

STICKS- FIRST FIFTEEN PAGES

EXT. HUON RIVER- DAWN.

Fog rolls over the Huon. Thick bush rises on either side of the wide, copper river. The water hardly moves.

A small boat cuts through the fog, rowed by a mottled, weathered man with a beard that hides most of his face. He's known as GOOD WILL.

On Good Will's boat are three passengers, and everything they own in the world, in big chests tied to the deck. The three passengers are female- one woman, and two girls. The woman is covered in shawls and scarves, protecting herself from the brisk air in an almost mad fashion. Her name is ELIZABETH, and under her shawls are a pretty face and light blue eyes, set off eerily by the deep black of her hair.

The two girls are her daughters, JENNY (16) and SAIDEE (7). Jenny has her mother's dark, dark hair and is thin and wiry in an adolescent way. Saidee is tiny, even for a child, and her chubby face has such a light complexion that it's as if she might at any moment disappear- fade away into the fog.

Saidee drags a finger through the ice-cold water of the Huon. Neither girls are as well insulated as their mother.

An oar smacks the water near Saidee's finger and she reels backwards in shock. The boat rocks with the movement.

ELIZABETH

Keep still.

JENNY

(to Saidee)

Aren't you cold?

Saidee goes to put her finger back in the water. Jenny takes hold of her hand.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Don't do that.

ELIZABETH

Keep quiet, you two.

JENNY

Sorry mother.

ELIZABETH

You're distracting the captain.

SAIDEE

Sorry, mama.

GOOD WILL

No need to be sorry, ma'am. I'm glad for the company. Gets very lonely out here. I sometimes forget I'm human.

ELIZABETH

Really.

A black cockatoo screams from the bush. Elizabeth grabs hold of her heart. Jenny grabs hold of Saidee.

GOOD WILL

Strange out here. Strange things lurking.

Saidee pulls free of her sister's grip.

SAIDEE

Let go.

JENNY

Well, sit still then.

SAIDEE

I am.

JENNY

No you're not.

ELIZABETH

Girls. Let's not let on we're squabblers.

Saidee sits herself right on the edge of the boat, looking out to the bush. Jenny rolls her eyes. Elizabeth checks in with Good Will, to see if he's noticing her flirting. He isn't.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

You must think I'm mad, bringing these two out here.

Good Will doesn't respond, concentrating on the river. Elizabeth continues anyway. Saidee starts to lean over the edge of the boat to look in the water.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

Three well-bred ladies, out here where there's not even a proper map. Savages and bushrangers and all sorts.

GOOD WILL
I wouldn't have picked you as mad
just yet.

ELIZABETH
No?

As Will talks, Saidee leans further and further over the edge.

Saidee can see something moving under the gold water. A fish? Too slow for that. A log? Sheets of fog unfurl across the water as she stares.

GOOD WILL
I'd guess, like the rest of us,
you're just very, very desperate.

The thing in the water floats to the surface. It's the corpse of a boy- bloated and blue from the water. Its eyes stare glassy, upwards. Saidee's breath catches in her throat.

JENNY
(to Saidee)
Saidee?

Saidee tries to point, but her body's gone clammy and stiff.

The corpse breaks the surface of the water, and the boy's mouth opens and he squeals, a long, sharp, other-worldly squeal and reaches his blue, dead hands up to Saidee's face. Saidee pulls back, rocks the boat, sending water everywhere.

ELIZABETH
You've got the boat all wet!

Saidee can't talk, can't breathe. The corpse has disappeared.

JENNY
Give her a blanket, will you mamma?

ELIZABETH
What's wrong?

Jenny pulls a shawl off Elizabeth and ties it tight around Saidee, hugging her close, brushing her wet hair back.

JENNY
She's cold. It's a cold morning.
She's a little girl.

Elizabeth turns back to the captain, muttering to herself.

ELIZABETH

Silly thing. Not long now, captain?
Should I call you captain?

GOOD WILL

Most folks call me Good Will.

ELIZABETH

And why's that?

Will steals a glance at Elizabeth as he turns their boat round another wide, sweeping bend.

GOOD WILL

Because I'm the closest you'll get
to it out here.

As they sweep over the foggy river, from Jenny's arms, Saidee eyes the surface of the water suspiciously.

TITLES- "STICKS"

INT. HUON HOUSE- MORNING.

LLOYD TUCK, a slab of a man, stands at a grubby mirror and basin in a bare bedroom, scrubbing his hands. He's doing his best to scrub clean, but the dirt is a part of him. He's ashamed of it. His nails are cracked and mucky.

He glances out the window of the bedroom to the bank of the Huon river below. Nobody around. Yet.

EXT. HUON RIVER- MORNING.

Further along the river, Saidee huddles closer to Jenny. Saidee keeps her eyes on the water, which is rippling slightly.

GOOD WILL

Lloyd's been busy. You'll be
impressed.

Jenny brushes Saidee's wet hair. Saidee leans close to Jenny's ear and whispers to her.

SAIDEE

I saw something in the water.

JENNY

Shhh.

SAIDEE
I saw a boy.

JENNY
Don't tell stories.

SAIDEE
I'm not!

Elizabeth turns her head.

ELIZABETH
Girls?

JENNY
(to Saidee)
Stop spitting, you'll get me in
trouble.

Elizabeth turns back to the front, still on edge. Saidee hasn't responded- her eyes are stuck on the surface of the water near the boat, which is calm now.

GOOD WILL
Here he is!

By one bank of the river, a clearing has been hacked away, and a small wood house erected. Lloyd stands stiffly, waiting by the bank. Elizabeth spots him immediately and waves.

ELIZABETH
Girls, say hello!

But they're not watching. Saidee's staring at the water like a cat. Jenny's worried about her-

Suddenly, Elizabeth moves to Saidee and slaps her hard with the back of her hand.

With a sharp intake of breath, Jenny realises Lloyd is standing on the bank, watching them.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)
Stand up straight, both of you!

Jenny shoots up like a rocket. Elizabeth pulls Saidee up.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)
(to Saidee)
Wipe your chin!

Saidee quickly wipes the spit from her chin.

Lloyd's still as a rock on the bank, impossible to read. The three women shiver under his scrutinising gaze.

LLOYD
Morning, ladies.

Elizabeth curtseys in the boat. She throws dagger-eyes to the girls and they quickly give their own little curtseys. The boat wobbles with the movement.

INT. HUON HOUSE- MORNING.

Saidee pushes open a wooden door into the sunken, small, slab-and-bark three-room house. A crudely-built stone fireplace sits in one corner of the main room, and small, square windows look out onto dense forest. She moves to a window, from which she can see the riverbank, and the others stepping off the boat.

A shadow moves past her- she turns. Nothing.

INTERCUT WITH- EXT. RIVERBANK- MORNING.

Lloyd takes one end of a chest- he's expecting to lift the chests with Will, but Jenny takes the other end.

LLOYD
I'll take that.

JENNY
I've got it.

Lloyd tries to move the chest himself, but Jenny keeps hold and helps move the chest down from the boat. Lloyd starts conversation to mask the conflict.

LLOYD
These girls been trouble, Will?

GOOD WILL
No trouble, no. No more trouble than you'll find out here.

JENNY
Are there people out there?

The awkward trio of Jenny, Will and Lloyd move the chest through the water and onto the bank. Elizabeth watches from the shore.

LLOYD
Haven't seen 'em round here yet.

GOOD WILL
They pass through in winter. Often
not this far inland.

LLOYD
Can't trust 'em.

GOOD WILL
No, no. Can't trust us either,
though, Lloyd.

LLOYD
I wouldn't.

Good Will cackles at his own joke. Lloyd doesn't. The two men and Jenny lay the chest down onto the dirt. Jenny grunts with the effort.

HOUSE.

Saidee opens a door to a small room with two beds. It's a dank, musty place. The little window looks out onto the forest- a little light filters down through the ferns. Saidee's searching for something. She can feel someone there.

SAIDEE
Hello?

The room is silent.

BANK.

Lloyd, Will and Jenny drop the last chest on the pile. Jenny turns to Elizabeth, who's waiting daintily to the side.

JENNY
Where's Saidee?

ELIZABETH
Stay for tea, Will?

JENNY
Did she go inside?

GOOD WILL
Long trip back. Best start now.

ELIZABETH
Will we see you again soon?

GOOD WILL

Once a month, if a boat comes with
mail. Why? You lonely already?

Good Will's smile cracks open again. Lloyd takes a crate.

JENNY

Mama?

ELIZABETH

Shush, Jenny. Help your father.

JENNY

(under her breath)
He's not my father.

ELIZABETH

Don't you ever let me hear those
words again, do you understand?

A beat. Lloyd and Will have stopped. All eyes on Jenny.

JENNY

Yes, Mama. Sorry.

HOUSE.

Saidee moves through the main room, trying to sense a
presence. The wind makes a round, moaning sound through the
brick chimney. Saidee pokes her head in it.

At the top of the chimney, she can see a square of grey sky.
She pulls herself inside the chimney and stands in it, her
feet in coals, her face at the sooty wall.

SAIDEE

Do you live here?

The walls, the dark, doesn't respond.

SAIDEE (CONT'D)

This is my house now. You can't
come in.

Again, quiet. Stillness.

SAIDEE (CONT'D)

Alright?

The front door slams open as Jenny and Lloyd haul the first
of the crates inside and onto the cold dirt floor.

Jenny notices her little sister's legs in the fireplace straight away.

JENNY

Saidee!

Lloyd turns and spots them too. He puts his hands on his hips, unsure how to respond.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Get out, you're embarrassing.

LLOYD

Is that where you'll be sleeping, Saidee?

A beat.

SAIDEE

(still in the fireplace)

Hello, Lloyd. No, thankyou.

EXT. FOREST- DUSK.

A little way from the house, Jenny and Saidee are looking for kindling to start a fire. Jenny has Saidee firmly by the hand. Saidee is dragging her feet. Jenny spots good sticks, bends to pick them up and passes them to Saidee, who has a small bundle of them.

A possum clambers up a tree near Saidee's face, and she drops the sticks in shock.

The possums eyes are shining in the low light, peering at them from its perch in the tree.

Jenny looks at her sister. Saidee doesn't move.

JENNY

Hey! Pick them up!

Saidee turns to her sister, shaken alert again.

SAIDEE

Don't tell me what to do.

JENNY

Do something useful, then.

Saidee stands there, upset, scared to bend down. Jenny huffs, collects the sticks and shoves them into Saidee's arms.

JENNY (CONT'D)
What's wrong with you?

SAIDEE
There's something here.

JENNY
There's lots of things. Shoo them
away. We're bigger.

SAIDEE
You don't know.

JENNY
I do know. It's called a possum.
It's like a big squirrel. It
doesn't eat people.

The possum hisses like a demon. Saidee recoils.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Hey! Boo!

Jenny throws a stick at the possum and it slinks up the tree.

JENNY (CONT'D)
Your skin is too thin, Saidee
Graham.

SAIDEE
I don't like it here.

JENNY
Well, it's too bad. We have our own
land here, we have Lloyd to look
after us. The colony stank of piss.

SAIDEE
Here stinks of poop. And river. And
dead animal. And there was a boy in
the water.

JENNY
Why must you make up stories?

SAIDEE
I saw him, his face was scabby.
There's something here. We're very
far down the bottom of the earth.
We're very close to Hell.

JENNY
Whatever will we do with you?

SAIDEE

Believe me.

JENNY

I'm going to do what mother told us
and gather kindling and if you're
not going to help, that's fine,
just stand there, but don't talk.

SAIDEE

It'll get you if you-

JENNY

Stop it! Shh! I don't want to hear
another word! Alright?

Saidee stands still, her fists clenched. When she's satisfied Saidee will be quiet, Jenny turns to the undergrowth, spots a large stick, and leans it against a rock to snap with her foot.

SAIDEE

(frustrated)

Nnnnnnnrrrrrrgh!

Jenny snaps the stick with a crack that echoes across the forest.

There's an odd silence. Then, the crunch of footsteps on undergrowth.

JENNY

What was that?

SAIDEE

I'm scared.

The crunching stops. Jenny steps closer to Saidee, peering through the trees. There's something...

There. A long way off. A white man in rags. Skin and bones. Red, hungry eyes. They're staring at Jenny.

She clasps her hand to her mouth before she screams.

JENNY

(whispers)

Run!

Saidee drops the kindling and runs to the house- Jenny scrambles to pick up the sticks, but there's something coming for them, in the trees-

-Saidee swings the front door open and Jenny follows behind, slamming it closed against the outside.

END ACT ONE.

INT. HOUSE- CONT.

Saidee throws the front door open and scurries into the house.

Lloyd and Elizabeth move out from their bedroom at the sound of the door, pulling clothes on.

Jenny runs in with the kindling, slams the door behind her.

ELIZABETH
What's happening?

JENNY
There was a man out there.

Saidee's hiding under the table. Lloyd moves to his gun.

LLOYD
A native?

JENNY
A white man. With clothes.

Elizabeth looks to Lloyd. Lloyd lowers his gun, puts it down.

LLOYD
No white men out in that bush.

ELIZABETH
Who could it-

LLOYD
No white men. You're mistaken.

SAIDEE
I saw him.

ELIZABETH
You have a tangled mind, Saidee.

JENNY
I saw him too, mama. Look!

Jenny points to the window. Elizabeth moves to it. Outside, nothing. Jenny sees this as plainly as her mother.

Elizabeth pulls the curtain.

ELIZABETH
Your eyes have been playing tricks
in the dusk.

LLOYD
Time for supper. Build the fire.

JENNY
What? No, there was-

ELIZABETH
Jenny.

LLOYD
There's logs at the shed, you'll
need to split 'em.

JENNY
I'm not going back out there.

Jenny stares at Lloyd and stands still. Elizabeth is uneasy.

LLOYD
If you can lift chests, then you
can swing an axe. And if you can
swing an axe, you'll not be sitting
in this house being waited on like
royalty. We're going to sit down
and have a nice supper, like a
family.

Jenny looks to her mother for support. Elizabeth glares.
Saidee watches from under the table.

Jenny huffs, turns on her heel and moves back out the door.

EXT. SHED

Jenny swings a crude axe onto a log and it makes a clean cut.
She swings again. This time, the axe sticks.

INTERCUT WITH- INT. HOUSE- CONT.

LLOYD
Saidee? What are you cooking?

ELIZABETH
She can't cook supper.

Saidee peers out from under the table.

LLOYD
She's a part of this house, isn't
she?

ELIZABETH
She's seven.

LLOYD
I know how old she is.

SHED.

Jenny splits a new log in two, throws it on a pile. She hears
raised voices from inside.

HOUSE- CONT.

ELIZABETH
I'll fix supper.

LLOYD
You'll let me speak.

ELIZABETH
She'll burn it.

The door opens, and Jenny enters, carrying wood to the
fireplace.

LLOYD
In my house, when I say a girl
cooks dinner then that is what the
girl does. That is how this house
is run. Is that clear?

JENNY
She doesn't need you to teach her
how to run a house.

LLOYD
How dare you!

JENNY
Mama-

ELIZABETH
Mind your tongue, miss.

LLOYD
Come here.

JENNY

I-

LLOYD

Come here.

Lloyd removes his belt and snaps it.

Elizabeth is a little thrown. Lloyd is firmer than she expected, but she's embarrassed by Jenny's behaviour.

LLOYD (CONT'D)

Are you going to build us a fire like I've told you?

JENNY

Mama-

ELIZABETH

Jenny! Do as you are told!

Jenny is stung. A beat.

JENNY

I'm sorry. I spoke out of turn.

Lloyd wants to use the belt but is aware of Elizabeth's gaze.

LLOYD

You're young. You've got a lot to learn. Saidee?

Saidee crawls further under the table.

LLOYD (CONT'D)

Saidee! Pantry!

Saidee runs from the table to the pantry like a rat.

Jenny gives her mother a dirty look. Elizabeth averts her eyes. Jenny turns back to the fireplace.

Jenny sparks a flint, and the kindling catches light.