

*Finding
Kerra*

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Published by Rhiza Edge,
An Imprint of Rhiza Press

www.rhizaedge.com.au

PO BOX 1519
Capalaba QLD 4157
Australia

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Cover Design by Production Works

Layout by Rhiza Press

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Hawke, Rosanne, author.

Title: Finding Kerra / Rosanne Hawke.

ISBN: 978-1-925563-47-4 paperback

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*Finding
Kerra*

ROSANNE HAWKE

For Robin, my brother and friend.

I respectfully acknowledge the Diyari people as the original owners and caretakers of the land where this story is set.

1

When I returned to Australia last year, it had been the men's legs that shocked me—hairy, knobby-kneed, muscly—all on display in shorts. But this July, when I arrived at Mulga Spring, Blake's station home in the Far North, I was freaked out by the dogs. *It was a bit of a worry*, as Dad would say.

With care I lifted the piece of wire from the front gate, hoping to surprise Blake. He wasn't expecting me until the mail run next morning. But I wasn't prepared for the painful screech when the gate swung open nor, as I pushed through to the garden, for the onslaught of barking and snarling dogs that instantly appeared. There were only three, but it seemed like a whole pack. When I stood still, they stepped back, but if I moved forward, so did they, baring dragon fangs as if they'd rip me to shreds. Maybe surprising Blake hadn't been my best idea. I retreated carefully towards the gate but one of the dogs circled behind me, blocking my way.

Panic drowned me as I realised the dogs wouldn't let me out. Two roved round me, while the third biggest dog stood a metre away, staring as if he planned to mesmerise me. The dog behind me closed in and nipped my ankle. It didn't take long to decide what to do next: I shouted, 'Anyone at home?'

A familiar voice yelled back from the house, 'Blue! Luke! Get out of it! Bow, ya mongrel! Drop!'

Two dogs disappeared like spirits; the one left in front of me flopped instantly to the ground, his head down, ears back.

'Blake?' My voice wobbled.

A screen door banged. My legs were shaky as Blake strode towards me. It wasn't quite dark yet and I could see his unsmiling face. It was humiliating knowing I hadn't started off on my best foot, but I shrugged that thought aside as my heart lifted. It was so good to see him; it had been months—his sun-bleached hair had grown.

He spoke to the dog first. 'Stay out of it!' Blake made a movement with his hand and the dog pressed itself closer to the ground.

'Here.' Blake was talking to me now, his voice softer. 'This is Bow. Put your hand near his nose and he'll know not to do that again.'

It took me a moment to obey, even though the dog seemed harmless with Blake standing there.

'Is he yours?'

'Yep. The head cattle dog here. He's trained to run the dogs like that—just doing his job, but he'll know not to round you up again.' With relief I recognised the humour in Blake's voice, and he put an arm round my shoulders as he turned me towards the house. I finally saw his smile that I liked so much. That familiar dimple at the corner of his mouth.

'Why didn't you say you'd arrived in town?'

'I was about to call when a guy said he knew you and was going this way. He's got a Toyota ute.' I would never have ridden with a guy I didn't know in Adelaide, but the manager

of the Road House said it was fine.

Blake's answer sounded amused, but I couldn't read his expression. 'Everybody has a Toyota up here, Jaime. Though it would have been Matt Hall. No one else would come out this way.'

'Yeah, Matt.' The young guy had tipped his hat as he swung back into the ute, then sped off in a scuttle of gravel, his dogs grinning at me from the tray.

'C'mon inside', Blake said. I caught his gaze on me as he picked up my bag and I followed him towards the house. It was magnificent with the sun setting behind it, like a nineteenth-century station house on a souvenir tea towel. A wide veranda circled the house and plenty of sheds stood nearby. I could hear a steady thumping, like the heartbeat of something huge, and the clank and buzz of the giant pinwheel that rose above the house.

The sky was lavender, purple near the horizon, and as I watched, streaks of yellow and orange spread above me. It was different from any sky I'd ever seen, as if the sun had been weeping. The beauty of it stirred a chord in my mind that surprised me with its sharpness. Here I was at last, seeing the heart of this Australia I'd been born in.

I took a huge breath. When Blake Townsend had offered between-semester work experience—housekeeping on his family station with horse riding lessons thrown in—Mum had thought it a good idea. 'You'd see what the other half of Australia is like. Be nice up there in July—not too hot.' She sounded enthusiastic, even though I knew she was still worried about my getting over 'all that happened in Afghanistan' earlier in the year. Typically, Dad was more concerned about

Blake. 'What do we know about him? You'll be a long way from everywhere up there, so no funny business.' But Dad didn't have to worry—Blake was my friend.

Blake took me into the hallway, past the dogs, one of which licked my toes as I walked through the door. It was Bow; I recognised him because he was the biggest of the three dogs and had no black patches on his face like the others. I accepted his apology and patted him on the head, feeling the security of having a powerful ally. The feeling quickly went to my head and I reached to pat the dog beside him. I was rewarded with a growl and Blake's swift grip on my arm.

'Don't touch the other dogs!'

I jumped at Blake's tone, then he relaxed. 'Sorry. I guess you wouldn't know. They're blue heelers and they're not pets. Those two are Dad's dogs. Bow's okay, he's mine. You can pat him, he's smart and the boss dog but the others will rip your fingers off, given half a chance.'

'Fine.' I smiled, showing I was willing to learn, but my smile froze as I entered the kitchen. Another girl stood staring at me; not just *any* girl, but a fashion model out of the junk mail for R M Williams bush wear.

'This is Richelle.' Blake put my bag down. 'She helps out sometimes.'

Wasn't that what I was supposed to be doing? I wondered how long she'd stay. Instinctively I knew there wouldn't be enough room for both of us. She was staring at me as if Blake would need lots of extra help just having me around.

'Blake told me you lived in Pakistan,' she said.

No *hello* or *how was the bus trip?*

'I thought you'd be foreign, you know, black.'

How rude! I guess it was the emphasis she put on the word 'black' that shocked me, like it should matter. Blake's colour heightened as he watched my reaction, but immediately I was on home ground. She was just like Kate Sample, a girl at school in Adelaide. Kate used to say stuff like that when I first arrived.

I smiled at Richelle. 'No, I'm not black but I feel like I am at times.'

Richelle's eyes glazed over a little, probably trying to work out what I meant. Before she could say anything else, Blake's father strolled in. He was the legendary stockman, complete with the outback felt hat.

'G'day. You must be young Jaime.' He spoke as though he knew all about me, making me feel warm and welcome. He had an outdoor, sun-baked look about him, but even with the age lines cutting his face he was what my mother would call an attractive man. Blake's father left without another word and I had the impression that even though he didn't speak much, when he did it'd be worth hearing.

Blake picked up my bag again just as his father called back, 'Seen Kerra, Blake?'

'Nup.' Blake sounded as if he didn't care either, and I guessed there must be another dog loose. He took me down the hallway.

'This is your room, Jaime. I'm glad you came.'

And there was the old Blake I knew in Adelaide, smiling his old 'Coke ad' smile.

'The lights go out at eleven,' he said. I must have looked confused, because he added, 'We generate our own electricity.'

So that was the hum I could hear.

‘If you’re dying to finish the last chapter like me, there’s an oil lamp.’ He gestured to the mantelpiece and I gasped in delight.

‘I had one just like this in Pakistan.’

He seemed glad I was pleased. Although *pleased* wasn’t exactly the right word; it was more like *wonder*. I couldn’t believe an old oil lamp could make me feel like that.

‘Never thought anything would be the same, hey?’

I shook my head. ‘Trying to find similarities just gets disappointing. Best to focus on what’s here.’ I sounded like my mother.

‘Maybe you’ll be surprised.’

I looked up at him, interested, but he didn’t elaborate.

‘Bathroom’s down the hall.’ He paused. ‘We pump from a dam too, so you have to go easy on the water. Sorry.’

I shrugged to show it didn’t matter.

‘We’ll start the riding lessons tomorrow.’

‘Don’t forget to tell me how I can help. That’s why I’m here. That is, if Richelle—’

‘No problem. She’s Matt’s sister. They live next door.’

‘Next door? I didn’t see any houses.’

He chuckled. ‘Twenty kay as the crow flies. They have the next station, Bulcanna. That’s “next door” up here.’ He put my bag inside the doorway, then looked back at me. His green eyes softened and I felt we were back in Adelaide. ‘Get some rest after that bus ride. Have you eaten? There’s cold lamb in the fridge.’

‘Thanks, but I had tea at the Road House.’

He gave me a sticky note. ‘That’s the wi-fi. When the satellite works. We don’t use the landline much, it’s an old

party line. Don't want everyone knowing our business.' He gave a short laugh. 'If you need anything else, my room's out the back.'

Ordinary words but he held my gaze as if they were special.

'Thanks.'

And he was gone. Maybe I was just tired but I'd expected more, like a good talk, or a hug. I'd needed one by then.

At least the room had a comfortable lived-in look. The furniture was antique, dark and polished. It looked like it'd been dusted. I couldn't imagine Richelle dusting, even though Blake said she helped out. An old-fashioned fireplace, unused, was set into one wall. A push-up window was on the opposite side, with a fly screen that swung out towards the yard. I pulled down the blind and caught a brief shadow of the windmill whirring against the darkening sky.

To make the room feel familiar, I unpacked, putting clothes away and arranging my books on the bedside table. My sister Elly had made me a card with a drawing of her holding our cat Basil on the front. I set that on the window sill. The dressing table had an oval mirror and miniature drawers on either side. Between the drawers was a photo in a gilt-edged frame. The understanding eyes of a woman Mum's age looked out at me and again I felt warmed and welcomed. They were Blake's eyes and I guessed this was his mother. I knew she'd died but he'd never told me how.

When I arrived home this February after visiting Pakistan, I'd told him about being abducted, taken to Afghanistan and about my friend, Liana, dying there. He was sympathetic and he'd listened, but after a while I knew

there was a closed door he wasn't letting me through.

It was another friend, Danny Dimitriades, who was able to go past the listening; Danny, whose grandmother also died while I was in Pakistan during the summer break.

'It hurts, doesn't it?' was the first thing he'd said. I was relieved. All my family, friends or rellies who knew about Liana kept off the subject of 'hurt'. Maybe they thought if they made me think about it I'd rush around the room like a mad rhino, breaking things. I did once. It was so out of character, guess it scared everybody, even me. But Danny and I cried together.

'It'll take at least a year to grow around it. I know—Grandpop passed when I was in Year 10. So you see, I'm an old hand.'

He'd made me feel more accepting of myself. He knew so much about life; a lot of it came from his family—they're so close—yet the rest came from just living and doing it with all his heart and soul. 'Just keep talking about it, that's what we do in our family. Talk, talk, talk.' He made a face and I laughed.

Mum took me to a grief counsellor. I didn't realise that my topsy turvy feelings were normal.

'Emotions are not tame,' the counsellor had said, 'so you won't feel them in any particular order. Some days you'll feel fine, on others you may feel angry, sad, guilty...' She had been right: I must have felt every emotion on the 'grief-feelings' wheel. Months later they could still bite me when I was least expecting it.

Now it was over halfway through the year and when Blake had said recently in one short sentence (as though it was a secret) that his mum had died, I knew he must have

understood. Finding her photo here made me think this had been her special room—maybe a sewing or reading room, or where she'd sat with Blake as a baby. She didn't look like she minded me being there, and I shook my head at my imagination. How could a photo of a woman I'd never met pull at my heart strings?

After I changed into my PJs and snow-leopard-print dressing gown, I sat up against the bed pillows with my phone. The screen showed no-service, so I typed in the wi-fi password and sent a message first to Mum and then to Dad that I'd arrived safely. Dad's answer was immediate, like he'd been watching for it.

Glad to hear it, sunshine. Look after yourself and check in. Love you. I smiled at the concern he was trying to hide.

Then I took my research project out of my backpack. It was the draft of a story from Liana's past she had told me before she died. When I was younger, living in Pakistan, I'd understood Liana was quiet, even withdrawn. Being with her was like watching her gaze begin at the horizon, then settle on you instead. Even though I was only in Year 8 I knew she wasn't coping. I think it was the dreams. She woke up one night screaming. We heard her even from the next dorm. That was just before the terrorist attack on the school.

I was engrossed, considering how writing Liana's story had helped me through the last six months. Helping me cope with that grey, watery expanse that Mr Bolden, my English teacher, called grieving. At first I didn't notice the door of my room being pushed ajar. When I heard the little sigh, I jumped, thinking it was Blake, then my gaze travelled down to the light switch and met a child's pair of eyes, blue like a winter's clear sky.

'I didn't know there were any other girls staying here,' I blurted out. Not the best way to make friends but it didn't seem to faze her.

'Are you Jaime?' was all she said.

'Yes.'

She inched in then. 'I'm glad you're here.' She wasn't being polite; she said it as though my presence truly mattered.

'Really?' I wanted to ask why but this white-haired girl didn't seem the sort to speak unless it was already in her mind to say. 'What's your name?' I asked instead.

'Kerra.' She crawled on to the bed; not too close. She looked like a waif, perched there scrutinising me.

She pointed at my dressing gown. 'Is that a real skin?'

'No!' I spluttered. 'I love snow leopards. I'd never wear their fur.'

Her face was deadpan; maybe it wouldn't have bothered her if it had been real. 'What are you doing?' She edged closer, watching me as though her next breath depended on what I said.

'I'm writing a story. I'm just fixing it up for Year 12 English.'

The girl ignored the Year 12 stuff. 'A true story?' Even her interest was subdued. 'What's it about?'

'About a friend of mine called Liana. She used to tell me lots of stories and they made her feel better when she was scared. When we lived in Pakistan—'

'You lived in Pakistan?'

I nodded, surprised at how incoherent I sounded speaking about Liana. The counsellor said my grief was tangled with PTSD from being kidnapped. I didn't think I felt stressed at

the time. Returning to Australia seemed worse. The questions were hard to field: *What were the terrorists like?*, *Were you forced to marry one?*, *Were they hot?* (That was Kate Sample). Even a radio station rang for my story. Dad said no. *You need to get through this quietly*, he'd said. I was relieved.

'When did you live in Pakistan?' Kerra was sizing me up, a disbelieving pout on her face. I didn't look Pakistani, and I wasn't really, just *felt* Pakistani sometimes. 'Is that why you talk funny?'

'I grew up there, that's why I have an accent. We came back to live in Australia last year.'

She seemed satisfied, or maybe she wasn't as interested in me as I first thought. 'Can you tell me a story one day?'

'About Liana?'

She shook her head. 'One of her stories about Pakistan, or one of yours. An adventure.'

I blew out a breath. I knew by heart so many of Liana's stories that they came to mind as if she were still beside me telling them.

'No one tells me stories. And besides—' Kerra stopped then. Maybe she would never have said it if I hadn't prompted her.

'Besides what?'

'She's like me.'

'Who? Liana?'

Her head gave a slight movement forward. 'Yeah. I'm scared too.'

'Why?' I dipped my head to see her face but she wouldn't say, nor did she seem ready to go to bed. Maybe she knew that I didn't understand who she was and she wanted to tell me. When she did, it was all I could do to stop storming out

to Blake's room to ask why he hadn't spoken of her. How can you omit a part of your life as important as that?

'Do you live here all the time, Kerra, or just in the holidays like me?'

'Of course I live here. I'm Kerra Townsend.' Then she added as though she didn't want anyone else to hear, 'I'm Blake's sister.'

2

The next morning I woke from dreams of a younger Liana running up our boarding hostel staircase in Pakistan, weeping. But when I hurried to hug and soothe her, it was Kerra in my arms, crying for her mother. I tried to shrug off the pall of the dream and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Blake was spooning scrambled eggs onto plates.

‘I should be doing that.’

He looked up. ‘It’s your first morning. You can start tomorrow.’

It didn’t seem the right moment to ask him about Kerra, and anyway, he started straight in about the horse riding. ‘If you get your jeans on, we’ll have the first lesson at eleven. Meet you out by the stables.’

I didn’t tell him I’d ridden in Afghanistan in January, but I guess that was only hanging-on-to-save-your-life kind of riding. Blake was going to teach me western style. *The best for the land*, he said.

Kerra waylaid me on the way out to the stables. She didn’t say where she’d been all morning, just surprised me by pulling my hand and saying I had to see the lamb. I followed her to what looked like an old dog run. A ewe stood in there, heavy

from her wool, discoloured and bloody in places, hiding her lamb from view.

‘A dingo got her. On the back. They always go for the backside. The dingoes get through the Dog Fence and then they kill the sheep.’

I regarded the ewe with compassion. I knew what the Dog Fence was: 5000 kilometres of fence designed to save livestock from dingoes.

‘Then the flies got her.’

I stared at Kerra. ‘Flies?’

‘Where she was hurt, the flies laid eggs on it. She’s fly blown.’ Kerra said ‘fly blown’ as if she was telling me the sky was blue, like I ought to have known. My little sister Elly would have said, ‘Duh.’

‘Right. Fly blown.’ I committed that one to memory.

‘If you hold the gate, Jaime, I’ll get the lamb.’

The sheep looked much bigger with Kerra in the run with it. Soon she emerged with the lamb in her arms like Elly held Basil, our cat. Except the lamb’s legs dangled down to Kerra’s knees.

‘You can hold it if you like.’

‘Thanks.’

The lamb lay passively, staring at me. So the stories about meek lambs were true.

‘Dad’ll fix it later.’

‘Fix what?’

She gave a frustrated sigh. ‘The mother sheep. He’ll cut all that crappy wool off. That’s crutching.’

When I finally arrived at the stables, Blake was already there. He was busy feeding the horses and didn't notice I was late. Horses poked their heads out of the half doors that looked onto the yard. A few shook their heads at me, as if they wanted me to notice them. Blake saw me step closer to one and he walked over.

'They're like dogs—make good pets if that's what you want or do jobs for you if you educate them right. This one is Dad's stallion. Got Arab blood in him.' He looked too big and feisty for me.

'Which one's yours?'

Blake took me to a chestnut gelding almost as tall as the Arab. 'He's called Cador.' His face crinkled into a smile as he scratched Cador's neck. 'That's a boy.'

'Cador sounds Celtic.'

He hesitated, then said, 'Mum named him. Her ancestors were Cornish—'

'Mine too,' I cut in.

'—Cador was an ancient ruler of Cornwall and guardian to Guinevere.' Cador snuffled at my raised fingers, then I patted his cheek.

'So you're a bodyguard, Cador. You look like one.' I moved to the mare in the end stall. She was pretty with a light brown coat. 'What about this one? Does she have a story too?'

Blake didn't follow me. 'She stays there. Richelle comes to exercise her.' His tone was clipped all of a sudden and I wondered what I'd said wrong.

Maybe he realised how he'd sounded, for he directed me towards the yard where a dark brown horse was tied to a rail.

'I'll show you how to rub down. This is Rainmaker.'

What a name! 'How come? She's not white like clouds.'

'It's not because of her colour. When she was born we hadn't had rain for over a year. We got seventy mil that day, hence her name.' He picked up the grooming comb. 'Brush her this way. She likes it. Then lay the blanket on, then the saddle. Always check the length of the stirrups. It's easy to come off if you don't have control.'

I never would have thought Blake knew all this when I'd met him at school in Adelaide. If I didn't know better, I'd have said this was his twin, although he still had that warm presence I'd always noticed at school. I could feel him in the room long after he was gone. Funny, he'd never spoken much of the station, his way of life here, the horses. All of which reminded me: 'Blake, why didn't you tell me you had a sister?'

He barely hesitated in doing up the buckle under Rainmaker's belly. 'Didn't I?'

'You know you didn't.'

He shrugged. 'It's no big deal. The subject never came up.'

No big deal? I frowned at him. My sister, Elly, was part of me, even if she did annoy me at times. I could never imagine not mentioning her to a friend I'd known for a year. Blake carried on telling me about how to mount and how to use my legs to steer and stop, while he led the horse round the circle in the yard. I suspected I wouldn't get any more out of him about Kerra, and, besides, it took all my attention to make Rainmaker do what *I* was being asked to do.

'Horses are like ten-year-old kids. They'll try and get away with anything if you let them. So you have to treat them like one—reward good behaviour, punish the bad. Whoa!

Now, Rainmaker didn't do what you wanted, so make her back up. She hates that. She'll respect you better now, but don't let up. She'll know as soon as you let your guard down.'

It sounded more like how to train dogs than kids, but it seemed to work on Rainmaker. I just hoped I could keep a firm hand. Whenever I didn't ride exactly as Blake had instructed, Rainmaker was quick to take the advantage, as if she was expecting me to weaken. Learning how to ride properly was going to be very tiring. The years it must take to be able to belt across the paddocks like The Man from Snowy River. It looked so effortless in the movie.

Blake seemed pleased with me by the end of the hour, and I was too, even if I had only trotted round the yard.

'Better not wear those sneakers tomorrow,' he warned. 'If you came off, your foot would go straight through the stirrup. You'd get dragged.'

'I don't have any boots with me.'

'There might be some in the cupboard in your room. A hat too. You're welcome to have a look later.'

Lunch time came and brought Richelle. There'd still been no talk about my jobs other than cooking the meals; nothing was said about looking after Kerra, which seemed a more needful task. After lunch there was discussion about checking the part of the Dog Fence near Mulga Spring, and Richelle was quick to offer help, 'since Jaime can't ride'. Then Blake said a few words to Richelle that I didn't catch, and he tipped her hat back with a chuckle. She smirked at him. It sounded intimate: the banter that kids often threw at each other at school. I hadn't understood it at first but learnt quickly that sarcasm was a form of endearment. The

closeness between Blake and Richelle excluded me as surely as if they'd closed a door in my face. I was dismissed to 'have a rest', as if I'd need one since I wasn't used to outback life.

I smiled sweetly (I hoped) and retreated to my room, determined not to let Richelle bother me. Maybe Blake didn't play around and tease me like that because he thought I wouldn't understand, but I was surprised at the way it made me feel, as if I was new at school again and had no friends. I settled on the bed and thought about Kerra instead—a more comfortable topic. I wondered where she was. Not in the house, because I'd called. I lay back with a book, hoping she'd find me if she wanted. It wasn't long before her head poked around the door as if I'd summoned her telepathically.

'Come in.'

She was already on her way.

'You want to help me find boots in the cupboard?'

'Yep.'

The boots were in a box at the back just as Blake had said. Kerra pulled them out. 'They must be my mum's.'

I was thinking the same and wondered if I should use them. 'Do you mind me wearing these?' Blake obviously didn't, but I hesitated to upset Kerra.

She answered with a totally unrelated question. 'Have you known someone who died, Jaime?'

'Yeah.' I had to catch a breath as the questions came thick and fast.

'Who?'

'Liana. My friend in boarding school.'

Kerra turned her frowning face to mine. 'The one you told me about? She died at school? Were you my age?'

I took a breath. ‘No, she died early this year. She was shot. In Afghanistan.’ I said that firmly, trying not to see the slow-motion footage of Liana that often replayed in my mind; her look of numb surprise as she fell. ‘There was a skirmish. We just got caught in the middle.’ My eyes closed, seeing her hand still in mine, the jerk on my arm as she fell.

‘Were you sad?’

‘Yeah. At first it was like I’d had anaesthetic and couldn’t feel a thing. My family thought I was coping well when I got home to Australia and I tried to keep it up.’ I stopped.

‘And then?’

‘When it hit me it felt like the stars had gone out and they would never shine again. Like I was going crazy.’

‘But it got better?’

I didn’t answer straight away. People didn’t ask questions like this. They often gave the subject a wide berth after a polite ‘and how are you now, Jaime?’ and I’d feel like screaming at them to just talk to me, even if they were scared of hurting my feelings. ‘I guess it’s getting better.’ Even if I still cried at times for nothing, but I didn’t tell Kerra that. ‘What about you? You must know. Did you feel like that when your mum died?’ Then I found out why she was asking. It wasn’t just morbid curiosity.

‘I don’t remember.’ We were quiet for a while. What could I say? I chose safer ground.

‘Who looks after you, usually?’

‘Mrs Crosspatch does, during school time.’

I stifled my amused gasp. ‘Is that her real name?’

Kerra had the grace to blush. ‘No, it’s Mrs Cowped.’ That didn’t sound much better and I glanced at her suspiciously,

but Kerra turned her serious face to mine. 'She has grownup kids in the city and visits them in the holidays, so that's why you came this time. Last year Richelle looked after me but I don't like her. I like Matt better.'

'What about Blake? Doesn't he look after you?'

'I don't like Blake looking after me. And Dad's too busy. Sometimes I go out with Dad and we give sheep needles or fix fences. I help him.'

'Is that where you were this morning?'

She nodded. 'We were killing a sheep.' My mouth gaped and she added, 'That's what we have for dinner. Sheep.' Then she sighed the same little sigh like the night before. 'Let's have a rest together. Can you tell me a story? About when you were in Pakistan. Is it green there?'

'Yes, it's very beautiful.' I could imagine why she was asking. There was only a small square of lawn in her outback garden. Even the plants were hardy with grey or white leaves. It reminded me of a holiday we had as a family. 'Once Dad took our family—'

'Who else's in your family?'

'Mum, Andrew, my brother and Elly, my little sister.'

'You like your brother?'

'Sure.'

Her eyebrows creased up as if she thought that was weird.

'We drove through a mountain pass with snow on each side to a place called Chitral. We could see heaps of snow-covered mountains rolling back like thousands of meringues on a giant cake...' I stopped. How could I explain the awesome beauty of the Hindu Kush ranges, the 'Indian Killers?'

'Is it a town?'

‘There is a town and lots of villages. It’s like a mountain kingdom, a lost one because it’s so difficult to reach.’

‘Did you meet the prince?’

I considered. I did meet a young man who was like a prince or who would have been a prince a hundred years ago.

Kerra tipped her head up, but still she didn’t smile. ‘You did.’

‘A sort of prince, I guess, but the culture is different there. I didn’t get to talk to him much.’ I thought of the romantic story I wrote about him last year. But it wasn’t really about him; it had been a way for me to process my feelings about missing Pakistan and learning to belong in Australia.

‘So what happened? Did you see snow up close?’ Her tone was so wistful I nearly teared up.

‘That was the problem. It snowed so much, the mountain pass we came through closed. Mum and we kids had to fly out in a tiny plane to be safe, while Dad waited to get our little van out through the pass.’

‘That sounds scary.’ I gave her a glance. Any other kid would have huge eyes, not her deadpan expression.

‘It was. Especially when the flight was cancelled due to the weather and Dad arrived home before us. He thought the plane had crashed on the mountains.’

Kerra watched me as I pulled on the boots.

‘What was the prince like?’

‘Like any other guy.’ I tried to shrug off her question as I stood flexing my toes in the boots. They fitted.

Kerra pouted slightly. ‘Tell me.’

‘He was very kind and polite—good looking like Blake, except his hair was brown not blond.’

‘Blake’s not good looking. And he’s definitely not kind.’

She said the word *def-in-ite-ly* with spaces between the syllables to emphasis it and I refrained from arguing with her. Most girls at school in Adelaide had thought Blake was hot, but then, sisters never did see the talent in their brothers.

An Akubra beckoned to me from a shelf in the cupboard and I tried it on. 'Come on, let's do something outside.' Getting Kerra out of the house would be good for her. 'Let's go for a walk, hey?' It'd be like a nature trail. Elly always liked stuff like that.

'Okay. But you have to tell me another story.' I was so flattered she liked my storytelling that I didn't notice the dulled passion underlying her tone.