

*CHAPTER 1**Untethered from the physical world*

On 10 June 1888, Constable Eamon Duff, accompanied by an aboriginal tracker by the name of Jimmy Sugarbag, rode into the Southern Highlands town of Berrivale and reported that all the residents of the nearby hamlet of Kerosene Creek were dead. The constable was evidently emotional and overwrought and undeniably affected by alcohol, and the story he told was fragmented and contradictory. He was woken by an explosion in the night and walked up to the village meeting hall to investigate where the 319 inhabitants of the village were assembled. He counted them. Some villagers were standing, while others were seated on benches, all dressed in their Sunday clothes as though posing for a daguerreotype. He made an effort to speak with various elders and forcefully shook the shoulders of others, but there was no response. Their limbs were rigid, their eyes were open and glazed and fixed on the dais at the end of the hall. In Constable Duff's words, "it seemed the spark of life had departed from the entire congregation."

The next day, the Sergeant led a squad of police and curious citizens back to Kerosene Creek. They found the village deserted and the meeting hall abandoned—the constable's "ghostly gathering" was nowhere to be found. The sergeant accused Constable Duff of drunkenness (not for the first time) and threatened him with dismissal, but Duff maintained his story. The explosion was confirmed by the sight of a tremendous crater outside the hall, strewn with iron machinery, rail tracks, wooden sleepers, and shingles for several hundred yards. The doors of the houses yawned open, tables had been set for dinner, but food lay congealed in pots on cold stoves. The streets were devoid of dogs, and the gardens were void of goats, with the shale diggings left deserted. The entire population appeared to have completely disappeared.

The puzzle was intensified by the grotesque discovery, at some distance from the meeting hall, of the mortal remains of a man whose body had been precisely cut in two along a meridian from crown to crotch, and the two identical halves had been laid out on a sheet of corrugated iron like an anatomical specimen waiting to be examined. In his report, the Sergeant conjectured that the man had probably been bisected by roofing iron dislodged by the explosion.

Very little was known about the members of the Kerosene Creek Socialist Cooperative, except that they were Irish refugees from the terrible potato famine of 1850. In recent times, the villagers had been mining kerosene shale, with which the landscape was

richly endowed, and had constructed an ingenious cable railway to transport the rocks from the valley floor to the top of the surrounding cliffs. The leader of the commune was one Henry Orbiston, variously described as a visionary, a tyrant and a madman. They identified the bifurcated corpse as none other than Orbiston himself.

In addition to constable Duff, another survivor emerged: Mr.. Malachy Kelly, the local blacksmith, was discovered wandering the nearby hills, disoriented and unable to speak clearly, gripping an axe and a stick of dynamite. The Sergeant placed him under arrest on suspicion of causing the explosion, and possibly murder.

One month later, at 6 o'clock on a Sunday morning, upon unlocking the front door of Saint Bridget's Convent in Berrivale, Sister Mary Frances discovered a thin and shivering young woman huddled on the front steps. The pitiful creature wore a stained and singed pinafore, and had scratches and scabs on her arms and legs. A battered carpet bag lay at her feet, and her right hand clenched something with such force that blood was seeping from between her fingers. But Sister Frances's most enduring memory was of the girl's shock of vividly red hair. A note was pinned to her dress.

*To the Abbess, Saint Bridget's Convent,*

*Dear Mother Jerome,*

*The girl's name is Jindy Kelly, aged about 16 or 17. She is believed to be a survivor of the Irish Commune Incident. She appears to have undergone a great shock, as a result of which she has lost the power of speech.*

*Father F. X. O'Brian*

Sister Frances brought the urchin to the Abbess, who attempted to question her, but the young woman appeared untethered to the physical world and did not know where she was or even who she was. They called the doctor, who treated the deep scratches on her wrists with Mercurochrome, waved his hand before her eyes, and described her state as "catatonic". Everyone had an opinion about what to do. Sister Agonistes proposed exsanguination, a method that had proven effective in previous cases of demonic possession. However, considering the girl's extreme paleness, her chances of surviving any additional blood loss were uncertain. The doctor prescribed a stimulant and recommended confining her for the time being in a darkened room. The nuns stripped off the ragged garment, sponged her down, bandaged her wrists, dressed her in a clean calico shift and tempted her to eat a few mouthfuls of porridge and sweet tea—all the time attempting to question her about her origins and what she remembered. Sister Matilda delicately prised open the fingers of her

right hand to reveal that she was holding some kind of talisman: a half-moon shaped green stone carved with the likeness of the head of a goat or some other horned animal. When Sister Matilda reached for it, the girl began screaming and bit the nun's finger with such force she later required stitches. Her screaming continued, and she fought, scratched, and bit anyone who tried to touch her and she was so strong it took four of the largest sisters to restrain her. The nuns locked her in the cellar with a cot, a horsehair mattress, and a bucket, and pushed food to her through a flap in the door. She continued her recalcitrance by refusing to lie on the mattress—preferring to curl up on the ground in a foetal position, wrapped in a blanket. The nuns took turns praying outside the door for the Devil to release her soul, and eventually the girl stopped screaming and reverted to her catatonic state, though she continued to refuse the bed. Once a week, the same four sisters carried her to the bathroom, washed her with coal tar soap and changed her bandages and shit-stained garments.

The green stone object, clearly precious to her, generated significant interest. While only Sister Matilda had examined it closely, opinions about its nature and purpose were plentiful. Sister Beatrix swore she had seen objects like it in her days as a missionary—the image of a primitive horned god that the savages worshipped. Or was it a likeness of Satan that a witch would use to cast spells? Others speculated that it was a “cursing stone” said to be used by the aborigines to punish those who broke their laws. Whenever anyone attempted to take it, or even persuade the girl to show it to them, she began screaming again. To preserve the peace, they let her keep it. They threaded a leather thong through a hole in the stone so she could suspend it like a pendant beneath her clothing.

Jindy ran away three times in the first two months. The first time, Sister Matilda gave chase on her bicycle, put her in a headlock and frogmarched her back to the convent. The second time, they found her at the Iron Works, sitting up in the manager's office taking tea like a lady. The same four sisters escorted her back, unaware that she had taken a box of vestas and started a fire in a charity clothes box. The third time the police returned her to the convent, trussed like a chicken across the back of a horse. The prison guards had spotted her in the branches of a fig tree that overlooked the wall of the gaol. She was waving and making hand signals to one of the prisoners, later identified as the blacksmith Malachy Kelly, who was serving 20 years for manslaughter and wanton destruction of property.

The police identified the girl as Jindy Fiadh Kelly, the daughter of the prisoner Malachy Kelly. They were both survivors of what the newspapers were now calling “The Kerosene Creek Mystery”. Her mother, May Kelly, had earlier been tried and condemned to hang for witchcraft and murder.

“Where were you trying to run away to?” the nuns asked her each time they returned her to the convent.

And every time, Jindy would point to the West.

“There’s nothing in that direction but stinging nettles and wild black cannibals who’ll put you in their cooking pot.”

Jindy’s answer to every question was to croak “Ma,” like a sheep. They eventually realised she meant “Mother.”

“Your mother is dead, Jindy,” they would repeat. “Get that into your fat head.”

A dead mother and a reprobate father were nothing new to the nuns of Saint Bridget’s. Most of them had been brought up on struggling farms with a drunken father, a worn-out mother, a dozen brothers, and sisters, not enough to eat, no education and little prospect of a husband. Marrying a daughter off to the Lord Jesus meant one less mouth to feed. For the daughter, it was a welcome escape from poverty, incest, and violence.

In 1888, Berrivale was the largest town in the Southern Highlands, and just 60 miles from Sydney on the Southern Railway, which guaranteed that the district’s milk, butter, and cheese reached the city markets in fresh condition. The railway transported coal from small mines in the valleys, as well as metal ingots and castings from the Berrivale Iron Works. Bushrangers took advantage of the dark forests and deep valleys, targeting villages, farmsteads, and the Cobb & Co coaches on the goldfields highway. The high walls of Berrivale Penitentiary were built expressly with these gentlemen in mind.

Saint Brigid’s Convent crowned one of the two Berrivale hills; the Christian Brothers Boys College capped the other. To Jindy, the convent was as much a prison as the penitentiary was for her father. Its solid, liver brick walls were three storeys high, enclosing a gravel courtyard, where a blue-robed statue of the Virgin Mary held her hands palm-up towards a grotto where baby Jesus peacefully slumbered in his manger, watched over by a cow, two sheep and a dingo.

Once Jindy gave up screaming and biting and began speaking, they put her under the charge of Sister Agonistes, the convent’s zelatrix, who had spies everywhere and eyes in the back of her head. Sister Agonistes had been raised on a sheep farm in the Snowy Mountains where she was familiar with breaking in wild brumby horses. “By the time I finish with you, my girl, you will thank me for thrashing you, and be able to rattle off a Rosary as fast as Beelzebub.” (Beelzebub was the convent’s pet cockatoo.) But even Sister Agonistes failed in persuading Jindy to sleep on the bed. The zelatrix experimented with tying Jindy down, but

the girl's screams and struggles were so agonising and went on for so long that Mother Jerome requested they let the orphan have her own way.

The nuns never discovered how Jindy ran away, because her cellar was haunted. Once, Sister Agonistes encountered the ghost of the last Mother Superior there. The ghost was "Naked and on her knees, mortifying her flesh with a scourge knotted with glass shards so that her back wept with the blood of the crucified Christ." The results was the nuns avoided the cellar and Jindy was free to roam the dark and musty catacomb unsupervised. Behind a pile of old furniture, rusty agricultural implements, and broken plaster saints, she stumbled upon a large awning window that she could crawl through. She made use of her private exit to roam the streets of Berrivale at night and the ghost-like figure with bright red hair frightened the *bejaysus* out of many an Irish drunk.

After two months, the nuns became bored with Jindy's monosyllables and stubbornness and gave up trying to save her soul. The effect was miraculous: when they stopped pressuring her to speak, she began talking; when they stopped forcing her to eat, she revealed that she had table manners; when they stopped rubbing her nose in shit, she used the bucket; when they unlocked the door to her cell, she stopped running away. Sister Agonistes gave up trying to discipline her and decided her time was better spent stalking the dormitories in search of blasphemers, masturbators, and bed wetters. However, Jindy still refused the bed, though she was willing to lie down on a bed of straw.

The first time that Jindy attended the 6 am prayer service known as "Prime," Mother Jerome delivered her homily on the Biblical text: "God punishes children for the sins of their parents, even unto the third and the fourth generation."

*That's Exodus Chapter 20, Verse 5, a voice whispered in Jindy's ear, Don't you remember? Exodus was Mr. Orbiston's favourite chapter.*

"I don't remember," whispered Jindy. "I don't remember who Exodus is or Mr. Orbiston. I remember nothing."

And when Jindy began talking to someone other than the voice in her head, the nuns discovered that she had no memory of anything that happened before 8 July 1888, the day that she appeared on the convent steps.

When the nuns gave her a Bible, Jindy didn't know what to do with it. After turning a few pages, she remembered that books were to be read, and that she once loved books and used to own books herself and they were precious, but she had no idea how to read. The words on the spines of books meant nothing more to her than claw marks on a tree. When she opened the

covers, all she saw were rows of ticks and scratches and curls, like a flight of sparrows perching on the clothesline. Or were they ants foraging from the nest? Or a secret code? She tried to copy them, but they still made no sense. One day in the convent's small library, she opened a book and instantly recognised an illustration: a drawing of an old man wearing a pointed cap, gripping a candle. A word popped into her head and her mouth spoke it: 'Scrooge...' then two words, 'Ebenezer Scrooge...' She remembered the name of the book: *A Christmas Carol*—a book she loved to read aloud so much she could recite it by heart! A memory came to her—an image—as though a flash of lightning lit up a scene for a fraction of a second: she was sitting the end of her parents' bed reading aloud to her mother, "Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that..."

She turned back to the first page and ran her finger along the jumble of marks until she found those words. The ants on the page seemed to crawl together into clumps that had meaning. She kept reciting from memory, pointing to each word as she said it, and soon she was not just pointing at the text, but reading it. "...Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterward, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley."

She hid the book under her dress and took it back to her cellar and, over the following weeks, she read it and reread it until she could point to any word and say it aloud. The next time she went to the Library room she discovered another old friend—another book she knew by heart—a book with a coloured picture on the cover of a naked girl with flowers in her long red hair and a fish's tail instead of legs. She opened it to the first page and recited, "Far out in the sea, the water is as blue as the petals of the loveliest of cornflowers, and as clear as the clearest glass." She returned Mr. Dickens to the convent library and replaced him beneath her straw mattress with Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*. And so she taught herself to read again—or was it remembering how to read?

The convent's book collection was a librarian's nightmare, with too few shelves for the books that parishioners had donated, and a classification system that only made sense to Sister Alexandria. The old nun selected books for Jindy—mainly hagiographies of male saints and memoirs of missionaries—which held little interest, but Jindy persisted with them until she was reading the most obscure texts with confidence. When the librarian was absent (frequently) Jindy picked through the disordered clutter of books on the shelves and piled on the floor and uncovered some more secular texts, predominantly by lady authors like Mrs. Gaskell and Florence O'Malley who wrote about some place called "London Society" that Jindy could hardly imagine. She found a few mysteries, such as *The Moonstone*, and a book of frightening stories by a man named Poe.

Before long, Jindy's hunger for new books brought her to the forbidden bookshelf. The black wooden shelf lurked like an ogre in the shadows against the far wall. A rusty metal grille fastened with a padlock protected its contents. She tried to peep through the holes but could only make out the worm-eaten spines of a few ancient tomes and the shivering shadows of daddy-long-legs spiders. When Jindy asked Sister Alexandria about the locked bookshelf, the librarian shook her finger and said, "If you so much as touch any of them books, Jindy Kelly, you will burn in hell for eternity."

"Have you read them?" Jindy asked.

"Pope Leo himself has declared them books to be *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. Just opening the covers of any one of them puts your soul in danger of eternal damnation."

Needless to say, Jindy spent the following days searching for the key. She found it on the librarian's desk, attached by a chain to The Epistles of Saint Paul. Sister Alexandria appeared to live among chaos, but Jindy had learned that the old librarian knew the location of every book, every pencil, and pen, every bottle of ink, and without a doubt every key. She knew that if she moved it, Sister Alexandria would know right away. The question of how to borrow the key without the librarian knowing, and return it to its exact position, was a problem worthy of Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

*Wax*, said a voice in her ear.

"I beg your pardon?" she replied, looking around to see who spoke.

*Are you the daughter of a blacksmith or not?* asked the voice.

"Who is speaking?" Jindy whispered. "Show yourself."

*Use your eyes, girl.*

The Virgin Mary, resembling the statue in the convent courtyard, was calmly seated in the Sister Librarian's office chair.

*Have you forgotten me as well?*

"Aren't you the Virgin Mary?" Jindy asked.

*We used to be on much more familiar terms. You called me The VM, if I remember.*

Jindy remembered. She remembered there were times when the VM had been her only friend. Hers was the voice that had whispered in her ear during Vespers *That's Exodus Chapter 20, Verse 5.*

"What do you mean 'wax'?" she asked. "What's wax got to do with stealing Sister Librarian's key?"

*I repeat: are you the daughter of a blacksmith or not? You use wax to make an impression of a metal key so you can make a copy. Malachy taught you that.*

So he did. Another memory: Malachy Kelly was her Da. He had taught her lots of useful things to know about pumping bellows to make a fire hotter, and the different colours of hot iron, and how to swing a hammer without breaking your arm. When he was casting engine parts, he permitted her to fill the sandbox and, after it was finished, she would bash off the air tubes.

Jindy loitered around the chapel and stealthily collected a cup full of wax drippings from the candles on the altar and melted the wax on the kitchen stove into a soft lump when the cook wasn't looking. The next time Sister Alexandra left her alone, she opened the desk drawer, pushed the key into the soft wax and made an impression of its shape. She unearthed a rat-tail file from a rusty toolbox in the cellar and used it to shape a scrap of brass from an old candle stick to match the mould. She persistently tested the key in the lock until it fit flawlessly, then diligently polished it until it sparkled like gold, and threaded it onto a set of rosary beads that she had picked up in the cloister. When Jindy pressed the shiny key on the Rosary to her lips, the nuns whispered to one another, "God be praised, The Lord has entered our wild child's heart."

*Now aren't you glad I'm back?* enquired the VM, preening herself in the scrap of mirror Jindy had mounted on her shelf. *Don't hesitate to ask me anything else you need to remember.*

The first time Jindy used her key to open the locked bookshelf, she felt surprised—even a little disappointed—that lightning did not strike her down. The books on the forbidden shelf were dusty and made her sneeze when she took any of them out. Some were written this century, some were from the dark ages, and some were not even in English. She opened a slim book in a language that she couldn't read, and a sheaf of hand-written pages fell out. The script was so minute she had to take the paper to the window to read the writing. It appeared to be a translation of an adventure story about two sisters. The title was *Justine, The Misfortunes of Virtue* by an author with the excitingly musical name of Donation Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade. Jindy pulled her chair over to the window and began to read.

The older sister named Juliette, was sixteen. She was exceptionally beautiful, but very vain as well as bold and flirtatious. Her younger sister, Justine was twelve, modest, pious, serious, but naïve. She always thought people had the best intentions. When their parents died suddenly, the two girls were thrown out of their house and had to make their own way in the world. Juliette was very successful at persuading rich men to admire her and give her money, but when unworldly Justine approached a monastery for help, the monks made her endure



beatings with canes and whips, scratches with knives and spikes and even “orgies, rapes, and sodomies” (whatever they were). Jindy wondered whether these were the same bruises and scratches that had been on her when she was brought to the convent. Had she suffered a similar fate? Had Father O'Brian and his fellow priests treated her as abominably as the monks treated Justine? Jindy found the story so disturbing she could not bear to read more than a page or two at a time, but it was so unlike any of the other books she had read that she concealed the sheaf of pages beneath her straw and returned to it compulsively whenever she had the chance. The final chapter caused the most distress of all. It depicted Justine, the virtuous sister, being struck by lightning and dying in agony. In contrast, Juliette, the wanton and degenerate sister, was rewarded by being made the Abbess of a convent.

*Now you understand why the Pope locked this book away in his Index Librorum Prohibitorum, said the Virgin Mary. If I were you, I'd lock it back up and throw away the key.*

But the thing that worried Jindy most of all was which nun had meticulously written out the English translation? Could it have been the librarian, the zelatrix, the Abbess? Had Mother Jerome's name once been Juliette? Or was it one of the really pious nuns who never spoke? During prayers and at mealtimes, Jindy searched the faces of her assembled companions and listened in on conversations for signs that one of the nuns knew French and had damned her immortal soul.

*Don't be sanctimonious, said the VM, slipping the Marquis de Sade's novel into its slot on the locked bookshelf, I'll wager that if you discovered the translator, you would beg her to teach you French so you could read more of this filth,*

Jindy discovered an even more terrifying book, *An Illustrated History of Martyrs*, lying among the breviaries at the back of the chapel. The cover depicted Lorenzo Bernini's The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, her stomach pierced by an arrow, her mouth gaping open like a fish, her eyes rolled back in rapture. It could have been an illustration of any of the trials of Justine. Each chapter depicted in lurid detail the torture and ghastly deaths of pious women who had sacrificed themselves to preserve their virginity. When she was twelve years old, Saint Agnes of Rome refused the governor's son. And was sent to work in a brothel. Saint Apollonia's teeth were knocked out before they burned her at the stake. Saint Catherine of Sienna was scourged, then crucified. A regiment of soldiers raped Saint Euphrasia. Saint Cecelia was stabbed and torn apart by horses. They quartered and beheaded Saint Dorothy. They broke Saint Catherine on the Wheel.

But the martyrs who attracted Jindy most were those young women who planned and executed their own agony. Saint Zita starved herself to death. Saint Serafina of Gimignano lay down on a rough pallet until her body became one with the wood, and worms and rats fed on her rotten flesh, while villagers prayed at her bedroom door. The celestially beautiful Saint Rose of Lima was so much in love with pain and suffering that she blistered her face with pepper, her hands with lime, she wore a hair shirt studded with nails, concealed a crown of thorns beneath her veil, and slept on a bed of broken tiles.

Jindy's legs and body no longer bore the scratches, but scars remained as reminders of the cuts on her wrists. She examined them carefully and wondered whether she had also been tortured, even crucified? She tried to recognise herself in these saints and martyrs. The idea was very attractive.

She resolved to become a nun.

### SYNOPSIS

The socialist commune of Kerosene Creek, was established on the Southern Highlands of NSW by refugees from the 1850 Irish potato famine. Its leader Henry Orbiston was described as a visionary and a madman. In June 1888, the village is all but destroyed by an explosion and the entire population inexplicably disappears, apart from the bifurcated body of Orbiston himself, and a red-haired 17 year old girl found on the steps of the nearby convent. She is Jindy Kelly, the daughter of the village blacksmith, whose *Ngunnawal* mother, May Kelly had been accused of witchcraft and condemned to hang for murder. But Jindy has no memory of the village, nor of the explosion, nor of her mother who also disappeared that night in the company of a group of Chinese gold prospectors. Jimmy Sugarbag, an aboriginal police tracker recognises that Jindy's problem is "forgetting business"; Sister Thomas, a Chinese nun and amateur psychoanalyst, diagnoses "hysterical amnesia." They take Jindy back to the ruined village in an effort to stimulate her memory.

As Jindy gradually recalls places and events, we piece together the story of a dysfunctional commune ruled by a messianic leader who keeps the adults sedated with home-brewed *Uisce na Beatha*, while the children go their own way. We learn of Jindy's complex ancestry, of her miraculous birth aided by an aboriginal midwife, of her "milk twin" Colm Duff, and of the children's relationship with the aboriginal children of the valley. Jindy falls under the spell of the enigmatic Chinese boy Johnny Fong and his bizarre companions who call themselves gold prospectors, but are exiles plotting the downfall of the Qing dynasty. They teach Jindy and Colm martial arts and enchant them with tales of "The Water Margin". While visiting

the remains of her house Jindy recalls finding a bushranger's gold nugget, and how her blacksmith father melted it down and cast it into a crucifix. Underpinning Jindy's recollections is the growing insanity of Henry Orbiston, whose sexual advances were rebuffed by May Kelly and in revenge he had her tried and condemned to hang for witchcraft and murder.

Sister Thomas believes the key to Jindy's amnesia was the terrible night when Colm betrayed her and she was raped by Orbiston's *boyos*; the night that Orbiston persuaded the entire village to drink a special batch of his mushroom-laced whiskey that would magically transport them back to Holy Ireland — and if it didn't, the dynamite he had planted under the meeting hall would finish the job.

But was it the explosion that finally killed Orbiston, or was it the Chinese sword wielded by Johnny Fong that cut him in two? And did the Chinese revolutionaries really take May with them when they returned to China? Sister Thomas finally admits that her motivation in rekindling Jindy's memory was to retrieve the gold to fund the revolution. She tells Jindy that a year ago in Hong Kong, she met a red-haired woman named May Kelly who told her the same story. Jindy resolves to take the gold to Hong Kong herself.

[Book 2: *China Business*, takes Jindy to Hong Kong to find her mother and finally solve the mysteries.]