

The Saddler Boys

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Extract

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.

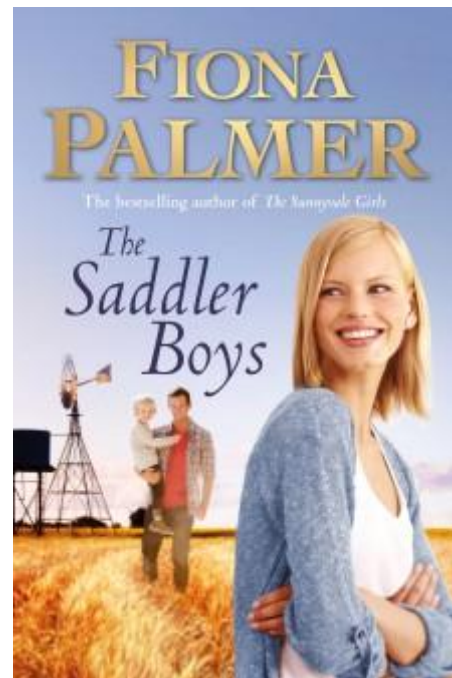
He took off his school hat, and she noticed that his short clipped hair looked mousy blond. He put on his helmet. She cursed when she couldn't see his face. Did she dare drive any closer? If he turned and saw her, what would he do? Approach her? Or run? Maybe she could tell him she was lost – or would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