

CHAPTER 1 - AUSTRALIA

Nick Harris loved starting a journey when it was still dark - it made what might have been a dull trip into a real adventure - and, maybe even more than most thirteen-year-olds, Nick loved an adventure. His bed was comfortable and warm, but a glow of anticipation kept him half awake while he waited for his alarm to go off.

Today, Nick was going to drive to Canberra with his father, while his seven-year-old sister Sally stayed at home in Melbourne with Mum. Nick's mother was a lecturer at Melbourne University, and couldn't take time off to come with them.

The alarm buzzed. It was 4:30 - time to get started. He rolled his tall, thin body out of bed, showered and dressed. Wide awake now, he dragging a comb through his sun-bleached blond hair as he went to join his father in the kitchen for a quick snack before they left. They would have a proper breakfast on the road, but that was still a few hours away.

"G'day, Nick - all ready to go?"

"Sure, Dad. Shall I make some tea?"

"It just needs pouring out, mate. Get me another one too, will you? Then we'll just have a bit of toast and get moving."

Nick frowned with concentration as he poured the hot liquid. Things had an unpleasant habit of spilling or breaking near him, unless he was very careful. But this time - apart from a few drops of milk in the butter dish - there was no problem.

Soon they were on their way. They drove west to the centre of Melbourne, then north on the Hume Highway, the main road between Melbourne and Sydney.

The usually busy city streets were quiet and mysterious, the Hume Highway deserted except for a few big trucks. Nick's imagination got to work. A terrible plague had struck the city. Paralysed bodies lay everywhere and he, Professor Nick Harris, was their only hope. He cupped one hand over his mouth as a breathing mask and noisily inhaled his filtered air. His other hand operated imaginary controls to spray the stricken city with the miracle antidote he had developed.

On they went, through the night. By the time they were up near Seymour there was more traffic and it was starting to get light, the stars fading from a cloudless sky. Now he was the gunner in a Bristol Fighter, on a dawn patrol over enemy lines, constantly alert for the deadly triplane of the Red Baron. He swung his Lewis gun from side to side as his eagle eyes carefully searched the sky around them.

They drove through Euroa and Benalla, past the big Ned Kelly statue in Glenrowan. These small northern Victoria towns were tiny points of civilization in the vastness of Australia, and between them stretched the bush. Nick pressed his face to the car window as the sun gradually picked out the colours of the Australian landscape, red and orange and yellow.

Windpumps and tall eucalypts were silhouetted against the dawn sky. Galahs clowned on the telephone wires. Brightly coloured Lorikeets and Rosellas fluttered into the air as the car passed. Once he saw the upper part of a dead tree floating on a lake of mist in a sheltered valley, its stark branches white with hundreds of sleeping cockatoos. A few minutes later, three kangaroos bounded back late from their night feeding ground. It was like discovering a new world.

Just as the normal working day was beginning, they crossed the Murray river into New South Wales and stopped for breakfast in Albury. Nick's father settled down with a morning newspaper and a cup of coffee while Nick concentrated on the huge plate of bacon, eggs and American style pancakes in front of him. He had almost finished eating when his father leaned across with the newspaper, carefully avoiding the pool of maple syrup Nick had accidentally spilled all over the tablecloth.

"Hey Nick, look at this! I reckon it's just what your cousins need." It was the property page of the 'Australian'. His father was pointing to an ad for some land, which he'd circled in pencil. Somebody was selling seven hundred and fifty acres of forested hills and a hundred acres of grazing land by the Shoalhaven River in New South Wales.

Two years ago Nick and his family had flown to England to visit his cousins, Josh and Steve. The flight had taken twenty-eight hours and had seemed like forever. England was funny. The trees and grass seemed much too green, and everything - houses, roads, fields, even the sky - seemed too small. And the way people talked there - they all sounded like characters from television shows! It had been great to see Josh and Steve, though. Before the trip, they had just been faces in

photographs, or faint voices on the telephone. Now, they were friends that he looked forward to meeting again - even if Josh did spend all his time doing boring and complicated things on the computer.

Ever since that visit, Nick's parents had been trying to persuade their English relatives to emigrate. Gradually, in emails and occasional phone calls, they had all worked out just what kind of place the English branch of the family would like to emigrate to. As Nick finished reading the ad, he realised that this was it. It looked perfect.

"What do you think, Nick?"

"Ah yeah!" he said enthusiastically. "As long as we can visit them every weekend!" Nick and his family lived on five acres of hillside in the suburbs of Melbourne, but this land in the paper was over a hundred times bigger. You could get lost in it!

His father looked thoughtful for a few seconds, then smiled.

"Maybe we'll go and have a look at it when we've seen Canberra". Nick's father was going to spend the next day in a meeting with some Federal Government people, then they would have a few days to look at the sights. Nick wanted to see the Tidbinbilla space tracking station, the War Museum and the Parliament House, and Dad wanted to go to the Australian National Gallery; then they had planned to spend a few days walking and camping in the hills by the Murrumbidgee river. Nick collected the maps from the car and they studied them over a second cup of coffee, working

out roughly where the land in the ad was. It turned out to be not too far from Canberra, so instead of exploring the Murrumbidgee they would drive over to the Shoalhaven river and see if this land was as good as it looked. Seven hundred and fifty acres was about three square kilometres - it would take at least two or three days just to see it all.

They drove on. Now, the trip was more ordinary, the road getting busier as the day advanced and they went further north, but the magic of the early morning stayed with Nick. He daydreamed about the land as they drove through Holbrook and Gundagai to Yass, where they left the Hume Highway and turned south east towards the Australian Capital Territory and Canberra.

His father's meeting took longer than expected, as that sort of thing usually did, but Nick had a few comics to keep him busy, so he didn't mind. They still had time that day for a trip to the tower on Black Mountain and a visit to the miniature village at Cockington Green.

Two days later they'd been to all the places they'd planned to see and Nick was worn out. He was ready for something different by the time he and his father drove east, following the directions they'd got from the Real Estate agent.

They left Canberra and crossed back into New South Wales, through little towns and settlements that looked as if they'd hardly changed since the first colonial days - wide dirt streets lined with twisted old gum trees; deep, shady verandas under the corrugated iron roofs of the old wooden buildings.

For the last ten kilometres they drove slowly along a narrow dirt road that wound along the riverbank, trying to avoid the worst of the rocks and potholes. They hadn't seen another car - or any signs of life - for half an hour.

"I reckon we're lost, mate", said Nick's father. "What do you think?"

"Let's give it another five minutes, Dad. We're following the river, so we must be somewhere close."

"If this is the right river!" He struggled with the wheel for a few more seconds and winced as they jolted over a particularly big rock. "OK, Nick. Five more minutes and then we give up." Nick peered ahead, looking for the "For Sale" sign, sneaking quick glances at his father, who was looking more and more worried.

"We must be nearly there, Dad."

"No, I'm sorry Nick. I've had it. We're going to wreck this car in a minute, or get stuck in the mud. Next chance I get we'll turn around and head back. We must have missed a turn somewhere. Back to the Murrumbidgee, eh?"

Nick couldn't believe it. He'd been so sure the land would be just right and Uncle Bill would buy it and he'd have a great time there with his cousins - and now they couldn't even find the place. He slumped down in his seat and stared at the floor, overwhelmed by his disappointment.

A minute later the car stopped and reversed slowly off the road. He didn't look up. This was it. They were going back. Then his father leaned forward and turned the engine off.

"Here we are, then!" He gave Nick a friendly punch on the shoulder, got out of the car and stretched. Nick looked. There was the Real Estate agent's sign, nailed to a tree. He grinned. It was all going to happen, after all.

"I knew it, Dad. I knew we'd find it!"

"Let's get moving and find a place to camp then, Nick." They pulled their gear from the back of the car and set off to explore.

Nick couldn't remember ever having such a good time. The land was perfect. The grazing area was three big fenced fields running along the west side of the river, where the soil was rich and flat. Flat enough to land a light aircraft, his father said. Uncle Bill - Josh and Steve's dad - had always wanted a plane. They walked along the side of one field, through a belt of trees and across a wide stretch of clean sand, and there was the river. It flowed along in wide sweeping curves, with deep pools that would be great for swimming or fishing. Immediately in front of them the water shallowed to a ford, with a small island in the middle, and a little way upstream Nick saw some interesting-looking caves part way up a sheer cliff.

"Look at those caves, Dad. Do you think there'll be Aboriginal paintings in them, or anything?" His father looked for a few seconds before answering.

"I don't know, Nick, but we won't be able to find out this time - I don't want to try to get to them without proper climbing gear."

"Oh, come on, Dad - it looks easy!"

"It might be easy, but it's a long way to fall, and we're a long way from any help if one of us gets hurt. Anyway, there are plenty of other things to do. Come on, let's get across and find a campsite."

They took off their boots and socks and waded out into the fast-flowing, icy cold water. Nick's feet felt numb after a few steps, but he had to move slowly with his heavy pack, placing each foot carefully on the slippery rocks of the riverbed. He was a prospector, crossing a lonely mountain river to the gold-rich hills beyond, after a month-long trek through the unexplored mountains with his partner, Old Jake.

At last they made it to the island, rested and massaged some feeling back into their feet before crossing the much narrower but deeper channel to the other side. This was a real adventure.

East of the river, there were cockatoos and kookaburras, wombats and wallabies. There were steep, rolling hills covered with big old gum trees, and the only signs of civilization were the white posts every hundred yards or so, marking the boundaries of the land. Nick explored it all and took dozens of photographs.

There was only one bad moment in the three days they were there. On the last day, Nick was walking down to the campsite from the top corner of the property when he found himself on the edge of a small depression - a saucer-shaped hollow maybe twenty paces across - in a circle of the biggest trees he'd seen.

He paused for a moment to take a photograph, but hesitated before going on. The way back to the tent was straight across the hollow, but it didn't feel right. There was a funny tickle in his back, and the hair on his neck seemed to be trying to stick straight up. He told himself not to be a baby, and walked on - but felt more and more scared with each step towards the centre.

After five steps it was too much. His heart was pounding and his legs were wobbling. He turned and ran back up the hill as if every monster from every horror film he'd ever seen was behind him, then back towards the tent in a wide detour round the hollow, only slowing down when he was completely out of breath. By the time he got back to the tent he couldn't believe he'd been such a coward - but there was definitely a mystery up in that hollow, and he looked forward to solving it when Josh and Steve came to live here.

Two days later he was back at school in Melbourne, telling his friends about the great place his cousins were going to buy. His father sent a long email to Uncle Bill about what they'd seen. Nick had never been very good at writing, but he had to tell Josh and Steve how great it was and to make sure their dad bought the land. He wrote a short but enthusiastic note to Josh and Steve, attached his photographs and clicked on "send". His screen cleared. The email went off into the space between Nick's computer in Melbourne and Josh's machine, sitting on his desk in his bedroom in England.