

PROLOGUE TO MERLIN'S WAY

Hey, come on! Come on! Get the lead out, willya? Put the foot down. Let's go! Let's go! Wadayasay, we gonna take all day, or what?

'Okay, young man, settle down! What is the matter with you? You're bouncing around like a cat on a hot tin roof.'

Ooh! I love it when she looks at me like that. When she shows me her teeth and her voice is all soft and silky. She sounds different when she talks to me. She never gives anyone else MY voice. But I do wish she'd hurry up. I'm desperate to do toilet, and if I dribble in the car, she'll go totally ballistic.'

Gee! Its sooo pretty out here. I wish we could live here in the bush, away from the city and the noise and the awful smells. There's so much space here Trees and grass and flowers. Things to sniff. Nice smells. And I could play among the trees and swim in the creek. I love water. It feels so good. Almost as good as her cuddles.

'Dylan! Will you sit still, please. You're distracting me. We'll be there soon. The picnic spot is just around this bend and across the bridge. So be patient for a few more minutes.'

I'm patient! I'm patient! But I DO need to do toilet. Really truly! I'm getting quite desper Hey Mum, watch the road! Stay on the road! Oh no Arrgh, the car is going bush. We're

Ooh! My head ! Gee, that hurts. Hey . . . We're upside down. What's that awful smell? It's like . . . It's that stuff she puts in the car to make it go. Petrol! That's bad! Petrol makes fire happen. Come on, Mum. We gotta get outa here. We gotta move. Hey, watsamatta? Come on, you can't sleep now! Come on, wake up! Mummy, wake up!

She can't hear me! She NEVER hears me! Why not. She hears everyone else. Why doesn't she ever hear me?

Hey! What's this stuff on her head? Smells funny! It's sticky. Blood! She's leaking blood out of her head. That's not good. That's a bad thing. I've gotta get her out of here. Okay, the seat belt thingy

first! Push this bit! Harder! It's gotta make a noise. A click! Uh! That got it. Oops, she fell. Hope I didn't hurt her. She's all scrunched up! Now, out through the window and around to her side. Good thing the car is upside down, 'cause I don't think I could get her door open, but I can pull her out through the window. Huh? I tore her shirt, and she didn't even budge. Grab her arm? No, that's no good. I've put a hole in her arm. I made her leak more blood. I'm just not strong enough!

Need help! The road! The road is up here, through these darn bushes. I'll stop a car. Come on cars, where are you? No cars! No help! Now I hate here. In the city there's plenty of cars. None here! She needs help. Gotta get her away from the petrol. What if it makes a fire?

Don't panic Dylan. Think! She said I have a good brain. Gotta use my brain. Where else can I get help? A house! Yes, there's a house over the road. Go Dylan! Across the road, through the fence! Ouch! Hate that barbed wire. No barbed wire in the city. Hey! There's a man.

Hey Mister! Mister, please help. We had an accident! Please! I can't get her out of the car. Please help her! Please!

'Hello, young fella! What are you so excited about? And where on earth did you come from. You're not from around here.'

Accident. Please help her! Gotta get her out of the car. Petrol! Fire! Pleeeeease!

'Slow down, lad. Slow down and tell me what the problem is.'

Car accident, Mister. She's still in the car. My mummy needs help. Please!

'There's been an accident, eh? On the highway. Well, come on, get in the car and we'll go have a look.'

No! No! No time for car. That's the long way round. It's quicker across the paddock and through the fence. Hurry! Hurry!

'Okay! Wait up now. We'll need some things from the house.'

Hurry! May be fire! May be . . .! Hey, he understands me. He really understands me. I could love this man . . . If I didn't already love Mum with all my heart. This man UNDERSTANDS me! Here he comes. Hurry! What's he got there? Blanket, big red metal thing! What's that? Oh, never mind. We've gotta hurry!

'I'm coming, Lad. I'm coming. My legs may be longer than yours, but I'm not as sure footed. Don't panic! There's no sign of fire. She'll be okay. Across the road, you said? Yes, now I can see where you went off the road.'

Come on! Down the bank, Mister. She's leaking blood. Please hurry!

'Okay now, let's see. We'll just spray a bit of this stuff around first! Just to be sure, eh? This will smother any little sparks.'

Whatsat? Ooh, white foamy stuff just like the froth the waves leave on the beach. Is that good stuff? What's it do, huh?

'It's a fire retardant, lad. Stop trouble before it starts. That's my motto. Now, let's see to the lady. The seat belt is a bit tangled up. Did you get that undone yourself, eh? Clever lad. I can see you had a go at getting her out on your own. Hope she hasn't any broken bones. We shouldn't really move her, but we can't really leave her in the car, crumpled and upside down like that.'

No bones broke. I already checked, Mister. She's okay except for the leak in her head. But why is she sleeping?

'Nothing broken, you say. Well, I'm just checking that. Okay? Mmmm! You could be right, lad. There's nothing obvious, so I guess we can risk moving her. Pulse and respiration are good, and I'd like to get her away from the risk of fire. There you go! Just bring me the blanket lad, and we'll wrap her up nice and warm. For the shock, you know. Always keep the patient warm.'

The leaking has stopped, Mister. Look! There's a big bump on her head here. Just here on the edge of her hair. See? I cleaned the blood off.

'I see! Yes, just a bit of a bump. Probably hit the rear vision mirror. The skin is split. Nothing to worry about, lad. Unless she has concussion.'

So why's she still asleep?

'She's unconscious. From the knock on the head But she's coming around now. She'll be okay so don't you worry. Hello, what's this? There's blood on her arm two little punctures.'

Oh! Oh! I did that. I didn't mean to hurt her. I just couldn't get a good grip on her shirt. I tore it. Mister, I didn't mean to make her leak more blood. I'm sorry!

'Hey! Don't fret. It's okay, really. You tried your best and it's lucky she had you with her. For a youngun, you've done very well. Here, she coming around now. Steady there lass. You've had a little accident but everything is fine. How do you feel?'

'Ooh! My head hurts. What happened? Is Dylan okay? Where's Dylan?' Her voice was sweet and soft, and her hand trembled as she brushed a lock of titian hair from her pale forehead.

Here I am! You okay? Please say you're okay! Please! Please!

'Oh Dylan. Thank heavens you're all right. My poor little love! You've had a terrible fright!'

'He's fine, miss,'

'Thank you for stopping to help us, Sir! We really appreciate it.' She looked across to her car. 'Oh! My poor car. She looks dead.'

'Just badly injured probably. We'll get some help for her, but for now, I think we should get a doctor to look at you. I live just over the road, so if you and Dylan will bide here awhile, I'll run home and get the car.'

'You live over the road? Then you heard the crash?'

'No lass, young Dylan came a fetched me. He's a smart lad. Oh by the way, my name's Ben. Ben Merlin. I've a sizeable parcel of land over the road, feed lotting cattle and growing citrus. I'm a police officer and can provide any number of character references, so you can trust me. Dylan does!'

She smiled up at the big man, comforted by the warm humor in his eyes. His face was full of character, not quite handsome in its hard angles and planes. Muscles etched his worn flannel shirt and stretched the fabric of his jeans.

‘I’m Fiona Campbell, and I *do* trust you, Ben.’

‘Goodo! Now, is anyone expecting you? Anyone I should call?’

‘No! There’s just Dylan and I.’

‘Well, I’m very pleased to meet you, Miss Fiona Campbell. Now, just rest here, while I fetch the car. I’ll have the doctor meet us at Merlin’s Way. Okay?’

‘What do you think, Dylan? Is that okay. Is her a nice man?’

Hey! Don’t hug so tight. I’m a bit sore around the ribs. Yeh! He’s a very nice man. You’re gonna love him, lots and lots. We’re gonna come and live at Merlin’s Way where I can run and run, and watch your babies grow into real people, and we’re all gonna live happily ever after.

Fiona Campbell smiled as her future husband bent to gently fondle the ears of her Bull Terrier pup. She didn’t quite hear his murmur.

‘You can bank on that, young Dylan.’

But Dylan heard! His tongue lolled and his bright eyes sparkled as he barked a sharp affirmative.