

FIRESTONE

1

KAI

Fire Trance

The first time it called my name, I was halfway up the seven hundred stairs from Bogliasco village to our campsite. The voice was soft, barely a whisper in the wind, but something about it ignited my curiosity and made me sprint to the top for a better view. When I stepped onto the landing at the summit, lungs burning and legs shaking, the voice called again, louder and closer.

“Kai!”

Panning my eyes left and right, then over the tiny rooftops more than a hundred metres below, I spotted a huge bird racing toward me. It soared beyond the town, above the breakers of the Ligurian Sea, travelling so fast it covered the half kilometre between us in seconds. Even without my glasses, I could tell from its wedged shaped wings it was a peregrine falcon. The bird squawked again, and there was no doubt the voice came from its gaping beak.

The falcon’s beady little eyes locked on mine and I flinched at its two-metre wingspan, almost running for cover, yet I surprised myself by raising an arm as a perch. The falcon let out a wild screech and landed on my arm, the wind from its wings rustling my hair. I winced as the massive creature shuffled on my elbow, digging its talons into my skin and nuzzling its head against my cheek. My eyes drooped closed as I drifted into a semi-conscious state, images swirling through my mind like a drunken meditation. I tried to focus the way Mum had taught me at her Reiki classes; Breathe. Relax. Let go. I opened one eye, my teardrop pendant dangled from my neck, glowing like a lit match, and the falcon was on the ground,

staring at my leg, which appeared to be covered in blood.

Panic swept through me and I sucked oxygen deep into my lungs. Jagged breaths at first, then smoother, deeper and rhythmic like the sea. The line between meditation and reality blurred as my eyes snapped open, and I had transformed into a bird, tumbling through the air next to the falcon, getting knocked around by turbulence. The falcon flew close, tapping me on the head with its wing and sending a tingle through my brain. I squeezed my eyes shut in shock.

After a moment, the sensation settled and I opened my eyes. The other falcon was gone and I flew alone, elegant and smooth, slicing like an arrow through the clouds. The air smelled so clean, tasted so pure, energising and cleansing me as it whooshed through my feathers.

Images rammed into my cortex with a clarity beyond anything I'd ever seen. Images of Earth thousands of feet below, as though the falcon's incredible vision had transferred to me. My heart vibrated inside me like a muffled electric generator, pumping blood through my system at over four-hundred beats per minute.

In the distance, a gravel path cut through a field of yellow flowers, leading to an enormous tree. At first, the tree looked like any other, then dots of light began to appear on its gnarled trunk. The lights multiplied and increased in size, merging and intensifying until the entire trunk glowed bright white, then the light flowed through the thick branches and into the leaves and small purple flowers.

I dived, speeding towards the tree. Prickles erupted in my groin, a sensation between sexual pleasure and discomfort, urging me to stop, but I continued until I could bear it no more, then pulled back and glided down.

The world shimmered, like the heat distortion from a mirage, then an old man materialised in front of the tree. Startled by his sudden appearance, I slowed my descent, circling at five-hundred feet. My eyes narrowed, zooming in on his face and he nodded, then leaned forward in a deep bow. The man's face reminded me of one of those shrunken apple-faces I'd seen at the market from time to time, with deep wrinkles and sunken eyes. He looked Japanese and wore a weathered tunic which flapped in the breeze with a whipping sound. I recognised him from somewhere but couldn't place the memory; maybe a distant relative, though I couldn't be sure. The old man waved his arms in a slow arc, some sort of Tai Chi move, and a streak of light shot from the tree to his fingers, surrounding him in a giant soap bubble of light.

The man cupped his hands together, one on top of the other and extended them toward me, concealing something in his palms. Red light streaked out between his fingers and his eyes glowed so bright it made me squint. He moved his top hand away to reveal a glowing red

sphere about the size of a golf ball. With his free hand, he drew a circle in the air and a ring of fire appeared. The old man threw the red ball into the fire ring, motioning me toward it like a traffic cop.

Without thinking, I soared through the ring of fire. Inside, a thick red fog churned, rendering my falcon eyesight useless. Slowly, the intensity of the fog dissipated, and shapes of a suburban town came into view. The familiarity of the houses took my breath away, as I glanced around at the streets of Parramatta, where I'd spent years of my youth exploring on the BMX Santa gave me when I was eight. At the perimeter of my vision, the red fog swirled like a memory sequence in an old movie, just enough to remind me that I wasn't really there.

With a flick of my wings, I landed on top of an enormous gum tree in the front yard of my mum's house, taking in the familiar view. As a kid, I'd climb right to the top of that tree, so high into the light branches that I would sway back and forth in the breeze, feeling invisible and invincible and able to see over every house, all the way to the skyscrapers of the CBD twenty-five kilometres to the east and to Bondi Beach further south.

The front door of Mum's house was wide open and I wasn't sure if I had the strength to deal with what would come next. I glided down and shimmered into my human form to land on the front porch. The big Balinese planter-pot I'd bought Mum years ago sat on display on the landing, empty as always, having never once had a plant or even a flower showcased in it.

Tears started to well in my eyes before I took the first step inside, my heart pounding in my chest. I took a few deep breaths and forced myself toward the kitchen. Mum's body was exactly as I remembered, laying on her stomach on the kitchen floor, one leg straight and the other bent, her knee jutting out to the side. She lay inches from the pantry, one arm extended over her head like she was reaching for something. Drool and vomit smeared the bottom half of her face and a small pile of puke was beside her mouth, tainting the smell of Mum's famous red curry, still on the stove from the night before, waiting for me and Kristy to arrive to celebrate my thirtieth birthday. If I opened the fridge, I knew I'd find the sushi and banoffee pie she'd made for me, a lingering tradition from my childhood.

A projection of me already knelt beside Mum, calling to her and shaking her shoulders, shouting hysterically for help, his voice nasally and annoying to my ears. I shuddered at the memory of her body, already stiff from rigor mortis. The other me fumbled in his front pocket for his phone and called triple zero, pleading to the operator to send the best paramedics and the fastest ambulances. At the time, in the onset of denial, I kidded myself that there might be some hope for Mum, some miracle device or new drug to bring her back, but deep down I knew she was long dead. I didn't need a coroner to confirm that.

This event took place ten weeks ago, around eight in the morning. I hadn't slept a wink the night before, waiting up and worried sick because my wife hadn't come home. The image of my mum splayed on the floor like that has played over and over in my head, bashing through my mind like the opening credits from *Law & Order*, complete with camera flashes and dramatic music.

In front of Mum, the last message she ever gave me was scrawled on the white floor tiles with cherry lip-gloss; *Kai. Wear my pendant. Keep my stone safe and find Hiro. Love always, Mum.*

My mind spun the way it had when I had first found her body and I watched my clone scratching his head, trying to decipher the message and process the situation. The other me noticed something clenched in Mum's fist and I shuddered at how I had to force her fingers apart to reveal the two strange stones in her palm. As soon as her hand opened, I heard the stones whispering and I watched myself looking around the room in search of the voice.

A hand rested on my shoulder and I turned to see the old Japanese man beside me. I wanted to lash out at him, demand why he would send me to such a painful place, a memory I'd been trying to suppress. Just before I opened my mouth, I realised I didn't feel as bad as I had in the moment. Seeing myself in the trance felt almost refreshing, like washing the pain I'd been clinging to away. The man's lips moved, his voice muted, maybe trying to explain what was happening. His mouth closed and he shook his head, pressing a finger to his lips. Then he crouched down and stood up slowly, drawing a circle in the air to create another ring of fire, this one big enough for us to walk through.

The man guided me through the fiery doorway into another red mist. When the fog cleared, we stood in the living room of my Sydney apartment. A quick scan of the room and I placed the memory from only a fortnight ago. Fifty or more empty bottles of Bundaberg Rum lined the perimeter of the lounge, standing like trophies along the skirting boards. Huge towers of Domino's pizza boxes were stacked in every corner and I wrinkled my nose at the mess, reminded of how low I'd sunken at the peak of my depression and grief, embarrassed at how much of a pigsty I'd let my place get.

Any doubt I had about the age of the memory vanished when another version of me staggered in from the hallway, this one wearing nothing but a pair of piss-stained shorts and a ten-week beard. A half bottle of rum swung from one hand and a tattered photo was clutched in the other. I glanced at the old man and felt blood surge into my face. He smiled without showing his teeth and shook his head, raising his palms to pacify me.

I could describe every detail of the photo in my projection's hand by heart, and thinking

about it now brought the pain of losing Kristy front and centre. An ache spread from my stomach to the back of my throat, squeezing my organs with invisible fingers until I couldn't take a breath, making my thoughts hazy and my legs weak. The torment on my clone's face mirrored my current mood and made me pity myself.

The photograph was a portrait of Kristy on our honeymoon at the Swiss Alps, the snow-covered Matterhorn in the background. She wore a pink ski-suit with her maiden name embroidered on the chest and leaned on the professional racing skis she'd retrieved from Storage King after six years of non-use. During the ten weeks following Kristy's disappearance, I had stared at that image for hours every day. I'd brooded over any photo of her I could find, but that one had always been one of my favourites. The way the snow settled on her wavy blonde hair and the glow of her cheeks made her look like an angel. Kristy's smile was soft and genuine and her gorgeous green eyes stared right into my soul. The photo encapsulated all the things I loved about my wife, and the look on her face was the one she gave me when everything was perfect between us, when I knew with certainty that she loved me more than anything in the world.

My clone swigged on the rum, wincing at the sharpness of it, then slumped on the couch. The greyness of his skin and weathered look on his face—the result of malnutrition, alcohol poison and sleep deprivation—tore my thoughts away from Kristy and left me suddenly anxious about my own health. My duplicate ran a hand through his oily black hair, leaving it as tangled and messy as a mad professor's, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the yellow stone we'd liberated from Mum's hand, mumbling incoherent words as he brought it close to his eyes. I reflected on the weeks I'd spent staring at the yellow stone, perplexed at the fire inside it, amazed how it could burn for two months without heating the stone. I'm not as obsessed with it now, but I still spend time every day trying to unlock its power. The other stone, a clear teardrop pendant, dangled from my projection's neck. I hadn't taken it off since I found it.

A few hours from now, Zac would arrive, concerned for my mental health after a recent phone call where I sounded distant and suicidal. I grimaced. Zac was spot on about that, I'd considered more than once how to permanently end the suffering. If Zac hadn't come when he did, I may have stepped in front of the three a.m. diesel locomotive I'd heard every sleepless night, or embarked on an unassisted swim across the Indian Ocean. Even though I protested, Zac wouldn't take no for an answer, and he threw me on a plane to London, thrusting me into a new life in Europe, the life I'm living now which Zac calls my 'healing holiday'.

The old man moved beside me and pointed to the ceiling where another ring of fire had erupted. On the other side of the ring was the glowing tree from before. The man blurred for a moment and transformed into an eagle, then shot through the portal. I shimmered into my falcon and followed him, eager to ask him who he was and how all this was happening. When I emerged through his magic doorway, I saw him standing next to the tree, motioning me over with a wave of his arm. He held a chalkboard and started to write a message on it. Excited about a way to communicate, I soared toward him as fast as I could.

As I got close, a voice came from behind me, faint, as though it came from miles away. “*Kai.*” My head whipped around but there was no one there, and my focus returned to the old man.

The world around me shook, up and down and side to side, my body spasmed and my wings folded against my sides. I tried to flap but couldn’t and I spiralled out of control towards the man and the tree. Without steering, I would collide with the man or slam into the tree in seconds.

2

KAI

Back to Reality

Snapshots of dirt, clouds, the old man, and the glowing tree cycled past my eyes as I tumbled in a repetitive roll. Dizziness and confusion crippled my thoughts and I let out a terrified squawk.

“Kazami! Wake up.”

Like a hooked fish yanked from a stream, I was wrenched from my trance. The crystal pendant around my neck burned like a chunk of dry ice against my skin. Zac stood in front of me, looking down to meet my eyes. At six-foot-five, he towered over me by six inches and his huge hands wrapped halfway around my biceps to steady me. I blinked at him a few times in a daze, tears blurring my sight. The fire crackled in the clearing behind me as a pile of leafy branches caught ignited. Voices drifted over from the other side of the field and I listened for a moment getting my bearings.

“Jesus, buddy. Were you asleep?”

I sniffed and ran a hand over my face. “Meditating, I think.”

“Thought you were gonna fall down the stairs, flapping your arms around like that.”

I looked at my elbow where the bird had been. “Where’s the falcon?”

“What falcon?”

“A falcon landed on my arm.” I rolled my arm over. Its talons had left small trickles of blood on my elbow, and I breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn’t imagined the whole thing.

Zac let me go and took a step back. “What happened to your leg?”

After the trance, I'd forgotten all about my leg and I looked down, wondering how I had no pain for such a large amount of blood. Running a hand over my leg, I looked at my palm, massaging the slippery blood in circles between my thumb and fingertips, perplexed at what had happened. I rolled my shorts up to inspect the injury, surprised to discover there was no wound, only a small scar midway down my thigh where my short's pocket would have been. I examined the scar, rubbing my thumb back and forth over its raised seam, certain I'd never seen it before. A chip of yellow crystal the size of a grain of rice was stuck in the blood just below the scar and I knew it was a piece of the mysterious stone I'd inherited from my mother. I scraped the crystal off my leg, pinching it between my thumb and forefinger while I inspected it.

I leaned back and wiggled the rest of the golf-ball-sized stone from my pocket. The afternoon sun shone through the cluster of crystals jutting from the top of the stone, projecting slivers of golden light around my feet like a disco ball. Inside the stone, a ball of yellow fire blazed, burning the way it had since I'd pried it out of Mum's dead fingers two months ago. Holding the shard next to the stone, I searched for where it had broken off, yet couldn't find the spot.

A cast-iron pot of water sat in the dirt close to the fire and I dropped the stone into the steaming brew, wondering if steeping it for a while might release the power swirling inside. There had to be a way to harness it, I just hadn't discovered it yet.

"The stone must have cut me when I ran up the stairs. Need to find a better place to carry it. Ran up in six minutes today, nearly killed me."

Zac ran his eyes over me. "Those sprints and push-ups are doing you good. You're getting toned again. You were looking a bit puffy when I picked you up the other week."

"I've been doing chin-ups on that tree over there, too. Cranked out eleven today." I held a hand out to Zac, showing him the little shard of crystal pinched between my fingers. "This was on my leg. A piece of the stone. Strange it would break off like that." I gave the shard to Zac, and almost told him about the healed scar on my leg, but changed my mind. Zac looked at the crystal and shook his head, then put it on top of the big rock we used as a table.

"Everything about that stone is strange. Wash the blood off your leg, it looks hideous. There's hot water in the pot over there."

I nodded. "So, is the bike all fixed?"

"Yep. Very happy. I'll tell you about it later. There's a dead tree down the road. I'm gonna drag it up here for the fire."

I watched Zac for a bit, not quite registering what he said. “Did you say you’re going to drag a tree up here?”

Zac winked. “A small tree, old boy. Back in five.”

I sat in the dirt near the fire and leaned back on the big rock, staring at the twigs as they caught alight, rolling the smooth glass of Mum’s pendant between my fingers.

When I closed my eyes, Kristy’s face appeared in my thoughts, smiling as she always did in my memories and flicking hair off her face which always turned me on. The image filled my throat with anguish, threatening to suffocate me and push me back into darkness. Without Zac to pull me back, I would have been there already. Since Mum’s death, I’d been getting my grief mixed up, grieving for a wife who dumped me instead of my mum who died. I’d been trying to block the memory of Mum, but after my recent meditation, it was at the front of my mind again. I thought about the way Mum was pointing at the pantry and decided she must have been trying to fetch something sweet to raise her blood sugars.

What was so important about the stone and pendant that it took priority over getting jam out of the cupboard to save her life? Questions about that day had plagued me for two months, and I was still no closer to the answers. Who is Hiro? How could Mum mess up her insulin when she’d been diabetic all her life? The paramedic told me she wouldn’t have suffered much, probably unconscious for several hours before she passed. Those words rattle in my head and rack me with guilt. If Kristy had just come home, I would have been there to save her, instead of drowning my anxiety in rum.

The question I’d wasted the most time on was: Why did Kristy leave? I called her dozens of times that night, expecting her home by seven. The first ten calls went straight to message, amplifying my concern, then the calls rang out for a few hours. Early the next morning, she answered and I had a moment’s relief at the sound of her voice, but her words cut me deeper than a blade through my heart. ‘Kai. I don’t love you. Never call me again.’ After that, the phone was disconnected. I must have tried it a hundred times during the following week and a few times a day after. All I wanted was an explanation but the out-of-service message never changed. The police investigated, only to shut me up after I’d hassled them for days, insisting she was in trouble. They told me she flew to Europe on a redeye flight the morning Mum died. Sixteen hours before Mum’s time of death, so she wasn’t a suspect. No one was a suspect. An accidental overdose was the term they used.

“Your wife left you,” the police had said. “It happens. Do you need us to organise a counsellor?”

Why would Kristy just leave like that? Was she having an affair? She'd been acting weird ever since starting her overseas business trips at the beginning of the year. I scrunched a fistful of hair and screwed up my face. The memories hurt so much, it really felt like she died. She was perfect. Maybe if I didn't hassle her about why she kept going to Europe, or hadn't pressed her to tell me what she spent over a hundred grand of her inheritance on. It was none of my business. Kristy told me about the inheritance before we were married and we agreed it was her money. But what did she spend it on? Our marriage was great, just tarnished a little by my insecurity at the end. Even the days before she left, we were laughing and chatting and going out to dinner. To just disappear like that was so out of character, it blindsided me.

"KAI."

Zac's voice startled me and I looked up. "What?"

"Fuck man, you're the worst at that. You just drift away in your own little world. Eyes open in a blank stare." A rolled cigarette hung from the corner of Zac's mouth and moved up and down when he talked. He took a drag and cracked his knuckles, then stepped on top of a dead tree on the ground next to him, ripped off a thick branch and dropped it on the fire. Leaves crackled and bright orange sparks scattered around him.

With an embarrassed snort, I shook my head. "Sorry."

"Stop thinking about Kristy, you're just hurting yourself."

"I can't help it."

"The only thing that will help you is a frontal lobotomy. What about Jessica? You two seemed pretty close at Cannes. Why don't you think about her?"

I smiled at the memory of Jess. "It was great to catch up with her. Didn't feel like it had been nine years since we'd seen each other, just like old times. And you're right, I hardly thought about Kristy when I was with her."

"They say sex is the best thing for a broken heart."

A heat crept into my face and I looked away, puzzled whether I blushed from embarrassment or guilt about wanting to kiss Jess. After a moment, I stood. Zac stared at me with a crinkled nose.

"What?" I asked.

"Something's different about you. The way you move has changed." Zac scowled and gave me another funny look.

"What now?" I asked.

"You just bowed to me."

“Bowed?”

Zac clasped his hands together in a prayer and leaned forward in a deep bow, the same way the Japanese man had in my trance.

“Did I do that? I don’t even remember.”

Zac narrowed his eyes and looked at me sideways. “Yeah. Sometimes you scare me, fella. You better tell me about that meditation.”

I rubbed my hands together and bobbed my head. “It felt so real. I was flying.”

“Flying? Like Superman?”

“No, a falcon. The whole thing was bizarre. Nothing like a dream. More like a movie, or virtual reality. There was a huge tree made of pure light and some old Japanese man.”

“Your grandfather?”

“No, mate. Don’t you think I’d recognise my own grandfather? Not sure who it was. I think he was about to tell me when you woke me up.”

“Go back if you want, I don’t care.” Zac frowned and went quiet, then picked up the dead tree and smashed it against a rock with enough force to break it in half. He placed the thick trunk on the fire and kicked the ground.

“Sorry, Zac. I didn’t mean I’d rather meditate than talk to you.”

Zac looked at me and shook his head, “It’s not you. Fuckin’ Jimmy. I’ve been trying not to think about him and his stupid face just popped into my head.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jimmy sent me an email a week ago. I only got it when I was in town earlier. Called me a wanker and a thief. Fuck, he pissed me off.”

“Why would he call you a thief?”

“Reckons I ripped him off two hundred quid. I split the money evenly between us, a grand each. A thousand quid for ten day’s work is pretty good. He must have found out about the extra four hundred they gave me for our flights and hotel on the first night.” He paused and spat in the fire. “What a prick. I’m the one who got him the gig anyway, he’d still be in Australia if it wasn’t for me. And I lined him up with the private job he’s doing now. He’ll get paid heaps for that.”

I tried to change the subject before Zac got too worked up. “How come you took so long, anyway? I thought you’d only be an hour.”

“Yeah, the bike wasn’t ready. Mechanic reckons he didn’t have time. Said the parts only arrived today and it wouldn’t be done till Thursday. The workshop was quiet, so I asked

if I could use his tools and fix it myself. He said yes and only charged me two-hundred Euro for the parts. And saved two days.”

“What was wrong with it anyway?”

“Cracked piston ring. Lucky it broke down so close to Bogliasco and they had a motorbike mechanic. Pain in the arse at the time but look at this campsite we found.”

“Can’t say I’m looking forward to getting on the bike again.”

“Come on, mate, it’s cool as hell.”

“Yeah, good fun, just uncomfortable for the pillion. Especially with a baboon like you on the front.”

“Why don’t you ride some of the way? The front seat’s fine.”

“No way, I haven’t ridden for years, and never anything like that.”

We had a moment’s silence while Zac stretched his arms toward the sky and cracked his neck. His face was flushed from the fire and his t-shirt soaked with sweat. When he looked back at me, he said, “Why don’t you try smoking it?”

“Smoking what?”

“The stone.” I noticed he had the little piece of crystal on his fingertip.

“What do you mean?”

“Stick this piece of crystal in a pipe and smoke it.”

“What made you think of that?”

“I dunno. Just before, I was having a smoke and rolling the crystal between my fingers and it came to me.”

“What do you think it’ll do? It won’t burn.”

“Mate, what’s clutching the stone to your chest gonna do? What’s sitting on it gonna do? Or flying like a falcon, or talking to it.”

“Ok, I get the point.”

“Honestly, short of sticking it up your arse, you’ve tried everything.”

“Nah, that didn’t work either.”

He cringed and looked away. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“In there.” I smirked and pointed to the cast-iron pot next to the fire. “I’m making tea.”

Zac nodded, then went to his tent and rummaged around, returning with a metal cylinder which glimmered red and silver in the firelight. “Check this out. I bought it in Venice from a street vendor. It’s an alien.” He passed me a pipe and pointed at various parts of it, “Eyes, mouth, antennae. Is that cool or what?”

“Sure.”

Zac reached for the Leatherman on his belt and unfolded the pliers. “Can I look at the stone for a sec? Get it out with these,” he said, passing me the pliers.

I fished the stone out of the water and held it up to admire it. The bottom was mottled yellow and red, smooth as a river pebble, and inside, hundreds of yellow crystals jutted out like a quail egg filled with toffee shards. The yellow inside flashed with light, like a little ball of energy. In the two months since I found the stone, I’d stared at it for days on end, and still knew nothing about it.

I passed it to Zac. He screwed up his face and said, “It’s cold. Straight out of the boiling water and the thing’s cold.”

“Stone cold?”

“Yeah. Fucking weird.”

“What do you want it for?”

He held the stone in his palm and brought the little piece close to it. “I wanna see if I can find the place the little piece broke off.” After a minute, he shook his head and passed the stone back to me. “It’s not jumping out at me. You can put it back now.”

I dropped the stone back in the pot to stew.

Zac pulled a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and held it up to my nose. “Smell this. Vanilla cherry.”

I stuck my nose in the bag, sniffed and nodded.

Zac placed some tobacco and the little piece of crystal in the pipe and passed it to me with a Zippo. A knot formed in my stomach and my breath quickened. I closed my eyes and tried to control my breathing, a sudden excitement fluttering my heart. Could this unlock the stone’s power and explain the strange link I have to it?

The pipe was cold and heavy. Staring at it made my mind wander to Redskin Indians crowded around campfires, sharing peace-pipes and stories. I sparked the Zippo and a small blue and orange flame flickered to life. The taste of lighter fuel hit me when I took a drag and the flame licked down the cone, filling my lungs with vanilla smoke.

The tobacco turned to ash, leaving only the glowing yellow crystal in the pipe. I held my breath a moment, then exhaled an iridescent yellow mist. The tinnitus in my left ear intensified, spreading to my right ear until all I could hear was a high-pitched ring.

Images formed in the campfire, morphing every second. A dragon, then a falcon, Mum’s face, the old Japanese man. Zac stared, eyebrows arched and mouth ajar.

Everything around me started growing until I felt like a tiny speck. Zac looked like a giant. My mind went foggy, my vision hazy. The high-pitched noise screamed in my ears as though my brain was about to rip apart.

I saw myself sitting on the ground next to Zac while I separated from my body, my soul drifting away like a spirit. I looked down where we sat, neither of us moved at all, not even flinched, as though we were frozen in time, yet the fire continued to burn as normal and our clothes flapped in the wind. The trees swayed back and forth, and the long grass at the camp's perimeter moved in short bursts with the breeze.

The surreal sensation of observing myself from above, as though it was not me on the ground at all, left me mystified until I noticed I couldn't breathe. There was no air. I gasped in silence, trying to draw breath, my mouth wide open to suck in oxygen. The back of my throat hurt and my chest ached, as though the force of my effort had collapsed my lungs. One of my hands clutched at my throat and the other groped inside my mouth in desperation. Panic built inside me, starting in my jaw and spreading like anaesthetic through my face and chest and arms. The light faded, like the dimming-knob of an overhead light was slowly turned down to complete darkness.

Nothingness.

Death.