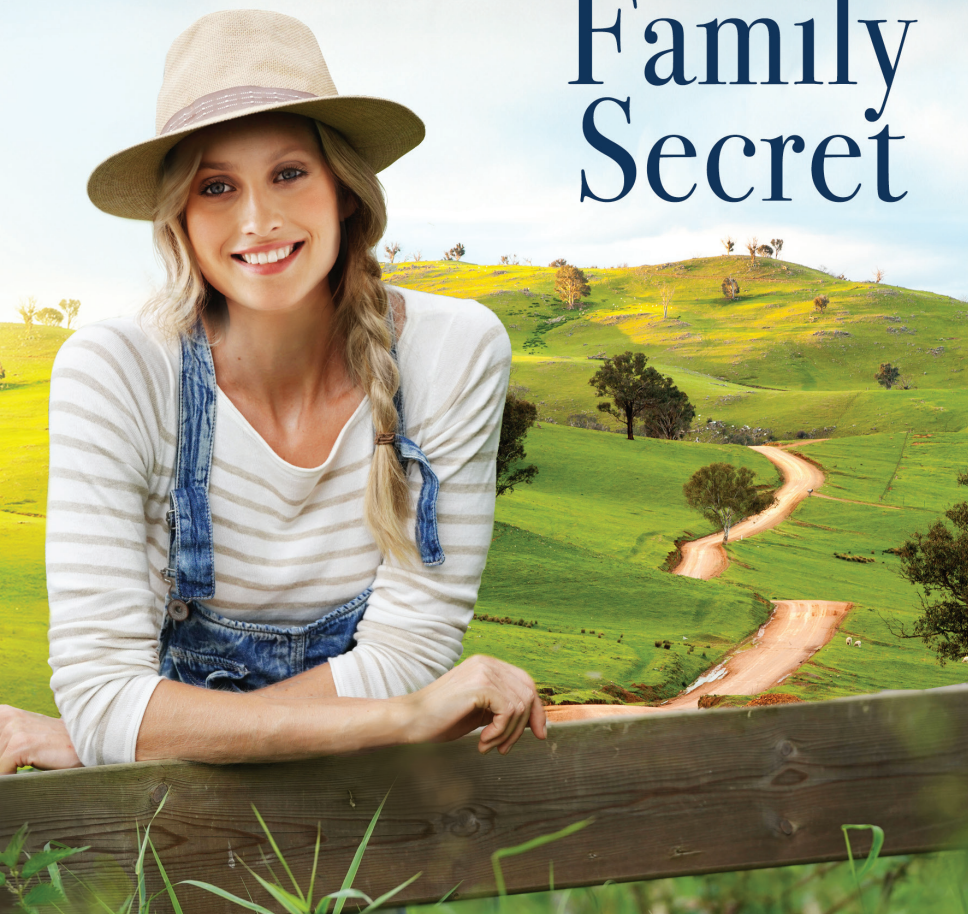


# FIONA PALMER

From the bestselling  
author of *The Saddler Boys*

## The Family Secret



FIONA  
PALMER

*The  
Family Secret*



**b** booktopia  
editions

## *Chapter 1*

‘BLOODY rain. It’s harvest, for crying out loud.’ Kim cursed as she peered through her windscreen into the darkness. The wipers whipped on the fastest setting but struggled to keep up with the deluge. The crazy storm had set the radio crackling, and the sound grated on Kim’s tightly bound nerves. She snapped off the radio and looked up just as a body of water appeared on the gravel road ahead. ‘Crap!’

Kim wasn’t going very fast but the floodway was not something she wanted to rush into at any speed. She stopped just at the edge of the lapping water, the idling motor hardly audible over the rain on the roof of her ute. She checked the water level against the bushes at the sides of the road, and deemed it just low enough to pass through. Slowly she entered the floodway.

It had started raining this morning, which of course made it the perfect time to drive 80 kilometres to pick up a belt for her header. Normally parts would come by post, but somehow it had ended up being sent with another farmer’s order. In the bush

it was sometimes quicker just to drive and pick it up yourself rather than wait for it to be reposted.

Kim sighed as she crept across the washed-out road, the ute lurching on unseen potholes. She hadn't taken this back road home in years. She'd hoped to save time, but now she remembered, of course, that it was prone to flooding. So much for a shortcut.

The area was surrounded by salt lakes. Neighbouring towns weren't called Lake Grace and Lake Biddy for no reason. When heavy rain came, especially when the ground was rock hard, the water would flow along the gullies and over roads in no time – but no one had expected this much rain to drop so suddenly in summer. Three more days and the harvest would have been finished.

Kim wanted to see how far the water had risen up the side of her ute, but darkness surrounded her. Before too long she made it to the other side without any water inside the cab, but from what she could tell, the floodwaters were still rising. Any later and she wouldn't have made it through.

Eager to get home, she drove on, the headlights making the trees' leaves glisten and the dark trunks shimmer. It really was a pretty sight, especially during such a long, hot harvest. But Kim would have appreciated it ten times more if it had happened just a few days later, with enough time to get the crop off. Now they'd be set back at least a week – not to mention the possibility of sprouting and staining on their grain. To top it off, her brother Matt had sent her a text earlier telling her they'd had hail. His message had been more swear words than anything else.

A murky, watery mass appeared before her – another floodway.

Kim stopped at the edge and mumbled a curse. This one looked deeper and was running faster than the last. Getting out of the vehicle, Kim made her way to the water's edge. The ute lights drilled holes into the night, allowing her to see the full force of the flow.

'Damn it.' Her options were to try to cross, to go back through the other floodway again or to stay here for the night. None sounded much fun. She'd been lucky to get through the first floodway as it was. By morning the water should ease off and the road would be passable – it was just a matter of waiting it out. As her shirt started to soak through, she bent down to pick up a stick to throw in frustration. But while she did so she heard a dreaded sound – *plop!* – as her mobile phone slipped from her top pocket into the water.

'Oh, shit! Dave.' Kim fished her phone out of the water and tried to dry it on the underside of her blue checked flannel shirt as she went back to the ute.

Her phone, a Telstra Dave, had been cursed since the day she got it. Sure, Telstra Dave came with waterproof Gorilla Glass, but that meant zilch since Kim had dropped the phone three weeks ago, shattering the screen. Some sticky tape held most of the glass in place, but waterproof it wasn't. Kim sat in the ute, slammed the door shut and turned on the dim interior light. Some chunks of the screen were now missing and moisture dripped from the cracks. The screen was blank. 'Bloody hell.' Kim threw it to the passenger side and hit the steering wheel with her hand. Today was not her day. Now she couldn't even call her brother and let him know what was happening.

Kim tilted her head back and groaned. What to do? She knew she was probably next to Tom Murphy's land and thought about walking to his house, but the stories of Tom's creepy worker soon put her off that idea. Plus it was pitch dark and she didn't know which direction to head. She'd rather stay in her ute all night, wet, than run into Crazy Harry on a night like this.

Ten minutes later, still cursing the rain and Dave, she noticed headlights bouncing their way towards her. They weren't on the road though – the lights were coming from her right, in a nearby paddock. Was it Tom out checking that his stock hadn't been washed away? The lights drew closer until a ute pulled up on the other side of the fence line. Kim got out and shielded her eyes from the glare. The rain was easing off.

'G'day,' yelled out a friendly voice. A tall stocky man walked towards the fence, a wide-brimmed hat protecting his head.

Kim ventured forwards. 'Hi.' She tried to see if this was Tom Murphy, whom she'd met on a few occasions in Lake Grace when collecting chemical and other farming supplies, but she struggled to make a match in the dark.

'You'll be stuck now,' the man said, stating the obvious, his hands resting on his hips. 'For a good while too. Did you want to come back to the house and get out of the wet? This won't be passable until early morning. You're welcome to camp the night.'

'Is there no other way out? Any access through the farm?'

'Sorry, lass, there isn't. I know this place like the back of my hand, and when she floods, there ain't nothin' you can do about it. There's a hot stew on the fireplace, if you're hungry?'

It had to be Tom. His wife's cooking was legendary. After all,

she was the president of the local CWA. Kim's belly rumbled at the mere thought of food. It was almost loud enough to match the low thunder.

'Sure, that sounds great, thanks.' Kim couldn't find any excuse not to. Besides, she could ask to use his phone to call Matt. She headed towards the man and climbed over the fence. 'Thanks so much for your kindness,' she said. 'I'm Kim.'

She held out her hand as a flash of lightning erupted across the sky, illuminating the man in front of her. Her heart raced as she saw a scar twisted across his face, and a feeling of dread shuddered through her. This was not Tom Murphy. And if it wasn't Tom, then the only other person it could be was his worker, and that meant . . .

Kim swallowed hard as his hand slid into hers and shook it. No, it couldn't be Hermit Harry – or Crazy Harry, as some liked to call him. He was almost folklore – whispered about at bonfires or by the torchlight at sleepovers to scare everyone. No one had seen Hermit Harry – not in town, not at church, not anywhere – but they'd seen his ute driving around Tom Murphy's farm. When she was growing up, the older kids had claimed he was burying dead bodies. There were kids who liked to sneak up on his house at night as a dare, to try to catch a glimpse of him, but the shotgun fired over their heads had put an end to that. Someone must have got a good look, though, as Kim had heard the nickname 'Scarface' used to describe him. She could only imagine how scary it must have been for a kid to encounter this man at night. Hell, she was terrified now and she was twenty-seven!

‘Call me Harry,’ he said.

*Bloody hell.* Kim’s knees trembled as she tried to keep her breathing normal.

‘Come on. Jump in and get out of the wet.’

Kim watched him move to his ute but her feet remained planted to the spot. Her mind raced with ways to back out of the invitation. Maybe she should say her brother was on his way, and that she’d better stay put. Then she realised she was letting the stories of her youth get to her. If he really was that terrifying, why would Tom Murphy have employed him all these years? Maybe Hermit Harry was just that: a hermit who didn’t like to go off farm? He might have scared away kids with his shotgun, but no one had ever been shot.

Giving Harry the benefit of the doubt, Kim walked towards his ute and tried not to think about her possible impending death and muddy gravesite.



## Chapter 2

‘YOU’RE lucky I found you,’ said Harry as Kim climbed into his ute. ‘I was just doing a quick check on the sheep and happened to see your lights.’

Right now Kim was wondering just how lucky she was. *Unlucky* seemed to be more appropriate. She could blame her phone, or the farmer who had her spare part, or even the postal mob for sending it to him in the first place – or she could blame the heavens for the bloody rain, which had set this whole sequence of events in motion. She should have stayed home. But now she was sitting in Hermit Harry’s ute.

‘Thank you,’ she said. A silence fell that Kim was keen to fill. ‘Were the sheep okay?’

‘Yeah, they were all up on the high ground. They’ll be fine there. I just like to double-check. So where’re you from, Kim?’

*Oh no.* Was he trying to find out if she had family waiting for her? ‘Um, I’m from Lake Bidy way. I work the family farm with my brother, Matt Richards.’

‘Ah, yep. I recall a David Richards. Tom bought his seeder bar a few years back. Is that your family?’

Kim nodded. ‘Yep, that’s my dad.’

They drove through the darkness, Harry steering with precise knowledge of the land. He’d slow down for bumps that Kim couldn’t see, but she’d feel the ute lurch a moment later.

‘Did you finish the harvest before the rain?’ he asked.

‘No, and we only had a few days to go.’

‘Bloody typical. Mother Nature loves to remind us who’s in charge.’

Kim almost smiled. He certainly had that right. For a hermit, Harry was friendly enough. Mind you, Kim had no prior experience of hermits. This was all new territory.

Soon Kim could see a light, and a small house loomed into sight. It had a tin roof and a large shrubby garden blocking any real view of the dwelling.

Harry parked in a lean-to off to the side of the house. The verandah light was on, and another sensor one flashed on when they pulled up. She saw two kelpie dogs by the door, wagging their tails.

‘Don’t mind the girls. They’re friendly. The black and tan is Molly and the red one is Bindi.’

As Kim got out both dogs barked at the visitor, but on noticing Harry they forgot Kim and rushed up to him.

‘See, I wasn’t gone long,’ he said, patting them. ‘This is Kim.’

Kim had never been introduced to dogs before but both wandered over to her and had a sniff up and down her jeans. ‘Bet you can smell a lot of animals on there.’ Kim smiled. ‘I have two pet

sheep, a kangaroo and a kelpie called Jo.’

‘And I thought I had a few pets,’ said Harry with a chuckle. ‘Come on. Let’s get inside.’ He walked to the door and kicked off his boots.

The verandah was covered with pot plants and had been swept clean. Kim thought hermits lived in derelict homes, not real houses with well-tended gardens and pot plants that needed regular attention. She could feel her guard starting to drop.

She took off her own boots and followed Harry inside. His hat came off the moment he walked in the door, exposing thin greying hair. The lights were on and the house was warm. A delicious aroma filled the air. Inside his house was tidy – probably cleaner than her own house, Kim thought. The furniture was old but well cared for, and rugs covered the jarrah floorboards. The only obviously new thing was the TV. She’d half expected some square, heavy, old-fashioned TV, or none at all. Maybe Harry sat in the blue chair with the worn arms watching *House Husbands* like the rest of Australia? Or maybe *Game of Thrones* was more to his taste? Actually, going by Harry’s house, Kim guessed *Better Homes and Gardens* would be more his style.

On the wall sat a large black IKEA bookshelf with rows and rows of books. She would have loved to have seen what he liked reading. Romance? Or thrillers? But it was the sight of two more dogs on the couch that caught her attention as they observed her with interest.

‘Ah, the old girl is Pepper. I’ve had her for a long time so she gets the special treatment. The other one is Jess – she’s terrified of storms, which is the only time she gets to come inside. Make

yourself at home,' he said, before heading off into the kitchen.

Kim could see Jess, the younger dog, was shaking, the tan patches above her eyes almost quivering too. Kim stepped over and rubbed her ears. 'It's okay, Jess.' The older dog with the same tan patches crawled across the couch towards them, hoping for some love as well. Kim obliged and gave her a scratch on the neck.

'Jess is one of Pepper's babies,' said Harry as he came back in. 'I kept Jess 'cos she was the spittin' image of Pepper.' He nervously held out a bundle of linen. 'There's a towel in case you want a shower or just to dry off,' he said. 'And some clean sheets for your room.'

Kim took them and followed him down a passage. He stopped by a door.

'You can camp here for the night. It's only been used on the odd occasion, say if we have a good year and Tom gets in a Pommy worker to help out. Other than that it stays empty, so I'm sorry about the dust and spiders. I don't usually venture in here.'

Harry's hands fidgeted by his sides and his eyes twitched nervously. In the light of the passage Kim had time to really study him. Besides the scar, his face was tanned and lined with wrinkles, like most men of the land who worked long hours in the sun. Yet his brown eyes appeared kind, not worthy of fear. If anything, *he* seemed fearful. Probably because he wasn't used to having new people around. She thought he was doing all right, considering. He must get enough interaction with Tom to keep up his social skills.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘It’s greatly appreciated.’

‘Yes, no worries. Right. Um, bathroom is at the end of the hallway, toilet is outside at the end of the verandah in the wash-house. I’ll go and check on dinner. Should be ready in ten.’

He turned and headed back to the kitchen before she could utter another word.

Kim opened the door and walked into the spare room. It was simply furnished, with a single bed. The floorboards were worn and the walls painted in flaking cream paint, while the patterned curtains looked like they’d dissolve if they were ever washed. The old spring mattress had a few stains, but the sheets in her arms were clean. Quickly she dried her hair with the towel and then made the bed. Her shirt was still damp but would dry quickly in the warm house. There was no way Kim was going to have a shower here.

Knuckles rapped against her door. She turned to find Harry there holding a pile of blankets.

‘You might need these.’

He didn’t step into the room so Kim went and took the blankets, placing them on the end of the bed. ‘Thanks. Hey, Harry, do you have a phone I can use to call my brother, to let him know I’m okay?’

‘Yes, sure. This way.’

He led her to another room, much the same size as the one she’d left, fitted out as an office with a simple desk, an old filing cabinet, some photos on the wall and an ancient computer. The brown patterned carpet looked like it hadn’t been changed since the house was built.

‘Phone’s just there,’ he said, pointing to the old handset sitting on the desk. She had the same one at home tucked in a cupboard for when the power went out and her portable ones didn’t work.

‘Cheers, Harry.’

He left her, and as she sat down Kim wondered who Harry called on this phone. Did he have family? Did they ever visit him? Or was this just to talk to Tom?

Picking up the receiver, she pressed it against her ear and dialled her brother’s number.

‘Y’ello,’ came his deep voice.

Kim had been half expecting Lauren to answer, but she was probably busy making tea or getting the kids into the shower or even bed. It was nearly eight-thirty.

‘Hey, bro. It’s me.’

‘Hey, sis. All sorted with the part? Wanna bring it up?’

‘Actually, I’m not home yet,’ she said.

‘What? What are you doing?’

‘I got stuck between the floodways out near Tom Murphy’s place.’

‘Ah, shit. Want me to come and get you?’

‘No, I’m okay. Someone came and picked me up.’ Kim wasn’t sure if she should mention who. She didn’t want him to worry.

‘Tom? Is he bringing you home or you camping the night? I can come get you if you need.’

Matt was a good brother. He wasn’t just her brother, he was her partner in the family farm, and he respected her completely. The feeling was mutual – she held her brother up on a gold pedestal. They’d been close growing up, and not once had he

balked at sharing the farm with her once their parents retired. In his eyes, it had been fifty-fifty right from the get-go. She was lucky her parents had felt the same and were so supportive of her desire to be a farmer, which wasn't always the case for their generation.

'No, we're landlocked at the moment. Can't get in or out. I'm staying with Harry for the night. He'll take me back to the ute in the morning once the water's dropped. I just wanted to let you know before you sent out a search party. I couldn't text 'cos I dropped Dave in the water.'

'Bloody Dave. I told you he'd be trouble.' Matt always teased her about Dave, which was the second one she'd owned after she'd accidentally run over her previous phone. 'Hope you never treat your men like you do your phones, sis,' he'd once told her.

'Hang on – did you just say you were staying with Harry? Who's Harry?'

Kim couldn't find a way to answer him.

'Kim? Shit, is that Hermit Harry? Tom's worker Harry?'

'Yes, that's the one.'

'Oh my god,' said Matt loudly.

Then Kim heard her sister-in-law Loz in the background. 'What?'

'Kim's staying the night with Crazy Harry. You know, I told you about Scarface Harry,' said Matt to his wife.

'No way! Hermit Harry? Tell her to run now,' said Lauren.

'Matt, Matt!' Kim almost shouted to get his attention. 'It's all right. I'll be fine. Please don't worry.' Kim wanted to tell him more – about Harry's house, his friendly dogs, about the food

on the stove – but she didn't dare in case Harry could hear the conversation.

'So, sis, what's he like? Does he really have a scar? Are you scared? Can you get a photo of him?'

Typical Matt. 'He seems lovely, actually. Yes, he does. No, I'm fine. And Dave took a dive into the water, remember,' she replied. 'Now, I'd better go. I'll be home in the morning, I hope.'

'If you're not back by lunch, I'm coming over there with the shotgun. Okay?'

Kim wasn't sure if he was serious or not. 'Yep. Don't worry. See ya tomorrow.'

'I hope so. I wanna hear all about it. No one has been into Harry's den,' he said with awe.

Kim laughed. 'Goodnight.' Then she hung up and headed to the kitchen to find Harry.

He stood at the bench where a slow cooker sat, stirring what was inside. The aroma was overpoweringly good.

'Anything I can do?' she asked.

'Sure. Help yourself to a plate, and load 'er up – there's bread on the table too,' he said, gesturing to the pine table in the middle of the kitchen.

Harry had obviously made improvements to the house over the years. Like the pale-blue benchtop; the cupboards looked as if they'd been painted at some point too. The kitchen sported cream wallpaper with a blue floral pattern on it, and the floorboards had been sanded and sealed. Kim had noticed that the ceiling in the main room had been replaced, yet the plaster in her room sagged with age.



She picked up a plate and joined Harry. 'It smells good. I think you might be a better cook than me, Harry,' she said.

'I don't know about that, lass. I've had many disasters over the years and got to this point through much trial and error.'

Kim laughed. 'Well, I know what that's like. I'm still going through that stage.'

They filled their plates and sat at the table, Harry at the end, Kim to the side.

It was good stew. Kim looked at the lumps of meat on her plate and suddenly wondered whether it was rabbit or roo. Maybe Harry was living self-sufficiently here, with his own vegie garden and an endless supply of rabbit. Her stomach churned. No, maybe she wouldn't ask. It was better to be none the wiser sometimes.

They chatted about farm work as they ate. Harry was really talkative, and Kim wondered whether he was lonely. When was the last time he'd chatted to anyone besides Tom or his occasional extra workers?

'This stew is amazing, Harry,' she said, before scooping up another mouthful. It was hard to talk when all she wanted to do was keep eating.

The more they talked, the more Kim got the feeling that Harry was impressed with her knowledge of farming. He kept shaking his head as if in disbelief. Living a hermit life, would he know that girls were now out working farms too? He'd assumed she was married to a farmer and quickly apologised when she set him straight.

'Sorry, Kim. I don't really get out much.'

Kim didn't know how to respond to that. She found her focus trained on his scar. She couldn't help it, and he caught her staring.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to stare. It's a ripper,' she said.

'Yes, that it is. I was in Vietnam when I was younger than you,' he said.

'You fought in the war? Was it awful?'

'You could say that,' he said, before getting up and reaching for her empty plate. 'I lost my best mate in that bloody war.' He was staring off into space for a moment before he glanced back to her. 'Sorry, Kim, I don't do personal conversation. One of the reasons I moved out here.'

All Kim's burning questions about his private life – if he'd been married or had kids, where he'd grown up – died away with his words. She could tell that she'd hit a nerve, and, keen not to create a bad vibe, she jumped up and offered to do the dishes. In the end they did them together.

Harry walked her to her room later that night, which she found a little unnerving. What if he preyed on his victims when they were asleep? What if he'd drugged her dinner? Then Kim almost laughed out loud at her wayward thoughts. Harry seemed anything but dangerous.

'Now, please lock the door. There's a bolt up the top.'

Kim screwed up her face as she tried to fathom the meaning behind his words. Was this just so she would feel safer?

'Oh, okay. Night, Harry. Thanks for your hospitality.'

'My pleasure.'

Kim shut the door to her room and looked up at the bolt.

'Don't forget the lock,' he said from the other side of her door.

Kim reached up and slid the bolt into place with a loud click, and it was only then that she heard Harry's footsteps echo along the passageway back to the lounge room.

Well, that was strange, Kim thought. At least she knew she was safe. Matt would try to tell her that Harry probably turned into a werewolf at night, or a giant bunyip that devoured girls.

Shaking her head, she finished making her bed. In the process she accidentally kicked a box underneath it, which caused the top to open. Kim was curious. She bent down to look at the old trunk and lifted the dusty half-opened lid. There were some clothes in there – something that looked quilted, a knitted baby's bonnet – a large collection of letters bound with string and some photos resting on top. Kim picked them up and studied the photo of two young men in khaki green. Straight away she guessed it had been taken in Vietnam because of the jungle background. Turning it over, written on the back in pencil were two names. *John and Harry*.

Kim looked at the two fresh-faced men with their arms around each other. Both had big smiles. Kim wondered which one was Harry. Neither had a scar, plus they were so young-looking and wearing baggy hats. There was another photo of an older couple by a house, and one of a beautiful girl in a pretty blue dress. On the back of both of them was written *Lake Grace 1969*. She wondered what other things this trunk contained, but felt she'd violated Harry's privacy enough.

Putting the photos back carefully and closing the lid on the trunk, she turned off the light, took off her clothes and crawled into bed. Then she got back out and slipped her shirt back on.

Just in case something happened. The voice in the back of her mind kept her wary. Good men were known to hold deep, dark secrets. Murderers walked the streets with their families. It was a horrible world that they lived in at times, and Kim wasn't about to drop her guard completely. Not even for a talkative, friendly hermit named Harry.

But as she lay there in bed she couldn't help wondering who Harry really was. What had brought him here, to Tom's farm? What had happened in his past that he didn't want to talk about? Was it just the war? Was John in the photo his best mate who'd died? Had that changed Harry's life? Or was there more to this intriguing man's story?

## Chapter 3

1968

‘A BIT of a fixer-upper,’ said John as he took in the old house, which spoke of years of neglect. Its roof flapped in the breeze, the noise ringing out like a hammer to an anvil, and its front door hung from its hinge like a lopsided mouth. Weeds grew through the cracks in the cement drive, bushes and shrubs pressed against the sides of the house, and spider webs festooned the verandah.

John glanced at his wife, Beth. She looked a little out of place in her city outfit, a soft knee-length blue dress with pockets at her waist. A frown was equally out of place on her delicate face, with her blonde hair held back with a thin headband and her curls sitting on her shoulders. He’d been fascinated watching her set her hair for the first time, but now he was used to it.

‘It’s charming,’ she said.

He knew she thought differently, but the fact that she chose to look on the bright sight made him love her even more.

John strode up to the front door and pushed it open. It fell off

completely and he had to stand it up against the wall. Dusting off his hands, he strolled back to his wife.

‘Come on now, Mrs Parson. Let me take you inside.’ John swept her light frame up in his arms as if she was a child. ‘I want to carry you over the threshold.’

‘Oh, John,’ she said, giggling as she held him tightly.

She smelt like fresh roses. He still couldn’t believe she’d married him.

‘There we are.’ Once inside, John almost decided against putting her down as the floor was so dusty. ‘The kitchen is through here, and the bedrooms off to the side,’ he explained as they walked through. ‘We won’t have to live with it like this for long. The bank said it shouldn’t be a problem to get the loan to buy the farm and then we can fix this place up properly.’

Beth stopped, turned to face him and caressed his cheek. ‘I know, John. We’ll be fine here. I want to be wherever you are. I want a pet lamb and lots of dogs, maybe even some cats to keep the mice down.’ She smiled and then walked to the back door and pushed it open.

The rear garden was even more overgrown than the front, and the path to the toilet looked like a jungle trek. It would be the first job on the list. John turned to Beth to explain exactly that when he was struck by her smile and the sparkling cornflower-blue of her eyes.

‘Smell the air. It’s so different. I’m going to love it here, John. You don’t need to worry about me. You know I’m nothing like my sister.’

John had to agree. Beth’s sister was a city girl through and

through, while Beth's inclination to try new things would stand her in good stead out here.

'And that smell, what is it?'

'It's the wattle over there, see?' he said, pointing to the bright yellow pompom flowers that covered the tree beside the outhouse.

'Oh, wow. It's gorgeous.' Beth turned to him and her delicate pink lips turned up in a coy smile. 'So, Mr Parson. When do we start?' Her fingers slid between the buttons of his shirt as she pressed herself against him.

His body responded. Everything about his wife turned him on. Her smile, her touch, her scent. Reaching around her, he cupped her bottom, pulling her closer, before sinking his face into her neck to kiss her soft skin. 'How about right now?'

Beth's giggle set his heart racing. This was their new beginning.

John woke up early, after another restless night. He watched Beth sleeping peacefully, her hair fanned out across her pillow, and took some comfort in the sight before sneaking out of bed. He quickly got dressed and made a coffee before heading out to check on the sheep.

In the last month they'd worked hard, his Bethy beside him with her shirtsleeves rolled up, scrubbing like a woman possessed. She was one determined lass. The way she'd cleaned walls and floors, carted out dead rodents, made new curtains for the windows, helped shift in furniture and still had tea ready at night showed just how much she wanted their farm life to work. He'd told her she didn't have to prove anything, and that he didn't

expect her to work so hard, but she wouldn't hear of it. Beth would give him that steely gaze and straighten her slender shoulders before walking off to her next task. Between the two of them, they'd turned the old house into something liveable.

John got into his pale-blue Holden EH ute. Well, in actual fact it was his dad's ute, but since he'd come back to the farm after finishing school it had become his. There was something relaxing about driving around the farm in the early morning: the way the sunlight caressed the land, bringing everything to life, and the fresh smells of the previous night. For these few moments he could enjoy, take pleasure in and almost believe this was his future. But all too soon reality set in. His future on the farm, his new wife, his life had been sorted until the post arrived last week, bringing with it a letter he'd never counted on.

Already his thoughts had ruined his mood and the magic of the morning had disappeared. John checked the sheep and then did some jobs at the shed before returning to have morning tea with Beth.

His parents' Morris Major was parked out the front when he arrived back at the house. It was older than his ute, a Series II in a soft green. John walked past it and up the path to the front door. His hand paused on the handle – he was reluctant to go inside. Yet the voice inside his head said he couldn't avoid what was about to happen. With a deep breath he entered the house.

In the kitchen, Beth had the kettle on and was getting out the cups. She was wearing a light lemon-coloured dress and her hair was out. She'd made an effort.

His mother, Norma, sat at the table with a carrot cake, her



signature dish, in front of her. More consolation. His dad, James, sat beside her, looking around the kitchen, no doubt reminiscing about his childhood in this house. When James had married Norma they'd built a new house near the main road, which was at the other end of the farm. Now, as John entered, they all turned to him.

'Cuppa's nearly ready, love,' said Beth. 'Norma, why don't you cut up that delicious-looking cake?'

Beth handed his mum a knife. John turned away to avoid his father's eyes; he couldn't take the look any longer. The pity, the sadness, the anger. It swirled like dark rain clouds and the worst thing was, John knew his own eyes held the same. He found himself shuffling through the papers by the phone. Automatically he found the one letter he knew he had to read again for probably the hundredth time.

*Commonwealth of Australia  
Department of Labour and National Service – National  
Service Registration Office*

*Dear Sir,*

*As a result of the national service ballot in which you were included you have been selected for service. In due course you will be notified of the arrangements for a medical examination to determine your fitness for service.*

*Please read carefully the notes on the back of this card.*

*Yours Faithfully,*

*Registrar*

‘Maybe you won’t pass the medical?’ his mother whispered. The hopefulness in her voice was the same as Beth’s had been when, late at night, she’d whispered through her tears. But they all knew he was as fit as a mallee bull and that he was destined for duty. They all knew where that duty would lead him: to Vietnam. To a war he hardly knew anything about.

John felt a hand on his back and looked around to find his beautiful wife, smiling and holding out his cup of coffee as if it held all the answers. He knew that he could be leaving her alone for not just a few years but perhaps forever.

‘Your parents need to talk to you,’ she said softly.

With a sigh he took his cup and sat down with Beth at the table.

His dad got straight to the point as his mum passed round the cake.

‘Son, we’ve tried everything, but we just can’t keep the farm while you’re away. We can’t afford to put on a worker, and your mum can’t run it on her own.’

John’s mum hadn’t really been the sort to help out with farming – she was a housewife through and through. He’d never ask his mum to even contemplate doing farm work. But with his father’s bad back, they were out of options.

‘You know I’d love to keep this place for you but . . .’ His words faded away as frustration flashed across his face.

John understood his father’s disappointment. This had been his farm, his life, and he’d worked hard so it could be passed on to John. Now all that had fallen through, thanks to one letter. Since its arrival, John had been making the most of every

minute he had on the farm, the place of his birth, the soil in his blood. Already he was mourning its loss. Farming was all he'd ever wanted to do.

His dad was doing his best to make this whole transition easy on them. With a smile, he continued. 'But if we sell up, then we can put some money towards a nice house in the city for you and Beth. We'll get a place close by and help Beth while you're away, plus she'll be closer to her family and we'll be closer to your sister's family.'

He didn't need to explain further. John wasn't going to be around for two years, so Beth would need her own family for support. Especially if she fell pregnant. There was a possibility she already was. He hoped not. John didn't want to miss the birth of his first child, nor did he want Beth left to raise their child on her own.

His father continued, 'Your mum is really looking forward to being closer to your sister, especially now that Susan has little Cheryl. We really are sorry, son. I know better than anyone what this place means to you, and to me, but we can't afford to keep it. I've had a few people interested. Everything points to selling up while we can.' James massaged his temples, his face grave. 'I'm so sorry.'

They stared into their cups. They were all probably thinking the same thing – if it hadn't been for that letter, they'd be sitting here now celebrating the farm handover to John, as the bank's formal loan approval had come through just the day before.

'I understand, Dad. There's not much else we can do.'

Norma put her cup down with false cheer. 'Well, I'm rather

keen on a home in South Perth. Your sister's only a stone's throw away and the river is so close by.'

Beth nodded. 'Sounds lovely. I think we'd be happy with something in a similar area. We'd love a big backyard, but I'm not sure we could find one that matches this.' She smiled ruefully.

When it was time for his parents to leave, John helped his dad up out of the chair.

'Thanks, son. The back's really tight and stiff today. Norma wants me to go see some doctors when we move to Perth. See if there's something we can do to ease some of the pain.'

'That would be a good idea.'

'The sooner we can sell this place, the sooner we can buy. Be good to get settled in before you take off,' said his dad quietly. 'At least so Beth feels comfortable. I'll start ringing around for a buyer straight away.'

His words were like a knife to John's chest, a sharp reminder of what he was about to lose.

'When do you have your medical, son?' asked his mum as she joined them.

'I'll head into Lake Grace tomorrow.' The words sounded like they'd come from someone else, as if John wasn't in control of his own body any more.

His mum kissed him before helping her husband into the car, then they drove off.

John sat down on the edge of the verandah and watched the gimlets around the house moving in the breeze. His two new dogs played among the small trees, chasing the pink and grey galahs that tried to eat the spilt grain from when he'd last fed the sheep.

What was he going to do in the city? When or if he came back alive from Vietnam, then what? Become a labourer? Would that make him happy?

A warm hand slid into his and the smell of roses snapped him from his thoughts.

‘We can always come back out here after you’ve done your service, John. We can make it work,’ Beth said, as if reading his mind.

She reached up and caressed his face, running her fingers across his stubble and gazing at him with such love that he almost cried. But he didn’t want to cry in front of her when he knew just how hard she was trying to be strong for him.

‘You are so wonderful,’ he whispered, before kissing her deeply.

‘I love you, John. No matter where we are, I’ll always be with you.’

And he realised that he might not have the farm he’d always dreamt about, but he had the most amazing girl, and his life was with her. As long as he had Beth, he had a rich life ahead of him. Besides, as Beth said, they could always find a way back to the country to farm.

John smiled, really smiled, for the first time since the letter arrived. ‘I love you too, Bethy.’

# *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 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, *The Family Farm*. She has extensive farming experience, does the local mail run, and was a speedway-racing driver for seven years. She spends her days writing, working as a farmhand, helping out in the community and looking after her two children.

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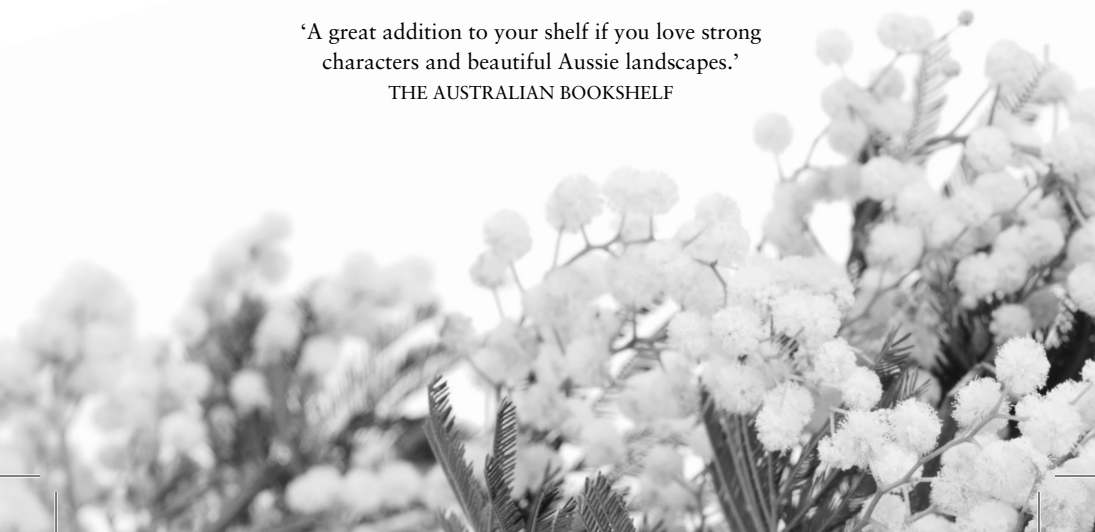
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Enter Charlie McNamara, an older man who's arrived in Lake Grace on business. Sparks fly between Kim and Charlie, but he seems to have a hidden agenda and a past life he's trying to hide.

They're both drawn to local hermit Harry, a Vietnam veteran who's haunted by memories from the war. What ties these lost souls together? Can they solve a long-held family mystery and heal fractures of the heart?

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