

Alice-Miranda in the Outback

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PUFFIN BOOKS

Prologue



Barnaby Lewis crouched down on the bank and cupped his hands into the sludgy pool at the bottom of the near-empty dam. It should have been full, or near to it, given it was topped up automatically from one of the bores. He tipped the murky water over his head while beside him, old Kingy took a slurp – though he looked as if he was thinking better of it. The gelding’s tail swished and Kingy blinked an eyeful of flies away, only to have them return a second later.

The troughs in the home paddock were drying faster than the washing on the line too. Barnaby had checked the irrigation pipes there yesterday. There had been no obvious holes – no unforeseen puddles to indicate a leak. The bore must have broken down. He stood up and ran his right hand through his thick, dark hair then shoved his Akubra back on his head. The sun was already burning his cheeks and it had only just gone eight. Barnaby couldn't repair the bore alone and manpower was thin on the ground at the moment.

Evie had been away for almost a week now. Barnaby hated the idea of his wife having to deal with so much on her own – selling her parents' home in Sydney, clearing it out and moving her mother into care, but being an only child, the responsibility fell to her. It couldn't be put off any longer, given her father had died suddenly a couple of years ago and her mother was showing early signs of dementia.

With Molly, Ralph and their family away on Sorry Business, Barnaby hadn't been able to leave Hope Springs – not with the mustering about to start as well. Ralph's uncle had passed away three

weeks ago and their mob had gone north. Barnaby wasn't sure how long it would be until they got back, but he hoped it was soon. He missed them – Molly especially, and not just because his culinary repertoire was limited to charred meat and three vegetables.

He'd been thinking about her a lot lately – the woman who had mothered him all his life. Born and raised on Hope Springs Station, Molly had never lived anywhere else. After marrying Ralph, she'd had three sons – Clinton, Sam and Buddy – who Barnaby thought of as his big brothers. The boys had grown up doing everything together. Riding, hunting, mustering and camping out bush any chance they could get. Two of them were still here – Sam, with his wife, Rosie, and their kids, River and Storm, and Buddy on his own. Clinton had hit the road years ago, showing up every now and then with stories of where he'd been.

Like his father before him, Barnaby had been sent away to boarding school as a twelve-year-old. He'd spent the first year sobbing into his pillow most nights and longing for the holidays that would take him home to Hope Springs and his beloved Molly and the boys. After university, armed with

a degree in agricultural economics, he came home for good and took over the place entirely not long after. Hope Springs had been in Barnaby's family for six generations and he loved it in a way that only someone who was born and bred in the outback could. His own son, Hayden, wasn't interested in the land. The boy dreamt of taking to the skies, but Illaria – his little firebrand daughter, all blonde curls and coffee skin, who preferred to be known only as Larry – said she was never leaving and Barnaby believed her.

Dust swirled in the distance. Barnaby couldn't be sure if it was a vehicle or a willy willy stirring up the red dirt until he saw a glint of silver – a reflection in the sun. There was no one left on the station except him and the kids, so why was there a car in the north paddock? It wasn't somewhere even the dopiest of travellers could lose themselves. There *was* an old stock route someone might have been mad enough to follow that came out near the top of Lake Eyre. He'd wait for the call on the two-way – and rescue whoever it was if necessary. Hopefully by road. He'd always been an anxious flyer and preferred not to take the chopper up if he didn't have to.

Barnaby shivered despite the heat. For a second it reminded him of that silly saying about someone walking over your grave. He took up Kingy's reins and stepped into the stirrup when the phone in his top pocket rang. Barnaby pulled it out and squinted at the screen. At least these days they had some coverage if the weather was clear and the satellite was pointing in the right direction. There was a name he hadn't seen in a while.

He pressed the button and answered.
'G'day, Hugh,' he said.

Chapter 1



Alice-Miranda focused on the long, straight stretch of road. In the distance she could see something flying towards them. She wondered for a moment if it was a light aircraft before realising it was an eagle. Another giant bird swooped in from the left across their path, almost touching the bonnet of the four-wheel drive.

‘Wow!’ Millie exclaimed, having just seen the creatures from the back seat. ‘Was that a pterodactyl?’

Alice-Miranda grinned. 'I was thinking the same thing.'

Hugh Kennington-Jones chuckled. 'They say everything is bigger in the outback.'

Millie grabbed her camera from the seat beside her. She was keen to enter the art and photography competition Miss Grimm had announced just before the holidays. There were great prizes as well as the opportunity to be exhibited at the opening of the new Fayle Art Space. Professor Winterbottom, the Fayle School Headmaster, had initiated the idea with Miss Grimm, amid a flurry of excitement and heightened activity in both schools' art rooms. By the time Millie went to take the photograph, though, the birds were too far away.

Behind them, Hugh could see the second Landcruiser in the distance.

'How about we stop and have something to eat?' Hugh asked the girls. 'There should be a roadhouse coming up. Why don't you let your uncle know that's the plan?'

Alice-Miranda picked up the handset from the cradle of the two-way radio and pressed the button on the side.

There was a crackle of static.

‘This is KJ One calling Ridley One, do you copy? Over.’

They’d decided on their call signs before setting off from Alice Springs that morning.

‘Loud and clear, KJ One,’ Lucas replied. ‘What can we do for you? Over.’

‘We’re taking a break at the Kulgera Roadhouse,’ Alice-Miranda said, having consulted the paper map she had spread out across her lap. ‘Over.’

‘Gotcha,’ Lucas replied. ‘I’m starving and Dad is too. Jacinta’s asleep. Can you hear her snoring? Over.’

There was a pause and the sound of Lucas shuffling around in his seat before the girl’s breathy grunts came through the airwaves loud and clear.

‘Ask him when they picked up the pig,’ Millie giggled.

‘That’s mean, Lucas and Millie. Over,’ Alice-Miranda chided, but Millie and Hugh were both laughing.

‘You’d better not tell her that I did that. She’ll never speak to me again. Over,’ Lucas said.

It was another ten kilometres before a clump of iron-roofed buildings loomed into view. A stripped-down sedan sat on a concrete plinth out front,

a sign for the Kulgera Hotel perched in the lidless boot. The tyres and doors of the yellow vehicle were missing and a forty-four gallon drum shored up the rear end so it didn't topple from its perch.

'I think that car's seen better days,' Alice-Miranda commented as her father pulled up to one of the petrol pumps that sat beneath a tall awning. Lawrence pulled in to the one behind.

'Sure has,' Millie agreed.

Hugh stepped out of the car and about a thousand flies zoomed in.

'Come on,' Millie said, swatting at the swarm. 'Maybe we should put the windows down. Hopefully they'll leave before we have to get back inside.'

Alice-Miranda jumped down onto the gravel while Lucas and Jacinta hopped out of the car behind them. Jacinta was yawning and stretching her arms, clearly having just woken up.

'How was your nap?' Millie asked Jacinta, who frowned and cast a curious look in Lucas's direction.

'Who said I've been asleep?' Jacinta asked.

'Yawning, stretching, messy hair – bit of a dead giveaway,' Millie replied, giving Lucas a wink. The boy smiled back at her.

‘Oh, yeah. Well, I was tired and there is *nothing* to see out here.’ The girl rolled her eyes.

‘Really? You’ve missed lots of interesting things,’ Alice-Miranda chimed in. ‘Like an emu with six chicks running along the side of the road. They were so cute and terribly fast.’

‘And a herd of camels and two pterodactyls, which flew right across the bonnet of the car,’ Millie said. ‘You should have seen them – I wish I’d had the camera out in time.’

Jacinta screwed up her nose. ‘Pterodactyls? Really? But I thought they were extinct.’

‘Nope,’ Millie shook her head and looped her arm through Jacinta’s, guiding her towards the roadhouse. She was going to have some fun with this.

Hugh and Lawrence followed the children inside and together they ordered an array of toasted sandwiches, burgers and chips. They were planning to stock up on drinks and snacks too. It was still another four hours before Coober Pedy, their stopover for the night.

‘So,’ said the woman behind the counter. She wore a sleeveless shirt, showing off arms the size of Christmas hams with a faded tattoo of a rose

on her left bicep. Her dark curls were streaked with grey and her face was red – which, upon closer inspection, you could see was the result of broken capillaries that trailed across her skin like a topographical map through the wrinkles. Her name badge said Sharon. ‘Whaddaya think of Kulgera, kids?’

‘You have some interesting garden ornaments outside,’ Alice-Miranda said. Along with the remains of the yellow car there was a huge beer can with four ‘X’s on it, a sign with the distances from the pub to places all over Australia and a Hills hoist laden with discarded sandals and trainers all hanging by their laces like some sort of sporty fruit.

‘When I’m not looking after the shop I like to indulge my passion for design,’ the woman said, deadpan. Alice-Miranda couldn’t tell if she was joking or not. Perhaps the decoration was a particular outback style that Sharon specialised in.

Millie and Jacinta had finished gathering their snacks, along with another tube of sunscreen for Millie to add to the three she’d packed from home – desperate as she was not to get sunburnt on the trip. They brought their haul back to the counter

when Jacinta squealed. Alice-Miranda turned to see a large jar containing a dead snake preserved in formaldehyde, and another smaller container that looked to be full of scorpions and various oversized insects. In front of those was a plastic terrarium with the words, 'WARNING DON'T TOUCH – Western Brown Snake' scrawled in permanent marker on the front.

'Phil won't hurt you, love. He's been dead for years,' Sharon said, tapping the lid of the jar. 'But I won't vouch for that other little blighter.' She gestured at the terrarium.

Alice-Miranda leaned in close to see the small brown reptile staring at her, its tongue flicking back and forth. 'Wouldn't he be more comfortable outside in his own environment?' she asked the woman.

'He might be, but I wouldn't,' Sharon said. 'Found him in the guest laundry last week. He can stay right here until Wally – that's my husband, the cook – has time to take him for a ride far, far away. That was Phil's downfall – tried to cosy up to one of the guests in number six as I recall. Woman screamed like a banshee – scared the old fella straight out under a road train. Thought I'd

preserve him to show visitors the wildlife that's best avoided.'

Millie gulped.

'Where you kids headed?' Sharon asked, while Wally – tall and nearly bald with heavily tattooed muscly arms – flipped their burgers in the kitchen behind her. He lifted a large stainless steel basket full of chips from the fryer, then slapped them onto a sheet of paper and gave the portion a liberal sprinkling of salt before wrapping it all up and putting the parcel on the counter.

'Coober Pedy, then Hope Springs Station,' Lucas replied.

'Whaddaya doin' out there?' Wally asked sharply, and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

'We're going to help Uncle Barnaby with the mustering,' Alice-Miranda explained. 'Aunt Evie and everyone else is away so Daddy offered that we could give him a hand and it was just fortunate things worked out with our school break.'

'Who's away?' Wally asked.

'Molly and Ralph and their family,' Alice-Miranda said. 'I haven't met them yet, but Daddy's told us a bit about them. He lived on Hope Springs

for a while during his gap year – but that was a long time ago.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Wally mumbled and went back to the grill.

‘Have you and Wally lived out here for long?’ Alice-Miranda asked Sharon.

‘All our lives,’ the woman replied. ‘Both born and bred in the outback, and never been anywhere else.’

‘You must love it then,’ the child said.

‘Yeah, Wal and I can’t get enough of workin’ a hundred hours a week for whining travellers who are always complainin’, isn’t that right, darl?’

The man muttered something. Alice-Miranda couldn’t quite make it all out, but it didn’t sound like a ringing endorsement of his wife’s words.

Millie realised the woman had a gift for sarcasm. ‘Where would you rather be?’ she asked.

Sharon turned and looked at Wally. ‘We’re retirin’ and headin’ for the Greek Islands as soon as our ship comes in. And it’s about to set sail – place is sold, so hopefully the next time you’re round these parts, we won’t be seein’ you.’

‘I’ve heard the Greek Islands are lovely, but it’s beautiful out here too,’ Millie said. ‘I don’t think

photographs do the place justice. The red earth is spectacular and flying over the West MacDonnell Ranges was so colourful – green and red and flowers too, which I hadn't expected.'

'Yeah there's a lot more vegetation than most people think,' Sharon said. 'We had some good rain a few months back. Todd River was flowing in Alice – doesn't happen all that often. Turns the countryside every colour of the rainbow but it's dryin' out again now.'

'You ever gonna stop yapping, Shazza?' Wally growled, and threw a tea towel over his shoulder. 'Those kids could starve to death, you know.'

Alice-Miranda looked at the man. He had the air of someone who'd been dealt a rough hand in life.

Wally finished wrapping the last of their order and Sharon rang up the purchases on the till. Lawrence walked to the counter and added several drinks, then pulled out his credit card.

Sharon looked up at him, a flicker of recognition in her eyes. She continued staring then snapped her fingers. 'You're that bloke from the movies. The one in that musical – what was it called again? About Nellie someone or other.'

'Frontier Woman: The Life and Times of Nellie Williams,' Jacinta chimed in, her face beaming. 'We were all in –'

'Worst movie I've ever seen,' Sharon interrupted the girl, and rolled her eyes. 'What were you thinking? A musical set in the outback – no one's gonna get excited about that, not to mention it was the Grand Canyon, wasn't it? So not even the proper outback either. And those kids almost did my head in – except the pair that were gun riders. Those girls were the only thing that didn't make me want to poke my own eyes out.'

Millie covered her mouth to stop herself laughing. *'Those girls'* were her and Alice-Miranda, but she wasn't about to say so after Sharon's scathing assessment. The movie had received rave reviews and made a fortune at the box office, but you couldn't please everyone. Hugh was biting his lip and trying not to laugh too.

'Seeing as though you're here,' Sharon continued, 'and I presume you've been in some other films that haven't tanked, how 'bout a picture for the wall.'

Lawrence had remained tight-lipped during Sharon's appraisal. He'd found it was better in

these situations to simply nod and maintain a quiet dignity.

The woman bustled out from behind the counter and grabbed the actor, dragging him through an open door and into what looked like a bar area. The children began to follow, but Lawrence suggested they should stay put.

‘Things you really don’t need to see in here, kids,’ Lawrence called out.

‘Like what?’ Millie asked, craning her neck.

Caps of all colours were hanging from the ceiling, and peppered among them was another unusual decorative touch – an array of bras and undies.

Millie nudged Jacinta and cringed. ‘Did you see the size of those bloomers in there? They’re bigger than Myrtle Parker’s.’

The adults re-emerged, Lawrence shaking Sharon from his arm.

‘You might not be the world’s best actor, but you are easy on the eye,’ the woman said, giving Lawrence a grin.

The group gathered their purchases and made for the door. ‘Lovely to meet you all,’ Lawrence said through gritted teeth.

‘It was Hope Springs you said you were headed, wasn’t it?’ Sharon called after them.

The family turned and nodded.

‘Why?’ Hugh asked.

‘No, nothing.’ The woman shook her head. But Alice-Miranda didn’t miss the strange look that passed between Sharon and her husband. Something had been left unsaid.