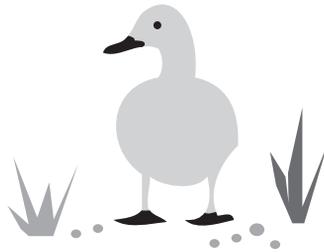


CHAPTER 1



‘Look out!’ cried Mum as Dad swerved to miss a large white duck waddling across the driveway.

I pressed my face to the window. I knew staying with Aunt Evie would be different, but I hadn’t expected an old sandstone cottage almost ready to collapse. Nor was I prepared for the raggle-taggle gypsy striding towards us. I swallowed hard. Tall and thin, with her dark curly hair tied up in a red scarf, Aunt Evie didn’t look anything like Dad. Plus, she wore socks with her sandals. Dad never wore sandals.

‘Honestly!’ she scolded as Dad opened his door. ‘Pumpkin’s my pet duck, not a speed bump.’ Her brown eyes twinkled as she peered into the back seat. ‘Now, where’s that long-lost niece of mine? Minnie Matheson? Is that you? Goodness, don’t look so scared, I don’t bite.’

The cool air was fresh on my face as I slid nervously from the car. Aunt Evie had lived near us years ago, but I hadn't seen her since I was a toddler and couldn't remember her at all. She'd left Brisbane to work in Melbourne and had only recently moved to South Australia.

'Hi,' I squeaked, dodging Pumpkin as he flapped at my feet. I took a breath and held out a shaky hand. 'Nice to meet—'

My carefully practiced introduction was drowned by Aunt Evie's suffocating hug. Her knitted jumper, scratchy on my cheeks, smelt like wool wash mixed with sunshine.

'Thanks a mill for your help, sis,' said Dad, stealing a hug and a kiss from Aunt Evie before glancing into the car. 'We couldn't do it without you.'

Easing from the front seat, Mum reached hastily into her pocket for another tissue. Her mum, my nanna, had died unexpectedly in Ireland, and now Mum and Dad were flying over to sort out Nanna's affairs.

Aunt Evie gave Mum an extra big hug. 'So sorry for your loss,' she said kindly. 'Never nice losing a loved one. Especially one so far away.'

'Thanks,' Mum murmured. 'It has been quite a shock.' She reached out an arm to pull me to her side. 'Thanks so much for looking after our precious girl.'

I chewed the inside of my cheek. It wasn't that I minded staying with Aunt Evie. She was Dad's sister after all. And from the stories Dad told me about them growing up, she did sound kind of fun. It was just ... six weeks without Mum and Dad? I'd never done anything without them before.

'If only,' Dad had said when I'd begged them to take me. 'Sorry, hon, you know we would if we could. But it'll be no fun for you over there – all black suits and serious faces. Besides, some country air and a bit more freedom will do you good.'

'But I'll miss you!' I'd pleaded. 'Who'll talk to my teacher if something goes wrong? Who'll help me with my homework and make sure I'm okay?'

'Like I said, we'll email and Skype,' Dad promised, 'and, if you're lucky, we might even send a few postcards. Come on, Mouse, Mum and I need you to be brave about this. Don't you think it's time you did stuff for yourself?'

And that was that. Mum and Dad bought two plane tickets for Ireland, and I packed for six weeks of winter – in freezing cold South Australia.

'You head off,' Aunt Evie instructed Mum and Dad once my bags had been unloaded. 'I mean, I'd love for you to stay and chat, but I'm worried you'll miss your flight.'

Dad checked his watch. ‘Oh, goodness! It’s already after one, and we still have to return the hire car. You’ll be okay, won’t you, Mouse?’

I stood beside my brand new suitcase, gripping the spongy strap. Pumpkin the duck pulled hungrily at my yellow laces. ‘Hope so,’ I said, blinking back tears. ‘One last hug?’ I’d given them a thousand hugs before we’d left Brisbane, but one more wouldn’t hurt.

The trail of dust from Mum and Dad’s car had hardly settled before Aunt Evie was bundling me in out of the cold. A windmill beside the cottage creaked a rusty welcome as she opened up the door. ‘We’re going to have so much fun,’ she said, nodding so enthusiastically that her curly hair bounced. ‘Wait till you’re all unpacked and have set out a few things of your own. You’ll feel a hundred times better. Come on, I’ll show you to your room.’

Dad had told me Aunt Evie was renting from a local sheep farmer in a place called Truro. Although the cottage was over an hour from Adelaide, it was, according to Dad, the perfect location for Aunt Evie’s work. Aunt Evie visited farmers and helped them feed their cows, and since most of her clients lived in the area, she wasn’t too far away.

Once inside the cottage I decided, with a shiver, that South Australian buildings weren’t like the homes back in

Brisbane: full of light and space and airiness. Instead, Aunt Evie's cottage was dark and solid, its thick windows and heavy frames blocking out the light.

Even worse, the wooden floors were badly scratched and the skirting boards were gouged, like they'd been chewed. I wondered if Aunt Evie had a dog.

'This way,' she encouraged, dragging my suitcase behind her. We passed a couch with split cushions, spewing yellow stuffing everywhere and a pot-belly stove oozing warmth in the lounge.

The floorboards were just as scratched in the hallway, where it smelt musty, like old mulching straw from the garden.

'That's my room,' said Aunt Evie, pointing to a closed door, 'and then the bathroom, and your room, right here at the end. You're my first official guest, Minnie. I hope you like it.'

'Mouse,' I whispered.

Aunt Evie stopped short. 'Sorry? What did you say? A mouse?'

My face burnt. I wished Mum and Dad had explained about my name before they'd left. But they hadn't, and now they were gone.

'No, not *a* mouse ...' I mumbled, taking a shaky breath.

‘What is it? You can tell me. What did you see?’

‘Um, well, nothing, just with my name ...’

Aunt Evie scratched the top of her head. ‘You mean Minnie? After your ancient aunt Winifred Robinson? I always thought Minnie was a nice compromise. In fact, I think you have a lovely name.’

‘Well, um, at home, Mum and Dad, they ...’

Aunt Evie smiled reassuringly as my words froze on my tongue. ‘Ah, yes. I imagine there are lots of things I need to know about Mum and Dad.’ She paused, her hand on the door knob. ‘But one thing I do know is I’m not telepathic and, like I said, I won’t bite. If you and I are going to get along, you’re going to have to speak up. Besides, you’re nine now, and old enough to say what you want.’

I managed a nod, but then lowered my head to hide my wobbling lip. I wasn’t used to being told to speak up.

‘Okay, good. Then we have a deal. Now, what were you saying? At home, Mum and Dad ...?’

‘Call me Mouse,’ I said.

Aunt Evie looked relieved. ‘Oh! Like in Minnie Mouse? Well, Mouse it is then,’ she said, turning and opening the door. ‘Okay, Mouse, what do you think of your new nest? I washed the curtains yesterday. And that’s a new rug, just for you.’

The curtains were bright yellow and a chirpy blue rug lay on the floor. The single bed under the window had been made up with a flowery doona and a smiley faced cushion sat jauntily against the pillows.

It was perfect.

Aunt Evie pulled my suitcase over to the bed. 'I'll leave you to settle in while I make some tea, but come through to the kitchen when you're done and we'll rustle up something nice for lunch. Do you like haloumi cheese?'

Once Aunt Evie's footsteps had disappeared down the hall, I plopped on the bed. The mattress was firm but soft. Just how I liked it. I sighed. The room *was* pretty cheerful. And Aunt Evie did seem kind. Maybe it would be okay?

I unzipped my suitcase and pulled out my new art pad and pencils – gifts from Mum and Dad for not taking me to Ireland. Then, instead of unpacking the rest of my things, I sat crossed-legged on the doona, flicking through my sketches.

The first one was of Cheeky, my Quaker parrot, who we'd left behind with our neighbour. I squinted sideways at the sketch. I'd tried drawing myself beside Cheeky, but something wasn't quite right. It wasn't my wispy hair, or my half smile. They were pretty standard for me. It wasn't even my skinny arms, or the way my left eye was a teensy bit greener

than my right. No, it was something to do with Cheeky. Perhaps I hadn't quite got the angle of his beak—

Thud!

My heart skipped. I craned my neck to peer down the hallway. What was that?

Thud! Thump!

I returned to my sketch, determined not to panic. It was only a bit of noise. Perhaps the roof was creaking? Or a possum was trying to sneak in through the eaves? I thought of the chewed skirting boards. Perhaps Aunt Evie really did have a dog? A very large, noisy dog. I wished I'd already asked.

Thud! Thump! Crash!

I dropped my pencil. The noises were too loud to be a possum and too heavy for a dog. It sounded like a demolition team out there.

'Aunt Evie?'

I held my breath, listening for her response. But there was nothing except the sound of blood rushing past my ears. Where was she? I wanted to run down the hallway to find her, but my legs had turned to wood.

CRASH!

I leapt from the bed. That was too loud to be normal. What if Aunt Evie had dropped the kettle, scalding herself

with boiling water? I couldn't just sit here while she was seriously injured. I had to be brave and find her.

I ran down the hallway and skidded to a halt outside Aunt Evie's bedroom door. Another thump banged the wall. A hoarse cough came from inside.

My heart raced.

'Aunt Evie?' I whispered, pushing down the handle. 'Are you okay?'

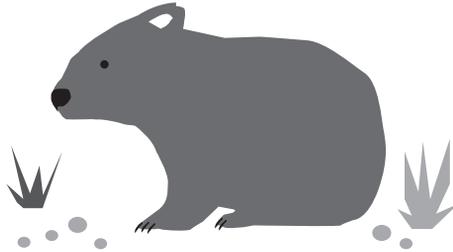
The door wouldn't budge. I listened, my palms sweaty, as a low growl rumbled from behind the door.

'Aunt Evie?' I said more strongly, giving the door another shove. But something solid blocked the other side.

I pushed as the growling grew louder. Then, after another huge shove, I managed to make a gap between the door and the frame.

I poked my head in and screamed as a dark shape leapt towards me.

CHAPTER 2



Corgi-sized but fatter, with short legs and no tail, the creature's thick grey coat was flecked with light patches of fur. Its large nose twitched as it nibbled my feet, its whiskers tickling my shins.

'A wombat?' I marvelled, my pulse returning to normal.

I checked around for Aunt Evie but couldn't see her anywhere. I'd never heard of anyone keeping a wombat inside a house.

Meanwhile, the wombat barged at my shins and rubbed its back and head against my legs, reminding me of a cat – a very large cat – demanding to be petted. It had thick strong claws, and I wondered if it was safe to touch it.

But when I reached out a tentative hand, the wriggling bundle pressed against my fingers begging me for a scratch.

Its fur was soft and silky and smelt like a mixture of damp earth and guinea pig.

‘Oh, you’re lovely,’ I whispered, sinking to the floor beside it. I stroked its face and back and then its face again. When I finally looked up, I glanced around Aunt Evie’s room. It was all was decked out in red: a red and black patterned rug, rusty red curtains and a gold and red lamp beside the bed. She really was a gypsy.

‘Quack, quack.’

I jumped as Pumpkin burst into the room and hissed at me before nudging the wombat’s face, giving it ducky kisses.

‘Pumpkin, out of there!’ called Aunt Evie, racing in after him. ‘Sorry, Mouse. This cheeky duck thinks he owns poor Miss Pearl.’

‘The wombat’s name is Miss Pearl?’ I giggled, turning back to pat her while Pumpkin prodded me with his beak.

‘Just push Pumpkin away, love,’ said Aunt Evie, nudging the duck’s backside gently with her foot. ‘It’s ridiculous the way he carries on – like a love-struck Romeo. But there’s no point scolding him; he’s virtually deaf. Here, let’s put him in the hall and close the bedroom door.’

With the duck firmly relocated, Aunt Evie squatted beside me and helped to scratch Miss Pearl’s back. She smelt faintly of peppermint, like the tea Mum sometimes drank.

‘Is Miss Pearl your pet?’ I asked.

‘Well, I suppose in a way she is, yes.’

I tipped my head to one side. ‘But how ...’

Aunt Evie waited. Then I remembered our deal. With no Mum and Dad here to finish my questions, I had to do it myself. ‘But how did you get a wombat as a pet?’ I asked shyly.

Aunt Evie smiled. ‘A perfectly reasonable question. I found Miss Pearl near the entrance of a burrow on one of my farm visits recently. She was barely breathing so I bundled her up and raced her to the local vet. They told me she was a southern hairy-nosed wombat, and after diagnosing her with pneumonia, they gave me antibiotics and a long list of instructions. I’ve been nursing her back to health ever since.’ Aunt Evie tickled Miss Pearl’s chin, and the wombat looked up, her whiskers twitching. ‘The two of us have become rather attached, haven’t we, missy?’

I rubbed Miss Pearl behind the ears. ‘Will she ever go back to the wild?’ I asked.

Aunt Evie shook her head. ‘Her lungs are too weak after such a long bout of pneumonia. Besides, there’s a rule here that if you’ve kept a wombat in captivity for more than forty days, you’re not supposed to release them back to their burrows.’

I almost fell backwards as Miss Pearl began clambering over my legs, butting my stomach and then sniffing my face.

‘Hey, Miss Pearl, be nice!’ chastised Aunt Evie. ‘She’s a total food monster, this one. Sorry, Mouse.’

I laughed as Miss Pearl’s long whiskers tickled my chin.

‘She’s part of the furniture now,’ Aunt Evie pulled Miss Pearl gently away from me, scratching her back and the top of her head. ‘She sleeps, she eats, she makes mischief. But mostly, she doesn’t know the meaning of quiet, do you, young lady?’ She held Miss Pearl close to her chest, giving her a hug. ‘I told Miss Pearl all about you, about how much I was looking forward having you stay. But I thought I’d at least give you a chance to unpack before introducing you!’

After their hug, Aunt Evie opened her bedroom door and Miss Pearl barged past me towards the kitchen. Her black toenails tapped against the floorboards, and I suddenly understood the scratches in the wood. Wombats had very thick toenails.

‘Come on,’ said Aunt Evie, standing up. ‘How about we make that lunch I’ve been promising you. I want to tell you all about your new school and organise the things you’ll need to take. I bet you’re looking forward to it. First day tomorrow.’

‘Aunt Evie?’ I began as I stood up to follow her. ‘Well, you see ... I was wondering ...’

Aunt Evie waited.

Mum and Dad had asked Aunt Evie to enrol me in the local school in case I fell behind while they were away. But I didn’t want to go. It was hard enough going to school in Brisbane where everyone knew me. What would I say in a new school? To new students and new teachers? What if no one listened?

‘About school,’ I finally stammered. ‘Do I *have* to go?’

‘Mouse!’ said Aunt Evie, raising her eyebrows in surprise. ‘A niece of mine skipping school? Has the cow flown over the sun?’

I wrinkled my nose. Didn’t she mean ‘the cow flown over the moon’?

‘Don’t tell me you’re coming down with something?’ she asked, placing a cool hand on my forehead and shaking her head.

‘No, it’s just, well, you see, Mum and Dad will only be gone six weeks and ...’

‘Tsk. It’ll easily be six, if not more. Do you know how tricky legal systems can be?’ She stopped when she saw my crumpled face. No one had said anything about Mum and Dad being away longer. What if they were still in Ireland at Christmas?

‘Come on, buck up! School in the country will be fun. Apparently you’ll be doing some big project – some ology thing or other. Sounds weird, I know, but amazing, too. Besides, I’m no company for someone your age. Spending your days rattling around the countryside with me, visiting smelly old cows? Absolutely no fun at all. I know what I’d rather do.’

Cows weren’t smelly. I would have loved to go and visit them. ‘But I’m way ahead of my class at home,’ I mumbled. ‘I don’t need to go to school.’

‘Five times three?’ quizzed Aunt Evie.

‘Pardon?’

‘Your five times tables. What’s five times three?’

Maths wasn’t my strong point. ‘Oh, um, 15.’

‘Eight 12s?’ she called, walking down the hall towards the kitchen.

‘Um ...’

‘Don’t you want to go to uni like me and your mum and dad?’

I hung my head. I did. I wanted to be a doctor, just like dad.

‘Well then. School it is. Now, what did you say about that cheese?’

*

After we'd finished lunch and cleared away the dishes, Miss Pearl lumbered off to have a sleep, while Aunt Evie excused herself to check emails.

'Perhaps you could entertain yourself for a bit?' she suggested, turning on her laptop. 'Read a book? Finish unpacking? Then I promise I'll give you a giant tour, okay?'

Back in my room, the not-quite-right sketch of me with Cheeky stared at me from where I'd left it on my bed. I bent my head sideways, left and then right, but it was definitely wrong. I wondered if I'd be any better at sketching wombats than I was at Quaker parrots.

I smiled. There was only one way to find out. Aunt Evie had said to entertain myself, so I grabbed my sketchpad and pencils and tiptoed around to look for Miss Pearl. I found her on the couch, legs in the air, sleeping like a baby.

'Okay, let's see,' I whispered, sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of her. I started with a pencil line to mark out her features, making sure I showed her mouth partly open with long front teeth poking out. Her nose was tipped back, but not so far that I couldn't see her five sets of very long, very wiry whiskers. I had no idea wombats had so many. I'd just started on her front paws when Aunt Evie called out.

'Mouse? Everything okay?'

‘Yes, everything’s fine.’ It was nice and warm next to the pot-belly stove, and I was enjoying sketching Miss Pearl.

‘Finished unpacking?’

Miss Pearl opened an eye at the sound of Aunt Evie’s voice and wriggled over on to her tummy. Shame, I was so close to finishing her portrait.

‘Sorry, Mouse,’ called Aunt Evie again, ‘can I bother you to come in here for a sec?’

I collected my things and headed into the kitchen. Aunt Evie sat in front of her laptop with bright red glasses perched on the end of her nose.

‘What’s that you’ve got there?’ she asked.

I held out my sketchpad, but she only half looked at it before her eyes wandered worriedly back to her screen.

‘What fabulous drawings. I’d love to take a better look, but for now, can I ask you a favour? Can you be super grown-up and take my rent up to the main farmhouse for me?’

I gulped. ‘On my own?’ I said in astonishment. Mum and Dad would never allow me to go anywhere new by myself in Brisbane.

‘It’s not far, only out the yard gate, up the driveway, across the road and then up the farmhouse driveway. You’ll need to knock on the door and explain who you are, and then once you’ve handed over the rent to my landlord,

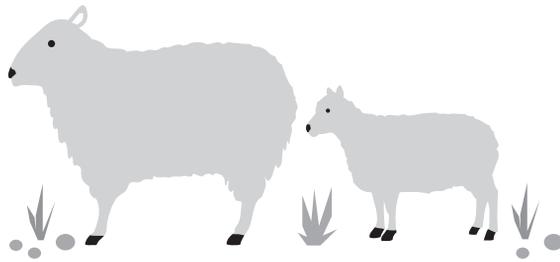
there's 300 hectares of sheep paddocks for you to explore. Mrs Campbell hates my rent being late.'

I shook my head. 'Can't you come too?' I asked.

'Goodness, it's only just over a kilometre away, it'll do you good to get some fresh air. You'll get cabin fever, mooching by the pot-belly stove all afternoon. Gosh, if you saw what your dad and I got up to when we were young – I don't think we were ever inside. I'm sure you'd like to see the sheep, wouldn't you? Why don't you take your sketchpad and go for a little walk?'

I clutched my pad to my chest. A *little* walk? A kilometre was a long way to go, especially on my own.

CHAPTER 3



I reluctantly pulled on my coat and runners and carried the rent envelope with my art pad and pencils outside. My breath made little puffs in the crisp afternoon air as I edged into a last patch of sunlight on the veranda. A lonesome gecko fled into a crack in the wall.

‘Make sure you shut the gates,’ called Aunt Evie from inside.

I huddled into my coat, surveying the wide horizon. The windmill creaked. Spots of light brown speckled the low hills in the distance. I guessed they must be the sheep. Between them and the cottage, pea-coloured shrubs and mottled boulders dotted paddocks so dry it seemed more like a desert than a sheep farm. Dad had told me there hadn’t been proper rain in the area for over two years, and although there was some grass around, it was dry and

brown and stubbly. Not like the lush green grass at home. Even the needle-like leaves on the trees were different to the leafy palms in Queensland.

A rooster crowed in the distance and a dog barked. A flash of blue caught my eye as a tiny bird hurried across the yellow dirt driveway before disappearing inside a nearby shrub. I waited, hoping it would come out again, but it didn't and it was too cold to stand still for long. The cold of the concrete floor seeped through the soles of my runners, and I stamped my feet. My toes were like ten mini icy poles in my shoes.

I had to keep moving. I took off down the driveway, hugging my art pad close as I strained to catch sight of the farmhouse. But it must have been beyond the low hill on the other side of the road since I couldn't even see a chimney.

I'd been walking for a few minutes and could just make out the end gate, when I stopped dead in my tracks. A huge kangaroo bounded along the fence between the paddock and the driveway, and I gasped as he stood upright to inspect me. It suddenly seemed very quiet. Just me and the kangaroo and the trees rustling in the breeze.

I glanced behind me. Maybe I should go back? The cottage would be warm and cosy, and maybe Aunt Evie would reconsider and let me sit beside the pot-belly stove to finish my sketch of Miss Pearl while *she* delivered the rent.

The dog barked again and a faraway sheep baaed.

No, crying to Aunt Evie wouldn't work. She'd only tell me to do things for myself. Besides, Aunt Evie wouldn't understand. I was sure she wasn't afraid of kangaroos.

I took a deep breath and kept walking, telling myself the kangaroo and I were on different sides of a very sturdy fence. I opened the gate at the end of the driveway and, after checking the road left and right, I ducked across to the other side.

A wooden letterbox stood at the gate with 'Campbell' written on the front. I wondered if the Campbells were nice. Did they have any animals beside sheep? Horses? Puppies even?

I walked along the driveway, weighing up whether I could just slip the envelope under their front door and quickly sneak away when I came across a flock of sheep. I stared as they pushed their noses into a rack, pulled out dry stalks of hay and spread them messily across the ground. The shrivelled tufts of grass in their paddock mustn't have been enough for all those hungry bellies.

But there weren't just sheep. There were lambs as well! I'd never seen newborn lambs before.

Unlike their mums, the lambs were snowy white, their gangly legs either tucked beneath them while they slept, or wobbling as they took skipping jumps around the paddock.

I was so busy watching them, I didn't notice a tractor bumping down the driveway towards me until it was almost too late.

I looked up in alarm. The tractor was only metres away, its engine roaring, its wheels shaking the ground.

I leapt out the way, pinning myself close to the fence just as the tractor swung off the driveway and idled at a nearby gate. The sheep scattered and I watched, my heart hammering, as a young man in a battered Akubra hat hopped out. He opened the gate and then steered the tractor through the paddock towards a rocky outcrop without so much as a glance in my direction. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Within seconds the driver had tipped the tractor's bucket, and rocks cascaded to the ground as dust flew into the air. The tractor continued to move expertly between a spattering of large holes, filling each hole with rocks with every tip. From where I stood, the holes looked large and round, nearly as big as my head. I wondered what had created them.

A sudden movement beyond the tractor caught my eye. I scanned the trees surrounding the outcrop, hoping it wasn't another kangaroo, when I noticed a boy about my age, dressed in a grey hoodie with a shock of blond hair. He was huddled against a tree and, like me, he was watching the tractor.

But his hands were balled into fists, his chin firmly set.

As I watched, he swiped at his face, as if brushing away tears. Then he glanced past me towards the gate.

I froze as he took a step in my direction.

He must have seen me, and I was trespassing! I had to get away, and fast. I sprinted all the way back to the cottage without looking back.

‘Aunt Evie, Aunt Evie!’ I cried, bursting through the door.

‘Mouse?’ Aunt Evie looked up from her laptop, tugging off her glasses. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Um, well I ...’ My lungs burnt. I took a deep breath.

Aunt Evie waited.

‘I didn’t deliver the rent,’ I blurted, offering her the crumpled envelope.

Aunt Evie drew her lips together. ‘Why? You didn’t get lost did you?’

‘No It’s just ... I saw this boy,’ I explained, ‘in the paddock. He ...’

Aunt Evie closed her laptop and stood up, taking the envelope from me. ‘You’re this upset over seeing a boy? Dearie me! You really are as shy as a mouse. There are three boys in the Campbell family. But I’m sure none of them are quite that scary.’

I dropped my head. Aunt Evie didn’t understand. It

wasn't *seeing* the boy that upset me. Something was wrong, but it wasn't just that I was trespassing.

'No need for the long face. We can drop the rent in on our way to school in the morning. Meanwhile, what say we make some lentil soup for dinner?'

She laid out the ingredients and started crushing the garlic, and I opened a can of tinned tomatoes. Her apron, covered with pictures of tiny red and black ladybirds, matched her head scarf, while the apron she'd lent me said, 'You're the apple to my pie'.

'Did you notice the chough nests while you were out there?' she asked.

I shrugged.

'Chough birds make mud nests between the branches of the mallee trees. It's quite a treat if you see one. I think there's a nest near the old dam. Perhaps I can show you tomorrow?'

'All day tomorrow?' I asked hopefully, passing her the tomatoes.

Aunt Evie smiled. 'Good try. I'm off to work and you're off to school as planned. I'll drop you in on my way and pick you up, but after that you can catch the bus with the other kids. There's a stop between our place and the Campbells'. Can't have them thinking you're a softy.'

But I was a softy. When I thought of all those new faces

staring at me, I shuddered. 'But, but ... w-what about Miss Pearl?' I stammered. 'Couldn't I stay here and look after her?'

'Mouse,' said Aunt Evie, cutting mushrooms, 'Miss Pearl is a wombat. She'll be perfectly content to sleep all day and will be more than happy to see us when we get home. Now, have you got something smart to wear tomorrow?'

I couldn't sleep that night. Each time I thought of school my stomach swirled and churned and whirled, until I couldn't stand it anymore. I crept into the kitchen hoping a glass of milk would settle my nerves, but instead I found Miss Pearl digging under the fridge door.

'Hey, what are you doing?' I whispered, glancing around for Pumpkin. He'd make such a fuss if he saw me, it was best I kept out of his way.

But Pumpkin was fast asleep by the pot-belly stove, his head tucked cosily under his wing, so I quietly took some carrots from the benchtop and led Miss Pearl to my room. Once there, I firmly shut my door to keep out Pumpkin and fed Miss Pearl the carrots.

When she'd finished, she jumped up and rested her front paws on the edge of my bed. 'Are you allowed up here?' I asked.

Miss Pearl looked at me, her brown eyes begging.

‘Okay then,’ I said, ‘just a few minutes.’ I leant down and tried to pull her up, but she was way too heavy, so I hopped off and half heaved, half pushed her onto my bed instead.

‘You’ve been eating too many carrots,’ I scolded. ‘Greedy guts.’

Miss Pearl nuzzled me with her head, before rolling onto her back, showing me her silky tummy. I tickled and stroked it before picking up my art pad. ‘Perfect,’ I whispered, turning to a fresh page.

I drew two pointy ears, a wide face and black nose, while Miss Pearl twitched in her sleep and occasionally opened one eye. I’d just started on her body when she jerked awake and rolled onto her stomach.

‘Hey,’ I chided as she tried to wriggle beside me under the covers. ‘You can’t sleep in here. I’m starting a new school tomorrow, and I have to get a good night’s rest.’

But there was no point arguing. Miss Pearl wriggled under my doona, draped her body over mine and rested her head on my chest. I was completely pinned to the bed. Not that I really minded. When Miss Pearl lay her head beside mine and her warm, carroty breaths wafted over me, I closed my eyes and fell into a deep, restful sleep.