

Grace

A door slammed, and laughter rang out. A child's high-pitched giggle mixed with the deep chuckles of an older man. Grace stepped out of the car and watched as her father swung her son high into the air. She smiled, their shared, demonstrated joy warming her work weary soul. Registering her arrival, the little boy ran to greet her, and her heart swelled with an overwhelming burst of love.

“Mum, we've got Jarrah ready so we can get the cows in now.” The high-pitched voice screeched at her with excitement.

“Apparently the quad bike's having a rest today and you're going to bring the cows in for me.” Her dad winked and smiled at his daughter. The adoration in his eyes had never wavered—his love of the two women in his life shone through for all to see. Grace was sure it had nothing to do with the fact that she and her mother were like peas in a pod. Her strawberry blond hair was lighter, her eyes perhaps a shade greener than Margot's, and they wore the same sized clothes. But none of those things mattered. He was her dad, and she knew he would have loved her regardless of what she looked like.

“Give me a minute to put the shopping away and change my clothes.”

Grace looked down at her high-heeled shoes and neat, slim fitting skirt. Her day had been busy, actually the entire week had been busy, and she was glad she didn't work full time. Finding time to eat lunch or go to the bathroom was a challenge. With drought affecting most of Queensland and New South Wales, her diary was choc-a-block with appointments. It seemed every second farmer in the district wanted to discuss their worries. What could they borrow from the bank, cash flows and whether they should buy, sell or agist cattle from the drier inland? Today she had finished early thanks to a client requesting a postponement until

tomorrow. Nipping to the supermarket on the way home, she had stocked up on groceries while she'd had the chance.

Struggling to unpack the car now with both child and dog underfoot, Grace almost tripped over Min, her kelpie, and sighed—partly with exasperation, but mostly with contentment.

“Here Daniel, how about you carry this bag inside for me?”

She handed a shopping bag to her son, distracting him from playing in the exact spot she was trying to unload the shopping, and grinned. Coming home to her little family was always the highlight of her day. Lucky enough to have parents a short distance across the paddock, they were far enough away to offer privacy but close enough to hear a call if required and caring for Daniel while she worked, not to mention all the other million ways they supported her, warmed her heart. It still astounded her how many of her friends thought she was lucky that Pete worked in the mining industry.

“Fantastic money,” said one.

“You must have a stash of cash by now, hey Grace?” said another.

“Nice for you to watch whatever you want on television,” said yet another.

In reality, they seemed unaware of how hard it could be. Having your husband away for weeks at a time before returning home for one or two weeks, exhausted, grumpy, and bringing with him a bag full of filthy clothes to wash, was not exactly the blissful, lucrative lifestyle people thought it was. It was lonely, stressful, and disruptive. For the weeks Pete was away, she and Daniel had a routine that worked well and she deliberately kept herself too busy to think about it. On the days she went to work, Daniel couldn't get to his grandparents' house quick enough, eagerly waving goodbye to Grace before she had barely swallowed her

breakfast. For the rest of the week, they both delighted in pottering about the little cottage and garden, helping her dad on the farm and doing the evening milking.

Daniel's chatter never let up as he rocked gently in the saddle in front of her. At the ripe old age of six months, he had reached up to her when she rode her horse, screaming angrily until one of her parents passed him up and settled him behind the pommel. His cries immediately switched to beams of delight and his pleasure in riding had never changed. She promised to find him a pony of his own when he turned four. Why four? Shrugging, she didn't know why, but she had, convincing herself that was a wonderful age for a country child who wanted to ride, to have his own pony. She had almost a year to think about it.

Dismounting carefully so as not to dislodge Daniel, she noticed the cows already making their way towards her and laughed as she called out to them.

“We can set our watches on you girls, can't we.”

She opened the gate wide and hooked it back before remounting and swinging Jarrah away to the side of the paddock and up the hill to check the water level in the trough. Pausing as they reached the top, she gazed at the peaceful, rural scene below her. The valley was picturesque and green. At the foot of the farm, the Clarence river meandered its way towards the sea in the same direction as the stream of black and white cows, mooching their way towards the cowshed. Her parents' old home stood proud in the established garden, green lawns and a mixture of Jacaranda and Silky Oak trees. Washing flapped on the backyard clothesline near the Poinciana tree, its colourful red flowers providing a perfect backdrop for the snow-white sheets.

On the opposite side of the paddock from the homestead was their cottage. Hers and Pete's. Behind it, the machinery and vehicle shed. As she rode on, Grace glimpsed the taller buildings of Grafton in the distance and snippets of the ocean beyond.

She breathed deeply, closing her eyes as the sounds and scents around her soaked into her soul. In the late summer, the gum tree blossoms were fading, the hum of bees still strong as they buzzed around the clover flowers and pockets of dreaded lantana scrub that persisted, despite her dad's eradication program. Birds chirped and called to each other as the mournful cry of the Koel sounded from somewhere in the bush. In response to the call, Grace looked up at the sky, engrossed by the height of the thunderhead clouds in the distance. *Are we in for a drenching later?* Her daydream faded as Daniel slapped her leg and brought her back to the present.

"Mum, come on, the cows have all gone now." Grace picked up the reins and gently kicked Jarrah into a brisk walk.

"Sorry mate, I was just listening to the birds and the bees."

Daniel turned, studying his mother quizzically, his forehead corrugated with concern. She laughed and tickled his ribs, creating a squirming bundle as he dissolved into fits of giggling, while Jarrah ignored her riders and carried her cargo down to the cowshed.

"C'mon girls, mind your manners." Grace growled at two of the dominant cows shoving each other's shoulders as they vied for first position in the shed—and the grain. She slapped their rumps, urging them to shuffle into position, their tails and bursting udders facing her as she stood below in the pit. Pulling the lever, Grace released the grain into the feeder trough in front of their faces. With the warm spray hose in one hand and the soft cloth in the other, she moved steadily along the row of black and white Holstein Friesian cows,

washing each udder as she went, before shutting the valve and releasing the cups from their hook. Flipping the set of milking cups upside down in her left hand, she expertly flicked the suction on as she attached them one by one to the cow's teats. Checking the pulsators, Grace smiled with satisfaction as the pure white milk pumped beneath the see-through bulb on its way along the stainless steel pipes and into the vat in the side room. By the time she finished the first row, the next twelve cows had settled themselves into position on the opposite side of the pit, and she repeated the process. There was something soothing about working with dairy cows. They were such creatures of habit. Grace found the rhythm of the milking plant and their deep, soulful brown eyes somehow connected her to the land and the serenity of their valley.

Daniel's high-pitched chatter infiltrated the shed despite the din of milking machines, radio, and throbbing refrigeration unit. He was helping her mother feed the calves, and she smiled. As the last cow wandered out of the shed, Martin stepped down into the pit, tying his waterproof apron around his waist. Leaving him to his preferred activity of cleaning the equipment and hosing down after milking, Grace remounted Jarrah and rode up the track to close the gate behind the cows as her mother took Daniel by the hand and led him back to the house.

Contentment flowed through Grace and her heart gave a little skip as she made her way back down the hill. Except for her University years and two overseas holidays, this farm had been her home all her life. They had been heaps of fun, but coming home had given her more joy than she could have imagined and her appreciation of both Australia and her home had magnified.

Grace shook her client's hand and closed the office door. She tidied the papers on her desk and reached to pick up her phone. Flicking it off silent mode, she raised her eyebrows. An unread text from Pete. He never sent texts during the day. If she received a message at all from him, it was just as she was going to bed. She glanced at her watch—almost twelve noon—and opened the message.

“Change of plans. Coming home today. Meet me at the airport at 2pm.”

“Anything wrong?” she messaged back.

“Just meet me.”

No kisses or little emoji. Grace swallowed as a lump formed in the pit of her stomach and the bile rose in her throat. *What has gone wrong? Is he sick? Or have they fired him? Something deep inside her suggested the latter.*