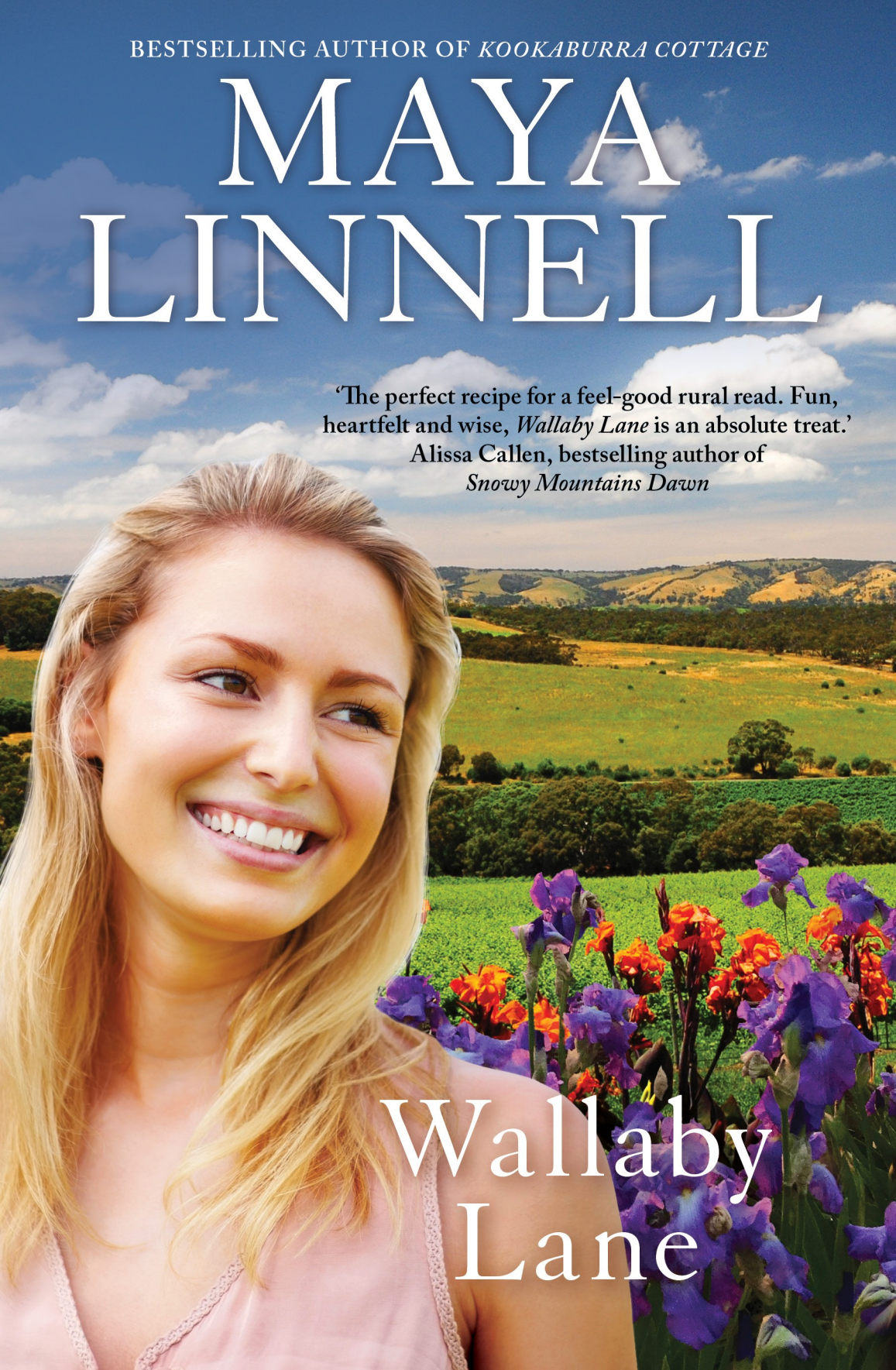


BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *KOOKABURRA COTTAGE*

# MAYA LINNELL

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Wallaby Lane

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# 1

The radio station's production switchboard had been lit up like a Christmas tree all morning and Lauren Bickford was desperate for a double-shot latte and fresh air to blast away the 4.30am-alarm fatigue.

She hustled out of the studio and nearly bumped into a colleague in the hall. 'Woah, George, you right with that?'

The long-serving breakfast presenter, George Whitehead, peered over an armful of perilously stacked items: newspapers, coffee cups and his laptop. 'Absolutely,' he insisted, his emphatic nod making the mugs clink together. 'Only a fool would stand in the way of a producer and her caffeine fix.'

Lauren laughed, swooping in before the towering pile crashed to the ground. 'I'm going to miss your sweet-talking, George. Caravan all packed and ready?'

'Ready as we'll ever be. My wife's even vacuumed the curtains,' he said, attempting to open the staffroom door with his elbow. 'And how about you, Blondie?' He lowered his voice. 'Is your suit dry cleaned and ready to go?'

'I've never seen you wear a suit to work, George,' Lauren said, grinning and opening the door for him, 'nor any of the

other presenters. But if it's good news tomorrow, perhaps I'll dust off the iron.'

'Dress for the job you want,' George replied. 'Those wrinkly shirts might be okay for the producer's box, but you'll want to look the part when you accept this new gig. As I told the HR team, you're the right lady to host the brekky show.'

'Fingers crossed,' Lauren said, donning a jacket and dashing outside into the crisp autumn air. Gold and ochre leaves crunched under her boots and puddles reflected the overcast sky, a timely reminder to pack her fingerless gloves for tomorrow's outside broadcast.

The barista, Jean Dellacourte, waved from the mobile coffee van. 'Lauren, you're late! I almost left.'

'Sorry, the listeners kept calling in. They're missing George already.' Lauren handed over her reusable cups, a twinge of anxiety running down her spine: excitement that she might finally step into the radio host's seat or nerves that she'd put herself out there with no guarantee of success? Probably both.

'It wasn't just George, everyone loved today's topics too. You've got a nose for good stories,' Jean said, lowering the radio volume and raising her voice over the grinding coffee beans. 'Everyone's got an opinion on the cost of firewood, especially when the temperature drops and folks are scrambling for a trailer-load of red gum.'

Lauren's topic suggestion had attracted calls from across the district, listeners sharing fond memories of family wood-chopping days and stories of snakes in wood piles and close chainsaw incidents. 'I'll be dreaming of a wood fire and lap rug tomorrow when we're broadcasting from Lacewing Estate. Fancy making a morning coffee run?'

'For a hardworking girl like you, I'll make an exception,' Jean said, promising she'd set up her coffee van bright and early.

The morning flew past and despite another coffee and the last of her Easter egg stash, Lauren was dead on her feet by 1pm. Yawning, she returned to her desk for another few hours, checked her running sheet one last time then lugged the recording equipment to the work car.

Heavy footsteps thumped behind her.

‘Great show today,’ said the station editor, Paul Wanganeen. ‘Now go home and get some rest, all this overtime is going to kill my budget. Boss’s orders, especially seeing George left hours ago.’

*George is retiring, not hoping for a promotion.*

‘A couple more things to tick off the list, then I’ll sleep easier,’ Lauren said, resisting the temptation to ask her boss about the job announcement.

*Less than twenty-four hours and you’ll know one way or another,* she told herself.

Satisfied they were packed for tomorrow’s show, Lauren drove out of the radio station, leaving Mount Gambier for the vineyards, quaint shopfronts and houses of Penwarra. Instead of turning into Petticoat Lane and crawling into bed, Lauren continued through town to Lacewing Estate, where volunteers ran back and forth from the winery car park to the barrel room, arms laden with baking.

‘Perfect timing,’ called a familiar voice. Lauren’s best friend, April Lacey, appeared with shopping bags over each arm, a smile on her face and the most sumptuous platter of sweets.

‘It’s busier than Rundle Mall in here,’ Lauren marvelled, tucking her fair hair behind her ears and admiring the mini lemon tarts, homemade lamingtons and chunky chocolate chip biscuits on April’s platter. ‘It looks like you’re hosting a wedding, not an art festival opening.’

April laughed, passing Lauren the platter. ‘Our committee takes their art almost as seriously as their wine. I won’t knock

back the help, but it's almost eight o'clock. Shouldn't you be sleeping?'

'Dotting my i's and crossing my t's. I want tomorrow's live broadcast to go off without a hitch for George's last day.'

'Speaking of big days, when do they announce your job?'

'It's not *my* job.' Lauren looked at her watch, 'But we'll know in seventeen hours and fifty-two minutes. Whoever gets the gig has big shoes to fill.'

'What do you mean "whoever"?' April swatted Lauren's arm. 'You're a shoo-in. You know the region inside and out, and you've paid your dues in the producer's chair.'

Lauren wasn't so sure. 'If the outside broadcast runs smoothly, I'll feel better about my chances,' she said, waving as Geraldine Corcoran—resident cooking instructor, chef and the star of tomorrow's radio show—tore into the parking lot.

'I've been thinking about tomorrow, Lauren,' Geraldine said after she joined them. She cast a fraught look at Lauren. 'I can't do it. You don't want me tripping over my tongue. April's a far better choice!'

Lauren heard the older lady's voice falter. Geraldine barely batted an eyelid when faced with a classroom of incompetent cooks, she swam in the ocean without a wetsuit year round and regularly plated up for a hundred or more diners at the Penwarra Golf Course, but tonight she looked like she'd rather face a firing squad than a microphone.

'Nerves are okay, Geraldine.' Lauren offered a reassuring look. 'But that's why I'm here, we'll run through the questions and you'll be good to go tomorrow.'

And even though it was already an hour past her bedtime, and the alarm would hit like a tonne of bricks at 4 am, Lauren talked Geraldine through the interview, role playing the questions several times until Geraldine was comfortable.

She fell asleep with her fingers still crossed the moment she crawled into bed.



Jack Crossley pulled a seatbelt over his shoulder, gripped the steering wheel with two hands and looked in the rear-view mirror.

‘Got your lunch box?’

His niece, Harriet, nodded, her glossy braids swinging.

‘Drink bottle and hat?’

She pulled her thumb from her mouth, gave another nod, then fixed Jack with a look. ‘I’ll be fine, Uncle Jack. Do we have *your* lunch box, hat and drink bottle?’

Jack returned his eyes to the road, amused by the sass in his niece’s reply. ‘Roger that,’ he said, as the rusty property sign for Sunny Cross Farm faded from view. The sign had been rustic when he’d first arrived in Penwarra as a teenager. Two and a half decades later, it was positively ancient.

‘Now, you remember what your mum says?’ Jack said as they pulled up at the school gate a little while later.

‘Use my manners, smile when I say hello and wash my hands. But why do *I* have to smile when I don’t want to, Uncle Jack? You don’t always.’

‘Ouch.’ Jack cast a mock-wounded look over his shoulder. ‘That’s a bit rough, kiddo.’

‘But it’s true!’

‘We’ll swap notes over dinner tonight to see how we both scored on that front.’

Harriet crossed her arms and peered out the car window, the spitting image of her mother, Clem—all bluff and bluster, especially when she was nervous.

‘What if no one else goes for Port Power, Uncle Jack?’ She tugged at the neckline of the football guernsey they’d bought for the first themed dress-up day of the year.

Jack scanned the car park. ‘I can see a bunch of Adelaide Crows supporters, a handful of interstate teams and some that forgot about footy day altogether, but there’s a good spread of Port Adelaide fans too. You’ll be right, Harri.’

She turned to Jack, her tiny hand on the car door handle.

‘Do you think Mum will be okay?’

Jack unbuckled his seatbelt. Had she picked up on Clem’s mood too? ‘It’s just a cold, she’ll be fine,’ he said, placing a bucket hat on Harriet’s head, hoping his optimism sounded genuine to her little ears. It wasn’t the coughing or sneezing he was worried about. ‘Now let’s get you signed in.’

The car park was swarming with students in their team colours, so Jack moved fast. He snapped the pre-requisite photo outside the classroom, sent it to the family group chat and wrapped his niece in a hug.

‘Don’t forget to be awesome,’ he said.

‘You too, Uncle Jack.’

Cars wheeled out of the school car park, but Jack pulled away slowly, using the short drive to the Penwarra Police Station to work out exactly when his sister Clem’s morning had taken a nosedive. The farmhouse had been silent when he’d left for the pool at 5 am, and she’d seemed fine, albeit sleepy and a little sniffly when he returned from his swim to find her with Harriet eating breakfast.

*The football-day fuss, that’s what did it.*

Clem had still been in her pyjamas at 8.45 am, the oven humming with muffins that hadn’t been ready in time. Like with a lot of things, Clem’s heart had been in the right place, but her determination to give Harriet the best footy-themed day hadn’t gone to plan. It wasn’t the football-shaped pancakes

or the fishtail braids with black, white and teal ribbons that sabotaged the morning, nope, it was Clem's vision for a lunch box with all the bells and whistles, even though she was under the weather. A basic melt-and-mix muffin recipe might have worked, but after she'd coloured the cake batter, mixed up teal and white buttercream icing and shaped fondant into Port Power lightning strikes, it had been too late.

Jack's phone flickered on the dashboard as the brown brick police station came into view. He parked underneath a towering gum tree and checked his messages.

His grandfather, Arthur, had sent through a text with a string of emojis.

Snazzy Port Power colours, Harriet! Hope your footy day is tops. When are we scheduling in another game of Scrabble, Jacko? I've got a ripper ready for the next triple-word score



Jack replied, then pocketed the phone. Returning to Penwarra hadn't been easy, especially seeing as it was his first country posting, but it wasn't about him.

*Clem will be fine*, Jack told himself. He locked the ute and started for the station, wondering how long his promise to Harriet would last. Hand washing was a cinch and manners were pretty much automatic, but when it came to unnecessary smiling, he had a feeling his niece's scorecard would be better than his on that one.



Lauren pulled into the Rural AM radio station car park the following day, savouring the last post-program debrief with her friend and mentor George.

'You've done it, Blondie,' George told her, unbuckling his seatbelt. 'One of the best outside broadcasts I've heard, and

a full complement of magnificent guests to boot. Wasn't sure you'd be able to coax Geraldine back to the mike after her first fluff-up, but you did well,' he said, adjusting his flat cap.

A bunch of helium balloons was tied to the station front door and the words 'Congratulations' beamed at them from the biggest silver balloon.

George grinned, nudging Lauren with his elbow and opening the passenger door. 'You got the job!'

Lauren shrieked with joy, almost tripping over her feet in her hurry to get out of the car and confirm her selection as the new breakfast show host.

'Didn't I tell you?' George, who was one step ahead, batted the big balloon away and opened the door. 'Bravo, Blondie, bravo!'

Colourful streamers crisscrossed the station staff room and every ounce of ill will towards the pernicky senior producer, Patrice O'Neill, evaporated when she rushed out of the staff kitchenette with a bunch of flowers in her arms.

'You're late,' Patrice said, frowning over her shoulder at Lauren. 'The sausage rolls will be dry as chips, they've been in the oven so long. Hold these, would you?'

Lauren froze as Patrice shoved the flowers into her hands, adjusted the ribbon, then reclaimed the bouquet.

'Congratulations on a brilliant final show,' Patrice said, passing the posy to George.

'Oh—' Lauren felt her cheeks flush scarlet, realising at the same time as George that the festivities were for him, not her. She whirled around, glimpsing the awkwardness on George's face, and marched down the corridor, so intent on reaching the bathroom she nearly collided with the station editor, Paul.

'Ah, Lauren. You got a minute?'

The tiny hope Lauren had been holding onto fizzled out as Paul walked with her to his office, sat on the edge of his desk and steepled his fingers.

‘Look, it’s never easy—’

Lauren slumped into a chair. ‘They passed me over again?’

Paul’s grim nod was confirmation enough.

A knock at the door and Patrice’s voice carried through the thin wall. ‘Any time you’re ready, then. We’ve got speeches to get through.’

‘Thanks, Patsy, we’ll be there in five.’

Patrice’s indignant ‘hmpffft’ was like petrol on a bonfire for Lauren.

‘This is bulldust,’ Lauren said, shooting out of the seat. ‘I interviewed perfectly. The HR lady loved me, *you* encouraged me to go for it and George gave me a glowing reference.’

‘I’m sorry, Lauren. My hands were tied.’ Paul shifted on the desk, sending papers fluttering to the floor.

‘Did they listen to the material I uploaded?’ Lauren blew out a breath, pushing her hair away from her flaming cheeks. ‘Nobody knows the district like me, Patrice doesn’t want the job and the fill-in guy is worse than a sensor light, only works when someone walks past.’

Paul shook his head. ‘I can see you’re upset.’

‘Really? What did they say, though? They can’t fob me off without feedback. Maybe I can change their minds,’ she said, a pleading note in her voice. ‘Do they want more references?’

‘You’ve made great progress with your delivery and with sourcing news,’ Paul said, ‘but management didn’t think you were ready yet.’

‘Ready? I’ve done the graveyard shift for four years, darn it.’

‘I like your spunk, Lauren, and you’re right; you know the lay of the land better than any outsider. But you’re working for the national broadcaster, not a dinky independent station or community radio. Freezing on air is only okay when you’re a junior. They want to see more public speaking experience, more time in the presenter’s chair without any hiccups.’

‘But how can I get better at managing my on-air nerves without more on-air opportunities?’

Another knock came at the door, then Patrice tapped on the office window, pointing to her watch. ‘Chop chop! The party pies are going cold.’

Her footsteps disappeared down the corridor at a brisk pace.

‘I think we’re done here,’ Paul said gently, opening his office door. ‘Come have a sausage roll. I’ve got bubbly in the fridge and we really do need to toast George’s farewell before his missus hooks up the caravan and heads off without him. You’re a fine producer, Lauren, and one day we’ll make a presenter out of you.’

Lauren slowly re-rolled the cuffs of her blazer so the striped satin lining was on display and pictured her mum’s response.

*Hold your head high, especially in the face of defeat.* Gabrielle Bickford would be bitterly disappointed about the job, but she’d be equally horrified if one of her girls dissolved into tears at work. *Chin up, keep powering on.*

Lauren swiped at her smarting eyes, straightened her spine and headed for the staff room, searching for positives within the disappointment.



Clem Crossley’s battered jeep was in the driveway when Jack pulled into Sunny Cross Farm that afternoon. He parked, grabbed a cloth from the shed and dampened it before polishing the bugs from the front bumper of his 4 x 4. The cloth didn’t clean off every splatter, but his evening habit kept the vehicle looking smart between weekend washes. He moved to Clem’s car, scrubbing at the headlights and the grille, but the bugs didn’t budge.

‘Uncle Jack!’ Harriet stood by the laundry door, her dark hair swirling around her face and flour smeared across her

cheeks. 'We're making a passionfruit log and Mum's rolling it up in a tea towel!'

Jack stepped out of his boots and followed her into the kitchen.

'Don't even look at the mess,' Clem warned, glancing up from the rectangular sheet of sponge cake as he assessed the sprawl of bowls, trays, wire racks, measuring tools and ingredients. 'We're in the middle of our *pièce de résistance*.'

'Chocolate sponge with passionfruit?'

Harriet beamed. 'That was my idea. So it looks like a real log!'

He wasn't sure how the combination would taste, but if their smiling faces were the benchmark for a successful afternoon's baking, it was already a winner in his books.

'Hope you don't have plans for dinner,' Clem said, carrying the tea towel roll to the dining table. 'But no stress if you do,' she hurried to add. 'We can save you some.'

'No plans apart from a quick bike ride before it's dark and grilling Harri about her day,' Jack said. 'Dinner sounds good, thanks.'

The coat rack by the door was laden with quilted jackets and vests but he found a spot for his duffle jacket and picked his way past tubs of their grandparent's knick-knacks, piles of crockery and partially sorted bed linens. Sentimentality had hampered Clem's best efforts at decluttering the rest of the house in the months since they'd arrived, and the spare room resembled an auction storeroom, especially with Clem and Harriet's unpacked belongings.

'The second-hand store will take the antiques,' Jack reminded his sister. 'And I can help shift them on the weekend.'

Clem shot him a pained look. 'It'd be easier if we didn't know the stories behind every piece. The record player Pop bought Nan for her fortieth. The matching armchairs she recovered five or six times. Pop's recliners, the drinks trolley, the little side table you made in high school.'

Jack laughed. ‘That wobbly side table’s the opposite of an antique.’

‘Is it just me, or is it weird living here without Nan and Pop?’ Clem asked, looking around the house Arthur and Shirley Crossley had built as newlyweds.

‘Strange as,’ Jack agreed, setting the table. ‘I keep expecting Nan to wander out of the laundry with our school shirts in one hand and the ironing board in the other.’

‘Or Pop to amble in from the sunflower paddocks, dust in every crease of his clothing and those faded bucket hats he liked. I can hardly bear to toss his old work clothes in the bin.’

‘He doesn’t need much at the retirement village, and don’t hang onto anything on my behalf. There’s enough in my storage unit to fill the station house once it’s ready.’

‘But we like you living with us,’ Harriet said, bringing water glasses to the table. ‘Can’t you stay forever?’

‘Not sure it’s Uncle Jack’s dream setup, but he does own half the house, so it’s his as much as it is ours. Stay as long as you want, Jack.’

Clem was kinda right. If someone had told him eighteen months ago he’d be sharing a house with his sister, he would’ve frisked their pockets for drugs. But the gift of their grandparents’ farmhouse, combined with the Penwarra policing position and Clem’s redundancy, had felt like three ducks had waddled into their lives and lined up in a millimetre-perfect row.

‘You’ll be sick of me after a few months,’ Jack said. ‘And the station house is part of the job. My door’s always open for you two. Especially if you bring desserts like this.’

He’d eaten more sweets in the last five months than the last five years, but the pride in Harriet’s smile and boost in Clem’s confidence as she plated up each delicacy, were worth every calorie.

## 2

‘Sorry again for the misunderstanding, Blondie,’ George said, tipping the brim of his flat cap towards Lauren. ‘I’ve felt wretched all day. I really thought the fuss was in your honour. You’re a plucky thing, though, it took mettle to soldier on in there.’

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world, George.’ Lauren wound a scarf around her neck. She’d gritted her teeth and smiled through the cake and speeches, turned her phone to silent as the impatient texts flooded in from her mum, sister and best friend, and resigned herself to giving George the farewell he deserved instead of retreating to lick her wounds.

She collected her car keys, studying the Moroccan carved camel keyring, the plastic Eiffel Tower and the porcelain babushka doll. The wanderlust she’d had while bouncing between radio and newspaper jobs, high on the thrill of European adventures, provided her with the answer she needed, just a moment before George asked, ‘Am I right in thinking you already have a Plan B simmering away?’

‘The start of a very loose plan,’ Lauren admitted, smiling properly for the first time since lunch. ‘I’ll chase a short-term

secondment to another radio station, one that'll offer airtime to get the experience I need.'

'Atta girl,' George said, bracing her shoulders with his hands and giving an almost fatherly squeeze. Her dad had been a fit and healthy forty-something when they'd lost him, and while George was years older, she'd always appreciated his paternal warmth. 'I knew they wouldn't keep you down for long,' he said, hugging her goodbye.

The phone reception between Mount Gambier and Penwarra was notoriously patchy, and Lauren waited until she was past the sawmills and the small towns that had once thrived in the peak of the forestry industry before dialling April's number.

'Cancel the celebration dinner,' she said, getting in quickly before her best friend's hopeful question.

'You're kidding me? You were a dead cert.'

'Apparently not,' Lauren said, giving April the abridged version of the day. April's loyal indignation, outrage and assurances that the radio station had made a monumental mistake soothed Lauren's wounded pride.

'Did your mum lose her mind?'

'We'll find out in about five minutes.'

'Need me to come by and referee? You can put Gabrielle on speakerphone and we can play Bickford Bingo. Five bucks says she'll try to convince you to move back to the city again.'

Lauren parked outside her pretty pink cottage on Petticoat Lane. 'You're on. Ten bucks says she'll mention Tahnee's pre-tax income and remind me that I should aim higher.'

They both laughed. Gabrielle Bickford *wouldn't* take the news in her stride. Nor would Lauren's big sister, Tahnee.

Lauren took a moment to appreciate the late afternoon light and the way it transformed the soft weatherboards of her house to king-protea pink. The feminine facade was a daily reminder that strength and stability come in all shapes and sizes.

The screeching started the moment Lauren unlocked the heavy front door.

‘Cool bananas! You’re flamin’ mad! Give us a beer then!’

‘I’m sorry, Gaz,’ Lauren crooned. She unlatched the large aviary and put her hand inside, but instead of climbing onto her wrist and allowing himself to be petted, Gary—a pink and grey galah—hopped from one perch to another, squeezed into his nesting box and sulked.

‘I’ll get you some sunflower heads and cuttlefish on the weekend,’ she said, topping up his seed bowl and adding an Iced VoVo biscuit as a peace offering. She took a second biscuit for herself, poured a gin and tonic and braced herself for the phone call ahead.

‘We’ve had the champagne on ice for hours, darling. Were you out celebrating?’ Gabrielle said when she answered.

Lauren sank onto the couch and kicked off the lace-up boots that were a fraction too snug across her toes. ‘I didn’t get the job, Mum.’

The line was silent for two sips of G&T and Lauren was just raising the glass to her lips for a third time, when Gary burst out of his nesting box with one of his favourite phrases. ‘Piss off, Curly! Piss off, Curly!’

Lauren startled and the mulberry-flavoured gin and tonic slopped down her knit blouse. She uttered a few salty words of her own as she mopped up the spill.

Gabrielle sighed. ‘I wish you’d rehome that infuriating bird. What happens when your editor calls after hours? She must have quite the sense of humour.’

‘He,’ Lauren corrected. ‘Not she. And if Paul needs me after hours, he’s more of a texter, not a caller.’

‘Your sister’s phone rings all hours of the night, you know. Meetings with Japan, powwows with the Danish clients, updates from the Florida team. Tahnee dropped in for dinner

yesterday and that phone barely stopped buzzing the whole time. But at least she gets paid accordingly.'

*Strike one for Bickford Bingo.* Lauren fixed herself another gin, stronger this time, and tried not to compare her mid-level radio job to her sister Tahnee's executive role at a prestigious law firm. *We both work hard. Success looks different for everyone.*

'Your sister will be furious when we tell her you were overlooked. Furious!' Gabrielle's ire set off a round of barking in her Unley Park townhouse. 'We are not happy about this, are we, Bruno? No, no, no.' Gabrielle's tone momentarily softened to the baby voice she reserved for her daschund, but once her attention was back on Lauren, she was all business. 'I'm sure it's against some HR protocol. Tahnee can help me find a legal loophole.'

Lauren managed a laugh. 'It's not high school, Mum. You can't send in letters appealing my grades.'

'We're gutted for you, sweetheart, really we are. If you were in Adelaide we could recap the interview, examine their feedback and work out where you went wrong.'

'Not that again, Mum. I'm not planning on moping around. I'm already working on Plan B.' *Poking sticks into my eye would be better than an interview post-mortem with my mother.*

'That's the spirit! I'm glad you've come to your senses. That tiny country town was always just a stepping stone. Stuff the lot of them!'

'I'm not leaving for good, Mum. Just a short secondment to iron out a few kinks and nail the job next time it comes up.'

While the thought of another panel interview made Lauren shudder, it was better than waiting for luck to find her—or worse, letting her family shoehorn her into a corporate career she didn't want.



After investigating a suspected break-in that turned out to be the homeowner's daughter 'borrowing' her parents' holiday house, and a welfare check on an elderly resident, Jack arrived back at the police station later that week to find the calendar on the wall had half-a-dozen new entries.

Sammi Altschwager, the station receptionist, bounced into the office, her ability to text and talk while walking despite barely looking at the phone in her hand making him feel even older than his forty-two years.

'Just in time, boss,' she said. 'You're due at a ribbon cutting in fifteen minutes.'

He frowned at the calendar. 'You sure I need to attend this luncheon?'

Sammi tossed him the patrol ute keys. 'If it were me, the lure of cake would make it a no-brainer, but it's not the same for a health-nut like you, is it?'

'I'm not a health—'

'Ahem?' Sammi cut him off mid-protest, with a pointed look at the carbon-frame bicycle, helmet and cycling shoes beside Jack's desk.

Jack shrugged. There were worse habits than lunchbreak workouts. Short of police emergencies, Mondays and Fridays were for cycling, Tuesdays and Thursdays for jogging and Wednesdays were for weights, plus the morning laps at the town pool.

'And don't get me started on your boring lunch box, either. I'd take a CWA catered luncheon any day of the week over those pitiful leftovers in the fridge.'

Biting back a smile, Jack pocketed the keys. 'Just saying, I'd get more bang for the taxpayer buck with an hour on highway patrol or dropping into the local businesses and saying g'day than swanning around at the Wildlife Sanctuary, watching them cut a ribbon for a bunch of new enclosures.'

Nevertheless, Jack put his hat on, then adjusted his belt. Unlike in Adelaide, he wasn't carrying the full quota of weapons and he suspected it would take some time to get used to the lighter load. He grabbed a water bottle from the fridge, wiped down each surface of the kitchen, then applied 50+ sunscreen.

Sammi followed him to the door. 'Try to have fun.'

Jack drove past the award-winning wineries, down a series of back roads and eventually along a limestone track until he reached a succession of homemade welcome signs. Judging from the cars lining the driveway and flowing out onto the dusty laneway, the wildlife shelter was a much-loved community facility.

Colourful flags flanked the entrance and the low hum of conversation, plus the unmistakable sounds of country music, came from the far end of the property. An older lady waved him over to the food table.

'Good to see you've settled into town, Mr Crossley, though it's a shame they couldn't have your accommodation ready in time,' she said with a 'tsk'. 'Fancy that, offering you a job in January and not having the station house renovations completed five months later. Lucky that old farmhouse is plenty big enough.'

'Sure is,' Jack replied, trying to conjure her name from the wealth of residents he'd met in the last few months. He mightn't know many faces yet, but Penwarra knew him, alright.

'I'm ruddy glad they didn't send us a fresh-faced young whippersnapper from the city. Least you've had a little life experience.' Her sharp gaze went from the smattering of silver at Jack's temples to his belt. 'You look like you could do with a good feed though.'

Despite Jack's protests, the woman piled his plate high with sandwiches, quiches and savouries, adding three more items after he'd assured her there was plenty. 'Don't forget the

condiments,' she said, gesturing to the smorgasbord of jam jars and chunky chutneys. 'Not a patch on your nan's preserves but better than any of that store-bought rot.'

'Thank you,' Jack said, spooning sticky chilli jam onto a devilled egg and calculating the extra cardio he needed to do that evening to counteract the sumptuous lunch.

The woman pointed to the chalkboard by the steaming urn. 'They're running guided tours on the hour—you'll just catch them. Don't forget to swing past afterwards, the sweets will be out by then.'

And while Jack wasn't sure he'd manage such an enormous lunch, let alone sweets, he thanked her and went in search of the tour group.



Jack was impressed with the facilities for injured and orphaned native animals, especially the quirky possum shed, which had been fashioned from recycled materials to resemble an old miner's hut.

'Possums might look cute, but as a protected species, they can be tricky to evict from your roof and garden,' said wildlife carer and today's tour guide, Sean Dainty.

'Not wrong there,' said the lady next to Jack with a frustrated sigh. 'When they're not stealing fruit and veggies from my garden, they're munching on my rosebuds just before blooming! Barely had a rose left by the time the brushtail possums had their fill.'

Jack's phone rang and he let the tour group walk ahead. 'All good, Pop? Is Clem okay?'

'No need to sound so worried, Jacko.' Arthur Crossley's rusty laugh came down the line. 'And your sister's probably relishing the peace and quiet. I was just calling to see how you're faring. Out and about, from the sounds of it?'

Jack leaned against the rustic possum hut and told his grandfather about the open day.

‘Harriet would love that. What do they have?’

‘Fruit bats, possums, a wedge-tailed eagle, wombats, wallabies, kangaroos, potoroos, flying foxes, turtles,’ Jack recounted the animals he’d seen. Just thinking about the feeding and cage-cleaning schedule and the kilos of food and milk powder the centre used every day made his head spin. ‘What *don’t* they accept?’

It caught Jack off guard when somebody other than his grandfather answered.

‘Domestic animals,’ said the flat voice.

Jack whirled around, not seeing anyone. It wasn’t until he lifted his sunglasses and peered far into the possum enclosure that he spotted a figure inside.

‘I’ll call you back, Pop,’ he said, then pocketed the phone and frowned at the near-invisible eavesdropper. After two decades in the force, Jack was normally much more alert, automatically aware of each and every person in the room, suspicious until he had reason not to be.

‘Why on earth are you hiding in there?’ The question came out sharper than Jack had intended.

Stepping out of the shadows, the teenager dipped a hand into the front of a baggy T-shirt and Jack couldn’t help automatically reaching for his holster.

‘Hey, hands where I can see them.’

‘Shh,’ the boy growled. ‘Keep your voice down.’ He pulled a small possum from the neckline of his shirt. It was clearly not in favour of leaving its warm, dark, human cocoon and by the time the boy had carefully extracted the creature and returned it to a fabric pouch, his neck was covered in fine scratches.

*This is a country kid*, Jack reminded himself, *not a wannabe gang member*.

The boy locked the enclosure behind him. When he stepped out into the light, Jack surmised he was about sixteen or seventeen. Like the tour guide Sean, this kid wore a khaki shirt with the sanctuary logo on it. But unlike the adults with their matching baseball caps, the boy wore a flat cap backwards. A curtain of greasy hair hung over his ears. His arms were criss-crossed with faded ink designs, waves, intricate mandalas and little animals, all the way up to his biceps.

‘You a volunteer?’

‘Sebastian Dainty,’ the teenager said. ‘Which is why I’m here instead of smiling for the cameras. And as I was saying before, my parents only take natives. No cats, dogs, turkeys, sheep, goats,’ he added with a sigh, intent on his dusty shoes. ‘Especially not goats.’

‘Can’t save them all.’

‘Not that it stops people dropping off strays on a regular basis. Just yesterday someone left a sack of kittens by the gate with no water or nothing.’ He gave a snort of disgust. ‘Scum.’

Jack agreed with him. Unfortunately, he’d seen kids in the city subjected to similar levels of neglect.

‘They’re cutting the ribbon soon,’ Jack offered, looking at his watch. ‘Shouldn’t be too long before everyone clears out and leaves you guys in peace.’ He pointed to the penmanship on the teen’s forearms. ‘Nice drawings.’

Sebastian folded his arms and the biro-drawings disappeared from view before Jack could comment any further.

A woman bustled up to them, peered at Jack’s name tag and gave a sharp nod. ‘Art and Shirley’s grandson, right?’

Jack didn’t blame the teenager for shrinking into the shade. There was something schoolmarmish about the woman’s bossy tone and pointed finger.

‘How can I help?’

‘Well for starters, you can go home via Victor Jenkins’ disgraceful property,’ she said, tapping Jack’s arm as if he were personally responsible for the issue. ‘Car bodies, grass up to your ears . . . You can barely drive past his boundary without spotting a tiger snake or a copperhead. It’s a stone’s throw from your grandfather’s old sunflower farm. Someone needs to do something about it—’

Jack nodded, lifting his hand to interrupt but the woman shook her head and waved her finger at him.

‘And then there’s my chickens. Someone keeps breaking into the hen house. Three chickens I’ve had stolen this year, and some days there’s barely an egg in the nesting boxes. That’s a lot of empty egg cartons, Constable Crossley.’

‘Foxes, perhaps?’ he ventured.

She bristled as Sebastian let out a snicker of laughter.

‘This isn’t a joke, young man. Foxes leave feathers and mess, and I’m yet to hear of an egg-eating fox. Mark my words, there’s something fishy afoot, now it’s chickens and eggs, next they’ll be stealing pumps from water tanks and pinching hot water services from new house builds. At least mark Victor Jenkins’ property into your official complaints register. I’m not the only one who’s fed up.’

Jack promised to note down both matters.

Once she was gone, Sebastian stepped out of the shadows. ‘Vic used to help with some of our overflow,’ he said. ‘When Mum and Dad had too many wallabies and roos, Vic would raise the odd joey, sometimes the runts that needed the extra attention. Oldies like her—’ he glared at the woman heading for the exit, ‘—they might toss a bit of cash around, make themselves feel better about the cause, but Vic does his bit too.’

The teen paused and Jack had the sense he wanted to say more.

‘If you see Vic, can you tell him I said hi? I haven’t visited in ages and I could use his help with an . . . um . . . overflow issue.’

‘Isn’t today all about new extensions and extra space for more animals?’

‘Well, don’t go out of your way if it’s a big deal,’ Sebastian huffed, eyes flashing.

‘It’s not a problem,’ Jack said. ‘I can pass on the message. What do you want me to tell him? That you’ve got a joey?’

Sebastian’s eyed darted back to the possum enclosure he’d been perched in and if it hadn’t been for Jack’s police training, he may not have noticed.

‘Something other than a joey?’

Sebastian kicked the dirt with his boots.

*Boy, he’d be easy to fleece in a game of cards.* Jack waited, curious to see if the boy would trust him with whatever it was.

‘It’s a kid goat,’ Sebastian blurted out eventually. ‘And Dad can’t stand goats. I mean, he, like, really, really hates goats.’ His words came out in a rush, coinciding with a round of polite applause from the audience. ‘I was gonna keep it here for a week or two, just until it was stronger, then give it to someone like Vic or surrender it to the pound. I’ll be grounded all holidays if Mum and Dad find out.’

Jack chewed his lip. He didn’t owe this kid anything, and it probably wasn’t wise to get caught in the middle of a family tiff, but there was something about the edge to Sebastian’s voice.

‘Can’t you give it back to whoever dropped it off?’

Sebastian shook his head. ‘My mate was supposed to dong it on the head when it was born, because it’s only got one eye. Not a good look for a stud breeder. Mum and Dad have been so busy getting this place ready for today, they haven’t noticed.’ He sighed. ‘Yet.’

‘And now it’s in the possum house?’

‘Vic’s is too far to ride my bicycle with a goat in a backpack.’

Jack couldn’t help it, his lips twitched at the mental image of a teenager cycling along the road with a goat in a backpack.

Sebastian scowled at him. ‘Go on then, have a laugh. Hardy-bloody-har. Or you could help me out and drop it to Vic on your way back.’ He scratched at his ear and shot Jack another grudging look. ‘Please?’

By the time the speeches were over and the crowd had started to disperse, the goat was stowed in a dog carrier in the back of the ute, along with half a bag of milk powder.

Jack opened the passenger door, trying to avoid eye contact with the pitiful, one-eyed animal. He’d go direct to Victor’s house, and then back along Wallaby Lane to Sunny Cross Farm. No way he wanted to risk Clem and Harriet falling in love with the darn thing.



‘Too early to light the fire?’ Lauren asked Gary, offering the galah a sheet of newspaper, which he promptly shredded. Even though it wasn’t particularly icy outside, she was in the mood for carbs, comfort food and a cosy wood fire.

Clouds scudded across the sky while Lauren collected an armful of kindling from outside, and the soft patter of rain settled on the roof as she scrunched up the sports section to light the fire. Soon the fire was roaring, Heinz spaghetti was bubbling away in a pan on the top of the wood burner and she was settled on the couch with her laptop.

*Just a quick look at the job ads,* she promised herself.

The broadcasting intranet was a rabbit warren of information, but she soon found what she was looking for. And while the bureau over the border in Warrnambool didn’t have any backfill openings for presenters, there was a short-term journo’s position up for grabs. Her bottom lip caught between her teeth, Lauren tapped out a quick email.

‘Three months in South West Victoria, Gaz. Reckon we can handle that?’

The galah hopped along the floor towards her and used his beak and claws to climb up to her shoulder. Lauren smoothed his rosy chest, traced the delicate curve of his silver wing and tickled the sweet spot beside his ear that made him coo.

She ate dinner at the dining table, determined not to refresh her email for at least an hour, but she had barely finished the washing up when the laptop dinged. ‘Bloody heck, bloody heck,’ sang Gary, bopping up and down with his feathered crest fanned out.

Lauren hurried to the laptop, then grinned at the bird. ‘Get your whale-watching binoculars ready, Gaz, looks like we’re daytripping to Warrnambool for a meet and greet this weekend.’



The sun was spreading its golden tendrils towards the horizon when Jack pulled up outside Victor Jenkins’ property that evening. The old lady at the wildlife sanctuary luncheon was right about one thing: the place *was* a pig sty.

Many years ago, when the paddocks at Sunny Cross Farm had bloomed with sunflowers, Jack had been able to glimpse the beginnings of Victor’s car collection from his grandparents’ back porch. The sunflowers were long gone, but the shelter belts of native trees had since grown, blocking their view of what now looked like a car cemetery, not the collection of an enthusiast.

A ‘private property’ sign hung from Victor’s gate, but even that was tired, with rust peeling the corners and the print faded by the sun. A tortoiseshell cat was perched on the gate post, a tabby sunned itself on the brick path, a pair of ginger kittens scampered out from under a decaying car body and an enormous fluffy white cat groomed itself on the front doormat. All but the fluffy cat fled when Jack shut the car door and opened the gate.

After knocking on the door and receiving a ‘you want me to move?’ look from the snowy cat, Jack surveyed the property. It was even worse up close.

Victor answered the door after several knocks, and while he wasn’t much younger than Arthur, age hadn’t treated him well.

Victor squinted at the uniform, then the plastic crate Jack held. ‘Another cat hater, huh? Join the queue,’ he snorted and made to shut the door.

Jack shook his head, put his boot inside the door and removed his cap.

‘I’m Jack Crossley. Shirley and Art’s grandson. And I’m not here to collect anything.’ He lifted the carrier. The goat wobbled on its spindly legs. ‘Sebastian hoped you’d save this fellow from the gallows.’

Victor folded his arms over his chest. ‘So this isn’t about the cats?’

Jack shook his head and set the carrier on the ground.

‘Or the cars?’

Jack shook his head again. *Not today*. ‘The goat’s got a birth defect, so the breeders planned to destroy it. Sebastian thought you’d take it, but it doesn’t have to be your problem.’

‘I’ll see about that,’ said Victor, his arm shaking under the weight of the carrier.

‘Sebastian sent along milk powder too. Where shall I put it?’

‘Gate’s fine,’ Victor said brusquely and, with a click of the door, Jack was dismissed.