

MAYA  
LINNELL  
Paperbark Hill



# 1

Diana McIntyre swiped a dusty sleeve across her damp forehead, tucked her trowel back into her tool belt and proudly assessed her day's work.

Six long garden beds ran the length of the paddock, two with freshly turned soil. In all her years of gardening, these were the patches she was most excited about, planted with tubers for her first commercial dahlia crop.

'Two down, four to go,' Diana said, fanning herself with her straw hat and trying to recall the last time they'd experienced such a spring heatwave in the western Victorian town of Bridgefield.

It wouldn't look like much to a visitor. Heck, if she hadn't spent the day on her knees, with her hands in the dirt, even she wouldn't be able to tell there were thousands of dollars of dahlias buried in the first two patches.

*Pete will be impre . . .* Diana pressed a hand to her heart. She'd lost count of the times it still caught her unawares.

She dusted her hands on her overalls, as much to remove the dirt as to shake off the sudden stab of loss. The mob of corellas that had been watching her all afternoon swooped down and

began picking through the soil. Diana started towards the birds, waving her hat, covering just a few steps before her body reminded her she'd used up her quota of energy for the day.

The gate hinges creaked as she walked from the dahlia paddock into her house garden. Diana snipped a bloom from the flourishing Abraham Darby rose bush, willing the scent to distract her. The last thing she needed was the boys to arrive home from school and find her in tears again.

*Fresh starts*, she reminded herself, cradling the bloom as she ascended the steps to her weatherboard farmhouse. Starting the flower farm was a step in the right direction, darned if she was going to let grief swallow her now.



Despite the early hour, Darwin's oppressive heat had sweat trickling down Ned Gardiner's back as he squeezed the final boxes into the moving van. He took a quick look over his shoulder to see his ten-year-old daughter Willow striding towards him.

'Morning sleepyhead,' said Ned. 'Ready for adventure?'

Willow pushed her glasses back up her nose and lifted an eyebrow. 'Are you *sure* Stan's going to make it through the red centre?'

Ned turned and met Willow's doubtful stare. He crouched down, smoothed her jet-black hair behind her ears and unfolded her scrawny arms.

'Sure as eggs,' he said. 'Has Stan the Van failed us yet?'

'I'll miss the fresh mangoes,' Willow said, nestling into his embrace.

'Me too. But maybe not the neighbours,' he stage whispered.

A giggle escaped and, just as he'd hoped, Willow's face brightened.

'Mrs Neilson was a little bit mean, wasn't she?'

It was Ned's turn to grin. That was probably the nicest thing in years that anybody from the apartment block had said about the disapproving resident in number five.

Seven-year-old Doug yawned as he ambled down the steps, his T-shirt on backwards. 'Ready to rock, Dad?'

Ned nodded, feeling his shirt sticking to his body. He wouldn't miss the Darwin humidity.

Doug jumped into the van. Willow farewelled the mangy tabby cat weaving between her legs.

'He'll fool someone else into feeding him before the day's out,' Ned assured her.

'Mrs Neilson might feed you if you're a good boy, Flopsy,'

Willow crooned, scratching under the cat's faded flea collar.

Ned's eyes went to the twitching lace curtains. Mrs Neilson was more likely to dance naked in her front yard, but kind-hearted Willow didn't need to know that.

'What about the mango tree, Dad? Are you sure we can't take it with us?'

Willow's pensive gaze stayed on the tree she'd lavished with attention during their stay, just like the tabby cat and the semi-translucent geckos that frequented their balcony.

'I wish we could, sweetie. How about one last water?'

Ned looked over his shoulder as he uncoiled the hose and sprayed a jet of water towards the tree.

'Dad!'

It was worth risking the wrath of the water conservation-nuts on the apartment board, just to see the children's delight. The curtains twitched once more as he finished watering, latched the van's back door, climbed inside and clicked his seatbelt on.

'Mrs Neilsen saw you doing that,' said Doug, his eyes wide.

'She'll report you to the water authority. Or . . . or the police,' added Willow.

Ned gave them a wink and waved to their nosy neighbour—*former* nosy neighbour—before coaxing the van into gear and pointing it south.



Diana rebraided her strawberry-blonde hair as hoots and hollers floated down the driveway.

By the time she'd reached the window, the twins were halfway down the gravel track. Harry was in front this time, his curls whipping back from his face and lanky legs pumping madly as he raced his bicycle past the hay shed.

His twin, Elliot, wasn't far behind, leaning forward like a Melbourne Cup contender hoping to win by a nose. *Competing for sheep stations again.*

Diana's eldest, Cameron, rode at the back with little Leo, still her baby at eight years of age. Despite the large age-gap, or maybe because of it, they chatted away, leisurely cycling home.

She headed outside with a container of lamingtons, warding off the inevitable 'I'm starving' and 'coconut on the floor' dilemma in one swift move. Bickering over who was today's driveway derby winner, they skidded to a halt at the dog kennels.

Diana's heart felt full as they unclipped the sheepdogs and made a fuss over their canine friends. Cam and Leo joined the fray, covering the final stretch of the driveway as a team.

*My beautiful boys.*

'Hi Muu-uum.'

'Lamingtons!'

'You should hear what Harry did at school today.'

They shoved their bikes haphazardly against the garage, gave her a quick hug and launched themselves at the food.

'Good day, Mum?'

Diana had to reach up to tousle Cameron's fair hair. 'Sure was, buddy. Notice anything different over there?'

The teenager took a lamington and followed her gaze. 'You got all the dahlias in?'

'I'm not a machine. I was pretty darn pleased to get *two* flowerbeds planted out today.'

Cam chewed thoughtfully. 'Reckon we can do the rest over the weekend. Might even rope those ferals into service.'

He nodded towards Harry, who was balancing a lamington on his nose. Paddy, the young kelpie, was glued to the sight, just waiting for a slip. Leo and Elliot were trying to copy him, much to the delight of their elderly border collie, Bonzer, who was feasting on the fallout.

Diana shook her head, biting back a grin. It was a circus, but it was *her* circus.



The road sign lit up under the glare of the van's headlights, telling them it was another 150 kilometres until the next town. Ned glanced across at his little passengers beside him on the bench seat. Doug had fallen asleep two hours ago, full of roadhouse burgers and ice cream, while Willow had fought to keep her eyes open, only dropping off half an hour ago. Her hands were still curled around the paperback she'd been reading for most of the day, and her glasses had almost slipped off the end of her nose.

Ned reached across and gently removed the tortoiseshell frames that were a smaller version of his own. She stirred, murmured, and settled back to sleep. His kids had always been good travellers.

The phone danced on the dashboard and a photo of Ned's little brother appeared on the screen.

*Bit late for Jonno . . .*

He put the call on speakerphone and slipped it into his top pocket, beside Willow's specs, expecting a jet-lagged catch-up but instead hearing panic in Jonno's voice.

'Colin's in hospital.'

'What? How bad?' Ned drew in a quick breath, mentally calculating the kilometres between him and his father's property in western Victoria. Almost 3000 clicks. He automatically pressed the accelerator a little harder.

'I'm on my way there now,' said Jonno, 'but from what I've heard, it doesn't look good.'

Jonno shared what little he knew about the accident, all second hand from the nurse who'd called him. Ned listened in quiet disbelief, straining to hear as the phone conversation dipped in and out of reception.

'What the hell was he doing? Resheeting the roof in gale-force winds?'

'You know Colin. The roof would need to be replaced entirely before he'd ask for help. Apparently he was trying to fix a loose sheet of tin before it got worse.'

'Worse is an understatement,' Ned murmured.

He looked at the clock on the dashboard. Time was against him. Even if he drove through the night and got the first plane out of Alice Springs tomorrow morning, there was still a four-hour drive from Melbourne to Bridgefield. At best, they'd be back in the Western District around sundown tomorrow.

Ned listened to the medical terms Jonno used, knuckles white against the steering wheel. His mind flew through the possibilities, but each new option required more dicking around than he had time for. What he'd gain in catching a flight, he'd lose in making arrangements for the van.

He slapped the steering wheel with his hand.

‘Thought you were only back in the country for forty-eight hours?’

‘I am,’ said Jonno. ‘The icebreaker’s all set to sail from Hobart. I’ll let you know how he is when I get to the hospital, but I reckon I’ll cancel my trip.’

‘Don’t be a bloody idiot. A research trip like this doesn’t come along every week. Colin will be fine. He’s too stubborn to die.’

Ned called the hospital as soon as Jonno hung up, but the nurse’s grave update didn’t instil any faith in him.

‘I’ll get the doctor to call you back, he’s arranging a transfer to a city hospital as we speak.’

Staring into the dark night, Ned rubbed the bridge of his nose, trying to smooth out the indent made by his glasses.

‘What a bloody mess.’

A little hand wrapped around his.

‘What mess, Daddy?’ Willow’s sleepy lilt was followed by a yawn.

Ned looked at her, glad his little girl didn’t realise quite how many answers there were to that question. The mess they had found themselves in when his now ex-wife, Fleur, decided parenting was ‘too hard’. The mess they lived in for a week or so each time they unloaded the van at a new rental. The mess of paperwork each new school required for the kids’ short-term enrolments.

‘Shhh, go back to sleep,’ he said, keeping his voice low.

He drove into the bleak night, reluctantly stopping at a motel in Tennant Creek and getting an earful from the owner when he knocked on the reception door.

‘You know what time it is, mate?’

Ned apologised and paid handsomely for a seedy-looking room with an op-shop aroma.

Willow stirred but Doug barely flickered an eyelid when he carried each of them into the motel and tucked them between the mothball-scented sheets. Ned didn't have the same luck. Even after a quick shower, sleep proved elusive. After a decade of avoiding trips to Victoria, he couldn't get back to his home state fast enough. Would they make it in time?