

THE GIRLS WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

# MING & FLO

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE



JACKIE FRENCH

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Angus & Robertson

An imprint of HarperCollins *Children's Books*

*I write my books on Dhurga land of the Yuin nation.  
I give my love and gratitude to elders past, who created  
the living larder and the beauty of my home Country;  
my love, respect and endless admiration to the elders  
of today, who give their knowledge so generously and  
profoundly to us all; and my love and confidence in the  
all the elders of the future. — JF*

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*'Men must work and women must weep'* is a  
quote from the poem *'The Three Fishers'*

by English poet, novelist and priest

Charles Kingsley in 1851.

*The first pub we come to,  
There we'll have a spree,  
And everyone who comes along  
It's 'Come and drink with me!'*

Lyrics from the traditional Australian ballad,

*Click Go the Shears*

*To Lisa, who changes the world in the  
thousand ways of a brilliant editor;  
and to Jack and Tom, always*

## PROLOGUE

*Ming gazed at the tiger. Its bloodstained teeth  
grinned at her. She lifted her skirts to run ...*

*But there was no escape.*

*Of all the stupid things she'd ever done,  
this was the worst. And all because of goat  
droppings ...*

# CHAPTER 1

## THE DAUGHTER OF TIME

*The deck lurched as the wrecked ship sank.*

*‘We need to use the goat droppings, sir!’  
gasped Jonathon.*

*Captain Cook stared at the young man.  
‘Goat droppings?’*

*Down in the hold sailors screamed as the  
water rose ...*

Ming Qong could feel the bite of the coral that had shattered the *Endeavour* on the Great Barrier Reef. She could even smell the goat droppings.

If only she *were* there ...

‘The dry droppings absorbed water to seal the sail



to the damaged hull so Captain Cook could get the ship to shore,' droned Mr Boors.

The class snickered at the word 'droppings', except for Kayla, who was texting under the desk, and Karuna, trying to balance a pen on his nose, and Tuan, who was reading the last page of the textbook. Again.

Ming sighed.

Mr Boors had a rare talent. Exciting history became dull as soon as he opened his mouth.

'Jonathon Monkhouse changed history,' said Mr Boors with no sign of interest at all. 'Without him Cook would have never returned to England. There wouldn't have been a British colony at Sydney Cove or today's Australia. Now if you all turn to page forty-five ...'

Ming's hand shot up before she'd realised it. 'Sir, why don't we ever learn about *girls* who changed history? I mean girls are changing the world right now, like Greta Thunberg and all the girls demonstrating and inventing. Where were girls at all the important times in the past?'

‘That’s a very good question,’ said Mr Boors, which was what teachers said instead of ‘Can we just get this lesson over with?’ ‘Can anyone suggest a girl who changed the world? Yes, Tuan?’

Be quiet, Tuan, thought Ming, exasperated.

Brothers! Especially twin brothers. *Especially* Tuan, who thought he knew *everything* about history just because they’d both read all Dad’s textbooks from when he did history as well as engineering at uni. Tuan liked the kind of movies where the pirates wore shiny leather boots. Pirates never wore shiny boots at sea because they’d have slid off the deck in the sloppy droppings of the animals ships had to take to sea just so people could *survive* ...

Ming imagined Tuan sliding off the deck in sloppy goat droppings.

Tuan flashed a grin at Ming. ‘It’s a stupid question, sir. Girls *couldn’t* change the world back then. Women didn’t even get the vote till last century. Girls in the past stayed at home or were servants or dairymaids and stuff.’

This is revenge, thought Ming. Last night

she'd caught Tuan watching that movie where the Americans captured the German Enigma code machine *months* before the US entered World War II. *And he hadn't even noticed they got it wrong till Ming had pointed it out to everyone in the boarding house!*

Mr Boors nodded absent-mindedly. 'Exactly. Now, everyone turn to page forty-five.'

Tuan sent Ming another grin, the same grin she sometimes saw in the mirror, just like she and Tuan both had Dad's Chinese-Vietnamese face shape and hair but blue eyes that had probably come from some Viking ancestor of Mum's — not that their mum had been around long enough to ask her.

Ming gazed around. Wasn't *anyone* going to come up with a suggestion? But the class were turning to page forty-five, except for Kayla, who was still texting, and Karuna, who'd decided to balance his history book on his head.

And the problem was, Tuan was probably right, even if he *had* told her to hush last week when she'd tried to tell the rest of the boarding house

how Mel Gibson shouldn't have worn a tartan kilt in *Braveheart* because tartan kilts hadn't even been *invented*, and blue face painting had gone out of fashion more than a thousand years before, not to *mention* the white car in the background of one of the battles. How could teachers allow schools to show movies that got stuff wrong like that?

Boarding School was Boring School. Except for Tuan her most interesting friends were all in books and lived at least a hundred years ago ...

Ming shut her eyes again, trying to let the whole of time seep through her mind. She could almost smell the centuries.

Oh, there were heroines and lots of queens, but had any one of them really entirely changed the world? And they'd all been a lot older than her. She focused as hard as she could. She *had* to find at least *one* girl who'd changed the world ...

'Brothers,' said someone with loathing, just behind her.

'Tuan's okay,' said Ming absent-mindedly. At least Tuan didn't call her Princess Nerd. She blinked.

Who'd said that?

Suddenly she realised the class was silent. No scuffling shoes, no droning voice. Even the traffic no longer muttered in the distance. Kayla's fingers had stopped and the book toppling from Karuna's head seemed suspended forever. Tuan was studying page forty-five, even though he knew what was on it just as well as Ming did.

Ming looked around.

The woman sitting on the windowsill just behind her seemed tall, though she wasn't, and old and young and both close and very far away. Her skin seemed more gold than tan and she wore a long purple garment and purple joggers, and held a mauve umbrella over her long silver hair.

And Ming knew her, even though they'd never met before. This woman had been with her, sensed but not seen, every time Ming imagined the past. 'You're ... History?' What am I saying? she thought desperately. This couldn't be happening!

'History's my brother.' The silver-haired woman sighed. 'He's okay too, just a bit too sure of himself.'

It's not his fault you humans only tell his side of the past. I'm Herstory.'

Ming shook her head. Had her brain broken? 'I don't understand.'

Herstory looked annoyed. 'Most people don't. Most people don't even *see* me. At least you can.'

Ming stared as the figure in the window crossed her legs in their purple joggers. This was no hallucination. 'What do you mean *his* side of the past?'

'Think about it! Ancient humans faced mammoths armed with bone-tipped spears — and the women hunted with the men,' said Herstory enthusiastically. 'People sailed on flimsy rafts to new continents or islands, and if there hadn't been women on those rafts, there'd have been no new humans. Who do you think baked the first bread? Bred wild red jungle fowl to become tame chickens? And we're talking girls too, not just women, because through most of human past women and girls worked together just like boys learned from the men.'

'Then why aren't girls in the history books?'

'Did you hear what you just said? *His* story. We've

had a long period of time in the most powerful parts of the world where men have controlled the way the world worked. Men have been the rulers, the property owners. Men wrote the history books — and they mostly wrote them to please kings or generals or male politicians.’

‘You mean they lied?’ People who lied about the past deserved to be trodden on by cockroaches.

Herstory shook her head, making her umbrella wobble. ‘No. They mostly just told only part of the truth. The bits they thought mattered. *History*, not mine.’

Ming glanced around the silent class, then back at the figure on the windowsill. ‘Why are you here?’

Herstory looked amused. ‘I’m always here.’

‘Why have you *appeared* now then?’

‘Because you called me.’

‘But I didn’t ...’ Ming hesitated. ‘Maybe I did.’

‘You longed to see a girl in the past change the world.’

Suddenly Ming realised she did, more than anything she could think of. ‘Can you show me that?’

‘Of course. On one condition.’

Ming tried not to bounce up to the ceiling with excitement. ‘Anything!’ she said enthusiastically.

‘You make a note of what you see. Everything you see that has been left out of all the history books you’ve read, all the “herstory” that’s been ignored. You write it down, all of it. Then you show it to everyone, including your brother — and I can show it to mine.’

‘Of course! I’ll write about *everything!*’ Ming could just imagine Tuan’s face when she told him where she’d been. This would be a billion times better than telling him about Braveheart’s fake kilt. What happened in the past explained the present. It *mattered*. ‘But how do I prove that I’ve actually seen the past?’

‘You don’t. But women’s stories are there, waiting to be found in old diaries, in letters, even sometimes in newspapers. Once you’ve seen the past, you’ll know what to look for. Write it as an essay, even as a story, just as long as people know that the things that happened in it were true.’ Herstory grinned. ‘Any



other questions?’

‘Why the joggers?’

‘Sometimes Time goes fast.’

‘And the umbrella?’

‘It’s going to rain some time. Ah yes, here it is.’ Herstory held her hand out the window to catch raindrops that scattered in a brief sunlit shower. She looked back at Ming, the drops in a small blue glowing pile in her hand. ‘Do you truly want to see the past?’

‘Of course.’

‘You’re not frightened by what you might see? The past isn’t always pretty.’

‘I’m not worried.’ Crocodiles, sword fights, the spears of advancing armies — Ming could face them all. She and Tuan had studied judo since they were seven. When other kids had been playing video games, they’d been bushwalking with Dad. And due to her education she’d know more than anyone she met back in the past. That had to help.

‘You should be worried. The past is — uncomfortable. Even the best of times lacked

things like phones. Or air-conditioning. Or safety from wolves or sabre tooth tigers. Dentists. Queen Elizabeth's rotting teeth ached most of her life.'

'Queen Elizabeth was wonderful!' Though she'd been almost old when she led England against the invading Spanish, banished from court or imprisoned when she'd been a girl.

'Queen Elizabeth still didn't have a dentist.'

Herstory looked down at the raindrops in her hand, then poured most of them out. The drops shone as they hit the ground, then evaporated.

Herstory looked back at Ming. 'These will give you forty-two days in the past to watch a girl change the world. You'll see but not touch. No one will hear you or see you either.'

'What?' Ming stared at her. 'No! I want to be *in* the past! I want to be part of it!' Watching things happen wouldn't be much better than a movie — more accurate, but boring too, because she'd have to watch people sleeping or cutting their toenails.

Herstory shook her head. 'It's too dangerous.'

'I can look after myself.'

Herstory looked amused again. ‘Against exploding volcanoes? Enemy bombs?’

‘Then send me where there aren’t any volcanoes or enemy bombs. Please! I want to *be* a girl who changes the world.’ Excitement trickled through her. She’d be a princess or an explorer. She could invent something incredible ...

‘I didn’t just mean there’d be danger to you. You’re going back to a time that changed the world. If the world isn’t changed, the present will be different.’

‘Then I might not be born?’

‘Possibly. All this ...’ Herstory waved her hand at the frozen classroom, Tuan, the cars stopped outside, ‘... might not exist either. Australia as we know it might not exist. I know what *did* happen, not what *can* happen.’

‘I still want to go.’

Herstory gazed at her, suddenly serious. ‘Very well, I’ll give you some Time.’

Suddenly Ming’s hand held two raindrops. Or Time drops, small and not quite blue, and not quite transparent either, as though Time might have been

compressed like ancient forests into diamonds.

‘Those are enough to *watch* six weeks in the past. Forty-two days, to see how a girl changed the world.’

Ming gazed at the drops glowing in her hand. ‘Why me?’ she whispered.

Herstory smiled. The sky seemed to ripple in a smile with her. ‘Because you’re a daughter of time, my dear. I always know my daughters. I always have Time for them too.’

Ming looked at her, suddenly suspicious. That sounded much too sweet. It didn’t *mean* anything either.

A daughter of Time? Ming didn’t think much of mothers. Her and Tuan’s mum had left soon after they were born. Dad hardly spoke of her. If Herstory thought of her as a daughter, why hadn’t she ever sent a birthday card?

No *proper* mother would make her daughter just *watch* the past, instead of being part of it. A mother who really knew her would trust that she’d make the right decisions and change the world, exactly as it should be changed.

Ming looked again at the two drops in her hand. Two weren't enough.

*Well-behaved women seldom make history.* Who had said that?

Raindrops still glittered on the sill. Or were they Time drops? Ming touched them gently. She half expected her hand just to feel wet. But instead the drops suddenly glowed like the ones in her hand.

If two were enough to see the past, would more mean that she was really there?

She scooped up four more drops.

'No!' Herstory slid off the windowsill and reached towards her, growing bigger all the time.

Ming grinned. Herstory really only did know what *had* happened. She'd never guessed what might come next. So much for thinking Ming was her dutiful little daughter.

Ming lifted the drops to her mouth.

## CHAPTER 2

### TIME TASTING

The corridor stretched forever, dappled with a million doors. Light came from everywhere and nowhere. Ming couldn't feel the floor with her feet, though she could see it, and when she took a step her body moved closer to the nearest door. The door handle was carved into a snarling face. She touched it cautiously.

Locked.

Had she come to the wrong place? Not to the past, but to ... to somewhere else, outside reality maybe? The air around her pulsed, as if with a gigantic heartbeat.

She crossed to the door on the other side of the

corridor and tried that. Still nothing. But she could hear sounds on the other side. An explosion and then another. People screaming ...

Maybe the doors led to different times and places. Maybe there was one that led where she was supposed to go.

Or perhaps after gulping down too much Time she'd be stranded here in nowhere forever, starving, dying of thirst. Or worse, *not* starving nor dying of thirst, but wandering always down an endless corridor.

The next door handle sneered at her with narrowed eyes. It didn't budge either, but this time she heard laughter and someone singing. There were happy times in the past too.

Another door. Another. Frowns, jeers, scowls. One door handle even poked its tongue out at her. Another, another, another ...

Some doorways were silent. Perhaps beyond them it was night. Perhaps everyone was dead. Or wearing headphones and watching computer screens. Or waiting silently with spears for an intruder ...

At the next door a small boy's voice said hopelessly, 'I'm hungry,' then he began to cry.

Ming pulled at the handle, ignoring its lion's teeth, though she didn't know how she could help the boy. She hadn't even brought her lunch with her. Note to self: always bring your lunch when walking through the past.

It was no use: that door was locked tight too. She forced herself to walk on.

She thought of Dad. Mostly these days Dad was a face on the video link, because flying both her and Tuan back and forth to the remote community where he was a mining engineer was expensive. If she failed to change the world, would Dad and Tuan disappear as well? She forced the guilt back, because there was nothing she could do about it now.

Battle noises behind this door, but not like the soundtrack of the movie Tuan had watched last night. This was agony no actor could imitate, the shriek of shells then a moment's silence before the screams.



She almost ran to the next door. The doorknob stared up at her, expressionless. Waiting. She reached it, expecting nothing.

It opened.

Ming tasted Time.

## CHAPTER 3

### ABOUT A COW

Time had a tang of iron and blood, of sunlight and darkness. Just like prunes: even if you never tasted them, you knew what they'd be like.

Suddenly she could feel an earth floor, warm against her bare feet, and heat, a dry heat that sucked at her skin. I'm in history, she thought triumphantly. Or Herstory. I'm not just looking in ...

She gazed around. A hut with a stringy-bark roof, a doorway with no door, two beds, two chairs made of branches, a battered table, some shelves and a fireplace with a black pot steaming over the coals, and nothing else at all.

Her next thought was panic.

Where was she? *When* was she?

It's 1898, she thought, and this is the colony of New South Wales. The nearest town is two day's walk away.

And how on earth do I know that?

I just do, she thought to herself. I know I'm Flo Watson.

She ran over to the mirror. Her own face looked at her, dark hair pulled back in a plait, blue eyes. But her hands were scratched and callused, and her school uniform had changed to a dress that was faded to no colour and patched at the armpits, and her feet were bare.

And I know things Flo knows, she thought, like how Flo and Ma had painted the hut's walls pale yellow with a mix of sour milk and cow manure.

And I know I'm not wearing any underpants. I don't even *own* any underpants, or any underwear at all.

Okay. Not a princess then. Maybe a heroine who saved —

The screamed cracked the silence. 'Flo! Come and

help!’

‘Ma!’ Ming found she used the name automatically. ‘What’s wrong?’ Was she going to save someone’s life already?

She began to run, then skidded to a stop. The afternoon sunlight streamed brighter than she had ever known, as if the sun had laid claim to the whole world.

Because the land was dust. Red dust, rising to a road that was dust too. Dusty gum trees. A garden of limp vegetables: potatoes, cabbages, pumpkin, corn. And down by a murky pool a skinny cow struggled in a ring of mud. A skinny woman with hair pulled back into a bun tugged at a rope around the cow’s neck.

‘Move, you stupid beast!’ the woman yelled. ‘Bring her a carrot, Flo, quick! She’s going to drown herself in two feet of mud!’

Ming hesitated in the doorway. What was Flo’s mother going to think when she suddenly had an Asian-looking daughter? Ming had written an essay only last term about how Australia had tried to deport

all the Chinese and Polynesians in the 1890s under the White Australia policy that lasted till 1973. She might even scream when she saw a girl who looked Chinese appear from the hut!

‘Flo! Get a move on! I can’t hold her back much longer.’ The woman’s accent sounded sort of English, but not quite.

She couldn’t let a cow drown. Ming ran to the vegetable garden and pulled at a bunch of leaves.

A carrot appeared. It wasn’t much of a carrot: stubby and wrinkled and the size of her thumb. But the cow gave a sudden hopeful moo as Ming held it up. It gave itself a mighty heave, then staggered out of the mud, its legs red with clay, then clomped over to Ming.

‘Oh thank goodness. I’m covered in mud too.’ The skinny woman grinned at Ming. She didn’t seem to have noticed any change in her daughter’s appearance at all. ‘Good thing the queen isn’t coming to tea. Give us a hand out, pet. This mud is like glue.’

So this was one reason why Flo’s mother hadn’t demanded to know why Ming was in her daughter’s

dress.

Ma looked as Chinese as Ming herself.

Okay, *this* was something the history books didn't mention, thought Ming smugly, holding out her hand. The colonial settlers were all supposed to be British! Maybe other kinds of people, not just girls and women, hadn't been mentioned too ...

The cow chomped the carrot in two mouthfuls, then looked hopefully for more, while Ma filled a bucket of water from one of the barrels that stood under the roof to catch dew or rainwater. Now she was closer, Ming saw one of Ma's eyes was swollen and bruised, almost shut, as if someone had punched her. The other eye looked red and irritated, from dust, or maybe from washing in dirty water.

How well could Ma see?

'You're safe now, you daft animal. It was my fault though, Flo.' Ma stroked the cow's nose. 'With all the ... trouble ... with your pa this morning I forgot to fill her water trough.'

Pa? Flo's memory showed a man who didn't look Chinese. He had a red face, brown hair and eyes as

blue as Flo's. He only showed up every year or two when he was passing by to another shearing shed. Flo and I could be twins, Ming thought in shock, as she thought of how Flo used to look at the reflection of her blue eyes and dark hair in the now dry creek. The man only showed up every year or two when he was passing by to another shearing shed.

And Flo and Ma were glad he didn't come home more often. Because the man called Pa was always drunk, offering a beating with his belt 'for all the stuff you've done while I was away and couldn't see it'. The man called Pa had punched Ma in the face this morning because Ma wouldn't tell him where the tin was. The man had grabbed Flo's hair ...

And then Ma had told the man that the tin was hidden behind one of the chimney stones. The tin with the last of their money, the wedding ring Ma took off so it didn't get damaged while she worked, and a brooch Ma's aunt had sent her.

Ma hugged her. It felt good. 'Don't worry, pet. Pa won't be back for months at least, maybe a year or more. He might even send a money order after the

next shed if he doesn't drink it all,' Ma added with desperate hope.

Ming remembered the song they'd learned at school: *Click go the shears, boys, click, click, click*, all about shearing. She remembered the last verse too, about when they'd finished the shed.

*The first pub we come to,  
There we'll have a spree,  
And everyone who comes along  
It's 'Come and drink with me!'*

They teach that song to kids, Ming thought, gazing at Ma's swollen eye and feeling sick. But no one tells us the reality behind it. That's a man's song. While the men sing that, the shearers' families are ragged and hungry, left in farms of rock and dust while the men looked for work.

'Why is he always drunk?' cried Ming.

'Oh, pet,' Ma hugged her again. 'Your dad drinks because his body aches after the shearing. He drinks to forget. And when he sees us he's ashamed and that makes him angry. He drinks to forget he's ashamed too.'



But that didn't excuse him beating Ma or Flo. 'You can't just forgive him like that! He *hit* us!'

Ma looked at her strangely. 'Your pa doesn't do anything ten thousand like him aren't doing right this minute. That's the way the world is, pet, just like the poem says, *Men must work, and women must weep.*'

Ming stared at her. At least in the future we know it's wrong, she thought, even if men still make excuses sometimes or blame the women.

Ma managed a smile. 'Come on. We'll treat ourselves like queens for a while, eh?' she said stoutly. 'How about a potato cake tonight with our stew? We've still got some sugar. Even Queen Victoria can't eat better than potato cake and rabbit stew.'

Rabbit stew? Ming gulped. She couldn't eat a bunny! When did pizza come to Australia? she thought desperately. But no one would deliver pizza out here ...

Something moved towards the cow's water trough — a dog, creeping on its stomach.

It wasn't much of a dog either: the size of a skinny football, mostly skin and fur. It glanced at Ming with

golden eyes.

‘That dingo pup is hanging round again. Get out of it, you yellow blaggard!’ Ma bent to grab a stone to throw at it. ‘That water’s for the cow.’ The dog scampered off behind the hut.

Ma smiled, properly this time. It was like the world had suddenly washed its face. ‘I’ve never seen a dingo that small. Maybe its pa was someone’s lap dog.’ She managed a grin, showing gaps in her back teeth. ‘What do you say to climbing the hill with our dinner to watch the sunset? Even your pa can’t sell our sunset,’ she added with the first hint of bitterness. ‘And ... and tomorrow we’ll take that blue petticoat of mine and make a new skirt for you.’

Ma laid a work-rough hand on Ming’s. ‘Don’t worry, pet,’ she said, just a little too brightly. ‘There are all the rabbit skins on the fence in the far paddock. Your pa missed those. We’ll sell them to Mr Ahmed next time he passes. That’ll give us flour and sugar enough to be going on with. Now let’s dig up those potatoes.’

Flo’s lucky to have a mother like this, thought

Ming, as Ma bent down to scrape away the soil around a potato plant with a rough wooden trowel. A mother who hugged you.

Three things happened all at once. A narrow brown snake's head lashed out of the potato bushes at Ma. Ma screamed. The dog leaped from behind the hut and grabbed the snake, flung it high, then jumped on it again.

'No!' Ma stared at the two red dots on her arm. 'Flo,' she said carefully. 'Go get the knife. And the Condy's crystals.'

Knife? You didn't use a knife for snakebite.

But Ming found herself already running, her feet pounding.

The knife lay on the table where she'd chopped the vegetables. The Condy's crystals packet was on the shelf.

Once again Ming ran.

Ma sat in among the potato plants, holding her arm. The tiny dingo crouched to one side, chewing what had once been a snake.

'Ma, are you all right?' Maybe this was how

she was going to change the world, Ming thought breathlessly. She'd save Ma's life, and Ma would take care of Flo, and Flo would become ...

But Ming couldn't think of any famous Florence Watsons. Maybe Flo had changed her name when she married. Ming crouched down next to Ma, but instead of giving her the knife, used it to cut a strip from the hem of her dress.

'Flo, what are you doing? Give me that knife!'

'We've got to bind up your arm to stop the poison travelling through your lymphatic system.'

'My what? Has all the upset addled your head?' Ma grabbed the knife, then swiftly cut along the puncture marks on her arm. Blood seeped. Ma squeezed, so the blood flowed faster, then took the packet of Condyl's crystals and poured a generous amount onto the wound.

Ming stared. That definitely wasn't what you were supposed to do for snakebite!

'That should do it,' Ma said breathlessly. 'The poison will have washed away, and the crystals will soak up the rest of it.'

She had to call Triple Zero. Immobilise the limb. Keep the patient still till the ambulance arrived ...

And none of that was possible. ‘Ma, please may I bandage your arm? Just lie still.’

Ma glanced at her, half scared, half reassuring, and nodded. ‘Just as you like, pet.’ She waited as Ming bound the cloth as tightly as she dared from the fingertips up towards her shoulder. Then Ma pushed herself to her feet.

‘You’ve got to lie still!’ cried Ming.

‘When I’m on my own bed, I will. It’ll be dark soon.’

Ming glanced around. The shadows crouched from trees and tussocks. The dog had vanished, taking the snake with it.

Ma gazed at the horizon. ‘Storm coming,’ she said. ‘No rain in it, I reckon, more’s the pity.’ She managed a weak smile. ‘I think we might do without the potato cake tonight, pet.’

‘How do you feel?’ asked Ming tentatively.

‘A bit shaky. Lend me your shoulder, Flo, love. It’s the shock,’ said Ma. ‘I need a cup of tea, and no

mistake. You put the kettle on, pet.'

'Yes,' said Ming breathlessly. Dad said brown snakes killed quickly. And did blind strikes, where no venom was injected. Surely Ma wouldn't be able to walk if the snake had truly poisoned her?

Ma looked pale by the time they reached the hut. But she still breathed easily as Ming helped her lie down. Then Ming lifted the stew pot off the fire and replaced it with a blackened kettle.

'Dinner's not burned dry?' asked Ma anxiously.

'No, it's fine.' Ming put two heaped spoonfuls of tea leaves into the squat brown teapot, then poured boiling water on top. Her hands worked automatically, knowing what to do. A heaped spoon of sugar, but no milk, because the cow was dry ...

Ma sipped thirstily, keeping her injured arm at her side and holding the cup in her other hand.

'Ah, that's better.' She handed the cup back to Ming and lay down again. 'You need to eat, pet.'

'I'll serve the stew.'

'Not for me, lovey.' Ma closed her eyes, breathing shallowly. She grimaced, in what Ming recognised as

pain. ‘Flo ... Flo, my darling,’ she said quickly. ‘You have to read the letter.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The letter in the tin box. The one from your Aunt McTavish. I ... I never told you about her, Flo. I should have, but the family cast me off when I married your pa ...’ She began to pant with the pain.

‘Ma, we have to get help!’

‘What help is there? Just your aunt. You have to read the letter, Flo!’

‘Of course I’ll read it. I’ll get it now.’

‘No. Just hold my hand. Promise me you will be safe.’

‘Ma,’ cried Ming, terrified. This couldn’t be happening. Ma was everything Ming imagined a mother should be. ‘Ma! Ma, please, don’t die!’

‘Promise you’ll read the letter,’ whispered Ma.

‘Yes,’ said Ming. And suddenly she knew what she must say, because Ma was loving and brave and deserved so much more than dying of snakebite. ‘I’ll read the letter, Ma. And I’ll be all right. I promise I’ll be all right! But don’t die!’

‘Heartache,’ whispered Ma. ‘Every time your pa left, there was heartache. But not like this. My heart hurts, Flo.’

Ming put her arms around the thin body. Ma suddenly seemed as fragile as cake crumbs.

‘I thought my heart would break, first time your pa went shearing. He was a good man once, Flo, before the drought and then the drink got him. He never married me for my money, no matter what people said. Never think you weren’t born in love. Promise me you’ll read the letter? I ... I should have let you read it before. I should have sent you away. But, oh, Flo, I couldn’t bear to part with you. Promise ...’

‘I promise, Ma,’ said Ming quietly. She kissed Ma’s good hand fiercely. ‘I promise I’ll be safe.’

Ma managed a smile, then gasped again. Her mouth stayed open as her body arched and shuddered, then lay limp upon the dusty mattress, her eyes staring at the shadow-shrouded ceiling.

Ming stood in shock for a moment. She had never seen anyone dead before. She reached out a shaky hand and pressed Ma’s eyes shut, then gazed around



the hut in rage at the unfairness.

But there was no one to yell at, except the dog, or dingo, lying across the doorway, a gold smudge in the shadows.

Ming hesitated, then covered Ma's face with the rough calico sheet.

What was she supposed to do now? You phoned the ambulance when someone died, or the police, and then funeral people came and ... and did all the rest.

But there was no phone. Flo's memory held no local police station, no ambulance, no hospital, not even any close neighbours, and certainly no funeral parlour.

Ming would have to bury Ma by herself, tomorrow. But how? And tell *someone*. But who?

She sat on one of the rough chairs, unable to eat, trying to think. Herstory had warned her the past was dangerous. She hadn't listened, hadn't even understood. Judo couldn't protect you from snakebites. Knowing that World War I would break out in sixteen years didn't help when you were all alone in a hut in the dust.

Was she even supposed to be here? No one could change the world from a drought-bitten selector's farm. Had the extra drops taken her to the wrong place?

Would those extra drops keep her here forever? And what would that 'forever' be like, if Flo Watson was supposed to change the world, and Ming Qong didn't do it?

It was growing dark. She quickly checked her bed for snakes in the last of the daylight. Flo had a nightie, but Ming couldn't bear to undress. She slid between the rough calico sheets.