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THE TOP 10 BESTSELLER



# BELLBIRD RIVER COUNTRY CHOIR

**SOPHIE GREEN**

AUSTRALIAN BESTSELLER

'Reading a Sophie Green book  
is the greatest escape'  
WHO MAGAZINE



## CHAPTER 1

‘It’s really brown,’ Kim says.

Alex half-turns her head towards her daughter, who’s sitting in the back seat, and sees her gazing out the window.

‘What is?’ she says, quickly turning her head back. She’s not used to driving on country roads. Her old colleague Garry warned her that she would need to pay attention or she’d find herself in a paddock – or, worse, crashing into a tree. Long, straight lines, he’d said. So easy to become bored. And that’s when they get you.

‘Everything,’ Kim says with a sigh and Alex hears her turning a page of her book.

‘I really don’t know how you can read in the car,’ Alex says, laughing. ‘It always made me sick.’

‘*This* is making me sick,’ Kim mutters.

‘What, bub?’

‘*Nothing.*’

Alex emits a sigh of her own. She has been telling Kim for weeks now that they’d be moving away from Sydney. It’s the city of both their births but as it’s built up to the 2000 Olympics it’s become a different place – fast and breathless and crowded. More cosmopolitan and more interesting, yes; harder to live in, also yes. Every day there seem to be more cars on the road

and fewer parking spots, more new buildings and not enough space for them. It feels to Alex like the city is swelling, as if it's a blister heading for bursting, and she doesn't want to be there when that happens – which will probably be around the time of the Opening Ceremony.

It might have been easier if she had an extra set of hands to help her – someone to run Kim to her Saturday sport, for example, while Alex did all the housework that accrued during the week. Her mother, Marta, helped a little bit but she didn't drive, nor did she live close by, so Alex knew she had to rely on herself most of the time. And for a gal on her own trying to bring up her kid, Sydney was tough. It took her an hour to get to work each day and often more than that to get home. On the nights when Marta wasn't looking after Kim, Alex would arrive to find her daughter asleep on the neighbour's couch. It was great to have such a friendly neighbour but Alex decided she'd rather see Kim more. So she told the Department of Education that she'd go to a country town, she didn't really care where, and they sent her here. Bellbird River, New South Wales. A pit stop of a place along the road to Tamworth. Not that Alex knows anything about Tamworth other than stopping there once on a school trip.

'I want to spend more time with you,' she explained to her only child. 'If we move to a country town the school will be around the corner. Won't that be better?'

Kim gave her the baleful eyes she'd perfected as a toddler. 'What about Grandma?' she said.

Well, Grandma had told Alex not to leave Sydney.

'Don't take my Kimmy so far away!' she'd said, laying on the guilt the way she likes to. The way she did when Alex, aged eighteen, told her she was pregnant and her mother had asked

her why she wanted to ruin both of their lives. As Alex used to joke to her friends: ‘Marta by name, martyr by nature.’

‘Get rid of it,’ Marta had said, as if the foetus was a pot plant that hadn’t made it through a stinking-hot summer. Now that foetus is Kimberly, all she wants to do is keep her near.

Alex knows why: Kim is her mother’s chance to get things right. She thinks she failed with Alex – pregnant in her last year of high school, never saying who the baby’s father was, not finishing her Higher School Certificate, even though she did it two years later *and* got into uni *and* managed to find a good, stable career – and if only Marta can keep Kim in her clutches she’ll right that wrong.

Alex appreciates all Marta has done with Kim – Alex could hardly have managed without her in the early years – but she wants to stand on her own two feet now that Kim is older. She chose to have Kim on her own but she’s felt like a kid herself for most of the time she’s been a mother.

Now she’s almost thirty Alex needs to stop reacting to things and take action. Motherhood just happened to her. Teaching just happened to her in a way – it was the career that made the most sense when she had a child to think about. She really wanted to be a lawyer. Lawyers are in charge. Lawyers have comfortable lives. Lawyers can afford to take nice holidays. But she’s not a lawyer, so moving to a town where she will be paid the same as in Sydney but won’t be paying Sydney rent is a chance for her to save up some money and maybe take Kim to the Gold Coast for a trip. Maybe even put a little away each month so she’s not always worried about whether or not she can cover the bills.

She couldn’t say any of that to Kim, of course. Money worries aren’t something children should have to hear about – which Alex knows because they’re all she heard about growing up.

So when Kim asked about her grandma, Alex smiled brightly and said, ‘Bellbird River isn’t so far. It’s just five hours. That’s nothing in a country this big!’ And certainly not as far away as Moree, which was the department’s other offer.

Alex rotates her head just a little so she can keep one eye on the road while observing the landscape. It *is* brown – and also golden in parts, and khaki in others, depending on how the farmers are working it, by the looks. There is land with furrows in its soil and staccato stands of eucalypts. Ahead she can see a dam, and galahs at the water’s edge.

Then the speed limit changes to sixty and a few hundred metres on is a small white sign with black writing: *Bellbird River*.

The real estate agent told her the house she’s rented is on the main road, so when Alex spies the sign saying *Town Centre* she puts her blinker on and turns left onto Drury Street. Although she doesn’t remember the address being Drury Street and she’s left the slip of paper in her handbag, which is on the floor below the passenger seat.

Kim keeps sighing as they drive slowly past heavy-brick single-storey shops with wrought-iron lace adornments, a pub whose heyday was clearly several decades ago, some weather-board homes and a couple of solidly constructed two-storey houses that look as if they were built around the time Queen Victoria entered her dotage. There’s a stone School of Arts built in 1901 – the first blush of Federation – and a town hall dated 1904, as well as a park with a slippery dip, swings and a cenotaph. The park has a vibrant stand of roses of various colours, almost in defiance of the sunbaked palette of the natural landscape around it. There are several bushes with lush pink blooms, a few with vermilion, a stumpy white rose bush and a pale yellow that is taller than the rest. Clearly someone cares enough about this park to go to the trouble of creating an oasis of colour.

‘Look at the roses, Kim,’ Alex says. ‘Aren’t they beautiful?’

‘S’pose so,’ Kim says and Alex can hear the shrug in her voice.

It’s only when they pass a sign pointing to the council swimming pool down a side street and the dwellings run out that Alex realises she should stop and check the address of the house. It’s on Jumbuck Way, number 98. And Jumbuck Way is . . . the road she turned off, which she knows because her instructions were to take the Kamilaroi Highway from the New England Highway, passing through Quirindi, then the ‘tourist route’ on Jumbuck Way. If she kept going on it she’d reach Tamworth, if she didn’t choose to turn off to Gunnedah. In other words, it’s the main road. The main road *into* town, just not the main road *in* town.

‘Where are we going?’ Kim says as Alex does a U-turn and drives back along Drury Street.

‘I must have missed the house,’ Alex says, turning left onto Jumbuck Way. She feels unsettled, as if she’s made a mistake coming here. ‘Look out for number 98.’

She passes the service station, then about three hundred metres along there’s one house, and another. A couple on the other side of the road too.

‘Ninety-eight!’ Kim shouts and Alex pulls the car onto the shoulder outside the house.

‘Charming country cottage’ was how the real estate agent described the place, which Alex leased without inspection because she didn’t have time to drive ten hours to Bellbird River and back just to look at a house. As Alex gets out of the car she sees that the charm of the cottage is debatable. Although maybe it’s meant to come from the fact that it’s old. About the same age as the two-storey houses she saw on Drury Street but not nearly as well preserved.

Kim hops out of the car, her Trixie Belden book tucked under her arm.

‘What do you think?’ Alex says, squinting into the afternoon sun.

‘Um . . .’ Kim also squints as she looks up at the dilapidated roof. ‘Is this really it?’

Alex looks down the road to her right, where the next house is a good fifty metres away, and to her left, where there’s a vacant lot sporting some old tyres.

‘I don’t think there’s much room for error, bub.’ She raises her voice as a passing semitrailer rumbles over her words. ‘This is number ninety-eight.’

Kim glares at the back of the truck. ‘I hope there aren’t many of those.’

‘There might be,’ Alex says. ‘For fifty dollars a week we probably can’t expect much. And this is a highway.’

‘Great,’ Kim says, rolling her eyes.

Alex wants to laugh – at eleven, Kim is still cute enough to be funny when she’s mad – but that would just make Kim cross at her. It’s so easy for a mother and daughter to get on each other’s nerves when there’s no buffer between them. Instead, Alex makes a face at her child and pulls the house key out of her jeans pocket. She picked it up from the real estate agent on the way through Quirindi, along with the instruction: ‘Don’t lose it, love, it’s the only one.’

The lock turns easily, and they walk into a short corridor and turn left into a light-filled room.

‘It’s nice!’ Kim says, sounding as surprised as Alex feels as they go back into the hallway and on to the sitting room.

Alex leased the place furnished – the real estate agent said the owner’s late mother used to live here and he’s never been inclined to sell her furniture – so Alex was expecting lace doilies on

everything and embroidered cushions with quaint designs. Instead there's a couch that's definitely out of style but in very good nick, highly decorated lamps that look sturdy, and armchairs that appear not to have been sat in for many years.

'Let's find your bedroom,' Alex says, nudging her daughter, who skips back to the hallway.

Alex takes the room at the front of the house, Kim the cubby-like room next to the kitchen, which isn't as old-fashioned as Alex feared.

'The beds are coming tomorrow,' she says, because second-hand beds were where she'd drawn the line, and the agent had agreed. 'So we may need to sleep in the sitting room tonight.'

'That's fine!' Kim skips again, this time out the back door and its flyscreen into a small garden that has two lemon trees, a cumquat in a large pot, and native plants that Alex knows she should be able to identify but can't.

'Can we call Grandma?' Kim says breathlessly as she inspects the garden.

They've never had a garden of their own – their apartment block in Meadowbank just had a concrete courtyard – and Alex can see curiosity on Kim's face.

'Not yet, bub,' she says and smiles cheerfully. She wants to feel settled before she has to listen to Marta's guilt trip. Plus she has to get the phone turned on.

'I'll bring in the suitcases,' Alex says, turning back into the house.

'I'll help!' Kim says, but she has her nose buried in a gardenia. Which is where it should be. Her daughter shouldn't be carrying her mother's baggage.

'It's fine. You explore.'

Alex walks down the hall, taking in the vague lavender scent of the house, and heads out the front door to the car.

She's congratulating herself on having found such a great place to live when she sees a woman across the road, a hand on her hip and a glare on her face.

'Hi!' Alex calls and waves, only to see the woman turn swiftly and walk up her front steps.

So maybe the congratulations were premature. Maybe that's one friend she's not going to make in this town. She'll have to worry about that later, though. For now she has bags to unpack, a child to feed, and no bed to crawl into as she contemplates the changes she has wrought on both their lives.