

MURDER ON *THE GHAN*

A murder–mystery novella

Gabriel Farago

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Alice Springs: the race

During the entire three-hour flight, Sophie had had her face pressed against the window like an excited child, taking in the stunning red, yellow and ochre colours of the Outback desert landscape gliding past below looking like something out of a *National Geographic* documentary. 'I had no idea it would be this beautiful. And so different,' she said, turning to Jack sitting next to her.

'You ain't seen nothing yet, kiddo. Wait till you see all this from the ground, especially the West MacDonnells.' Jack pointed to an undulating, caterpillar-shaped mountain range in the distance. 'That's them over there. Stunning country with the oldest river in the world; the Finke River is thought to be more than three hundred million years old.'

'Kiddo? What's that?'

'An Aussie term of endearment. After all, we're about to land in the Outback. And where I'm about to take you, well, the lingo is going to be a little different. Better get used to it.'

'Lingo?'

'Yep. The language. You'll find that folk speak a little differently out here. Especially where we're going' – Jack looked at his watch – 'straight from the airport. We'll leave our luggage there and collect it later. If we do that, we should just make it.'

'Are you going to tell me where we are going?'

'No. It's a surprise. You wanted adventure, remember?'

'True.'

'A little different from the concert hall?'

'Sure is.'

'That was the idea. Buckle up, we're about to land.'

The first thing everyone seemed to notice on arrival at Alice Springs was the dry heat and intense glare that made lips crack and eyes water. The hot air baked the red earth, and the rugged hills in the distance shimmered like liquid glass in the midday sun as Jack and Sophie walked out of the terminal and caught a taxi.

The racetrack on the outskirts of Alice was just a short ride from the airport.

'Here we are,' said Jack. 'This should be quite something.'

Sophie looked at the huge crowd walking towards what looked like some kind of showground with marquees, banners advertising beer, tents, and all kinds of vehicles and trailers, converted vintage buses and ancient caravans parked along the way. Somewhere in the

distance, a band was playing country and western music.

‘What’s this? Some kind of country fair?’ said Sophie, as Jack helped her out of the taxi.

‘Of sorts,’ said Jack, laughing. ‘We have to walk from here. Come.’

‘Of sorts? What do you mean?’

‘This is the inaugural Larapinta Cup. A historic event. Years of planning have gone into this. You wouldn’t want to miss this for the world.’

‘A race? What kind of race?’

‘A unique one. You’ll see why in a moment. We’re almost there. I’ve got tickets for refreshments in that marquee over there. And in that marquee, the CWA – the Country Women’s Association – is doing a wonderful job. Their cakes are legendary.’

Shaking her head, Sophie looked at Jack. ‘You planned to come here all along, didn’t you?’

‘Aha,’ said Jack, grinning sheepishly. ‘I have lots of mates here. You’re about to meet a few of them.’

‘I see,’ said Sophie, feeling a little apprehensive about being pushed along by the colourful, albeit it a little rowdy crowd making their way to the entry.

Just then, a mountain of a man dressed in torn jeans, a checked shirt and a huge, broadbrimmed hat with a crocodile-skin headband walked up to Jack from behind and slapped him on the back.

‘You made it, mate,’ said the man.

‘*Rusty!* Wouldn’t miss it for quids. You’re riding?’

‘Sure. I entered Rosie. She’s just over there getting ready.’

‘Well, that should be quite something, mate.’

‘You bet! I see you brought a friend,’ said Rusty, turning to Sophie watching him, his bushy red beard giving him a roguish, bushranger look.

‘That’s Sophie. We just flew in. She’s a conductor,’ said Jack, lowering his voice.

Rusty extended his huge hand. ‘Please to meet you, love. You work on the trams? Melbourne? I’ve been to Melbourne once—’

Jack burst out laughing. ‘Not that kind of conductor, mate.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Never mind. Another time. You better get ready. Look, Rosie’s waiting!’

‘Sure thing. See you after the race. We’ll have a few beers.’

‘You bet.’

Sophie watched Rusty swagger away, his well-worn boots kicking up the dust, and pointed ahead, her eyes wide with astonishment. ‘Is that Rosie?’

‘Yes, that’s her.’

‘But that’s a *camel!*’

‘Sure. This is a camel race. Can I get you a beer?’

The first race started at three pm sharp. Rosie was a starter in the second race.

‘Just stay here for a moment,’ said Jack as the first race ended. ‘I’m going to place a bet with the bookie over there.’ Jack pointed to a man with a huge leather bag strapped around his waist, surrounded by eager punters holding up bundles of cash. Jack managed to place a bet just before the start of the race and return to Sophie standing at the barrier.

‘Here we go,’ said Jack. ‘Rosie’s the favourite. She won the Camel Cup last July here in Alice. She’s a legend. And so is Rusty. Camel racing started here thirty years ago in a dry river bed: the Todd River.’

‘I never knew there were camels in Australia,’ said Sophie.

‘Camels were introduced to South Australia by Afghan cameleers in the early eighteen hundreds, to help explore the harsh interior. Perfect transport in the Outback, which was often too difficult to traverse with horses or bullock carts, especially during a drought. Camels have been thriving here ever since. In fact, there are so many in the wild now, they pose a big problem in the national parks. Introduced species rarely mix well with local fauna and flora.’

Moments later, the tinny loudspeakers attached to the top of poles crackled into life, as the race was formally announced and seven temperamental camels lined up at the starting line.

‘This is incredible,’ said Sophie, her face flushed with excitement as the roar of the crowd all but drowned out the starting gun. Within seconds the camels were out of the barrier and on their way. While their running style looked awkward, their speed was astonishing. How the riders managed to stay in the saddles strapped to the back of the camels was a mystery.

Rosie got off to a good start. Rusty, now wearing a red helmet, looked formidable as he led Rosie into the first turn. This was always tricky, as camels tended to bump into one another in the turn, causing all kinds of mayhem, to the great delight of the crowd expecting something like that.

The way to avoid a collision that could easily result in a rider falling off, or worse, was to be at the front, and that was exactly where Rusty had positioned Rosie, who seemed to be enjoying herself and was moving with surprising speed towards the next turn.

That’s when Rambo, Rosie’s main rival, made his move. His rider had carefully positioned Rambo in the inside lane as he approached the turn. This would make overtaking Rosie possible if Rambo’s stamina kept up.

Rusty could see Rambo approaching from behind and knew exactly what his rival was up to. If Rosie could just manage to put on a little extra speed, she might just foil the overtaking manoeuvre. After that, it was plain sailing down the strait to the finish line. Rusty talked to Rosie constantly and was pleased to see her respond exactly as he had hoped. Rambo was nowhere to be seen, so Rusty assumed he must be falling behind. The roar of the crowd certainly seemed to suggest that.

Now moving at top speed with the finish line in sight, Rusty sensed victory. That's when the unexpected happened.

A stray dog suddenly came out of nowhere and ran onto the track only a few metres in front of Rosie, who was closing in at full speed. Spooked by the sudden appearance of the unexpected intruder, Rosie tried instinctively to avoid running into him, and suddenly veered to the left. Unable to hold on, Rusty was thrown out of his saddle and hit the ground with a bone-crunching thump just as Rambo roared past him, the camel's hoofs barely missing his head as the rest of the field came up from behind. Rosie, by now riderless, continued to run towards the finish line and came second. Obviously, without a rider, she would be disqualified.

'*Bugger!*' said Jack and tore up the betting chits. 'So close; can you believe it? Let's hope Rusty's all right. That was quite a nasty fall for a big bloke.'

'Look, there he goes,' shouted Sophie as Rusty stood up, dusted himself off, took off his helmet, and then limped off the track towards the beer tent.

'Doesn't look like he's broken anything – this time. Nothing a couple of schooners won't fix, and there will be plenty wanting to shout him a few beers in the tent, that's for sure.' Jack turned to Sophie standing next to him. 'What did you think of the race?'

'I haven't seen anything quite like it. It's been wonderful. You promised adventure and you delivered!'

'He usually does,' said a voice from behind. Jack turned around.

'Andrew! How wonderful to see you,' said Jack, embracing an elderly Aboriginal man.

'I thought you might come. It's been quite a long time.'

'This is Sophie Ritter, a famous conductor from Vienna,' said Jack, introducing Sophie.

'Welcome to the Outback,' said Simpson.

'Andrew and I were involved in the rescue of Anna Popov,' said Jack. 'In fact, without Andrew she may never have been found.'

'What fascinating friends you have, Jack,' said Sophie, enjoying herself. 'First there was Rusty, and now Mister Simpson.'

'Fascinating is one word for it; I could think of a few more,' said Simpson, laughing. 'So,

you already met Rusty. Quite a character. Nasty fall, though. He'll be drowning his sorrows in the beer tent by now, for sure.'

'Do you think we could visit your gallery, perhaps this afternoon? I would love to show Sophie your collection. That would really give her an insight into Aboriginal art and culture.'

'Sure. Come past any time. You know where I am. I better go and join the boys in the tent,' said Simpson. 'See you later.'

'What an interesting man,' said Sophie after Simpson had left.

'He certainly is. In many ways. He's a retired police officer and now runs an art gallery specialising in Indigenous art, and he helps young Aboriginal offenders find their way after jail time. His personal collection is perhaps one of the best in the Outback. Wait till you see it. Now, let's sample some scones and cakes in the CWA tent over there before they're all gone. Cakes first, beer tent later, art after that. Come.'

****** End of Chapter Excerpt ******

The adventure on the Ghan has taken a perilous turn, and Jack Rogan is at the centre of a deadly game. What dangers will the Outback reveal, and what fate awaits the precious opal? The conflict with the Desert Raiders intensifies, and every moment is a battle for survival. The thrilling conclusion to *Murder on the Ghan* awaits in the full book. Join Rogan and Ritter as they navigate through a labyrinth of intrigue and danger. Will they triumph against overwhelming odds? Find out in the full journey — the final showdown is just a page away.

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