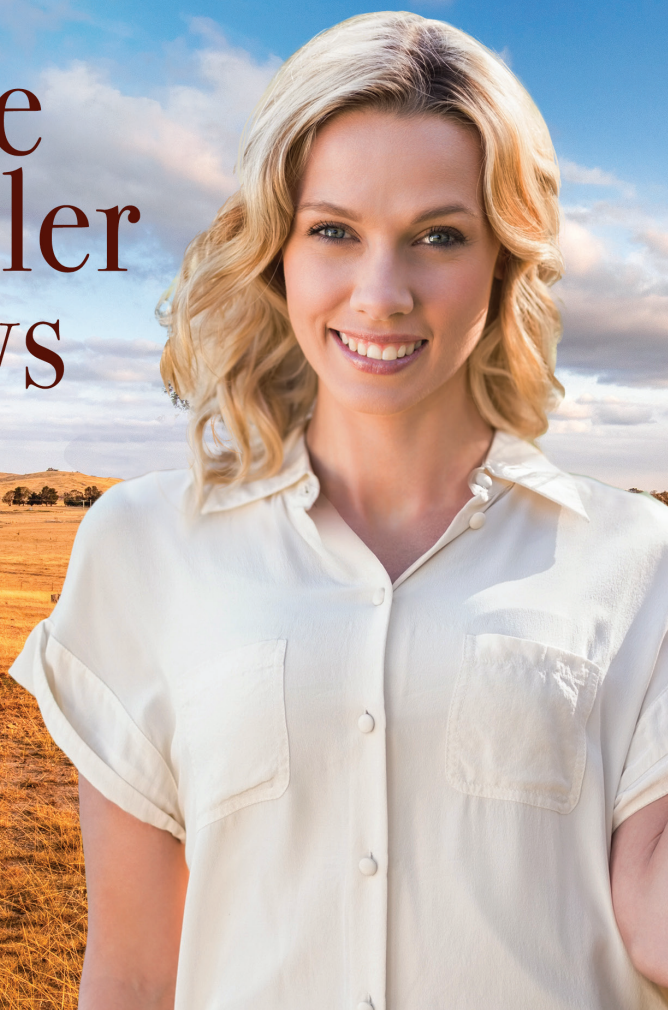


FIONA PALMER

From the bestselling author of *The Sunnyvale Girls*

The Saddler Boys



FIONA PALMER

*The
Saddler Boys*

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Prologue

PEERING out her car window, she waited and watched as kids piled onto orange school buses with bundles of energy. She scanned each face for likeness, for familiarity, for features she was trying hard to remember. But she had no clue if she'd ever spot him. Would she even be able to recognise him?

The buses pulled away from the school and she followed one in the direction she knew. It was weird being back here, in Lake Biddy – a tiny outback town in the middle of nowhere. And she wasn't exaggerating; she meant tiny. A shop, a pub, a school and a few houses. It was all surrounded by empty paddocks and scrub. Being so isolated made her feel misplaced and slightly scared, like a flower petal blowing into the dry desert. Being here brought back waves of feelings she wasn't used to, memories she didn't want to remember, or deal with.

The large bus continued along the road and she kept following, knowing her boy must be on that bus. When it stopped at the familiar gate, she was overwhelmed with emotion. She reached

for her cigarettes with shaky hands and quickly lit one, puffing away until the hit came.

She pulled over and waited for the bus to leave, then crept forward. A little boy with a large schoolbag walked to the bush on the left of the gate where a small tin shed was nestled. She watched him wheel out a tiny motorbike from the shed and start it. Could this really be him? He looked about the right age, but she was no expert.

He took off his school hat, and she noticed that his short clipped hair looked mousy blond. He put on his helmet. She cursed when she couldn't see his face. Did she dare drive any closer? If he turned and saw her, what would he do? Approach her? Or run? Maybe she could tell him she was lost – or would she tell him the truth?

The boy roared his motorbike up the driveway, leaving a trail of dust behind.

It was probably for the best, she thought as she sucked the last bit of life out of her cigarette and lit up another one. She wasn't quite ready yet. But soon. Soon she would be.

Chapter 1

BUGS smacked into Natalie's windscreen, hindering her view as another dual-cab four-wheel drive sporting a big roo bar whooshed past her on the endless bitumen road. That made three four-wheel drives in a row, not to mention the massive trucks that barged past, blowing her across the road like a dead leaf in the wind. Add the wayward storm of rocks flicked up off the road every time she passed a big vehicle and her sleek car was taking a serious battering. Welcome to the country.

Natalie Wright glanced out her window into the wide-open paddocks that stretched for miles in yellows and browns against a vibrant blue sky. The vista was dotted with large gangly eucalypts, their leaves shimmering in the sun as if coated in glitter. Nat's music played like a soundtrack to the scene before her. Actually, it made her want to search through her iPod for some Jimmy Barnes or Paul Kelly. The rural landscape seemed to evoke an Aussie yearning for something a little more rustic and raw. A smile grew on her face and she breathed in deeply, imagining

she had her windows down and could smell the earthy, fresh countryside.

Was it the massive sky that made her feel so free? It stretched over her, uninterrupted except for one wispy, see-through cloud. Or was it the fact that she'd been driving for over three hours now, leaving the city with its bustling streets and compressed buildings so far behind? Nat tapped a manicured nail, painted in dusty rose, against the leather steering wheel.

This was her real first venture into the countryside. Sure, she'd driven down to Margaret River to taste the fabulous wines and flown up north to Broome, but never had she driven east towards the middle of Australia, where nothing seemed to live except pink-and-grey birds and bobtails that liked to sunbake on the road. The land was so hot it shimmered, and Nat wondered if she'd be able to breathe the air in. Would her skin crackle and wrinkle after her year here?

A rusty metal sculpture of wheat stood proudly on the edge of the road, followed by two more, metres apart, before a sign for the township appeared. Two years ago, if someone had told her she'd be travelling to the outback to stay in Lake Biddy, population not even three hundred, she would have laughed and called them mad. Yet, here she was. Life had a funny way of turning the tables. She grinned to herself. Out here she'd have the freedom to make her own choices, and maybe along the way she'd find out just who Natalie Wright really was.

She'd tried to research this place but couldn't find much on the internet, and what Google Maps had shown her was more paddocks than any sort of town. As she drove into Lake Biddy

she noted three streets on the right before she realised she had driven right through town and was back among native bush on both sides of the road. Small was an understatement. Jogging around the block would never get her fit here. Maybe she'd have to run around the paddocks – but what if she got lost, bitten by a snake, chased by a kangaroo or eaten by some starved native animal? She should have packed her exercise DVDs. Already she missed her workouts at her local gym.

She slowed down then did a three-point turn, right next to a dead kangaroo on the side of the road. Its body was stretched tight like a balloon. She'd never seen one in the wild before but she wasn't going to stop for a closer look. Just the thought of the smell of its rotting carcass made her screw up her nose.

This time she drove even more slowly through the town, noting the large white bin structures on her right, which were situated next to a railway line. In the main street there was an old tin workshop with cars and trucks parked out the side. A Country Women's Association building with a small sign on the old bricks looked a little neglected with its flaking paint and old wire fence. Next was another shed-like structure, cream and antique red with two fuel pumps out the front, and a wide verandah. One advertisement offered a Coke and pie special while another was spinning in the gentle breeze; *Open* flashed in white then black. Three utes were parked out front, their trays loaded up with big tool boxes, wire and other things that looked farm-related. A couple had dogs waiting patiently on the back.

Nat pulled into the area and parked her Monte Carlo blue BMW next to the fuel bowser. Her fuel gauge was reading nearly

empty. It was her motor, all eight cylinders, chewing up fuel. Not that she minded, especially when having to pass those long trucks. Her beautiful car had been a twenty-first birthday present from her parents last year. It was an exquisite blue with gorgeous black merino leather seats, which were so comfy. Made the long trip bearable.

Nat flipped down the mirror and reapplied her favourite lipstick, which was a similar shade of rose to her nails. Then she reached into her Gucci tote, pulled out her wallet and stepped out of the car.

Outside, the afternoon sun was blindingly bright and warm. It had been cool when she'd left the city but now it was time to discard her jersey shrug. She noticed two men standing outside the shop on the verandah, watching her. Behind her large dark glasses, she studied them back as she locked the car and walked up to the shop. They wore boots, thick socks, shorts and shirts that looked a little on the thin side. The man with the dirty hat had a big tear up the side of his shorts. She could probably tell what colour underwear he was wearing if she had a good look. Nat shot them a smile before smoothing out her printed silk wrap dress and adjusting the tie at her waist.

The heat prickled at the back of her neck underneath her long blond hair and she wished she'd taken the time to put it up. One of her high-heeled sandals slipped on the uneven dirt but she expertly gathered herself and made it to the cement verandah without a glimmer of trouble. Nat had dressed in her best for her new adventure – she hardly left the house without a good pair of heels – but only now did she wonder whether she looked too

different. It seemed that old clothes and worn boots were the go.

The men nearby still watched her soundlessly, as if their tongues had frozen. She opened the glass door and walked inside the shop, pushing her sunglasses onto her head. A girl of no more than eighteen was serving a man at the counter, her face flushed as she talked to him. She wore a black singlet, torn denim jeans and had her hair up in a loose knot. An open can of Diet Coke sat nearby, along with a phone that was making tweeting sounds.

The girl was about to put a box of tissues in a plastic bag when she looked up. Her mouth dropped as she spotted Nat. The door opened and the two men from outside shuffled in. The man at the counter didn't turn; he was busy signing something. He was also in shorts and boots. At least his shorts didn't show his underwear, Nat thought.

'Excuse me, can I get some fuel?' asked Natalie.

The girl nodded. 'Um, yeah. Just turn the pump on.' She pointed to a switch on the wall behind her. Someone had written, *Turn off fuel!!!* and underlined *off* three times.

'This one?' Nat put her finger on it. When the girl nodded, she flicked it on. 'Thanks.'

'Cheers, Jess,' said the man at the counter, putting down the pen.

Jess stood up straighter and smiled. 'No worries, thanks. See you around.'

Nat checked him out when he turned around. He was tall and cute. A real-life handsome farmer. This one wasn't like the two older guys behind her with scruffy hair and worn clothes. Well,

actually this one did have messy, blond-tipped hair and he wore boots, but his face was gorgeous. Something you'd normally see in a fireman calendar, with dirt smudged on his tan skin. His deep sapphire eyes found hers, he smiled, she smiled back and then he walked straight past her and out the door.

He even smelt manly and strong, salt of the earth stuff. With an appreciative sigh she went back outside to her car and opened the fuel cap. The bowser was old, the price much higher than she was used to, and the handle was covered in leaking fuel and dust. She wasn't a real princess – she pumped her own fuel. It was just a lot cleaner in the city. Nat didn't want to get it on her dress or in her car and she wouldn't be able to wash until she'd found her new house.

'Would you like me to do that?' said a warm voice behind her. Nat turned to see those blue eyes coming her way from the nearby red ute, where he'd deposited his shopping. His legs were long, lean and golden-brown, like his muscled arms. He would make a perfect Mr January. At least the blue shorts he wore weren't torn but his blue cotton shirt had a few missing buttons, revealing a golden chest with only a light scattering of hair. He stopped in front of her, waiting.

'Um, yes, please. Thank you.'

'No worries.' He grabbed the nozzle with a strong grip. 'Nice car. Are you lost?'

'No.'

He frowned as he took in her high heels. His eyes slowly made their way up along her legs to her face and Nat resisted the urge to shiver with delight. She got many appreciative looks from

guys but for some reason this felt different, like he was a knight looking upon a princess.

‘Are you sure you’re not lost?’

Nat laughed. ‘No. Lake Biddy is where I’m meant to be.’ She waved to the back seat of her car, which was filled to the top with bags. ‘It’s my new home.’ She could tell he was surprised, even though he tried to hide it. ‘Actually, do you happen to know where the schoolhouse is?’

‘Ah, you’re the new teacher. Now it makes sense.’ He smiled and it was full of sincere warmth and friendliness. He had a crooked tooth, which somehow made his grin more interesting and real. ‘Sure. You go right from here then take the next right and your house is the small blue one mid-street on the left. The school is at the end of the road. You’ll see it.’ His brow creased slightly. ‘You don’t have much stuff,’ he said a little sceptically.

She looked at him, amused. He didn’t seem to believe she was actually here to stay. ‘My brother is bringing a truck down tomorrow and helping me move in.’

He nodded as the two men from the shop came outside again. This time they talked quietly while watching her.

‘Don’t mind Don and Polly. They’d stare at a brand-new Holland header the same way.’

‘Thanks, I think.’ Nat wasn’t sure what a Holland header was exactly but it sounded like these guys were harmless.

The fuel clicked full, and he put the nozzle back and screwed the cap on. ‘You’ll need to tell Jess how many litres so she can put it into the computer.’

‘Okay, thank you.’

‘No worries. I guess I might see you around then, seeing as you’re here to stay.’ His lips curled into a wide smile that brightened his masculine jaw. ‘Welcome to Lake Biddy.’ He went to extend his hand, realised how filthy it was, and tucked it into his pocket. ‘I’m sure you’ll love it here. You may find us all a little strange to begin with but I’m sure we’ll grow on you.’ With a nod he turned and walked back to his ute. ‘Turbo, get up!’

A black-and-brown dog came running from a spot beside the shop and launched onto the back of the ute. Then, without a backwards glance, the stranger was gone.

Instead of making her feel like she was the odd one out or crazy for leaving the city, he’d actually made her feel welcome, like she’d made the right decision. She was determined to make this work, no matter how different or strange life out here was. Nat wasn’t naive; she knew she’d be the round peg trying to fit into a square hole. But a part of her welcomed that challenge. It was time for her to experience something out of her comfort zone, something away from her family and their opinions. Something she could do alone.

She walked back inside to pay. ‘Good afternoon,’ she said as she passed the men.

They both smiled and tipped their hats. ‘Afternoon, love,’ one said. ‘G’day,’ said the other.

After paying for the fuel and a bottle of water, Nat followed Mr January’s directions to her new schoolhouse but kept driving to the end of the street to see the school. He was right: it was easy to find. She stopped by the small fence that edged the road. There was just one wooden building, painted white, with a

quadrangle on one side and an undercover area with an ablution block on the other. Was this it? It was so small and quaint. The gardens looked tended to, the lawn lush and green. There was brightly painted play equipment out the back and a flagpole near the school sign: *Lake Biddy Primary School. Est. 1923.*

Excitement, nerves and anticipation churned through her. This was her life, her year, and she couldn't wait to meet all of her kids on the first day of school. This was what she'd always dreamt about. It was finally happening.

Chapter 2

NATALIE spent her first weekend in Lake Biddy moving into her little house. And it really was little: it took four strides to get from the bedroom to the kitchen. Her brother, Jason, had taken the short journey three times, shaking his head in shock.

‘The whole house is smaller than Mum’s kitchen, sis,’ he’d said, hands on his hips as if addressing a boardroom meeting.

‘At least I won’t have much to clean,’ she’d replied in defence of her new home. ‘Anyway, I like it. It feels snug and personal, like my own bedroom.’

‘That’s because it’s the size of your bedroom,’ her brother had teased. But he’d stayed true to his word and helped her move in. Together they had carted in the bed, couch, tables and chairs that he’d brought down in the hired truck.

‘Actually, this has been fun,’ Jason had said at the end of the day. ‘It’s not often I get to do manly jobs like this. Makes a nice change from the office.’

‘Well, I appreciate you coming to help me, Jase. I know you

guys don't agree with me coming out here —'

'You mean to Woop Woop. Outback past the black stump.'

'Yeah, but it's not that bad. You'll see. I'm happy with my decision and it means a lot that you came to help me settle in. Just saying.'

Jason had pulled her into his arms. 'Anything for you, sis.'

Her first night in Lake Biddy had been spent with her brother and a meal of pasta and wine in her new home. The next day he returned to Perth, leaving her to empty her boxes: clothes, plates, photos, cleaning products, plus her laminator and coloured paper. By the end of Sunday it was feeling like her place. She'd arranged her things in each room just how she liked them, and no one else had put their two bob in. She skipped through the narrow passageway, all three metres of it, and swung from the doorways, singing as though she were in a Julie Andrews-inspired musical.

And now in the Monday morning sunshine, as Nat shut the door to her little blue house, she felt like singing again. It was her first day of school and she felt like a lamb, bouncing with each step. Nat loved getting to school early. Even as a child she had been fascinated by the long empty corridors and still rooms. Maybe it was the anticipation of what was about to begin, being able to watch everyone arrive, chatting and running around. It was no different being a teacher. Each step towards the tiny school filled her veins with adrenaline and excitement. Birds chirped in the nearby trees as a gentle breeze rattled the leaves. It was warm in the sunshine but not enough to bring a sweat – that would come later on, with a forecast top of thirty-eight degrees.

‘Hello, you must be Natalie. Welcome.’ A medium-height lady in a perfectly ironed pencil skirt and blue blouse walked to the school gate and pulled Natalie into a hug. ‘Hi, I’m Kath, the registrar.’ Kath’s grey hair was short and neat, her nails filed. There was no missing the cigarette stains on her fingers and the lingering scent of smoke. ‘So great to have you here. Gosh, I love your dress,’ she said, eventually letting Nat go.

‘Hi, Kath. Lovely to meet you finally.’ Nat had been emailing Kath and felt fully prepared for her first day. She knew her kids’ names, their ages, and who the rest of the staff were. Kath had said there was no need to get to the school any earlier than the kids’ first day, that she’d cope just fine and would settle in within the week, guaranteed. Pulling out two sets of keys from her bag, Kath gave one to Nat and opened the school building with the other. The door caught on the jarrah floorboards and Kath used her shoulder to push it open like she’d done it a million times. Inside, the boards ran the length of the school. Long benches sat outside each classroom, where the kids would put their schoolbags, with rows of hooks above for their hats and jackets. Windows ran along the length of the outside wall, and Nat knew they would soon be filled up with the children’s work.

Their heels clicked against the hard floor as Kath led Nat down the corridor. ‘That’s the library room, then the senior room, which is Grace’s. This is the principal’s office, where I sit too. And this one is yours, with the staffroom at the end.’ A flutter of excitement rippled through her as they paused by the door to her classroom. Inside it was rather bleak and lifeless: white walls, blue-grey carpet and a big blackboard. It had a

plain, nunnery-like feel, but the sight of the small desks and little blue chairs made her smile. Tiny bottoms belonging to bright-eyed children would soon be sitting there. There were twelve children in Nat's class and she had taken much delight in making all the nametags for their desks the previous night, along with a small sheet of the cursive alphabet for the younger ones. Her laminator had run hot, covering phonics charts, a day chart and a poster with their classroom rules. The school probably had its own large laminator but Nat hadn't been able to resist buying her own, along with an array of bright stickers and fancy paper, not to mention her own stationery. To Nat, the smell of hot melted plastic was almost as alluring as fresh flowers and she couldn't wait to get the nametags out of her large tote and start sticking them to the desks.

Kath must have sensed her eagerness. 'I'll let you get sorted. If you need anything I'll be just next door.'

'Thank you, Kath,' Nat said, getting to work. She rearranged the desks, settling on a U-shape, then stuck on the nametags and hung up her posters. She looked around – it was definitely feeling a little brighter already. Soon, with the kids' work to exhibit, it would be a room full of colour and excitement, just like her Year 1 class with Mrs Smithe had been.

Truth be told, it was Mrs Smithe who had made being a teacher seem like the grandest and most alluring job. Nat had idolised her. She'd had more attention, comfort and understanding from Mrs Smithe than from her own parents. Then, in Year 3, she'd had another wonderful teacher in Miss Parish. Nat could remember wanting to impress her so much and, right from those

early years, being a primary school teacher had been her only dream. Other kids had changed their minds, but not Nat. She was finally living her dream and it was everything she'd hoped for and more.

She actually felt tingles watching kids arrive by bus, flooding into the school in a flurry of chatter and schoolbags. Her bright-faced kids came inside and crowded around her, as if she was a shiny new toy. Everyone wanted to touch her and feel her clothes, especially the girls. She took in their faces; at the moment they were all unfamiliar but soon she'd know them all so well. Then they'd really be her kids. Just thinking the words made her squeeze her hands together with joy. Sure, she'd worked in a school before, but this was her first posting, her first real class.

By Friday morning, Nat couldn't believe it had only been a week. It felt like a month had passed with all the things they'd done. Already the walls were covered in artwork and maths sheets. Just about anything she could put up she did, just to make the classroom feel more inviting. Now she was stapling the laminated titles of the books they would be reading this term to the pin-up board before the bus arrived.

'Gosh, you don't waste any time.'

Nat turned to see Kath, who smiled as she pushed back her short, grey hair. Nat admired the way Kath always came to work in a pencil skirt and blouse, stockings and nice shoes, showing that the job still demanded respect even in such a small school. The previous day Kath had mentioned she was in her sixties,

and had seen all her kids through this school, as well as some of her grandkids. Nat also learnt that Jess from the shop was Kath's granddaughter. She thought of what Grace, the senior teacher, had told her: 'Kath has been here nearly longer than the school.'

'It's the best part of the day.'

'Yet another gorgeous dress. Don't you worry the kids will paint it or accidentally glue glitter to it?' Kath's face crinkled with lines.

Nat laughed, flattening the material of her designer V-neck dress. It was black down the sides, with a white centre and a beautiful rose pattern overlay. 'I have others.'

With a smile, Kath left her to her morning routine. Nat quickly finished getting her desk organised, along with her sheets for that morning's lessons.

'Good morning, Miss Wright,' said a tiny voice from the doorway.

'Good morning, Lucy.' Lucy still had her bag on her back – it was half her size and Nat was amazed that the child could carry it. She was one of the town kids who walked to school. Her green school shirt looked two sizes too big and nearly hid her black shorts. She had one pink sock and one yellow sock, and her shoelace was undone. 'Don't forget to do up your shoelace, Lucy,' she prompted while the child tugged on one pigtail. Lucy shrugged and Nat went over and tied it up for her. All her kids were special. Ruby had the reddest lips and a dad who sat at the table in jocks – as she'd reported for show-and-tell on her first day. Liam had all the freckles and a pet bobtail, and

Ava always had a runny nose and sniffed a lot. Jack had solid little legs like tree trunks and told her repeatedly that his dad took him shooting cans. Zara seemed to have her head in the clouds, and her uniform had been inside-out on her second day. Mallory and Seth were siblings. So were Mia and Noah. Isaac thought he was a cowboy and was constantly shooting things, and Billy was shy and wore long-sleeved shirts and pants every day despite the heat.

Natalie stepped outside as the two buses pulled up, and watched the children big and small descend on the school. Mia tripped over and a senior boy helped her up and checked she was okay.

‘How have you liked your first week?’ The principal, Ross, had appeared beside her, white shirt straining around his belly, the buttons threatening to pop.

‘It’s been wonderful. I can’t get over how different it is from a city school. The size, the mixed classrooms and the way the kids all get on.’

‘I know. I was a big city schoolteacher for a few years.’ His thick hair hardly moved as he shook his head. The sides were greying considerably. ‘The country kids seem more tolerant and helpful. Perhaps when you know everyone it’s harder to get away with being a troublemaker.’

‘I keep waiting for the novelty of having a new teacher to wear off but they are all just so eager to please me. I’m loving it,’ she admitted.

‘Good, I’m glad,’ he said, before twenty kids’ voices overpowered him.

With their bright morning faces, they all greeted her and the principal before going back to their lively discussions.

Natalie studied one of her eight-year-olds as he took off his schoolbag and hung up his hat with meticulous care. He was again wearing long pants and a full-length shirt. 'Morning, Billy. Don't you get hot in pants?'

The boy cocked his head to the side. 'Sometimes.' His voice was soft, unlike most of the other boys, who practically yelled.

After she gathered her class together, they began their morning by going through the day chart and then sharing their news. The children's 'news' was sometimes the highlight of her day, and also a good way to get to know them better.

It was Noah's turn. 'Last night my dad kicked our dog, Brute, because he was fighting with our other dog, Tonka, near my little sister. He yelled at them both and said swear words.'

The class giggled and Nat realised she'd been holding her breath, hoping Noah wouldn't say the swear words. 'Well, that's no good, Noah. It can be a bit dangerous around dogs when they're angry.' She nodded for him to sit back down and then clapped her hands together to get their attention. 'Now, this morning you're going to do an activity that will help me learn a little bit more about you all. So, when I'm finished, I want you to take a large sheet of paper from my desk and draw me a picture of your favourite place.' As she'd expected, kids started yelling out.

'My cubby house.'

'The tractor.'

'The water slide.'

Nat waved her hands to shush them. 'Listen. Year 1s, 2s and 3s, you will also have to write about it: where it is, why it's your favourite place and so on. I'll be around to help you. Okay, off you go.'

While paper shuffled and pencils rattled, Nat glanced at her phone. It was angled on her desk towards the window, the only spot it got good signal, and she thought of her friend Alisha, who had posted another photo on Facebook last night of herself at their favourite nightclub. It said, 'Missing my BFF.'

She gazed back over her class, their heads bent over their work. She got up and moved around the room, helping the younger ones write, asking them about their pictures. When she got to Billy she stopped and stared at the headstone and cross on his page. Surely it couldn't be a cemetery? Holding the desk, she knelt down beside him.

'Hey, Billy.' She spoke softly so as not to draw the attention of the other kids. She didn't want him teased. 'What's your favourite place?'

'It's where my nana is,' he said as he coloured with a black pencil.

'Oh, I see. Do you go there often?' Nat glanced at the nearby kids; some had turned to look but none of them laughed or teased. If anything, this seemed normal.

'Sometimes, with Dad. We sit and talk to her. Dad said that she can hear us and that she's watching over us.'

Nat swallowed hard. Billy's gentle words had moved her. She placed a hand on his shoulder. 'You must miss her.'

He turned his bright blue eyes towards her. 'I miss her butterfly

cakes and poems. And her hugs.’ The power of his gaze went right through her, as if he was secretly telling her all about his pain and loss. As her eyes started to gloss, he put his hand on her arm and smiled. ‘It’s okay.’

Nat felt strange, as if this dear little boy had tried to comfort her. Could he tell just how heartbroken she felt for him? Billy seemed wise beyond his years. His little angelic face tilted slightly. Then he frowned and looked back at his work. ‘How do you spell “favourite”?’

In a flash the moment was gone, the pause button lifted, and life continued. ‘I think that’s a good word for the blackboard, Billy.’ As Nat walked to the front, her heart ached for him. He was different from the other kids – timid, sometimes a loner, softly spoken and reserved. After just a week, she felt as if Billy was a kid with an old soul, who flitted through life like a butterfly.

She picked up some chalk to spell out the word for them all. So many schools had whiteboards or fancy projector screens these days, but having a blackboard made her feel just like Mrs Smithe. Even the smell of the chalk dust felt right. And the kids fought over who got to clean the dusters.

At lunchtime, Nat was sticking the kids’ work up on the wall when Grace popped her head in.

‘Would you like a cuppa? Ross has gone out on yard duty.’ Grace saw the picture Nat had just put up and smiled sadly. ‘Oh, is that Billy’s?’

‘Yes. How did you know? Did his nana pass away recently?’

Grace nodded and her shoulder-length bob swayed. Her

fringe was long but didn't quite cover the scar along her forehead. 'About three months ago. Alice Saddler was a wonderful lady and a good friend. She was well known and loved in this community.' Grace took a moment, her eyes glistening, before she continued. 'She died from a metastatic melanoma.'

Nat's mouth dropped open. 'Is that why Billy dresses in full-length clothes?'

'Yeah. He's been a stickler for it ever since. I hear he gives his Dad curry every time he wears shorts. It's a hard lesson for a little boy.'

'He was very close to her?'

'Oh, yeah. I mean most kids are close to their grandparents around here because they all live on the farms together, but Alice was the one who helped bring Billy up.'

Nat frowned as they walked to the staffroom. Outside, kids were trying to eat their lunch quickly so they could go play. 'No mother?'

'No. She died not long after he was born.' Grace turned on the kettle and got out two cups from the cupboard.

Kath was at the table stirring a mug of soup. 'Kettle should still be hot. You talking about Billy?'

'Yeah. He seems like a gorgeous kid. Out of all of them he seems the sweetest, but . . .' Nat wasn't sure how to explain it – and what if she was wrong?

'He's a bit different?' added Grace.

'Yes. Has he been . . . tested?' Nat asked carefully as she took her lunchbox from the fridge with her homemade salad.

'They took him to doctors but they said he wasn't "bad"

enough to put under any label. Alice did a lot of after-school work with him to help keep him up with his year but now she's gone, you might find him slipping backwards.'

Nat walked across the black-and-white checked lino and sat at the table. Grace brought over their cups before fetching her lunch from the fridge.

'All right. Is there anything I should keep an eye out for?' Nat asked.

'He withdraws into himself and can sometimes have anxiety attacks but I've seen the way you are with the kids – you'll be fine,' said Grace with a smile. 'He just needs patience and understanding. You seem to have that in spades. So are you excited about this afternoon?'

Nat groaned as she chewed a mouthful of salad. 'Not sure,' she mumbled.

Kath laughed, and it sounded like one of the birds Nat had heard that morning on her walk to school. 'You'll be fine. It's just a meet and greet and, believe me, you'd rather get it all over and done with in one go. It will save all the gawking every time you go to the shop.'

'I guess. I'm heading to Perth afterwards, though, so I can't stick around for too long.'

'Really? Are you going to do that every weekend?' asked Grace.

'God, I hope not.' Nat stabbed her fork at a cherry tomato. 'I still need a few things I forgot and everyone will want to see I'm still alive. They think I've gone to the end of the earth.' Gary, for one. 'God forbid they might actually come and visit me.' She

was actually looking forward to getting back to Perth, as the annual Wright-Hutchinson get-together was on. For years they had celebrated the friendship of these two families, as far back as Nat could remember, but this year would be different: this year, Nat Wright was dating Gary Hutchinson. He was eight years older than her, and she'd had a crush on him her whole childhood. Six months ago he'd finally asked her out, and they'd been together ever since. And the families couldn't be happier.

'Ha, good luck with that,' said Grace. 'I've got friends and family in Perth who have never come out here, yet they expect me to drop in and see them all the time. I was staying in Midland once and even that was too far away for them.' She shook her head in dismay.

Nat actually hoped there was some truth to Grace's words. She liked having Lake Biddy to herself. She was worried that if her parents and friends saw how remote it was they'd try to talk her into coming home. Nat just wanted one year to herself. A year doing a job that she'd wanted to do her whole life. Was that too much to ask?

Fiona Palmer

Fiona Palmer lives in the tiny rural town of Pingaring in Western Australia, three and a half hours south-east of Perth. She discovered Danielle Steel at the age of eleven, and has now written her own brand of rural romance. She has attended romance writers' groups and received an Australian Society of Authors mentorship for her first novel, *The Family Farm*. She has extensive farming experience, does the local mail run, and was a speedway-racing driver for seven years. She spends her days writing, working as a farm hand, helping out in the community and looking after her two children.

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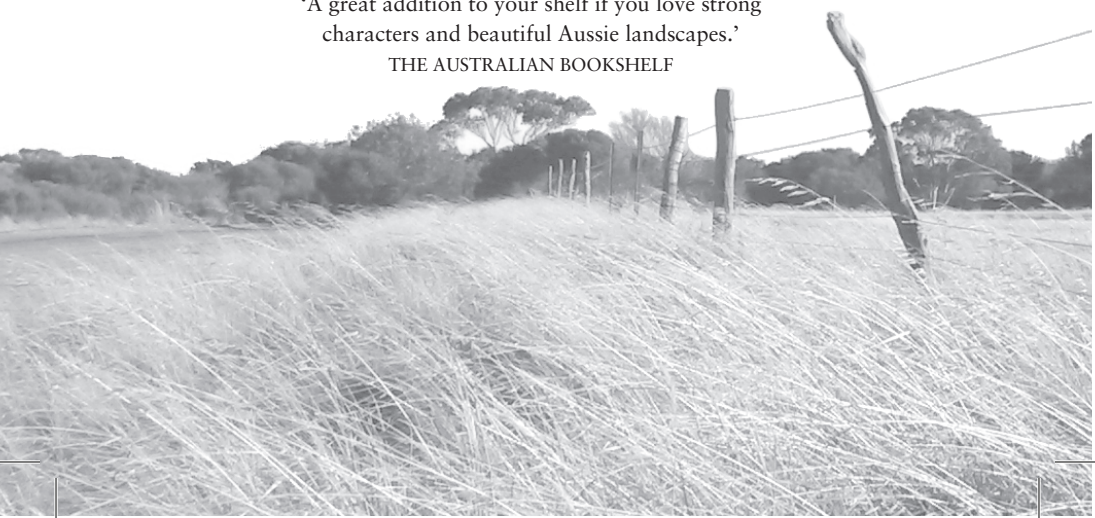
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Schoolteacher Natalie has always been a city girl. She has a handsome boyfriend and a family who give her only the best. But she craves her own space, and her own classroom, before settling down into the life she is expected to lead.

When Nat takes up a posting at a tiny school in remote Western Australia, it proves quite the culture shock, but she is soon welcomed by the swarm of inquisitive locals, particularly young student Billy and his intriguing single father, Drew.

As Nat's school comes under threat of closure, and Billy's estranged mother turns up out of the blue, Nat finds herself fighting for the township and battling with her heart. Torn between her life in Perth and the new community that needs her, Nat must risk losing it all to find out what she's really made of – and where she truly belongs.



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