



A liquor store assistant ran to help Val shovel the wine carton onto the counter. Being eight months pregnant had some advantages.

Not many.

Okay, none.

Wallowing around in sweltering Australian summer heat with a four hundred pound bowling ball where your stomach used to be totally sucked.

When did a Texas-raised cowgirl become such a warm weather baby? She only lived a few years in New York, nut now anything less than a foot of snow before Christmas didn't seem right.

She shouldn't mope. Hell, she had the job of her dreams at Channel 7, a growing reputation as a true-crime writer and she was having a baby with the greatest guy a girl could wish for.

Mom would kick her ass. "Raise your chin, honey," she'd say. "Harding's don't pout."

Val sighed.

There was the problem. How could you keep your chin up when you weighed more than a Ford pick-up, and you hadn't hugged your Mom in more than two years?

When Mom was in the same country, stuck in Sydney waiting out compulsory hotel lockdown.

So near, and yet so far that Val just wanted to cry. All the time.

“You okay, love?”

The matronly check-out operator looked over the top of her glasses, one eyebrow raised in concern.

Another late pregnancy affliction, everyone imagined you were about to collapse, or maybe explode and cascade amniotic fluid over their nice clean floor.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Go on.” The kindly lady nudged the Veuve Clicquot bottle among Val’s purchases. “A few sips when you get home won’t hurt the baby. Treat yourself.”

“Oh. I got that to wet the baby’s head.”

“Here you go then.” She slid a three-pack of fancy chocolates across the counter. “Have these on us. Merry Christmas, eh?”

Once Val had wrapped the wine — gifts for her friends in the newsroom — and hidden the champagne as a surprise for Tim, she had nothing to do but lay down.

The doctor ordered rest. As if she could possibly relax with Freddy Kruger jabbing knives in the base of her spine however she twisted or turned.

Val had imagined a Nirvana of trashy romance novels and day time soaps for the final weeks of her pregnancy, but she missed her job — the companionship, the urgency of daily deadlines — especially with Tim going to work at a newspaper every day.

“You in the bedroom?”

Val woke with a start to the shush of a beer can opening in the kitchen — Tim’s evening ritual.

“Yes, in here.” She dragged herself up on the pillows.

Tim leant in the door frame, his beer at his waist, grinning.

Val smeared hair off her cheeks. “Sorry, I must have fallen asleep.”

“Good,” he said.

“But I’ve done nothing for dinner.”

“No worries, I’ll chuck something on the barbie. Fancy a steak? I bumped into Nancy on the driveway. She invited us to Christmas Day breakfast on the beach, BYO bubbly and croissants. What do you think? It’ll be the crowd we met at their place.”

“That would be lovely.” A relief. With Mom and Dad in New South Wales and Tim’s folks deep in the wheatbelt on the family farm, the big day had looked a bit lonely, even with her man at home.

“Right, oh, then. I’ll let Nancy know. What do you want for Christmas, anyway?”

“What?”

“A present. What would you like. I’ve been wracking my brains.”

“Tim, it’s December the 21st.”

He shrugged. “Three days until I do my Christmas shopping then. Go on. What would you like? I want to do something special.”

*I want my Mom.* Still half asleep, the protective discipline that usually stopped the thought reaching her eyes failed.

“Oh, love.” Tim put his beer on the chest of drawers and climbed on the bed to hug her. “I know that look.”

“I’m sorry. It’s baby brain. I’m all over the place. I’ve been thinking about Mom and Dad all day. I was in the liquor store —“

“Yeah, that’s where my thoughts turn to my parents.”

She punched him on the shoulder. “I know it’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is,” Val said. “Mom and Dad will be here before New Years.”

Tim rocked her in his arms. “I know, on Christmas Day they’ll be in Sydney, virtually on our doorstep.”

“Hardly,” Val said. “It’s a five hour flight.”

“If they could get on a plane.”

“That’s the worst. They’re out of quarantine today — if only they could get tickets, but it’s hopeless. It’s just not meant to be.”

Tim kissed her neck. “Roll over. I’ll give your back a rub.”

“Would you? You’re the best, Tim. Don’t mind me. I’m being an idiot.”

Christmas Day turned out okay. Val found a small package with her name on it under the tree — a gorgeous gold bracelet. The card said ‘from Santa’ in Tim’s boyish scrawl.

At Scarborough Beach, Nancy and her friends forced a glass of champagne on her. Seeing as they were all midwives, Val accepted their assurances and appreciated their compliments on her condition.

A perfect blue sky, an early sea breeze, kids trying out new boogie boards or buckets and spades, strangers wishing everyone the joy of the season, Val loved every minute and hardly even noticed her aching back until she wedged into Tim's Holden for the drive home.

"Nancy's friends are great, aren't they?" She said.

"They'll kick on all day. Do you want to go back? Sorry, I thought —"

"You were right. That was just enough."

"Excellent."

Val nodded off to the hum of the engine before they'd cleared the beachside suburbs.

She came too in a parking lot. "Tim, why are we at the airport?"

He grabbed the steering wheel and stared around. "Oh, no. Are we? I must have taken a wrong turning. Well, seeing as we're here ..."

No, it couldn't be, could it?

As he towed her over the cross-walks to the terminal, Val squeezed her palm to her thudding heart, worried it might jump right out of her ribs. "What have you done, Tim?"

"Never you mind."

The arrivals hall boiled with anticipation. Crowds pressed for the first view of loved ones coming down the stairs to the baggage reclaim. The arrivals screen flashed 'QF672 Sydney — landed'.

Val dug her nails into Tim's forearm. "Did you —?"

"Is that them?" he asked.

On the escalator, Mom, descending to the automatic security doors endearingly perky in Golden Girls chic twittering away at Dad, who smiled with calm indulgence.

Val squealed. "I'm going to die. This is incredible. How did you do it?" He cocked his head, the smug swine. "We're reporters. We have contacts. Look, they've seen you."

Mom's eyes went wide-eyed with pure joy. She tugged on Dad's sleeve, and his beaming wave put a lump in Val's throat the size of a longhorn steer.

"Oh, Tim. I love you so much. I think I'm going to have the baby right now."

"Don't do that, love."

Mom and Dad jumped off the moving stairs. A security man stepped into their path — arms spread to stop them. A second official locked the security doors.

Mom's hand went to her mouth. Dad turned on the guard.

*Bing, bong. "Due to a new outbreak of Covid, the Western Australian Government has reimposed hotel quarantine restrictions on travellers from New South Wales effective immediately. We apologise ..."*

*"Oh, Shit." Tim arms locked around her just in time. Val's head spun, her knees gave way.*

*"No," she said. "Two more weeks. And they'll be right here in town."*

*If you liked this and you'd like free books every month, why not sign up for my newsletter?*

FYI, I wrote this on December 14th. On December 17th, the WA Government closed its borders because of a COVCID outbreak in Sydney!