

# Parting Skies



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# **Parting Skies**

**A Short Story Compilation**

**By Kelly Matsuura**

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'Parting Skies' was created in the USA.  
First electronic release: June 2013.  
Published by Kelly Matsuura

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This is a sample of the 'Parting Skies' anthology. Downloaded from  
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## The Drumming

*Tasmania, Australia*

The drumming was soothing, distant. Like rain in the night. It wasn't quite dark yet, but Simona was resting in her cabin, tired from the day's excavations. She'd fallen into that half-sleep, where you have a foot in both the real world and the dream world. The drumming got a little louder, a little closer, calling for her to start a journey. She'd been called many times in her life, but never outside of Costa Rica, and not for several years now.

She let the drumming enter her heart and release her spirit to go outside and receive her message. Her spirit followed the path behind several cabins. There were no animals to guide her, but she felt she knew the right way. At one point she wandered off the track, sensing the dream-world path that others would not be able to see. As she walked, the sky got brighter, yet she knew in the real world it would be nightfall. She stopped in a clearing in front of a small cave. She waited a short time and looked around, hoping to see Armadillo or maybe Turtle. They usually appeared on her journeys.

Something growled in the cave. The animal that emerged was one she didn't recognize; it was the size of large dog, but lean with a thick tail like a kangaroo's. Its small canine head and sharp eyes resembled a hyena. As it walked out into the sunshine she saw a patch of black stripes on the creature's hind legs. A most unusual animal, she thought, but was not frightened. Simona judged it to be a female due to its bowed stomach, but she wasn't sure.

The animal looked closely at her, as if contemplating her worthiness. Satisfied, it led Simona to the beginnings of a path and started howling. It stopped and lay down by the tree line; Simona understood that she was to go on alone. She patted the animal gently on its head to affirm their connection, and then headed off along the pathway. What did the strange animal want her to do? She walked a little further, but couldn't find anything. The drumming resumed in the background and the sky darkened. She had lost the connection.

The next morning, Simona awoke slightly foggy, but ready for another day on the excavation site. A leading forensic ornithologist, she was hired to identify some rare bird skeletons that had been found.

On the short ride to the dig, she tried to recall the details of her vision. She suddenly remembered the strange animal bones that had been unearthed the day

before. No-one had had time to examine them, but instinct told her they were the remains of the same kind of animal.

At the site, she rushed to her make-shift office, and started looking through the sample collections.

"What are you looking for?" her assistant, Damien, asked.

"Yesterday someone brought in some animals bones, an incomplete skeleton. Ah, here they are!" She set the box on the table and looked at the eight bones. "Any idea what it is? It's a four-legged animal, lean and ..."

"I can tell you what it is. A thylacine, known as a Tasmanian Tiger. They've been extinct since the 1930's." Damien examined a leg bone, a grin on his face.

"I've heard of thylacines, but I've never seen a specimen before." Simona took a closer look.

"They're a rare find these days, especially in this area. I've found some on other digs further inland where they were more prevalent," he explained.

"So, if they've been extinct since the thirties, these bones should pre-date then? Is it possible they're more recent? They're in good condition if not," she said.

"Don't get too excited. Hundreds of people have tried to prove that thylacines are not extinct, but it's just a dream. We might learn something interesting from this specimen, anyway. I'll get the bones cleaned up for testing." Damien went to work, leaving Simona to wonder what her vision meant. If thylacines were extinct, what was the female trying to show her?

She worked for a few hours on her own tasks.

Richard, an aboriginal field assistant, stuck his head in her work tent.

"Hey, Simona! Smoko's ready."

She grinned. It had taken her a few days to catch on that 'smoko' meant 'morning tea'.

"Thanks, Richard! Wait, do you have a second?" she called him back.

"Yeah, sure. What is it?"

"We found bones from a Tasmanian Tiger yesterday. I didn't know what they were, but then last night I had a dream about seeing one. A female. Do you think it means something?" She hoped he wouldn't think she was being silly.

"Interesting. I think Tassie Tigers are the keepers of secrets. I remember years ago, my wife kept an important secret from her mother, and when her mother finally found out and asked my wife why she hadn't said anything, my wife told her that a Tassie Tiger had warned her to keep her mouth shut. Her mother never asked about it again."

Richard's story sent a tingle down Simona's spine. She did have a secret, and she had wanted to tell someone for months now. But the secret had nothing to do with Australia, or this excavation. It was something she'd have to face when she went home though.

Richard noticed her expression.

"Ah! You do have a secret. Well, now you know what to do about it." He patted her arm and left her alone in the tent.

Simona hugged herself briefly, trying to shake off the creepy feeling that the secret had somehow followed her here to Australia.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Simona spent most of it alone, carefully collecting tiny bird bones from a remote corner of the excavation site. It gave her time to think, which wasn't what she wanted at all today. She was glad to pack up and get in the van to go back to their cabins for the evening.

"You were quiet today," Damien commented during the ride home.

Simona saw Richard watching her out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't speak.

"Sorry. Just a slow day. I got lost in my thoughts I guess." She looked out the window, hoping Damien would drop it.

"Hey, that Tassie Tiger we found was a male," he told her.

"Really? Cool. Did you find more of the skeleton?" she asked, glad for a change of topic.

"The guys found a few small bones, from the feet. No skull though. I hope it turns up before we leave. I know my university would like it for our display."

Chris, the driver, interrupted. "We're here at the cabins. If you're going to the pub for tea, be back here at the van in twenty."

They all got out. Most of the guys hurried to their cabins to change, but Simona and Damien lagged behind.

"You're not going tonight?" he asked.

She usually enjoyed the pub's atmosphere, but tonight she wanted to try and contact the thylacine again.

"No, I'm tired, and I'd like to catch up on some reading I brought with me." It wasn't a lie; she did have research to do.

"Me too. My stomach's a bit yuck from pub food night after night. Think I'll make some soup and salad, and read my Kindle. Have a great night!" He waved, and went to his cabin at the back of the park.

Simona went inside her own cabin, and dropped her bags by the door. She kicked off her shoes, and threw her jacket over the arm of the sofa; she was not a tidy person on a good day. She made a mug of coffee, and sat down to relax. She was so tired, not from work but from thinking. She drank only a third of her coffee before falling asleep at the table, her head down on her crossed arms.

She dreamed.

It was midday, and the sun was burning everyone. Simona worked at the large sieve, which was sheltered above, but she was feeling slightly faint from

the heat. Being from Costa Rica, she was used to tropical heat, but the desert heat of Danchuang in southern China was unbearable.

She took a break and wandered through the shrubbery to the toilet pit. She didn't need to use it, but there were few women on this dig and she could be alone here for several minutes to rest.

She was sitting on a log, drinking water, when someone grabbed her from behind.

She struggled, but the man was very strong and dragged her from her seat, pulling her towards a small rock cave. She hadn't even noticed it before; it was partially hidden by the scrubland. He smelled like mud and firewood, and his breath reeked of the tobacco the local men chewed.

It was a few meters to the cave entrance, and she fought all the way. She managed to break free and spotted a pile of bleached white bones on the ground. She picked up a long thigh bone, and a canine skull. She ferociously beat her attacker with both, until he fell down dead on the ground. Her hair flew about her and she laughed like a crazed witch, not recognizing her own voice. She dragged his body as far into the cave as she could. It was narrow, but she was small enough to get further in than an average-sized man might. She pushed the body in deep and covered it with some debris from outside the cave.

Simona knocked her coffee over as she bolted upright, awake from the nightmare.

"Damn it!" She quickly cleaned up the mess.

The dream was mostly true. She had been attacked at the dig site, and killed the unknown assailant, but she had only hit him once with a rock to his temple. Panicking, she hid the body in the cave and didn't tell anyone what happened. She had not seen the man before, and she was sure he would not be known to the other dig members. They were almost all Chinese, from Nanjing University. Only a few locals had been hired to help, and she knew them all well. Her attacker must have come to the site from the local village and slept in the cave for a few nights, waiting for a chance to attack or rob someone.

She knew she should've reported it, but it would've become a huge incident and shut down their excavation. Not to mention the embarrassment it would've caused the Chinese scholars to be involved. Also she was terrified of the Chinese authorities; what if they hadn't believed her? It was a huge nightmare that she'd been dealing with alone for the past three years. She hadn't told a soul, but it was slowly eating her from the inside out. Recently, she'd decided to tell her boyfriend Michael about it and ask his advice, but she always made excuses to wait until a better time.

The image of herself in the dream – beating the man with the thylacine bones and relishing it – horrified her. That is not how she felt about it either at the time, or now. She had not wanted to kill that man; she had only tried to escape him. Anyone who knew her would believe that.

A thought occurred to her: maybe the dream just meant that she wanted to be free of the guilt she felt, it might be just the memory of the incident that she was attacking over and over. Yes, it was a good interpretation, and one she would tell herself. She had to pull herself together or she wouldn't get through the next two weeks of the job.

She made herself some dinner, and even managed to get a bit of work done. At ten-thirty she took a long shower, and dressed in an old tracksuit. She sat on the floor with a large candle, and tried to contact the thylacine again. She felt there was more to the message that she had received the night before.

After a few minutes of deep breathing and recitation, she heard the familiar drumming.

It was loud this time, a sign that the connection was strong. The sound vibrated through her, slowing her heartbeat to match the rhythm of the drums. Her body shivered as her spirit separated from it, and once again went out into the bushland. She walked the same path that she had followed previously, but this time when she came to the clearing, the area was different. It was familiar to her though, and she realized it was the same topography as the site in Danchuang. There was the log she had sat on, and there was the small path that led to the latrine. Her instinct told her to look for the small cave where she had hidden the body, so she stepped over the log and followed the rough trail along to the cave entrance.

When she reached it, she gasped in surprise. The thylacine was there waiting, but that was not what shocked her. The cave entrance had collapsed; it now only looked like a pile of rubble with some weeds and grass growing over it. In fact, it didn't look like there had ever been a cave there.

The thylacine barked once, and came over to Simona. It licked her hand, and seemed to be smiling. Simona didn't know how to feel.

"Is this true?" she asked the thylacine; sometimes animals spoke to her on dream-walks.

The thylacine nodded its head and barked again. It leaped around in a circle, its tail lashing about. Simona had to assume it was a positive answer. If the cave really had collapsed, then she was safe. It was unlikely that the area would ever be developed; it was too rocky and rugged, and no-one had any reason to be looking for that tiny cave. Even if the body was found one day, the police would think the man had died in the collapse itself.

"Thank you!" she said to her little friend. "Is there something you want me to do for you?"

The thylacine barked again, and ran off down a faint pathway. Simona followed and they stopped in front of a large gum tree. She noticed a hole at the base of the tree and peered in; she saw a few large bones and the skull from her earlier dream. It had to be the thylacine skull that Damien wanted.

The thylacine barked farewell; that left Simona there looking at the bones, unsure what to do next. The drumming started up again, calling her back to her body. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, letting go of the vision.

She opened her eyes and was back in her living room. Exhausted, she went straight to bed. She lay under the covers thinking over both visions, and her nightmare about Danchuang. There was something she was supposed to do, but she wasn't quite sure what it was still.

She woke up around five a.m. and decided to go see if she could find the gum tree from the vision; she wondered if the skull was really there or not. She hurried to the clearing from the first dream-walk, and thought she could guess the way to the tree from there.

After about fifteen minutes of circling around the area, she found it. Getting her bearings, she calculated how far they were from the excavation site where the other bones had been found. It actually wasn't far, less than a kilometer. They always drove to the site from camp because of the heavy equipment and food supplies needed every day.

She examined the tree and found that the skull and bones were hidden in the hole as she had seen. But what was she supposed to do with them? She could take them to Damien, but how would she explain where she found them? He would want to see the location to look for other evidence.

While she was thinking, her nose picked up a strange scent. She stood still and listened. There was something in the bushes. She turned only slightly, and couldn't believe her eyes – there was the female thylacine, standing just a few meters away. She knew it was the same one, though she couldn't explain how.

She saw the thylacine's stomach moving strangely, and she stepped a little closer. A small snout poked out of the backward-facing pouch. Simona finally understood. She wasn't the only one with a secret that needed to be kept hidden.

She knelt down and pushed the bones as deep into the crevice as she could reach. She felt a ripple of *déjà vu* as she filled the hole with rocks, earth, and debris, just as she had in Danchuang.

When she finished, the thylacine barked and licked her hand. The pup poked its nose out again and gave a tiny whimper. Simona smiled; it was the cutest little thing.

"Your family will be safe," she promised the mother. "I'll take care of the other bones before I leave."

The thylacine barked again and ran off into the bushes.

A hawk flew overhead and cawed, attracting Simona's attention. She waved to her totem animal.

"Hi! It's been awhile!" she called out.

The drumbeats were only faint, but they vibrated through her limbs, pulling out all the blackness, all of her guilt, and releasing it into the morning wind. For

the first time in a long time, she felt free. She could go home now, to Michael, with the burden of the past behind her.

The End

Thank you so much for reading!

'Parting' Skies' is available from all Amazon Kindle stores and Smashwords from June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013. For other purchasing options, please check my website for details after the release date.

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