

‘Everything a summer read should be ... Warm and witty’
Who Weekly review of Danielle Hawkins’s *Pretty Delicious Café*

when it all went to custard

Odds of saving marriage – slim.
Farming expertise – patchy.
Chances that it’ll all be okay in the end
– actually pretty good.

Danielle Hawkins



CHAPTER SAMPLER

PRAISE FOR DANIELLE HAWKINS

The Pretty Delicious Café

‘Everything a summer read should be ... Warm and witty’ *Who Weekly*

‘*The Pretty Delicious Café* is brimming with romance and eccentricity. A refreshing take on romantic comedy, it reminds us about the importance of family, friends and the opportunity of fresh beginnings. Danielle Hawkins’ fans will not be disappointed with her latest and people new to her will not be able to put it down’ Better Reading

‘... hits the mark with its quaint and cosy setting, smattering of eccentric small-town characters and budding romance’ *Weekly Times*, Melbourne

‘*The Pretty Delicious Café* is another delightful read from Danielle Hawkins. It’s light-hearted, self-deprecating and charming, with quirky and engaging characters who draw out the themes of friendship, family and living life to the full’ *The Blurb* magazine

‘*Pretty Delicious* is a story of determination, of love, of allowing oneself the freedom to follow their dreams rather than allow themselves to be restrained by self-doubt or burdened by that which they cannot control. It is a story of friendship – Lia and Anna – and the power of reconciliation and forgiveness. The characters, with their flaws and neuroses are heartbreakingly real, and thus easy to identify with’ The Bookseller New Zealand blog

‘I loved this book, I love the characters and I love the sense of family’
Beauty & Lace Book Club Pick

‘Author Danielle Hawkins ... has a talent for witty and convincing dialogue and this, in particular, gives *The Pretty Delicious Café* verve and humour. She’s also a skilled sculptor of characters and I enjoyed the cast she assembled for this, her third foray into fiction’ *Otago Daily Times*

‘Danielle Hawkins’ quirky humour and easy style make this a great summer read’ *Dominion Post*

‘A girlfriend lent me this book during the holidays – saying ‘it’s just delightful, you need to read and review this’ ... Delightful is a perfect description ... it really is a wonderful story, with quirky and relatable characters, fast, witty dialogue and lots of humour’ NicShef♥Reading #1 reviewer Amazon

Dinner at Rose's

'It's so good that it's hard to believe it's a first novel. It had better not be her last. Please, Danielle' – Lee Matthews, *Manawatu Standard*

'What really carries it is the quality of the writing. The dialogue is absolutely spot on. You would almost believe the author wrote for TV or writes sitcoms. It's very, very funny' – Paper Plus, Winter Reads

'A cross between *All Creatures Great and Small*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and something the Topp Twins would write if there was only one of them and she was straight, this is a very funny book' – *Next Book Club*

'It was page 4 when I saw this and knew it was going to be a good book: "You really should consider becoming an eccentric yourself. It makes life so much more interesting"' – Jessica, GoodReads

'I LOVED this book and devoured it quickly' – Georgia, GoodReads

'This book ... has to be the most satisfying in this genre that I've ever read' – Kathleen Dixon, GoodReads

Chocolate Cake for Breakfast

'Another sweet, gently funny depiction of life in the back blocks of New Zealand' – *Next Book Club*

'This is a delightful, contemporary romance' – *Herald Sun*

'Helen is frankly delightful – intelligent but oh-so-human ... a plausible, relatable storyline and hugely appealing characters. A charming summer read, and a giggling good time' – *Australian Women's Weekly*

'Helen reminds me of a modern day James Herriot and her often hilarious adventures in this dairy country will have you laughing (although if you're squeamish this may not be the book for you!)' – Bec, GoodReads

'This is pure escapism and I thoroughly enjoyed this read' – Carol, Reading Writing and Riesling

'This book is like chocolate cake for breakfast: addictive' – Bree T, GoodReads



Danielle Hawkins lives on a sheep and beef farm near Otorohanga in New Zealand with her husband and two children. She works part-time as a large animal vet, and writes when the kids are at school and she's not required for farming purposes. She is a keen gardener, an intermittently keen cook and an avid reader. Her other talents include memorising poetry, making bread and zapping flies with an electric fly swat. She tends to exaggerate to improve the story, with the result that her husband believes almost nothing she says. Danielle has written four novels: *Dinner at Rose's*, *Chocolate Cake for Breakfast*, *The Pretty Delicious Café* and *When It All Went to Custard*.

WHEN IT ALL WENT TO CUSTARD

DANIELLE HAWKINS

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers

First published in Australia in 2019
by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited
ABN 36 009 913 517
harpercollins.com.au

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HarperCollinsPublishers

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
1 London Bridge Street, London, SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower, 22 Adelaide Street West, 41st floor, Toronto,
Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada
195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

ISBN 978 1 7755 4141 7 (paperback)

ISBN 978 1 7754 9172 9 (ebook)

Cover design by XXX

Front cover image XXXXX

Author photograph by Marama Shearer, Thrive Photography

Typeset in Baskerville Regular by Kirby Jones

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

The papers used by HarperCollins in the manufacture of this book are a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable plantation forests. The fibre source and manufacturing processes meet recognised international environmental standards, and carry certification.

Chapter 1

I wasn't enjoying the afternoon of 23 February even before I learnt that my husband was having an affair. It was very hot and I was on the phone with a deeply unpleasant woman who'd just fenced off her neighbour's driveway. I had a lot of pressing work to do, and the knowledge that her complaints were nothing to do with Building Control and I wasn't the person who should have spent the last nineteen minutes listening to them was not improving my outlook.

Pushing a swag of hot hair off my forehead, I changed the phone from one ear to the other and said, 'Yes, but I'm afraid—'

'He *cut* the wires! *Wilful* destruction of my property! And he had the *gall* to tell me it was none of my business what he planted! I suppose it'll be none of my business when his horrible flax bushes block off the creek and there's a foot of muddy water in my house, either!'

'Mrs Cotter, I don't really see why—'

'You people seem to be very concerned about *his* rights, but what about *my* rights as a ratepayer?'

'You don't *have* the right to cut off his access,' I said.

'That driveway is on *my land*!'

'Yes, but you signed a right-of-way agreement. We've got it here on file.'

At which point she hung up.

I put the phone down and returned to the plans on my desk. It rang again immediately; it was Lyn at the front counter.

‘Please, not Mrs Cotter again,’ I said.

‘It’s not,’ said Lyn. ‘Someone here to see you.’

I did a little chair-dance of annoyance, but venting frustration on Lyn had long-lasting and unpleasant repercussions, so I merely said, ‘Okay. Coming.’

Having traversed the three corridors and two flights of steps between my office and reception – the Tipoi District Council building was designed in the sixties by an architect who, in his determination to create something truly unique, had overlooked such trifling concerns as lighting, ventilation and internal flow – I found our next-door neighbour Andrew Faulkner at the front counter. He looked hot and dusty and he smelt like wool grease, and I wondered what emergency had brought him straight into town out of the yards.

‘Hi, Andrew, how’s it going?’ I said.

‘Jenny. Could I have a word in private?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said, slightly unnerved. ‘Um ... outside?’

I led the way out to the small paved area between the street and the police station fence, which contained two painted wooden bench seats and a raised garden bed filled with stunted orange marigolds. The sun beat down fiercely and rebounded off the concrete paving stones, and the air shimmered with heat. ‘This is revolting,’ I said. ‘Come back in and we’ll talk in the staffroom.’

‘No, it’s okay. You’d better have a seat.’

Beginning to be nervous, I sat down on the edge of a bench and squinted up at him.

He crossed his arms, uncrossed them again and dug his hands into his shorts pockets. ‘Christ,’ he said. ‘Right. So, um, I just found your husband in bed with my wife.’

‘Oh,’ I said inadequately.

‘Sorry,’ he added.

‘You – you mean ...?’ Which was stupid, because there was only one thing he could possibly have meant.

‘Yes.’

‘Did they see you?’

‘Yes,’ he said again.

‘What did you do?’ I croaked.

‘Turned around and went away again. What was I supposed to do?’ His thin brown face crumpled suddenly, like a hurt child’s. Andrew Faulkner had always seemed, from what little I knew of him, to be a grave, stoic sort of man, and it’s extra horrible watching unemotional people suffer.

‘Andrew, I’m so sorry,’ I said softly.

His head shot up. ‘You *knew*?’

‘No!’

‘I’ve got to go,’ he said. ‘I’ve got sheep in the yards.’ And, turning, he hurried across the street to where his ute was parked.

I sat in that sweltering little concrete courtyard, waiting for the onslaught of anguish and rage. It seemed slow in arriving, and eventually, probing my mental state as you probe a sore tooth with the tip of your tongue, I decided with some surprise that what I felt seemed largely to be relief.

* * *

Returning to my desk I looked at the building plans, decided that they may as well have been in Swahili for all the sense I could make of them, shut down my computer and left. I collected one small, indignant child from day care ('It's not *time* to go home! I haven't had afternoon tea!') and one from school ('I want to go swimming! You never let me do *anything* I want!'), then headed homewards up the valley between smooth, steep, grassy hills burnt a delicate fawn by the summer sun.

'Are we going to Nana's?' Nathan asked as I swung up my parents' driveway, eight hundred metres before our own.

'I'm just going to see if you can stay here for a little while this afternoon,' I said.

'Why?' asked Lily.

'Oh, I just need to – to go down the farm with Dad, and it's so hot and sticky I thought you might rather not come.' This was a fairly safe bet; the kids quite liked farming once they were out there, but they were invariably unwilling to go.

Pulling up beneath the big oak tree beside the implement shed, I opened my door and said, 'I'll just run down and check whether Nana and Granddad are home.'

They weren't. Returning to the car, I found the children wrestling in the front passenger footwell.

'It's mine! *Na*-than! Mum, Nathan's got my daily diary and he won't give it back!'

'She's not sharing!' Nathan wailed, bursting into noisy tears.

'Back in your seats NOW!' I shouted.

Two pairs of big brown eyes lifted to mine, widened, filled and overflowed.

'Oh, guys, come off it,' I said tiredly. 'Jump in your seats and I'll buckle you back up.'

‘Aren’t we s-staying with Nana?’ Nathan sobbed.

‘She’s not home.’

‘But I don’t w-want to go down the farm! It’s too hot! I’m as-sorsted!’

‘Cheer up, sausage,’ I said. ‘Let’s see what we find when we get home.’

What we found at home was a very twitchy Dave, pretending to read the paper at the kitchen table.

‘Daddy!’ Lily cried, abandoning her schoolbag in the middle of the floor and throwing herself at him. ‘Do we have to go down the farm?’

‘No,’ he said, pulling her onto his knee.

Human shield, I thought sourly.

‘How was school, Lily-billy?’

‘Shineya and Paige went on a plane in the holidays, and they had a TV on the front of their seats! And Shineya said there was a whole channel just for Barbie movies! And –’

‘Nathan, don’t lick the Marmite lid!’ I said sharply.

Dropping it, he scurried across the kitchen to climb onto Dave’s other knee.

‘Oof,’ Dave said. ‘Steady on there, Nath.’ Putting an arm around each of his offspring he eyed me smugly over the top of Lily’s head.

At that point, the rage I’d been expecting arrived. It filled me from top to toe, scorching and electric. I could have wrestled a rabid gorilla and won; lifted a freight train; leapt tall buildings in a single bound. How *dare* the snivelling weasel sit there hiding behind his children?

‘Would you guys like an ice block?’ I asked.

Lily and Nathan bounded to their feet. ‘Yes!’

‘I’ll get them!’

‘I want orange!’

Dashing past me, they wrenched open the freezer door.

‘You have to eat them outside,’ I said, smiling shark-like at my now unprotected husband.

Within seconds they’d vanished outside, ice blocks in hands, and were sitting cross-legged under the persimmon tree on the far side of the lawn.

‘So,’ I said, leaning my elbows on the kitchen counter. ‘Is she the love of your life, or was it some sort of brain explosion and you don’t know what came over you?’

Dave gave a miserable, half-defiant shrug.

‘Any comment? Anything at all? No?’

‘For God’s sake, Jenny!’

I straightened with a jerk. ‘Dave, it is *not* unreasonable for me to be pissed off about this!’

He picked at the side of his right thumbnail and said nothing, and the silence grew and spread between us.

‘What are we going to tell the kids?’ I said half to myself, looking out over the lawn to where Nathan was now hanging from a low branch by one hand and one knee, waving his ice block like a baton.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you’re going to be moving out. They’ll want to know why!’

Dave sighed heavily. ‘Yes, alright, I’ve stuffed up. But there’s no need to take it out on Nathan and Lil.’

‘How dare you?’ I said, whirling back to face him. ‘How *dare* you imply I’d upset the kids just to get back at you? Of *course* I’m not going to tell them you’ve been fucking Toni Faulkner!’ I don’t

swear much, and I winced at the ugliness of the word as well as at the image it conjured up.

‘Sorry,’ he said helplessly.

I pressed my hands to my eyes. ‘I guess we’ll have to sit them down and give them the standard speech about how we both love them very much but we don’t want to be married to each other anymore.’

There was a long pause before he said, ‘Can’t we – shouldn’t we try? Get some counselling or something?’

After another, longer pause I dropped my hands and looked at him. ‘Do you honestly think we’ve got a marriage that’s worth saving?’

* * *

‘So where is he?’ asked my sister Rebecca the next evening, when, having heard the news from Mum, she rang for further details.

‘He’s staying in town with one of his friends.’

‘Not with *her*?’

I tucked the phone between ear and shoulder so I could take the washing off the line while I talked. It was just after eight, and the sun was setting in dusty golden splendour behind the Faulkners’ woolshed on the skyline. ‘Well, not at her house, anyway. She’s moved out too.’ Which meant that their affair, if it was ongoing, was presumably being conducted either in Travis Lynch’s spare bedroom or at the Palm Court Motor Lodge, a charmless hostelry set back about two metres from the edge of Tipoi’s heavy traffic bypass. Neither location seemed particularly romantic, a thought which consoled me slightly in the watches of the night. Not much, but slightly.

‘What’s she like?’ Rebecca asked.

‘Pale and thin and completely devoid of personality, as far as I can tell. But she obviously has hidden depths.’

‘God, what a tosser he is. What did he have to say for himself?’

‘Oh, he didn’t mean for it to happen, he was lonely, I’m too wrapped up in the kids, I need to accept some responsibility, we should go to counselling ...’ I pulled a sheet off the line and started to fold it. Tessa the elderly fox terrier, inherited the year before when Dave’s grandmother went into a rest home, came around the corner of the house and flopped down on her side beside the washing basket. She would much have preferred to stay in her comfortable bed in the living room, but if I insisted on wandering around outside I needed to be supervised, and no-one could accuse Tessa of failing in her self-appointed duty. If Tessa had been human, she would have been the sort of woman who vacuums pointedly around you when you sit down to have a cup of tea.

‘He’d really try counselling?’ asked Rebecca.

‘Apparently,’ I said.

‘That’s good, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t want to fix it,’ I said slowly.

‘Well, you’re angry, of course,’ she said.

I dropped my sheet into the washing basket and reached for the next one. ‘Yes, but – you should be friends with your husband, shouldn’t you? And we’re not.’

There was a blank pause before she said, ‘But what about the farm? Who’d run it? You couldn’t expect Dave to stay around if you split up; you’d have to buy him out. And then how would you afford to pay someone to manage the place? You can’t ask Mum and Dad.’

No-one pours cold water down your neck like my little sister. ‘I don’t *know!*’ I said. ‘I don’t know how any of it would work. It’s been one day!’

‘Look, I’m just *asking,*’ she said sniffily. ‘No need to jump down my throat. Maybe I should kick Sean out, too. He’s such a bastard. He never helps me at all. And Caleb’s teething at the moment – I’ve had no sleep for weeks ...’

Finishing the washing, I picked up the basket, pulled Tessa’s ears and crossed the back lawn to the veggie garden. The litany of Rebecca’s troubles continued while I picked four lemons, cut a head of broccoli, went back inside and filled the kitchen sink with water.

‘I haven’t had a break since God knows when,’ she said.

I held the broccoli under water to flush the earwigs from their homes between the stems. ‘Haven’t you just been out on the boat?’

‘Well, that’s hardly a relaxing holiday! Watching Caleb twenty-four seven – Sean’s hopeless. I doubt he’d notice if Caleb fell overboard!’

Sean, to my knowledge, was a reasonably hands-on father, but I just said, ‘Mm,’ as I skimmed half-a-dozen panicking earwigs off the water’s surface with a sieve and tipped them out the kitchen window. ‘How was the fishing?’

‘Not bad, actually. I got a twelve-kilogram kingfish the day we came home. Hey, Jen, why don’t you come down for a girls’ weekend? Get a bit of distance; put things into perspective. We could go out dancing –’

‘Dear God, no,’ I said, scooping out another earwig.

‘Why not?’

‘I can’t think of anything I’d like less than staying up till eleven o’clock to go out with a lot of sneery seventeen-year-olds.’

‘Why sneery, may I ask?’

‘Don’t you remember being seventeen? I thought people in their thirties who went to nightclubs were sad, pathetic old losers.’

‘Well, they’re not,’ she snapped.

‘I’m sure they’re not. But I still don’t want to be one of them. I like sleep.’

‘You want to be careful, Jen. You’re getting alarmingly middle-aged and boring.’

‘Quite possibly,’ I said, taking the broccoli out of the sink and inspecting it for further signs of insect life. There were many; I’d removed most of the earwigs but none of the resident caterpillars. Growing vegetables in summer is very discouraging. Too many other things want to eat them.

‘Nice new men don’t just miraculously appear on your doorstep and sweep you off your feet,’ said Rebecca. ‘You have to go out and find them.’

What a truly horrific thought. ‘Didn’t you want me to stick with the old one?’

* * *

Nine caterpillars and another two earwigs later, she rang off. Leaving the broccoli on the draining board I made myself a cup of tea and sat down with it at the kitchen table. What *would* happen to the farm if I divorced Dave? He and I didn’t own it; we owned the stock and machinery, and leased the land from my parents. The farm earned enough – barely – to pay the lease, a large amount of interest to the bank and Marcus the worker’s wages; we drew only a tiny allowance in the hope of eventually beating the mortgage into submission, and lived

almost entirely on what I earned working Wednesday to Friday for the council.

Pulling a copy of the *Farmer's Weekly* towards me, I started writing numbers in the margin with Lily's purple glitter pen.

Assets

2000 ewes at – I shrugged and took a stab – \$120 per head

1400 lambs at \$80

220 cows with calves at foot at \$1500(?)

100 weaner bulls at?

70 heifers?

Tractor, 2 motorbikes, post rammer, shearing plant, hydraulic cattle crush???

I put down the sparkly purple pen. This was hopeless. If I wanted to make an even slightly accurate guess, I needed the depreciation schedule from the latest set of accounts and some current stock prices.

Anyway, we owed the bank five hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Our total assets and total debt probably balanced out, more or less, so if we sold up we'd come out with half of nothing each. I rested my head in my hands. Surely that wasn't right. Dave had run the farm for eight years – would he be owed eight years' worth of undrawn salary? And even if not, there was no extra money in the system to pay a manager. Maybe *I* could manage the farm, I thought doubtfully, and was immediately beset by panic. Living on a farm does not a farmer make, even if you do the accounts and help out occasionally in the yards. I didn't know when a paddock should be shut up for silage or how to fix a water leak; I couldn't hang a gate or calve a cow.

So if I left my cheating husband, we'd have to terminate the farm lease and my father, who was thoroughly enjoying his retirement, would get back all the worry and responsibility of running the place. But Dad wouldn't want to do that indefinitely, so then what? Either I would have to step up, or the farm – heaven forbid – would have to be sold. The farm my great-grandfather and his brother broke in, fresh off the boat from England, having lost both parents and a sister to consumption on the voyage. I remembered Great-Granddad – a frail wisp of a man with a sweet, shy smile. He smelt of aniseed and tobacco smoke, and he used to let me help fill his pipe.

And apart from all of that, Dave and I splitting up would bring Lily's and Nathan's nice stable home tumbling down around their ears.

Dave wanted to try to fix our marriage – well, I'd just have to try too. Be more patient and less preoccupied; readier to laugh at his jokes and slower to snap.

I can't, I thought in sudden panic. *I can't bear it*. And although I knew I was being silly and melodramatic, I pushed my forgotten tea out of the way, rested my head on the table and cried.

* * *

I was still crying when I heard a car come down the driveway and pull up on the other side of the house. Dave, I thought drearily. The picture of repentance, no doubt, and wearing his best lopsided smile. Dave's best smile was mischievous and rueful and intimate, with a hint of dimple. *Yes, I'm trouble*, it said, *but we both know I'm gorgeous, and though women everywhere adore me you're the only one who really understands me*.

I *did* understand him, sadly; the smile would have worked a lot better if I hadn't.

I pulled a square of kitchen towel off the roll at the end of the bench, blew my nose, squared my shoulders and went to meet him at the door.

'Jenny, darling,' said my mother as I opened it, hastening up the steps and throwing her arms around me. Dad, behind her, grasped my shoulder and gave it a little squeeze.

'Hi,' I whispered, overcome with relief and gratitude. My parents, although always delighted to see me in their house, normally visited mine about once every other year.

'That *stupid* man. I could kill him,' said Mum fiercely.

'Shh. The kids are asleep,' I said, standing aside to let them in.

'Of course. Sorry, darling. Brian, could you make a cup of tea?' Leading me across the kitchen to the table, she pressed me into a chair and sat down beside me, holding my hand. 'Don't cry, love. He's not worth it.'

I nodded and blew my nose again, pushing the paper with my margin notes casually away.

'Where's he staying?' Mum asked.

'In town, with Travis.'

'Sonia says *she* didn't come in to school today.'

I wondered for a moment what Sonia not going to school had to do with anything before realising that the *she* was Toni Faulkner, who had taken a part-time job in the office at Lily's school when she and Andrew moved into the district two years ago. No wonder she hadn't been at work; she'd been busy leaving her husband for mine.

'She's a strange woman,' said Mum. 'Quite unfriendly.'

'Apparently not always,' I said dryly.

Dad rounded the kitchen counter bearing one Dora the Explorer and two Bunnykins mugs of tea, a packet of chocolate biscuits under his arm.

‘Brian,’ said Mum with weary disapproval.

‘Only cups I could find,’ he said, carefully putting everything down and pulling out a chair.

‘They’re fine. Thanks, Dad.’

Silence fell while we sipped our tea. It was eventually broken by Mum, who sighed and said, ‘Never mind, love, you’re better off without him.’

‘He wants to try to patch things up,’ I said to the tabletop.

‘Does he?’ she asked, brightening.

‘Mm.’

‘You’re not going to, are you?’ said Dad.

I looked up in surprise. ‘Well, I – for the kids’ sakes ...’

He grimaced.

‘*Brian,*’ said Mum, taking my hand again.

I barely noticed. ‘But you like him, Dad!’

Dad snorted.

‘*Don’t* you?’

‘Not much.’

‘But – but what about the farm? We – I – wouldn’t be able to afford to keep leasing it. I’d have to pay Dave out *and* pay a manager.’

‘Don’t worry about the farm. We’ll figure something out.’

‘What?’ Mum and I said together.

‘I don’t know. Something.’

‘Dad,’ I protested, half laughing.

He sent me a long, level look over the rim of his Dora mug. ‘Don’t you *Dad* me, young Jennifer. Now, if your life will be blighted

without that waste of space, you stay with him by all means. But if you're thinking of letting him come crawling back just so you can pay the damn farm lease, then you need to get a grip.'

I reached out blindly with my spare hand and took his, and he smiled. 'Good grip,' he said.

Chapter 2

The next few months were reasonably awful. Dave and I had a series of long and unhappy conversations, during which he ranged from remorse to frustration to blame to regret and back, and I maintained a dogged, miserable resolve. It was sad and exhausting, and telling Lily and Nathan that Dad wasn't ever coming back home will rank forever as one of the least fun experiences of my life, but finally things were settled, and we picked ourselves up out of the wreckage and started rebuilding some new version of normality.

Dave moved out of Travis's spare room and got a job managing a bull-beef unit on the other side of town – a thoroughly unsatisfactory job in every respect, he said, which he accepted only for the sake of his children. He had the kids on Wednesday nights and every second weekend. He disliked this arrangement because he didn't see them enough; I disliked it because both kids, but Lily in particular, were shattered and distraught every Thursday; and the kids disliked it because it was so obviously inferior to the old routine.

After much discussion, the cows were sold to pay for Dave's share of our joint assets. The plan was to graze dairy calves in their place, which would require no capital outlay and provide a nice reliable monthly income. Marcus the worker agreed to

stay on, with a pay rise to reflect an increase in responsibility and with Dad in a supervisory role. It was all a bit precarious and understaffed, but it seemed to work, at least in the short term.

* * *

One grey and gusty Friday afternoon in May, as I drove up the hill home, I rounded the corner before the woolshed and saw Dad climbing stiffly off his four-wheeled motorbike to shut the road gate. Pulling over, I opened my window to talk to him.

‘Afternoon,’ Dad said. A handful of golden poplar leaves whirled across the road between us and plastered themselves against the windscreen of my car. ‘What’s up?’

‘I went in to Wrightson’s about that pipe, but they don’t have one in stock,’ I said. ‘They’re ordering it in; it might be here tomorrow.’

‘No rush.’ He bent to look in at Lily’s window. ‘How was school?’

‘Okay,’ said Lily.

Nathan struggled briefly with his seatbelt, got it open and crawled out of his booster seat to perch beside me on the centre console. ‘Watch me, Granddad, I’m a sloff.’ He linked his hands behind the headrest of my seat and hung off it, head flung back.

‘A what?’

‘A sloff. Hanging upside down in the branches.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘A sloth. Excellent choice.’ It might be nice, I thought dreamily, to be a sloth. I believe they sleep for twenty-three hours a day.

‘Good man,’ said Dad. ‘Now, Jenny, I had a call from John a day or two ago.’

‘John?’

‘John ... what’s his name? Oh, you know, used to work for Royce.’

‘Mercer,’ I said, after a moment’s thought. ‘John Mercer.’ A small, weather-beaten man with terrible teeth, he’d been a shepherd on what was now Andrew Faulkner’s place, and he used to give Rebecca and me Curiously Strong peppermints from a little flat tin that lived in the breast pocket of his shirt. We didn’t much like the peppermints, but we appreciated the thought.

‘That’s the one. John Mercer. Saw him at the sale yesterday. He’s retired now, and he’s at a bit of a loose end; he was wondering if he could rent Grandma’s cottage.’

‘It’s not fit to be lived in, is it?’ I said doubtfully. The cottage had no insulation, and it had been empty for about twenty years.

‘Oh well, we could give it a bit of a spruce-up, couldn’t we?’

‘Mu-um,’ said Lily from behind me. ‘I’m *tired*. I want to go home.’

‘It’d have to be a pretty major spruce-up,’ I said, ignoring her.

‘Well, maybe he could come and look at it, and if he thinks he can make it habitable he can have it for nothing.’

That sounded good to me. If he wasn’t going to pay any rent, surely I wouldn’t be obliged to de-spider the place. Although I *had* better go and look at the roof. ‘I’d better check that it’s sound, first,’ I said. ‘Can’t you just imagine the headline in the *Tipoi Times*? MAN KILLED WHEN BUILDING CONTROL OFFICER’S HOUSE FALLS ON HIS HEAD.’

‘True,’ said Dad. ‘It would be a poor look.’

No small ginger-and-white dog met us at the back door when we reached home, the significance of which escaped me until I went inside to find the contents of the kitchen rubbish bin evenly

distributed over a four-metre radius. Said dog was in her basket, industriously chewing a plastic bag that had contained mince. Her stumpy tail wagged once and then stilled as our eyes met, and her ears went flat back against her head.

‘The rubbish is all on the floor!’ announced Nathan, master of the obvious statement.

‘Yep,’ I said. Tessa passed me in the kitchen doorway like a plump, hairy torpedo and shot to safety under the car.

‘You forgot to put her outside this morning,’ Nathan said.

‘Yep.’

‘That was silly, wasn’t it, Mummy?’

‘Nathan, could you just *not* talk to me for a minute?’

‘Okay,’ said Nathan cheerfully, and pounded down the hall to his bedroom. Nathan was completely incapable of doing anything quietly, even if he wanted to, which he didn’t.

‘Lily!’ I called. ‘Come inside now.’

Lily, listening to the radio in the car, glanced at me without interest and leant forward to turn up the volume. I ran back down the steps, opened the car door and jabbed the radio’s ‘off’ button.

‘It’s my favourite song!’ she cried.

‘Do *not* ignore me when I talk to you!’

‘I didn’t *hear* you!’

‘Yes you did! Now go and have a shower, and use the soap!’

With shoulders drooping, she descended from the car.

‘Take your bag!’

‘I hate you,’ Lily shouted, grabbing her bag by one strap and bolting indoors.

I sighed as I followed her into the rubbish-strewn kitchen. Just last night I’d read an article on Facebook, that bottomless well of trite parenting advice, about helping your children work through

the trauma of their parents' separation. You must never snap; never shout; always respond to testing behaviour with boundless, unrelenting love and acceptance. Bugger.

I cleaned up the rubbish, retrieved the kids' lunch boxes and found a note in Lily's schoolbag bidding me to a school fundraising meeting on 20 May at nine am in the staffroom. This morning, in fact. *Never mind*, I thought. *I can ring in the morning and apologise for missing it. Again.* And then, *Oh, shit, it's the twentieth and I haven't paid the bills.*

We had macaroni cheese for dinner, with peas in so I'd feel like the sort of mother that provides her children with at least an occasional vegetable. Nathan sorted his peas out and arranged them in rows at the side of the plate, and Lily said she wasn't hungry and she'd like to go to bed.

We did baths and teeth and stories, followed by a panic when Lily remembered that she hadn't done her homework and the hurried composition of a poem about autumn. Then I cleaned the kitchen and sat down at the table with the laptop and this month's bills. There was a GST return due too, and I'd need to code two months' worth of accounts before I could file it.

I loathed doing accounts, but because they were exponentially more loathsome if left to accumulate, I usually kept them up to date. Lately, however, I'd done nothing but pay the bills and the wages on the grounds that it was All Too Hard At The Moment. I should have known better. I was just as tired now as I'd been three months ago; just as upset about the decline and fall of my marriage; and I had twice as much accounting to do as normal.

At seven fifty-four, surrounded by piles of paper and halfway through the month's KiwiSaver contributions, I heard a car come down the driveway, turn and stop on the gravel in front of the

carport. Approaching visitors were invisible from the kitchen and living room windows, which all faced down the valley towards town. Your first sighting was of their feet through the glass panel at the bottom of the kitchen door, and if you really didn't like the look of the feet you had a split second in which to hide behind the living room sofa. (A childish response to unwanted callers and one which, after vaulting lightly over the back of the sofa to escape a neighbour selling natural skincare products the previous month and landing on a plastic stegosaurus, I had decided it was time to give up.)

This evening's feet were male, clad in grubby white sneakers, and I didn't recognise them. I opened the door to find Dave's friend Travis, holding a supermarket bunch of murky purple alstroemerias and looking nervous.

'Hi, Travis,' I said.

He thrust the flowers at me. 'Hey, Jenny. Can I come in?'

'Of course. Wow, thank you so much; they're lovely ...' They weren't all that lovely, and I was overdoing it. 'I'll just put them in water.'

'So,' he said, following me across the kitchen. 'How's it all going?'

Tessa heaved herself out of her basket with a deep sigh and pattered across the floor to greet him.

'Oh – it's going.' I smiled bravely and immediately felt annoyed with myself.

'It must be hard,' he said, stooping to pat Tessa. She cowered ostentatiously, just for effect.

'I *don't* beat her,' I said. 'Even when she deserves it. It's just a bid for sympathy. Cup of tea?'

'You wouldn't have any herbal stuff, would you?'

My sole box of herbal teabags was labelled Be Happy, and I saw Travis look at it with a sympathetic little smile.

‘That looks like a paper blizzard,’ I said, indicating the table, ‘but actually it’s a highly organised system, so we’d better not disturb it. Come and sit in the lounge. How’s work?’ Travis owned a small but fast-growing plumbing business in Tipoi.

‘Fine. Busy.’

‘Gingerbread man?’ I offered brightly, putting the tin down on the coffee table. ‘I’d go for the ones without icing, if I were you – Nathan was chief icer, and he tends to lick the knife between biscuits.’

‘Dave’s a wreck,’ said Travis.

I sat down heavily in an armchair.

‘He’s *gutted* that he hurt you. Jen, couldn’t you give him another chance? It wasn’t even an affair, just a – a stupid impulse.’

I balanced my tea carefully on the chair arm and looked at my sock-clad feet. *Oh, please, not now*, I thought. It’s so exhausting, defending your position when you’re not sure it’s the right one.

‘You guys were so good together,’ he continued. ‘I really thought you two would go the distance.’

‘Did you?’ I asked, sufficiently surprised to look up. ‘Why?’

‘Well, I guess because you’re such a pin-up couple. You know – popular, good-looking, nice kids ...’

Crikey. ‘Well, there you go,’ I said. ‘Proof that you can never tell from the outside what anyone’s marriage is really like.’

‘He stuffed up, Jenny,’ said Travis earnestly, his pleasant, open face creased with distress. ‘People do. It doesn’t necessarily mean they’re wankers.’

‘I *know*. I do, honestly. I’m not just – just sticking to my guns because he’s embarrassed me and I want to punish him.’

‘No, of course not, I didn’t mean —’

‘We were a *lousy* couple. He thought I was boring, and I thought he needed to grow up. We should never have got married in the first place.’

Travis opened his mouth and shut it again, and I felt like the sort of person who tells children there’s no Santa Claus for the fun of seeing their little faces fall.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘Have another gingerbread man.’

He left soon afterwards, crushed, and I returned to my accounts. KiwiSaver contributions at three percent of gross income, and employer contributions tax at ten point five percent of that, so net employer contributions were ...

‘Mummy,’ said Lily, appearing like a small pyjama-clad ghost at my elbow.

‘What are you doing awake, love?’

‘Should you and Daddy never have got married?’

‘Lil! No!’

‘That’s what you said. I heard you.’ She started to cry.

I pulled her onto my lap and hugged her tight. ‘No. Lily. Stop it, my darling. I did say that, but —’

‘Then you wouldn’t have had me and N-Nathan.’

‘You and Nathan are my favourite people in the whole world. Hands down. Even when you’re revolting. Hey, listen.’ I gave her a little shake, and she raised her face from my shoulder and looked up at me with wet, tragic brown eyes. I smoothed her hair back. ‘The thing with me and Dad is ...’

‘Is what?’

‘We just weren’t ... getting on very well. We weren’t nice to each other, and we were making each other grumpy. And if being with someone makes you unhappy, I think it’s best *not* to be with

them. Otherwise you get in the habit of snarling at each other, and you turn into a horrible person.'

'Why can't you just say *sorry*?' Lily asked, resting her hot little forehead against my neck. 'Just promise to be nice to each other.'

'We've tried,' I said. 'But ... you know how you and Mandy just don't get on? You're both lovely people, but you can't play together without arguing.'

'She's not lovely. She's really annoying.'

'I bet *she* thinks she's lovely.'

'Well, she's not.'

'See?' I said. 'If you feel like that about someone, it's best not to hang out with them. It just makes both of you bad-tempered.'

Lily sighed. 'I wish everything was like it used to be.'

'Oh, sweetie, I know,' I said. 'People always feel like that when things change. But then you get used to it, and it's not so bad after all. It might even be better.'

She sighed again.

'Better go and hop into bed, love, or you'll be tired and cranky in the morning.'

'I want to sleep with you,' she whispered.

'Okay. You go and jump in my bed, and I'll come when I've paid the bills.'

'I want you to be there now.'

'I have to do this first.'

Lily started to cry again, noiselessly, the tears welling up and trickling down her cheeks to fall off her small pointed chin. It was quite unbearable to watch, and I wondered desperately, for perhaps the thousandth time, whether it's brave or horribly selfish to end an unsatisfactory marriage. Does it set a worse example to stay with someone you've got nothing in common with because

leaving would cause such an almighty upheaval, or to cut and run? Is it nobler to lie on the bed you've made or to admit you made it wrong and start again?

'Oh, Lil,' I said. 'Go and get your pillow, and I'll move all this stuff into Dad's and my – into my room.'

She went straight to sleep beside me, her lashes still wet and her fierce little face smooth and peaceful. *We'll be alright*, I promised silently. *I won't spoil them because I feel guilty, I won't run Dave down no matter how much he annoys me, and I won't ever make them choose between us.* On which noble resolve I sighed, opened the laptop and began coding accounts.

Chapter 3

‘Nathan!’ my father cried the next afternoon, clapping his hands over his ears. ‘For the love of Mike!’

Nathan, who was standing on Mum and Dad’s sofa with his head flung back, wrapped in a hairy brown rug and baying at the ceiling, looked at him reproachfully. ‘I’m a wolf, Granddad, howling at the moon.’

‘How about being a stalking wolf, creeping up silently on your prey?’ I said.

‘Alright,’ said Nathan, jumping off the sofa.

‘You’ll have to move incredibly slowly and patiently, so you don’t scare the deer.’

‘Who’s the deer?’

‘Caleb?’ I suggested.

‘No, he’s a baby wolf.’

‘Okay then, Granddad’s armchair. But remember you need to stalk *quietly*.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Nathan impatiently, waving me to silence and dropping into a crouch.

‘That boy,’ said Mum, smiling. ‘Just look at Caleb copying him.’ Rebecca’s little boy Caleb was squatting at Nathan’s heels,

clutching his cuddly blanket around his shoulders with one hand and sucking the thumb of the other.

‘No, baby wolf,’ said Nathan sternly. ‘You must wait for me at the cave. There.’ He pointed, and Caleb crawled obediently under the coffee table.

‘How’s work, Bex?’ I asked. Rebecca ran a Pilates studio in Wellington; a very upmarket one, all gilt-edged mirrors and shiny blond wood, where she conducted intensive one-on-one lessons for an exorbitant hourly rate.

‘Insane. Booked solid,’ she said, shaking her sleek black hair back off her face. Rebecca, Mum and I all take after Mum’s mother, who came from the Ukraine. We have dark hair, slanted hazel eyes and wide cheekbones, and with enough makeup we look striking and vaguely exotic. (Though, on the less glamorous side, if not for rigorous hair-removal regimes we would all three grow moustaches.)

‘Have a piece of cake, love,’ Mum said. She pushed a plate of fruit cake towards her younger daughter, who eyed it with amused scorn.

‘No, thanks.’

‘You’ve no need to worry, with *your* figure.’

‘Mum, I *have* this figure because I don’t eat cake.’

‘Jenny?’ Mum asked.

‘Thanks,’ I said, taking a piece and consoling myself with the thought that if it is indeed true that once you pass forty you have to choose between a nice bum and nice skin, in not too many more years Rebecca would have a face like a raisin.

There is, however, no need to give up *entirely* on one’s bum. ‘Can I have a private Pilates lesson later on, so I can feel like one of the rich and famous?’ I asked.

‘Sure. That piece of cake’s worth forty extra squats.’

‘Totally worth it,’ I said, taking a defiant bite.

‘What’s young Sean up to this weekend?’ Dad asked, looking up from the glossy magazine Bex had brought with her.

‘He had a presentation to finish for work, and he wanted to go mountain biking. And he was hoping to catch up with a friend for coffee.’

Dad assumed the exact same expression that Bex had used to decline cake.

‘Men sometimes go out for coffee these days, Dad,’ I said. ‘Even straight ones.’

He gave me a long, flat look over the tops of his glasses, and I grinned.

‘Aaarghh! Hi-ya!’ Nathan cried, leaping out from behind the corner of the sofa and attaching himself to Dad’s leg. Caleb trotted after him and cast himself upon Dad’s other foot.

‘Good Lord!’ said Dad. ‘Kung-fu wolves!’

Lily, who was colouring in across the table, looked up, rolled her eyes and bent back over her page. She had, now she was seven, put aside childish things – I was hoping she’d pick them up again shortly.

Marcus the worker appeared at the patio door suddenly out of the rainy dark, setting off the security light; the sound of his approach had been drowned out by the noise of the wolf attack.

‘Hello, Marcus! Come on in,’ Mum called as he opened the door. ‘Boys! Settle down, please! Too noisy!’

Marcus, looking like a model in an outdoor clothing catalogue, pushed back the hood of his raincoat and smiled. ‘No, thanks, Lorraine. I won’t come in – I was just wondering if I could have a hand on Monday morning to drench those calves.’

‘Have we got anything to drench them with?’ Dad asked, putting Caleb down.

‘I called the vets this morning and asked them to leave some stuff in the after-hours box,’ said Marcus. ‘I’m going through town tonight, so I’ll pick it up.’

‘You’re wonderful,’ Mum said.

He glinted at her, shut the patio door and vanished into the night.

‘Gosh, we’re lucky to have him,’ said Mum. ‘How many young men do you know who are out in the rain working at quarter to six on a Saturday night?’

‘Well, *he* certainly thinks he’s pretty awesome,’ Bex said.

‘He can think he’s as awesome as he likes,’ I said. ‘We’d be lost without him.’

Later that evening, once our respective children were in bed, Rebecca came up to my place wearing space-age microfibre leggings, a ravishing apricot-coloured hooded top and Dad’s gumboots.

‘Gorgeous top,’ I said, meeting her at the door.

She stepped out of the gumboots and came in. ‘I’ll send you one. I sell them in the studio. Since when do you have a dog?’

Tessa had bustled across the kitchen and was nosing at her socks. ‘I’m sure we had Tessa last time you were up,’ I said. ‘She belonged to Dave’s grandmother.’

‘Why have *you* still got her, then?’

‘She’s a nice old sausage. I’d miss her. And Dave’s never said anything about taking her to live with him.’

‘That’d be right,’ she said. ‘How is the lovely Dave, anyway? Dad says he’s giving you grief about the kids.’

I sighed. ‘He wants to have them half the time, week and week about. And – and I guess that’s fair, really, but it just doesn’t *work*. He can’t get away from his job five nights a week to pick up Lil from school, and he can’t take Nathan with him on the farm all day, so I’d have to have them until five thirty, and then he’d collect them or I’d drop them off, and it’s a half-hour drive from here to his place. The thought of putting two tired kids into the car every night and driving them across the district so they can have tea and go to bed just seems completely brain-dead to me. But apparently,’ I finished, ‘I’m using the children to punish him.’

‘I’m sure you’re not,’ said my sister vaguely, having lost interest somewhere in the middle of this little tirade. ‘Come on; let’s do this. Got any mats?’

I led her into the living room, where I’d pushed the coffee table aside and laid down a yoga mat and a beach towel. Rebecca appropriated the mat and stood, slim and straight, at one end.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Feet shoulder width apart, weight spread evenly, tummy pulled in ... Shoulder blades down, Jen. *Down*. That’s better. Now, deep breath in, then breathe out as you roll down.’ She folded gracefully towards the floor. ‘Breathe in, then roll slowly up again. Suck in your tummy. Navel to spine.’

‘I am,’ I said.

‘Maybe you should cut down on carbs.’

‘Do you give your paying clients these helpful tips?’ I asked.

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘You look pretty good, actually. You’re tall enough to pull off a few extra kilos.’

‘Thanks,’ I said, only a little bit sourly.

After some preliminary stretches she set me about five hundred crunches, and to rub salt into the wound she did them too, with

additional extra-for-experts leg raises and while maintaining a stream of nonchalant conversation: ‘– with balsamic vinegar and a handful of pine nuts. Sean wants another baby.’

‘Ugh,’ I said, crunching doggedly. ‘Do you?’

‘Eventually. Although it’ll be a nightmare, with running the studio.’

‘Unghhffno pair?’ I said. (‘Even with an au’ had coincided with the up stroke of my four-hundred-and-ninetieth crunch.)

‘Doesn’t help with the sleep deprivation. You really struggled when Nathan was little, didn’t you?’

‘Don’t think – it was – too bad.’

‘What about that weekend when we came up, just after he was born?’

I collapsed onto my back. ‘That weekend when he was ten days old, when I had mastitis and Lily had an ear infection, and we were shearing?’

Tessa, who had been watching me with her chin on her forepaws, got up and came to stick her nose in my left ear. I swatted her weakly. ‘Tessa, stop it!’

‘Hey!’ said Rebecca. ‘Do you want this session or not?’

‘I don’t *do* this for three hours a day like you do. I think all my abdominal muscles have torn themselves off their attachments.’

‘I doubt it. Alright then, roll onto your stomach. Arms out at right angles from your body, palms facing forward ... Shoulder blades down. *Down!*’ She got up and came to crouch beside me, laying a hand between my shoulders. ‘God, you’re tense, Jen.’

‘Yeah, you get that when your marriage disintegrates.’

‘You’re the one who wanted out.’

I closed my eyes and felt hot tears leak out at the corners. ‘I know. Still hurts.’ It may not have been the love the poets dream

of, but you share a lot of experiences over ten years. ‘And I’m worried about the farm.’

‘What about it? You’ve got Supermarcus, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, but we’re just coping with the day-to-day stuff. There’s no longer-term plan.’ Well, except that I’d started listening to Beef + Lamb New Zealand farmer education podcasts in the car.

She rubbed my back gently. ‘You’ll figure it out. You’re the strongest person I know.’

‘No I’m not,’ I muttered.

‘Yes you are,’ she said firmly, evidently feeling that I’d had enough sympathy as was good for me. ‘Okay, squeeze your shoulder blades together – tighter – tummy button to spine ... Now lift your chest up off your mat.’

Chapter 4

We pregnancy-tested the ewes on a clear, bitterly cold day in early June. I was late, having been detained at the school gate by Amy Wallace, head of the Pukewai School fundraising committee, who was looking for a sucker to run a jumble sale.

I rounded the side of the woolshed at a run, pulling my woollen beanie down over my ears. The man who did our sheep ultrasound scanning was a grim and humourless fellow, and without me there either Dad or Marcus would have to mark the ewes, which would mean only one person pushing sheep up the race, which would mean delays ...

But no. John Mercer, new tenant of Grandma's cottage, was stationed at the side of the scanning crate with a can of spray paint in each hand. He wore an ancient nylon tracksuit and a limp roll-your-own stuck out of the corner of his mouth. 'Jenny,' he said, graciously inclining his head.

'Hi, John. Thanks so much; I'm really sorry I'm late.'

'Single!' called the scanner, and John sprayed a blue dot on the ewe's back.

'Maybe you could help push them up,' he suggested kindly.

'You must have things to do ...' I said.

'Nothing that can't wait.'

‘Dry!’ the scanner said.

Glowing with competence and satisfaction, John marked the next ewe red and drafted her out into a side pen. Dad, at the far end of the race, winked at me. I smiled back and climbed over the rails to stand at the side of the race.

‘Do you want to separate off some of these skinny ewes?’ John called back to Dad as I pushed a bony old matron into the crate.

‘Single!’

‘Marcus?’ Dad asked.

‘Not now,’ Marcus shouted, chivvying another twenty ewes into the pen at the back of the race.

‘It’ll be easy enough to draft ’em out,’ John persisted. ‘I can just put them with the dries for now. I remember I used to say to Royce, “Royce,” I’d say, “if you want them to put on weight you’re going to have to feed them. If you keep doing what you keep doing, you just keep getting what you keep ge—”’

‘Next!’ barked the scanner.

‘Yes, good idea, John,’ I said hastily, and Marcus’s lips tightened.

We stopped work just once, for half an hour’s lunch break, and it was after four o’clock when the last ewe ran through. The scanner got slowly and stiffly to his feet, stretched his back and stripped the long plastic glove from his right arm.

‘Well, that’s a good job done,’ said John, extracting his tobacco from inside his tracksuit jacket with shaking hands. After a long and inadequately dressed day, he had turned an alarming shade of purplish grey.

‘Back a bit from last year,’ said the scanner as Dad and Marcus came up the race towards us. He squinted down at the screen of

his machine. 'A hundred and forty-one percent in the mixed-age ewes and a hundred and twenty in the two-tooths.'

'How many dries?' I asked, linking my arms behind my back to try to relieve the tightness in my shoulders.

'A hundred and twenty-four.'

Almost twice as many not pregnant as the year before. Shit. What had we done wrong? 'Have any of them aborted, do you think?'

'No more than one or two,' the scanner said. 'Nothing significant.' He bent down to pick up his machine and carried it away around the corner, adding over his shoulder, 'More likely to be condition. Fairly light, some of them.'

They were indeed, I thought worriedly, looking out over the mob John had drafted off. They'd been in the yards all day, of course, so they were bound to look a bit hollow – and the very thinnest and mangiest sheep is always the one standing front and centre – but even so ...

'Sorry, chaps, but you get that in a drought,' said Marcus tightly.

Dad clapped him on the shoulder. 'No-one's blaming you, son,' he said. 'There's always a tail end. We'll separate them off and sprinkle them through the cattle block for a month, and they'll be new animals.'

'Wouldn't hurt to give them a drench, either,' said John, cupping his hands around his cigarette to light it.

Marcus looked at him with flat dislike. 'Well, I haven't got time today, I'm afraid.'

'No, no,' said Dad. 'Of course not. Where do you want these girls? They can just stay here below the shed for now, can't they? We'll sort them out in the morning.'

‘I’m on it,’ said Marcus wearily, going to untie his dogs from the back of the yards.

* * *

At eight-sixteen two mornings later, I was hunting frantically through a mountain of clean washing for my black merino work jersey when there was a tap at the glass sliding door just behind me. I spun around, startled, and saw John standing on the deck, swathed in an enormous plastic raincoat.

‘Oh, hi, John,’ I said, unlocking the door and pushing it open. ‘Is everything alright?’

Nathan, with a Marmite sandwich in one hand and my red tights tied around his head to make a ninja turtle bandana, dashed into the living room. ‘Mum! There’s a rat under Lily’s bed!’

‘Dead or alive?’ I asked.

‘Dead. Its guts are all coming out.’

‘Then it can wait. Sorry, John, it’s a bit of a crazy time of day around here.’

‘Hello, there, young fella,’ said John, leaning against the doorframe in a leisurely way that made my heart sink. ‘Are you a Red Indian?’

Nathan sighed as if the stupidity of adults was a cross almost too heavy to bear. ‘No, I’m *Raphael*.’

‘Who?’

‘Can you please get your bag and jump in the car, love?’ I said. ‘And tell Lily to, as well.’

‘Lily!’ Nathan roared. ‘Get in the car!’

‘Don’t stand there and yell; go and *find* her. Go, go.’ I flapped

a tea towel at him, and he whirled and ran off. ‘Sorry, John, we’re running late, I’m going to have to dash ...’

‘Those light ewes,’ John said. ‘Did you decide to put them back in with the others?’

‘What?’ I said stupidly.

‘And he never drenched them.’

‘Oh, I’m sure –’

‘He didn’t. I may be old, but I’m not stupid. He ran them around again on Monday night after you’d gone and drafted off the dries, and then he chased the skinny ones straight out the back of the yards with the rest.’

‘I – I’m sure there’s a good explanation ...’ Oh, dear Lord, please no. I needed to know that *someone* in my life could be trusted to do what he was supposed to without direct supervision. Poor old John – he was lonely, no doubt, and he’d been giving Marcus the doubtful benefit of his outdated wisdom, and Marcus was too immature to be tolerant.

‘Of course there’s a good explanation,’ said John, standing up straight again. ‘He’s a lazy little bastard and he’s taking advantage of you.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Well, I can’t do anything about it just now; I’m late for work. Thanks for telling me, John. I’ll look into it.’

‘You do that, m’ dear.’ And he clomped down the porch steps and off across the sodden lawn.

* * *

On our way down the hill that morning, I worried about Marcus’s possible insubordination while Lily patronised her brother.

‘What’s two plus two?’ she asked.

‘Four,’ said Nathan promptly.

‘Yes, well, that’s *easy*. What’s four plus four?’

‘Five.’

‘*No*, Nathan. Four plus four is *eight*. What’s two plus three?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Nathan crossly.

Lily sighed. ‘*Five*.’

‘Lily, for goodness’ sake,’ I said. ‘How on earth is he supposed to know when he hasn’t started school yet?’

‘I’m *helping* him. He needs to learn.’

‘He will, when he gets to school. Oh no.’

‘What is it?’ Lily asked.

‘Mrs Wallace,’ I said, pulling onto the gravelled verge in front of the school. She was talking to Christine Denny at the gate, but her real quarry, I feared, was me. ‘Right, have you got your bag, love?’

‘Should I take my bag for Dad’s too?’ It being Wednesday, they were spending the night with Dave.

‘No, I’ll leave it at day care with Nathan’s, and then you don’t have to remember it.’ I got out of the car to kiss her, and she flung her arms around my waist. ‘Have a good day, chicken. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘I’ll miss you, Mummy.’

‘You too. But you’ll have a great time at Dad’s.’

‘Will you ring and say goodnight?’

‘Of course,’ I said.

‘Good morning!’ cried Amy Wallace, approaching. ‘How are you today, Lily?’

‘Good, thank you,’ Lily said to her shoes.

‘I haven’t seen you at netball. Aren’t you playing this year? It’s not too late, you know. I’m sure we could find you a spot.’

Lily gave something between a shrug and a squirm.

‘Arwen’s just *loving* her netball.’ (I’d been told, although I wished I hadn’t, that Arwen’s name was a happy reminder of the night of her conception, on which her parents had had a *Lord of the Rings* movie marathon.) ‘She’s doing so well with her shooting, now. You must take Lily to netball camp next year, Jen; you’ll be amazed at how her confidence will improve.’

‘Mm,’ I said.

‘Now, I’ve got the list of phone numbers for the jumble sale ...’ She paused to fish a piece of paper from her handbag. ‘Here it is. It’s so sweet of you to volunteer. I can’t *believe* it’s the same Saturday as Aaron’s family reunion; we *never* go away ...’ She lowered her voice sympathetically. ‘How *are* you, anyway?’

‘Great,’ I said brightly.

‘And the kids?’

‘They’re doing really well.’

‘Little angels,’ she said, turning to the car to wave at Nathan – who was, unfortunately, probing his nose thoughtfully with his index finger.

* * *

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Reynolds!’ said Ray de Vries playfully as I came in through the council building’s automatic doors fifteen minutes later. I’d been starting work at eight forty-five since Lily had gone to school two years before, but Councillor de Vries, bless him, was not noted for his rapid assimilation of change.

‘Hi, Ray,’ I said. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Not bad, not bad. Family all well?’

‘Fine, thanks.’

‘I saw Dave at the squash club last night. Let him off the leash for a night, eh?’

I smiled vaguely.

‘I bet *he* was a bit slow to get going this morning. Ah well, mustn’t keep you.’ He trundled off towards the lunch room, and I headed upstairs.

I didn’t ever plan to grow up and be a building control officer – it just sort of happened. I got a degree in mechanical engineering, largely because my high school careers adviser said engineering was no field for a girl, and before Dave and I moved home to the farm I worked for a company in Auckland that designed and made biomedical equipment. I had no background whatsoever in building or construction, but there were no other engineering-type jobs going in Tipoi and, luckily for me, no other applicants. I liked my job, although the building department was chronically understaffed and I spent the occasional hour in the middle of the night wondering if, on my deathbed, I’d really feel that all these hours trying to reconcile the Building Code and the Resource Management Act (which overlap but contradict each other) had been worthwhile.

Worthwhile or not, I spent the morning doing paperwork and the afternoon at a commercial building site on the edge of town, where I found that the foundations were marked out three metres to the left of where the plans said they should be. This led to a long and wearying debate, during which the owner said (many times and with steadily increasing wrath) that only an officious little bureaucrat would worry about such a minor detail, and I replied (almost as many times and with steadily decreasing sincerity) that I was very sorry, but that as well as being illegal the change would compromise the on-site sewage system, which wasn’t quite as minor a detail as he seemed to think.

After this uplifting encounter, I spent two solid hours answering emails, and left work feeling tired and flat. I called in to see Mum and Dad on the way home, and found them eating poached eggs in front of the TV with their plates on their knees.

Mum looked up as I opened the patio door. ‘Egg, love?’ she offered.

‘Yes, please. I’ll get it. Anyone want a cup of tea while I’m at it?’

‘Why not?’ said Dad.

‘How was your day?’ Mum called as I broke two eggs into a perspex jug of cold water.

‘Reasonably dire. How was yours?’

‘Fine. Kathleen and Geoffrey were here for lunch, so that was nice.’

‘Really?’ I asked, and Dad snorted with laughter.

‘Yes, really,’ said Mum firmly. ‘They’ve just got home from visiting Joshua in Argentina. They had a wonderful trip.’

‘Cool.’ The microwave beeped, and I took the jug out and peered at its contents. The egg whites were still raw, so I put it back in.

‘They asked after you,’ Mum said. ‘Kathleen was very sympathetic.’

‘Mm.’ Aunty Kath was very good at commiserating with other people’s misfortunes – it was rejoicing in their triumphs that she struggled with.

‘She’s planning to ring you,’ said Mum, and just then there was a medium-sized explosion. She hurried in to find me scraping egg off the inside of the microwave. ‘Oh, *really*, Jenny.’

‘Sorry, Mum.’

‘It’s so much better just to do them on the stove,’ she said, taking the jug and tipping my unexploded egg down the sink.

‘Hey, I could have eaten that one!’

‘It’s as hard as a rock,’ she said, hurrying it down the plughole with the dish brush. ‘You can’t eat it.’

‘Well, I can’t now.’

Lips folded into a thin line, she filled a pan with water and thumped it down on the stovetop. ‘Go and talk to your father.’

Startled by what was surely an extreme reaction to a very minor culinary disaster, I said, ‘No, Mum, your tea will get cold. Go on. I promise not to blow up anything else.’

‘I’d rather just do it myself, please,’ she said shortly.

Dad grimaced sympathetically as I went back into the living room.

‘What on earth’s bugging her?’ I mouthed.

He shrugged.

‘Hey, Dad,’ I said, perching on the arm of the sofa, ‘John called in this morning and said Marcus didn’t drench those thin ewes; he just put them back in with the main mob on Monday night.’

‘Really? Why would he do that?’

‘Laziness, I suppose,’ I said. ‘If he did.’

‘Funny thing for John to say if he didn’t.’

‘Well, he obviously doesn’t like Marcus, for some reason or other. He might just be trying to get him in trouble.’

‘Look, I don’t know,’ said Dad. ‘I haven’t seen the ewes since we scanned.’

I fiddled absent-mindedly with an earring. ‘Would you mind wandering out and having a look at them?’

He sighed.

‘I don’t want to have a go at Marcus unless he’s done something wrong,’ I said.

‘I don’t know that you want to have a go at him anyway.’

‘Not have a go at him,’ I corrected. ‘But if he *is* slacking off, surely it’s best to pull him up on it.’

Dad sighed again.

‘Dad?’

‘Just – don’t go in with guns blazing, eh?’

‘No, of course not,’ I said, taken aback.

‘You do sometimes, you know,’ said Mum, putting her head around the corner.

‘When?’ I tried not to sound defensive but failed miserably.

‘Well, leaving David, for a start.’

‘What?’

‘Lorraine,’ said Dad weakly.

‘Yes, he made a mistake. And by *God* he’s paying for it. *Everyone’s* paying for it.’

‘Lorraine!’ Dad said again.

Bursting suddenly into tears, Mum turned and fled.

I sat and stared after her with my mouth open.

‘She doesn’t mean it,’ said Dad, rubbing his face with his hands. ‘Kath’s been winding her up about the dire consequences of divorce.’

I stood up. ‘How helpful of her. Right, I’ll see you later.’

‘Jenny ...’

‘It’s okay,’ I said, although it wasn’t. I opened the patio door. ‘It’s fine. Night, Dad.’