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THE
WHITE
GIRL

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CHAPTER ONE

Odette Brown rose with the sun, as she did each morning. She eased out of the single bed she shared with her twelve-year-old granddaughter, Cecily Anne, who went by the name of Sissy. Wrapping herself in a heavy dressing gown to guard against the cold, Odette closed the bedroom door behind her and went into the kitchen. She put a lit match to the wood chips and strips of old newspaper in the stove. She then fetched the iron kettle and made her way out into the yard, filling it with cold water from the tap above the gully-trap. As she leaned forward Odette felt an unfamiliar twinge above her left hip. She placed the kettle on the ground and clutched at her side, breathing in and out until the pain gradually subsided.

Odette closed her eyes and listened. The morning sky was quiet but for a lone bird gliding overhead. It was the black kite Odette knew well, the same bird spoke to her each morning. She opened her eyes and looked across to the town of Deane on the other side of the dry riverbed. To the west she could

see a column of smoke wafting lazily over Henry Lamb's junkyard. She watched as the kite hovered above Deane's Line, a narrow red dirt track skirting the western boundary of town. The Line, as the track was commonly known, had been named in honour of the early squatter and land speculator, Eli Deane. Deane carried the blood of so many Aboriginal people on his hands it could never be scrubbed away, not from the man himself or the town that carried his name. The Line had been drawn a century earlier to separate the Aboriginal people incarcerated on the nearby mission from the good white *settlers* of Deane. A government regulation deemed that any Aboriginal person living west of Deane's Line was a resident on an Aboriginal reserve.

Back in the house, Odette cut herself a thick slice of bread from the end of a tin loaf and placed it in a heavy pan with a slab of dripping. She made herself a pot of tea and sat at the table drinking the brew. She cut the bread into small squares and salted it, a tradition she observed with as much ritual as a priest preparing Holy Communion. As a child she'd often had no choice but to eat bread and dripping. Now, at the age of sixty-three, the breakfast was a delicacy she indulged in each Sunday morning. The texture of the warm bread dissolving between her tongue and the roof of her mouth triggered memories of the *big room* on the mission, where she'd sit with the other Aboriginal children, eating in silence at the long bench. Afterwards, they were sent into the classroom for lessons, including religious instruction, reading and writing, followed by long afternoons at work in one of the fields. There would be more prayers of an evening and lonely nights alone in a narrow canvas bunk.

Odette looked into her empty tea cup, aware she'd momentarily been away. In spite of herself, she glanced at the framed photograph hanging on the wall above the stove, a portrait of her only child, Lila. The photograph had been a gift for her daughter on her sixteenth birthday. Lila had been pregnant at the time, a secret she'd managed to keep to herself until she was almost five months gone and could no longer hide her condition. Odette had initially dismissed her daughter's nausea as a symptom of a fever, common across the bitter winters of the district. They had shared a bed and Odette savoured the closeness of her daughter's warmth, until Lila began turning her back and refused her mother's comfort. It was only when Odette caught a glimpse of Lila's swollen stomach through a crack in the bedroom door that her daughter's situation became apparent. When Odette confronted her, Lila didn't bother covering her naked body.

'Who did this to you?' Odette demanded. 'Who put you this way?'

Lila refused to answer.

Odette put the palm of her hand under Lila's chin and forced her daughter to look at her. 'Who did this to you?' she repeated quietly. 'You have to speak to me, Bub.'

Despite Odette's constant grilling, Lila remained silent about the cause of her pregnancy. When the baby arrived, pink as a newborn piglet, delivered by Odette's childhood friend and community midwife, Millie Khan, both women knew the father could only be a white man. After the birth of the baby, any time that Odette probed for details, Lila flew into a rage. The birth of her daughter changed Lila. She'd grown up a quiet girl, thoughtful and calm, but as a young mother she hardened.

No man, young or old, stepped forward to take responsibility for the child. The white community of Deane, thriving on the gossip of a light-skinned Aboriginal baby, exchanged salacious tales about *them wild young gins off the mission* and the so-called respectful men in town who secretly chased after them. Lila became part of that gossip, retreated into herself and rarely left the house.

When Sissy was a year old, Odette woke one morning to the sound of her grizzling in the narrow crib. Odette rested her palm on the bed beside her and felt the hollow where Lila's body should have been. She lifted her granddaughter from the crib and walked into the kitchen. The house was empty and a bitter wind rattled the window panes. Odette noticed a piece of paper on the table. Lila had left her mother a two-line note.

*I need to go away for a time. I'm sorry but I have to leave here.
I know you will do better than I can, to care for Sissy. I love you.*

Odette held the baby to her chest and re-read the note several times in disbelief. She was convinced that her daughter would not abandon her own child and would soon return home, but Lila stayed away. Following her disappearance, Odette spent many mornings pushing the baby in a rickety pram along the dirt roads circling the town. With no parents to speak for her, Sissy was in danger of being removed from her grandmother's care. From that time on, Odette had no choice but to engage in a dangerous game of cat and mouse with the Welfare authorities.

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Returning to the bedroom, Odette dressed. As she pulled on her woollen coat she paused and looked down at Sissy, curled in a ball under the blankets. She'd given Sissy a haircut a week earlier, an unappealing bowl cut. For much of her childhood Sissy had been mistaken for a boy, her tomboyish looks and behaviour disguising her beauty. Odette leaned forward and caressed the skin on the back of Sissy's neck and left her granddaughter to sleep.

She closed the front door behind her and put on her gumboots. Gripping the collar of her coat, she went down the veranda steps, crossed to the low wooden gate and walked out past the single row of workers' shacks of Quarrytown. It wasn't a town as such, but a designated zone of the reserve that remained under the jurisdiction of government. The single street took its name from the sandstone mine in the hills north of town, where Aboriginal men from the mission had once been employed. The mine had been closed for decades and most of the workers' huts had been empty for years. The abandoned shacks were slowly being camouflaged by *Morning Glory*, an invasive weed with a deceptively attractive blue flower.

Reaching the narrow footbridge, Odette paused above the trickle of murky water in the riverbed below. Although it had been raining heavily for more than a week, the river, or what was left of it, could no longer quench its own thirst. Over the years its life-force had been stolen by farmers irrigating upstream, their phantom pipelines and open channels criss-crossing the land with little more than a nod and handout to the corrupt politicians who benefited from the theft. After so much neglect, there was little left of the river to give.

Deane's Line was heavy with mud and Odette's boots sunk deeper into it with each step she took. The walk to the Aboriginal graveyard behind the mission was a good mile from home. The smoke bellowing from the chimney above Henry Lamb's junkyard was rich with the scent of eucalypt. Located on the town side of Deane's Line, the junkyard was literally feet away from reserve land. When she reached Henry's rusting fence, Odette saw the front gate was open. Henry was crouched in the dirt, gently patting his dog, Rowdy. The animal had been traded to him a few years earlier. Henry had proudly claimed Rowdy was *pure* Alsatian – *a military dog* – as a way of justifying the dubious exchange of a working tractor for the pup. Rowdy turned out to be no more Alsatian than Henry himself. Regardless, the black and tan mongrel was faithful and strong, and guarded Henry and the treasures of his yard with ferocity when necessary.

Henry got to his feet when he saw Odette. Each day he wore the same sweat-stained Akubra hat with bib and brace overalls over the top of a putrid once-white singlet. He walked with the bandy gait of a man who'd ridden a horse most days of his life, although in his case Henry had never been on the back of a horse. He'd not been near one since he was six years of age, when a wild brumby kicked him in the side of the head and knocked him unconscious. Henry fell into a coma and spent the following two months in the hospital at Gatlin, the nearest town to Deane. When he finally returned home, Henry remembered nothing of the accident and little else about his own life. He eventually returned to school but was constantly bullied in the schoolyard, and no one stepped forward to protect him. When Henry found

himself in trouble, which was often, even his father would shrug his shoulders and say, *The boy's an imbecilic, simple as that.*

Henry looked down at Odette's muddied boots. 'Where are you heading to?' he asked.

Odette had a soft spot for Henry. She liked to humour him but would never make fun of him. 'Well, as far as I know Henry, this road goes to one place, which is the mission and the graveyard. Which is also where you've seen me heading every Sunday morning for years now. So, I guess that's where I'm off to this morning.'

Henry kept his eyes on her boots. 'You know that if you were to follow the river track into town and out past the old railway line, your boots would not be so muddy. It's dry over there.'

Odette stuck her hands in her coat pockets. 'Don't you think I know that, Henry? I know every inch of this town and all the country round it.'

Henry patted the dog. 'I know you would know that, Odette. I was just thinking for you, and keeping your boots clean, that's all.'

For years the Aboriginal people living on the mission were barred from entering town, except on Saturday mornings between eight and noon when they were permitted to shop at the company store in the main street. While *crossing the Line* remained an offence, technically at least, the law was generally ignored.

'I prefer to avoid town,' Odette explained. 'Unless I have business there.'

Henry kissed Rowdy's damp nose. 'Me too, Odette. One of your people told me, when I was a youngster, I think it was

one of your people at least, that no birds fly over town. Just like you, they go round it.'

Odette knew the story well. She'd heard it from her own father, Ruben. 'Yep. That's the truth, Henry. The birds used to tell the old people, "If you folk aren't allowed in the town, we won't be bothering with it ourselves."'

'The birds, they spoke with them people?' Henry asked, scratching his head.

'They certainly did. And they still do. A morning doesn't pass without one of them talking to me.'

'There you go,' Henry said to Rowdy, sharing the conversation with his dog. 'Just the same way I speak with you, boy.'

Henry was around the same age as Odette. They'd been at school together. Few of the white kids would sit with Henry following his accident. He shifted continuously in his seat and had a habit of wetting his shorts. He found himself thrown in with the Aboriginal children during class breaks. Initially his presence was regarded as peculiar but he gradually felt more comfortable in their company and preferred it to sitting on his own. Henry's schooling, for what it amounted to, came to an end when he turned eleven and his father put him to work in the yard. Old Mr Lamb had been driving his buggy one afternoon when he came across his son walking home from school. Henry was in tears. One of the older boys had painted his face black while others held him to the ground. 'You wanna hang round with the boongs,' one of them screamed, 'you're gonna have to be one.'

Henry never went back to school from that day on. He'd become deeply attached to his new friends and missed

their company. On Sunday mornings, he'd sneak over the junkyard fence, head for the mission and wait in the long grass for the boys to gather after church service.

He looked along the length of the Line in both directions. It lay empty and silent. The early morning sun battled the gathering clouds. 'There's not many of us left around here from the old days, is there Odette?'

'No, Henry. Me, you, Millie Khan. Maybe a few others.' She pointed at the dog. 'And there's Rowdy, of course.'

'I heard they have done a count of all the people in the district,' Henry said. 'Around here there is now one hundred and twenty-seven people. In the town and all about.'

'How'd you remember that?' Odette asked. 'The number?'

'I read it in the newspaper and wrote it down. Last week.'

Henry showed Odette the inside of his forearm and pointed to a set of numbers written in fading ink. 'See? It's all here.'

Henry had obviously not washed in the last week or so, but Odette wasn't about to point out such a fact. She had no desire to offend her old friend.

'I wonder where most of them one hundred and twenty-seven people are hiding themselves,' Odette said. 'It's a long time since I've seen that many people round here.' She looked down at the dark earth. 'That wouldn't include my people. They don't count us, Henry.'

'I never heard of that.' Henry appeared genuinely insulted. 'If that was my job, I would count you, Odette.'

'I'm sure you would. And I appreciate that.' She gestured towards the yard. 'Henry, would you have any bicycles in there? I'm after a two-wheeler.'

Henry let out a childish giggle. 'You wouldn't want to ride a bike along here, Odette. It would be a tougher day than walking in them boots. You'd get yourself stuck in the bog, I reckon.'

'The bicycle isn't for me, Henry. I've never been on a bike in my life and I'm not about to start now. Sissy's birthday is coming up and I want to get her something special this year.'

Henry looked over his shoulder. 'I have plenty of bikes back there. Disrepaired though.'

'Could you turn one of them into a rideable machine? One that would hold together?'

Henry rubbed his hands together as he considered the challenge. 'I reckon I could do that. Only one bike?'

'Just one bike, Henry. Riding two bicycles is not easy when you're starting out.'

Rowdy bared his teeth and let out a low growl. 'What are you doing, boy?' Henry asked. In defiance of his name, Rowdy was usually a calm dog. 'You be friendly with Odette. You have known her all your years.'

It wasn't Odette the dog was growling at. A guttural sound could be heard in the distance. It grew louder. Henry, Odette and the dog turned and looked along the Line. A red pick-up truck, belching dark smoke, was sliding from side to side in the congealed ochre-stained mud. Rowdy raced onto the road and raised his chest, defiantly facing the oncoming menace and barking ferociously. Henry desperately patted his thigh and ordered Rowdy to return to his side. The truck careered towards the dog. Rowdy refused to budge. The driver of the truck hit the brakes and the pick-up turned full circle, coming to a halt opposite the junkyard gate. Rowdy started herding the truck, head-butting a hubcap and barking loudly. Henry

hobbled over to the dog. ‘You stay back here and you behave yourself,’ he said, grabbing a handful of fur from Rowdy’s shoulders and dragging him back into the yard.

The driver jumped out of the pick-up, followed by a passenger. Odette recognised both boys. The driver, Aaron Kane, was the eldest son of Joseph Kane, a failed farmer whose family had arrived in the district in the previous century. The Kanes had prospered until a decade of drought descended on the land. During the Great Depression of the thirties the soil had turned to dust and the water vanished, leaving behind a haunted and parched landscape. While some farmers walked away from their properties, leaving empty farmhouses and dead livestock behind, the stubborn Joe Kane remained. Over the years he became increasingly embittered by his failure. People wouldn’t buy his scrawny, neglected animals for anything more than feed for their dogs.

The passenger in the pick-up was Aaron’s younger brother, George. Odette had worked on the Kane farm when the boys were young. She had taken care of the children and tried keeping the chaotic house clean while their mother lay in her bedroom, suffering from an illness never spoken of. Odette felt uncomfortable around the brooding Joe Kane. He looked at her in a way that made her feel uneasy, and had a habit of touching her whenever he walked by.

One hot afternoon, towards the end of summer, Odette was preparing dinner when she heard Mrs Kane moving about in the bedroom. The woman passed by her in the kitchen, without saying a word, and left the house. Odette watched as Mrs Kane walked out across a paddock in a white dress, her straw hair lifting with the breeze. She hadn’t returned to the

house two hours later when Joe Kane drove home from a trip to Deane. He came out of the empty bedroom and enquired about his wife.

‘You seen my missus?’ he asked Odette.

‘She went walking.’

‘Walking?’ Kane puzzled. ‘What do you mean, walking? There’s no place she needs to walk.’

‘She headed across the paddock towards town.’

‘What did she say to you?’

Odette had never heard Mrs Kane speak a word, not to her own children or anyone else. ‘She said nothing. She just went walking.’

Mrs Kane’s body was found three days later, face down in a dam that held no more than a foot of water. Odette had been feeding the boys when Joe Kane coldly announced to the children that their mother was dead. George jumped down from his chair, threw himself at Odette and burst into tears. Aaron didn’t react at all. He sat motionless in his chair, as if he hadn’t understood a word his father said.

The week after Mrs Kane’s funeral, Joe Kane asked Odette if she’d consider moving to the farm and looking after the boys on a more permanent basis. Odette declined the offer without hesitation. Kane would not accept her rejection, and a few days later drove to Quarrytown and knocked at Odette’s door. Lila answered it.

‘What do you want?’ she asked.

Joe smiled at the sight of the teenage girl. ‘Does Odette Brown live here?’

Lila left him at the door and went searching for Odette in the yard. ‘There’s a man here for you. A strange white man.’

Odette was surprised to find Joe Kane on her doorstep. It was obvious he'd been drinking. 'Who was that, here just now?' he slurred.

Odette ignored his question. 'What do you want?'

'I want you to come out to the farm and look after my boys. They're running wild.' He rubbed his ample belly. 'You can bring that lovely girl with you.'

'I'm not interested, Mr Kane. I have other work now. You can't be here in Quarrytown,' she said, shutting the door in the man's face.

Over the following months Odette would occasionally see Joe Kane's truck parked along the river track. The sight of him not far from her home caused Odette great unease. One morning she walked past and saw him sitting in the truck, both hands clutching the steering wheel. He appeared to be talking to himself. Returning from town later in the day she was relieved to find the truck had gone. She'd been planning on baking a cake with Lila that afternoon but when she opened the front door and called out to her daughter, to Odette's surprise the house was empty.

Aaron lifted his chin towards the junkyard gate. 'I'm after some parts for the truck. Spare tyres and a new gearbox.'

'I have no gearboxes,' Henry snapped.

Aaron ignored Henry's attempt to brush him off. 'We're racing at the track outside of Gatlin in a month. Course you'd have a gearbox in there, I reckon you'd have dozens of 'em. I'll pay,' he added. 'You can earn yourself some spare change, buy yourself a drink and a feed. Maybe even a bar of soap,' he

chuckled, turning to his younger brother for support.

‘I have no parts in this yard for you,’ Henry said. ‘I don’t have any parts for any sort of a truck. And I don’t need no money for drink. I never take a drink.’

‘Henry,’ Aaron said, ‘I can see from out here all the shit you have piled up back there. You wouldn’t know what you have in the yard.’

Aaron walked to the gate and tried forcing it open.

Henry moved between Aaron and the gate.

The boy pushed him away. ‘Fuck off, Henry.’

Henry looked anxiously at Odette.

‘How have you been, Aaron?’ Odette asked. ‘Do you remember me?’

The boy looked her up and down. ‘I don’t know you from any place.’

‘Yes, you do,’ Odette said. ‘You and your brother, I looked after you for a time when you were young. When your Mamma was still with us.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Aaron said. ‘Nobody has taken care of us but our father.’

‘She did,’ George interrupted. ‘I remember her.’ George smiled at Odette in a manner that appeared familiar to her. ‘You used to make cakes for us. And at the end of the day you would walk all the way home.’

‘That’s right,’ Odette said. ‘I’ve always enjoyed walking. And they were scones I baked, not cakes. You loved them, George.’

He nodded his head approvingly. ‘Scones. Yeah, I remember now. We piled them with butter. You remember Aaron?’

‘Shut the fuck up, George,’ Aaron sneered. ‘Go sit in the

truck. I don't have time to waste here. You going to let us in the yard or not Henry?'

Henry rarely let anyone enter the yard. 'Today is Sunday. I don't open on Sundays.'

'Make an exception,' Aaron said.

Henry again turned to Odette for support.

Aaron looked from her muddied boots up to her dark face. 'I thought there was none of your lot left around here.'

Many years had gone by since Odette had last seen Joe Kane but the man's anger, evident in his older son, was unmistakable. 'Oh, my people are still here, son. A few of us are above the ground, the rest are below it. We've always been here and we're going no place.'

Aaron spat in the dirt, close to Odette's muddied boot. He walked slowly back to the truck and climbed into the driver's seat. 'We'll be back, Henry,' he called. 'I don't care if you're open for business or not. Or what day it is.'

The truck roared away, leaving a spray of mud in its wake.

'Are you alright?' Odette asked Henry, who looked upset.

Henry was just as concerned with Odette's wellbeing as his own. 'You need to be careful with yourself, Odette. Being cheeky with that boy. He's a bad one.'

'Don't you worry about me, Henry, I can take care of myself.'

'Hey, I remember something,' Henry said, changing the subject. 'The bike. I remembered you want one bike.'

'That's right. For Sissy. For her birthday.'

'How much time do I have to make the bike?'

'Three weeks coming. But it doesn't matter if it can't be done before then. Sissy will understand.'

Henry counted to three under his breath. 'I can do that for you, Odette. Three weeks. I'll write myself a note and I'll build the bike for you.'

'Good for you, Henry. And I'll have the money waiting.'

'There won't be any money,' Henry said. 'I will build you the bike for free. For your Sissy.'

'I can't have you doing that, Henry. I don't take charity from anyone. I never have.'

Henry scratched the side of his head, mulling over Odette's comment. 'You don't have to take the charity, Odette. You can take a gift. From me.'

Thanking Henry, Odette said goodbye and walked on. She felt terrible for Henry and the way the Kane boy had spoken to him. Henry had spent his life being bullied and had locked himself away in the junkyard to protect himself.

Odette understood that the young folk around town didn't have much to do and relieved their boredom with occasional acts of mindlessness. But there was something more worrying about the older Kane boy. The summer she'd cared for the children Odette had been struck by the emptiness in his eyes. When she bathed him, Aaron's body often carried bruises and cuts. She was certain the child had been beaten by his father, but being an Aboriginal woman she had no right to interfere in the business of a white family.

She remembered the younger brother, George, also. He was a quiet boy, at odds with his brother. Seeing him again now she realised there was something more about George but she couldn't put her finger on it.