



**Girlfriend** *fiction*

**BOOK  
MARK  
DAYS**

SCOT GARDNER



ALLEN & UNWIN

# CHAPTER 01

My name is Avril and this story is about me and my cousin Katie, who is from another planet. My planet is run by sheep, hers is run by fashion and mobile phones, but we're best friends anyway. The story also features our families, a few horses and dogs, lots of sheep, some local yahoos and one seriously hot guy – but I'll get to that. There are some excellent fight scenes, like the sheep poo wars of September and the family feud with the evil Carringtons next door. And there's some serious party action at the Forsyth Agricultural Show and Ute Muster. Woohoo.

Katie says my family is prehistoric and she's not totally wrong. We have a computer that connects via dial-up but only on days when it feels like it, and even on a good day I can run faster than it does. But I do have email. Here's a classic from Katie:

Cuz,

I'm hot. I'm so totally hot. I'm on fire. The sex queen of Pentland Secondary has struck again! It was the Year 10 formal last night. A STRICTLY alcohol-free event, so

naturally we were all tanked. Music pumping, full-on laser show and stage smoke, it just WENT OFF.

I picked up not one . . . not two . . . but THREE!! major studs. The power to PICK and CHOOSE, that's what I'm talking about! And I have photographic evidence on my phone to prove it! I could have sent them to you but you'd need a minimum of a MOBILE PHONE and MOBILE SERVICE! I know they haven't been invented in Rockleigh yet. Wish you guys would hurry up out of the 1980s! Or is it 1880s?!? LOL.

Prehistoric is an exaggeration, obviously, but we're a long way from the centre of her universe.

One good thing about living on my planet is that I don't go to school. Ever (yay!). The closest school is in Mildura, which is 165 Ks away. I learn via correspondence, which means Mum and Dad and Nan and Hoppy (my grandad) help me with lessons set by teachers in the city. I read books. Hundreds of books. One whole wall of my room is fantasy and classics, horror and horses. I have my own private library but I only read one book at a time. It's the one with the bookmark in it. Katie posted me the bookmark from Darwin when we were eight. It's a mango leaf. She ripped it off a tree and stuck it in an envelope and it used to smell like the fruit but now it's getting a bit fragile and it smells like dry grass.

Correspondence also means that there are no boys at school (except my nine-year-old brother Chooka, boo!), no girlfriends (no human ones, anyway, boo!), no actual teachers (yay!) and

no formals (megaboo!). I study in the morning if there's nothing urgent to do around the farm, and a few hours each night. It probably sounds sad, being all alone on my planet of sheep, but I love it. I get to sleep under the stars, help lambs into the world and ride my horse whenever I want. I've been driving the ute and the tractor since I was eleven and I can cook for twenty shearers. I've shot pigs and foxes and rabbits, chopped the heads off a hundred roosters and butchered a sheep. I can smell when it's going to rain and I can kill a brown snake with a shovel if I have to.

Experience is a good teacher, Hoppy says. Maybe that's why I know nothing about love.

# CHAPTER 02

The Carringtons live fifteen kilometres away as the crow flies. We see them at the lamb sales a few times a year and they pass us on the track every now and then, but they never wave. A Carrington hasn't deliberately waved to a Stanton since before the fires of 1968, but the strange thing is hardly any of us knows why. Even Dad doesn't know what started it. Hoppy and Les Senior were in the war together. They were best mates then but now you'd think they'd been on opposite sides the way they carry on. It's a full-on traditional family feud that's been passed down the generations. Dad has worked with some rough blokes but the only fist-fight he's ever had was with Les Carrington – that's Les Junior – when they were about eighteen. He reckons Les came off second-best. Apparently eleven of our sheep died strange deaths after that blue. Could have been dogs, Nan said, but why blame the canines when there's a perfectly good pack of mongrel humans next door? (That's Hoppy's slant on it.) Talk about love thy neighbour. Fifteen Ks is too close some days. Like the day Katie and her family were due to arrive. The phone rang early and I answered it.

‘Hello?’

‘Les Carrington here. Your maggots are in my rape. You’ve got an hour until I start shooting the ferals.’

And he hung up.

It took a minute to process what he’d said. Your *maggots* (our sheep) are in my *rape* (canola – stinky green crop with yellow flowers, used for oil and margarine). You’ve got an hour until I start shooting the *ferals* (domestic animals gone wild).

Hoppy rolled his eyes when I told him and gulped the last of his tea. He grabbed his hat. ‘You can drive, Av.’

Dad was already out somewhere on the tractor, planting our own canola crop, so it was just me and Hoppy in the ute, bouncing through the paddocks to the western boundary. Apparently that fence was the first thing replaced after the fires. I had my sunnies on but the golden glare from the Carringtons’ canola field still hurt my eyes as I scanned the paddock for loose sheep. We crested the ridge where the land falls away to the creek and spotted the mob way off in the distance, on *our* side of the fence.

Hoppy was swearing under his breath. ‘Stupid idiot. They’re not even on his place. Woah, stop Av! Hole here.’

I parked the ute across the slope (handbrake doesn’t work) and we got out to inspect the damage. A good thirty-metre section had peeled off its posts and it lay curled up on the yellow flowers. There were sheep tracks everywhere, so the mob *had* been next door. Hoppy set about collecting tools from the ute and I dragged the fence back into place. Wires had been snapped, a steel post bent. Strange. Sheep don’t snap wires. Kangaroos do, but even a kangaroo can’t snap six strands of ringlock and bend it all out of shape.

Hoppy inspected the break. ‘This wasn’t the sheep. No way. This was done by machinery. One of those Carrington nutters has hit the fence with the cultivator. Wasn’t even our fault.’

I could feel myself getting fired up like Hoppy. Carringtons are mongrels.

I heard an engine in the distance. Sounded like our quad bike.

‘Look out, here they come,’ Hoppy said. He straightened like an old bull kangaroo.

It wasn’t our bike but the Carrington one, heading in our direction. I felt a flutter in my chest and my pulse quickened. There was only one way to communicate with a Carrington and that was with fire in your eyes and broken glass in your words.

The rider wasn’t wearing a helmet, he had on a dark trucker’s cap that held a mini haybale of wavy blonde hair mostly in place. It was the son – Nathaniel Carrington. It was five years since I’d seen him this close – and getting closer – and he wasn’t a boy any more. He was tall, his sleeves were rolled above his elbows and his arms were work-wiry and tanned. He stopped the bike and sprang off, approaching us with a disarming smile. Hoppy didn’t see it, he had his eyes down while he wrestled with the broken fence. Hoppy couldn’t look and I couldn’t drag my eyes away. Thank god for my sunglasses.

‘Wasn’t even our bloody fault,’ Hoppy growled. ‘The fence has been broken from the other side.’

‘Ah, yes. You’re right there,’ Nathaniel said. ‘My fault. Sorry about that. I hit it on my first run around with the seeder and forgot all about it.’

‘And the mongrel has the cheek to ring us and abuse us.’

Nathaniel blushed. The colour swept down his neck and under his collar. He yanked on the peak of his hat. ‘Sorry you copped that. I remembered as soon as I heard Pop on the phone. Came straight out. Thought I might beat you to it.’

‘Bloody Carringtons couldn’t grow ice in Siberia.’

‘Hoppy!’ I snapped. ‘He’s saying sorry.’

Nathaniel laughed and shrugged. ‘Doesn’t matter.’ He took a step closer. ‘I’ll fix it if you want, Mr Stanton.’

Hoppy stood with his jaw set in disapproval. He looked at Nathaniel for the first time. ‘No, I want it done properly. I’ll bloody fix it myself,’ he said. He waved his hand, dismissively. ‘You can get on your bike and go and tell your grandfather to get his facts straight before he starts mouthing off.’

He turned his back on Nathaniel.

My face burned.

Nathaniel looked at me and I mouthed, ‘Sorry’.

Nathaniel nodded, defeated. He looked like a kicked puppy. He got back on the bike and left.

I watched him go, and just as he was about to leave the paddock, he looked over his shoulder at me and waved – a big arm-over-the-head sort of wave – and I waved back.

I’d learned to hate a lot of things about the Carringtons. I discovered with that wave that it was going to be very hard to hate the youngest one.