

Died And Moved In

Christine Jones

Died and moved in

Copyright © 2007 by Christine Jones.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Dedicated to my eldest daughter Linia,
who not only is a dedicated reader of books,
but also picks up mistakes.
Thanks sweetie.

CHAPTER ONE

Can you imagine anything more frustrating than a combination of rain, mud and a large, woolly ram that just happens to be bogged up to his eyeballs in blackberries? This is truly a test for an unqualified hard-headed farmer who happens to be of the gentler sex and has the weight and height of an anorexic ant.

Time eludes me and finally I conclude I have one of two options. Either leave the bastard here to eat its way out or humble myself and grovel to the nearest farmer for assistance.

“Go to buggery! Starve you unintelligent poor excuse for an animal!” I was gifted at birth with exceptional vocal cords, so cursing loudly requires little effort on my behalf. All right, I give up... the mongrel got the better of me. What the hell, he only cost me twenty-five dollars. “I was ripped off!”

Litres of water squelch in my boots as I make my way down the hill. I can suddenly hear my four-letter word echoing back at me from all corners of the entire valley. Picking myself up, I flick half the paddock off my hands, wearing the other half on my arse. When I’m angry, I get dangerous, so much so, I can actually scare myself. At present, I’m homicidal. Looking back, in the direction of God’s worst creation, I find him wandering quite smugly back to his awaiting mates.

“You humungous bag of shit! I’ll have you for Sunday dinner. If I owned a shot gun, you’d be sucking on mint sauce!”

Staggering towards the back door of my house, so old I swear it saw the birth of Christ; I boot my way through a mob of vultures commonly known as chickens.

“Bugger me dead, I’ve done it again!” It’s becoming a bad habit leaving the back door open. Unfortunately, I know what awaits me inside. Moments later, two squawking chooks are propelled through the air, and yes, chickens can fly if boosted by turbo boots and the sound of a slamming door.

These foul creatures have no manners and leave their calling cards in the most inappropriate places. I’d kill for a caffeine fix and my body pitifully screams for a hot bath, but my eyeballs are fixed on lumps of chook shit. I have no choice but to do the inevitable, yet not before a bucket of hot brew to dull the senses.

The warm water soothes my battle-weary bones but has little effect on my current mood. I curse the day I bought the farm from hell. It’s times like this I find myself thinking of my family. They warned me about moving

to the rural end of the earth and to some hick town with a lifestyle of the eighteen-hundreds. Nevertheless, I had to find my own independence, so I keep telling myself. My family's lifestyle revolves around bleeding the underdog, kiss my arse or you're fired crap. Sometimes I look at my birth certificate; unfortunately, it only reminds me that I am related to them.

My wealthy father presumes love is his signature on a cheque, associating me with a tax file number and sees jeans as the national dress of the unemployed. My dear mother is a typical example of a well-bred woman, who has about as much independence as a man in a straight-jacket with a wallet full of credit cards.

I concluded some years ago that my younger brother, Steven, has chronic S.F.B syndrome. Translated, shit for brains, which in his case is incurable. The symptoms are, womanising, idolising one's self, sucking up for self-gain and when it comes to money, he has deep pockets with very short arms. I tried to warn him about taking a position in the firm, but he wouldn't listen. He's the old man's assistant and I can still recall the expression on his face when dear old dad slapped him on the back and said, 'you're going places son'. Steven hasn't left the first floor yet, but thinks he has.

Alison, Ali for short, she is the baby of the family. Fancy calling her a baby at twenty-three, she'd have my guts if she read my diary entries. Anyway, Ali makes sure I get everything I need like my fortnightly allowance, which I get from daddy dearest. Mind you, I do work for it. I conned him into using me as a tax dodge and I still come up with brilliant ideas for advertising.

Ali is naïve, but persistent. I remember how she cried for days when I broke the news to her, poor kid. I still laugh when I think of all the things she did in an attempt to stop me from coming here. My darling sister cancelled my booking, deflated my tyres, stole my battery, had my car towed away and a few other misdemeanours you don't want to know about. I had no choice but to pay my brother a hefty fee to kidnap and lose her somewhere, which I will never hear the end of. Every day, I get a telephone call from Ali and as the telephone is now ringing, I'll give you one guess as to whom it might be.

I slip on my fluffy, brown slippers with the little claws protruding from the toes, I like novelty items. Wrapping a towel around my chest, I casually journey out to the kitchen where I park my butt on a stool. As I get bad mobile reception, this place came with an old land line phone.

"Hi Ali." Here we go again, the twenty-questions routine. I give the same answers and she's content for the day. "Yep, it's wet and windy. No darling, the cute woollies aren't in the freezer, yet. Cows are mooing, chickens are squawking, and the duck is still sitting on the eggs and yes, I got my allowance, thank you." It's the same thing every time.

She'll tell me about her new car and again ask me if I received the photos of it; I did and have a sore thumb from hitting delete. Ali likes her cars like her men, small, yellow and pleasing to the eye. She will soon fill me in on all the gossip, which she already did yesterday and the day before that and the day before that! This is where she's on her own. I'll make myself a mug of coffee, throw some wood on the heater, perhaps even read an article from a magazine; she won't even miss me.

The telephone lives on a wall held together by ten layers of wallpaper beside double windows that leak and don't open. Below the window is my sink, which is part of an L shaped breakfast bar in fading worn yellow laminate. I hate yellow! From this position, I can admire the magnificent views of a rural landscape surrounded by snow-capped mountains. One of the reasons I brought this place, classic postcard stuff. The lengthy, gravel driveway runs right past this side of the house, leading to a semi-circle; a mixture of mud and grass. At least there's an area of concrete between there and the back door. On the other side of the drive is a paddock belonging to yours truly. Joining that, the neighbour, whom now I think of it, I've never seen in the four, long, tedious months I've been here.

The unsightly house I'm staring at was obviously designed by some drug-fucked architect. It resembles a small, pink box plonked in the middle of a drab paddock with about as much vegetation as the Nullarbor Plains. A local told me it was up for sale. The owners have separated and although a reasonably new house, neither occupied the humpy.

For a person who values privacy, I'm a real sticky beak; nothing gets passed me, whether dead or alive. The rain pelts against the window, slightly hazing the view. Descending upon the house next door, my eyeballs are fixed on a white, late model Ute towing a loaded trailer. Fancy that, it looks like I'm getting new neighbours.

Wiping the condensation off the window, as though my life depended on it, I study the poor sucker venturing from the warmth and security of the Ute to a downpour.

"Bloody rain!" Oops, that's done it; I've brought the one-sided conversation to a halt.

"Sarah!" Ali's voice pierces my eardrum.

"Yes, I'm here. Listen, I'll have to call you back, I can hardly hear you. The weather here interferes with the prehistoric phone lines; it's a wonder we haven't already been cut..." Hanging up is easier than being rude. It takes talent to pull excuses from thin air; I ought to know, I'm a professional. I even have a master's degree to prove it, thanks to my parents, who funded my education and provided me with a cushy advertising job. I hate practicing on Ali, but she does go on and on. It's enough to make you want to go out and get stoned or drunk.

A quick change from my birthday suit into some clothes and I'm back at the window surveying the new neighbour. Boy, is he, she or it agro. A kick to the front tyre, kick to the back tyre, oh no not the bodywork, yep the bodywork. Note to self, keep distance, possibly into kick boxing.

After assessing the situation, I conclude that he, she or it is having great difficulty unhooking the trailer. I'm wearing a grin from ear to ear. I can't help myself; I get such satisfaction out of watching some other poor, miserable bastard having a lousy life. Somehow, it makes me feel as though I'm not the only one getting a bum deal.

With the trailer unhooked, the figure darts for shelter under the veranda. I don't know what the hell they're doing and why they haven't gone inside, but this mysterious stranger is now going back to the Ute.

Well they didn't stay long; maybe they had the wrong address. I continue to watch as the Ute pulls out of the drive, along the road and suddenly... Oh shit, they're heading down my drive. Panic stations! Is my house clean? Pass with a push. Do I look presentable? No, I can only pray they're blind with a Seeing Eye dog that can't talk.

The Ute travels past my kitchen window; we're both clocking thirty-Ks as I head for the lounge room. There's no shelter at the back door and I haven't the heart to let he, she or it drown.

The leadlight rattles in the door with it swinging open to reveal Mr. tall, dark, wet and oh my God, he's so hot I would put posters of him up on my bedroom wall and buy an action figure of him. By invitation, he is now standing in my grand entrance, lucky if it's a metre wide and only a bookshelf divides it from the lounge room. The hunkster removes his hat. You know the type, every farmer has one, every tourist wants one and is now a part of Australia's national dress.

The dark, long, wet head of waves just scream to have fingers run through it. My sister goes into debt to have hair like his. I wonder if it's natural. I'm so engrossed by his appearance; I hardly notice he's opened his mouth and introduced himself as Michael Bowen. He utters something about moving in next-door and being locked out because he thinks he's missed the agent. Should I tell him that no one has been near the house all day? Na, I might look like a sticky beak and we definitely don't want to make a bad impression, not yet anyway.

Mr Bowen has left his mobile at the motel; naturally, a request to use my telephone is granted and within moments; he's dialling. I have an overpowering urge for a caffeine fix, which I extend my generous hospitality by inviting him to join me. A smile indicates his acceptance and it's obvious, he's not a smoker. Pearly white teeth like those spell healthaholic, who considers junk food as the next best thing to suppositories.

I'm all ears; so much so, I could outdo a bugging device.

“You’re bloody joking!” Michael eyes an apology, I assume for his language. “What time is he expected back?”

Blah, blah, blah, blah, sorry my hearing is only limited.

“If you’re prepared to pay the cost of the motel, I’ll be quite happy to stay in it tonight... No, I didn’t think so. So what do you suggest I do, kick the door in?”

Observation, Michael is one very unhappy little Vegemite, who looks irresistible when angry. He places his hand over the receiver.

“Sorry about this, but would you mind if I left this number with the agent’s wife? They say they weren’t expecting me until Monday.”

“Go for your life, numbers on the phone.”

“Thanks a lot.”

What else could I say? He’s so cute, I just couldn’t say no and with a smile, he continues the conversation, which is short and sweet. With a lustrous grin, I place a mug of coffee in front of him.

“Help yourself to milk and sugar,” I said, drooling excessively into mine.

“Thanks, it’s just what the doctor ordered.” Michael winked his appreciation.

I’m not one to procrastinate, going straight into my usual premeditated routine of interrogation. I will ask a thousand and one questions, attempting to extract one’s life history before he can escape my clutches. My first question is to determine his marital status and whether or not he has little ankle biters lurking in amongst the junk in the Ute. I conceal my excitement in a sip of coffee. A horrible thought enters my mind. Now in this day and age one can’t tell by mere appearances, I just hope he’s not gay, what a tragedy that would be. Should I ask him? No, don’t push your luck. It’s better I don’t know; it may bring on a nervous rash and scratching is so unflattering.

Anyway, I nearly lost the plot when this marvel of flesh informs me he’s an architect in his father’s firm. Amen, he didn’t build the pink box having been taken in by the scenery and the land itself. He has big plans for the house; I hope he will let me drive the bulldozer when the time comes. It’s very exciting to meet someone employed and educated.

I have to confess he’s equally as good, if not better at interrogating than I am. We are now down to the fine dust at the bottom of the bag. I’m considering releasing information on the colour undies I’m wearing, but I don’t wish to appear rude. Besides, I have been a bit slack in the laundry department and I’m wearing a creation that usually lives at the back of the draw and hasn’t seen daylight in a long time.

We waited for what seemed like hours. The sheepish agent arrived, grovelling with some lame excuse of misfortune. He dangled a set of house keys, luring the adorable hunk of flesh away to his new home.

The top of the old fridge has a small freezer section. You know what they look like; the Antarctic in winter, more ice than food, which in my case is full of pre-cooked dinners for one. Now anticipating pulling forth something to please my taste buds, my heart skips a beat at the sight of a microwave dinner.

“Yum, yum, chicken and spuds.” I have a habit of talking to myself. At least I know I can count on an intelligent conversation. I’ll talk to anything that’s silly enough to listen.

I can’t help but wonder what happened to my enthusiasm, the one I had when I first came here. Be self-sufficient; grow my own meat and veggies. All that living off the land crap had my brain swirling in green.

I glance out the window at a wet black night. The man, who has my hormones jumping, obviously had the right idea. I presume he has gone to the local hotel for a nice hot counter meal. I picture him enjoying a beer surrounded by decent conversation whilst I sit here like a stuffed chicken awaiting a ping from the microwave. It only informs me of a meal that’s dried up and inedible.

The telephone interrupts my thoughts.

“Saved by the bell!” The squeal of excitement dies, as I foresee a pestering relation on the other end.

“Hi.” I speak into the receiver. “This is Sarah. Sorry I’m not home, but if you hang up now you will save yourself the price of an STD call.” I just love making out I’m an answering machine; some of my friends can’t tell the difference. I suddenly hear a familiar chuckle.

“Hi Sarah,” Steven said. “How’s country life treating you?” He mimics what he considers the slow, country accent. “Have any of the local lads shown an interest yet?” The chuckles are his lack of confidence in me to find a bed mate.

“Steven!” Thank God, what a relief to hear my brother’s voice instead of my sister’s. “So, what have I done to deserve a call or should I say what account are you having problems with.”

“No, I don’t need any favours Sis. Look, I haven’t got time to go into the details...”

“So, what’s your specialty tonight, nappies, diva, granny snatching?” I did say my brother was a womaniser and he isn’t fussy.

“Very funny Sis; least you still have a sense of sarcasm. Not all’s lost then.”

“Okay, okay, so what can I do you for?”

“You want the good news or the bad?”

“Tell me the good first, I can hang up if I don’t like the bad.”

“I’m coming over to visit. The bad, Ali’s coming too.”

“I told you to give me the good news first.” I laugh. “That’s great news, you’re going to love it here. So, when will I be honoured with your presences?” The news had made my day.

“The long weekend.”

“That’s next weekend Steven!” Hold on, I’m now suspicious. Since when has he ever given up three days of womanising to visit me? Never!

“I know and I’m sorry it’s such short notice, but....”

“Ali wants to see the farm and dad won’t let her travel alone.”

“It’s absolutely pathetic! He demands I chauffeur her on a trip to a farm; geezers, he could pay one of her friends to go with her. Oh, and how’s this. He won’t let me bring any of the cars over; he thinks we might go bush bashing. As if, we’ll use your car for that.”

“Sorry Bro, it’s not bush bashing, it’s paddock slumming in my car.” I chuckle. Steven is also amused and knowing him as I do, he would have preferred to come alone, enabling him to gossip about the family. “Hold on,” a thought came to mind, “what’s he on about, aren’t you flying over?”

“Yes, but Ali wanted to come over by boat and mum went off on one of her tangents about the fumes.”

“You’ve got to be joking. Oh, don’t tell me, mum’s friends have talked her into some other weird and wonderful lifestyle. What is it this time, mystical enlightenment from the orient?”

“No, wait for it, she’s gone alternative.”

“Same thing, different hairstyle. I’m just waiting for her to shave her head and burn incense, then we’ve seen the lot.”

“Sorry Sis, I have to go. I’d love to chat, but I’m on someone else’s phone.”

“What’s new? Who is she, Miss, Mrs. or Ms?”

“Give me a break, I have a reputation to uphold. Now don’t forget next Friday, I’ll call you during the week and give you the details.”

Short and sweet, that’s Steven for you. I do have to admit I’m excited. It will be their first visit to the farm and I’m naturally going to go out of my way to impress them.

CHAPTER TWO

The weather was lousy all week, but only you know who occupied my thoughts and motivated my actions. I've dishonoured the female race, breaking every rule in the sacred women's bible, titled *'Men can be detrimental to your health, but you got to love em'*. Chapter one specifically states to avoid exceptionally good-looking men, as it's not worth the hassle. They are usually so full of themselves there isn't room for organs. I can't believe the irrational stunts I pulled to get Michael's attention. In all honesty, I must add that my actions were totally out of character for me. No truly, I'm an old-fashioned girl at heart.

Over that weekend, I kept my distance with Michael going in and out and unknowns helping him to move in. However, Monday, I climbed this un-shapely willow tree bordering both properties. After luring a massive bull to the base of the trunk with a bale of hay, I screamed my head off.

"Help, help, maiden in distress! Big bad bull is going to eat me all up! I hope someone will help me; anyone will do. Michael!" All I heard was crack and ended up on my arse. For my efforts, I found myself sitting in cow shit and staring up at an oversized steak.

Tuesday, in pursuit of attention, I bogged the old orange tractor in the paddock. Painstakingly, I took a plunge in the mud, cursed extremely loud with the rain trying to drown me and for what, deafening silence! Michael wasn't even home. That afternoon I lost my head, the sort of stuff that could see you wearing a restricting, white jacket. The hunkmaster is outside playing with plants. I attempt to chase a sheep down my drive, but would this ball of wool do as it was told? Not on your bloody life! It went everywhere but the drive and once it was in my garden that was it; I don't need to prune the roses this year. With all my yelling and screaming, you would have thought Mr. Bowen would have come running, fat chance! I zoomed in on him with binoculars I found in the shed. It soon became painfully clear to me why he couldn't hear me. He's listening to something through earphones the size of dinner plates wrapped around his head. Do you think I would admit defeat? Not bloody likely, it was war!

I watched and schemed, schemed and watched. The telephone rang; I lifted the receiver and dropped the receiver. I took notes whilst my eyes studied the moving target. Was he going back inside? Yes, no, yes, no, maybe, no! Stay right where you are, I thought and went in for the kill.

Dressed in military uniform, weapon and survival gear strapped to

my body, I hauled myself up onto the chook-shed roof, before sussing out the enemy. Truth is, I was wearing painted overalls armed with a hammer and a sandwich. First lesson in survival; food.

Craters formed whilst I smashed down on the corrugated iron. Naturally, I didn't want to appear too obvious, but with each bang, the echo made its way around the valley a few times. I presumed if he was any sort of gentleman, he'd see a woman doing men's work and come racing over to offer his assistance; especially as bits and pieces were flying off the roof in all directions.

After quite some... minutes, my attempts to draw attention to myself had failed miserably. I don't think the chooks appreciated the many new skylights in their house either. Anyway, I thought if worse came to worst, I'd burn their humpy to the ground and build a new one, yet this was only as a last resort. Now, before going to extremes, I set my phone to stream anything that came up, returned it to my pocket and placed on earphones the size of satellite dishes. The flat roof made the perfect dance floor where vigorously I wriggled my arse to the tune of news, sport and weather. Did Mr. Bowen notice me? No bloody way! The guy wouldn't take note if they used his house as a nuclear testing site. He's the type who blinks and misses the streaker at a football match doing an encore, but I had one more trick up my sleeve.

Beside the chook shed, a forty-four-gallon drum, full of rubbish was doused in a little petrol. From a distance, the matches flew through the air. Finally, we had ignition. The drum left the planet, returning after a few orbits.

"Oops." I said, perhaps a little too much petrol and I prayed like all shit they were aliens and not barbecued chickens.

Okay, I admitted defeat. I was not going to let myself get further stressed out or emotional over the hunk. So what, I'd sunken lower than the Titanic. So what; my pride was around my ankles. Who gave a shit that I was lying flat on my back on the wet grass kicking and cursing, throwing a childish tantrum. Oh my God! I suddenly thought, startled by the sound of speedy shoes.

"Are you alright?"

Sitting up, I realised something had finally drawn Michael Bowen's attention.

"Just take it easy," Michael said. "Do you suffer these fits often?"

Acting vague is a specialty of mine, placing more emphasis on the other person to explain in more detail what they're on about so there's no misunderstanding.

"Don't worry," Michael said looking at me with gorgeous, compassionate, brown eyes. "You'll feel disorientated for a little while. Most do after having an Epileptic seizure." It just rolled off his tongue, as though he was doctor make me feel good.

If I hadn't suddenly gone brain dead, I would've just passed out.

Faking it is far easier than explaining why your entire face has turned blood red with embarrassment. I thought, okay, calm yourself girl. Now speak clearly, logically and above all, don't ramble on.

"Ah, no, I'm not epileptic. Ah, fresh air, exercise, diet, all that sort of shit... I mean it's good for you. Veggies, vitamin pills, yoga, herbal teas, you should try it, I mean, you most probably already sniff shit, pop pills and vegetate." It is times like this that prompt masochistic thoughts, I would have thoroughly enjoyed punching myself right in the mouth. Why is it that the moment your heart says go for it, the rest of your body acts like it has just spent the term of its natural life in prison?

"Sorry it just looked; never mind." Michael expressed embarrassment. I had the unpleasant feeling that the conversation was about to come to an abrupt halt, but alas, he has a talent for damage control. "So, you're health conscious, that's really good."

"Yes, no, sometimes. Depends on the weather and mood I'm in. They don't usually last long."

"I like bush walking."

"So do I!" Geezers, I thought that was one for the books, as I hate bush bashing. I wished someone would show up and gag me before I did myself more damage.

"Oh really." Michael smiled. "Have you gone up the mountains there?" He pointed at what I consider Mount Everest.

"Ah no, but I've heard its fabulous, great, wonderful views, couldn't find better mountains."

"I get the message," Michael replied. "Sounds good. I'm looking forward to the better weather, spend some time up there."

"Yeah, me too. You can really sit back and be one with nature." I sucked in the cold air, as though I was already there. I thought, oh shit; I'm starting to sound like my mother.

"So you like meditating and things like that?"

"Oh yeah." I'm off again. "Relaxation, the art of stress relief, getting in touch with your inner self and being inspired by God's creations." I nodded like a dick-head, caught up in my own bullshit. I couldn't believe what I was saying! I even thought of calling my mum for some advice on the subject, how sick is that!

In reply, Michael said he'd never got into such things, believing he wouldn't have the patience to sit and meditate. On a positive note, he had heard good things on the subject and perhaps I could teach him the basics at some stage. Naturally, I'd be in that and grinned like the Cheshire cat.

I can understand why he looked at me the way he did. It's not every day you have a conversation with a complete idiot. Having already done enough damage, I thought it best to just sit back and die quietly. Unfortunately, I don't know how to be quiet.

Well alas all good things came to an end, he had things to do, places to go and smiled see ya later. The second Michael was out of sight, I ran into the house where I grabbed my handbag and car keys. I broke every speed limit in my travels to the city.

Still in my overalls, I took a deep breath and snuck into a shop selling alternative products and giftware. Okay, so I hadn't been in that part of the universe before, I'm what some call sceptical. I felt so embarrassed with no kiddie section to hide in and the assistant hot on my gumboots. The lady was ever so nice, as I attempted to explain what I was looking for.

"My friend is on a quest to find inner peace and awareness." I continued by trying to explain meditation, pretending I knew something about it. My brain and mouth were not synchronised. I couldn't believe it, here I was sounding like an idiot when I'm used to speaking with businesspeople, if you weren't in control, you could kiss big dollars down the drain. Who was I fooling; it was certainly not the shop assistant.

I couldn't help it, I blabbed. I told Wendy, her name was on a neat little pin, about my dilemma. To my surprise, she was very understanding and extremely helpful. Wendy had a marvellous sense of humour and explained a few things to get me started. I walked out of that shop with bookmarks, coffee mugs, spiritual literature, dangly things, music and a large picture explaining chakras. Wendy must have thought me a customer with more money than sense.

It's pitiful I know, but oh the pain! The poor couch took a beating that night. Cushions bulged ready to spew stuffing with my arms crushing the colourful patterns with emotion. To side-track myself, I started reading a book. It's a million pages thick and I got lost somewhere on page one. My intellect couldn't cope with the philosophy; you're either into it or you're not and I'm definitely not. How embarrassed do I still feel; to think a mere male living across the paddock could have such an influence on my sanity and hormones. Jeepers creepers, he's only a man and my maturity level has taken a nosedive. It would be fantastic if my body followed suit; I could cope with looking sixteen again. There are millions of these things infesting this planet and I pick one, who finds me about as exciting as a fly blown sheep. I'm so embarrassed; I think I'm going to be sick.

Wednesday, the phone woke me. It wasn't exactly early as I'd slept in. What does one expect when you stay up reading and drinking coffee until the rooster crows. Mrs. Berry told me her son Matthew would be over shortly, once he'd finished feeding out hay. He was coming to the farm to kill off some sheep for me, which I'd been putting off. Suddenly I was doing a mad panic. I was dressed and out rounding up woollies and I hadn't even had a caffeine fix, how depressing.

I risked life and limb to fill the decrepit holding yard. Whilst sitting on the fence, I was trying to choose three unsuspecting blobs of wool for the

food chain. This was a hopeless task considering I felt like Pontius Pilate, handing over the sentence of death. Fortunately for me, I have handed the dirty deed to another, who will pick up and deliver them back, less the fluffy bits.

“Now come on.” I grovel to my penned flock. “I ask for three volunteers. I know this is a dangerous mission but think of it this way; you’ll go to a higher greener plain in the sky. It’s for a good cause, my stomach. Oh, bugger me dead! You guys are enough to make me want to go vegetarian.” Having heaved a sigh of frustration, I soon realised that what I’d heard and read about sheep was true. They’re nothing but useless wimps, who are only interested in eating, sleeping and mating, you can’t even house train them.

“Come on just raise a foot. You’re only excluded if you have dependants or a pensioner.”

“Aren’t they all wethers?” Only one voice could have startled me enough to fall off the fence. “I don’t see any volunteering, do you?” Michael glanced over my flock most amused.

“I can’t help it; I hate doing this. I’m a wimp when it comes to animals.” I leant up against the palings.

“Oh, lamb for dinner. They say you get used to it when living on a farm. The secret is not to name them.”

“This is a first for me, I’m used to pre-packed foods. How can I eat something after it’s looked at me with those beady, little eyes? Look at them; I have to pick three of the poor buggers out for the freezer, I just know this is going to give me nightmares for years to come.” I didn’t think it that funny; however, Michael did. I was sure he was fighting to keep a straight face.

Michael handed me a letter and without even looking, I shoved it into my frumpy shirt pocket. “Thanks, I ought to check my letter box, yours could be in mine.” It was hopeful thinking.

“If they’re bills, keep them.” We both smiled. “Do you want a hand?” His words were music to my ears.

“Yes! I mean, only if you can spare the time.” My heart pounded and I felt that childish sensation come over me. What stupid thing would spring from my mouth next that would have him running from this asylum? Just keep your mouth shut girl, I thought. Pretend you’re missing a front tooth; the image will keep you quiet for a while.

Rolling up the sleeves of his grey shirt, tucked into tight jeans, Michael stood bravely amongst the mob.

“Any three?” Michael awaited my signal. With the quick nod, he was in like Flynn.

Ding, ding round one. The woolly mammoths put up a good fight, so did Michael, who showed the fluff balls, who was boss. He grasped victim number one, which kicked and begged for mercy, yet the hunkmaster pushed

it into a separate pen.

In he went again. Ha, the sheep won, it got away, but not for long. Two down one to go. Michael attacked another and yes, the third victim was penned. He's the stud master all right.

"There you go." Michael climbed over the fence.

"Thanks, it would've taken me ages." I smiled grateful.

"Only if you waited for volunteers." Michael raised a brow.

Okay, I can take sarcasm. So, he was amused at my expense. So, he thought me a prize wimp and a blubbering idiot. I wondered how much more damage I could do over coffee. Would you believe it! I didn't get the chance. Good old Matthew Berry revved the guts out of his early model Ute whilst hooning across the grass to pull up in front of us. I have to be the unluckiest person on this planet when it comes to my love life.

I was under the impression that there would be a strange looking thingamabob on the back of the Ute, which keeps the woollies in whilst being transported.

"How's he going to keep the sheep in the back?" I asked, having drawn Michael's attention. We stared at this man, who has the appearance of a beer guzzling, weightlifter. This bearded hulk pulled something from the front seat. It had to be the expression on my face that gave me away; Michael placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't worry, if you pass out, I'll just throw you over my shoulder and carry you into the house." He cocked a grin.

I abruptly returned to reality, acknowledging Matthew's presence with him sharpening this humungous blade of shimmering steel right before my very eyes.

Obvious by his grin, which I believe to be a permanent fixture, Matthew relished in every aspect of the job.

"So how do you want them love, chops, roasts?"

"Alive; I mean any way you want to slice them up. After all, you're the murderer, I mean the butcher."

"You go inside Sarah," Michael uttered sympathetic. "I can give Matthew a hand."

Oh no, was it that obvious, I thought. I'm positive I've caught S.F.B syndrome; I'll kill Steven!

"No, I'm fine," I replied forcing a smile. "Really; I'm not squeamish." That's the girl, think positive, take deep breaths and hopefully you won't kiss grass. What was I thinking?

The first slash sent blood everywhere. Oh my god, I'm going to be sick, I'm going to faint, I'm going to die! Someone get me Prozac, no a stretcher, an ambulance! There's no time, just find me a dry piece of turf. I can't take this, oh the blood, the gurgling that final gasp of air. Oh my god, he's doing another! My legs, I can't feel my legs, I feel cold, I feel giddy,

someone pinch me, I think I'm dead.

"Are you alright Sarah?" Michael asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's not as bad as I thought it would be. You're a real master craftsman Matthew, a credit to your trade." I think I returned to the land of the living, but don't quote me on that one.

Matthew sarcastically grinned at Michael. I sensed he saw through my thin skin; well he has had plenty of practice and I bet he's picked up a few human bodies off the ground in his time.

"You did alright for a first timer." Matthew heaved the first of the carcasses over the small fence. "They're a good size, plenty of meat on them. Now, how do you want them cut up?"

"Pre-packaged," I mumbled with the lifeless woollies lying at my feet. Michael grinned at Matthew.

"I don't think she really cares." Michael exerted his masculinity by helping Matthew load the Ute.

"I'll drop them back late tomorrow arvo." Matthew winked and slipped into the driver's seat.

I was so depressed, no, more like suicidal. Michael declined my invitation for coffee, but I did feel a little better after blowing my weekly budget that afternoon in town. What the hell, it's not every day you buy a humungous freezer for three sheep. I'll have to find someone who likes killing vegetables; it's going to take me quite some time, before I'm able to pick up a knife again. I'd decided on spaghetti on toast for dinner that night, least it doesn't squirm when you fork it. Well, least I hope not.

CHAPTER THREE

Late afternoon, I spent loading body bags and I actually had room in the freezer for a few more woollies. Perhaps I'm becoming blood thirsty, speaking of thirst, coffee time. I stick the jug under the tap, but for some reason, it's not filling up. Would you believe it's pouring hard outside and not as much as a drip from the tap! Please God, don't let it be the water lines; please not again! I spent the first three days in this joint wondering where the mains tap was, only to find I have a spring fed dam with a gravity line.

Now this thick, black plastic pipe runs fifty acres to the top of the hill. Smack bang in the middle of a blackberry forest is a swamp crawling with every hideous creature God could think up, and they call this my water supply. An old rusty petrol can bobs up and down on the surface indicating the end of the pipe. It takes quite a bit of muscle to remove an ancient metal device from the end. Supposedly, it lets the water into the pipe, trapping the murky supply so it doesn't flow back into the dam. Whoopee do, I thought that's what taps were for.

I finally remove this thing after hours of cursing and half mangling it, not to mention the cuts and bruises I gained as an added bonus. We now get to the fun part where you bucket tons of discoloured water. Naturally, you get more over yourself than in the pipe, which sees you not only wet, but also in the process of catching pneumonia. It takes forever to prime fifty acres of hideous pipe; unfortunately, daylight is running out.

I proceed to test my hours of agony. Standing over the tap near the house, I cross my fingers, promise the good Lord anything and everything and hold my breath in anticipation. Yes, I have water!

"Thank you God! You are a miracle worker! And I promise not to think of Michael for more than ten seconds at a time."

A roaring fire warms the room, the smell of coffee rises from my mug on the table in front of the couch that I'm relaxing on. The lounge was once a long, wide porch. The ceiling is on a slant, the back wall retains the white weatherboards and the ply-board panelling to the sides is horrendous. A floral, threadbare carpet covers a cement floor; lengthy windows look out to the concrete beyond. There are doors everywhere. A back door, one to a short hallway, to a bedroom, to the kitchen and to a bathroom, which was tacked onto the back of the house by convicts wanting revenge on the lord of the land.

My facial mask is setting quite nicely. To enhance this brown slime, a

green vegetable friend, having given up its life, covers my eyeballs. This beauty treatment was taken from an article in a thousand-year-old magazine I found in the shed. To some, this could be considered madness, as you know who might suddenly drop by. Earlier, I saw there were no lights on next door, so I feel confident of living dangerously. As a precaution, I have a bucket of warm water at my feet with a humungous beach towel over my lap.

It's nice to just sit back, relax and listen to the news. Bummer, more road fatalities; nothing exciting ever happens out here. The place is too hilly for floods, too green for bushfires and if undies are pinched from a clothesline, a day of mourning is declared. I must be getting bored; I haven't even flinched at the announcement of a head on collision with a petrol tanker. I'm sure I'm losing vital parts to my personality, but wouldn't you know it, they're more concerned about the spill than the dead. The Greenies are outraged, the tanker has upset the grass and a few trees may die due to sniffing fumes.

I suddenly feel this cold draft, which prompts me to peel off my veggie friends and...

"Oh my God!" There are strange things happening in my lounge. I can only describe this as an electrical storm, which has scared twenty years off my life. Panicking, I now have mask embedded in my eyeballs and can't see a bloody thing. My foot has taken a dive into the bucket of water and I'm fumbling for the towel. I presume my television has blown up, as I can't hear a thing. Bloody mask, it's like wiping off cement! I suppose it doesn't help to rush this sort of thing, but I'm eager to investigate the damage.

Have you ever experienced real fear? I mean the type you get when you think your life is about to end and I don't mean via an accident or self-inflicted? Your body is numb from the dandruff line down. You want to scream, but nothing comes out even my saliva has backed up. You're mighty close to needing a clean set of pyjamas and you can't even remember who you are, let alone watch your life flash before your eyes. Well, that's exactly how I feel. Not only have I got my face buried in a towel, but I can also feel myself wedged between two some things.

I call on God at the top of my lungs, having found myself sandwiched between my brother and sister.

"I should have known you'd pull a stunt like this!" I'm obviously still shell-shocked. "You nearly scared me to death!" I'm about to let Steven have it again when I notice they are gawking at me, as though I'm the one terrorising them. If their mouths were open any wider, I could pot a ball and win a prize. "Okay, I'm sorry." I bury my pride. "I shouldn't have yelled and yes, I'll get over the trauma. You can give me a hug now.... Hello?"

My brother has always been an exceptional actor and practical joker, which I should be used to by now. He got me a good one this time yet I'm curious about Ali. Usually she doesn't go along with him, considering it only

a cheap thrill at someone else's expense. Perhaps it's merely a reaction to the humbleness of this palace.

"I know this place isn't the Ritz, but it's not that bad." I cock a grin. "Come on you two, knock it off. Hello?" When Steven goes out to stir the pot, he'll continue until his opponent is exhausted. I'm not in the mood to ride this one out. "Okay Steven, you win. It's a great prank, best I've seen yet. You better be able to fix my television because you're dead if you've stuffed it." Surely, this will entice him to let words flow from his gaping mouth. He'll be itching to tell me how he did it; he loves to boast.

Observation; now there's one thing that I haven't taken into consideration but is now sort of hitting me in the face. They're kind of, now how do you explain this, they're not here, but they are here. I can see them as plain as... nope; they are not that plain. In fact, I have put my hand on Steven's knee, and I know I'm taking my time, but I'm sort of afraid to look down. Have you ever had that feeling like you might see something nasty, scary, not humanly possible, making you hold your breath? I look down.

I woke up on the cold floor. Glancing around, I heaved a sigh of relief and put it all down to a bad dream brought on by too much reading. Parking my butt on the couch, I chuckle at the thought of Steven being an angel, now that's hysterical.

"Hi Sarah." Ali touched me on the shoulder. Without thought, I respond.

"Hi Ali." I force a smile and suddenly freak out. I'm looking at what I can only describe as Ali the angelic, without all the trimmings.

"Please Sarah, don't faint again. We have to talk to you."

"We," I squeak, as not much else is going to come out.

"Yes we, Steven and I." Ali sits down beside me. I move over a little, a lot, to the other side of the room.

"Steven, he's here too?" I have this urge to touch my sister, but I'm not ready to put my hands on that stuff, it could be catchy.

"Hi Sis." Steven acknowledges me whilst walking from the kitchen. "Surprise, we got here early; hope you don't mind." He suddenly floats towards me. Naturally, this is not something I see every day. "Don't you pass out on me," Steven orders. "We definitely have to talk about this."

"Okay, you talk, and I'll try and keep the blinkers open." I'm trembling as though I'm sitting butt naked at the Antarctic.

"First things first..." Steven said. "This is your house! I wouldn't be caught dead living here."

"You are dead silly!" Ali moves closer to me. I intervene, not wanting an argument.

"Okay, will someone please explain what's going on here?" I move quickly to a chair and raise my hand for them to keep their distance. I know they look like my brother and sister but looks can be deceiving.

Taking it in turns, Ali and Steven explained, which goes something like this. Ali was determined to bring her new car over; they were on their way to have it freighted by boat. In one of his insulting moods, Steven called her dream vehicle a dodgem car. In addition, she was slower than a wheelchair in an Anzac parade. Spurred to anger, Ali decided she would show him what her little love could do. Putting her foot to the floor, she overtook a bus and to their surprise, they wound up kissing a gas tanker coming the other way. I made their day; informing they had made the six o'clock news. Five minutes of fame, what a way to go.

Thrilled, Steven wanted to know how he looked. I tell him they didn't show the gory bits and he's now angry.

"Fuck me dead!" Steven is fuming and I can't help but say what's on my mind.

"Yep, you're pretty fucked and you're definitely dead."

Ali now wants to know how her car is. I can't help but presume that after hitting a truck, it was probably something the wreckers couldn't sell unless someone wanted a dashboard ornament. I should have kept my thoughts to myself.

Well, after Ali had shed a few tears for her car, she took control of herself and continued. She said the last thing they recalled, before the impact was the conversation about yours truly. It was all a blur until they both found themselves here. Steven said it was all her fault and she had stuffed up her insurance rating not to mention his life. He couldn't believe she had hit the huge fucker head on.

"The truck wasn't that big, smart arse!" Ali retaliates. It's like watching ping pong, back and forth as they mouth off at each other. Steven's going in for the kill; this may prove to be exciting.

"What do you call a cruise ship, a rubber dingy?"

"Well if you weren't such a bloody loudmouth and told me about the Anzac parade, I wouldn't have overtaken!"

"But you hit a bloody big truck you stupid cow!"

Don't panic; this is a natural occurrence for these two, they never stop arguing. Though I've never been part of the United Nations; I know it would be suicide to send in a peacekeeping force at this time.

The television has come back to life, drawing my attention to the current affairs show. It's big news this petrol tanker accident. I have this horrible feeling something's not right.

"See, I told you!" Steven leaps from the couch to turn the volume up. Showing is the tanker and this little yellow thing stuck to the front. Steven's right, it is a pissy little car, what's left of it. Ali's crying, pointing out the mangled car whilst Steven's bitching about the skid marks and how far the rest of the car actually went, before coming to rest. Although I've only seen pics of it, I can well believe its Ali's pride and joy. Cars are cars to me,

as long as they get me from A to B, I couldn't give a shit what make or model it is, as long as it's not yellow.

The way Ali is carrying on, you'd think she'd lost a bust size. So what, she had custom made number plates, which seem to be the only thing left of the wreck seen on television. I don't know whether I'm feeling sheer terror or curiosity, but I find myself poking my finger into Steven's chest and uttering my thoughts.

"You feel normal...well kind of. Do you have an urge to walk through walls, rattle chains and make weird noises?" It's in my nature to make jokes when I'm stressed; it helps to lighten the situation. Least it's better than passing out; I'm scared I might miss something.

What did I say? Surely mere words cannot incite such hysteria! On her knees, Ali is bringing about God's second flood. My little brother is hollering at the top of his lungs having examined his hands, before feeling his face.

"Do I look all right to you? I still have my exceptional good looks, don't I?"

"Yes Steven..." I put his mind at rest. "And before you ask, your suit is fine, but I don't like the tie much."

Snatching another tissue from the box on the coffee table, Ali sniffs whilst listening to the report on the television.

"How awful." Ali blows her nose, having drawn our attention. "They don't recognize us; they don't even know who we are."

"You drip Ali." I can't help but be somewhat amused. "They know who you are, but all members of the family have to be notified first before they publicly announce the deceased."

Bolting to the kitchen, I see the receiver on the bench. It was the thought of being pestered by Ali that had my telephone engaged for a number of hours. Although the phone has been off the hook, my parents do have the local storeowner's number in case of emergencies. I'm only a few minutes away and as my family hasn't notified me, I am hopeful there has been some mistake.

I do realize there's a considerable amount of shock involved when informed of such a tragedy. Maybe my parents have been detained by police or bombarded by the press. My father does like attention and will probably treat this like a social event.

What I had for dinner comes to mind. Perhaps I'm just hallucinating, and they weren't normal mushrooms taken from the paddock. I think I'll just go with the flow; contemplate psychiatric help another day.

With the receiver back on the hook, I race back to the lounge just in time to hear Steven verbally horrify my sister.

"I wonder if they've scraped us off the road yet? I've heard they can leave you there for hours."

“Good one Steven!” Hearing a knock, I move towards the back door. “It’s most probably the neighbours come to complain about the racket.”

Why do people always show up at such inconvenient times especially when I look like shit, feel like shit and...

“Michael! Ah, come in.”

“I tried to ring, but you were engaged.” Michael appears slightly apprehensive, as he continues. “Your family has been trying to get hold of you.” He expressed relief when I said I knew all about it. I think he thought he would have to be the bearer of bad news; he continues. “I’m really sorry to hear about your brother and sister. You’ll have to excuse me; I’m not very good at this. I’ll understand if you’d rather be alone, but I am a good listener if you want to talk. I just thought I’d let you know, if there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to ask.”

For a moment, I’m speechless. I think this is all becoming very real, but I won’t hold my breath, as I don’t want to end up like those two. I lead Michael around the bookshelf and into the lounge room. My brother and sister look at him, waiting for introduction.

“Michael, this is my sister Ali and my brother Steven. They’re here for the long weekend.” I just presume if this is a prank then it would now be all over, and I can kill him without mercy. Steven stretches out his hand.

“Hi, how are you?” Both Steven and I glance at each other and for a second, I thought Michael looked embarrassed. After further study, his expression screams sympathy.

“Well, excuse me for breathing,” Steven airs agitation. “What an arse hole! Does he usually ignore people like this?” My guest doesn’t impress him.

“Leave him alone...” Ali raises her head from the floor. “He can’t hear us, we’re dead. You deaf moron!” She stares up at Michael, obviously hoping for a response. We get one, but not what we expect.

Michael wraps his manly arms around me, drawing my head to his chest. This part of the dream I like and if an alarm rings and wakes me, I’ll pull its guts out and put the parts all over the house as a reminder never to buy another clock.

“It’s all right,” Michael whispers. “Just let it out.” His tone is making me swoon.

Reality check! This is unbelievable; the man of my dreams, who ignores my guests and gives me the impression that I ought to give into an emotional disorder of some kind, is hugging me. Surely, I’m missing something here, which just happens to be a brother and sister.

The telephone rings. Michael asks if I would like him to answer it. I reluctantly nod, as I’d rather let the bloody thing ring and remain in comforting arms. He moves off towards the kitchen. Okay, I’ll admit I’m worried, but somehow Steven has a way with words that begin riots.

“Holy rumbling arse holes! It’s true Sarah; we’re dead! That guy didn’t even acknowledge us.” Again, Steven is studying his hands and feeling his face.

I have to admit, he does look a little pale. Okay, I’ll admit I’m terrified and I didn’t want to accept the fact, but this is not a good time to pass out.

“Just stay calm...” I’m trying to be discreet here. “I’ll get rid of him and then we’ll sort this out. Oh God! I don’t believe what I’m saying. You two have no idea what I’ve gone through. I’ve been chasing this guy all week and here he is in my house and now I have to get rid of him!” I could kill them both.

My sister has this dumb look on her face, but this is nothing unusual.

“Can you hear him Steven?” Ali points towards the kitchen. Steven nods and begins to smile. I can’t hear anything, well maybe a mumble.

“It’s true!” Steven’s eyes bulge. “He’s talking to Carson. Who’s Sue?” He asks me.

“She owns the grocery store down the street, why?”

“Okay Sis, this is what happened. Carson rang the emergency number and gave the details. Your stud in there was in the store; Sue told him it was urgent they get hold of you.” Steven’s bullshit tone and expressions is pathetic. “A death in the family always brings out the best of people.”

“Yeah, yeah, what else.” I’m not in the mood for his pathetic dramatics.

“Poor old Sue was in the shop by herself and unable to leave, saint Michael offered to check on you.” Steven suddenly scoffs. “What is this, the bush telegraph?” He briefly listens, before relaying the conversation in his own words. “They’re all wondering how you found out. Hold on, Michael thinks you might have seen it on the news. Intelligent lad... ah bullshit!” Ali tells Steven to keep his voice down, which he does whilst continuing. “Carson hasn’t got a heart; he’s most probably reading off a prompt dad set up! Oh, poor Sarah gets all the sympathy being so far away from home. I knew the prick wouldn’t give us a mention. Hold on, spoke too soon.” He pauses, taking in the conversation.

“And?” I’m an eager beaver.

“Interesting, the family is so devastated, mother has already called the caterers.” Steven looks to Ali with her remark.

“She will spare no expense to see us off in style.” Ali smiles grateful.

“Get on with it Steven!” I didn’t think my voice carried out to the kitchen.

“He told your knight in denim to keep an eye on you. That would be right, flog you off onto someone else.” Steven sighs agitated.

With Michael entering the lounge, I’m staring at two supposedly dead people. How am I meant to react? It must be true; everything indicates my brother and sister have kicked the bucket, ceased breathing, legally dead. So

why aren't I hysterical, rolling around the floor crying my eyes out? I can only put it down to the two being right in front of me.

"That was a Mr. Carson; he sends his condolences and said your parents will call you first thing in the morning." The combination of compassion and awkwardness in Michael's expression is most touching. I only glance with Ali plonking herself down on the couch.

"This handsome creature has promised to look after you, how nice of him. But who's going to look after us?" Again, Ali is reaching for tissues. I ignore her with Michael asking me how I'm feeling.

"I'm okay." I force a smile.

"I had a feeling you'd say that. It helps to talk and as I said, I am a good listener."

"I'm sure you are...." My eyes wander with Steven roaming the lounge. A second glance in his general direction and I find he's playing silly buggers. My brother has put his arm through a wall; I'd say this is cause for alarm.

"Help Sarah," Steven yells. "I'm stuck!" He has his foot firmly planted on the wall, attempting to force himself free.

My hand impacts with my mouth, stopping me from airing hysteria. Ali's moved swiftly to assist Steven and by the expression on Michael's face, I better think up something fast for my actions.

"I left something in the oven!"

"You sit down, I'll see to it for you." Michael forces a smile. "Is there anything I can get you, a coffee or something?"

"Yeah, get me a stiff drink." Calm is not something I can practice at this moment.

"Where do I find it?"

"I have brandy essence in the cupboard." A reality check has me eyeing him. "Sorry, I don't drink, it was just a thought." Now using body language, my hands awkwardly play with air, gesturing to my brother to knock it off until I can think of something. I gained a sympathetic look for my state of mind.

With Michael off to the kitchen, I've performed an Olympic dash into the little hallway, before bursting into my bedroom. Firstly, I place my eyeballs back into their sockets. Secondly, I take the photo out of Steven's hand and slip it into my dressing gown pocket. Thirdly and the best part, I slap the annoying disturbance, who disappears into the wall.

Racing back to the lounge, I collide with Michael. From the floor, I look up at him. Michael apologises and assists me to my feet. No harm done, except my ego.

Having made our way to the couch, I sit and inspect the photo for damage.

“I take it you were close to them?” Again, Michael expresses awkwardness.

“No,” I reply. “Not really, actually, not at all.”

“You bitch,” Ali said. Both she and Steven join the living. “And after all I’ve done for you. That’s it; I’ll never give you another wonder bra again! Sag for all I care.”

“Give her a break Ali.” Steven grins. “Can’t you see she’s trying to get rid of him? How could she not be close to a drop dead, gorgeous brother like me; mind you, I can’t say the same for you.” Appearing excited about his newfound status, Steven waves his hands in front of Michael’s face. Naturally, there’s no response. “I think I’m going to enjoy being deceased.” His mischievous grin said it all.

Standing behind Michael, Steven flicks the man’s curls. Michael reacts as though plagued by an annoying fly.

“I had to see if they were real.” Steven thought it amusing. Surprisingly, my brother didn’t follow me out to the kitchen.

Back with a can of fly spray, our eyes react to the abundance of chemicals in the air. Michael interprets this, as an emotional break through where again; I’m being comforted in his arms.

“Grab it while you can Sis,” Steven teases. “He may not be so affectionate in the morning.” He just had to make weird smooching sounds to piss me off further.

“He’s just so nice.” Ali sighs, impressed. “Country boys, you have to love them.” Her sights shift to a grinning Steven.

“Yes, but by god they’re slow. Lay on the tears Sis, you’re supposed to be devastated. Trust me, it will get you to second and third base....”

“That’s all you ever think about!” Ali thumps Steven on the arm. “He’s doing a wonderful job comforting her. I give him ten out of ten. Love his curls Sarah, are they natural?”

“He’s a mummies boy,” Steven cringes. “I bet he has a starched handkerchief in his pocket, love from mum.”

I’m sure that’s sweat trickling down my back; stress definitely causes your body to react in strange ways. If I get a nervous rash, I swear I’ll hit Steven before I allow him to see me scratch. What choice do I have... Michael has to go.

CHAPTER FOUR

It took some doing yet with Michael out the way, I can finally sort out this mess. I continue to curse, drool and stare out the kitchen window with the love of my life entering his house. What a waste! I'm going to kill them, bring them back to life and kill them again! This little notion is repeating in my thoughts.

Ali sits at the kitchen bench, a total depressant. There's one thing in her favour; she's still beautiful even after being mangled to death. I can only hope I look as good after being crushed by a petrol tanker.

My sister is one of those women, others envy. Her mop of silky, dark hair compliments a complexion, which has never known pimples. She has boobs men would pay to grope, a model's figure and long, long legs. You know the type, the one who can wear short, skirt suits that have the office boys permanently in a state of slave labour. Pity she hasn't the brains to go with the body beautiful.

I still can't work it out; there must have been pigmies somewhere hanging off the family tree. Both Steven and Ali are tall, but I look at more belly buttons than I care to. I'll have to tell Michael not to wear a belt; it could lead to buckle marks on my cheek. Okay, I am exaggerating, but I do hate being referred to, as a little, petite person. There is an upside to this gene dilemma, I got the brains; so, I'm not too fussed about my other shortcomings of a flat chest and big feet.

Staring out into the black night, it suddenly dawns on me that Steven is exceptionally quiet. A quick glance establishes that he's not in the kitchen and why is he not in the kitchen? Because I am still in shock and the grieving process has yet to hit me. What the hell, he's dead; maybe my brain is not coping well with his departure. Is it time for me to cry yet? No bloody way! How can you express such emotions when your brother's head is protruding through the convict brickwork above the mantel piece?

"Hey Sis, you should see what's behind here." Steven's amused at my expense.

My brain ceased to function when my eyeballs popped, and my mouth now knows everyone's shoe size. It's times like this you want to ring someone; preferably a doctor with a huge bachelor's degree in psychiatry.

"Put your face back on Sis; you look like this dead rat behind here. Geezers, I've never seen such a beast. It reminds me of some of your past bed mates." Steven shakes his head with yours truly remaining silent and gob

smacked. "I'm off, I have some exploring to do. Don't wait up for me Sis."

A few minutes pass and finally my brain is back in gear, low gear. My sister hasn't budged from her seat at the bench.

"Ali, I really don't know what to say except... how does it feel?" I can't help it, I'm a little curious.

"How should I know; I'm dead." Ali appears to be struggling with her newfound status.

Okay, so that was an intelligent answer. I will attempt to keep the conversation up and extract information, which may just make me reconsider jumping in my car and driving to the local pub.

"I think we have already established this Ali. Talking about it might make you feel better." I heave a nervous sigh, as this isn't going to be easy.

"Sarah, I believed in monsters when I was little, but I never believed in ghosts. We were taught at Sunday school that we go to Heaven when we die. I saw no white light, well, not that I recall, and I've heard no harps or voices coaching me to the other side. I've been dead for hours and haven't been contacted by God yet. Maybe you have to make an appointment or something. Perhaps I have to go to church or do a good deed to get in." Oh God, Ali's going religious on me.

My eyes are kind of searching the ceiling. I have to admit, it does make you think. I now decide not to take any chances. If there is a God, then I don't want him sending me downstairs when it's my turn; I couldn't bear eternity with Steven. From now on, I will not use the Lord's name in...

"Jesus Christ!" My brother has popped up right in front of me. "Stop doing that Steven!"

"Hey, it's a whole new way of travel for us." Steven's on a high. "You ought to try it, it's a scream." He disappears.

It's awfully hard to concentrate on my sister with me nervously expecting Casper to jump out from nowhere and again scare the shit out of me.

"Look Ali, I don't know anything about this being dead business. No one has ever come back to tell me about it, until now." I'm glancing about on edge. "Unfortunately, there's no books on what to do when you get to the pearly white gates." On the other hand, maybe someone has written a book, but I haven't been exactly looking lately.

"Pearly white gates! All I did was walk through a rusty one at the end of your drive." Tears are forming in Ali's eyes. "Oh Sarah, I don't know if I can cope with this. Do ghosts have nervous breakdowns?" She sniffed.

"How should I know, maybe you can make some enquiries." What else could I say? Dan Aykroid, I'm not.

Again, Steven scares precious years off my life when he suddenly emerges from thin air, near the kitchen sink. I loathe the smug look on his face, especially when combined with running his fingers through his thick,

blow-waved hair.

“Oh stop carrying on Alison and grow up.” Steven expresses his heartlessness. “Just face it, you’re dead.” He grins sarcastically shifting his smug sights to me.

“Doesn’t it bother you being dead,” I ask. He considers this for a moment, straightens his thin, leather tie, inspects his manicured fingernails and scrutinises my facial expression.

“No.” This word is said with such ease, I want to boot him in a certain part of his anatomy that’s dearer to him than life itself. I decide against this action, the thought of passing straight through him and hitting the cupboard would only cause me injury and him satisfaction.

“Just think about it Sis. Yours truly can go and do whatever I so desire!” Leaning over the kitchen bench, he directs his words at the baby of the family. “Ali, Ali, Ali, I want you to picture this. No bosses, no competing for promotion, no waiting to be served in your favourite shopping spots and just think, you can play with any guy’s arse to your heart’s content.” Steven has high expectations; I’m just dying to hear what he’s got planned for himself. “We can be rich beyond our wildest dreams Ali.” His eyes light up. “Win a few lotteries, no better still; clean out the casinos!”

“Steven...” I drew his attention. “You’re a dick head. You haven’t even considered whether there’s any limitations you’re bound by. For all you know, this could be a temporary stopover prior to getting your wings, or in your case, horns.”

“Hold that thought; I want to try something.” Steven disappears.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” I snarl, turning to Ali, who is writing something on the telephone memo pad.

“What are you doing?”

“My will.” Ali sniffs.

“I think you’re a bit late. Jesus Christ! I don’t believe this.” My hands mimic strangling actions out of sheer frustration.

“Better late than never.” Ali’s bottom lip is quivering. She must be in shock; no one can possibly be that stupid.

I thought a caffeine fix was in order, thinking Ali could use a cupper. Unfortunately, it was a bad move.

“Oh Sarah, I’ve wet myself!” Ali cries with fluid passing straight through her and drenching my newly covered stool and threadbare carpet.

“Least I’m not the only one who can’t hold their drink.” I didn’t quite mumble softly enough. “I’m sorry!” The poor kid’s having a very bad day. Oh, Go...goodness gracious me, I just remembered my promise to his holier than thou. I hide my frustration and hand my sister a tissue. “It’s all right, no harm done.” I move to her side.

About to reach out and give my sister a hug, anything to pacify her, I have this horrible thought and jerk back. Earlier, I prodded Steven in the

lounge yet that was different; I was none the wiser. Although the thought of bodily contact is scary shit, my curiosity is getting the better of me.

Standing over Ali, my hand cautiously reaches out. Expecting to pass straight through her, my vocal cords are ready to scream and there is that added option of fainting, so here goes. Thank you God! She feels solid.

“So how do I feel,” Ali asks, pulling another tissue from the box.

“You feel normal to me. Sorry, I don’t mean to prod you like dead meat, but this is all new to me and to be quite honest, I don’t know what to do.” No, I don’t feel the need to wash clammy, cold hands to rid myself of spook germs.

“Oh Sarah, what’s going to happen to us?” Ali’s breaking my heart, poor kid.

“I don’t know Ali. Like I said, maybe you’re just passing through; catch the early cloud to heaven tomorrow or something.”

“Or hell...” Ali’s droning voice is enough to strip you of compassion. “What if we end up down there?” She doesn’t give you time to answer. “Oh Sarah, would you say I’ve been a good person?” Her soggy eyes are pleading for a positive answer.

“I wouldn’t be too worried Ali, you’re a good person.” I’d rather lie than break her heart. “Not that I can say the same for Steven.” My added remark has my sister’s mouth gaping and mind ticking over.

“He once said he’d rather go to hell than be seen dead in church. Do you remember that woman he tried to chat up at the hotel, the one collecting money...”

“The Salvation Army chick.” The thought alone has me amused yet I attempt to keep a straight face. “He has a soft spot for women in uniform. It’s going to get him in trouble one of these days.” It suddenly dawned on me, what I had said. Yes, I do feel an idiot with my brother no longer having to worry about such issues. Ali has not picked up on this and responds ever so seriously.

“He’s been eyeing off this new security guard at work. They say she has a black belt in martial arts and wears a gun.” There’s a concerned look in her eyes for our brother.

“Wow!” Steven screeches with excitement, appearing on the stool beside Ali. “I just spoke with this old guy.” He has my full attention, yet I can’t say the same for my sister. “He’s a real pro when it comes to this death stuff. You were right Sis; we are limited to the boundaries of your soul.”

“What!” I hate it when he tries to be poetic.

“We are joined forever like the three musketeers, the three little pigs, the good, the bad and the ugly.”

“Do you mean to say someone else saw you?” I’m again gob smacked.

“Only if we want them to.”

“Who was it?” I’m worried.

“His name’s Murray, Murray Williamson.”

“Oh shit, there are more of them!” Obviously, I’ve heard this name before. “He’s been dead for yonks Steven! Well, so his wife told me.”

“I know that. Do you think I would lower myself to speak with one of the living? You’re privileged, only because you’re family.”

Steven continued, telling us about how pissed off Murray was due to his wife being with another man. Mr. Williamson blamed his wife for his death.

“What!” Ali finally expresses interest. “She murdered him?”

“No, nothing like that,” Steven replies. “The two of them were celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary.” He cringes with the thought. “Use your imagination, I’m not going into the gory bits. Anyway, he had a heart attack in bed, died with a smile on his face.”

“That’s not her fault,” Ali said and with her remark ignored, Steven continued.

My brother’s bedtime tale, according to the book of Murray, goes something like this. If one dies before his or her time is up, which apparently happens quite frequently, you remain in a ghostly form until your expiry date. As a spook, one’s limitations depend on the deceased’s last thoughts. How absurd, I conveyed. I’m told to think about it. How many times have we heard stories of resident ghosts haunting theatres, pubs and other places? I suppose it did make sense, I just never believed in such things and I’m not superstitious either, just thought I’d throw that one in. Anyhow, Steven continues, saying that apparently the last thing one is thinking of, in the moments before death, is where they end up. He gives a supposedly true ghostly example.

This elderly woman, a Mrs. Newstead was cursing a blocked toilet. Little did she know that her grandchild had stuffed a toy into the bowl having caught in the S bend. Her last thoughts were of where she was and how much she detested the job she was doing.

“Whammo, heart attack, dead!” Steven is into the dramatics. “And that’s where she stayed for three years, just gazing into a toilet bowl until the new owners of the house replaced the old system. Murray said she was happier at the tip where she has others to talk too.”

“What a load of crap!” I said this in all innocence, it wasn’t meant to be funny.

“Good one Sis, you still have a sense of humour. But seriously, it’s all true, I swear.” He eyes Ali, who gasps.

“We were thinking and talking about you!” Ali is obviously convinced, and Steven adds.

“Next thing, we’re roadkill. Murray said you start off a little dazed before remembering the whole event.” Steven starts nodding in agreement

with Ali.

“That’s why we couldn’t remember hitting the truck.”

“You mean, you hit the truck; there was no us driving, only you.” Steven will never let her forget this one.

“Oh shit...” I said. “What an awful thought. God knows who could be floating around out there.”

“Yeah...” Steven grins. “You better pray your ex-husband isn’t thinking of you when he croaks it.” He jerked his head back in laughter.

“Jesus Christ! Don’t wish that on me!” The concept sent chills through me.

“Well Sis, it’s late.” Steven stood. “You should go to bed and get some beauty sleep. Ali, we have experimenting to do.”

“I don’t want to do anything.” Ali the depressant is back.

“Yes you do. Now come on; Sarah’s tired and I think she’s had enough for one day.”

Oh how kind of him. Rid me of my love and send me to bed empty-handed whilst they go off to play. I have to admit, the emotional output is draining on the body. Maybe I’ll see more clearly in the morning.

“Okay you two, there are four bedrooms in this house, one belongs to me. No fighting over rooms and no popping into my room without invitation.”

“We’ll be right Sis,” Steven replied. “Oh, by the way, Michael’s apparently a good guy.”

“How do you know?” He again has my full attention.

“The gossip is shocking around here.” Steven raises a cocky brow.

I’m so curious to find out more about Michael, but my brother is a tight-lipped arse hole, who can blink out to really piss me off. I can’t see myself getting used to their disappearing act.

“Come on Steven, don’t leave me like this,” I’m yelling into the air. “This is cruel you vicious bastard! Get back here this minute and tell me or I’ll... I’ll... what in the fuck can you do to a ghost?” Okay I lost that round. I’m more intelligent than Steven; revenge will be sweet, believe me.

I lay in bed, tossing from side to side. How on earth can I sleep! My body is exhausted, yet my brain is still on a marathon. I find myself looking for logical explanations. Perhaps it’s a premonition of something to come. Na, I don’t believe in all that psychic crap; the power to see into the future. I must be merely hallucinating, brought on by loneliness, sexual frustration and something evil I’ve eaten in my attempts to be a country bumpkin. Mind you, I did like the bit where Michael showed up; I should have put more effort into the comforting session, played it for all it was worth.

I have one other theory, which I will now test. Yes, I am in pain and have most likely given myself a bruise. Don’t let anyone tell you to pinch yourself, it only reinforces what you already know and it bloody well hurts.

“Steven!” I call out.

“Go to sleep Sis; we’re busy!” Now I’m hearing them in stereo and yes, they’re still here. I just ruled out a bad dream.

My bedroom has two old fashion doors; one to the little hallway, the other to the dining room. An open fireplace backs onto another in the kitchen. A vent in the brickwork enables me to overhear any conversation going on in the kitchen and dining room. As I can’t hear anything, I can only assume that those two are using spook sign language or some other form of weird communication.

Stretching out my hand, I set the alarm on my digital clock. Reaching down, turn off the electric blanket. Straightening the top sheet, I make myself comfortable. With a yawn, I close my eyes and try to think of happy thoughts. Stay focused; think happy thoughts. For god sake, happy, happy, happy, bloody happy thoughts. One happy thought, two happy thoughts, three happy thoughts.... One hundred spookys hiding in the wall and if one pokes its head out, I’ll punch it in the balls, there’ll be ninety-nine spookys hiding in the wall. Ninety-nine spookys hiding in the wall....