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# The Family Farm

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## Chapter 1 & 2

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## Chapter 1

THE old Holden ute squeaked and rattled as it rolled along the gravel road, leaving a billowing dust trail. Isabelle Simpson was glad to see the land around her home district hadn't changed during her absence. The same vast blue sky watched over her, and the unchanged trees were filled with pink and grey galahs and bright-green parrots. Her heart felt free and her skin tingled with eagerness. Not long now. She smiled at the familiar farm signs along the road as if remembering old friends. Izzy was glad that the farmers she'd known her whole life hadn't sold out and moved on. It just wouldn't be home without them.

A high-pitched ringing interrupted her thoughts. Pulling over, Izzy picked up her mobile, saw who was calling and promptly pressed cancel before throwing the phone down. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Didn't he realise what he'd done?

The phone began vibrating on the seat near her leg. A text message had arrived. Hesitantly, she picked it up.

**We need 2 talk. Can u please call me.**

Like hell, she thought. Izzy had already told him all she was going to say on the matter. Suddenly a sob forced its way out from deep within her throat, catching her by surprise. Her shoulders shook as she clutched the steering wheel. Finally, the bottled-up tears fell like an irritating dripping tap. He had ruined everything and she felt so betrayed. Izzy let the tears fall freely this time, hoping it might help her move on and be done with this whole cock up.

The familiar road beckoned when she glanced at it through blurry eyes. I'm almost home, she thought. Sniffing loudly, she wiped away the last of her tears with the back of her hand and straightened her back. Izzy Simpson was made of tougher stuff than that. Besides, another few minutes and she'd be back home. Back to her parents. Back to the strong

memories of Claire. Back to the close proximity of Will Timmins. Back to another man complicating her life.

Bloody hell. That's all I need, she sighed.

Planting her foot on the accelerator and spraying gravel, Izzy drove her ute back onto the road. She headed through her local town, past the three large grain storage bins. They were a towering icon of Pingaring and a marker point for Izzy. She smiled. Her farm lay only ten minutes to the east. After days of travelling, it finally felt like she was coming **home**.

As she peered out of the open window, the breeze flicked her long dark hair about her face, tickling her skin. There was something about coming back that made the landscape seem so much more beautiful and bright, highlighting the smell of the warm dusty air, the hint of eucalyptus and the exciting blue of the sky. She knew this route like the back of her hand, the Mallee trees and scrub bush that lined the road and the places where the wildflowers grew in spring.

Taking a deep breath, as if it would suck in all the familiar smells at once, Izzy glanced at her kelpie dog. "What do you reckon, Tom? Good to be back, isn't it, mate."

His answer was to stick his head out the open passenger window. Tom's tongue flapped in the wind and his bottom lip blew down, revealing his yellowing teeth.

Both windows were open, the hot afternoon breeze provided the only relief. Even though her ute was old, it still ran well. Brown vinyl lined the interior, well worn but clean and tidy, except for the dog hairs which coated the brown seat covers on the passenger side. Below Tom on the floor sat his ice-cream container with enough water to wet his chops.

Yes, her old blue Holden meant more to her than a trip to the Caribbean with a hunky spunk of a man. Izzy had bought it when she was fifteen. After four long weeks working on Spud's crutching cradle she had earned enough money to buy it off the local mechanic in town.

Izzy remembered that long month, many years ago. It had been the first time she'd worked off the farm. Her first day had been over at a neighboring farm crutching six hundred head of ewes, big fat ones too. It had been a stinking hot day full of endless flies and large blowies. Spud, Johnno and Mick were on the crew back then. They crutched the wool off around the tail of the ewes to prevent them from being blown by flies whilst she roused and pushed up sheep. She could still remember the clang of the metal flap as the blokes had pulled the ewes from the high race she'd just pushed them up into. The whirr from the hand pieces and the constant bangs, mixed in with Mick and Johnno yelling sick jokes to each other, caused her ears to ring that day. Then there were the sharp prickles hidden in the wool that had made her already sore and swollen fingers sting as she had grabbed the ewes by their thick, greasy coats, struggling to move the more stubborn ones up the race. Not to mention her aching back from bending over all day sorting the crutchings from the shitty dags and half-clean bits of wool.

Izzy had learnt quickly to pack her own toilet paper. It came in handy when you had to squat behind the ute or cradle.

Yes, it had been hard work, but bloody good pay for a fifteen-year-old. Her HQ ute had been the reward, and it had been a special couple of days with her dad as he helped her clean it up. That was before the accident, back in the days when he allowed her to help him around the machinery on the farm. Over the years she'd earned enough money to upgrade her ute if she'd wanted to. But strangely, she felt too attached to ever sell. It held a lot of good memories of times spent with her dad, and also ones of her cruising the paddocks with Claire in her newfound freedom.

Slowing down as the familiar turnoff approached, she flicked on the indicator and turned left, stopping just short of a faded sign.

*B & J Simpson, Gumlea* was etched onto a piece of ancient red jarrah and faded white paint peeled out from the grooves. Gumlea was the name given to the farm long before her granddad had brought it. Named, she guessed, after all the salmon gums, which were planted on the farm many years ago. The sign hung from two small chains off a thicker rusty frame. Her dad would've loved to see the words *and son* on the sign. He'd wanted someone to pass his farm onto, and Izzy had wished with all her heart that it would be her. She'd only dreamed of running the farm nearly her whole life. She'd been twelve when she'd realised that's what she'd definitely wanted. Being away at boarding school had been hell and proved to her how much the farm meant. The only thing standing in her way was good ol' dad. Izzy sighed as she moved the stick into gear and headed down the corrugated gravel driveway, intermittently lined with the tall salmon gum trees that she used to climb as a child.

Her nerves started to twinge. Crap. What were her folks going to say when they saw her? Dad was never too keen on surprises. Oh, she knew her mum would be ecstatic. Mum always missed her the most. They got on well. Although, it would have been nice if her mum could have helped change her dad's stubborn mind every now and then. He could be like a mule sometimes, which was the main reason Izzy had been away from the farm she loved for the past few years. He'd have a fit if he knew what work she'd been doing.

Tom barked as he spotted the farmhouse, bringing Izzy back from la la land. Three large paddocks surrounded the farm buildings. Two were in crop, the Halberd variety of wheat making a golden-brown haze, nearly ripe for harvest. The other paddock was bare, and in the far corner sheep huddled in the shade of the nature reserve along the fence line. Large silver farm sheds rose up like a pop-up book the closer she got. Izzy drove past ancient ploughs left rotting together in clumps. The same ones she and Claire used to play on.

Dad's Toyota Land Cruiser was parked at the house with the sheep feeder on behind. He couldn't afford to upgrade his ute like some of the other farmers around, but instead had to

wait for a good year or until it died on him. Then it would become a necessity to get a newer one as half the farm work couldn't be done without it. Izzy had spent most of her childhood in that ute. She checked her watch. It must be about smoko time, she thought.

Parking next to the Land Cruiser she noticed the garden was still as amazing as ever. Her mum had planted native shrubs, grevilleas, bottlebrush, and other plants that thrived in dry conditions. Water was always a problem, especially this time of year. But she also had an area of plants which she tended to regularly, from the row of deep red roses to the clumps of iris's and daylilies. Then there were the springtime pink and white everlastings and colourful livingston daisies which amazingly covered the hard ground throughout her garden putting on a bright display worthy of any garden show. Mum always managed to find enough flowers in her garden to put on the table in Nana's vases.

Looking down at her worn blue jeans and tan singlet, Izzy wondered whether she should have dressed up. She flipped down the sun visor in the car, gawked into the cracked mirror taped on behind it and applied some lip balm. She would have liked fuller lips and a larger smile, but at least she had straight teeth. Her blue eyes were vibrant against her clear olive complexion. Hastily she retied her wavy brown hair back into a ponytail. Her hands showed signs of neglect. Deeply tanned, they were callused and dry, but that didn't worry Izzy. To her, each callous was like a gold star, showing how hard she worked. Poking her tongue out, she pulled a face at her reflection, then flicked the visor back into place.

"C'mon, Tom," she whistled, then, slamming the door behind him. They walked side by side towards the large cream fence and the open wooden slat gate that beckoned you towards the house with its faded tin roof. Izzy slid her hands into the tight restraint of her back pockets to settle her nerves. The soft patter of Tom's paws against the earth led them towards the back of the house. The front door was hardly ever used, only by the odd travelling salesman or Jehovah's Witness. Each step seemed to take forever, but soon she

was standing in front of the familiar fly-wire door. Slipping off her Rossi boots, she placed them neatly next to a rugged pair of her father's. She smiled. Everything on the veranda was how she remembered it. The wooden table that her mum had rubbed back still stood in the same spot, covered with old tins and bottles that contained various cacti. A couple of rusty rabbit traps and shears hung on the wall above the table, a souvenir of days gone by. Terracotta pots with large leafy plants were scattered along the wall. At the end stood three large steel wheels from old machinery, which her father had bolted together to close off the verandah.

Tom sighed as he settled himself down to his old spot just left of the door. Reaching for the handle, Izzy called out, "Hello. Anyone home?" Taking a step inside, she called out again, "Mum?"

"Izzy, is that you?" A voice came from the cool darkness and her mum soon appeared. Izzy had inherited her tall, lanky, almost boyish figure from her mum. Jean's curly brown hair, highlighted with soft grey, sat on her shoulders. Her blue eyes shone with excitement and her wide smile emphasised her laughter lines. Small crow's feet, on the corner of her eyes, made her look wise and beautiful.

The plain cream shirt she wore was spotless, except for a treasured gold locket that enclosed a small photograph of Izzy's sister, Claire.

"Hi, Mum. I missed ya," said Izzy, stepping into her mother's open arms.

Jean Simpson pulled out of Izzy's embrace, held her daughter at arm's length and gave her a once-over. "It's so good to see you too, sweetheart. Why didn't you tell me you were coming? How long are you home for?"

"I wanted to surprise you. But let me get in the door first before you bug me with questions, okay," Izzy teased.

“Come on, then. Your dad’s having a cuppa. I’ll make you one too.” Jean placed her arm around Izzy’s shoulders and led her into the heart of the house.

Izzy’s thick black socks muffled her footsteps on the brown patterned carpet as they walked the few steps down the corridor into the open kitchen. Over the sink, light flowed in through a large window, which revealed the garden. Even though the cupboards in the kitchen were the classic mission brown of their era, with the matching green bench tops, they were still as tidy as ever. The brown stoneware tea, sugar and coffee bowls sat neatly lined against the cream wall and she knew there would be no dust on them or grains of sugar or coffee spilt nearby. Izzy got her cleaning gene from her mum. When she worked on say a tractor, all the bits sat in an organised spot and the area was always cleaned before she started and again afterwards. Her eyes ran over the empty sink that shone from a recent scrub. But it was the solid frame of her father, sitting at the breakfast bar, which captured her attention. A faint sliver of steam rose up from the white mug of tea, held strongly in his wide, deeply lined hand. His dark-blue, almost black, piercing eyes glanced up at the sense of someone’s presence.

He nearly knocked his stool over and spilt his tea as he scrambled to his feet. “Isabelle. My God, what are you doing here? I heard someone pull in, but I thought it was just Will.” He embraced Izzy in a tight bear hug and kissed her cheek, his stubble just scratching the surface of her skin. She almost had to stand on tippy toes to reach her arms up over his burly shoulders. It wasn’t that he was taller than Izzy, just he had a much bigger frame and a barrel chest.

Izzy wondered for a moment why he would be expecting Will. She let the thought slip from her mind as she hugged her dad. Gee, I love this old geezer, even if he does try to run my life, she thought. Bill Simpson smelt just how she remembered him, with a hint of sweat and grease mixed in with his deodorant. His tufted-up short, greying hair had thinned slightly

at the front. Deep-set wrinkles stood out on his ruddy skin and that familiar tiny dimple appeared with his smile along with his old set of dentures.

Izzy let go of her dad and pulled out a stool alongside him. Jean placed a cup of tea down in front of Izzy and slid the plate of scones closer.

“Now, tell me, darling, how long are you staying? Did you get time off from work?” asked Jean eagerly.

Izzy couldn't hide the smile that grew large and wide. “I'm home for good, Mum. If that's okay! Is my old room still up for grabs?”

“Of course it is, sweetheart. It's been waiting here since you left. Oh, I'm so glad you're back to stay, Izzy.” Jean reached over and touched Izzy's hand, a gesture of just how much she had missed her daughter.

“So, what happened to your job over east?” said Bill, while looking into his tea. “Didn't get the sack, did ya?”

That's just like him, thought Izzy. Typical bloody Bill Simpson style, thinking the worst all the time. “No, Dad. I didn't. The kids are old enough now to take care of themselves and I just wasn't needed any more. Besides, my place is here with you and Mum on Gumlea.” She didn't think he needed to know the truth, just yet.

Izzy thought about the Radcliffs. They – well, Rob – had given her a job on their farm Cliffviews in New South Wales. It had started out as an ‘everything job’, helping with their kids, the housework and the odd farm job when she could manage. But, Izzy had told Rob from the start that she loved farm work. She was hoping to learn as much from him as she could from fencing to tractor maintenance, spraying out chemicals and spreading of fertilizers, more or less anything to do with running a farm. Cliffviews was good size, just over four thousand acres and they grew wheat, canola, barley and ran sheep. From there, it had started. When his farmhand quit she stepped into the position. She'd worked hard to

prove how dedicated she was, and bit by bit Rob taught her more. Then her job changed to permanent farmhand. He must have believed in her and the skills that she had acquired as they started to take holidays and leave her to run the farm. Rob even roped her into helping with the farm books and they'd sat and worked on the crop plan together. Whatever needed doing on a farm, Izzy could do it and she was damn proud of what she'd achieved in a short amount of time. She was now, well and truly, ready to run Gumlea.

She'd never passed this information on to her dad, of course, as he'd have a fit if he knew she'd been doing farm work. As far as he knew, she'd simply been the househand. Otherwise he never would have let her go.

The Radcliffs had become like an adopted family and Izzy would always remember them for their kindness and love. She sighed heavily. She already missed Alice and her two kids, Emma and Chris, so much. If only her dad could be more like Rob, so understanding, and eager to teach her anything she wanted to learn. Rob never held back because she was a girl. It was just a shame he had to go and ruin it all. Everything had been so perfect, but now...well...every good memory was blurred with his betrayal. She could never go back.

Shaking her head, she tried to throw Rob from her mind. "So, Dad, what's new on the farm?" Izzy rested her hand on his arm for a brief moment, drawing his attention back to her.

"The farm's the same, love. Not a lot happening. We're counting on this year's crop. It looks like the best we've had in a while. Just as well. We need it to help pay off the new land and to replace the old header as it's on its last legs." He ruffled her hair. "But don't worry your pretty little head over it. We have more important things to do. I think your coming home is cause for celebration, don't you, Jean? What say we have a barbecue? It's been a while since we've had everyone over." Bill scrunched up his brow, trying hard to remember.

“I think that’s a great idea. I’ll do a ring around and let everyone know,” said Jean.

“How does Thursday night sound? That should give you enough time to settle in.”

“Yeah, sounds fine to me, Mum. I don’t have a lot to unpack and I already feel settled in. Does anyone need a hand with anything or shall I just go and put my stuff away?” Izzy said, reaching for another scone.

“No, I’m fine, Isabelle. You go do your thing. I’m off to feed the sheep in the side paddock, and then the header needs seeing to.” Bill swallowed the last of his tea. “I’m so glad you’re home, honey. You’ve made my day. We’ll catch up when you’re done.” With a wink, he turned and headed to the back door.

“Come on, Izzy. I’ll help you get your stuff.” Jean collected up the cups and put them in the sink, then placed the Glad wrap back over the remaining scones and popped them in the fridge that was decorated with the postcards Izzy had sent them from the towns close to Rob’s farm near Merriwa. Some were from Dubbo, Newcastle and a couple from Tamworth and Bathurst. When Rob gave her a weekend off, here and there, she’d take off in her ute and explore around New South Wales with Tom.

Walking out of the kitchen, Jean stopped in front of Izzy and smiled before pulling her into another embrace. “Did I mention that I’m happy you’re home?” she said.

“Maybe once or twice.”

## Chapter 2

The next morning Izzy woke with a warm fuzzy feeling. Everything felt right. She lay motionless for a moment trying to get her bearings, taking in the smells and sounds of her old room. She blinked as she focused on the light blue wall, which held the weight of a large, jarrah frame enclosing a picture of two girls on a motorbike. Both girls had the same blue eyes and oval faces, with similar, striking smiles. Izzy remembered having so much fun with Claire that day. A mischievous twinkle was unmistakable in Claire's large eyes, as the wind had flicked her golden hair about her face.

They had been young then. Claire was sixteen, three years older than Izzy. Even with the age gap, they still got on like a bonfire. Claire had loved to dink Izzy on the bike, and they'd had their fair share of stacks. She'd been born a daredevil, fearless, something Izzy had tried to aspire to.

Izzy's head swam with memories. Claire had been her best friend, besides being her big sister too. She had to admit that she'd idolised her, although she'd never confessed it then.

A magpie squawked outside her window, competing with a heap of screeching pink and grey galahs in the distance, and she caught the smell of fresh toast. Mum and dad must be up already, she thought.

Flinging her arm out of bed, she checked her watch. "Bugger." She sat bolt upright. It was already six a.m. Izzy had planned to be up early to do a tour of the farm with her father. She must have been more tired than she thought, after all the driving. Three days it had taken her to get back home, and not to mention a lot of money in petrol plus one flat tyre.

Throwing back the plain blue sheets, Izzy swung her slender legs out of bed and planted them on the old wooden floorboards. Stretching out her long arms and bending her

neck, she stifled a yawn, and stood up. It was already warm and it was going to get hot today. The flies were already buzzing around, trying to find a cool spot. Izzy stepped towards a white melamine cupboard and grabbed out a pair of khaki shorts and a dark-blue singlet. Quickly she dressed and put on a pair of thick socks, as well as her boot guards, and strode out of her room. Mum was in the kitchen alone.

“Where’s Dad?” she asked.

“He’s just out fuelling up the ute. Here, eat some breakfast first. Your father’s already had his.” Jean finished buttering some multigrain toast, then reached for a pan on the stove and transferred two eggs onto the top of it. “There ya go, love.”

“Ah, Mum, you’re a legend.” Izzy settled herself on a stool at the breakfast bar and began to dig straight in.

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As they drove from one dam to the next, the morning sun sparkled against the golden tips of the wheat as heavy heads leant over in the gentle breeze. An impatient Tom pushed his head out past her to the open window.

Little mounds of woollen bodies lay dotted over dry feedless paddocks, trying to conserve energy for the warm day ahead.

The final paddock came around too soon as they checked on the last mob of sheep. A blurry haze spread out before them as the heat had intensified in the late morning.

“It’s gonna be a hot one at the clearing sale today,” said her dad suddenly.

Lifting her head from its comfy position on her arm, Izzy turned to her father. “What clearing sale? You didn’t tell me there was a clearing sale on. Whose?” she asked curiously.

“Ray North’s. He’s retiring early after having too many shitty years back to back.”

Izzy nodded. She knew Ray and his wife. They lived about twenty-five kilometres from here. “Who’s interested, Dad?”

“Johnno’s already leasing most of the land and Perkins the rest. He just has his machinery and sundries to sell. Thought we could go in and have a look. He still has that yellow ten-tonne Volvo truck I wouldn’t mind getting if it’s in my price range. Plus there’s probably a few other things that might be of interest. Best go give our support as well.”

They settled into silence. Another family was leaving the district while their farm merged with others around it. Towns shrunk, schools closed and local businesses battled. It seemed the way of the world, Izzy thought sadly, as she rubbed Tom’s ears. She wondered what Pingaring would be like in another ten years. She pictured a derelict town with tumbleweeds rolling past.

It took them most of the morning to drive around the farm checking on sheep and dams. Plus Izzy made her dad detour to other parts of the farm, just so she could see every square inch of it. She had missed it all so much and was happy to find it just how it was two years ago. Except for the large eucalyptus tree that had fallen over in the rock paddock, which dad said had happened last year after cyclone Harry had come down the coast.

When they finally came back to the sheds, Izzy quizzed her dad on his new purchases and checked them over, much to his irritation. She like the new, well actually second hand, seeder bar he got and the new drill press for the workshop. By now, it was nearly lunch and Jean was calling them on the two-way, telling them to clean up and head to the house.

After a cold meat and salad lunch, they headed to Ray’s farm. Izzy had questioned her dad for more details. What other things was he interested in and how much was he willing to pay? She even offered her opinion but knew damn well he wouldn’t listen to it.

“Dad, I think you’ll be lucky to get that truck. It’s gonna go way above your price,” she said, having a go anyway. “With harvest around the corner it will sell as fast as a carton of cold beer. My bet is it will go for around twenty-six thousand.”

Her dad just ‘hmped’ at her.

Crossing her arms, she shook her head. She should have bet a six-pack on it, because she knew the old man was dreaming. Trucks were always in high demand at harvest, especially during a good year.

Izzy stretched her long legs as much as she could. Three adults in a ute was just a bit too cosy. Thankfully, it wasn't going to be a long trip. Her mum was helping the CWA ladies with afternoon tea and drinks, so she was dolled up nicely today. She had on a pair of white shorts and a soft blue shirt with minimal makeup, but that was all she needed. Izzy couldn't believe how graceful her mum could look. Why hadn't she inherited any of that, she wondered.

Izzy wouldn't dare wear white. It would never stay clean on her. She was still wearing her work clothes from the morning. Lifting up her blue cap, she scratched her head where the sweat was itching her skin. Clearing sale days always seemed to be hot.

Soon they were pulling into an open paddock where they found a bare patch of earth and parked among the sea of mostly white utes and duel cabs. Already there was a large gathering of blokes in hats and boots. Dust rose in the air, like when sheep were on the move in the paddocks, but this time it came from the prospective buyers walking up and down the rows of items for sale. In and out of the large machinery they walked. Even if you weren't there to buy, you still had a look.

Two large red headers sat neatly in a row next to a yellow truck, two green tractors and seeding bars to suit, plus a couple of ploughs and two motorbikes. Ray's work ute, a fire fighting unit, a couple of bits and pieces made another few rows and an area in his large shed contained sundry items. That was where the farmers' wives congregated. Izzy tagged along with her dad, looking at various items and stopping to chat to the locals. Everyone was coming up to them wondering who was with Bill and they were surprised to see it was Izzy. Therefore, the conversation always lasted that bit longer and they all asked the same

questions. Have you been home long? Are you staying for good? How was it in New South Wales? What's the farming situation like over there? A good hour and a half had passed by the time she glanced over near the large silver shed where the ladies had set up their tables with an assortment of goodies and an old bath tub filled with ice for the cans of cool drink and beer. Her mum was busily getting the urn organised for those who wanted tea or coffee.

A minute later the auctioneer started up and his voice boomed out erratically as the bids began. He started with the small items first, which took nearly an hour to get through, before getting to the larger items. The truck her dad was interested in was coming up shortly. Izzy stood back from the crowd of men that had circled around the auctioneer. They looked dwarfed next to the large black tyre of one of the red headers. Once the auctioneer's hand went down, the men all shuffled on to the next item, raising a dust cloud as they went. It was like they had an imaginary rope around them all as they moved together, almost synchronised.

Bidding eventually started on the large yellow truck. "Do I hear fifteen thousand?" bellowed out the auctioneer with his red nose. His large gut heaved. He obviously enjoyed the taste of beer, Izzy surmised. Give him a red suit and a white beard and he could have easily been mistaken as Santa Claus. A bloke in front of Izzy with a Summit Fertilizer hat raised his hand, clutching a bit of paper with the number thirty on it. In a blink of an eye, hands were raising left, right and centre and the price flew upwards. Izzy gave a silent chuckle as the price ran straight over her dad's top bidding price. She was sure he didn't even get a chance to bid.

"Twenty six and a half thousand, going once... going twice..." The auctioneer scanned the crowd for a bid. "Sold," he screamed after no more takers. Izzy saw her dad look across to her and she raised her eyebrows and smiled with a look of 'I told you so'.

“What did I tell you, hey?” she teased as she rejoined him, whilst the rest of the crowd moved on to the next item for sale.

“You had a lucky guess,” he grunted back, avoiding her eyes.

She should have known. Not many blokes out here took a girl seriously, let alone her dad. She was trying to break into a tough market.

“I’m dry as chips,” he said quickly, changing the subject. “Let’s go see Jean.”

Off they strode side by side, both the same height but Izzy half the width, towards the spread of food. Her dad bought a beer. It was only three-thirty but it was just a given that it was okay to drink earlier in the day if it was a special occasion, or there were more than two blokes around. They made all kinds of excuses to crack open a cold can.

“Hi, Bill. Any luck?” Jean asked.

He grunted his reply.

“What Dad meant to say was that he had no luck as the truck went for over twenty-six thousand, just like his daughter predicted.” Izzy felt obliged to explain what her dad had found too difficult to admit.

Jean gave an understanding nod with just a hint of a smile and winked when Bill wasn’t looking. “Izzy, I’ll be finished here in a few minutes. Did you want to meet up with me and go over the sundries?” asked Jean as she handed Izzy her change. “Your father will have found a few mates to have a drink with by then, no doubt.”

“Sure, Mum,” replied Izzy before taking a large mouthful of the lamington she had just bought.

Izzy decided to head off to check out one of the motorbikes, as she believed it would be very handy on the farm. Luckily, it hadn’t been auctioned yet. It would certainly be a lot cheaper to run, as well as being easier to shift sheep with than the ute. Especially with diesel prices what they were. She had seen the blue Yamaha TTR250 earlier. Now she sat upon it

and quickly started it. It purred into life. Quickly she shut it off, fearing other bidders would take too much interest. It looked in great nick as it was only a year old. The black knobbly tyres still had plenty of tread, and the blue plastic mudguards and bodywork had no scratches or cracks. She guessed it might go for around five thousand and she had that much put aside. Deciding to find Ray and ask him about it, she turned and started scanning the crowd.

A tall lean figure started to approach her. She couldn't tell who it was at first as he had on a hat and sunglasses. Nearly every bloke here was wearing the same with jeans and boots. Except she could tell this guy had a body you could bounce rocks off. It wasn't until he raised his tanned muscular arm in a half wave that she recognised him. Yeah, she remembered his sexy swagger all right and knew if he took off his sunnies that she'd be met with a pair of intense blue eyes. He fitted into the 'tall, dark and handsome' category and something about him demanded your attention, as if he was magnetised and your eyes were like little metal ball bearings.

Suddenly, Izzy felt rather ill. Especially as she had been admiring the fine-looking fella. That was until she realised it was Will Timmins. Argh! Her skin crawled as the hairs on her arms twitched like little antennas, wary of a predator. Oh, she knew Will all right, had known him all of her life. His parents owned the farm next to theirs.

Brian and Sandy Timmins had one of the biggest farms in the area. Her father had told her just this morning that there were rumours Brian was going to lease another 2000 hectares next year off Mike Littlemore. Mike was apparently moving to Perth for his kids where they were booked into school.

Brian and Sandy only had two children, Will and his sister, Jolene. Jolene was older than Will and was already married with a couple of kids in Perth. Izzy hadn't seen Will in years, and frankly she'd have been quite happy if she'd never seen him again.

Before she could turn and walk away, he spoke.

“Hey, I thought that was you, Izzy. It’s good to see you. How long have ya been back?”

Will smiled at her, wondering what kind of answer he would get in return. He had found Izzy by accident, admiring her from afar as she checked out the bike. After he’d watched her for a moment some of the things she did looked familiar, little things that resembled Claire. It had shocked him at first. For a moment, he believed it was Claire and his body almost burst with the thought. When he got his heart back under control, he twigged that it was Izzy. He felt an moment of disappointment at the truth. But now as he stood in front of her, he found himself staring at this new grown-up version of the girl he once knew. With Claire momentarily forgotten, he began to remember the little Izzy and took pleasure in noticing the womanly improvements a few years had offered.

Izzy kicked at the dirt, took a step back and planted her arms protectively across her body. Her face was set hard and her reply to his question was short and curt, “Long enough.”

Will nodded his head. “Ah, I see you still haven’t forgiven me. You know time is supposed to heal all wounds.” He swung his hands up on his hips as if to reinforce the statement to be true. “Come on, Izzy,” he pushed. “It’s been years.”

Lifting her head, she glared fiercely at him. “Why should I forgive you? I don’t have to like you, you know.”

The look she was giving him was the same hatred-filled one he’d got the last time he saw her, nearly three years ago. It was about the only thing that hadn’t altered with Izzy.

Will laughed under his breath. “You Simpsons are a stubborn lot, you know that.” He knew straight away that he shouldn’t have said it. He noticed her body language change. It was as if he’d waved a red flag. Her eyes had narrowed and were drilling holes into his head. A few more minutes of this and he’d be dead!

Izzy couldn't contain the fire brewing up inside her. All the anger and hurt broke free from the knotted ropes she'd used to secure it away with and returned in full force. She tilted her head and spat just loud enough for him to hear every word clearly. "Better than an arrogant, self-centred, using bastard like yourself."

Izzy couldn't see Will's reaction as his face was almost covered by his hat and sunnies. He just stood quietly. His tall, muscled frame was almost leaning backwards from the force of her words.

Then ever so slowly and quietly he replied, "Why don't you tell me how you really feel? Can't a bloke change?"

Izzy thought he must have been hoping for a miracle. If he thought she could just forgive him and move on, he was wrong. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "I'll believe it when I see it. Probably around the same time that all the flies just up and die!" She had already turned on her heel and started to leave.

Will wasn't angry with the way she'd reacted, just sad. He wanted this whole thing over. Will watched her walk away. "I'll see you later then," he called out. "Don't forget we're neighbours and you can't avoid me forever."

"Huh. Not if I can help it," Izzy yelled back without turning around. Bloody hell, she thought. That's all she needed, especially after just getting home from another debacle.

Her steps were long and forceful, almost stomping, as she left. She didn't know where she was going until she ended up back at the table where her mum was working. As it turned out, she was just finishing up so they headed off together into the large shed to check out the household items. It took Izzy a while to calm down and to stop her heart racing like a mad goanna. Will could send her blood pressure soaring in seconds. How dare he have the hide to talk to her like there was nothing wrong between them.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” asked Jean. “You look annoyed. Has your father said something to upset you?”

Izzy forced herself to smile and flapped her arms about freely as if to brush away her tension. “No, I’m fine. Just deep in thought, that’s all.”

It wasn’t until they got to the end of the shed where some old metal framed beds and mattresses were stacked that she noticed a small man with slightly hunched shoulders chatting to his wife in the corner. “Mum, I’ll be back in a tick. I just want to have a word with Ray.” She touched her mother’s arm before setting off to chat with Ray after remembering that’s what she originally had intended, before Will had made her lose her cool.

“G’day, Ray. How ya going, Louise?” she said, greeting them with hug.

Ray looked so soft and gentle, like a podgy teddy bear with a floppy hat. What he didn’t have in height, he made up for in heart size. You didn’t need glasses to see the years on the farm had taken their toll on Ray, as he looked older than his sixty years.

Louise was nearly ten years younger and looked fabulous in her white cotton dress and straw hat. They had four daughters, all married off with their own kids now.

Her dad said that was one of the reasons they were selling. They missed the girls and their grandchildren, plus none of the family were interested in taking on the farm.

Apparently, they were moving to their retirement house closer to the family. Izzy hoped that never happened to her. She wanted to live and die on their farm. With a bit of luck she would have her own children to pass it on to, regardless of what sex they might turn out to be.

“It’s so good to see you, Izzy. It’s been a while. Are you home visiting?” Louise asked politely.

“No, I’m home for good. I’m here to help Dad run the farm.”

“Ha, good luck with that, love,” said Ray. He understood the huge wall she had to climb.

Ray turned to head off and leave the girls to it, but Izzy quickly stopped him.

“Actually, Ray, I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your motorbike,” she said swiftly.

“Oh, sure thing.” Ray halted and waited until Izzy was by his side again.

Ray’s small bowlegged strides led the way through his shed, past large brown cardboard boxes. Some were filled with a collection of new fan belts protruding out like bows, others held an assortment of old spanners and wrenches. Things he didn’t need in the city. The last couple of smaller boxes held large silver pots and pans with the odd plate set and collection of tea towels. The clearing sale had obviously been a good chance for Louise to clean out her cupboards.

Ray’s well-worn leather Blundstones kicked up a cloud of dust as they stepped off the grey cement floor onto the dry soil, heading in the direction of the motorbike.

“Which one you interested in, love?” said Ray softly.

“The blue 250. Has it had regular services?” she queried Ray as she swatted at the annoying flies that buzzed around her face. It was days like this Izzy wished she had a fly net or a couple of old corks on bits of string hanging off her hat.

“I’ve only done one as I’ve hardly used it. Getting too old, you see. It’s much more comfortable sitting in the ute. I mainly got it for when the kids came down, but they only used it once.”

Izzy watched him closely for a moment. The deep lines upon his dry tanned skin showed the many years he had worked this land. “You gonna miss it, Ray. All this?” she asked.

He nodded as he walked. “Hard not to, love. Farming has been my whole life, and my parents’ and theirs before them. But Louise is lonely and miserable without the kids and I miss them too. I’m getting too old to be doing this by myself. It becomes dangerous and my back is just not what it used to be. It’s going to be a big change, that’s for sure.” His face looked tired and his eyes betrayed a deep sadness. “It’s hard to leave something that you’ve poured all your blood, sweat and tears into. But none of the kids want it.”

“Yeah, well, I’d give my left leg to have our farm.” Izzy felt for Ray, she knew what it meant to him. To give it all up for a small boxed-in yard, squeezed in among thousands of other homes when you were used to the open space with just the bush as your nearest neighbour. Izzy had felt the same at boarding school. There was never any peace and quiet there.

“When are you leaving?” she asked, breaking him from his thoughts.

“Two weeks’ time. The kids are coming down to help us shift to Bunbury. Don’t you worry. We’ll be okay.” He gave Izzy a weak smile, obviously still trying to convince himself. “We’re right next to a nice golf course and we’ll be able to play as much as we want. Imagine that, Izzy. A real green golf course. I wonder if my game will improve,” he said, almost laughing to himself.

Golf was one of the main sports out here. The fairways were green but only after it rained, and then it was only weeds that grew. Not to mention greens that were actually black oily sands. If you were stuck in the bush off the fairway, you really were stuck in the bush. Many balls were lost every year. It was worse than the road toll.

Izzy’s dad played golf as well. He usually packed an Esky with a few beers to get around, as did most of the outback golfers. Most buggies resembled rolling pubs, with rattling bottles and cans. Nothing like the city golfers.

“Yes, I’m going to miss this place. It will always be home,” Ray said, deep in thought again.

They merged with a small crowd of men who were already milling around the bikes. Izzy nodded goodbye and left Ray talking to Jake Perkins, while she edged her way into the group.

Digging her hand into her back pocket, she pulled out a small piece of rectangular paper and held it at her waist. She felt like a cowboy ready to draw his guns from his holsters.

The auctioneer started the bidding on the Yamaha, his arms flapping about at his sides as he pointed out bids. It started to slow. “I have five thousand one hundred, going once,” yelled out the auctioneer.

Izzy raised her hand, making her number sixty-eight visible for the first time.

The auctioneer pointed at her. “Five thousand two hundred. Can I see a three?” He scanned the crowd. There were only two serious bidders left and the man in the black hat was shaking his head as he looked down at his disappointed son.

“Five thousand two hundred, going once...going twice...” Izzy felt a nervous excitement. “Sold to the young lass, number sixty eight. Congratulations, love,” said the auctioneer before moving on to an oldish red four-wheeler.

Izzy smiled. Her first auction buy. She was stoked she’d managed to get it for just over her estimated price.

Later that afternoon she rode it up a small plank of wood into the back of her dad’s ute. She was deliriously happy, even if her dad had reacted just how she’d expected he would.

“Why waste your money on that? What are you going to do with it? You’d better get a helmet before you go breaking your neck.” Bill ranted on and on.

Izzy wondered what a supportive and encouraging father would be like. Did they even exist? Hell, not in her house.