

Chapter 15

MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SKIN A CAT

Two hours later Fin staggered, exhausted, back to the ramshackle farmhouse. The animals had been mucked out, but it had been much more difficult than he imagined. In the process he had been stood on by an alpaca, headbutted by a goat, scratched by a wombat, pecked by a goose and he'd slipped in a puddle of emu pee. The barn was now spotlessly clean, but he was not. He was covered in such a wide variety of animal droppings, he had

no idea where one odour ended and the next began.

Fin had had enough. He was very sorry that the Cat Lady had a broken leg. Actually that's not true, he was only slightly sorry because he was beginning to think she deserved it. The things he was having to endure were not a punishment that fit the crime. In fact, he was pretty sure even murderers in maximum security prisons were not smeared with bat droppings. It wasn't fair that he was stuck cleaning up poop while Joe and April were having fun chasing an imaginary bear around the forest.

Fin pushed open the back door, already mentally preparing the words he would say to the Cat Lady. It was going to be something along the lines of 'I've had enough. You can't make me do these things. I'm going home.' But as soon as he stepped inside he was silenced by a delicious smell.

Fin knew he should make his bold statement, but his tongue was too busy tasting the air and his brain was too busy imagining how good something that smelled that fantastic would taste.

'Take your clothes off,' said the Cat Lady, looking around from her cooking pots.

‘Huh?’ said Fin. He was exhausted and hungry, so he couldn’t fathom why this woman wanted him to be naked as well.

‘You’re covered in muck,’ said the Cat Lady. ‘Don’t come inside ’til you’ve taken your clothes off.’

Fin blushed. ‘I can’t walk around nude.’

The Cat Lady gave him a withering look. ‘Fair enough, we don’t want you scaring the animals. Neil will lend you some of his clothes.’

Fin suddenly noticed that there was someone else in the room. There was so much clutter he had been easy enough to miss. Neil, the boy from the mini-van, was sitting silently at the dining table shucking peas.

‘How long has he been here?’ asked Fin. ‘Why didn’t he come and help me muck out the barn?’

‘I’m not training him up to be a cat lady,’ said the Cat Lady.

‘How is cleaning up poop training?’ demanded Fin.

‘Did you learn something?’ asked the Cat Lady.

‘No,’ said Fin. ‘Except geese have teeth, alpacas kick, emus have enormous bladders, never turn your back on a goat with horns and a camel can spit up to five metres.’

‘There you go,’ said the Cat Lady. ‘You learned about working with animals. That’s half the job.’

‘You can’t be serious,’ said Fin. ‘And I suppose cleaning your gutters taught me about the importance of rainfall?’

‘It taught you to get used to being up high,’ said the Cat Lady. ‘Balance and heights isn’t hard. It’s just practice.’

Fin had a horrible sinking realisation. He had been tricked. He wasn’t being tortured. He was being taught something. This somehow only made everything worse.

Neil continued to stare at him blankly. He was obviously used to shucking peas because he didn’t even look at his hands as he deftly separated the peas from the pods.

‘What’s he doing here anyway?’ asked Fin. ‘Are you giving him pea training?’

‘No need,’ said the Cat Lady. ‘No one can shuck a pea faster than our Neil.’

Neil nodded.

‘He’s a great help with odd jobs,’ said the Cat Lady. ‘He’s a good grandson.’

‘He’s your grandson?!’ exclaimed Fin. ‘Then why isn’t he being trained up to replace you.’

‘It’s his inner ear,’ said the Cat Lady, patting Neil on the shoulder affectionately. ‘He can’t do heights.’

‘That’s convenient,’ muttered Fin.

‘Don’t you mock him,’ said the Cat Lady angrily. ‘In our family vertigo is a curse.’

‘I imagine it’s a curse for anyone,’ said Fin.

‘It’s worse when you’re circus folk,’ said the Cat Lady.

Neil hung his head in shame. The Cat Lady put her arm around his shoulders and squeezed him supportively.

‘It’s not his fault,’ said the Cat Lady. ‘But when your mum is a trapeze artist and your dad is a tight-rope walker, it’s hard knowing you’ll never be able to carry on the family tradition. That’s why he stays with me. He can be useful here.’

Neil nodded and went back to shucking peas.

Fin looked at the posters on the wall. He hadn’t noticed before that they were all circus posters. There was one in particular of a tiny woman hanging thirty metres above the ground, dangling from a rope that she held onto with nothing but her teeth. Fin peered closer. The picture was faded

and yellowing around the edges. It must be sixty years old. He turned and looked at the Cat Lady. 'Is that you?'

The Cat Lady raised her chin in a proud sort of nod. 'I was an aerial circus artist for fifty years. How else did you think I was able to climb a telegraph pole in under three seconds the other day?'

'I don't know,' admitted Fin. 'I guess I just assumed you'd worked for the power company.'

The oven timer pinged.

'That'll be lunch,' said the Cat Lady. 'If you want any, you'd better get your clothes off. Neil's old overalls are on a peg by the backdoor.'

Neil got up and started setting the table. The Cat Lady went to get the meal out of the oven. This was Fin's moment. He could either stay dressed in his poo-covered clothes and walk the eight kilometres into town, or he could take his clothes off, put on another boy's overalls, and sit down to eat the most delicious thing he had smelled since he moved to Currawong.

His stomach rumbled. It was an easy choice to make. He would eat first, then dramatically denounce people and storm out later.