

A smiling woman with long brown hair, wearing a straw hat and a grey tank top, holds a wooden crate filled with fresh green leafy vegetables. She is standing in a lush green field under a bright blue sky with wispy clouds. In the background, there are scattered trees and a few sheep grazing in the distance.

FIONA PALMER

The Sunnyvale Girls

From the bestselling
author of *Outback Heart*

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THE screeching of galahs in the early morning sounded like church hymns. Nothing made Maggie feel closer to God than this moment in the dawn. The air was fresh, scented with rosemary, basil and wild lavender. The light was soft and glowing as if filtered through stained glass, and the sounds of the birds assured her that she was alive.

Maggie was happiest in her garden. It was her little wonderland, although there was really nothing small about it – the pumpkins and watermelons sprawled beyond the rabbit fence. She bent over to squeeze some of the basil, releasing a burst of scent. Her back groaned slightly as she stood up and stretched. At seventy-two, she had no complaints except a tired body.

A smile tugged at her lips as she admired the tomato plants. They were only small now but soon she'd have to get Toni to truss them up. Come January/February they'd be making their own sun-dried tomatoes. Eating fresh from the land was one of life's pleasures for Maggie. If the world fell apart tomorrow, they'd

survive, just as they always had. They were three generations of women who lived off their own land. It was just the three of them, too – Maggie, Toni and Flick. The Sunnyvale girls. They would thrive on what they grew, and on how they supported each other. Wasn't that what family was all about?

Tending the garden daily, watching it all flourish, also made Maggie feel closer to Rocco. His memory came to her more frequently than ever when she was in the garden. After all, through his gentle nurturing, he was the one who had opened her eyes to the magic of growing your own produce. How different life would have been if the war hadn't made it all the way out here, to their remote farm.

Maggie always greeted her day with time in the garden. It was her special ritual. Toni, her daughter, would be at the sheds, already elbow-deep in farm work, while her granddaughter, Flick, was off to see the sunrise with her beloved horse in her own favourite place. All three of them belonged on this farm, entwined in Sunnyvale's earth like the deep roots of the gum trees, and their spirits hovered over it protectively like wedge-tailed eagles. Maggie had been born on this farm and it was here she hoped to see out the rest of her life.

Felicity Stewart held her breath for a moment as the sun rose from the horizon. Golden light brushed the tops of the pale grass in the pasture paddock before her. The crisp morning air stung her cheeks but she refused to move. Even Contractor stood firm beneath her, snorting his breath into the cold air and shaking his

mane as if also impressed with the dawn. Flick leant forward and rubbed his neck. The combined scent of Contractor and his leather saddle was her favourite smell in the world, and it made this moment perfect.

‘It’s always worth it, hey, boy?’

His body trembled beneath her. He knew that with the sun now up, their time here was coming to an end. But Flick wasn’t quite ready for work. Last night’s events haunted her, and her mind was in turmoil. She wasn’t sure if she should approach Chad about what she’d seen last night or not. He was coming out to the farm today anyway, so maybe she’d just wait and see.

‘Time to do some work,’ she said to herself, but the dog beside them barked. ‘Oh, I know, Fella. You’re always ready for work.’

Fella looked up at her, tail wagging and eyes sparkling with mischief. He was a Red Cloud kelpie and had short brown fur – it was a colour he shared with Contractor, although Contractor had a big white blaze down his nose and white socks on his back legs. Her boys were a perfect pair, her best mates, and could read her moods better than her own mum. The farm’s worker, Jimmy, had a dog too. Gypsy was Fella’s sister, and both were only two years old, still just pups.

Flick clicked her tongue and nudged Contractor on his way. With one hand on her hip and the other on the reins, she glanced back at the sun. The magic of the sunrise and all its amazing colours was nearly gone, leaving just the sun brightening a new, long day. She’d seen many sunrises in her twenty years, but to her eyes they still got bigger and better every day.

Contractor broke into a gallop, knowing they were headed

back home and towards breakfast. Fella's lean body stretched out alongside them, his tongue flapping in rhythm with his strides. Flick leant forward in the saddle.

'Come on, boy.'

The wind against her face was glorious and she felt safe on Contractor's powerful body. Her mum preferred the Honda motorbike, but Flick loved the strength of her horse and the fact that he would protect her. A bike would never go back to the house for help, no matter what her mum had to say about the benefits of her Honda. But then again, Toni had always been a hard arse.

As the farmhouse came into view, Flick dropped Contractor back to a walk. Fella was racing to catch up, breathing heavily but tail still wagging madly.

Flick spotted Maggie's plump bum as she bent over her herbs in the vegie patch next to the house. The Stewarts were known throughout the district for having a thriving vegetable garden. Nan was always giving away armloads of produce to anyone who visited. You name it, they grew it. Olive trees, smaller than the huge ones over by the old house, edged the garden. Every year they bottled up jars and jars of olives. People put in orders for them, and for good reason. They were delicious.

'Morning, Nan,' Flick said as she approached.

Maggie stood up. She was wearing her favourite apron. It was faded blue gingham with a white pocket at the front, where she tucked her pair of scissors. She picked up the basil and parsley she'd just snipped.

'Hello, my darling. How was the sunrise this morning?'

‘Absolutely glorious. I saw the wedge-tailed eagle back by its nest. I’ll have to keep a closer eye on the lambs in that paddock.’

Maggie nodded. Her face was wrinkled and dotted with age spots, her soft grey hair pulled back into a neat, practical bun. She was fine-boned and petite, with the exception of her rear end. Maggie said her backside was her storage tank in case the Depression ever hit again.

Flick could see the traces of her nan’s beauty, and the proof was in the old photos. She’d been a stunner in her day. Grandad had always said he was the luckiest man alive on the day she married him. He had lost the use of his legs in a farming accident long before Flick was born, so he’d got around either in his wheelchair, on the motorbike or in the converted ute. Never had he walked the farm with them or strolled through the crops of an evening, but he’d always been around, overseeing the farm, until he passed away four years ago.

‘Hurry up and put Contractor away,’ Maggie said. ‘I’ll have brekkie ready in a few minutes. And if you see Jimmy in your travels, can you let him know, please?’

‘Sure, Nan.’

Flick headed towards the horse shed and locked Contractor away. ‘There you go,’ she said, handing him his wide plastic bucket of mixed feed. Flick kissed his long nose, put the saddle away, and ran back to the house. Fella ran beside her, glancing up excitedly as if to ask, ‘What are we chasing?’ Fella was clearly disappointed when they got to the verandah and Flick pulled off her boots. No boots meant no play. His head dropped as he flopped down beside them. Knowing that she never worked

without her boots, Fella practically sat on them now. That way he wouldn't be left behind. Flick scratched his ears. She couldn't resist his gorgeous face.

'You're a sook, Fella,' came a voice over her shoulder. Jimmy strode onto the verandah followed by an energetic Gypsy. Instantly, Fella leapt up and nipped at Gypsy's ear. Then they sprang around, jumping at each other, playing.

'Mad as cut snakes, those two,' said Jimmy, his hands on his hips. At forty-four, Jimmy was still fit and handsome. His blond hair was trimmed short and his jade-green eyes changed intensity in the light, but James Painter had always been Jimmy to Flick. He'd worked on the farm for nearly four years, ever since Grandad passed away. Jimmy wasn't just their worker any more. He was more like family now, and the only father figure, besides her grandad, that she was ever likely to have.

'Bit like us two,' said Flick, and launched herself at Jimmy as he bent over to take off his boots. Flick tried to put him in a headlock but he stood up, lifting her off the ground. She squirmed as he threw her over his shoulder. Fella and Gypsy paused to watch them.

The screen door snapped open. 'Knock it off, you two. Mum's inside waiting.' Toni was always so stern, her skin tanned from all the outside work, her body lean and strong. Her hair was short, almost pixie-like, and was streaked with grey. If it weren't for the beautiful hourglass figure that filled out her jeans and stretched her shirts across the chest, she'd fit right in with the men in the yards.

Toni's dark-brown eyes flashed with impatience, and Jimmy

set Flick down. He straightened his shirt, gave Flick a wink and squeezed past Toni. At least Toni cracked a smile.

‘Come on. Nan’s made us omelettes.’ Toni turned and they both headed inside the homestead. It had a verandah on three sides and a big patio out the back, but if you asked Flick, the house lacked character. She had always preferred the old house in the gimlet trees further down towards the back paddock, with its jarrah floorboards and high ceilings. But she’d grown up in this house, so it was home. It had its own quirks: the toilet door that didn’t shut, the cracks in the lounge room walls that opened and closed with the seasons, and the buckshot holes in the pantry from the time that Nan tried to shoot a snake that had snuck inside. And there were wider doorways and ramps instead of steps, which had been put in for Grandad.

In the dining room, the table was set with plates and Nan’s homemade tablecloth. Nan was serving the freshly cooked omelette to Jimmy, who sat at one end. Grandad’s seat at the other end always stayed empty. Flick sat on one side of Jimmy, Toni the other, and Nan usually sat beside Flick. It had been this way since Jimmy had arrived.

Nan always fed them and kept house while they ran the farm; she was not ready to retire. She’d said that the moment she stopped working would be the moment she’d start to die.

‘Oh, Maggie May, this looks great. Thank you,’ said Jimmy, who wasted no time digging in.

Nan squeezed his shoulder, delighted at pleasing him. While Flick waited for her breakfast, she tried to ignore the pile of university brochures at the edge of the table. Was her mum really

going to start on about this again today? Flick flipped her long chestnut plait over her shoulder but it wasn't enough to deflect her mum's disappointed glare. Luckily, Nan was back within minutes, flopping an omelette onto Flick's plate.

'Thanks, Nan. The herbs smell divine.'

'So, did you catch up with Chad last night?' Jimmy asked.

Flick drew in a breath. 'Yeah.'

His brow creased. 'You were home early. Heard your car,' he explained.

Toni shot her a worried glance. No doubt she'd been thinking the same thing.

'He had an early start so I only stayed for a beer.'

Nan sat down with her muesli, and Flick hoped they'd forget about Chad. That was one subject she wasn't in the mood for. She gave her full attention to eating her breakfast instead.

'We weren't expecting you home last night,' Toni persisted. 'Is everything okay?'

Flick attempted to keep her feelings of confusion and hurt from her face, trying for a casual smile. 'He had to get up really early so it was just easier to come home and get a good night's sleep.' She wasn't sure if she'd pulled it off. Jimmy, chewing as slowly as a jersey cow, studied her expression.

'Oh, all right.' Toni seemed convinced. She cleared her throat and reached for the travel brochures she had strategically placed on the table beside the bunch of university brochures.

Flick's stomach dropped. *Here it comes again*, she thought. She didn't know what was worse – a lecture about travel or the Spanish Inquisition on Chad.

'I, um, picked these up when I was in Narrogin yesterday getting the hose fittings,' Toni said.

Flick glanced at her mum. She was trying to act casual as she slid the pamphlets across the table. The four travel brochures were for Italy, France, America and Vietnam.

'These look great and the girl said they're very popular destinations,' Toni continued. 'There's the money Grandad left you just waiting for you to pick a trip.'

'I told you, I'm happy here, Mum,' Flick said. 'I don't want to travel. Fella and Contractor need me and I'd prefer to use the money to do up the old place.'

Toni clicked her tongue. 'You don't want to be stuck here your whole life, Felicity. Go, explore the world before it's too late and you end up like me!'

Flick finished her omelette and turned to her mum, a woman she'd grown up idolising, a woman of strength and determination. Nothing was impossible for her and she'd done everything on her own. Always. 'What's so wrong with being like you, Mum? Your life seems pretty perfect to me.'

'There's so much more out there on offer,' Toni replied. 'I know you love it here, but this place isn't going anywhere.'

'This place is all I've ever wanted. When are you actually going to listen to me?' Flick stood abruptly, collecting her plate while Jimmy tried his best to look invisible.

Toni got up too but Maggie raised her voice. 'Antonia, leave her be.'

Before anything else could be said, Flick darted for the kitchen, dropped her plate in the sink and charged out the screen door.

She needed time to cool down. Her mum just seemed to like pushing her buttons. Why was she so persistent? And why couldn't she hear what Flick was saying? Flick found it hard enough dealing with her mum, but now it seemed she had boyfriend issues to contend with, too. This was definitely not her week.

Toni flinched as the screen door slammed. She wanted to go back to half an hour ago, when the light had spread through the shed and warmed her skin as she'd sat cleaning motor parts in petrol. It had been so peaceful, just the galahs screeching and the odd sound of a small branch they'd nibbled off as it hit the ground with a thump. Back before she'd made Flick angry.

Pushing her empty plate away, she pulled back the travel brochures. Each photo of exotic lands and different cultures drew her in. Why wasn't Felicity interested? She'd give anything to have the opportunities her daughter now had laid out before her.

Jimmy reached around her and collected her plate, his rolled shirtsleeves exposing his muscled forearm.

'Thanks, Jimmy.' She smiled up at him. It was hard not to notice James Painter. He was far too handsome for his own good. After losing her dad, it had been so nice to have a male figure around again, and Jimmy was tall and strong, but upbeat and optimistic, too. That was something she'd missed her whole life. Her dad had depended on Toni for nearly everything, but being wheelchair-bound, he'd also suffered from bouts of depression.

She resisted the urge to watch Jimmy's denim-clad backside and instead focused on her mum. Toni wondered how she'd

managed to stay on the farm for so long without complaining even once.

‘Thanks for brekkie, Mum. We’ll be off moving a mob to the south paddock. See you at lunchtime.’

‘Okay, dear. And don’t forget to check the dam pump. I’m not getting the water to my vegies.’

‘We’ll check it out on our way back. See ya.’

Jimmy was waiting outside for her. His boots were on and he was leaning against the verandah pole, the morning sun casting bright light across his unshaven jaw. The stubble only came off when it got too long and itchy for him. Toni didn’t mind it, and had often wondered what it would be like to have his strong arms around her and to kiss his lips. But that was a ridiculous notion. He was eight years younger than her, still in his forties, still young enough to have a family of his own. Toni had been thirty-three when she’d had Felicity, and by the time she’d realised she was pregnant, the father, Simon, had already moved on, leaving Toni behind with the most amazing gift.

Toni slipped on her Rossi boots and glanced towards Contractor’s stall.

‘She’s not there,’ Jimmy pre-empted, putting on his tan akubra hat and passing Toni her dark-brown one. ‘She’ll be down at the old place.’

Toni realised Jimmy was right. The old brick farmhouse had always been Felicity’s thinking place.

‘Shall we go move this mob, then?’ he asked.

‘Righto,’ Toni replied as they headed for the ute, boots crunching on gravel. Gypsy, at Jimmy’s heel, launched herself up onto

the back tray of the old Hilux they used for paddock work. The noise from the Hilux's holey muffler was great for moving on the sheep.

Toni drove them down the track past the gimlet trees and the old house. She spotted Fella lying outside the front door, the tell-tale sign that Flick was inside.

'Do you think I'm pushing her too much?' Toni asked, clenching her hands on the steering wheel. Her nails were short, her hands marked with cuts and ingrained dirt. Jimmy remained silent. Toni stopped at the paddock gate and glanced at him.

'You really want to know what I think?' he said, looking at her.

'Of course.'

'Even if you never take my advice?' he replied with a smirk, then jumped out of the ute to open the gate. When he got back in he fiddled with his hat in his hands.

'Come on, Jimmy. Please.'

'Well, honestly, I don't think you can force Flick to do anything. She's stubborn, like you.'

'Me? Don't you mean my mother?'

'All you Stewart women are stubborn, but that's not a criticism. Being stubborn is also one of your strengths. It's what makes you all survivors.'

Toni shrugged, unable to look into his intriguing green eyes.

'All I'm trying to say is, it has to be Flick's idea. She'll go to uni if she can see a benefit in it for her, maybe to do agribusiness or an equine course. And maybe the travel will come a few years later when something grabs her interest. She's still only twenty.

But if you keep pushing her, she may close herself off just to spite you.'

Toni mulled over his words as she drove closer to the sheep. Gypsy had already jumped off and was bringing them into a close group. She risked a glance at Jimmy's face. 'How did you get to be so insightful?'

Suddenly the ute lurched and they both hit their heads on the roof. Toni braked and rubbed her head.

'What the hell was that? Did I just run over a sheep?' she said, glancing at the mob ahead.

'I don't think so. It sounded solid.' Jimmy leapt out and gasped. 'Oh my God,'

Toni rushed to his side where he knelt down. 'What? What is it?'

Jimmy was trying to talk but he was laughing too hard. He reached for Toni and pulled her down to see under the ute. They hadn't hit a sheep or a rock, but the old rusty bullbar from the front of the Hilux. It had somehow come off and they'd run right over it. Toni burst out laughing too.

As their laughter eventually died, Toni became aware that Jimmy was still holding her arm. She also realised she was leaning into him.

Jimmy didn't move away and there was a new expression in his eyes she hadn't noticed before, one she couldn't handle.

'Toni . . .' he whispered, staring deep into her eyes, but just at that moment Gypsy barked at them, as if to say, 'What the hell are you doing? Are we moving this mob or what?'

Toni jumped up off the ground and brushed the dirt from

her pants. 'Well, we need to shift this bloody thing,' she said.

Moments later Jimmy was pulling on a section of rusty steel. Together they dragged it out from under the ute. It squealed as metal ground against metal and they lifted it onto the back tray.

'Seems like the rust ate out the brackets,' she said as she walked to the front of the ute. 'The old girl looks a bit different now.'

Jimmy chuckled. 'She sure does.' His gentle laugh was enough to put them both at ease. But Toni couldn't forget their moment. What had Jimmy been about to say to her?

Gypsy barked and they started moving the sheep again.

'The lambs are looking good,' said Jimmy.

'They are, aren't they? We've had such a good drop rate.'

'Yeah, you were right to change the lambing dates. They're going great on all the green feed,' he said, shutting the gate on the mob in the next paddock.

Toni clenched her teeth to stop her smile spreading. 'Thank you. I appreciate that.' Her father had scarcely given her any praise over the years. When she'd used her initiative or suggested an easier way, her father had never acknowledged it. Although she felt a pang of guilt admitting it, even to herself, deep down Toni loved running the farm without her dad's overbearing self-righteousness.

She leant back against the frame of the gate and watched the merinos, their heads down eating as they settled into the different paddock. The growing lambs beside their mums did look really healthy, and Toni felt a sense of accomplishment. She worked damn hard on this farm, and it took everything she had to offer.

Toni had no idea what ‘personal’ time was. She’d never taken a real holiday. A weekend down the coast fishing was as good as it got. And to think she’d spent her childhood dreaming of getting on an aeroplane and flying far away from Sunnyvale.

‘You look like you’re a million miles away,’ Jimmy said.

Toni sighed. ‘I guess I was.’ She swatted a fly and turned to face him. ‘Do you ever wonder how different our lives could have been?’

His face was unreadable and Toni instantly regretted her wayward question.

‘Yes, I’ve thought about it. Like if the bank had given me the loan to buy my father’s farm instead of him having to sell it? But then I wouldn’t have gone looking for work and I wouldn’t have ended up here.’ He shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t have you three in my life and it’d be pretty empty. So I’m glad it worked out this way. Maybe fate had this planned out all along.’

‘Wow.’ Toni knew Jimmy enjoyed working at Sunnyvale but to put the three of them before having his own farm?

‘Sometimes life has a way of working out, even if you don’t realise it at the time. Sometimes —’

‘Sometimes you talk too much.’ She smiled. ‘But I know what you’re trying to say. So, thanks. I know I’m lucky.’

‘Is this about your dad?’ Jimmy asked softly.

Toni couldn’t bring herself to respond. How did he know? Was she that easy to read?

‘Who do you talk to, Toni? You never leave the farm. You don’t seem to have any fun —’

‘I have fun,’ she said vehemently.

‘Really? I’ve asked you to come to the club with me for a feed and a game of pool and you never do. Or head to the lake for a swim and just relax. You work too hard, you know that.’

‘I . . .’ Toni closed her mouth again. What could she say? *I don’t go anywhere with you because it would be too much fun?* She didn’t want to like him any more than she already did. It was easier not to be around him – especially in his swimming shorts! It was bad enough in summer when he’d strip off his shirt and stand under the outside shower.

‘What is it that you wanted to do before your dad had his accident?’ Jimmy pressed.

Oh God. The million-dollar question. Toni winced as her dreams flooded her mind. ‘Dad couldn’t help it. They had no other choice but to bring me home to help.’

‘That’s not what I asked, Toni.’

Toni hated the way his jade eyes ate right through to the most fragile part of her. She glanced back to her sheep, the paddock opening up before them along the horizon. ‘I wanted to travel,’ she said at last. She’d never spoken about her desires to anyone before.

‘So what’s wrong with starting that now? You can always take me along,’ he added with a wink.

Toni laughed, but that shimmer in his eyes was back. She’d always been able to read him, but now he seemed to be sending new messages.

‘I’ll remember that next time I head to the sale yards,’ said Toni, slapping him playfully on his arm.

‘Toni, you never know what life might be about to throw at

you.’ He shrugged. ‘Look at me – fate threw me in with three extraordinary Sunnyvale girls. Sometimes things just work out.’

For some reason Jimmy’s words rattled inside her mind and caused a tingle down her spine. Maybe this would be the year that brought about change for them all. The more she thought about it, the more she felt it was true. She breathed in deeply, the air tinged with dust and eucalyptus, but also something else.

What did fate have in store for them all?

2

FLICK turned off the old vacuum cleaner and arched her back as she surveyed her efforts. It had taken her two hours to finish scraping off the old carpet underlay that had stuck fast to the jarrah floorboards. Grandad had always said that floorboards were a sign of being poor, so the moment they could get rugs or carpet, they did. Now jarrah floorboards like these were hot property. This whole house was filled with them, and Flick wanted the boards in glossed glory.

Maggie's old room was the last one she'd cleaned. Now Flick could start up the sander she'd hired. She'd already bogged up the cracks in the walls, repainted them and replaced all the ceilings in the rooms where rain had got in and damaged them. The house was transforming before her eyes. Flick didn't need much effort to imagine it all fixed up. It would be full of character and charm: high ceilings, wide passageways, a huge built-in pantry in the kitchen, lots of rooms. Flick picked up the vacuum cleaner, took it out the front and dumped it on the verandah by

the door. The outside of the house was still the original bricks. Flick touched the perfect rectangles with their swirl pattern. She couldn't imagine making each one of these by hand.

Heavy boot steps creaked along the verandah. 'You need a moment alone with your house?' Jimmy teased as he stopped beside her. Gypsy found Fella and they ran off into the bush as if they were rally cars, skidding around the trees.

'How did they do it, Jimmy?'

'How did who do what?'

'Rocco and Giulio. You know, the Italian prisoners they had working on the farm. Nan said that they made each one of these bricks by hand and built this whole house with just a tape measure, plumb and level. It must have taken ages.'

Jimmy touched a brick too, his dirty finger tracing the pattern. 'I guess it would have. But they worked hard in those days. Would have done a whole day's work on just a bit of bread and cheese too, probably. They were bloody clever, I'll give 'em that.'

'Nan said they used a shovel to slap the mud into a mould. Imagine trying to make all the bricks and then still having to build the house. She said when it came time to put the roof on, the house was only a smidgen off perfectly square.'

Jimmy shrugged. 'It's like asking how they made the Colosseum, or Petra in Jordan.'

Flick studied Jimmy. 'Have you ever been?'

'Me? No. My sister has. She loves travelling. I wouldn't mind going one day, but what's better than what we've got?' he said with a wink.

'I agree.' She smiled. 'So, what are you doing here? Escaped Mum for a bit, have you?'

Jimmy cleared his throat. 'Something like that. Thought I'd see how you're going. Tried sanding yet?'

'Just about to. Can you run me through it again? I really don't want to stuff up.'

He nodded and followed her inside and down the wide passageway. There was a lounge room to the left and a bedroom to the right, and further down it opened up into a dining area with another room on the left. There were fireplaces in the lounge and dining rooms, with a big old stove in the kitchen that was a thing of beauty. Flick was so glad it hadn't been ransacked over the years. She planned to put in a new one, but alongside the old one. Sometimes Nan still came over to light a fire in the old stove to cook her pavlovas. They were the best ever.

The kitchen wasn't large but it extended out off the dining area and had a walk-in pantry. A door off to the side took you to the enclosed back verandah, to the bathroom and the sleep-out bedroom.

The large sander was in the corner of the main bedroom, plugged in and ready for work.

'Have you hit down all the nails?' Jimmy asked.

'Yep. The lounge room was last and it was in really good shape.'

He bent down to look at a few spots. 'Good job. I could take you out doing tradie work if your mum ever sacks me.'

'It's easy when someone shows you. And as if Mum would sack you. She'd never admit it but I don't think she could do without you.'

Jimmy smiled, even though Flick could tell he was trying not to. She was glad that news made him happy. Her mum should tell him stuff like that herself but she was too much like Grandad, never any good at showing her emotions.

Jimmy stood up and handed her a dust respirator and goggles. 'Okay, just like I showed you before. Never bounce the sanding drum or stand in one place, or you'll get hollows in the floor.' Jimmy started the drum floor sander and walked forward. 'See? Just like that. Go in the direction of the planks and wood grain.' He did a patch and then it was Flick's turn.

She was a little nervous, but Jimmy was a good teacher. She learnt more from him than she would at any agriculture school.

'That's it, keep going.'

As she moved forward again there was a loud vibration noise. Confused, she stopped the machine and pulled off her dust mask.

'What did I do wrong?'

'It was a loose board. You must have missed one.'

Flick hadn't noticed a loose board before. She stepped to the wall and pressed on the boards along it. None of them moved but as she knelt down, the edge of one of the shorter boards rose up.

'This one doesn't have any nails in it at all.'

That was strange. Flick pushed it down again and slid her finger under the other end. The short board lifted out completely from under the edge of the wall. She shot Jimmy a look.

'Huh. I hope this isn't how the mice get in,' she said, bending down to look into the hole. 'Hey, I think there's something down there. Hang on.'

Flick jumped up and ran to the kitchen to get the torch. When she returned Jimmy was trying to fit his arm down the hole. She laughed. 'That's what having too many muscles does. Here, mine are skinnier.'

'I could feel the top of a tin,' he said, excitement in his voice.

Flick shined the torch on his face. 'Who's supposed to be the kid here?' She crouched down to peer into the black slit. 'It's a box. God, I hope there are no snakes hiding down here.' Handing Jimmy the torch she squeezed her hand into the gap.

'It's probably a snake pit filled with spiders of every shape and size.' Jimmy reached over and tickled her arm.

Flick tried hard not to scream and drop the box but she did pull it back so fast she knocked skin off her knuckles. 'Damn you, Jimmy. You know I hate snakes and spiders.'

'You're just like Maggie. You gonna fill this house up with buckshot too?' he said with a chuckle.

'If I have to.' Flick turned the narrow tin box, which was almost as wide as the floorboard, so she could ease it out. 'Whoever put this here would have had arms like me. It's a tight fit. Do you think it was Nan?'

'I don't know. Hurry up and open it. Maybe it's old coins worth a fortune.'

Flick brushed off the dirt from the top and rested the box on her lap. It was a little rusty and looked old. She prised open the lid. Inside was a stack of envelopes gathered by string. The top envelope had some moisture damage, and the address was hard to read. Two fading stamps were lifting off the corner.

'Letters. To who?' Jimmy asked.

'I'm not sure. I can't quite read it.' Flick counted ten letters in all and looked at one towards the middle. The ink on the envelope was much easier to read, although the handwriting was unfamiliar. 'It's addressed to Nan. Look, see? *Maggie Fuller, care of Sunnyvale Farm, Pingaring.*' Flick held it up for Jimmy and as she did, she realised something. 'It's never been opened.' She checked the others. 'All for Nan and none have been opened. I wonder who they're from.'

Jimmy took one and studied it. 'The stamps are Italian.'

'No way, really?' Flick studied the rectangles and sure enough, Jimmy was right. 'Amazing.'

'Do you think Maggie hid them? Or maybe someone didn't want her to see these.' He looked around. 'Who's room was this?'

'It was my great-gran's. A scandal, do you think?' On the back of the second letter was an address. 'Oh, I have to go show Nan right now. I wonder what they say.'

'What about the sanding?' said Jimmy as Flick stood up.

'It can wait – this is like finding buried treasure! I won't be long, but if you get bored . . .' she said with the sweetest smile she could muster.

Jimmy just waved her off and put his dust mask back on.

'Thanks, Jimmy. Love ya!' Then she was off, running towards the main house, past the gimlets and the vegie garden. 'Nan!' she yelled as she got closer. '*Nan!*'

Maggie opened the back door. 'Goodness, girl, what's going on? Is someone hurt?'

'No, but look what I found in the old house.' Flick was trying to catch her breath as she handed over the pile of letters. 'They

were hidden under a floorboard and they're addressed to you. All ten of them. And they have Italian stamps. Who are they from, Nan?'

Maggie stepped out from the doorway and took a letter. Her finger went to the stamps and then both hands began to shake. Clutching the letter to her chest, she closed her eyes.

Flick watched her sway and reached for her. 'Sit down, Nan.' She helped Maggie to the bench seat against the back of the house. 'Are you feeling okay?'

Maggie nodded and smiled, but there were tears in her eyes. She gently opened the letter, some of the fragile paper tearing. Flick held her breath with anticipation.

'Can you read it, please, darling? I haven't got my glasses,' said Maggie in a strained voice.

Flick sat beside her and took the letter from her nan's grasp.

'It says *Bella Maggie*, I think?'

Maggie gasped and nodded. 'Oh yes, *beautiful Maggie*. What else does it say?'

'Um . . . *I am looking for work but there is none. I help my family. I am trying to get back to you. I haven't heard from you but I will not give up hope that you wait for me. I made a promise. I will come back to Australia so we can be together. Ti amo, Rocco.*'

Flick dropped the letter on her lap and looked up at her nan. Tears were falling silently down her lined face.

'Oh, Nan.' Flick embraced her, clutching her hand in hers as her strong nan cried. 'I'm sorry it upset you. I thought you'd be happy.'

Maggie sniffed back some of her tears as she snuggled into Flick's hug. 'Oh, I am happy, dear. I waited so long for these letters. I thought they never came.'

Flick handed her the tin. 'There are more. Are these from the Italian prisoner you talk about sometimes?'

Maggie nodded, fingering the letters. 'He was the love of my life once, Felicity. It seems so very long ago.'

If the emotion on her grandmother's face was anything to go by, time didn't seem to be a factor. 'But you never forget your first love, right?'

Maggie dried her tears with her apron. 'Where did you find them?'

'Hidden under a loose floorboard in your mother's room. Do you think she hid them from you?'

'Perhaps she did. Maybe she knew how I felt about Rocco, even though we tried hard to hide it. Or maybe she just didn't want the connection to him. She never would have approved. He was a prisoner, an Italian and he had no money.' Maggie sighed angrily. 'I asked her if she'd seen any letters from Rocco. She lied to me. I should have known.'

'Did he have to go back to Italy?' asked Flick, not liking the flash of regret and pain on her Nan's face.

'Yes, all of them were sent back after the war. It broke my heart.' Maggie glanced at the letters again.

'Would you like me to read another one, Nan?'

'That's okay, dear. I'll go find my reading glasses. You probably want to get back to what you were doing.'

Actually, Flick wanted to stay right there and ask Nan heaps

of questions about her and Rocco. But she realised Maggie probably wanted some time alone, and she couldn't blame her. What a thing to find. All those years Nan was waiting to hear from Rocco . . . she'd thought he never cared, when all along he did. It was so sad, Flick could have cried. All that lost love.

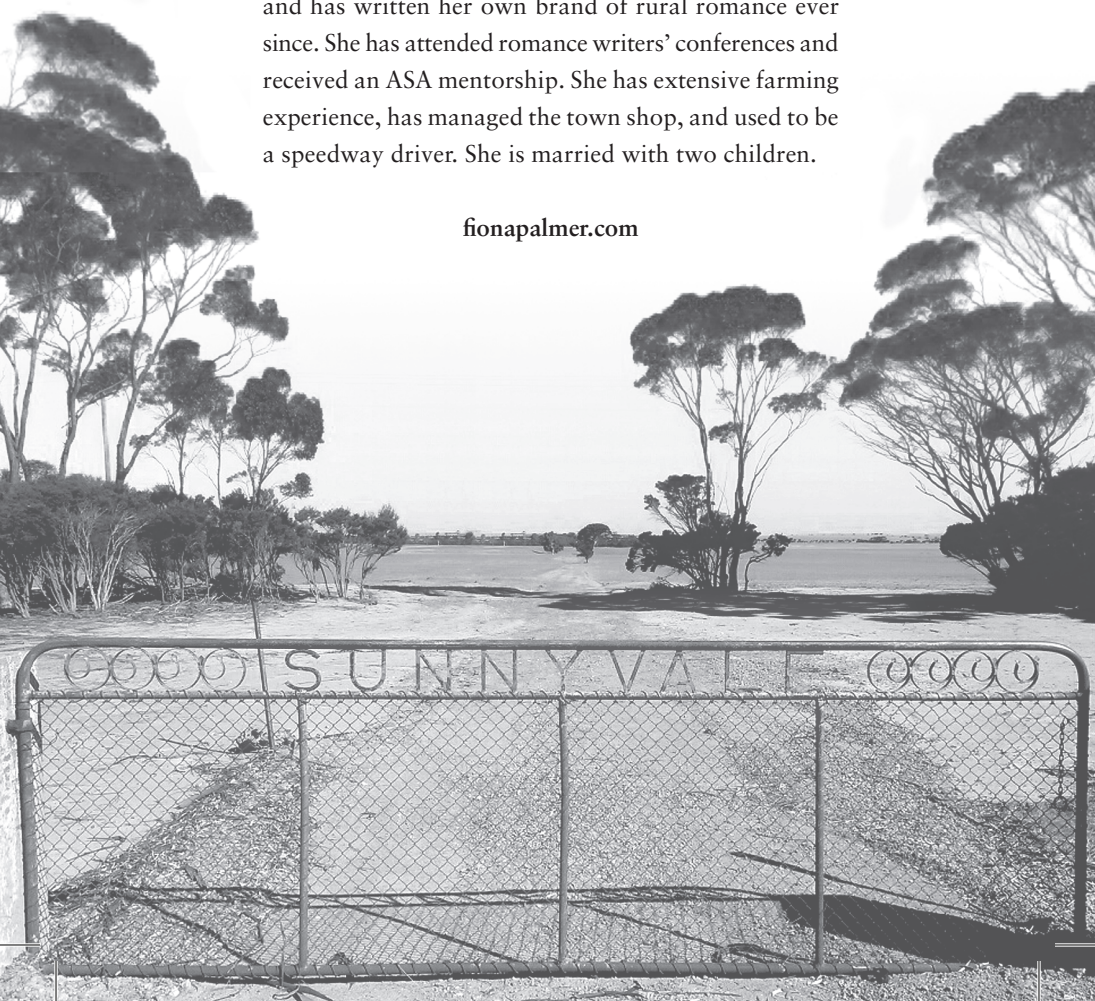
'All right, Nan,' she said, kissing her soft cheek. 'I'll get back to work. If you need anything you know where I am. We'll talk after dinner, okay?'

Maggie nodded but she was staring at her letters, her eyes brimming with memories and tears. Flick had never seen her blue eyes so vibrant and youthful. She got up and walked to the edge of the verandah but Maggie didn't notice. She was already back in 1944.

Fiona Palmer

Fiona Palmer lives in the tiny rural town of Pingaring in Western Australia, three and a half hours south-east of Perth. She discovered Danielle Steel at the age of eleven, and has written her own brand of rural romance ever since. She has attended romance writers' conferences and received an ASA mentorship. She has extensive farming experience, has managed the town shop, and used to be a speedway driver. She is married with two children.

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THE AUSTRALIAN BOOKSHELF

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Three generations of Stewart women share a deep connection to their family farm, but a secret from the past threatens to tear them apart.

Widowed matriarch Maggie remembers a time when the Italian prisoners of war came to work on their land, changing her heart and her home forever. Single mum Toni has been tied to the place for as long as she can recall, although farming was never her dream. And Flick is as passionate about the farm as a young girl could be, despite the limited opportunities for love.

When a letter from 1946 is unearthed in an old cottage on the property, the Sunnyvale girls find themselves on a journey deep into their own hearts and all the way across the world to Italy. Their quest to solve a mystery leads to incredible discoveries about each other, and about themselves.



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