

THE MEANS

Sample Chapter *TWELVE*

As nights went it was the worst Eddie could remember. If he slept at all it was in tiny boats on epic swells, lurching and yawing in troughs of doom. Billo went from feverish to shivering then back again in torrid cycles over which Eddie had not a skerrick of influence. The most he could do was keep replacing the bedding Billo kicked off or occasionally stoke the fire when he shivered, and get him to take sips of water. Eddie felt powerless, and was. At one stage he thought he'd lost him he was so cold and quiet. Another time in the early hours Billo sat up and started jabbering about The Crusades and Eddie thought he was coherent, but when he responded Billo blew a raspberry and lay back down in disgust. Eddie wished there was something he could do, anything to give him real hope, but he knew there was nothing. And when first light presented their wretched little scene to the world at large, the futility of their plight made him despair. He was going to lose his brother, right there on the banks of a river he didn't even know the name of, a long way from anywhere either of them could call home. He put his head in his hands and sat, empty and sad, too tired to even weep.

How long Eddie sat like that he really didn't know, but eventually something made him look up and when he did he saw a sight he scarcely believed. On the edge of the clearing down on the beach stood three aboriginal kids, one of them a half-caste.

"Hey Billo," he said, automatically reaching for his friend. But Billo wasn't anywhere reachable by earthly means, and when he looked back the kids were gone too.

"Well bugger me," said Eddie. "Two skinny and one white."

"Hey!" he said, getting up and hobbling towards them. "Hey, come back! Please come back!"

He checked the sand for footprints and was relieved to find he wasn't delusional. Then he followed the direction of the departing prints into the scrub a-ways, but quickly determined that was a vain exercise at best: he had no idea what he was doing and they already knew where he was. If they wanted to come back they would. But how could he encourage them? Where there were kids there were bound to be adults who might be able to help them get out of here. He had to lure them back.

Eddie returned to camp and checked on Billo, who lay dull and listless, clammy to the touch. Eddie took one of his shirts and dunked a sleeve in water, squeezing a few drops at a time into Billo's mouth. But for once his heart wasn't in it. For the limited good it might be doing he could be spending the time trying to make contact with the kids and their parents. He put the shirt down and stood, looking around camp for what, he didn't know, wishing he had some sweets to offer them, and then admonishing himself for the thought. He well knew of white man's panacea.

"Oranges!" he remembered. "They're bright. And sweet. And healthy, what's more." He took the bag from the esky and carried it down to the beach on his shoulder, whistling like he thought might befit a would-be Pied Piper, looking more like a silly Santa. He made a great show of positioning oranges in a semi-circle on the sand and sitting down in the centre, before starting to eat one himself, peeling it carefully and holding it high at every stage for any onlooker to see, addressing his audience of oranges as he talked the process through so the kids were in no doubt what lovely sweet things oranges were and look how easy they were to peel and pull apart and even if you'd never seen one before you'd love the taste on your tongue and the sticky juice dribbling down your chin come on kids come on out and get

yourself one there's plenty here for every little girl and boy and oh my God he sounded like a fucking paedophile. He stopped cold.

This time Eddie did weep. Like the saddest clown he wept with silent, wracking sobs, still holding his half-finished orange in one hand, the other turning over grains of sand in his fingers, the finest of worry beads, not noticing the black legs approaching till he was looking at their feet in front of him. He looked up through red eyes into the whitest eyes he'd ever seen.

The woman was still and her face calm and resolute, and when she looked at Eddie it seemed to him she understood everything that ever was. It was hard to guess how old she might be, but she was naked above her grass skirt and carried pendulous flat breasts on her chest, over which hung the most exotic collection of seeds and bones and assorted indescribables he'd ever seen worn around a neck. She also had the most outrageous head of hair he'd ever seen on a human being, a wiry grey explosion more like teased out steel wool than hair. Yet despite her appearance she instilled a confidence in him, a familiarity he couldn't explain, and when she nodded and made a 'picking up' motion with her hand that he instinctively recognised as an invitation to follow, he did as he was bid. And when they reached his own camp and she signalled him to sit, this time with a flick of the fingers shooting from the hip, he sat. And watched.

First she knelt beside Billo and began running her hands over his body without touching him, singing in a low, nasal drone. Sometimes she would bend down and sing closer to one part or another, then she would rock back and raise her head and her voice, projecting skyward as if reporting her findings to a greater source. Next she moved to the other side and removed his bandage, chanting all the while, and when the wound was bared the treatment took a turn that sucked the breath from Eddie's mouth. She sang right onto the raw wound, so close her lips were often touching the angry flesh, her fingers splayed on either side of her head giving the impression she was either concentrating all her efforts on that one area, or channelling something from elsewhere through that wild hair of hers. Then she leant back again and sang to the heavens, a mournful and urgent song, full of knowing and purpose, impossible to ignore.

Or so it seemed to Eddie, who watched enthralled for a period of time he really had no notion of. Indeed, when she stopped to summons one of the kids with a cluck of the tongue and another of her unmistakable hand gestures, he had no idea they were even standing behind him.

The child walked forward with a dilly bag and gave it to the woman. It was the half-caste, who Eddie noticed was an adolescent. Taller than the other two girls she carried herself with a grace belying her age, if indeed he was guessing her age correctly to be around thirteen or fourteen. There were also no signs of shyness about her, and where the other two coyly avoided eye contact, she considered him impassively. And when she walked past it was as if he wasn't there.

From the bag the woman took several bunches of plant matter, one dried, two fresh, and some bark. With fingers almost too deft to follow, she plucked leaves from the fresh plants and put them in her mouth for chewing, signalling to Eddie that he pay attention. After she'd chewed for half a minute or so she spat the mottled green secretion onto Billo's wound, gently spreading it out with an elegant, upturned finger. She glanced up at Eddie to satisfy herself he was watching, and took the dried bunch in one hand and the bark in the other and directed him to bring the billy. Then using no more than a few economical gestures she conveyed to Eddie how Billo was to have tea made from the bark, and Eddie was to drink tea made from the dried plant. At this last instruction Eddie pointed to his own chest and gave her a quizzical look, but she just nodded once and touched her head, which he wasn't at all sure how to take. Throughout the whole exchange not a word was spoken.

Then without fanfare she stood, put a finger to her lips in the universal gesture of ‘silence’ and walked away, preceded by the girls, again without him being aware they’d even moved, much less having collected the oranges from the beach to take with them.

“Hey, thanks,” Eddie yelled after her when he found the wit to speak. But the woman didn’t turn around, just raised her hand above her shoulder and gave a little twirl of the fingers that Eddie readily interpreted as, “Don’t mention it; I’d do the same for a blackfella,” and then spent some time pondering how a simple expression like that could sound so right, yet so wrong at the same time.