

‘Any chocolates worth eating?’ Dad is in the back seat, rummaging through a paper bag. Mum is in the front of the rental truck, sitting next to me. Her words float over her shoulder, ‘The best ones are gone.’

The rain has been steady since we left the freeway. We’re driving along the slopes and bends that drive us further towards my new home, a country town in the Queensland hinterland which has a population of 2,530. It’s going to inflate to 2,533 once I move in with my two children. The town has one claim to fame, the double-decker vanilla slice. It features two squares of custard, as thick as mattresses, sandwiched between a crunchy wafer, concocted from free-range ingredients and baked in an artisan bakery. It was the lure of sampling this tasty morsel that brought me and my children here, one weekend. We drove through the town and ended up at a sloping **For Sale** sign on the front paddock of this chicken farm.

Peppy, my Border Collie, is sleeping next to Dad. His grizzly snores are snuffled by the hailstones hitting the side windows, sounding like handfuls of rice thrown against glass. Mum says something, but her words are drowned out by the rumble of the truck and the swish of the wipers.

‘What did you say, Mum?’

‘Are you excited about the move, Libby? This new enterprise of yours.’

My mouth falls into a crooked smile. Ever since I purchased the thirty hectares of land with a depilated three-bedroom weatherboard home, Mum has been talking about me as if I’m an entrepreneur bravely venturing into uncharted territory. I’m just taking a risk and hoping it pays off.

‘Ask me if I’m excited when the farm is operational, the kids are settled into their new school, and I’ve renovated the house. Right now, I feel like I’m on the edge of a cliff about to jump with my eyes half open.’

Mum laughs quietly. ‘Your Grandpa Mick used to say it should be mandatory that every human take a risk in life; go out on a limb. He used to say it’s character building.’

‘Character building?’ I shake my head. ‘Well, I’ve had enough character building. Don’t need anymore.’ My hands are desperately gripping the steering wheel as the truck’s tyres slide over the mud and debris on the roads. The wipers are barely keeping up with the water gushing down in front of us. A slap of water hits the windscreen and I slam on the brakes as we hit a downward slope of bitumen. ‘The tyres on this damn truck must be bald as.’ I mumble to myself, but it’s loud enough for Dad to lean forward from the back seat.

‘Just take it easy Libby. This road is bloody narrow. We’ll be in strife if a bus comes from the opposite direction.’ Despite the simmering anxiety in my stomach I snuffle a laugh. That’s Dad for you. He always tries to say something comforting during stressful circumstances, but his comments never fail to pile on layers of distress to an already dire situation.

Mum rolls her eyes so dramatically they could orbit the sun. She turns to glare at Dad. ‘Ray, please. Libby’s got this.’

We drive in silence for the next kilometre. The rain eventually stops, and my heart leaps with anticipation as the sky clears to reveal a canvas of blue. I wind down my window and inhale the fresh air. A flicker of hope and positivity ignites within me. The paddocks of lush green grass roll out in front of us, and I imagine my girls, the hens, fossicking and scratching the ground for worms, underneath a canopy of sunshine.

‘Have the previous owners left you enough chicken feed to get you through today?’ Since I purchased the farm, Dad’s had a long list of questions for me. I know that he’s worried that I’ll sink all of my money into this, and then go bust, but I’ve incorporated all of my experience from the corporate world into this egg farm. I’ve spent hours plotting graphs for profit goals, conjuring marketing plans, and targeting budget estimates in the hope that all of that, accompanied by back-breaking work, will make this a successful venture.

‘Don’t worry Dad, it’s all sorted,’ is my stock standard answer to his barrage of questions. In reality, I’ve heard enough stories to know that the climate, nature and luck are the true elements that will determine my success or failure. Farming is subject to so many things that can’t be controlled.

As we wind into the gravel driveway, Mum points out a rainbow arching over the sky. ‘Now that’s a good omen, Libby.’

We spend the next two hours moving my furniture from the truck into the house. The French provincial style of furniture sat comfortably in our house on the Gold Coast, but here it looks like the debutante who turned up to a Bachelor and Spinsters Ball dressed in a white formal gown, when everyone else is wearing checked shirts, jeans and RM William’s boots.

The house feels smaller once the furniture has filled every corner. Mum senses my misgivings and puts an arm around my shoulders. ‘Cosy,’ she says reassuringly.

Dad walks outside and rolls up his sleeves. ‘Isla and Spencer are going to love this.’

I sigh raggedly as I mull over how they will cope with our move from the city to the country. ‘They’ll have to get used to the patchy internet out here.’

‘Come on,’ Mum says. ‘The girls must be chomping at the bit to get outside.’ We walk to the barns, our feet sliding in the muddy ruts of the path. The hens have been inside since yesterday afternoon when the previous owners closed the barn doors for the final time. They’ve retired from this farm, moving to their new home in Rockhampton and left inexperienced me as the next custodian. When we slide open the large wooden doors, the hens make a dash for the outside, clucking and complaining about being left inside for so long. I walk over to the laying boxes. I’m rewarded with eggs that are slightly warm, with the occasional coat of feathery-down on the speckled shells.

Peppy gambles around the perimeters of the land, his pink tongue lolling out of his mouth with excitement. I point to a flat area, close to the vegetable patch. ‘You know how I promised Isla and Spencer a greenhouse for propagating their flower seeds, that’s where I’ll build it.’ I imagine the future – my teenage children realising their dream of owning a mail-order flower seed business, while I tend to my chickens. The last two years have been shadowed by grief and sadness, but I’m hoping that we’ll find our happy places here.

There’s a rumble in the distance and all three of us stop and listen. Dad walks out to the front of the property and Mum, Peppy and I follow him. A semi-trailer pulls up at the front gate. We watch curiously as a dark-haired man with a bush-ranger beard steps out and strides towards us. ‘I’ve got a delivery for Libby Prowse.’

I step forward. ‘A delivery? Are you sure it’s for me?’

The man stands tall and solid as the trunk of a grey gum. ‘Well, this card might explain who it’s from.’

I take the envelope from his outstretched hand. Mum’s handwriting reads; *Happy days for Isla and Spencer in their greenhouse, love from Pops and Nanna.* I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, trying to suppress the torrent of emotions rising within me. ‘Thanks, Mum and Dad. I don’t know what to say.’

Mum puts her arm around my waist and Dad rests a hand on my shoulder.

The guy waits for a moment before he says, ‘And where would you like me to leave your greenhouse?’

I point to the spot, and he gets back into the semi and drives it down the driveway. When he parks the truck, it takes all four of us to drag the massive, rectangular box to the flat spot that I’ve chosen.

‘I’m going to start building it now,’ I say with determination.

‘I can help you,’ the guy says. ‘This was my last delivery for the day, and I’ve got nothing to go home to.’

‘I’ll make us coffee,’ Mum says. She calls out to Peppy who follows her into the house.

‘And I’ll program your TV. That’s more my domain,’ Dad says rather sheepishly. ‘Libby can build anything, but I can’t even hammer a nail.’

When Mum and Dad walk into the house, the guy gives me a shy smile. ‘I’m Craig by the way, and don’t worry I’ve built a few of these. We’ll have this together in no time.’ We start setting up the frame. Eventually, the jigsaw of pieces start to resemble a long rectangular building. Craig pulls out a flat carpenter’s pencil and a notebook from his shirt pocket. We plan shelves, work benches and storage boxes that will need to be built once Isla and Spencer get a feel for the inside layout.

‘You just moved into the area?’ Craig asks.

‘Yeah. We’ve lived on the coast all our lives. Me and the kids have been dreaming of moving to the country and here we are.’

Craig raises his eyebrows, ‘Wow! Big move. Brave of you.’

I fold my arms. ‘Necessity, more like it. My husband went to work one day and never returned. He was a construction manager on a building site. He died when a steel girder fell on top of him.’

Craig flinches. ‘Ah shit! I’m so sorry.’

‘Hey, it’s not your fault. Shit happens. It was two years ago so it’s time for us to tuck our grief deep in our hearts and get on with living. Stuart would have wanted us to be happy.’

We stand together, a pocket of silence between us. I focus on a brown bantam chicken preening herself. ‘This is why I moved here with my children. Nature heals.’ My words catch on my breath.

Craig stares at the mountains that stand like silent boulders, with his hands on his hips and his feet slightly apart. He finally says, ‘Hits you like a steam train when your life changes like that. Every now and again it hits me, how it is ... now.’ He makes a juddery sigh. ‘I lost my family five years ago. We had our old period home re-wired. The old wiring in the house was over a hundred years old and never caused a problem. We had it re-wired and it ignited a fire in the roof. I was working interstate at the time. Happened while my family was asleep. They had no hope. My wife and ten-year-old twin boys didn’t survive.’ He makes a painful groan and keels over at the waist and I can’t help placing a hand on his shoulder. Shock falls through me and my eyes prickle with tears as I search for something to say.

He reaches for his phone and scrolls to a photo. His large, calloused hands cradle his phone with gentleness, as if he’s holding a bird with a broken wing. On his screen is an image

of his wife and two boys. 'This was taken two days before the fire.' His words have a painful edge to them.

'Craig, I'm sorry.' My hollow words tumble out, sounding useless.

'But they're still with me, here.' He places the heel of his left palm on his chest. 'In the same way that your husband is with you. Our loved ones leave their memories anchored to our hearts.' He puts his phone into his shirt pocket. 'Everything changed after that. I packed in my job as a CEO of a mining company and started my own business, building greenhouses and garden sheds. It was something I'd always dreamt of doing. Funny thing is, because I lost everything and everyone I'd lived for, I reached the conclusion that I had nothing more to lose if this business venture didn't work out. I live in a caravan park now and I just take life day by day. If I'm having a sad day, I go fishing. I try to be kind to myself; do you know what I mean?'

I make a series of affirming nods. 'I sure do.'

We keep working on the greenhouse and when it's fully built, Craig points to the dirt track from the garden to the greenhouse. 'A little curved concrete path would finish this off. I could help with that if you like.'

I stand up, rub my aching back and smile at him. 'I'd like that very much.' Then I put my hands to my mouth. 'Oh hell! Do I need a permit for this?'

Craig laughs. 'Out here, you can build a sports stadium without a permit, and no one would know.'

I chuckle with him. At least he can still find a way to laugh, despite the tragedy he's been through.

'My teenagers move in tomorrow. We're having a barbecue lunch on Sunday. Our first one here, to christen this place. You're welcome to come.'

His face breaks out into a grin. 'Are you sure? I don't want to crash your christening.'

'Aaahhh, come along. My Dad can't hammer a nail, but he's king of the barbecue so bring an appetite.'

Craig's eyes crinkle with a smile.

'And I might enlist your handyman skills for a few other jobs around the house.'

'No problem. Happy to help.' He grins and waves as he drives away.

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Mum and Dad are about to take the truck back to the depot. Mum kisses me on the cheek, 'We'll be back tomorrow, with Isla and Spencer.' I lean against her, grateful for their love and support.

That evening, I watch the sunset from the shaded verandah at the back of the house. Peppy sits at my feet. He's worn out after helping me round up the chickens into the barns, safe from foxes and other predators. I think of Stuart as I stare up at the sky. He's the first star that lights up the sky, every night. I think about Craig losing his wife and boys. Life can be horrendously cruel, but the world keeps spinning, day after day. My children gave me a reason to go on. I wonder what helped Craig to piece together the remains of his life.

I breathe in the fresh air and raise my arms, grateful for new beginnings.