



Chapter 1

1836 Bandi Bandi Prospect farm
(nallawailli waibala)

Ngoonungi – Murrui'yunggory – Spring was a bit cool but the sun shone warm on our backs. Waratah flowers grew red and juicy so Ngoonungi flying foxes came to eat. Soft rains fell.



I saw a glittering billabong with a hundred swimming black swans. I thought, 'they are mulgu', whispering my mother's language. One white swan drifted in their midst. My heart cried out to the bird, asking how it came to be amongst the others, so alone and wildly strange. I counted mother swans with fluffy cygnets while my master loaded his gun to shoot and eat those birds baked with potatoes in beef dripping. I wondered if the meat would be white or black.

The dawn mist slipped into my lean-to and I heard heavy breathing. I shifted on my straw pallet bed and felt a heavy weight on the blanket. I sat up. A dead black swan lay on the blanket, its red beak open and neck oozing crimson blood. The webbed feet, like grey bat wings, dangled over the edge. I screamed and he stood and pointed at me.

‘A little present for my girly,’ my master, farmer Bryant, laughed as though he would burst.

I was ten years old, and I wanted to kill that man, but farmer Bryant was sneaky and swift as a snake. I stared daggers into the back of his pimply neck, like maybe I could pop one and watch the exploding green pus. His sweaty pong made me gag. I hid a sharpened stick in my smock, sharp enough to draw his white blood. It was a heavy boondi. It would slide inside his gullet. By touching the point, I felt better. Anyway, a bum trap constable might get me if I stabbed the master. My nose had to be stuffed with fingers to escape the blasts of his farts, like blunderbuss shots.

There I was, standing minding my own little business, hidden in the dark passageway of the grand farmhouse playing with a penny whistle. I heard a footstep. My hair stood up, skin prickled. A slight out breath of rancid air near my ear and he had me. A hairy hand took hold of my neck and squeezed. Pee trickled down my bloomers.

‘Give us a bit of tickle, lass.’

Fast as a quoll cat I slithered out of reach.

I could not run away. I wanted to find my mother. Somehow, she had lost me. I knew she had looked but I must have been hidden from her eyes. She might return here and not be able to find me. She had been gone for years but her soft face visited my dreams. I felt her watching me and loving me.

But soon I realised she was not coming back, and I would have to find her. I searched the bush tracks for any Koori woman who might be my mother.

One sunny day, Mr Bryant tied me on a bullock cart with a thick hemp rope. I was a dark-skinned gurung, a child in

a linen sack dress and bonnet, pathetic and snivelling with a parcel of damper in brown paper wrapped with string.

The cart full of wheat moved down the Great Western Road past convict chain gangs digging holes. They begged for bread, so I pushed my fingers into the parcel and dropped crumbs along the track so they might eat them. They scattered like crows picking up scraps and waved to me. Bryant grunted and swung his whip across the bullocks as they trotted along a dirt track and we passed through a yellow grass plain waving in the breeze.

This master at Bandi Bandi farm was a grunting pig, and he kept me like a pet. On another day I rode up front in the buggy to the creek to catch freshwater yabbies and tied Cedric the horse to a branch. The air filled with the sound of cockatoos as we walked across grey gum leaves.

On bright mornings I remembered skipping with my mother in the bush. Boronia perfume still wafted in the air with gymea lilies and red waratahs. I licked nectar from red honey blooms. My hands traced rock grooves for making stone tools near the creek. We looked down at the Wollondilly stream, where Garangatch, the great eel, ran from a quoll cat Merrigan, who took his mootin spear and tried to kill that eel. The fight created the rivers and mountains, caves and rock holes. It made the whole earth beneath us. Garangatch's eye shone like a silver star from deep pools, and the great eel slithered in the rain and a sacred quoll growled in the night.

Cedric lived behind a timber wall. He was my friend. I fed him carrots and brushed his brown coat and picked stones from his hooves.

In the big house stood a magic tiny ship in a bottle. I asked how the ship got into the bottle. Why was it dancing in blue

water? The white sails seemed to blow in a wind. I wanted to touch the little ship and climb aboard. I studied the ropes and knots. My master, Mr Bryant, put it on a top shelf so I could only see it by climbing up on a chair.

‘Mr Charles Darwin’s ship The Beagle has departed from Sydney harbour just this month. I might go on a ship one day. Ships take people over the ocean every week.’

‘They won’t take a girl,’ said Mr Bryant.

My chatter made the master angry, and I had no way to stop my cheeky tongue. It was a curse. Behind my back, the servants laughed at me, an abandoned half-caste, said I was not fit for polite company. I would never bow down. I often spat and kicked the master.

One night I dreamt flashing pictures of my mother on the run with me searching for her. I hated her in the dream, but pity then took me over. She was desperate to feed me.

I never forgot my dark-skinned mother Muraging. I waited by the window, expecting her figure to bob up with her dilly bag bulging with good tucker. I cried for my waiana mother every night and stood guard on the road watching for her shape to come running back to me. I felt alive with memories of my people, keeping the sense of them hidden inside. They were eating me up.

The farmer’s wife had died of typhus fever and he had mourned over her green body. Then Mr Bryant took me out of his warm house and placed me in the care of one of the convict farm workers. They put me outside, and I lived in the draughty gunyah bark shelter working as a maid and a farm labourer. I learnt to read and write by candlelight from an English servant. We read the bible and an alphabet book like

my mother had shown me. We weeded corn and wheat and raked and hoed the hard ground. I carried buckets of water to the house and animals. Best of all, I fed chickens and stole eggs. Sometimes we pushed cobs of corn into pockets to eat raw at night. The other workers did the same. We stole or went without food. When it rained, the cold water trickled onto my straw bed.

I learnt many English words and saw horrible things amongst the convict labourers. Melancholy, sodomy, murder, bottom prodding, cunt licking, nose picking, laughing and sorrow. The men spoke of regret and guilt, and some went half mad with hunger when they sold their rations for pipe tobacco. Bloodcurdling sounds echoed in the black nights, and I knew the people laboured for nothing, while I cried as a child living alone in a gunyah.

Some convict lasses gave me cheek, spitting in my gruel, and said I was a dirty wild thing. They told me my family must have been sable brethren savages, brutal dark-skinned beasts, the sons of Cain, to forever suffer for their crimes spoken of in the Old Testament. All dark-skinned people were the spawn of Satan, in league with the devils, holding pitchforks with whipping tails. Nobody should believe such rubbish, and I poked my tongue at them, growing tougher by the day.

Some of the farm Koori labourers talked in lingo and protected me by camping nearby at night. I knew one man as the Captain of Cattai, and his cousin George Boomerang and Jack Longo Murrell of the Lower Branch tribe taught me to eat wild figs and bake a goanna on coals and how to make a drink of waratah red flowers into cordial. Those uncles made me a bangalay dish to carry water and carved me a digging

stick with a snake curved around it. They said I was a proper little blackfella.

In the mornings, I mucked out the pigsty, raking goona and laying fresh straw. I washed buckets, rubbed dirt from eggs, looked out for foxes, cut grass, winnowed wheat, and shucked corn, but sometimes I hid in the paddock. All the time, the farmer boss yelled at me. I hoped waiana might come back soon, but she did not come. My body grew little breasts.

One day a post messenger delivered a letter to the door.

‘Mr Bryant, is that letter from mother? Where is my mother? You sent her away but I need her. Give me her letter!’ I stood defiant by the farmhouse door. Hands on hips. My mother’s face swept past me in the middle of the air. He sniffed and laughed and lit his pipe. A huge hand took hold of the horse whip in his lap, he smoothed it with a thumb.

‘Cheeky sod. It’s not for you. As if anyone would write to you! She’s long gone, not coming back. If she did I’d have her arrested, she was a blooming thief.’

‘She’s coming back! I know she’s looking and probably sent me that letter but you shiteater, you hid it.’ I held out my hand to him. He snarled and laughed at me.

‘Get away from the door before I set the dogs on you.’

‘I won’t leave until you show me her letter!’ I shouted at him and shook my fist.

‘Silly girl, you know I’m a kind and generous man, like a daddy. I got something.’

I squatted down and held out a kind stroking hand then his slap missed my face. I ran into my gunyah and barricaded it with logs, hearing him laugh aloud. Inside, I leaned with no breath against the wood, and he banged the bark, but

stopped after a few terrible moments. He seemed to enjoy biding his time. Through the slats, I noticed him sharpening an axe. Perhaps he meant to cut my head off? My heart banged like thunder and my hand clutched my boondi stick. He was coming for me, waiting for me to drop my guard. I wanted to sneak into the house to find that letter. It might have told me where to find her.

Later, when dark came in the farmyard, I smelt the smoke. Bryant sat nearby with his clay pipe and grinned and waited for me. I was like a trapped rabbit. His smoke flickered in the mist. He shook the pipe and sighed, drinking rum from a bottle. Then he took out his long smelly winji and rubbed it. His purple mouth groaned. My face stayed under the blanket, and I prayed I could stab him if he grabbed me. Then, he rattled small change in his pocket and piled up the farthings and half pennies in little mounds. Was it a payment? I stayed inside, watching a coin roll under some wood. When no one was around, I might get it for myself, never having owned a coin. I would need it on my travels to find mother. The next day, I took the money and hid it in my dilly bag with my treasures of shells and glass flakes.

One morning, I saw a Koori man talking to Bryant, and they looked over at me. There was some agreement about my protection. With threats from uncles, I might sleep without fear.

After a long time, I got bigger, eating porridge. If I ran after blackfellas passing, I asked them, 'You see my waiana? Mary James, you see her. Wilguja?' But nobody told me anything. Then, one day, the ladies from the Windsor Benevolent Society came to visit and examine me. Maybe they thought I was an

orphan, but I said, 'I got a mummy.' How could my mother find me if they took me from that place? They shook their heads. A man measured my skull and held a colour chart next to my skin.

After a long drought, Mr Bryant shot his dying cattle. Another awful day. I sat on the step of the farmhouse and in the distance I saw an approaching horse. It was the postman, he seldom stopped at Bryant's farm but this time he trotted up to me and winked.

'A letter addressed to Bryant. But it's got darn feathers on it. Like it was dropped in an emu nest.'

'Give it here,' I said and stretched out my hand. The postman dangled the brown paper parcel in front of me.

'For the master only, not a girl.' He knocked on the door and Bryant came out and snatched the article while counting out mean coins for the postman.

I was incensed and saw myself snatch the letter and fart in Bryant's face.

'Is that letter from Mary James?' I asked.

'No harm for you to see it. I can barely read myself.' He coughed and spat. 'You, however, are a clever girl. But it ain't addressed to you! I might just stick it up my rectum.' The sun poured down and flies clung to our faces. I felt as if I would crack in half. Bryant grinned and slammed his door. I peeped through the window and saw him place the letter in a drawer with other letters. I was certain it was from mother and she wanted to find me.

I waited until late at night and I climbed through the back window into the kitchen and made my way to his sitting room where he had his desk.