

## 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.