Germans. Ninety year-old Nan Barnett, who assisted in her mother's home front activities during WWI and was a civilian driver for the navy during WWII, recollected:

But it was terrible the First World War. We were all healthy and well, but listening to the casualties, seeing all the casualties, it was shocking. It'll always live in my mind. Always...The war news came in columns and columns of casualties in the newspapers...No good news, it was always tragedy – tragedy in the islands and the sinking of big warships, prisoners of war dying – dreadful...My uncle came back. He was left to shoot the horses. [In the Second World War] Mother organised the Anzac Club...she got an MBE for the work she did with the navy... (Campbell, Rolfe & Clarke 1997, pp. 70-71)

Krystina Gruber, a Polish woman taken with her younger sister as a child slave by the Germans recalls:

You had to undress. Just think, you are fifteen years old or fourteen, there are all these men with guns in their arms, and you have to completely undress yourselves...this beautiful girl, she was maybe eighteen or nineteen...she had her

period and blood was pouring from her because she had nothing, so she bent down and put her hand down. One soldier came up and he said, "Quick, straighten up, straighten up." She cried and said, "How can I?" He bashed her and bashed her and left her there. (Campbell, Rolfe & Clark 1997, p. 80)

This oral history project for older women, funded by the Department of Human Services as part of their Home and Community Care Program, was a validation of the women's lives and an emotional release, since most had never shared their stories.

From 1999 to 2005, as part of, and following a Federation Community Grant, I recorded *From There to Here*, a volume of 164 first person accounts documenting migration to Werribee (Campbell 2005). War, its silences and repercussions, echoed throughout the generations, from Victoria's first invasion and the Maori Wars to Afghanistan. Refugees, ex-servicemen and women, their families, prisoners of war from Australia, Italy, Changi, Ethiopia and, in the local Italian community, silence and shame about involvement and internment during WWII. Cheryl Hersey's account was a documentation of the change in women's roles: a WRAAF at the time of the women's service integration in the RAAF; cartographer during the Vietnam War; wife and mother with her husband serving in Vietnam; RSL member who eventually became the first woman president of the local RSL, now a war widow working for Carry On Victoria, a support service for veterans.

My verse novel, *Cecilia's War* (2007), a fictionalised account of my childhood, is a juxtaposition of personal and world wars; the writing of this traumatic period of my life was a powerful lesson in the limiting effects of self-censoring. Not intended for any particular genre, it has drawn positive responses from both adults and young adult readers, the immediacy of the first person point of view and language and facts of wartime Queensland contributing to its authenticity. A thirteen-year-old commented '*Cecilia's War* is a source of hope for any other child in the world in the same position', and a twelve-year-old, 'I liked it heaps, especially the way Margaret used the year starting 1941, so everything is in old language...' It is now translated into German.

Legacies (2009), my collection of short stories and poems dealing with the impact of war over several generations, is also influenced by my own experience and my extensive reading of fact and fiction collected since my post-war teenage years. Three of the stories are chapters of a discontinuous narrative in progress, a precursor to *Finding Sophie* in

subject matter and tone: three generations suffering the ramifications of the Vietnam War and previous wars in the first person point of view of a young girl, troubled by and questioning the emotional anguish and repercussions which inevitably impact on her life. These repercussions, and the silences researched and documented in the accompanying exegesis, have similarly impacted on my own life. When launching *Legacies*, Cheryl Hersey commented that these were the characters and situations she encountered in her work with Carry On, a validation of their authenticity. *Legacies*, with the accompanying teacher's notes I have prepared, is now being used in local schools:

In the family of every person who fought, there are reverberations of loss and grief: loss of loved ones, some missing in action and never found; loss of the lives planned; and for those in the shadows of post-traumatic stress – unacknowledged still for the true breadth of its impact – the loss of a meaningful family life for almost every member of the family. (Campbell 2009, p. 10)

This loss is a central theme of the collection. It is also the central theme of *Finding Sophie*, the creative component of my thesis. My husband's response when he read 'A Legacy of Roses', the story of a soldier killed in Vietnam, from *Legacies*, was 'I didn't know you felt like that'. My response, 'You never asked me'. We had both perpetuated the silence. This silence echoes throughout *Finding Sophie*:

She backs off and studies my face. 'You've been crying. What did Alec say to upset you?'

I consider evasion, but it's no use trying to dodge Gran and her questions. 'We talked about Vietnam.'

She gasps and the tube of gel clatters to the floor. 'He talked about Vietnam?'

I nod. Gran's face is a fast forward of changing expressions – shock, fear, disbelief. 'But he *never* talks about Vietnam.' Her voice is almost a whisper.

I'm suddenly brave with words. 'Did you ever ask him?' (Campbell 2011, p. 121)

Repeating the pattern of centuries, young people are learning, and experiencing through novels and history texts, a mainly masculine perception of Australia's history of war. In addition, the Vietnam War in particular is narrated mostly by American authors. This silence was my motivation for writing *Finding Sophie*; it is an imaginative exploration of the Australian experience and the impact of war on an Australian family. It is not a novel *about* war but rather the echoes of war that reverberate through generations. A 'coming-of-age' novel, a common and popular genre in young adult fiction, it concludes with the

protagonist's realisation that, although she cannot resolve her grandmother's and great-uncle's misunderstandings, she is able to take charge of her own life.

Written from a female perspective, *Finding Sophie* also includes a masculine response to the horror and repercussions of war, but more importantly, for me as a woman and a writer, it questions the silences, repressions and the self-censoring of women's experiences.

In the rest of the exegesis I will discuss aspects of the historical research undertaken towards the writing of the novel, feminist explorations of silencing women's stories that informed my thinking, reading young adult literature that influenced the structure of *Finding Sophie*, and some of the challenges that I faced in dealing with the subject matter.

Chapter One, *The Hero Myth*, questions the origins of the Anzac legend and the masculine ownership of the hero myth created by correspondents and the Defence Force. I explore the actuality of war masked by this mythology – the soldier's role of trained killer and the truth behind the larrikin digger glorified in the myth. This chapter also questions the omission of women in the Anzac story, the nurses on hospital ships anchored in view of the action at Gallipoli.

Chapter Two, *Gender Differences and Silences*, explores the exclusion of women in official war histories, the perceptions of, and differences in, roles and the gaps and slippages in the recognition of women in war narratives. I also discuss the silences: truths of women's experiences, repercussions of war and the long history of rape as a weapon of war.

Chapter Three, *Young Adult Literature*, discusses the recognition of young adult literature as a separate genre, its importance to young readers and within the publishing industry and education. It also questions the silences in the literature used to educate young people about war and the lack of Australian young adult fact and fiction, especially by women, covering the Vietnam War.

Chapter Four, *The Challenges in Writing the Thesis Novel*, documents the challenges I as a woman faced in writing for this age group. Understanding that young readers immerse

themselves in the protagonists' lives, I aimed to represent a range of experiences and, without being didactic, present truths about war to encourage their own questioning.

Chapter One: The Hero Myth

Anzac Day remembrance directs Australians to the Gallipoli war experience as the foundation of the Anzac legend, the ultimate measure of heroism and the creation of our national identity. The Australian War Memorial's Anzac Day commemoration site claims Anzac Day to be our 'most important national day' (2009). Bruce Ruxton (1991, p. 8) a former president of the RSL, elevated the meaning of Anzac to greater heights with his claim that it has become a 'magic and sacred word'. Captain Ali, grandson of a fallen Turk, agreed: 'If you gain something with your blood it should be a sacred thing' (Lindsay 2003, p. 58). This mythical stature of Anzac is further elevated with each Anzac Day and is passed on in military tradition, through educational programs and bequeathed as a comforting cloak to cover the repercussions of war to generations of families. My novel *Finding Sophie* explores the impact of wars on one family over three generations questioning such notions of heroic military service and Australian war legends as exemplified by the Anzac mythology.

The Australian War Memorial (War History, Colonial Period 1788-1901 2009) acknowledges that the military has played an integral part in Australia's history. British troops who escorted the convicts on the first invasion in 1788 undertook multiple roles: to guard against any other country's external attack, to maintain civil order and 'to suppress the resistance of the Aboriginal population to the British'. However, the Anzac celebrations do not include any acknowledgement of Aboriginal loss of life, an estimated 20,000 compared with 2,500 settlers and police, in the British invasion of Australia. Lake and Reynolds (Lake & Reynolds with McKenna & Damousi 2010, p. 163) recognise the silence surrounding this war fought on our soil with the Indigenous population:

Thus we show no embarrassment, indeed feel pride in our invasion of Turkey at the behest of the British, but great reluctance to acknowledge the British invasion of Australia. Many resist the idea that an invasion ever took place. (Lake et al. 2010, p. 163)

Their comment is reflected in my own family's pride in my great-great-grandparents' 1842 arrival in Portland and, with their claim and 'settlement' of land, their participation in what has been termed the Black War. My great-grandfather is listed as 'hunter';

‘hunting party’ and ‘collision’, the terms used when groups of white settlers carried out reprisals against the Aboriginals (Sheahan 2008, p. 59).

Danielle Thornton, in her review of Hutchinson’s *Pilgrimage: A Traveller’s Guide to Australia’s Battlefields* (2002), is also critical of this continual exclusion of Aboriginal history: ‘the nationalist fanfare that now accompanies Anzac Day effaces this inconvenient history, and as such serves as a yearly sally by the Whitewash-Warriors in the History Wars’ (Thornton 2007, p. 74)).

It is commonly understood that the acronym Anzac² had its foundation on Gallipoli’s rugged cliffs. However, when Birdwood took command of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in Egypt he was asked to select a code address for the corps, which did eventually fight at Gallipoli, and adopted the word ‘Anzac’. A&NZAC was originally stamped by clerks on the official Australian documents. While Anzac is now a word used in both Australia and New Zealand and the countries have fought side by side on many occasions, the A&NZACs have been formed only at Gallipoli and in Greece during World War I (Ewer 2008) and again in Phuoc Tuy Province, Vietnam (*ANZAC Day Traditions, Facts, Folklore* 2010).

Despite having a military history spanning over 100 years,³ it is Australia’s involvement in Gallipoli, a WWI battlefield in another imperial war, which has become the template for mateship, courage, and honour, the creation of the Anzac spirit. Moreover, it is the basis on which all war commemoration and celebration is founded. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, however, remind us that Bean, Australia’s official war correspondent, ‘did not suggest that it emerged on the Anzac Peninsular’ rather, the source of ‘Australian manhood’ was not to be found in military battle, but in the distinctive character of outback colonies’ (Lake et al. 2010, p. 163). The Australian Government Culture Portal reinforces

² Anzac, the acronym of the original A&NZAC used in Cairo, is accepted in general use, which I do unless I make reference to an actual Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, or in direct quotes.

³ The last British regiment departed in 1870, Norfolk Islander free male settlers practised musketry in 1788. Governor Hunter raised the Loyal Associations, in 1800; volunteer corps were raised for the Crimea and by 1860 a volunteer unit existed in most Australian suburbs and towns. Some 2,500 Australians, lured by the promise of settlement on New Zealand’s ‘confiscated land’, volunteered for the Maori Wars in the 1860s. A New South Wales infantry battalion and an artillery battery sent to Sudan were the first soldiers paid by a self-governing colony fighting in an imperial war. Australian Commonwealth troops fought in the Boer War and naval contingents of full-time and reservist sailors fought in the Boxer Rebellion in China (Australian War Memorial 2010).

this: 'Like it or not, hero or larrikin, ratbag or rebel, the Anzacs, in all their complex iconography, are an inextricable part of the Australian tradition of masculinity' (2010, p. 2), a tradition begun in the transportation of male convicts and continued in the goldfields and on sheep and cattle runs. However, neither acknowledges the fact that many of these soldiers in World War I were from a diverse cultural background. For example, there is no recognition of Aboriginal servicemen and 'The number of Russians alone in the 1st AIF amounted to 1000 men – a virtual battalion' (Govor 2005, p. 2).

The Australian Anzacs who fought at Gallipoli were the same 'larrikins' who raced their donkeys against cars, climbed the pyramids, fought amongst themselves, contracted sexually transmitted diseases and burned down brothels in Cairo. As Peter Stanley claims, 'hundreds of books have been written about the 'good'...This is the diet that has nourished the Anzac legend; but it has led to a seriously skewed understanding of Australia's military history' (Stanley 2010, p. 10).

War correspondents, and the media, played an important role in the creation of the heroic Anzac myth, as did the Australian government through its public relations exercise aimed at validating the sacrifices made by patriotic young men for 'Mother England'. In 1915 British correspondent, Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett wrote:

The Australians rose to the occasion. [Not waiting] for orders...they sprang into the sea, forming a rough sort of line, rushed at the enemy trenches...The courage displayed by...wounded Australians will never be forgotten...In fact, I have never seen anything like these wounded Australians in war before...They were happy because they knew they had been tried for the first time and had not been found wanting...There has been no finer feat in this war than this sudden landing in the dark and storming the heights. (as cited in NLA 'Despatches from Gallipoli' 2008)

These words, published in the Melbourne *Argus*, are credited by their correspondent Charles Smith with 'having done almost as much towards bringing Australians into the limelight of world-fame as have the heroic deeds of the soldiers themselves' (cited in National Library of Australia 2008). Similarly John Masefield wrote of their 'extraordinary prowess in war. Not even the vigilance of the censors could keep down the accounts of their glory in war' (cited in Ruxton 1991, p.1).

Under Billy Hughes' new Labour government in 1914, censorship was strict but lacked uniformity from state to state. News from Gallipoli, shaped by Bean and censored by the government and newspapers, gave Australians an optimistic view of the war. British authorities delayed Charles Bean's report on the landing on 25th April and it was not published in Australia until May 13th. The Department of Defence considered his despatches 'a true and faithful account of happenings at the Front' (NLA Despatches from Gallipoli 2008).

Ashmead-Bartlett, however, disagreed and recorded in his diary:

I thought there were limits to human stupidity but now I know there are none. The censorship has now passed beyond all reason...There are now at least four censors all of whom cut up your stuff...Thus only a few dry crumbs are left for the wretched public. (cited in NLA 'Dispatches from Gallipoli' 2008)

Trench newspapers, where soldiers were able to voice their feelings freely, were for the soldiers only. Not so *The Anzac Book*; originally intended for the soldiers at Gallipoli, but published in 1916 after the withdrawal, this became Bean's 'happy warrior' collection of soldiers' words and pictures for those at home (Ekins 2010). Edited out of the collection, the final verse of Harry McCann's poem is an example of this:

There's a nation filled with sadness, crazy righteous gladness,
News of battle! Tales of Conquest! Little loss and so much gain.
But beneath the pride of triumph runs a deeper note of sadness.
Pity, comfortless and feeble, for the kindred of the slain. (Seal 2005, p. 172)

While Bean edited the troops' words in the revered *The Anzac Book* to suit his own purposes, the censors' and soldiers' influence on what he allowed to be printed cannot be dismissed. When, in an honest despatch from Egypt 'he had effectively admitted to soldiers' families that their sons and brothers might well have been drinking and whoring in the back streets of Cairo' he was warned by the troops 'not to walk too close to the Nile' (Stanley 2010, p. 35). Stanley reveals another fact which has slipped through the heroic myth: five of the seven VC winners contracted venereal diseases.

Contemporary journalist Pilger (2001, p. xix) supports the power of the media influence when he states that journalists may insist that there is never a 'line'...they know almost '*instinctively*' what they are able to write for publication and more importantly, 'what to

leave out'. Moreover, Pilger's opinion is validated by Ross Howard's comment that the media's role is critical 'in exacerbating war or consolidating peace...by propagandising and distributing misinformation or biased information. Or by covering up the truth...' (Howard, Rolt, van de Veen & Verhoeven 2003, p. 7). Despite the army's censorship during the Vietnam War, journalist Candice Sutton comments that 'journalists' freedom of access to war will probably never again be so great' (Brown, MacGladrie & Sutton 2007, p. 178), a statement validated by Kevin Foster's (2010) criticism of the Australian Defence Force's control over the media in Afghanistan. All of which reflect Ashmead-Bartlett's diary entry. Bean criticized British Admiralty official photographer Ernest Brooks for his faking of photographs when he posed the soldiers for his pictures (Ekins 2010, p. XXVII). However, a recent revelation is that Bean credited Australians as he considered they deserved, and pandered to the Australian audience by deliberately claiming photographs of New Zealander and Irish troops as Australian. These are now regarded as Australian Anzac historical images (Lester 2010). This revelation then poses the question: what other written, photographed and preserved 'truth' is in actual fact a lie?

The Anzacs are promoted as soldiers who fought valiantly on the steep cliffs of Gallipoli and gave their lives in the service of their country and, while there is no question of this, into the gaps of historical accounts fall the unacknowledged, those who supported the fighting men, many of whom also gave their lives. These included the bakers who cooked the daily bread, the butchers who slaughtered the mobs of sheep, the sailors who manned the submarines and the landing barges, the wounded who died on the ships and were buried at sea and the 'shattered' men, wounded and shipped to hospitals and later to France when they recovered sufficiently to fight again, or those sent home never to recover. And what of the nurses? Bean (1921), in his fourteen page chapter detailing the evacuation of the wounded and their treatment on the hospital ships, mentions them in two sentences. Don Watson, speech writer for the former Prime Minister Paul Keating, acknowledges an understanding of this: 'Mateship, rugged bushmen, soldiers...I don't know where the sheilas get a look-in with this at all' (cited in Dapin 2011, p. 28). Fallows notes a continuation of this silence; in the ten years following World War I, and as a result of the 'populate or perish' propaganda issued by the government because of the young men lost in the war, more Australian women died in childbirth than men were killed at Gallipoli (Fallows 2002, pp. 21-24).

In his war diary, Bean laments the fact that war correspondents have ‘so habitually exaggerated the heroism of battles that people don’t realise that the real actions are heroic’ (Gerster 1987, p. 27). One of the soldiers fighting at the Nek wrote, ‘Yes, it was heroic, it was marvellous, the way those men rose, yet it was murder’. Although the survivors didn’t talk about it, the strip of land was nicknamed ‘Godley’s abattoir’ (Carlyon 2003, p. 138). Simpson with his donkey is elevated to hero status, but the truth of his life lies hidden behind the mythologised glory of sacrifice for his mates; he was British, as were the majority of men who enlisted and, having jumped ship, he enlisted to get a free trip home. As the militarisation of history continues, World War II Australians’ experiences at Kokoda, the Western Front and Tobruk have been glorified and raised above normal warfare to super human efforts and iconic symbols of extraordinary *men* at war.

The mythologising of heroic combat and notions of bravery under fire masks the unpalatable truth about warfare. Jason’s study of the Vietnam War in American literary culture reveals this crucial understanding of the soldier’s role. The ‘hero’ myth camouflages the soldier’s role as ‘trained killer’. The military is an ‘uncompromisingly male institution’ and ‘killing the woman within is the preparation for killing the enemy without’ (Jason 2000, p. 30). Australian Vietnam War personal accounts and fiction based on personal experience, including *Nasho* (Frazer 1984) and *Vietnam Conscript* (Ryan 1992), are explicit in their portrayal of bastardisation, racism and sexism. Brown, a National Serviceman conscripted for Vietnam, recalls his training:

There was a culture of brutality in the place, natural enough when an institute is dedicated to the art of killing...a group of regular army sergeants were doing bayonet practice on a hessian bag and one sergeant came out with blood on his blade. They checked and found a family of kittens in the bag, one badly injured. The corporals then went into a blood bath, repeatedly bayoneting the bag until the kittens were chopped to bits. (Brown, MacGladrie & Sutton 2007, p.36)

Furthermore, Leigh Astbury (1992, p. 67) reports on another silence, the ‘the equation of ‘dying’ and sexual orgasm’ experience of killing described by ordinary soldiers having been ‘a standard trope since the seventeenth century’. Earlier, Ashmead-Bartlett wrote in his dispatch reporting the Gallipoli landing: ‘But then the Australasians, *whose blood was up* [my italics inserted], instead of entrenching, rushed northwards and eastwards,

searching for fresh enemies to bayonet' (Ashmead Bartlett cited in National Library Australia). This recollection is also referred to in *The Sorrow of War*:

And once again I am ready to jump in and mix it in the fiery scene of blood, mad killing and brutality that wraps soul and personality. The thirst for killing, the brutality, the animal psychology, the evil desperation. (Bao Ninh trans. 1993, p. 42).

All soldiers are trained to kill but on all sides some are fuelled by their lust for blood. In my novel, Alec also gives voice to this silence and challenges young readers to question the realities of war and its effects as he speaks to Sophie about his time in Vietnam:

Jesus, we didn't know who to save – the young women in the bars, the kids on the street, the old men in the villages. And we killed any and all of them, and we trained the Vietnamese to kill each other... I don't know who we were fighting, and I don't know how many I killed. (Campbell 2011, pp. 116-117)

However, the plight of Vietnam veterans fighting to have the effects of their experience recognised 'mirrors a recurring theme in Australia's military history' according to Crowe, 'a battle by a group of out-gunned and out-numbered soldiers against a seemingly omnipotent foe', the foe being 'government reinforced by our bureaucracy' (Crowe 1999, back cover). In a collection of satiric cartoons, *Punch* magazine claimed to be 'a lover of peace...but not unfamiliar with war' and was unafraid to speak of the effects of war:

The War has its *grandes heures*, its colossal glories and disasters, but the tragedy of "the little things" affects the mind of the simple soldier with a peculiar force – the "little gardens rooted up, the same as might be ours", "the little 'ouses all in 'eaps, the same as might be mine", and worst of all, "the little kids, as might 'ave been our own." (Mr Punch's History of the Great War 1920, p. 116)

In the glorification of courageous military heroes attributed with 'the Anzac spirit', there is little mention of fear. While these effects were recognised, little was done to alleviate them. Biographer Robert Macklin (2008, p. 45) records Albert Jacka's heroic feats in WWI but silence surrounds the fact that Jacka suffered the shakes and bouts of crying, as did many of the soldiers executed for cowardice. John Leak, a VC hero, 'could not stand shell-fire' and wept over those he had killed. He went AWL in Belgium and was sentenced to life-imprisonment for desertion; this was later remitted. His daughter learned of his VC from a teacher at school and his family knew nothing of his shame until after

his death (Daly 1998). Leak's fear was regarded as cowardice, despite his VC, but in his essay 'Reproaching the Military Hero Sans Peur', James Cook (2005, p. 93) suggests that the 'shaking might even be a sign not of fear, but the fact that fear has been overcome' and that 'a hero *sans peur* is no hero at all, or at least not the only sort of person worthy of the appellation'. Although post-traumatic stress disorder was finally recognised as a repercussion of the Vietnam War, in the more recent Afghanistan conflict, the Australian dead are returned as heroes:

Coming Home

I called my dad a hero
when he packed his gear
for Afghanistan.

I'm not a hero, son, he said
I'm a soldier
back on duty.

We counted days
until my dad came home.

We met the plane
when he flew in
the officers saluted him
his mates marched by his side.

Now my dad's a hero
because he's dead. (Campbell 2011)

The Prime Minister attends each funeral but the wounded are forgotten. These are Larsson's *shattered Anzacs* who were 'unsuccessfully killed' (2009, p. 247).

Les Carlyon (2004, p.1) recalls in his Australian War Memorial Anniversary Oration 'There's an old saying that says victory has a thousand fathers but defeat is an orphan'; not so the defeat at Gallipoli, which has taken on a legendary role in the teaching of Australia's history. Robin Gerster's seminal work, *Big Noting*, labels the six volumes of Bean's *Official History* 'one complete artefact' in which is 'manifested the patriotic purpose which motivated the whole project'. He begins one chapter: 'The Australian Iliad: Bean's Official History', and quotes John Butler Cooper: 'Hereafter some Australian Homer will tell the story in an Iliad that will rival the tale of the siege of Troy' (cited in Gerster 1987, pp. 62-64). Bean's use of imagery, simile, metaphor, dialogue and

character description certainly add to the narrative structure of myth and legend.

A reading of oral accounts and primary source material of returned soldiers reveals the facts behind the rhetoric. Peter Cochrane's review of *Dinkum Diggers* (Blair 2001) claims 'the study of the 1st Battalion records confirms that the Anzac legend is at best a partial truth, at worst a lot of triumphal nonsense' (Cochrane 2001, p. 8). Without the inclusion of women's stories, the legend of Anzac can never be any but a 'partial truth'.

McKenna raises another political point for discussion in the claim that Australian leaders 'mimic the public performances of American politicians' as they make a show of attending church services on Sundays:

...one wonders if the Anzac revolution has occurred not because we are a post-Christian society, but because we live in a time of religious revival. Before Anzac, we bow down, we close ranks and we remain silent. So sacrosanct has Anzac Day become, that no political leader dare risk qualifying, let alone doubting, the absolute centrality of its position to our national identity and national values. (Lake, et al. 2010, p. 134)

As the older diggers pass on, the younger returned men, even those once ostracised, become the perpetuators of the myth. However, for many young people, a pilgrimage to Lone Pine's Anzac Day service is regarded as a rite of passage. When there are few boundaries for today's youth, when drugs and alcohol and the general disregard for authority offer a forlorn future for many, and the 'me generation' focuses on self-gratification and materialism, a pilgrimage to Gallipoli is often a revelation and a catalyst for change. It is there on the battlefields and amongst the graves that young Australians gain some understanding of the realities of war, and of the Australian spirit of mateship, courage, endurance, humour and selflessness that contributed to the creation of the Anzac legend. The Kokoda Track now shares that role and there is little doubt that Long Tan will follow. The negative side of this is the fact that young people are being indoctrinated with an out-dated belief that the blood and sacrifice of battle creates a nation. In *Finding Sophie*, the young protagonist has travelled to Gallipoli to pay homage to the Anzacs; she also develops an understanding of the traumatic ramification of war on individuals and its tragic effect on family over generations:

'I don't know what you see in that woman,' Mum says. 'She's a zany sixties coffee house singer and a protester. She's never grown up.' She always refers

to Gran as ‘that woman’ and ‘a protestor’. She sounds the words like a death sentence on a war criminal.

Mum’s mother, Nanny Sharlton, is much the same about Gran; and she’s told me of her family’s proud military history that goes back to the Boer War. She took me to Gallipoli to visit her grandfather’s grave – all those white gravestones, all those young men. Now when we go to the Dawn Service I cry as I remember them. Nanny cheers and claps the Anzac Parade; she wears her great-grandmother’s war brooch with a bar for each of her three sons who fought – two of them died – and tells me about the proud women who sent their sons off to war.

Gran is so different. She never talks about her dad’s time in the Army – I never knew him, but I know he fought in New Guinea. We learned about the Kokoda Track at school, and I often wondered about him – was he there? And no one mentions the Vietnam War. (Campbell 2011, pp. 6-7)

Throughout history young men, and young women, have been the pawns of politicians secure in their power and a firm belief that nations are forged by war and that war brings peace. Surely the celebration of the living, of our achievements as a democratic society, is more relevant to Australian history. How then, to impress upon the younger generation that war is a political decision, made by those in power, imposed upon the young? And what of the original Anzacs, the young men who registered for the ‘chance of a lifetime’: a ‘Free Tour to Great Britain and Europe’, who met the requirements of the AIF recruiting flyer’s ‘must be between the ages of 18 and 45, have a minimum height of 5 feet 2 inches and be able to expand your chest to 33 inches’? Those same adventurous young men who killed and were killed, the ‘good’ and the ‘bad characters’ (Stanley 2010, p. 10), what would be their reaction to the version of history now taught to the young:

Anzacs

Innocent
in your irreverent youth
when your blood sang
gloriously
your perfect bodies
worshipped by the sun,
did you know
we likened you to gods?

Shattered
in your indecent death
when your blood ran
ingloriously
on mangled mateship
putrid in the sun,
how could you know
we’d worship you forever? (Campbell 2009, p.25)

Chapter Two: Gender Differences and Silences

Roles in war are traditionally divided according to gender, which impacts on men's and women's experiences of war and the later re-telling or fictionalising of those experiences (Bassett 1998). The 'hero myth', in its championing of masculine deeds of action, mateship, solidarity and bravery, often excludes women's valuable contributions to the war narrative:

Military history is a male preserve, dominated by the image of a male warrior. Nevertheless, the unprecedented progress of women towards equality during the twentieth century is brought into sharp relief by war, although that progress often went unnoticed, and unsung, behind the striking deeds of valour on the battlefield. (Adie 2004, p. viii)

The attitude of authorities during World War I, also prevalent in society, reflected German philosopher George Hegel's claim that 'women's limited mental capacity equips them for housework and child rearing' (cited in de Vries 2010, p. 390). Unfortunately for women, those same perceptions continued through generations. In World War II, when women tried to enlist in the services or to take on roles perceived to be men's roles, both authority and community held these same views. Not until 1941, when the War Cabinet 'issued a statement to the effect that maximum use should be made of womanpower in service to release men for combat duty' (Howard 1990, p. 27) was it recognised that women could contribute to the war effort, not only in the traditional role of nursing, which it must be remembered was ranked with prostitution during earlier wars (Adam-Smith 1984), but also in occupations critical to the operation of the war machine. However, their inclusion did not necessarily mean equal recognition. Reporter Lorraine Stumm was angry and humiliated as 'a top briefing given by Macarthur at GHQ came to an abrupt halt...when a male reporter pointed out that a female was present "Did the General really want to continue?"' (Stumm 2000, p. 85). I found this a moving and important story that deserves to be published and read, however, *I Saw Too Much* was rejected by a number of mainstream publishers (there is no documentation of the basis for these rejections) and later Stumm self-published it.

In official histories, mostly written by men, the dead men are acknowledged, as are those men who shared and witnessed their suffering and bravery but, as the Amnesty International *Lives Blown Apart* report attests, 'Women's lives and their bodies have been

the unacknowledged casualties of war for too long' (cited in Smith-Spark 2011, p. 2). Army nurse Helen Keyes' conversation with Dr Peter Edwards, official historian of the Vietnam War supports this:

I said to him, "I was there. I was there for two years" and he said "That's interesting". And I said "Well aren't you going to talk to me about it?" And he said "Oh no, I'm writing the *official* version of the war." In other words..."the official version of the war *consciously* excludes women's experiences". (McHugh 1993, p. 105)

Moreover, the multiple roles of women who went to war and the repercussions of war on all who served, their families and society over generations have, until recently, been consigned to silence.

In her research for *Painting Ghosts*, which documents war painting by women artists, Catherine Speck discovered the commonly held perception that women's association with war was 'passive', that war is '*the* quintessentially gendering activity' and the military expectation of leaving the 'feminine' behind. Fuelling this perception is 'the way women are represented on only a small number of national monuments and other war memorials', and 'often as mothers remembering their lost ones or as idealised forms holding scales of justice' (Speck 2004, p. 11).

Speck challenged the belief that women artists avoided representing war. However, where women painted and what was considered suitable for women to paint was decided by men. Nora Heysen, an official Australian war artist in World War II, was commissioned to paint seven women in uniform, which she did in portraits that 'quietly but firmly place these women leaders in our military culture as significant historical figures' (Speck 2004, p. 131). When Heysen, in her appointed officer status, was sent to New Guinea in 1944 and allowed to 'go forward as far as practicable', she painted the fighting men and Indigenous people and was reprimanded for not painting enough women. She was expected to focus on the nurses, but when she finally went forward with nurses at a Casualty Clearing Station, the military bureaucracy decided that women artists 'were not permitted to spend any length of time working in areas where there were no "facilities" for them' (Speck 2004, p. 136). How then were the nurses considered?

Brenda McBride writes of her wartime nursing career in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force which included nursing during the Blitz, going in with the troops following the D-Day landings to serve on the front line at Field Dressing Stations and, at war's end, working with the Jews who had lived through the death camps. She concludes her story, 'Everyone had a different war. This was mine.' (McBride 1979, p. 190). McBride's recollections illustrate the significant difference between men's and women's accounts of their experiences of war. Most men describe actions, the graphic details of fighting, wounds, mates, honour, revenge and 'the male theorists' privileging of men's reliance upon abstract concepts such as justice, right and duty (Coates 2011, p. 134), whereas women, nurses in particular, generally focus on the emotions; actions are described without the graphic details of horror, and their language reflects sisterhood, and as McHugh asserts, their stories 'make a far more eloquent testimony to feminism than any abstract ideological argument' (McHugh 1993, p.x). As psychologist Carol Gilligan argues 'women's moral judgement is more contextual, more immersed in the detail of relationships and narratives...women appear more adept at revealing feelings of empathy and sympathy...' (cited in Coates 2011, p. 134). Anne Barber recalls her Vietnam nursing experience: 'We lived together, played together, worked together...and we became a family' (McHugh 1993, p. 55).

Australia's military nursing tradition began in 1899 and nurses have served in almost every conflict in which Australian troops have been involved. Many of them, in the earlier wars, paid their own expenses (Biedermann 2004). Added to these were the doctors and ambulance drivers, some of whom joined medical services from England and provided their own transport. One of them was Olive King in 1915, who later joined the Scottish Women's Hospitals (King 1986). Australian nurses on board the hospital ship *Sicilia* were witness to the battle for Gallipoli just half a mile away where 'the casualty count far exceeded expectations' and 'so terrible was the slaughter' that troopships were converted into hospital ships (Rees 2008, p. 37). Sister Ella Tucker, aboard the *Gascon* wrote in her diary: '*Red letter day*. Shells bursting all round, we are off Gaba Tepe. The soldiers have commenced to land' (Bassett 1997, p. 44). Although nurses served on the front line tending hundreds of wounded on the first day, there has been little recognition of their contribution in Anzac Day commemorations. I chose to address this in my novel:

‘What didn’t I say? My grandad’s brother fought at Gallipoli. Great-uncle Harry met his wife there. My mum was –’

‘Met his wife there? But there weren’t any women at Gallipoli. We did a project on the Anzacs and I went there with Nanny.’

‘Is that so, Soph? And who tended all those men wounded in the carnage, my great-uncle Harry among them?’ (Campbell 2011, p. 46)

The number of Australian nurses serving overseas in World War I almost equalled the number serving in World War II. They were awarded medals such as the Military Medal and some lost their lives, yet returning nurses were denied the privileges granted to the servicemen (Rees 2008). My research/poetry echoes the same depth of masculine ownership of the ‘hero myth’:

A Nurse’s War, Vietnam

She wakes again to screams
and the choppers landing.
Through her open window
the scent of violets,
a pale winter moon.

...

In her dreams
the pungent jungle,
sand-bagged hospital at Vung Tau.

She’s gowned and bloodied,
sweat streaming,
day runs into night runs into day
as she tends the remnants of men
shot and spiked and burned,
young men writhing
from the landmine blast
terrified, denied
their masculinity.

...

Heartbeat to the clatter of guns
she stares, unseeing,
into the still night,
the words from the RSL an echo –

*Nurses don’t count,
they didn’t actually go to war. (Campbell 2011)*

The final lines of the poem echo the response given to Narelle Biedeman when she rang an RSL in NSW during her research of Vietnam nurses for her PhD and she was told ‘...Nurses don’t count, they didn’t actually go to war’ (Biedermann 2004, p. xxvii).

According to the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick of Armies in the Field, ratified by both 'Australia (with reservation) and Japan' in 1929, nurses were not to be imprisoned. However, although Prime Minister Tojo agreed in 1942 to apply it, Japan had not ratified the Geneva Convention Relative to the Prisoners of War (Bassett 1997, p. 141) and Australian nurses were massacred on Banka Island along with civilians and British soldiers, others imprisoned in Sumatra and sent to Japan. Despite this treatment and their own grief, fear and the pressure to prostitute themselves to the Japanese officers, they comforted young Japanese soldiers, 'boys of fourteen who were lonely and bewildered' (1985 Nelson, p. 77).

Nurse Betty Jeffrey, imprisoned in Sumatra, wrote that the prostitution pressure 'was the most repulsive and unpleasant experience in our whole imprisonment' (Bassett 1997, p. 143), however, most Australian nurses were able to repel the Japanese advances. Not so Japan's comfort women who were sent ahead to the front line and faced the same dangers as the soldiers. The first 'batches of women' sent to Shanghai were listed as units of war supplies, 80% of their ages being fourteen to eighteen years. Hours before Japan surrendered, an order from the Civil Administration Department ordered 'that comfort women were to be attached to local hospitals as nurses and 'when this message is understood, burn it' (Hicks 1995, p. vi).

The sexual use of women by troops is an accepted historical fact – 'this is your rifle/ this is your gun/ this is for killing/this is for fun' as a soldier clutches his crotch and lifts his rifle, is an old rifle-training mantra my husband remembers from his National Service days. In Darwin during World War II the government girls' hostel and the nurses' quarters were known as 'Bulk Store Number One and Bulk Store Number Two' and were indented for rations: 'females, troops for the use of' (Lockwood 1960, p. 22). In my own service experience, airmen regularly raided the airwomen's quarters for our underwear; raised in darkness on the parade ground, it was displayed on the flagpole at the RAAF Base morning parade. Blatant sexism, sexual harassment and assault continues. Since the recent Skype Scandal, when a female member of the Defence Force Academy was filmed, without her knowledge or consent, having sex with a male colleague, more than 1000 people have 'made allegations of sexual abuse to a review panel set up by Defence' (Oakes 2011, p. 1).

Rape too, is historically accepted as a weapon of war,⁴ an acceptance starkly illustrated by the title of war correspondent Edward Behr's book, "*Anyone Here Been Raped and Speak English?*" (1982). Rape has been documented in recent history: the anonymous publication of *A Woman in Berlin* (anon. 1955) records the troops' ravage in World War II; the Rape of Nanking; and also in Vietnam. While feminist Germaine Greer's comment 'All soldiers in certain circumstances will rape regardless of whether they are ours or theirs or whoever's' (Daily Mail Reporter 2011) caused outrage in Britain, Cassandra Clifford documents the use of rape in thirty three countries and claims that in 'both a modern and historical context' it is evident that rape is used as a weapon of all armies (Clifford 2008, p. 1). I make reference to this in *Finding Sophie* when Alec tells Sophie of 'the villages burned to the ground – and everyone in them – or raped and butchered or blown to bits' (Campbell 2011, p. 115). Clifford demonstrates this powerlessness of women when she asserts that rape is also 'an issue silenced by suppressive governments, ignorance and fear. The idea that rape is a normal by-product of war, due to its continual use historically and currently, only perpetuates its use' (Clifford 2008, p. 2).

The 'dominant theme' of the feminist Anzac Marches to 'seek recognition of the violence perpetuated on women in all wars...' (Howe 1995, p. 304) was often dismissed by those opposing them. The repercussions of rape impact not only on the victim in psychological and physical terms, they also carry a gender and social stigma causing societal breakdown and leaves in its wake sexually transmitted diseases – in many cases intentionally – and unwanted children in orphanages. Rosemary Taylor's *Orphans of War* (1988), Barbara Ferguson's *Rain in my Heart* (2006) and Susan Terry's *House of Love* (1966) are detailed accounts of babies and children abandoned in Vietnam including those of mixed heritage, fathered by troops, and those orphaned by the killing of their parents. Maisie Davey recalls wartime Fremantle, 'When the ships were going back to America...you'd see all the girls running down with their babies – they were nearly all black babies – telling them

⁴ Clifford (2008) cites Homer's *The Illiad*, Giambologna's sculpture, *The rape of the Sabine Women*, the Old Testament of the Bible which includes 'Women are raped in Zion; virgins in the towns of Judah' and Zechariah 'For I[God] will gather nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses looted and the women raped...' and Genghis Khan 'The greatest pleasure in life is to defeat your enemies...and to ravage their wives and daughters'. Stanley (2010) records that members of the Australian Militia and naval reservists who occupied German New Guinea in World War I raped the women they called 'Marys'. In Vietnam other atrocities included the forcing and sometimes detonation of a grenade in a woman's vagina (Biedermann, 2004).

to take their so and so babies with them, they didn't want them' (Campbell, Rolfe & Clarke 1997, p. 49).

A shameful silence at the heart of society has always been the incidence of venereal disease (VD); Fallows indicates in Australia at the time of World War I, 12-15% of the population were infected. Medical examinations were intended to ensure that soldiers were not infected when they departed but many contracted a disease pre-embarkation, and every boatload of returning wounded included those with VD who were disembarked separately (Fallows 2002). Visiting a brothel was legal, but contracting VD was an offence which resulted in dishonourable discharge. Authorities were the first informed but families were left in uncertainty without income and unsure if their man had been killed (Stanley 2010). Since society regarded VD as a 'moral failing' rather than a disease, doctors too contributed to the silence: 'A Sydney doctor explained how he informed the wives of those infected: 'If it is gonorrhoea I say it is an infectious disease; if it is syphilis I say it is blood poisoning' (Stanley 2010, p. 33). After the war, women were blamed for their own infertility, since VD was seen as a women's disease – in London women were gaoled for infecting soldiers. Cairo in 1941 was an echo of the World War I behaviour when VD 'caused more deaths among the troops than dysentery, at that time the major disease in the Middle East'. However, later in occupied Japan, 4,500 of the 11,000 Australian troops were infected, and the same pattern of sexual behaviour was continued in Australia's involvement in Vietnam when Vietnamese women were considered 'fair game' (Fallows 2002, pp. 21-24).

During World War II young men, primed for fighting, faced an uncertain future and young women, equally anxious for commitment, responded to their needs, taking risks and making decisions they would never have considered had they not been 'living for the moment' in the uncertainty of war (Potts & Strauss 1987, p. 24). Australian servicemen married Australian women before departure, but they also married women in the countries where they were stationed and fought, a practice historically documented in armies for centuries. Queensland alone, with its population of 1.3 million was base for 1 million American servicemen; 'over-paid, over-sexed and over here', their unpopularity with Australian troops echoed the unpopularity of Australians in Britain during World War I for trespassing on local territory – girls. Women considering marriage were often unaware

of the difficulties facing them and divorce and desertion were very real possibilities.⁵ Australian servicemen in countries such as Japan and Vietnam faced racial discrimination and opposition from their superiors⁶. This is referenced in my novel:

‘What was her name, Alec?’ The question’s a whisper.

‘Minh Le,’ he murmurs. The lines of pain soften and I suddenly feel an intruder on his memories, but he speaks again. ‘We *were* married, in a Catholic ceremony, but the Army wouldn’t recognise it.’ He pauses for a moment, shakes his head slowly. ‘My beautiful Minh Le. I remember her belly warm and round with my child –’ (Campbell 2011, p. 118).

Despite the difficulties, a great number of these marriages were successful, fiancées and wives welcomed into both families and communities; however, as Carol Fallows documents, the hundreds of books written about war have paid ‘little or no attention to the thousands of women who migrated to Australia’ after our involvement in wars (Fallows 2002, p. ix).

The WAAAF, first and largest of the women’s services was formed in 1941 and, by the end of the war, WAAAF mustering numbered more than seventy different jobs with 700 commissioned officers. In all, more than 44,500 women served in the women’s services, excluding nurses (Women in Air Force: Royal Australian Air Force 2009); added to this number were those in the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD) who, with some medical training, also served overseas, in the Land Army and other roles, such as the Comforts Fund, which was considered more traditional. However, despite the critical role played by women, the perceptions of the unsuitability of females for demanding and responsible war work persisted. The Manpower Directorate⁷ was formed to redirect the labour force; all Australians carried ID showing name, address and occupation, but only women were required to also list marital status and age. When a WAAAF on duty reported the first Japanese submarine entering Sydney harbour her male superior stated, ‘You’re a woman. You wouldn’t know the difference between a submarine and a shark’ (*Girls’ Own War*

⁵ Australian/American brides did not gain US citizenship; they received no allotment from US Army authorities; could not accompany husbands to the USA; had no claims whatever on the USA; after the war a Court of Claims would decide on their possible admission to the USA; husbands would need to pay a large sum of money for wives allowed under the quota system (Potts & Strauss, 1987).

⁶ Fallows interviewed John H who fell in love with a Vietnamese girl. His captain took him outside and threatened to shoot him, claiming that the girl he loved was probably a Viet Cong spy (Fallows 2002).

⁷ From the first of April 1942 all engagement of male labour was controlled and a national registration of both male and female labour was completed. The government had the power to say what every man should do whether in the armed services, war industry or civilian industry (Australian War Memorial Encyclopaedia viewed 2011).

Stories 2011). Seldom recognised is the fact that women in the Australian Womens Army Service (AWAS) served in New Guinea, as did the Royal Australian Navy Nursing Service (RANNS). Although male hierarchy 'thought that the presence of Australian Servicewomen would have a civilising effect on Servicemen and boost morale' (Howard 1990, p. 156), the women themselves wanted to play a far more active role. AWAS too, 'played a key part of the chemical warfare experiments' which included being guineapigs of mustard gas despite its use having 'been outlawed as a weapon by the Geneva Convention' (Howard 1990, p. 148) and, with Army nursing sisters, were stationed at Cowra prisoner of war camp at the time of the Japanese outbreak.

My research indicated a plethora of male dominated literature about war but, in many instances, an omission of women's experiences. On a 1999 visit to the RAAF Museum, and remembering my WRAAF experience, I was astonished to find only one printed and framed reference to the WAAAF of WWII and no mention of the later WRAAF. It was reassuring to discover in 2010 that the WAAAF had been included but there was still no acknowledgement of the WRAAF. The museum had been in existence since 1977 and I had previously visited the old building which had women's uniforms on models on display – in fact a pennant of my own had been donated with other artefacts of that period. The silences were clearly unacceptable.

In most war narratives women do not tell their own stories or control their images but instead are often stereotyped. The problem with stereotyped images in war literature is that they are largely male representations.

According to Tillie Olsen in *Silences*, of writers who have been recognised as significant in our time only one in twelve has been a woman. It is not surprising then that female characters have been presented as stereotypes serving as foils, motivators, barriers, rewards and comforters to males who actively pursue adventure and their own identities. From a male perspective the central and most desirable characteristic of female characters has been their passivity. (Ferguson 1986, p.6)

Patsy Adam-Smith addresses the effects of war on women at home and in the services, their families, and the changing roles of women. Her aim is to honour 'the brave, modest, forgotten women' and to record 'the many instances of endurance, devotion, bravery and self-sacrifice' (Adam-Smith 1984, p. vii). Similarly *Minefields and Miniskirts* is for me

the definitive text for women's experiences during the Vietnam War. Siobhan McHugh's polyphonic text is a broad representation of women's experiences which acknowledges the importance of women voicing their own experiences: 'Sometimes I felt like a therapist, as the women explored traumas and tragedies; they emerged fresh, while I felt emotionally exhausted' (McHugh 1993, p. x). Each voices a different era and evokes the attitudes to and by women of that time, moreover each demonstrates an understanding of silence, and its impact, when women's stories fall into the gaps and slippages of male war narratives. This is an impact feminism has been working to address:

Power – the power to name oneself, to be a speaking subject rather than the silent object of someone else's ideas, formulations or images – means agency. And clearly, the restoration of subjectivity, voice and agency to those who have not had it is a crucial project of feminism... (Tucker 1994, p. 20)

The reasons for the women's silences in the face of the 'hero myth' are complex: 'The unspeakable stories may mean many things: the inability to articulate feelings, the repression of certain memories, the silences imposed by power elites, the refusal to speak for whatever reason' (Cerne 1997, p. 30). In his biography of Australian Nancy Wake's experience as a resistance fighter with the French, Peter Fitzsimmons (2002 p. 3) wrote about 'the trust she displayed in me by telling me things of which she had never spoken previously'. By the time he published her story there had been two previous books about Wake's life, Russel Braddon's biography, *Nancy Wake* in 1956 and Wake's autobiography, *The White Mouse*, in 1985. And yet some forty plus years later there were still some aspects of her experience she had not spoken about. In my recordings of oral histories, the older the interviewee, the more willing they were to speak the full truth of their experiences, giving voice to silences not previously revealed to even their families. Nancy Wake's 'trust' may have been the freedom of age.

In her book *Silences*, Tilly Olsen claims: 'Not to be able to come to one's truth or not to use it in one's writing, even in telling the truth having to "tell it slant," robs one of drive, of conviction; limits potential stature; results in loss to literature and the comprehensions we seek in it' (Olsen 1978, p. 44). However, those who know their own truths face challenges in telling it – loyalty to living veterans, the trauma still a very real and all-consuming part of their lives, an inability to voice the experience and also, for many, the sense that only soldiers have the right to write about war.

It appears that until late in the twentieth century women's stories/experiences were not generally heard, and author Marcia Tucker makes a pertinent observation when she writes:

Thought of as singularly female...the uninscribed language of the anecdote, story, oral history...as well as the more "trivial" forms of women's poetry, verse, autobiography, diary entries, personal correspondence and such – haven't been of much interest until very recently, and have virtually no market beyond a small number of specialists. (Tucker 1994, p.18)

Contributing to this silence is the fact that many of these important stories are written by women late in life. They are often self published and many, through the lack of editing and marketing are not enticing, particularly to young adults, since the language often lacks immediacy. Jackie French wrote her sensitive *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (2008) generations after World War I; a novel such as this requires empathy but distance and a closer recognition of young readers. There is no doubting the challenge of writing about these experiences.

Plato wrote, 'Only the dead have seen the end of the war' over two millennia ago, a statement that families, and the veterans themselves, have verified. Though silence and alcohol, traditional attempted remedies for the after-effects of war, are documented through generations, information about these mechanisms of escape is not readily available to young people. As novelist Coetzee argues: 'Until we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story' (cited in Rabalais, 2008). Three recent plays, Bernard Clancy's *Foxholes of the Mind* (2010), Hoa Pham's *Silence* (2009) and Kate Mulvany's *The Seed* (2009), speak much of the 'unspoken' of the Vietnam War. Clancy addresses the damaging effects of PTSD on veterans, their families and society – he includes a female nurse in his cast. Hoa Pham addresses the silences in three generations of Vietnamese women, and Mulvany includes the effects of Agent Orange in veteran's children.

As part of the Anzac Appeal in 1919, widows and children of servicemen were 'exhibited' in the streets of Sydney. A man in the street commented: 'Good God! Is that what the war has left us?' (Adam-Smith 1984, p. 80). Gillian Nikakis, daughter of a civilian prisoner of the Japanese in Rabaul, who disappeared without trace, vividly evokes a similar response in *He's Not Coming Home*, the story of her search for knowledge of her

father's war experience (Nikakis 2005). For families such as hers there was no resolution of grief and, for many, their anguish lasted a lifetime. Families of the dead suffered grief of loss; families of returned men suffered a different loss; men who returned were changed men, the wounded feeling emasculated because they were no longer the virile men who departed.

Women too, were changed, particularly after the Vietnam War when, as Ann Curthoys (1995, p. 338) concludes, 'gender and sexual identities in the decade from 1962 to 1974 were in the process of transformation'. The passive female who Garton (1995, p. 200) claims was expected to 'make sympathetic responses and sexual readjustments' for repatriated men had transformed into an independent woman. The family unit which had become a 'home front war zone where the war against the war [had been] played out through verbal, emotional, and physical violence' (Coates 2011 p. 124) now suffered the repercussions of readjustment and the effects of wounds, both physical and mental, making women, too, victims of the war. A booklet for children of Vietnam veterans, *I Thought It Was Just Me* (Leslie-Adams 2000), guides a child through repercussions of a father's PTSD, completely ignoring the fact that a mother could be a sufferer after her service in Vietnam. In 1992 Patricia Ferguson, an Australian Army nurse, became the first Australian female to be awarded a TPI pension (Crowe 1997, p. 125). Veterans faced a lengthy struggle for recognition of PTSD,

First World War veterans privately endured their NYD conditions...and then failed to acknowledge the same afflictions in their sons after the Second World War. Veterans of both wars, represented by the political influential Returned Services League, shunned the Vietnam vets as medical experts began acknowledging that NYD is actually PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder. (Daly 2010, p. 45)

There has also been little recognition of the birth defects in their children from the effects of chemicals and the high rate of suicides in both veterans and their children⁸.

Finding Sophie exemplifies how the aftermath of wars reverberates for generations as it does in reality: each of the characters portrays effects from a long history of war, and

⁸ The *Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: Suicide in Vietnam veterans' children (Supplementary Report No.1)* 1998, reported that the rate of veterans' suicide was higher than that of the general public and the suicide rate of veterans' children was three times higher than that of other children (Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs).

when Mai, the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, writes to Sophie she raises the issue of secrets and changes in generations of her family in both Vietnam and Australia:

We are north of Ho Chi Minh City...We are crowded into a tiny house (it has mango trees, yum-yum) with aunts, uncles and cousins...so many rels and so many stories! Secrets no one's talked about in years, and I never dreamed of. My heart aches for all they went through and could never tell because they were afraid of repercussions. So much to tell you – and Alec too. (Campbell 2011, p. 156)

The Australian Anzac legend was founded on the young colonials' celebrated manhood with no recognition of the stories of the women. Since silence makes truth of the lie, unless women speak up they are tacitly complicit in enforcing the myth. It is this premise which underpins the relationship of the women in *Finding Sophie*. Sophie questions, and while her mother and maternal grandmother give voice to the myth, Gran in contrast speaks of events, demonstrating the power of sisterhood and nurturing, a relationship which allows her granddaughter Sophie to see the ripple effects of silence.

'Gran...' There are so many questions I want to ask – Was Alec a conscript? What did he do in the Army? Is his back the result of a war injury? How long was he in Vietnam? But Gran is too upset and I can't interrupt.

'And then when Alec came home...' She closes her eyes and bites her bottom lip. Her hands are clenched together; her red nails a sharp contrast to the white of her knuckles. 'He wouldn't talk to me, Sophie. My brother, and we used to be so close. He wouldn't talk to anyone. He came back here to us and it was terrible...' She looks at me; her voice is almost a whisper, almost as though she's talking to herself. 'I was trying to help.' (Campbell 2011, pp. 70-71)

This narrative is an exploration of the outer and inner world and, as the female voice gives life to the women's stories, authenticity of my own experiences of war adds authenticity to the text.

Women's stories validate women's experiences and provide a balance in war narratives; their importance in young adult war literature cannot be dismissed. Their inclusion creates a balanced rather than narrow perception of war and its repercussions and provides a vehicle for young readers to understand, through their immersion in literature, facts and perceptions neglected or omitted in male accounts. Set in texts in the school curriculum, and in the research students are required to undertake, these fictive and non-fictive accounts are an opportunity to give voice to the silences. In presenting facts and

previously ignored events in Australia's history, they would offer young readers, our future decision makers, a more inclusive understanding of their world.

Chapter Three: Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature is often regarded as less important, less serious and less worthy than adult or children's literature, and its authors are often equally less acknowledged.

First recognised as a separate category from children's and adult literature in the 1950s, young adult literature, aimed at a 12-18 year old readership or, in some definitions 12-21, is still dismissed by many as 'a great abyss between the wonderfully exciting and engaging materials for children and adults' (Vandergrift 2008, p. 1) or 'adult lite' and somehow not legitimate (Owen 2003, p. 1). However, a study of this category reveals that its importance to readers of this age group and within both the publishing industry and education cannot be dismissed.

Mary Owen, a respected school librarian argues young adult literature offers to young adults something that adult fiction does not: an understanding of themselves and the world in stories with a sense of immediacy and focusing on a teenage protagonist (Owen 2003). The creation of awards by the Children's Book Council Australia, State Library of Victoria and others, reflects the growth of popularity of Australian young adult literature, and my study supports Owen's claim that in the literature available to youth today, 'no topic is off-limits' and the 'format of young adult stories is now more diversified than ever' (Owen 2003, p. 2). Often a coming of age narrative, this literature can assist young people in developing a greater awareness of self as the readers and characters face the same challenges and, while not always providing an answer 'even the discussion of personal events from one's own life in response to a literary text is, in one sense, an implicit acceptance of the assumption that literature illuminates or instructs actual life experience' (Vandergrift 2008, p. 4).

However, it must be acknowledged that these conclusions are drawn by adults. While young adult literature has a valid place, its readership is not necessarily in the age group claimed. In a study 'to examine the connections that readers make to fictional works', conducted by Professor Adrian F Ashman of the University of Queensland,⁹ of the readers

⁹ Professor Ashman's paper on his study of 130 Year 10, 11 and 12 students, in equal numbers of male and female and from private and state schools, reported the results of two general research questions: 1. What knowledge do young adults have of their interactions with books? 2, What are the outcomes of recreational reading? (Ashman 2003).

between 15-18, all read adult fiction; one began reading adult literature in Grade 3. In discussing authenticity, one student commented: 'They [YA books] lack a lot of meat to the story. They're all the same and I find them really unrealistic...about things they do in them and the issues they bring up...they over-dramatise what it's like being a teenager'. In responding to issues and themes, another student noted: 'Young adult books talk down to you. You want to read about something through the book and then make your own decision, by yourself'. Another complained of the teachers' lack of understanding that young adult literature was no longer appropriate reading: 'We have to read some of these [YA novels] in school. It's pointless. There's nothing in those for me. It's something that I already know. You can't learn anything in there' (Ashman 2003, pp. 6-10).

Nevertheless, Owen asserts that Australian authors have made a 'significant contribution' to the genre acknowledging Nimon and Foster's claim that Australian young adult literature is 'distinctive' in its relation to Australian experiences, its myths and landscape and it raises for its readers' questions of identity having 'the effect of maturing the personal and cultural psychic of what it means to be Australian' (Owen 2003, pp. 1-3). Reflecting on the 'longer-term influences' reading literature has 'on the individual's thinking' (Ashman 2003, p. 3), and encapsulating my purpose in choosing the subject matter for *Finding Sophie*, Charles from Year 12 maintained: 'Sometimes when you read a particular thing, you stop and think about it. You go into in-depth thoughts in your head and it really makes you question everything you've ever been told' (Ashman 2003, p. 10).

In reality young men and women who fight or have fought in wars are close to the age of young adult readers. Young men lied about their ages to enlist in WWI, Jim Martin being the youngest recorded at fourteen (Hill 2001). The current minimum application age for joining any of the services is sixteen years and six months; cadets are eligible at twelve years six months, and children over ten are invited to register for a Defence Jobs Membership which gives access to 'the latest member only games, competitions, media and news' (Defence Jobs 2010, p.1). Today the military is a more professional service; young men and women *choose* to join the defence forces and are not conscripted as many were for Vietnam and New Guinea¹⁰ but this choice does not always prepare them for the

¹⁰ In 1943 a bill was passed that soldiers in the CMF were obliged to serve in the South-West Pacific Area which was Australia, New Guinea, the Philippines and the Netherlands East Indies (Australian War Memorial Encyclopaedia).

reality of fighting and the impact that will have on their families and themselves. Pertinent war literature may be one way to inform young aspiring soldiers of the realities of war. Owen (2003 p.1) states that 'reading allows people to examine issues at their own pace and it is in this role that fiction poses its greatest potential to educate' and class novels ensure that all young people read. However, as Pam McIntyre (p.19) asserts 'the challenge is to make studying rich and appealing, rather than asking comprehension questions'.

The Centre for Youth Literature's findings are reassuring that despite the changes brought about by modern technology 'young people claim they read for pleasure no less frequently' (2001 p.1) and Ashman's study is conclusive in demonstrating both the importance of literature for young readers and that fiction written for young adults is for many a useful bridge between children's and adult literature. The ages in that transition vary, just as the maturity of the young readers varies. A key understanding of this is Kay Vandergrift's claim that the perceived maturity is 'only at a surface level' and 'young readers need a great deal of time for the distancing and reflection possible through literature' (Vandergrift, 2008 p. 1). Nimon doubts 'any definitely clear differentiation' being possible:

For surely if there is a function for the young adult novel, it is to provide a link between children's books and adult books whereby the reader may progress smoothly from the reading of childhood to that of maturity without jarring transitions from one stage to another...any clear border is likely to prove a barrier that must be leapt; and at any such barrier some will baulk and fall. (Nimon & Foster 1997, p. x)

This premise underpinned my writing of *Finding Sophie*. However, young adult fiction is often introduced to young readers by adults, most often teachers, and for some, their only exposure to literature is that which is included in the school curriculum. Terry Hayes, in his article published in the on-line journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), claims that the 'plurality, diversity and inclusiveness' in the text lists was retained with the change to VCE in 1992, but acknowledges it 'brought with it a re-focusing by the self-styled guardians of culture and education and a firm censorship which shifted its emphasis from morality to worthiness'. When a community in Geelong became outraged at the inclusion of excerpts from Louis Nowra's *Summer of the Aliens* and threatened to sue, despite the fact that it had been included and performed throughout Australia in previous years, 'the text was discreetly removed from the recommended list'.

The media coverage of the incident resulted in the Department of Education setting guidelines for the selection of set texts, which as yet have not been tested. Hayes asks, when authors such as Christos Tsiolkas and Sonya Hartnett push the boundaries in their work, are listened to by teachers, read by young readers, and their writing is spoken about, 'but not officially', 'can we as educators start pushing the boundaries to include them as part of 'legitimised curriculum'? And if so, how? And when?' (Hayes 2010, p. 2). As Sue Page argues, in her questioning of Holocaust information presented to young readers 'Writing is, as Orwell says, a political act...adults 'own' the knowledge and therefore have the power to make decisions about what information will be distributed to children and adults' (Page 2008, p. 7) This also raises concerns about how decisions are made, and by whom, in relation to texts that challenge the 'hero myth'.

In 1977 Eric Bogle claimed in his 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' that someday no-one would march in the Anzac Parade, at one stage a commonly held belief. Now a growing number of children and families attend both the parade and the dawn service; Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, Vietnam Veterans' Day, are acknowledged at schools throughout Australia. The educational facilities and publications of the Victorian Shrine of Remembrance and the Australian War Memorial, the government funded resources of books and DVDs through the Departments of Veteran Affairs and Defence, which are now used as part of the school curriculum, all reinforce the military importance of our history. They focus on Gallipoli for its positive aspects of Australian culture ignoring that 'it's important to distinguish between history and mythology' (Lake et al. 2010, p. 138). Teaching manuals from the Shrine start with the *Early Years Program: Loyal Friends*, suitable for students in Prep-Year 2, which begins 'This program identifies important values by looking at the service of animals during wartime and peacekeeping through the story of Simpson and his donkey' (Education Early Years Program 2009, p.1). There is no mention of the wounded and killed horses, the distraught soldiers who were left to shoot their horses and dogs, the pigeons lost and destroyed in the carnage or the dogs blown up when walking the minefields. While graphic details are not suitable for small children, surely it is possible to present a more balanced view. The larrikin hero image is celebrated, and older students learn of mateship, bravery and fortitude that should not be ignored. However, they do not learn the negative aspects of war.

The secondary school winners of the Simpson Prize¹¹, one from each state and territory, visit battle sites in France and attend the Anzac Day Dawn service at Gallipoli. My study of the winning and runner-up entries from 2001-2009 reveals an echo of the educational publications with words and phrases including 'heroes', 'sacred', 'birth of our nation', 'sacrifice for our freedom', 'new nation which had spilled blood to protect itself', 'Australian manhood'. However, especially in the more recent entries, it is reassuring to note students who read more widely and were critical of the myth:

Before being asked to write this essay I was a firm believer of the widely accepted version of the Anzac story. After relatively small amounts of research, however, I found that my beliefs, influenced largely by brief encounters with film and media, had not delved very deeply into the facts of the matter, but rather were merely products of brief assumptions made from ambiguously presented information...Australians take Anzac day very seriously, although most of what they commemorate is merely a biased nationalistic account of only moderately important events. (Vindin 2003, cited in Simpson Prize)

The 2010 essay topic was: *Are there voices missing from the Anzac legend?* Prime Minister Julia Gillard mentioned student responses of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Anzacs, submariners, clergy and war correspondents. Once again, women were not included.

A range of young adult Australian war fiction covering WWI and WWII has been written by male and female authors. French's novel *Soldier on the Hill* (1997) explores WWII attitudes, and her *A Rose for the Anzac Boys* (2008) is a sensitive exploration of the experiences of three young women facing the horrors of the front line in WWI and their coming home changed by the experience. She uses letters as a successful fictive device and her author's note is an excellent factual background:

This book is also the first one where I have thought, I don't know if I should keep writing this. I don't know if anyone should read it.
This is a grim book. It is based on letters and diaries that make even grimmer reading. Much of the time, reading and writing, I was in tears hearing the voices of so long ago. (French 2008, p. 264)

¹¹ Funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and administered by the History Teachers' Association of Australia, The Simpson Prize directs Years 9 and 10 students to the Gallipoli experience as the foundation of their research. Essay topics include 'We will remember them. How and why have Australians commemorated the ANZAC experience' and 'Gallipoli was a turning point in Australia's history. Assess the impact of the ANZAC experience on Australia and Australians since 1916' (Simpson Prize, ATSSSE 2010).

Researching both Australian and Vietnamese literature, I understood her response and was often relieved that *Finding Sophie* was a story subverting the traditional war narrative.

There is, however, little Australian young adult fictive narrative addressing Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. Fiction with both male and female protagonists has been written by British, American, New Zealand and authors of other nationalities for young adult readers, although many are now out of print. Australia and America have different relationships with Vietnam and different experiences of the Vietnam War; my research indicates Australian young adults' notions of the Vietnam War, its myths and repercussions, have been shaped selectively by mostly American fiction, and by predominantly male authors. A small number of novels by Australian male authors including Michael Hyde's *Hey Joe* (2003), Michael Bauer's *The Running Man* (2004), Brian Caswell and David Chien's *Only the Heart* (1997) and Steve Tolbert's out of print and almost impossible to locate *Settling South* (1995), cover a breadth of Vietnam War themes: conscription, post-traumatic stress, refugee experience and Vietnamese family life in Australia. Liam Davidson's *Red Haze* (2006) is an excellent non-fiction book addressing the Vietnam War but all of these works contain a limited inclusion of women's and families' experiences.

Australian women authors dealing with the Vietnam War are few: Rushby's *When the Hipchicks went to War* (2009) is a refreshing contribution, a naïve sixteen year-old go-go dancer's reality check when she travels to Vietnam to dance and sing for the troops; Ruth Starke's *Noodle Pie* (2008) focuses on the Vietnamese experience in Australia; Jenny Pausacker's *The Diary of Jan Packard* (1974) and Kirsty Murray's *Walking Home with Marie Claire* (2003) explore Australia during the changes of the seventies. Libby Hathorn's *Valley under the Rock* (1993) gives reference to the war. Feminist author Joanna Russ considers a part of the 'nightmare' suppression of women writers is that in many instances 'women's lives are the buried truth about men's lives' (Russ 1994, p. 119); *Finding Sophie* is my attempt to unearth a portion of this 'buried truth'. Like Pausacker and Murray, I have set my novel in Australia, but in a different time and with a different understanding of the Vietnam War.

Australian young adult novels do explore the theme of war, however, many of these novels deal with the past of great or great-great grandparents, a past which is far distant from

today's youth. The Vietnam War, however, is still part of the present; many families are living with the repercussions of the Vietnam War, but for young readers there is mainly American young adult fiction dealing with the Vietnam War which does not add to the story of what it is to be Australian. Young adult fiction, and other fiction that is accessible to young readers, can be an important and powerful vehicle for creating historical understanding. As Tom Jorgensen argues 'reading may impart a knowledge of cultural background...a counterweight to the bulk of the American culture children are subjected to' (Jorgensen 2002, pp. 28-30), and Owen confirms the importance of having our own young adult fiction:

Australian literature is 'designed to speak to its Australian young adult audience at a significant stage of their intellectual and emotional development asking them questions of 'Who am I?' and 'How are we formed?' (La Marca, p. 55) In addressing these questions it has the effect of maturing the personal and cultural psyches of what it means to be Australian. (Owen 2003 p. 4)

In a time when so many comparisons are drawn between Vietnam and Afghanistan, and Australia's involvement in Afghanistan is daily on television and in newspapers, it is important that there are opportunities for young people to learn about both, and particularly important to learn from an Australian rather than an American point of view. The blurb on the back of Patrick Lindsay's *The Spirit of the Digger* (2003) states that:

Those who fought in the trenches of Gallipoli, the Somme and Ypres have an immediate kinship with the Diggers who followed in their footsteps in North Africa, and New Guinea, and later in Korea, Vietnam, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

First person accounts from Vietnam veterans, both male and female, dispute that, as does Paul Ham who asserts 'The army cast them aside, like redundant draught-horses'. He records a member of the 8th Field Ambulance:

you were written off the records, and told very politely that if you weren't off the base in an hour, you'd be arrested for trespassing' and a returned national serviceman's response from the RSL "'Yours wasn't a war, mate! You didn't fight in the trenches. You were on a twelve month holiday'" (Ham 2007, pp. 560-564).

It is important, too, as Seal asserts (2005, p. vi), that while they learn of the ‘resilience, humour and courage of Australians caught up in situations of great peril and often profound loss’ they also learn about the political realities:

All nations suffer war, of course. But Australia’s wars have been especially significant in the proportion of our losses, especially during World War I, in the effect upon our national identity and in the fact that we have always fought in other people’s wars’. (Seal 2005, p. vi)

Vandergrift claims that stories have the power to take us ‘beyond the scenes we know’; they ‘connect us with people, places, ideas and events beyond our normal range’, furthermore, they are ‘useful in opening a dialogue’ between young people and adults (Vandergrift 2010, p. 1). Every religion, every culture, has its own powerful collection of stories to guide and inspire; my experience with oral history supports this. The use in local schools of my Werribee collection, *From There to Here* (2005), to teach socially relevant history, demonstrates the veracity of Vandergrift’s claim.

In a recent lecture at the Shrine of Remembrance, author Peter Stanley reminded the audience that young people are open to the truth (2010); it is no less than young people deserve. War is killing. Killing has repercussions. The repercussions of war reverberate through generations of men, women and children. Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country* (1987), an excellent American young adult novel addressing the issues faced by a Vietnam vet and his family, was at one time a set text for senior English in Australian schools. While it is pleasing to see the film *Paradise Road*, a film based on Betty Jeffrey’s *White Coolies*, included in this year’s VCE list, there are few Australian young adult novels. An abundance of personal accounts by Australians is available; however, fifteen years later *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (Edelman 1985), although poignant and thought-provoking, is another American non-fiction text set for VCE.

New Zealander Ken Catran’s series of young adult novels reflect his passion for history and research; the Moran story of four generations of soldiers through World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, provides a wide background of changing attitudes and beliefs; it demonstrates, through family involvement, the actuality and repercussions of war and the patriarchal and suppressive attitudes of the military. It is important that young readers have access to a range of war experiences and the inevitable

repercussions. Literature is a safe haven to accrue experience (Vandergrift 2010), a form that encourages questioning and self-reflection, so surely literature for young readers must be given the recognition it deserves. Moreover, as Larry Johannessen asserts, studying works such as these ‘may help students deal with the world they will encounter outside of school and as Fred Wilcox argues, “empower [them] to take responsibility for issues that affect their lives and the future of our planet”’ (Johannessen 1993, p. 5).

A significant aim in writing *Finding Sophie* was to exemplify Maya Linden’s proposal that ‘there can never be an “innocent text” devoid of political stance and statement’ (Linden 2005, p. 25), and the feminist agenda to voice silences were fundamental in writing the novel. Post-structuralism claims many truths in the texts, and as Pam Morris states: ‘Literature constructs a representation of that already existing reality by means of words...Language is the main means by which cultural values are recycled and sustained from generation to generation (Morris 1993, p. 8).

Finding Sophie is a narrative which includes a female protagonist, four other female characters and four male characters. A diverse representation of that ‘existing reality’ is included for young readers to draw a variety of meanings from the text, not the least being what reality I, as author, drawing from my own life experience, reflect through my writing. Annie Soter is quite clear about this ‘autobiographical’ content in literature when she writes that we might ‘seek to see in it evidence of authorial states of mind or stances adopted by the author in relation to morality; ethics, or political, cultural and social issues’ (Soter 1999, p. 6).

My novel could be read from a feminist perspective but my main concern was to write well-researched young adult fiction which addresses both the masculine and feminine realities of Australians at war. Soter draws from Showalter & Forsney when she states that ‘underlying all feminist criticism is the belief that women read, think, and act differently from men’ and acknowledges Koodny’s argument that ‘our reading still reflects the influence of the patriarchal system in representation of reality’ (Soter 1999, p. 33-34). Mem Fox reinforces this in her revelation that children as young as five on reading *Possum Magic* write to her referring to the female Hush as ‘he’ and states

It's alarming to consider that by 5 years of age children mentally enforce a sex change in a literary female protagonist because they find the idea of an active, interesting, and respecting female character simply unthinkable...We have the power to change "gender appropriate" behaviour and attitudes, yet many of us seem blind to the opportunity. (Fox reprint 1996, pp. 172-173)

Young adult readers grow beyond the traditional 'happy ever after' and the 'ultimate triumph over evil' and, for authors, 'striving to enhance a reader's reflectiveness is far more important' (Nimon & Foster, p. xii). Moreover, it must also be considered that each reader interprets the text through their own experience. Fictionalising history, giving voice to its silences, is a way of regaining the past and allows young readers to 'perceive events through modern eyes' (Alexander 2002, p. 1); in first person, with a young protagonist and present tense, it offers an immediacy and, in novels such as *Finding Sophie* with a background of war and its repercussions, allows the reader to gain 'a sympathetic understanding of the pain of others' (Nimon & Foster 1994, p. xiii).

Theorists debate the importance of literature and all its underlying issues. When Ashman conducted his study with young readers he posed a question: If you were going to write the all-time best seller, what would it be about? The group burst into derisive laughter. Year 12 Aaron's response captures the essence of what I think literature really should be:

You don't aspire to write an all-time best seller. You write what you feel like at the time. Success is not equated with money. It's about what you want to write, or what you want to say, and what it says to the reader. It's really about communication. (Ashman 2003, p. 12)

Chapter Four: The Challenges in Writing *Finding Sophie*

Choosing to write a novel set in the past created several challenges, not the least of these being the fine-tuning of my research when there were so many threads leading to other areas of interest. The war section of my personal literature collection consists of more than 400 titles; added to these were journal articles, museum and shrine collections, and the easy availability of internet information. Which silences would I choose to break and how could I, without being didactic or preachy, make history relevant and enticing to capture a contemporary audience. How could I write a novel subverting the traditional war narrative and address the paucity available in this genre written by women? How could I contribute to the validation of the importance of women's experiences of war and their writing to represent and record those experiences?

I have worked with, and written for, young people for many years and I believe that a novel is an ideal way of informing without being didactic. It can assist a young reader to make sense of a sometimes confronting and disturbing world and of past events impacting on their lives. Author and analyst, Clarissa Estés confirms this:

Stories are medicine...They have power; they do not require that we do, be, act anything – we need only listen...stories engender excitement, sadness, questions, longings and understandings...stories are embedded with instructions which guide us about complexities in life. (Estés. 1992, pp. 15-16)

In a review article discussing the relationship between fiction and knowledge, Andrew O'Hagan (2011, p. 17) writes about how fiction can breathe life into factual contact, 'Among the things historical fiction does is put words into the mouths of those too dead to speak them and project images from the eyes of lost witnesses'. It is this concept, and author Cynthia Leitich-Smith's (2008, p. 3) assertion 'you have to tell the stories that ignite passion within you' that prompted the writing of a contemporary story which appeals to 'now' but is linked to the past in flashbacks and surreal moments using the creative strategy of different voices and varying points of view. As author Goldie Alexander (2002, p. 16) asserts 'Nothing is easier to lose than the past' and the choice of a 17 year-old engaging main protagonist, who is on an emotionally involving and exciting journey of discovery, provides an opportunity to inform young adult readers and to reclaim a sense of integrity for participants in the Vietnam experience.

While young adult literature usually has a young protagonist, my reading of this genre and studies in Professional Writing and Editing demonstrate that the elements of character, plot, setting, style and theme are no different from those of adult fiction. The essential emotional experience also applies:

John Knowles and Arthur Miller are in agreement on a number of things. Perhaps the most important is that literary experience is primary, literary analysis secondary. "I think a novel should be taken at face value first – as an experience", Knowles says. (Dunning & Howes 1975, p. 311)

Morrison too, asks: 'Am I committing heresy when I suggest that the function of an artist, no matter through what medium he [sic] works, is to move his audience emotionally?' (cited in McKernan 1989, p. 30). My reading of successful young adult fiction confirms this.

The best young adult fiction which creates a credible, well-researched narrative and engages the reader due to an active voice, realistic dialogue, authenticity and development of characters. To reach the reader, the author must be aware of the intense emotions of the young adult age group and make connections with them on the page so they can enter the characters' worlds. As Paul Jennings states 'imagination is the food of compassion' which allows us to 'put ourselves in the place of another' making us 'truly human' (cited in Ricketson 2002 pp. 4-6). In writing *Finding Sophie* I chose to use a number of fictive devices such as flashback, letters and a diary entry, all of which I hope will capture the reader's imagination, giving them access to the characters' internal worlds and by putting them in the characters' shoes so that they can have an emotional connection rather than remaining an observer viewing the action from a distance. For this novel, in particular, these creative choices serve a dual purpose: a satisfying emotional experience and an incentive for younger readers to question the many silences of war.

Another challenge in the chosen structure was the creation of a timeline to accommodate the ages and actions of several generations in addition to three wars. For example, most surprisingly the RAAF museum at Point Cook, I discovered, had been closed for a few years prior to being relocated. Its reopening in October 1996 required a reorganisation of characters' ages and the year in which the novel was set.

With the novel covering three generations, creating distinct characters and capturing the essence of each was an essential and challenging task. Characters are built in dialogue, body language, actions and reactions as well as physical description. The use of dialogue is popular with young readers; it ‘shows’ rather than ‘tells’ and immerses them in the immediacy of the present. They are positioned in the story with the characters; as witness to the social exchanges in *Finding Sophie* they feel the tension of the silences and actions accompanying the dialogue, the expression of the unspeakable.

Gran wrote herself on to the page; I could visualize her clearly, her bright red hair and painted nails, the ankle bracelet and the mice in balloons on the bathroom wall. Alec was shaped by men I know, people with noise in their heads and shadows on the soul ‘who have lived and almost died in the shadows’, men who had ‘sounds pushed back and down, just as enemy guns were often silent during the day. But again, in darkness, ... [are] exposed and sound becomes spectral’ (Jason 2000, p. 72). Rather than an information drop, I chose to include Alec’s response to helicopters flying over and just a mention of his nightmares and distant moods. I stole the basis of the fractured Granddad from my own life experience. Sophie needed to be well rounded and contemporary despite her parents’ treatment of her and her love for old-fashioned things and life on a secluded farm. A recovery from a recent illness gave her the vulnerability the character needed. As an older woman writing in the voice of a teenager, I am always conscious of the challenges this presents; I am fortunate to have willing young readers who provide feedback and a number of young people who I used as models of language and attitudes. One adult reader suggested cutting the first chapter, considering it irrelevant; young readers disagreed. When I was invited to speak to a Year 9 class on writing I read them a section of the novel and was reassured by their reactions, especially four students who had been in a similar situation and vouched for its authenticity and importance to the story.

Creating a believable Mai set a different challenge. Her letter is the voice of the young friend the reader knows only through Sophie’s recollections. Despite her physical absence she contributes a valuable perspective, a facet of the Vietnamese thread giving voice to repercussions of war. Her letter to Sophie hints at the silences and sorrow in her family, a sorrow Dang Troy Tram, a young North Vietnamese doctor working with soldiers, records in her diary, ‘The sorrow has seeped far into my heart like the relentless monsoon

rain willing itself in the earth' (Dang Troy Tram, trans. Pham 2007, p. 14). Mai is also a link to Alec. Mr Ng adds to this with his experience of war and the loss of his daughter. It is an opportunity to voice the silence about some soldiers' behaviour, both enemy and allied, during military conflict:

'In our village only women and children, old men. Young men fighting. Alec...we come together to village, bring present for children, Army food.' He pauses for a moment, still looking away from us, and I wonder what he sees...'No one to say who do this thing, who use knives and rifles, who torture them – women and children, old men. How can we tell? Only burned village and dead people with no voice.' (Campbell 2010, pp. 76-77)

My research revealed explicit accounts of atrocities, especially concerning women, but rather than including them, I considered it more appropriate to encourage the readers' own questioning. Atrocities are usually attributed to the enemy, but Alec's recollections differ:

The streets and that bloody jungle crawled with fear. Even the villagers didn't know who to trust. And I'm telling you, Soph, you think My Lai was one of a kind. Not on your life it wasn't. And we were just as much to blame as the Americans. Just as vicious when it came to fighting old Charlie. (Campbell 2010, p. 117)

While the novel is set in 1997, young people reading today do so with the contemporary understanding of military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Returning soldiers are granted accolades and respect from the Prime Minister and Defence Force; the media coverage of the returned dead ensures that their heroism, whatever the cause of death, is acknowledged Australia wide. This was not always so (Winter 2003). Australia's involvement in another country's war is still not universally accepted by Australian people, but no opposition and bitterness has equalled that pertaining to the Vietnam War. *Finding Sophie* reminds young readers of this when Alec speaks to Sophie about his experience:

Alec's face is dragged into lines of almost unbearable pain. 'Ah, yes, we were saviours. Until we came home and they spat on us and threw blood at us. Protestors lining the streets shouting abuse at us, calling us baby-killers.' He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. 'And Bethie was one of them. We were no different from my dad and his mates – we were soldiers doing a job – but they were heroes, and they wouldn't even let us in the RSL'. (Campbell 2011, pp. 117-118)

The decision to ‘show’ in dialogue and actions rather than ‘tell’ allows for a more compelling narrative that I hope will engage young readers. For a generation distant from the experience, the dialogue allows me to highlight the divisions and hostilities within the Australian community during the Vietnam War. Gran has a different perception; to her, protesting was not a criticism of Alec, but of the war:

‘We saw pictures of the war – in the papers, on the television. It was terrible. I couldn’t think of Alec over there, know what was happening, and do nothing about it. It might only have been black and white TV, but it was graphic...’

‘And when the troops came home, did you...were you one of the protestors there when they marched?’

Gran looks at me steadily, without blinking, without expression. ‘You mean did I spit on them? Did I throw blood on them and abuse them?’...‘No, Sophie. How could I do that? They were men and boys sent by our government. I wanted them home with their families, to love and be loved, not over there, in an unjust war killing and being killed.’ (Campbell 2011, p. 123)

For the young contemporary reader, this dialogue exchange illustrates the complexity of emotional responses to war by many women, supportive of their men, but opposed to the politically instigated and un-winnable conflicts which may resonate with the present conflict in Afghanistan.

Acknowledging that many perceptions differ according to gender in writing about war and since young adult readers immerse themselves in the complexities of protagonists’ lives and decisions (Owen 2003), I aimed for the thesis novel to encourage a range of experiences. These are set amidst the repercussions of war on women and families through generations, however, despite the protagonist being female and the point of view first person, I also recognised the importance of presenting a balance of male and female perceptions and perspectives. Mr Ng’s acceptance contrasts with Alec’s bitterness:

Nothing’s lost on Mr Ng. ‘Your sister good lady,’ he says, suddenly serious. And so is Alec...

‘... if she could be persuaded to mind her own damn business.’

I’m stunned by the bitterness in his tone, and when I look at him, by the hard set of his jaw.

‘You her business, my son. You family.’

‘Yes.’...‘I know I should let it go...’

‘The past is other country. We leave behind us.’

(Campbell 2011, pp. 105-106)

Granddad's recollections of World War II are those of a small child and these are repressed by the trauma of his later accident during Gran's involvement in the Vietnam War; Mrs Browne's are flashes through her dementia. Each of these recollections, the letters and the locket, adds a layer to the understanding of the Vietnam experience and the repercussions of war.

The old writers' adage, 'write from what you know', influenced my choice of place which, although ensuring authenticity, also presented a challenge. For the protagonist, Sophie, Werribee is a place of emotional solidarity, of belonging, a place of the heart. Mai, too, understands this connection as she writes to Sophie from Viet Nam, home of her parents and grandmother who were refugee boat people, but not her own: 'We leave just before Tet and will celebrate at home. Home! What a wonderful word. Home in dear old Springvale' (Campbell 2011, p. 156). For her Australia is her 'heart place'. The challenge was description and inclusion of local history: how much was too much? Werribee is the place for generations of Sophie's family, but I could not dismiss the importance of Indigenous belonging and used this reference as an echo, a reminder of the loss in the local stories of the past: '...the Woiworung hunters speared kangaroos here, and down by the river there are still scarred trees, but the people have vanished, and only the tales of poisoned flour and massacres remain' (Campbell 2011, p. 5).

My collection of oral histories (2005) gave reference to the stone shelter from the Aborigines and included a background of local Indigenous history written by a Koori historian. It also provided a wealth of WWII experiences including: the plane crash into a Werribee South farm; the bombing range practise that almost killed a farmer; Italian farmers' internment; the harassment of the German shopkeeper; Changi and Australian prisoners of war, and the nurse whose colleagues were gunned down on Bangka Island with Vivian Bullwinkel. Could I include any of these narratives? I decided they were not relevant to my story. In dialogue I was able to include references to Manpower, the Comforts Fund, Land Army, Jim Cairns and the moratoriums, not as an explanation but rather as an encouragement for the young reader to search for meanings. Sophie makes reference to Kokoda; while commonly referred to as the Americanised 'Kokoda Trail', Track is used by Australian veterans who fought there (Fitzsimmons 2004 p. xii) and this validated the term I had always known.

Choice of the narrator's voice was quite deliberate, first person point of view is a popular choice in contemporary young adult fiction and I believed it was appropriate for telling the story and would draw young readers into the lives of both Sophie and Sophie Anne. However, since the novel is set in the past, language was an essential consideration and, while recalling speech patterns of young people in 1997 required only my own and my grandchildren's recollections, would present day youth consider this old-fashioned? It was important to find a readable balance. My research revealed an abundance of letters and diaries written by servicemen in World War II, in particular a young airman's letters home (Sullivan 1995); this enabled me to use the language of that time in the letters from Stephen to Sophie, and personal letters loaned by friends allowed me to check the correct wording for those opened by the Base censor. The letters and the flashbacks of Sophie Anne's life add to the immediacy of Sophie's first person, present tense narrative. The reader is with Stephen when he writes, 'When I come back, my dearest, I will buy you a wedding ring, but until then, Sophie, it's Nan's DEAREST ring that tells the world you are mine' (Campbell 2011, p. 134).

This love interest is engaging for young readers, as is the developing romance between Sophie and Tim; it too, is an echo of the past but contrasts with the darkness and tragic consequences and it contributes to the rising tension and mystery that hooks the reader. Melva's love for Alec is revealed as she takes him to the hospital. Sophie watches her speak to him in the ute: 'I can't hear the words, but I am stunned by the expression on her face, the tenderness in her eyes' (Campbell 2011, p. 62). Her love is never declared, another silence.

In the flashback of Sophie Anne's final moments the reader shares the terror and tragedy as Stephen, Sophie Anne and baby Jimmy drown in the swollen creek.

A roaring in my ears. Jimmy! Jimmy! A galloping black horse and a mad man. Stephen running beside the water, shouting.

Water surrounding us, swallowing us. Stephen jumping, splashing, reaching us. Stephen's arms thrashing against the water. Stephen holding us. Together. Together in the angry flood.

The blackness drags like a nightmare. I clutch at his jacket, clutch at Jimmy, clutch at air, but I'm going down...down...down...Jimmy. Stephen. The blackness tearing us apart... (Campbell 2011, p. 143)

This section is part of the climax. Recognising that letters and flashbacks were added devices for building believable characters, the challenge throughout the narrative was how much to include without revealing the story.

Gran, although having been involved in the Vietnam War protests, was like generations of women who supported their fighting men. Now, with the rest of the family she is suffering the silences and repercussions. Unlike Granny Sharlton, who treasures and honours a military history, Gran has remained silent. Reflecting the young generation's interest in Anzac Day, Sophie questions and stirs the guilt and shame over Granddad's accident when Gran was marching in a protest prior to Alec's return.

‘When Alec came home, Norman was still in hospital – been there for weeks. Greg was a little tacker and I was recovering from a miscarriage. Shock of the accident, I suppose.’ Her voice is flat, lifeless, as though speaking without expression can deaden the pain. ‘Alec wouldn’t speak at all.’ (Campbell 2011 p. 122)

Gran's revelation of her father's post-war silence, his lack of recognition of her mother's service, and his choice of RSL and mates over family, is another aspect of those generational repercussions.

Tran, a Vietnamese doctor in *Settling South*, tells the protagonist ‘Often people go to war...I think it is not easy to understand what war can do to people. Especially if you have not been close to it’ (Tolbert 1995, p. 76). My role as a storyteller is to assist in the reader's understanding, not only of those ‘close to it’, but also those caught in the ripple effect of its repercussions. Novel writing always presents a challenge, but an empathy with the characters, attachment to place and theme and the freedom to ask the question ‘what if?’ offer a writer a sense of fulfilment. Writing a fictional narrative set against a factual background with personal connections presents the same challenges, one being keeping distant my personal frustrations about the chosen issues and allowing the characters to portray them. However, my greatest challenge was choosing and including some of the truths about Vietnam. I endeavoured not to overload the narrative while fulfilling my intent of examining the impact of war over generations.

Conclusion

Previous chapters have illustrated the many silences in official versions of Australia's history of war presented to young adults: women at war; the impact of war on women and families; the truth of the training for war and the war experience; the Army's strategy to present only a favourable image; the censorship of the media; the hero myth; and the dearth of Australian young adult novels, particularly by women, set in the Vietnam War or dealing with its aftermath. This awareness contributed to my motivation for writing *Finding Sophie* which interrogates notions of male bravery by examining responses to AWL (absent without leave), conscientious objectors, shifting social attitudes and generational conflict. The text also voices the Vietnam veterans' question: Why were WWI and WWII soldiers proud to serve their country and welcomed home as heroes, but Vietnam returnees brought in secretly, 'embarrassed' by their service and labelled 'baby-killers'? (Gerster 1987, p. 252).

The Anzac legend and silences remain in the emotional ambivalence about war; statistics of war deaths and territory gain or loss are sometimes likened to a game of chess. 'At face value, war is about killing and dying' (Biedermann 2004, p. 3) and killing and death have repercussions. In civilian life, in all cultures, killing incurs a penalty, either death or imprisonment. In war, the killers, alive or dead, become heroes, slain soldiers met 'a warrior's death' (Nadin 2011, p. 4), airmen '...lived like hawks and poets and paladins and died the quick death of dragonflies...' (Merriman, cited in Waters 1945 p. 1). The continuing repercussions of war slip into the silences of generations, and the roles of women are shadowed by the accepted honour and bravery of *men* at war.

The echoes of war have surrounded me since I was a small child. Reading war literature and working with young readers motivated me to write *Finding Sophie*. As a teenager I read heroic narratives, predominantly masculine accounts of bravery, sacrifice and adventure; in that post-war era soldiers were heroes. Fiction and non-fiction and my own WRAAF experience reinforced that view. Later texts questioned this, as I did in my own writing. Young people's lack of knowledge of women's roles and of the Vietnam War strengthened my resolve. The scope of silences shocked me: Australia inviting itself, and Menzies decision, passed late at night without discussion in an almost empty Lower

House, to send troops to Vietnam (Sexton 2002, p. 54), Japan's offer to discuss a truce refused by Australia in 1944 (Connaughton 1991, p.1), the Japanese Kill Them All order in 1944 (Nikakis 2005, p. 154), and the repercussions of those decisions, evoked anger, horror and grief. Although the stereotypical attitudes towards women were no surprise since these were the experiences of my life, the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance's sixty years delay in completing a proposed garden with monuments and plaques paying tribute to women seemed excessive, as did the seventy years in the acknowledgement of Joan Turnour's code-cracking at Albert Park (Strong 2011, pp. 1-2).

In his article, *The Creative Writing Kaleidoscope*, Greg Nash discusses the role of the exegesis claiming that

The themes and discourses expressed in my creative outcome were much richer for the foundation work I completed in my exegesis in advance of writing the creative outcome...it led to me adjusting and adding elements to the exegesis to cater for directions the novel took that I did not pre-empt. (Nash 2011, pp. 4-5)

This was not my practice. I have been undertaking research for *Finding Sophie* all my life and at times found it difficult to put that aside. In the novel it was necessary to engage with the characters; I wrote the narrative first, but as my research progressed I continually added and adjusted both novel and exegesis until the conclusion of the thesis, continually reminding myself that the novel was an artistic creation, not an information drop. However, *Finding Sophie* was also a vehicle for giving voice to silences and for encouraging the reader's questioning. This objective is as Nash argues, 'every author writes with the purpose of progressing particular themes and discourses on to their readers with the intention of influencing their reality in some way' (Nash 2011, p. 3).

Researching for this thesis became a journey into darkness. According to Ghandi, 'When you know the truth, the truth makes you a soldier' (Scribd 2012, p. 4), and soldier I did become tracking through silence, the enemy territory, fighting for appropriate ways to expose those truths revealed. Even though I had knowledge in this area, as I did the research I discovered more silences. Repercussions of my research were nightmares; eventually I read romance at bedtime, using the lightness of 'happy ever after' to combat the darkness. My health deteriorated; the stress of my illness compounded the stress of what I learned in my research. I was forced to take two leaves of absence. At times my

family questioned my decision to continue but, as a writer, I have an ethical and creative responsibility to voice the silences and my commitment was to write through that to finish what I had begun.

One very satisfying aspect was my husband's response to my research; an ardent war narrative reader, he was surprised and shocked by the hidden truths I discovered, finally asserting that my knowledge of war is now greater than his. Another assertion reflected his masculine/soldier perception – 'You're turning into a feminist.' My focus has been on women's roles and experiences but I had never considered myself a feminist. I had always believed in the power of women, the rights of women, but the suppression of women's voices, the celebration of 'manhood' and the dismissal of the feminine, the sexual expressions of these views in the military and in war – my newly gained knowledge – sharpened my perceptions. Writing the novel was an opportunity to express my views.

The responses by young readers in Ashman's (2003) study and expressed in the Simpson Prize essays demonstrate the ripple effect of literature in their lives, both in the school curriculum texts and in their own reading choices. As one reader said, 'It's all about communication' (Ashman 2003, p. 12). Unless this communication is based on 'truth', young adults' understanding of the world is built from silence and lies.

Another silence I encountered in my research and in interviews for the oral history *From There to Here* (Campbell 2005) led me to an interest in local Italian families' experiences during World War II, a critical portion of Werribee's history. Issues of war, internment, discrimination and victimisation are still steeped in silence. As a result I have planned my next young adult novel to give voice to this silence within the community since I firmly believe that a truthful, and also engaging connection, with young readers about local relevant issues is imperative. The pertinent immediacy of a young adult novel is an ideal model of communication for me to explore cultural and historical omissions.

Writing this thesis was for me a freedom, freedom of expression in the novel and freedom to voice, with a background of research, truths about war and its repercussions from a female perspective. But that freedom did come at a cost:

A Voice in Darkness

*In time of war when truth is so precious, it must be
attended by a bodyguard of lies. Winston Churchill*

She haunted me with sadness in her eyes,
gowned in light she tried to speak of war –
Truth, silenced by a bodyguard of lies.

When politicians dared to theorise
and mangled bodies lay in blood and gore,
she haunted me with sadness in her eyes.

In killing spree that powers authorize
men who raped her branded her a whore,
Truth, silenced by a bodyguard of lies.

When women found the power to criticize
and protest songs at last became a roar,
she haunted me with sadness in her eyes.

She tried to speak in fictions men devise,
to raise her voice through gloried battle lore,
Truth, silenced by a bodyguard of lies.

In echoes of the myths, the battle cries,
the ripple-wounds bequeathed from war to war,
she haunted me with sadness in her eyes,
Truth, silenced by a bodyguard of lies. (Campbell 2011)

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