

# The Outback Heart

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Extract

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2013

Indianna Wilson saw the yellow leather football flying towards her in the dusky evening light. She drove her work boots into the dirt and launched herself up to meet the ball, catching it against her chest.

'Nice mark, sis. Shame it was a one-off,' teased her brother.

Jasper stood near their front gate. Indi couldn't see his eyes or his cheeky smile, only the dark outline of his lean body in the dying light. When they'd started having a kick, the sun was just setting behind her, casting its fading rays of yellows, reds and oranges across the sky. But now, with the onset of night, she could see the town lights of Hyden twinkling in the distance. Indi loved this time of the evening, especially when she wasn't at work.

'Ha. I could set you up a perfect mark and you'd still drop it. You know the guys want me instead of you in this year's team,' she said before kicking the football straight to his chest.

Jasper caught it with ease. At twenty-five, with his shaggy blond hair and vibrant blue eyes, he was the town's catch – not that Indi would tell him that. Why make his head swell any bigger? Jasper and their older brother Patrick both had blond hair and blue eyes, whereas Indianna had her mum's dark-brown hair. That was where the differences ended though.

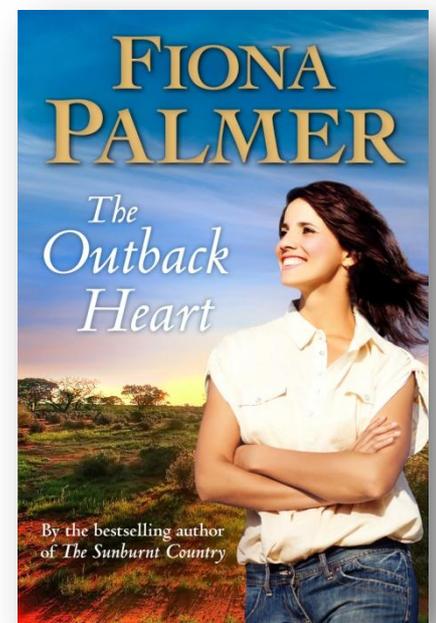
'Oi, you kids finished? How far away is tea, Indi?' shouted a rumbling voice from the front door of the house.

Indi could see her dad's large frame backlit by the inside lights and was about to answer when the football hit her on the shoulder, catching her off guard.

'Scored!' yelled Jasper as he ran to retrieve the ball.

'We're coming in now, Dad.' Indi punched Jasper's arm as he walked beside her through the gate to the house. 'I'll get you back for that,' she warned him.

Growing up with two older brothers had made Indi a little tougher than most girls her age. While other little girls spent their days inside playing with their dolls, Indi had been outside in the dirt scrapping for the football with Jasper and Pat. They had given her a love of playing football which, at twenty-three, none of her friends shared. At first the boys were gentle with their little sister but as she grew older and better, they began to play harder. She would always take on Jasper, who was only a few years older and took longer to develop in his teens. He didn't take too kindly to being flogged by his sister but he took great delight in repaying the beating when his growth spurt finally kicked in. It wasn't uncommon for her to have bruises or a split lip from wayward elbows, which always ended in their mum lecturing the boys. Indi would stand behind her mum pulling faces at her brothers while they got busted for being too rough. If only their mum knew that Indi gave as good as she got when it came to chasing the football.



'Dirt before the shovel,' said Jasper as he held open the flywire door for Indi after they'd kicked off their boots.

Their dad, Allan, was at the table reading the latest issue of *Farm Weekly*. His large steel-rimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose, and his grey hair tidy after Indi had cut it with the clippers last week. He was a strong man, kept busy by his contracting business. Jasper and Patrick both worked with him, spraying and spreading for the farmers around town. And there were trucks in the huge shed down the backyard for carting grain at harvest.

'I put some chops out this morning, Dad. Won't take long to cook up. Give us ten or fifteen.' She turned to her brother, who had sat down and started to read the *Countryman* paper he'd pulled across from the pile on the table. 'Good to see you're so keen to help, Jasper,' she said before heading into the kitchen. It was pointless with Jasper. He was used to being looked after, a bit like Dad. Their mum had left huge shoes to fill. She'd always done everything for them, to the point where Indi wasn't sure if her dad even knew how to use a washing machine. Jasper sure as hell had never used the vacuum and she could probably count on one hand the number of times she'd seen either of them do the dishes. But that's how it was. Mum had stayed home to run the house while the men worked. It had been her job and she'd done it with pride.

Indi stepped into the country-style open-plan kitchen that wrapped its way around the three walls with the dining table filling the fourth side. Her mother had redecorated the kitchen five years ago, giving the place a rustic feel – her collection of tin roosters completed the look. Indi hadn't changed a thing, never would.

Indi tied her long dark hair up in a messy bun before cooking the chops. She whipped up a tossed salad and placed it on the large pine table, along with some plates and cutlery. Allan put his magazine away and pushed the pile of papers to the side. Indi brought the meat out and they all began to help themselves. This was how they rolled in the Wilson house.

Allan smiled at Indi. 'Cheers, love. It looks great.' He had his checked shirt rolled up at the sleeves and, although his large hands were washed clean, there was engine grease near his elbow. After a few mouthfuls Allan cleared his throat, his fork shaking slightly in his hand. 'Sweetheart, are there any roses in bloom out in the garden?'

Indi glanced at Jasper, who also knew what their dad was really asking. 'Not really. Are you thinking of a bouquet for Mum's grave?' she asked as she watched her father nod his head slowly. 'It's okay. Mrs Bateson always has a heap of flowers in her garden. I'll give her a call later and see if she minds putting together a bunch for next weekend.'

Allan nodded again and then rested his fork on his plate. 'Two years,' he said solemnly. 'I can't believe it's been two years already.' Allan's river-blue eyes watched Indi. She knew just how much she looked like her mum and how it affected their father, especially around her anniversary.

Jasper moved his hand across, giving his father a quick squeeze on the arm. 'I know, Dad,' he said.

A weak smile crossed Allan's lips. 'It feels like just yesterday she was nagging me about leaving my sweaty socks on the floor again.'

Indi swallowed the lump in her throat. 'Do you remember that time she put all the boys' stinky socks on your side of the bed to get back at you?'

Jasper chuckled but the pain was still raw. 'Yeah. She always did know how to set us straight.'

Allan glanced at his kids, a grin spreading across his face. 'Yep, your mother was a corker, that's for sure. One of the many reasons I loved her. She didn't take anyone's crap, especially mine. But still, she spoiled us.' Allan gave Indi a wink. 'Just like you do, sweetheart.'

Indi stole a glance at their family photo on the wall behind Jasper. Her mum, Elizabeth, had been so strong and brave. She was a 'glass half full' lady, and never gave up without a fight. Whether it was getting Patrick through his troublemaking period at school, helping boost tourism for Hyden or fighting her breast cancer, she did it with a positive attitude. She never complained. For Indi, it was something to aspire to.

The phone rang. Allan pushed back his chair and picked up the receiver on the kitchen bench.

'Yello? Oh, hi, Grundy.'

Jasper rolled his eyes. 'Bet you fifty bucks he wants us to spray his paddocks,' he whispered.

'Why? We've never done Grundy's before,' Indi whispered back.

'Do you want to take the bet or not?' Jasper was far too cocky.

'Nah, you know something. What's going on?'

Allan hung up the phone and joined them at the table again. 'Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle. Never thought we'd score a bit of extra work from Grundy.'

Indi glanced at Jasper. 'How did you know, smartarse?'

Jasper started laughing. 'A little birdy told me that Grundy took both boom arms off his sprayer yesterday.'

'Oh, really? What happened?' asked Allan.

'Apparently he'd just finished spraying a paddock when his phone rang. After a long conversation with his old man he hung up and drove straight out of the paddock, forgot he hadn't folded the boom arms away. Swiped both clean off. It'll cost a bit to fix so we might have his whole spraying program.'

'Classic. Good ol' Grundy. Good luck living that one down,' Indi sniggered.

'Hmm,' said Allan as he drummed his large fingers against the table. His short nails were embedded with dirt and his dry callused skin was dotted with cuts and bruises. 'Bad for Grundy, great for us. You and Patrick can head out early in the morning to start with the paddocks by the house and then Grundy will let you know from there. I'll ring Pat after dinner.'

'I heard he only got the one paddock done,' chuckled Jasper.

'I wouldn't be quick to laugh, Jasper. You and Pat have done the same thing. Cost me a bloody fortune, you two have.'

'Mine was catching a power pole, Dad, and I was just starting out.' Jasper picked up his chop bone and chewed on the scant remains. 'So, what are you doing, sis, while we're out doing circles?'

Indi shrugged. 'Same old, same old. Road training the feed barley from out at south-east Hyden into the bin here – the port wants the feed barley for a ship that's come in. There's a train late tomorrow night so I won't be home for dinner. I'll make up a casserole and leave it in the fridge.'

'Thanks, sweetheart,' Allan said. 'Is there any ice-cream left?'

'Yep, and some apple pie.'

She collected their empty plates, and Jasper carried the leftover salad.

When they brought dessert back to the table Allan asked, 'So when does footy training start, Jasper? Can't be too far away now. Or are you still without a coach?'

'No, we've found a new coach at last,' said Indi, digging into her apple pie.

'We have?' asked Jasper. 'Since when?'

'Ha! See, you don't know everything. I have a little birdy, too.'

Indi smiled. Jasper was getting agitated.

'Well?' Jasper asked.

'Okay, so you know Dowerin won the grand final in their league.'

'Yeah, they were down the bottom to begin with, weren't they?'

'Yes, they were. So I investigated a little. The people I spoke with couldn't say enough about Troy and his coaching and how he turned the team around. And that's just what we need here. I know this town can be great again, just like it used to be back when you played, Dad. Anyway, I went to Jenny and Phil, 'cos I knew they were looking for another worker, and together we propositioned Troy. It was all spur of the moment and we wanted to get in before anyone else did. I got some money from the local businesses to add to his package with Phil's job at Farmworks, including a house, and we managed to get him on board.'

'Even though we were wooden spooners last year? You did mention that, right?' said Jasper.

'Um, sort of.' Indi waved her hand at him. 'But lucky for us, he was leaving Dowerin anyway and snapped up the deal. I'm so excited. I've put so much into getting this bloke here.'

'How come you never mentioned it?' asked Allan.

Indi shrugged. 'Just didn't want to get anyone's hopes up in case the deal fell through.'

'So you've been working on this all by yourself?'

'I had Jen and Phil's help. We just didn't want to jinx it so we kept it pretty quiet.'

Allan shook his head. 'You certainly did that.'

'Well I hope this fella knows what he's doing,' Jasper said. 'I'm glad we don't have to coach ourselves. I mean, Robbo was bad last year, he had no idea how to coach a team, but it was good of him to try.'

'I can't believe you sorted all this out yourself, Indi,' Allan said.

'It wasn't just me, Dad. Jenny helped. It was a win-win situation. He's arriving this week and we'll all get to meet him next week at training.'

'Oh, well, good on you, love,' Allan said. 'Your mum would be real proud.'

'I just hope he's as good as I've heard. We could use a few wins this year. If we can't build this club back up, we could lose it altogether. I can't let that happen.'

'I agree, sis. Not having a footy team is just wrong.'

'Besides, we have potential. You and Pat are great players. I'm hoping Troy has the goods to shape the rest of the team, then you'd have some help,' said Indi.

Jasper tilted his head. 'Gee, Indi, I think that's the closest you've come to paying me a compliment. You think I'm great?'

'Nah, but having young Lucky on the team just makes you look good,' she said, giving her dad a wink. 'He couldn't get a kick in a stampede.'

'That's right,' Allan said, his great shoulders shaking with each chuckle.

Jasper stopped frowning as he burst out laughing. 'Hell, Lucky even makes Indi look like an AFL player. That Irish bugger hasn't got a clue.'

As the tears of laughter filled her eyes, Indi hoped her mum was watching.