

**THE
SERPENT'S
SKIN**

ERINA REDDAN



**PANTERA
PRESS**

Praise for *The Serpent's Skin*

'*The Serpent's Skin* is a deeply satisfying book of quiet power and dignity. I loved the sparse poetry of the writing, and the punchiness and strength of this novel's voice.'

Christos Tsiolkas, *Damascus*

'*The Serpent's Skin* is a powerful, gripping read, with a cast of complex, satisfyingly original characters. Erina Reddan has written a rich, memorable Australian novel.'

Graeme Simsion, *The Rosie Project*

'With *The Serpent's Skin*, Erina Reddan has lovingly crafted a fast-paced and timely novel tracing the consequences of a family suffocated by mystery, unquestioned power and grief. Erina pays tribute to women who refuse to bow to the secrets of the past by gifting us JJ, a tenacious spirit who not only seeks the truth no matter the cost, but uncompromisingly searches for the depth and bravery of her mother's love, of women and their truth, over any ties to patriarchal expectation. This is powerful storytelling.'

Sarah Schmidt, *See What I Have Done*

'Wonderful. Achingly poignant and real, with a page-turning story and characters to break your heart.'

Toni Jordan, *Fragments*

'A powerful and insightful novel that illuminates how secrets stay buried within families, and the bombs, sheer strength and bravery required to stand up to male power.'

Sarah Macdonald, *Holy Cow*

'A perfect jewel of a book, captivating, rare and precious. The dark beauty of *The Serpent's Skin* twists its way into your heart, refusing to let go until its devastating but triumphant conclusion.'

Elise McCredie, *Nowhere Boys*

'... the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.'

Audre Lorde

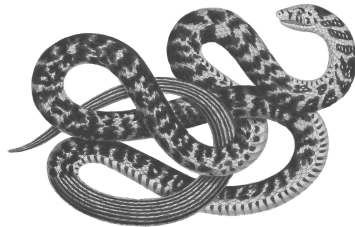
PART I

BURIED

1968

The past is never where you think you left it.

Katherine Anne Porter



THE BEGINNING

Dad said she'd gone. I didn't reckon. I reckon she'd had enough, all right, but she couldn't be *gone* gone. Mothers didn't take off. Not any of the mothers I knew. And not my mum. She was too set on yanking my hair into twisty plaits, no matter what I might or might not have done to make her go.

Philly said Dad wouldn't lie. 'Dad hates sin more than he hates the devil.'

'Shut your gob and go to sleep.' I jammed my arms behind my head and got my eyes busy counting cobwebs on the ceiling. You couldn't keep ahead of those spiders.

Philly jumped up in her flannel jarmies. Even in the moonlight I could tell Mum'd ironed em. Those jarmies made me bloody mad. I flung back the blankets and bolted to our chest of drawers, the chill of the floorboards nipping at my feet. I ripped open Philly's drawer. She had her clothes in piles like soldiers, all squared up.

'Get your filthy hands off my stuff,' she said.

'Your PJs are dirty. I'm getting you another pair.'

‘You’re a lying snake in the grass, JJ.’ She pushed back the covers and was on all fours.

‘It’s on ya collar—bleedin great stain.’

She twisted her head, plucking at her jarmies, like a maggie, over and over at the ground for a worm. She gave up and launched herself at me, roaring. At nine, she was only a year younger, but so little, I caught her scratching hands easy. She pushed her face into mine and hissed like a cat.

We both stopped, listened. Normally, Mum would be belting down the passageway, floor vibrating, yelling at me to stop riling up Philly again. But this time there were just the rats scratching about like nothing had changed on their side of the wall.



There was no Mum the next morning, either, rushing into our room with a big wind: ‘That Jack Frost—had the bug in him last night. Jump up and see if you can catch him at it!’

I was awake already without Mum, though. I poked my head over the window ledge. Out past the three pine trees in front of our place there was nothing but paddock after paddock, all silver and emptied over with frost. Inside it was all shivery bitey. Philly had a whimper up about how icy itchy her chilblains were. So I picked up the big warm wind Mum would have made and blew it all over her, dashing her and our school uniforms to the fireplace in the lounge. At twelve and thirteen, Tim and Tessa considered themselves too big to complain about a no-changing thing like the weather. I stabbed at the ashes in the grate for a spark of leftover orange hot from last night’s fire.

'Bloody damn!' I said.

'You'll go to hell.'

'Least it'll be hot.'

Philly clapped her hand to her mouth and made full moons with her eyes. I dropped the poker with a big racket to cover over her shriek, in case Dad thought about thundering in here. The freeze shivered us up as we ripped out of our pyjamas and into our polo tops and tartan skirts. Philly folded her jarmies so the buttons were in a dead straight line down the front. I balled mine up to shove under the pillow.



It was all tight around the breakfast table. Tessa had Mum's apron over her school uniform. Mum always said it didn't matter that the big yellow sunflower with all its joy on the front had worn gone—we knew it was there and that's what counted. The apron was too big on Tessa because she was skinnier than most, but she'd wrapped the straps around and around so they were strangling into her like flat snakes across her belly. She'd got our bread turning brown in the toaster, put out Vegemite and poured milk into plastic cups. Mine was purple like irises. Mum said when I was a kid I wouldn't have any other colour, so the others had to stop fighting me for it. I guess that was after she showed me irises in her book and said they were named after the Greek goddess who carried messages across the rainbow between heaven and earth. A bit like me, she said, cause I sometimes knew more than I should, and where I got that knowing she didn't know but it had to be heaven. I'd made little teeth marks on the side of my cup where I gnawed when

I wasn't eating my vegies but pretending I was getting ready to. I settled my teeth into those marks now. They were a bit of warmth in the shiver cold.

Tessa seemed taller today. Her hair already ribboned up. Just as shiny careful as when Mum did it. Had that brave girl look on her face. I wanted to smack it right off. Dad patted her hand when she put his toast on his plate.

Wished I'd got Dad's toast for him.

Dad didn't say anything about Mum. Hunched right over, eyes all high beam on his plate. Tim beside him, carbon copy.

'You right to go to school?' Philly asked me, with a chirp like a bird. Her pixie face above her pink cup. No teeth grooves. Tessa looked up sharp from the sink, like she'd forgotten something and it was a stab in the guts to her.

I pointed at my school uniform to show I was going whether I was right or not.

'So all better?' said Tessa, pretending she hadn't missed a beat, smoothing her apron over the front of her just like Mum did.

'Who wouldn't be after spending a day in bed reading?' said Tim, his spiky crew cut slicked over neat with water. He dropped his eyes straight back to his plate, though. He didn't have it in him to go full pelt on me this morning. He had the toast to his mouth but could only get a nibble in. Still, he was getting through it. It was almost like he expected Mum to come racing through the door with the chook eggs in the collecting tin, rousing at him for leaving food on his plate.

'What would you know?' I said. 'Never read a book in your life.'

'You don't either—just baby stories.'

'Do so. Read *Alice in Wonderland*—the whole book yesterday.'

‘Not sick at all, then?’

‘Was so.’ I jumped to my feet, kicked backwards at my chair. It skidded across the floor and smashed into the cupboard. There was a ghost of a grin on Tim’s face. Dad slammed his fist against the table. ‘Pick that up,’ he roared without looking up.

I had my fists tight, tight, and the blood inside me was spurting like hot milk through the pipes in the dairy. But Tim stopped grinning. Looked away out the window, and just like that the red whooshed out—leaving me just as empty as a wrinkled old balloon skin.



Tessa kept checking out the window for the bus on the far hill. She smacked Mum’s hairbrush against the bench like Mum did. She should just try to use it on me and then she’d see. Philly jumped good and proper, though, every time, like when Mum was at it.

Tessa got Philly out the door and started her off down the track to where the bus stopped for us on the road. I sprinted out after them, but before I got too far I peeled away to the back verandah to check on the joey. Tessa shouted after me but I didn’t bother yelling back.

Tim was already there, hunched over the joey, dipping the tip of the rag into an old tin of milk and sooking it at her mouth. But she kept her black button eyes looking straight, like her head was too heavy to move. I bent to cosy the towel around her and push the clock more against her tummy. We were trying to fool her into living by pretending the ticking was her mum’s heartbeat.

'You should talk to Dad about where Mum's gone,' Tim said.

'No, you should.'

A crow flapped to rest on the nearest strainer post. Ducked its head to the side and gave the joey a good looking at.

I pushed the cardboard box with the joey in it snug to the wall. Pulled the scratch of the torn towel over it.

'Anyway, won't do no good, he says he doesn't know,' I said.

'She'd never just up and leave. You gotta ask him again; reckon he knows something more than he's saying.'

I thought about telling Tim it was all my fault, but I reckoned she'd call or maybe even come back today so then I wouldn't have to.

'You're older,' I said.

'You're his little shadow.'

'You just want me to be the one who gets the backhander.'

He squatted forwards, pulled back the towel a bit and reached under to tease the milk rag around the joey's mouth again. 'I'm just saying,' he said.

Tessa's voice yelled for us to hurry up or we'd miss the bus. I got to my feet.

Tim stroked the joey's nose with the back of his finger, not going anywhere.

'Bus, Tim,' I said.

Not a muscle.

'If we miss the school bus, you'll get what for from Dad. He won't be driving you all the way to Chilton.'

Still nothing.

I grabbed him by the back of his jumper and hauled. He fell backwards, but jumped up straight away, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. He scooped up his bag and took off, leaving me for dead.



Just before lunch, Mother Gabriel's cracked voice came over the loudspeaker calling: 'Tim McBride, to the office.'

I screwed the lid on my ink bottle real quick and opened my desk to shove in my maths book and ruler. I sat there, fists opening and closing, just waiting for that bell. You never heard Tim's name over the loudspeaker. Mick Watson, Shane Smith, the two Farrell brothers, sure. Tim liked setting everyone else up to get boiled hard in hot water, but he made sure to keep his own toes dry as dry. So him being called up like this must've had something to do with Mum.

Reckon Philly thought the same cause she was waiting for me as soon as I got out of the classroom door. Clicking her fingers over and over. 'Why'd they call Tim and not Tessa? She's the oldest.'

I grabbed her hand to stop that clicking. 'Cause he's the boy.'

We raced to where only kids in trouble went, pulling up short under the head nun's window, making sure we were plenty out of sight. Philly danced from one foot to the other.

'You'll wet your pants again. You should have gone to the toilet.'

She shook her little squeezed-up monkey face.

'Look. If Mum is really in there, you know I'll make her wait for you while you go,' I said.

Philly put her hands on her hips and bared her teeth at me. I gave up and let her stay. We turned to the office, screwing up our eyes like it would help us see through the wall. I snuck

around to the door to look through the keyhole. Philly was just about inside my shoes, she was that close behind.

The door sprung open and we startled back. Mother Gabriel was as wide as the doorway, what with her habit sticking out all stiff, on top of her being fat. Philly's little fingers bit into the back of me and I put my arms by my sides to make myself so big Mother Gabriel couldn't see her.

'You.' Her stubby finger was pointing straight at me. 'Get the Strap.'

I knew where the Strap was.

I took a step back as if to leave, but I was trying to get a look around her into the office to see if maybe there still was a chance Mum was in there.

'You'll have that Strap on the back of your own legs in a minute,' Mother Gabriel warned.

I had to get going then. I motored Philly behind me fast so she couldn't be seen until we got around the corner. When I let her go Philly scuffed my head with the back of her hand. 'Should have asked if Mum was in there.'

I didn't answer, just got hold of her jumper at the elbow and towed her back to my classroom. Philly was too scared to come in cause kids weren't allowed into classrooms at lunchtime. I raced up to the glass cabinet at the front where Sister Peter hung the Strap on a nail where it could keep an eye on us.

Philly gave me a 'what took you so long' look when I got back outside. I thought about taking a detour to the toilet block so she could get it out of her but, one: Mother Gabriel was waiting, and I didn't want to make her any madder; and two: even though I knew what I knew, there was still a chance Mum could be with her.

Mother Gabriel was right where we'd left her on the step outside her office. She took the Strap and tested it against her hand.

'Has Tim McBride arrived yet, Mother?' I asked, brave as brave, thinking it was one of the Farrell brothers about to be on the business end of that Strap and still wondering what she wanted with Tim.

'Elizabeth Jane and Philomena Anne McBride, get back to your own playgrounds or it'll be you two next.' She cracked the Strap against the door of her office. 'And do that ribbon up properly, Elizabeth. You're a disgrace to St Francis Xavier's.'

We stumbled over each other backing away from her and getting around the corner. We leaned against the wall, Philly shaking, me pretending not to.

'She knew my name,' said Philly, all moon eyes again. I didn't answer, and it took Philly a few seconds to catch on that whatever Tim was called for it had nothing to do with Mum.

'Toilet. Now.' I yanked at her jumper and pulled her upright from the wall.

But we heard Mother Gabriel's grunt and the whack of the Strap. In the distraction Philly twisted away. I got back hold of her again.

Then we stopped.

It was Tim.

We knew the sound of him trying not to cry.

I let go of Philly's jumper and charged around to the office door. I jumped that step and raised my fist to bang on that door. Tim must be feeling real bad about Mum leaving if he'd let himself get caught at something.

Philly flew at my back to stop me, her arms swung around my neck, but I shoved her off and sent her spinning into the

dirt. I banged that door right open. Mother Gabriel's backside and all the layers of her habit filled the room. She was hunched over, thrashing the Strap onto Tim's bum. She swung her arm back to lay into him again. Bent over a chair, Tim lifted the back of his arm to swipe at his eyes. All the sorry for him balled up in me and I launched myself dead at her. The shock of the extra weight on her arm turned her right around. She shook me off, her face all red and animal.

I stumbled back, hit the statue of Mother Mary holding baby Jesus and sent it smashing to the ground, and went down after it. Mother Gabriel stood over me, panting like she'd been out after the cows.

'You,' she had that finger stabbing at me again, 'I'm not surprised at.' She swung her veil back from her shoulders with a great heave, pushed her sleeves further up her arms. 'Tim McBride.' She was speaking to him but her eyes were square on me, not blinking. 'I'm done with you. It's your sister Elizabeth's turn.'

Tim looked from me to Mother Gabriel. I scooted on my bum away from her boot.

But she got to the door before I could get anywhere near it. 'Get up off the floor,' Mother Gabriel said to me. She flung the door wide for Tim. Yanking her head to Philly outside. 'Get your sister to the sick bay,' she told him. 'Change of underwear.'

Tim didn't move an inch. Nothing but his eyes: at me, at Mother Gabriel, at the door.

'The shame this one is to your father.' Mother Gabriel whacked the Strap on the filing cabinet, still panting. 'Elizabeth's got the devil in her. Now go away while I get him out of her.'

Tim threw me a sorry with his eyes before he took off out the door. Mother Gabriel slammed it closed after he'd gone. She scratched her neck, keeping her eyes right on me.

'Clean up the broken mess you've made of our Sacred Mother,' she said to me.

I gathered some of the biggest bits, got to my knees and on to my feet, the back of my neck prickling up under her spidery stare.

Once I clattered the pieces into the bin, Mother Gabriel finally peeled her eyes from me, giving me her back.

Then came the sound of the door locking.