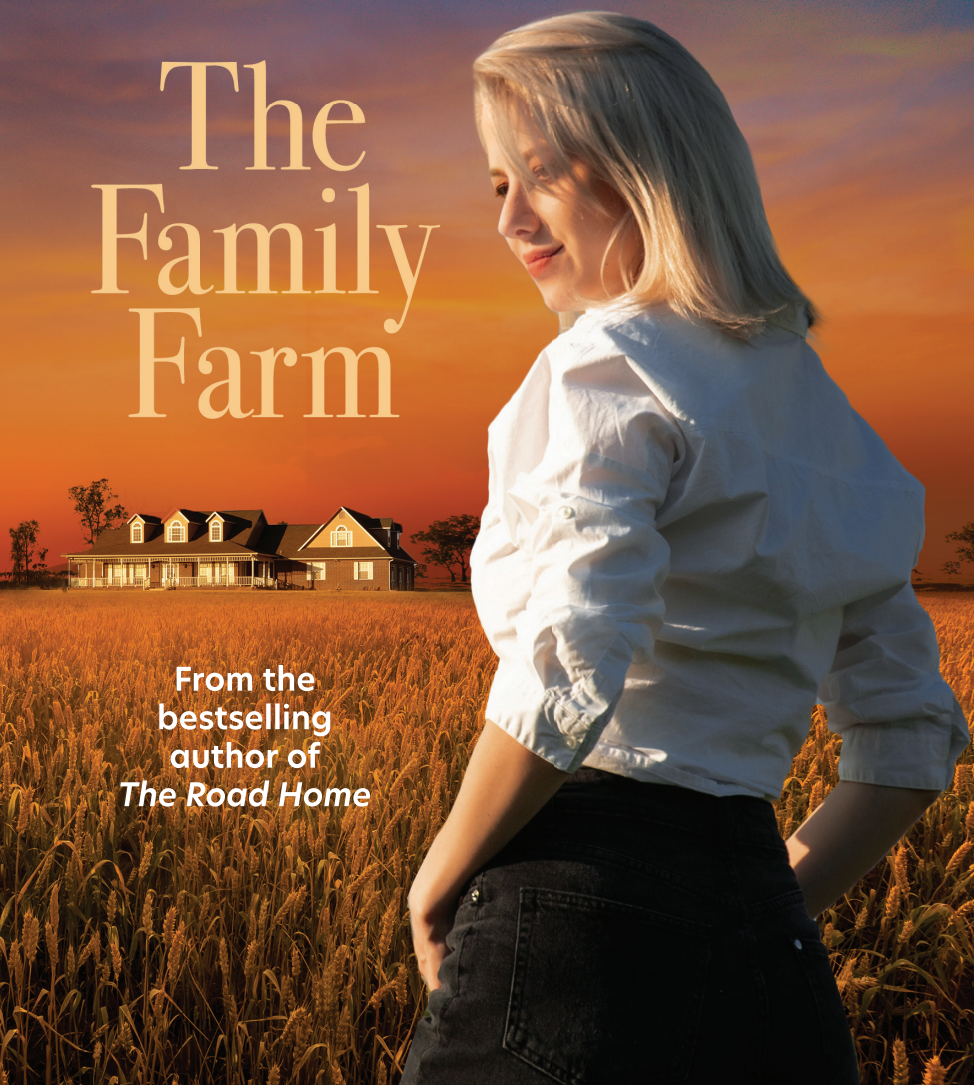


# FIONA PALMER

## The Family Farm

From the  
bestselling  
author of  
*The Road Home*



FIONA  
PALMER

THE  
*Family  
Farm*

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editions



# *Part One*



# 1

THE old Holden ute squeaked and rattled as it rolled along the gravel road, leaving a billowing dust trail. Isabelle Simpson was glad to see the land around her home district hadn't changed during her absence. The same vast blue sky watched over her, and the unchanged trees were filled with pink and grey galahs and bright-green parrots. Her heart felt free and her skin tingled with eagerness. Not long now. She smiled at the familiar farm signs along the road as if remembering old friends. Izzy was glad that the farmers she'd known her whole life hadn't sold out and moved on. It just wouldn't be home without them.

A high-pitched ringing interrupted her thoughts. Pulling over, Izzy picked up her mobile, saw who was calling and promptly pressed cancel before throwing the phone down. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Didn't he realise what he'd done?

The phone began vibrating on the seat near her leg. A text message had arrived. Hesitantly, she picked up her mobile.

We need 2 talk. Can u please call me.

Like hell, she thought. Izzy had already told him all she was going to say on the matter. Suddenly a sob forced its way out from deep in her throat, catching her by surprise. Her shoulders shook as she clutched the steering wheel. Finally, the bottled-up tears fell in floods. He had ruined everything and she felt so betrayed. Izzy let the tears fall freely, hoping it might help her move on and be done with this whole cock-up.



The familiar road beckoned when she glanced at it through blurry eyes. I'm almost home, she thought. Sniffing loudly, she wiped away the last of her tears and sat up straight. Izzy Simpson was made of tougher stuff than that. Besides, another few minutes and she'd be back home. Back to her parents. Back to the strong memories of her sister, Claire. Back to the close proximity of Will Timmins. Back to another man complicating her life.

Bloody hell. That's all I need, she thought, sighing.

Planting her foot on the accelerator and spraying gravel, Izzy drove her ute back onto the road. She headed through her local town, past the three large grain-storage bins. They were a towering icon of Pingaring and a marker point for Izzy. Her family's farm lay only ten minutes to the east. After days of travelling, it finally felt like she was coming home.

As she peered out of the open window, the breeze flicked her long dark hair about her face, tickling her skin. There was something about returning that made the landscape seem so much more beautiful and bright, highlighting the smell of the warm dusty air, the hint of eucalyptus and the glorious blue of the sky. She knew this route like the back of her hand – the mallee trees and scrub bush that lined the road, and the places where the wildflowers grew in spring.

Taking a deep breath, as if she could suck in all the familiar smells at once, Izzy glanced at her kelpie dog. 'What do you reckon, Tom? Good to be home, isn't it, mate?'

His answer was to stick his head out the open passenger window. Tom's tongue flapped in the wind and his bottom lip blew down, revealing his yellowing teeth.

Both windows were open, and the hot afternoon breeze provided the only relief from the stifling heat. Even though her ute was old, it still ran well. Brown vinyl lined the interior, well worn but clean and tidy, except for the dog hairs that coated the brown seat covers

on the passenger side. On the floor below Tom sat his ice-cream container with enough water to wet his chops.

Yes, her old blue Holden was more than just metal and rubber. It was almost like a member of her family. Izzy had bought it when she was fifteen. After four long weeks working on Spud's crutching cradle she had earned enough money to buy it off the local mechanic in town.

Izzy remembered that long month, many years ago. It had been the first time she'd worked off the family farm. Her first day's work was over at a neighbouring property crutching six hundred head of ewes, big fat ones too. It was a stinking hot day full of endless flies and large blowies. Spud, Johnno and Mick were on the crew back then. They crutched the wool off around the tail of the ewes to prevent them from being blown by flies, while she roused and pushed up sheep. She could still remember the clang of the metal flap as the blokes had pulled the ewes from the high race she'd just pushed them up into. The whirr from the hand pieces and the constant bangs, mixed in with Mick and Johnno yelling sick jokes to each other, had caused her ears to ring that day. Then there were the sharp prickles hidden in the wool that had made her already sore and swollen fingers sting as she grabbed the ewes by their thick, greasy coats, struggling to move the more stubborn ones up the race. Not to mention her aching back from bending over all day sorting the crutchings from the shitty dags and half-clean bits of wool.

Izzy had quickly learnt to pack her own toilet paper. It came in handy when you had to squat behind the ute or cradle.

Yes, it had been hard work, but bloody good pay for a fifteen-year-old. Her HQ ute was her reward, and she had spent a special couple of days with her dad cleaning it up. That was before the accident, back in the days when he allowed her to help him around the machinery on the farm. Over the years she'd earned enough money to upgrade her ute if she'd wanted to. But strangely, she felt

too attached to ever sell. It held a lot of good memories of times spent with her dad, and of cruising the paddocks with Claire in her newfound freedom.

Slowing down as the familiar turnoff approached, Izzy flicked on the indicator and turned left, stopping just short of a faded sign.

*B & J Simpson, Gumlea* was etched into a piece of ancient red jarrah, and faded white paint peeled out from the grooves. Gumlea was the name that had been given to the farm long before her granddad had bought it, named, she guessed, after all the salmon gums, which had been planted on the farm many years ago. The sign hung from two small chains off a thicker rusty frame. Her dad would've loved to see the words *and Son* up there. He'd wanted someone to pass his farm on to, and Izzy had wished with all her heart that it would be her. She'd dreamed of running the family farm nearly her whole life. She was twelve when she realised that was what she definitely wanted. Being away at boarding school had been hell and had proved how much the farm meant to her. The only thing standing in her way was good ol' dad. He could be like a mule sometimes, which was the main reason Izzy had been away from the farm she loved for the past few years. He'd have a fit if he knew what kind of work she'd been doing.

Izzy sighed as she moved the stick into gear and headed down the corrugated gravel driveway, intermittently lined with the tall gum trees that she used to climb as a child. Her nerves started to twinge. Crap. What were her folks going to say when they saw her? She knew her mum would be ecstatic – Mum always missed her the most – but Dad was never too keen on surprises.

Tom barked as he spotted the farmhouse, bringing Izzy back from la-la land. Three large paddocks surrounded the farm buildings. Two were in crop, the Halberd variety of wheat making a golden-brown haze, nearly ripe for harvest. The other paddock was bare, and in the far corner sheep huddled in the shade of the nature reserve along

the fence line. Large silver farm sheds rose into view like a pop-up book the closer she got. Izzy drove past ancient ploughs left rotting together in clumps – the same ones she and Claire used to play on.

Dad's Toyota Land Cruiser was parked at the house, with the sheep feeder attached behind. He couldn't afford to upgrade his ute like some of the other farmers around, but instead had to wait for a good year or until it died on him. Then they'd need to get a newer one as half the farm work couldn't be done without it. Izzy had spent most of her childhood in that ute. She checked her watch. It must be about smoko time, she thought.

Parking next to the Land Cruiser she noticed the garden was still as amazing as ever. Her mum had planted native shrubs, grevilleas, bottlebrush and other plants that thrived in dry conditions. Water was always a problem, especially at this time of year. But she also had a section of plants that she tended to regularly, from the row of deep red roses to the clumps of irises and daylilies. Then there were the springtime pink and white everlastings and colourful livingston daisies, which incredibly covered the hard ground throughout her garden, putting on a bright display worthy of any garden show. Mum always managed to find enough flowers in her garden to put on the table in Nana's vases.

Looking down at her worn blue jeans and tan singlet, Izzy wondered whether she should have dressed up. She flipped down the sun visor in the car, gawked into the cracked mirror taped on behind it, and applied some lip balm. She would have liked fuller lips and a larger smile, but at least she had straight teeth. Her blue eyes were vibrant against her clear olive complexion. Hastily she retied her hair back into a ponytail. Her hands showed signs of neglect. Deeply tanned, they were callused and dry, but that didn't worry Izzy. To her, each callus was like a gold star, showing how hard she had worked. Poking her tongue out, she pulled a face at her reflection, then flicked the visor back into place.



‘C’mon, Tom.’ She whistled, then slammed the door behind him as he jumped out. They walked side by side towards the fence and the open wooden slat gate that beckoned you towards the house. Izzy slid her hands into her back pockets to settle her nerves. The soft patter of Tom’s paws against the earth led them towards the back of the house. The front door was hardly ever used, only by the odd travelling salesman or Jehovah’s Witness. Each step seemed to take forever, but soon she was standing in front of the familiar flywire door. Slipping off her Rossi boots, she placed them neatly beside a rugged pair of her father’s. She smiled. Everything on the verandah was how she remembered it. The wooden table that her mum had stripped back still stood in the same spot, covered with old tins and bottles that contained various cacti. A couple of rusty rabbit traps and shears hung on the wall above the table, souvenirs of days gone by. Terracotta pots with large leafy plants were scattered along the wall. At the end stood three large steel wheels from old machinery, which her father had bolted together to close off the verandah.

Tom sighed as he settled himself down in his old spot just left of the door. Reaching for the handle, Izzy called out, ‘Hello. Anyone home?’ Taking a step inside, she called out again. ‘Mum?’

‘Izzy, is that you?’ A voice came from the cool darkness and her mum appeared. Izzy had inherited her tall, lanky, almost boyish figure from her mum. Jean’s curly brown hair, highlighted with soft grey, sat on her shoulders. Her blue eyes shone with excitement and her wide smile emphasised her laughter lines. Small crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes made her look wise and beautiful. The plain cream shirt she wore was spotless, and around her neck hung a treasured gold locket that enclosed a small photograph of Izzy’s sister, Claire.

‘Hi, Mum. I missed you,’ said Izzy, stepping into her mother’s open arms.

Jean Simpson pulled out of Izzy’s embrace, held her daughter at arm’s length and gave her a once-over. ‘It’s so good to see you too,

sweetheart. Why didn't you tell me you were coming? How long are you home for?'

'I wanted to surprise you, Mum. But let me get in the door first before you bug me with questions, okay?' Izzy teased.

'Come on, then. Your dad's having a cuppa. I'll make you one too.' Jean placed her arm around Izzy's shoulders and led her into the heart of the house.

Izzy's thick socks muffled her footsteps on the old floorboards as they walked the few steps down the corridor into the open kitchen. Over the sink, light flowed in from a large window, through which the garden was visible. The cupboards in the kitchen were the classic mission brown of their era, with coordinating green benchtops, and they were as tidy as ever. The brown stoneware tea, sugar and coffee bowls sat neatly lined against the wall, and she knew there would be no dust on them or grains of sugar or coffee spilt nearby. Her eyes ran over the empty sink that shone from a recent scrub. Izzy had inherited the cleaning gene. When she worked on a tractor, everything sat in an organised spot and the inside of the cab was always cleaned before she started and again when she'd finished.

The solid frame of her father, Bill Simpson, sitting at the breakfast bar captured Izzy's attention. A faint trail of steam rose up from the mug of tea he held in his wide, deeply lined hand. His dark-blue, almost black, piercing eyes glanced up as he sensed someone's presence.

He nearly knocked his stool over and spilt his tea as he scrambled to his feet. 'Isabelle! My God, what are you doing here? I heard someone pull in, but I thought it was just Will.' He embraced Izzy in a tight bear hug and kissed her cheek, his stubble scratching the surface of her skin. She almost had to stand on tippy-toes to reach her arms up over his burly shoulders. It wasn't that he was taller than Izzy, he just had a much bigger frame and a barrel chest.

Izzy wondered for a moment why he'd be expecting Will, but let

the thought slip from her mind as she hugged her dad. Gee, I love this old geezer, even if he does try to run my life, she thought. Bill Simpson smelt just how she remembered him, with a hint of sweat and grease mixed in with his deodorant. His tufted-up short, greying hair had thinned slightly at the front. Deep-set wrinkles stood out on his ruddy skin, and that familiar tiny dimple appeared as he smiled, along with his old set of dentures.

Izzy let go of her dad and pulled out a stool alongside him. Jean placed a cup of tea down in front of Izzy and slid a plate of scones closer.

‘Now, tell me, darling, how long are you staying? Did you get time off from work?’ Jean asked eagerly.

Izzy couldn’t hide the smile that grew large and wide. ‘I’m home for good, Mum. If that’s okay! Is my old room still up for grabs?’

‘Of course it is, sweetheart. It’s been waiting here since you left. Oh, I’m so glad you’re back to stay, Izzy.’ Jean reached over and touched Izzy’s hand, a gesture of just how much she had missed her daughter.

‘So, what happened to your job over east?’ asked Bill, while looking into his tea. ‘Didn’t get the sack, did ya?’

That’s just like him, thought Izzy. Assuming the worst all the time. ‘No, Dad. I didn’t. The kids are old enough now to take care of themselves and I just wasn’t needed any more. Besides, my place is here with you and Mum on Gumlea.’ She didn’t think he needed to know the truth just yet.

Izzy thought about the Radcliffs. They – well, Rob – had given her a job on their farm, Cliffviews, in New South Wales. It was a good size farm – just over four thousand hectares – and they grew wheat, canola and barley, and ran sheep. It had started out as an ‘everything job’ – helping with their kids, the housework and the odd farm job when she could manage. But Izzy had told Rob from the start that she loved farm work. She was hoping to learn as much from him as she

could – from fencing to tractor maintenance, spraying out chemicals and spreading of fertilisers, more or less anything to do with running a farm. When Rob's farmhand quit, Izzy quickly stepped into the position. She'd worked hard to prove how dedicated she was, and bit by bit Rob taught her more. Then her job had changed to permanent farmhand. He must have believed in her and the skills she had acquired, as they started to take holidays and leave her to run the farm in their absence. Rob even roped her into helping with the farm books, and they'd worked on the crop plan together. Whatever needed doing on a farm, Izzy could do it, and she was damn proud of what she'd achieved in the two and a bit years at Rob's. She was now well and truly ready to help run Gumlea.

She'd never passed this information on to her dad, of course. He'd have a fit if he knew she'd been doing farm work. As far as he knew, she'd simply been the house-hand. Otherwise he never would have let her go.

The Radcliffs had become like an adopted family and Izzy would always remember them for their kindness and love. She sighed heavily. She already missed Alice and the two kids so much. If only Izzy's own dad could be more like Rob; so understanding, and eager to teach her anything she wanted to learn. Rob never held back because she was a girl. It was just a shame he had to go and ruin it all. Everything had been so perfect, but now . . . well . . . every good memory was blurred by his betrayal. She could never go back.

Shaking her head, she tried to throw Rob from her mind. 'So, Dad, what's new on the farm?' Izzy rested her hand on his arm for a brief moment, drawing his attention back to her.

'The farm's the same, love. Not a lot happening. We're counting on this year's crop. It looks like the best we've had in a while. Just as well too. We need it to help pay off the new land and to replace the old header that's on its last legs.' He ruffled her hair. 'But don't worry your pretty little head over it. We have more important things



to do. I think your coming home is cause for celebration, don't you, Jean? What say we have a barbie? It's been a while since we've had everyone over.' Bill scrunched up his brow, trying to remember.

'I think that's a great idea,' said Jean. 'I'll do a ring around and let everyone know. How does Thursday night sound, Izzy? That should give you enough time to settle in.'

'Yeah, sounds fine to me, Mum. I don't have a lot to unpack and I already feel settled in. Does anyone need a hand with anything or shall I just go and put my stuff away?' Izzy said, stuffing a large portion of scone into her mouth.

'No, I'm fine, Isabelle,' replied her dad. 'You go do your thing. I'm off to feed the sheep in the side paddock, and then the header needs seeing to.' He swallowed the last of his tea. 'I'm so glad you're home, honey. You've made my day. We'll catch up when you're done.' With a wink, he turned and headed to the back door.

'Come on, Izzy,' said her mum. 'I'll help you get your stuff.' Jean collected up the cups and put them in the sink, then placed the clingwrap back over the remaining scones and popped them in the fridge, which was decorated with the postcards Izzy had sent them from the towns close to Rob's farm near Merriwa. Some were from Dubbo, some from Newcastle, and a couple each from Tamworth and Bathurst. When Rob had given her a weekend off here and there, she'd taken off in her ute and explored New South Wales with Tom.

Walking out of the kitchen, Jean stopped in front of Izzy and smiled before pulling her into another embrace. 'Did I mention that I'm happy you're home?' she said.

'Maybe once or twice.'

## 2

THE next morning Izzy woke with a warm fuzzy feeling inside. Everything seemed right. She lay motionless for a moment, trying to get her bearings, taking in the smells and sounds of her old room. She blinked as she focused on the wall that held the weight of a large, jarrah frame enclosing a picture of two girls on a motorbike. Both girls had the same blue eyes and oval faces, with similar, striking smiles. Izzy remembered having so much fun with Claire that day. A mischievous twinkle was unmistakable in Claire's eyes, as the wind flicked her golden hair about her face.

They had been young then: Claire was sixteen, three years older than Izzy. Even with the age gap, they still got on like a bonfire. Claire had loved to dink Izzy on the bike, and they'd had their fair share of stacks. She'd been born a daredevil, fearless – something Izzy had tried to aspire to.

Izzy's head swam with memories. Claire had been her best friend as well as her big sister. She had to admit that she'd idolised her, although she'd never confessed it then.

A magpie squawked outside her window, competing with a heap of screeching pink and grey galahs in the distance, and she caught the smell of fresh toast. Mum and Dad must be up already, she thought.

Flinging her arm out of the bed, she checked her watch. 'Bugger.' She sat bolt upright. It was already six a.m. Izzy had planned to be up early to do a tour of the farm with her father. She must have been

more tired than she thought after all the driving. Five days it had taken her to get back home, not to mention a lot of petrol money and one flat tyre.

Throwing back the sheets, Izzy swung her slender legs out of bed and planted them on the old wooden floorboards. Stretching out her arms and bending her neck, she stifled a yawn and stood up. It was warming up and high temperatures were expected. The flies were already buzzing around, trying to find a cool spot. Izzy stepped towards a white melamine cupboard and grabbed out a pair of khaki shorts and a dark-blue singlet. Quickly she dressed and put on a pair of thick socks, as well as her boot guards, and strode out of her room.

Mum was in the kitchen alone.

‘Where’s Dad?’ Izzy asked.

‘He’s just out fuelling up the ute. Here, eat some breakfast first. Your father’s already had his.’ Jean finished buttering some multigrain toast, then reached for a pan on the stove and transferred two eggs onto the bread. ‘There you go, love.’

‘Ah, Mum, you’re a legend.’ Izzy settled herself on a stool at the breakfast bar and began to dig straight in.

As Izzy and Bill drove from one dam to the next, the morning sun sparkled against the golden tips of the wheat and heavy heads leant over in the gentle breeze. An impatient Tom pushed his head out past Izzy to the open window. Little mounds of woollen bodies lay dotted over dry feedless paddocks, trying to conserve energy for the warm day ahead.

The final paddock came around too soon as they checked on the last mob of sheep. A blurry haze had spread out before them as the heat intensified in the late morning.

‘It’s gonna be a hot one at the clearing sale today,’ said her dad suddenly.

Lifting her head from its comfy position on her arm, Izzy turned to her father. 'What clearing sale? You didn't tell me there was a clearing sale on. Whose?' she asked curiously.

'Ray North's. He's retiring early after having too many shitty years back to back.'

Izzy nodded. She knew Ray and his wife. They lived about twenty-five kilometres away. 'Who's interested, Dad?'

'Johnno's already leasing most of the land and Perkins the rest. Ray just has his machinery and sundries to sell. Thought we could go in and have a look. He still has that yellow ten-tonne Volvo truck I wouldn't mind getting, if it's in my price range. Plus there's probably a few other things that might be of interest. Best go give our support as well.'

They settled into silence. Another family was leaving the district while their farm merged with others around it. Towns shrunk, schools closed and local businesses battled. It seemed the way of the world, Izzy thought sadly as she rubbed Tom's ears. She wondered what Pingaring would be like in another ten years. She pictured a derelict town with tumbleweeds rolling past.

It took them most of the morning to drive around the farm checking on sheep and dams. Plus Izzy made her dad detour to other parts of the farm, just so she could see every square inch of it. She had missed it all so much and was happy to find it just how it was before she left. All except the large eucalyptus tree that had fallen over in the rock paddock, which Dad said had happened last year after Cyclone Harry had come down the coast.

When they finally returned to the sheds, Izzy quizzed her dad on his new purchases and checked them over, much to his irritation. She liked the new – well, actually, second-hand – seeder bar he'd got, and the new drill press for the workshop. By then it was almost lunchtime and Jean was calling them on the two-way, telling them to clean up and head to the house.



After a cold meat and salad lunch, they all headed to Ray's farm. Izzy grilled her dad for more details on the way. What other things was he interested in and how much was he willing to pay? She even offered her opinion but knew damn well he wouldn't listen to it.

'I think you'll be lucky to get that truck, Dad. It's gonna go way above your price,' she said, having a go anyway. 'With harvest around the corner it will sell as fast as a carton of cold beer. My bet is it will go for around twenty-five thousand.'

Her dad just 'hmphe'd' at her.

Crossing her arms, she shook her head. She should have bet a six-pack on it, because she knew the old man was dreaming. Trucks were always in high demand at harvest, especially during a good year.

Her mum was helping the CWA ladies with afternoon tea and drinks, so she was dolled up nicely today. She had on a pair of white shorts, a soft blue shirt and minimal make-up, but that was all she needed. Izzy couldn't believe how graceful her mum could look. Why hadn't she inherited any of that, she wondered. Izzy wouldn't dare wear white. It would never stay clean on her. She was still wearing her work clothes from the morning. She stretched her legs as much as she could. Three adults in a ute was just a bit too cosy. Thankfully, it wasn't going to be a long trip. Lifting up her cap, she scratched her head where the sweat was itching her skin. Clearing-sale days always seemed to be hot.

Soon they were pulling into an open paddock where they found a bare patch of earth and parked among the sea of mostly white utes and dual cabs. Already there was a large gathering of blokes in hats and boots. Dust rose in the air, like when sheep were on the move in the paddocks, but this time it came from the prospective buyers walking up and down the rows of items for sale. In and out of the large machinery they wandered. Even if you weren't there to buy, you still had a look.

Two large red headers sat neatly in a row next to a yellow truck,

two green tractors and seeding bars to suit, plus a couple of ploughs and two motorbikes. Ray's work ute, a firefighting unit, and a couple of bits and pieces filled another few rows, and an area in his large shed contained sundry items. That was where the farmers' wives congregated. Izzy tagged along with her dad, looking at various items and stopping to chat to the locals. Everyone was coming up to them wondering who was with Bill and they were surprised to see it was Izzy. The subsequent conversation therefore always lasted that bit longer and they all asked the same questions. Have you been home long? Are you staying for good? How was it in New South Wales? What's the farming situation like over there?

A good hour and a half had passed by the time Izzy glanced over to the shed, where the ladies had set up their tables with an assortment of goodies and an old bathtub filled with ice for the cans of soft drink and beer. Her mum was busily getting the urn organised for those who wanted tea or coffee.

A minute later the auctioneer started up and his voice boomed out erratically as the bids began. He started with the small items first, which took nearly an hour to get through, before starting on the larger items. The truck her dad was interested in was coming up shortly. Izzy stood back from the crowd of men circling around the auctioneer. They were dwarfed by the large black tyre of one of the red headers. Once the auctioneer's hand went down, the men all shuffled on to the next item, raising a dust cloud as they went. They moved together, almost synchronised as if they had an imaginary rope around them all.

Bidding eventually started on the large yellow truck. 'Do I hear fifteen thousand?' bellowed the red-nosed auctioneer. His large gut heaved. He obviously enjoyed the taste of beer, Izzy surmised. Give him a red suit and a white beard and he could easily have been mistaken for Santa Claus. A bloke in front of Izzy raised his hand, clutching a bit of paper with the number thirty on it. In the blink of an eye, hands

were rising left, right and centre, and the bids flew upwards. Izzy gave a silent chuckle as the price ran straight over the limit her dad had set himself. She was sure he didn't even get a chance to bid.

'Twenty six and a half thousand, going once . . . going twice . . .'  
The auctioneer scanned the crowd for a bid. 'Sold,' he yelled after confirming there were no more takers. Izzy saw her dad look across to her and she raised her eyebrows and smiled with an 'I told you so' look.

'What did I tell you, hey?' she teased as she rejoined him, while the rest of the crowd moved on to the next item for sale.

'You had a lucky guess,' he grunted back, avoiding her eyes.

She should have known. Not many blokes out here took a girl seriously, let alone her dad. She was trying to break into a tough market.

'I'm dry as chips,' he said quickly, changing the subject. 'Let's go see Jean.'

Off they strode side by side, both the same height but Izzy half the width, towards the spread of food. Her dad bought a beer. It was only three-thirty but it was a given that it was okay to drink earlier in the day if it was a special occasion – or if there were more than two blokes around. They made all kinds of excuses to crack open a cold can.

'Hi, Bill. Any luck?' Jean asked.

He mumbled his reply.

Jean gave an understanding nod with just a hint of a smile, and winked at Izzy when Bill wasn't looking. 'I'll be finished here in a few minutes, Izzy. Did you want to meet up and go over the sundries?' she asked as she handed Izzy her change. 'Your father will have found a few mates to have a drink with by then, no doubt.'

'Sure, Mum,' replied Izzy, before taking a large mouthful of the lamington she'd just bought.

Izzy headed off to check out one of the motorbikes, which she believed would be very handy on the farm. It would certainly be a

lot cheaper to run, as well as being easier to shift sheep with, than the ute, especially with diesel prices what they were. She had seen the blue Yamaha TTR250 earlier, and now she got on it and started the engine. It purred into life. Quickly she shut it off, fearing other bidders would take too much interest. It was only a year old and looked in great nick. The black knobbly tyres still had plenty of tread, and the blue plastic mudguards and bodywork had no scratches or cracks. She guessed it might go for around five thousand and she had that much put aside. Deciding to find Ray and ask him about it, she turned and scanned the crowd.

A tall, lean figure was approaching her. She couldn't tell who it was at first as he had on a hat and sunglasses, and nearly every bloke here was wearing the same with jeans and boots. But she could tell this guy had a body you could bounce rocks off. It wasn't until he raised his tanned, muscular arm in a half wave that she recognised him. Yeah, she remembered his sexy swagger all right and knew if he took off his sunnies that she'd be met with a pair of intense blue eyes. He fitted into the 'tall, dark and handsome' category, and something about him demanded your attention, as if he was magnetised and your eyes were little ball bearings.

Suddenly, Izzy felt rather ill. She had been admiring the fine-looking fella, until she realised it was Will Timmins. Argh! Her skin crawled as the hairs on her arms twitched like little antennae, wary of a predator. Oh, she knew Will all right, had known him all her life. His parents owned the farm next to theirs.

Brian and Sandy Timmins had one of the biggest farms in the area. Her father had told her just that morning there were rumours Brian was going to lease another 2000 hectares off Mike Littlemore next year. Mike was apparently moving to Perth for his kids, where they were booked into school.

Brian and Sandy only had two children, Will and his sister, Jolene. Jolene was older than Will, already married with a couple of kids

and living in Perth. Izzy hadn't seen Will for ages, and frankly she'd have been quite happy if she'd never seen him again.

Before she could turn and walk away, he spoke.

'Hey, I thought that was you, Izzy. It's good to see you. How long have you been back?'

Will smiled, wondering what kind of answer he'd get. He had found Izzy by accident, admiring her from afar as she checked out the bike. After watching her for a moment, some of the things she did looked familiar. For a moment, he believed it was Claire standing there and his body almost burst with the thought. When he got his emotions back under control, he twigged that it was Izzy, and felt a moment of disappointment. But now, standing in front of her, he found himself staring at this new grown-up version of the girl he once knew. With Claire momentarily forgotten, he began to remember the little Izzy and took pleasure in noticing the womanly improvements a few years had produced.

Izzy kicked at the dirt, took a step back and planted her arms protectively across her body. Her face was set hard and her reply to his question was short and curt. 'Long enough.'

Will nodded his head. 'Ah, I see you still haven't forgiven me. You know, time is supposed to heal all wounds.' He swung his hands onto his hips as if to reinforce the statement. 'Come on, Izzy,' he pushed. 'It's been years.'

Lifting her head, she glared at him fiercely. 'Why should I forgive you? I don't have to like you, you know.'

The look she was giving him was the same hatred-filled one he'd got the last time he'd seen her, several years ago. It was about the only thing that hadn't altered about Izzy.

Will laughed under his breath. 'You Simpsons are a stubborn lot, you know that?' He knew straightaway that he shouldn't have said it. He noticed her body language change, as if he'd waved a red flag. Her eyes narrowed and were drilling holes into his head.

Izzy couldn't contain the fire brewing up inside her. All the anger and hurt broke free from the knotted ropes she'd used to secure them away and returned in full force. She tilted her head and spat just loud enough for him to hear every word clearly. 'Better than an arrogant, self-centred, using bastard like yourself.'

Izzy couldn't see Will's reaction as his face was partially covered by his hat and sunnies. He just stood quietly. His tall, muscled frame was almost leaning backwards from the force of her words.

Ever so slowly and quietly he replied, 'Why don't you tell me how you really feel? Can't a bloke change?'

Izzy wondered if he had been hoping for a miracle. If he thought she could just forgive him and move on, he was wrong. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. 'I'll believe it when I see it. Probably around the same time that all the flies just up and die!' She had already turned and started to leave.

Will watched her walk away. He wasn't angry with the way she'd reacted, just sad. He wanted this whole thing over. 'I'll see you later then,' he called out. 'Don't forget we're neighbours and you can't avoid me forever.'

'Huh! Not if I can help it,' she yelled without looking back.

Izzy's steps were long and forceful, almost stomping. She didn't know where she was headed but soon found herself back at the table where her mum was working. As it turned out, Jean was just finishing up so they headed off together into the large shed to check out the household items. It took Izzy a while to calm down and to stop her heart racing like a mad goanna. Will could send her blood pressure soaring in seconds. How dare he have the hide to talk to her like there was nothing wrong between them.

'Are you all right, sweetheart?' asked Jean, sensing the tension in her daughter.

Izzy forced herself to smile and flapped her arms about freely as if to brush it away. 'No, I'm fine. Just thinking, that's all.'



It wasn't until they got to the end of the shed where some old metal-framed beds and mattresses were stacked that she noticed a small man with slightly hunched shoulders chatting to his wife in the corner. 'Mum, I'll be back in a tick. I just want to have a word with Ray.' She set off to chat with Ray, who was standing with his wife, Louise, after remembering that was what she had originally intended, before Will had made her lose her cool.

'G'day, Ray. How are you going, Louise?' she said, greeting them with hugs.

Ray looked so soft and gentle, like a podgy teddy bear with a floppy hat. What he lacked in height, he made up for in heart size. You didn't need glasses to see that the years on the farm had taken their toll on Ray – he looked older than his sixty-five years. Louise was nearly ten years younger and looked fabulous in her pale cotton dress and straw hat.

Together they had four daughters, all married off with their own kids now. Apparently Ray and Louise were moving to their retirement house to be closer to their family. Izzy hoped that never happened to her. She wanted to live and die on the family farm. With a bit of luck she'd have her own children to pass it on to, regardless of what sex they might turn out to be.

'It's so good to see you, Izzy. It's been a while. Are you home visiting?' Louise asked politely.

'No, I'm home for good. I'm here to help Dad run the farm.'

'Ha, good luck with that, love,' said Ray. He understood the huge wall she had to climb. He turned to head off and leave the girls to it, but Izzy stopped him.

'Actually, Ray, I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your motorbike,' she said swiftly.

'Oh, sure thing.' Ray halted and waited until Izzy was by his side again.

Ray's small bow-legged strides led the way through his shed, past

large brown cardboard boxes. Some were filled with a collection of new fanbelts protruding out like bows; others held an assortment of old spanners and wrenches – things he wouldn't need in the city. The last couple of smaller boxes held large silver pots and pans with the odd plate set and collection of tea towels. The clearing sale had obviously been a good chance for Louise to clean out her cupboards too.

Ray's well-worn leather Blundstones kicked up a cloud of dust as he stepped off the grey cement floor onto the dry soil, heading in the direction of the motorbikes.

'Which one you interested in, love?' said Ray softly.

'The blue 250. Has it had regular check-ups?' she queried, swatting at the annoying flies that buzzed around her face. It was days like this Izzy wished she had a fly net or a couple of old corks on bits of string hanging off her hat.

'I've only done one as I've hardly used it. Getting too old, you see. It's much more comfortable sitting in the ute. I mainly got it for when the kids came down, but they only used it once.'

Izzy watched him closely for a moment. The deep lines upon his dry tanned skin showed the many years he had worked this land. 'You gonna miss it, Ray? All this?' she asked.

He nodded. 'Hard not to, love. Farming has been my whole life, and my parents', and theirs before them. But Louise is lonely and miserable without the kids and I miss them too. I'm getting too old to be doing this by myself. It becomes dangerous and my back is just not what it used to be. It's going to be a big change, that's for sure.' His face looked tired and his eyes betrayed a deep sadness. 'It's hard to leave something that you've poured all your blood, sweat and tears into. But none of the kids want it.'

'Yeah, well, I'd give my left leg to have our farm.' Izzy felt for Ray. She knew what it meant to him – to give it all up for a small boxed-in yard, squeezed in among thousands of other homes when you were used to the open space with just the bush as your nearest

neighbour. Izzy had felt the same at boarding school. There was never any peace and quiet there.

‘When are you leaving?’ she asked, breaking away from her thoughts.

‘Two weeks’ time. The kids are coming down to help us shift to Bunbury. Don’t you worry. We’ll be okay.’ He gave Izzy a weak smile, obviously still trying to convince himself. ‘We’re right next to a nice golf course and we’ll be able to play as much as we want. Imagine that, Izzy. A real green golf course. I wonder if my game will improve,’ he said, laughing to himself.

Golf was one of the main sports around Pingaring. The fairways were green only after it rained, and then it was usually weeds that grew. Not to mention the greens that were actually sand with oil on them. If you were stuck in the bush off the fairway, you really were stuck in the bush. Many balls were lost every year and occasionally found by another bush goer.

Izzy’s dad played golf too. He packed an esky with a few beers to take with him, as did most of the outback golfers. Their buggies resembled rolling pubs, with rattling bottles and cans.

‘Yes, I’m going to miss this place. It will always be home,’ Ray said, deep in thought.

They merged with a small crowd of men who were already milling around the bikes. Izzy nodded goodbye and left Ray talking to another farmer, while she edged her way into the group.

Digging her hand into her back pocket, she pulled out a small piece of rectangular paper and held it at her waist. She felt like a cowboy ready to draw his guns from his holsters.

The auctioneer started the bidding on the Yamaha, his arms going in all directions, pointing out bids. The action started to slow. ‘I have five thousand one hundred, going once,’ yelled the auctioneer.

Izzy raised her hand, making her number sixty-eight visible for the first time.

The auctioneer pointed at her. 'Five thousand two hundred. Can I see a three?' He scanned the crowd. There were only two serious bidders left and the man in the black hat was shaking his head as he looked down at his disappointed son.

'Five thousand two hundred, going once . . . going twice . . .' Izzy felt a nervous excitement. 'Sold – to the young lass, number sixty-eight. Congratulations, love,' said the auctioneer before moving on to an oldish red four-wheeler.

Izzy smiled. Her first auction buy. She was stoked she'd managed to get it for just over her estimated price.

Later that afternoon she rode it up a small plank of wood onto the back of her dad's ute. She was deliriously happy, even if her dad had reacted just how she'd expected he would.

'Why waste your money on that? What are you going to do with it? You'd better get a helmet before you go breaking your neck.' Bill ranted on and on.

Izzy wondered what a supportive and encouraging father would be like. Did they even exist? Hell, not in her house.

# *The Family Farm*

Fiona Palmer lives in the tiny rural town of Pingaring in Western Australia, three-and-a-half hours south-west of Perth. She discovered Danielle Steele at the age of eleven, and has finally written her own brand of rural romance. She has attended romance writers' groups and received an Australian Society of Authors mentorship for this novel. She has extensive farming experience, does the local mail run, and was a speedway-racing driver for seven years. She currently works two days a week at the local shop in between writing her next book and looking after her two small children.



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Isabelle Simpson longs to take over the family farm, but her ailing father is locked in a tragedy of the past and won't give her the chance she deserves. The stand-off between them threatens to tear the family apart.

Izzy decides to break free and make a new start for herself — even though that means leaving the handsome Will Timmins and all her mixed emotions about him behind.

But when hardship falls on the farm again, Izzy returns with an even greater determination to resolve the family feud. As she gathers with her friends in the close community under the shade of the gum-tree tavern, confessions are made, long-held secrets are revealed and hearts are set free.

Set under the blazing blue skies and in the golden wheatfields of Western Australia, this is a colourful story of family life on the land, and a heartwarming romance about finding true love and following your dreams.

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