

BLACKBIRD

BY MAREA HANNAH WHITLEY

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

1966

'Listen, Lucy, I'm not going to be quiet until you show me the game.' This was neither the time nor place to play, but I could think of nothing else except that silly game, and could do nothing else until I'd played it. I handed Lucy my pen. 'Here, use my pen; it'll only take a second.'

'Stop it, Marea.' Her voice was a soft whine; she was weakening.

'Come on, Lucy, you know I won't leave you alone till you do it.'

Lucy wound round and round, covering my left palm with ink. It tickled and I giggled.

Uh oh!

'Lucy and Marea, come here,' Mother Mary Macarius called from the next room. Her long black veil hid the ears of an elephant.

We rose from our seats. Lucy gave me a look that would have frozen the equator.

We stood before the principal.

'What were you girls doing?' she asked indifferently, as if there were no basis for our obvious fear.

'Nothing, Mother,' I quickly lied.

'Be quiet, Marea,' the monster glanced at me, 'I'm more likely to get de trut from Lucy.' Her narrow, blue eyes turned to the pale, little girl. 'Well, Lucy?'

'Nothing, Mother,' Lucy lied.

'Well,' she slowly reached for the feather duster, 'you'll be caned for nuting den. Hold your hands out.' We raised our right hands. 'Bote hands.' Lucy looked at me, I looked at Lucy. Mother looked at both of us. We slowly raised our left hands. Mine was covered in ink. Lucy whimpered. Mother turned purple.

Self-preservation proved stronger than seven years of platonic friendship. 'Lucy did it, Mother!'

Mother attacked the tiny girl with such unbridled anger, the feather duster threatened to snap. Delicate, timid, poor Lucy couldn't cope, she buried her head in her shoulder to muffle her screams but this infuriated the principal and lengthened the beating.

From the corner of my eye I saw the other girls exchange glances; some placed hands over ears and closed eyes. Lucy's distress was unbearable; her cries broke my heart. *Stop it, Mother! Leave her alone, you Monster! You bitch! Bitch! Bitch!*

The duration and potency of the flogging would have left an Amazon incapable of further exertion, but when Mother finally pushed Lucy aside she turned to me with such renewed strength and ferocity, one would have thought I was a communist – her worst enemy.

The feather duster whirred, up, down, up, down. My palms turned pink, then red; they puffed like pincushions. Strength deserted me, my hands dropped, lower, lower. Incensed by my non-compliance Mother leaned forward and thrashed my arms, swinging the bamboo from limb to limb, sometimes catching my hair, my head.

I couldn't bear it. I inched away but the principal caught the hem of my uniform and dragged me back. 'Oh, no you don't, Marea!' Raising my skirt, she flayed my thighs, left,

right, left, right. My knees buckled. She released the skirt and flogged my calves, my shins: my ankles.

The room spun; the world turned black. I started ticcing inside my head where it was safe, where no one could see. Glorious release in the darkness of my mind, everything together, then one at a time, blinking, licking, lips twitching. I watched myself in a mirror, a compassionate spectator, accepting, forgiving.

Relief and escape from a painful reality, withdrawal from the roller coaster ride that had been my life for the past seven years.

1960

A bare, black, asphalt playground stretched before a two-storey red brick fortress. Saint Cyril's was cold and uninspiring, built to accommodate Catholic Baby Boomers and the children of Catholic immigrants. The view from the gate was modern, but tucked away between the end of the new block and the back of the presbytery sat an outstanding insult to early Australian architecture - the infants' shed.

A pathetic remnant of the original parish school, the shed had evaded demolition because it was large enough to accommodate sixty children. I viewed the tin relic with a critical eye. Chipped, scratched, rusted and patched, its paint curled; its roof creaked. If it were an animal you'd have shot it.

Around me, scattered across the asphalt, small children hung close to their mothers, some weepy, some excited, others looking shy. All were sticky with the heat. I walked into mum's shadow and wiped my sweaty face on the hem of her skirt - and then wiped it again in the opposite direction.

The mighty southern sun bleached the sky, the bitumen melted and stuck to our shoes. We were gathered before the shed, waiting.

Neighbour and sometime playmate, tow-haired Tommy Gallen, stood nearby, squinting, staring straight ahead, silent, suspicious. Our mothers were good friends. They chatted aimlessly, swatting the flies; turning occasionally to nod to women they recognised from church. Tommy's big sister, Cheryl, was best buddy with my big sister, Marianne. The two ballerinas raced around the corner from the front playground; hand in hand, hot and breathless.

'Look at these two,' Cheryl cried, releasing Marianne and pushing her little brother closer to me. 'Aren't they cute!' Tommy didn't think so. Shaking free, he pinched his sister's arm and poked his tongue out. Cheryl went to punch him, thought the better of it and tossed her head in my direction, her eyes lighting on the straw like fringe which protruded from beneath my hat.

Anger vanished, peevish expression turned mischievous. Every day for the past fortnight, the two girls had teased, pulled and curled my short, honey-blond hair, assuring me that after fourteen days of this torture my hair would remain curly for life. I was a very gullible five-year-old.

Absolutely devastated when the experiment failed, I'd sought compensation but received none, not even an apology. Nor would I. Pixie-faced Cheryl peeped at Marianne and both giggled at the memory of the joke.

The ringing of a large bell sent the conspirators scurrying away and put an end to the women's small talk. My mother, and all the other mothers, looked expectantly towards the shed and I instinctively followed their gaze.

A mighty heave by an unseen force caused the shed door to suddenly bow inwards. On the point of snapping in two, it burst open and a mountain of a woman, old, wrinkled and swathed in black, exploded through the doorway like a craggy cannonball. 'Good morning, ladies,' she screeched, frightening the birds from the trees. 'Let's get started.' With gusto that belied her years, the woman hitched up her long skirts and catapulted into the crowd.

'I'll take your son, Mrs Andrews.' The doorkeeper reached for the child and there was a tug-of-war over the boy, the young mother wishing to accompany him into the shed. 'No, Mrs Andrews, new enrolments only, mothers only get in the way.' With an experienced yank, the older woman claimed the child and threw him through the door. 'He'll be fine,' she declared, blocking his mother's path. 'Go home, Mrs Andrews.'

The young woman capitulated, walking away with bowed head, and I made the connection between power and the wearing of long robes. Priests in church also wore long robes and everyone did what they said. I would wear long robes when I grew up.

Master Andrews' rough initiation set the standard. Hysterical children were alphabetically dragged from their mothers' arms and shoved into the shed.

'A boy this year, Mrs Gallen, looks a fine lad, come here, child.' The doorkeeper lunged for Tommy but he dodged her and walked in unaided, the first to do so. The old grouch was unimpressed, glared after him and grumbled, 'We'll soon sort him out.' There was no pleasing her, angered if children resisted, furious if one cooperated.

I decided there was nothing good about school.

'Ah, good morning, Mrs Morgan.' The grouch recognised my mother. 'Another girl, marvellous, we can't have enough girls.' Hands as large as dinner plates reached for me. 'Come along, little one.'

'No, no, leave me alone.' I scrambled up mum's dress and wrapped my arms around her neck. 'I don't wanna read or write, I wanna go home!'

'Now then, enough of that!' My chest was clamped; my body wrenched away. 'Behave!'

The doorkeeper's touch turned me to stone and I surrendered unconditionally. Mrs Morgan was my only chance but a mute appeal in that direction raised no hope. My mother was smiling and waving as if her precious daughter lay nestled in the loving arms of an angel. 'Ah musha, musha,' she called after me. 'Musha, musha, Marea.'

Therese Morgan was the daughter of Irish immigrants. Caught between two worlds, she responded to the challenge with flair, and borderline insanity.

Dumped before the shed and shoved through the door, I blundered into the building, determined to flee out the nearest window. But the room was as dark as a coalmine and I was blinded by the sudden transition from sunlight to shadow. Robbed of sight, I stood in the blackness listening for danger.

'Hello.' A fresh, youthful voice floated through the gloom. 'I'm Miss Blaine, your teacher.'

Raising my eyes, I discerned a fuzzy ball above and within seconds the head of a young woman materialised. Short, black hair framed a pretty face and a long, lithe body stretched beneath a slender neck.

Wary, I pulled away and then leapt back when the young woman stepped towards me.

'Don't be nervous,' she soothed, halting her advance. 'You're safe with me.'

I hesitated, glanced back at the door.

'Sister Mary Reparata won't be joining us,' Miss Blaine whispered. 'Sister teaches First Class. She's just helping today. Sister likes to help,' a barely perceptible roll of the eyes, 'whether or not it's needed.'

'Whew!' School took a huge upswing. I smiled shyly at my teacher.

She moved a little closer. 'And who do we have here?'

'Jennifer.' I always wanted curly hair and the name Jennifer.

'Oh? I don't have a Jennifer on my list.'

'Mum changed my name before tea last night.'

'She's lying, her name's Marea. She hates her name.' Tommy opened his mouth for the first time that morning. The look I gave him left no doubt I much preferred he keep it shut.

'Now listen to me, Miss Marea Morgan,' Miss Blaine said gently, crossing my name off the list, 'you have a lovely name and should be proud of it.' She motioned to a rack on the wall. 'Hang your hat up and I'll show you where you sit.'