

THROUGH MY EYES AUSTRALIAN DISASTER ZONES
series editor Lyn White



Alex

ROSANNE HAWKE



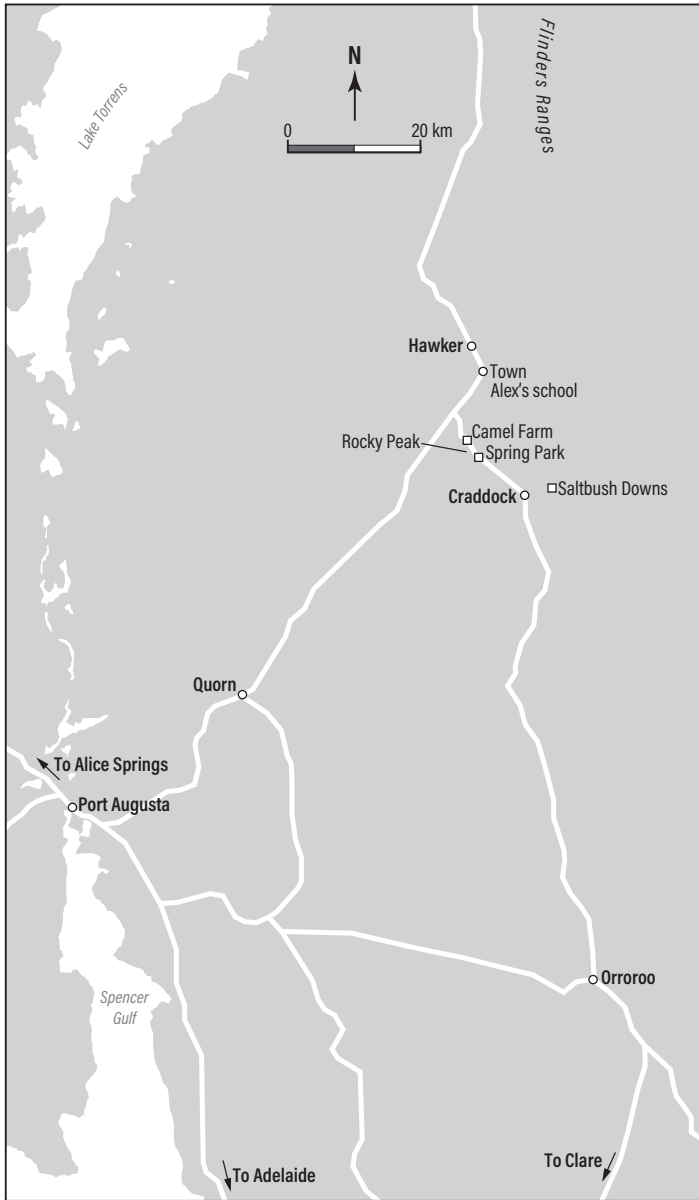
ALLEN & UNWIN
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This story takes place in the Flinders Ranges region of South Australia. We acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Adnyamathanha people, who belong to the oldest continuing culture in the world and who cared for and protected Country for thousands of years. We honour and pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

The novel is set during 2020. The characters and some of the locations are fictional, to protect the privacy of communities and individuals. We have also altered some details and the chronology of various events, for the sake of the story, but the essential truths of the devastation caused by the drought remain.







One



Alex Bray jumps off the school bus and gives a thumbs up to his mate Harry, the last kid still on board. At fifty-five kilometres, the bus run is a long trip – it feels especially long in the morning. Alex doesn't mind too much, though; it's the price of staying on Spring Park, the family's property. Tangi bounds up to meet him.

'You been waiting for me, girl?' He drops his bag and roughs up her black fur, then smooths the perfect tan triangles above her eyes. 'You love that, don't you, girl? So you missed me?' She barks once. 'Guess you're hoping I'll ride Jago.' That's when Tangi gets her best workout. Especially if she hasn't been helping Alex's mum with the sheep.

'What have you done all day?' he asks her. She yips, and Alex fills in the blanks as they walk the kay to the house. 'Cheered Dad up? You didn't rouse up my chickens, did you?' She looks at Alex as though she's saying, *As if*. 'You're impressive, Tangi.' The kelpie grins

as she pads carefully beside him. 'I'm proud of you, girl.' She's so intelligent she's won muster dog trials.

The track winds through cracked brown paddocks until Alex's house comes into view. It's a colonial Aussie with a veranda all the way around, the tin roof designed to reflect the sun. The windmill cranks in the breeze, pumping water from the bore into the tank out the back. There used to be a rose garden in the front, and even a small patch of buffalo lawn, but now it's all as dried up as the paddocks.

He can see his dad sitting on the veranda. Will he say hello or not?

'Is that you, Alex?' Dad's watching the sky. He's always checking for clouds, or any sign that the weather will change. Farmers do that naturally, of course, but Alex thinks his dad's a bit obsessive about it lately. It's early May – in a good year rain would be on its way by now.

'Yeah, just me.'

He walks up the steps and Tangi flops beside the bench. 'What have you been up to today?' Alex asks. He doesn't ask how his dad is, as it seems like he often can't explain.

'Gave the ute a service. Changed the oil.' His dad smiles, and Alex relaxes. Today's a good day then. His dad seems happier when he can work on machinery and engines. Dad's mate Roger was probably over, too.

'That's great.'

'What about you?'

‘Ag science was interesting. This Year Twelve guy came in to tell us about his research project — saltbush, how it’s high fibre, and can uptake salt, reducing soil salinity. It’s drought-resistant, but it can survive in soils with salinity that would kill most other plants.’ Alex can’t stop. ‘It gives other plants a better chance to grow.’

‘S’pose he reckons we should grow saltbush like a crop, eh? This the Schmidt boy?’

‘Josh, yeah. He’s got good ideas. Maybe we could do more like that – help with the drought . . .’

Alex trails off, seeing his dad’s eyes darken. It’s as if he’s shut off a light inside.

‘Sorry, Dad. I’ve been raving on and making you tired.’

His dad waves him away. ‘Go and exercise Jago. Maybe I’ll help feed the chooks when you get back.’

‘Sure, Dad, you take it easy.’

Alex drops his bag in his room and heads to the kitchen. He pours a glass of cold water and gulps it down. It’s autumn, but still twenty-five degrees outside. Should be cooler by now.

His mum isn’t home; she’s been doing shifts three times a week at the local pub, cooking. Their town is half an hour’s drive away, and meal prep starts at four. That’s what puts food on the table here. She usually leaves a note. None today.

Tangi skips around Alex, ready for a run after hearing the mention of Jago. Alex heads for the shed that counts as the stable. He hears the whinny before he reaches it.

He often wonders if Jago is lonely after his big sister, Lily, took their mare, Posie, with her to live with their grandparents in Adelaide. She and Grandad go for rides and keep the horses in a stable north of the suburbs. If she were here they'd be doing this together.

How could Lily bear to leave? He'd miss the sky at night, the sunrises, the sunsets, the cobalt blue that's always there during the day, even if he hasn't felt as though there's much colour in his life lately.

'Hi, Jago.' Alex scratches Jago's brown head and the white splotch on his forehead. Jago plants a whiskery kiss on his face. 'Pleased to see me, eh?'

Alex doesn't bother with a saddle today, just takes the bridle off the hook and puts the bit in the horse's mouth. 'Where shall we go, you two?'

Jago turns his brown eyes on him and nickers. Jago likes Rocky Peak. So does Alex. It's the only landmark of interest in a flat landscape.

He jumps on Jago's back and turns him south. They canter, then full-on gallop.

Tangi loves a run just as much as Jago, but she can't keep up. Her paws get sore after a while. Always sits down halfway there under the shadiest eucalyptus tree and waits until Alex returns, then trots back with them.

Riding Jago always gives Alex a reprieve from his thoughts. Thoughts about whether Lily is happy away from the property, because he certainly wouldn't be. And about his dad, who's been unwell for over a year now. When will he get better? Jago is racing across the paddock, and the wind in Alex's face blows everything

out of his mind. He even laughs as Jago's hooves pound across the cracked ground.

Rocky Peak looms in front of them, and they weave their way to the top. There they rest, Jago checking out the ground for blades of grass, and Alex staring down at the view of their property. He loves it up here. From this point he can see the Flinders Ranges to the north, purple in the distance. This hill straddles the boundary between their property and that of the Gibsons next door.

The Gibsons' place is up for lease. Another farmer bitten the dust and gone south to find work. The drought got too much – their bore dried up. Hard to know if the water will come again or not. The Gibsons had four young kids – their leaving made a huge dent at school, and it meant they lost a teacher as well. It was bad for the town too – fewer people buying stuff is not good for businesses, and the Gibsons are not the only ones who have left.

Looks like fences going up at the Gibsons where Alex hasn't seen any before. Maybe someone's moved in.

His great-great-grandfather called their property Spring Park because there was a spring near where the bore is. That's a joke now. The spring dried up eighty years ago. Alex wonders if the land looked like a park back then. When he was younger he could see green paddocks from up here by the beginning of May, but right now it's still warm and dry like the end of summer, not mid-autumn. The drought has brought more whirly-whirlies and soil erosion.

He sighs at the dusty brown landscape before him. They've had drought for quite a few years. It was extra

bad in 2019, which was when they had attention from the government and media. Even though people down south seem to think the drought's broken, Alex's family still can't put a hay crop in.

When he's older he wants to help make the farm more sustainable, but what can be done without rain? Moist soil is needed for the land to be sustainable. Even the creek has nothing in it except fallen trees. He glances to the north-east, where the tree line of the creek breaks up the northern paddocks.

At least it's cooler up here and he can see the paddocks around the house near the huge ghost gum his great-great-grandfather planted when he built it. The ghost gum is magnificent, especially when it's shining in the moonlight.

His gaze shifts to the empty dam to the east. He's seen no water in that since he was young, either. Alex doesn't like going near the mound to the right of it. Nor does Dad. Too many bad memories.

He pats Jago's neck. 'What'd'ya reckon, boy? What can help the property get better, and Dad too?' Jago snorts. 'Yeah, I can't think of much either.'

Just then Jago's ears twitch and his shoulders shiver. 'What is it, boy?' Then Alex hears it too.

A stone rolls down behind him, and another, then there's a fall of shale. Jago's showing the whites of his eyes. 'Hey, boy, it's okay.' Alex pats Jago on the neck, uses soothing words, but it doesn't work. Jago turns in a circle, his ears back, tail swishing, his front legs ready to rear. 'Steady, boy, steady.'

Alex has to keep calm so Jago can settle, but he doesn't know what's coming. His heart is galloping.

They face the direction of the sounds, hear a growl. An animal must be moving up the other side, and Jago doesn't like it. It's not thumping like a kangaroo. Too heavy for a dingo, which are rarely seen due to the Dingo Fence.

'Who's there?' Alex calls, in case it's a person.

Jago turns another circle, then backs up too close to the edge. Alex glances over his shoulder. Stones scatter and sheer away below them. 'Easy, boy, easy.'

No one answers. Not a person, then.

Jago is snorting, tossing his head. If he backs up any further they'll go over the side. Alex keeps the reins short, but Jago is lifting his head higher, his nostrils flaring.

There's a growl, close by. Then the animal shows itself, teeth bared, and creeps forward on to the edge. It snarls at Jago.

It has to be a feral dog. It's huge, in poor condition, but surely it wouldn't attack a horse.

Jago rears. Alex isn't expecting it and has to scabble to stay on. He should have used a saddle. He slips.

'Ooph!'

The wind is knocked out of him. He's dragged a few metres before he lets go of the reins, but he's on the same level as the dog now.

Its gaze locks on him and it growls, low and guttural. It edges forward until it's fully on the track, closer to Alex. Its front legs quiver, readying for attack. Alex

averts his eyes – staring at an aggressive dog will only make it worse. There’s nothing else he can do, no sticks he can grab to protect himself.

Jago squeals, lowers his head and charges the dog.

‘No!’ Alex shouts. It’ll attack Jago for sure. He can imagine those fangs sinking into Jago’s neck.

Jago rears over the dog. His hooves crash down on its front paws, and it yelps. Jago rears again and the dog springs away, back down the rise. Jago shakes his head up and down, then nuzzles Alex’s hair.

‘Ow.’ Alex’s lower back hurts as he manages to stand up. Has he broken anything? His legs seem to work. No sharp pains, but his muscles will be sore for yonks.

‘Phew, are you Wonder Horse or what?’ Alex has only seen Jago act that way once before, with a snake last October – a time of year when snakes are hungry and aggressive. Jago is used to dogs, yet somehow he knew this one was not a friend. ‘Thank you, Jago. You just saved my bacon.’

That dog sure was a nasty piece of work – so hungry it would hold up a horse or a person. Seeing a feral dog so near their place is worrying, but he’s surprised at how shaken up he is. It’s well known that the drought is bringing wild animals closer to properties as there’s little for them to eat, but this is getting too close.

‘Come on, Jago, let’s go home.’ Alex leads Jago to a rocky outcrop and climbs on a rock to reach the horse’s back. ‘Ouch.’ He’s never had to do that before; usually he can spring up, even without a saddle to grip on to.

On the way back, Tangi joins them as they pass the tall eucalypt. Jago's still tossing his head. Alex knows he should tell his dad about the feral dog, but it might trigger a bad reaction. It doesn't take much for Dad to fall apart at the moment. Will it always be like this?



Two



Dad's not on the veranda when Alex gets back from rubbing Jago down. *Guess he's forgotten about helping with the feed-run.*

Alex always feeds the animals before dinner. He has a system: Jago first, then pellets for the chooks – they love scraps, too – collect the eggs, scrub them, put them in the cool room on egg trays. His mum takes them to the General Store in town when she has a shift at the pub. After that Alex waters his herb and veggie garden when the sun's low to minimise evaporation, and finally, he feeds Tangi on the veranda by her kennel.

Today, on impulse, he decides to check the sheep have enough hay before he feeds the chooks – save his mum doing it tomorrow. At the same time he can see if there's water in the troughs. There's not enough feed for the sheep in the paddocks because of the drought, so they're hand-fed.

Alex goes to the machinery shed where the ute and quad bike are kept, and finds the quad-bike key under the

front mat. He rides it to the hay shed, grabs a hay bale by the twine and hoists it onto the trailer. When the bales run out, they buy in more from down south where farmers can still do cropping. Mum's doing her best by working at the pub, but she doesn't make enough for hay. They have to rely on the wool sales to cover that.

His back muscles complain again. 'Ouch.'

Alex drives through the paddock that has the dam in it. His parents don't discuss this paddock. Things are different now with Dad feeling depressed a lot of the time and not able to work like he used to. Alex has been able and willing to help with his dad's chores – at least they're together.

How could Mum even suggest he leave and study in the city, like Lily, or in some big rural town like Port Augusta? That's over a hundred kilometres away – he'd only get home for weekends. He doesn't think he would survive, and probably Mum and Dad wouldn't either. Dad misses Lily too much as it is.

Besides, the area school says he can study online. Many senior high school students in rural districts are doing that now because of the pandemic. COVID-19 has affected farmers and townspeople too with fewer jobs, fewer shops and cafes open, which in turn keeps tourists away. No one's travelling much at the moment.

Drought is second nature to Alex – he hardly knows anything different – but there was the bushfire on top of that, then the pandemic. It's been a triple whammy. His dad couldn't— But Alex shoves that thought out of his mind. It never helps to think *what if things were*

different. It's the way it is, and they just have to get on with it.

The sheep come running when they hear the quad bike. Lanky is the first to reach him, baa-ing.

He scratches her on the head. 'Hey to you too, Lanky. Have you been getting on with all your friends or are you still ignoring them?' She follows him to the quad bike and baas again and he drives off. 'You miss riding with me, eh? You're too big now, Lanky, sorry.'

His dad taught him how to drive the quad bike and the ute. *Only on the property*, he said. But Mum has the ute today, since they had to sell her car. Too expensive to keep up the registration.

After Alex ensures the sheep have enough hay, he checks the level of water in the tank with his hand on its shadow side. The bottom third is cooler to his touch – still water left. The trough has a float – while there's water in the tank, there'll be water in the trough. It's a five-thousand-litre tank, so they'll have to cart water from the bore tank soon. In this weather the sheep drink five thousand litres in a week. In summer it only lasts a few days.

Because of the drought they can only run one sheep to six hectares on natural feed. That means only thirty or so ewes in a paddock like this at one hundred and eighty hectares, so now they are hand-fed and more sheep can live in a paddock. When he was younger there was enough natural feed to sustain over a hundred sheep in a paddock like this one. Sheep farms in this district need to be big enough to provide enough feed; theirs

is three thousand hectares. Mum says a property needs two thousand sheep to make a living, but Alex doesn't think they've ever had that many. Since the bushfire they only have four hundred ewes left. It's been a challenge to make enough money from sheep and wool sales to keep the farm going. And now that the sheep are hand-fed, the cost of hay makes it even less profitable.

A few kookaburras laugh in the gum trees, and Alex smiles – they don't often come up this far. His grandpa told him that if kookaburras laugh late in the afternoon like this, it will rain the next day. 'Ha, someone needs to tell the rain to listen, hey, Tangi?' She grins at him like it's a good joke. Alex wishes it was just a joke.

He finds the eggs have already been collected. Dad sure is having a good day.

Alex puts Tangi's food in a bowl and takes it out to the veranda. She waits politely until he says to eat it, but he never delays giving her the go-ahead. That's another thing his dad taught him: *Look after the animals first, then eat.* Alex pats her. 'When you're a bit older and we get a new pup, you'll be allowed inside all the time, Tangi. You'll be retired!' She looks up at him for a second, then scoffs the rest of her dinner.

It's dusk and a white owl glides into the sky from the ghost gum. Alex catches his breath. The owl never fails to move him.

Inside, Alex takes out three dinners his mum has made from the freezer, puts one in the microwave, and sets the table. His mum says to keep things as normal as possible for his dad's sake even while she's at the pub.

‘Dad,’ Alex calls. He hears a murmur, and finds his dad in the lounge room watching the news. ‘It’s time for tea. Are you hungry?’

His dad shrugs. ‘Darn news, always something bad happening.’ Alex’s heart sinks. The news often changes his dad’s mood.

‘C’mon, we’ll eat together.’ Alex hopes Dad doesn’t refuse. He’s not sure what to do when that happens. But his dad flicks the remote and stands up, steadying himself on the back of the couch, and shuffles into the kitchen. Alex puts the second of the meals in the microwave. ‘Thanks for collecting the eggs, Dad.’

His dad nods. ‘Thanks for feeding the sheep.’

So he does take notice. At times Alex feels he’s sunk in a world of his own.

They eat together silently until his dad says, ‘Heard from Lily?’

‘Last I knew, she was on a PE camp.’

‘She has a lot of those.’

Alex smiles at him. Dad seems to have forgotten the bad news on TV. That must be a good sign. Maybe he’s getting better. But Alex knows not to get excited. At times his dad seems well, but the next day he can be a different person.

It all began with the drought, which in turn caused the bushfire early last year. Dad had to shoot the burnt sheep, hundreds of them, burying them next to the dam. He has never been himself since. Before that he stood tall, efficient in his farming, teaching Alex skills he’ll need. On good days he can still do some of that, but it’s

like walking a tightrope not knowing from one day to the next what his mood will be.

Later, Alex is in his room when he hears the screen door bang. Mum's home. He always feels relief when she's in the house. He gives her a minute or two to get a coffee and put her dinner in the microwave. Then he shuts his laptop and goes into the kitchen.

'Hey, Mum.' Her eyes crinkle, but Alex can tell she's tired. Her brown hair is scraped into a knot, and there are dark patches under her eyes. He gives her a hug – he's a head taller than her now. 'Work okay?'

She nods, takes a sip of coffee. Then she sighs. 'Good to be home.'

'Anyone book in?' It's only Thursday night; people usually come on weekends. Their district is called the Gateway to the Outback, so people expect bush tucker.

'A family on their way to the Flinders, camping. A few others wanting emu steaks. One lot said they wanted an "explorer's platter".' She smiles. 'Emu, kangaroo and camel. Maybe we should add that to the menu.' Often his mum visits the dining room to meet people, or to clean up. 'Few guys in the bar had dinner – looked like a meeting. Talking about the drought, what to do . . .' Her voice trails away.

Talk of the drought is never easy in their house. Alex is almost used to it as a way of life, but his mum remembers better days and wants them back.

She asks about Dad. 'How's Tom?'

'He's asleep in front of the TV. We had a good evening. He ate his tea.'

She smiles and clasps his hand. ‘Thank you, Alex. I worry leaving you alone when he’s like this.’

‘He’ll get better, won’t he, Mum?’

She grimaces. ‘He’s suffered a dreadful trauma. It’ll just take time.’

Alex can tell she’s just repeating things the doctor has said, but he truly wants to believe it. He wants his dad back the way he was.

Alex wants to tell his mum about the feral dog, but decides she’s too tired and kisses her on the cheek instead. ‘Night, Mum. I’ll see you in the morning.’ He says it like he’s got studying to do and she nods, even though his school doesn’t give homework before senior high.

‘Night, Alexander.’

Back in his room, he opens the laptop, then changes his mind. It’s not too late to send a text to Lily. Then he can tell Dad some good news. Not for the first time, Alex thinks his sister should be here. It would help Dad, he’s sure of it.

Hey, sis, Dad was asking today how you are.

He reads a whole chapter of *The Hobbit* before she replies.

Is he getting better?

He had a good day today. But he gets tired.

Lily is the only one he can talk to about Dad. What would he say at school if he was asked about his dad? Nothing. But even Lily doesn’t say much about Dad either.

Nan and Grandad okay?

All good. Grandad forgets where he’s put stuff.

Alex thinks their dad is just as bad at the moment.

See ya, Lil. Wish you were here.

Lily just sends a sleepy emoticon in reply.

He hopes she doesn't think he's complaining, but the truth is, he's still annoyed that she left to study in the city.

Oh well, time to turn in. During the week Alex goes to bed early as he needs to wake before sunrise to do the morning feed run and help his mum – his dad isn't bright in the mornings. The bus comes at seven-thirty to do the long trip around all the properties picking up the farm kids in time for school. The town kids have it easy – they get to sleep in. But Alex would never trade more sleep for his life on Spring Park.