

FIONA PALMER

From the bestselling
author of *Heart of Gold*

The Road Home



FIONA
PALMER

*The Road
Home*

 booktopia
editions



PROLOGUE

MAGIC was happening. Even at the tender age of twelve, Lara felt the energy around her from the land. This afternoon was no different. A family of kangaroos grazed in a nearby paddock, their imposing figures framed in the afternoon glow as a little joey moved around in the dry, golden grass. They might even be big reds, but with the ochre hues from the setting sun behind them, Lara couldn't be sure.

'Get a load of that, Larz. Isn't it just the duck's bum?'

She studied the pink and gold sunset in the reflection of her father's eyes. Oh, how she was going to miss him when she was sent away to boarding school next year: his brown stubble and wayward hair half hidden beneath his favourite red cap, the creases around his eyes and mouth from years of laughter. Dad always liked a good joke or harmless prank, and Lara wouldn't have him any other way. He just wouldn't be her dad without the checked shirt, singlet and jeans, and the leather Rossi boots. A farmer through and through. It wasn't fair that she'd have to say goodbye to all this.

‘Come here, possum,’ he said, holding out his arm. The mouth of the shed framed her father in black like the thick edges of a photo frame.

Lara eagerly scooted her brown milk crate closer to her dad’s and enjoyed the warmth of his embrace as she tucked her arms around his chest. Her own checked shirt pulled tight against her slender arms and the button on her jeans dug into her belly, but she wouldn’t move for anything. She inhaled deeply. He smelled like grease, diesel and dust.

‘I’m going to miss this, Dad.’

‘What? Sitting by the shed watching the sunsets?’ his deep voice teased.

‘No . . . well, yes, but you too. This . . . now . . . everything. These moments.’

He gazed down at her. His eyes glistened with affection and the colours of the sky glimmered off his threatening tears. He blinked them away and planted a kiss on her head.

‘Why can’t I stay here?’ she asked for the millionth time.

‘You know why, love. We want the best for you, so you can go out and make something of yourself.’

‘But Noah gets to stay here,’ Lara tried once more. Noah got to go to the local district high school and stay on the farm while she was heading miles away to the big city of Perth. If only she’d been born a boy, this wouldn’t be happening.

‘Ah, yes, but Noah will be running the farm and you’ll be going on to something wonderful,’ he said with a sigh.

Lara knew her dad didn’t really want her to leave. If he had his way, he’d probably let her stay. It was Mum who had the really big

plans for her. Mum had been studying to be a nurse when she'd met Dad, but had never gone back to it once Noah was born. She still regretted it.

Lara heard the crunch of footsteps on the gravel behind them, then the sound of her mother's voice. 'Oh, I'm not too late,' she said, dragging a crate next to her husband and resting her hand on his lap. 'Gosh, it's a beautiful one tonight. Look at that horizon.' Her mum reached across and squeezed Lara's fingers tenderly. 'Where's Noah?'

'Out on the motorbike,' Lara said.

Her mother laughed. 'I should have guessed.' She flicked her long braid back over her shoulder and gazed across the darkening land. Lara wanted to be just like her mum, so beautiful, graceful and loving.

By now the sky was stained a lustrous cherry with splashes of gold, and tiny clouds dotted the sky like buttered popcorn. It wasn't just the sky that was so breathtaking, but also the remaining warmth of the sun, the stillness and the echoing birdsong in the trees. It was the smell of lingering dust and eucalyptus and the feel of the crisp night air starting to settle. It was having people she loved beside her, the feeling of the big wide world before her, and the safety and security it all seemed to bring. That was the magic. Moments like these where Lara felt so blessed to be who she was. And no matter what her parents told her about it being best for her, she was sure she'd never understand why she had to leave it all behind.

1

LARA Turner lay on the lawn and inhaled the scent of damp grass, her sunglasses keeping out the midday sun. The smell instantly transported her back to her childhood, evoking an image of making tunnels in the marshmallow weeds in the sheep yards. Huge damp leaves tickled her eight-year-old arms as she commando-crawled through the green foliage, following Noah's boots. The memory quickly disappeared, but for that split second she'd felt the carefree fun and wonder of her youth. With a sigh she crossed her ankles, careful not to dirty her favourite high heels. From this spot in the park, Lara could look up and see nothing but sky and the leaves on the trees. No intruding skyscrapers, including the finance building she worked in, the one that enclosed her all day. It was why she loved spending her lunch break in the park. She had to drown out the city noise with her iPod, but other than that she felt almost alone.

A glance at her watch told her she had only ten minutes left of her break. She sat up just as a hand touched her shoulder.

'Who would have guessed I'd find you in this spot again?'

‘Nic! Hi. Did your meeting finish early?’ Lara peered up into Nic’s bright blue eyes as he rested his sunnies on his head. He held out his hand and helped her up. He looked gorgeous in his perfect white shirt and navy suit. She leant over and gave him a quick kiss.

‘Yep, and I thought I’d rush down here to see you. Come on, I’ll walk you back to your office.’

Lara picked up her leather handbag, put her iPod away and walked beside Nic out of the small park. Her expensive heels sank into the lawn with each step. They walked in silence until they got to her building, where Nic opened the large glass door and walked straight in. Luckily she had her hand ready and caught the door. He headed straight for the elevator while Lara went for the stairs.

‘Come on, Lara. There’s not much time and this is much quicker.’

Lara paused and raised a sculpted eyebrow. Nic’s smile almost turned her to jelly. ‘Oh, okay.’ She much preferred the stairs. She wasn’t exercise-mad, although she did enjoy keeping fit; she just hated the suffocating feeling of that tiny box on cables.

Inside the lift, Lara breathed a sigh of relief to find it was just the two of them. Nic touched the small of her back and they stood in silence as the lift ascended to the fifth floor.

The moment they got to her office, Nic quickly shut and locked the door. He smelled like the aftershave she’d bought him for his birthday and it instantly weakened her knees. Nic turned, his simmering eyes already undressing her. Lara’s breath caught in her throat.

‘Come here, beautiful,’ he urged, sweeping Lara up in an embrace. His arms crinkled her elegant white shirt, which tucked into her black pencil skirt just under her bust. He leant her back against her desk, planting kisses along her neck.

‘You’re so hot,’ he breathed.

She kissed him one more time before pulling back. ‘Sorry, Nic. I’ve got to get back to work.’

He shook his head and sighed. ‘I don’t know why you work so hard.’

Lara shrugged. ‘I can’t help it. Anyway, my break’s nearly over and I want to make a start.’ She pecked him on the cheek.

‘Okay, but we’ll catch up properly soon.’ Nic brushed away a strand of hair from her face. She loved the way he gazed at her, like she was the most important thing in his life and it was killing him to leave.

‘So I’ll see you tonight, then?’ They nearly always spent Thursday nights together, either in her bed or eating at a secluded restaurant.

‘Sorry, darling. Can’t tonight. I have a meeting I couldn’t get out of. Gotta wine and dine a client. You understand, right?’

She nodded sadly and the old sinking feeling crept up on her again. ‘Go on,’ she persisted. ‘I don’t want to get busted by the boss.’

‘I’ll let you know if I can catch up with you on the weekend. Okay, babe? Love ya.’ With that, he unlocked the door and left.

Just as Lara had finished straightening her desk there was a knock at the door and her assistant, Amber, walked in with an armload of papers. Her bushy eyebrows were raised.

‘Was that Nic?’ She plonked the papers on Lara’s desk and squeezed herself into a nearby chair.

‘Don’t give me that look, Ambs. He loves me.’

Amber removed her black-framed glasses and cleaned them. ‘Who just happens to be married?’

Lara sat down at her desk and picked up the papers. ‘I know

you don't approve, but they *are* separated. You know he's leaving her next year, as soon as the youngest is at school.'

Amber tilted her head to the side.

'They're only living together for the kids,' Lara stressed.

'And you believe him?'

'Of course I do. There's this little thing called trust, Ambs. There's nothing left of their marriage but he has to do the right thing for his kids and I can understand that. They're important to him.'

Amber got up and shrugged. 'Personally, I'd wait until he'd signed the divorce papers.' She nodded to the papers in front of Lara. 'Chuck them on my desk when you're done. They just need a signature, okay? Oh, and your one o'clock appointment is running late.'

'Thanks,' Lara said as she started looking through the papers flagged with bright yellow sticky notes.

'You're welcome. Oh, and how about going home at a reasonable hour tonight? Ted said you were still here while he was trying to vacuum last night. You need a life, Lara,' Amber added with a smile.

Lara took her eyes off the paperwork for a few seconds. 'I really want that job, Amber. It's what I've been aiming for.'

'Workaholic is all I'm saying.'

Once Amber was gone, Lara rested her head on the desk, her loose hair cascading over her shoulder. She wanted the promotion so badly and knew they'd be making the decision any day. She wouldn't drop the ball now, not when she was so close. 'Be the best that you can be, Lara,' her mother had always said.

Her phone rang and she sat up with a start.

'Hello. Lara Turner.'

‘Hey, sis. How’s it going?’

‘Noah!’ she said, smiling and relaxing back into her chair. ‘Hey there, yourself. God, I haven’t heard from you in ages.’ Usually she did all the calling – at least on birthdays and at Christmas, although in truth they had struggled to stay in touch after their parents’ deaths. They led such vastly different lives now.

‘Yeah, good. Hey, I can’t talk long. I’ve just ducked out of the shed to get the next mob in, but I really wanted to ask you something. Can you come down this weekend? I need to catch up with you. It’s important.’

‘But the weekend’s the day after tomorrow! Can’t you just tell me over the phone?’ Her fingers flicked through her diary.

‘Sorry, Lara. I meant to call you earlier but I’ve been flat out with shearing. You know how it is.’

Yes, she knew all about how easily time could get away from you. ‘Tell me it’s not because you’re short a roustabout?’ she joked.

‘No . . . but if you wanna throw a few fleeces, I won’t say no,’ he teased. ‘Please, Larz, it’s really important, and it’s about time you came back to the farm and saw old Dippa before he carks it.’

Lara’s heart lurched. ‘Is he sick?’ She couldn’t bear it if something happened to her dog. Dippa was a black and tan kelpie her dad had given her when she was fifteen. She’d always wanted her own dog, but she’d had the feeling Dippa was also a bribe to keep her coming home. It had been such a long time since she’d been back to the farm – two years since her last visit, and even then it was just for the night, for Noah’s thirtieth.

‘He’s fine, but he probably would have a heart attack if you came home, it’s been so long. Can you come?’ Noah pleaded.

Well, she probably deserved a break after signing off on the Denver file. It might even help her to stop thinking about this job promotion. Lara felt her smile widen as she made up her mind. ‘Sure, Noah. I’ll see you Saturday morning, okay?’

‘Thanks, Lara. I owe ya. Catch ya then.’

She said her goodbyes and hung up. A buzz of excitement built through her body as she stared out the side window at the other tall buildings. Row upon row of metal and glass twisted together to block out the sky. If she pressed her face right up to the glass, she could just make out the sky above.

Now that she thought about it, she was really looking forward to seeing the vast horizon on the farm. But lurking in the back of her mind, as always, was the unease of going home.

Lara had lived in Perth for nearly half of her life, since she’d gone away to boarding school at thirteen, but the farm was still home to her, and always would be. She had so many wonderful childhood memories with her parents. How could she not hold Erindale in her heart?

Yes, it had been a while, but part of her couldn’t wait to be heading home.

Noah hung up his phone and threw it on the seat of the ute before walking back to the sheep yards. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck and chest, soaking into his blue singlet as the midday sun tried to test him with its fiery summer heat. The sapphire sky was free of clouds but the breeze had picked up and could blow some in. He jumped over the outside fence of the yard. The sheep moved

away from him, raising fine black dust that stuck to his sweaty skin and lined the inside of his nose. He walked towards a metal gate, swung it open and let the animals run through. Heavily woolen sheep raced past him as he whistled and waved them on. One hard-headed ewe clipped him in the back of the knee and his leg buckled under him, sending him down to the ground. His knees found the hard dirt and fresh sheep shit.

‘Ah, ya daft animals!’ he yelled. He’d never much liked sheep. When he was a kid helping his dad pen them up, they’d knock him over and trample on his feet. Sheep had been the cause of his first accident, too. When Noah was fifteen his dad had given him the old ute to use on the farm. It was to become properly his after he got his licence, but one day, as he was driving down the back lane, a stray sheep had run out into the middle of the road. Instead of continuing to the other side, the stupid thing had gone every which way, leaving Noah with no option other than to pick a side. The sheep finally decided to head the same way, so he ended up skittling them like a bowling ball, and his beloved ‘new’ ute had been left bent and buckled.

Noah pulled himself up and closed the gate. He could hear the machines in the shed as the shearers worked. He’d be in there soon enough to start pressing up some bales, but he had to get this mob pushed up first. He watched their stick legs and large woolen bodies as they ran around in circles, just following the one in front. Bloody sheep.

He’d tried farming without them, after his parents had died and the farm had been left to him. He’d never been as pleased as when he’d watched the big trucks with their sheep crates take the

last of them away. No more carting water, no more hand-feeding, no more shearing, crutching and drenching, and no more flyblown sheep. For a while he'd been happy on Erindale as he concentrated on the cropping side of things. He was finding a way to make it work – until the last few bad years hit. When the rain doesn't come and the crops don't grow, sheep are needed to keep the farm turning over. Typical. Noah felt like his father had reached down from heaven and slapped him on the back of the head. *Damn it, boy. You need sheep to help balance the farm.*

He'd got rid of the sheep for a selfish reason and now he was paying the price. And the price was high. Of course he'd had to go back out and start buying up sheep again, but he could only afford the runty ones. Slowly he was building his numbers up – and he was hating every minute of it. It was like holding out his hand and smashing each finger with a hammer.

He'd thought of selling the farm many times since he'd inherited it. But he couldn't. He was stuck here, whether out of loyalty or tradition he wasn't sure. Erindale. It's what his father had worked hard for and what he'd wanted for Noah. And his father had been a great man, so who was he to challenge his wish? Some part of him thought that running Erindale was keeping his parents' memory alive. Maybe it was, but it would never bring them back.

2

LARA got dressed in a pair of jeans, her black high heels and a silky halter-neck top in the prettiest cobalt, which matched her eyes. She only had to run a comb through her hair a few times to make it shine, and it fell down her back with a hint of a curl at the bottom. She'd decided to take advantage of Thursday late-night shopping and get a few things for Noah. One time she'd gone home, he'd worn a white shirt with fluoro squiggles to the pub, something he'd had since the late eighties. Just in case he still had that shirt, she thought she'd better get him a few others.

Within an hour, she'd bought him three T-shirts and two dress shirts. Noah's size was easy. He was tall but had never changed from 'scrawny' so she knew she was safe with a medium. Noah could eat a horse every night and still look like he was starving. That was the Turner metabolism for you. His face came to mind, lean and tanned with brown eyes. She hoped he was getting his hair cut. Last time she'd seen him he'd resembled a shagpile rug. She'd forced him into a chair and cut it herself, horrified to find a

few dreadlocks. ‘Surprised you didn’t get shorn at shearing time,’ she’d said.

Lara’s tummy began to rumble as she walked along the city streets; it was getting close to eight o’clock. The smell of sizzling steaks at a nearby restaurant wasn’t helping. She loved her meat, which she assumed came from her farm upbringing and her mother’s stews, roasts and barbecues. Tempted by the aroma, she headed into the restaurant with her bags slung over one arm and waited to be seated. It was cosy inside, with red and black bench seats along the wall. Low chandelier-style lights hung from the ceiling, giving the room a warm glow. Families were enjoying the start of their weekend time together. An elderly couple sitting in the corner held hands, and behind them a child dropped his fork on the floor. In the booth next to them was a tall man who caught Lara’s eye. She couldn’t mistake the way he tilted his head as he talked, and the immaculate style of his blond hair. Nic did love his hair products.

Lara looked for the clients he was taking out for dinner, but across the table were three kids, flicking peas from their spoons. She recognised them from photos Nic had shown her. He must have had a change of plans. Lara had heard all about his kids – how little Marcie was losing her teeth and Georgie was top in her class at maths, and not forgetting Tyler, who wanted to play football for the Eagles. She’d assumed one day the children would be a part of her life too and revelled in all the details Nic proudly shared. He hadn’t introduced her to them yet; he’d said he wanted to wait until next year, when they had got used to the separation. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t just say hi, as a colleague. She started to walk over to the table.

Another woman beat her to it. Lara stopped in her tracks. It was Emily, Nic's wife. She was pretty, with long black hair like glossy silk sheets. Emily leant over as she sat down, and they kissed. It wasn't so much the affectionate kiss that burnt Lara, but the way Nic lifted his hand to brush away Emily's fringe. It was the same way he held her eyes in a caress for those few seconds, which felt like an eternity, and the way Emily gazed back at him with intense love. Lara felt the heat climb up her neck to her cheeks like the sting from an open-handed slap.

'Excuse me,' a waiter said. 'A table for one or are you meeting someone?'

Lara felt herself tremble as she dragged her eyes away from the devastating scene. 'Ah, no, I'm . . . fine. Thanks,' she managed to squeak before pushing back through the door onto the street like a cat who'd been dunked in water.

In. Out. In. Out. She breathed heavily, her mind in a blur and her anger simmering below. To hell with him, she thought. Lifting her head and squaring her shoulders, she marched back into the restaurant, forced a smile onto her lips and stormed right up to his table.

'Oh, why, hello, Nicolas. Fancy seeing you here,' she said, as cheerfully as she could manage. She touched his shoulder, making sure to dig her nails in and get his full attention.

Nic coughed and reached for his wine glass while Emily glanced at Lara curiously.

'Hi,' Lara said to Emily and hoped the well-dressed woman couldn't see the torment in her eyes. 'I hope you don't mind if I interrupt your lovely dinner, but I saw Nic and thought I'd better say hello.'

‘No, not a problem,’ Emily said warily. ‘How do you know Nic?’

Lara glanced at Nic, who’d been avoiding her gaze, perhaps hoping she might disappear if he didn’t look at her. Oh, how Lara would love to say exactly how well she knew Nic, but she couldn’t do it. Not to Emily and not in front of his kids. They deserved better.

‘Well . . .’ Lara started, waving her hand and trying to think of a reply.

‘Lara works in our building,’ Nic cut in quickly and smiled reassuringly at his wife. He turned to Lara, his eyes full of fear.

‘That’s right,’ Lara said, smiling at Nic, knowing she had done her job and unable to bear it any more. ‘Look, I have to rush off, but it was nice to see you all. I hope you enjoy your dinner.’

She strutted all the way to the exit. Once out the door, she staggered around the corner and fell into a bus-stop seat, deflated. Traffic whizzed past along the city street as she gazed at nothing, trying to digest what she’d just seen. Her heart was thumping so hard it ached and throbbed in her neck. *Damn him, damn him*, she wanted to scream. Tears finally welled up in her eyes as the reality sank in. She felt so stupid. A total joke. She had believed him. He’d told her time and again that it was over with his wife, but *that* – what she’d just seen – wasn’t over. That was not a couple keeping it together for the kids.

He’d lied to her about that, and about the so-called meeting tonight. Nic would never leave Emily, never. Lara was just his entertainment, a bit on the side. Oh, God – how long had he planned to string her along?

Tears rolled down Lara's cheeks. She felt dirty, cheap and used. Well, there was no way she wanted him either, not like this. She wouldn't ruin a marriage on purpose. Lara dragged her hand across her cheeks, wiping away her tears with force. Damn him to hell. She pulled out her phone and managed to call Mel.

'Hey, Lara,' said Mel.

'Oh, Mel,' Lara sobbed.

'Lara? Are you okay? What's wrong? You sound terrible.'

'Nic's been lying to me,' Lara said between shaky breaths, fresh tears lining her face. 'I don't know what to do.' She was more distraught at being deceived than at the thought of losing Nic. Right now she was repulsed by him.

'Hang in there, Lara. I'll call Anna and we'll meet you.'

They organised to meet at the coffee shop just around the corner from where Lara was sitting.

With one last look towards the restaurant, Lara got up and headed down the street. Tears ran silently down her face with each shuddering breath. She felt like a silly teenager who'd been taken advantage of and lied to. As her heels clipped unsteadily along the street, she thought of the waste and the humiliation.

Twenty minutes later, the girls arrived.

'Hey, sweetie,' Mel said as she entered the cafe with Anna. Mel's round face was slightly flushed and a pen was lodged behind her left ear. Lara plucked it out and Mel squeezed her in a tight hug.

'I'm okay,' she tried to reassure them.

Anna hugged her too before they all sat down and ordered coffees and cheesecake. Lara glanced at her friends. She'd instantly connected with Mel in boarding school, and Anna and Mel had

been friends since primary school. Mel had lost her mum when she was fourteen so she knew how Lara had felt when she'd lost her own mother seven years later.

'Thanks so much for coming,' Lara said. 'It must have been hard for you to get away from the kids, Anna. I really appreciate it.'

'Of course we'd come,' Anna said, reaching out to squeeze Lara's hand. 'Paul's home with the kids, so everything's fine. Now, tell me – what's up? It sounds serious.'

Lara looked to Mel for help.

'Nic's been lying to Lara about what's going on at home.'

Slowly and painfully, Lara filled them in on how she'd seen Nic in the restaurant. She felt the tears welling up again and smiled when Mel passed her a napkin.

'You really thought he'd leave her?' Anna asked.

Lara nodded sadly. 'I wouldn't have stayed with him otherwise. He assured me it was all over. When we first met, he told me that he was separated. I believed him. I really thought we'd be together one day.'

'I wish I could have seen you face him. God, I wish I had your balls, Larz,' said Anna. 'Are you sure they hadn't just made up, or were putting it on for the kids?'

Lara slumped forward in her chair. 'From where I stood, they looked very much in love. And his face had guilt written all over it when he saw me.'

'I'm so sorry, Lara,' Anna said. 'That really sucks.'

'That's bloody men for you!' Mel said as the waiter unloaded a big slice of cheesecake, three forks and three coffees into the middle of the table.

‘God, I hope not,’ said Anna, pulling up the sleeves on her mismatched tracksuit. She drooped over her coffee, wrapping both hands around the mug.

‘Sorry, Anna,’ said Mel. ‘Your Paul’s an exception.’

Anna sighed. ‘Probably not for long, the way we’re going.’

‘What do you mean?’ Lara asked.

Anna waved a hand over herself. ‘Well, look at me, for Christ’s sake. I feel like a slob next to you guys. I haven’t washed my hair in nearly a week, and my legs haven’t been shaved in months!’ She looked at Lara. ‘I still love him and I know he loves me but it’s just so hard these days. Paul used to have my undivided attention but now the kids get all that, and as for a sex life . . .’ Anna rolled her eyes and lowered her voice. ‘I’m just too exhausted. The last time we had sex was over a month ago and I was barely awake.’

Lara and Mel raised their eyebrows simultaneously.

‘It sounds scary, I know, but there’s nothing passionate about it any more. I’m just too tired. And men say they actually *need* sex . . .’

Lara leant in closer. ‘But Paul would never cheat on you, would he?’

Anna shrugged. ‘Who knows? I hope not. I should try to give him more attention, but it just never happens. Sex has become another chore that I feel like ticking off my list with the rest of them. But I still love him. I’m just hoping that once the kids are older, it will get better.’

Lara’s eyes were wide in shock. ‘Wow, and I thought the hard part was *finding* a partner. That it was all perfect once you got married.’

‘Sorry, girls,’ Anna said, laughing. ‘It’s not all doom and gloom.’

It's also amazing and totally rewarding, and we love our kids to death. Gotta take the good with the bad, you know?'

'Hmm, you two should get a babysitter and go out at least once a month to try to reconnect. I'll come and watch the kids if you need me to,' Lara offered. 'I didn't realise it was that hard.'

Anna squeezed her hand. 'Well, then, I'll definitely talk to Paul about it.'

Lara grinned at her friends but was distracted by the overwhelming shame that was still brewing in her belly.

'Sweetie, what are you thinking?' asked Mel, waving her hand in front of her friend's eyes. 'You're staring off into space.'

Lara shook her head clear. 'Oh, sorry. I just can't believe it,' she said. 'Here I was thinking things were perfect for us. I've been so busy trying to get this promotion, but we did plan to spend more time together after that, so I could get to know the kids.'

'Don't worry about Nic. If he wanted to be with you already he would have found a way – wife or no wife. I'm sorry to be so frank, Lara, but you deserve much better. I always thought so, anyway.'

'Me, too,' said Mel.

'Thanks, guys. Whatever would I do without you?'

'Any time,' Mel said, and Anna blew her a kiss across the table.

'Hey, guess what?' said Lara, remembering her other news. 'I'm going home to Erindale for the weekend.'

'Oh, wow. That's great,' said Mel. 'Wish I was going with you but I've got another neutering to do on a dog.'

'Mel, when are you *not* fixing up some cat or dog?' Lara said, laughing.

Mel had been inspired to become a vet at the age of thirteen,

when she'd come to the farm with Lara for a long weekend. She had been beside herself with all the animals – lambs and a pet kangaroo called Boing, chickens and Squawk the cocky. For a city girl, Mel took to them like a natural and declared before they left that she'd become a vet, especially after watching Lara's mum save lambs all weekend. That was the first and last time Mel had ever come out to the farm. The following year her mother had died in a car accident and Mel had been the woman of the house ever since, looking after her younger brother and father.

'So what's prompted this visit home, then?' Mel inquired. 'Is work getting to you?' She studied Lara like a protective mother. 'You do work far too hard, you know.'

Lara let Anna's last comment slide as she shook her head. 'No, my brother wants to talk to me about something and it'd be nice to see my dog again. I should be back by Sunday night.' Lara looked at them lovingly. 'Thanks again, guys, for rushing to my aid. It was just a shock, you know . . .' Tears prickled in her eyes.

'You don't need him.'

'He's so not worth it, Lara!'

'You're really better off without him.'

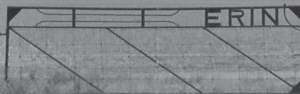
'Shall we go on?' Mel asked.

Lara smiled. Who needed men when you had great friends?

The Road Home

Fiona Palmer lives in the tiny town of Pingaring in Western Australia, three and half hours south-east of Perth. She discovered Danielle Steele at the age of eleven and has now written her own brand of rural romance. She has attended romance writers' groups and received an Australian Society of Authors mentorship for her first novel. She has extensive farming experience, has managed the town shop, and used to be a speedway-racing driver. She is married with two young children. Fiona is the author of two other novels, *The Family Farm* and *Heart of Gold*.

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ISBN 9781925995732

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]

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When your life is at a crossroads,
how do you find the road home?

Lara Turner has a boyfriend, a nice house in the city and a chance at a big promotion. So when her brother calls asking her to come home, she hesitates. Can she face the memories that inhabit the beloved place of her childhood? And how does she feel with the news it's to be sold? Is she the answer to saving the family farm?

Jack Morgan has memories of his own to contend with. A falling-out with his family and a bitter end to a past relationship have left a big chip on his shoulder. When his best mate's beautiful sister arrives on the scene, he finds himself deeply conflicted.

Lara and Jack have a powerful attraction but are constantly at odds. Will their love of the same land keep them apart, or grow into a love of a different kind?

From the bestselling author of *The Family Farm* and *Heart of Gold* comes a heartwarming novel about finding your true place in the world, and the healing power of the land.

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