A glimpse of happiness

by Odi_Et_Amo_20

Summary

We weren't particularly happy with how McLeod's Daughters ended - well to be honest everything after Claire's death was a bit of a disappointment for us. So here's a version of how we wish things would have gone. Enjoy.
Chapter 1

"Do you still love him?" That's what Tess had asked her. A question she hadn't answered, because she wasn't sure. But now she knew. After she saw what Peter was capable of, she knew that she didn't and she couldn't love him anymore. She was about to lose Drover's Run. Her home, her life, her everything. She was going to lose it all because of Peter. If only he had handed in the letter of resignation to the board, when Claire broke the contract with Australian Bloodlines, she wouldn't be in this mess. No, Peter was to blame for all of it and still she was the loser in it. And as if he hadn't done enough damage in her life, he was now blackmailing her into marrying him. She could either lose Drover's or marry Peter, and neither of the options was appealing to her.

She walked around from one side of the room to the other, feeling absolutely sick about the choice she was about to make. She knew what she had to do, but the outcome of her decision could end in a disaster - but she was willing to put her own feelings aside, if it meant that she could keep Drover's. Gentle voices from outside reached her ears and she walked to the window in her room. She saw the others outside, busy with the chores for the day - unaware of the choices she had to deal with. They were all laughing when Jodi showed her dancing skills, while she moved a bag of seed from one place to another. A small laugh escaped Claire’s lips. If she wasn’t sure about her decision before, she was now. Seeing all of them together like that, meant the world to her. For once in her life, Claire didn’t feel alone. This was not only her home, but also theirs. Claire moved her focus to Meg. She had been here since Claire was a little girl - How could she possibly take that away from her?

Her eyes caught Tess and she knew she had to tell her what was going on. She also knew Tess would try and talk her out of it, but she really hoped she would understand. Truth is, the idea of facing Tess and telling her what was going on and what she planned to do, was something she didn't wanted to do either. She knew her sister well enough now, and she was fearing her reaction. She really hoped that all of this wouldn't result in her losing her sister once again, because that was something she couldn't take. Tess was the only family she had left, and she needed her support. She could only pray for her understanding as well. Well, pondering on the possible outcomes would do her no good.

She gathered all her courage and slowly made her way out of her bedroom, down to the kitchen and out of the house. The others were still chatting and laughing, meanwhile she was feeling like her heart was going to escape her chest from how fast it was beating. She slowly approached them, cursing herself for the situation she had put everyone in. She had been so stupid! Maybe she should have listened to Alex when he had told her that Peter was a knob and not good for her. Suddenly she froze in place. Alex! What would Alex say when he found out what her plan was? She would lose a business partner, and above all, she would lose a mate. Tears started gathering in her eyes, but she quickly blinked them away not wanting anyone to see her crying.

"Claire? Are you okay?" She was brought back to reality by Tess’ question. No, I’m not okay, Tess. Nothing is okay.

“Yeah, everything is fine” Claire said looking down at the ground. “Actually. Can I talk to you. In the kitchen?” She turned around and started marching back to where she came from, knowing that Tess would follow her. Please, heart, don't fail me now. She thought to herself as she busied herself in filling a glass of water. She wasn't thirsty, she just needed something to do with her hands, because otherwise she might have strangled herself for her own stupidity. "What's wrong?" Tess asked and walked to the sink. Claire looked out in the blue, with the water in her hand. It wasn't news you could just break to someone - No, it needed a further explanation but she hadn't the slightest idea on how to start the topic. Urgh, to hell with this.

Claire turned her head to her sister. "I'm going to marry Peter" she said. Tess’ mouth almost dropped to the floor and they both went silent for a couple of seconds. Tess finally closed her mouth but she still hadn't grasped her brain around with her sister just had said.
"Before you say anything. I need to explain why" Claire poured the rest of the water out in the sink and placed the glass on the counter. She pulled out a chair and gave Tess signal to sit down as well. "Peter didn't hand in my letter to the board." She began, she couldn't look Tess in the eyes, but she could feel her eyes on her. "There was a clause in the contract. He made me put Drover's as a guarantee in case anything were to go wrong. But he assured me that nothing would. He's a bastard Tess!" She said, tears forming in her eyes once again, only this time she wasn't able to stop them, so they rolled slowly down her cheeks. "They will take Drover's because he hasn't handed in my letter to the board. We are going to lose everything out of spite! The only way to save Drover's Run is to marry him." By now tears were streaming down her face. She couldn’t imagine spending the rest of her life next to that man! "So he’s blackmailing you?” Tess asked. She was shocked, and angry. Claire just nodded her head to answer her sister. "Oh, Claire!" She said standing up and coming to hug her. "There must be another solution. We will find a way out of this.” How Tess managed to stay positive in a situation like this was beyond Claire. “There’s no other way out, Tess. The marriage is the only solution. But no one can know why I’m marrying him. This stays between me and you.” Tess must have seen the desperation in Claire’s eyes, because she decided to not argue any further. "We will get through this, Claire. I’m here for you." Tess said hugging her sister once again. “Thank you.” Was all Claire managed to answer.

Tess let go of her sister and looked her in the eyes, to make sure she understood what she had just told her. But Claire couldn't see how they were suppose to get through it, she just had to tough it up for the sake of Drover's, her sister and the others - She couldn't allow herself to be overwhelmed with feelings and thoughts about what could have been, before Peter showed the real him. She knew deep down that he still loved her and even though she despised everything that man stood for, there was glimpse of "what if" in her body. What if she could learn to love the man she thought she knew, with time? It would make such a difference in all this. She shook her head, to get the thoughts out of her head. She knew the man Peter really were, she shouldn't even be thinking these kind of thoughts.

Claire got up from the chair and placed her hands on her sides, as she always did when she had made up her mind about something - Tess knew there was nothing she could say to talk her out of it now. "I have to drive to Gungellan and tell Peter my answer" she said and walked towards the door to the laundry.

Tess sighed as her sister walked out of the kitchen - She was truly concerned about all this, but if Claire really was tied on both hands, there was nothing else to do. It can't be the only way, there must be a loophole somewhere in the contract. She found herself gazing by the thought of that. Maybe she could find a loophole? It didn't have to be a massive hole, just enough to get them out of the contract.

Claire parked outside Gungellan hotel, but she wasn't in a hurry to go in. She sat behind the wheel and let all of the memories she had shared with Peter run through her mind. Good and bad. She buried her head in her hands. Get yourself together Claire. You are a McLeod and you do what is necessary. She took a deep breath and got out of the car.

It felt like everything was happening in slow motion around her and before she knew it, she was standing outside Peter's hotel room. She lifted her hand to knock on the door, but she kept it hanging in the air. She closed her eyes and made a quick shook on her head, before she guided her hand and knocked on the door. She could hear him move around inside the room and her whole body froze when he opened the door. “Claire” he said and a smile appeared on his face. She couldn't bring herself to match his smile. “Peter, I’ve made up my mind about your offer.” She said, getting straight to the point. She wanted no formalities, the quicker she was to get out of there the better. Standing now in the presence of the man she once loved, she was sure even the last bit of love she proved for him was gone - or soon to be gone. She couldn't love a man that was capable of blackmailing her in staying with him. She couldn't love Peter again. So she took a deep breath and proceeded to talk again. “I’ve came to the conclusion that the only way I have to save Drover's is marrying you. So I accept your offer.” She could feel herself breaking on the inside as Peter hugged her. He probably hadn't understood what she said. She didn't love him. She wasn't going to
marry him out of love. Why the hell was he happy? “Oh, Claire!” He said. “I knew you would make the right decision. I want to marry you the soonest possible!” To Claire's shock, Peter tried kissing her, but she was faster than him. She held her hand on his chest, keeping him from getting any closer. He looked like he didn't understand why she would keep him from getting near her. She quickly smiled at him, she should at least try and act happy towards him - she couldn't risk him taking the proposal back and she feared he would, if he found out why she married him. Well, she had kinda already told him, but it was like his brain sorted the details out and focused on what he wanted to hear. “I'm sorry, I have to go now. If you don't mind? I really want to tell everyone about us, and I would like to do it at dinner tonight.” She said. Her whole body was screaming for her to get out of there, away from him, as soon as possible. Peter looked her in the eyes and took her hand in his. He looked like the happiest man on earth and it made Claire feel even more sick and unsure about her choice. "It's a good idea Claire. There is no rush anyway, we have the rest of our lives together now. I'll come by tomorrow, then we can sort things out - I know we have a lot to figure out. I can even move in from tomorrow, wouldn't that be wonderful?" Move in. with. you. The words kept playing on repeat in Claire's head. Peter was the last man she wanted on Drover's, but she knew she had to let him move in, if she wanted to keep the facade towards Peter and the others at home. She turned away quickly and as soon as she had her back turned to him, tears started to fill her eyes again. But they were different this time - she was angry. Angry with herself that she had let it get this far. "I'll see you tomorrow" she said and started to make her way back to Merc.

She was dreading the dinner moment that night. But she had to face the consequences of her actions. She slowly made her way to the house, deciding on what was the best way of breaking in the news. She had decided that only her and Tess were to know the real reason behind the marriage. Everyone else was going to think that it was out of love. For Claire, this was the best solution. Everyone hated Peter after all that had happened, she didn't want to give them one more reason to do so.

Her walk back to kitchen was filled with thoughts about her decision to marry Peter. She walked right past Meg in the kitchen, didn’t even notice her talking to her. The voices from the others was like a humming to Claire as she entered the dining room. She pulled out a chair and kept her focus into the big wide nothing. She could hear the others talk, but she couldn't bring herself to focus on what they were saying. “I’m going to marry Peter.” She suddenly blurred out and closed her eyes. The only thing that reached her ears now was silence. Although her eyes were closed, she knew that they were all staring at her. She counted to ten and took a deep breath before talking again. “He's coming around tomorrow. He will be moving in.” She looked at them before she continued “And that’s the way it’s going to be, I know you all have some issues with him, but it’s not up for discussion”. None of them said anything, they were caught by surprise. Claire’s eyes found it’s way to Tess’, she needed some sort of reassurance, she needed to know that she was doing the right thing. "Well, I guess that congratulations are in order!" Tess said. “Congratulations with what?” Meg asked as she entered the room, holding a tray. “Claire is getting married to Peter” Jodi said in a harsh way. Meg looked at her daughter, then at Claire. "Oh" Meg said. She was just as surprised as the rest. "Well, that’s good - I guess” Claire tried to force a smile as she looked at Meg. “But that's a sudden decision! What happened?” Jodi asked. Claire was really dreading this question. “Jodi!” Meg reprimanded her daughter. “She's marrying Peter for the same reason you were going to marry Alberto.” “Well, I hope her marriage will be more successful than mine was.” Jodi muttered, but Claire was able to hear her and busted out laughing, partly because of nerves, partly because what Jodi said was funny, and partly out of irony. If anything, her marriage would be more of a disaster than Jodi’s. Meg looked with a worried look at Claire, she could sense something weren’t right. She just couldn’t put her finger on it - but for some reason Claire didn’t convince her and she knew what Peter had put her through, and Claire weren’t the type of person to just forgive something like that. She caught Claire’s eyes and smiled at her. “Let’s eat before dinner gets cold” she said, knowing she shouldn’t rummage in that topic anymore.
Chapter 2

Claire woke the next morning feeling horrible from yesterday's event. She had barely slept the whole night, so when the alarm went off the following morning she not only felt sick, she also looked sick from the lack of sleep. She had been thinking the most of the night and questioning herself. Did I really do the right thing? She rolled to the left and faced the left side of the room. She sighed and took a deep breath to try and get her thoughts under control. Her eyes caught a picture of Alex, Nick and herself. She couldn’t have been more than 19 years old in that picture, and Alex would be 20. She managed to get a smile across her face - She wished herself back to that time, she didn’t have a carry in the world. Her biggest fear was losing a bet to Alex Ryan, and let him mock her around. If only life was this easy now.

She got up and slowly walked to her closet. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror - She couldn’t stand to look at herself, she felt disgusted by the choice she had made. Or not so much the choice, more the situation she had allowed herself to be put in. The choice was by far the best for Drover’s. She threw on the first and best she found in the closet and went downstairs for breakfast. No one said a word to each other, the silence was getting awkward. Becky kept staring at Claire as she poked the eggs on her plate with the fork. She didn’t understand why she would go back to Peter, after all she had put her through. She remembered it clearly, because she had been the one to tell Claire about the wife in Queensland. Claire noticed Becky’s eyes on her, but tried to ignore her. She didn’t needed anyone else to judge her, she had plenty of judgement in herself.

A car pulled up outside and Claire knew at once who it was. She looked at Tess who made a signal with her head, telling her to go outside to him. She had to use all of her strength to walk outside and greet Peter. The walk ended sooner than she would have hoped and she found herself outside in seconds. Peter was already out of the car, bringing out bag after bag. Had he just hoped for Claire to say yes to the proposal, since it looked like he had planned his packing well - It wasn’t just the essentials he had brought, it was more like his whole closet. “You wanna help?” he said from the car in a cheerful way. Not really. Claire walked to him, trying to smile. “You sure packed a lot of stuff, when you weren’t even sure I would say yes” Claire said looking suspicious at him. He smiled “I know you. I didn’t doubt you would make the right decision”. He placed his arm around her waist and pulled her in. “I’m so happy we are going to do this” he said and hugged her so tight, he lifted her a bit from the ground. All of the cells in Claire’s body screamed and begged him to let go. “Peter. We still have some things to sort out” Claire said, trying to make him understand this wasn’t as easy as he wanted it to be. “I know, but we can work through it - I’m sure we can” Yes, well I’m not. I just don’t have a choice.

Claire took one of his bags in her hand and started to walk back to the house, with Peter following her like a dog. They were almost back when she heard another car coming - She turned around to see it was Alex. As he parked the car in front of the house, the wheels left a huge cloud of dust behind. He got out of the car, faster than expected. “What the hell is this?” he asked and slammed the door. His eyes were raging and his body language didn't exactly invite to a friendly conversation. “Not now Alex” Claire said as she walked towards him. She knew this wouldn’t end well.

“What is this knob doing here?” he said and walked passed Claire to face Peter. “She had agreed to marry me” Peter said in a pompous way. Alex stopped his movement when he heard Peter’s words. Marriage - No, that couldn’t be right. He turned his head towards Claire, his eyes were hurting. “Is that true?” he asked in a gentle voice. Claire didn’t answer him, she couldn’t get herself to tell him the truth. She didn’t have to talk, he could see it in her eyes - It was true, they were getting married. Alex suddenly felt like he couldn’t breath. It felt like someone was grasping his organs and pulling them down. He had never felt like this before. Is this what panic attack feels like and why am I even panicking?

He stood in his own thoughts for a moment, before he finally realised what was going on. “You
couldn’t just leave her alone could you? You had to walk straight into her life once again, and ruin everything” he shouted. “Alex, just go. Please. We’ll talk about this later” Claire said and grabbed him by the arm, urging him into his Ute. But Alex weren’t ready to leave, how could he leave on news like this. He pulled his arm out of Claire’s grip and threw a punch in Peter’s direction. Alex’s fist collided with Peter’s jaw before any of them could register what had happened. “Alex cut it out!” Claire hissed, trying to get between them - but without luck. She wasn’t a match to the men forces and she couldn’t stop the fight that was about to take place in front of her. Alex was in a whole different world and pushed Claire away as she tried to split them up. Peter swung a punch in Alex's direction, but he was faster than him and ducked right as the fist was about to hit. A massive fight was evolving in front of Claire and there was nothing she could do to stop it. “What is going on?” Tess asked as her and the other came running from the back of the house. “We got to stop this, Claire” Tess said and looked at her sister. Claire was standing with tears in her eyes, this was such a mess - But she knew Alex wouldn’t have taken the news well, this was to be expected. In all the fuss they hadn’t noticed Nick pulling up beside Alex’s ute. He almost got out of his car, faster than Alex had. He runned towards Peter and Alex to stop their fight - and with great force he got between them and shoved Alex away. “This isn’t worth it mate. Stop” Nick said and looked his brother straight in the eyes. Alex looked at Nick. “You are right” he turned his head towards Claire. “This isn’t worth it”. Claire felt her heart ache as he had said that - she knew it was directed at her. Alex walked past Claire and Tess, but before he got in his ute he took a final look at Claire and shook his head. Meg walked to Peter’s side to help him inside, he had gotten his ass kicked pretty badly by Alex. The rest followed, beside Claire and Tess. Claire couldn’t move. All she wanted to do was shout for Alex to come back, explain why she had decided to marry Peter - She needed him to save her from this mess, she had gotten herself into.

Alex slammed his hands against the wheel as he was driving away from Drover’s. Music was blasting out of the stereo in the car as he drove around on the narrow roads, leaving trails of dust behind him. Claire had been on his mind since he left Drover’s, he was so mad at her. He thought she was better than this - out of all people she had to chose the biggest knob of them all. He shook his head as he had before he drove away, what did she see in him? Was he missing something here? He suddenly got to think about their business, they had come a long way, how could she throw it all away?

He had no intention on working with Claire as long as the bastard was around. He didn’t even know if he could be her friend if it involved accepting Peter as her husband. He knew she could do better than him - why settle? He stopped the car and smashed his hand against the steering wheel once again. He knew the decision he was about to make would tear Claire apart, but if they couldn’t work together, he could might as well pick up the horses. He turned the ute and drove towards Wilgul. He got out in a hurry and got the horse trailer attached without thinking of the consequence his actions could have. He drove back towards Drover’s with the horse trailer. This time he didn’t park out front - didn’t really want to cross paths with Peter again. He parked his ute in the back, near the stables. Nick was still at Drover’s, helping Tess transport some seeds they needed at Wilgul for the organic wheat. Nick stopped with his work as soon as he saw Alex pull up - this smelled like trouble. “You shouldn’t be here right now” Nick said as his brother walked past him and Tess. “I’m just here for the horses, I’ll be on my way again soon enough” Alex said and kept walking. Tess looked confused at Nick. “The horses?” She asked and followed Alex. “I don’t understand, didn’t you agree on training the horses here?” Alex didn’t answer her question, he kept walking to the horse ring. As soon as he turned the corner he could see Claire was standing in the middle of the ring with Casino. He knew he had been rough on her - but he couldn’t believe how dumb and blind she was.

“Alex is here to pick up the horses” Tess said as they came closer. Claire dropped the rope she was holding and her eyes got big. “What? Alex - you can’t do that” she said and jumped the fence. “Watch me” he said and found the first horse. “We have contract” Claire said, begging him to listen to her - It was pointless, she was like an annoying humming around him. She ran in front of
him, so he couldn’t get past her. “Don’t you do this to my Alex. Don’t you dare take this away” - It was the only thing Claire had left to keep her insanity in place. Alex looked at her with an empty look. “You made your own choice. I’m not sure I can ever forgive you for this” he said and shoved her away with his shoulder, as he walked past her. “Forgive me? You have nothing to forgive me for” Claire said. She could feel the tears pressing to come out. If only she could tell him what was going on.

“I really thought you were better than this Claire” Alex said as he walked back to get the last horse. By now Claire was more angry than sad - how could he speak like that to her, they were mates. He was supposed to have her back. “Better than what? Did it ever occur to you, that I actually have the room in my heart to forgive and let go - unless some other people?” the last part of question was directed at Alex. Well, the truth was that she hadn’t forgiving Peter and she wouldn’t, but she couldn’t tell Alex that - not matter how much she wanted to.

Claire followed him as he went for Casino, her mind was racing with thoughts. “So this is it?” she asked and looked helplessly at Alex, as he got Casino attached to the rope. Alex didn’t answer her, he walked straight past her as she was invisible. She didn’t understood how he could be this cold, he was the only true friend she had ever had. It couldn’t and it shouldn’t be this way. “Alex you can’t do this” Tess said as she got up to his ute. She wanted to tell him why all of this was happening, but she knew she couldn’t. Claire walked slowly back towards them, the tears were pushing to come out. “I can’t work here, when Peter is going to be around” Alex said and turned his head to Claire. Claire looked back at him with no expression on her face, she was lost for words. As Alex loaded Casino in the trailer he got a sting of heartache, was he really doing the right thing here? He could see Claire’s world falling apart in front of his eyes, he hated seeing her upset.

“Can’t you just talk to me?” he said in a gentle voice, approaching Claire. He could see the tears was building up in his eyes. “I” she looked down on the ground. She was about to drop the bomb, but she knew no good would come out of it. “I don’t know what to tell you. I love him”. The words ripped the last of the pieces that hold her heart in place. He knew there was something more, he could feel it. Dammit Claire, can’t you just for once admit you are in deep water. He shook his head and started to walk back to the ute. “Just remember you made this decision” he said to her, before driving off.

Claire needed to get away from Tess and Nick, the tears were coming and she couldn’t stop them. She turned her back on them and started to march back to the stables. Not long after Tess and Nick could see Claire ride with great power away from Drover’s. Nick looked at Tess with a worried look. “Should you .. “ Tess shook her head, “No, she needs time” she said and finished Nick question he hadn’t got to finish. They both took a deep breath. “I’ll try and talk to Alex. He overreacts sometimes, but this time - I have never seen him like that before” Nick said. Tess smiled at Nick, grateful for his will to try and calm Alex down. She stroke his arm and started to walk back to the house. “Tess?” Nick asked. She turned to him and waited for him to continue. “What is the deal with all this? Peter and Claire I mean”. “Sometimes you can’t control what you heart wants” she said and walked away from Nick. She wondered how long they could keep this lie, it was bound to come out at some point.

Nick found Alex sitting outside on the bench in front of the house, when he got back to Wilgul. He didn’t understand his brothers actions back at Drover’s, what was it all about? He slowly walked to him and placed himself beside him on the bench. The didn’t say a word to each other. Alex handed Nick a beer. “Thank mate, but it’s not even 11 yet” Nick said. Alex finished the rest of the beer he was drinking, and opened the one he had offered Nick.

Alex took a deep breath and leant back on the bench. This was about the worst day he had ever experienced. Nick could see his brother was a mess inside. “What is going on mate?” he asked and waited for Alex to say something. “Mate.” Alex stopped. He was overwhelmed with feelings of hate, anger and jealousy. “He is a bastard” he finally continued. “And that gives you the clear to walk around and hit people?” Nick asked - No, this was more than just Peter being a knob. “She
deserves more. She doesn't deserve to be with someone like him” Alex said and took a sip of his beer. “You mean she deserve someone like you?” Nick asked, he could read between the lines. Alex looked at him. Someone like him? No, Claire did differently not deserve a man like him - but where was this jealousy feeling coming from. Did he feel more for Claire than he let himself think? “That is not what I’m saying” Alex finally said. “But it’s exactly what you are saying mate. Her happiness isn’t for you to judge” Nick answered him in a harsh way. “God mate.” Alex said and got up from the bench, feeling rather irritated. “He lied to her about his wife and you think she deserves to be around a man like that?” “No, but it’s not for me to judge her decision. Claire is a friend of mine, and all that’s important is for her to be happy. If you can’t handle it, you should have acted on your feelings a long time ago” Nick said and walked away from Alex. Act on my feelings? “What do you mean with that?” he asked to his brothers back. Nick turned around and a small but confident laugh found it’s way out - he looked at Alex and shook his head. Was he really this much in denial. He disappeared into the house and Alex was left alone outside. He was confused and the feeling of losing Claire - as a mate, suddenly hit him, harder than he expected. This wasn’t worth fighting over, Claire had always been his mate. He couldn’t imagine it any other way. He kicked the tire on his ute in anger of what he had just did, Claire would never forgive him for it. He knew how much the horse training meant to Claire - What a absolutely moron of a friend he had been. Nick was right - Claire’s happiness weren’t for Alex to judge, he should support her. Even if it meant he had to tolerate Peter. He needed to talk to Claire but what would he say? He couldn’t say anything that would make up for his actions. No, the best thing he could do right now was letting Claire get some space and maybe tomorrow they could talk about what a lousy friend he had been.

It was the first night with Peter, but Claire couldn’t sleep with him in the room - It didn’t feel right. She had made her way over to the armchair in the other end of the room, and was crawled up in a blanket. She looked at the bed where Peter was asleep and closed her eyes. God, she couldn’t stand to be near him. The light from the moon and stars reflected in Claire’s face and a small line of light crossed the floor. She opened her eyes once again and started into the dark. She wondered when and where they would get married, would his kids be there? Well, of course they would. She sighed. This was all getting too much for her.

She got out of the blanket and walked to the window. The stars were so bright tonight and the moon lit everything up making the fields glow in moonshine - For a moment of happiness filled her body. The marriage to Peter was the only way to keep Drover’s. She couldn’t just give up on it, it had always been her life and she sure wanted to keep it that way. But the happiness soon got replaced with the hate she had build up towards him. She hated him for putting her in this situation - Why couldn’t he just have turned in the letter. What did he accomplished with all this. She shook her head. She knew. He wanted her, he had always wanted her and he didn’t let anything get in the way of that. Her eyes started to tear up - This wasn't the life she wanted, but how could she get out of it without losing Drover's. She closed her eyes. She couldn't get out of this one, it would be impossible, Peter would take it all away with a blink of an eye if she tried.

She startled when Peter mumbled something in his sleep and rolled to the other side. She had been caught in her own thought about the time they were happy together. At the time she felt like she had found her soulmate, the man she was going to live the rest of her life with, but then everything had been turned upside down. She couldn't be in this room anymore, she needed to get some air, to clear her thoughts. She walked outside and grabbed a chair on the porch. Her whole body was shivering and and she finally broke down, this was not her life, it couldn't be. She sobbed into her hands and couldn't stop the emotions, she had kept inside from finally coming out. She needed to get out of this, it was the first night with him here and she already felt disgusted. She couldn't spend another night with him. Time passed by quickly and before she knew it, daylight slowly crawled its way over the hills, leaving everything in a beautiful orange colour. She looked out on the land that surrounded her and she got to think about Alex. She couldn’t believe how he had
reacted. She was a bit angry with him, he was supposed to be her friend - best friend, and she couldn’t even count on him. She shook her head, this was stupid. She needed to see him, she needed to try and talk some sense into him.

Peter was still asleep when she got back to the bedroom, so she quietly found some clothes and put it on before going to the stables. She saddled up Eagle and rode out into the sunrise. It would have been a perfect morning for a ride, but this morning she could think of anything else, then she needed to fix things with Alex. As she got to Wilgul she dismounted Eagle and dried the tears away, that had found it’s way to her eyes. Nick came in sight in the door. He opened it wearing his PJ's. They were green with red shapes and both top and bottom matched - She had never thought of him as the PJ type of guy. "To what do we owe the honor of this fine visit this early?" He joked. She tried to laugh, but it didn’t got out very convincing. Nick walked closer to her with a worried look in his eyes. "You ok?" He asked.

Claire didn’t knew how to answer that question. She wasn’t okay, she was far from okay - but she couldn’t tell him that. Suddenly a voice behind Nick reached her ear. "What are you doing here?" it was Alex, he was standing in the door with his arms crossed. He looked rather pissed. This is going to be harder than I thought.

Alex walked towards her and Nick. "I'll let you two talk" Nick said and walked back to the house. They didn’t say anything, they just looked at each other - none of them knew what to say or how to begin. They had these amazing plans together and now they were hanging on a thin leash. Alex could clearly see she was upset and he immediately regretted how he had acted yesterday - well almost, he still stood his ground on working with her as long as Peter was around. He could simply not do it.

"Claire” he said and took a deep breath. It pained him to see her this upset. “Look. I’m sorry about yesterday” he looked at her. “Yeah. Yeah, me too” She said and her eyes reached his. “I’ve been an awful friend. If you want to marry Peter, you should”. She was caught by surprise by that comment - This was not what she had expected to hear from him. He recognized her confused look and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Look. I still think the man is a total knob and I don’t approve of him. But if you really want to marry him, I won’t be standing in your way. Heck. I could even give you away?” he laughed at his last comment. Give me away?! Her eyes got big, where was all this coming from?

She couldn't believe her own ears - how did he go from the anger he was feeling yesterday to how he was acting this morning. What had happened to him? She closed her eyes for a second. She didn’t want Alex to give her away, she didn't want to get married at all! She was kinda hoping that Alex would talk her out of this. She was desperate to tell him what was going on, to explain the reasons behind her choice. But she couldn't - Alex would go mad, she had seen what happened yesterday. “Look Claire, all I want is for you to be happy.” He snapped her out of her thoughts. “And if it means that you have to be with that, that, heck, I don't even know how to define him! If you have to be with Peter to be happy, I won't be standing in your way. But I can't work with you any longer. I’m sorry.” His words left her surprised and really sad. Working with Alex was the best thing that had happened to her in a while, but she was happy that at least she wasn't losing her best friend in all this madness. “I can't say that I’m happy with your decision, Alex, but I’m glad that we worked it out.” She answered looking him in the eyes. She was sure that she could see the same sadness she was feeling, reflected in his eyes. “I'll see you around.” She told him and made her way to her horse and rode back to Drover's.

Peter came to greet Claire, as she walked out of the stables back at Drover’s. Even his presence made her feel sick, but she had to put on a happy face. “Where have you been?” he asked her and smiled, as he came closer to her. She walked towards him, didn’t even felt like involving him in her whereabouts. “I’ve just been out on a ride. Couldn’t sleep, and the sunrise is always beautiful.” she said and moved her foot around in the ground. Peter grabbed her around her waist and kissed her - it caught her off guard and she couldn’t help but freeze until he pulled himself away from her. “I missed you when I woke” he said and took her hand in his. Claire couldn’t say anything, she was
still in a state of shock from the kiss - when they first got together, his kisses used to make her legs wobbly as jelly. But now she only felt disgusted by them. She smiled at him as they walked back to the house, hand in hand.

“We should set a date” he said as they entered the room. Already?
She wasn’t ready to marry him this soon. “I have some business in Queensland, it’s going to take some days - so I really want to set a date for the wedding, for when I get home” he said and pulled out a chair. Tess walked in the kitchen, she could feel the tension Claire’s body showed. “What is going on?” Tess asked and kept looking at her sister. “We are just setting a date for the wedding” Peter answered and poured a cup of coffee to himself. Claire was still speechless. This was really happening.

“I’ll have to leave for about two weeks, so we could get married july 8th? It’s a week after I get back, should be plenty of time to get things done” he said and looked at Claire. “We don’t want a fancy wedding anyway. You and me are the ones that matter on the day anyway”. Claire looked at him. No she didn’t want a fancy wedding with him, she didn’t want to marry him at all. “Claire?” he said and got her out of her thoughts. “Erh, no. It’s perfect” she said and finally sat down. She tried to look happy, but her facial expressions failed her - Luckily Peter was too blind to see it. The others walked in and were eager to get their breakfast before heading out. Their voices faded out in Claire’s mind, she couldn’t think and she couldn’t speak. All she wanted to do was burst out in tears and tell Peter he could forget about everything. A warm gentle hand found it’s way to her’s. She looked up and saw Tess - she sent her a messages with her eyes, begging her to end her suffering.

Tess clearly saw her sister was in pain, but what could she do - Claire had decided to marry Peter, the wedding was bound to happen sooner or later. “We are getting married july 8th” Peter said and Claire snapped out of her own miserable thoughts. “What, that’s just around the corner” Jodi said and almost dropped her knife. “We need to throw a bachelorette party then” she continued - she looked too eager in Claire’s opinion. “That’s really not necessary” she said and begged Tess to help her talk Jodi out of it.

“We have a lot of work Jodes, we don’t have time to do something big” Tess said and smiled to her sister. “Nonsense” Peter said “You need to celebrate. It would do you good.” Claire looked at him - he didn’t know the first thing about what would do her good, if he did he wouldn’t be here. “It’s decided then” Jodi said took a bite of her toast. Claire sighed for herself, everything just became much more real - she couldn’t believe it.
Chapter 3

It was the morning on Peter’s trip to Queensland. It was the beginning of two weeks, without Peter and without the guilty feeling that overcame Claire’s body each day. Even if it was just for a couple of weeks, she finally felt like she could breathe again. She was standing in front of the house with her arms crossed, she was smiling at the thought of him leaving - it was a minor detail that he would be coming back, but she tried not to think about it. The last couple of days had turned her life upside down and she was beginning to doubt, if she could continue to keep up with the lies. She found comfort in the thought of her sister. At least Tess was there. Tess knew the whole truth and Claire knew she could support her, in any way possible. Claire watched Peter’s car disappear down the road. She took a deep breath and made her way to the horses’ ring. Her heart ached when she found it empty. Horses were her life, and training them her dream. And now she had lost it again - But an opportunity had presented itself. Peter had offered her to start working with Australian Bloodline again, and that could might as well be that spark of hope, that glimpse of light in the darkness, that she needed. She stopped for a second, overlooking the ring. She thought about when her and Peter had first started to work together, how wonderful her life had been back then. A quick thought wandered her mind. Maybe I could learn to live with Peter. Maybe, just maybe there could be a chance for us, a chance of finding happiness down the line. Maybe he was actually trying to do the right thing, maybe he did care for me - maybe he regretted what he had put me through?

She hated herself a little more for thinking those thoughts, she couldn’t allow herself to fall back into his grip after all he had put her through. She shook her head and decided that pondering on what could be, would do her no good - getting started on the chores for the day would keep her mind of things and was a lot more productive. Claire was dreading the following day. Jodi had set her mind on organising her bachelorette party, but Claire wasn’t in a party mood at all. Yes, work was indeed the only thing I would love to keep busy with right now.

Alex was still having mixed feelings about what had happened with Claire and their business. Had he really done the right thing? Now they didn’t have the training to do, he had felt a little distance between them and that was a new feeling for him. He had got a lot more free time, and he hadn’t really talked to Claire after the morning she came over - so to keep himself busy and to prevent the process of overthinking from starting, he decided to head over to Killarney after breakfast, to see if he could help Harry with something. There wasn’t too much to do around Wilgul anyway, since Nick and Tess were too busy with the organic wheat. The drive to Killarney was short, Alex hadn’t even noticed that he was already pulling up in front of the house. His mind had still been occupied with thoughts about Claire. C’mon Alex, get a grip! Why are you still thinking about her? She’s your friend, and she deserves to be happy. But is she really happy? The other day her eyes told a complete different story from what her mouth did. Oh Claire, if only you would say that you need help! Alex wasn’t liking where his thoughts were going, so he quickly made his way to the house. He had decided to go in from the back of the house since it was still early in the morning and he thought his parents were still having breakfast outside, as they always did when both Nick and him were still living at home. But he was wrong, there was no sight of Harry or Liz in the back garden, so he kept walking to the house, while he was approaching the pool, he saw that his mother was sitting there alone. He didn’t think much of it, as it wasn’t something of unusual, but as he got closer, he could hear her sobs. What’s going on? “Mom?” Alex asked as he run the distance between him and his mother. He knelt down beside where she was sitting. “Mom? What’s wrong?” He tried again, but Liz wasn’t answering. It pained him to see his mother in such condition. What the hell is going on? “Would you please tell me why you are crying?” Alex inquired again, but he still hadn’t received an answer. “Alex…” Said Liz weakly, if Alex hadn’t been kneeling beside her, he wouldn’t even have heard it. “I’m sorry.” She
added before bursting out in tears once again. Alex didn’t understand what was going on. He got up and marched inside the house, he couldn’t believe his own eyes when he saw the living room. What on earth happened here?! There were smashed plates on the floor, a food tray had been thrown against the back of a couch. It was like a tornado had just gone through the room. “Dad!” He shouted. “Dad! What happened?” Alex heard something smash in Harry’s office and headed there. Harry was sitting at his desk, drinking. He seemed furious. “Dad?” Alex asked again. “Don’t call me that!” Was Harry’s harsh answer. Alex couldn’t understand. Had he done something that he didn’t know about? The last time he had seen Harry in that condition was after Nick’s accident. But Nick was safe now, he had seen him only an hour ago. So what had happened? “Don’t you dare call me that! I’M NOT YOUR FATHER!” Harry shouted and threw the glass he was holding against the wall near where Alex was standing. Alex froze. He couldn’t believe what he just heard. He was waiting for Harry to start laughing, to tell him he was joking. But Harry wasn’t that type of man, he’s not a joker. “What…” Alex tried to speak, but he had nothing to say. What was there to say? “Your mother was already pregnant when we got married. But not to me. I’m not your father, Alex.” Harry said almost too calmly. Harry’s words were painful for him to hear. Harry’s not my father. “Alex.” He heard a feminine voice behind him. He turned around and blinked fastly to clear the tears from his eyes. Liz was standing in front of him. Her eyes puffy and red, her voice hoarse from all the crying she had done. Earlier it had pained him seeing his mother cry, but now he could only feel one thing towards the woman that was standing in front of him - anger. She had lied to him, to everyone for 30 years. His whole life was a lie. Alex felt like he couldn’t breath, he turned around and looked at Harry again. The man was devastated. He was a victim in this as much as Alex was. He couldn’t stand being in their presence any longer. He ran outside the house and to his Ute. Angry tears were still forming in his eyes and they prevented him to see properly. But he didn’t needed to see to know where he was going. He knew the road out of Killarney by heart, he had drove in it so many times. He stopped and got out of his Ute when he reached the gate. The Killarney sign caught his eyes. “H.J Ryan & Sons” Hammer in hand, he started attacking the sign. It was a lie. It was all a big lie. After he had smashed the sign, he got back in his Ute and drove off, leaving a big cloud of smoke behind himself.

Alex had been driving aimlessly for the past hour, he didn’t have anywhere to go, or to better say anywhere he wanted to go. Well that wasn’t exactly true, he knew where he wanted to go and who he wanted to see now. Claire. She was the only person he wanted to see right now, but he knew too well that it wasn’t possible, so he just resorted in going to the Gungellan Pub to drown his sorrows in alcohol.

“Come on Claire. You are taking forever, you are going to be late for your own bachelorette party” Jodi shouted to Claire from the veggie patch. “Look, the windmill needed to get fixed - water for the animals is a bit more important than a stupid party” Claire said and dried her oily hands off in her shirt. Jodi panicked when she saw it. “No. No, tell me that just didn’t happen” she said and was about to give up on the whole party. Claire looked confused at her - oh the oil. “Relax will ya’? I have plenty of other clothes to wear” Claire said and started to walk back to the house. Yes, work clothes Claire. Not party clothes. Jodi followed her back to the house. “Tess, can you please say something to her?” Jodi asked in a hopeless way and planted herself on a chair in the kitchen. They were all ready, only waiting for Claire to fix the windmill as she had insisted on doing before driving to Gungellan. A small laugh got out of Meg and Becky’s mouths - they didn’t know anyone who could mess up clothes like Claire.

Claire was already out of the kitchen and on her way to her room, before Tess or any of the others could say anything to her. Stupid party. I don’t even want to go - but it would be good to forget about Peter for a while.

She looked through her closet and didn’t find any suitable clothes for the night ahead. She only had one dress, a long beautiful red dress - she wore it when she had to attend something fancy. But the dress reminded her of Peter now, the last time she had worn it was to the Miss. Gungellan ball. Jodi had entered a year ago. Who was she kidding? She wouldn’t find anything in her closet, that would
fit the description of what to wear on a bachelorette party. “Tess, can you come up here?” she shouted down the stairs. She definitely needed help from her sister, if she were to find anything to wear.

Tess walked in to see a huge mess of clothes on Claire’s bed. Even though her sister wasn’t the girly girl type of person, it was nice to see she had a bit of “What am I going to wear” in her. Made her look a bit more feminine. “I have nothing to wear” Claire sat and placed herself on the edge of the bed with a loud sigh. Tess got the feeling that was more to it, than Claire’s lack of clothes. “You sure you okay?” she asked and placed herself beside Claire. “You’ve been working like crazy - more than you normally do, the past days”. Claire looked at Tess with a empty look on her face. “It’s really happening, isn’t it?” Claire asked her sister. Tess placed a comforting hand on her leg - she didn’t knew what to say, to make it better for her.

“I have the perfect dress for you” Tess said, trying to distract her sister's thoughts. She came back with a small, tight black dress. “I can’t wear that” Claire said and looked a bit scared. What would people think if they saw me in something like that. “Just try it on, will you? We’ll be waiting for you in the kitchen” Tess said and walked out of her room.

Claire stood a couple of minutes in front of her mirror - the dress was beautiful, but on her. She felt very insecure about it, she wasn’t used to these type of dresses - or to any kind of dresses for that matter. She studied herself in the front and back. The dress stopped at the middle of her thighs, it was tight and it really showed of her body. Well, I might as well keep it on. She wasn’t going to admit she looked good in it.

“Wow Claire. You look really good” Jodi said as Claire got back to the kitchen. Tess smiled, she knew Claire would wear the dress beautifully. “Come on, time to go” Jodi hurried, before some of the others could say anything.

As they got to the pub, Claire began to feel a bit overdressed. They were all staring at them, at her, when they went inside. “Maybe I should go change” Claire said to Tess. “No way, you look good” her sister answered back. They found themselves a table before Meg and Tess went to the bar, to order drinks for the group.

“Stop messing with your hair” Jodi said and gently pulled Claire’s arm away. Claire leant back in the chair with arms crossed, she sure didn’t like being told what to do or what she shouldn’t be doing. Tess and Meg got back with drinks for them all. “Dig in” Meg said and pulled her chair out. “Shouldn’t one of us be drinking water or something?” Claire asked. “Why? We have rooms for tonight” Tess said and took a huge sip of her drink. “Rooms? Are we sleeping here?” Claire hissed. She hadn’t planned on spending the night here. “Come on. Lighten up will you” Tess said and studied the dancefloor. “Oh by the way. We just saw Alex, he looked pretty upset and drunk would be a good word to add as well” Meg said. Claire’s eyes got big, why was he upset?

Alex had studied her from afar all night. Seeing her in that dress was doing things to him, things he wouldn’t even admit to himself he was feeling for his best mate! But he couldn’t help it, Claire was gorgeous in that dress, not that she wasn’t every other day. He ordered another beer as he watched her chat with the others. He couldn’t stand this any longer. All the emotions he was feeling before of what he had discovered just a couple of hours ago, and the things Claire was doing to him were too much. He took his bottle and unsteadily made his way outside of the pub. He found an empty bench and sat down.

Knowing that Alex was there, that he too had seen her wearing that dress, made Claire uncomfortable. She grabbed one of the drinks Meg and Tess had brought to their table and took a big sip. She needed alcohol to relax. After that first drink, the others started going down like water, and soon enough Claire felt the need of using a bathroom. She excused herself from the others and, on unsteady feet she made her way to the toilettes. On her way out of the toilettes, she saw him through the window. Alex was sitting outside alone, clutching a bottle of beer in his hands. “He looked pretty upset” Claire remembered Meg’s words. I should check on him. Ignoring the calls she got from the other men in the pub, she exited the building and joined Alex on the bench. “Oi, mate” She greeted him. He looked at her but said nothing, she held his gaze and could see sadness
in his eyes. “You okay?” She asked him. “It’s all bullshit Claire” He said. She didn’t understand what he was referring to, and as she was about to ask him, he spoke again. “It’s all bullshit. None of the things in my life are real. I’m not a Ryan.” Even in his state of drunkenness he could see the puzzled look on Claire’s face. “Harry is not my father. Mum lied to all of us for 30 years.” He explained. Claire didn’t know what to say, is there a right thing to say in a situation like this? Probably not. So she decided to let actions speak for her, in an attempt of comforting Alex, she placed her hand on his knee. In response, Alex placed his hand on top of hers, squeezing it slightly, as to say that he understood what she was trying to do. They sat like that for a couple of minutes before Alex spoke again. “I love you Claire. More than the chopper.” He tilted his head to look at her. An amused grin started spreading across her face and she couldn’t help the soft laugh that escaped her lips seconds later. “Yeah righto” She said, she knew that Alex was drunk and that he didn’t know what he was talking about. “I’m serious Claire. You are the only thing in my life that is not bullshit.” He stared at her before leaning in to kiss her. The kiss was short, because both of them were surprised by it. But Alex was even more surprised when Claire kissed him again. This time they both took their time in exploring each other mouths. Claire was the first one to pull away once again, what was she doing? She was kissing Alex Ryan. Her best mate. This was wrong. But it felt really good at the same time. Alex decided to take things in his own hands. He got up from the bench and helped Claire on her feet. He wanted her, but was not going to do anything in front of the whole town. Besides, he wasn’t sure where Claire stood in this as well, so it took him by surprise when she told him she had a room booked. For a brief second Claire sobered up and started questioning her actions - but the soberness and logical thinking disappeared as soon as it had appeared, when Alex took her hand.

They made their way back inside the pub, that contained a lot more people now than when Claire had been inside. She draw a quick look at the table where the girls were sitting - Luckily for them no one was paying attention to the door and to the people that were coming in and out of it. They were able to sneak up to the rooms unnoticed. As soon as they were sure they were alone, Claire kissed Alex again, which resulted in some difficulties in getting the door to the room opened. As soon as they both got inside, Alex pulled Claire to his body again, craving to feel her skin under his hands, and kissed her once more. This kiss was different to the others, it was more urgent and intense, and it left Claire overwhelmed. She could feel her legs turning into jelly, and not sure they would support her much longer, she took a few steps back searching for the bed. Due to her incapability of pulling away from Alex, she took him down on top of her when she got on the bed. Claire was passed out and he was sitting on the bed next to her. His mind was producing a million of thoughts all together, resulting in a headache. Deciding he needed fresh air, and another beer, Alex got dressed and left the room.

“Come on, up we get” she heard someone shout. Or at least it felt like that. A bright light hit her closed eyes and her head started to pound. She covered herself in the sheet, pulled it over her head and hoped for the annoying voice to disappear. “Can’t you talk a little quieter?” Claire asked and peaked out from under the sheets. “Rough night?” Tess asked and jumped to her side, making her stomach twist a few times. “Where did you go last night? We didn’t see you after you went to the bathroom” Tess said, still looking at Claire. “I can’t remember much - I don’t even know how I got back here” she said and looked around in the room. This was so unlike Claire, it kinda freaked her out a bit - usually she didn’t drink, at least not to the point where she couldn’t remember anything. “We should head home soon” Tess said and got up from the bed. “Look at you, bossing me around for a change” Claire said. Tess laughed at her sister. Claire made her way out of the bed. “I just need a quick shower, then I’m ready” she said and walked to the bathroom. She hadn’t brought any other clothes so she was forced to put on the dress again, before making her way downstairs to Tess and the others.

The others had already ordered their breakfast when she joined them at the table. The smell of food made her want to throw up - maybe she shouldn’t have drunk that much last night. But it was so
good to get Peter of her mind, even if it was just for a couple of hours.

“You look like crap” Becky said as she saw Claire. “Feel like crap as well” Claire said and took a huge sip of the water in front of her.

After they had finished breakfast they made their way to the ute outside, it was time to get back to Drover’s and catch up with the work they had missed out on. Claire looked to her left as she walked out of the pub. Alex - what was he still doing here? She remembered bumping into him last night.

“How you feeling mate?” she pushed his leg down from the bench. He woke with a startled feeling. “Claire?” he said with small eyes. “You ok?” she asked him. He looked at her, knowing she was referring to the fact Harry wasn’t his father. He took a deep breath and got up - he was still unsteady on his feet, so Claire had to place a hand on his shoulder to help him find his balance. “I will be” he said and walked past her. His shoulder grazed Claire’s, and a weird feeling appeared inside of her.

“Call me if you need anything” Claire shouted to his back. He lifted his hand to let her know he had heard her. Claire stood in her own thought for a moment before heading back to the ute. Something was different, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. She shook the thought out of her head and smiled to the others as she approached them. “What’s with him?” Meg asked. “Something with Harry” she couldn’t tell them what really went on in the Ryan family. “They’ll work it out with time” she said and started the ute.

“I’m so gonna need a nap” Jodi said as soon as they all were gathered in the kitchen. “Forget about that, I need you and Becky to clean the troughs” Claire said - she didn’t exactly feel the best herself, but there was too much work that has to be done, there simply was no time to rest.

“Besides, this was your idea.” Jodi sighed and sent Claire a discontented look before walking out of the kitchen. “Right, I go check the fences then” Tess said and followed Jodi and Becky.

The phone rang in the study as Claire was on her way out. “Drover’s Run, Claire speaking” her body froze when she heard his voice, it was Peter - She had managed to forget about him for a short amount of time, and it had left her with the greatest feeling inside. “Wait, what happened?” she asked in a worried voice. Meg came in sight in the doorway. “No no, stay. I understand. Yes I’ll tell everyone” she said and ended the call. “What was that all about?” Meg asked. Claire looked at her, she was genuinely concerned. “It was Peter, his daughter is in the hospital” Meg’s eyes got big and she took a step into the study. “Oh no. Is it serious?” Claire shook her head. “Does this mean you will have to postpone the wedding?” Meg sent her a comforting smile. “I don’t really know. They wanted to keep her at the hospital a few weeks and Peter didn’t feel he could leave her side” Meg sent her a comforting smile. “Does this mean you will have to postpone the wedding?” Claire nodded, didn’t feel the need to answer her with words. Claire placed herself on the edge of desk and took her hand to her face - this was good news, really good news. Well apart from Nathalie being in the hospital of course. “I’m sorry Claire. But you can still get married when he is back. No need to rush anyway” Meg said. If she only knew, Claire thought to herself. “Yeah, yeah. You are right” Claire said, trying to sound confident.

Meg took another look at Claire before leaving the study. She still felt something was wrong, she was sure Claire hadn’t told them everything - She was too calm about the news from Peter, she almost looked relieved.
Chapter 4

It was a beautiful morning, the sun brightened up the fields and paddocks that surrounded Drover’s and the sky was clear blue. She didn’t know how long she had been admiring it, before she got snapped out of her thoughts by Becky and Jodi. She looked back as she could hear them talk about Craig, on their way to the house. She closed her eyes one last time and breathed in the fresh air and let herself feel the warm from the sun on her face.

She hadn’t been talking to Peter for the last week but Natalie had improved last time they spoke - but he still wasn't ready to leave her side. If everything had went according to plan, he would have been home three weeks ago, and she would have been married by now. She thanked God for putting obstacles ahead of the wedding. She couldn’t bare the thought to marry him. She took a deep breath and made her way to the kitchen, she wasn't't feeling hungry - she hadn’t been feeling hungry the last couple of days. But some coffee would do her good right now.

“But do you think he likes me or like like me” she heard Jodi ask. “Jodi I don’t know. Why don’t you just ask him?” Becky answered her in an irritated way. She had been on about Craig for a week now, driving everybody mad with questions.

“Morning all” Claire said and pulled out her usually chair by the table. They all greeted her with a morning and continued with what they were doing, before she had interrupted them. “Claire can I take the tractor to Wilgul later, Nick’s is catus and we need to clear the fields for the organic wheat” Tess asked and poured herself a glass of orange juice. “Sure, knock yourself out” she said.

“Okay, food is ready” Meg said and took the sausage pan to the table. “Oh lovely” Jodi said and dug right in.

Claire suddenly felt very uncomfortable by the smell of the bacon and she could feel herself turning pale by the thought of throwing up. She took her hand to her mouth and tried to cover her nose at the same time. “Are you okay Claire?” Meg asked her with a worried voice. Claire nodded, unable to speak in the fear of feeling more sick by the smell.

“You look a bit pale” Meg continued. The others looked at her, agreeing with Meg. “I” she stopped herself and got up from the chair to get away from the smell and sight of bacon. “I just got hit by a sudden nausea” she said and took some deep breaths over the sink.

“It must be the heat” Meg said and walked to her - put a hand on her head. “You don’t feel warm - it’s probably just dehydration” Meg concluded. Claire nodded her head, agreeing with her. Meg kept studying Claire, there was something about her sickness - She had her thoughts about it, but wouldn’t say anything in front of the others.

“Oh Claire wait a minute” Meg called her back as she was on her way out of the kitchen. The others were already gone and Claire really didn’t think she had the time to waste, on talking with Meg this morning. “Make it quick. I want to round up some sheeps before it gets too hot” Claire hurried her. Meg wasn’t sure on how to spill her thoughts out, she had trouble constructing an useful and meaningful sentence - Claire looked at her with a face that eagered her to hurry up.

“Look, it’s just. I’ve ..” Meg stopped, wasn’t really sure on how Claire would react. “Meg, I don’t have time for this. Spill it out”. “I’ve noticed you’ve been off your food lately” she finally said. Claire gazed at her with suspicious eyes - And so what if she had, was it really such a big deal to discuss this now?! “Yes well, there have been a lot of stuff. Peter, the wedding and his daughter in the hospital” Claire said. She knew that all that hadn't caused her any problems with eating, but it was logical to think. “I don’t think it’s just due to the stress” Meg finally said and walked closer to Claire and placed her hand on her arm. Claire looked at Meg’s hand and then and her - She was acting really weird. “I think you may be pregnant”. Her eyes got big and she shook her head like as she hadn’t heard or didn’t understood what Meg had just told her. She then got out a small nervous laugh. “No you are wrong, I can’t be pregnant” Claire said. Meg stroke her arm and sent her a comforting smile - “Just take a test. To be sure” Meg said and patted Claire’s arm before leaving the kitchen.
Meg had left claire with a million thoughts in her head. She knew she couldn’t be pregnant but she still froze by the thought of it. Impossible, I haven’t slept with Peter since .. before we called it of. She didn’t understand why she was getting nervous by the thought of it, she was a 100% sure she wasn’t pregnant, but it couldn’t hurt to take a test - could it?

Claire went on doing her work for the day, but what Meg had told her was constantly at the back of her mind. There was no way she could be pregnant, because pregnancies didn't just happen like that, without sex. And she hadn't slept with Peter - or with anyone else for that matter - in a really long time. And even when she did have had sex with Peter, they had always been careful. But then again, a pregnancy could explain the sickness she had been feeling the past couple of days, especially in the morning. She tried to set her mind back on the sheep. Damnit, Claire, get yourself together! She thought to herself. But she had to know for sure if she was expecting a child or not.

So she decided that after lunch, she would drive to the town to buy a pregnancy test. The only thought of a possible child with Peter made her shiver.

She had never eaten lunch or drove to Gungellan that fast. But she was really impatient, it all seemed so absurd to her. She tentatively entered the pharmacy and, with shaking hands picked up a pregnancy test, paid for it and returned to her Ute. She couldn't wait to get back to Drover's, so she decided to find a toilet to take the test. Gungellan isn't a big city so she didn't really have a big choice in where to go. The hotel’s bathrooms are cleaner. With that thought in mind she drove herself to the Gungellan Hotel and entered it. She was glad to find it rather quiet, there weren't many people in there at that time of the day. She ordered herself a drink and took place at one of the tables, waiting for her bladder to be full. The small box inside her pocket seemed so heavy, not really for it’s physical weight but for what it symbolised. She got up from the chair and headed for the bathrooms. Once again she was glad to find them empty. After she had peed on the stick, the waiting game began. Why do they make them this slow? 5 minutes is an eternity!

After the 5 minutes were over, she picked the stick up from the sink she had layed it on, and took a look at it. There was a big plus staring back at her. It's positive. I am pregnant. She quickly stuffed it back in her pocket and threw away the package in the bin next to the sinks, and after washing her hands, she exited the toilets. Claire's heart was heavy. She was pregnant and she couldn't understand how it had happened. It's been months since her and Peter had been intimate, so the baby couldn't be his. Who was the father then? She wasn't the type of person to sleep around, and she would remember if she actually had slept with someone. She was caught so deep in her thoughts that she wasn't paying attention to where she was walking. Suddenly she collided with something - or better with someone. Strong arms found their way around her to keep her from falling in her bum. “Careful, Claire.” Alex’s voice reached her ears as if it was coming from thousand meters underground. Alex! She suddenly remembered. The morning after her bachelorette party she had woken up in her bed but she had no idea on how she had gotten in there or what she had done that night. The only thing she remembered was talking to Alex. And it was only now, now that Alex’s hands were placed on her sides, that she remembered. She had kissed Alex. He had told her that he loved her more than his chopper. And they were in her bedroom, on her bed. They were kissing and touching each other, trying to claim every inch of skin on the other person’s’ body. She had had sex with Alex Ryan! Her best mate Alex. What have I done? “Claire? You alright mate?” Alex brought her back from her thoughts. He wasn't holding her any longer, instead one of his hands was placed on one of her shoulders and he was looking at her in concern. He doesn't remember. I didn't remember either.

She kept staring at him, how could they let this happen? As if her life wasn’t complicated enough, this had to happen. “Hello, Claire - You there?” Alex said. She snapped out of her thoughts and shook her head. “Yeah. I need to go” she said and hurried away from Alex’ grip, she couldn’t face him, not now. She hurried into the ute, she wanted to drive away, far away from the truth that just presented itself. It wasn’t like she didn’t fancied Alex, she did - a bit too much sometimes, but they had been friends for ages, best mates and nothing more. Although she had to admit she had felt jealous, that time Tess and Alex had something together, okay maybe she had been more than jealous, but - Her and Alex had never been a real option for her, thought about, yes. She shook her
head. What is happening to my life. She sobbed into her hands, hoping no one would see her and make their way to the ute.

She parked the ute and got out quickly when she returned to Drover’s. Tess, I need to find Tess. Her hands were shaking and she couldn’t remember half of the way back. She walked with hasty steps towards the house, didn’t notice her surroundings - she didn’t even notice Meg calling her name from the stables, her mind was in a complete mess. “Claire?” Meg shouted at her as she was running towards her. “Tess. Have you seen Tess?” Claire asked. Meg could see she was out of herself “What’s wrong Claire?”

She kept walking around in circles and shook her head, trying to make sense of it all. “N-n-nothing. I need to see Tess”

“She’s at Wilgul remember? Her and Nick are clearing the field for the wheat”. Right, of course. She knew she needed to act fast in order to keep Meg, from figuring out what was going on and she sure didn’t want any question - because she wouldn’t be able to answer them. She gathered her thoughts and toughed it up. “I’m fine, just really needed to see Tess. I’ll be in the study” she said and started to walk again. At least she could be alone in there.

She pulled out the desk chair and sighed. What was she going to do? She couldn’t tell Alex about the baby, she couldn’t risk losing him as a mate. If he ever finds out we slept together, it will be the end of our friendship - She was sure Alex didn’t feel anything for her, other than friendly feelings. And the fact that they had slept together might be too awkward and a thing he might wouldn’t be able to get over, she didn’t even knew if she could. No, she had to pretend it was Peter’s. She stopped her thought - That would mean she had to sleep with him. She started to cry, she couldn’t do that.

The phone interrupted her thoughts and cry. She dried the tears away and tried to sound as if, she hadn’t just been crying. “Drover’s Run” she said. “Peter. Hey” she hurried up from the chair. “Tomorrow? That’s .. wonderful” she covered her mouth with her hand, he had just told her he would be back tomorrow and all she wanted to do was cry. “What bad news?” she took the phone in her hand and walked around the desk. “The letter? So, they got it?” she stopped - did he just say he had handed in the letter to the board of Australian Bloodlines?

She almost dropped the phone when she hung up on Peter. He had actually handed in the letter to the board, she didn’t know what to think. She was in shock. He had told they had to fire him because of his action, they had made them doubt his loyalty and he couldn’t work with clients like that - she didn’t even care, he deserved everything he got. She slowly felt like she could breath again, taste the freedom she had been lacking for the last couple of months. She managed to forget about the pregnancy and Alex for a moment, this was big - like really big. It meant she didn’t had to marry Peter, that she could tell him to pack up his things and get off her property as soon, as he got back tomorrow. Now she really needed to find Tess.

Tess and Nick had just finished the day’s work and was sitting outside on the veranda, at Wilgul. “Urgh, how much longer will we have to do this?” Tess asked and took a large sip of her iced water. “Clearing a whole field isn’t easy - But I reckon we can be done within a couple of days”. She looked at him and almost collapsed by the thought of the work that was in store for them. “Well, I can’t wait to get home and take a loooong hot bath” Tess said and placed her feet on the chair in front of her. Nick laughed at her, she sure wasn’t all that used to hard work - huge different between her and Claire.

Tess could hear someone calling her name from afar. She turned her head and saw Claire on Eagle, approaching them in high speed. What had happened?

“What’s up with her?” Nick asked and looked just as worried as Tess. “I don’t know” she answered and got up from the chair to meet her sister. Wait, she is smiling?

“I need to talk to you” Claire said and dismounted Eagle. Well, it must be important since she rode all the way to Wilgul. “Peter called” she could see the eager in Claire’s face. “And?” Tess asked, longing for her continue. “He handed in the letter” Claire said and made sure Nick was out of reach to hear the news. “Omg. That’s - does that mean .. “
“Yep” Claire said before Tess could finish her sentence. “Argh, that’s great Claire” Tess almost screamed, hugging her sister.

Claire laughed into Tess’ shoulder and felt truly blessed in this moment. But her happiness soon got replaced with fear and the fact she was pregnant with Alex’ child. She really needed to talk to Tess about this. She pulled herself away from her and Tess immediately noticed the change in Claire’s mood. “There is more” Claire said silently. “More?” Tess’ looked surprised at her “I can’t take another news about Peter” she said. Claire shook her head, about to tell her Alex’ name when she saw Nick walk towards them. She couldn’t say anything now - Tess picked up on her sister’s silence and got the messages at once. “We talk when we get home?” she asked before Nick stood beside her.

Claire nodded to her sister and sent Nick a smile. “G’day mate” she said and stroke Eagles mane, not knowing what to say - he surely wanted to know why she was in such a rush to speak with her sister. “Claire just wanted to let me know, that Becky needs the tractor - So if you can bring it over as soon as you are done?” Tess said and looked at Nick. “Yeah sure thing, we are done for the day anyway. We can head back to Drover’s now”

“Sounds good, see you there” Claire said and mounted Eagle again.

“You are what?!” Tess shouted when Claire told her she was pregnant. Claire sent her a strict look and hissed at her. “Can you keep it quiet, jesus - I don’t want the others to hear anything” she placed herself on a chair at the dining table. Tess looked around to make sure none of the others was near. “How far along are you?” Tess asked and joined her sister at the table. “I don’t know, 2 weeks, 3 weeks - I just found out” Claire looked nervously around the room. “But you and Peter, I didn’t thought you two were .. You know. Having sex” Claire’s eyes got big - God no, not in a million year. She had to tell her about Alex, but it wasn’t as easy as she expected. She feared her sister would judge her, since they had hooked up when Tess first has arrived to Drover’s.

“That’s the tricky part” Claire said and looked at Tess with a shy look. Tess didn’t understood what she meant, tricky part? Oh, it slowly begin to make sense. “The bachelorette party!” Tess bursted out “You are very naughty Claire McLeod. I must say, didn’t think you had in you, sleeping with a stranger”’ Tess laughed, even though the situation wasn’t funny - at all. But her sister never did anything wrong, and things like this, sleeping with a stranger especially didn’t happen for Claire. Claire collected her thoughts before she opened her mouth. “It wasn’t a stranger Tess. It was …” She stopped. “It was Alex.”

Tess’ mouth dropped to the floor. “Alex?” she didn’t knew what to say or do. “How did that happen?” she asked, still surprised about the fact her sister and Alex had been sleeping together - she actually weren’t THAT surprised about it, it had to happen someday. Ever since she had gotten here, she had felt Claire and Alex had a special bond a wild attraction towards each other, but none of them acted on their feelings. It was part of why herself and Alex hadn’t worked out, she could see how much Alex cared for Claire - in a way he doesn’t or wouldn’t for any other.

“I don’t know. We were just .. talking and out of the blue he tells me he loves me and kisses me. We were both drunk, very drunk. And that’s how I ended up in our room. I couldn’t remember before, but I stumbled into Alex back in town, and suddenly it all came back to me” she put her head in her hands and sighed. “Why did I let this happen Tess?”

Her sister stroke her on her shoulder, trying to comfort her. “Sometimes things happen for a reason Claire. But, what does Alex say?” Claire lifted her buried head from her hands. “He doesn’t know Tess - At all. He can’t remember what happened that night.”

“You have to tell him Claire, you can’t have his baby and not let him know.” She wasn’t even sure if she wanted to keep the baby, well she hadn’t thought about what to do with, but - gosh, the thought was too much for to deal with right now. “Can you just agree with me, that for now no one knows, about any of this?” Claire said and sent her Tess’ a sharp look. “Right now I just want to get through tomorrow with Peter, tell him the wedding is off and deals with whatever that decision
might throw at me. I can’t think of Alex or this pregnancy right now. I need to get my life back, I need to get out of this with Peter.” Tess nodded and lifted her hand saying - whatever you want to do, I don’t agree with you but of course.

That night was really restless for Claire, she had been tossing and turning in her bed, first not being able to find a comfortable position, then not being able to stop her brain from thinking. Her life was going to change drastically. She was going to cut all contacts with Peter, and she couldn't wait to see him walk out of her life for good. But her worries and problems wouldn't end, even with Peter gone. No, because now she was pregnant. She was carrying Alex's child. That thought made her smile and she stroke her stomach slightly. She wasn't showing yet, but there was a life starting inside of her. But her happiness was soon gone. This pregnancy was a mess. She couldn't tell Alex that she was pregnant with his baby because she wasn't brave enough to tell him that they had slept together. She was too scared of losing him, that she almost didn't care that she would have to bring up her child alone. I’m sorry you won’t have a dad. She thought and kinda hoped that the baby could feel what she was thinking, and know that she didn't mean for things to happen that way. If she had the choice, she wouldn't have gotten pregnant like this, to her best friend and with him not even knowing! She knew that Alex would be a great uncle to this baby, but it pained her to think that his child would have to go through something similar he has. Her child won't know the truth about its father, just like Alex didn't know about his. Claire sighed and turned her head to the clock on her nightstand. It was almost 5 and the first rays of daylight were starting to appear in her room. She decided that it was better to get up and get some work done before Peter was back.

When Claire returned to the house to get some breakfast it was already past 8AM. She entered the kitchen and found the other sitting there eating their breakfast. “Good morning” she greeted everyone rather cheerfully before sitting down and staring at her food. “Why are you so happy?” Asked Jodi, taken back a bit by Claire’s behaviour. She had to admit that she had been a bit moody in the past weeks, so Jodi’s question didn’t surprise her at all. “Peter’s coming back today.” She said smiling. “Things are about to change.” She added, not wanting to give much away. “Ah, love.” Answered Jodi before returning to her food. She couldn't deny that she was really happy about Peter’s return, but it wasn't for the reason Jodi thought. Love had nothing to do with her happiness. No. She was smiling because of the freedom she was about to get back.

It looked like Claire wasn’t the only one eager to be reunited, because a couple of moments later, they all heard a car stopping in front of the house. Peter was back incredibly early, he must have left Queensland before sunrise. Claire got up from her chair so fast that she almost made it fall backwards, and she rushed to the front door. Peter was already inside the house, and when he saw her, his face split up in a huge smile. “I’ve missed you.” He said closing the distance between them and hugging Claire. Her whole body tensed, she didn’t want him to touch her again, and especially not now. “I need to talk with you. In the study.” Was all she said to him before breaking his embrace and walking off to the study. He followed her, rather confused by her behaviour. He thought she would be happy to see him again, especially after weeks apart. “Close the door.” Claire instructed him after he had entered the room. Her behaviour was odd and suspicious, but Peter couldn’t believe the words that left her mouth next. “We are over. I want your things out of my house and I want you out of my property. Out of my life for good.” He couldn't understand what she was saying. “What?” He asked. “If you thought that blackmailing me into marriage would bring me back to you, you were horribly mistaken. Now that you have set things straight with Australian Bloodlines, now that I know that no one will take Drover’s away from me, I want you gone.” She said calmly. He was furious. She couldn't be saying that. “After all I’ve done for you? I’ve given up on My family, my job and my career for you. I’ve lost everything!” He shouted. “I didn't ask you too.” Even she was surprised by the calmness of her voice. Being in Peter’s presence was making her uncomfortable, and the fact that he had the guts to raise his voice on her, made her blood boil. She trying to walk past him to get out of the study, but he stopped her by taking hold of her arm. When she tried to pull her arm out of his grip, he got even more angry at her and pushed her against the wall. “You are ungrateful! I’ve given up on everything, EVERYTHING! Can’t you
understand that?” He shouted, his face only millimeters from hers. Claire was scared now, but she didn't want him to know that. “It's all your fault, Peter. You have ruined everything in the first place after you forgot to tell me you were married.” Knowing that he won't bother her again gave her the strength she needed to break free from his hold and to get out of the room. Peter followed her outside and in the hallway. “You have 15 minutes to collect all of your stuff and get out of here.” She told told him, her hands on her hips. “What's going on here?” Meg asked as she joined the duo in the hallway. “Peter was leaving.” Claire said coldly looking at him. “You can't do this, Claire. I love you.” He was desperate now. He could lose her, she was the love of his life. “This is all your fault. I don't want to see you ever again.” To Claire's surprise, he didn't try to argue again. He silently made his way upstairs and gathered all of his things before silently walking down again and out to his car. He took a last look at her. “I really did love you, I hope you know that.” He said before he get in his car and drove away. Seeing him leave, Claire thought that she has never been as happy as she was in that moment. She was free, he was out of her life for good. “I guess there will be no wedding then.” Meg said coming to stand by her side. Claire simply smiled at her before going out of the house. Her feet took her to the stables before she even had the time to process what she was doing. In a matter of seconds she was riding Eagle towards Wilgul. She had to see Alex, to explain everything - well not everything, but the reason behind her sudden marriage to Peter. She saw him in the distance, he was repairing some machinery. Claire felt like her heart was going to burst out of happiness, and she kinda hated the fact that a huge part of that happiness was because of Alex. She couldn't allow herself to have feelings for him. Things were going back to normal for her - well, sort of. If you didn’t counted in her knew found title as being pregnant. “G’day mate.” She said dismounting Eagle when she had reached him. “What brings you here? I thought the knob was coming back today.” Alex said looking at her briefly, before focusing back to what he was doing. “I want us to be partners again.” she said without hesitation. Alex looked at her, he knew they couldn’t - not with Peter around. He sighed a bit “Claire .. “ she stopped him, holding her hand in front his face. “Before you say anything, I need to explain a few things” she looked over his shoulder at the bench on the veranda. “Can we?” she asked and pointed her head in direction of the bench.

“I need to tell you something” She said, as they got to the bench. “I’ve broken the engagement off with Peter.” Alex looked at her, did he hear what he thought he did? He wasn’t sure on how to react, she looked happy but was she really? “To tell you the truth. I’ve never disagreed with your opinion on him - he is a knob” “Yeah? Why did you want to marry him then?” Alex asked. The moment Claire had been longing for was finally here, she could finally come clean to Alex about Peter. “He was blackmailing me into marrying him” Claire said and kept her eyes on Alex, she could see his anger reach his eyes. “He never handed in my letter to the board, they were threatening to take Drover’s. Peter came back, offered to make all the problems go away - if I married him” She stopped, Alex still didn’t say anything - He was hurting, she could see it in his eyes. Was it because she hadn’t told him before? “I didn’t know what else I could do Alex .. I couldn’t lose Drover’s” she said, hoping he would understand. He felt his anger building up inside, he wanted to punch something - really hard. He was mad at Peter and luckily for the knob he wasn’t around, because this time neither Nick or anyone else could have stopped him from beating him. A part of him felt betrayed by Claire, they were supposed to be friends and she hadn't shared it with him. “Alex. Say something?” she begged - all she needed was a look, a clap on the shoulder. Anything to let her know he understood. He turned his head to her, and looking in her eyes he got overwhelmed by a feeling of regret. He regretted his action and the pain it had caused Claire - How could he forgive himself for doing anything that had hurt her that much, as the day he picked up the horses and called their contract off.

“Claire I .. “ he didn’t have to say anything more, she could see he was in deep pain. She knew he had regretted everything he had said and done, and if he could forgive her she was more than willing to forgive him. Her thoughts wandered to the life that was growing inside of her, their life.
For a moment she wanted him to know and she almost blabbered out her pregnancy. But no, this wasn’t the time or place to do it - he would find out sooner or later and until then, she had to work on an excuse. She had to tell everybody Peter was the father - even though she hated that idea, she would have absolutely nothing to do with him. But telling everybody he was the father seemed more logical than explaining a one night stand between friends. ‘Cause that was what they were right, friends?

“What do you say Alex? Forgive and forget?” she looked out on the open land before turning her head to him once again. He made a small laugh and a smile started to fill his face - He had always been such a sweetheart when he smiled. Can you stop thinking about him in that way, please? - She thought to herself.

He took his hand out “Partners?” Claire laughed and took his hand “Partners”.

It had been some crazy months. The whole trouble with Peter and the wedding that luckily didn’t happen. And of course, the one night stand with Alex. Claire gently stroked her stomach with her hand. She was 6 months pregnant and her belly was getting bigger and bigger as the days passed - She smiled as she felt the baby move, she felt so lucky to be experiencing this. She had never thought of herself as a mother and the thought of having a child, had never crossed her mind, not until she got pregnant that is.

She couldn’t wait for the little one to come out, she was eager to meet him or her - Claire had chosen not to know the gender of the baby, as long as it was healthy she couldn’t ask for more. Wonder who you’d look like. Your dad or me - she thought to herself. But instantly she started to feel guilty towards Alex, he still didn’t know the baby was his and maybe he would never know. The question whether it was right or wrong still troubled her a lot, and sometimes she thought it would be easier to come clean, about everything - but she really didn’t see a point to it. Besides, Alex was seeing some girl from Fisher. Which didn’t exactly make it any easier on Claire, but she was the one who had chosen to keep it a secret and now she would have to live with those consequences. She shook her head to clear her thoughts and swallowed the bit of jealousy and pain, thinking of Alex had caused in her. He is just a mate.

She tightened the halter around Eagles face and saddled up to go meet the others out in Skinny Jims. Riding was getting more and more difficult for Claire, her belly was getting in the way and she couldn’t fit into the saddle anymore - And her breast, all that jumping didn’t work well with breasts about to produce baby food. But she refused to let her pregnancy stop her from doing her work, she just had to work around it and sometimes it took a bit longer, but it couldn’t be any other way.

“Where we at with this?” Claire asked as she dismounted Eagle and walked over to Becky and Tess.

“It’s heliotropium as you expected” Becky said and brushed the dirt on her hands off. Claire sighed. Great, just great. She didn’t need this.

“Helio .. what?” Tess asked.

“Heliotropium, it’s a weed. It’s very toxic for our cattle, if they eat anything they can suffer from liver damage and that could cost them their lives” Claire said in a firm way. “We spray?” Claire asked Becky. “I guess it’s the only way around this”. Yes of course, and now they would have to move all of the cattle from Skinny Jims into Little Regret - She so didn’t needed this right now and rounding up cattle in this heat AND being pregnant, was without a doubt hell on earth.

“Becky you take care of the weed. I’ll take Tess and Jodi with me and start getting the cattle moved. I’ll send Jodi your way to help, when we are finished” Claire said and was on her way back to Eagle.

“But Claire, it’s like 50 C outside today - How do you expect us to handle all this cattle in this heat” Tess asked with her arm pointing on cattle. “Look, either we move them or they die - It’s really simple Tess” Claire hissed. She knew it was going to be hard work, but they simply had to do it or lose all of their stock.

“Come on, in you get” Claire said as the last couple of cattle passed the gate into Little Regret. “Jodi, go check on Becky. See if she needs any help” Claire said and stirred Eagle towards her. “Yeah, sure” she said without any hesitation and started to make her way back to Skinny Jims. “Are we done now? Can we please go back. I really need a bath Claire” Tess asked her sister - They had been moving cattle for the last 3 hours in a boiling sun and all Tess had thought about for the last hour, was a nice long bath, followed by a cold drink. Claire smiled at her and started to trot Eagle. “Yeah sure, but make it a fast shower - We still have some things to do around the yard and stables” "You are kidding me right?” Tess started and made Oscar follow them. “You need to relax Claire -
You are 6 months along, it can’t be good for the baby with all that stress” Tess finished. Claire shook her head “I’m not stressed”. Well, maybe she was a bit more stressed out over things than usually - but she really needed to keep the place in control, so everything was ready for the baby. There simply was no time to waste and if her belly kept growing in the same pace, it had been growing in this past month - it was all a matter of time, before she wouldn’t be able to even get on a horse, and she would officially be to no help. “I just want everything to be perfect when the baby arrives”

“Yes of course, but it doesn’t mean you have to work yourself so hard - We are all here to help” Tess said. Claire hated when Tess was right, she still didn’t understand where she got all of her so called life knowledge from.

“Claire” Meg said and came running from the other side of the stables. “We have a problem”. Claire looked at her, what kind of problem was she talking about? I swear to god, if something is broken or I have to move one more cow, sheep - anything, I will lose it. She took a deep breath and looked at Meg calmly. “It’s Peter. He is inside waiting for you” Claire’s heart sank, no that couldn’t be right - She had told him not to come around anymore, she didn’t want anything to do with him. She slowly turned her head towards Tess, who was just as surprised as herself. A feeling of panic started to emerge out in every single cell in her body - Everybody, besides Tess thought Peter was the father, but Peter would know he wasn’t, because they hadn’t slept together at all. Her eyes begged Tess for help, she didn’t know what to do with herself and her huge belly would give her away as soon as Peter saw her. Shit - She thought to herself. Tess walked to her side and placed a hand on her arm, she couldn’t say or do anything to make Claire calm or even fix the situation that was about to happen during the next minutes. Claire started to make her way back to the house, she kept thinking of what to say or do - mostly she was leaning to not say anything at all, let him talk. Yes, that would be a good idea. She slowly opened the door to the study, where Peter was waiting. Her heart was racing and she felt really nervous about everything - but she was filled with rage. How dare he place his feet here, after all he had put her through.

“Peter?” She said as she entered the room. He was standing with the back to door and was holding a picture of Claire and Tess in his hand. “Didn’t I take this of you two, a long time ago?” He asked and turned around to face her. His mouth dropped when he saw her - he didn’t expect her to be pregnant, what had happened since he left?

“What are you doing here?” Claire said in a firm way and walked towards him to take the picture out of his hand. He shouldn’t be touching her stuff. He followed her with his eyes, as she walked around the desk and placed herself in the chair. She looked at him like her eyes were telling him to talk. She sighed and was about to tell him to leave Drover’s, if he didn’t have anything to say, when he mumbled the word pregnant. “You are pregnant?” he said, almost in silence. “Yes, well .. “ Claire didn’t wanted to talk with him and she sure didn’t felt the need to discuss her pregnancy, and definitely not with him. “How can you be pregnant?” he finally asked. He weren’t in a position to demand an explanation from her.

“That is none of your business. All I want to know is why you are here, when I distinctly told you not to come here anymore” Claire’s voice was firm and cold. Peter still looked confused about the fact, that his ex-fiancé was sitting in front of him, pregnant. Claire noticed his confused look, she felt like she had to explain to him, he weren’t the father - but how could he even be thinking that, he damn well knew they hadn’t slept together. “Come on, you can’t be serious. If you just for a second thought you were the father, you can forget it. You know we didn’t sleep together when you were here” the last words killed her to say, just the thought of her ever being able of sleeping with the man in front of her, made her sick. Peter looked down and his facial expressions slowly changed from confused to mad. “Is it his?” he asked, still not looking at Claire. “His?” she know he was referring to Alex.

“Have you slept with him?” he looked Claire right in the eyes, which made it run cold down her back. “Have you been sleeping with Alex?” he asked one more time. Claire didn’t knew what to say, she was caught by surprise of his anger.
“Dammit Claire. You know how much I have sacrificed for you? I’ve lost my family, my job and everything I ever cared for - but I did it because I love you, and I would give up on everything just to be with you. You were the most important thing in my life - And now you are telling me, you are fucking pregnant with SOMEONE ELSE'S CHILD?!?” his fists was turning white and Claire was convinced he would hit something. But despite of her fear of making him more mad, she couldn’t let him stand here and accuse her for anything.

“First of all, this baby is none of your business as I’ve already told you” she made her way around the desk and faced him. “Secondly - All you ever sacrificed was your own decision, not mine. So don’t you dare pull that stunt on me. And if you have ever loved me, just one tiny bit - you wouldn’t have put me through a living hell. You have gotten anything you have ever deserved from your action”. Claire’s blood was boiling, she was raging inside. Her words made Peter even angrier and suddenly he found himself out of control, and grabbed her by the arm “This is all I get after everything?” he yelled at her, just a few inches from her face. “Peter let go” she was genuinely scared of him now. He tightened his grip around her arm and shook his before letting her go with a push.

His push had enough force behind to make Claire fall to the ground. Everything around her had happened so fast, that she hadn’t noticed being pushed before she landed. She covered her belly with her arm, in fear of the fall had cause any damage to the baby. Suddenly she saw Alex in the doorway, when did he get here? He looked as he was in a state of shock, or even a whole other world - it was clear for Claire that his mind was spinning out of control, she could see it in his eyes. He had walked in just when Peter had pushed Claire to the ground. It had all happened in slow motion for him and he panicked as Claire was falling, fearing for the baby - She and the baby were fragile and he felt it was his duty to protect them both. Suddenly his mind began to trigger a lot of incoherently memories from the night, Harry had told him he wasn’t his father. He remembered being in Gungellan, drinking heavily - Then he had bumped into Claire outside the pub. They had a heartfelt talk, but what more? His eyes got big as he remembered. They kissed, he looked at Claire. They did more than just kiss, they slept together. Him and Claire - does that mean Claire was pregnant with his child?

He snapped out of it when he heard a glass being shattered across the floor and Meg’s voice from behind, telling him to do something. Claire! he ran to her side and supported her, so she could get up. “You ok?” he asked, he had to make sure Claire and the baby - his baby, was fine. Claire nodded her head, she was too shocked to talk - but she was fine, the baby was fine. Alex turned his focus to Peter. “You piece of shit!”
“You piece of shit” was the last Claire heard Alex shout, before he had crossed the room in great pace to get to Peter. This time it wasn’t Alex who gave the first punch, it was Peter - and it hit Alex right on his nose. Alex shook his head and wiped off the blood that was beginning to run from it. “You shouldn’t have done that .. Mate” Alex said in a calm, yet very hard way. Within seconds he grabbed Peter around the collar and pushed him up against the weapon cabinet, still with a firm grip on his shirt. Alex was raging and he had very little self control left, he knew it would take all of his strength not to do something to Peter, that he would regret later on. But the man in front of him, had put the woman he loved with all his heart at risk - and his baby at risk. There was no forgiveness or mercy, for a man like that.

“Alex no!” Tess panicked, when Alex planted a fist in Peter’s stomach. “This one's for Claire” he said, as he pushed him into the cabinet once again. “You really think, you will have a chance with her - she doesn’t want you. She is just playing with you” Peter said. The words from Peter’s lips reached Claire, and she instantly started to feel even more hurt. She knew she hadn’t been fair to Alex, at all - But one thing she weren’t doing, was playing with him or his feelings. She could never do that - but looking back, it was exactly what she had been doing all these months. Tears started to roll down her cheeks.

“She didn’t even tell you about the baby - That must mean she is embarrassed of you, being the father” Peter continued with a laugh.

“Shut up” Alex shouted from the top of his lungs - the words had hit him in the right spot, and he couldn’t control the outcome of his action that were to follow. He tossed Peter on to the ground, and planted one fist after another into his face.

Jodi screamed and started to cry, when Alex had tossed him onto the ground - The girls were in shock, they didn’t know how to stop Alex. Peter would get seriously hurt if he continued. “Claire, we have to do something” Tess said to her sister from the doorway. Claire was looking helplessly at the fight between them, what could she possible do to break them of? The tears were still running in a great stream down her cheeks, this was all her fault. If she hadn’t been too stubborn to ask for help, none of this would have happened. She had to get herself together, before the fight got even more out of control. She walked towards Alex, making sure she wouldn’t get hit by accident. She planted a gentle hand on his back and spoke the words “Alex, stop. If not for me, then do it for your child” She was surprised about how she had managed to sound so in control and calm, when her whole body was in a state of panic. Alex stopped his beating on Peter, still holding one arm in the air, ready to take aim once again. He snapped out of it, his child - he couldn’t be beating on people like this, that wasn’t a proper way to act as a father. He lowered his arm and felt tears gathering in his eyes - He was going to be a dad. He lifted himself from Peter and turned his head to Claire.

“You’ll hear from my lawyer” Peter said and made his way to the door. He could barely walk. “You’ll tell them what?” Meg asked in a harsh way, before making room for him. “That you showed up uninvited at a private property and refused to leave, when told?” Meg yelled at his back before he was out of sight. She switched her focus back to Claire and Alex in the study - She knew Claire was hiding something, but not in a million year did she expect it was something like this. “Come on - They need to talk” she said and placed a hand on Tess’ and Jodi’s shoulders, guiding them away.

None of them said anything, they just stood there, looking at each other. Small tears was beginning to find it’s way down Alex’ face and it ached Claire to see, how much he hurt - because of her. “Alex .. I’m” she stopped, nothing could ever explain or forgive why she had acted the way she had.

“So you were never going to tell me about it?” Alex asked, still looking at Claire. “You would have kept it a secret and made me raise my OWN kid as an uncle” He looked away, couldn’t stand
to watch Claire upset - it was his soft spot, Claire. And he knew if he kept looking at her, he would feel her pain even more than he did and just wasn’t ready to forgive something like this. “I .. I wanted to tell you, so many times. I just didn’t know how to - and it just got easier to pretend it was Peter’s, since it was the most obvious conclusion. But when I finally got the gut to talk to you about it, you had hooked up with .. What’s her name? Melissa - And I didn’t want to ruin it for you” She stopped, she had nothing more say.

“Damnit Claire. I would never have gotten together with Melissa, if you had told me what was going on!” he looked at her again. “I .. I would have. You and me, we” he stopped. Claire looked confused at him, what was he trying to say?

“Forget it, I can’t do this right now!” he said before storming out of the study, leaving Claire alone. The sound of his ute driving away made her break down - this was it, he would never talk to her again. Tess came running as soon as she had heard the ute drive off. “Oh Claire” she said as she saw her sister on the floor, sobbing into her hands. “He will never forgive me for this, Tess” “He will. He just needs time” Tess answered her sister, afraid that Claire was right - This was a huge thing to keep as a secret and Alex didn’t forgive that easy.

“Hey Nick” Claire said as she got out of the Ute, she would have usually rode Eagle, but in her condition, driving was far more easier and less painful. “Is Alex here?” She asked as she came to stand in front of him. “G’day, mate. Yeah, he's over there” he said pointing in a direction behind her with his head. “He was pretty pissed when he came back yesterday, so be careful.” He said jokingly as she started making her way to where Nick had said Alex was. They hadn’t talked since their big fight yesterday and she didn’t even knew if it was too early to try - but she had to try, for the baby.

Alex had his back to her and was focused on what he was doing, so he didn't acknowledge her presence until she spoke. “Alex, can we talk? Please?” She said, her voice almost cracking. Alex’s body tensed as soon as he heard her voice. “Now you want to talk? You are a couple of months too late, Claire!” He said turning back to face her. His eyes were red and his cheeks stained by tears. Alex was not a person who cried easily - in fact Claire was sure that she had never seen him cry before - so she was taken back by the sight.

“How could you do this to me? You know what I've went through with Harry and mom! I thought you were better, Claire.” He said and then turned back and continued working on what he was doing before. “I was scared to lose you.” Claire answered. “But I can’t help thinking that I’ve lost you anyway. I’m sorry, Alex. I didn't mean to lie to you.” She answered trying to fight back the tears that were starting in her eyes. Alex turned to face her again, he looked her in the eyes for what seemed an eternity. Then he did something, that left Claire completely at a loss of words. He slowly took a step forward and came to stand in front of her, still looking at her. Then he slowly lowered himself and kneeled in front of her, finally breaking the eye contact with Claire. He placed his hands on Claire's bump and caressed it before giving it a soft kiss. “Hello there mate.” He finally spoke, but not to her - no, he was speaking to their unborn child. “You have heard my voice before, but it's time to introduce ourselves. I’m your dad.” He continued. His voice was so sweet and soft, Claire had never seen this side of Alex. “Your mommy and I are arguing a bit, but we love you. You know that, eh?” Claire couldn't fight her tears any more, she let them roll freely down her cheeks. She suddenly felt the urge to run her hand through Alex’s hair, but she stopped herself, knowing too well how weird it would have been. “I love you, mate. I can't wait to meet you.” Alex said and then stood up after kissing Claire's stomach one last time. Claire was still lost for words. She was so embarrassed, that she didn't have the courage to look Alex in the eyes, instead she looked down at her feet - or her belly that is, since she couldn't see her feet any more. She could feel Alex’s eyes on her and she could tell he was impatiently waiting for her to say something, but she simply didn't have the strength to. She brought her hands up to her belly, caressing it wherever she felt the baby move. Alex’s eyes followed her every move. He put a hand
on her stomach too, next to hers. His fingers brushing Claire's slightly, she immediately felt 
butterflies in her belly, a sensation completely different to the one the baby's movements caused. “I 
want to be present in the baby's life. Well, I have to admit that you have done a good job involving 
me in the pregnancy even if you didn't tell me it was my child.” Alex told her, his words hurt her, 
not because of what he said, but because of what she knew she had done - or she didn't have done. 
Alex had been by her side as soon as he had discovered she was pregnant, even if he thought it was 
Peter's baby. He had accompanied Claire to her ultrasounds, and he was with her when she felt the 
baby move for the first time. He had given her all the support he could. “I should have told you. I 
wanted to tell you right from the start. But I couldn't because I…” because I love you Alex, I’ve 
always loved you. But your friendship is too important to lose it. Once again she didn't have the 
guts to tell him the truth. “Because you were too scared to lose me.” Alex finished her sentence for 
her. If only he knew the real reason, if only she could tell him what she really felt, it would all be 
more simple. Maybe if I tell him I love him, we will be able to be a couple. And our baby will 
grow up with both parents by its side. Damnit, Claire! Stop with this nonsense! Alex is just a mate, 
you love each other in a matey way. Nothing more, nothing less. You were both drunk that night. 
Those pregnancy hormones are really messing with your head! Claire couldn't help her mind 
wandering, but she had to stop herself. Alex didn't love her like a man loves a woman. “I’m still 
angry with you. And it will take some time to get over, but right now” He stopped and a smile 
started to find its way, to his lips. “I’m just too happy now. I’m gonna be a dad!” Claire's heart 
broke when she saw him that happy, the guilt was consuming her. She couldn't forgive herself for 
not telling him the truth about the pregnancy. She had been scared about the fact, that she wasn’t 
sure Alex would have wanted a child - a child with her. She had been scared that he would have 
turned his back on her, that he would have cut every contact they had. But now, seeing him that 
happy, she realised how mistaken she was, and how badly she had messed up everything. She 
should have known better. She has known Alex almost her whole life, she should have known that 
he was not the kind of man who runs from his responsibilities. She should have known that he 
would have stayed by her side, supported her through everything, just like he had done not even 
knowing it was his unborn child he was caring about. 
“Can we make one deal?” Alex said, breaking the silence. Claire looked at him. “No more 
secrets?”
“No more secrets” Claire said in answer to his question. Alex put his arm around her shoulder and 
they started to walk towards the house. “Don’t think I’m not still angry with you - cause I am. But, 
you are also the mother of my child - So I need to make sure everything is okay with you and the 
baby”. Claire let out a tiny laugh. Typical Alex Ryan, he was such a tease sometimes - She knew 
he was angry, but somehow he couldn’t stay mad at her for more than a few moments at a time. 
They stopped in front of the house. “We have to start working together from now on” Alex said 
and looked Claire in the eyes. She nodded - she agreed with him, one hundred percent. She 
suddenly remembered Melissa, his new girlfriend - or whatever she was. Her heart ached at the 
thought of it. 
“So, how are you going to break the news to Melissa - I’m sure she didn’t sign up for this?” Claire 
tried to joke. Alex shook his head and gave Claire a gentle push towards the door. “In .. And let me 
worry about Melissa” Alex said and closed the door behind them. 
“This is a rare sight” Nick said as they got inside. “You two figured everything out then?”. Alex 
and Claire looked at each other, they had to tell Nick about the baby. 
“You might wanna sit down for this mate” Alex said. Nick looked confused at them both, what 
was going on here. “Will you just sit down already?” Alex rushed him. 
“Yeah yeah” Nick said and pulled out a chair - Claire and Alex joined him at the table. “The thing 
is .. You are going to be a uncle” Alex said, alternately looking at Claire and Nick. Nick started to 
laugh - he already knew he was going to be an “uncle”. “No mate, like for real” Nick still looked 
confused. “Alex is the father” Claire blabbered out - no more beating around the bush. Nick started 
to laugh, it was the funniest thing he had heard in a long time. Him and Claire, come on. 
“You aren’t kidding?” he finally said as he saw how they kept a serious face on. Alex shook his
head and placed his hand on Claire’s belly. “But it’s strictly a partnership, nothing more” Claire quickly added. Her words had caught Alex by surprise and he couldn’t help but feel a little sad about the thought, that they weren’t a real couple. “Yeah - We are going to work together as parents” Alex said and forced a smile.

“This is so unreal” Nick finally said - He should mind his own business, if they could make it work like that, it was great. “We won’t be able to stop Harry’s excitement when he finds out”. Something moved inside of Alex when Nick had mentioned Harry’s name - they hadn’t talked for a long time, he wasn’t ready yet. Claire noticed Alex’s pain in his eyes - she should go, let the boys figure out the whole mess with Harry. “I’ll have to get back to Drover’s” she said and got up from the chair. “I’ll .. Talk to you later” Claire said and placed a hand on Alex's shoulder. It was a bit weird to be leaving, after a talk like this - but she felt relieved, finally she could walk around with a clean conscience. Alex squeezed her hand and smiled, letting her know he had heard her.
Chapter 7

“I don’t know Claire - he hasn’t been a very good father for either Nick or me” Alex stopped himself. He couldn’t make up his mind about his relationship with Harry. The truth about Harry not being his father had cause a lot of pain, but the truth also was that Harry hadn't been a good father - Everything he had ever done, didn’t came without a cost. He always acted in his best interest. Either he cut ties with Harry completely or he would try and sort something out with him - it wasn’t like Harry hadn’t tried. Alex had put up with everything Harry had thrown his way, because he had too, but now that Alex had discovered that they weren’t blood related, he suddenly didn’t have to accept any of the things Harry had done in the past.

“Look. It’s not always about being related by blood” Claire said and looked at Alex. “You have to admit that Harry isn’t all that bad - Well most of the times, but he had done some great things for you and Nick”. She kept looking at him, waiting for him to say something - but he didn’t. “Look. Would you have loved this little bundle of joy” Claire said and pointed at her bump “Any less if you weren’t to know you were the father? Wouldn’t you still be around to help with all sort of stuff?”. She was right - Harry had been there and even though his actions hadn’t always been the best, he was still his father.

“This is why I always come to you” Alex said and sent a smile Claire’s way, that made her smile as well. They had worked through things over the past couple of months, and they were slowly beginning to get back to where they were, before all of this mess had started. There was still one thing, that still bugged Claire - He was still seeing Melissa. She was still beating around the bush, trying to shut any feelings down towards Alex, unless they were matey feelings. She started to regret she hadn’t been honest about her feelings for him, before Melissa got in the picture - but she wouldn’t ruin things between them, by confessing them now.

“I better get going now” Alex said and started to walk towards his ute, followed by Claire. “You coming back after you two have talked?” she asked and watched him open the door to the ute. “I can’t Claire. I’m sorry. I have to go and .. Meet Melissa in Fisher.” She felt her heart drop when he mentioned her name. “Are you okay with that?” Alex asked her in a gently voice.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay with that?” Claire smiled at him. “It’s just .. I’m only 3 weeks away from due date now, what if he or she comes early?” Alex smiled and walked closer to her. “Well, you won’t come early, won’t you?” he asked in his baby voice and placed his hand on her belly. “I promise you this is the last weekend in Fisher until the baby is born, will that make you feel better?” he asked before getting in the ute. No, it wouldn’t she thought to herself. The problem wasn’t really the distance between them, more the relationship with Melissa. She smiled to him before he drove off.

Alex pulled up outside of Killarney, sitting a few minutes in the ute before making his way to the house. He hadn’t been back here since the day Harry and Liz had their fight, and he had found out the truth about his father. As he got to the door he couldn’t decide on whether to knock or just walk straight it - he went inside the house without knocking, after all it had been his home for so many years, even though Harry weren’t his father.

He walked through the narrow hallway with the walls covered in pictures of their family - or he noticed that all the pictures of his mother or with his mother in, weren’t there anymore. “Harry?” he called, but no one answered. He got to the living room, but still no sight of Harry anywhere. He walked to the big window that had a beautiful view to the garden.

“Alex .. “ a voice reached him from behind. He turned around and saw Harry. “This is a surprise” Harry said and walked closer to him.

“Yeah, well .. I think we should talk” Alex said. Harry invited him to sit on the sofa with his arm pointing at it. “Nick told me about you and Claire - I must say, it was a surprise” Alex shook his head, was he already on to business?
“Look Alex. Whatever happened between me and your mother, shouldn’t affect you. I still see you as my son - nothing will ever change that. I know some things got said in the heat of the moment.” he stopped, and took a moment to let Alex digest what he had just said.
“Your still get Killarney - That if you want to of course.” he finally continued. “You’ll have someone to pass it on to now as well”

Alex looked at him, surprised about his kindness - This was so unlike Harry, it left him speechless. “What do you say son?” Harry asked and was holding out his hand “Can we call it truce?”. Alex shook his head and a small grin appeared on his face. “Truce” he said and took Harry’s hand. They still had things to figure out, but for now this was better than nothing - with time they would get back to normal, or at least it was what Alex hoped for.
“Tell Claire I can’t wait for my grandson or daughter to be born” Harry said to Alex’s back as he got in his ute. “But theoretically it isn’t your grandchild, is it?” Alex answered out of the window. “Come on” Harry laughed and shook his head. “Yeah, righto” Alex smiled back before he left Killarney.

The drive to Fisher took about 2 hours - 2 hours he had spent thinking of the past months and today's conversation with Harry. He finally felt he was in a good place and he was looking forward to the day the baby would come and to be co-parenting with Claire. He knew it would be hard, given Claire’s stubbornness - but he wasn’t any better himself. Claire. Her name kept playing on repeat in his head. Suddenly he started missing being around her and that huge bump of hers. After all they had been through, nothing had changed between them. What are you doing Alex - get your thoughts together.

He left his ute and started to walk towards Melissa’s apartment. It sure was different being in the city, he didn’t give much for it - Always liked the bush better, but Melissa had insisted on going out to dinner, in a real restaurant as she called it. He gently knocked on her door and could hear her move around inside the apartment.
“Hey there handsome” she said as she answered the door. She was absolutely stunning to look at, the long red dress and her hair that came in waves from her head - but something was different. He started to question himself, what he really was doing here.
“Alex?” he snapped out of his thoughts.
“You look stunning” he finally said and watched how a smile crossed her lips. He quickly stopped questioning himself about his relationship with Melissa - it was all the things from today, that was playing with him and making him unsure about everything.
“Let’s go - I’ve booked a table for 7 o’clock” Melissa said and shut the door behind her. She grabbed Alex under the arm and started to lead him down the hallway.
“We are going to have so much fun tonight” she said and started to tell him about her day.
Chapter 8

Claire woke up in the middle of the night, feeling a sharp pain through her spine. She quickly got out of bed and walked around for a bit - It usually did the trick for her. She had been tormented by back pain for the last couple of weeks. But this time it didn't help at all, the pain kept rushing through her body and suddenly it felt like her uterus would explode. Oh god, you are officially in labor, Claire McLeod - At least she was pretty sure that was the case.

"Tess. Wake up" She said as she entered her bedroom. Tess didn't pay any attention to Claire, she was hard asleep. Claire clapped her on the leg, which made her wake. She looked confused - But as soon as she saw her in pain she knew what was going on.

"Omg. NOW?! Okay, uhm. You'll stay here and I'll go get Meg" She said and rushed out of bed. Meg was a good idea, she had been through this before. Claire felt her uterus make a twist again, followed by a sharp pain through her body - This was even more painful than she could ever have imagined. "You okay?" Tess said. Her face was full of pain from watching Claire in labour. "Just go" Claire groaned - She was really not in the mood for making conversations.

Tess came back with Meg, they were both still in their nightwear. Meg rushed to Claire’s side, and asked how far along the contractions were. "How should I know?" Claire hissed - She couldn't time the contractions and be in this kind of pain, at the same time.

"We need you to get to the hospital now" Meg said. "Tess get some clothes on and help Claire as well. I'll run back to the cottage and grab a few things. We meet outside, ok?" Tess nodded as Meg ran out of the room.

Claire looked at Tess with soft eyes - the contractions were taking a break and she could finally breath again. Claire placed herself on the edge of the bed and watched how fast Tess got dressed - I don't think she had managed to dress this quickly before, she thought to herself. Tess made her way towards Claire and placed a supporting arm around her waist, so they could get back to her bedroom at get her in some clothes. Halfway to Claire’s bedroom another contraction started and it made Claire groan even more in pain. This one was even worse than the others. Tess panicked, didn't exactly know what to do. "The ute. Just get me to the ute" was all Claire could get out of her lips - No time to get any clothes on at this point.

The stairs took forever for Claire and Tess to get down from, since Claire couldn't walk very fast and the pain in her spine, got more intense every time she took a step. They finally got to the ute where Meg was waiting with Jodi and Becky. Jodi was holding the bag Claire was supposed to bring to the hospital. Meg opened the door for Claire, trying to make it as comfortable for her as possible, but as soon as Claire had put one foot inside of the ute, another contraction hit her. The contraction made Claire bent over in pain, this was too much for her.

"You are doing good" Tess said while she rubbed Claire’s back. "No no no NO!" Meg yelled. Claire looked up - Great. The ute wouldn't start, just what I needed She thought to herself. "The Merc. We take the Merc" Tess said. "You can't .. the motor is broken” Becky said. Claire frowned - This was not happening.

"How can it still be broken. I told you to fix it 4 days ago!!" Claire snapped. This wasn't part of the plan. She should be on her way to the hospital by now. Another contraction were on it's way. "I .. Can't .. Do .. THIS" Claire shouted. Meg rushed to her side. "We need to get her inside again” Meg said and took me under her arm.

"Alex! I'll ride to Killarney. Alex can fly the chopper” Becky said and runned towards the stable. "Good idea. We'll be waiting inside - but please hurry" Tess said.

Claire’s contractions were getting heavier and she already knew they couldn't make it to the hospital. She started to feel panic spread through her entire body - She was so not ready to do a home birth, no. Alex had to come and they had to make it to the hospital. Meg placed herself beside Claire, holding a cold cloth at her head - She was dripping in sweat from the pain. "Oh god,
here's another one" she said and squeezed Meg's hand. She didn't say anything, she just kept patting Claire’s head with the cold cloth.

"Mum! Look" Jodi suddenly bursted out. She sounded terrified.

".. We need to get you back in bed" Meg said. Claire didn't understand why, they were waiting for Alex, and he could be here any minute. She looked down at herself, and saw a puddle of liquid under her feet - If she weren't sure about reaching the hospital in time, she was now.

Meg and Tess supported her from both sides as they walked back to Claire’s bedroom. As soon as they got to the bed, they could hear the chopper landing outside. Another contraction took it's turn in twisting Claire’s uterus around and she screamed in pain this time. "It's okay. You are doing fine" Tess said and dried her head free from sweat.

Claire pushed her hand away - It felt really annoying right now.

"Claire?!" Alex shouted from the hall and run up the stairs. He looked just as terrified as Jodi sounded back in the kitchen. "We need to get you in the chopper" he said when he saw Claire.

"There is no time" Meg said and asked Jodi to prepare for some hot water and a lot of towels.

"Right. I'll take the chopper to Fisher and fly in the doctor" he said and turned away. "NO!" Claire groaned. "Stay. I need .. you"

He walked back to her and kneeled down beside her, so he could look her in the eyes. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere" He said and took her hand in his - He really meant it, this was where he was supposed to be.

Claire felt a lot safer with Alex in the room as well, he surrounded her body with peace and his voice calmed her down. "I wanna push" Claire suddenly said, still sitting on the edge of the bed. "We need to get you in bed then" Tess said and moved the sheet. The next contraction Claire had made her whole body bend over - There was no way she would get in that bed, the pain were heavier when her spine was in an upright position. "I can't" she cried. This was too much for her, she really couldn't do it. All she wanted was to go to the hospital and get this baby out, in a magical way without any pain - but who was she kidding?

"Claire look at me. Remember the class? Wanna try the kneeling position" Alex asked. She nodded. He got up from the floor and found an empty suitcase in the closet, they could use for Claire to rest her upper body and arms on, when she pushed. Alex started to feel really overwhelmed by all of this, he wasn’t prepared to do this - but as he saw how terrified Claire was and the pain she was in, he knew he had to do something. He had to be strong for her.

"I'll go find Jodi" Tess said and ran out the door. Meg nodded and got behind Claire on the floor, and lifted her oversize t-shirt up - The baby would be coming any minute now. Claire felt a little uncomfortable with Meg behind her, but the feeling soon got replaced by a relief of having her around.

"Look at me Claire .. I'm here" Claire looked up and got met by Alex’s bright blue eyes. She instantly felt loved and protected. "Don't leave me" she said and groaned.

"I won't .. never" He said and smiled to her - He really meant it, no way he could ever leave her again. The contractions were getting heavier by any minute that passed by, and Claire finally got to a point where she couldn't help but push.

Tess and Jodi got back in the room with their hands full of towels and a bucket of warm water. "You are doing great" Meg said and reach out for a towel. "Breath .. Focus on your breathing" Alex said. An impressive amount of pain suddenly hit Claire - It came and went within seconds and she looked back at Meg and a gentle baby cry reached her ears. "It's a little girl" Meg said and wrapped her in a clean towel. Both Claire and Alex laughed and cried at the same time. Alex kissed her on the head. "You did it mamma" He said. Claire smiled at him - She couldn't have done it without him.

The moment Claire hold her daughter in her arms she thanked god, for giving her, giving them this little wonder. Tears were running down her cheeks as she kissed her daughter's little hand. She looked up at Alex - she couldn’t believe they had managed to create something so beautiful.

"Baby's health is good, and mum is good too. You just need to rest now" Dr. Anderson said and got
up from the bed. Tess had phoned Claire’s birth doctor after the baby had been born, and she had driven to Drover’s from Fisher as soon as she got the call.
Claire smiled at her little angel, her fingers were so tiny. She was just absolutely beautiful. "I can't help but stare at her .. She looks so clean and nice now. Nothing like when you pulled her out mum" Jodi said. Claire looked at her - Her baby was still as beautiful there as she was now. Tess had placed herself on the other side of the bed. "She is just perfect Claire" She said and played with the baby’s little fingers. Meg joined them and Claire smiled to her - She didn't have to say anything, Meg knew what she was saying with the smile - Claire was grateful for Meg had been there to deliver the little wonder.
"Can I?" Meg asked, wanting to hold her. Claire smiled and placed her in Meg's arms and watched how proud Meg got - She was almost a grandmother now. How weird was that. Becky walked over to Meg and studied the baby. "She is so sweet" - Claire couldn't agree more. Dr. Anderson closed her bag and walked back to the bed. "I better get going now" she said. "I'll walk you out" Tess said and got up from the bed. "I think you others should let mum and baby rest now as well. It have been a very hard night" Dr. Anderson said with a smile. "Yes, of course. I'll go make some breakfast for everyone" Meg said and gave Claire her little girl back.

When everyone had left the room Claire got to think of Alex. Where was he? He had vanished just a few hours after the birth, with the excuse he had something very important to do - he had assured Claire he would be back soon.
"I've brought you this" Tess said as she came in sight in the door. She was holding a tray with breakfast, but Claire really didn't have an appetite, she was too exhausted. Tess placed the tray on the nightstand and sat down on the edge of the bed. She stroke the baby’s little head with her hand. "Have you thought of a name yet?" she asked Claire - But she actually haven’t. Claire had been sure she would know what to call her when she got her, but nothing came in mind, at all. Beside, Alex should have a say in it as well. But for now there was one thing she could call her daughter, whether Alex liked it or not. "BOM"
"BOM?" Tess looked confused at her sister. "Baby Of McLeod" she said and smiled.
"Little BOM .. I love it" Tess said and smiled back at Claire.
"I'll let you two rest. There is still work to do around here" and she got up from the bed. "Don't forget the fence in Skinny Jim" Claire said as Tess were about to leave the room. "Claire .. Shut up and be a mum" Tess said with her back turned to her - It made Claire smile and a small laugh escaped her mouth. Not long after Tess had left the room a small knock sounded on the door. Alex walked in, he was holding a little toy rabbit in one hand and flowers in the other. "What are these for?" Claire asked as he gave her the flowers. "Just for the most awesome woman on earth" He said.

He placed himself on the bed. He was feeling a little uncomfortable with Claire’s breast almost hanging out. They looked at each other and Claire’s mind was back at the birth. He had been so incredible, words couldn't describe it. For the first time in her life, she had felt really loved and cared for. I need him in my life.
Alex was busy looking at BOM and her tiny feet when he finally looked at Claire - He needed every inch of strength inside of him, to say what he was about to say. “Claire.. “ he stopped for a second, if he did this there was no going back - no, he had too. It was time he confessed his feelings for her, once and for all. “Claire, there is something I want to tell you” she looked at him with the most caring eyes he had ever known. “You are the one thing in my life, that has always been real - The one person I’ve always counted on. You’ve always been there, no matter what and now.. “ he took a short break. “And now you have given me the best present in the world - a daughter, a beautiful daughter” His eyes started to tear up, this was harder than he expected. Claire took his hand in hers, stroking it to comfort him. Alex placed his hand on her cheek and stared into her eyes - he had always loved her, why didn’t he see it before now? “Claire .. I” he didn’t get to finish before Claire interrupted him. “Alex. Shut up” she said - it was like she knew what he was going to
say and somehow she felt the same. “Just kiss me” she finally said after a short time. Alex leant in to give her a gentle kiss on her lips.

“I love you” they said in each other’s mouths as Alex pulled away, it made them laugh. “Is she done?” Alex asked, looking at his daughter. Claire nodded and covered up her breast as she placed BOM in Alex’s arms.

“I know you might not like it, but until we find a name for her, I’m calling her BOM” Claire said in a firm way. “BOM?” he asked and looked at her. “Baby Of McLeod” Claire answered and smiled at him. “But she is a Ryan too?” Claire’s eyes got big, she couldn’t cope with the Ryan name at this moment. Alex laughed, she still had to get her way around things. “BOM is perfect” he said, knowing she was freaking out about the Ryan name.

Claire suddenly remembered Melissa - was he still with her? She started to feel sad, was he only saying all this because of BOM and the surreal experience.

“Alex - what about Melissa?” he turned his head to look at Claire - He already knew what to do about her. He was right where he was supposed to be, with the two most important girls in world.
Chapter 9

It had been a week since BOM’s birth and Claire and Alex’s life had drastically changed. She absolutely loved being a mom - although her mommy-role was still new, it came naturally to her. She was in love with her little girl and so was Alex.

Alex had spend every possible waken hours at Drover’s with them for the last week, he was scared to miss out on anything - Even though Claire had assured him, that the only thing BOM would be doing was sleep, eat and burp. She couldn’t even smile yet, but Alex didn’t care. He wanted to be around their little angel as much as he could. “She already has you wrapped around her little finger” Claire joked, as she walked into the nursery, seeing Alex walk around with BOM in his arms - Claire had told him many times, that there was no need for him to be holding her all the time, but he really didn’t care. No, he could simply not take his eyes of his little girl - she was perfect.

“She can wrap me around her finger as much as she wants” He said and admired her sleeping in his arm. “Claire, just look at her” he said as Claire walked closer to him. “We made this little bundle of joy. You and I”. Claire smiled and placed her arm around his waist, they sure had done a good job with her. She looked up at Alex, who met her in a kiss. She still had trouble getting her brain to understand that all of this were real. Her and Alex, little BOM - months ago her life was in absolute chaos because of Peter, and she had been ready to give up on everything so she could keep Drover’s - but now she finally had everything she wanted. A family of her own and a man she adored as much as he adored her.

“Come on, it's my turn” Claire said and put her arms out, ready to take over for Alex. He gently placed his daughter in Claire’s arms and admired how Claire interacted with their baby girl. He couldn’t wish for a better mother to his child - He got overwhelmed with his feelings towards Claire and his new role as a father, and a few tears started to gather in his eyes. He still didn’t understood how his life could turn out this good within months, every bad thing that had ever happened was a million miles away in his thought, he could only see the bright future ahead of him and his new family. The images of Claire with his daughter in her arms was all he wanted to remain in his thoughts, it was all he needed. He smiled for himself and put both of his arms around Claire’s waist and pulled her in for a hug - He rested his head on top of hers and felt like he would never let her go again.

“What had gotten into you?” Claire laughed. She wasn't used to see this side of Alex, guess the books were right about men finding their soft spots, when they become fathers. “We should let this little girl sleep” Claire said with a baby voice to her daughter, and broke out of Alex’s grip to put BOM into the crib. “And we should get dressed” she said as she turned to Alex with a huge smile on her lips. “Yeah, you think?” Alex teased and pulled her in. It took every inch of strength for Claire to decline his offer - sneaking back into the bedroom and cuddle up with Alex was a very attractive idea.

“Urgh, don’t do this to me” Claire said and shook her head with a smile. “I need to see how Tess and the others have coped the last week” She said and looked him in the eyes. She was probably right, getting back to the real world could do them both good. Claire pulled herself away from Alex’s arms and stroke his chest before leaving the nursery. He stood in his own thoughts for a couple of seconds before breaking them with a smile - he walked to the crib and took one last look at his daughter before leaving the room with the baby monitor in his hand. He found Claire in front of the mirror in her room, looking extraordinary happy. “I can finally fit into my work jeans again” she said and turned her body to Alex. He couldn’t help but laugh at her -
he didn’t know anyone like her, who appreciated jeans as much as she did. He rummaged through the clothes that was shattered around the bedroom, he couldn’t find a single clean shirt anywhere. He would have to go back to Wilgul and pick up some clean clothes and he should really be doing some work around the place. “I have to go back to Wilgul and pick up some new clothes” he said and watched Claire putting her boots on. “And I may have to be there the rest of the day, can’t trust Nick to do everything” he said - But going back wasn’t really something he wanted to do, he wanted to be near BOM incase something were to happen. Claire laughed at his comment about Nick, she was having the same exact feeling with Tess. “I’m going to miss you” she said and walked towards him and planted a kiss on his mouth. “Mmmh, no - we are not done here” Alex said as Claire pulled away from him and stopped their kiss. “Come on, get some clothes on” Claire laughed and walked towards the door. “Come down for some breakfast when you are ready” she said and left the room, leaving Alex longing for more of her sweet lips.

“Come back soon okay?” Claire asked through the car window, she didn’t want him to go. “Nothing can keep me away” Alex answered and kissed her through the window before he started his ute. The drive back to Wilgul was only a half an hour and he already missed being around his girl. He just needed to get through today’s work as fast as possible and then he would be on his way back to Drover’s and the girls. He pulled up outside the house and noticed Nick’s ute was still there - Alex shook on his head and showed a small grin on his face. Come on mate, are you this lazy, he thought to himself before entering the house. “Nick?” he yelled before heading to his room. He grabbed a new bag from the closet and stuffed it with clothes - this time he wanted to make sure he had enough of clothes.

“Look who finally returns home - The long lost brother” Nick joked from the doorway. “How is everything at Drover’s” he asked. “You know, good. A lot of stuff to do with the baby and everything” Alex answered and made his way out to the kitchen. “Nick, she is sooo wonderful - I could look at her all day” he said and smiled. Nick laughed at his brother, the father role suited him more than he had expected.

“Yeah, she sure is a wonderful bundle of love” Nick agreed and poured himself a cup of coffee. “But Alex” he said a bit hesitant. “Haven’t you forgotten about something?” Alex looked confused at his brother, forgotten about what?

“Melissa?” Nick finally said. “She has been calling all week mate”. Dammit - Alex thought to himself. He had totally forgotten about Melissa, he had been too occupied with his daughter and Claire. He had wanted to break things up between them ever since BOM had been born, and he finally understood his feelings towards Claire. “Oh yeah” Alex said, he didn’t know what he should say - he didn’t really feel like giving Melissa a reason for their break up, she meant nothing to him, but he didn’t want to be a shitty person either. “I’ll call her later” he said and walked out of the kitchen.

Alex was busy fixing the old tractor when he heard a car pull up behind him. He had decided to stay close to the house, in case Claire rang him about BOM. What is she doing here? He thought as he saw Melissa get out of the car. He dried his hands free from oil in the old rag beside him before making his way towards her. She didn’t look happy and he could understand, but Claire and BOM was the only important thing right now and he didn’t feel like giving Melissa a long explanation on his whereabouts the last week. “I’ve been trying to reach you for a week” she said to him, as he stood in front of her. Alex knew that he had to tell her, but he didn't know how. “Yeah, I’ve been busy.” He said, but before he had the time to say anything else, she spoke again. “The whole week? You have been busy the whole week? I hope you have a good reason.” Melissa was starting to get impatient, and Alex couldn't stand talking with her any longer. He knew that she was going to be an assehole, but he had to take his responsibilities. “I’ve been over at Drover's Run. Claire has given birth. We have a beautiful baby daughter now.” He said, he wasn't able to hide his excitement when he was talking about
BOM or Claire, they meant the world to him. He was ready to spend the rest of his life with the two girls he loved the most. He had finally come to terms with his feelings, he was in love with Claire, and he was pretty sure that she felt the same about him. Alex glanced at Melissa’s face, he couldn't quite figure out the emotions she was feeling. She was angry and hurt, but there was something else. She still hadn't said anything, so he took the chance and spoke again. “Look, I didn't want things to go like this, but I can't keep lying to you. I don't love you, and I don't think I ever did. BOM’s birth has opened my eyes; it's made me realise where I’m supposed to be.” He looked at her again, this time, she opened her mouth to speak. “It took you a long enough to realise. It was clear to anyone but Claire and you that you had feelings for each other. I just thought that you’d have the guts to tell me that we are over. Goodbye, Alex.” She said and got in her car and drove away.

Alex was taken back a bit by how she reacted, he thought that she'd make a scene, that there was going to be some screaming. But he was glad that he was wrong. Alex got back to fixing the tractor, but all he could think about was Claire and their little BOM. For the past week, he was the happiest he has ever been. And now that he was parted from them, even though it only had been a couple of hours, he was missing them like he had never missed anything before. The only way he could imagine his life from now on, was by the side of his two girls. He was ready to fight anything and anyone that was going to stand in the way of his happiness; he was prepared to fight to see Claire and BOM happy. He had never been more determined about something, but the birth of his little girl was the best thing that's happened to him. When he had discovered that Claire was pregnant with his child, he was scared that he wasn't going to be a good father - he was still scared about it, but he was ready to learn along the way. Suddenly it hit him, if this was the life that he wanted - and he was sure that this really was the life that he wanted to live, he had to speak with Claire about it. They had to establish in what kind of relationship they were, because for him, being just mates wasn't enough anymore - But he had the feeling Claire felt the same way, that she also wanted more than just being mates. They had been acting like more than friends the last week, so why wouldn’t she. He wanted BOM to grow up with both her parents by her side, he wanted to give her a couple more siblings, he wanted Claire and himself to be a real couple. Because now, more than ever before, he was sure that he was in love with Claire Louise McLeod. He decided to go back to Drover's after he was done with work at Wilgul and to talk with Claire about his plans.

Claire was happy about finally being able to ride again - she was still a little bit sore, but it felt wonderful to be back on a horse. But even in this state of contentment, she felt like she was missing something - or someone - to be truly happy. For the past week, she had spent almost every second of her day with Alex. The two of them were learning how to be parents and working together, and in her opinion, they were doing pretty good so far. Today was the first time she wasn't with Alex and BOM, and every fibre of her body was missing both of them, even though they’ve only been apart for a couple of hours. It had felt strange at first, to have Alex constantly around, and it had felt even stranger to have a little human that was all their own to care about. She was so grateful that Alex had been there to help her, because she doubted that she would have managed without him - Of course Tess would have been a help as well, but it just wasn’t the same. He was so at ease with BOM, the two of them loved each other, and she had finally come to terms with her feelings for Alex. She loved him, and she wanted him by her side, to raise their daughter together. It was time for her to admit those feelings out loud, and to admit them to Alex - Because the happy family she was picturing in her head was only hypothetical, and it was going to stay like that if she didn't talk with Alex soon - she could only hope that he felt the same.

After a short ride on Eagle she decided to head back, she had been away from BOM long enough and her feed was coming up as well. She felt the wind through her hair as she rode across the paddocks, and a feeling of happiness surrounded her entire body - riding through the land she owned and knowing her little angel was waiting for her at home, was the best feeling. When she got back to the stables she was in a hurry to brush down Eagle, she was eager to get back to BOM before her feeding - she smiled at the thought of holding her little princess in her arms
once again.
“I can do this for you” a voice said from behind. Claire turned around and saw Becky standing with Stormcloud at her side. “Thanks Beck, I owe you one” Claire said and handed Becky the brush. She walked with a great pace back to the house, she couldn’t wait to see BOM.
As she entered the kitchen she could hear Meg and Tess talk from the dining room, it sounded like they had a really funny conversation going. She smiled for herself before entering the room, she loved how they all got along so well - like one big family, even though Tess and BOM was the only ones who shared her blood.
“Ahh there you are” Meg said as she saw Claire standing in the doorway. “I just put her down 30 minutes ago” she continued. “Oh, but her feeding is only a half hour away” Claire said and pulled out a chair.
“You can’t really count on a feeding schedule this early - she went out as a light” Meg said and smiled at Claire “She’ll wake up when she is hungry, don’t worry”. Guess it’s no harm to let her sleep Claire thought to herself - that way she would have a bit more time to figure out how she should open the conversation with Alex, before he got back. But as Claire was about to make her way into the kitchen, a soft cry sounded through the baby monitor. Guess I’ll give Alex a thought later - she thought to herself and turned around and walked towards the stairs instead.

Alex was standing outside of Claire’s bedroom a few seconds before entering - listening to her soft voice as she was speaking to their daughter. It hit him right in his heart and overwhelmed him with love, he couldn’t help but smile all over his face as he walked in.
“Hey” he said in a gentle way and placed his bag on the armchair. “Hey there yourself” Claire said and took her eyes away from BOM for a second, to greet him with a smile. He slowly made his way to the bed where his two favourite girls were sitting. “Aren’t you just the sweetest thing ever” Alex said as he placed himself on the bed. He stroke BOM’s head with his fingers - the softness of her skin still surprised him every time he touched her.
He made himself comfortable with a pillow behind his back before taking BOM in his arms, it felt like forever since he had held her in his arms - he couldn’t help but smile at her little perfect face.
“Did you see that?” he suddenly said. “See what?” Claire asked a bit confused.
“She just smiled at me” Alex said and looked at Claire with bright eyes.
“Alex - She can’t control a smile yet” Claire said with a laugh - wasn’t he just the sweetest thing ever?
“No Claire, I swear. She really did” he said and looked back at his daughter - well he knew she couldn’t smile yet, but an almost smile had to count for something. “Didn’t you just smile at daddy?” he asked BOM in his famous baby voice.
“You are such a tease” Claire laughed and pushed him on his arm.
They sat in silence for a few minutes, both thinking of how to start the conversation, they both had been thinking about it all day, before Alex broke it. “There is something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” Claire looked at him with a curious stare.
“This week has been one of the best, if not the best in my whole life - I hate leaving you two, even if it’s for a couple of hours only” he continued and changed his focus from BOM to Claire. He sighed, didn’t know how to put his next words. “What are you saying Alex?” Claire asked him, eager to hear what he had to say - because so far, it sounded like he had had the same thoughts as she did.
“Guess what I’m trying to say is” he stopped again, he couldn’t get the words out. She was sitting there beautiful as ever and he suddenly felt really nervous around her. “God Claire. You love me and I love you - let’s stop beating around the bush. Let’s do this!” he said.
“This?” Claire asked in a teasing way - she knew what he meant, but she wanted him to work for it. “You and me Claire”.
“So you want us to be an item?” she said with a smile. Alex looked at her and shook his head.
“Claire .. Shut up” He laughed. “You in or out?”
“Jesus Alex - Can I think about it?” she stopped for a second and noticed how his eyes suddenly
got filled with questions. “No, I’m kidding. Of course I want us to be together. It’s what I’ve always wanted” she said and stared into his blue eyes.

Alex looked down at his sleeping daughter in his arms. “I’m gonna put her down in her bed, she’s gonna be more comfortable there.” He told Claire before heading to the nursery. He really didn’t feel like being too far away from BOM, but he wanted to be alone with Claire, they needed the time - even if it was just for a couple of hours, or hour even. He came back to Claire's bedroom, taking the baby monitor with him, and placing it on the nightstand, before taking his position back on the bed. He really didn't know what to say, Claire had just agreed to get in a real relationship with him. It was a huge accomplishment and step for them both - a step that was easier to take than first expected - He knew she was a reserved person and that she didn't talk about her feelings - nor did he for that matter. This was one of the reasons they got along so well. He put an arm around Claire's shoulders and she snuggled in his side, resting her head on his shoulder. They just sat there like that for a couple of minutes, listening to each other's breathing, before Claire spoke. “How long have you been fancying me for?” She asked him, he couldn't help but smile at her. “I think I’ve always fancied you.” He answered her honestly. It was true, he had always found her attractive and intriguing, but he had never made a move on her. He was slightly cursing himself for that now, thinking about all the time he had wasted, all those years he could have spent holding her in his arms, just like he was doing now. “I’ve always fancied you too.” She said, interrupting his thoughts. “Why didn't you say anything?” He asked her. “You didn't either.” Was the answer she gave before she kissed him on the lips. It was just a peck at first, but it wasn't enough for neither of them. So their kiss grew more passionate and urgent, they were so lost in eachother that they didn't hear the knock on the door.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but dinner’s ready.” Tess said amused. She had always suspected that there was something between those two, but they were both too blind to admit it. “Come down whenever you are ready.” She said, unable to suppress a laugh. She was so happy that Claire and Alex had finally made a move, now BOM would grow up with both her parents by her side as a couple, a thing Tess had always wished she had.

Alex looked down at Claire, as soon as their eyes met, they both busted out laughing. “Well, at least we don't have to think of a way to break the news to the others.” Claire said trying to catch her breath.
Chapter 10

Alex - could you for once clean up after yourself? Claire thought to herself as she entered the bathroom. She started to gather all of his used towels and clothes in a pile, shaking her head - it was like having two kids around, and BOM’s stuff didn’t even make such a mess. She walked downstairs with the pile of clothes and towels in her arms, determined to find Alex and make him get on with the washing - they couldn’t let Meg do all housework and since Alex had been staying over for the past month, the amount of washing and cleaning had increased.

Alex was nowhere to be seen downstairs, the only trail of him was a half eaten toast and a carton of orange juice on the table - Liz really did everything for those boys, didn’t she? Claire shook her head, feeling rather annoyed about the mess. She didn’t had time to clean up after Alex, but she couldn’t just sit by and watch Meg do all the things herself either.

“I guess I will be doing laundry this time” Claire sighed and went to the laundry. After she had loaded the washer it suddenly hit her that she wasn’t exactly sure about how it worked - Well she had washed before, but all the different programs and degrees for the water was a huge puzzle for her. This seems right she thought as she closed the washer and turned the switch. “It started - It’s a start” she said to herself, feeling rather confident - how hard could it be, right? After she had finished cleaning Alex’s mess in the kitchen she went outside, determined to find Alex and give him a mouthful - he needed to clean up after himself, she wasn’t his maid and Meg wasn’t either. But as soon as she saw him walking around with BOM in the baby carrier, the lecture she had planned in her head slowly disappeared. She couldn’t help but smile all over her face at the sight of them, he was a natural with her and the bond between them grew stronger and stronger for everyday - BOM was lucky to have a father like Alex, and she was lucky to have a man like him in her life.

“Oh look, there’s mummy” Alex said and tried to turn his upper body towards Claire as she came closer. Claire greeted them both in a huge smile before she walked to Alex’s side so her daughter could see her face. “Hey there my little angel” Claire said and stroked BOM on her cheek.

“Neil Thomson called” Alex said and started to walk along the fence. “He wanted to make sure Casino was ready for the Gungellan race.”

“But that is only a month away” Claire interrupted him, there was no way they could get him ready that fast - he had done a lot of progress, but with BOM to take care of during the day, they had to cut down on the training sessions with Casino. “That’s why I said we could have him ready” Alex said and noticed Claire’s mouth drop. “You did what?” she stopped. She couldn’t believe he had agreed to that, he knew as well as herself that Casino wouldn’t be ready. “But Alex - We can’t have him ready by that, even if we train him day and night”

“I know, trust me I do - But Neil was afraid that we didn’t have as much time to do the training, with BOM and everything” He stopped for a second. “He was looking to take the business elsewhere - So I had to tell him we could do it. Besides, he won’t find a better trainer than us anyway.”

Claire looked at him in her famous suspicious way “And what are you going to tell him, when we get closer to the race and he finds out Casino isn’t ready?” Claire asked. “Well, I’ll think of something - until then, we just have to work our butts off, won’t we?” he said with a teasing smile and clapped Claire on her butt before he continued his walking. Claire shook her head and smiled, that man was sure something.

It was nearly lunch time when Alex finished his work with Casino. After his conversation with Neil on the phone this morning, and his conversation with Claire, he knew they would have to work hard to keep up with the training - It had been a bit of a struggle for Casino, getting used to Alex, since Claire was the official trainer and most of the time did do the training, but after BOM’s birth Alex had to get more involved with the training - He knew Claire hated the fact she couldn’t
be around the horses as much as she used to, but she was wearing the feeding machines and that
was something he couldn’t help her with. If he could, he would gladly take over the feeding, that
meant more time with BOM. He started to walk to the house, feeling his stomach churning - He
couldn’t wait to get something to eat and put his legs up for a brief moment.
Meg had arranged the lunch outside on the veranda and everybody had already gathered around the
table when he stepped outside. “There you are, was beginning to wonder” Meg said and smiled at
Alex when she saw him. “Just had to finish up with Casino” Alex said and walked behind Claire,
stroking her shoulder before pulling out the chair beside her.
“Nick phoned earlier” Tess said and reached for a piece of meat and continued “Harry can’t get the
tractor to start.” Alex swallowed the bite he had just taken before answering. “What, again? I’ve
told him to buy a new one for the past 6 months.”
Claire laughed - she was surprised he didn’t had, he had the money for it, why keep an old tractor
when you can get a new one? “I guess I’ll head over there later today” Alex said and looked at
Claire as he wanted her to tell him it was okay. She stretched her legs on the empty chair ahead of
her and placed BOM on her shoulder, as she said “I’ll just be around this little joyride the rest of
the day then” and smiled. Jodi looked up from her plate, did she just hear what she thought she
did? “You are going to be in here - the rest of the day?” she asked Claire. “Yep, that’s right” Claire
answered and took a bite of her food. “But you never just sit in here, without doing something?”
Jodi continued - she was right, Claire was always on the move, bossing everyone and everything
around. “I’m not just going to do nothing, I’ll have BOM around - beside. You guys always tell me
to pamper myself, so today is the day where Claire McLeod is taking a break” she said with a
confident shook on her head. “Look at you go” Tess laughed at her sister.
“Oh, before you go” Alex said and got up from his chair “We have to set something straight, just a
second” He said and hurried inside. He left the girls with a confused and exciting look on their
faces. He came back with one of his old caps in his hand. “Draw” he said to Claire and holded the
cap in her direction. “What is this?” she asked with a small laugh as she draw a little piece of paper.
“We need to figure out a name for BOM - she can’t go around forever with the name BOM. The
kids will make fun of her” Alex joked. Claire slowly unfolded the piece of paper in her hand, and
frowned when she saw the name on it. Alexandra - She started to laugh. “Oh, Alexandra - what a
coincidence” Jodi said and looked up at Alex. “Another Alexandra here” Tess laughed and folded
the piece paper again, before throwing it onto the table. “Are they all going to say Alexandra?”
Claire asked as Alex got to her side again. “Well, it’s a good name” he said and took BOM in his
hands. His comment made them all laugh, he knew they wouldn’t have fallen for it and it was
meant as a joke, a bit of tease - but he was right in one thing, they needed to find little BOM a name
soon.
“Actually” Claire said and placed her feet on the ground. “I’ve been thinking of a name - but I
don’t know whether you like it or not” she said and looked up at Alex. “Try me” he said while
rocking his daughter on his shoulder.
“Charlotte Prudence McLeod” she said and waited for everybody's reaction. Immediately Tess’s
eyes lit up as she heard the name. “That’s a beautiful name Claire, but how did you get to it?”
Becky asked. “Charlotte is my middle name” Tess said, still smiling all over her face. “And
Prudence was my mums name” Claire said and smiled to her sister. At first Alex had trouble
grasping his head around the name Claire had just dropped, but as soon as he saw Tess and Claire’s
smiles and he knew the meaning of the name, he absolutely loved it - she already looked like a
Charlotte now. There was one thing though, he insisted on getting his name in as well. “It’s a really
beautiful name Claire” Alex said and bent down to kiss her on the cheek. “One thing though” he
said and looked at Claire. “Since she is my daughter - I want my name in as well”. Claire looked at
him a bit confused. “What, Alexandra?” she asked - Because she was not naming her daughter
Alexandra.
“No, Ryan. Charlotte Prudence McLeod Ryan” he said. Claire hadn’t even thought about putting
his name in as well, but of course - he was her father. “Well, I guess I can live with that” Claire
joked and a smile crossed her face. Alex shook his head, she wasn’t going to admit it but he could
tell she was loving the name. “We’ve better get back to work” Tess said after a short amount of time and took her plate in her hand before getting up from the chair.
“Can you put her down in the crib before you go?” Claire asked and looked up at Alex. “Of course” he said and reached for Charlotte’s blanket on Claire’s chair, before making his way inside.
Claire soon found herself sitting alone outside on the veranda - what was she supposed to do? Charlotte was asleep and all of the others were busy with work. Why did she ever agreed with herself on taking a day off - she wasn’t good at sitting still.
They had had the same small argument for the last couple of days, and she was getting tired of it - It didn’t go anywhere, except round and round in the same circle. She didn’t understand why Alex couldn’t just let it go, or she could - but he knew her, she wasn’t too keen on expressing her emotions or feelings, she had never been. And still he was on her back about her lacking to talk about things when somethings was wrong, besides, who was he to give her a lecture on problems, when he obviously was as bad at talking things over, as she was?

That was one of the reason they were so good together, their similarities - they never had to explain themselves, because the other one knew the reason behind their actions.

She was slowly beginning to understand that Alex wouldn’t let this argument go and it was stupid - the argument had started when Claire had agreed on taking on another horse for their training program, without talking with Alex about it. He had made some valuable points at the time, but Claire had been too stubborn to listen to him. She clearly knew she had taken on too much with the new horse, they simply didn’t have the time to train it right now - but they could use the money and she was beginning to get back into training after the birth of Charlotte.

“Look. All I’m saying is, that you shouldn’t have agreed on making a contract” Alex said, standing with a rope in his hand - They already worked their ass off with Casino, there wasn’t any time to break in a new horse. Looking back, Claire knew it had been a stupid idea - but how could she admit that to Alex and lose face? He would never stop rubbing it in her face.

Claire didn’t say anything, she just looked at him with an annoyed look and brushed the dirt on her hands off in her shirt. “Claire come on, enough of the silent treatment - just for once admit you were wrong?”

Claire shook her head and laughed. Was he kidding her? Did he seriously think she would admit she was wrong - They could use the money and yes maybe she shouldn’t have said yes at the time, but if they made an effort they could get the training done. “I’m not gonna admit I was wrong, ‘cause I wasn’t Alex” she said with a firm look.

“Claire that’s bullshit and you know it - God I wish you could talk about the problems, instead of making them invisible. We have a real problem here Claire, what will you do when you can’t deliver the contract?” Alex asked her and was expecting a typical Claire McLeod answer, and he got it. “I will just have to deliver the contract, won’t I?” she said before making her way towards the horses ring. If Alex wasn't to be right, she would have to work hard and starting from now.

“You can’t make this go away Claire” he said and followed her to the ring.

“What’s all this fuss about?” a voice said from behind. It was Nick, how long had he been there? Claire shook her head, fighting in front of an audience - what an amusement it must have been for him.

“Claire is just too stubborn to admit she made a mistake, saying yes to train this horse” Alex said in an annoyed way, making sure Claire knew exactly how he felt about her choice. “The horse looks good though” Nick said and joined his brother along the fence. Claire smiled in confident, at least there was someone on her side in this.

“It doesn’t matter how good the horse looks, when we are going to have a problem delivering the contract - And Claire here, won’t admit she was wrong and is in denial of the problem.” Claire looked at him briefly before turning her back to the boys again.

“Denial of problems, sure shouldn’t be coming from you mate” Nick said and laughed. “Thank you Nick” Claire laughed and walked closer to the boys, this was getting interesting now. “What do you mean about that?” Alex asked clueless.

“Remember Melissa?”

“Yeah, what about her?” Alex asked, still a bit confused.

“Mate come on. You made her beat around the bush for a week, before SHE finally showed up, so you could get your things together and end it with her”. Wait, she showed up, when? Claire
thought to herself.
“That was different Nick - Charlotte had just been born” Alex said in self-defense. “So you’ve seen Melissa after BOM’s birth?” Claire asked, a bit confused. She didn’t exactly know how to grasp her brain around this. “Only for a couple of minutes, to end things between us - you know, so I could be with you” Alex said with a small smile, but he knew Claire wouldn’t let this one go easy, he could see it in her eyes.
“You have been kissing me, sleeping with me in my bed, while you were still with her?” She asked. She was so hurt by this, that she couldn't stop the tears falling from her eyes. “How could you? You know how much Peter hurt me, and you go and do the same thing? I thought you’d be honest with me.” She said the last part almost whispering, but Alex heard it nevertheless. “She didn't mean much to me, I didn't love her. I was over the moon about Charlotte and you. I just wanted to get on with our life. I had completely forgotten about her until I saw her at Wilgul.”

He defended himself. He was angry now, how could Claire compare him to the bastard? “Plus if we want to talk about honesty, let's start with you. Remember you didn't tell me you were having my baby, and you probably never would have if Peter hadn't showed up.” He told her. She looked at him with big eyes. He was right and she knew it, but still his words angered her. “I thought we were over this. I have apologised and explained multiple times why I’ve done it. But I see that you can't get over it. Was this your way of getting back to me, huh?” She asked, but she didn't wait to get an answer, she was too scared of what he could say. Instead she turned his back to him and walked back to the horse, she hadn't been this angry in a long time.

“Would you just listen?” Alex asked and jumped the fence. “I will never do you bad, I honestly forgot about her. She wasn't in my mind. The only thing I cared about was you and BOM. I didn't mean to hurt you.” he placed his hand on her shoulder, but she couldn’t stand being around him right now. He lied to her, after all she went through with Peter, he should have known better than to keep this a secret. “How do you expect me to trust you Alex, when you aren’t being honest with me?” Claire hissed. She didn’t want to talk about this anymore right now. “Is this really how you are feeling?” Alex asked, waiting for Claire to answer him - but she didn’t. He shook his head, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He hadn't done anything wrong, why was he the one to be punished for all this?

“Fine Claire. I’ll leave you alone then” he said and jumped the fence. If she didn’t want to talk, he didn’t either - at least he could be at Wilgul without anyone blaming him for doing the right thing. Claire watched Alex go back to the house, followed by Nick. How did this escalate so quickly? She damned herself for being too stubborn, maybe he was actually telling the truth - she just didn’t want to listen, too busy imagine different scenarios in her head. If she had learnt one thing from her relationship with Peter, it was to never trust someone who had lied once. But she wanted to trust Alex, or she did trust him - used to anyway. Peter had really done more damage to her, than she had expected. Deep down she knew that Alex was doing things in good faith, but if he had already lied to her, even before their relationship really had started, how could she be sure that he wouldn't lie to her again? A relationship should be founded on trust in each other, but how could she trust him? She wasn’t a saint either, she knew it, but somehow her mistakes seemed less in her eyes - or at least justified. Maybe their relationship was a mistake, maybe they weren't meant to be together.

After pointless of hours training the new horse, Claire finally gave up - her mind wasn’t at the training and she couldn’t focus on anything else than her fight with Alex. She was both angry and hurt at the same time. The man she thought she knew, looked like a total stranger to her and she couldn’t forget the fact he had lied to her - on the other side her heart ached in longing for him. Her heart wanted to go find him, tell him she was sorry about everything but her mind wouldn’t let her do that - if anyone owed the other something, it was Alex. She had nothing to apologise for, at least nothing she hadn’t apologised for earlier.

“What am I gonna do with you, hey?” she said out loud, as she took the grim off the horse. She was in deep water with this training and she couldn’t do it without Alex - but of course he had to run to Wilgul, leaving everything for her to take care of. She opened the gate to the paddock and watched
the horse run out of the ring happily and into the paddock, before she went back to the house.
Charlotte’s feed should be up right about now she thought to herself and looked at her watch. She hadn’t been to the house since this morning before the big fight, she had been too busy trying to keep her mind off things and get a move on the training - normally she would have checked up on BOM one or two times, so she was extraordinary happy when she saw her daughter in Meg’s arms as she walked into the kitchen. “Hey there Charlotte” Claire said in her baby voice and for a moment she forgot all about Alex and their fight.

“You’ve been out working late today” Meg said as she handed Charlotte to Claire. “Didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Been training this new horse - needs a lot of work, but I reckon he will be worth it by the time I’m done with him” Claire said, trying to sound confident. She was determined to prove Alex wrong about her decision. She pulled out a chair and placed herself on it with Charlotte in her arms. She made herself comfortable before putting her breast out - at first she had been a bit shy when she was feeding BOM around people, but now she didn’t even give it a thought, nothing they hadn’t seen before anyway.

“Ouch, easy there” Claire said in a gentle voice, patting Charlotte on the back. Meg turned her focus from the dishes to Claire and smiled. “Must beginning to feel like a struggle to breastfeed” she said and placed the dish towel over her shoulder. “I remember with Jodi - the first month or so was okay, but after that it just felt like little needles poking your skin. The sucking get’s really heavy”. Tell me about it Claire thought to herself and looked at Meg. Charlotte was nearly 3 months old now and the breastfeeding was beginning to be a struggle for Claire - not just because of BOM’s heavier sucking that made each feed feel like her breasts got turned into pincushions, but also because of the amount of milk Charlotte needed by now. She was eating much more than she used to and Claire’s milk production had trouble keeping up with the pace.

“Hey Meg. When did you start to give Jodi porridge?”

“I think she was about 4 months old before I tried it - but she was a bit fussy about her food as little, why?” she asked and continued with the dishes in the sink. “I’ve been thinking to start Charlotte on it - you think it’s too soon?”

“Nah, You could try. If she wants to take it there is no trouble - just make sure you start off simple, like with potato or carrot mush” Meg said, still with her head in the dishes. “Actually, we could try to give her some for her feed tonight, see if she likes it?” Meg said and turned to Claire. “Yeah I guess - wouldn’t do any harm” Claire answered and stroked her daughter on her head. Hmm, she is a bit hot she thought to herself - it must be the heat, a dry season was heading their way and the air always got sultry at this time of the year.

“I think she needs a bath, she is a little warm” Claire said and got up from the chair after Charlotte had finished her feed. Meg walked to her side and put her hand on top of Charlotte’s head. “Yeah a bit, it must be the heat - a nice bath will cool her off” she said and smiled to BOM. Claire nodded her head and walked towards the nursery. A nice cold bath was all she needed and she would be good for a nap. She could use one herself, but there was too much that needed to be done around the place.

“Come here little angel” Claire said and lifted her daughter to the changing table. BOM interacted much more with everyone and she was beginning to remember voices, and a smile here and there was floating their way as well. Claire couldn’t help but let out a small laugh as BOM started to babble - it wasn’t much, but it sure was on it’s way. She had grown up so fast, it felt like yesterday Claire had given birth to the earth’s most beautiful girl.

“Let’s put you down in mommy’s room, it’s cooler there” Claire said and placed the used towel in the basket behind the door. She placed Charlotte in the little crib her and Alex had placed at the end of the bed - it was easier to have her in there most of the times, when she woke up and needed a change or a feed. Claire had placed herself on her stomach on the bed, facing towards the crib, that way she could still be near Charlotte waiting for her to go to sleep. She was getting a bit tired herself, but she had to remind herself that she needed to keep up with the training and should go check on Becky and the fenceline at Skinny Jims.
Claire woke to a heart-rending scream coming from Charlotte. She quickly gathered her thoughts - she had fallen asleep the minute she had put Charlotte down in her crib. Claire quickly got out of bed to pick up Charlotte, she was burning hot and a rash was beginning to appear on her little legs. She had never seen her daughter this upset and her cry went straight to her motherly heart, it was truly awful for Claire. “What’s the matter aigh?” Claire said in an attempt to calm her daughter down, but it didn’t work - she was too disconsolate. A bit of panic started to run through Claire’s body, what was wrong with her daughter?

Meg will know what to do she thought to herself and walked with great pace to the kitchen, but Meg wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Shoot, she is in Gungellan Claire suddenly remembered. “Okay BOM, what are we going to do?” she asked her daughter. It felt like she was getting hotter and hotter by the minute, and Claire couldn’t calm her down as much as she tried. “Let’s get this off you” she said and started to unbutton the yellow bodystocking. “I know I know” Claire said in a gentle voice that yet didn’t reflected her panic. As Claire got the bodystocking off Charlotte, she noticed the rash had spread to her back. What is this? she asked herself - she had never seen anything like this before, it could be chicken pox - but how? they hadn’t been around anyone with it and it didn’t quite look like chicken pox either. Charlotte bursted out in a even heavier cry and it made Claire panic even more. She took her daughter in her arms and ran to the Merc - she didn’t know what to do, she had to find Alex. She quickly seated BOM in the safety seat, made sure she was tightened good before she ran to the other side of the car. Her body was panicking so much, that her hands fumbled with the keys, before she got them in the ignition and started the car - She took a quick look at her crying daughter in the rear mirror, she had feared that day BOM would get sick from the moment she was born and it wasn’t without reason. It was the most awful feeling Claire had ever experienced and she was deeply scared.

He saw the merc in high speed coming from the road leading to the front of Wilgul, the car left a trail of dust and Alex prepared himself for a mouthful of more guilt and judgement from Claire - but as soon as the merc stopped in front of the house he knew that wasn’t the case, that wasn’t why Claire was here.

He ran to her side as soon as he saw the panic in her eyes, as she got out of the car - his daughter was crying and it ached his heart. “What’s happened?” he quickly asked Claire as soon as he got to them. “I don’t know, she won’t settle. I’ve tried everything and Meg wasn’t around - I don’t like it Alex, there is something really wrong” Claire said with tears forming in her eyes - she was scared, he was scared. What was wrong with their little baby girl? They quickly got inside of the house, BOM still a crying mess - Alex took her in his arms, hoping it would calm her down a bit but his attempt failed, just as Claire’s had. “She is burning up” Alex concluded as he stroked his hand all over her tiny body, he stopped as soon as he saw the rash on her legs and back - it was red, warm and almost formed small blisters on the skin. It looked painful and scratchy, no wonder BOM wouldn’t settle. “Where is this coming from?” he asked and looked Claire in the eyes - it hadn’t been there this morning. “I don’t know. I put her down for her nap and when she woke her legs were covered in the rash - she was screaming her lungs out Alex, we have to do something” Claire said with panic in her voice.

“Well drive to Fisher” Alex said, he was ready to jump in the car this second. “The driver is 2 hours, without traffic - We can’t let her cry all the way there, look at her” Claire said and walked to Alex’s side. “The chopper then. We fly in the chopper. I can get it from Harry under an half an hour.” The chopper was a good idea, that way they could get to Fisher fast.

“What’s going on in here?” Nick asked coming from his bedroom in the other end of the house. Charlotte’s cry and fuss had woken him, he had been feeling a bit down lately so he thought a nap would do him good - until the cry started. “It’s Charlotte, she is sick” Alex answered his brother as he came to his side. “Can you stay here with Claire, while I go get the chopper from Killarney?” Alex asked, almost on his way out of the door.
“Wait a minute” Nick said in a calm way, studying Charlotte’s rash - It looked like the one he got from time to time. “I reckon it’s hives” he said and looked at Claire. “Hives?” Claire asked - why didn’t she thought of that before?
“Yeah - It looks quite like the hives I get from time to time” Nick said and started to walk back to his room “just a second”.

Claire and Alex looked at each other, they were both surprised they hadn’t thought of it before and how did she get it, it was not like they had changed anything around the place BOM wasn’t used to be around. Nick got back with a cream in his hands - he took the top of and squeezed a small amount out in his hand “This always do the trick for me - it takes off the itchiness. No wonder she has been screaming like this” he said and gently started to cover his niece’s skin in the creme.

Not long after Charlotte slowly began to calm down and her crying stopped - she was exhausted from all the crying and it didn’t take her long before she fell asleep in Alex’s arms. Claire placed herself on the couch and sighed. What a day this had been. She was exhausted as well, but right now she was happy everything was going to be alright with her baby girl. “So - hives. But how?” Claire asked into the open. “I mean, how does it appear on you?” she asked and turned her head to Nick. “It’s always caused by an allergic reaction, I don’t always know from what. Have you changed anything over at Drover’s?”

Claire took a moment to think about his question, but nothing came to her mind - expect one thing, laundry detergent she thought to herself. “Well, Meg just bought a new brand of laundry detergent the other day” she said and looked at Alex and Nick. “It’s probably an allergic reaction to that” Nick said and stroke his niece’s arm. “Keep this - it should be getting better anytime now, it usually doesn’t last for more than 24 hours ” Nick said and threw his cream in Claire’s lap before he walked out of the house - he had a lot of stuff to do and since he couldn’t get any sleep he might as well get something done.

Alex placed himself on the couch beside Claire - they hadn’t talked all day since their fight this morning, but right now the fight seemed unimportant. BOM could have been really sick and a stupid fight like the one they had this morning, shouldn’t be happening. He looked at Claire and instantly started to regret all the things he had said this morning - He knew what she had been through with Peter, it was only natural for her to feel ambushed about the thing with Melissa. “Claire” he said softly, but before he could continue Claire placed her hand on his arm “Don’t say anything. I’m sorry - I’m sorry we had such a stupid fight because I doubted your decision” she took a deep breath. “It wasn’t fair of me to compare you to Peter, I know you are nothing like him - I just got scared” she said and looked down at her daughter in Alex’s arm. “Scared? Of what?” Alex asked her. A shy smile crossed her lips “Of losing you” she said and looked him straight in his eyes - in that moment his heart melted and he knew he never wanted a stupid fight like that come between them again, he had to make an effort to tell her even the minor things. “You are not going to lose me Claire” he said and freed up one of his hands from BOM and placed it on top of hers. “You are everything I ever wanted” he said and kissed the back of her hand - A smile filled Claire’s face, he was really nothing but loveable that man.

“Actually there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about” he said and suddenly his face got serious. “It’s about my dad - my biological dad”

“Yeah?” Claire said, eager to hear what he had to say. “Earlier today I talked with mum” he said and stopped. Claire looked at him and smiled, she knew it was a big step for him to take - he hadn’t talked with Liz since the big announcement about Harry and Alex, he hadn’t even told her she was a grandmother - but Nick of course had, and even though Alex didn’t want anything to do with her, she still sent BOM a present not long after she was born. Claire was happy about him talking to Liz again, even though it was just a phonecall it was a step in the right direction. She could understand why Liz had done what she had, it didn’t justify her actions but Claire almost did the same - people do extreme things under pressure.

“Well go on” Claire said. “I think I want to meet my father - I need to see who he is, where I come from” Alex said and waited for Claire’s reaction. “If it’s what you want you should do it, I’ll support you every step of the way.”
Alex felt a stone drop from his heart, it meant everything to him that Claire was this supportive - but he didn’t really expect anything less from her.

“His name is Bryce and he lives in Melbourne - Mum gave me the address. I’m thinking of going in a couple of weeks. I think we should make a trip out of it, just us 3” he said and looked down at Charlotte. “It'll be good for us” he looked back at Claire with a look only he could manage. Claire was loving the idea of being alone with Alex, they hadn’t really had the opportunity to be that around Drover’s - there was always something to do or someone who needed help.

“I love that idea” Claire said and moved closer to him and Charlotte - she really couldn’t wait to get out of here for a couple of days. She didn’t like the city that much, but being alone with Alex was worth a trip to the city. “We could go after the christening - well, not right away. Maybe the week after?” Claire agreed, it sounded like a good time to take a couple of days off - besides Tess was getting the hang of the farming life by now and with Meg and Becky’s help, she could manage a day or two alone. Claire placed her head on Alex’s shoulder and closed her eyes. She was grateful for being here right now, grateful for her daughter and grateful for Alex - She couldn’t wait for the next couple of weeks, BOM’s christening and their trip to Melbourne. Everything was just perfect right now.
Chapter 12

Everyone was running around like chickens without heads, to make sure Charlotte’s big day tomorrow would be priceless. Her christening was finally knocking on the door and both Claire and Alex couldn’t wait for their little girl to get her name officially. It had been some crazy days with a lot of work to be done, not just around the property but also with the christening - even though it was set to be a small gathering, Tess had insisted on a spectacular event. Both Claire and Alex would have settled for nice quiet lunch with everyone, but Tess had already taken control over the planning and who knows what was to be expected?

“Claire we need to sort out your outfit for tomorrow” Tess said as she continued to walk behind her sister. Claire was in a hurry to get the fences checked before tomorrow and what she would wear was the last thing on her mind right now - Besides, she could always wear some white jeans and cute simple shirt, that was always a good pick.

“There is no need Tess - I’ve already figured it out” she said and stopped for a second. Tess looked at Claire a bit suspicious, this could only mean one thing. “Don’t say jeans. If you are going to say jeans, I’m gonna scream” Tess said. Claire shook her head and a small laugh found its way out, she knew Tess would be this way. But it was BOM’s big day and she was the one to shine not her.

“Look. It’s Charlotte’s big day Tess, why does it matter if I wear a couple of nice jeans and a simple cute shirt - It’s not my christening” she said and continued her walk to the stables. She was already running late and if she wanted to be back before noon, she should really be going. Meg barely had the time to look out for Charlotte today and with Alex over at Killarney, Claire had to make sure she was back in time for the afternoon feed.

“But it does matter” Tess said and followed Claire into the stable. “You are the mother - and on days like these, you are suppose to look your best”. Claire looked at her and frowned, she knew too well Tess wouldn’t see this one out. “Fine - You can sort something out, as long as it means I can get back to the work around here?” Claire said with her arms in the air.

“I’m gonna make you look smoking hot” Tess said with a big smile and started to make her way back to the house. “Nothing too fancy Tess - I mean it” Claire shouted to her sister’s back, but it didn’t even matter. She could shout as loud as she wanted, Tess had already made up her mind about the clothes and there was no way she would be listening to what Claire had to say. She shook her head once again and smiled - she was really blessed to have a sister like Tess, they were so opposite as each other and yet so alike. It was really scary sometimes, mostly when Tess figured Claire’s thoughts out before she had grasped her brain around them herself.

It had been months since he had seen Liz and he was getting a bit nervous about it - which was stupid since she was his mother, but things hadn’t exactly ended well the last time they had spoken. There was still a lot of unresolved problems among them, and it would take time to fix them - if they even could be fixed. But Alex was sure about one thing, he didn’t wanted his own mother to miss out of his daughter's christening. He deeply regretted that he hadn’t involved her in Claire’s pregnancy, but at the time he was too hurt to even think about repairing his relationship with her - she had lied to him his whole life, and that wasn’t something you just got over. But with this new father role of his followed a greater bond of family, than he had ever experienced before - he wanted Charlotte to know her family, good or bad. He wouldn’t want to be the one to take that away from her and if it meant he had to start talking to his mother again, so be it - beside, he couldn’t avoid the fact he had missed her around and he still loved her deeply, despite of all the lies.

He stopped as he reached the backyard, he could hear her laugh from the pool and to where he was standing - he wanted to move, but something stopped him. He started to think about all the memories from his childhood that involved his mother, he didn’t know how much he had missed her until he saw her. His heart started to ache and all he wanted from his mother was a big hug, and
tell her he was sorry for everything. “Nice of you to finally make it” Nick said. Alex had been too occupied with his thoughts that he hadn’t noticed Nick coming from the house. “You gonna stand here all day or what mate?” he asked and started to walk to the pool where Liz and Harry were sitting. He slowly began to walk towards them, it was the most unreal feeling he had ever had - if you don’t count in the birth of his daughter of course. Last time Liz and Harry had talked things were thrown around and it had involved a lot of yelling as well, how could they sit here and talk and laugh, like nothing had ever happened - it almost looked like he was back in time, when nothing was wrong.

“Mum?” he said gently as he reached the table. Liz turned her head towards her oldest son and tears immediately began to form in her eyes.

“Alex” she said and got up from the chair - she had missed him so much these months and she couldn’t wait to hold him in her arms again. Alex couldn’t help his tears from coming as his mother walked to his side. He had been so mad at her for a long time, but that anger slowly began to fade away as she stood there - she was his mother for crying out loud, how could he ever have treated her like he had? He started to curse himself for it, he had been a lousy son. Liz noticed his tears and she instantly knew what he was thinking and feeling. A comforting arm found its way to his shoulder “It’s okay Alex - don’t cry please” Liz begged him, she hated to see her sons upset. “I’m sorry mum - For everything!” Alex said and looked his mother straight in the eyes. “I’m sorry too. I know I need to regain a lot of trust” she said and looked at all three of them “but truly know I didn’t meant for any of this to happen”. Harry looked at the woman he had loved for so many years and he couldn’t help but feeling guilty about the things that had happened - he too should apologies for his behaviour, but he also felt his anger was justified. He had lived on a lie for almost 30 years and no matter how much he wanted to, he couldn’t forget the fact that the one person who was supposed to be honest with him had lied. He wanted to forgive and let it all go, but he couldn’t - but he had too. Seeing Liz and Alex together like that, made him realise how much he had missed his family. All family have troubles right? They could work their way around this one as well, he thought to himself.

“Come and sit down” Liz said and pointed Alex in the direction of an chair. “I had hoped you would have brought my granddaughter” she said and looked at Alex with a smile that was saying it all would be okay. Alex draw a small smile, it was the first time he had heard the word granddaughter from her mouth and it made him so happy. “Sorry mum, but she is napping right now” he said and poured himself a glass of water. “Oh, she could have napped here - plenty of room” Liz said.

“It’s not just the nap mum, Claire is still breastfeeding her and I wouldn’t be able to get back in time” Alex said with his mouth full of food. “And why didn’t you bring her?” Harry suddenly asked. “She is family now and I rarely see my daughter-in-law”.

Alex looked at him, knowing Claire tried to keep her distance - she still had a hard time coping with the fact her daughter had half Ryan blood in her. It was not like she hated Harry, or sometimes she did - but she just didn’t liked his way around business. And as she said, Harry never does something for the good of his heart, he always has a motive - of course he wanted Claire there to push them into a marriage or something like that, to secure his granddaughter’s future he would say.

“Well, she was busy. They are all very busy planning tomorrow’s event” Alex finally said. “And still you are here” Nick laughed. “You got a problem with that?” Alex teased and started to punch him on the shoulder. “Maybe you should go help out, I’m sure Tess could find something for you to do” Alex said with a laugh - he knew Nick and Tess had something going on, still none of them had taken it any step further the past 6 months. Nick laughed about his brother’s comment and took a sip of his water.

“Nah mate, Claire insisted I should go” Alex said and smiled to his mother.

They had all finished their lunch and were having a laugh - all four of them have missed being a family, as screwed up as it might be, they were a family after all. Liz placed her hands on her lap and sighed - it had truly been a good day and she had missed her boys. She couldn't wait to see her
granddaughter tomorrow. “I better get going” Liz said and got up from her chair. Suddenly it hit Harry that he didn't want her to go, he wanted her to stay - he grabbed her arm and looked at her the way he used to. “Why don't you stay here?” he asked. Liz didn't expect his hospitality and was a bit confused, why did he want her to stay? It wasn't like she didn't want too, but he had made it perfectly clear to her last time they spoke, he wanted absolutely nothing to do with her. “I mean - it is your home after all” he finally continued. Liz couldn't believe her own ears. “I’ve missed you - me and the boys can't be a real family without you. So what do you say?” Harry asked and got up from his chair. “We have a few things to work through, but I’m sure we can” Alex and Nick looked at each other, they were having the same thought. They couldn't believe their own ears as well and it was the last thing they had expected from Harry - but it was good to see them together again, and Harry was right. They weren't a real family without their mum back on Killarney. “Yeah, we’ll let you two sort this out” Alex said and got up from his chair followed by Nick, they both had a huge grin on their faces. “See you tomorrow son” Harry said to Alex’s back as him and Nick made their way to their cars.

“Who would have thought that?” Nick asked his brother as he was about to get in his Ute. Alex looked back at Liz and Harry and shook his head - if they could manage to work through their problems, everybody else could. “See you tomorrow Nick” Alex said and got in his Ute.

BOM had given both Claire and Alex a 4AM wakeup call, she hadn’t done it for months now but Claire was sure she could feel the stress about the whole day ahead of her. The three of them were all laying in bed, they rarely had the time to do it - so when the chance presented itself it was stupid not to take it. “You are getting so big” Alex said in his baby voice. He had Charlotte on his tummy and she was making the sweetest blubbing noises, she was in a really good mood this morning. Claire laughed and stroke her short, almost non existing hair with a gentle hand - She could look at her daughter for ages without getting tired of it, she was indeed the most beautiful human being she had ever laid eyes on. “How did we manage to create such a masterpiece?” Claire asked and snuggled her head onto Alex’s shoulder.

“Well I must say, my genes did a lot of the work here Claire” he teased. “Lucky for you I was around, aigh?”.

“Shut up” Claire laughed and punched him on the shoulder. “Hey, language - baby in the room” he laughed while pretending to cover Charlotte’s ears. Claire shook her head, she was blessed with all this love and she still didn't understand how she could get this lucky - The only regret she had, was not admitting her feelings for Alex a long time ago.

“Are we ready to begin?” Meg asked with Charlotte in her arms. Claire looked around to see if anybody was missing - but they were all there. Becky, Jodi, Tess, Nick and of course Harry and Liz - Terry was busy filming the whole thing. Claire nodded to Meg, giving her sign to begin.

“Dear Charlotte.

On this day we are gathered to celebrate your naming

Alex put his arm around Claire and pulled her in - his body was filled with happiness and love. “You came into our lives when we least expected it. You filled it with joy and laughter, from the moment you got here. You also seemed to have the strength to push people together” Meg paused and looked at Claire and Alex. They couldn’t help but smile at that comment. It was true, if Charlotte hadn’t been born, they may never have expressed their true feelings towards each other. Charlotte was the one that had helped Claire and Alex to understand how they felt for each other, when they had been too blind to admit the facts around them.

“We wish you nothing but happiness through your life - may you have your mother’s strength and talent, your father’s love and your aunties ability to forgive.

This is here by your name

Charlotte Prudence Ryan Mcleod’ They were all clapping their hands and Harry proposed a cheer for his granddaughter - they were all smiling and laughing, enjoying the christening of the little
wonder, that indeed filled their lives with love and laughter.

“I think I got it all” Terry said and handed Alex the recorder. “Thanks mate” Alex said and clapped him on his back, before walking towards the dining room - he needed to put the camera in a safe spot, he couldn’t risk it being ruined or anything. No, he wanted to be able to look through this footage the rest of his life. He walked back out to the others and grabbed Claire around the waist, which made her scream - she hadn’t expected that sudden movement from behind. She turned around with a smile that reached both of her eyes and it only got bigger when she saw Alex’s. “You know what?” Alex asked and folded his hands around her waist. “What?” Claire asked and gave him a confident smile.

“This is one of the best day in the rest of my life - Isn’t it crazy?” he said in a smile. Claire couldn’t do anything but agree with him on that. For the rest of their lives they would look back at this day, and remember how great it had been - filled with love, laughter and happiness.

“Okay lovebirds, we need a picture of you two” Jodi said and interrupted their gazing thoughts. “Don’t make me look too ugly in it” Claire said and posed by Alex’s side. “Sorry Claire, I can’t help how you look” Jodi teased before making her way around to the others. When did she get this Corky? She thought to herself and shook her head.

“Now, I remember a time where she actually used to respect me” Claire laughed and turned her head to Alex again. “Well, maybe she found out you had a soft spot - the big bad Claire wolf, isn’t that big and dangerous anymore” he joked and reached for a beer on the table beside them. “What is that suppose to mean?” she frowned and waited for an answer, as Alex unbottled his beer.

“Well you know. Since Charlotte has been born, people are starting to notice your .. softer spot due to your new mummy role”. Claire couldn’t figure out if she should be flattered or if Alex was insulting her. “Don’t take it the wrong way. It suits you - kinda find it rather attractive, maybe even sexy” he said with a huge smile and sent her a wink, before he left her side. She decided on following him, she really didn't want to drop this conversation. “So you find me sexy?” She asked him as she came to stand by his side. She still couldn't believe that Alex Ryan, the man who could have - and probably did have - any woman he wanted, choose to settle down with her. She watched Alex’s face intently, she could see a vast range of emotions on it. “How can you ask such a question?” He asked her almost shocked. “Of course I do find you sexy. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, and you aren't even putting an effort in trying to impress. You are always yourself, and that's the sexiest thing you could ever do.” He told her softly. “Stop doubting yourself.” He added before kissing her softly on the lips. Claire didn't know what to say, so she let that kiss speak for her.

“Oi, keep it PG, there are kids here.” Nick told them amused as he walked past them. Claire started laughing as soon as she heard what Nick had said. There were kids there - their kid. She thought she was the luckiest woman in that moment, she couldn't wish for anything better. Alex kissed her on the forehead before he placed a hand on the small of her back, guiding her towards Liz and Harry and little Charlotte.

“Oh Claire, she's so beautiful. She's got Alex’s eyes.” Liz told her. It was clear that it only took their little BOM only a couple of hours to wrap her grandmother around her little finger. “She will probably be the most stubborn little girl, considering who her parents are.” Harry said. His comment got him a smack on the shoulder by Liz but it made Alex and Claire laugh out loud. It was true, both her and Alex were really stubborn. “Alex told me that you are back on Killarney.” Claire said to Liz, who only nodded in response. “It's good to have you back. BOM will need her grandmother.” Claire added and watched as small tears formed in Liz’s eyes. The Ryan’s probably weren't the best of families, but they were a family nevertheless. And Liz and Harry were the only grandparents BOM had, if she didn't count Meg. Claire's heart was at ease, she knew that Alex and her would get through anything if they kept working as a team. She couldn't help the smile that formed on her face as she thought about the small trip the three of them would soon take to Melbourne. Maybe she was wrong, if everything was to go well in the city, maybe Charlotte would have another grandfather in addition to Harry.

- Yes, Charlotte was truly a blessed child and Claire was eager to give her that family she had
missed when she grew up.
Chapter 13

It had been a few weeks since Charlotte’s christening, and everything was slowly beginning to get back to normal around Drover’s. Claire had been busy trying to get as much done around the place as possible, before her and Alex were off to the city - It wasn’t like she didn’t trust Tess to handle it, but it still made her more comfortable to know, that the major things were done as she liked it to be done. Despite Claire’s new mummy-role she still liked being in control, maybe even more now than ever.

“Oh, I’ve sorted everything out with the feed - But Becky you know what to do” Claire said and clapped her hands as she walked towards the rest. They were all standing at the car, ready to send them off, but Claire had insisted on checking the feed for the horses one last time - They were after all a very important key factor for the property's income, she wouldn’t wanna take any chances. It was important they got the right mix of feed. “Claire come on, we are gonna miss the plane” Alex rushed her with his hands full of luggage. “Yeah yeah, righto” Claire said, knowing Alex was right - they really had to get going if they were to catch their plane. “Have a safe trip” Meg said as she placed Charlotte in the car seat and closed the door. “Oh Tess, don’t do any major things around here, we’ll be back in 4 days - if there is anything just call Killarney” Claire said and looked at her sister.

Jesus Claire, have a little faith in me Tess thought to herself. She was aware of how things worked around here by now, they could manage - But it was typical Claire behaviour, she always wanted things her way, but that was part of why Tess loved her dearly. She couldn’t help but smile and shake her head. “Come on .. In” Alex said and grabbed Claire by her arm and forced her into the car, they really had to get going if they were to catch their plane.

As much as Claire was looking forward to spend some alone time with Alex and BOM in the city, her mind wasn't completely at ease - she always hated leaving Drover’s, even if it only were for a couple of hours. She liked being in control and being that far away from Drover’s made it a bit hard to know what was going on. Halfway to Adelaide Claire finally gave in for her need to call Tess and see if anything was going as it should, it had only been about 3 hours since they left - but a quick phone call wouldn’t hurt anybody. “Did you bring your phone?” Claire asked Alex as she rummaged through the glove compartment. He took his eyes off the road for a second to see what she was doing. “What do you need it for?” he asked, knowing exactly what she wanted with it. “You know, I just want to call Tess - see if everything is okay” she said and gave up finding the phone in the compartment. Alex shook his head and a small smile crossed his lips. Oh Claire, always in control he thought to himself. “You know, I reckon everything is fine. It’s only 3 hours since we left - Even Tess couldn’t have brought that much damage to place” he tried to joke, but Claire absolutely didn’t find it amusing. Her mind was already going crazy about all the things that could go wrong - she hadn't even had those thoughts before Alex said anything. “Claire relax, okay? everything is fine”.

“If I could just give them a quick call I could relax” she said. “Well, I didn’t bring it - so I guess you’ll have to trust Tess and the others” Alex teased her. Claire frowned and leant back on her seat with her arms folded. Alex was probably right, everything was in perfect order back at Drover’s - she just needed to let her guard down a bit. She looked back at her sleeping daughter and smiled. She was an easy baby, hardly ever cried and she was always so happy. “Wonder how she’ll take the flight” Claire said and gazed out the window. “She’ll be doing fine” Alex assured and looked at Charlotte in the rear mirror.

“When are you meeting Bryce?” Claire asked and looked at Alex.

“I’m .. “ he stopped, didn’t know how he should put it. Truth be told, he hadn’t called Bryce - he was just kinda hoping to go and meet him and then introduce himself. He knew it wasn’t the smartest idea, but he couldn’t exactly present himself as his son over the phone could he? No, it was a conversation they needed to have in person.
“Well .. I haven’t actually called him yet” he finally said. Claire looked confused at him. “What do you mean?”
“Yeah you know. I figured I’ll just go find him when we get to the city” he said and quickly looked at Claire to see her reaction. “So he doesn’t know you are coming?” she asked surprised. Alex draw on his shoulder, he didn’t know what to say. “You really think that is the best way to go around this?” she asked.
“Well, I didn’t quite want to present myself as his long lost son over the phone. This sounded like the best option”. Claire couldn’t argue with that - she couldn’t put herself in his situation, so telling him what to do or what not to do, wasn’t really something she had any say in. He could go around it anyway he wanted to, she would still support him every step of the way.

They finally arrived at the hotel, both very exhausted after the long drive and flight - BOM on the other hand was fully awake and had been it since they boarded the plane. She had taken the flight well, exactly as Alex had assured Claire about.

“I’m so tired” Claire said and a yawn followed her words, as she placed herself on the couch in the middle of the room. She took herself a couple of seconds to admire the hotel room Alex had booked - it was really big and had a separate bedroom, she was yet to discover. The view from the living area was great, you could see out into the big Melbourne city life. Alex interrupted her thoughts as he placed himself beside her with Charlotte in his arms. Claire studied her daughter in the arms of Alex, she was getting so big. She couldn’t believe it had been 6 months since her birth, and both her and Alex’s life had been blessed with an endless love. She smiled and stretched a hand out towards Charlotte - She was busy babbling and playing with her favorite toy bunny that followed her everywhere. It was the one Alex had brought her on the day she was born.

“Should we go find some lunch, I’m starving” Claire said and felt her stomach rumble. “Actually Claire” Alex said and turned his head towards her. “I was thinking of going and see Bryce - I was told he’ll be at his office around this time of the day. You know how lawyers are” he didn’t want to set her up for disappointment, but if he were to have a real shot at meeting him he had to do it now, today - before he missed his chance. “Oh okay, that’s fine” Claire said and smiled at him - she really didn’t want to be standing in his way. “I’ll just grab something from the hotel and maybe take a nap along with BOM”.

“You sure it’s fine?” Alex asked. “Go, I’ll be here when you get back” she assured him and reached out for her daughter. “We’ll walk you out” Claire said and got up from the couch, followed by Alex. “I’m gonna miss you” she said and smiled at Alex, which made him sent her an even bigger smile. He walked closer to her and embraced her in a huge kiss before pulling himself away. He then turned his head to Charlotte in Claire’s arms and kissed her gently on the top of her head, he couldn’t wait to get back to them and tell Claire all about Bryce. “Bye bye daddy” Claire said and waved Charlotte’s arm at him - she waited until she couldn’t see him anymore before closing the door behind her.

He was dealing with a lot of nerves as he stood in front of the office building. He couldn’t decide whether this had been a bad idea or a good one. Well, here goes nothing he thought and entered the building. It didn’t take him long to find the floor Bryce’s office was on and he gave the door a quiet knock before entering. He would have expected someone at the front desk but there weren’t anyone in sight. He looked around for a bit, wondering if he should wait or come back - but he then heard a male’s voice from the half closed door in front of him. He slowly opened the door and knocked on the doorframe - in front of him stood a tall elderly man with white hair, he was dressed in a suit which made him look confident and a bit scary. The man, he assumed to be Bryce got off the phone as soon as he had knocked on the frame of the door. “I’m sorry, I’m closed for office hours for today - Schedule an appointment with my secretary.”

“There isn’t any at the front desk” Alex said, not knowing what to say - He always had something to say, but right now he couldn’t find the right words. “Well, what can I help you with then?” The man said and placed himself on the edge of his desk.
“Is your name Bryce?” Alex asked and took his akubra off before entering the room. “Yes, who are you?” Bryce asked a bit suspicious. “This might sound a bit strange, but I’m Alex. I’m ..” he didn’t get to say anything more before Bryce interrupted him. “Ah, Alex. I know who you are .. son” his words sounded so harsh and yet so familiar to him. “Your mum said you might be stopping by” he said and invited Alex to take a place in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “I’m not quite sure what you are looking for - I can’t offer you a dad, it’s 30 years too late.” Alex looked confused at him, that wasn’t what he was after. “No, I’m not looking for a dad. I just wanted to see where I came from” Alex said and smiled nervously. “Well, here I am then” Bryce said and let out a confident laugh. “I tell you what. I was just on my way out to grab some lunch - why don’t you tag along, then we can get to know each other?” Bryce asked. “Yeah, that sounds good” Alex said, surprised by Bryce’s openness towards him - somewhere deep down he had prepared himself to be rejected by him, but he hadn’t and that was a good first step. He hadn’t really figured out what he wanted from all of this, but maybe time could tell.

“Shandy can you make room for one more at my table?” Bryce asked as they got to a fancy restaurant. Shandy was the hostess of the place and it looked like Bryce came here a lot, from the way he was interacting with her. “What do you want to drink?” Bryce asked as they both were seated at the table. “I could go for a beer” Alex said. “A beer and a glass of wine - and two plates of the seafood” Bryce said to Shandy - Alex noticed how Bryce studied her as she walked away, she sure was pretty, but maybe a bit too young for someone like Bryce. “She is a real party animal that girl” Bryce said and smiled. Alex shook his head and laughed, of course he thought to himself - of course Bryce and her had something going on.

“Tell me a bit about yourself as we wait for food to arrive - Your mother didn’t tell me much, other than you run a farm?”

“Well, I run one with my brother Nick just south of Gungellan. I also have a horse training business with Claire, who is my better half and also the mother of my child” Alex stopped and waited Bryce reaction. “You kidding, I’m a grandfather?” Bryce said and laughed. “You can’t run from that” Alex said and smiled - if he didn’t want to be a dad, would he even want to be a granddad?

“I would have loved to meet them” Bryce said as the food arrived. “Well they are back at the hotel, I can call them and get them if you like?”

“Yeah, just a quick meeting before I go back to the court wouldn’t hurt” Bryce said and took a sip of his wine and dived into the plate of food.

“Claire this is Bryce” Alex said as Claire reached the bar of the restaurant where Alex and Bryce were waiting. He had called her after they had finished lunch and fortunately she had been excited about meeting Bryce when he called her. “G’day” Claire said and shook Bryce’s hand. “And this must be little Charlotte” Bryce said and looked at Charlotte in her stroller. He stooped down and stroke her tiny hand. “She takes after her mother - A real treat I must say” he said as he got back to Claire and Alex. Claire was flattered but didn’t know what to say, so she just answered him with a smile. “Well, it was nice to meet you all - but I have to get back to court” Bryce said and picked up his suitcase. “Oh Alex, maybe you can drop by tonight - we could get a glass of something and catch up?”

“Yeah, I would love that” Alex said and gave Bryce his hand before he went out of the door.

“Well, he seems nice” Claire said and looked at Alex - Yeah he does, doesn’t he Alex thought to himself.

“Let’s get out of here” Alex said and pushed the stroller towards the door. “That I can agree on. I so need to try their bubble bath back at the hotel” Claire said and followed him out of the door. She was really exhausted from the last couple of weeks and she had been working herself too hard with the new horse, to get it ready in time. “I’m totally in favour of that as well” Alex teased her and kissed her on the tip of her ear, which made her body shiver. “Alex - We are in public” Claire laughed and pushed him away from her. “Just focus on the stroller, will you” she smiled.

“I’m going now. Don’t wait up” Alex said and popped his head in the bedroom. “Have fun” Claire
said from the bed and smile to him. She was exhausted and all she wanted right now was a good
night sleep, so even if she wanted to wait for Alex to get back, she probably couldn’t keep her eyes
open. He hailed a taxi from the street and 10 minutes later he was outside of Bryce’s office. He had
expected the drive to be longer, but there wasn’t that much traffic at this time of day. He payed the
driver and entered the building. He was surprised to see a secretary at the frontdesk as he got to
Bryce’s office. “Ah Alex, there you are. Just give me a minute” Bryce said as he saw Alex in the
doorway.
“Honey, can you call mum and tell her I’m not gonna make it home tonight. I’m swapped with a
work case”. The secretary was his daughter? Alex was a bit confused. “Is this your daughter?” he
kindly asked and got a bit closer to them both. “Yes, this is Sabine - she also works for me here at
the office. Sabine, this is Alex - my .. Client” Bryce said and pointed his hand at Alex. It was clear
he didn’t want her to know Alex was his son nor her brother, so he just played along with it - he
couldn’t expect anything from a guy he had just met a few hours ago, and he sure didn’t want to
create chaos in their family.
“Nice to meet you” she said and gave him a kind smile before making her way to the front desk
once again. Alex pulled out the chair he had used earlier and waited for Bryce to finish tying his
tie. “Where are we going?” Alex asked, eager to know the location. “Back to the restaurant.
Shandy is bringing some good friends of her - you are going to have a such a good time” Bryce
smiled. Wait what? Alex couldn’t believe what he was hearing. How could he think Alex was
interested in that when he had Claire at home. He shook his head. Bryce was a bastard as Harry -
well not in the same way of course. He had no intention to let Bryce into his life, if this was how
he went about his life. One bastard was enough to deal with. “actually. There is a place I need to be
tonight. I have to go” Alex said and shook Bryce’s hand before leaving the office, leaving Bryce
with a confused look on his face.
All the way back to the hotel he couldn’t help but think about the fact that both of his dad’s were
bastards - Well, Harry he could deal with since he had known him all of his life, and whether or not
any of them would admit it, they loved each other like father and son.
“What are you doing back so early?” Claire asked as Alex walked in the hotel room - she had just
put BOM down and was ready to find the bed herself. “Whata you know” Alex said and placed
himself beside her on the couch. “He was a bastard - I seem to collect them as fathers” he said and
turned his head to Claire. “I’m sorry” she said, didn’t know what else she could say. “It’s okay. I
don’t need him around anyway.” he smiled - he had all the things he needed. Claire and BOM. The
most precious people in his life.
Claire placed her head on his lap and made herself comfortable - They had been in Melbourne for a
whole day and this was their first alone time. They had planned on the bubble bath earlier, but
Charlotte had different ideas about her napping. Claire placed herself on her back so she could look
at him, still with her head on his lap. “What do you want to do tomorrow?” she asked. There was
only one thing he wanted to do tomorrow and that was being wherever Claire was. He smiled and
placed his hand on her stomach. “Be with you - I’ll follow everywhere you go”. Claire smiled and placed her hand on top of his. “Have I told you I love you?” she asked and
looked him straight in the eyes with the look that always melted his heart - It was only her and
Charlotte that could do that to him. “I love you too” he said and caressed the bare skin on her leg.
“Why didn’t you wake me? What time is it?” Claire yawned as she came in sight in the bedroom door. Alex was sitting at the dining table feeding Charlotte some baby mush - it wasn’t Meg’s homemade but she gladly took it. “Well I thought I would let you sleep” Alex said and wiped a chunk of mush away from Charlotte’s chin. “You looked so peaceful and considered the night didn’t involve a lot of sleeping, I thought you could use it” Alex said and sent her a seductive smile. Claire couldn’t help but feel a bit shy as he had said his last words, and a small laugh found it’s way out. It sure had been a good night with Alex she thought to herself as she pulled out a chair, and joined them at the table. He kept smiling at her, knowing he had hit a weak spot in her - He loved teasing her with stuff like this, because it meant that Claire didn’t have control over absolutely everything around her.

“Stop smiling like an idiot will you” she said with a smile and shook her head. She knew he enjoyed seeing her like this too much and she kinda hated it a bit - she liked being in control but around Alex her guard dropped completely. “Your dad is a weird species” Claire prattled to Charlotte and glanced at Alex. “But a hell of a good species if I must say it myself” He said and laughed. Well, Claire couldn’t argue with that. He was about the best, if not the best thing in her life, apart from Charlotte of course. She still cursed herself and him sometimes, for taking so long to share their feelings towards each other. Sometimes she even took herself thinking about how life could have been, if they had been honest with eachother years ago. She sighed and looked at her daughter and then at Alex, it didn’t really matter - she had everything know, and that was the most important thing. Her thought got interrupted by the phone. “I got it” Alex said and reached out to the phone at the wall behind him. “Yeah?” he said, not even bothering to introduce himself.

“Oh, hey Jodi” he said and frowned at Claire, which made her laugh. “Urgh Jodi, wait a minute. You have to talk to Claire about this, I don’t wanna hear any details about that stuff” he said and reached the phone to Claire. Claire sent him a confused look before taking the phone out of his hand. Claire said as she walked to Alex’s side to place the phone back on the wall. “Jodi?” Claire asked curiously. “Yeees Jodi, I’ll remember to buy the purple set and not the pink.” she rolled her eyes and got up from the chair. Alex gave Charlotte the last spoon of mush before cleaning her hands and face with baby wipes.

“Okay, byyyyye Jodi” Claire said and hung up the phone. Jodi had asked Claire to buy her a piece of lingerie from the city, she had seen in a magazine and made sure that Claire wouldn’t forget it the week leading up to their trip. “I can’t believe she want to spend that much money on underwear” Claire said as she walked to Alex’s side to place the phone back on the wall. “Jesus Claire - I don’t wanna know” he said and shook his head as if he tried to forget the words he had just heard. “It’s just underwear Alex” Claire said and placed an arm around his shoulders. “Yeeah, but it’s for Jodi we are talking - not you” he said and looked up at her. “And the difference is?” Claire asked, it was underwear for crying out loud - he didn’t have to imagine Jodi in it or anything. “The difference is” he said and pulled Claire in so she landed on his lap “That I would be the one to take it off you” with his words followed a gentle kiss on her lips. His lips were as soft as ever and the kiss had a mild aftertaste from the fruit he had been eating for breakfast. She looked him in the eyes, not wanting the moment to stop - everything around her disappeared as she closed in to kiss him again, this time their kiss was deeper and more powerful. She could do this all day if it was up to her, and she had a feeling Alex could as well. Their embrace got interrupted by Charlotte. She was babbling in the high notes and a laugh escaped her mouth as she dropped the spoon on the floor, she had got a hold on. “I better get her dressed” Claire said and pulled away from Alex. “Yeah” Alex said as he cleared his throat. It was probably good Charlotte had interrupted them when she did, he had lost himself in Claire’s kiss and everything else had disappeared - he had been ready to clear the table from plates and whatever, right here and now. Until Charlotte had made a note of herself. “I’ll clean this up then” he said and watched Claire walk back to the bedroom with Charlotte in her arms, wearing nothing but one of his shirts. She’ll be the end of me he thought to himself as he
tried to gather his thoughts on the cleaning, but it was nearly impossible when she walked around being all so sexy and the best part was, that she didn’t even try.

“What is up next?” Alex asked as Claire got out from the lingerie store. He had kindly offered to stay outside with Charlotte, he didn’t really feel like seeing another woman’s underwear - if it had been for Claire, it had been a different story. But he didn’t quite have the urge to make a note of Jodi’s. “I think we have it all” Claire said and took a quick look at the bags under the stroller. “I could do with some lunch” Alex said and took a quick look around the area to see if he could spot a café of some sort. “Oh yeah, I would kill for something to eat - and BOM is out like a light as well. Would be nice with a quiet lunch for once” she said as she adjusted the blanket in the stroller. “Let’s find something in the park, aigh?” Alex asked and took one of his hands off the stroller for Claire to hold.

“Here is a good spot” Alex said and pointed his finger at a bench under a big oak tree. They placed themselves at the bench under the tree - some food would do them good, especially Claire since she hadn’t eaten all day. They had found a little sandwich shop near the pond in the park, it looked really good and Claire was starving. “I think this is the best sandwich I’ve ever had” she said with her mouth full. Alex found it amusing, it was the first positive thing Claire had to say about the city. “So the city isn’t all that bad then?” he joked and took a bite of his own. “Give me a break - I’ll take Gungellan pub over any of this, at any time” Claire said and moved the hair that was getting in her way, behind her ear. “Yeah, me too” Alex said and pushed to her leg with his. Claire sent him a smile and a steam of happiness rushed through Alex’s body.

Charlotte was still out like a light in the stroller when they were finished eating their sandwiches - it allowed them to cuddle up into each other’s arms and admire the view, just the two of them. Alex found himself thinking of how lucky he was right now, how happy he had been for the past months. The thought of living each day with Claire and Charlotte filled more and more, it was the only thing he wanted to do. Never in his whole life had he come across a woman like Claire. She could make his blood boil like no one and her stubbornness annoyed him to pieces sometimes, but at the same time she could calm him like no one else and she loved him for all he was - And he loved her no matter what she might throw his way. He kept caressing her shoulder as he thought about how perfect they were together. He knew what he had to do, there was only one thing he could do. He hated being apart from them and his heart ached by the thought of not having Claire by his side. Yes, he wanted to propose to her - he was ready more than ever, to start a whole new life with her at his side. His thoughts about Claire and him, suddenly got replaced by the thoughts of how he should propose, what kind of ring she wanted and would she even say yes? She was used to manage everything by herself and wasn't good at taking help from others, especially not guys - maybe she didn’t even want to get married after all that had happened with Peter. He quickly shook the last thought off him, he had to pop the question despite of the past. Peter was out of her life for good and he was ready to make her the happiest woman on earth.

“What are you thinking of?” Claire asked and snapped him out of his thoughts. He squeezed her shoulder and looked at her with a smile before saying “You and me. Life - How happy I am”.

Claire smiled at him, she couldn’t believe the happiness she was feeling as well. The past months had really turned out to her favour, it made the past with Peter seem like a decade ago. Alex had managed to almost let her forget she ever had anything with Peter, and it was the best feeling she could ever wish for. Having Alex around made all the problems that came her way seem so small. Claire placed her hand on top of his and it made Alex’s thoughts race back to the ring question. Maybe he should ask Tess about what kind of ring she would like - but there was no chance for him to find anything in Gungellan, he would have to go to Fisher or something like that. No, he needed the ring to be perfect, just as Claire was. A quick thought came to his mind, maybe he could call Tess from the hotel and pick up a ring here, today, before they went back home tomorrow. That way he was assured of a good quality ring and Claire would be taken by surprise when the day come, and he would ask her to marry her - he didn’t plan on that day being too far away in the future though. “You wanna head back to the hotel?” Claire asked and looked at him. “Before BOM
wakes” she continued. “Yeah, that’s a good idea” Alex said and freed Claire from his grip - if he wanted Tess’s opinion on the ring he should call her soon, before the stores closed. It would have been so much easier if he had brought his own phone, then he could have sneaked out now and bought her a ring and meet her back at the hotel - Maybe he should just go to the jewelry now, and pick a ring out himself. He didn’t really need Tess in on this, he wanted it to be a complete surprise for everyone when he would ask Claire to spend the rest of her life with him. “Actually Claire” he said as they got up, getting ready to leave. “There’s a thing I need to do”.

“Oh, we can do it before going back” she said and started to push the stroller ahead of her. He needed to find an excuse fast, but what? It had to be something good to make her go back to the hotel by herself. “You wouldn’t wanna go” he said and walked to her side. “Why not?” she asked and looked confused at him. “I promised Nick I would go and check a couple of the local bike shops around here - he is looking into buying a new one” Alex said, and hoped for the best.

“What? Didn’t he just buy one 3 months ago?” Claire asked. “Yeah well, you know - it never hurts to look”. Claire smiled at shook her head. “You boys and your toys” she said and stopped. “I’ll just see you back at the hotel then?” Alex nodded to answer, but before sending her off he swooped her in and kissed her.

As he put the keycard in the lock at the hotel room a bundle of nerves started to find it’s way to him, he stopped for a second at took out the ring from his pocket - he had found the perfect ring, if he should say it himself. It was a beautiful white gold diamond ring, it was very simple but not too boring - He was sure he had found the perfect combination for Claire. He just had to hide it from her until the big reveal and that would be the hard part. He quickly put it back in his pocket and opened the door.

“Did you find anything?” Claire asked as soon as he got in the room. “Found what?” he asked, he had totally forgotten his own excuse about the bikes. “For Nick you silly” she said and walked to him. “Oh yeah, no. Nothing for him there I would say” he said a bit nervous and walked past her. He needed to secure the ring in his bag before she would notice it. “You okay?” she asked him and followed him into the bedroom - he felt a little tense and out of himself. Why did she follow him into the bedroom, she weren’t supposed to do that. He patted himself on the chest to make sure the ring was still there. Of course it’s still going to be there you fool, you put it back in not more than 2 minutes ago he thought to himself. He took a deep breath and turned to Claire, he had to act normal or at least try - but it was easier said than done. It was a huge step and having the ring around made his head spin with a lot different scenarios. What if she didn’t say yes and what if she didn’t like the ring he had picked for her?

“Alex?” Claire said and waved her hand in front him. “Have you even heard a word of what I just said?” she asked and kept looking at him. Get yourself together Alex, you’ll give yourself up. He smiled at her, and took her hand. “Sorry Claire, I just spaced out - it’s been a long day. What did you say?” he asked and kissed her on the top of her head. Claire frowned at him, why was he acting so strange?

“Well .. nothing important - but could you however look after Charlotte while I’m in the shower?” she asked. “Sure, take as long as you need” he said and sent her off with a smile but he did notice her suspicious look before she vanished into the bathroom. Her shower was the perfect opportunity for Alex to place the ring in the pocket of one of his shirts in the bag - She’ll never find it there he thought to himself as he zipped the bag and placed it in the closet once again. He felt more at ease, knowing the ring was in a safe place where Claire wouldn’t find it.

“What is my big girl doing?” he said as he walked to Charlotte in the other room. She was lying on her playmat busy looking at herself in the little mirror, that was hanging in the string amongst other colorful objects, such as little animals in different shapes and sizes. She giggled and smiled as she noticed Alex’s voice - he placed himself on the floor with her and occupied her attention with different noises as he tried to imitate the noises the animals on the string would say.

- Claire was asleep on his arm in the bed that night and he couldn’t get his eyes of her. They had had the most fantastic trip together - it was just what they had needed. Even though the whole
Bryce thing didn’t work out as he had expected, he was still glad he took the chance to meet him and see where he came from. He didn’t know what the future had in store for him or Bryce, he didn’t even know if he wanted a future with him, knowing he was more of a bastard than Harry. He closed his eyes and his mind got back to the fact, he was lying in bed with the most beautiful girl in the whole world - he couldn’t wait to ask her to marry him, he couldn’t wait to get married to her and start their life together. He smiled for himself, maybe Charlotte would have a sister or a brother in the nearest future?
“What is all this?” Nick asked as Alex entered the kitchen on Wilgul. Alex fumbled with the box he was holding in his hands, but finally found the edge of the table and placed it. He looked at Nick and smiled - he had to tell him about his big plan to propose to Claire tonight, if he were to get him out of the house.

“You won’t believe this mate” he said and pulled out the little red box with the diamond ring inside. “No way” Nick said as he saw the ring in Alex’s hand. “You kidding me?” he asked and got up from the chair.

“Nah mate! What do you think - Reckon she like it?” Alex asked his brother that was busy studying the ring in the box. “I think she’ll love it” Nick said and clapped his brother on the shoulder. He couldn’t believe his big brother and Claire were getting married in the nearest future. He smiled from the happiness that surrounded Alex and walked to the sink, to refill his glass of water. “But you still didn’t tell me what all this is” Nick said and started rummaged through the box on the table.

“I’m going to prepare a special dinner for Claire tonight - I’m gonna ask the question tonight” Alex said and started to unpack the groceries from the box. “So in order for me to do so, I need you to be out of our way” he said and turned his head to Nick. “You sure are something” Nick laughed and shook his head “and what if I have plans?” he continued. Alex looked at him, what was he on about - him, plans?

“Well, I would say this is a bit more important than your plan on staying in and watch the telly, don’t you think?” Alex teased him. Nick shook his head and took a last sip of water before pouring the rest out, in the sink. There was no point in trying to talk him out of it, he simply had to give up Wilgul for the night. “Whatever mate, just remember to clean up after yourself” Nick laughed and clapped Alex on the back on his way out of the kitchen. “I think you should take your own advise” Alex shouted at him as he grabbed one of Nick’s dirty old t-shirts from the chair beside him. He frowned at it when it appeared to him he was holding dirty clothes in his hand - He took a look around the kitchen, he would definitely need to clean this place up before Claire’s arriving. If it was up to him he would have done the dinner at Drover’s but he couldn’t get everybody out of their way, without revealing his big plans and he really wanted to be alone with Claire tonight. He had asked Tess to look after Charlotte for the night, with the excuse he wanted to take Claire on a date - well in theory it was a date, with a bit more to follow. He suddenly got nervous at the thought of proposing to her, what should he say and should he kneel down or just ask her at the table? There was so many question racing through his head, he had never been so nervous in his life. He shook his head to get rid of the nervousness and instead filled his head with thoughts about his life with Claire and little Charlotte, he smiled when he thought about their time in Melbourne, just the three of them - it had been perfect. As much as he loved the others at Drover’s he sometime missed being alone with Claire, there was always someone around them.

“I’m off then - Good luck mate” The sound of Nick’s voice interrupted his thoughts. He walked Nick out and watched him drive off in his ute for the rest of the day and night - where too he didn’t quite know, probably Harry and mum, but that was a thing he couldn’t think about right now. He needed to get this place cleaned up a bit and then he had to start on the cooking, which wasn’t his strongest side.

Claire had just finished putting the last touch on her clothes she was going to wear for her date with Alex tonight, when Tess came in sight in the door holding Charlotte in her arms. “You can’t wear that Claire” she said and walked into the bedroom. Claire looked down at herself in the mirror before turning her head to Tess. “What’s wrong with this?” she asked a bit in self defense.

“You are going on a date. You can’t wear your party jeans” Tess said and placed Charlotte in the middle of the bed, making sure she was as far away from the edge as possible. “It’s a date .. with
Alex, Tess” Claire said. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t wear these jeans to a date with Alex, it wouldn’t even be anything fancy - and beside, he knew her, so she didn’t need to impress him or anything. Tess shook her head, she would never understand her sister’s way of thinking but she refused to let her go to Wilgul wearing party jeans and a shirt. “You stay here. I have a couple of options” Tess said and vanished from the room. Claire rolled her eyes at Tess’s back, she knew what options meant. It meant she had to wear a dress, a dress that most likely wasn’t her style. She sighed and made her way over to the bed where Charlotte was lying. “I’m gonna miss you tonight” Claire said and stroked her daughter’s cheek. It would be the first night away from her and she wasn’t looking forward to it, but she knew she was in good hands with Tess.

“Try this on” Tess said and threw a long black dress her way. Claire picked it up in her hands and studied it and then looked at Tess with a look that asked her if she was serious. “Go on” Tess hurried her and placed herself on the bed with Charlotte. Claire shook her head and started to take her clothes off, no good would come out of her arguing over the dress with Tess. Tess couldn’t help to notice her sister was wearing some casual white undies and cursed at her inside of her head - she didn’t really know how to dress for a date, did she?

Claire got the dress on with the help from Tess to sip the back. She stared at herself for a moment or two in the mirror, she hate to admit it, but she kinda liked the dress - it was more her style, not like the tight thing she wore at her bachelorette party. The dress still complimented her body figure very well, even though it was a bit loose in it. The dress only had two small straps to protect her shoulders. She turned her back to the mirror to look at how the dress looked from behind, she turned the front to the mirror once again and her leg peaked out from the opening that started from the bottom of the dress and ended at her thigh. “Wow Claire. You look .. “ her eyes met Tess’s in the mirror “Good?” she asked. “No. Fantastic” Tess said and stood beside her. A smile spread itself across Claire’s face, she had never felt this pretty before. “But are you sure it isn’t too much?” she asked Tess with a worried look on her face, it was Alex after all. “No, it’s perfect Claire - But we do however have to talk about that underwear” Tess said and frowned at her. “What is wrong with my underwear?” Claire asked, she was beginning to feel a bit attacked on her clothing. “Well, nothing .. If you are 50 or something like that” Tess said and sent her a joking look. “I have the” Tess said, but couldn’t finish her sentence before Claire interrupted her. “Let me guess, the perfect set for the occasion”. Tess smiled and shook her head before making another trip into her room, to find Claire a nice set of lingerie. Her eyes gazed through her drawer when she saw in the corner of her eye, and she spotted a bag on the chair - she had just bought a brand new piece of underwear online. She picked it up and studied it for a second in her hands, this would be perfect - A light purple, it would give some colour in contrast to the black dress. “Here, you can keep it” Tess said as she walked back into Claire’s room with the underwear in her hands. “I’m gonna put Charlotte down, while you finish getting ready” she said and left the room with Charlotte on her hip.

Before leaving her room Claire took one final look at herself in the mirror - She actually look really good, maybe she should start taking an interest in clothing? She shook her head, nah. It wouldn’t do her any good with the work anyway. Everybody lost their words as Claire got in sight in the kitchen and she instantly felt a little shy and she could feel her cheeks turn a bit red. “Alex is sure gonna be over the moon when he sees you” Meg said and walked closer to Claire. She studied both Claire and the dress, she had never seen her in anything like that before, she was absolutely gorgeous to look at. “Well, I better get going” Claire said and sent them all a shy smile, she couldn’t wait to get out of there, all of the stares that made her the center of attention was beginning to make her too uncomfortable.

He heard the car park outside and he rushed to the mirror in the bathroom, to make sure he looked presentable. He gave himself the clear before walking to the porch and greet Claire. He was left speechless as she got out of the car, she was absolutely stunning to look at and she took his breath away - He had never seen her in a dress like this, she was beautiful and sexy to look at. He could feel and see she wasn’t as comfortable in the dress as she looked, and that made her even more
attractive. He slowly started to walk towards her and he couldn’t help but smile. How lucky could a man be, to get a woman like her?

“You look absolutely beautiful tonight” he said as he took her hand and kissed it. Claire frowned at him and laughed, she felt so out of place in this dress but seeing Alex react this way was worth it and she sent a silent thank you to Tess in her thoughts. Alex guided Claire into the house and closed the door behind them. “You have really outdone yourself” Claire said as she saw the table with the lit candles and fresh flowers he had arranged. She turned around to look at him and found him gazing at her. “You look .. so stunning” Alex said and walked closer to her and placed one of his hands on the side of her head “I’m lost for words” he continued before giving her a gentle kiss on the lips. Claire had never seen him like this before, maybe she should reconsider her thought about clothing from earlier. “I just need to go check on the food” he said and pulled away from her. “Is there anything I can do?” she asked and followed him. “No, I got it - beside, you can’t cook even if you tried” he joked, trying to make them both relax more. “Well, you can’t either” Claire said in self defense and placed her hands in the side. “But I just did, didn’t I?” he said and send her a teasing look. She shook her head and a small laugh got out, 1-0 to Alex Ryan. “But you can place that sweet bum of yours at the table” he said as he closed the oven. “Aye aye captain” Claire joked before leaving the kitchen. He was almost done with everything, he just needed to arrange the food on the plates. He patted himself on his chest to make sure the ring still was in the pocket of his white shirt.

“Dinner is served” he said as he placed one of the plates in front of Claire. He quickly went back to the kitchen and unbottled two beers - none of them liked wine and a beer would make the whole situation more relaxed, and he definitely needed that. “I hope the beer doesn’t kill the romance” he said and reached her the beer. Claire laughed, no it definitely didn’t. “It looks really good Alex” she said and looked at her plate with a nicely cut piece of meat, a salad at the side and some roasted potatoes. She didn’t have the slightest idea he could cook and she suspected he had gotten a little help, from Liz - but it tasted and looked really good nonetheless. Throughout the meal they kept laughing and joking as they used too and it made Alex feel a lot less nervous about him popping the question to her. He tried to find the right time to get the ring out but he couldn’t figure out when that would be, so after 10 minutes of fumbling through his words in his head he decided now was as good as ever. He pulled out his chair and walked to Claire’s side, took her hand and asked for her to get up as well. She didn’t quite understand why but she did it, without any questions - She could see he was feeling a bit on edge all of the sudden. “Claire .. “ He said and stopped. He kept his stare at her eyes “You are the one person, I can always be honest around and you have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen. You have giving me more than I could ever wish or hope for, a beautiful daugther .. a life with you - I love you more than anything. I’ve wasted so many years being in denial of what I really felt for you, I don’t want to waste another day” he stopped, the next words didn’t come easy to him. He took a deep breath and kneeled down in front of her. His heart was racing and he could feel his hand shiver as he went to take the ring out of his pocket. “Claire Louise McLeod. Will you do me the honor and be my wife?”.

Claire’s heart stopped and skipped a beat before returning to it’s normal rhythm. Was this really happening, was Alex Ryan really on his knees in front of her. She gathered her thoughts and got back to reality, she couldn’t believe this. “Alex” she said with a gentle voice. She didn’t even question her thoughts, all she wanted was being with him. “There isn’t anything that would make be happier” she said and smiled. At first he looked at bit confused at her, was it a yes or? “Yes Alex, I will marry you”. He couldn’t believe it, it all started to feel so unreal and his heart exploded of happiness. He finally understood her answer and tears began to make their way to his eyes, he got up on both feet and met her in a big kiss and hugged her so tight it lifted her from the ground. “I didn’t think I could get any happier, but you just proved me wrong” he said as he got her back on the ground again and placed the ring on her finger. Claire couldn’t help but smile as she wiped small tears away from her eyes, making sure not to ruin the makeup. “I can’t believe you planned all this” she said and looked at the ring Alex had placed on her finger. Her heart melted at the thought of her spending the rest of her life with the man she had loved as long as she could
remember - She didn’t use to believe in soulmates, but Alex had proven to be hers, without a doubt. “I hate to ruin the romance, but I really have to use the toilet - the beers are running right through me” he said. Claire laughed at him “Well, you did get down a bunch”.

“Well I had to do something to calm my nerves” he said and kissed her on the cheek before finding his way to the bathroom. Claire still had trouble grasping her head around what had happened 10 minutes ago, she was engaged - it felt so unrealistic. She took the plates from the table and made her way to the sink in the kitchen, she could make herself useful as she waited for Alex to get back. She found herself gazing out the window, thinking about how happy she was when Alex sneaked up on her from behind. It made her startle a bit when he placed his hands around her. “You didn’t have to clear the table” he said and kissed her neck. “It was the least I could do, you went through so much trouble tonight” Claire said and turned around to face him. “I just wanted everything to be perfect” he said and looked into those eyes he always got lost in. “It was more than perfect” she said and placed her hands around his neck and kissed him on the lips, before focusing on his eyes again. His eyes suddenly changed from overflowing with happiness to exude desire. “What?” Claire asked with a small laugh as he kept his stare at her. “You are just doing things to me Claire” he said in a deep almost silent voice. Doing things to him? She was just standing there looking at him. He went in for another kiss on her lips, this time he made sure the kiss lasted longer than before. As he pulled away Claire felt the exact same feeling as he did, his kiss had made her desire him even more. She quickly took his head between her hands and embraced him in a deep kiss, letting their tongues explore each other’s mouths while dancing. Alex pushed himself closer to Claire, trapping her between him and the counter. He placed one of his hands on her back to push her even closer to him - at this point she couldn’t be close enough. The warmth from his hand and the touch of his finger, made Claire scream inside. She couldn’t get enough of him. She kept pressing her body towards Alex’s, longing to feel him. Alex’s hand found it’s way to the opening in the dress and started to caress her bare leg, which filled Claire’s body with even more desire. He felt the warmth from her skin as he stroked his hand up and down her leg, by now he couldn’t get enough of her. He gently lifted her leg and placed it around his waist, Claire soon followed with the other herself. He broke their kiss and looked at her with a seductive smile. They kept each other’s stare as he started to unzip her dress, he gently pulled the straps down from her shoulders and kissed every inch of skin they touched. Alex could feel the pressure rising and he wasn’t able to hold back anymore as Claire took a hand through his hair. “Oh my, Mr. Ryan” she said as she felt his erection against her. She freed her grip around his waist with her legs and let herself put her weight on them again. She started to let the dress slide down her body as she looked Alex flirtatiously in the eyes - it droved him crazy, she could see it. She took a step out of the dress and walked towards him, in nothing but the purple lingerie and her high heels. She was biting her lip as she cornered him and started to unbutton his shirt. She made sure to unbutton each button very slowly, knowing Alex hated it and he wasn't able to retain himself for much longer. As Alex felt the last button get unbuttoned, he pulled his shirt off and pulled Claire in for another exploring of each other’s mouths. With great speed and force he lifted her from the ground, forcing her legs to lock themselves around him. He kept kissing her as he walked to the kitchen table and placed her on the edge of it - Claire was feeling his lust now as well and found her way to his pants, it took both her hands to unzip them and pull them down. Alex stopped his kissing and looked at her for a second, it left Claire restless. All she wanted was to feel his kiss and touch against her. “On your feet” he ordered her in a gentle way and took her hand in his and turned her around so her back was facing him. He placed his hand at the small of her back and gently made her bend over, leaving her arms to support her on the table. He bite his lip before letting a caressing hand run all the way from her neck to her bum. His touch made her shiver and was leaving goosebumps behind on every inch of bare skin he came across. He kneeled down and planted a gentle kiss on each of her buttocks before getting to his feets once again. Claire had never felt like this before, she had never been in so much longing for Alex to touch her and she didn’t understand where all of this was coming from - but at this point she was too occupied to question it. Alex kissed her neck while his hands found their way to her undies, making sure his fingers danced on her skin as he pulled them down to her
knees. He moved closer to her, so close that Claire could feel all of him against her bare bottom section. She let out a small moan as she felt his erection on her skin. She turned around to face him and placed her hands on his back. “Kiss me” she begged him and pulled him closer. He did what she asked and placed his hands on the table, making Claire lean against it. She couldn’t take this anymore, she needed him so badly and he kept teasing her with his touches. Her hands found their way to the elastic of his boxers and with her thumbs she managed to pull them down. He was standing completely naked in front of her now and she liked what she saw, she couldn’t help but bite her lip and run her hands over his chest. Alex gently nipped her earlobe and in one movement he unhooked her bra and watched it fall to the ground. He took a second to admire her body, you couldn’t see she just had had a baby 6 months ago - she was perfect. He met her in an intense kiss once again and lifted her legs to the side, making just enough room for him to get between them. One hand was massaging her breast while the other was keeping his weight, preventing his body from trapping Claire between him and the table. He pulled her a bit further out and as soon as he did that, he entered her making Claire’s body give in for the lust and desire she was feeling. He kept going back and forth as he looked her in the eyes, he could see she was enjoying it and a smile crossed his face. Claire tightened her grip around him with her legs, she couldn’t get close, she wanted to feel every inch of him, no, she needed to. The tightened grip invited him to go a bit faster than he was, which was a bit of a surprise to Alex. He leant in and kissed her on the mouth and felt Claire’s nails leaving marks at his back. “You like this?” he asked her in a seductive way and made sure his pace was a bit faster and heavier - Claire didn’t answer him, but she didn’t had too, he could see it in her eyes. She really enjoyed it. He suddenly stopped his rhythm still in her. Claire opened her eyes and looked at him. “Oh please, don’t stop” she said, begging him to continue. Alex smiled, he loved teasing her like this. “Let’s go to the bedroom, make ourselves a bit more comfortable” he said and helped Claire on her feet.

As they got to the bedroom he picked up on his kissing from the kitchen once again, and in their wilderness they found their way to the bed - Claire made a gentle push on his shoulder, which made him lose his balance and fall backwards onto the bed. Claire placed herself on top of him, feeling him slide into her once again. She smiled at him and their mouths met in an intense kiss. He was enjoying the view as she was riding him and his hands found their way to her breasts, caressing her nipples gently - he could feel she was on the verge of coming and he pulled her down on him for a kiss. She felt like her whole body exploded as the lust rushed through her entire body and she could help but moan loud. Her wildness made it hard for Alex to retain himself for much longer and he could feel his ending was closing in on them. He tightened his grip around her waist and back, and he slowly began to let out small groans - he couldn’t keep it for much longer. Claire smiled at him as she noticed were this was going. His eyes got big and he finally exploded followed by a long groan.

Claire lifted herself from him and rolled to her back, they were both dripping in sweat. For a few moments they just laid there, didn’t say anything, both trying to catch their breath. Alex’s hand found it’s way to Claire’s. “This was really .. “

“Good?” Claire interrupted and laughed. Alex laughed as well “More than good” he said and turned his head to her. Claire smiled at him and stroke his cheek - she was exhausted right now. Alex got up from the bed and found a new pair of boxers in the drawer and made his way to the bathroom. Claire reached for one of his shirts in his closet and covered herself up before making her way to the kitchen. She smiled for herself as her mind got back to where it all started earlier. She poured herself a glass of water and her eye noticed the ring on her finger. She had totally forgotten all about Alex proposal during sex. She was truly as happy as she could be right now, she smiled and took a sip of her water. She picked up her undies and slipped into them as Alex joined her in the kitchen. He kissed her on the top of her head and finished the rest of the water in her glass. He opened the refrigerator and took out two bowls of chocolate pudding with strawberries at the side. “I had planned on dessert as well” he said with a cheesy smile. Claire laughed and took one of the bowls in her hand. “Let’s eat them in bed” she said and made her way back to the room. She was almost asleep in his arms when he lifted his head so he could look at her. “Claire - never
forget that I love you” his words filled her entire body with love and she kissed his chest before replying “I love you too”

The next morning they woke up to the sound of the phone ringing, it made Alex jump out of bed and rush to it. Claire rolled to the other side to check on the clock. It was already 8, she should be heading her way to Drover’s soon - she had been away from Charlotte too long. She got out of bed and passed Alex at the phone in the living room. She picked up her bra from the floor in the kitchen and unbuttoned the shirt she was wearing and put the bra on. She replaced the shirt with the dress and waited for Alex to finish his conversation. “Are you trying to lead me astray once again, wearing that dress?” he said as he hung up the phone and walked to her side. Claire sent him a shy smile and couldn’t help but bite her lip. “I need to get back, been away from Charlotte too long” she said and snuggled up in his arms. “Yeah, I’m driving you - I can’t stand to be away from the little bundle of joy any longer” he said and gave Claire a quick kiss before going to his room and finding some clothes to put on.

“We should do this more often” Alex said as they pulled up at Drover’s. “What? Getting engaged or have wild sex?” Claire joked. Alex smiled at her, hopefully a one time engagement was enough, but the sex though. “Clear your mind” Claire said and pushed him on the shoulder and laughed before leaving the car. Alex shook his head and freed himself from last night’s event and followed Claire to the kitchen. They were all there, eating breakfast and having a laugh. “Oh there they are” Meg said as Alex and Claire got in sight. “Yeah sorry we are so late” Claire said and went straight to the highchair where Charlotte was sitting and enjoying her banana mush.

“Oh ooh, I’ve missed you” Claire said and gave her daughter a kiss on the top of her head. “Have you guys eaten yet?” Meg asked and reached a plate to Alex. “Oh Meg, this looks good. Thank you” he said and pulled out a chair at the table. Claire placed herself by the high chair and reached for a plate as well. “What is that?” Jodi asked as Claire reached for a baby wipe to remove some mush from Charlotte’s hand. “What?” Claire asked confused. Jodi couldn’t believe what she was seeing on Claire’s finger. “That” she said and pointed at the ring.

“Oohoo, Claire said, didn’t know how to explain. She looked at Alex and a grin spread on both their faces. “What?” Tess joined in, she was curious now. Claire pulled out her hand in the air, making sure everyone could see the ring. “Omg - that is a ring” Tess said and her mouth dropped. She looked at Alex then at Claire. “Aaargh, this so great!” she said and pulled Claire in for a hug.

“That’s why you needed me to watch Charlotte all night - Why didn’t you say anything Alex?” Tess asked and left her chair to give him a hug as well.

“Well, I wanted to be a surprise for everyone” he said as Tess let go of him. “You did a very good job at hiding it” Meg said with a smile as reached for Claire’s hand to look at the ring up close. “I’m really happy for you two” Meg said and let go of Claire’s hand. “Me too! What do you say BOM, mum and dad is getting married aigh” Tess said and switched her focus to Charlotte. “I want a ring like that when I’m getting engaged” Jodi said and drooled over the ring. “You already had a ring, remember?” Becky said and forced Jodi to remember Alberto. “Oh yeah. You are right” she said and got snapped out of her dreaming.

“So, when is the wedding?” Tess asked and looked at Claire. “Wow, easy now Tess - we haven’t figured out any details yet” Claire said and shook her head. Tess was really high over heels, but the wedding wasn’t something to be rushed. “I guess you’ll be moving in then?” Meg asked Alex and poured herself a cup of tea. Alex looked at Claire, they hadn’t even discussed it but it would make sense - he was practically at Drover’s all the time anyway because of Charlotte and him and Claire’s relationship. Claire smiled at him, of course he was moving in. “Yup” was all Alex said and leant back in the chair, resting his arm on the back of the Chair Becky was sitting on. His mind raced back to last night and he couldn’t help smiling, it sure had been something wonderful. Claire caught his eyes and she instantly knew what he was thinking. She shook her head and smiled to him, before continuing her eating.
Chapter 16

It had been a few weeks since Alex had proposed to Claire and they were as happy as they had ever been. They had used the last two days on moving Alex’s stuff into Drover’s and they could finally see an end to it. Claire was standing in the middle of her bedroom - or their bedroom now, she couldn’t believe all this stuff he had. She picked up an old toy car from one of the boxes and frowned at it before smiling.

“Hey, easy with that” Alex said and rushed to her side. He took the toy car out of her hand, and gently studied it for any fractions, before putting it back in the box. “What? It’s my whole collection from childhood” he said as he saw Claire’s confused look on her face. His collection meant everything to him and he was really picky about who got to hold them. Claire smiled at him and let out a small laugh, it was just cars, she couldn’t really see what the big deal was. “What are you doing?” Claire asked as Alex started to place some of the cars on one of the shelves on the wall. “They fit in nicely there, don’t you think?” he said as he took a step back and admired his cars. “You must be kidding” Claire said and walked to shelf “These, goes back in there and into the basement” she said and looked at him with a confident look.

“What, Claire - come on” he said. But he knew it was pointless to argue any further with her as she placed both hands on her sides and shook her head. “Yeah yeah, I’ll bring them to the basement” Alex said with a bit of sadness in his voice - He really liked his collection but he also knew it had been a long shot, for Claire to allow them in the bedroom. Hmm, maybe I could sneak them onto a shelf in the study he thought to himself as he started to put the cars back in the box.

“Where do you want this?” Nick asked from the doorway holding a box in his hand. “That depends on the content of the box” Claire said with a laugh and walked to his side to take a look. She quickly rummaged through it to see if there was anything worth keeping of Alex’s things, but it was mostly some old books and car magazines. “Alex?” she asked and turned to him with a magazine in her hand. “That box can go to the basement” he said and removed the last car from the shelf. “Basement it is” Nick said before leaving the bedroom again. Claire placed herself on the edge of the bed and studied how gentle Alex was with his car, they really meant a lot to him, didn’t they? She couldn’t help but smile at the sight of him, he was always this macho man in everything he did, except when it came to BOM and from what she could she, his prized collection of cars. “I moved your lamp to the other side of the bed, and I put mine down on this side” he said and walked closer to her. Claire looked to her left to see her lamp replaced by his, she looked back at him with a cheeky smile. “And why is that?” she said and got up from the bed. “Well, ‘cause I sleep on this side” Alex said and pointed to the bed “and you always sleep on the other side, so I kindly moved your lamp” he continued and placed his hands around her waist. “What if I want to sleep on your side?” Claire asked and frowned. “You can’t, live with it” he said and placed a kiss on her mouth. She couldn’t help herself from laughing at his comment - She couldn’t wait to see what the future had in hold for them.

A gentle knock interrupted their moment and Nick once again came in sight in the door. “Sorry to disturb” he said, knowing he had just walked in on them. “I just took the last box out of the car - so I’m heading back to Wilgul now”.

“You don’t want to stay for dinner?” Claire asked and walked towards him. “Nah I better get home, still have a few things to get done before it get’s dark” he said and tapped on the door with his fingers. Claire nodded in response to his answer, she could understand him - Running a property alone wasn’t easy and you always have to race time. “You sure you’ll get by without me?” Alex laughed and walked to their side. “Please mate, I got by fine before you came - I reckon I’ll get more done without you hanging around all day, slacking” Nick’s remark got all three of them to laugh. “Is that right?” Alex said and placed his arm around Claire’s shoulder. “Yeah, watch out for him Claire - the next you know you’ll be doing his boxers” Nick said with a laugh before leaving the room. Claire turned her head to Alex “I’m not doing your boxers” she said with
big eyes and a laugh.

“You leaving already?” Tess asked as she saw Nick on his way to his ute. “Yeah, I have a few things I need to get done before it get’s too dark” he said and turned to her. “Why don’t you stay for dinner? Celebrate Claire and Alex” Tess asked with a smile.

“Claire already offered - See you tomorrow” he said and opened the car door with a smile. “Actually Nick. There is something I have been meaning to ask you” Tess said - she had been doing a lot of thinking lately, on how she could add something to Drover’s. She already had the organic wheat with Nick, but she was eager to have some more on her plate. “I’ve been thinking about a breeding program with the alpacas” she said and awaited his reaction. She knew everyone around her thought the alpacas was a bit of a joke, but Nick didn’t. He was the only one who took her serious. “Yeah?” he said halfway in.

“Yeah, and I thought you could help me with a business plan or something - since you are quite good at stuff like that”

“I would love to” he said and smiled. Tess could ask him anything and he would do it, anything for being near her. “What does Claire say about it?” he asked and closed the door to his ute. “Well, she doesn’t exactly know yet.” she said with a nervous smile. She had put off the topic about the breeding program as long as she could, she knew Claire wasn’t too keen on having the alpacas in the first place. Nick shook his head and laughed. “Good thing I ain't going to be around tonight then, she’ll have a stroke - I’ll come by tomorrow, then we can sit down and go through everything, yeah?”

“Yeah, that sounds good” Tess said with a smile and waved him off. All that was left to do now, was telling Claire about her big plan and hope she wouldn’t throw it out of the window.

“This looks really good Meg” Tess said as she joined the others around the table. She was starving and Meg’s chicken pie looked really delicious. “Oh, it's nothing” Meg said trying to hide her enthusiasm. “It sure does” Alex said and started to dig in. They were all laughing, eating, talking, having a good time. Claire found herself feeling extraordinarily happy - This was what would be in store for her in the future and she loved the idea about it. She and Tess finally had the family they had missed out on as kids, and knowing BOM would be surrounded by all of these people who loved her unconditionally almost brought tears to her eyes - Sure she missed Jack around, but this was indeed the next best thing.

“Can we just raise our glasses for the changes around Drover's and the happy couple” Terry said. He for once had joined them during dinner, which was a rare sight even though he had been living at the cottage with Meg for some time now. Alex smiled at Claire and took her hand, he couldn't believe how blessed he was and soon he would have the honor of calling her his wife.

“I have some news as well” Tess said and smiled. She was ready to tell Claire and the others about her alpaca plans, it was now or never. “I’ve decided I want to start an alpaca breeding program.” Claire stopped her eating and looked up from her plate. “Please tell me I didn't just hear that?” she said and stared at Tess. Alex and Jodi no longer felt the urge to laugh, it was obvious to them that Claire was trying to keep whatever business she found suitting, but she would have wished and hoped for her to go through it with her - she had after all been living on Drover’s all her life and somewhere deep down, she still felt she should have the final say in what gives and takes. “That’s why I’m telling you now” Tess said. “I didn’t think of it as a big deal or anything”. The others were quiet and Alex and Jodi no longer felt the urge to laugh, it was obvious to them that Claire was trying to keep
herself from bursting out in a minor fit. Claire was about to open her mouth and tell Tess off, when Charlotte dropped the spoon she was trying to hold in her little hand and made Claire change her focus from Tess to her. She soften up as soon as saw the smile on Charlotte’s face and she couldn’t help but smile - Maybe she had been too hard on Tess, if she really wanted to do this, she wouldn’t stand in her way. “You gotta take care of all the financials yourself - And I don’t have time on my hands to check up on them either” Claire said, to everyone’s surprise.

“Youp, of course” Tess said and sent her sister a smile, she didn’t expect it to be this easy to convince her.

“I think we should start using the legs more with him” Claire said and jumped down from Casino and walked towards the fence where Alex was standing with Charlotte in his arms. “I reckon we should keep using the arms, it makes him jump much better” Alex said and started to rock Charlotte gently from side to side. “Yeah but with some more leg work, the jump would come more naturally and it doesn’t look forced as well” She said and crawled over the fence.

“Hey guys”

“G’day Nick” Claire shouted to him and turned her head towards the house. “Have you guys seen Tess?” he asked and stood still. “Yeah she is probably in the study or on the veranda”. Nick nodded to Claire to let her know he had heard her and made his way to the house. He didn’t find her in the study and made his way to the veranda and there she was. Wearing her work clothes like no other could, she always managed to look as if she hadn’t been working at all - most of the times anyway.

“Nick, hey” She said as she noticed him in the door. “I’ve found everything” she said and pointed to the table full of paperwork. “You want something to drink?”

“Yeah, a drink would be nice” he said and took a seat at the table. She came back with glass of iced lemonade. “Let’s get to work” she said with a smile and placed herself on the other side of the table.

After a good hour they got interrupted by Alex and Claire’s laughs from the distance. Tess turned her head towards the driveway as they came closer. They had been together for a while now and they still acted like they were on cloud nine. “It must be nice” Nick said and interrupted Tess in her wonder on their secret to still be in love. “What?” she asked and turned her head to Nick.

“Knowing you have found the one person you can’t live without” he said and leant back in the chair. Tess looked at him, he was right. Sometimes she wished she could be more like Claire, she had truly found her love and she wasn’t scared to show it or rely on it. “I’m not sure I could ever give myself to a person like that” she said and broke her stare from Nick. Truth be told, she missed everything Claire had but she was too scared to go for what she really wanted, what if something went wrong?

“Maybe you just haven’t found the right person?” Nick asked with a curious look. His words made her look at him once again. She had found the right person, he was sitting right in front of her - Nick was the only one that always supported her, even if her ideas was a bit crazy. He was the only one she could see a future with, a feeling she had never had with anyone before - still she was too scared to do anything about it. “What if I have found that person, but the problem is me?” she said and gazed at him. He couldn't help but feel his heart beat a little faster as they looked in each other's eyes. Was she talking about him? They both knew there was something between them, but they had never acted on it - he didn't exactly know why. He placed himself on the edge on the chair without taking his look from her. “If you have found that special someone, you gotta let yourself fall and trust he will catch you.” he sure would catch her, without a doubt. “How do I know he will catch me?” Tess asked and sent him a shy smile. “He will” Nick said. Before they knew it their heads were millimeters away from each other, and none of them knew how they had moved so close to each other. Tess felt her heart skip a beat as she could feel his breath on her lips, just as she was about to let her mouth meet his, they got interrupted by Claire's voice.

“Tess?”

“Out here” Tess said and pulled away from Nick with a startled look. “Can you look after BOM for
a half an hour? I need to pick up the sheep cutter at Vincent’s place, he lend the other day”. Claire asked. “Oh, I’m going through the business plan with Nick” Tess said.

“I think we are done with pretty much everything for now” Nick said and got up from the chair. He walked to Claire and gave Charlotte a little tickle before turning his head to Tess. “We can talk later” he said and walked towards his ute.

“Did I interrupt something?” Claire asked as she had noticed how Nick’s last word came out. Tess shook her head and got up from the chair. “No you haven’t. Come here little BOM” she said and freed Claire’s arm. “What shall we play with, huh?” Tess asked her niece and walked towards the sandbox Alex had build beside the veranda.

Tess couldn’t believe how fast time had gone by these past months, and she found herself gazing when Claire placed herself on the edge of the sandbox. “You back already?” Tess asked, didn’t she just leave? “Yeah, I told you a half an hour - you ok?” Claire asked and shoved to her sister’s shoulder. She looked like she was in a whole different world, like she had a lot of thinking to do. “Look, I’m sorry about last night with the alpacas and all that, I was a bit too harsh on you” Claire said, afraid it was her fault Tess was lost in her own world. “What?” Tess asked Claire, she hadn’t heard one word - her mind was busy thinking of Nick. They almost kissed before Claire interrupted them and she needed to figure out what that meant. “I have to go” Tess said and placed her hand on Claire’s knee to pick herself up. Claire frowned and looked at Tess back as she disappeared into the house. “Auntie is a bit out of place sometimes, huh?” Claire said and placed herself in the sand with Charlotte to meet her in the little play she had going on.

Tess soon found herself outside of Wilgul - She couldn’t forget about what almost happened earlier and she needed to talk to Nick about it. She was determined as ever to figure out what was going on between them, once and for all. But as soon as he stood in front of her she lost all the guts she had gathered - it was too risky.

“What’s up?” he asked her and walked closer. He felt drawn to her and he could feel she did as well, but something stopped her from coming any closer. “I eh .. I need help with the alpaca shed” Tess said and looked away from him. “Are you sure that is all you want to ask me?” he said and took a step forward. He kept trying to catch her eyes but she wouldn’t allow it, if she did she would fall and she just simply couldn’t allow that. “Tess .. “ he said in a gentle voice as he tilted her head and forced her to look at him - he knew she felt it, he could see it in her eyes. For a few seconds she was captured by his touch and look, but her mind hurried on her to pull away from him, so she did. “Can you come by someday when you have the time?” she asked and hurried back to Oscar. She needed to get away from him, this was getting too awkward for her to handle. “Tess!” Nick shouted at her as she rode off and soon the only trail she left was the dust from Oscar’s hoofs. He kicked the ground under him, why was it this difficult for her? He had done nothing but being patience, couldn’t she see he wanted what was best for her and nothing else?

“Thought you would be out here” Claire said as she walked to the table outside at the veranda. “Mmmh” was the only thing Tess could answer her, her mind was spinning with thoughts about what had happened with Nick. “What’s wrong?” Claire asked and pulled out a chair and made herself comfortable - it was a bit chilly with the evening air so she covered herself up in the blanket Tess had around her legs. Tess turned her head and looked Claire in the eyes, if someone would have told her 4 years ago that she would be sitting with her sister by her side, she wouldn’t have believed them. “Is it Nick?” Claire asked and got her out of her thoughts. How could she know? Tess thought for herself. She nodded in response, didn’t know what to say. “Tess .. A word of advise” Claire said and turned her upper body to face Tess. “Nick is very sensitive, he is not like other guys”

“I know that” Tess said a bit accusing. “My point is. If you want him, tell him, don’t let him go around hoping whatever you two have, can lead to anything, if you aren’t sure you want it” Claire said and hardened her stare to make sure Tess understood where she was coming from. “You think I’m playing him?” Tess asked in self defense. She wasn’t playing with him, she would never do that and how could Claire even assume that was what she was doing?! “No! That was not what I
meant” Claire said “All I’m saying is he won't wait around forever” Claire begged her to understand, but without luck - Tess was already up from the chair and on her way into the house. “If you think for one second I’m having fun with this, you are wrong - I’m going to bed” but she turned around one more time before leaving. “And you should be the last to talk about playing with someone .. Claire - Goodnight” She instantly regretted the last words, why did she even say that? She shook her head and walked with great pace towards her room. She wished everybody could get off her back when it came to Nick, and would stop telling her what to do and not to do.

Tess’s words lingered to Claire’s thoughts as she found her way to the bedroom - she was mad and hurt at the same time. She couldn’t believe Tess had used her situation to justify what was going on with Nick, it wasn’t the same thing. Claire slammed the door a bit too hard as she walked into the bedroom. “Aigh, you gonna wake Charlotte” Alex said and quickly looked at the crib at the end of their bed. “Do you think I played with your feelings?” Claire asked him directly and placed herself in front of him. “What?” Alex asked, not knowing where all this came from. “Do you?” she hissed, trying to keep her voice down because of Charlotte. “I don’t understand what you are on about Claire” he said and placed himself beside her.

“Back then, with Peter and the pregnancy - everything Alex. Did I play with your feelings?” She said, making sure to cut it out for him. Alex sighed and shook on his head, he thought they were past this months ago. “Why are you bringing this up now?” he asked and looked her in the eyes, he could see she was hurt and angry. “Tess told me I was playing with your feelings when I talked to her about her and Nick” Claire said and crossed her arms. “You know, sometimes people say things they don’t mean when they are angry - I reckon you should forget about it and come to bed” Alex said and stroke her hair. Claire looked into his bright blue eyes and got lost in them - he was the only one that could calm her down like this, and without him even saying a word to assure her she didn’t play with him, she knew what he thought - Words weren’t necessary. “I’m sorry” she said and smiled at him. Alex leant in to kiss her on the cheek and patted her on the arm. “Come to bed and get some sleep” he said and gave her a cheeky smile.
“Come on, you can do it” Alex said in a cheerful way as he reached his arms out towards Charlotte. She fell into his big arms with a huge giggle and smile - She was exactly one year old today and was beginning to take an interest in walking. He squeezed her tight as she landed in his arms and gave her a big cuddle. He was sitting on the floor in his and Claire’s bedroom, it was still early in the morning but both him and Claire had been up early, to make sure everything was ready for her 1st birthday. “Daddy have a biiig surprise for you, my little angel” he said and got on his feet with Charlotte still in his arms.

“What kind of surprise?” Claire asked as she got in sight in the door. “Nah, you’ll have to wait and see” Alex said and sent a smile her way. Claire sighed for herself, this could only mean one thing - he had found something extraordinary. “Nothing too big or fancy I hope” Claire said and smiled at Charlotte. “Nothing is too big for my little girl, aigh?” Alex said and kissed Charlotte on her head. Claire couldn’t help but smile and shake her head, she still had him wrapped around her littlefinger - well, she had everyone wrapped around her littlefinger, including Claire. Alex formed his lips in a kiss and turned his head towards Claire, to let her know he expected a kiss from her.

“Is everything ready?” Alex asked as their lips parted again. “Meg finished all of the food last night and Tess is decorating the cake right now” Claire said and walked to the closet. “When will Harry and Liz be here?” she asked and pulled out a top from the bottom drawer. “In a couple of hours, the same with Nick”.

“I think you should wear this one” Alex said and came to her sight. Claire looked at him and then at the dress that was hanging in the back of the closet. “Really?” she asked and pulled out the dress - Tess had bought it to her for her birthday a couple of weeks ago, she hadn’t worn it yet. “You’ll look stunning in it” Alex said and sent her the look only he could. Claire couldn’t help but feel her legs turn into jelly, he always knew what to say - maybe she should give it a go, it was Charlotte’s birthday after all. “We’ll head downstairs” Alex said and started to walk towards the bedroom door. “I’ll be down in 5” Claire said as she took the dress in her hands. She allowed herself to admire it in the mirror before putting it on. It was in a soft tail-greenish color, light and not too long or too short - it was perfect for a summer day like this. She never used to wear dresses, let alone any clothes that weren’t fit for work - but after all of Alex’s compliments throughout their whole relationship, she was beginning to embrace the thought about shopping for a few dresses, just so she had some for parties and stuff like that - she still prefered some good jeans and a shirt over anything else.

Claire took an extra look at herself before heading out of the bedroom and down to meet the others, in the kitchen. Tess’s eyes lit up when she saw Claire was wearing her dress, she had known that color would look great on her and boy had she been right. “Good thing you are here” Tess said to Claire. “Can you take this? I need to get dressed” Tess said and handed Claire the cake. Meg had baked her famous strawberry cake, with fresh strawberries and cream inside. Tess had decorated it with some small bunnies and flowers, and the text was saying Happy 1st Birthday Charlotte. Claire took a look at the cake and was impressed by how well it had turned out - She never understood how Tess could be good at so many things, like, where did she get the skills from?

“Hurry, take a picture” Alex rushed on Terry. He wanted to capture the perfect moment, where Charlotte would take her first bite of a cake. The whole scenario were a disaster, cake everywhere, both on the ground and on Charlotte - but that was to be expected by a 1 year old. “Claire and Alex, could you stand on each side of Charlotte?” Terry asked. He wanted to get a nice family photo with the three of them.

“You have made quite a mess, haven’t you?” Claire asked her daughter as she kneeled down beside her to clean her hands and face from cake and cream - Charlotte found it extremely funny to have all the attention on her, and she sent everyone one of her sweet giggles. “Pressie time” Tess said
from a distant and waved everybody closer to the gift-table. “Mine first” Tess said and handed Claire her gift, as they all gathered around the table. Claire was excited to see what Tess had bought for her niece, probably something very Tess-like Claire thought to herself as she started to unwrap the present. “They are beautiful Tess” Claire said as she saw the present. It was a complete set of knife, fork and spoon in silver, with little bunnies on. The back had Charlotte’s name engraved - they were truly amazing and it would be her very first cutlery.

After a good half an hour all the gifts had been handed out from everyone at the party, and it almost brought tears to Claire’s eyes to see her little girl was loved as much as she were. Meg and Terry had bought her a bracelet with small animal charms and her zodiac sign on - they practically functioned as grandparents for her, along with Liz and Harry, so they wanted to give her something special for years to keep. Jodi and Becky had bought heaps loads of clothes and it was clear to see that Jodi had been in charge of the shopping, since most of the clothes were dresses and skirts. But all the clothes were very cute, nothing to set a finger on. Harry and Liz had gifted Charlotte the biggest of all gifts and they had left everybody speechless, including Alex. Harry had started a trust fund in Charlotte’s name, for her to have when she turned 18 - Every month, from this day, Harry and Liz would be putting aside money for Charlotte’s future. An investment in her education and future, as Harry had called it. Alex had disappeared shortly after all of the presents had been opened, he had his own surprise to plan - it was then Claire saw him coming from the driveway, with a red box in his hands. “We have one last gift” Alex said and handed Claire the box. She looked at him with a curious look, she had no idea on the gift Alex had planned. As she opened it she noticed a tiny riding helmet in black. “What is this for?” Claire asked with a smile, not quite sure what he had planned with this. Charlotte couldn’t even walk properly yet and riding was out of the question until she turned at least 3. “Come on, walk with me” he said and took Claire’s hand. The rest of the crowd followed them to the stables.

“You didn’t?” Claire asked him as she noticed the dark brown pony with a white mane. “You bought her a pony?!” Claire asked surprised. Never in a million year had she expected this - They had talked about getting her a pony, but that was way out in the future. “Wow Alex, it’s really sweet” Jodi said and walked closer to it, to pat it on the muzzle.

“I know she can’t ride yet, but I figured - every girl needs a horse, and if she is just half the McLeod you are, she will be riding sooner than later” Alex said and smiled to Claire. He was right, she was a McLeod and a McLeod needed a horse - And it wouldn’t even surprise anyone if Charlotte picked up the saddle in a young age, with a mother like Claire. “It’s perfect” Claire said and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I’m sure Charlotte will be thrilled about it, when she can understand more” she continued and walked to pony with Charlotte on her arm.

“It was getting late in the afternoon and everybody was sitting around the table on the veranda, talking and having a laugh. Tess had stepped aside for a bit, to clear her thoughts - she still thought about her and Nick, and she damned herself for being too scared to do anything about the feeling she had for him.

“Too much for ya?” Nick said and came to her side. She made a quick startle when she noticed him, she had been too busy with her thoughts that she hadn’t seen him walk up. “Yeah, sometime you just need to digest everything” Tess said and smiled at him. His presence made her nervous, considering the thoughts she had just had about him and her - she knew he felt the same as her, and she was the one that couldn’t make up her mind about them. “Tess .. “ Nick said and looked at her

“There is something I need to figure out”

“Yeah?” Tess asked and turned her body against him. “The other day - we almost kissed Tess” Nick said. “I guess what I’m trying to say it, I need to know where we stand - You feel it and I feel it” he said and took a step closer to her. Tess got captured by his words, he was right and she wanted to admit it, more than anything - but she was scared. She wasn’t used to love someone like he was, she couldn’t trust people enough not to get hurt, because of her past. But Nick was
different, she knew that and yet she found herself struggling with the idea of them becoming more than friends. “It’s not that simple Nick” at least it wasn’t for her. “Why not?” he asked and took her hands. “We both want this, don’t we?”

Tess sighed and closed her eyes - there wasn’t anything she wanted more than him. She had never felt like this before. She wanted what Claire and Alex had, and she felt like Nick could be the right person to bring her that. Before she knew it she had closed in for a kiss, she didn’t have the slightest idea of how and when, but in the moment their mouths met she knew she couldn’t let him go - this felt more right than anything in her life ever did.

“You see, it’s simple as that” Nick said as he pulled away from her. Tess couldn’t help but smile. Maybe it was this simple, but she wasn’t quite sure - she definitely needed to think all this through and not just rush through with something. “I think we should head back - they will wonder where we are” Tess said and looked at him one more time. She didn’t really want to leave this moment and head back, but she knew she had to. Staying could get Nick’s hope up and if she weren’t sure about where this thing between them should go, it was better to let him wonder a bit now other than break his heart.
“Your hands are shaking mate, let me help” Nick said as he watched how Alex’s hands had trouble with the bow tie.
“I’ve never been so nervous before Nick” Alex said and removed his hands so Nick could do his bow tie. Of all the things Alex had ever did in his whole life, nothing topped this nervousness he was feeling right now. He looked at himself in the mirror as Nick took a step back - He was ready to marry Claire, the day had finally come. He couldn’t help but smile at his own reflection as he thought of Claire and Charlotte, thought of the life they had lived for the past 5 years and the life that was waiting ahead of them.
“You have the speech ready?” Nick asked his brother. Alex nodded. He had been working on it for days, he had found it hard to get his feelings down on paper but he had finally managed, and the outcome of it was pretty good if he should say so himself. Alex studied himself in the mirror, trying to calm himself when he caught the reflection of Nick and his nephew John - he smiled when he thought about how crazy the last 5 years had been, he wouldn’t have thought any of them would be where they were now, if someone had asked him 6 or 7 years ago. His heart filled with warmth when the little boy smiled back at him, Alex couldn't wait to have his own son and to teach him all the boy stuff Tess and his mother were preventing him to teach to Charlotte.
“So how’s the baby making going?” Alex asked Nick. He knew they had been struggling for some time now. Nick looked at his brother with a startled look. “Alex, could you not? John has big ears” he said and sighed, before getting up from John’s side, who was busy playing with a toy car. “But it’s not going .. At all” he continued. Alex couldn’t help but notice the sad look on Nick’s face and he really felt for him. “I’m really sorry mate” Alex said and gave Nick a comforting clap on the shoulder.
“It’ll happen with time, I’m sure” Nick said. “I just wish I could convince Tess about it as well”
“You know how the McLeod's women are, they always second guess you” Alex said in an attempt to lighten the mood. Nick shook his head and a small laugh escaped his lips, Alex was right.
“So what about you and Claire?” Nick asked.
“What about us?”
“Well, we aren’t really trying. But we have talked about it, ages ago - We both want one or two more, but we have just been so busy with the breeding program and training the horses. The time hasn’t exactly been in our favor, so I guess we’ll see what happens” Alex said and his thoughts were back at his wish about having a boy.

Claire was standing in her bedroom, feeling overwhelmed by all of the feelings she felt inside. She had never seen herself getting married after what Peter had put her through, but in a few hours she would be Mrs. Claire McLeod Ryan. She frowned a bit when she said the Ryan name to herself, but then she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and she had to admit that the last 5 years had been wonderful, even with Harry involved in their daily lives. She couldn’t wish for better grandparents for Charlotte, they had been amazing with her. Charlotte was indeed blessed with having such loving grandparents around her, especially Meg and Terry had gone out of their way to make Charlotte happy and spoiled rotten, they even had the title granddad and grandmother. No doubt all of them would be over the moon for another grandchild, which both Liz and Harry had been pushing for, for the last year - even more after they had discovered about the problems Nick and Tess had in conceiving another child after their son John. Her sister’s relationship with Nick had blossomed shortly after BOM’s first birthday. They had gotten married before her baby girl had turned 2 and had been blessed with a beautiful and healthy son not too long after that. Claire placed a hand on her stomach and smiled - Harry’s and Liz’s wish would come true sooner than any of them expected. She had been feeling a little under the weather for the past weeks and
she was starting to recognize the same signs she had had, when she was pregnant with Charlotte. At first she had shot down the idea, but as the signs grew stronger she finally gave in and took a pregnancy test - The test had shown her what she already knew deep inside, that her and Alex were going to have a second child and she was impatient to give him the news but at the same time she felt like she had to keep the secret to herself because she was scared of hurting Tess. considering her sister’s desire of a second pregnancy and the struggles she had with it. She pulled herself away from the mirror and walked to the window. The stress factor due to the wedding sure hadn’t made things easier for Claire. She simply hadn’t found the right occasion to tell Alex. She got pulled out of her thoughts by Tess’ voice.

“Charlotte is ready, she looks so cute in her dress” She said and walked closer to Claire. “Are you okay?” she asked, as she saw her sister’s wondering look. Claire shook her head and pulled herself back to reality, she was okay, more than okay. She was marrying the love of her life, she was pregnant with their second child and she couldn’t wait for their lives as a married couple to start. And this time, Alex was going to be right beside her during the pregnancy, she still felt guilty about how she had denied him that with Charlotte. “Could you help me with this thing?” Claire asked and took the wedding dress in her hands. Tess smiled, even on a day like this her sister still wasn’t too keen on dresses.

“Claire you look .. absolutely amazing” Tess said and couldn’t get her eyes of her sister, as she stood in front of her in the wedding dress. She had never seen her glow like this before.

“Yeah?” Claire asked to get Tess to confirm what she had just said. “You really do. Alex won’t be able to get his eyes of you” Tess said and she could feel her eyes start to get watery. “You can’t cry Tess - I’m not much for makeup, but on a day like this you can’t ruin it” Claire joked as she tried to keep the tears in as well.

Their moment got interrupt my Charlotte’s gentle voice, calling out for Claire and soon Charlotte walked in the bedroom. “Mommy!” she said as she saw Claire and her little feet started to walk with great pace towards Claire and Tess. Claire kneeled down and embraced her daughter in a hug. She couldn’t believe she was 6 years old already, it felt like it was yesterday she found out she was pregnant with her. Claire felt her whole body fill up with happiness as she pulled away from Charlotte and looked at her. “You look so pretty in this dress” she said and stroke Charlotte on the cheek. “You look pretty as well, you are the most beautiful woman on earth!” Charlotte said and brushed a bit of her hair away from her shoulder.

“You really think so?” Claire asked her daughter with a smile.

“Mnmh, you should wear a dress everyday” Charlotte said and crawled onto the bed.

“You are the sweetest thing, you know that?” Tess said and joined her niece on the edge of the bed.

“I knooow auntie, you keep telling me” Charlotte said, almost as she was tired of hearing it. Both Claire and Tess laughed as they looked at each other. “Charlotte, could you go find Jodi and tell her to get the horses ready?” Claire asked her daughter.

“Yep. I leave my flower’s here, so don’t forget them” she said with a finger in the air and ran out of the room. “We won’t” Claire laughed. Her daughter was getting so bossy.

“You’ll never guess who her mother is” Tess said with a laugh. Claire placed herself beside Tess and looked at her. “Are you okay?” she asked and kept her stare.

“What do you mean?” Tess asked.

“About the struggling you and Nick are having?”

“It’s hard, but I’m okay. Besides, we shouldn’t be talking about this right now - We have a wedding any moment now” Tess said and got up from the bed. The truth was, that she wasn’t okay, she deeply wanted a second child and was beginning to lose hope - but she wouldn’t let that get in the way of her sister’s wedding, all she wanted to think of right now was Claire’s wedding and having a good time.

“Claaaaaaire” Meg’s voice sounded from the stairs and her footsteps got closer to the bedroom. “We are running a bit … late” Meg continued as she got in sight in the door. “You look absolutely beautiful” Meg said and couldn’t keep her eyes from watering. Claire smiled at her, she was the
closest thing to a mum she had and seeing Meg react this way, meant more to her than she realised. Claire felt really blessed to have that woman in her life. She had acted like a mother towards her, and now was filling the role of grandmother for Charlotte. When Meg and Terry had decided to move from Drover’s to their own place, on a bit of land near both Drover’s and Killarney, Claire was scared that they were moving out of her life too. But she soon realised that the closeness of their new house meant that they were still able to get to their respective workplaces. And having her own house meant that Meg was finally able to have the big veggie garden she had always dreamed about! Even though Meg was living in her own house now, Drover’s still felt like home to her, Claire knew that and it made her happy to think that she was not the only one for whom Drover’s was everything. She still remembered how she felt when she thought that she was about to lose it all. It was hard to believe that something so good as Charlotte and her relationship with Alex, had come out of that dark period.

“Oh shoot” Tess said and looked at the clock on the nightstand. “We need to go now”.
The trio made their way downstairs and out of the house, towards the horse’s stables where Jodi and BOM were waiting for them. Tess used to say that Claire was born on a horse, so there was no better way to make her entrance to her wedding than on a saddle. When they reached the stables, Charlotte was already on the pony she had received from Alex on her first birthday, and Jodi was standing near her holding the reins of Eagle and Oscar. Jodi was another person who had learned what Drover’s really meant for her in the past years. After Charlotte’s first birthday, she had set off on travelling the world, just like she had always wanted to. She had been out and about for a bit over a year, but then she had come back to Drover’s Run, saying that no matter how beautiful the place she was in was, deep in her heart she felt that she wasn’t where she should be, where she belonged to. She had started to love and appreciate the land just like Claire had her whole life. Upon her return, she had really been of help for Tess with the organic farming, so she was put in charge when Tess had moved in at Wilgul with Nick, where she had transferred her Alpaca breeding program too. Over the past years Jodi has really grown up and matured, she was no longer the whiny teenager who always tried to avoid hard work.

“You ready to go Jodi?” Meg asked and hurried on her.

“Yes I sure am - See you out there” Jodi said as she walked by Claire and Tess. “Oh, by the way. You look amazing Claire” Jodi continued. Claire smiled at her to let her know she appreciated her compliment. Even though she was wearing a dress, Claire mounted Eagle very gracefully, soon followed by Tess. The three of them started to ride out towards the paddock, where the ceremony was to be hold. They soon were passing by Becky’s and Brick’s cottage. This was another new thing on Drover’s. Soon after Brick had proposed to Becky, Claire had been approached by her leading station hand, who had asked for her permission for Brick to move in to Drover’s. Claire had agreed and was delighted to know that Becky wasn’t thinking of leaving. After things have started going well with the breeding program and she had started earning good money, Claire had decided to demolishing the shearers’ quarters to build a cottage for Becky and Brick. A cottage they soon were in need off, because not long after Becky discovered she was pregnant and to everyone’s surprise her and Brick were expecting twins. The twins, Danny and Emma, were already two years old now and they really brought life to Drover’s, not that Charlotte didn’t - but it was different with toddlers. Along with John, the four of them really brought joy and laughter. The twins and John for that matter, had been making Charlotte beg for a little sister or brother the past year, she was almost as bad as Liz and Harry. Claire smiled as she looked at Charlotte who was riding in front of her and Tess, she couldn’t wait to tell her she was going to be a big sister.

As they got closer to the paddock, Claire started to feel nervous and overwhelmed. She was going to be the center of attention and that wasn’t really her thing, but she found comfort in the thought of Alex waiting for her.

He saw them in the distance and his eyes quickly sought out Claire. He couldn’t believe what his eyes saw, she looked even more stunning than he had thought and that was only from the distance. His heart started to beat faster, it was finally happening. He looked out on the crowd, they were all
busy looking at Claire’s entrance.

“Get down there mate” Nick said and placed his hand on Alex’s shoulder. Alex turned his head to Nick and smiled at him. “Come on John, let’s go” Alex said to his nephew and took him in his hand. John was supposed to be the ring bearer, a thing both himself and his parents were thrilled about, but also a bit nervous about - He wasn’t that steady on his feet yet and the smallest things could catch his attention, walking down the aisle.

As Alex reached the start of the aisle his heart skipped an extra beat, when he watched Claire get down from Eagle in the most elegant way. Tess was coming towards him and John, to make sure her son was ready. “Daddy” Charlotte said excited and dismounted her pony.

“Hey there angel” Alex said and hugged her. “Could you go help John with the rings. Make sure he won’t drop them?” Alex continued. Charlotte nodded and made her way over to Tess and John. Alex kept walking towards Claire, his soon to be wife. He thought she looked stunning when he saw her miles away, but close up she was even prettier. Her dress was long, slim fitted - making sure every good detail on her body got complimented. The back was made out of see through lace with a flower pattern. It looked like the dress was made for her, he had never seen her shine as much as she did in that moment. He couldn’t help but smile as he reached his hand out towards her.

“You look .. beautiful, pretty, stunning - I have no words” he said and felt tears pushing their way out of the corner of his eyes. Claire gave him a shy smile and looked down at herself. She wasn’t comfortable in dresses and she was about to be the center of everyone's attention, which she didn’t look forward to either. She looked up and caught his eyes and in that moment she knew everything was going to be alright - everything was going to be more than alright, she was marrying the love of her life in the surroundings of their loved ones.

“Guys, we have a wedding to start” Tess said and interrupted their stare into each other's eyes.

“All the way down the aisle Claire felt the guests’ stare on her and that was one thing that made her really uncomfortable, but Alex was quick to pick up on it - he lead in and whispered “We are almost there. Just look straight in front of you, think of me or pretend all the guests are naked”. His words made Claire send out a quiet laugh and a smile started to appear on her lips. He always knew what to say to calm her down. Claire changed her focus to her daughter and John in front of them. Charlotte made sure to spread the flowers out nicely when she threw them and little John was very keen on all the attention, he waved at every single row of guest all the way down to the end of the aisle, where Nick took him in his arms until the rings were to be needed.

Alex and Claire reached the end of the aisle and stopped in front of the priest. They were to be married under a beautiful old tree near the old cottage, that had been in Claire’s generations for ages. Claire had picked out the place because she wanted to feel close to Jack on a day like this, and this was the last place on Drover’s he ever sat foot on. Alex turned his head to Claire and formed the three little words “I love you” on his lips.

“Good morning and welcome. Claire and Alex are so glad to have you here on this beautiful summer day - in a surrounding as special as this.” The priest stopped for a second to clear her throat.

“Love is magic and a wedding is a celebration of that magic, and that is why we are here today. We are gathered here today to share Alex and Claire’s joy for one another, to watch them seal the love for each other. I’ve married many couples in my lifetime as a priest, but I must say. I have never seen a couple quite like Claire and Alex who exudes how much they are suited for each other, as they do. It’s truly wonderful for us to see. They are the example of how love is hard work, the promise of possibility and also the expectation of joyful surprise. We are here to celebrate, witness, honor, dance, laugh, sing, eat and be glad because of these two, who had finally found each other.”

Claire looked at Alex, her heart was filled with the love she had for him. She still couldn’t believe this was all happening, it was like she floated somewhere in outer space and watched it all unfold under her.
“We give our thanks for the love that has gathered us together today, Alex and Claire’s love. We give our thanks for their open hearts and loving spirits, our thanks for their courage to walk the path of true love and all the things that come along with it.

6 years ago they welcomed their beloved daughter, Charlotte, and I think we all know, she is to thank for this love to gain its strength - The birth of this beautiful girl made Claire and Alex see true love.

Marriage is a special place, where we can endlessly explore ourselves in the presence of another. As the writer Richard Bach has so beautifully stated “ A soulmate is someone who has locks that fit our keys, and keys to fit our locks. When we feel safe enough to open the locks, our truest selves step out and can be completely and honestly who we are.”

Alex looked at Claire - the speech the priest was holding described his feelings so well, he couldn’t believe it. He felt it strange to be hearing how he felt from a woman that barely knew them. Was their love for each other that obvious?

“We can be loved for who we are and not for who we’re pretending to be. Each unveils the best part of the other. No matter what else goes wrong around us, with that one person we’re safe in our own paradise” These words hit Claire harder than she thought and she could feel her tears pushing to get out. It was true - she had always felt safe around Alex, even when they weren’t together.

“Our soulmate is someone who shares our deepest longings, our sense of direction - Our soulmate is the one who makes life come to life” This statement from Bach truly fits Claire and Alex. Throughout our lives we grow and we will always be growing and when we marry, we promise not only our own growth but also our willingness to witness and withstand the ongoing growth of another human being - That is because in marrying we promise to love not only as we feel right now, but also as we intend to feel. In marriage we say not only “I love you today” but also “I promise to love you tomorrow, the next day and always”

Claire and Alex. I remind you that marriage is a precious gift, a lifelong dedication to love and a daily challenge to love one another more fully and more freely.” And with these words the priest gave Claire and Alex the signal to turn to each other, before she continued. Both Alex and Claire was smiling with joy, never had they been this happy.

“Do you Claire Louise McLeod, take Alexander Marion Ryan, to be your beloved husband, knowing in your heart that you will be a faithful friend, and a loving companion? On this special day, in the presence of family and friends as witnesses, do you give your sacred vow that you will always be with Alex and support him, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow? Do you promise to love him completely, to console and comfort him during difficult times, to laugh with him and grieve with him, to share with him life’s simplest but most enduring pleasures, to be truthful and honest with him, and to cherish him, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do” Claire said and got lost in Alex’s beautiful eyes, she could see his smile get even bigger as she had given her answer.

“Do you Alexander Marion Ryan, take Claire Louise McLeod, to be your beloved wife, knowing in your heart that you will be a faithful friend, and a loving companion? On this special day, in the presence of family and friends as witnesses, do you give your sacred vow that you will always be with Alex and support him, in times of sickness and in times of health, in times of joy and in times of sorrow? Do you promise to love her completely, to console and comfort her, to laugh with her and grieve with her, to cherish her, for as long as you both shall live?”

“May I have the rings?” The priest said and turned to Nick. John walked on his unsteady feet towards Claire and Alex, with the help from Nick.

“Claire and Alex’s rings are an external and visible sign of the internal and spiritual bond of love which unites their two hearts. May they serve as a seal of the vows Alex and Claire have made to
one another. Bless these rings, symbols of eternity, beauty and strength. Bless the couple who give them and wear them - may the ever live in harmony, unity, love and happiness from this day forward.

Alex will you please give Claire your vows”

Alex gathered his thoughts and swiped away the tears from his eyes.

“Claire… for the rest of our very, very long lives I promise to love you with all of my heart, honour you with all of my actions, and treasure you like actual treasure.

I promise to keep you warm when you get cold, and to stand in the way of the sun when it gets hot. No matter how many horses you take on, I promise to always give my best to keep up. Every time. And wherever we go, I promise to be there, holding your hand and telling you, “I love you.”

You’re my best friend, and you’re the best thing that ever happened to me.

Let’s get really, really, really old together.

Thank you for marrying me.” Alex kneeled down at got the ring of the little container John was holding, he placed the ring on Claire’s finger with shaking hands.

“And as I asked Alex, I ask you Claire to make your vows”

By now tears was rolling down Claire’s cheeks as well, she had promised herself not to cry, not to come out as weak - but the feelings inside were too much for her to hold in, and after all - this were happy tears, no sign of weakness in them.

“I promise to cure a faithful and fantastic marriage with you. I promise to treat you with kindness, respect, appreciation and silliness. I promise to participate in our relationship, even when it might be hard. I promise to let you know when you are getting too arrogant around the horses and training. I promise to roll my eyes with you, and not at you. I promise to make laughter an integral part of our family. I promise to love you until I am extinct.

Thank you for marrying me.” She placed the ring on Alex’s finger with a steady hand and smiled at him.

“Claire and Alex, by the power invested in me, I now pronounce you married! You may now kiss!”

Alex placed his arm around Claire’s waist and pulled her in. Their mouths met in a soft kiss and the guests supported it with applause in the background. “What do you say Mrs. Ryan? We did it” Alex said said as they pulled away from each other. Claire frowned at him “McLeod Ryan - and yes we did” She said and smiled all over her face. They entwined their fingers into each other and made their way down the aisle, as a married couple.
Chapter 19

Claire was standing a bit away from the others, watching Alex talking with Liz and Harry. She couldn’t believe they were married, after all those years in denial about their true feelings, this was like a dream coming true. A dream she had never in a million years thought would come true, until 6 years ago where they were blessed with their beautiful babygirl as the priest had pointed out in her speech. She turned her head in the other direction and her eyes caught Charlotte running around and playing with John.

“It’s a crazy feeling isn’t it?” Tess asked and pulled Claire out of her bubble.
“What is?” Claire asked and kept her focus on Charlotte.
“Going from lovers to married” Tess said and took a sip from her wine. Claire’s smile got even bigger. “It really is - it’s weird as well” Claire said and looked at her sister. She was finally able to understand what Tess had been on about after her wedding, she had kept talking about this magical feeling and a feeling of something changing, even though anything hadn’t really changed - but Claire knew now, more than anything, what she meant at the time.

“Are you sure you won’t regret not going on a honeymoon?” Tess asked. Nick and her had had the time of their lives on their honeymoon, and she couldn’t understand why Claire didn’t wanted to go. Claire frowned at her sister and sighed.
“I’ve told you - there is no time for a honeymoon. We have so much work to catch up on, both the training and breeding is going really well. It’s not that we, I, don’t want to go, it just don’t fit into the schedule right now. Maybe in a couple of months” Claire said and seeked out Alex in the crowd. “I better go find Alex” Claire said and sent Tess a smile and stroke her shoulder gently. Tess nodded and took another sip of her wine.

Alex was still talking with Liz and Harry when Claire joined his side. He instantly put his arm around her waist and smiled at her.

“Ah, there you are. I must say, you look absolutely beautiful in that dress Claire. So stunning!” Liz said and studied the dress and Claire.

“Thank you” was all Claire could say - she looked good, she agreed, but she still wasn’t used to get those kind of compliments from people.

“Yes, and it was a beautiful ceremony. Now both sons are married - what more can we ask for?” Harry said and lifted his glass and gave signal to Alex and Claire to take a sip with him. Alex reached for a beer behind the bar and handed it to Claire.

“No thanks” Claire said, and kindly placed it on the table beside her.

“Excuse me - If everyone would find their seats, the food will be out shortly” Terry’s voice sounded from the other end of the tent. Alex had asked him to be the toastmaster and he had been more than happy to do it, made him feel involved in the wedding as he had said himself.
The food for the wedding was catered by someone Liz knew, she had insisted on paying for the food. It was a bit over the top for a backyard wedding, both Alex and Claire had tried telling her but without any luck - but as long as her and Harry paid for it, they could eat like royals for all Alex cared.

They were enjoying a fine tasting lobster soup as their first meal and even though Claire had had her doubts about letting Liz organize the food, she had to admit she was in a state of delicious food heaven. Normally she wasn't that much of a seafood eater, but she was already on her second portion and it felt like nothing could stop her.

“You sure you have enough room for the rest?” Alex joked as he saw her finish the last spoonful.

“Plenty!” Claire said wiping around her mouth with the napkin. She had an endless appetite at this moment and she knew it was caused by her pregnancy - she really needed to tell Alex. “What are you smiling at?” Alex asked and interrupted her thoughts. She hadn’t even noticed she was smiling, but how could she not. She was feeling so blessed.

“Just everything” Claire said and squeezed his hand. Alex knew something was up, he could see it in her eyes, in the way she smiled and the way she acted. “There is something you are not telling me McLeod” Alex said and looked suspicious at her. Claire turned her head and looked at him, how did he know? For a second she considered if now was the right time to tell him about the pregnancy, but before she could finish her thought it got interrupted by Terry who announced the first speaker of the day, Harry. Wonder how this will go Claire thought to herself, she knew Harry and he would most likely drop hints about grandchildren or Drover’s.

“Thank you Terry” Harry said and adjusted his tie.

“Alex. Let me start with saying, how happy you have made your mother and me, by marrying Claire - I know it seems old-fashioned, but it was always me and Jack’s big plan. To expand our properties to one huge property. I know it’s not quite what is going on, but a man can hope right?”

Alex shook his head at these words, Harry just wouldn’t give it a rest.

“I know Jack would be proud of you Claire. He always talked about how you were to run Drover’s and he hoped you would do a lot better job than him. I’m not one for criticizing, but I think you did and still do. Sorry Jack. You never asked for help, even when it was offered to you and I admire that Claire - You somehow made it work, where everyone else had doubt you had faith, just like your dad.

Liz and I couldn’t wish for a better daughter-in-law, it’s no secret we’ve seen you as one since the boys and you were children and we are happy to finally make it official. You McLeod’s women are making it hard for the Ryan’s to catch up!

- Best of luck to you both, know we’ll always be here for you, Charlotte and for the next grandkids to arrive in the future.

To Claire and Alex” Harry said and lifted his glass in unison with the rest of the guests. Before sitting down he shook his head at Alex, as to say he was proud of him and that was something Harry rarely did, and it finally made Alex understand what Claire had been asking him years ago, right about the time he found out the baby was his - If he wasn't going to be as much of as dad for the baby, if she had been pregnant with somebody else, because fatherhood wasn't just blood, it was all the little things in between.

“Where you going?” Alex asked as he saw Claire get up from the chair.

“I just need to use the toilet - I’ll be back soon” Claire said and made her way back to the house. On her way back she got followed by Tess, who felt the same urge as herself.

“Well that speech made it clear where I stand with Liz and Harry” Tess said and frowned at her sister.

“What do you mean?” Claire asked her with a confused look on her face.

“Didn’t you hear him? “Liz and I couldn’t wish for a better daughter in law” it’s obvious they don’t like me” Tess said and stopped outside the bathroom door.

“He didn’t say that” Claire said, trying to calm Tess down - although Liz and Tess had found it hard to get along since she arrived at Drover’s for the first time almost 10 years ago.

“What, are you blind? Liz hates my guts” Tess said and walked in the bathroom with Claire.
“And so what if she do - You aren’t married to her” Claire said and turned her back to Tess so she could help her unzip her dress.

“Yeah well, it sure feels like that sometimes” she said and leant against the sink. Claire laughed at her remark as she placed herself on the toilet. It was true. Being in a relationship with a Ryan meant you had to deal with Liz a lot - But Claire had actually come to like it, especially because of her greatness with Charlotte.

Tess stood against the sink and looked around the bathroom while Claire finished on the toilet. It felt like years since she had first sat foot on Drover’s and had to get used to the farming life, and learn to know her sister - She smiled for herself, it felt like they had never been apart now, like they’ve been in each other's life all the time. She turned against the mirror cabinet to find an aspirin, she could feel a headache sneak up on her and if anything was as it used to the aspirin’s would still be where they had always been - and they were. But as she took out the pack her eyes caught another small package in the back.

“Claire, what is this?” She asked and took the package out of the cabinet

“What is?” Claire asked as she flushed the toilet.

“This?” Tess asked and turned to face her, with the package in her hand. It was a pregnancy test.

“Oh, it’s nothing - I just have a package of those in the cabinet just in case” Claire said. She wanted to tell Tess she was pregnant, but she wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings and she was really scared she would.

“But this is opened” Tess said and took a look inside and pulled out the pregnancy test Claire had tested positive on. “And it’s positive?!” Tess said with a blank stare.

“I guess you’re going to be an aunt again” Claire said without knowing what else to say. She couldn’t read Tess’ mind, was she happy or sad or maybe both?

“Claire that is … SUCH good news!” She said and embraced her sister in a big hug. “How far along are you? and why haven’t you told me?!” Tess asked in a firm way.

“Only a couple of week Tess. And I haven’t told anybody. Everyone was so stressed due to the wedding so I thought I would wait to tell anyone to after the wedding, and I haven’t told you because ..” Claire stopped. “Because I didn’t wanted to hurt your feelings. I know how you and Nick have been struggling this past year” Claire said and tears were starting to find their way to her eyes. “But you can’t say anything Tess, I haven’t told Alex yet - Still trying to figure out the right way and time” Claire said and looked at Tess with the serious look, only Claire could pull off. “Don’t worry about the right way, he will be thrilled” Tess said and seeked out some toilet paper to dry her eyes with, without ruin her makeup.

“Yes I know he will, and that is why not telling him have been killing me - I don’t want him to think I’m keeping it from him again, as I did with Charlotte” Claire said and dried her hands in the towel by the sink.

“Just give me a minute or two, then I’ll be back out” Tess said.

Claire made her way back to the tent without Tess. Her mind wandered on what Tess and her had been talking about in the bathroom, on her way back to the tent. She shouldn’t really think about the right place to tell Alex about the baby, but she still kinda wanted it to be special - the only thing she knew for sure, was that she was going to tell him before this day ended, she couldn’t keep it to herself anymore.

“Mum” Charlotte waved at Claire from Liz’s lap as she got back in the tent. Claire smiled as she walked up to Harry and Liz to talk to her daughter.

“You having a good time BOM?” Claire asked and kneeled down to be in the same height.
“Muuuuuum, stop calling me that!” Charlotte said with an irritated voice - she was growing so fast and it was a bit scary to see how much she resembled Claire already.

“But you are my little BOM” Claire laughed and gave her quick kiss on the cheek. “You have to stop growing up so fast Charlotte, your mum can’t keep up - You are our little BOM” Harry said and looked at Claire with a smile. Claire smiled back as to say thank you, for being on my side.

“You are both annoying, and now I’m leaving” Charlotte said in a way that made the three of them laugh. Claire watched Charlotte find her way to Nick and John’s side, she would really make a great big sister, there was no doubt about that - seeing her interact with John the way she did, melted her heart and her hands instantly found their to her stomach.

“Is anything wrong dear?” Liz asked and interrupted Claire’s moment. She had picked up on her stare and the way her hands had made a little wall of protection around her stomach.

“Oh, no, everything’s fine” Claire said and quickly smiled at them “I’m just gonna go find Alex” she said before making her way back to the table. She would need to be more careful, Liz was good at picking things up and she wouldn’t want people to know before Alex, well Tess obviously knew but that was different, she was her sister and they told each other everything.

“I almost put out a search warrant for you” Alex said as Claire came back. “Sorry, I just had a talk with Tess and then I stumbled into Liz and Harry when I got back” She said and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. A kiss that made Alex reach the sky of excitement, they were actually married, husband and wife - it was crazy.

“Should we do the next speech before the main course?”

“Jesus Terry, don’t do that” Alex said with a startled voice. Terry had sneaked up on Alex from behind, without him noticing him. “But you are the toastmaster, whatever you do is fine” Alex said and emptied his beer.

“You sure I can’t get you anything?” Alex asked Claire as he studied her pouring some water in her glass. She shook her head as she took a big sip “I’m fine” she said and smiled at him.

“Before we are digging into the lovely veal that awaits us, we have one more who would like to bless this beautiful couple with a speech. Meg, my darling, you are up” Terry said and looked down at Meg at his side. She got up a bit shaken, like it had caught her by surprise.

“I’m not good at speeches at all, it don’t come easy to me like the cooking .. or cleaning” Meg’s words made the crowd laugh.

“I’ve watched Claire grow from a very very young age up until now, where I’m still witnessing the growth of this wonderful woman. I’m thankful for being a part of your life for so many years, I’ve always seen you as my own daughter and I’m quite sure Jodi have seen you as a big sister in a way, maybe more so the last couple of years.

I’ve seen a strong woman deal with the loss of her mother at a young age, only to deal with the loss of her beloved father too early as well, I’ve seen a woman struggle to maintain things as they were but also a woman that wasn’t afraid to take chances - they’ve might not always have turned out the best, but that never let you to give up.

Claire, you are a truly loving and amazing woman that always have her heart in the right place. You and Alex has given me, and Terry, one of our biggest presents - Little Charlotte. I’m blessed and grateful for the role you have allowed me to fulfill in her life, and in your life as well. I know I can never replace your mother or Jack, and I would never want to - but knowing you have been relying on me in the ways you have, warms my heart.

I don’t say this often, but I love you and the family you are allowing me to be a part of. It makes me happy to know, you finally found the love you deserve and the love you have been longing for, with the man you have been longing for - But nonetheless, it makes me happy to know that you grew out of the loneliness and into this life full of laughter and joy.
- I wish you both a long time of happiness, love, joy and laughter. Thank you for making us all one big family” Meg’s words had hit herself just as much as they had hit Claire, and she had to wipe her eyes with her napkin, before she made her way over to Claire to give a big hug. They didn’t do it often, they rarely even spoke about their feelings or what they meant to each other, but this sure called for a hug. Meg had meant every word, she really did see Claire as her own daughter - but it was only natural, since she had been there for so many years.

“It was a beautiful speech Meg” Claire said with tears in her eyes, as they hugged. “I really do love you too and I’m thankful for having you in my life” Claire said as they ended their hug. Claire had always known that Meg meant a whole lot to her, but never quite in what way, not until Charlotte had been born and the speech Meg had just held, simply strengthened those feelings. “I’m so happy for you both” Meg said and hugged both of them before finding her way back to her seat.

The veal got served not long after the speech, everything was running smoothly - Alex had really did a great job picking Terry for the toastmaster role, he knew what he was doing and he had the speakers in a perfect order, and always made sure to give the caterers a heads up when they were suppose to bring the food or wait a little while longer.

“Have you seen Charlotte?” Alex asked and looked out on the guests. Claire joined his search for their daughter and she soon smiled. Charlotte was sitting with Jodi and Becky, playing with Becky’s twins.

“What?” Claire asked with a smile as she noticed Alex staring at her. He placed his hand at the back of her neck at stroke his fingers over her bare skin, each touch made Claire’s skin react - his touch was soft and loving.

“Maybe we should do more than just talk about a little brother or sister for Charlotte” Alex almost whispered, to make sure no one else could hear what they were talking about - It was a private matter after all. Claire didn’t think her smile could get any bigger, but it did as soon as he had said what he did. If only you knew, Claire thought to herself. They were already doing more than talking about a second child, way more.

“We should” Claire said and watched Alex’s eye lit up. She was planning out the perfect moment in her head, the moment when she was going to tell him she was pregnant - But any moment just seemed good right now. “Alex, there is actually something I’ve been meaning to tell you. I’m .. “ She got interrupted by Charlotte pulling Alex’s arm, she was in a hurry to be given the permission to take a ride on her pony. “Hold on babygirl, mum was saying something” he said and turned his head towards Claire again. “It’s okay, you can take this little treat outside” Claire said and tickled Charlotte in the side, which made her giggle so hard. “I’ll be right back then” Alex said and kissed Claire on the cheek.

“Whoever get’s out there last, ows the others a biiiiig icecream” Alex said and started to pretend he was running as fast as he could - he was soon surrounded by John, Emma and Danny as well. Claire watched him play with the kids on their way out of the tent and couldn’t help but smile. She was lucky she had found a man as good as Alex, he was really something special. Guess I just have to wait a bit longer to tell you Claire thought to herself and placed her hand on her stomach.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

So this is it, the last chapter of this fanfiction. Hope you've liked it :)

It was getting late and the bright blue sky, was slowly beginning to turn into an orange delight to look at. The sun was crawling it’s way behind the hills and a mild summer breeze had started to flow over the afternoon sky.

Alex was leaning against the small brick wall around the veggie patch, with a beer in his hand. He had withdrawn himself from the celebration inside the tent, he needed a moment to gather his thoughts, before he was about to hold his speech. He had it all written down, but it was another thing to actually stand in front of all his friends and family and express his feelings towards Claire. Both Nick and Tess had been holding fantastic speeches about love, unison and family - and he was afraid his would be a blur compared to theirs. He took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. It had been a day full of love, joy and laughter. He was the happiest man on earth right now and he had everything he ever wanted. A beautiful daughter and the fact that he had just married his best friend and soulmate, overwhelmed him with feelings. Feelings he found hard to describe and that was also one of the reasons why he was so nervous about his speech to Claire. He felt a stare behind him and turned around to see Nick, standing a bit away on the other side of the brick wall.

“What are you doing mate?” Nick asked and walked up to the wall that separated the two brothers. Alex smiled and finished the last of his beer, and placed the empty bottle on the wall.

“Just thinking mate” he said and turned to face Nick.

“Be careful not to flatter yourself” Nick teased. He could clearly feel the tension coming from Alex’s body.

“Oh, shut up” Alex said and shook his head with a laugh

“What are you thinking of?” Nick asked with a clean face and placed his arm on the wall to support the weight from his upper body, as he leant himself up against it.

“Just everything and nothing. Especially the speech” Alex said and pulled it out from his pocket.

“Don’t worry. It’s a great speech and Claire will love it” Nick said, trying to calm his brother’s nerves.

“I hope you are right mate” Alex said and smiled, while he kept his look on the speech.

“We better go back inside” he said and folded the paper in his hands a few times before putting it back in the pocket. He wasn’t sure he would ever get ready to hold the speech, or at least any more ready than he already was, so anytime was as good as now. Alex made a small jump over the wall and dusted the dirt off his hands, before him and Nick went back to the tent.

“If everyone would be seated, the dessert will be out shortly but before that, we have the last speaker of the day ready. The groom!” Terry said from his seat further down in the tent.

“Have you told him anything yet?” Tess asked Claire.

“Not yet” Claire said and turned her head to look at Tess and John that was sitting on her lap. “I will, very soon” she continued and felt a warm feeling inside when her nephew smiled at her, and reached out his toy car towards Claire. He was growing so fast, she remembered how she had found it hard to keep track with Charlotte when she was John’s age, it felt like it was yesterday she was this little and still keen on cuddling up on her lap.

“If everyone would be seated, the dessert will be out shortly but before that, we have the last speaker of the day ready. The groom!” Terry said from his seat further down in the tent.

“Ups, we better find our seat” Tess said and gave Claire a smile before they both made their way back to their table.

Alex could feel the pressure as he got up from his chair and watched how the guests followed his
every move. A little voice inside his head was constantly telling him he couldn’t do it, that his speech was awful and he would make a fool out of himself - He had the biggest urge to get back on the chair and never do the speech, but then he turned his head to Claire, who was looking at him with her bright blue-greenish eyes and her divine smile. In that moment he knew Claire deserved his speech, deserved to know how he felt, because that wasn’t something he was that good at explaining. But neither was Claire, but that was okay, because they know how they felt for each other - but she deserved to actually hear it, coming from him. He pulled out the speech from his pocket and cleared his throat.

“Claire .. “ he stopped, and unfolded the last of the paper.

“You are the one person I need more than need. You bring me calmness, love, laughter and joy each day. Every time you are standing in front of me I wanna hold you, and even then it’s not close enough.

You have given me the most beautiful daughter in the world, you two are really making my life complete. I couldn’t ask for more. It took us years and years to get where we are, some may even say we were blind - I can’t speak for you, but I was. I wanted you more than I wanted anything in my whole life, I just didn’t see it. But someday I was lucky enough to finally catch a glimpse of the way you’ve always seen me, looked at me and that was when I knew.” He stopped and looked down at Claire. She was still sitting with her beautiful smile, taking in every word he said. “I knew, that I couldn’t live without you.

I’m blessed when I see you in jeans and no makeup - but let me just say I have never seen anything quite like you tonight, where I’m blessed to be seeing you in white. Everytime you look at me, I feel like I could die.

I know we are right for each other, cause right is more than right. My feelings are more than feelings, a feeling I can’t describe. I will take this moment, surrounded by our family and friends with me. It will forever hold a place in my heart, and guide me through the rough patched like you guide me when life gets tough.” He cleared his throat and looked how Claire had to wipe away tears with her napkin. He folded his speech back together and tossed it on the plate, he didn’t need a paper for this part.

“When I look into your eyes Claire, as you sit here by my side, I can see my eyes. I feel my heart beating in yours - They are merged together like two perfect pieces that doesn’t fit with any other. Word’s isn’t always enough to describe what you are feeling - And when I look at you, sitting here looking this beautiful, my words come nowhere near enough.

Claire, I love you more than love and I can’t wait to live the rest of my life with you and our beautiful daughter.” Alex finished his last words with a shaken voice and he wasn’t able to hold back his tears any longer, saying out loud what Claire really meant to him had opened his eyes even more. He loved her, he had always loved her and he wouldn’t want to live without her - But in the progress of writing this speech, he had found out what she really meant to him and she was indeed everything. Her and Charlotte were the two most important person in his life, and he couldn’t live without them nor would he.

Claire got up from the chair and kissed him on the mouth, a long soft kiss that ended in a warm hug. “I love you Alex Ryan” Claire said and smiled at him with tears in her eyes and tears rolling down her cheek. A even bigger smile formed itself on his face and they placed themself in their seats once again, to the applause from the guests.

“Do you mind if I go put John down in the spare room?” Tess asked Claire.

“Not at all” Claire said and smiled at Tess and stroke little John’s cheek. He was fast asleep in her arms. Claire watched Tess make her way back to the house and turned her head back to Alex the moment Tess was out of her sight. Sitting like this with him was everything to her - She couldn’t help but think about his speech earlier and how much she had come to realise they meant to each other. This was the perfect moment to tell him about the pregnancy, but there were too many people around.
“Can we go for a walk?” Claire asked, hoping he would take a short walk around the house or something. It didn’t need to be very long, just long enough for her to share the big news with him.

“You trying to leave me astray are you?” Alex asked with a cheesy smile on his face. Claire frowned at him, he was such a tease sometimes.

“Oh, look who comes here” he said as Charlotte was coming towards them. She crawled on top of Alex’s lap and snuggled into his arms.

“You tired angel?” Alex asked and kissed her on the top of the head. Charlotte shook her head, but both Claire and Alex knew she was tired. It was 2 hours past her bedtime and she had been up since 5, it was only natural she was getting tired. Claire smiled and leaned in to place some of her hair behind her ear.

“You want mum and dad to tuck you in?” Claire asked and took her hand in hers.

“No” Charlotte said in a firm way and crossed her arms. “I’m not tired” she said and snuggled her head even deeper into Alex’s chest.

“It that right?” Alex asked and started to tickle her. She was trying not to laugh and stay upset, but Alex made it really difficult for her.

Tess came back in the tent and made her way over to Alex and Claire, and pulled out a chair to accompany them.

“You look tired” Tess said and stroked Charlotte’s cheek.

“I don’t want to go to bed” she said and jumped off Alex’s lap.

“No? Why not?” Tess asked her niece.

“Just because” she said and began to walk away from them.

“Chaaarlotte” Alex said, trying to get her back. It was way over her bedtime and she should be a sleep.

“Let her go” Claire said. “We only get married once” she continued and smiled at him. She was right, and one night of staying up late wouldn’t do much damage.

“About that walk” Claire said and remembered the talk they were having before Charlotte had walked over.

“Guys, gather around the dance floor please. It’s time for Claire and Alex’s first dance” Terry shouted, making sure everyone heard him. Claire froze, dance, her? No she couldn’t do it, not in front of everyone. Alex got up from his chair and took out his hand like a real gentleman, waiting for Claire to take it. She looked at his hand and then at him. “I can’t do it” Claire said and looked like she could run out of the tent any minute.

“Claire you have too” Tess said “It’s tradition”

“I can’t do it. I can’t dance in front of everyone. I don’t dance” she said.

“Come on, up you get” Alex said and took her hand and forced her on her feet. “Everything is going to be fine, I am the grandchild of a ballroom dancer after all” Alex joked as they made their way onto the dancefloor. Claire was panicking, but his joke had managed to put a smile on her face for a brief second, but as soon as they were standing in the middle of the dancefloor with all the people around them, she felt her heart starting to beat fast and she got really nervous. “Relax” Alex said in a soft sweet voice and pulled her in. His big arms felt like a shield that protected her from all the bad things. “Just look at me, forget about the rest - It’s me you are dancing with, not them” he said and started to lead them over the floor. They looked so graceful as they swiped over the floor, the look they gave each other really established the love they had for each other - You couldn’t even see how nervous Claire was. But that was just one of the things Alex was good at, calming her down and making her nerves go away.

“Hey look at that, you are actually smiling” Alex said and sent her a big smile. Claire let out a small laugh, she was. She felt safe and she had managed to leave out the people around them from her mind. Right now, in this moment it was just her and Alex and the music, nothing more nothing less.

“Alex .. I” she said and looked into his bright blue eyes. “I’m pregnant” she continued with a big smile, making sure to keep his stare. This had felt like the perfect moment to share the news with
“What?” Alex said confused, still leading her around the floor.

“I’m pregnant. We are going to have a baby boy or girl” by now Alex had stopped and it looked like he was grasping his head around what Claire had just told him.

“Are you serious right now?” he asked still looking like he was in shock. Claire nodded and bit her lip like she always did, when she was getting a bit shy, nervous or uncomfortable.

“That is the greatest news!” Alex said and a huge smile spread its way from one side of the face to the other. He pulled her in and hugged so hard that he managed to lift her from the ground. Both Claire and him smiled and laughed. “I love you McLeod” he said and took her head between his hands and kissed her.

The guest were clapping at them, thinking their dance was over, not knowing the conversation they had just had.

“It looks like I gained more than her forever today” Alex said and faced the crowd. The guest looked at each other, they didn’t quite understand what he was on about. “We are going to welcome another McLeod-Ryan to the family” he said and kissed Claire again. It took a moment before the guests had understood what he was talking about, but when they finally understood it was another baby he was talking about, they all clapped.

Everyone was eager to tell their congratulations to Claire and Alex. It wasn’t quite what Claire had had in mind, telling everyone here and now - But Alex looked so thrilled about the pregnancy, she wouldn’t want to take his moment of fatherly pride away.

“I thought this day couldn’t get any better” Liz said and embrace Claire in a hug with tears in her eyes. She placed her hand on her stomach, which made Claire feel a little uncomfortable. “How far along are you dear?” Liz asked, still with her hand on Claire’s stomach.

“It’s still early, only a couple of weeks” Claire said and took a step back, to get Liz to take her hand off her stomach. There wasn’t even anything to feel or see yet.

“Let’s hope we can get a little grandson this time around” Harry said. Alex shook his head, a boy would be great, yes, but it wasn’t everything - if they got another girl he would be just as thrilled.

“You just won’t settle, won’t you?” Alex asked him and watched how Harry put on a cocky smile before him and Liz made their way to mingle with some of the other guests.

“I don’t understand why he has to do this!” Alex said and turned his head to Claire. He damn well knew why Harry was eager to get a grandson from Alex - he wanted someone to run Killarney and of course that was a man’s job. Nick had granted him a lovely grandson, but that wasn’t enough, because for Harry it was the oldest son who got the farm and that would mean Alex, despite him not being his biological father, he still saw Alex as his own.

“You know how Harry is” Claire said and placed her arm under his “Just let him be.” Alex looked at his wife - The word wife still tasted funny on his tongue and he couldn’t quite grasp his head around the fact they had given each other their forevers - and smiled.

“Well this was a huge surprise” Nick said as him and Tess came towards them. Nick hugged both Claire and Alex. “I’m really happy for you” he continued and placed his hand around Tess. Alex studied his brother’s look to see if he could catch a glimpse of sorrow in his eyes, but he couldn’t. Their pregnancy didn’t seem to affect neither Tess nor Nick.

“Thanks Nick” Alex said with a genuine smile.

“Oh, that reminds me” Tess said and looked at Alex. “You know the thing you’ve planned, it’s now” she said and looked at Claire with a big smile.

“What?” Claire asked and looked at Alex, then at Tess.

“Oh yes, we better get going!” Alex said and started making his way out of the tent.

“Now hang on a bit. I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what you have planned?” Claire said and placed her hands on her hips. She hated surprises and she hated the fact, that Alex had planned something she didn’t know of.
“Come on” Alex said and stopped his walking and looked straight at Claire.
“I’ve told you - I’m not taking one more step until you tell me what is going on”
“Are you coming or will I have to carry you out of the tent McLeod?” Alex said and started to walk towards her. Claire thought of her options for a few seconds before she started to walk - Neither of the options was appealing to her, but she sure wasn’t going to be carried anywhere. The four of them walked outside and made their way to the front of the house, at first Claire didn’t see anything out of the ordinary but not long after a beautiful old open horse carriage, appeared from the driveway. The carriage was drawn by one of the most beautiful white horses, Claire had ever seen. The carriage was decorated with flowers and candles, that made it glow all they way up the driveway.
“What is this?” Claire asked, trying to hide the fact she was amazed by it.
“It’s going to take us to Gungellan, where our car is waiting for us with our luggages” Alex said with a big smile.
“Look, we know you said you didn’t have the time to go on a honeymoon” Tess said and walked closer to the horse carriage. “But, we all thought it was silly not to go, so we planned a little something”. Claire looked with a steady look at Tess and then at Alex.
“Will someone mind telling me what all of this is?” Claire hissed.
“When we get to Gungellan, we get in the car and we take a 4 day trip to the coast” Alex said and took Claire’s hand.
As much as the idea of going away with Alex seemed appealing to her, they couldn’t go. There wasn’t any time with the horses, the breeding and the daily chores around the place to keep the farm running.
“Alex .. It’s a beautiful idea - but, we can’t” Claire said “There is too much to be doing here. And what about Charlotte?” she continued.
“We have Charlotte covered” Nick said. Claire smiled at him.
“But it’s not just Charlotte - It’s the whole place. How are we supposed to get any work done, miles and miles away?”
“You don’t have to worry about that, we are all here - and we know what to do” Meg’s voice sounded from behind and behind her both Jodi and Becky appeared.
“Guys, it’s really sweet of you - but you all have so many other things to look after, and none of you can train the horses” Claire said.
“We’ll manage. 4 days is nothing” Becky said.
“And for the horses - I’ve already talked with all of our contractors to let them know the training, will be falling behind 4 days .. Now, in you get” Alex said and started to push her towards the carriage.
“But we can’t just leave like this, what about all of the people in there?” Claire asked and pointed her finger towards the tent.
“Of course you can leave, you HAVE to leave - it’s tradition for the bride and groom to disappear out of the blue” Tess said and smiled. “Now, do as your husband is telling you too and get in. But before you do that, I need a hug”, Claire smiled at her sister and embraced her in a big hug. “Now, keep BOM 2 safe” Tess said as she pulled away from Claire.
“Don’t worry, I’ll be watching her every step of the way” Alex said and guided Claire up in the carriage.
“That’ll sound about right” Claire said with a frowned look and cheesy smile.
“I can’t believe you’ve done all this” Claire said as they had taken their seat.
“I had a bit of help from Tess and Nick” Alex said and placed his arm around her.
“That’s why she had to borrow some clothes from my room, huh? I did find it a bit weird” Claire said and looked back at the 5 of them standing in front of the house.
“How is it possible for me to love you more and more each day?” Claire asked and looked back at Alex. He stroke her cheek and planted a soft kiss on her lips, as he pulled away he placed his hand on her stomach and looked in the eyes, with all the love he had for her, Charlotte and their
unborn child.

The two of them looked so happy, as the carriage drew them away in the clear night sky, the only light that surrounded them was the candles and the bright light from the stars and the moon. During her time here on Drover’s, Tess had seen the best and the worst side of it all. There had been good days and bad days - But this was indeed one of the best days on Drover’s Run and she knew that many more were to come. She could only wonder what the future would bring them, but one thing was for sure. This was home for everybody around her, including herself and it would always be.

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