

Blue
Skies

FLEUR
M^cDONALD

ARENA
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Author's Note

Depression is rife in our community. I hope that the threads of information in *Blue Skies* may help someone get help or realise that a friend, partner, colleague or loved one needs help. There isn't a stigma attached to this illness - it is just that, an illness.

The best thing about writing fiction is you can't let the truth stand in the way of a good story! I have stuck to the facts as far as possible in my depiction of the pioneering days of Esperance. However, it is possible that there are some timing and geographical errors. These are for the sake of the pace and plot of the novel. Any other mistakes are purely my own.

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ARENA Books, an imprint of

Allen & Unwin

83 Alexander Street

Crows Nest NSW 2065

Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

Email: info@allenandunwin.com

Web: www.allenandunwin.com

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*To Bev Due and Ned Woodward, friends who
suffered from breast cancer and both died before
this book was finished.*

*To Anthony, Rochelle and Hayden – my world.
Carolyn, without whom Blue Skies wouldn't have
been started, let alone completed.*

Prologue

1940

The woman wept as if her heart would break, her long copper hair falling in curls over the side of her face and down her arms. She rocked backwards and forwards in her grief, her arms encircling her knees.

Their place had been here on the side of this stream. It was here they'd talked and laughed. In summer they had paddled in the cool water or swum in deep rock pools, and they'd spent many a sultry summer evening here lying next to each other, while the native bottlebrush trees swayed gently in the breeze.

During the winter months when good rains had fallen, turning the stream into a river, they had dreamed of their future, their lives together, the farm, and children. And it was at this place, in among the soft moss and wild orchids, that they had slipped away from their chaperone and he had finally claimed her as his own.

The woman had been grateful to have this handsome, vibrant younger man fall in love with her. She'd believed she would be left on the shelf; she was not particularly beautiful or interesting. But his love had made her shine.

She didn't understand his change of heart - surely he must be lying. But why? And what on earth did her future hold now?

Chapter 1

2000 - November

Brian took his eyes off the road for only a moment. But that was all it took. The steering wheel tilted towards the edge of the road, the gravel grabbed at the front tyres, and next thing he had completely lost control.

His wife's screams and his moan of terror stopped abruptly as the airborne car hit the ground and skidded. The sound of crunching metal and shattering glass echoed through the countryside, then everything was still, the only movement the spinning of a wheel and a broken aerial swinging from side to side. The occupants of the car were silent. Above them a crow cawed.

Amanda gazed down from a second storey classroom at the people milling around the graduation hall, trying

to spot her parents in the crowd. She could see her accounting professor and the dean of the university talking to her biology lecturer, amid beaming parents who were chatting to one another. She couldn't believe this day had come at last. After all the arguments trying to convince her father she needed to get an agribusiness degree, after three years of hard work and part-time jobs, enduring the separation from her mum - not to mention the family farm, Kyleena - she had finally done it.

The dean had let it slip before the ceremony that she'd topped her class. Would that make her father proud? she wondered.

She smiled as she spotted Katie and Jo talking to their parents with the seriousness of newly graduated adults, looking nothing like the drunken, loud yobbos they could be when they weren't studying.

Her eyes fell on Jonno with a familiar stab of longing. He looked so handsome in his suit and tie. She'd only ever seen him dressed so formally once before - at Cory McLeod's funeral. She felt a pang of sadness thinking of her friend who hadn't made it to graduation; he'd been killed in a car accident in the first year of their ag course. His death had been devastating to his friends.

Suddenly, the door in the room flew open, startling Amanda, who looked around to see Hannah coming into the room. Her friend looked so unlike her usual wild, straggly self as she rushed into the room, dressed in a black graduation robe and

blue sash, her fly-away blonde hair swept up under her mortar board. 'Why're you hiding?' she demanded, her eyes bright with excitement.

'I'm not. I'm just watching everyone,' said Amanda, turning back to the window.

Sensing Amanda's sombre mood, Hannah moved over to the window and put her arm around her friend's shoulder. 'Are your parents here?' she asked.

'Of course! You don't think Mum would miss it, do you? I haven't seen them yet, but they're always running late - they probably snuck in after the ceremony started and have run into one of Dad's old mates,' said Amanda smiling wryly to mask her concern.

'Well come on then. You can look for them later, Miss Dux! Right now you're needed for the class photos and drinks. That's actually why I came to find you.'

'And here I was thinking you cared,' said Amanda with a smile. She followed Hannah out of the room, switching the light off behind her.

Arranging themselves in front of the camera, the class of 2000 smiled and called out 'Bundy!', while their families looked on proudly. Between shots, Amanda searched for her parents.

Forcing a smile, she was hardly aware of the camera clicking and whirring as more photos were taken of the whole class, then a series of the dux of agribusiness with the recipients of the three agricultural awards and their teachers. As the final shot was taken of her with the high achievers from the university's other courses, Amanda caught sight of two policemen speaking with

the dean. The look of shock on his face as his eyes searched the crowd told Amanda the story, and without thinking her feet carried her to them.

Hannah followed, motioning for Jonno to come with her. They were by Amanda's side to hear the news and gather their weeping friend to them, the graduation celebrations forgotten.

Amanda sat next to her father in the church, her mother's coffin resting on a gurney in front of them, her uncle speaking at the pulpit. Although cheerful flowers matched her mother's vibrant personality, Amanda had to close her eyes against the pain she felt looking at them atop the coffin. She could hear her mother's laughter, see her flashing eyes and feel her arms around her.

It wasn't until she felt a touch on her arm that she realised the pallbearers were making their way out of the church and on to the cemetery. Consumed by her own thoughts, she hadn't heard a word of the service. She walked by herself to the hearse, tears clouding her vision.

Her father's rigid posture and continuing silence were unnerving. Struggling with his grief and guilt, he had locked himself away, leaving Amanda to cope with the funeral arrangements.

She felt like she had aged dramatically in the two weeks since the accident. She would never forget seeing her mother in the coffin, cold and unresponsive,

her scars from the accident cleverly hidden. The lady at the funeral home had helped do her mother's hair and makeup, but it was Amanda who had chosen her outfit and fastened the silver bracelet that had been a gift for her fortieth birthday on her lifeless wrist.

It was hard to believe that only two weeks before she had been so full of hope and optimism for the future.

Choking back a sob, she ran to her car and sped away.

Chapter 2

2001

Amanda swung the pick, which bounced off the manure that was packed solid under the shearing shed. Despite the cold wind, a thin film of sweat covered her brow and she pulled up the hem of her shirt to wipe it off. There was about fifteen years' worth of compressed sheep dung and she'd scored the great job of digging it out. There was barely enough room to stand under the shed, let alone swing the pick.

She crawled out on her knees and tried to stand up, gasping in pain as her muscles screamed in protest. With blistered hands she hauled the full barrow out into the open, not seeing a big lump of manure before the barrow hit it, tipping on its side, its contents emptying onto the ground.

'Bugger!' Amanda shouted, unable to stop angry tears from spilling down her cheeks as she swept all the manure back into the barrow with her hands. She

swiped at the tears, smearing dung over her cheeks, then pushed the laden barrow over to the front-end loader's bucket, full now from her hours of work. Amanda jumped into the driver's seat and turned the key, before backing carefully out of the sheep yards and heading towards the huge pile of manure that sat on the fenceline bordering the laneway. Hitting the levers that controlled the bucket, she emptied the load onto the mound, then slumped forward, resting her head on the steering wheel. Surely there was more to her life than shovelling shit.

It was now four months since she had to come back to Kyleena to help her dad. The death of her mum hadn't changed her plans - she'd always wanted, yearned, to come back to the farm - but the homecoming hadn't been anything like she'd imagined it would be. And her rural exchange plans, to England, were looking more appealing by the day.

Her father had withdrawn into himself, not talking except to issue instructions - and far from being interested in the innovative ideas his daughter had for Kyleena, he had been stubborn and resistant. Last night was a prime example.

After convincing her dad to let her into the office, Amanda had discovered that the computer lacked a security program. When Brian had walked in with a cup of tea for her and wanted to know how she was getting on, Amanda had asked how he stopped viruses getting onto his computer. It was so important to have security to protect the files; it was one of the first things

they'd learned at uni, she had told him. His face had darkened and he'd slammed the mug down, sloshing the hot liquid onto the desk, and left the room. Later, Amanda realised that he'd probably thought she was questioning his office ability, implying that he was old and out of touch. She hadn't meant that at all.

Today, she'd done nothing but think about how she could fix what she had broken. Amanda was sure that her dad wouldn't let her near the office again, let alone contribute to any of the managerial decisions. So instead of utilising her knowledge of budgets and farm improvements, she was fixing rundown fences, drenching sheep and, today's glorious job, shovelling sheep shit.

Although she loved her father, her mum had often had to act as mediator between them. Being alike in many ways, there had been occasions when they had locked horns, the worst being when Amanda had decided she wanted to go to ag college. Her father had loudly disagreed, much to her surprise, since he had attended the same college she was applying to. But he maintained that ag college was no place for a woman; the social culture was too rough for *his* daughter.

The two-way suddenly crackled to life.

'On channel, Mandy?' her dad's gruff voice asked through the two-way speaker.

Sighing but not shifting her head, she felt for the two-way receiver and responded.

'I'm in number one paddock and I've just checked the dam,' he said. 'It's getting a bit low and there's two

dead sheep stuck in the mud on the edge. You'll need to come and pull them out.'

'Why don't you do it, since you're on the spot?' she demanded, resentment sweeping away her caution. The answering silence stretched into minutes, and finally Amanda drove the front-end loader into the shed, collected a rope and climbed onto her four-wheel motor bike, still fuming as she sped off.

Riding through the open gate into the paddock, Amanda saw her father sitting on the edge of the dam staring at the dead sheep. She could tell that his thoughts were elsewhere. Her gaze shifted to the dead ewes. As far as she could see, he hadn't even tried to pull the sheep out of the mud himself.

As she approached, he stood up and came towards the bike. Levelling his face with hers, he looked her in the eye. 'Don't ever question my instructions on the two-way again! The rest of the district doesn't need to know what's going on at our place. You do as I say and no backchat, understand?' he hissed.

Amanda folded her arms, her face set. 'Dad, it would have been quicker for you to pull them out than for me to leave what I was doing and come out here. Time efficiency is important on a farm. What I've just done isn't efficient. Time costs money. It's not that hard a job. Not pleasant, granted, but not hard.'

Brian acted as if she hadn't spoken. 'Understand?' he repeated.

'Yes, Dad,' she answered sullenly.

As she uncoiled the rope and tied it onto the back

carrier, she heard her father walking towards his ute, the gravel crunching underfoot. As he closed the driver's door, she lifted her head to look at him, and said, 'Sorry about last night, Dad.'

There was a brief pause as he processed what she had said but then, without speaking, he turned the key in the ignition and drove away.

Staring at the carcasses, tears once again threatening, Amanda suddenly understood that his silence and these sheep were punishment for the night before. And she could see the blame in his eyes every time he looked at her - he thought she'd caused her mother's death! As if she didn't feel enough guilt without him heaping it on her. They had been on the way to *her* graduation after all.

Oh, she understood that he was grieving - she was too. But to survive, they had to move on. She knew when she lectured her stony-faced father, he saw her as cold and heartless. If only he could see inside her, see her own overwhelming sadness, then perhaps he would understand that she was trying to cope in her own way by focusing on Kyleena, on their future. But her father wasn't interested in understanding her it seemed.

Ah well, she needed to get the animals out of the dam before they contaminated the water any further. Fixing the rope around one of the dead sheep's legs, she rode slowly away, dragging the animal behind the bike. She steered towards a cluster of trees which would become the ewe's final resting place. Breathing through her mouth to avoid the stench, she unhooked

the rope and rode back to the dam to remove the other dead animal.

As the sun began to sink lower in the sky, Amanda made her way back to the house. She knew her father would be in his office, listening to the radio and drinking beer. Avoiding her.

As a child, the house had been bright and cheerful, full of laughter and fun. Her mother, Helena, had been a wonderful cook and gardener, as well as working alongside her father and keeping up with her original profession, journalism, by writing an occasional article for the rural papers. Since her death, the garden had grown wild and the house had lost its cosiness. It seemed to understand the occupants were slowly self-destructing.

Pushing open the door of her mother's study, Amanda was hit by the smell. Finally the room smelled fresh and clean. It was like someone loved it again. When Amanda had first summonsed the courage to open the door, not long after the accident, it had still smelled like her mum. The moisturiser she used, her shampoo and soap. The book she was reading had been on the coffee table and the latest editorial she'd been working on sat unfinished on her desk.

The fragrance had faded over the months and when it had started to smell musty and rank Amanda knew she had to do something. She couldn't bear leaving her mother's favourite room to become unloved, so two weeks ago she had moved her computer onto the desk and claimed the area for her own. Her father had watched grimly as she had flung open the curtains,

brushed the dust away and set a vase of her Mum's favourite lavender on the table. He wouldn't set foot over the threshold, arguing that it was Helena's space and should be left the way it was.

Amanda hadn't heeded his wishes, and tonight she opened the window and sat on the soft couch where her mother used to curl up and read on rainy days with her feet tucked up under her, her long, dark, wavy hair tumbling over the couch's arm.

There was a photo on the desk showing Helena, Brian and a young Amanda in the garden. Amanda could just recall the day it was taken. The drought-breaking rains arrived from nowhere. A fierce storm had swept through, cooling the sweltering day, but it hadn't fazed her mum, who was clothed in a thin cotton dress. She had danced in the rain, her arms outstretched and face turned towards the heavens as she laughed with joy, with hope. Her dad had run from the shed and taken his wife in his arms and together they'd delighted in the downpour, while their only child had watched from the verandah in wonder.

Fifty-three was too young to die, thought Amanda, tears springing to her eyes. And twenty-two was too young to lose your mum. She buried her head in the cushion, hoping to catch a hint of the fading essence of her mother.

Later that night, Amanda woke from a restless sleep, thirsty. Stumbling out to the kitchen to get a drink of

water, she was alarmed by odd noises coming from her dad's room. She made for the door, but was stopped in her tracks by the sound of gut-wrenching sobs and muttered words. Quietly pushing the door open a crack, she peered in. Standing at the foot of the bed with his back to her was her dad, his shoulders heaving with sobs. He held a photograph of Helena, the silver frame reflecting in the moonlight that filtered through the open curtain.

'Why, Helena, why? How could this happen after everything we've been through? After all we did to stay together? How could you leave me now?'