

## THE BLUEBIRD CAFE

### Chapter One

THE UPSTAIRS WINDOW of the Bluebird Cafe in the Tasmanian ghost town of Copperfield reflects only the sky, and above this window the gable rises to a point on top of which is a spindle of turned wood, painted blue. If you look up at the spindle and half close your eyes, especially at dusk, the spindle looks like a woman. Bedrock Mean, the only human being for miles around, still lives in the cafe where she mourns for her young daughter Lovelygod who vanished from her bedroom in the middle of the night on the seventeenth of August 1970, ten years to the day before the baby Azaria Chamberlain vanished from her bed in a tent in Ularu.

‘It seemed to me to be a night like any other night,’ Bedrock says. ‘It was cold, but the nights are often cold in Copperfield. The interior of the forest around here is dim and moist, for sunlight can not penetrate the thick foliage, and the forest floor lies still and soft and mossy like the bed of a silent giant. Beneath the canopy of the great myrtles are soft fetoons of fungi; in the dark grey-green of this place where the fronds and swords and slow coils of ferns criss and cross and curl like some memory more than half forgotten in the mind, scarlet, spongy caps gleam in rotting crevices, and the silence of the secret glades is the silence of a nightmare. In some places the forest floor is false, a laughing trick of the land, a trap.

I hear the silence of the forest reaching out to Lovelygod and calling her in the middle of the night from her bed. In her white nightgown she runs through the back garden past rows of vegetables and fruit trees until she comes to the wire gate that opens onto the gravel path leading away, away into the forest. On bare feet she runs into the thickest darkness of the smoky labyrinth; she goes where none but darting furry animals may go. In and in and in she skips until she reaches the false floor of the phantom forest, treads

on the magic carpet of sweet, poisonous matting, and slips through the surface and is gone. No ruffle, no ripple, no sound can be detected outside the forest.

‘When Lovelygod was born I fancied she had wings. Strange. Yet even if she had wings they would not save her; she could flutter forever and ever in the cage the earth has made for her. Yet as long as I live, and as long as Lovelygod is missing, I will never give up hope.

‘When I was a child myself I used to go past a haberdashery shop and in the window there was a pair of red shoes, a child’s pink smocked dress, and a white satin ribbon tied in a bow. Next to these things was a tinted photograph of a five-year-old girl and a handwritten notice that told you Shirley Thompson set off one day all by herself to visit her grandmother who lived two streets away. Between Shirley’s house and her grandmother’s, Shirley vanished, leaving no trace. As far as I know she has never been found. Her mother put the photo and the clothes which were the same as the clothes Shirley had been wearing, in the window of the shop in the hope that somebody who knew something would see them. I was told that Mrs Thompson kept Shirley’s room exactly as it would have been if Shirley had been there, and in the front window of the house she always left a light for Shirley. I didn’t understand it then, but now I know that the hope is unending because the guilt is unending—if Mrs Thompson had not let Shirley go out by herself, Shirley would not have disappeared.

‘If Lovelygod had not been sleeping alone in the room at the end of the veranda with the windows wide open, free to roam, free to be stolen, free to disappear, she would be here today. The mistake was mine; the guilt is mine; I will never give up hope.’