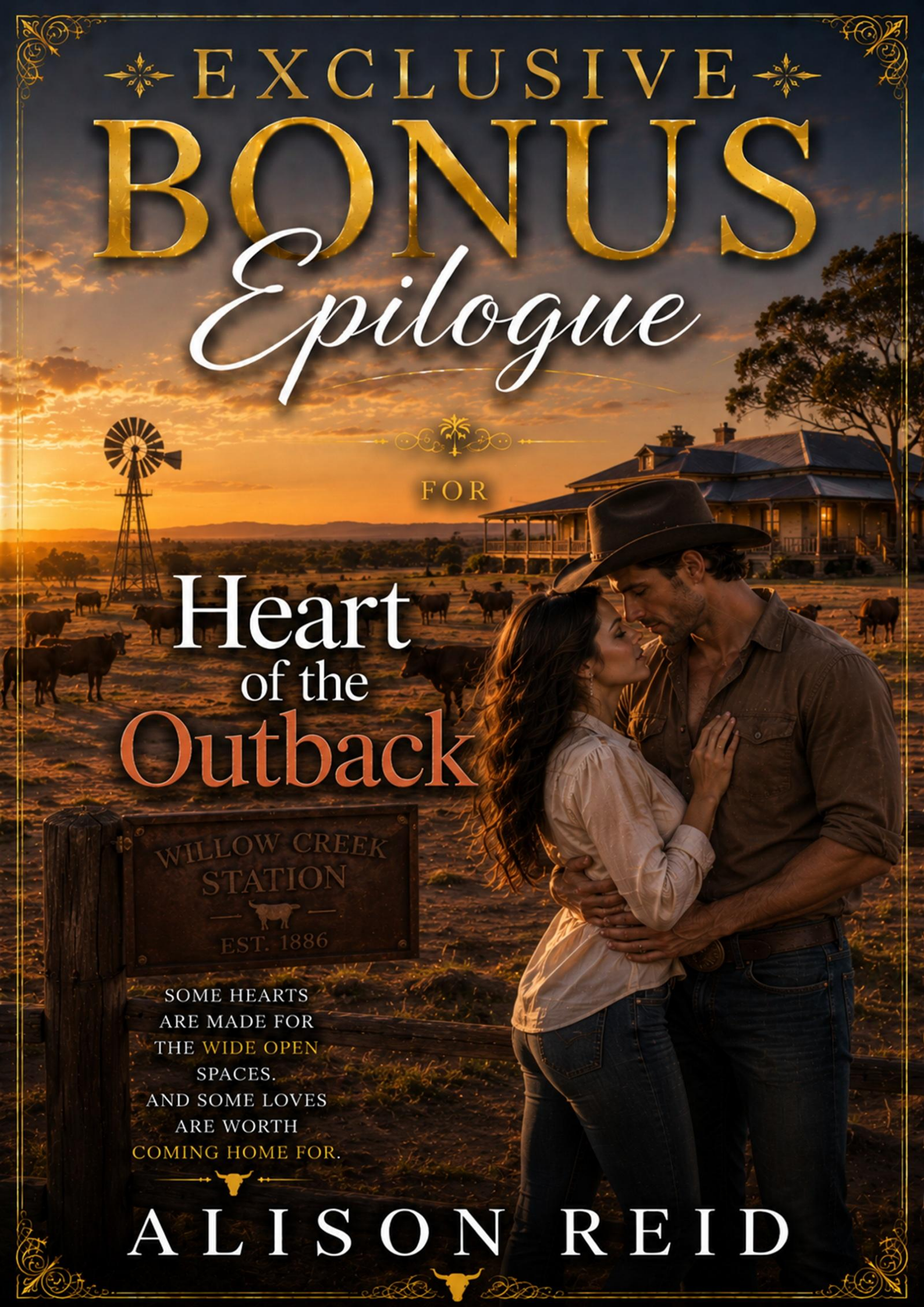
EXCLUSIVE

BONUS Epilogue

FOR

Heart of the Outback



SOME HEARTS ARE MADE FOR THE WIDE OPEN SPACES. AND SOME LOVES ARE WORTH COMING HOME FOR.

ALISON REID

Exclusive Bonus Epilogue

Heart of the Outback

by Alison Reid

Four Years Later…

Christmas morning arrived in a whirlwind of wrapping paper, excited squeals, and far too much sugar.

The Callahan homestead had never looked more festive.

A towering Christmas tree stood in the corner of the lounge room, covered in handmade decorations Charlotte had insisted on creating herself. Some were crooked. Some were covered in enough glitter to blind a person. Nathan had contributed by chewing on two of them before Agnes rescued the tree.

The two-year-old was currently sitting in the middle of the floor wearing reindeer pyjamas and a Santa hat that kept slipping over his eyes.

"Daddy!" Charlotte gasped dramatically. "Nathan is eating the ribbon again."

Ben looked up from assembling what appeared to be an impossibly complicated toy tractor.

"Nate."

Nathan grinned. Then deliberately stuffed more ribbon into his mouth.

Ben sighed.

Agnes snorted from her armchair.

"He's all Callahan."

"Hey," Ben protested.

"Like I said." Agnes sipped her coffee.

Jemma laughed as she scooped Nathan into her lap.

"Mummy save me," Charlotte declared dramatically. "The boys are impossible."

At ten years old, Charlotte had become wonderfully confident. She was taller now, her dark curls longer, and her smile came easier than it once had.

Every time Jemma looked at her, her heart swelled. Because this little girl had changed her life just as much as Ben had.

"Open your next present," Jemma said.

Charlotte's eyes lit up. She reached beneath the tree and found a flat rectangular package wrapped in silver paper.

"Who is it from?"

Jemma exchanged a glance with Ben.

"Us."

Charlotte frowned.

"That's weird."

"It might make more sense once you open it," Jemma said softly.

This moment had been a long time coming.

A few months after Nathan was born, she'd found herself watching Charlotte help bathe her baby brother, chatting away as though she'd been born to be a big sister. Something had settled in Jemma's heart then—a certainty she'd carried ever since.

That night, after Charlotte was asleep, she'd quietly asked Ben how he would feel if she adopted her. For a moment he'd simply stared at her. Then his eyes had filled with emotion. Without saying a word, he'd crossed the room, pulled her into his arms, and held her so tightly she could barely breathe.

"Thank you," he'd whispered roughly against her hair.

Not because Charlotte needed another mother. But because Jemma already was one. And Ben had loved her all the more for wanting it to be official.

Curiosity immediately replaced excitement. Charlotte carefully tore the paper away. Then stopped. A large cream-coloured folder rested in her lap. She looked confused.

"Paperwork?"

Ben bit back a smile.

"Keep looking."

Charlotte opened the folder. The room grew quiet. Her eyes moved slowly across the first page. Then the second. Then the third. Her brow furrowed. And suddenly she froze.

"Mum?"

Jemma's throat tightened. Charlotte looked up. Her grey eyes were already filling with tears.

"These are adoption papers."

Jemma nodded.

"Yes, sweetheart."

Charlotte stared at her. Then back at the papers. Then at Jemma again.

"You mean... you're my real mum now?"

The wobble in her voice nearly shattered Jemma.

"Oh, baby."

She crossed the room and dropped to her knees beside her. Taking Charlotte's hands in hers, she smiled through the tears burning in her own eyes.

"Yes, sweetheart."

Charlotte blinked rapidly.

"But... you've always been my mum."

Jemma laughed softly as tears slipped down her cheeks.

"I know."

"Even before Nathan?"

"Even before Nathan."

"Even before the wedding?"

"Especially before the wedding."

Charlotte's bottom lip trembled.

"Really?"

Jemma gently brushed a curl behind her ear.

"The day I met you, you stole a piece of my heart, Charlotte Callahan. And every day since then you've taken a little more."

A tear rolled down Charlotte's cheek.

"I love you, Mum."

Jemma's composure cracked completely.

"Oh sweetheart, I love you too. So much."

Charlotte threw herself into her arms.

Jemma held her tightly, pressing a kiss to the top of her head as tears streamed freely down both their faces.

Behind them, Ben quietly cleared his throat and looked toward the Christmas tree. Agnes handed him a tissue. Without looking at her, he took it.

"Not a word."

Agnes smirked.

"Crying already, are we?"

"I'm not crying."

"Of course not."

Charlotte pulled back just enough to look at Jemma.

"Does this mean nobody can ever say you're not my mum?"

Jemma cupped her face.

"That's exactly what it means."

Charlotte beamed through her tears.

"Best Christmas ever."

Nathan pointed at Charlotte.

"Why sissy cry?"

Charlotte laughed through her tears.

"Because it's the best Christmas ever."

Nathan considered that.

Then held up a sticky candy cane.

"Cwismas."

Everyone agreed. It was.

* * * * * * * *

Later that night, the homestead had finally fallen quiet.

Nathan had long since surrendered to sleep after an exhausting day of Christmas excitement, and Charlotte had gone to bed with her adoption papers tucked safely beneath her pillow.

Jemma was already curled beneath the sheets when Ben slipped into their bedroom.

The soft glow from the bedside lamp cast golden light across the room.

She looked up from her book and smiled.

"Everyone asleep?"

"Barely," Ben replied, loosening the collar of his shirt. "Charlotte's read those papers at least six times."

Jemma laughed softly.

"I think she's happy."

"I think she might explode from happiness."

His smile softened as he climbed into bed beside her. The mattress dipped beneath his weight. Without hesitation, he reached for her. Jemma went willingly, settling against his chest as his arms wrapped around her.

Home.

That was what Ben felt like. Strong arms. Steady heart. The safest place she'd ever known. He tilted her chin upward and kissed her. Slowly. Tenderly. The kind of kiss that still made her heart flutter even after all this time.

"Merry Christmas, Mrs Callahan," he murmured against her lips.

Jemma smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Mr Callahan."

His hand drifted through her hair before sliding down her back, holding her closer.

For a few moments neither spoke. They simply lay there together, enjoying the quiet. The peace. The happiness. The life they'd built.

Ben brushed another kiss against her forehead.

"Today meant a lot to her."

"It meant a lot to me too."

His arms tightened.

"Thank you."

Jemma frowned slightly.

"For what?"

"For loving her the way you do."

Emotion thickened his voice.

"For never making her feel like she was anything less than yours."

Tears pricked unexpectedly behind Jemma's eyes.

"She is mine."

"I know."

His hand drifted lower, resting against her waist.

"Best thing that ever happened to her."

Jemma shook her head.

"Not true."

"It is."

"No." She smiled. "The best thing that ever happened to Charlotte was you."

Ben made a sound of disagreement. She ignored it. As she always did. His hand continued its lazy path across her stomach. Then paused.

Jemma gently covered it with her own. Holding it in place. Ben immediately felt the change in her. The sudden nervousness. The way her breathing caught.

His brows drew together.

"Jem?"

She swallowed. All evening she'd been waiting for the right moment. Now that it was here, she found herself suddenly terrified.

Ben pushed himself up on one elbow. Concern immediately replacing contentment.

"What is it?"

Jemma looked down at their joined hands resting against her stomach. Then back at him. A small smile trembled across her lips.

"Remember when Charlotte said this was the best Christmas ever?"

Ben nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I think it just got better."

For a second he simply stared at her. Then understanding flickered. Followed by hope. Then disbelief. His hand tightened beneath hers.

"Jemma..."

She laughed shakily.

"I'm pregnant."

The silence that followed lasted only a heartbeat. Then Ben's eyes closed. A broken sound escaped him. Half laugh. Half prayer. When he opened his eyes again they were shining.

"You're sure?"

Jemma nodded.

"I found out a few days ago."

For a moment he couldn't seem to speak. Couldn't seem to breathe. Then he gathered her into his arms so quickly she laughed. His face buried against her neck. Another baby. Another child. Another miracle.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

Ben lifted his head and kissed her. Softly. Reverently. Like she had just handed him the world.

"Best Christmas ever," he whispered.

And Jemma couldn't help smiling. Because this time, they both knew it was true.

— The End —

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