



**Girlfriend** *fiction*

# BIG SKY

MELAINA FARANDA



ALLEN & UNWIN

# ONE

‘No way. That’s so unfair!’ I screwed up the letter and hurled it at the wall.

‘Careful,’ Aria yelled, parrying it with her mascara wand. ‘Pueeeeeugh! What stinks?’

‘Gran’s sprayed the letter with her CWA meeting perfume.’

I paced the strip of scuffed carpet between our narrow beds while Aria picked up the crumpled ball and wrestled with Gran’s copperplate. The tiny, shared cubicle was more claustrophobic than usual. Aria and I had hassled the SRC to campaign for bigger bedrooms, but the school preferred to spend money on fancy sculptures and plush carpet for the visitors foyer. Sometimes I dreamed about bursting through the thin partition walls and fancy brickwork and breaking free. Running until I reached the sea.

‘But you can’t go home for the holidays! They can’t make you!’ Smudged mascara made Aria look like she’d been crying. ‘You’re coming to my place. The party’s set. Everyone’s coming. Aaron Dearnly will be there.’

I thumped the wall. My brother, Damien, had taught me how to punch properly, but too long at St Anne’s had made me hit like a girl.

Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.

Aaron Dearnly was school captain at our brother school, in the First Fifteen for rugby and on the debating team. I'd had a crush on him since we'd spent an afternoon together in the library after a debating competition. It had been a typically lame topic – city life is better than country life – but afterwards Aaron had seemed interested that I came from a cattle station up in the Kimberley.

When Aria told him I'd won the All-Around Cowgirl award at the Kununurra rodeo, I'd cringed, thinking he would laugh. In my bedroom back at Bundwarra, I had a wall full of prize buckles. Down here in Perth though, it seemed so . . . hick. I could still pick a ringer fresh from a station. That wide walk, arms strapped with glossy shopping bags, narrowed eyes stinging from the big smoke.

But Aaron hadn't laughed. Instead, he'd asked about rodeos and camp drafts and mustering, as if he was truly fascinated . . .

The end-of-term party was Aria's grand plan for me to get a chance to talk to him again.

I snatched Gran's letter back and re-read it. In a horrible haze of potpourri, everything I was hoping for evaporated – the party, Aaron's ironic smile, the dimple in his square jaw . . .

'We'll fix it. We'll tell them you're not going,' Aria insisted, screwing up her dainty nose. 'You'll just have to miss the plane or something. Daddy can fly you up after the party.'

I shook my head. A strand of sun-bleached hair, my one vanity, wafted across my eyes – even the Perth winter hadn't managed to darken it. 'I have to go.'

Gran was bossing me around *again*. I was going to miss out on three weeks of hanging out at Aria's place, shopping in the city centre, being cooked for by Rosita, and sleeping on a pillow-top emperor-sized bed that could have comfortably fitted my horse!

'But it's all arranged. Daddy's even getting some men to make the pontoon bigger for the band.'

'Well, now he'll have the perfect place to moor his monster yacht.' I'd been out on the *Sea Princess* only once, when Aria's parents had held a swanky party and they'd wanted to show off their designer-clad daughter. Once had been enough. We'd sailed out to Rottnest and while the others had eaten lobsters and lounged on deck chairs, I'd been pinned to the rail, with Aria holding my hair back as I'd emptied my guts.

'Don't worry,' Aria said. 'I'll come up with something.' She tilted her head so that a swing of glossy black hair hid her eyes. But I didn't have to see that devil glint to know that she was plotting the perfect excuse – just like all the times we had been hauled up to the office to be told off. You'd think living with the same person day in, day out would get boring, but with Aria there was never a dull moment. That's why I loved her. She was as unpredictable as a rogue bull.

'Aria, I'm sorry. I really am. But this isn't something I can get out of.'

'But what about Aaron Dearnly? C'mon Skye. You've never even kissed a guy.'

'Makes up for you, you hussy.'

‘No *really*. Don’t you feel kind of weird? You’re the only girl I know who’s never hooked up with someone.’

‘That is not true!’

We glared at each other. My hands on hips. Aria’s eyes narrowed to slits. ‘Oh what – you mean that guy at the rodeo counted? The one your brother beat up?’

Why did I ever tell her about that? I clawed at the waistband of my stupid pleated school skirt wishing for jeans and a belt to hook my thumbs through. ‘The drunk guy who stank of – what do you call those thingies?’

‘Dagwood dogs. And for your information, I’ve never met anyone who really does it for me.’

‘Apart from Aaron.’

‘Yeah, well, nothing’s going to happen there now, is it?’

Aria flew across the tiny space with one of her fierce ferret hugs that knocked me back onto the bed. For such a petite person, and one who was dead lazy and had never had to lift a finger – let alone her own dinner plates, bedding, phone, or whatever else Rosita picked up for her – Aria’s strength never ceased to amaze me.

‘This was my gift to you. To get you guys together,’ Aria said. ‘You’d be the perfect couple.’

She meant it. Aria loved giving me things. She always seemed to magically have a spare of everything – hair straightener, MP3 player, mobile phone – and anything else that was out of date by more than four minutes. And now, she wanted to give me this too – Aaron Dearnly, all wrapped-up with a band on a pontoon and a bow on top.

The prep bell rang and I sprang up. ‘Sorry.’

‘Skye, this might be your one chance to actually kiss a

guy before you leave school? The longer you leave it, the harder it's going to get. You'll be like this weird old spinster woman—'

'—chewing hay stalks'

'Yeah, that's right – and breeding feral pigs.'

'... and going to CWA meetings ...'

'... and getting even creepier about horses.'

'Aria Mercedes Antoinette Paris Winston! You just stepped over the line.'

Beneath my laughter, a small, sneaky part of me didn't think it was such a bad prospect to be summoned to Bundwarra for the muster. The party had seemed like a great idea, but I was uneasy about the thought of Aria flitting back and forth, checking on me and Aaron. It would be humiliating. I longed for sun and warmth and big skies again. I blew on my bruised knuckles; the pallid drizzle of a Perth winter had sapped my strength.

I stood, feet planted wide as if I were going to throw a bull. 'I'll take the weird spinster option. I'm going back to Bundwarra.'

Aria pouted, her naturally red lips making her look more than ever like one of the exquisite china dolls made by Mrs Rafferty from the neighbouring station. 'Don't be such a pushover.'

'Aria – Dad's leg's broken and Gran'll be looking after him. My family has to work hard just to stay afloat. I can't click my fingers for cash and I can't just chuck a tantrum and expect my parents to give me whatever I want.'

Aria's nostrils flared, but I didn't rush to apologise like all the other times I'd put my foot in my mouth.

From across the corridor, the second bell rang through the shabby dorms reminding us we should already be seated for prep.

Aria grabbed her schoolbooks and stormed out, leaving me alone with the stinky letter, wondering if I still had a best friend.

# TWO

‘*Finally* – it’s here.’ I hefted up my duffle bag.

Aria barely glanced up from her perch on the largest of her four Louis Vuitton suitcases as the airport shuttle bus pulled up at the entrance to St Anne’s. She fiddled with her phone, texting. It had been like that ever since our fight after reading Gran’s letter. My best friend had turned into a stranger. Every time I’d asked who the guy was, she’d change the subject. I hated secrets.

‘Um – *hello?* Aria? The shuttle bus’s arrived. I have to go. Will you be okay waiting alone for your dad’s driver?’

Aria pressed send and nodded.

‘Why doesn’t he just let you get a cab instead of making you wait. It’s the first day of holidays.’

Aria’s delicate eyebrows furrowed. ‘Daddy’s very busy.’

‘Well, what about your mum? Why can’t she come and get you?’

Aria looked away.

I didn’t push it. When I’d stayed over at Aria’s on the occasional home weekend I’d hardly seen her parents, and Aria never seemed to want to talk about them. Unlike me. I rabbited on about my family whenever I got the

opportunity. Aria knew all about Dad and Gran and Mum and Damien. Sometimes when we were bored – like when we were waiting outside the deputy’s office – she’d beg me for stories about life on Bundwarra, so I’d tell her about the time Gran found a king brown snake in the toilet, or when Damien lost his daks on a barrel race.

‘I’ll see you soon, okay. Have fun at the party for me.’  
I stooped to give her a hug.

Aria didn’t bother getting up. Her arms felt limp and anaemic. As if she needed a good dose of iron. Or a good telling off about sulking.

‘I’ll miss you.’ I meant it.

‘Yeah,’ Aria said. Her phone beeped.

I helped the driver slug my bag into the lock-up trailer and then sprawled in the back seat. I slid open the window to shout goodbye.

Aria didn’t look up. She was too busy texting.



For someone who preferred good old-fashioned correspondence with real people, Gran had somehow figured how to use the internet to book my ticket using Damien’s frequent flyer points.

Perth to Broome. Broome to Kununurra. Then, finally, the mail plane, bristling with tools, packages, vet medicines and spare parts, which would drop me off like a big human parcel to Bundwarra Station.

I flicked through my magazine – as ever attracted to and dismayed by the glossy pages of winter fashions. I couldn’t

afford the outfits Aria snapped up without a second thought, and while she would have willingly lent me any of her clothes, she wore a size six. The only jeans I'd be wearing at Bundwarra would be scuffed and saddle-worn. As for the winter chill: forget cute knee-highs and faux fur-collared coats – I was going to have nearly three whole weeks in the stinking heat, wearing elastic-sided R.M. Williams work boots crusted in cow dung.

Sighing, I stuffed the magazine into the seat pouch and stared through the grimy window at the stretching red earth below, wondering what Aria was doing. I tried not to feel hurt – Aria usually couldn't keep a secret to save herself. If anything, sometimes I wished she didn't feel compelled to tell me everything – especially at midnight before a big hockey match or a Maths exam. But in the last week she'd withdrawn from me completely, lured away by her mysterious new text buddy. Now that I couldn't spend the school holidays at her massive Nedlands mansion, maybe she'd lost interest in me.

I couldn't help feeling a sharp squeeze of injustice. Where was Damien when he was needed? He knew the station was struggling, but he'd chosen to play Cowboys and Indians in America. With Dad's broken leg and Mum in Indonesia trying to set up a beef export deal, it all came down to me. I'd rung Gran to complain, but she'd given me an earful about the cost of my fancy boarding school (huh – I was on a remote education scholarship!) and how, with the mining boom, it was hard to find station hands. Bundwarra had been forced to take any comer, including *backpackers*. Gran had enunciated this last word with horror, but I was

stoked. The muster wasn't going to be with a whole team of crusty old ringers who'd hate taking orders from a schoolgirl!

I pressed my face against the window like a little kid. Below, red-brown plains ended abruptly as giant rock formations loomed into view. It never failed to thrill me – the blood-coloured mountains with pin-prick trees rising from parched earth dotted with clumps of spinifex. In the wet, the cliff faces would glisten with silver waterfalls, and lush green grass would spring up on the floodplains.

By the time the plane finally taxied into Kununurra and landed with a series of bone-crunching bumps, I'd almost forgotten about Aria, the party and Aaron Dearnly's knowing blue eyes. I rolled up the magazine and stuffed it into my half-filled duffle bag. I hadn't packed much – just a spare pair of jeans and singlets and underwear.

As the door opened, a blast of hot air wafted through the cabin. Beads of sweat instantly formed on my forehead and I pulled off my jumper. Hot clammy air kissed my bare shoulders. I stretched my arms and legs and threw my head back to the blinding blue sky. Big sky. That cramped, squeezed-in feeling I'd had in the city vanished as I breathed the vastness.

Then I spotted the most beautiful boy I had ever seen slouching towards me – Aaron who?

I flicked a gold curtain of hair over my face to hide the hot blush crawling into my cheeks. My body always betrayed me like this – my face lighting up like an emergency flare – whenever I was embarrassed. Through strands of hair I noticed he wasn't much older than me. He was impossibly

good-looking with smooth olive skin and almond-shaped, tawny eyes framed by thick black eyelashes that Aria would have killed for.

As he drew closer, his eyes widened.

A shiver rippled through me.

‘Skye.’

I nodded.

‘I’m Dan. I’ve been sent to tell you that Angry’s at the pub.’

Angry was the mail run pilot. A Kimberley legend, he was spectacularly crabby, and had a leathery red face that looked as if it had been slow-baked in a camp oven. Like many men in the north-west, he was fond of an Emu beer or ten.

‘We’ll be waiting a while then.’

‘Fine by me.’ His perfect features were made more human by the warmth in his eyes and a slightly crooked smile.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked. That was what we asked round here. Never: ‘Where did you come from?’ That kind of question could land you in trouble. Frontier territory attracted runaways from down south, people fleeing from a fight, a relationship bust-up, the city, another life.

‘Got work mustering on a big station. I was down on a station in the Pilbara, then someone told me about this job.’

My heart sank faster than a dropped magpie goose. I tried not to let my face fall along with it. I’d like to be on a muster with Dan. He seemed nice, not like some of the macho cowboys or hopeless, tongue-tied ringers I’d met through Damien.

Bundwarra was a small station compared to the properties owned by pastoral cooperatives. One of the stations

further up was over four hundred thousand hectares. In the Kimberley people thought nothing of driving three hundred kilometres for a game of tennis or even further for a footy match. But Dan would probably be too far away for that . . .

‘What about you?’ he asked.

‘I’m helping out on a muster too, but on a small station. Just for the school holidays. Then I have to go back to Perth.’

Dan smiled. ‘Mum made me do Year 12 even though Dad said the only good thing about getting the certificate was for cutting up for the dunny. The minute I got my ticket, I took off. My grandmother’s people come from up this way. She always made it sound like paradise.’

All I could think was, now that you’re here, it is.



By the time Angry stomped back to the Cessna, I wished he’d kept drinking at the pub so we’d have to stay in Kununurra. Then Dan and I could have talked all night long. He was nothing like Damien’s bragging, bonehead mates. Dan actually listened and managed to extract more information about my life at St Anne’s than I’d told anyone before.

Angry hit his head as he bent to open the hold. Dan trailed alongside me, then loaded my duffle bag next to his swag before offering me the window seat.

It was impossible to talk above the roar of the old mail plane. I think Angry preferred it that way because he flew tight-lipped and sour-faced. I sat cramped between the window, the mail sack and spare parts for tractors and bores

while we sped over the pocked, stony landscape with scrub clinging to red rock piles and buttes and the occasional mirror glint of a river twisting beneath.

As we flew over a familiar bend in the river I spotted the Devil's Horns and knew we'd soon land at Bundwarra. I racked my brains for a cool way to say goodbye to Dan. Super casual, like: 'See you at a rodeo sometime.'

The Cessna taxied onto the makeshift runway marked out by rusty forty-four gallon drums. It was a strip of dirt just beyond the homestead. Long ago I had spent weeks helping to clear rocks from it.

Dan grabbed his swag and readied to leave.

'You're getting off here?' I asked. 'I thought you were going to a big station?'

Dan blinked. 'This is Bundwarra, isn't it?'

My mouth went dry. 'Yes,' I croaked.

Angry watched us through the mirror with bleary eyes. 'Nice work sucking up to the boss's daughter, blackfella.'

Dan recoiled. He sprang away from me and fled from the plane, as though I'd suddenly become contagious.

Twin balls of red dust hurtled towards us and erupted into a lather of insanely happy dogs. Zippo and Red had been let off their chains. They usually snarled at strangers, but both dogs leaped on me, then Dan, drooling and slobbering as if he was a long lost friend. I batted them away, and kneed Zippo in the chest to stop him jumping. I tried to feel their joy at my homecoming. But watching Dan slink further from the plane, I couldn't shake Angry's obnoxious words. As they replayed in my mind, the in-flight meal – a stale salad sandwich – flipped

in my stomach and I tasted bile. I'd stake my All-Around Cowgirl Buckle that Gran had no idea.



'Skye!' Gran strode over to the runway. There was never any doubt where I got my height from: Gran was an imposing figure – a tall, grey-haired woman in a faded blue floral dress and white orthopedic shoes permanently stained with red dust.

I submitted to the obligatory peck on my cheek. 'Gran. This is—'

'You must be Dan.' Narrowing her eyes, Gran took in Dan's battered Stetson, checked shirt, jeans and low-slung belt equipped with the pouch for his knives. He was scrubbed up and looked the part, but she sniffed. I could practically hear what she was thinking and my cheeks burned with shame.

'The rules are: no alcohol, no swearing, no vulgar behaviour,' Gran said crisply. 'The big house is off limits. Except for Saturday dinner. Mail run on Thursdays. Phone calls to be made between six and seven. Internet access after sunset on Fridays. The bunkhouse is over there.' She pointed to a rectangular building near the tractor shed and closer to the river. It was a typical Kimberley-style stockmen's quarters with a corrugated iron roof and flyscreened panels for windows – all breezes gratefully accepted.

Dan continued to stand, as if waiting for further instructions, or perhaps he was hoping for a welcome.

Gran waved a reddened, calloused hand. Her knuckles

were swollen from years of constant work. ‘Well? What are you waiting for? Dinner’s in three hours.’

Cringing at her tone, I barely had time to roll my eyes at Dan in sympathy before Gran tugged at my elbow with an iron grip.

‘If I’d known,’ Gran muttered as she hustled me towards the big house, ‘I would never have —’

‘Never have what?’

‘That’s the trouble with hiring over the phone.’ White lines showed at the edges of her pressed lips.

‘What exactly is the problem?’ I demanded.

‘They’re more trouble than they’re worth.’

I wrenched my arm away.

‘They go walkabout. Can’t keep the time to save themselves. Spoil the horses for other riders.’

You didn’t have to go to a camp draft or rodeo to know that Aboriginal stockmen were among the very best. Besides, we were living in country where Aboriginal and white people lived side by side, lived together. ‘What *century* are you living in, Gran?’

‘Don’t be insolent, young lady.’

Despite adapting to internet technology, Gran still inhabited some weird version of frontier life. When I was a kid, Mum had told me that some people wouldn’t change just because the rest of the world had, something about how leopards couldn’t change their spots.

I’d argued that a palomino’s spots got lighter. Mum had laughed like I’d said something funny. But I’d meant it.

I resolved to make up for Gran’s treatment of Dan and,

with his beautiful golden eyes and that crooked smile, being nice to him wasn't going to be hard . . .

At the sight of the homestead my heart thumped audibly. The sound rushed to fill my ears. Bundwarra. With its pitched tin roof, wide verandahs screened to keep out the mozzies, purple bougainvillea growing up the posts, and the huge old mango tree shading a stubborn square of green lawn. This was the place I'd cried for every night for a whole term when I'd first been stuck in the holding yard of St Anne's Ladies College.

Halfway through Year 9, Mum had decided that long distance education via the School of the Air wasn't working. Correction – *it* was working, and better than ever with the new internet satellite technology, but I wasn't. It was far too easy for me to do a couple of hours on the computer then sneak out to the home paddock, slip onto Blue Dreamer and take off. I'd spend hours going feral in the bush. I'd swim in the higher country creeks, climb trees, and poke around the old gorges and caves to discover rock paintings, crystals and, once, a stone shelf with a bundle of old bones that had scared me silly.

Gran had been on my side. She'd argued that I should stay – to help out with the fencing and repairs – but Mum had said that no daughter of hers was going to be a dropout. I'd go to boarding school and finish Year 12 and hopefully have the rough edges knocked off me into the bargain. Luckily, I'd always been a reader – there wasn't much else to do during the knock 'em down rains – I'd passed the scholarship exam easily.

It was weird when I first got to school. I couldn't find a

single person who enjoyed lying on the grass and staring at the clouds, or watching birds building nests, or exploring the riverbank, continuing on and on past each bend wanting to see what came next. Fun in the city was always ‘arranged’. You had to buy something, or go somewhere that had been purpose-built – like an ice-skating rink or a shopping centre. In Perth, fun cost money.

The screen door swung open.

Dad hobbled out, his sun-faded eyes flicking first to the horizon, then to me.

‘Dad!’ I charged and tackled him. Dad was the touchy, huggy one. If it had been up to Mum and Gran, Damien and I would have grown up not knowing what a hug was.

Dad rocked backwards. ‘Whoa. Careful.’

‘Nice work.’ I surveyed the crutches and white cast, already grimy with red dust.

Dad nodded. ‘Yard post fell off the truck and collected me. Smashed the bone in three places.’

‘Impressive.’ I rested my head against his neck, inhaling sweat and hay and diesel engine – Dad smell. I had to bend to do it.

‘Reckon they must be putting growth hormones in the feed down at that school of yours.’

‘Yeah, well – you’re obviously not getting enough of them up here.’ I looked pointedly at his cast. ‘Horse or cow breaks a leg and you have to shoot it.’

‘What do they teach you down there – how to give your old man cheek? There’s still some good in me yet, missy.’

‘But not for the muster. You got yourself out of this one.’

I remembered the pastoral care officer we'd had during my first term at St Anne's: she'd said every part of our body was connected to our thoughts and feelings. I'd binged up my ankle in a hockey tournament and she'd reckoned my ankle injury was to do with my fear of the future, my subconscious fear of moving forward. Either that or a ruddy big hockey stick had smashed against it – it still gave out on me occasionally.

I wondered if this subconscious fear thing was what had happened with Dad. Bundwarra was on a financial knife-edge. Mum had tried to hide it from me; she'd wanted me to do well at St Anne's without all the worry, but Gran, typically, was frank.

'It couldn't have happened at a worse time,' she grumbled. 'We have to hope the cattle are in good condition after all that blasted summer rain. The grass would have hayed off quickly, so the pasture will be poor. And we just have to pray that Liz does well in Jakarta.'

Dad turned to Gran. 'How's the new fella then, Edith?'

'He's cool, a good bloke,' I butted in. 'He's Aboriginal. His grandmother came from up near here.'

Dad nodded. 'Good. Might have a feel for the country then.' He creased his eyes and shook his head as though he felt sorry for me. 'Reckon the muster might be a bit of a handful, Skye, with those two German backpackers and that method actor fella from Sydney on the team.'

'What?' I disentangled myself and stood with my hands on my hips, just like Mum used to do when she was telling off Damien after he'd cracked a whip and nearly caused the

mob to rush the yards. ‘Is anyone else coming? Anyone with experience?’

Dad shook his head. ‘Most of the regular blokes are off working at the mines. Money’s too good. You and the new fella are it. The Germans have worked on another station for a bit, too.’

I turned to Gran. ‘Apart from Dan and me, who has any decent experience with a muster?’

Gran sniffed. ‘No one wants to earn an honest living above ground.’

‘So how exactly did you find these . . . people, Gran?’

Dad laughed, his eyes crinkling up in a nest of crow’s feet. ‘The internet. Things are getting flash out here. Edith has been busy building a website. Next thing you know the dogs’ll be wearing collars.’