

Jenn J McLeod

House  
for all  
Seasons



S I M O N & S C H U S T E R

A U S T R A L I A

House For All Seasons

First published in Australia in 2013 by

Simon & Schuster (Australia) Pty Limited

Suite 19A, Level 1, 450 Miller Street, Cammeray, NSW 2062

A CBS Company

Sydney New York London Toronto New Delhi

Visit our website at [www.simonandschuster.com.au](http://www.simonandschuster.com.au)

© Jenn j McLeod 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Author: McLeod, Jenn J.

Title: House for all seasons / Jenn J. McLeod.

ISBN: 9781922052049 (pbk.)

Subjects: Administration of estates--Fiction.  
Benefactors--Fiction.

Dewey Number: A823.4

Editor: Belinda Castles

Cover design: Christabella Designs

Internal design and typesetting: Midland Typesetters, Australia

Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

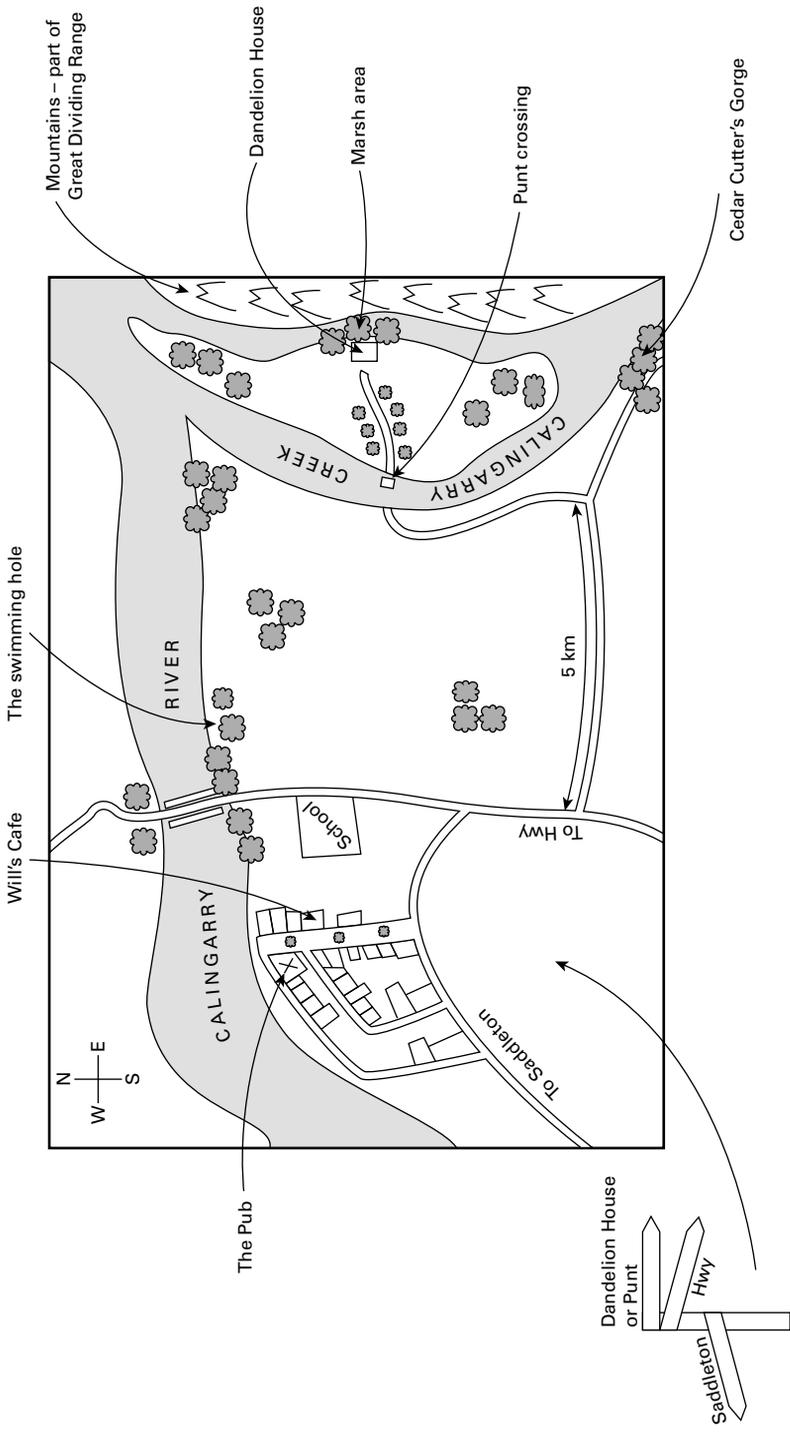
The paper used to produce this book is a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable plantation forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations in the country of origin.

To the four women who have shaped my life.  
Each as different as the seasons.

Jeannette ~ Kristine ~ Shirley  
*My partner in dreams ~ The wind beneath my wings ~ My mum*

And to Pam Leicester ~ whose courage inspired Sara's story  
*It's the happy ever after you deserve.*

# Calingarry Crossing (township)



1

‘I’m not going back there. Not for three months, three weeks, not even three days.’

Two decades on and Poppy, once powerful playground prima donna, could still command a crowd. ‘As lovely as it is to catch up with you ladies after all this time, I can’t do this. I won’t. Sorry. Besides, it makes no sense.’

Time pressured—as usual—Poppy stood apart from her three companions, alone and restless on the window side of the conference room. She eyed the wall clock hanging at one end of it, then her friends.

Former friends.

Strangers.

‘Didn’t you understand the conditions when you read them?’ Sara said, struggling to project her voice. She was propped on the edge of the Chesterfield sofa in a very girly skirt and top—all pastel and flowing—fidgety fingers pressed into her lap, twisting themselves in knots. ‘The will states we’re all supposed to go back.’

‘Yes, but it’s madness.’ Poppy didn’t bother hiding the exasperation in her voice. ‘Even if I wanted to go back there, the Walkley Awards are on earlier than normal this year. I have to be here for that.’

Sara blinked big brown eyes. ‘Wow, a Walkley! Do you think you have a shot?’

Poppy shrugged. ‘As much as anyone else. Whatever happens though, I can’t up and walk away from my life like the rest of you seem to have no problem doing.’

*Who was she kidding? She had no life.*

Living and breathing her job was all Poppy did, twenty-four seven.

‘You know the news business. No predicting when a story will break. And if I do win, well, who knows. I’ll definitely need to be on the spot ready to do what I do.’

‘And we all know what it is you do, don’t we, girls?’ Amber piped up from her pretentious pose at the opposite end of the Chesterfield, her body draped in such a way that it took up two-thirds of the magnificent old sofa. ‘Making *up* the news rather than reporting it.’

Poppy ignored the stab. She’d learned to disregard Amber Bailey’s caustic remarks at school. She knew all too well the cattiness was a result of growing up amid the bitter feuding of an alcoholic mother and a pushy father.

A tinge of regret niggled Poppy. At least pushy meant Amber’s father had cared enough to want the best for his child. Poppy’s father, Johnno Hamilton, was too damaged to care about anyone, especially his daughter.

Poppy made a point of addressing Sara. ‘All I’m saying is, win or lose, I’m bound to be busy around that time.’

Amber ran a manicured hand over slender, solarium-enhanced legs and in a tone as high and mighty as the heels on her designer shoes said, ‘What our roving reporter *means*, ladies, is she’ll be busy recovering from wearing stilettos and a dress. Or perhaps, Poppy darling, walking into the Walkley Awards in those very stylish Blundstone boots and combat pants is your preferred style. You always loved making statements at school.’

‘And you, Amber, always wanted to be the centre of attention. I see that hasn’t changed either.’ Poppy sneezed, three restrained achoos, either an allergic reaction to the miasma of perfumes and

potions floating over Amber, or the artificial ficus plants plonked in each corner of the room.

One by one, Poppy searched the multiple pockets of her khaki cargo pants until she located a tissue to wipe her nose. ‘Besides, Johnno’s actually coming out of that jungle home of his in Nimbin to attend the function. I suggested he stay with me a few days. He didn’t say no.’

‘*Your* father is coming to Sydney to watch you win an award for a report you did on the war? Now *that’s* madness.’ Amber flicked a small makeup mirror open and bared bleached-white teeth in a kind of snarl, vanishing a red lipstick smear with the tip of a bejewelled finger before closing the compact with a snap. ‘Your dad hated war stories. He hated war. As I remember it, he hated people too, didn’t he?’

Poppy stared at the sharpness of the cold, overcrowded Sydney city skyline, her thoughts waging their own war.

*Attack or retreat?*

She decided to ignore Amber’s sneer. Ordinarily, mostly where people were concerned, retreating came naturally to Poppy. Only for some reason she had the sudden need to defend her father. But how could she explain Johnno to anyone when she didn’t understand him herself?

Wedging her fists into her trouser pockets, as if digging deep for the right words, Poppy decided to try. ‘Johnno doesn’t hate people, Amber,’ she said in a voice as cold and flat as the pane of glass between her and the view outside the thirteenth-floor office window. ‘He hates the world. Besides, he was fine with my job when he thought I was protesting against the war. Not so pleased when he realised I was reporting on it—or as he would say, “glorifying” it. When he bothers to acknowledge one of my letters to let me know he’s still alive, they always start the same way: *Dear Poppy-ganda.*’

‘Well,’ Amber huffed, ‘I say let’s get this come-back-to-the-country pilgrimage over and done with sooner rather than later, so

we can get the place on the market. Spring or summer is the best selling time, although forget December and January. Real estate dies. We certainly don't want to be trying to sell a cold old house surrounded by water in the middle of winter.'

Amber still sounded like she was trying to control the four of them. Little had changed since school, when she'd acted as if everything and everyone revolved around her, the brightest star in her own universe, her fiery-red curls symbolic—everyone else mere moons to her bright sun. No curls anymore, though. Her slick, salon-straightened coiffure looked every bit as stiff and unnatural as the rest of her.

'In his letter,' Amber continued, 'Mr Madgick suggests we pick a season each to spread out our stays. I think that's a perfect idea.'

'Are you seriously considering this, Amber? And enough with the bloody Mr Madgick thing. You make him sound all spoooo-keeee!' Poppy waved her fingers and gave a little wolf howl, the moment of melancholy about Johnno pushed to the back of her mind. 'Ah-woooo!'

'I'm not considering it. I'm doing it. I suppose *you* think I can't.'

'Leave that perfect Potts Point palace of yours and get your hands dirty in the oldest tumble-down house in Calingarry Crossing? Frankly? No. And I figured you'd be the last one wanting to show your face back there, considering the mess you and your father left behind.'

'I'm definitely going back,' Sara chipped in, distracting the pair as though she knew from experience the situation between Poppy and Amber needed defusing quickly. 'I can go first if you like.'

'Oh, we know why you're so peachy keen to go back to the old stamping ground, don't we, Poppy?' Amber's face barely registered the little society snigger she let out. Botoxed to the max, her sole expression now seemed stuck somewhere between a scowl and a smile.

The way she preened her hair, and with her big, almond-shaped eyes, Amber Bailey-Blair not only looked like a cat, she *was* a cat,

purring one minute, the next sharpening her claws, and always landing on her feet. From the look of her—that hair, her flawless skin, designer wardrobe and jewellery aplenty—she'd done more than land on her feet. She'd landed in the lap of luxury.

'So, Sara, we are right—aren't we?' Amber challenged. A cat taunting a mouse, although Sara seemed far from mousey these days with the defiant lift of her chin and a look that said that sticks and stones would no longer break her bones.

'I'm sure you both *think* you know why I'm so keen, but I can assure you, you don't.'

At thirty-six, Sara Fraser's voice did still have that thin 'don't make me cry' whine, but if anyone was allowed that Sara was, simply for surviving every challenge life had thrown her way before her sixteenth birthday.

'It's not a case of seeing how a certain person's getting on, is it, Sara?' Poppy stifled a grin, sharing a rare camaraderie with Amber.

'Okay, okay, enough!' Caitlin Wynter—dux, school prefect and perennial peacemaker—propelled her office chair closer to the Waterford jug on the corner of the conference table, filling her glass. 'I can't believe you three are bickering like teenagers again. We're supposed to be twenty years older *and* wiser. Just as well we're keeping to separate seasons in the old place, if you ask me. I doubt we'd make it out alive if we all stayed together.'

Poppy turned towards the woman who'd been her best friend and ally throughout high school. 'So the good doctor is going to up and leave her life to do this crazy thing too?'

Researching the trio of old friends Poppy had learned Caitlin's father was behind the successful *Dr Wynter Wellness Centre* franchise, and with the old doc's passing a few years ago, Cait and her brother now presided over the business as company directors.

'You lot couldn't shake me off at school. What makes you think you can shake me off now?' Caitlin settled back with a grin, looking at ease in the executive leather armchair, tucking one toned but

*House for All Seasons*

lily-white leg under her curvaceous bottom. Her eyes, the colour of burnt toffee, peeked out from beneath her heavy brown fringe. ‘Anyway, a little injection of something different never hurts.’

‘Trust a doctor to say that.’ Poppy relaxed into a smile as she remembered the studious young girl. Only one thing could ever peel Cait Wynter away from her schoolbooks. ‘I wonder how big Gypsy’s menagerie is these days.’

How Cait had loved helping Gypsy with her rescued animals—the lost, the hurt, the hungry—an analogy not lost on Poppy, seeing all four girls together again.

‘And Amber, I’m sorry to disagree,’ Caitlin continued. ‘But I happen to think the property is at its best in winter, especially early mornings when that layer of mist settles over the river and makes the house look like it floats on a cloud. To think old Gypsy left such a treasure to the four of us.’

‘But why us? Especially me. There must be someone else who ...’ Amber’s voice trailed away.

Of course, there had been someone else, and it seemed now that all four women were remembering the same moment twenty years ago.

\*

It was late November 1989—school muck-up day—and the New South Wales country town of Calingarry Crossing was sweltering after a drenching of rain so hard there was talk among the locals of ruined wheat crops.

Today was part of a great Australian tradition, a rite of passage for finishing students like Caitlin and Poppy. Sara and Amber, both sixteen, were two years younger and in Year 10. It was the day Year 12 students burned uniforms and books, many saying goodbye to Calingarry Crossing in search of a future away from the hardship and heartache of the land. Some students would stay on to work the family property or get jobs nearby. Others

would choose university. The two older girls were both heading to Sydney Uni, Caitlin kicking and screaming, preferring country life to carrying on the family tradition, while Poppy couldn't get out of town fast enough. Nothing was going to stop them all from making the most the day, though, except, maybe ...

'Willow!' all four girls said in unison, seeing their young friend walking along the path outside the school grounds, the clickity-clack of a stick dragging back and forth across the galvanised wire fencing.

'What are you doing, Willow?' Poppy asked. 'Does Gypsy know you're here?'

'I wanna hang with you.'

'Absolutely not,' Amber decreed.

'Why not?'

'Because you're not old enough.'

'Not old enough for what?'

'For muck-up day this afternoon, silly. Don't you know anything?'

'Amber!' Caitlin censured, walking to the fence so she didn't have to yell over the cacophonous chatter coming from the bottlebrush tree, home to a noisy family of lorikeets. 'Willow, it's really only a party for Year 12 students.'

'But Amber and Sara are going. I can tell. They're all dressed up.'

Overdressed in Poppy's opinion, but to a tomboy, anything more than jeans and a T-shirt was overdressed.

'So what if we *are* going?' Amber patted her lips with the tip of her ring finger as if a smearing of lip gloss made you grown up. 'You're too young.'

'I'm almost as old as Sara and Amber,' Willow challenged.

'Muck-up day is for students who actually go to school. You don't.'

'That's not my fault. I thought I was part of your group.'

'Can't Willow come?'

‘Don’t be stupid, Sara,’ Amber snapped. ‘She can’t keep up. We have a job to do, remember?’

‘How come Caitlin and I have to put the banner up anyway?’ Poppy complained.

‘Well, for one ...’ Amber stuck her thumb in the air and began counting off with each finger. ‘Hanging a banner *was* your idea, Poppy. And two, obviously Sara and I are too dressed up to be climbing a dirty old bridge. Oh and three, it’s *your* Year 12 muck-up day. Us Year 10 kids are only organising the party afterwards. We’re too young to muck up.’

‘Too young to muck up, but not muck around. Isn’t that right, Amber Bailey?’ Poppy quipped.

‘Oh, you always think you’re smarter than everyone. At least I was smart enough not to burn my family’s house down.’

Anger licked Poppy’s cheeks until they burned. ‘You know that’s not what happened.’

‘Quit it, Amber. Ignore her, Poppy.’ Caitlin turned her back and directed the next question to Sara. ‘Is Will going to collect the banner in his dad’s truck when it’s all signed?’

‘Of course! He said he would, didn’t he.’

Amber cut in. ‘Well, it’s a damn shame your Mr Macho Football Hero with the big muscles can’t hang the thing while he’s at it.’

Sara slammed her hands on both hips, the yellow sun frock she wore making her look like a little yellow bird fluffing up in defence. ‘As well as school and football, he has a job, you know. We don’t all have a father to manipulate and get us what we want when we want it, Amber.’

‘*Another job?* You mean besides looking good?’

‘You should talk, Miss Perfectly Pruned Eyebrows.’

‘Sara, Amber, for goodness sake. Don’t you ever stop?’ Caitlin shook her head in disbelief.

‘What banner?’ Willow asked, blinking into the sun.

‘It’s our Calingarry *Class of ’89* farewell sign,’ Poppy said. ‘We recycled the big yellow banner from the school fete a few years

back. Once we get every student's signature we're going to hang it on the bridge down by the swimming hole.'

'I can help.'

'Hardly! Not with that gammy leg.' Amber's eyes dropped to the built-up shoe and brace Willow wore to minimise her limp. 'And you can't sign it, either. You don't go to the school.'

'That's enough, Amber.' Poppy hurdled the fence effortlessly, landing beside Willow.

'Tell her I'm part of the group, Poppy.'

'It's prob'ly best you stay home today, Willow,' Poppy said in a low voice so the others, now making their way through the school gate, wouldn't hear. 'I won't be able to watch out for you.'

'I don't need looking after.'

'I know ... I didn't mean ... Look, I'm doing the paper delivery for Mr Hilt tomorrow. I'll bring a paper over to your house when I'm done. Your mum likes it when I read to her. I can tell you all about the day then.' Regret ground Poppy's voice flat. 'We really have to get going now. See you tomorrow. Okay?'

'Poppy? Sara? You coming or what?' Amber demanded.

'Coming. Coming.' Poppy turned in the direction of home. 'This way, everyone. We're going to need extra rope and marker pens. I have some in my room.'

The four of them walked away, leaving Willow behind, her smaller than normal figure—stunted by illness and pain—slowly disappearing from view, disappearing from their thoughts.

\*

In the thirteenth-floor office suite, four grown-up women sat in silence. If only one of them had seen the signs that day. Poppy had ignored the shimmering veil of early tears in Willow's eyes. She'd missed the determination behind them, the look that said this girl had had enough of being the odd one out.

*If only.*

*House for All Seasons*

Poppy felt the sting of her own tears and blinked them back. ‘So then ...’ She rubbed a hand over the hidden nicotine patch on her arm three times, as if it was a magic lamp. She sure could do with a cigarette right now.

*Three wishes wouldn’t go astray either.*

She’d settle for one wish—to be out of this room and occupying her thoughts with work. Somehow, a war zone seemed preferable to the guilty silence in the conference room.

‘Where is this Mr Madgick, anyway?’ she said. ‘Wasn’t he supposed to be meeting us here thirty minutes ago?’

‘Yes, and *we* ...’ Sara’s index finger circled the room, tagging each of them, ‘... we are supposed to have worked out when we’ll be at the house. So let’s at least look at some dates.’ She thumbed the pages of her pocket diary.

‘I’m sure I can work a stay in somewhere soon,’ Amber said, opening her black leather Filofax on her knees.

Poppy and Caitlin were both tapping at their smartphones when the door to the conference room opened.

‘Good afternoon, ladies.’ The woman’s voice was as ethereal as her appearance: skin ivory, hair ebony, eyes cerulean, but with lips blood red. She stood just inside the door, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

‘You’re not—’

‘Mr Madgick sends his apologies.’ Not waiting for Poppy to finish, the woman glided over to the conference table and tidied the glasses and water jug into a more acceptable formation. ‘I’m Jesamiah Huckenstead, his associate.’

‘You have *got* to be kidding,’ Poppy muttered through still lips. She’d never seen anyone wear so much mauve. Jesamiah looked—and smelled—like a life-size lavender bag.

‘I assume you’ve all read and understood the conditions of the inheritance?’ the woman asked, ignoring Poppy’s aside.

Caitlin answered first.

Of course she did.

Caitlin always had the answer. Always the first one with her hand up in class, and always right.

‘As I understand the will, Gypsy wants each of us to stay a season at the Dandelion House.’

‘The Dandelion House?’ Jesamiah’s deliberately drawn eyebrows arched in a half-mocking, half-confused expression.

‘That’s what we called it when we were kids,’ Caitlin clarified. ‘We’re also being asked, at least until we’ve each had time to consider our options, not to contact or try to influence each other.’

‘Won’t be too hard,’ Amber mumbled, inspecting the chip on one French-polished fingernail.

Caitlin continued. ‘After that I’m not sure.’

‘All will become clear in time,’ the woman reassured them.

‘No time like the present,’ Poppy said. ‘What’s the catch? Why did Gypsy leave *us* the old house?’

Jesamiah looked at Poppy, her smile warm but verging on the kind a mother gives a child who says something inappropriate in public. ‘There’s no *catch*, Ms ... ah ... Hamilton, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Poppy Hamilton.’ Poppy’s hand searched for her press ID, thinking her name must be on display. She found it, not hanging on a lanyard around her neck as usual, but secure and out of sight in her pants pocket.

‘Perhaps you can start with spring, Ms Hamilton?’

‘Ah, well, we’re still discussing some of the details. I’m not sure I can at all.’

‘The instructions are quite straightforward.’ So was the tone in Jesamiah’s voice. ‘The terms and conditions are not negotiable. It’s all of you or nothing. I cannot stress this too firmly.’

‘We *all* understand,’ Sara said with a rare show of authority, followed by a quick sideways glance at the others. ‘Poppy, you know if one refuses it will affect all of us, and whatever her reasons, Gypsy wanted us to do this.’

‘Why? It’s been years. It’s just an old house, for God’s sake.’

‘How can you, of all people, say that?’ Sara sounded like a mother, although she wasn’t one, not unless you counted the years

she'd nursed her dementia-afflicted father. 'Stop acting like you don't care. Am I the only one here willing to admit how important Gypsy and the house were to each of us back then—you more than anyone, Poppy.'

'But after what happened to Willow, I—'

'You weren't to blame. None of us were.' Sara scanned the room. Shy Sara Fraser who once had said very little now sounded strong, her words as impassioned as their delivery. 'The only thing we're guilty of is forgetting. Going back can fix that.'

In a way, she was right. Poppy *had* shut the memory of that day from her mind. Worse still, she'd shut out Gypsy afterwards. She'd done the same thing Johnno had done to her: walked away when she should have stayed, forgotten when she should have remembered. Only Poppy hadn't walked. She'd run.

Poppy Hamilton was still running, and always away from Calingarry Crossing, which suddenly seemed suffocatingly close. The town was hardly the edge of the outback or a scorched desert, nor was it like the lush picturesque towns of the New South Wales coast. Once nothing more than a midway watering hole to break a tired stockman's journey, an inland settlement had slowly grown out of the dusty plains. Too small to be called a town, even too small for its own postcode for a long time, a river meandered through its heart. That lazy Calingarry River gave the town a future.

'Very well.' Jesamiah handed each woman a card. 'I'll let you decide. There will be further correspondence prior to each stay. In the meantime, you can reach me or Mr Madgick on this number.'

The women each took a business card. It read:

*Madgick & Associates—Trust Managers*

*In Madgick we trust*

'If there are no more questions, I wish you—Poppy Hamilton, Sara Fraser, Amber Bailey and Caitlin Wynter—a good afternoon and a *very* good season.'