

***Out of the Ashes* by Emilie Richards**  
**Excerpt**

*Chapter 1*

The child's scream shattered the early morning stillness. When it ended, silence washed into the space where it had lingered, smothering all traces of its existence.

By then Alexis Whitham had already left her warm bed and raced barefoot to the front porch of the small farmhouse. By then she had already had time to name her fear. The man she and her daughter had crossed the world to escape had found them anyway.

*Charles had found them.*

"Jody!"

As if to assist in Alexis's search, the still hidden sun began to streak the purple horizon with fire.

"Jody!" Alexis took the porch steps in one frantic leap, nearly tripping over the hem of her nightgown. "Where are you?"

There was a cry from behind the spiny bushes rimming the small patch of grass that passed for a front yard. Alexis could just make out the outline of Jody's thin body, bent as if she were searching the ground. She was alone "Mommy! Quick!"

Alexis swallowed a sob of relief. Jody was still here. Charles hadn't come and taken her, stolen her so he could hold her until he could get the prize he really sought. He hadn't found them yet. Perhaps he never would.

But something *was* wrong. Alexis ignored the sharp rocks stinging her feet as she ran along the path. "I'm coming." In seconds she parted the bushes, heading for the nine-year-old sprite who was her whole world.

"Over here." Jody didn't even turn at her mother's approach. She was bending between bushes, just visible in the dim light. "It's a koala bear."

Like a disqualified runner halfway to the finish line, Alexis abruptly halted her frenzied flight. She took a deep breath and willed the overload of adrenaline in her system to evaporate. She didn't trust herself to speak, but Jody didn't notice.

"He's been hurt, Mommy. I was out looking for the wallabies. I left some carrots on the steps last night. They were gone this morning, but I saw a wallaby near the porch, and it hopped

over to the bushes. Then I heard this crying, like a baby, and I came over here to see what it was, and it was a koala. And he's bleeding!"

Alexis found her voice. She forced herself to sound calm. Jody mustn't know what she had feared. The child had lived in fear of her father for too long already. "Move away from it now, Jody."

Jody grunted, a universal signal conveying disgust with adults who dared to issue orders. "But he's hurt."

"Now."

The little girl grunted again, then did as she'd been told.

Alexis stepped around her and peered down at the ground. She averted her eyes after she saw that Jody wasn't just exercising her fertile imagination. The koala lay almost hidden by the bushes, its huge eyes open as if in censure.

A child's slaughtered teddy bear.

"He's still breathing," Jody said when her mother didn't speak. "I felt his chest."

Alexis was struck with new fear. This wilderness they lived in was filled with menaces as dangerous as her ex-husband. "Jody, never, never touch a wild animal!" Alexis faced her daughter, moving her a safe distance away.

"He's not *wild*. He's hurt. I'm going to make him better. Then he can be my pet. You said I could have a pet!"

"I said you could have a cat."

"A cat would disturb the ecological balance."

Not for the first time Alexis silently wished that she could lop twenty points off Jody's IQ. The points wouldn't be missed, and Jody would be so much easier to parent. She gathered the resisting little girl in her arms, nightgown to nightgown. "Now look, neither of us has the faintest idea how to take care of the poor thing. We don't even know what's wrong with him. It could be something like rabies." She held Jody tighter as she realized what that could mean.

"Rabies is not a problem in Australia," Jody informed her. "I've been reading."

Alexis didn't question her daughter's facts. She'd learned long ago to trust the total recall capacities of the brain that resided under Jody's brown pigtails. "We still don't know what the problem could be. We're going to have to find someone who does." She felt Jody relax a little.

"Then you aren't just going to leave him here?"

"Of course not."

Jody peered around her mother's shoulder. "He knows me already. He knows I'm his friend. You've got to think of somebody who can rescue him!"

Alexis was already trying to think of someone who might be able to help. She was living on a remote island, halfway across the world from her home. She had been here just a month. She knew no one, had no resources other than her own two hands and her bank book. And she couldn't draw attention to herself. If she did, her own life could be worth less than the dying koala's.

"Go get dressed," she told Jody as an idea formed. "We'll both get dressed, then we'll go over to Flinders Chase Park. Somebody there should know what to do. They won't be answering their phones yet, but maybe somebody will be up."

Jody took one last look at the koala, then, with a sniff, turned and ran up the path. Alexis hurried after her, the animal's huge eyes haunting her steps. She knew what it was like to lie injured with no hope of rescue. She had recognized the grim acceptance of death, and it had stirred something painfully familiar inside her.

She would find a way to help. And if she had to wake everyone at the rangers' station to do it, she didn't care.

\*\*\*

Matthew Haley was having his second cup of tea. He had drunk the first an hour before dawn. That was the time when memories took over his dreams, forcing him into a sweating awareness that he was alive and the two people he loved were not. The tea was a ritual cleansing of dreams, a cup of reality, a passage into daylight.

Two cups were required to produce the desired effect. He drank it steaming hot and as dark as the sky when he awakened. He sweetened the first cup with Kangaroo Island's own honey, a honey that was known nationwide. He never drank that first cup without thinking of the way Jeannie had always sneaked an extra spoonful into her morning tea when she thought he wasn't looking.

But Matthew had always been looking, because everything Jeannie had done delighted him.

Invariably he drank the second cup plain as he stood at the cabin window and watched the sun climb past the tree shadowed horizon. And each time the sun cleared the treetops, he put all

thoughts of the past out of his head and concentrated on that day alone.

He had no reason to believe that today would be any different. He stood at the window wearing little except the expression that had become as much a part of his face as his long, straight nose or the dark brows that sheltered cold blue eyes. The expression said, "Don't touch me. I know you mean well, but I don't want you in my life." It was an expression that had chilled the heart of every man and woman who had tried to get close to him in the three years since his wife and son had died on a ferry plane to the South Australian coast.

The sun had scarcely peeked through the straight, tall trunks of the park's sugar gum trees when Matthew heard a banging at his door. He set his half-finished tea on a wooden table and, cursing softly, climbed the stairs to pull on a pair of khaki walking shorts before he responded. There was no need for anything more. He knew who would be waiting patiently on the steps. Harry Arnold, another Flinders Chase ranger, was checking on him. Harry checked on Matthew each morning, just as he checked on the park's kangaroos, emus and koalas. No one else could have gotten away with such a blatant show of concern. Harry did. Simply because he was Harry.

"A bit early, even for you," Matthew said as he opened the door.

Harry wasn't on the stoop. A woman with cornsilk hair and china doll features stood blinking at him, a music box figurine come to life. Beside her stood a pigtailed pixie who was investigating the hair on his chest with curious eyes.

"I'm so sorry," the woman began.

Matthew crisply cut her off. "The park is closed. If you're campers, the ranger station opens at—"

Alexis didn't move. "I'm not here to see the park, Mr...." She waited for him to give his name. When he didn't, she stepped back to look at the brass plate beside the door. "Haley?"

He nodded, frowning. "I don't mean to be rude, but as I said, the park isn't open. I'm not on duty yet."

"That's okay," Jody said before Alexis could speak again. "We don't care if you're official. We just want you to come take care of my koala."

Alexis silenced Jody with a look. She had the distinct feeling that the scowling brown-haired ranger was about to close the door in their faces. "I'm Alexis Whitham, and this is my daughter Jody. We live on the Bartow farm, at the park border. There's a koala in our front yard, and he's sick or injured. We have no idea what to do and no one to help us. If you don't want to

help—" she leaned on "want" just a little harder than she needed to "—perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell us who might?"

He noted the accent. The china doll was an American, which didn't surprise Matthew; he placed her immediately. She and the little girl had been the source of Kangaroo Island gossip for the last month. Americans weren't unheard of; they visited along with the throngs of other tourists who swept on and off the island with the regularity of the tides. But few Americans had ever chosen to make their homes here. From what the locals could tell, this one and her daughter planned to stay.

Matthew had heard all sorts of conjecture; he had even heard how lovely the foreign stranger was. And he had to concur. She was small and delicate, with features sculpted by a master craftsman and pale gold hair that didn't quite skim her shoulders. Her eyes were a blue so light they were startling.

No, the gossips hadn't exaggerated, but now, as then, he wasn't the slightest bit interested. "Koala? Are you certain?"

Alexis forced herself to be polite, even though the adrenaline rush of the morning had stripped away much of her natural courtesy. "I'm certain. He's lying under some bushes in our front yard, and he was alive when we left."

"He knows we're trying to get help," Jody added. "I told him."

Matthew's eyes flicked to the little girl. He didn't smile. "And he listened?"

"Of course." Jody tilted her head. "Why aren't you wearing a shirt?"

"Because it's five o'clock in the morning."

"I'm sorry," Alexis apologized, pulling Jody toward her to silence her. "We won't bother you any longer."

Jody gasped in protest. "But—"

Alexis tightened her grip on her daughter's shoulder. "Come on, Jody."

Matthew couldn't deny they were bothering him; they were. He'd barely had time to shake off his nightmares, barely had time to escape behind the walls that were his only way of making it through each day. But neither could he deny that they had done the correct thing by seeking him out. Even if koalas hadn't been protected under Australian law, he would have been the right person to ask for help. He knew about suffering, and he'd be damned if he let any creature suffer needlessly.

"If you'll wait just one minute, I'll come with you," he said gruffly. "Just let me get some clothes on."

As if drawn by his words, Alexis's eyes dropped to his bare chest. The ranger was tan and fit, a man who spent his days outdoors under the sun. He was broad-shouldered, but narrow hipped and long-legged. Somehow the strong, rangy lines of his body were more comforting than the austere contours of his face. He was a handsome man—or would be if he smiled, but there was nothing warm or reachable about him. Even though he'd said he was coming with them, it still wouldn't have surprised Alexis to have him shut the door in their faces and never open it again.

"We'll wait in our car," she said, raising her eyes to his face. Nothing there had changed. He was still regarding them with an expression she could only characterize as frozen.

She had a sudden flash of compassion. Wounded recognizing wounded. She had never learned to cover her own wounds so thoroughly, but then, women were taught in childhood to be wide-eyed and vulnerable. It was training she had never quite been able to overcome.

She wondered what had put the sorrow behind the ice in his dark blue eyes.

Matthew knew how rude it was to ask the woman and child to wait in their car. The morning air was chilly, and the little girl had just shivered to prove it. But he didn't want them in his house. He guarded his privacy as he guarded his expression. He reached for the doorknob. "On second thought, go ahead and drive on back. I know where to go. Just don't approach the koala again, please. They can be nasty tempered, and I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

"We'll be careful," Jody promised. "But I've got to check on him and tell him you're on the way."

For just a moment something passed over the ranger's face. Alexis saw it, and knew it was pain. She knew something more. She wanted to find its source and give the comfort she so badly needed herself. And that frightened her almost as much as Jody's scream had.

"Just stay back when you do," Matthew cautioned Jody, his face blank once more.

Jody nodded.

As she and Jody followed the path to their car Alexis heard the door shut behind them. For just a moment she wanted to turn, to shout through the closed door that she had changed her mind, that she would find someone else to help. Instead she walked on.

She had awakened to a scream, and she was still overwrought. That momentary desire to

reach out to the ranger was nothing more than the product of a nervous system gone haywire and an imagination that would be better confined to the new book she had just begun writing.

She walked on, one arm slung casually around Jody's shoulders. By the time they reached the car, the pain in dark blue eyes no longer haunted her.

As much.

\*\*\*

The Bartow farm was the closest property to Flinders Chase. But "close" was deceptive when it meant seven miles of corrugated gravel roads and dirt tracks that wound through thick stands of mallee scrub and eucalyptus and pine forest. The main road to the park accounted for four of the miles, the drive leading to the farm's homestead the other three. On the advice of her landlord, Peter Bartow, who lived in Victor Harbor on the South Australian coast and held the Kangaroo Island land as investment property, Alexis had bought a brand new four-wheel-drive wagon. The shocks had been worthless in a week.

From the first moment Alexis had stepped off the ferry to gaze at the island that was to be her new home, she had felt like a stranger. Since that had been the whole point of coming to Australia, she had refused to let herself be overwhelmed by loneliness and a longing for the familiar. She had tried to accept each facet of her new life with grace and patience. Grace and patience ended abruptly when it came to the Kangaroo Island roads, however. Only a little of the island had anything as civilized as asphalt. The rest was a maze of gravel lanes or, worse, deeply rutted dirt paths.

Getting anywhere was a major expedition. For a city woman used to having civilization at her fingertips, the roads were a symbol of Alexis's new and profound isolation.

Now, after miles of teeth jarring jolts, she pulled to a stop in front of the fading-to-gray frame house that was her new home. Before she had turned the key to silence the engine, Jody was out of the car. Alexis watched her crash through the underbrush, and, with resignation for what they might see, she got out to follow.

The koala was still alive, its dark eyes a chastisement.

"The ranger'll be here in a few minutes," Jody told the animal. "He's going to take care of you."

Alexis kept a careful eye on the little girl as she carried on her soothing monologue, reaching out once to halt her when Jody got too close. "Listen, I hear a car," she said when Jody's

stream of reassurances had almost petered out.

Jody peeked through the bushes. "A truck—ute," she corrected herself. "Sometimes I forget."

Very rarely, Alexis thought. Jody had taken to the Australian vocabulary with enthusiasm. But then, she had shown a remarkable facility for languages from the moment they had begun spending weeks in places with names like Bora Bora and Waimauri. The long and circuitous trip to Kangaroo Island had been a nightmare for Alexis but one marvelous adventure for Jody.

"It's the ranger," Jody announced.

"Mr. Haley."

"He came quick." Jody pushed aside the bushes as Matthew descended from his ute. "We're over here."

If the ranger was surprised to be summoned through a dense growth of scrub, he didn't show it. He had pulled on a khaki shirt sporting a park insignia on its left sleeve, and he carried a burlap sack and rope in one hand and a small black bag in the other. He was all Boy Scout preparedness and clean-cut good looks. He was also all business.

"Step back, please," he said with no additional greeting.

Alexis moved to one side, taking Jody with her. "He's still alive," Jody said, wriggling out of her mother's grasp to peer over the ranger's shoulder as he squatted to get a closer look at the koala.

Then he moved even closer. He began to speak reassuringly to the little animal.

Alexis was stunned by the warmth, the sympathy, in his voice. It was hard to believe this was the same man who had almost shut his door in their faces.

"That's right, mate, we'll take care of you. There's nothing for it, though. We're going to have to bundle you up in this bag until I can put you in a cage for the trip back to the park. No worries, though. You might be a bit crook now, but we'll have you climbing trees again in no time." Mathew reached out to touch the koala, frowning when it didn't try to escape.

Jody couldn't see the frown, but she explained the koala's lack of response anyway. "He knows you're trying to help," she told Matthew. "He'll let you."

Matthew could feel the little girl right behind him. She was almost leaning against his back. He wanted to snap at her and tell her to stand clear, but he couldn't make himself do it. She



was so concerned, and he couldn't make himself add to her unhappiness. He sat back on his heels and opened the sack, reaching in for a pair of thick leather gloves. "I'm going to have to take him back to the Chase. We can care for him there and see what his problem is. He won't want me to move him, and koalas can be quite nasty when they're disturbed. You'd both better wait on the porch."

"But he knows me," Jody said. "He'll feel better if I'm here."

Alexis reached for the little girl's hand and tugged her toward an opening in the scrub. "Come on, honey. You'll need to do as Mr. Haley says."

"But he knows me!"

Alexis did the only thing possible under the circumstances. She picked Jody up and started toward the house. Matthew turned to watch her go, reluctantly admiring the way she had taken charge of the situation. She seemed almost too slight to bear the burden of the little girl's weight, but she managed without complaint, like a woman who had always managed alone. For the first time he wondered what circumstances had brought her here, and why she was making her home in this godforsaken spot on an isolated island in the Southern Hemisphere.

Then he turned back to the koala, all thoughts forgotten except how he was going to rescue the animal.

On the porch, Jody tried to wriggle out of her mother's arms. "But I didn't want to leave," she said for the fourteenth time.

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to." Alexis set her daughter down but wisely didn't take her hands off her. "You know that. Sometimes you have to do what other people tell you because you're not always right."

"I almost always am."

"You almost always *think* you are," Alexis corrected. "Now, can I trust you to stay here without disturbing Mr. Haley?"

Jody's expression was rebellion incarnate, but she nodded, and Alexis knew she'd stay. "I'm going inside to start breakfast. Call me when Mr. Haley is finished." She cupped her hand under Jody's chin. "Come on. Smile."

"Is that one of those things I *have* to do?"

"Tis."

The smile was reluctant and brief. Alexis bent to kiss the heart shaped face so like her

own, then went inside to set the table. It was only minutes until she heard Jody's call. When she emerged from the house, Jody was in the drive, watching the unsmiling ranger transfer the koala from the burlap sack to a wooden cage in the back of his truck.

"What's wrong with him? Do you know? Will he be all right?"

Alexis hurried off the porch to rescue the ranger from Jody's questions, but he was already answering them.

"I'm guessing he'll be fine. You don't need to worry."

"Can I come see him?"

Alexis reached Jody just as the little girl noticed a bandage on the koala's shoulder.

"What's the bandage for?" she asked accusingly.

Matthew fastened the lock on the cage before he turned. His eyes sought Alexis's, and she knew he was trying to phrase his answer carefully. "He was bleeding," he said finally, turning his gaze to Jody.

"What from?"

"A bullet hole."

Alexis drew in a sharp breath, and she instinctively reached for the little girl. But Jody had already figured the worst. "Poachers?" she asked, her high childish voice at odds with the adult word. "Was it poachers?"

Matthew frowned, puzzled. "How did you know that?"

"Koalas are protected. Only a poacher would shoot one."

He looked to Alexis for explanation. "She reads everything," Alexis told him, shrugging. "Is she right?"

He nodded, and concern broke through his carefully neutral expression. "I'm afraid so. This isn't the first koala that's been shot at, and I doubt it will be the last. It takes a ruthless man to kill one. Until we find out who's behind it, you may want to reconsider living way out here by yourself."

"Why? It's koala skins he wants, isn't it?"

"Right. But you might as well *be* a koala if you get between one and the man who wants it. A poacher's bullet could be as deadly to a woman or child as to an animal. And next time our poaching friend might do more than injure his target."