

FIONA PALMER

From the bestselling author of *The Road Home*

The Sunburnt Country



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Chapter 1

HOT westerly winds rattled the old tin roof and blew a small eddy of dust into the workshop. Jonelle put down the container of coolant and reached for the radiator cap that was resting on the car's motor. She should have been more careful but it was too late: her dusky-pink nail polish chipped on contact with the motor. 'Oh, crap. Nae's gonna kill me,' she mumbled. Her nails were hardly worth doing, always kept short out of necessity. Without another thought for her newly manicured nails, she screwed the cap into place and wiped her hands on her faded blue overalls before leaning on the front of the car. Jonelle Baxter smiled. She closed her eyes and let the smell of petrol and grease calm her. This was her comfort zone. This was her life. She gazed around at her workshop, with its corrugated tin walls, and masses of tyres and car parts scattered about.

Her serenity was shattered by the panic that started to rise through her body as she realised how close she was to losing it all. But she'd die before she'd let this place go. It was more than just a workshop – it was home.

'Oh my God! What are you doing? You shouldn't be working!'

Jonelle's eyes jerked open. Her best friend Renae stomped towards her, a pair of black heels swinging from one hand, the other hand resting on her jutted hip. She was trying to frown but her lightly powdered twenty-six-year-old skin barely wrinkled. Then she spotted the chipped nail polish. 'Jesus, Jonny. I just did them today. They only had to last till tomorrow.' Renae shrugged her slim shoulders, her usual

way of dismissing Jonelle's lack of concern. 'Don't worry. I'm sure by tomorrow there'll be a new shade you'll want to try.'

Jonelle glanced at her hands, glad they weren't completely covered in grease.

Renae tried to glare but the smile on her glossed lips gave her away. 'I swear, my best work is wasted on you.' Renae pointed to Jonny's worn, dusty boots. 'And you have the best toes, but you never bloody show them off.' She swung the shoes at Jonny, who caught them with both hands. 'Wear those tonight.'

'Thanks, Nae. But my thongs will do.' Renae knew Jonny only had workboots, thongs and a pair of ugg boots in her shoe collection.

'No, they won't. Come on, humour me? Please? At least your hair is brushed shiny. I love it when you take the time to do your hair properly.' She paused as she gave Jonny's overalls a once-over. 'You're not even ready for this dinner, are you?'

Jonny shut the bonnet on her car, giving it a rub with the rag she pulled out from her overalls. 'Yes. Why do you think I'm getting the car ready?'

Renae laughed, brushing her fringe back from her oval face. Her dark roots were growing out and soon Jonny would be enlisted to play hairdresser again.

'Not the bloody car, Jonny. You! You're the one going out for the night, not that thing.'

Caressing her 1977 308 LX Torana SLR 5000, she admired its orange finish and its traditional muscle car silhouette. 'It's okay, she didn't mean that,' Jonny whispered to her car before facing Renae. 'Hey, don't knock my car, and it's not a date. It's just dinner. Mates getting together, like it's always been,' she stressed. Jonny carefully placed the shoes on the bonnet, and popped the buttons on her overalls, revealing the blue summer dress she'd put on earlier. 'Ta da! See? I'm ready,' she said, stepping out of the overalls and hanging them from the hook on the corrugated wall of the workshop. She whipped off her boots and socks then slipped on the black heels, throwing Renae a look that said 'Are you happy now?' She figured she'd better humour her best friend; besides, saying no to Renae was always hard. Jonny liked seeing her happy.

‘You’re twenty-six, Jonny. You should start thinking of it as a date. You haven’t had a fella since . . .’ Renae’s brow creased as she held up her hand to count fingers.

Jonny shot her a warning glare.

‘Anyway, you scrub up real well, Jonelle Baxter . . . when you can be bothered.’

‘Well, it helps having a beautician as a best friend. Even though it’s *not* officially a date, thanks for your help.’ She hugged her friend. ‘You working at the pub tonight?’

‘Yep.’

‘Cool. If you see Zac or JB in there, ask them if they’ve fixed the chook pen for Mum yet. Give ’em hell if they haven’t.’

‘I always rev up your brothers, you know that.’

‘All right, I’m off. Gotta get stuff from the shop first,’ Jonny said. ‘Can you close up for me?’ Renae rolled her eyes but nodded. ‘Thanks again. Talk to ya tomorrow.’ Jonny headed for the driver’s side and opened the door on her orange Torana.

As Jonny drove out, she saw Renae slide the door shut on the workshop. Jonny gave a last wave of thanks. The business name, *Jonny’s Mechanical*, was painted in white and red across the big blue building. Despite the paint job being only a few years old, the workshop would just look like a run-down pile of tin to most. But to Jonelle it was her life. It always had been, even when she was a kid. The old petrol pump out the front had stopped working long before she could remember but it stood now as a memory of days gone by. She could no sooner get rid of it than she could the old oil signs and car numberplates that lined the shed walls. It had all been there when she’d bought the business from Coot. He was as old as the workshop and the stuff he collected – he hadn’t been saddled with the name ‘old coot’ for nothing.

Coot was more than just an eccentric old man; he’d been her mate, surrogate grandfather and idol. And because of what he meant to her, she loved the place just the way it was. Everyone around these parts knew that no matter how old it looked on the outside, on the inside you could still get your car fixed.

With another glance down the deserted street, Jonny gunned the V8 motor. As always, the thumping sound of the eight cylinders brought a smile to her lips and sent a rumble through her chest. On the main street of Bundara she headed towards Gabby and Carlos's grocery shop. The town wasn't huge: five streets, with most of the businesses on the main drag, like the pub, post office and grocery shop. On her street were Phil's Tractors, which had closed six months ago, and the Farmworks shop, which had put off two of its staff, one of them being the agronomist. Don't need one of them in a drought. It was like having a ladies' vending machine in the men's toilets, so her dad had said. Bloody pointless.

Jonelle parked out the front of a brick building with a bullnose verandah, the Bundara General Store sign hanging from its eaves. Getting out of the car, Jonny cursed as she twisted her ankle in Renae's shoes. 'Good for nothing,' she muttered as she wound down the window before shutting the door. With the heat from the burning sun the car would be an oven by the time she got back in. Maybe she should have taken the ute. At least it had air-con.

Through the dark lenses of her sunglasses, Jonelle glanced up at the blue sky that stretched over Bundara – not a cloud in sight. It was the story of the whole year and then some. She'd forgotten what rain even smelt like or how it felt.

'No matter how hard you stare, it won't make it rain.'

Gabby had emerged from the shop with an old straw broom. Jonny stepped across to the shade of the verandah and joined her. 'One day it might work, Gabs.'

'Ha – yeah, maybe,' she said, laughing. 'You're looking good today, Jonny. Got a hot date with Coop, I hear.'

'Jesus. Not you too.' Jonny tugged at her dress, the floaty material feeling weird against her slim legs. 'I'm just watching out for him. Someone's gotta make sure he's looking after himself with his folks away.'

Two years his junior, Jonny had known Ryan Cooper her whole life. They had played together since their first encounter in the sandpit. She had become his friend before Zac, who was too busy playing with

his older brothers. Ryan was an only child as his parents had trouble conceiving and they were late in life when he magically came along. So Jonny had become his closest friend and sister, to a degree.

Gabby leaned against her broom, her faced pained. 'Yeah, poor bloke. I know it's still hard on him.' Gabby brushed a few dark ringlets back and tried to tuck them into her loose bun. 'You tell him we're thinking of him, won't you?'

'Sure, Gabs. I'd better get the food and head out.' Inside, Jonny picked up a basket and zoomed around the small shop, gathering the things she'd need to make carbonara tonight. She couldn't go past the honeycomb ice-cream. It was Ryan's favourite, and besides, she'd eat any ice-cream. On the other side of the narrow counter Carlos started ringing up her goods. His large olive hands whisked each item through and bagged it up with practised ease.

'Hey, Jonny. You're looking hot to trot,' he said with a wiggle of his thick eyebrows. His black hair sat in a moulded blob like a Lego man's. 'You been keeping busy?' Carlos and Gabby had bought the shop five years before, but they'd had it back on the market for the last two.

'Yeah, sort of, Carlos. Plenty to do. Just don't get paid for it,' Jonny said.

'Let's hope it picks up, hey.' As Carlos beeped through the last item, he asked, 'On the account?'

In his dark eyes she saw the questioning glance she knew well. 'Yes, please. Look . . .' she drew in a deep breath, 'I know my account's way overdue, but I'm a bit strapped this month. Any chance I can trade you a service?'

To her relief, Carlos smiled. 'Sure thing, Jonny. The car is way overdue. I've been putting it off. I think my tyres are due for a change, too. These roads are bad and Gabby's always driving Ethan to his doctor in Narrogin for his asthma.'

Jonny felt awful having to ask for the reprieve but these were tough times and Carlos understood. If it had been anyone else she wouldn't have asked. 'Bring it around any time.' Jonny wasn't sure if Carlos was just helping her out or whether he really did need new tyres, but she couldn't be picky. 'Thanks again, Carlos.'

‘Ah, sweet girl, you’re doing me a favour. Have a good night. Say hi to Ryan for us. Oh, did you hear about the rescue meeting coming up?’

She grabbed her bags and headed for the door. ‘Yep, sure did. Cheers, Carlos. See ya.’

Jonelle felt her skin flush with heat as she climbed back into the Torana. She was glad she’d packed the esky. Ryan’s farm was only fifteen minutes away but in this heat the ice-cream would be a runny mess by the time she got there.

Gabby was chatting to Sue outside the butcher shop, so Jonny gave them a toot as she went past. They waved back. Driving along the empty street again she wound her window up, almost to the top. She’d spent far too long this morning fixing her blonde hair into a cascade of gentle curls, and she’d be less than pleased if it turned into a wind-swept mess.

Jonny headed out of town past Renae’s little white house, which doubled as her beauty parlour when she wasn’t working at the pub or tending the school garden. Beyond Renae’s house were endless stretches of bare paddocks. No crops growing this year. Only a few farmers had taken the risk, and mainly it was just feed for the sheep. So all there was to look at were dull droopy gum trees, brown thirsty bushes, dry earth and a scattering of yellow grasses. A sunburnt country, all right. Three years ago Bundara had been such a beautiful place, so green and lush, thriving. Jonny knew it would be like that again one day.

About ten minutes out of town, Jonny’s eye caught something glimmering in the sun off the side of the road. She began to slow and could soon see a man with the boot up on his white Holden Commodore Sportwagon. Flat tyre. She glanced at the esky, wondering if the ice-cream would last. ‘Ah, bugger it.’ Changing down, she manoeuvred her car in behind the stranded Commodore.

Even as she walked up to the man, she knew he’d never changed a flat before. He was staring at the tyre uncertainly. He lifted his head and, seeing her, his eyes widened.

‘Well, you look like you could use a hand. Not the best weather to be stuck outside,’ Jonny said. He was a handsome guy, clean-shaven and wearing black slacks and a white shirt, sleeves rolled up to his

elbows. She could smell his aftershave in the afternoon air. She stopped a metre from him, but felt the lure of his scent pulling her closer.

‘Yeah. I’d like to say I know what I’m doing . . . but I don’t. I’m sure it’s not too hard to figure out.’ His hazel eyes sent shivers down her spine and he smiled as they watched each other in silence. After a few long seconds he glanced at her car.

‘LX Torana. SLR, nice. She purrs like a big cat.’ The stranded guy gazed longingly at her pride and joy.

Jonny glanced back at her baby. Orange with a black bonnet and fat wheels. ‘Yeah, but not so nice on hot days like this. You like cars?’

‘Sure do. Anything Holden, though.’

‘Ah, a man after my own heart,’ she replied. ‘If you’d said Ford, you know I’d have been forced to leave you stranded.’

‘Please don’t. Just because I like cars doesn’t mean I’m very good at fixing them, as you can see,’ he said with a sheepish smile towards his flat tyre. ‘But this baby, I like a lot.’ The cute guy walked over to check out Jonny’s car while she went to get the spare wheel and the jack from his boot. By the time he’d done a lap of her car, she had his car up on the jack and was lifting off the wheel.

‘Oh, hey. Thanks,’ he said, rushing to her side and then pausing. He lifted his hand and brushed it through his short, styled hair. ‘This is so wrong.’

Jonny looked up and smiled while slotting on the spare. ‘What?’

‘You . . . changing my tyre in that gorgeous dress. You look like you’re going out,’ he said, taking in her black heels. ‘It’s so weird. I’m in the middle of nowhere, and you just appear: this beautiful girl who’s changed my flat tyre faster than the guys at my local workshop, and I’m standing here like a wet fish.’ He rubbed his hand against his smooth, chiselled chin. ‘Are all girls this hands-on in the bush?’

Jonny laughed as she began to tighten up the nuts. ‘Maybe.’ She studied the shocked expression on his face. He stood there uncomfortably. ‘Don’t worry. I’m sure if I hadn’t come along, you’d have figured it out.’ He relaxed a little. ‘Um, would you mind just double-checking that these nuts are tight?’ she asked, giving him the wheel spanner and hopefully keeping his manhood intact. He smiled and moved to the

tyre as she chucked the spare in the back. *He must be into sports or working out*, Jonny thought, taking in his lean backside and strong arms. *And definitely a non-smoker*, her mind continued. His teeth were so white and his dark hair was perfect. Who knew with these tidy city men? She'd bet her left leg that he owned more skin products than she did. Renae would be impressed.

'Yep, all good,' he said, standing back as she released the jack. He carried the remaining tools to the boot and stowed them away.

Jonelle brushed some of the gravel dust off her dress.

'Well, thank you so much . . .?'

'Jonelle.'

'Thanks, Jonelle. I'm Daniel, and I really appreciate that you stopped to help. I think I would have been here a while doing it myself,' he said with a grimace. He shook her hand, holding it a moment longer than normal. A tingle skittered through her palm and along her arm. Could he feel that connection too? His hands were like silk to touch and as clean as his pressed shirt. She wondered what he thought of her hands, engraved with years of grease and dirt. Jonelle met his gaze and caught a flirty smile. It had been a while since a guy had looked at her like that, especially a stranger. This was one of those moments of instant attraction with someone you didn't know and would never know, but you just happen to cross paths and have a sizzling spark. Even if he was a pure city boy, totally out of his element here on the side of a barren, narrow country road.

'You're not from these parts, are you?' she asked, not wanting to leave yet. There was something about him that made her chest tighten with nervous excitement – maybe it was his clean good looks or the fact that he actually knew what model her car was, or maybe it was just the way he smiled at her, which left her feeling wanted, sexy and alive.

'That obvious?' There was that cheeky smile again. 'I'm from Perth.' He gestured at the endless barren pastures. 'I'm definitely not in Kansas any more.'

His deep hazel eyes came back to her, almost drinking her in. Jonny found it embarrassing but exhilarating at the same time. 'Nope, you sure aren't. Anyway . . .' Jonny tilted her head and glanced at her car.

‘Yeah, I’d better let you go. It was really nice meeting you, Jonelle. I can’t thank you enough for your help. I hope I run into you again.’ He held out his hand and she took it without hesitation. *Yep, there are those tingles*, she thought.

‘No worries, Daniel. I’d best be off – I’ve got ice-cream in the car. Nice meeting you,’ she said honestly. A pang in her chest at her departure. They were just two cars passing on the road. She turned and headed back to her car.

Jonny watched Daniel in her rear-view mirror as he stood beside his car, front door open, watching her roar off down the road. Whether it was to catch a last glimpse of her or to listen to her V8, she wasn’t sure. As she sped off, she couldn’t help but wonder where he was headed and whether their paths might ever cross again.

Chapter 2

JONELLE'S thoughts were still lingering on Daniel's musky scent, his sexy smile and the shape of his lean body when she turned down Cooper Road, two minutes from Ryan's farm, Mallee Plains. It was a sheep and mixed-cropping farm, but you couldn't see any sheep and there were definitely no crops this year. Barren, sandy soils were the crop favourite.

As Jonny turned the corner to pull into Ryan's driveway, her heart lurched. It always upset her coming out to visit Ryan, to see him so broken, and to be reminded of all that he had endured.

Her fingers drummed on the steering wheel as two brown rabbits darted across the gravel, their white tails bobbing as they ran. The road led all the way up to the sheds and the old farmhouse where Ryan used to live. As soon as they'd married, Alana had wanted a better house. More like *demand*ed a better house. Now Ryan lived alone in a massive empty cream house enclosed within a matching Colorbond fence.

Alana had first come to town as a teacher. Teachers were one of the few sources of new females, along with barmaids, although barmaids never stuck around long enough to get attached. Besides Renae, the barmaids were mostly overseas backpackers passing through. Alana and Jonny had never really got along. It wasn't that Jonny didn't like her, more that they ran in different circles. Jonny was out fixing cars and helping with fire and rescue, while Alana started a book club and travelled back to the city a lot. Jonny had to admit that it had irked her when Ryan fell so hard and fast for Alana. She'd lost one of her best

mates and her oldest friend in the process, and it didn't help that Alana had tried to shut Jonny out of his life. But that was all in the past . . .

Jonny pulled up out the front and took a deep breath. 'Let it go, Jonny. She's gone for good.' But that just made her feel worse, because her joy was Ryan's pain. Yes, she'd got her friend back, but he was damaged goods, and she'd do anything to have the old Ryan.

Carrying the shopping from the car, she went through the side gate along the paved pathway. There was a huge patch of sand where the turf had been laid a few years back. Spindly rose bushes and dead sticks were scattered throughout the depressing garden beds. Expensive trees and plants were now lost to the endless dry. Keeping plants alive simply for decoration was the least of Ryan's worries.

Jonny got to the back door and yelled out, 'Coop, can you get the door for me?' There was no reply. Tilting her head towards the sheds, she picked up the distant rumble of a machine. She should have figured he wasn't here, given that Missy, his brown kelpie, wasn't licking Jonny's legs to death. With a sigh, she juggled her bags and the esky in one hand and let herself in.

A chill ran through her as she entered Ryan's house. Since the divorce, Ryan spent all his daylight hours working so he didn't have to face the empty house. And Jonny could understand why. She didn't like the place much – far too big and cold. When Alana had left, she'd taken everything that wasn't bolted down, leaving just a hollow shell to remind Ryan he was alone. Every now and then, Jonny would bring a picture to put up on one of his empty walls, a scenic photo Renae had taken or one of them all together having fun. Zac, her older brother, had framed them with some jarrah he'd been pulling up from the floor of the old house on their farm. Ryan would complain, 'You're filling my house with junk, Jonny. I only gotta look out my window to see where that photo was taken,' but later on she always scored an extra-tight hug from him and a murmur of thanks.

Jonny put the ice-cream in the freezer and unpacked the rest of the food. She glanced around the large kitchen with its fancy white cupboards and granite benchtops. It didn't look its best with all the dirty dishes piled up. Normally Jonny wasn't one to clean up after someone

else, having had years of cleaning up after her brothers, but Ryan wasn't coping. Jonny set about washing his dishes. After an hour she had the benchtops sparkling and was about to start on dinner when she spied Ryan driving down to the house from the sheds. She headed out to the back verandah with two cold beers. His strong shoulders hunched as he came striding towards her, backlit by the setting sun. Everything glowed yellow, as if there was coloured cellophane over her eyes. The dead grass was pale yellow, the dirt deep red and the sunset every shade in between.

'Heya, Jonny.' Ryan smiled as he took off his cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm. His shaggy brown hair held the shape of his cap. Ryan was so different from that city guy she'd met earlier but she loved his rugged, hardworking appearance. It was who Ryan was, and besides, he'd look like a total knob dressed like Daniel.

'Hi, Coop. Had enough for today?' She handed him his beer as he leant over and kissed her cheek. The scent of sweat, grease and dust was his cologne, a respected fragrance in the country.

'Yep, sure have.' He took a swig of his beer and squinted at her. 'You look a bit different today. My guess is Nae?'

'Uh-huh. Apparently this meets her approval for dinner. You know, some days I feel like her own life-size Barbie doll.'

'Well, you do have the blonde hair and the nice rack.'

Jonny hit him in the arm.

'Ah, Jonny, come on. The dress is cute, but you know I still love ya in those old work overalls you wear. I like how you don't go for all that girly stuff.' He smiled before turning his blue eyes out over his land. She knew that he was thinking of Alana, who was always wearing dresses and had a shoe collection to rival Imelda Marcos'. Jonny also bet Alana wasn't using the same containers of make-up her mother had bought her for her sixteenth birthday.

'Besides,' Ryan said, turning back with his cheekiest grin, 'you're much easier to talk to when you don't look like a girl.'

She shoved him playfully.

It was starting to cool off as the sun dropped, so they made themselves comfortable on the edge of the verandah. Missy came up and almost drowned Jonny in dog slobber.

‘Missy, no! Go and sit on your spot,’ Ryan growled. Missy obeyed, sitting by the back door, her ears drooping a little.

‘So how’s things? Still got any sheep?’ she asked.

Ryan’s shrug was hardly noticeable under his blue cotton work shirt, which was dusty and marked with sweat. This was how Jonny saw all hardworking men. When she was a kid she used to roll around in the dirt just so that she could look like her dad and brothers.

‘Some of them. Mainly the stud ewes and a few rams.’ He sighed heavily. ‘Gotta buy more feed or else I’ll have to sell them or agist them. I can’t figure out what to do.’

‘Have you asked your dad? Does he have any suggestions?’

Ryan brushed some dust from his wayward brown hair. Alana always kept it short on him, but Jonny was glad to see him back to his scruffy old self. He looked more mischievous this way.

‘Nah. I’m trying not to bother him with it, Jonny. Dad retired so that I could take over the farm, and it’s what I wanted. So many of my mates still have their dads interfering and refusing to give up the reins. I know how lucky I am. Besides, I’m not going to ruin their retirement.’

‘Coop, I really don’t think your dad will mind. He’s probably dying to come back and do something. People do get sick of fishing, you know.’

‘Yeah, I guess,’ he said before changing the subject to her brothers. ‘So I hear Zac lost his Pommy barmaid?’

‘Ha ha, yeah. Don’t worry – he’ll have another one at the pub to pester soon.’

The conversation flowed between them like it always did. They skirted around the hard stuff, cracked jokes and teased each other instead. Jonny knew Ryan craved the familiar peace between them, and she enjoyed being the one to make him laugh. He had such a deep, infectious laugh.

When the sun finally dipped below the horizon, they collected their empty beer bottles and headed inside for dinner. Missy raised her head, watching them pass, hoping for a last-minute pat.

‘Wow, I have benchtops again.’ He squeezed her shoulders gently. ‘Thanks, Jonny, but you don’t have to clean up after me. I know how much you hate picking up after yourself,’ he joked.

‘Well, I had to. I needed most of those dishes to make dinner.’

Ryan got out two glasses and started pouring them each a Scotch. ‘So, what are you burning for us tonight?’ he asked, before adding an extra nip in his glass. ‘I’d better numb my tastebuds,’ he joked.

She whacked his bum with the wooden spatula she’d just pulled from the second drawer. ‘No ice-cream for you.’

He jumped away from Jonny, his eyes growing wide. ‘You didn’t?’

She raised an eyebrow as he checked the freezer.

‘You rippa.’ Ryan threw an arm around her shoulders, then pulled away when he saw her screwing up her nose. ‘I might go take a shower, yeah?’

‘Yeah, you do that. You stink like last week’s socks. I’ll get started on dinner.’

Ryan downed his glass as if it was water before heading to the shower. That worried her. But like most folks around here, nobody discussed the hard questions, and even if they did, they never got the truth.

Ten minutes later Ryan reappeared in blue shorts and a clean white singlet. His wet hair flopped on his head and beads of moisture clung to his stubble. Jonny had just mixed the pasta into the cream sauce. ‘It’s nearly ready,’ she said, as she watched him pour more Scotch. ‘Oh hell. Guess I’m not driving home tonight,’ she said, shooting him an exasperated look.

Ryan grinned. ‘As if you would anyway. You never go home at night when you bring the Torrie.’ He put on a high-pitched voice, trying to imitate her. ‘*I can’t hit a roo in my car.* I bet you look after that car better than your men, Jonelle.’

Jonny cringed at her full name and rolled her eyes. ‘What men?’

‘Come on. You gotta have someone. There are plenty of guys around.’

‘Yeah, but I know all of them,’ she said with an eye roll. She served up their plates and sat down at the table. ‘Besides, unless they were holding a set of extractors for a 308, I wouldn’t even notice them.’

Ryan laughed. ‘So true. Hey, thanks for tea,’ he said, twirling the pasta onto his fork then eating a mouthful. ‘It’s actually delicious,’ he said. ‘Another recipe from your mum?’

‘No, I made this one up myself. Oh, and while we’re on the topic, Mum wants you out for dinner one day, too. She’s nagging me cause she’s worried about you and thinks you’re getting too thin.’

‘Your mother thinks everyone is underfed unless they’ve got cheeks on them like a baboon. Maybe later. I’m pretty busy.’

‘Ryan, it’s been six months since Alana left, and six months before that you knew it was coming. It’s time you moved on, got back out and about.’

‘Harsh.’ He picked up his glass and emptied it. Jonny raised her eyebrows and he frowned back at her. ‘Don’t go getting all motherly on me. I already have one mother,’ he growled.

‘Are you sure you’re all right, ’cos, you know, I’m here if you need to —’

‘Damn, Jonny. I don’t need a shrink, either.’ His pushed his half-empty plate away and sat back. Jonny chased her pasta around her plate, feeling uneasy about his outburst. A moment of silence passed and Jonny eventually looked up.

Ryan slowly cracked a smile. ‘I just need a mate. You have always been that for me, Jonny. I love ya heaps, you know that.’ He waited until she nodded.

‘And I love you too. That’s why I worry about you. I’d be a shit mate if I didn’t.’

‘Fair enough,’ he replied, as they both grinned.

Jonny was relieved. She didn’t like things being funny between them.

‘Hey, want to watch a movie? We could dig out the old *Star Wars*. Remember how many times we watched that growing up?’

‘What do you mean?’ she teased. ‘You’re still growing up.’

She had let Ryan change the subject and move on so as not to ruin the night. He knew how to shut her out if he wanted to, like the time she’d tried to warn him about Alana. He hadn’t answered any of her calls and had avoided her for a week, he was that cross. She didn’t think now was a good time for him to shut anyone out of his life.

‘I’m still older than you, okay? Don’t you forget it,’ he said. ‘Leave the dishes. Let’s go into the lounge.’

Jonny stacked the dishes in the sink and joined Ryan on the couch. They put their feet on the worn wooden coffee table as Ryan started the movie. Her shoulder squished against his and it felt nice to be back on familiar ground. She watched him carefully. If only he would open up to her. She wanted to help him, and she could see he was holding something back.

‘Ryan . . . ?’ She couldn’t think of how to tell him just how concerned she was, but he knew what she was thinking, he always did.

Ryan smiled at her. ‘Ah, Jonny, there’s nothing to worry about. It’s back to the way it was. Just you and me, kid.’ He put his arm around her and she snuggled against his chest, which rose and fell with each breath while his heart beat on in the background. He smelt like Ryan, no colognes or fancy stuff, just the deodorant he always used. And she was comfortable with him, just like she was with her own brothers. Back in high school she’d given dating Ryan a go, but only because everyone expected it as they spent so much time together. But it never worked out – it all felt so wrong and bland. Daniel, the random stranger on the road, had evoked more feeling in that one touch than Ryan ever could. But Ryan had her heart in a different way.

‘Can you go grab the ice-cream, Jonny?’

Jonny pushed him away and laughed. ‘No. I cooked, so it’s your turn to dish up dessert.’

Ryan flicked Jonny’s legs off the coffee table as he headed to the kitchen. She had always joked that she had four brothers, not three, and sometimes Ryan was a big pain in the arse just like the rest of them.

Chapter 3

DANIEL had never needed anyone. He grew up through his late teens more or less on his own, without family help. No mother, no brother, just his dad, who was hardly home and not involved in his life unless trying to direct him in his career.

So he felt quite odd being at the mercy of a beautiful girl. Jonelle certainly was something of a contradiction: dressed like a well-kept woman but so at home doing the dirty work. And the Torana! She must have one of those muscle-man boyfriends – buff arms, tattoos and black boots – who let her drive his pride and joy. Daniel pictured her boyfriend as he drove up a slow rise in the road towards his destination.

At the top the view opened up before him and all he could think was *Why me?* The dusty little town of Bundara lay ahead, its welcome sign rusted and drooping to one side. *Bundara, best little bush spot, estimated population 580.* The paint was peeling, and if the sign was any indication of what the town would be like, then he was in for a stellar couple of months.

Bundara looked like a dust bowl. The town was a huddled speck surrounded by acres and acres of bare dirt, with the odd dead tussock or spindly bush. A wasteland. But the sapphire sky that encompassed everything was magnificent. He'd never seen anything like it. So much clear sky, like a blue blanket thrown over the earth. And the sun was bearing down on this tiny town like it was beating it into submission. For a moment, the contrast of the beautiful sky against the red, dry landscape took him by surprise. It was like a postcard.

Daniel turned his focus back to the small speck of a town. He saw the rusty tin-roof homes. Heat shimmered off the main road and dust swirled along the gravel edges. Daniel slowed down as he approached for fear he'd miss the whole town.

'Oh wow,' he said when he spotted the tiny shop on the main street, just before the local Sovereign Bank, his new place of work. The bank was an old rendered brick building with high cream walls and its opening hours taped up in the centre of the large glass door. There was no ATM out the front and no indication that this was a bank, except for the little bank logo by the door. The concrete footpath was uneven with giant cracks caused by the roots of the great lilac tree alongside it. The tree cast a huge circle of shade and was the only enticing thing he'd found on the street so far.

It was nearly six o'clock. Everything was shut except the pub. He knew that would be open because he was supposed to be staying there for the night. Tomorrow the removal truck would arrive with the furnishings for the bank manager's house – his house.

The pub wasn't hard to find in a small town like this, perched on the corner of the main road and the street that led to the town hall. It was a two-storey rustic red-brick construction, with a balcony on the top floor and a bright-red roof. The balcony rails and the trimmings around the leadlight windows of the grand entranceway were all painted the same heritage red.

Daniel pulled his car around the back, where a few utes were already parked on the gravel. Outside the car, the heat took his breath away and again he noticed the dust and eucalyptus in the air, so strange and so different from the city. Sweat began to gather on his back, and he hurried inside to check in. The decor made him smile: out-dated, patterned, red and black carpet, worn black lino around the edge of the bar and stools that had supported their fair share of backsides. It had the customary dartboard in one corner, pool table in the other, and dining tables with plastic chairs opposite the bar. Ahead he could see a set of French doors that led into a front bar and a small bottle shop.

'Can I help ya, mate?' asked the barmaid from behind the bar, where she was polishing glasses.

‘Checking in,’ he said, stepping forward. The girl was in her mid-twenties and wearing a singlet that barely reached the top of her denim skirt.

‘Sure, follow me. I’m Renae.’ She walked around the bar, out through the glass doors and headed left to a tiny reception area. ‘Daniel Tyler, right? Just one night?’ she asked, after consulting the small diary on the desk.

‘Yep.’

Renae raised her eyebrows and gave him the once-over. ‘Just passing through?’

‘Um, no. Here for a little while.’ He watched her waiting, hoping for more details. He wasn’t sharing.

‘Well, here’s your key. Up the stairs to your left, room at the end. Shower’s on the right. Dinner is available at six-thirty until the cook feels like leaving.’

‘Great, thanks.’

‘I’ll be at the bar if you need anything.’

He watched Renae walk away, admiring her petite body. She was very friendly and had a great smile – a prerequisite for barmaids.

As he carried his bag from the car up to his room, Renae flashed him another smile. If he were leaving tomorrow, yes, he’d probably try his luck, but this tiny town would be his home for the next couple of months. He didn’t need complications.

Slotting the old-fashioned key into the lock, he opened the door to his room. His jaw dropped faster than his bag. ‘Jesus!’ A brown threadbare cover lay over the bed, its tassels reaching all the way down to the floral carpet. The room was clean and tidy but unbearably daggy, and the decor made it feel so small. He sat on the bed, sinking down as the worn springs groaned. The musty smell had undertones of cigarette smoke. The newest thing in the room was the TV, which was as thick as a fish tank and definitely not digital. Daniel wondered why he’d even bothered to bring his laptop up. They wouldn’t have wi-fi. The crazy red and black decor of the bar downstairs was starting to look more enticing. He checked his emails on his phone and sent a text message to his mates to let them know he’d arrived in Woop Woop. He didn’t

mention that he felt like he'd been dropped in a time machine and rocketed back fifty years.

Tucking his designer wallet into his pocket, Daniel headed back downstairs into the stale, alcohol-tainted air of the quiet bar. There were a few more people now, three guys sitting at the bar and a family of four at one of the tables. Dan pulled up a stool and sat down next to a guy in a blue truckie singlet who looked about his age. The other two blokes were in their fifties, with wrinkled leathery skin covered with spots and wayward hairs. They looked tough and territorial, but when they turned to him they smiled and offered cheery grins. Dan returned the greeting as he wondered what their lives had been like.

'A newbie, huh? How you going? I'm Zac,' said the guy on the stool beside him. Zac held out his large hand, callused and stained with dirt. His hands had clearly seen a lot more manual labour in their twenty-odd years than Dan's had.

Daniel took his hand. 'G'day. I'm Dan.' Before he could say anything else, Zac whistled, and seconds later Renae popped back into the bar with a frown on her pretty face.

'Zac Baxter, I'm not your bloody dog.'

'Sorry, Nae, but I think this bloke really needs a drink.'

Renae started pouring a beer, watching Dan the whole time with a flirty smile. 'Yeah, I think you're right. You do look a little hot and bothered.'

She handed him the beer and before he could get his wallet back out from his pocket, Zac waved a note at Renae.

'Hey, thanks, mate,' said Dan, putting his money away and taking a long guzzle of the cold beer. 'Ah, yep. I needed that. Long day on the road and then I got a flat tyre.'

'Pretty shitty in this heat.'

'Is it always this hot in November?' he asked as Renae dropped Zac's change on the counter. 'It doesn't get this hot in the city.'

Zac laughed. 'Ya softcock. How would you know, when you're in an air-conditioned office all day, and then you jump into your air-conditioned car straight to your air-conditioned house? I work out in that heat every day. And my old man still refuses to put in air-con at

home. Says it's for pansies. He likes to remind me that he grew up with just a wet sack hanging in the doorway to cool the breeze.'

Renae clicked her tongue. 'Yeah, you're so tough, Zac,' she said sarcastically. 'Ignore him, Dan. I've spent every summer for years listening to him bitch and moan about the heat.'

Zac squinted at Renae. 'Haven't you got glasses to wash or something? Dennis isn't paying you to chat up the new customers.'

Renae pulled a face and went to serve the old bloke at the other end of the bar.

Daniel chuckled as he glanced at Zac, who had a week's stubble across his strong jaw. 'Not cool to upset the barmaid. She'll cut your beer off,' Dan said.

'Nah. Not Nae. She loves it when I tease her. Besides, I've known her all my life and I'm one of her best customers.' Zac scratched at his dusty arm, his nails lined with black dirt. 'So, what are you doing in Bundara? You look a long way from home.'

'Yeah, don't I know it. But this is going to be my home for the next few months. I'm the relief bank manager.'

'Oh, hey. Greg's replacement. Man, I don't envy you. You're gonna be compared to the plague 'round here.'

'Great. Thanks for the heads-up. So what do you do, Zac? I'm guessing farming?'

'Yeah, I work with my old man and my brother on Baxter Plains. It's outta town about ten k's. Nine thousand acres, a few sheep and not much crop.'

'Because of the drought? You really feeling it?'

Zac studied Dan, choosing his next words carefully. 'The whole bloody district is. Our farm is better off than some, but that doesn't mean we aren't struggling. I guess you'll see all that when you start work. Man, I'd hate to be in your shoes.'

Dan shrugged his shoulders. 'It doesn't worry me. It's just a part of my job.'

Zac almost choked on his beer. 'You'd better not go around saying that too loud or too often. Folks won't take too kindly to it. It may be a job to you but these are real people's livelihoods you're playing with.'

‘Oh, for sure. Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. No hard feelings?’ The look on Zac’s face wasn’t one of forgiveness but he shrugged his muscled shoulders.

‘You won’t upset me. I’ve got a duck’s back but I’m just warning you that others can be a bit testy. Lots of high-strung folks around at the moment,’ said Zac.

Dan nodded, grateful for having met someone not easily offended. He glanced around the unfamiliar pub, feeling more foreign than ever. He had begun to realise that it wasn’t just the scenery; it was the people and their way of life that were different as well.

‘So, you camping at the pub the whole time or moving into the bank house?’ asked Zac.

‘My gear is coming down tomorrow, so it’s just the one night here.’ *Thank God*, he thought to himself.

‘All right. Well, I haven’t got much on over the weekend so if you need a hand, give me a call.’

Dan smiled, a little shocked. ‘For real?’ If someone had offered to help in the city he’d be worried they were planning steal all his stuff. But this was the country. And there was something trustworthy about this bloke. Open and honest. Rare virtues. ‘Cheers, Zac. That’d be great.’

‘No worries.’

‘So what does a guy do around here for fun?’ Dan asked as he undid the top button of his shirt, the cool interior of the pub refreshing after the oppressive heat.

‘Well, we’ve got the pub and footy season, or we make our own fun.’

Dan threw Zac a questioning look.

‘Don’t worry. Stick with me and I’ll show you some fun while you’re here. I’ll send you back to the city a different bloke. A better bloke.’ Zac slapped his hand on the bar, making Renae look over. ‘Can we’ve another two please, Nae?’

Dan drained the last of his beer and thought about what Zac had said. He highly doubted that a few months in the bush could change him, beyond drying out his skin and giving him a tan. He was tougher than these country blokes would think; they’d soon find that out.

The next day after lunch, Daniel let himself in to the three-bedroom house that would be his home here in Bundara. It was one of the nicer ones in town – around six years old with a modern kitchen and tiles throughout. It was a huge improvement on the pub. He'd only been in the house ten minutes when there was a knock at the door.

'Hello, anyone home?'

A woman in her forties wearing trackpants and workboots, her brown hair pulled into a loose bun, was standing before him. She looked a little rough, like a strong country woman, he guessed.

'Hi,' said Dan, opening the security door.

The woman held out her hand. 'Daniel? How are you going? I'm Jean Symonds. I'm the senior consultant from the bank. I live three houses down. I saw a bit of movement at the house and thought I'd come and introduce myself, see if you needed any help.'

'Oh, thanks, Jean. Um, that's nice of you, but I'll be fine. I haven't really got all that much to do.'

'Okay. Well, I'll leave you to it and I'll see you in the office on Monday. But if you have any questions or you're not doing anything, we have dinner at seven so feel free to pop over then. Our house is the cream one. There's a ute out the front, 'SYMMO' number plates – can't miss it.'

Dan stood gripping the door and wondering how it was possible that a lady he'd just met was inviting him into her home to share a meal. 'Thanks again. So nice of you to offer, but I've got dinner sorted.' Dinner hadn't crossed his mind, but going to the house of a stranger in a town he'd just arrived in was a bit weird. God, for all she knew, he could have been a murdering psychopath.

'Good luck moving in. It's the best house in the street. See you Monday,' she said, before walking back down the footpath.

As Jean made her way home, Dan saw his removalists pull up out the front. It was only a small white truck with *Henderson's Removals* painted on the side. He greeted the driver, Paul, who was wearing a fluoro-yellow shirt that stretched across his enormous belly. Dan slipped his hands into the pockets of his denim shorts as he watched the hydraulic back door of the truck open. The sun's rays seemed to

burn through his white polo shirt, and the back of his legs tingled with heat. It was going to take him a while to adjust to the brutality of the November sun. No-one had warned him about that when they sent him out here.

A newish Holden ute rumbled along the street and parked nearby. Its black and white plates read 'MERRIT7'. He recognised Zac in the passenger seat. Zac climbed out of the ute in what seemed to be the Bundara male uniform: singlet, shorts and workboots. A young bloke trailed behind.

'Hey, Dan. I was at the shop when I saw the truck go past. Thought you might be ready for that hand. I brought reinforcements,' said Zac. 'This is Rick Merrit: butcher's son and handy when it comes to moving stuff.'

Daniel shook hands with Rick, who was about six feet tall and stood eye to eye with Dan. Rick was solid like a man, but still had the face of a teenager. 'Thanks for coming,' Dan said.

Rick shrugged it off. 'Let's get cracking, shall we? I've still gotta go and pick up the roast for Mum.'

With four blokes it only took half an hour to unload the bed, couch, TV, fridge, a small cupboard and a dining table and a few boxes.

'Man, you travel light,' said Zac, after they'd positioned the couch.

'Well, I'm not here for long,' Dan said frankly. 'They're taking applications for the permanent manager's position soon, so I'm just here to fill in and check everything's in order in the meantime. With the last guy pulling the pin, it made things a little hard.' Dan had bought most of these belongings new rather than dealing with shifting his own furniture from his house in Perth. He figured he'd just give it away when he got back to the city. He wasn't here to make a home. He was here to work.

'So you got any kids? A girlfriend?' asked Zac, collapsing onto the couch for a rest.

'No and no.' Dan signed off with the delivery guy, then, turning back to Zac, said, 'I'm too busy to get involved with anyone. You?' He thought he should ask, the guy did just help him out.

Zac rolled his eyes. 'Nah. Not many to chose from out here.'

Rick snorted as he rested against the couch near Zac. 'I've got one, must just be you, hey, Zaccy. You're wearing the wrong deodorant.'

Zac punched Rick in the arm. 'Jesus, you've got a smart mouth for a nineteen-year-old.' He stood up next to Dan, resting his hands on his hips. 'Well, we're gonna be at the pub again tonight for a pool session. You should drop by for a game. Besides, it's your shout,' said Zac.

'Yeah, mate, the more the merrier.' Rick held out his hand and Dan shook it. Rick was big and shy, but Dan could see that with more time the kid would open up. He didn't know many teenagers who'd stop what they were doing to help a stranger.

'Um, I guess. I had Jean Symonds drop by and invite me for dinner . . .'

Zac waved his hands like he was trying to stop a truck. 'Nah, nah. You don't want to go doing that, mate. Jean's a nice bird but she'll burn your ears off after an hour, and her hubby, Symmo, has a model tractor collection and he loves showing people every single one . . . in detail,' Zac emphasised.

Rick was shaking his head, waving his hand across his throat in a slicing motion. 'Nooo, mate. You don't wanna go through that, trust us.' His eyes were wide as though reliving a nightmare.

'Ookay. The pub it is,' Dan said slowly. Both guys smiled, happy with Dan's choice. 'Well, thanks for your help. You too, Rick. I wish I could offer you a beer but . . .'

He gestured to the empty fridge they'd just lugged in.

'It's cool,' Rick replied, hitching up his low-hanging denim shorts. 'The pub has plenty, you can thank us there.' He smirked before following Zac back to his ute

Dan shut the front door of his new house and cranked up the air-con. The place was silent again – just what he was used to. He leaned against the door, wondering just how many other locals he was going to mix with tonight and how many of them would have files he'd have to sift through on Monday morning.

He hoped none of them. He'd never socialised with his clients before and he didn't want to start now. Besides, it was his dad's wise advice that was freely given when he'd followed John into banking. He was the son of John Tyler, Sovereign Bank's managing director. He had to get results.

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ISBN 9781925995749

Published in Australia and New Zealand by
Booktopia Editions, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue, Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia

Printed and bound in Australia by Ligare
[FSC logo to be inserted here by printer]

booktopia.com.au

Jonelle Baxter is a young woman in a man's world – a tough, hardworking motor mechanic from an idyllic country family. But lately things in her perfect life have been changing, and her workshop isn't the only local business that's struggling.

Daniel Tyler is new in town, posted from the city to manage the community bank. As he tries to rein in the spiralling debts of Bundara, he uncovers all sorts of personal dramas and challenges. The last thing Jonny and Dan need is an unwanted attraction to each other.

It's going to take more than a good drop of rain to break the drought and to keep this small but very colourful community thriving.

From the bestselling author of *The Road Home* comes a moving and heartwarming story about love, change and courage – and the beauty that's found in the bush, even in the harshest of times.

