

Prologue

Bala-dhu Gunhi Bangalbuwurayi. I am Mother Earth, home to girawuu and biladurang dreaming.

I am founded on granite and sculpted by melting ice and volcanic lava that created the Wambool Bila that runs through me like blood through the veins of my Wiradyuri mayiny. Over time the landscape has changed, but my people have continued to live, love, thrive with me, as one.

The Wambool Bila is a place of sustenance. It is abundant with large trout, the river blackfish and the silver perch, but the bila is more than a source of food. Its galing is the giver of life that brings people to its banks. Galing cleanses spirits and bodies, and the overhanging trees along its banks are used for shelter from the elements, to sleep.

The rise and fall of galing over seasons mirror the rainfall of this place of birthing, of living and ceremony. I am the place of reflection, of serenity and tranquillity, where the sounds of silence allow those who listen to remember or imagine the time of the

Ancestors – gudyiin – walking this place, often coming together for sharing, for celebration and corroborees, and for sorry business.

The Wiradyuri have been part of me for millennia, hunting and gathering and feasting on native animals – the wambuwny, the dinawan, the budhanbang, among many other species that nourish and sustain them. All the while respecting their totems, ensuring no living creature will ever die out.

While the life of the Wiradyuri is not without its challenges, it is one to be admired and respected for its longevity and its value system: yindyamarra, marrumbang, ngumbadal and winhanga-gigilanha. Values that focus on responsibility and accountability to miyagan, kindness, love, unity, caring, where ngumambinya means each member of the Clan can trust others for help. But that trust will be tested in times ahead.

News from other tribes travels across the land through word of mouth, and warnings abound of the white ghost interlopers, the people of the white-skinned tribe, making their home in what I am known as to them: the new country. The white ghosts see me as useful for their own ways, willing to change Wiradyuri culture forever, disrespecting ngurambang, its Ancestors, its creatures, its kin.

But I am Wiradyuri ngurambang, and Wiradyuri people will never give me up, give up on me, for we are one. We have our own lores, even if the white ghosts do not recognise them. And Wiradyuri will never give up on the freedoms they have always known here.

The white-skinned tribe will follow Wiradyuri tracks across the ranges; they will build pathways that will act like an acceptable entry to our homeland, and while they may initially be welcomed as friends, they will behave like the invaders they are.

Whispers that come with the winds also say the white ghosts are bringing with them weapons, sickness, and a language that defines

us in ways we know nothing of: savagery, cannibalism, worthlessness. They are bringing their own countrymen, convicts bound in chains, to be whipped at will, often considered the worst of society, some driven to a life of hardship simply because they needed to eat. The inhumanity demonstrated against these men and women will be shown towards the Wiradyuri too.

The white ghosts will create a way of life that keeps Wiradyuri separate from them, but worse, separate from each other. And when they mix their blood with ours through the rape of our yinaa-galang and girls, the Wiradyuri will not have the language to express the grief of such violations, or the anger that will build within them.

Such violations will not go unpunished. Nor will their imposition upon and theft of Wiradyuri land, of our cultural ways and our own humanity.

Wiradyuri culture is yindyamarra and winhangagigilanha, respect and caring for each other. But our culture has no meaning to them, and I have witnessed the tragedy and trauma befall the Gadigal, Bidjigal and Dharawal mayiny already. The white ghosts have arrived without invitation and are travelling without yindyamarra for those who have lived here forever; they will cross Gandangarra ngurambang and find their way here, there is no question about that – but when?

There have been many ghosts who have attempted to come over Katta-toon-bah, the place of 'shining falling water'. The ngurambang of the Darug, the Dharawal, the Darkinyung and Gandangarra have been encroached upon, and their warriors have resisted, and that intrusive pressure will be upon me too, soon.

The white ghosts have been trying for many moons, since the big canoes arrived into Kamay and carried a leader they called James Cook. He was challenged by the Gweagal, mayiny of Dharawal

ngurambang, but he did not leave. And his canoes kept coming and brought with them more white ghosts and new, bigger animals, first leaving them at Wuganmagulya.

The white ghosts will travel over land on the backs of other creatures, sitting upright with an air of authority, as if their way of being is better than that of the custodians of ngurambang here. They will call themselves explorers and will be worshipped by their own for finding places that have long been known by Wiradyuri and other tribes. Even to get to the place they will name Bathurst, they will need the guidance of those from this land. But the footprints of the First Peoples will not be acknowledged.

Their arrival will bring curiosity and the white ghosts will think the Wiradyuri a novelty at first. They'll come with yarraman and belongings that will be new and strange to the Wiradyuri, who at first may be afraid. Possum skin cloaks and other adornments will be traded for weapons and white ghost tools. And the newcomers will try to act like guests, even offering gifts in exchange for knowledge, for guidance across the land. They will attempt some level of ghostlike-friendship, and in return the Wiradyuri will treat them with yindyamarra, as is the Wiradyuri way. They will generously share food and knowledge in exchange for white-ghost ways of doing new things.

But will that extension of friendship last? Will it be reciprocated? Or will it be exploited and abused? Will the white ghosts dismiss Wiradyuri as naïve, or consider them of lower intelligence to themselves? Will they create a hierarchy where Wiradyuri will find no place of power, their desire for control over their own lives ignored?

Will the white ghosts disrupt and destroy the life Wiradyuri have known since the beginning of time, since Baayami created the water-holes, the animals, the songlines.

My questions are born from fears their beasts will turn me inside out, digging at my heart as if I am replaceable, irrelevant, unnecessary in their new world order. I fear they will, as they have done elsewhere, create their own boundaries, fencing me off from my people, and stripping me bare, until eventually I have no more to give; no nourishment, no sustenance, no life. I fear they will manipulate me to a point that the Wiradyuri way of life will become unrecognisable, and the impact of loss will cause a spiral of depression among the mayiny.

I believe that when the white ghosts find the Wiradyuri to be protective of all they love, they will learn in the most brutal way from the people of this ngurambang – from the Blue Mountains in the east, to the western slopes in the south, to the grassy plains in the north and west – that they will fight for what is rightfully theirs.

And even though the white ghosts will arrive with firesticks they will point and shoot, poison they will lace food with, disease they will spread, and a hatred born from nothing other than greed and ignorance, they will learn that the mayiny of Wiradyuri ngurambang are resilient and strong, and though they may be displaced and disempowered, they will never give up their ngurambang, ever.

The journey of the white ghosts to conquer me for their own purposes will be devastating, but when the warrior Windradyne commands, 'Dirrayawadha!', his people will rise up.

Chapter One

‘There are too many white ghosts here,’ Windradyne whispers to his sister Miinaa, and she is thankful to hear her natural tongue after a day of trying to speak only English at Cloverdale. She is exhausted mentally and physically as she tries to settle three restless gudha-galang for the night. The eldest, Giyalung, is an astute six-year-old, Yarruwala, a confident five-year-old, and Ngawaal, a boisterous four-year-old.

Miinaa’s accommodation consists of a small room with a single bed pushed against a stone wall. The full moon can be seen through the window above the bedhead this evening, and the sunrise will wake them in the morning. Even though other windows at Cloverdale have curtains, she prefers the natural light – it reminds her of sleeping under the stars before she arrived at the Nugents’ property. There are lumps of wood fashioned into something to sit on in one corner and a small lamp offers a dull light as she puts the children’s meagre belongings neatly in one spot.

Windradyne's own children live with their mothers along the Wambool Bila, as do the rest of their miyagan. Other families are scattered across Wiradyuri ngurambang. Some live and work on land granted to, and now legally owned by, white settlers. The arrangement that Miinaa has at Cloverdale is unique, and not something many others want. Some see it as becoming like the white ghosts. But Windradyne just wants his *minhi* to be safe.

'This is what the Gubbna Ghost wanted, back when he drove that carriage to our ngurambang many, many nights ago,' Windradyne says, with a bitter tone. 'When they built that road over our trading routes, when the white men in rags and chains came here as their punishment, they brought punishment upon us as well. Making us live *their* way.'

Miinaa was a younger girl when the white ghosts first arrived, but she recalls the day that the Gubbna Ghost raised a piece of red, blue and white material and renamed her homeland a settlement, calling it 'Bathurst'. She remembers vividly the first time she ever saw a white ghost: his coat was the colour of blood, and when he removed that coat, she thought he was peeling off a layer of skin. She had to blink hard before realising there was another layer of cloth there, and then very, very white skin beneath that. She felt silly that day, but then she felt sick.

Those earlier times, of seeing convicts arrive, threw her into emotional turmoil she'd never known. Seeing them beaten if they did not work past exhaustion shocked her and the other yinaa-galang, but they came to learn it was important for the white ghosts to finish the road, so that more of their kind could arrive. And that the people giving the orders were often far, far away.

It was back then that she first realised her gumbal, Windradyne, was a leader; that it was his role to meet the leader of the white ghosts, the one they called the Gubbna. He took that meeting with two other men, and they were given some food and tomahawks and a piece of yellow cloth in exchange for a possum skin cloak.

Her thoughts are broken by the sound of Ngawaal giggling.

‘The gudha-galang are restless tonight,’ she says, smiling, grateful for the laughter of the children, the only joy in her long day. ‘They’ve had a good feed of wambuwuny, thank you,’ she says to her brother, who is known as a skilled hunter among their own. She observes him as he watches the children; she notes his strong features. Some yinaa-galang say he is marambang ngulung, but she never strokes his ego. She also thinks it would be strange to tell your brother he is handsome.

Miinaa has a much smaller frame than Windradyne; she hasn’t the height of her brother, but is lean like him. Her dark hair falls down the length of her back and is tied together loosely with a piece of calico to keep it off her heart-shaped face. Her full lips curve upwards tonight after many hours in the vegetable patch today, and she thinks sleep will come easily to her tired body.

As Windradyne plays with the children, she admires his strong Wiradyuri features, similar to most of their men, and she can see both Yarruwala and Ngawaal are growing to have the same body shape and looks: broad shoulders, muscular arms and legs, and thick, black curly hair. Windradyne has his hair pulled back tonight, and his beard is plaited in three sections.

She hopes the young boys who look up to Windradyne will have the same physical strength, and walk with the same fierce pride and confidence, when they’re older.

But Miinaa also sees a side of him that many don't – the gentle, loving man, not afraid to show ngurrbul to the younger ones in their Clan. And it warms her heart when he visits them at Cloverdale straight from hunting, bringing with him wild turkey or geese for everyone to enjoy, or when he takes the gudha-galang out fishing.

Tonight, the children seem extra happy to see their uncle, and he tickles Ngawaal, making the child chuckle loudly. When the youngster pulls on Windradyne's plaited beard, he mocks pain and falls to the ground groaning, making them all laugh.

'Why you have this, Mamaba?' Ngawaal asks, pulling on his own chin. 'And why this many?' He holds up three fingers.

'One for each of you gudha-galang.' Windradyne tickles the young fella some more.

Their laughter warms Miinaa's heart. There hasn't been much to smile about of late, as the Nugents' station continues to grow, with more convict workers, which means more work for her, cleaning, cooking, tending to the needs of her miyagan but also the owners of Cloverdale, Andrew and Susanna Nugent, and their children, Oscar, Edward and Lalla. Yesterday, she had to darn all the socks of the men on the station, and threading a needle was an exercise in patience she didn't enjoy.

'And why this?' Ngawaal asks his uncle, touching the red cloth wrapped around his forehead and tied at the back.

Windradyne picks the gudha up and rests him on his lap. 'This says I am a warrior.' He watches the young one, whose eyes focus on the cloth as he runs his little hands along the band, concentrating on the sense of touch. 'You come from a long line of strong Wiradyuri mayiny, and you will grow into a big, strong man one day. You'll be next in line soon enough.'

‘Your gumbal is the next warrior in line,’ Miinaa says, pointing to Yarruwala.

‘And then you!’ Windradyne lightly pokes Ngawaal in the belly, making him wriggle about.

‘*Me?*’ he asks enthusiastically. Miinaa’s heart fills when she sees pride in the child.

‘Yes. Your name, Ngawaal, means power and force. And you carry your name within you.’ Windradyne rests his palm on the boy’s chest for a moment. ‘It is part of your identity.’

‘I *am* powerful!’ The child beats his chest and chuckles.

The five-year-old pipes in. ‘What does *my* name mean, Mamaba?’

Windradyne’s grin tells Miinaa that he’s happy to be sharing culture with the children. ‘Yarruwala means very strong and almighty.’

‘Ha!’ Yarruwala boasts to Ngawaal. ‘I am strong, and *almighty*.’ He flexes his barely-there muscles.

Miinaa knows their sister will want to be front and centre of the activity, and seconds later she’s there, forcing the two boys out of the way, pushing her face up close to Windradyne’s.

‘What about me? What does *my* name mean?’ she asks excitedly.

‘Your name means that you are very, very smart.’

‘I’m very, very smart,’ she says proudly in the direction of the boys, her blue eyes lighting up her face.

Miinaa and Windradyne glance at each other knowingly. It is never spoken of by the adults who know the dark girl with the blue eyes was born from rape. Her mother’s role with a settler was often exploited, and then one day she was abused in the most heinous way, her spirit never the same after the brutal

attack. Before the child was born it was agreed between the Clan that the happy-go-lucky girl would only ever be told she was loved, that she had grown from love, and would always be loved. Giyalung had been nurtured and protected in the communal way the Wiradyuri had raised all their gudha-galang, generation after generation, for tens of thousands of years. She is one of the reasons they have ended up at Cloverdale – it is added protection for the young girl. For all of the children.

Miinaa understood the look of grief and anger in Windradyne's eyes whenever Giyalung asked about her own story, though; it reminded them both of the violation, and the need to avenge it. The fire that stirred in his belly was stirring in hers as well.

'I'm smart,' the girl says again, satisfied, without asking anything else, and crawls into the bed sheets next to Yarruwala, while Ngawaal climbs back onto Windradyne's lap.

'Where's the line you said?' he asks, pulling on Windradyne's plaits.

'What line?' Windradyne doesn't want to sound cranky, but Miinaa knows he's tired and that the plait tugging will be annoying him. He takes Ngawaal's hands in his own and holds them still.

'You said that I was in line after Yarruwala. Where's the line?' The child looks around the cramped space.

'Ngawa, Windradyne, where's the line?' Miinaa laughs, and her brother shakes his head and rolls his eyes.

'It's not a line you can see, silly.' He rubs the boy's head. 'It means that you're the next man in the family to do an important job.'

'What job?' The boy's eyes are wide, as if what is expected of him in reaching manhood is something to look forward to.

‘Your job will be to teach your sons and their sons the same stories, the same responsibilities that you will learn as you grow up to be a man.’

Ngawaal springs from Windradyne’s lap and stands tall, chest out, ready for the call to manhood and yet too young to understand what that call will look like in years to come. Cloverdale and Wiradyuri ngurambang is set to change dramatically.

‘What’s *your* name mean, Mamaba?’ Ngawaal asks.

Miinaa smiles. It’s a long time since she’s heard his birth name, and she looks forward to his answer.

‘Well, the name I had when I was your age was Wiiny-maldhaany, and that means fire maker.’

‘But, Mamaba, why does everyone call you Windradyne?’

‘You ask a lot of questions, Ngawaal, and I’m too old and too tired for any more talk.’ Windradyne lifts the young boy from his lap.

‘Into bed now.’ Miinaa ushers Ngawaal who climbs willingly between the sheets, squishing into his sister’s back. Yarruwala is then pressed up against the wall where he is trying to get to sleep. The three tussle for a few seconds before quietening down.

Ngawaal rolls over and faces the adults, eyes wide open. ‘Mrs Nugent said when you are tired, you say it’s time to sleep.’

‘Then it’s time to sleep,’ Miinaa says, tucking the sheet tight under the thin mattress so the child can’t escape easily, as he is prone to do at night.

‘Come,’ Miinaa says to her brother and nods in the direction of the far corner, where she places the lamp on a tree stump used as a table. Windradyne follows, rolling his shoulders as he walks.

As they sit, Miinaa whispers, ‘What’s wrong, gumbal? Why so much worry in your eyes?’

He shakes his head and sighs, taking his time to answer. ‘I don’t know how much longer we can be welcoming, friendly to the white ghosts. We have tried for long enough, but there is no yindyamarra from them.’ He looks over to the bed. ‘And then, even when we are kind, they treat our women . . .’ His voice trails off, but she doesn’t need him to say anything more.

‘I know.’ Miinaa agrees with him generally, but feels the need to defend the one family that has always shown her Clan yindyamarra. ‘But the Nugents have treated us as friends. They’ve acted kindly towards us.’

‘They treat us kindly, ngawa, but, Miinaa, they just treat us like we’re human, how we *should* be treated. We shouldn’t think of it as special. It’s how *everyone* should act towards each other. With kindness, with ngurrbul, and ngawa, always with yindyamarra. But that’s not the case with the other white ghosts.’

Miinaa understands the point her brother is making. She knows that since the white-skinned tribe arrived, things have never been equal. There has been some courtesy and exchanges of knowledge and trading of goods and food, but she has never felt the same about life on their own ngurambang.

But the Nugents, the Irish people she works for, the people who have given them a room in their house, who let her Clan move freely on what is now regarded as *their* land – these white ghosts are learning the language that Miinaa and Windradyne have spoken since birth. In her heart she believes that *this* family is different.

‘They may not understand our connection to ngurambang, but they do listen when we talk, when we tell them things they should know,’ she continues.

Windradyne nods in agreement, then says, 'But the rest of the white ghosts, they don't care though. They don't listen, and they don't want to know.'

'I know, gumbal,' she nods. 'But the Nugents are trying to do it the right way. We're showing that sharing is our way of doing things too. Surely, learning about each other will help us understand each other better.' It's a question as much as a statement, and there's hope in her voice. It's a hope that her brother does not share. Windradyne believes that hope is a luxury in a landscape that is rapidly changing in ways that do not benefit his own people. Even Miinaa is learning that hope can be a wasted emotion.

But hope is all she has these days, as she watches her brother get more frustrated, angrier, overwhelmed by the changes happening around them daily: more white ghosts, more foreign animals and plants, more pressure on their own food supplies, more movement off their traditional lands as they are fenced off for the invaders to control. More of everything except control of their own daily lives, because that has declined since the first white ghosts arrived. Even speaking language now they mostly do in private, forced otherwise to speak the white ghost language around them.

'Windradyne?' she prompts. Her brother is bowed over, with his head in his hands.

He sits upright. 'It's true the Nugents are walking with us, but why can't all the white ghosts show the same yindyamarra?' His voice has started to rise and Miinaa puts her finger to her mouth, nodding in the direction of the gudha-galang, who are finally asleep. He nods, and speaks more quietly.

'It's one thing to welcome a few of these ghosts, to show them our campgrounds, and where to find food; to be hospitable and

caring as you would be to visitors to your home. But it doesn't mean they can take *over* our home, *our* ngurambang. We never agreed to that; we never said that was all right, that we approved. We never *gave* them what is rightfully ours.'

'I know, gumbal, but we're here, at Cloverdale. We're safe and the gudha-galang are happy.' The children are always her main concern.

'Ngawa, but I think Andrew and Susanna Nugent feel they owe us, because one day I showed them where the creek and the rivulet met, and then they built here.'

Miinaa is not sure about her brother being responsible for where the Nugents built their house, but she lets him continue.

'And, ngawa, we're all safe and happy, but you're here to work, to help raise their children. Others are simply being pushed off their land, moved away, having to find new places to camp along the bila. Most are not as lucky as you and the gudha-galang here.'

Even though she has to live the white ghost way, Miinaa knows her quality of life is better than other yinaa-galang on stations nearby, because the Nugents are kind to her. Mrs Nugent is teaching her and the gudha-galang the language of the ghosts and they work together to grow potatoes and cook for the family and the employees.

'I guess it's good, too, that the Nugents are the Irish tribe,' Windradyne says, adjusting the lamp to make the room darker as Ngawaal's eyes are still open. 'I understand them to be better than the English tribe.'

'Why?' Miinaa shrugs. She'd never noticed much difference between the ghosts, other than that some have yellowish hair, or light brown hair, and that Susanna and her children all have reddish hair, and some of them have freckles. But they all go red

in the sun, because their skin is pale white – not like the colour of the whitest clouds, but still so pale she thinks many of them look sick.

‘Mr Nugent said the Irish are different to the English, and they have tribes inside their own tribes too, like we have clans within our tribes. But the Irish clans aren’t miyagan, they’re religious clans who go to the same church where they pray to their creator god.’

Miinaa is fascinated, impressed that her gumbal has listened and learned from Andrew Nugent, one of the few white ghosts he has confided in over time.

‘The Nugents belong to the Catholic tribe and the other big Irish tribe are the Protestants.’ He stumbles over the foreign word but it doesn’t matter because Miinaa doesn’t understand the Irish tribes anyway, though she knows about the Catholics and has heard Susanna mention the Protestants before, with a cold tone.

‘How does it work, with the two tribes?’

‘Apparently they don’t get on,’ Windradyne says, ‘and they’re all controlled by the English tribe. And there are two different areas of land separated by galing.’

‘Like a bila, maybe, like the Wambool?’

Windradyne shrugs. ‘I don’t know, but Andrew says he came to this land because the English are trying to control the Irish, and their ngurambang as well.’

‘So, the Irish are still white ghosts, but they are *better* than the English ghosts?’

‘Ngawa, because it is mostly the English ghosts who are making the rules here and causing havoc on our ngurambang, on our mayiny. We know the Darug have already tried to fight back. But we need many, many spears to fight against the white

ghost firesticks. We know over the ranges the people have fought back against the English, but the fighting hasn't ended either.'

Windradyne frowns.

'What is it, gumbal?'

'I hope what happened over the mountains with Pemulwuy will not happen here.'

'It might,' she says. 'He was a warrior like you. And they shot him!' Miinaa's shoulders slump as she reflects with yindyamarra about the warrior from Botany Bay that they had all heard about. They knew him as Pemulwuy, a Bidjgal man who led the resistance for his own people. There had been bloody battles fought in Parramatta and on Dharawal ngurambang at Appin. She's heard heartbreaking stories of people massacred or left wounded. Stories that Pemulwuy's head had been cut off and sent to another country over the seas, a vast body of water she can only imagine. Such brutality would never have crossed her mind, had she not heard it from her own brother's mouth. A story so vile she threw up what little was in her stomach that day. There were already too many stories that scared her; she didn't want, couldn't cope with any more.

Windradyne's words break into her thoughts.

'Word has travelled to our camp by those who have walked carefully over the ranges,' he says, straightening his spine, 'that down in Sydney-town, where the white ghosts are taking over all of the ngurambang with force, moving all the Clan off their homelands, and worse,' he pauses, 'the warriors Cannabaygal and Durelle have been murdered too.' Windradyne hangs his head in silence.

Miinaa puts her hand on her brother's shoulder.

'I don't want to hear any more.' Tears form in her eyes. She stands because she is too restless to sit any longer. The men

Windradyne speaks of were warriors like her brother, and her greatest fear is losing him the same way.

Windradyne rises from his slumped position, takes a deep breath, and looks up towards her. ‘They—’ he gulps, then resumes. ‘They cut off the men’s heads, and left their bodies hanging from trees. They are savages,’ he says, teeth clenched, trying to contain his anger only because he doesn’t want to disturb the children.

Miinaa almost loses her balance at the image that flashes past her eyes. She squeezes them shut tight and shakes her head, wishing hard for what she sees to disappear, but the horrific scene remains in her mind long into the night, until she finally falls into a restless sleep. It will be many nights before she can dream of better things.