

**PETER
YELDHAM**

The Murrumbidgee Kid

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*To Marjorie,
who is always there, from the first page*

Author's Note

My deep thanks are due to the Australian actor Bill Kerr. While this is a work of fiction and all the characters imaginary, Bill's reminiscences of his boyhood were the sparks that first kindled my interest and led to the character that became Teddy Carson.

PART *One*

Belle Carson was a good-looker, the best looker for miles around; even those who didn't like her (which included most of the women in town and quite a few of the men) had to admit that. But they also agreed she was as nutty as a fruitcake, and in the manner of small communities the bush telegraph — which spread any gossip the least bit unusual or outrageous — frequently carried news of her.

Five-feet-seven, slim as a reed with soft dark hair and blue eyes to drown in, Belle couldn't help it; she was always unusual, and often outrageous. It was a recurrent nightmare for her eight-year-old son, Teddy. Whenever he and his dad were with her, he'd notice the sly looks and the way people raised their eyebrows and muttered to each other. Gabbing, George called it, a bunch of old boilers cackling, which meant his dad felt it too — the talk about them, the constant chitchat.

But it was worse at school. Teddy was on his own there. Piggy Morgan said Belle was a dingbat. Tom Parkes said she was as mad as a blue gum full of galahs. The rest of the class sniggered agreement and pronounced her a loony. Got tickets on herself, they said, even if she *had* been on the stage in the city, and was supposed to be famous. This was in frequent dispute, for none of them had ever heard of her and neither had their parents, so she couldn't have

been all that famous. Bill Burwood, the son of the bank manager, reckoned the biggest part she'd ever played was probably the arse-end of a horse in a pantomime. So Teddy, though two years younger and three inches shorter, fought him.

Big or small, each time a boy made an insulting comment or a dirty joke about his mum, Teddy felt compelled to fight them. He'd lost count of the number of fights he'd had in Belle's defence, and was painfully aware he had managed to win none of them. He had suffered cut lips, bruised ribs and greater humiliations: his head held down the black pit of the school dunny by the big boys until the stench made him sick; treacle spread on his seat in class; and once an agonising Chinese burn on his wrist while the teaches Mrs Lassitter, wrote on the blackboard with her back turned. Daily he went to school in dread, enduring more torment than he dared mention at home.

Meanwhile he kept wondering if one of the taunts levelled at him could possibly be true — that George was not really his dad at all and therefore he was a bastard. It was hard to know how to ask Belle about this, but ask he must. He thought about it when trying to sleep at night, rehearsing what he could say, and several times braced himself to try, but his mouth felt dry and his tongue too thick to pose the question. Then one day it just happened.

Belle was making a stew, peeling carrots and potatoes in their tiny kitchen, which seemed even smaller since the delivery of the new Hallstrom refrigerator earlier that week. It was an invention that ran on kerosene — Teddy couldn't understand how, but it kept food and drinks colder than their old icebox — and they no longer had to have the iceman call each day. George had been able to buy the machine at a special price on easy terms because he was in the sales department of Gable's of Gundagai, the big local emporium,

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and Belle had been in a good mood ever since it arrived, so this was the moment.

'Am I a bastard?' he blurted out, then was terrified when her face changed from shock to anger. For a moment he thought she might hit him. She never had raised a hand against him, but there was always a first time, so he was on the back foot and ready to run, in case. But her anger was not directed at him.

'Who said such a thing?' She knelt and put her arms around him, and he could feel her shaking.

'Just some kids,' Teddy mumbled, wishing he had said nothing. 'Who? Little brutes. Give me their names, darling.'

'I can't, Mum. I forget who it was.'

'No, you don't, my pet.'

'I do, honest.'

'Don't say honest like that when you're not telling the truth. We both know you're not.' She hugged him so tightly he could feel her whole body trembling, and he had a strange feeling she was going to cry. 'I won't make you tell, but you must promise me .one thing.'

'What, Mum?'

'Not to believe them, or their nasty, stupid lies.'

He gladly promised, because it was the answer he had wanted. What a relief. It meant George really *was* his dad, so he couldn't be a bastard. After another hug Belle released him and stood up. There were tears in her eyes, but she quickly looked away so he knew he was not meant to see them.

'I'll get you a cold lemonade.' She went to the new machine. 'I hate this shitty little town,' she said, but it was more of a whisper, and he knew he was not meant to hear this either.

The gate always squeaked. George kept oiling it, but after a few days the squeak returned. It was a sound they lived with, like the rows every Friday night next door when Harry Lucas came home from the pub and started belting his wife Essie. Like the dog across the road that yapped when anyone walked past, or Mr Miranda cutting his grass at the same time each Sunday morning, the clatter of his mower waking people trying to sleep in. When he finished they knew it was an hour before church time, because Mr Miranda was a verger at St Thomas's who carried the collection plate, and he'd be showered and in his best suit — his only suit — before the bells rang.

George said Mr Miranda's lawnmower drove him batty, as did Harry Lucas yelling abuse at his wife, while the dog catcher ought to sort out the bloody yapper opposite, whereas the squeaking gate at least had its uses. After all, nobody could arrive out of the blue and catch them having a bit of a feel, or even doing it in the cot. Belle told him not to be so coarse in front of you-know-who.

Her name was really Arabella; Teddy had once heard old Auntie Ethel call her that, but Belle said she'd changed it when she was twelve, after her parents died. Even at that age she'd known Arabella was not the right kind of name for a theatrical poster. And now that Auntie Ethel herself had gone to heaven, no one called her anything but Belle.