

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 dopest 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.