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# Fiona PALMER

## Matters of the Heart

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PEEK**

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and page-turners'

*Sydney Morning Herald*



# Matters of the Heart

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*Matters of  
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## For the readers

‘I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!  
How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book!  
– When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable  
if I have not an excellent library.’

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*



## Chapter 1

THERE WAS SOMETHING MAGICAL ABOUT STANDING OUT IN the open, the morning sunlight warming her skin, the scent of night lingering on the crisp air and magpies' cries so haunting they gave her goose bumps. Lizzy Bennet loved this time of the day, the sun just peeping over the horizon and the wildlife in full swing. It was as if the land hummed with energy, and she tried to draw from it because lord knows she needed it.

Just a moment longer, she promised herself as she sat up on the quad bike watching the sky illuminate with shades of blue, yellow and golden streaks of the sun's rays. There wasn't a cloud in sight, just large gum trees nearby, their long waxy leaves glistening like tendrils of metal catching the light. It was a scene of which Lizzy would never grow tired.

A wet nose pushed into her neck and she squirmed, reaching back to pat her black-and-tan Kelpie.

'I know, Pippa, it's time for breakfast. Let's go face the noise.'

Pippa braced herself on the back of the bike as they headed for home, the cold morning air making Lizzy shiver.

Pippa suddenly barked madly, her muzzle right by Lizzy's ear. Lizzy winced and noticed a big wedge-tailed eagle circling above a white woolly body on the green pasture to her left. 'Good spotting, Pip.' She made a beeline to the ewe as the eagle flew up high, keeping its dinner in sight as Lizzy stopped the bike. She swore softly as she knelt beside the deceased ewe and sank her hand into the wool.

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled, feeling the hard, cold body under her hand. Lizzy had been out checking them yesterday afternoon. How had she missed this one? How long had the ewe struggled overnight before she died? The heavy feeling of failure weighed on Lizzy's chest. It never got any easier. Lizzy felt horrible with every one she lost.

Lizzy checked the ewe's back end and saw a tiny lamb, only halfway through birthing. At first she thought it was also dead – its ear was red raw where the eagle had taken a few bites, and its tongue was swollen – but then its eyes opened.

'Oh thank goodness.' She smiled as she reached for the lamb and gently pulled it the rest of the way out. Lizzy held it against her chest as she looked it over. Pippa watched with interest, tilting her head slightly. 'I think this one's a fighter, Pip.' Its eyes opened again and it weakly tried to move. 'Let's get you home and fed.'

She wrapped her jacket around the lamb and climbed carefully back on the bike. Pippa jumped on behind her and together they headed home at a gentle pace.

The Longbourn house sat on the edge of the farm amid two large sheds, four silos, scattered piles of old rusted machinery and a dam. The structure itself wasn't anything fancy: a faded red tin roof, wrap-around verandahs and well established trees

to make it cosy. Some of the back verandah had been enclosed to make two more rooms when her younger sisters Catherine and Lydia had come along. Lizzy shared her room with her older sister Jane, and Mary had kept a room to herself as her piano playing had driven everyone out over the years. In all fairness, she was very good now and they loved the tunes she could play, but the early years of lessons had been rough on them all.

As Lizzy headed up the garden path, past tough irises edging a struggling lawn, she heard voices, raised and giggly as if a hen's party were in full swing. Just the usual breakfast banter that came with a house full of women. Noisy Bennet women.

Inside she found her father at the table, a plate of fruit and yoghurt in front of him. He shot it a look of distain before turning back to the newspaper.

'How's a man supposed to do a decent day's work on just that?' he asked his wife when she brought Lizzy a bowl of the same.

No one notice the slight bulge of her jacket where the little lamb curled up underneath.

'It's good for you, John. Stop your whining and eat it,' said Margaret.

John held the paper in one hand while he poked his spoon at the bowl with his other, his expression suggesting he would rather eat a sour lemon. 'Why should we suffer just because the CWA decided to put on a few health workshops?'

'You look nice, Mum. Quilting club today?' Lizzy asked as she sat down beside her dad and patted his shoulder. 'It's okay, I know where she keeps the chocolate,' she whispered.

Margaret wore a long soft blue skirt, dark blue blouse and a soft pink scarf around her neck, plus a full face of make-up.

She pressed a hand to her curly grey hair pulled back into a bun, gently probing for any recalcitrant loose strands. ‘Thank you Lizzy. I have a CWA meeting today and then we’re making teddies for the Smith Family.’ Margaret’s voice rose an octave as she shouted, ‘Lydia Bennet, get out of the bathroom now and come and eat your breakfast or you’ll miss the bus!’

Lizzy squinted one eye as her mum’s piercing voice went right through her. Her dad always said Margaret had the lungs of a horse; but even he would have to admit that trying to control the toileting habits of five daughters with one tiny bathroom could do that to a person.

‘Hey Dad, look who I found this morning,’ Lizzy said, opening her jacket.

His glasses were perched on the end of his nose, his grey hair like tufts of wire wool that thinned out towards the top of his head. He lowered the paper and a sadness swamped his eyes. ‘The mum?’

Lizzy shook her head.

*You can’t save them all*, her dad had said when she was six and saw her first mauled lamb. *It’s nature; that lamb has fed a family of birds*. It was a rough way to learn about the cycle of life, but in farming there was no shying away from it. Lizzy had built up a tough resolve from that moment on. She’d learned to use a gun to put animals out of their misery, including her own pet lamb when it had been torn open by wild dogs. Her dad’s hand had been on her shoulder the whole time. She’d been fifteen then. There was no way any of her sisters would have done it. Sometimes she felt like she was the only one who took after their dad, the only one who truly understood life at Longbourn.

‘Oh, this one is just hanging on,’ said Jane as she joined them at the table.

Margaret came out and put Jane’s breakfast in front of her before she spotted the lamb, practically sitting at their table. ‘Poor little blighter. Was nearly someone’s breakfast, I see. I’ll get some stuff for its ear and then make up some milk.’

‘Thanks Mum.’

‘You girls eat up while I get it ready.’

Jane picked up her spoon with long graceful fingers. ‘Thank you Mum,’ she said with a wide smile.

Jane put the smallest amount of yoghurt on the end of her spoon and slipped it into her mouth soundlessly. .

Lizzy touched her brown hair, hurriedly plaited this morning, as she admired the way her sister’s blonde silky mane cascaded over her shoulders as if she’d spent the past two hours brushing it until it shone. When Lizzy was little she used to think Jane was a princess for her delicate ways and beauty; indeed, she often wondered how she could be Jane’s sister when she was so different: brown hair, sun-dyed skin and bull-at-a-gate tendencies. Her eyes were brown and her body curvy, contrasted with Jane’s gorgeous features: high cheekbones, skin creamy and blemish free plus blue eyes that looked like sparkling sapphires.

Jane met her gaze and her perfect lips curled up. ‘How are you today, Lizzy? Did you sleep okay? I heard you get up early.’

‘I wanted to check on the lambs and see the sunrise. It was worth it,’ she replied. ‘I’m not sure this little guy would be alive if I’d found him any later.’ Her sister’s concern always warmed her heart. No matter if it was a snotty-nosed four year old or an old man who repeated himself ten times over, Jane would

focus her attention on them wholeheartedly. She was a natural nurturer and perfectly suited to her role in childcare.

‘Mum, Lydia still isn’t out of the bathroom and I need to do my face.’ Catherine stomped into the open kitchen–dining area in her fluffy pink onesie.

‘Oh my god, Kitty, you’re not even dressed! Here I am worried about Lydia.’ Margaret pushed a bowl into her daughter’s hands. ‘Eat this quickly while I sort out your sister.’

Jane smiled as Kitty joined them for breakfast. Before eating she slipped the hood of her onesie up so she resembled a pink rabbit. Who would have thought she turned seventeen this year? Most days she behaved as if she were two years younger, like Lydia.

Moments later they heard banging on the door as Margaret yelled a hurry up to Lydia.

‘Oh wow, we have a new pet lamb?’ said Kitty, spotting their guest. ‘Can I feed him?’

Lizzy frowned. ‘I don’t think you’ll have time. But after school he’s all yours.’

‘Yay.’ Kitty turned to Jane. ‘Looks like we might be catching a lift in with you, sis.’

‘Well, I’m leaving in fifteen minutes. Be ready.’

‘Oh, did you hear the news,’ said Margaret eagerly as she re-joined them at the table with her bowl of yoghurt and fruit. She didn’t wait for anyone to answer, too caught up in her own excitement. ‘Janice at the P-and-C meeting last night told me that Netherfield Park had finally sold.’

John shifted in his seat and Lizzy jerked upright, suddenly all ears. Lizzy wasn’t one for gossip, but when it included the large property – worth millions – that bordered their land, she

was interested. Not only that, but some of Netherfield used to belong to the Bennets, back before she was born, so she felt a vested interest in the place.

‘Who would have bought that? No one around here can afford that kind of money.’ It was prime farming land that had been built up by the Jones family for three generations. But last year their only son had died on the farm, leaving the family devastated. The two daughters didn’t want the farm, and the parents simply couldn’t bear to stay, so they’d decided to sell and follow their daughters to the city.

‘Who has that kind of money? A corporate? The Chinese? I heard they bought a big farm up north,’ said Lizzy, again, hoping her mum had the answers.

Margaret fluffed up like one of her chooks as she relayed the information. ‘The Bingleys have brought it. I was told that their son, Charles, is to take over the farm.’

‘Charles Bingley is a hunk,’ said Kitty. ‘All the girls at school follow him.’

Everyone’s eyes shot to hers.

‘Follow him where?’ asked Margaret.

Kitty rolled her eyes. ‘On Twitter. His sister is a fashion guru, with her own blog. Charlie posted a photo just the other day of him at the front of the gates to Netherfield. Such a hottie, those blue eyes,’ said Kitty as she brought up the photo on her phone. ‘See?’

She held out her phone to show them all. Kitty never let anyone touch it, so Lizzy had to lean over the table to get a good look at Charlie. Sure enough she recognised the gates to her neighbour’s farm and there next to them was a tall, handsome man with the said blue eyes, in moleskin pants and a patterned

button-up shirt. He looked like a model advertising watches, not someone who would pull lambs from dead ewes. ‘Yeah, he is a bit all right,’ she said as Kitty snatched her phone back.

‘Maybe if you followed some cool pages instead of all that farming and political stuff you might actually know what’s happening,’ teased Kitty.

‘I don’t have time to scroll through some random person’s photos, even if you think they’re famous. Why would I want to? It’s not like I know them personally or ever will. Seems like a waste of time and data.’ Lizzy ignored Kitty’s pulled face. ‘Besides, I *have* heard of the Bingleys. And I know they have the money to buy a place like that.’ She turned to her dad. ‘I wonder what his plans for the place are?’ she said raising her eyebrows.

‘Wonder if he’s found the busted boundary fence yet?’ her dad said. ‘You think seeing as he’s so wealthy he might fix it all himself?’ John gave her a hopeful wink.

As far as this Charles Bingley was concerned, the Bennets were at the opposite end of the farming spectrum. Half of their land was leased out to Ken Collins, and the bank had been breathing down their neck for years. Each season they clung to hope that they’d have a good enough year to get through.

‘Be nice to have a new young man about, and a good-looking one at that. It’ll cause a stir in the hen house if he’s single!’ Margaret put her spoon into her empty bowl. ‘Bet he’s never had to worry about where his next bit of money is coming from or feel the pressure of waiting for the bank to come knocking on his door! We’ll be the talk of the town soon with the way this season is panning out, John.’

John breathed out slowly as he put his spoon down. ‘Margaret, I can’t help it if we had a drought one year and then a frost the next.’ He tilted his head slightly, his eyes squinting behind his glasses. ‘Farming is a gambling man’s game and I was never very good at the casino. But if the government could see fit to look after the ones feeding the country, like they do in America, then we’d not be so hard up thanks to Mother Nature.’

Lizzy smiled at her dad. ‘Should go into politics, Dad, and sort them all out.’

Margaret frowned. ‘Really, Lizzy, don’t egg him on.’ She tutted and headed into the kitchen with some dirty dishes.

Jane and Lizzy shared a conspirator’s grin just as Lydia waltzed in, her school uniform consisting of a very short navy skirt and a polo shirt emblazoned with the school’s logo. Her long dark hair was swept up on her head in a loose knot. The girls had an hour trip to get to the district high school. If they missed the bus Jane sometimes took them in on her way to the childcare centre that she managed. Which could happen today unless Kitty planned on wearing her bunny onesie to school.

‘If Mary was here she’d tell you that you wear too much make-up to school,’ said Jane.

Lydia squinted at her oldest sister. ‘Yeah, but she’s not and I don’t need you on my case too. Besides, all the girls wear eye shadow.’ She shot Jane a look to show just how much she cared before moving on to something she was interested in. ‘Mum, I need a new dress for the cabaret on the weekend. Can I have a hundred bucks?’

Margaret threw her hands up in despair while Kitty left to get dressed. ‘Do I look like I’m made of money? I struggle to pay our grocery bill. Borrow one of your sister’s dresses.’

‘No way! Not fair, Mum. You don’t understand. Do you want me to be single *forever*?’ Lydia took out her phone and started texting. It beeped shortly after. ‘Megan says you’re horrible too,’ Lydia announced as she picked up her school bag and headed outside to the beat-up old ute they used to get to the end of the driveway to meet the bus.

‘Maybe Charles Bingley might be at the cabaret,’ said Margaret touching Jane’s shoulder. ‘You should make a new dress for the occasion. Use that baby blue material you have, it sets off your eyes.’

Jane closed her eyes for a moment, her white teeth pulling on her bottom lip. ‘I don’t know if I’ll have time,’ she said. ‘Still lots of setting up to do at the hall.’

‘I was thinking of wearing jeans,’ said Lizzy and waited to see her mum scoff.

‘I wouldn’t put it past you, Elizabeth. A flannel shirt and your work boots too probably.’ Margaret rolled her eyes as if she’d been shown how by Lydia.

‘I like the sound of that,’ said her dad.

‘Don’t you start,’ warned Margaret, handing Lizzy a beer bottle filled with milk with a black teat on the end.

‘Thanks Mum.’ Lizzy moved in her chair so she had room to feed the lamb who had been so quiet she would have thought it was dead if it wasn’t for the feel of its heartbeat against her chest. ‘Poor little guy is so worn out.’ She opened the lamb’s mouth and wiggled the teat into it, trying to let some of the milk dribble out so it could get a taste. ‘Come on, you know you’re hungry.’ Everyone was watching, holding their breaths, silently hoping the lamb would feed. It was a long few seconds and then the lamb began to suck and Lizzy felt the room relax, including herself.

‘Good, good,’ muttered John.

Jane grinned from ear to ear and reached over to stroke the lamb’s head with her finger.

‘Well done, Lizzy,’ said Margaret. She checked her watch as Kitty sped past them, dressed in her uniform and still trying to brush her long brown hair as she went.

‘Bye, catch you later,’ she said as the screen door slammed behind her.

Jane went to brush her teeth and Margaret went back to the bedroom. Suddenly the house grew peaceful again and Lizzy almost sighed. Beside her, her dad actually did.

‘Much better,’ he said going back to his newspaper.

Lizzy couldn’t agree more. The Bennet household at peak hour would be enough to scare any one, let alone potential boyfriends.



## Chapter 2

LIZZY DRAGGED THE WIRE GATE ACROSS THE GRASSY PADDOCK and tied it shut against the thick old fencepost. She leaned against it for a moment, watching the ewes waddle with full udders while their lambs trailed close by. Some nudged at the teats, forcing their mother to stop while they kneeled to drink sending their tails into a dancing frenzy. Lizzy grinned as she watched them. The one she'd rescued had begun to feed well and soon his tail would be jiggling like the rest. 'Hey Dad, I've been thinking,' she said turning to where John sat in the ute. 'We should call him Rocky.'

Pippa was already on the ute waiting for the next job, her tongue hanging out from the exertion of shifting this mob to the new paddock.

'The lamb?'

'Yeah. Like the movie.'

Her dad chuckled. 'Why not. It's much better than Kitty calling the last one after that boy singer.'

'Bieber grew into his name,' she said with a smirk before giving the mob one last look and heading for the ute.

‘You heading into town now?’ he asked as she drove back to the sheds.

‘Yep, think I’ll get those parts. What will you do?’

John scratched at his chin. ‘I might tinker with that old pump motor.’

‘Good luck.’ It had died a long time ago, but John never liked to give up on anything. ‘I’ll drop by the pub and see Lottie while I’m at it.’

‘Figured you might,’ he said with a knowing grin.

At the shed her dad got out and whistled to Pippa, who reluctantly got down and threw Lizzy a traitorous look.

‘You can keep Dad company. Be a good girl.’ With a wave she headed down the driveway.



Lizzy pulled out onto the gravel road, leaving their rusty farm gate in her dust. It was surprisingly warm for the end of June. It had been a late dry start to seeding. Many sleepless nights as Lizzy prayed for rain. If a drought came now the farm would slip further from their grasp. But luckily the rain had come just recently and the crop was coming to life before her eyes. Lizzy left her window down so she could breathe in the air thick with damp soil and moist straw.

Paddocks flashed past, most covered with green as new crops began to grow, some edged with shrubs or tall gum trees, others dotted with barren salt patches where grey dead sticks stuck out like abandoned old fence posts. It was hard to believe they were once trees, before the salt killed them. It was a harsh landscape at times. During the drought it had been bloody awful but it was still home and Lizzy loved this

area despite the hardships it could bring. She'd long ago – at the age of ten – decided that the farm was her place, and she'd told her dad she was going to be a farmer. They had spent the day looking over the growing crops, John answering her many questions about how it grew and what the parts of the plants were called. At one point Lizzy had lain between the rows and hidden from her dad. He'd laughed until he'd nearly cried when she pretended to swim through the green crop, her stomach pressed against the dirt as her legs kicked and her arms flailed about in an approximation of freestyle. Moments after she'd sat up with the rich chlorophyll wheatgrass scent filling the air, she'd known the soil beneath her was where her roots had set up home. 'I'm going to be a farmer too, Dad.'

His reply had been simple. 'Well, I guess I better teach you how to drive the tractor.'

She'd begun dreaming of becoming a Jillaroo and by the age of thirteen she was trying to convince her dad to let her stay home from school to help with harvest but had to concede to just jumping on after school. There was something about working the machinery, looking after the sheep, being on the land from sun up till sun down that filled Lizzy's heart with inspiration, passion and a happiness that no one else in her family seemed to understand, apart from her dad. There were times she'd catch him just watching over the land, taking in all the details, and the appreciation for what he saw had threaded down to her.

Lizzy slowed to watch a large blackish-brown wedge-tailed eagle on the side of the road stand over a fox carcass, tearing at it with its sharp hooked beak. It didn't pay her any notice until Lizzy was nearly level with the bird and its dinner, when

finally it opened its wings and took flight. She guessed its wing span to be nearly two metres as she marvelled at its wedge tail. They were amazing birds, even if they did like to nibble on lambs like Rocky. Lizzy had nearly come to a standstill watching it, but as it soared around in a loop Lizzy put her foot down and continued on her way.

The gravel road finished at an intersection, and Lizzy turned onto the bitumen road into town. It was a half-hour journey to Coodardy, population fifteen hundred served by a pub, a pool, a police station, a church hall and a main street wide enough that cars could park nose in to the curb on either side. It was an old town but the council had a full-time gardener who kept the curb gardens green, pathways swept and the red roses around the memorial hall trimmed. On Anzac Day the local ladies and school kids covered the ground around the hall and base of the flag pole with handmade red poppies. It made a spectacular display along with the roses. Lizzy always slowed when she passed the childcare centre, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jane outside with the kids who would be charging around the yard on scooters and little pedal tractors, or playing in the sand pit.

Parking her brown ute (it was white, but with mud and gravel roads she didn't see its original colour very often) out the front of Tilly's Hardware store and ducked inside.

'Hey Bethy,' said Tyron as he restocked shelves with spray nozzles alongside the garden equipment on the next wall; pet supplies lined the other. Everything was exactly where it had been as long as she could remember. As a kid, when her dad came in for supplies Lizzy would help Tyron put the poly fittings back into the right-size boxes. 'The customers always

mix them up,' Tyron would say, rolling his eyes as if he were forty not eight. Lizzy was pretty sure she could find her way around this shop blindfolded.

'Your pump parts are on the counter ready.' When Tyron smiled his dimples appeared, and Lizzy felt a strong desire to press them like she had in kindergarten.

'Cheers Ty. I'm after some camlock fittings too.'

Tyron put the last of the bags of spray nozzles on the shelf and followed her down to the back corner of the large shop.

'So, you hear about the Bingleys? Town's humming with gossip. Mum saw him and his sister in the store the other day, buying up fancy stuff.'

'Fancy stuff?'

'Yeah, no-expense-spared food and drink. They bought that hundred-dollar bottle of shiraz that's been on the shelf for the past ten years,' he said with a laugh.

'Oh no, really?' she scoffed, picturing the dust-covered bottle that sat in the glass cabinet in the wine section. 'I always wondered who would end up buying that.'

'I hope they come to the cabaret tomorrow. Mum said his sister is a looker.'

Lizzy smiled. 'It's a shame she won't find a proper man around here to dance with,' she teased. 'You'll probably all be too feral for her fancy tastes.' She tugged one of his dreadlocks.

Tyron shook his head. 'You're the feral. Will we get to see you frocked up for once?'

He looked over her jeans and checked flannel shirt, smudged with grease, dirt and tufts of spider web from her hurried search of the old shed for a belt for the tractor. But Coodardy was a farming community, filled with hard-working folk among

whom her farm clothes wouldn't raise an eyebrow; well, except maybe from her mother. 'I'm sure I'll find something that will suit. What *you* wear will be the problem,' she teased as she searched for the fittings she needed.

'I'll look smashing no matter what I wear.' He pushed out his chest and pulled a supermodel pose. 'Look out, I overheard Ken in here the other day saying he was going to ask you to the dance. He still trying?'

Lizzy groaned. 'It's not going to happen. Ever!' Ken Collins was a farmer from the next town Toongarrin, sixty kilometres away. A few years back he leased nearly a thousand hectares of Longbourn from the Bennets at a good-enough rate to keep them afloat. It seemed to come at a cost, though, because ever since he'd been asking Lizzy out to different events. Luckily so far she'd been too busy with farm business. Ken thought himself quite important in social standings, strutted around like the lord mayor of his town. He was a Shire Councillor but had his eyes set on the President position no doubt. Lizzy had nicknamed him Ken Doll, because his hair was black and, like a helmet, it never moved. And his skin had a waxy, unearthly shine.

Tyron laughed as he went to book up her purchases on her account. 'I'll see you tomorrow, then. Save me a dance,' he said as she was leaving.

'We'll see.' She gave him a smile and a wave and headed off down the street to the local watering hole.

The two-storey pub was made from old red brick with tall deep-set windows. A verandah, top and bottom, gave it history along with the railings and gutters painted in heritage green and white slats on the top section. In the middle, where

the bottom verandah met the balcony, *Coodardy Tavern* was printed in white across the green background. The tin roof was rusty corrugated iron with two large bricked chimney stacks standing proud out the top. Bordering the pub were large gum trees and a lilac tree, along with parking for the folks staying for the night in the rooms on the top floor. Seeing as Coodardy was on a main road that went north and south through the state, it was always full of travellers needing a bed. Which kept her best friend really busy.

Lizzy pushed open the double doors and was hit by the beer scent that was only found in a pub. As if over the years it had been absorbed into the bricks, carpet and ceiling. With the amount that was spilled on the floor after a footy wind-up it wasn't surprising. She walked up to the front bar, the carpet giving way to jarrah floorboards and scattered empty tables and chairs. When Lizzy and Lottie were little they had used those chairs and tables to make a big cubby with some sheets in the dining lounge and wanted to charge people two dollars to enter. They only managed to get Mr Peters, the delivery man, to have a look. They'd spent their earnings on a cool drink, which they shared on the balcony while their legs dangled below between the railings as they sipped and watched the town cats and dogs roam about.

'Hey Dave, where's Lottie at?'

Charlotte's dad wore a grey singlet, chest hair exploding beneath it like wool escaping from a bale; the only place hair didn't seem to grow on him was a narrow bald patch on the top of his head.

'Hey Dizzy Lizzy. She's out the back working on a beer order for the shindig at the hall,' he said with a smirk.

He nodded to the back door, but Lizzy was already on her way. She could never resist a smile at the sound of the nickname Dave had thrown at her when she was six. *Dizzy Lizzy and Snotty Lottie. What a pair!*

Lizzy pushed through a few scratched doors and veered left to the small office identified by a tattered *Staff Only* sign taped to the door. Not clear tape; no, this was red gorilla tape four fingers wide. Dave had gone around the whole edge and said it would make people really see it.

Inside Lottie was leaning over the keyboard, the click-clack of pressed keys and the tick of the wall clock was the only sound until she leaned back on the chair, its familiar squeak like a trodden-on mouse.

‘You can’t sneak up on me, Lizzy Bennet. I know the sound your boots a mile away.’ Lottie flicked her wavy brown hair back and smiled.

Her best friend’s smile filled her with a familiar contentment. ‘Hey you.’ Lizzy pressed her finger to the crease line between her friend’s eyebrows and gave it a little rub. ‘You work too hard.’

Lottie almost snorted. ‘Says the pot.’ She pushed her chair back and stood up. ‘I need a new life.’

‘I know.’

Lottie had said those words at least once a week since Lizzy could remember. She was frantically saving money so she could leave and set herself up somewhere else – anywhere else. Her dad had none to give, and he relied heavily on Lottie to help keep the pub running. Her mum died when she was nine, and Lizzy knew that it was the memories of her mum around the pub that kept Lottie tied to it. Lizzy knew how trapped Lottie felt at times Lizzy but silently – and selfishly, she knew – hoped

her friend never saved enough or overcome her fears to leave. Coodardy wouldn't be the same without her.

'What brings you to town?'

'Parts, but when I'm done will you be free for a drink or two?'

Lottie raised an eyebrow, her deep chocolate eyes twinkling. 'Shall we take a few to the hill? Watch the sun set?'

Lizzy was already nodding, her plait moving up and down her back with the motion. 'Yes, let's.'

'It's a date. See you at five.'

'Hey Lizzy, I nearly thought you weren't going to show up today,' said Alice with a grin. She moved towards a pile of books stacked up on the library counter, her coloured bohemian dress billowing out behind her. 'Now, here they are, all ready to go. The *Animal Health and Welfare* didn't come in. Maybe next week. But the new Jane Harper book came in and I put *The Nowhere Child* in as well; you'll love it.'

'Thanks Alice.' Lizzy picked up the top book. *Understanding Engines* and underneath that was *Plant Nutrients and Abiotic Stress Tolerance*.

Alice held up the third book *Soil Science* and gave her a look that Lizzy knew all too well.

'Thank you. These are great.'

Alice sighed. 'It's such a shame you didn't go to uni, Lizzy. It's not too late, you know?'

Lizzy focused on piling up the books and tried to ignore the prickle from her words. There had always been a choice. Lizzy could have left the farm, got a job and paid her way through university in order to study agronomy – but then there might have not been a farm to come home to. There still might not if

they didn't get some good years behind them. But the Bennets had not been able to afford to hire a farm hand, and it had been Lizzy's choice to stay home and help run Longbourn with her dad.

She was happy with her decision. She wasn't paid a wage, just her food and board and some cash every now and then, but that was plenty if it meant they could keep the farm. She had been trying bloody hard these past four years since leaving school to help turn things around.

'I'll see you next week, Alice. Let me know what you can find on hydraulics please, and maybe some more on plant science.'

Alice sighed again as she leaned against the bench, her arms rattling with all the bracelets that adorned them. 'Okay. You take care. I'll let you know about the Learning Plant Language workshop. Hopefully we get enough signed up so we can hold one.'

'I hope so too, Alice. I've heard it's great. See you later.'

Lizzy balanced her books against her chest and exited before Alice could start up on some other opportunity that would be better than working on the farm. Alice was all for women advancing academically and never hid her view that Lizzy was wasted out on the land. Lizzy knew that Alice simply didn't understand – couldn't understand – just how that land had nestled itself into Lizzy's soul. Take her from the land and what would she do?

Exactly a minute after Lizzy put her books in the ute, Lottie marched out of the pub carrying a large blue esky, which she hauled up onto the back of the ute.

'Let's get the hell out of here before I get another job,' she said with a grin. 'I think Dad was hoping I'd hang out the bar

mats he just washed, but I've clocked off.' As if to prove it she tapped the face on her watch. 'It's five on the dot, let's go!'

They drove out of town in silence, windows down and elbows resting on the doors. The 'hill' could be seen from town; actually, it could be seen from ten kilometres out and was in the Coodardy Nature Reserve. It was strange to see such a mound on predominantly flat land with its collection of old gum trees, gimlets and jam trees which would be covered in yellow wattle flowers and smelled like raspberry jam when cut. Some granite rocks protruded up the incline, and in winter the rock pools would fill up and home hundreds of tadpoles. As kids Lizzy and Lottie had spent many hours collecting them in glass jars and then watching them grow legs.

Lizzy turned off onto a narrow track, bush scratching the sides of her ute and they drew their arms inside as they weaved their way to a little parking spot. The rest of the way was taken on foot. At the start of the track, off to the side under a quandong tree, was an old garden cart on four wheels. They pulled it out and put the food and esky onto it and then took turns pulling it up the track to the top. About six years ago they'd decided to camp overnight, and with swags, pillows and food under their arms they'd started up the hill. Then halfway up, Lottie's swag slipped from under her arm, rolled away and collided into Lizzy, causing an explosion of swags as she'd lost her balance and tumbled back down the hill. It was funny to look back on now – Lizzy could remember Lottie's scream and her shocked face as she ran down behind her – but it hadn't been fun at the time. Lizzy had ended up with scratches, a twisted ankle, dirt in her mouth and eyes and too many bruises to count. After that the cart had been

‘borrowed’ from her mum. To this day she often muttered about her missing garden cart.

At the peak of the hill was a small clearing where an old bench seat sat north overlooking the town and surrounding district. Ty and his cousins had brought the seat up a few years back and it had become part of the landscape. An old washing-machine liner sat behind it, ready to use for bonfires, and a collection of mallee roots stacked back under a small gum tree.

Not many people knew about this place, so it remained how they left it. And there were rules. All rubbish was taken from site, and any wood used had to be restocked.

‘Man, I never get sick of this place. Makes me feel like a kid again when we used to come up here and sleep under the stars,’ said Lottie plonking herself on the bench seat and breathing in the bush scent.

Lizzy threw her a bag of sweet-chilli chips and fished out two cans of beer from the esky before sitting beside her. ‘I needed this. Cheers,’ she said crashing her can against Lottie’s, causing beer to slop out the top.

‘I can’t wait for the cabaret. I need to find a wealthy man who can take me away from my current life.’

‘You don’t need a man for that, Lottie.’

She scoffed. ‘Oh I know, but it would be easier driving out of town in a fancy new car. Dad wouldn’t feel so bad about me leaving then.’

‘He’ll miss you like crazy but your dad wants you to be happy. I want you to be happy. I know you miss your mum, and that leaving here means leaving a bit of her behind, but Lottie, your mum will always be with you. Wherever you go. And so will I.’ Lizzy reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze.

It had taken Lizzy a while to realise her friend suffered from depression, how well she'd tucked it away deep inside her. It was a few years back that Lizzy had found Lottie in the corner of her room curled up staring blankly at the wall. Dave had called Lizzy because Lottie hadn't moved in two days and he was at a loss as to how to help her. Since then she'd made Lottie promise to talk to her about anything that was troubling her. These visits to the hill had become a form of therapy, along with the councillor Dave suggested she see when she came to town each month.

'Yeah, I know. It's so hard. I feel bad when I can't remember Mum. Then I walk into the pub kitchen and I get a memory of her leaning over the bench, her hair dropping across her face as she made me cookies. She looks up and says, "Hello my darling." In that moment I feel like I've found her and lost her all over again. It's a constant battle on leaving and staying.'

Lizzy felt a heavy weight on her heart as she took in her friend. 'I wish I could help you.'

Lottie smiled. 'You do help me, Lizzy. I'm in a better place than I was back . . . then.' She sucked in a deep breath and then exhaled.

They lapsed into easy silence. As the minutes ticked by, Lizzy glanced at the wooden box sitting in a nearby tree; they'd made it together when they were twelve for the Phascogales to live in. They hadn't seen any of the brush-tailed marsupials yet but could tell they were using the box, so they'd made another four and put them in various trees around the hill. They had, however, once seen a little mouse-like Dunnart with its extra-big ears and fat tail hiding under a rock.

'So, Charlie Bingley, hey?'

‘Who?’ said Lizzy as she watched the clouds change from white to yellow as the descending sun’s rays shifted beneath them. Soon the clouds would be deep golden and red, projecting the colours of the sunset.

Lottie repeated his name and Lizzy nodded. ‘Oh, him.’

‘*Oh, him?* The whole town is talking about him! Charlie Bingley is loaded, he’d have to be to buy up Netherfield so easily, especially with what old man Jones was asking for it. Rumour has it he bought the whole lot, no lease in sight. Mick Jones thought he was going to have to split his farm up into bits to sell it off.’

‘There’s five thousand hectares at least; we don’t even have half that!’

‘Dad overhead that Bingley’s a big farmer from further north looking to expand. Apparently they’re well known around the place.’

‘Yeah, they must be looking to diversify. Wonder what drew them this way?’ Lizzy said, opening the chips and grabbing a handful.

Lottie sniggered. ‘Who cares. It’ll be nice to have some fresh blood about town. Must be sending all the single ladies into a tizz. I think the last new bloke in town was that German backpacker who did seeding for Mr Roland.’

‘I didn’t even meet him,’ said Lizzy. ‘You get to see them all being at the pub.’

‘True, and if the pub gossip is correct – and the pub is usually never wrong – this Charles guy is coming to the cabaret and bringing his sister.’ Lottie wiggled her eyebrows, then pulled out her phone and brought up a photo of Charles Bingley. ‘Not bad, hey?’

‘Kitty showed me a photo the other night.’ Lizzy glanced at the phone. ‘He doesn’t look very old.’

‘It says he’s twenty-five.’

‘I feel for him. He’s going to be studied like a pretty butterfly in a glass jar.’

‘Yeah, he will be.’ Lottie tapped her phone, Charlie disappeared and her iTunes account opened. ‘Happier’ by Marshmello and Bastille played from the small speaker in her phone, just loudly enough for them to enjoy without it encroaching on the quiet bushland.

‘We are living in the moment, Lizzy.’ Lottie rested her head on Lizzy’s shoulder and gestured at the view. ‘This is the best part of my life right now.’

Lizzy nodded in silent agreement. Land stretched out until it connected with the coloured sky, its hues turning deeper shades of pink and gold. Beside them thin waxy gum leaves flittered in the gentle breeze making a faint rustling sound just audible over the music. Lizzy caught something moving from the corner of her eye and pointed silently to show Lottie. Together they watched the short-beaked echidna waddle its way along the bush line. Its ivory-looking, black-tipped spikes glistened in the sunlight while its little feet carried its small brown body along.

With smiles on their faces they watched the echidna until it was gone and so was the sun.

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