

THE QUARRY

Chapter Six, from *Fragile Skins*

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In the previous chapters of Fragile Skins, Kay has recently discovered that her husband Patrick had a short-lived fling with an African woman in Kenya sixteen years earlier which resulted in the procreation of a daughter, Akinyi Martha. Knowing that Akinyi's mother has recently passed away, Kay, in this chapter, struggles to decide whether to go to Kenya with Patrick and their daughter Avie to 'pick-up' Akinyi and bring her back 'home' to Tasmania

It was a curious thing, the way the world tilts when you come to learn the truth of what you thought was your reality. Kay saw the world differently now as if the kaleidoscope of her world had turned, mutating the normal and familiar with the strange and with that which had previously gone unnoticed.

She hadn't thought about Kenya for a long time, not beyond a superficial level, not beyond those fleeting memories of her long-time-ago trip there. She hadn't had any reason to. But now, with the whole world tilted, it was as if that piece of land had attached itself like a growth to her back. And not just Kenya, but Africa itself. Her eyes and ears now sensitised to anything from or about that continent. And not just on the telly – all those news reports and charity adverts about wars and droughts and famines – but out on the streets as well. It was as if her eyes, unintentionally and without her consent, had turned into African-spotters, spotting anyone who appeared to be *from*

over there. It disturbed her, this sudden – what was it? She wouldn't call it an obsession, more like an acute awareness – this sudden attentiveness to Africa. Disturbed her because as much as she tried she could not forget about that girl in Kenya. There was no way of escaping from her. Thirteen odd thousand kilometres away she was, yet there were reminders of her everywhere. Even in the bathroom for heaven's sake with the toilet paper printed with ridiculous African-shaped animals.

At school, Kay came to pay particular attention to one of the year ten students. His name was Benjamin. He was a tall skinny boy, apparently part of the Sudanese lot living next door to her parents. He was quiet too. She wasn't quite sure whether to call him moody, or simply just shy. It was difficult to tell, his face not easily readable. She noticed he had a scar on the top of his left cheek; it was a clean cut line that gleamed in the sun. The teachers gossiped about it in the tearoom.

'I read in this month's National Geographic about some tribe in Africa that cut their kids' faces during initiation. Can't remember the name of the tribe for the life of me.'

'Could've been from the war in Sudan.'

'There's plenty of horror stories about refugees coming out with all sorts of horrible mutilations.'

'It's unbelievable. We don't realise just how lucky we are in this country.'

'I don't want to start rumours or anything, but you know, the parents from that culture can be pretty heavy-handed.'

Mmm. Yes. All the teachers held their teacups to their tightly-pressed lips, nodding in agreement to that last comment. Kay couldn't help notice, however, perhaps because she held back too, that each one of them, despite the fact that all in the room were white, all true blue Aussies, were very careful with what they responded to that. They put on their teacher facade to be open-minded to all their students' backgrounds; it was not, after all, their place to judge. Although Kay knew, as she suspected did every other teacher, that they were all placing their judgements on that boy's scar right then in their own heads.

Kay herself had seen some pretty disturbing things in Kenya, disturbing things that she'd almost forgotten. It had been sixteen years ago after all since she had been there.

All those orphan kids – teenagers and young ones – left to roam the streets on their own, sniffing glue and flying high and getting caught up in all sorts of crime. It was easy to forget all that when she was back at home safe inside her house with its white-picket fence, in a town that privileges law and order. But since her world had tilted, since that letter from Kenya arrived, all those memories came flooding back to her.

She remembered, most poignantly, most shockingly, that early morning in Kisumu when night had only just begun to lift its curtains. She and Patrick had been on their way to catch a *matatu* to Ukwala, that small village in the interior that had been their home for a brief four-months. It was the rustling sound of paper to her right that caused her to stop in her tracks. The source of the scrunching: a small black arm. It was reaching out from beneath a sheet of newspaper. Five grubby little fingers pointing up to the sky. And then a head poked out, blank-eyed and puffy-faced, and a scrawny little torso. Comprehending what all those sheets of newspaper along the path hid beneath them, she had grabbed Patrick's arm and they both looked on quietly as more paper shuddered, more bodies begun to rouse. It was like watching the dead rise from their graves. Their movements were slow. Vacuous. Parting the paper with stiff-cold hands. Lined against the building walls, dirty cardboard sacks started shaking as well. There were more of them. More of them in those sacks. More of them waking up. Bare bums crawling out bum-first from their nighttime asylums. The sight of them had made her shudder.

Memories such as these tapped at her conscience. What if the girl, *Patrick's girl* (how hard it was to say that), what if she turned out like those street kids too – what if she was already becoming one? A homeless urban-filth beggar. Or worse, what if she was sold into prostitution; drugged up and forced to give her body to dirty old men triple her age? Kay was certain the girl had some sort of family over there, but still, anything could happen in Africa. It wasn't unknown for poor relatives to sell off the orphan kids. As difficult as it was to acknowledge that the girl, the one called Martha Akinyi, was a product of her husband's betrayal, as much as it made her nauseous just picturing the child – the young woman – in her head, Kay knew deep down that she, that her and Patrick, could offer – *must* offer – the girl a chance at life. She did, after all, grow up a good Christian woman (mind you, her parents would flip their lids if they knew she

was even considering such a thing). She and Patrick had a warm house (however dysfunctional it was at the moment, but that would change, *must* change), plentiful food, safety, healthcare, so many opportunities for education – imagine the opportunities! What African teenager wouldn't jump at the chance to come to Australia?

Kay looked out the tearoom window and saw Benjamin sitting with a group of boys. With his char-black skin he stuck out like a sore thumb amongst them. The other boys were laughing (probably at some dirty joke no doubt), but it was Benjamin who sat there, silently, gazing out across the school yard at something no one else could see. He was better off here, wasn't he? That troubled face, that scar, the nightmares that must keep him up at night. He was, wasn't he? But of course he was.

When she returned home that night, and after Avie had gone to bed, Kay, in the middle of an ad break, in the middle of – *We are happy little Vegemites as bright as bright can be* – turned to Patrick and said, 'so you think it's the right thing for her to live with us?' – *We all enjoy our Vegemite for breakfast lunch and tea* – 'You mean?' – *Our Mummies say we're growing stronger every single week* – 'Yes' – *Because we love our Vegemite* – 'Does that mean?' – *We all adore our Vegemite* – 'I think so' – *It puts a rose in every cheek!*

With the final whistle of the Vegemite tune, Patrick pulled her into his arms. 'Thank you,' he said. She could've been mistaken, but she was certain she heard the strain of fear in his voice and it only made her all the more anxious for what she was about to get herself – and her daughter – into.