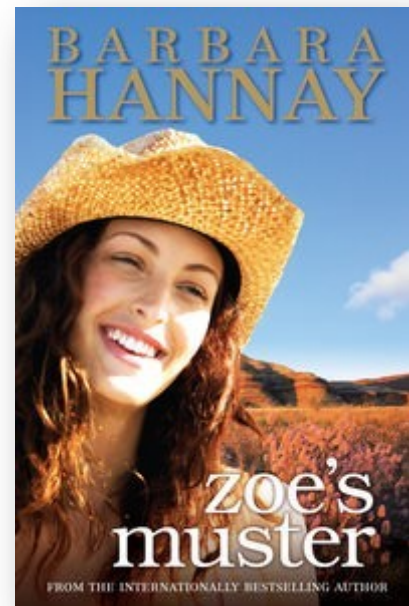


Zoe's Muster

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Extract

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Just after dawn the bus finally rolled into the tiny township of Gidgee Springs. Before it came to a bumpy stop Zoe was already on her feet, collecting her akubra from the luggage rack and stuffing into her bag the novel she'd been too distracted to read.

Anticipation had kept her restless and awake throughout the long night. From the moment dawn showed as a pale glimmer on the horizon, she'd been peering out of her dust-smeared window at flat silvery paddocks dotted with straggly gum trees and cattle, and she'd decided that the stark, unadorned scenery was, in its own way, rather beautiful.

Now, excitement bubbled inside her as she made her way down the aisle of the bus, stepping over the legs of a slumbering passenger, nodding to others who were curious, though only half awake.

Her crazy outback adventure was about to begin.

A chill breeze greeted her as she stepped down onto the dusty footpath and she shivered inside her denim jacket. The bus driver was in a hurry, already extracting her bulging backpack. A small cloud of dust rose when he set it down on the footpath. The dust settled on Zoe's boots.

With a nod, the driver was gone, clambering back into his seat behind the wheel. The engine growled and the bus rumbled off down the empty, silent street, past the blank rows of buildings, leaving Zoe bathed in exhaust fumes.

She looked about her. The only signs of life were a parked truck and a skinny dog sniffing at a crumpled paper bag on the ground.

Beyond this single main street the bushland stretched forever. It was like arriving in a ghost town, or discovering she was the last person on the planet.

Luke Fairburn had assured her someone from Mullinjim would come to fetch her. Even so, Zoe felt more nervous and keyed up than when she'd opened her business and served her dainty cakes and slices to clients for the very first time.

She might have felt calmer if she wasn't so uptight about the whole meet-the-Fairburns deal. She'd promised her mum that she wouldn't reveal her secret, but how hard would it be to honour that promise?

Shivering, she buttoned her jacket against the chill. She would kill for a coffee. She sent another hopeful gaze over the buildings that fronted the street. There was an old wooden pub, a café that claimed to sell 'real Aussie' hamburgers, a general store and post office combined, and a barbershop. It was six-thirty a.m. and nothing would be open for hours.

Caffeine withdrawal wasn't helping Zoe's mood.

Eyes narrowed against the bright morning light, she studied the thin line of blue bitumen that led out of town, clear across the flat grassy plains, all the way to the horizon. The bus she'd travelled on was matchbox-sized already, but she was sure she could see another vehicle heading this way – probably one of the Fairburns coming to pick her up.

Once again her stomach registered a ruffle of nervous excitement. Here she was, Zoe Porter – stock-camp cook extraordinaire.

Oh, God. Was she mad?

She'd done her best to look the part. She was wearing her most faded and conservative jeans, and she'd deliberately left her boots unpolished. Before she left Brisbane, she'd even rolled her brand-new akubra in the dirt to get rid of its just-bought newness and crispness.

Imogen definitely thought she was mad. Imogen, owner of a mocha-toned sports car and matching wardrobe, thought the whole venture was mad, but she couldn't be expected to understand. She couldn't possibly guess why Zoe was so desperate to fit in out here.

The vehicle was getting closer now. It was a silver-grey sedan, not quite the workhorse truck Zoe had expected. She picked up her pack and took a step towards the edge of the kerb. Might as well look ready and keen.

Despite her nerves, she smiled as the car approached. Shoulders back, chin high, she was determined to give an impression of confidence.

The car whizzed past, and Zoe stared after it. Talk about disillusioned. There hadn't been as much as a wave from the driver. Weren't country people supposed to be friendly?

And where the hell were the Fairburns?

She dug her mobile phone from the pocket of her jeans, glad she'd stored the Mullinjim number. Now she pressed it, and took a deep breath as she listened.

Silence.

Damn. She was out of the network.

It was tempting to feel sorry for herself, but there wasn't much point. She supposed life in the bush didn't run to a timetable.

After walking the length of the shops twice, she realised she was yawning. Now, she regretted her sleepless night on the bus and she sank onto her swag, elbows on her knees, head in hands. She let her eyes drift closed. Might as well try to relax.

She was drifting into a half-sleep when she heard footsteps. They seemed to come out of nowhere – the firm tread of boots crunching on gravel.

From her position, hunched on the swag, she saw a pair of dusty, elastic-sided riding boots strolling to a halt right in front of her.

'I'm your transport.' The deep voice was as dry as the dust on its owner's boots, and it held more than a hint of disapproval. 'We'd better get going.'

Looking up, Zoe encountered long legs in battered jeans, a low-slung belt of well-worn leather, and a faded blue shirt. Finally, she saw a dark, unshaven jaw, a handsome face with high cheekbones and stern blue eyes.

Not a Fairburn.

He was youngish – probably in his thirties – but he bore no likeness to the photos she'd seen of Peter and Luke.

'I'm waiting for the Fairburns,' she told him as she scrambled to her feet.

'I was sent to collect you.'

A glance up and down the street showed her she was alone with this man. 'Who sent you? Where's your vehicle?'

He gave a bored shrug. 'It's parked behind the pub. I stayed there last night.'

His eyes narrowed as he regarded Zoe and she would have liked to throw her shoulders back, but it was too late. It would be too obvious now.

'Luke Fairburn knew I'd be in town,' he said, 'and he asked me to collect you.'

Zoe realised she'd been unconsciously gearing up for a family reunion – a one-sided one, admittedly, but still, an emotional meeting that would make up for her lonely arrival in the outback. Instead, she had to decide if she could trust this unfriendly man, and for a moment she wondered if she'd made a huge mistake in coming here.

Clinging to caution, she said, 'Luke Fairburn never mentioned that I'd be met by a stranger.'

At that, his blue eyes showed a glimmer of respect. 'I'm Luke's neighbour, Mac McKinnon.' He didn't offer his hand. 'Come on over to the pub if you're worried. They'll vouch for me.'

He picked up her pack and swung it over his shoulder, as if it weighed no more than a kitten.

Trying not to feel deflated, Zoe followed him.

She told herself that everything would be all right once she got to Mullinjim. Luke Fairburn had sounded really friendly on the phone, and he couldn't help it if his neighbour was antisocial.

While Mac McKinnon was filling his vehicle with fuel, Zoe confirmed with the publican's wife that he really was the Fairburns' neighbour.

She found the fading redhead eager to establish Mac's credentials. He was, most definitely, the Fairburns' neighbour, she said, and then she eyed Zoe shrewdly and grinned. 'Mac hasn't got you rattled already, has he?'

'Definitely not,' Zoe lied. 'But you know what they say – better to be safe than sorry.'

'You won't have any trouble with Mac. His bark's way worse than his bite.'

'I hope I don't have to find out.' Zoe wasn't cheered by the other woman's knowing smirk.

She was about to question her further when a sound from behind warned her that Mac was back.

He cocked his head to the doorway behind him. 'Ready?'

'Of course,' she couldn't help snapping, but to her surprise, when they reached the ute he opened the door for her, and closed it without slamming it.

Moments later she was zooming down the highway with him, but he wasn't even *trying* to be friendly.

'Is it far to Mullinjim?' she asked in a bid to open conversation.

'About an hour.'

An hour? Just her luck. She'd hoped for a quick trip packed with animated conversation with a friendly Fairburn. Instead she was becoming uncomfortably aware of this grouchy guy's jeans-clad thighs, of his strong hands on the steering wheel, of his arresting profile silhouetted against a backdrop of flashing gum trees.

She tried another question. 'Have you lived out here all your life?'

He shook his head. 'My family has a property further south, near Hughenden. I only moved up here five years ago.'

'Branching out on your own?'

'That's right.' He slid a wary glance in her direction.

'Starting out on your own can be quite a challenge.' Zoe waited for Mac to expand on her comment, or play the conversation game by asking her a question. He did neither.

Fed up, she turned her attention to the view through the dusty side window, where gum trees and pale grassy paddocks whisked past with regular tedium. She found herself longing for the sight of a house, or even a water tank or a windmill – any sign of human habitation.

What was it like to grow up out here, she wondered, to think of this stark country as home? She supposed that country folk loved their bush with the same nostalgia she felt for the tin roofs and hilly streets of inner Brisbane, but to her, this landscape felt alien and unfriendly.

Not unlike her companion.

Doggedly she gave conversation one more attempt. 'Will you be involved in the Mullinjim muster?'

Mac nodded again. 'Luke needs a hand this year. He's been managing on his own, since his father's heart attack.'

'Heart attack?' Zoe stared at him in horror. 'How – how awful.' Actually, this news was beyond awful.

Mac shot her a quick, frowning glance. 'It happened just after new year.'

Zoe gulped, hardly daring to ask if Peter Fairburn was still alive. 'How – how bad was it?'

'Not fatal, thank God, but a close call.'

She was stunned by how upset she felt for this man, this *father* she'd never met. 'Is he okay now?'

'He's had surgery and he's making a good recovery, but he's not up to mustering.'

A relieved sigh escaped her. For the Fairburns' sake, she was glad Peter had survived, and for her own sake as well. For a moment there, she'd been terrified she was too late to meet her father, that this whole crazy venture was in vain.

She lapsed into sobered silence after that. The country was changing. Ahead of them she saw a line of tall trees with thick, creamy paperbark trunks and willow-like, drooping branches. A cluster of trees arching over the road cast welcome shade.

The road dipped beneath the trees, running down to a creek forded by a strip of concrete instead of a bridge. It was surprisingly beautiful. Clear water ran over river-washed stones, and on either side dark, earthy banks were lined with reeds, smooth rocks and fallen tree trunks, now dank and mossy. The ute's tyres met the concrete and sent up a spray of water, startling a pair of wood ducks.

'Wow!' Zoe dug in the bag at her feet. 'Would you mind stopping for a sec? I'd love to take a photo of this creek.'

'Don't have time,' Mac muttered, driving on. 'There are plenty of creeks out here.'

'But this one's so beautiful.'

Mac was still scowling at the scene beyond the car. 'It might look pretty enough at the moment, but it's not always like this.'

'Well, no. I suppose it dries up in the drought.'

'And it floods in the wet.'

That doesn't stop it from being lovely today, Zoe thought, but already she'd missed her photo opportunity. Mac had changed gears and they were climbing up the other side of the creek bed, leaving her to twist in her seat and make do with an unsatisfactory shot through the dusty rear window.

It wasn't long before Mac, with an easy glide of the steering wheel, turned the ute off the main road onto a dirt track. Now, they rattled and bumped over a cattle grid beneath an imposing post and beam entrance.

Zoe saw the name Mullinjim painted white on the entrance. This was it – Peter Fairburn's home, and the place where her mother had come all those years ago. Somewhere on this land, she'd probably been conceived.

Once they were through the entrance, they barrelled along a dirt road that was little more than two worn tyre tracks. Zoe sat up expectantly, eager for her first glimpse of the homestead, but they continued to drive past paddock after cow-dotted paddock with no sign of a building.

Eventually, Mac stopped at a gate across the track.

'I'll get that for you.' Zoe was keen to do something.

'Don't bother. You won't be able to manage it.' The glance he slid her as he opened the driver's door was one of amused contempt.

Zoe glared after him. 'It's only a gate,' she yelled at his back.

Showing no sign that he heard her, he strode to the gate, fiddled briefly with a piece of wire and a chain, then swung the gate open and sauntered back.

Zoe's temper was at a rolling boil as they drove through the gateway then stopped again. If she wasn't careful, she would lose it with this man before she'd even met her employers.

She sighed. 'I suppose you're going to tell me I wouldn't know how to close the gate either.'

'Dead right.' Mac actually grinned. 'And you probably won't be here long enough to make it worth training you.'

Before she could respond, he was gone again, swinging the gate closed and fastening it with some kind of loop.

Bastard.

Zoe was fuming as the ute started up again, but she pressed her lips together, holding back all the things she wanted to tell this arrogant so-and-so. She consoled herself by remembering that it was the Fairburns' opinion of her that mattered, not their snarky neighbour's.

Ten minutes later, the ute topped a rocky ridge and a stunning vista stretched before them: vast spreading plains of taupe-coloured grass, and far off in the distance, *at last*, the wink of sunlight on an iron roof.

Zoe had to ask. 'Is that the homestead way over there?'

Mac nodded, and to her surprise, he braked. 'You seem pretty keen on taking photos. Why don't you take a shot of this?'

'If we've got time to stop now, why couldn't we stop at the creek?'

He looked almost apologetic. 'That creek winds right across this property. When we're out on the muster you'll have plenty of chances to get a photo of it.'

It wasn't a very satisfactory explanation, but Zoe obediently took a photo of the view before them, and she sat quietly as they drove on.

She supposed this country looked much the same now as it had when her mum had come here. She drank in details. To their left, a line of tall trees continued, marking the meandering route of the creek. To their right a paddock held horses instead of the ever-present cattle, and beyond this paddock stood a building that might have been stables, with timber walls that had weathered to silvery grey.

The ute slowed and Zoe sat up straighter, eager to catch her first sight of the homestead. They rounded another bend in the track and she caught a glimpse of the house framed by an archway of purple bougainvillea. Dazzling in the sunlight, it was low and white, with a deep shady verandah, surrounded by surprisingly green lawns and bright garden beds.

She caught a glimpse of a figure on the front verandah, and she felt her heart leap in anticipation. She leaned forward, straining to see more, but the ute continued on and her view of the homestead was blocked by the bougainvillea hedge.

'Aren't we going to the house?'

'Your accommodation's this way.'

'But shouldn't I meet the Fairburns first?' After all, they were her employers.

'No need to bother Virginia and Peter now,' Mac said. 'Luke's busy, but you'll meet him later.'

Mac was frowning again as he drove on, moving slowly now, possibly because he didn't want to raise dust. They passed all kinds of buildings – almost a small village – little fibro cottages, timber sheds, open-fronted corrugated-iron structures that housed farm vehicles and tractors and complicated machinery.

Then open country and paddocks again.

Zoe's jaw dropped. 'Where are we going?'

'To the stock camp. It's only another kilometre.'

So far away? Her spirits were at rock bottom by the time they finally rolled to a stop.

'Home sweet home,' Mac said dryly.

In front of them stood two rows of ugly, battered metal demountables facing each other across a strip of tin-roofed concrete with a long wooden table and metal seats in the middle.

Not quite the quaint, old-fashioned cottages Zoe had seen in magazines, but their appearance wasn't nearly as disappointing as their distance from the homestead. *Grow up, Zoe. This whole adventure is bound to be a test of your character.*

Determined to be upbeat, she climbed out of the ute and stretched her stiff back. Already, Mac was lifting her gear from the vehicle.

'The ringers have left this donga for you.' He nodded towards the first of the demountables. 'You won't have to share.'

'Are there any female ringers?'

He shot her a dark look that might have been a warning. 'No.'

Pinning on a brave smile, she once again followed his easy, long-legged stride, doing her best to suppress the unhelpful thought that she was rather like a cattle dog trotting behind its master.

After shouldering open a flyscreen door, Mac stepped aside, allowing her to enter first. She'd half expected him to dump her gear on the step and

disappear, so this new display of manners impressed her more than it should have.

Her smile was spontaneous. 'Thank you.'

For the briefest moment their eyes met. His eyes really were the most incredible blue. Zoe hastily turned her attention to the room.

It was okay, actually. Basic, of course, with a slim mattress on a wire base, an old-fashioned wardrobe with a slightly spotty oval mirror, a card table and a plastic chair, grey lino on the floor.

'This will feel like a palace after you've been camping out in the bush,' Mac said, watching her.

'It's fine. It's terrific.' Zoe squeezed her face muscles into an even wider smile as she looked around her, wondering about the possibility of a private bathroom. There wasn't one, of course. She would be sharing with the men.

I'll cope.

She wondered where Luke was. Was he away with the ringers? She was dying to meet him. She wouldn't feel right about being here until she'd met at least one of the Fairburns.

'I guess you're anxious to see the kitchen,' Mac said.

'The kitchen?' Zoe blinked at him. Was he taking her to the homestead after all?

'The camp kitchen. It's right next door.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'