

DOMINIQUE WILSON

*Orphan Rock*



PART ONE

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Bessie

MOST TIMES, BESSIE thought she must have been here forever. That she'd simply appeared one night between two of the girls as they slept. Between Lottie – of that she was sure – and another. Who the other was didn't matter. Maybe a girl now in another bed, maybe one now grown and sent to work as a maid for one of the elegant ladies who sometimes visited the orphan asylum. She imagined herself a scrawny baby, blue with cold and mewling with hunger. In her imagination she saw Lottie wake and wrap her body around her to keep her warm, so that she'd stopped crying then, and fallen asleep till morning.

She never imagined what happened after that, what Matron's reaction would have been at finding a new baby in the dormitory. But when she'd told Lottie her thoughts, Lottie had laughed and told a different story.

'You weren't no baby,' she'd said. 'You were walking, and talking some already. Not much, but talking all the same. It was the week they shot Ben Hall – I remember, because it was all the teachers talked about. Anyway, I was scrubbing the steps at the front of the main building, and I saw them bring you here. You were crying and kicking and screaming, and when Matron told them to put you down, you tried to run off. Matron caught you and told you to stop this nonsense, stern like, giving you a shake, and you just crumpled on the ground like she'd beaten the fight right out of you.'

'But who brought me here?'

‘A woman. And a police constable.’

‘My mother?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘Why? Why would my mother want to give me away?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t your mother. Maybe you’re an orphan just like me. I don’t know, do I? Don’t you remember anything?’

Try as she might, Bessie couldn’t remember any of it. In the five years she’d been here, the strict routine of prayers, work, school, and more prayers that defined life at the Protestant Orphan School had erased any memory of her earlier life. Sometimes, in that peaceful state between sleep and wakefulness, she thought she could remember a pale woman, and the haunting fragment of a song. Once fully awake, however, those memories would be swept aside to make way for the realities of another day, so that she’d stretch out her fingers, seeking the comfort of Lottie’s body next to hers, hoping to fade those realities for just a little longer.

Though it was not yet dawn, Bessie lay awake. The dormitory smelt of urine and loneliness. Twenty-eight beds lined the walls, housing two or even three girls per bed. From one of the beds a child called out in her sleep and another mumbled a reply. In the pre-dawn grey, Bessie saw a girl go to the end of the dormitory, urinate on the floor then scurry back to her bed. They were not allowed, of course, to urinate on the floor. Once in bed, with the dormitory door locked, they were meant to stay there till morning – no reason was ever accepted for breaking this rule. As a result, many of the girls did wet their beds, especially the little ones. Some did so in their sleep, so that they had no way of avoiding individual punishment. Others woke in time and tried to hide their weakness by urinating out of their bed, but as this only resulted in collective punishment, the guilty child would eventually be found out, then have to endure days of being ostracised.

Bessie remembered the very last time she’d ever wet the bed, the time Lottie had taken the blame for her. It was when there’d been smallpox in Melbourne. A doctor came to Parramatta from

Sydney to vaccinate all the children, so as to collect their scabs to make more vaccine, should smallpox ever reach Sydney. Many had come out in spots, but Matron had told them this wasn't *real* smallpox, only cowpox, and they should be grateful for this chance to repay the good people of Sydney who'd brought them here in their times of need, and that God would look favourably upon them because of it.

On that day, she'd been woken up by Miss Pipkin, the First Teacher, pulling the blanket off their bed. She'd seen the wet bed and was dragging Bessie out of it by the hair, calling her a repulsive child, no better than her mother who came from the gutter.

'It wasn't me! It wasn't me – it was Lottie!' Bessie cried, but Miss Pipkin hadn't believed her and hit her on the head for lying, and the large bunch of keys she always carried cut Bessie's scalp.

'It's true, it was me. Please don't hit her no more!' Lottie sobbed, staring at the blood trickling down the side of Bessie's face. 'It really was, Miss Pipkin. I couldn't help it...'

So the mistress had made her do penance by making her stand naked at the foot of their bed with the wet sheet over her shoulders like a cape, all through morning prayers and breakfast. Bessie too had to stand there naked, a trickle of blood matting her hair and running down her face and her neck. Later, Lottie refused to talk to her, even though Bessie had saved her bread from supper to give to her, to show how sorry she was.

Outside, a single bird chirped its song, then was quiet. The sky lightened towards morning, promising yet another hot day. Bessie heard the rattle of keys. The dormitory door opened and Miss Pipkin came in ringing a brass bell.

'Good morning children. Half past five, time to rise.'

Bessie sighed – Miss Pipkin was her least favourite person in the whole school. She was a large woman always dressed in black, who wore her hair in a tight bun and never smiled, and never hesitated to beat the girls for laziness or for a future misdeed. 'When I was a nanny back in the old country,' she'd say at every opportunity, 'I would never have put up with such behaviour.'

They stood at the foot of each bed, tousle-haired and sleepy-eyed. As Miss Pipkin neared the end of the dormitory, Bessie held her breath – if the teacher noticed the urine on the wooden floor, they'd all be punished. She was almost at the end of the room when one of the Second Teachers hurried in.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Pipkin, but Matron would like to see you.'

'Now? Oh, very well. Take over, would you please, Miss Lynch?'

As Miss Pipkin left the room, Bessie slowly let her breath out. Miss Lynch was a favourite – though strict, her voice was kind and she always called the girls by their names, and never by their numbers.

'Well, come on girls! Don't just stand there. Morning prayers. Kneel please.' Miss Lynch opened her prayer book. '*Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred and—* Winifred dear – kneel, don't sit. Let's start again. *Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred...*'

The General Confession was followed by the Lord's Prayer, a psalm, the Collect for Grace, then a prayer for the Queen's majesty, and another for the Royal Family. At last came the words all were waiting to hear – *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.*

'Now girls, downstairs to wash. Quickly!'

Washed and dressed, they lined up for inspection and to be allotted their before-breakfast tasks. Lottie was sent to the kitchen, Bessie to clean the verandas.



She dropped her scrubbing brush into the bucket and wiped the veranda tiles dry with a cloth. She had cleaned these tiles so frequently she need only kneel on their hard surface and dip her brush into the cold water to immediately enter that inner world of dreams that allowed her day-to-day existence to become inconsequential. There was little variation in her daydreams – a life away from the

orphanage, away from people who believed to spare the rod was to spoil the child, and who took every opportunity to remind her how worthless she was, how unlovable.

Most times, Bessie believed what her betters told her, how much of a burden she was to society and how, if not for the goodness of the orphanage, she would probably end up a prostitute. But in her daydreams, she imagined herself with a mother. Someone who didn't believe her to be a burden, who'd be happy to spend time with her and hug her if she hurt herself. It would be nice to be hugged.

Lately, she thought there may be something better, out there in the world far from the orphanage, even if she never had a mother. She'd caught a glimpse of that other world when made to stand in line for those fine ladies and gentlemen who came from Sydney looking for servants.

'Can she wash?' the woman would ask Matron when one of the girls took her fancy.

'Yes, Ma'am.'

'Can she cook?'

'Plain fare, Ma'am.'

'Handy at her needle?'

'Plain work, Ma'am.'

They'd move along the line and stop before another girl, then another, and the same questions would be asked again. Then they'd whisper to each other, if they were kind, or discuss loudly a potential maid's attributes. 'No, she's too ugly. I don't want one too pretty, but neither do I want an ugly one – I couldn't bear looking at her every day.'

The way these women dressed, the way they moved and spoke, was what interested Bessie. If she couldn't have a mother, maybe she could be like one of these ladies, one day.

So she'd asked Lottie what made some people better than others. *Money*, Lottie answered, so Bessie then asked why some people had money and others not, but Lottie hadn't known.

'God decides,' Miss Lynch said when asked the same question. 'God decides to whom He'll give the ability to serve, and to whom

He'll give the ability to command. God wants us to help each other, Bessie. That's why He gives wealth to those with the ability to command, so they can look after their servants. It's their God-given lot, just as it's your God-given lot, when you leave here, to serve those with wealth cheerfully, so they may go about their business making this a better world.'

'Yes, but—'

'It's God's will, Bessie. Do not question God's will. You only need to remember *your* lot, and know it's all for the best.'

Bessie didn't mean to question God's will; she just didn't understand what made God choose to give to one, and not another.



'Bessie, stop wriggling,' Lottie whispered.

'I'm hot.'

'Well, stop it anyway.'

They were in bed, neither able to sleep.

'Lottie?'

'Mmm?'

'Why did Matron want to see you?'

'Shhh...'

'Why, Lottie?'

'I've been assigned out.'

'No, I don't want you to go!'

'Well, it's not like I've got a choice, is it?'

'But when will you go?'

'I don't know. Next week sometime. Matron said there's a lady newly arrived in Sydney who's looking for servants. She said she'd take me on as a kitchen maid.'

'Lottie? You can ask Matron to stay. You're not thirteen yet – everyone can stay until they're thirteen...'

'Well, I won't. I don't want to. You know they never want the older ones. What if no one else ever picks me again? I don't want

to be kicked out when I'm thirteen with nowhere to go. I ain't got nobody, Bessie. I *have* to go into service.'

'But I want you to stay here. With me!'

'Shhh... Go to sleep.'

'If you go, I'll never see you again.'

'Well, that can't be helped, can it? Maybe you will one day, I don't know. Now go to sleep.'

'Lottie?'

'Shhh.'

Bessie turned from Lottie but couldn't sleep. What would she do when Lottie left? Though only three years older, Lottie was the closest thing to a mother Bessie had ever had. Often, she pretended Lottie really *was* her mother. That they'd live together in a little house one day, away from the master's cane, the constant scrubbing of floors, and the constant prayers...

A mouse scurried across the wooden floor. She closed her eyes, trying to sleep, trying to stop her mind asking questions she couldn't answer. A mosquito whined near her ear. Outside, a brush-tail possum started its throaty coughs and growls and she concentrated on those until, finally, she slept.

BESSIE FOLLOWED MISS Pipkin, wondering why she had been singled out. Normally, on Saturday mornings after their weekly bath and hair inspection for lice, they were given two clean pinafores for the week – all other items of clothing being changed fortnightly. So why had she, alone, been given a full set of clean clothing, when it was only pinafores week? And why her boots? Boots were never worn unless someone important was coming.

Maybe she was being assigned out, maybe even to the same woman as Lottie. She'd like that. She knew she was too young to be working as anything other than a scullery maid, but she wouldn't mind if it meant being with Lottie.

She followed the teacher down the walkway to Matron's office. Miss Pipkin knocked and opened the door.

'... we aim to put these poor abandoned ones, who might otherwise become pests of society, into a position to lead useful and respectable lives. We strive, Sir, to save children with tainted blood from the vortex of irrecoverable degradation and—'

'Yes, yes. Quite.'

Bessie waited for her presence to be acknowledged by Matron, who droned on. The bearded gentleman sitting in front of Matron's desk looked impatient. He pulled a gold watch from the pocket of his waistcoat, looked at the time and stood.

'Thank you, Matron, but we really must go.'

'Of course, Sir, of course. Now, Bessie O'Hanigan, you're a very

lucky child. Your mother applied to be reunited with you, and the Board has approved her application.'

Bessie looked from Matron to Miss Pipkin to the man standing opposite Matron's desk. She paled. Opened her mouth, shut it again. Her bowels churned. She began to shake. She didn't understand.

'My mother? Reclaimed?' but her voice was raspy, barely audible. She gulped.

'Yes, child. Of course your mother! Mister Bellingham here is her husband. He applied on her behalf. And as Mister Bellingham has reimbursed the committee for your maintenance during your entire stay at the School, there's nothing holding you here. You're to go with him today.' Bessie was barely aware she was being spoken to. She couldn't stop thinking – she had a mother, and her mother wanted her back. 'Work hard, Bessie. Remember, only through hard work can you hope to escape the state of penury—'

'Yes, yes, I'm sure Bessie will do just that. Now we really must go.'

Matron nodded, but continued anyway. 'Obey your new father, Bessie. Do not let—' Her *new* father? She'd never thought about a father... 'Do you have anything you'd like to say?'

*I have a mother. And a father...*

'Bessie?'

'Can I say goodbye to Lottie?'

'No, you may not. You're to leave here forthwith. I'll pass on your farewells to the girl. Do you have anything *else* to say?'

Bessie frowned and shook her head. She knew she was expected to thank Matron, to show how grateful she was, but if she wasn't allowed to say goodbye to Lottie, then neither would she thank anyone.

'Don't you think you should thank Matron for her charity, Bessie? Where would you be if she hadn't taken you in?' Miss Pipkin asked.

Bessie frowned some more and looked down at her boots.

Mr Bellingham cleared his throat. 'Say goodbye, child, so we can go.'

‘Goodbye.’ *I have a mother.*

‘That will have to do, I suppose. Very well. Godspeed, Bessie O’Hanigan. Mister Bellingham.’



Bessie had never ridden in a carriage before. At first she sat upright, tightly hanging on to the seat, expecting to fall off at any moment, but she soon realised she was safe – the rhythm of the horse’s hooves, the bounce of its tail and the heat of the day all had a hypnotic effect on her, so that she now sat, outwardly calm whilst in her mind a million questions churned and tumbled and disappeared unanswered, to be replaced by *I have a mother!*

Cornelius Bellingham guessed the girl’s confusion, and for the first half-hour of their journey didn’t try to intrude upon her thoughts, but now her absolute stillness made him uneasy. He reached under the seat of the carriage and pulled out a leather satchel, from which he withdrew a cloth-wrapped package.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘oatcakes. In case you’re hungry.’

Bessie chewed on the crumbly biscuit and stole a furtive glance at Cornelius. He didn’t frighten her much – he had a kind face and, away from Matron’s office, his voice had softened. She wished she could ask him to explain what was happening, ask him the hundred and one questions she had about her mother.

‘Is there anything you’d like to ask, child?’ he said, as if reading her thoughts.

Bessie nodded.

‘Well? Ask.’

‘Please Sir, my mother. Where is she?’

‘She’s home, Bessie. In Sydney. We’ll be there in a couple of hours. Your mother wasn’t well enough to make the journey.’

‘My mother’s ill?’

When Cornelius didn’t answer, Bessie thought he may not have heard her question. She took another bite of the oatcake, keeping her gaze lowered. Was it wrong – impolite maybe – to ask after someone’s

health? She was wondering whether to ask again when Cornelius interrupted her thoughts.

‘Tell me, Bessie. What did they teach you at that school?’

‘Reading, Sir. And handwriting.’

‘And arithmetic?’

‘Yes, Sir...’

Cornelius laughed at Bessie’s tone of voice. ‘You don’t like arithmetic?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Well, I don’t imagine you’ll have much use for arithmetic. I’m sure we can think of something more interesting for you to learn.’

‘Mister Bellingham?’

‘You may call me “Papa”, child. Or “Father”, if you’d rather.’

‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘My mother... Is she ill? Is she dying?’

‘Good heavens, child, no. No, not at all. Wherever did you get such an idea? Listen – your mother... Well, she has a delicate constitution, a nervous disposition, you see.’

Bessie nodded. She didn’t mind her mother having a delicate constitution, as long as she wasn’t going to die.

The sun rose higher in the sky, the day became hotter. The road was busier now – men on horseback, a dray loaded with barrels, another piled high with furniture. Wagons and carriages and traps. A Cobb & Co coach pulled by a team of horses overtook them, bumping and jostling over ruts in the road, thickening the dust as they passed. In a tree some distance away, a flock of sulphur-crested cockatoos screeched their disapproval.

‘Mister Bellingham?’

‘Yes, child?’

‘What’s tainted blood?’

‘Nothing you should worry yourself about.’

Bessie glanced at Cornelius. His voice sounded angry, and he frowned as he flicked the reins, so that she regretted asking that question. She slumped back in her seat.



As they entered the outskirts of Sydney, Cornelius thought to wake the girl now asleep beside him, but decided against it – there'd be plenty of time for her to discover the city. Once more, he wondered if he was putting too much faith in this child.

He'd been surprised by her appearance – he'd expected her to look like her mother, pale and fair and slender, but though waiflike, the child's striking combination of black hair and blue eyes caught him unprepared. He'd watched her struggle to come to terms with Matron's news, and the emotions she'd revealed struck him in a curiously poignant way. And he'd seen how, though she'd understood what she was expected to say, she'd summoned from deep within herself the strength to defy expectations. He'd never admit it to the child, but he liked this small defiance.

He slowed the horse and turned into Phillip Street. Tipped his hat at William Langston, the bookseller, hurrying down the street. Just before the Office of Stamp Duties he turned into a laneway to stable his horse. The air smelt of hot stone, refuse and horse dung, and an occasional gust from the bay added the stench of sewage, indicating low tide. Yes, he liked this small defiance, but he'd have to watch that wayward streak – he didn't consider himself a harsh man, but he intended to be an authoritative father to the girl, as society demanded. It would be for the child's own good.

'Bessie? Wake up, girl – we're home.'