

❧ Prologue ❧

1889

Benjamin Dalhanty twitched the curtain in the study. Outside on the veranda, the wool broker from Goldsbrough Mort & Co. awaited an audience, his filthy hands making a sorry mess of the hat he held. He was stocky. Spade-headed. The type of rugged fellow Ben's father admired. The sort of man Ben knew he could never be, though he suspected his father still believed in the possibility of miraculous transformation. As if it were conceivable for Ben at some future point to become the man expected of him and suddenly find the wherewithal to manage hundreds of thousands of acres.

Beyond the white paling fence of the homestead fifteen stockmen rode past, followed by the overseer. The Goldsbrough wool broker turned to watch as one flat-topped wool wagon and then another and another trundled by, the towering bales momentarily blocking the agapanthus sky. This was fortuitous timing, for it allowed the broker to understand the enormity of the business he hoped to vie for. And yet even as Ben stared at the man's broad back, a vision arose of sandstone buildings. There he was. Benjamin Dalhanty. Striding along a city street toward his office. Black umbrella

swinging jauntily. Ink-stained fingers eagerly awaiting blank paper. His copperplate was second to none.

The slide and thud of a drawer drew Ben reluctantly back into the present: the cedar-lined study with its thick Aubusson rug. His father, Alfred, remained ensconced behind the mahogany desk, squaring up different denominations of pound notes, the growing stacks perfectly aligned. Once satisfied with his counting he marked down the amount in a green ledger and packed the money into a metal box, keeping a portion of it aside. That afternoon, before he left on the paddle-steamer for Bourke, from where the Sydney-bound train was due to depart the next day, Alfred would slip out to the grove of palm trees located a half-mile from the rear of the homestead and bury the cash for safekeeping. The palms had been a passion of Ben's late mother, who had spent time in Ceylon, and it was beneath them that Alfred stashed his hoard. This miserly attribute amused Ben. It was hard to leave behind humble beginnings forged on the outskirts of London.

Alfred Dalhunny was wary of banks, his main complaint being the expectation that money borrowed should be repaid, and invariably sooner than was convenient. These infernal institutions, he declared, never made anyone's fortune, which was why he'd mastered the art of prevarication. Drip-feeding the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney and the London Chartered Bank of Australia kept them marginally content – and besides, neither bank wished to lose any Dalhunny business.

Alfred locked the box and patted the lid affectionately before pocketing the remaining notes and sitting the container on the floor. He straightened curved shoulders and swivelled his office chair, displaying the profile that drew comparisons with Napoleon, along with the sweep of hair that fell across his brow. Ben waited for the usual speech about the importance of the station running smoothly in his father's absence. The unstated message was clear. Ben was to heed the station's manager, Mr Todd, in all things. Mr Todd was, after all, the finest manager west of the divide.

And didn't the man know it. Riding about with his superior air.

It was not unusual for Mr Todd to ignore Ben, as if he were merely another worker, and a barely useful one at that.

‘And keep that young wife of yours out of mischief. It’s one thing for her to have visitors, but I’m not partial to her gallivanting about the countryside and leaving my grandson alone in the care of the Aboriginal domestics. People come to us. It’s what’s expected. Rachael isn’t in the city anymore. We have a hierarchy out here for good reason.’ Alfred squinted at Ben’s necktie. ‘Purple? Dalhuntsy don’t wear purple.’

Ben considered the colour rather chirpy. It lifted the drab cloth of the suits he wore and Rachael agreed it complemented his tanned skin. ‘I thought—’

‘Well, don’t think, son. It doesn’t suit you. We have a valet for that,’ decreed his father.

At last count, the homestead staff consisted of four housemaids, a cook and her assistant, the valet, two washerwomen, a boy to chop wood and Mrs Wilson, head of the household and all matters domestic, who also doubled as a lady’s maid for Ben’s wife. A man was likely to trip over one of the many people running about the place, and that was before he took a step beyond the gate, where the business of making money supplanted everything else.

To keep the cogs of pastoralism oiled, it was necessary to employ a village of eighty, comprised of stockmen, blacksmiths, farmworkers, carpenters, contractors and general labourers. There were so many people Ben was at a loss as to why his father felt it necessary to spend three months in Sydney every year when station life could be just as noisy as the city. At times, with numerous men riding about the place and steamboat whistles continually screeching when the river ran, it was all Ben could do not to retreat to his bedroom and place a pillow over his head.

Ben was reluctant to interrupt his father, who was now collating papers for planned business meetings in Sydney, but quietly he reminded him that the wool broker was still outside, here to tout for their business, and the heat was punishing.

Alfred clacked his dentures in irritation. He was fond of the teeth left him by his father. 'Waterloo teeth' he called them, a grisly reminder of their battlefield provenance, although to Ben the inclusion of hippopotamus ivory was far more reminiscent of fashionable Piccadilly than the Waterloo killing field. Alfred liked to believe that the scavenged teeth belonged to one of Wellington's ex-Hanoverian sabre-wielding soldiers. The essence of a dead warrior was deemed an advantage when their pastoral existence was hard-won. There was a certain combative element to their lives.

Mrs Wilson entered, following a single knock on the door. She greeted her long-time employer with a curt hello and with the briefest acknowledgement to Ben, sat a silver tea tray on the desk. She straightened her five-foot-five frame, deftly avoiding the low-hanging candelabrum and poured a single cup. Once the task was completed she ensured the solid silver teapot, sugar bowl and creamer were perfectly positioned to display the *W* insignia etched on each piece.

Alfred proceeded to give the housekeeper final instructions. The Aboriginal women and girls working in the house were to be treated firmly but not harshly. Managing them appropriately was a civic duty if they were to assimilate into society and the use of any language other than English was not to be tolerated. The head gardener was to pay careful attention to the watering of the orchard (marmalade and homemade cordial being particular favourites of Alfred's). And the bird netting protecting the orange koi in the pond, purchased at great cost from Victoria, was to be checked thrice daily. Mrs Wilson was dismissed and, with three neat steps backwards as if departing royalty, she eventually left the room.

Were it not for Mrs Wilson, Ben would have dispensed with the household domestics entirely during his father's absence and spent languorous hours with his wife and baby son dozing on a blanket next to the manmade pond. Being 'left in charge', as Alfred termed it, meant little. His power was restricted to riding about the run and tipping his hat in greeting to Mr Todd. Not that Ben had the

slightest idea what he might order the staff to do, even if they were willing to listen to him. Frankly, he preferred watching his wife embroider grub roses on Julian's baby socks than pretend interest in the differing qualities of clean and greasy wool. But pretend he must.

The Dalhuntys' land spread south-west, near the confluence of the Culgoa and Barwon Rivers, where the mighty Darling began, and it was a day's ride to their closest neighbour and the fence that separated their sheep. Between here and there a man could cross river flats dense with black soil, meander through redgums and cross rusted ridges, doing his best to spot nobs of merinos among clusters of saltbush. In a good season the land was plump and fertile, the trees full leafed, the grasses greener than green and the animals bulging. In a bad one, settlers bowed their heads and tried hard not to stare. At times, the savagery of the place could make a man weep. It still astounded Ben how his father loved it so.

Outside, the wool broker was speaking to their manager. Mr Todd, bespectacled and heavily bearded, gave his usual animated response, a single scratch of the forehead. Of more interest to Ben was the stranger who had joined them. The third man was tall and spare with a peaked cap. Undoubtedly Captain Augustus Ashby. The riverboat captain had, during a chance meeting in Bourke eighteen months prior, managed to convince Alfred to assign him the highly coveted transportation of Dalhunny Station's wool clip after the previous riverboat tasked with the contract had hit a snag in the river and sunk, resulting in a shambolic attempt to save the beer on board, and taking a crewman to his muddy end. Ashby's unapologetic approach had been novel, brash and timely, and had impressed Alfred. That feat alone was worthy of admiration and Ben could not begrudge the justified pride that radiated from the man who was soon to float nearly two thousand bales of Dalhunny wool to South Australia.

Ashby was granted immediate entry to the study. Alfred put aside the tea just served. Stout glasses of brandy were offered all round and Ben was introduced to the Captain, who reciprocated

with a firm handshake and a jovial manner. He cut a fine figure in a tailored coat, polished boots and close-clipped beard and yet still retained the aura of a can-do individual. Capable and presentable. Already the robust wool broker, still suffering ignominy outdoors in the heat, had fallen a notch in Ben's estimation.

'A pleasure to meet you, Benjamin. I look forward to a long association.' Captain Ashby didn't stand on ceremony. He drained the brandy and sat the glass on the desk. 'I see Goldsbrough Mort are here to offer their services.'

'It would be churlish to decline a meeting. They are taking on more clients now the railway is opening up the west. The direct route from Bourke to Sydney is proving popular,' replied Alfred.

Ben stayed by the window and sipped at the brandy as his father and the captain took up seats opposite each other. The captain was yet to fully gain the measure of Alfred. If that were possible. A wariness overtook his sociable charms.

'So you're in agreement with this trade minimisation strategy the government has in play, using railways to stop the transport of wool to South Australia?'

Alfred peered about the study as if formulating the correct tone in which to convey unwelcome news. This was one of a series of tactical traits that included sitting a guest on the veranda facing the brutal afternoon sun. Railways were foremost in Alfred's mind. He was nothing if not progressive, as long as advancements were in his best interests. The politicians would rather build roads and railways than locks, especially if it meant the profitable wool trade was delivered to Sydney rather than down the Murray-Darling to the southern states. The fact Ashby was unwilling to grasp the significance of the railway's importance boded ill for the man's business, but that was not Alfred's concern.

Subsidised rail freight was being offered to entice growers away from the waterway, however Alfred was holding out for a better deal and championing a new mode of transport when the current most economical method sat across the desk was not conducive to business. Alfred enjoyed a moment more of power posturing,

however if Captain Ashby experienced any discomfort it was short-lived.

‘They’ve been barking about trade minimisation since ’77, Ashby. Until I have a complaint, Dalhenty Station will be shipping its wool to the railhead at Murray Bridge. I’d not fix what is yet to prove troublesome.’

Immediately, the budding tension vanished. More brandy was offered and the cargo manifest for goods currently en route to the storehouse was checked by his father. Alfred ran a manicured finger down the extensive list. Tobacco, flour and sugar was awaited by the Aboriginals as eagerly as the Dalhuntys and their labourers anticipated their stores. Next came the confirmation of insurance, the bill of lading not being completed until the wool was stacked on Ashby’s barges, his flotilla of vessels numbering three. Money was not mentioned, the shipping rate having already been haggled over at Bourke’s Central Australian Hotel. Their South Australian broker would sell the wool on their behalf less commission and expenses, ensure Ashby was paid for his services and then arrange the timely deposit of wool proceeds into the Dalhenty bank account. A perfectly succinct arrangement.

‘The waters will hold?’ Alfred folded the manifest, which would eventually be delivered to the overseer and then the storekeeper.

Captain Ashby toyed with the rim of his now empty glass. The slightest movement of his head suggested a third brandy would not be refused if offered. ‘It’s a fair flow. I’ve heard word there’s near eighty steamers running between here and Wentworth as we speak. The customs officials on the border have their work cut out. They’re reckoning on twelve thousand bales of wool being shipped from the Darling River woolsheds this year.’

Alfred sat back in his chair. There was nothing he liked better than having the value of the wool industry underlined. There was a great importance to their business, one that literally guaranteed the Australian economy’s seamless transition into the next century with the wealth wool produced.

'There will be opportunity to continue our discussion en route to Bourke. Idling down our great water highway with my wool holds great appeal, however it is the Sydney train for me. Tiresome journey though it is.' Alfred rose, ending the meeting.

With business concluded and the captain departed, his father refused to waste further time. It was Alfred's prerogative to be magnanimous one moment and then renege on an arrangement the next, and on this occasion it fell to Ben to placate the wool broker who'd spent the better part of two hours languishing on the veranda.

In the hallway lined with portraits of Dalhuntys now risen to prominence through slightly revised life stories and the benefit of a commissioned painter adept at creating likenesses based on Alfred's memory, Ben was met by his wife.

Rachael Dalhunty was twisting the double rope of pearls at her neck and humming absently, the mushroom pink of her gown grey in the half-light. She was waiting for the cargo to be delivered and never failed to be delighted when a new selection of muslins and silks arrived. Ben dare not ruin her happiness by mentioning the arduous journey the Bourke dressmaker would be undertaking by dray in a fortnight. Instead he admired the glint of auburn in her braided and curled hair and the whittled waist encased in whalebone. He so enjoyed plucking away at those laces at night.

'Frank was looking for you,' she said.

'He's always looking for someone.' Frank the Englishman, no one knew his last name, had arrived from the west nine years prior with a camel in tow and a sorry story of deprivation endured in the desert country. Alfred had been keen to throw the man off their land, however Ben was rather taken with the thought of having their own camel on the property, and a one-year stay of execution was granted. In hindsight, persuading Alfred to let Frank remain for a little longer proved to be one of Ben's sillier requests. Frank had taken to calling him 'Honoured Brother', an audacity, was rude to every man on the property and was generally a nuisance.

His constant presence grated at Ben, while Alfred grew to admire Frank's careful tending of the palm grove. The mad Englishman, Ben knew, was best ignored.

Rachael backed into the drawing room and beckoned. Ben was tempted to follow, and she pouted at his hesitation. He pointed to the front door and his shoulders sagged. She laughed. In a couple of hours his father would be gone.

Outside, the wool broker was crossing the scythed grass and opening the freshly painted front gate. He turned on seeing Ben, his Scottish accent thick and curt.

'Captain Ashby was more than pleased to explain to me that your South Australian broker had Dalhunny Station's business. Sewn up tight were the exact words he used.'

He closed the gate, effectively barring Ben. The man was annoyed, and rightly so. It was rude of his father to ignore a meeting that had been agreed to, but this was not the first time superiority outranked politeness.

'I'm terribly sorry for the wait, Mr . . .?'

The wool broker was clearly keen to depart. 'Fraser. Glen Fraser. And who are you? Another lackey? I've met a manager and an overseer and sundry other men of different rank. You assume I'll be impressed, no doubt, but frankly I did not expect such treatment.'

Ben instantly liked Fraser. He was all too aware of his father's rudeness, but never had he been so forcefully reminded of it. Most people didn't dare risk Alfred's ire, for fear a daughter's well-planned engagement failed, a son's managerial position on a far-flung property was withdrawn, or a business transaction cancelled.

'I'm, I'm sorry, Mr Fraser. I'm Benjamin Dalhunny.'

Fraser was drawn to the purple necktie. Reluctantly he took Ben's offered hand, although the gate remained between them.

'I say, do come inside and have some lemon cordial. Are you a breeder of chickens? Father has some very fine Double-combed Hamburgs. We've been raising them for some years now and they really are superior layers.' Ben opened the gate. Mr Fraser gave the

impression that he was somewhat confused, although Ben wasn't sure if it was due to the offer of a refreshing drink or the opportunity to view their prized Hamburgs.

'Ben! Ben! Julian is crawling.' Rachael was on the veranda, excitement streaming from her. 'Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt.'

'My first child. A boy. Julian.' Ben leant confidentially towards Mr Fraser as Rachael dallied briefly before heading indoors. 'Father is awfully pleased, but what if the lad doesn't like sheep?' The thought tickled Ben no end and he burst out laughing. When he stopped he noticed Mr Fraser wore a similar expression to that of his dearly departed mother, as if he were trying to ascertain whether Ben were quite all there, up top.

'Yes. Well, I too have a son. Ian.' Mr Fraser made no effort to walk through the gate.

'To our boys then,' said Ben, privately pleased the Hamburgs were not to be disturbed. They didn't always take to strangers.

'Yes,' agreed Mr Fraser, a glint of amusement softening a hard-edged face. 'To our sons.'

⌘ Part I ⌘

The Station

❧ Chapter I ❧

Mid-January, 1909

Julian Dalhanty grew up in a place his father called God's country. As a young boy it was impossible for him to gauge how much land God owned, but somehow his family had won a chunk from the fringes of it. When Julian asked his father where the Lord's best paddocks were, he would wave vaguely to the east, so Julian knew God was pretty darn smart. Eastwards, unseen mountains straddled the plains, wreathed by bloated clouds that gave up their filling regularly. If the Dalhantys were lucky, sometimes their pasture would get a taste of that providence, once God's run was saturated and those westward-flowing rivers converged and streamed towards them. But God sure did seem to need a lot of water, while their land grew dryer every year.

Julian was born the eldest of four children to Benjamin and Rachael Dalhanty in 1888, two years before the big flood came down the Darling River. Day by day, the waters had crept across the vast flats and plains, filling cracks, gilgais and dry creek beds, until the land was soggy and could hold no more. Although Ben manhandled gunny sacks filled with sand in an effort to lessen the torrent, his parents had spent a week on the homestead

roof during the worst of the deluge, cradling him until their arms cramped. They lived on raw sheep meat and a pot of cold tea, surrounded by their waterlogged belongings, staring at the partially submerged station buildings. Grandfather Alfred was in Sydney enjoying his yearly jaunt and most of their workers were either miles away mustering or had headed to Bourke on his father's suggestion to help construct a levee around the town. To fill in the time, his parents read the Bible, tried to catch fish and prayed that some of their sheep had survived.

In the end, they were saved from starvation by a riverboat, which had left the channel and struck out towards them. A dense patch of scrub ripped the wheel casings from the steamer and the trapped branches churned the brown water, spraying it outwards in twin arcs. Julian's father told him later he was sure Noah himself was coming to their rescue that day. So it was with a fleeting degree of disappointment and then unbridled gratefulness that Ben had recognised Captain Augustus Ashby as he steamed towards them. Julian, being only two at the time, recalled nothing of this, however he was left with the legacy of that great inundation. The sheep that had sustained their family for generations had melted into the earth.

Who the Dalhunts were, where they had been and, crucially, the direction in which they were heading, were weighing on Julian this particular morning. If one family was to be given a pile of average-to-ruination luck, it was them. Any sane person would leave, strike out on their own. This was Australia after all. There were tin, gold and opal mines, and sheep properties aplenty, more opportunity than a man could imagine.

And yet he was still here, like the three generations of Dalhunts before him. Digging in like a soldier. Ready to defend, no matter the cost. And the enemies were plentiful. Drought. Flood. Fire. Although his father reckoned a person couldn't blame the land. Hell, Julian supposed he was right. The soil held on to any drop of moisture thrown its way, gobbling it down like a scrub turkey come in from the caked silt of the plains. Now it was mid-summer,

a season that lasted longer than man or beast cared for, and the rain was still sitting out east, too far away to see or smell.

Dawn announced itself with the sound of the wind swishing through palm fronds, lagging footsteps in the hallway and the sight of Bony ambling past Julian's window. The dog had arrived one winter, unasked for and unwanted. A bullet was the most likely reward for stray dogs on sheep land, and, were it not for one of Julian's younger sisters, Meg, Bony would have ended in the dead ditch next to the rubbish tip. He was a complaining mutt, likely to piddle on a person if they stayed put in one spot for too long. That detail only helped to further endear the animal to Meg and at her insistence their father allowed Bony to stay. He saw the benefit of a dog that left its calling card were a person idle. Ben Dalhanty was not one to fritter away time, and he expected the same of others. An extraordinary characteristic, considering his ability to immerse himself in a task and then spend an inordinate length of time accomplishing it.

Through the window Julian observed Bony as he lifted a leg on the copper, whining with pleasure. A stream of pee ran down the side of the pot. The dog scratched at the ground, sniffed a bit and then, crouching low, raced from sight. Julian counted to three then, sure enough, the familiar sounds of chickens screeching were followed by Meg screaming abuse. His father bellowed – insofar as he was capable of bellowing – for peace to return.

Sighing, Julian located the hole in his mattress, pulling free a yellowing train schedule cut from the newspaper. *Bourke to Sydney*. He ran a finger across the print. He only needed the fare.

He had never thought of his decision to leave in terms of running away. It was far easier to reframe it as a yearning for a different life – a fair wish for a boy anchored to the sameness of the land. The desire to quit the bush had not come without consternation. He knew what his family expected of him as the only son. Except that Julian didn't want it. Not the debt nor the struggle nor the endless round of pretending their lives would improve. There was every possibility they would end up impoverished, and he wasn't

staying around for that. By chance, it was an article written in an old copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald* that stirred his interest. Listed on the same page as the regular shipping news, which occasionally noted the departures, destinations and wool cargo of the largest paddle-steamers plying the Murray-Darling, was an editorial about the SS *Osterley*. She was to be launched in London and with luck was expected to arrive in Sydney in September of this year on her maiden voyage. Maiden voyage. It had a ring to it. A voyage that would take a person along the Suez Canal through Egypt. Julian imagined running across the scrubbed decks as they passed Africa on one side and Asia on the other. It was as far removed from this life as he could possibly get. And so, for want of another idea, the sea beckoned.

A flash of red bobbed towards the window. Julian quickly slid the timetable under the pillow and covered his nakedness with a shirt as Meg scrambled through the opening, falling on top of him. A mess of dirt, crumpled dress and curly carrot hair righted itself.

‘Goddamn dog. It’s the same every morning. Why aren’t youse dressed, Julian? Morning’s half gone.’

‘Jeez, Meg, can’t a man get up when he’s good and ready?’ Julian pulled his feet out from under his sister. Her invasion of his privacy was becoming downright bothersome. There were parts of a man’s body that weren’t controllable in the morning and even if the flag was only at half-mast he didn’t need Meg catching sight of it. He kicked out at her and she scrambled to the end of the bed. ‘And where did you hear that word? Don’t be saying goddamn in front of Mother or Father.’

‘Goddamn preacher says goddamn. Frank said so. “Praise the Lord, goddamn,” he says, sitting on the steps out the back of the hall. Then he crosses himself and belches on account of the rum he drinks to wash away Lucifer.’ Meg gave him an innocent look. ‘I’m just saying what Frank says. Anyways, youse still not sleeping with yer pants on. I’m telling youse, Julian, one of these days something’s gonna happen and youse’ll be striding out in your glory afore youse remember youse’re starkers.’

Meg rolled out of his reach, snatching up a dropped slingshot.

‘And one of these days Mother is going to find out you go wandering over to Frank’s place when you’re meant to be doing lessons and she’ll tan your hide for it. Now turn around.’

Julian waited until she obeyed then pulled on his moleskin trousers.

‘Don’t see why I can’t spend time with Frank.’ Meg spoke to the bedroom door, drawing a shape on the timber, her backside wiggling left and right. ‘Everybody else has gone and left us. Frank’s cooking pickled vegetables and rice today. Wese could sneak over to his place later.’

Being reminded of the wizened Englishman’s cooking was an unwelcome detail. Julian had spent more time with his pants down than up after the last meal he’d shared with Frank. The food tasted good, but the after-effects – of feeling your innards being drained from your body – were compounded by Bony, who followed him about ready to lick up any offerings.

‘The fox came back,’ Meg said. ‘I can smell him something fierce. I reckon I could find his hidey place. I’ve got the sense of a tracker.’

‘All right, all right. You can turn around now. Don’t forget Mother expects you to talk properly and act properly. And if you miss another reading and writing lesson with me, I’ll be the one to get the blame. Talking to Frank and hunting with a mongrel dog doesn’t fit in with Mother’s idea of educating a thirteen-year-old. You better get cleaned up.’

‘Fine.’ Meg stuffed the slingshot in the pocket of her dress. ‘I’ll be *proper*.’ She drew the word out as if she were a haughty society matron and bobbed a flounce of a curtsy. ‘I’m always proper at breakfast.’

Julian knew from experience that was a straight-out lie.