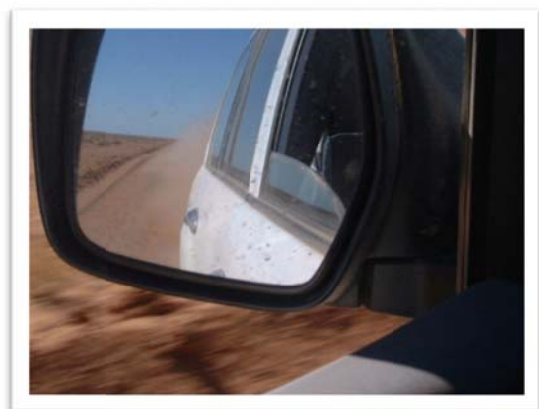


## Paddington's Story – Part 7

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Waves of sadness washed over me as pet Pete drove the dusty road north leaving a banner of dust trailing behind us.



I stared out of the window, but there was nothing new to distract me from my mood. I hadn't seen a kangaroo, emu, camel or dingo since Marree – it appeared nothing lived in this barren landscape. I must keep my pets in sight at all times, as I didn't fancy being left behind to fend for myself, a little pup like me wouldn't last five minutes in this harsh environment.

My pets hadn't said much since our departure, and my gut instinct told me they too were feeling the loss of our friends. Leaving Marree had dampened everyone's spirits.

'You okay, Paddington?' Sooz looked over her shoulder at me.

'Yes Sooz, I'm fine,' I pulled against my seat belt. 'I'd like to come and sit on your lap though. Can I Sooz, please?' I gave her my most beguiling look.

'Pete, can you pull over? I think Paddington's unwell.'

'He's not going to be sick, is he?' asked Pete, stopping the car on the edge of the track.

'Unwell! Sick! Sooz, Pete, I'm fine.' I obviously needed to practice my facial expressions if they thought I was ill.

The grand pet's vehicle pulled up behind ours, and as they walked over to join us, I heard grand pet Poo say, it was time for a rest and a drink and grand pet Moo agreeing.

'Paddington seems okay now.' Pete peered down at me as Sooz attached the lead to my collar.

I smiled up at them. 'I'm fine, let's walk.' I wagged my tail furiously and yanked the lead and Sooz fell into step behind me, as I sniffed at the drifts of sand and flowers along the soft edge of the track. It felt good to stretch my legs and I felt better for doing something. Sitting watching kilometre after kilometre of nothing was limiting and certainly not conducive to my mental state of mind. The grand pets ambled along after us and when I stopped to bury my nose in a funny red flower, I listened to them talk about it. They called it a Sturt's Desert Pea and they all seemed excited to have found it.



'I've never seen one.' Grand pet Moo removed a camera from the bag that hung over her shoulder and spent many minutes setting it for the perfect shot.

I turned back to the flower. 'It's got no smell,' I told Sooz. 'It's pretty though.'

Flowers at home in Balhannah weren't really my thing. I liked to dig and they often were in the way of my excavations. I'd ignited Sooz's temper a couple of times when I inadvertently dug up a new plant.

I pulled her away from the flowers and she stopped me with a yank of the lead. 'Snake tracks,' she gestured at the prints in the sand and Pete dropped down on his haunches to take a closer look.

'Lizard tracks over there,' said Pete.

'Are those Emu tracks?' asked grand pet Poo.

'No, grand Poo. I've been looking and I've seen nothing,' I woofed.

'Not sure,' replied Pete. He had his camera to his eye and I heard the click of the shutter. Photography was Pete's passion and he seemed happiest when he had a camera in his hand. I watched him follow the snake and lizard tracks, clicking shot after shot.

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'Careful Pete,' I called, remembering Power's advise about not tackling snakes. 'They bury themselves under the sand and jump out, bite you and then drag you under it until you suffocate... then when they're hungry they devour you in one mouthful.' I repeated Powers words as he'd told them to me, except I left the gory details out. I didn't want to scare Pete the way Power scared me. I'd learnt a lot from Power and would treasure the memories forever. Now Pete needed to respect my newly acquired knowledge and learn from me, but Pete wasn't taking me seriously. I lunged forward and dragged Sooz behind me – I needed to get to Pete to warn him.

'Pete, did you hear what I said about being eaten?'

'Quiet, Paddington.'

'But Pete, it's dangerous. Power told me how...' and I repeated my advice again.

'You have an awful lot to say for a little chap,' said Pete without looking at me.

'Pete, it's time to hit the road,' I woofed my command using a serious tone.

He removed the camera from his face and looked around at us all. 'Is everyone ready to move on?'

'Yes, Pete,' I woofed. 'It's dangerous here.'

'Yes,' replied Sooz. 'If we want to make Coward Springs before dark we should get going.'

'Okay, let's go then.'

Pete turned back to the track and we all followed behind him. I was glad to see Pete was now listening to me. I would just have to find a way of teaching him about reptiles. I didn't want to have to dig him out of a hole, if he got dragged into one. My little legs weren't up to the task.

I led the way back to our vehicle and gazed up a Sooz. I gave her the best dejected expression I could muster. 'Sooz, can I sit with you for a while?'

She picked me up and kissed my nose. 'Would you like to sit up front with me?'

'Yes Sooz, that's what I asked.' I sometimes wondered whether Sooz understood me. Pete seemed to understand more than Sooz, perhaps it was because she was a girl and we boys were wired differently. I'd heard my mother talk about the difference and without her years of experience, I was guessing.

I curled up next to Sooz and Pete made her strap me in. I wanted to sit on her lap and feel her arms around me, but Pete always worried about safety. But, as the vehicle resumed a steady rhythm and ate the kilometres, I crept onto her lap and finally drifted to sleep.

I woke with a jolt. Pete had stopped the vehicle at a gate. I pushed myself into a sitting position and looked through the window. A sign said – *Welcome to Coward Springs*.

'I think we need to check and see if it's okay to bring Paddington in.' Sooz looked at Pete, with her: *go and do it now look*. She always used the word we. I'd heard Pete say you mean the '*royal we*' and she'd smile sweetly at him. He was mostly good humoured and would go and do what she asked. She had us both wrapped around her little finger, and as we loved Sooz, we did whatever she asked to please her.

I jumped onto Pete's seat after he'd climbed out. 'Pete, can I come?' he didn't turn around to acknowledge he'd heard me, but kept walking.

'No Paddington, we have to wait.'

'But why Sooz?' I asked with my paws resting on the lip of the open window and with my head poking out of it.

She didn't answer and so we waited for him to come back. I let rip with three high level barks when I saw him striding back towards the car and wagged my tail in welcome. I jumped back onto Sooz's lap as he clambered into the driver's seat.

'Everything okay?'

'Yep, not a problem,' he said all smiles. 'Prue said we could park over there,' he pointed to a spot in the middle of a grove of trees.

It was hours later my pets finally joined me around the campfire. I'd been placed on a large blue plastic sheet with my lead tied to a stake. And before they started unpacking the vehicles, Sooz read them the riot act.

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'We'll use this sheet for Paddington. If we sit him in the middle of it, he can't sniff around on the ground. We can't risk him picking up any poisonous food that birds may have dropped. We all have to be vigilant – okay?'

I saw her give them that look and everyone nodded.

'Don't worry,' said Pete coming over and patting me on the head. 'Nothing's going to happen to Paddington.'

'I didn't really understand what the concerns were. Power had told me to watch out for snakes and lizards. I remember him saying never to eat anything that wasn't in my bowl. Perhaps this had something to do with that. When I thought about it, I did have a habit of picking things up off the ground and chewing them. I would be good – otherwise Sooz was going to have a coronary.'

Unpacking the vehicles took ages. It had taken ages to pack them in the first instance, so why would they unpack them? It didn't make sense to me, until I saw the food box come out and the table to put the food on and chairs for sitting in and swags for sleeping in and water for drinking and my bowl... Oooooooh I howled. That's my bowl.

'I'm starving Sooz. I haven't eaten since...' I tried to remember when I'd eaten last. 'It's been hours.'

'I'll feed Paddington,' said Sooz.

'Oh thank you, Sooz.'

I watched as she prepared my special puppy meal. She'd gone to a lot of trouble and brought along tasty meals and puppy biscuits to tempt my appetite. My mouth salivated as my nose picked up the aroma

'Sit, Paddington,' asked Sooz.

I sat down and gazed lovingly at my bowl in her hands.

'Wait, Paddington,' Sooz put my bowl on the blue sheet in front of me.

I dropped my vision to my bowl. I hated this game she insisted on playing. Wait, wait for what? I lifted my vision back to her face. 'Why do I have to wait, Sooz?'

'Wait, Paddington.'

'Sooz, I heard you the first time. I'm not deaf.'

'Go,'

With the magic word of release I jumped forward to my bowl. My mouth couldn't Hoover up the food quick enough. I was so starving I thought I might die if I didn't eat quickly. I chased the last few morsels around the bowl and licked it clean.

'Good boy, Paddington,' Sooz lifted my bowl and took it away.

'But Sooz, I'm still hungry. Can't you leave my bowl so I can lick it again? I might have missed something. Sooz!' Darn, she wasn't listening to me.

The aroma of cooked human food drifted to my nose. Perhaps they might give me some of that. Perhaps I'm being hasty. I sat and watched grand pet Poo turning tasty looking morsels over on the barbeque plate. Yum, my mouth drooled again.

Finally, I was picked up and placed on one of the camp chairs and everyone joined me. I watched them eat, my eyes following each forkful of food to their mouths. Sooz sat close to me and reached over to caress my ears every now and then.

'Sooz, please save me some of yours.'

'It will upset your stomach, Paddington. Don't be greedy.'

'But Sooz, I'm still hungry.'

'You've eaten.'

'He can have this, I can't eat it all.'

'Thank you grand pet Moo,' I licked up the morsel from her hand. 'That was tasty, thank you Moo. Anymore?'

That's enough now,' said Sooz.

I detected the sternness in her tone and decided not to push my luck.

The camp fire embers glowed as darkness arrived and I looked up at millions of stars dotted across the inky night sky. It was beautiful and I wondered about all my ancestors up there, looking down at me and how proud they probably were of a Boniebraes pup like me, making history as the first Bearded Collie to camp in the outback.

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As the smoke drifted over me I began to feel drowsy. The pets were washing up and putting things away and when all was tidy, Sooz picked up her toiletry bag and disappeared to the bathroom and the grand pets followed her. My pets went through a ritual of brushing teeth and washing before bed, I personally didn't understand why. I remembered my mother saying there were times she couldn't fathom her pets and I guessed this was one of those times.

'I don't know about you guys, but I'm bushed,' said Sooz emerging out of the darkness. 'It's time for bed.'

'Where's Paddington going to sleep?' asked grand pet Moo.

'With me, in my swag,' replied Sooz.

'No, I'm not.' I barked. I'd seen how the swag was all zipped up. That wasn't how we slept in it at Marree. It had been open in the bedroom, but here, Pete had put it together and it looked claustrophobic and I didn't want to sleep in it.

'Pete, can you hand Paddington to me once I'm in?'

'Yes sure.' He picked me up and I licked his nose.

'Pete, can't I sleep in the car? I don't want to...'

'It's okay Paddington, you'll be lovely and cosy in there with Sooz,' he said, popping me into Sooz's arms and zipping us in.

'No, Sooz, no. Please let me out.' I banged my head on the canvas above my head and my legs and body took on a life of their own, as the convulsion hit. 'I'm scared, I don't like it. Let me out! Oooooooh, Oooooooh, I howled scrapping the side wall of the swag with my nails. 'Help, let me out, Oooooooh, Oooooooh, Oooooooh.'



My heart raced in fear. I wanted my mother. I felt Sooz's arms tighten around me and I fought against her, thrashing her with my legs and digging my claws into her skin. I had to get away, but the more I fought the harder she held me and eventually exhaustion left me unable to fight anymore.

'It's okay Paddington,' cooed Sooz into my fur. 'It's going to be okay. Once you get used to it you'll be fine.'

'Sooz, I won't, I don't like it,' I sobbed and pushed my nose into her hair. Her smell was comforting and she held me fiercely against her chest, I eventually fell asleep with her arms

wrapped around me.

I woke hot. The swag was like a body bag and in its confines and with our body heat, it felt like a furnace. I looked out of the netting above our heads and beyond at the night's sky. I wished I was a star with all that open space to choose from. It was wishful thinking on my part and I tossed the notion aside – I couldn't be a star until I passed to doggie heaven. I crawled down besides Sooz's legs towards the bottom of the swag. I hoped to find a way out, but all I found was an air vent. My nose wrinkled and I sniffed the cool air into my lungs. Sooz's feet were inviting and I curled up next to them and eventually fell to sleep.

I was scarred after the swag incident. It was scary, but there were scarier things to enter my life and so the swag episode became just that, a memory to laugh at. And laugh my pets did the following morning over breakfast.

'What a noise. I've never heard anything like it,' said grand pet Poo.



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'You should have heard him the first night we brought him home,' replied Sooz.

'Worse?'

'Far worse,' she laughed and cuddled me to her chest.

'Sooz, I don't mind you laughing about me, but could you not squash me so hard.'

'I love you Paddington.'

'I love you too, Sooz.' I sliced my tongue across her hand.

'Time to hit the road,' said Pete.

'Where are we going next, Sooz?' I gazed loving at her.

'Next stop Oodnadatta,' said Pete.

'Thanks Pete,' I woofed. 'Don't worry Sooz – we'll spend time on doggie vocabulary at the next stop.' Thank goodness for the boy connection.

