



EMILY CHARLOTTE OULD

Emily has been writing since she was twelve years old. She grew up in Cornwall and always finds herself writing about family and falling in love for the first time. She studied creative writing at Falmouth University before going on to complete her masters in Writing for Young People. She's had short stories and poetry published, and has loved English language and publishing for as long as she can remember. She's also a big fan of country music. On completing her MA, she combined her love of country music and writing – something she never even thought possible – and wrote *Don't Fence Me In*. She finds setting hugely inspirational and often gets depressed in cities.

About Don't Fence Me In

It's 1989. Sixteen-year-old Bonnie Wild hates her teeny, tiny Texas hometown, Old Springs. There's nothing there but the heat, the dust and, just like every other small town, gossip. Lots of it. Every day is just the same old, same old. So, when aspiring country singer Beau Hartley shows up at a county fair one night, Bonnie's world is turned upside down.

But first love comes at a price.

Can she escape Old Springs with Beau in her stride and track down a father she's never met ... or will her roots keep her tied down?

emily.ould65@hotmail.co.uk

@Lazerbeam_sky

DON'T FENCE ME IN

Chapter One

Old Springs, Texas. 1989.

*I ain't leavin' this town
It's got my memories tied down
Only way I'm leavin' is if
You come round and tell me to quit'*

Let me tell you something about Texas. It's real hot. Like, swelteringly hot. If you cracked an egg on the pavement, it would fry. My hometown, Old Springs? It's just the same right over. A forgotten, sunbeaten town which nobody pays any mind to.

Sometimes I wish it might just burn down. That the heat would be enough to swallow it up, flames crackling, 'til all that's left is sparks and ash. That we could create something new out of the wreckage. But that'll never happen.

We're right on the outskirts of Texas near the Mexican border. Our dirt roads are full of potholes with weeds that are too stubborn to disappear. We don't get many tourists here, but when we do, it's usually 'cause they're lost.

I've lived here my whole life and the worst thing that's happened to us is a few storms and a couple hurricanes spreading their torment over our rooves. It's hot here, always hot. There's nothing more than a few beauty shops across town, an old dime store, and our sheriff, Tom Bale, wandering round with not a whole lot to do, except maybe flash his badge and have coffee with one

of the neighbours. The town's tiny houses and cheap dime stores look like they might crumble and fall apart any second.

There ain't no way in hell I'm staying here.

Because I haven't even done anything with my life yet, let alone been anywhere else in this huge world. I think about Washington and North Carolina and Michigan and get goose bumps pricking my skin. When I'm caught daydreaming 'bout it, my mama tells me to quit dragging my feet, but I just can't wait to get gone.

'Bonnie?' Mama calls. 'What ya doing out there?'

I'm sitting on the broken oak tree that lies square across our yard. It's the only place you can ever get any shade. It came down in a storm once and nobody ever bothered to move it since.

'Great Aunt Annie needs your help,' she calls again. 'Can you come here?'

I lie back across the thick branch and prop my turquoise sunglasses on top of my wild brown curls.

'Be right there,' I holler back.

In the hot Texas sun, you kinda need somewhere cool to kick back and relax. The knotty bark of the tree is rough against my bare legs and cool where I rest my hands. Mama can get real riled up when she wants to, mostly when I don't do exactly what she says *when* she says. But I don't see why I can't lie in the sun a little longer. It ain't exactly like my Great Aunt Annie is bed bound or nothing.

'You comin' or what?' I hear her again.

Pushing my sunglasses aside, I reluctantly scramble off the tree and tiptoe back into the house. The dusty heat sweeps over me as I wobble on the balls of my bare feet, making my way down the concrete path. The kitchen tiles welcome me inside, cool against my toes, after the heat of the rough ground outside.

I slump against the cold slab of kitchen counter where Mama's preparing vegetables for dinner.

'Can't you quit your lazing about for one afternoon?' she says, slicing the top off a carrot. 'You're always lounging around in the sun. Ain't you got better things to do?'

I shrug.

'Will you just look at yourself?' she carries on, throwing me a glance, and

I roll my eyes. 'Your hair's a mess and dirt's all over your face. Go wash. Then help your aunt. She's having trouble with her cards again. She's comin', Annie!'

She brushes me swiftly out of the kitchen, taking care not to bump my head on the low beam hanging above the door which leads to the small living room.

Great Aunt Annie is hunched in her usual spot in the old armchair. That chair's been part of our family for years. Great Aunt Annie is eighty-nine, but I know that chair ain't as old as her. Its patchwork squares are grubby with age and it's so threadbare that it's a real wonder she can sit in it at all without falling through. Her glasses sit on top of her head while she squints at the fresh newspaper on her lap.

I swish past her with my skirt and wait until she notices I'm standing real close. When she sees me, she pulls her glasses off her head and pushes them up along the edge of her nose.

'How you doin', Aunt Annie?' I ask and rest my knee on the side of her chair.

'I'm doing well, Sweet Thing,' she replies.

Ever since I was little I've never heard her call me anything but Sweet Thing. I've never been Bonnie to her, not since the day I was born. It's *always* been Sweet Thing, like she plucked me right out of a candy store.

'Now.' She squints as she points her rickety, old walking stick towards the chipped paint on the wall. 'Can you get that deck of cards out for me on top the fireplace? I can't get up, see.'

'Sure, Annie.' I pass her the deck of cards. 'You want me to shuffle?'

'No, I ain't that senile. Just sit and I'll roll 'em right up.'

She winks at me as I sit down on the carpet stool right opposite her patchy armchair and wait while she deals at expert pace. Apparently, before I was born, she used to be the fastest dealer in Texas. She still has her own neighbourhood bridge league and we always play a game of Ruby Red on Sunday afternoons, straight after church. Just me and her.

'You OK, Sweet Thing?' She looks at me from behind her deck of cards, still shuffling, and I smile back.

'I'm OK.'

But she carries on looking, so I try to throw off her watery stare and look

out the window instead. When Great Aunt Annie stares at me I always get a weird feeling, like she's seeing right through me. Her old eyes are like a watery film, the kind that can glide right into your soul, unannounced and uninvited. More than once, she's known what's on my mind, and I'm worried she knows it now. Even worse, I'm worried Mama knows it too.

Because, even though I may hate this town down to its roots, if it weren't for Great Aunt Annie, I'd be out of this zip code before you could say gone.

'Bonnie?' Mama calls now from the kitchen. 'Come here. I need your help with something.'

'I'm helping Great Aunt Annie with her cards. Like you asked.'

She breezes into the living room. Her hair is like mine, with wild brown curls and flicks that curve out at the end. But her hair is short, while mine is long and tangled.

'I almost forgot. Take this over the road to Mrs Tucker,' she says, handing me a large brown envelope. It has Mrs Tucker's name on the front in big black letters, the handwriting neat and lilted. But it stays in the air, breaching the space between us, while she waits for me to take it.

'But I'm helping Aunt Annie with her cards,' I say again, still sitting on the stool.

'I need you to take this letter, Bonnie.' She flaps it once in my direction.

'Why?'

'Don't concern you right now, does it? Please, baby, just do it.'

She's softened, so I get up off my knees and take the letter. I notice it isn't even her handwriting. Before I can ask her whose it is, she's left the room and holes herself back up in the kitchen, peeling more vegetables like there ain't no tomorrow.

'I want you to take it now, Bonnie,' she shouts from the kitchen.

I peep through the doorway. Her back is turned and her hands are busy. I glance back at Great Aunt Annie before I go, making sure she's all right, and she gives me another wink.

Then I slip on my boots and step outside where it's just me and the hot Texas sun. I take a step forward, snap my shades down and the street goes a whole shade of tinted blue.

The ground is hot and dry. Mr Martinez waves to me on the other side of the road, walking his dog, and I wave back before walking five doors down to

Mrs Tucker's. Our town is so old it looks like it might as well be a part of the Wild West.

Walking along the sidewalk, I try to imagine our local thrift store as an old saloon, filled with women with breasts as big as watermelons squeezed inside clinching corsets and men guzzling whiskey all day; clouds of dust rising up from the ground as rickety wagons roll by and masked bandits on horseback gallop across town.

But the daydream fades as I catch Mrs Montgomery slipping out the double doors of the liquor store, rimmed glasses on her head and her white-grey hair perfectly permed. Just like that, I'm pulled back to the present day.

You know, at sixteen, it's hard living here. We're a dirt road town that leads to nowhere, known only to drifters and folk who live here already. Sometimes, it's like the rest of America has forgotten about us, wiped us off its heel and left us in the dirt. Even worse, I think the people here like it that way.

Two minutes later and I'm right outside Mrs Tucker's. Swinging baskets of hibiscus flowers hang up in the porch, floating like froth on top a milkshake at Creaky Joe's Diner across town.

Before I make my way up the path, I unlatch the gate in front of her house where a huge tomcat is lounging on the windowsill outside. Ginger. At least that's what we call him. He doesn't belong to Mrs Tucker any more than I belong in Old Springs, but he still hangs round here every day. I stroke his ears as I walk up the front porch.

'Still here, Ginge?' I run my fingers all the way to the end of his tail. 'I guess it's hard to leave this place, huh?'

'Is that Bonnie?' a voice says behind a screen door and I look up. There's Mrs Tucker, already waving at me with a green watering can in her hand.

She pulls me into a hug once she's out on the porch and I catch the scent of her perfume: midnight rose, which she hasn't changed all my life.

'Now,' she says, hitching up her skirt, 'what can I help you with, dear?'

'Mama wanted me to give you this,' I say, showing her the letter in my hands.

'Ah, yes. She told me you would be here. Sweet tea?'

'Well, no,' I say. 'I have to get back but –'

'Follow me.'

She bobs away, leaving me and Ginger baking out in the sun. For a second

I think about staying out there with him, but shake the thought away as I hear Mrs Tucker already tinkling with the cups from her cupboard. I step into the little white house and click the door shut behind me. She tinkles in the kitchen as I slip off my boots.

The letter stays tight in my hand.