

STICKING
with
PIGS

BY MARY-ANNE SCOTT



CHAPTER ONE

The muddy red-brown spots of blood on the kitchen floor threw Cindy into a tailspin. ‘There’s something dead in the bag.’ She jabbed her finger at the bundle in Uncle Jeremy’s arms and her voice went up a notch. ‘I can see fur.’

‘It’s not fur,’ Uncle Jeremy said. ‘It’s feathers.’

‘Come on, Cindy,’ Wolf said. ‘He’s a hunter. Of course there’ll be something dead.’

‘Mum,’ she screamed. ‘Something’s bleeding on the floor.’

Uncle Jeremy searched the bench top for a cloth and spoke to Wolf over his shoulder. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset your sister. I bagged a couple of ducks this afternoon and I haven’t had a chance to pluck them.’

‘Ducks!’ Cindy’s eyes widened with horror. ‘Oh my god, what if they were flying along and got shot and they fell out of the sky? Mum!’ she screamed again. ‘There’s dead ducks in our kitchen.’

Mum had been practising the cello in her bedroom but she must have dropped everything as she came running through the house, barefoot. ‘Hello, Jeremy,’ she called. ‘Welcome.’ She grabbed a pan to slide under the soggy, dripping newspaper and smiled apologetically. ‘Don’t mind Cindy. She’s at that age where ducks are for nursery rhymes and can’t understand you’ve brought us a gift.’ Mum said gift with some clout, obviously hoping Cindy might come to her senses.

‘I’m six,’ Cindy said. ‘I’m not a baby and dead animals aren’t presents.’

‘Wolf,’ Mum said, looking right at him in a way that was both imploring and desperate. ‘Please take Uncle Jeremy outside and help him pluck or deal – or whatever you do – with those ducks.’ She thrust the pan into Wolf’s hands and moved his elbow to make sure he kept it under the sodden parcel. ‘Oh and here’s some more newspaper and a bin liner

for the scraps and feathers.’ She peered into the sink then and prodded something in a plastic bag.

‘That’s a bit of meat; I shot a stag last weekend,’ Uncle Jeremy murmured with a nervous glance at Cindy.

‘Thank you,’ Mum said.

It wasn’t dark outside but it was heading that way. The kitchen window threw two squares of light onto the outdoor table so Wolf went over and spread the newspaper on its rough surface. Uncle Jeremy scrunched up the wet paper and swung the ducks by their necks onto the clean sheets. The table moved precariously. ‘It’s a cruddy old thing,’ Wolf said, giving the table a shove. ‘Nearly busted.’

Inside the sounds of Cindy’s protests were getting fainter. Mum must have taken her down the passageway. ‘Sorry about Cindy, she’s pathetic. She says she’s not going to eat meat when she’s older.’

‘Oh well, maybe she won’t,’ Uncle Jeremy said. His voice was quiet for such a big hunting man. ‘I think everyone should

eat what they feel like eating and even little ones know what that is.’

‘Yeah. Sure. So what do we do with these ducks?’ Wolf stared down at the two carcasses. He didn’t feel much like touching feathers and blood either.

‘We need to clean them up.’ Uncle Jeremy selected a duck, flipped it over and began tearing its feathers out. The noise was rasping, like sticking plasters being ripped off over and over. ‘First of all, we need to remove its feathers. Are you up to helping me? It’s ok if you – ’

‘No, I’m fine. Show me.’ The ripping noise made Wolf’s skin crawl and so did the sight of the bald prickly skin that was exposed once the feathers were torn out. He steeled himself against his queasy stomach, picked up the second duck and held it the way Uncle Jeremy held his. It felt floppy and not warm, but not cold either. An earthy, pungent smell came off it.

‘You want to start with the feathers at the base of the wing,’ Uncle Jeremy said as he leaned over and tugged at a couple of tufts. The bird’s head fell off Wolf’s arm and flopped and

banged on the tabletop. ‘These big feathers are called scapulars. Have a go.’

Wolf tugged and the feathers came out more easily than he’d expected.

‘Good. Lie the bird up your arm, like this.’ Uncle Jeremy picked up the dangling head for Wolf and laid it back on Wolf’s arm. Uncle Jeremy’s own duck was smaller and Wolf was annoyed that he was stuck with the bigger of the two. He didn’t want the duck lying on the sleeve of his sweater. ‘Now turn it over and pull at the feathers from this breast line down. You want to go in a downward direction so you don’t rip the skin.’

Wolf watched Uncle Jeremy’s gnarled hands curl and yank at the feathers. They were big workingman’s hands with hair on the back of his fingers and blood around his wide, short nails.

Duck feathers escaped the newspaper and floated free. Wolf noticed one caught in his uncle’s beard and there were several on Wolf’s clothes and on the ground. It was ok being

out in the dusk with Uncle Jeremy; the rattle of dishes, the thud of footsteps inside and the rise and fall of his family's voices seemed far away.

'That's very good. You're a natural the way you're running your thumb down the bird, dragging the feathers. You don't get holes in the skin that way.'

Wolf felt a warm glow. A natural, huh? Davey would laugh at that.

'Why don't you tell me about Davey?' Uncle Jeremy said, startling Wolf.

'Davey's out of hospital. He's been home two nights and he's a bit better – not much though. You'll see him at dinner time 'cause he gets lonely lying in bed all the time.'

'You would, wouldn't you?'

'We know he's got Addison's and that it's treatable but not curable.'

'Well, that's got to be a good thing.'

'Sort of. Not really. He won't get better.' Wolf shut up then. He didn't trust himself to go on and his voice had started to get a choked up sound to it.

‘There’s a difference between getting better and being really sick. Don’t focus on the curability stuff.’ They worked in silence for a while before Uncle Jeremy said, ‘It must seem as if the rabid dog that’s been terrifying your family has come to live as the family pet, huh?’

Wolf stared at his Uncle in surprise. ‘Ah, yeah. Yeah, it does. And the dog has sunk its teeth into Davey.’

‘This may also sound like empty words, but your brother will get his strength and his life back. It’s tough for you to see your mate so unwell, it cuts you up.’

Wolf nodded in the darkness.

‘Plenty of people live with chronic illnesses you know. It’s raw and scary but believe it or not, you’ll learn how to keep that dog in its cage after a while.’ Uncle Jeremy held the duck up between them. ‘Don’t worry about the wings,’ he said as if Wolf had been asking him. ‘We’re going to cut them off, same as the neck, I’ve gone high enough.’ He flipped the bird up the other way and the neck swung like a rope swing. ‘Now the legs and arse; we’re going to get these feathers down to about here and then chop.’

Wolf filed the arse reference away for Davey.

‘This is when it gets messy. I need a bucket of water and maybe some more newspaper; I don’t want to upset your mother.’

Wolf went into the laundry and got the water. He didn’t know why Uncle Jeremy couldn’t cut the bits off now and bring the birds inside.

‘Thanks, Wolf,’ he said when the bucket of water was on the table between them. ‘I’ll cut this bird and then you cut the other one.’

It was harder than it looked, especially the neck bone, which needed twisting. When it finally came away, it splattered blood. Wolf tried not to glance at his clothes but he could feel the specks as if they were on his skin.

‘Let’s remove the entrails,’ Uncle Jeremy said as if he’d thought up a new game and Wolf watched as Uncle Jeremy tugged and pulled at nearly everything inside the duck cavity. ‘I’ll do both the birds so you don’t get more blood on your sweater, but the secret is, you want to remove the lot: the heart, the liver, although some people eat the liver and even the lungs.’

There was a smell of guts, blood and something raw and primitive. ‘Now we use the water to wash the birds out,’ and Uncle Jeremy went on to dunk and clean out the carcasses. ‘You ok?’

‘Yeah, yeah, of course.’ Wolf was relieved to find that he was ok. ‘The smell’s a bit gross.’

‘That’s the smell of nature. You get used to it.’ He laid the birds on the concrete behind him. ‘I’ll let them dry there while we clean up this mess.’ Uncle Jeremy chucked the feathers and guts onto the newspaper and rolled it into a bundle. Then, he picked up the bucket of water that had bits floating in it and said, ‘It must be stressful for you all at the moment?’

‘Mum’s got concerts and stuff, Dad’s knee is bad and he’s had lots of time off teaching. It was already kind of dumb but now it’s way worse ’cause of Davey. Not that Davey can help it,’ Wolf added quickly.

‘What about you?’ Uncle Jeremy asked.

‘What about me? I don’t do anything,’ Wolf picked feathers off the table and rolled them into a tight ball. ‘I don’t care anymore; I can’t concentrate at school.’ Wolf threw the ball of feathers into the dark. ‘I’m always here.’

‘Something bad happened to me once – well I did something crazy – and so I pulled out of my studies. It was stupid.’ Uncle Jeremy shook his head in the growing dark. ‘Be a shame if you chucked in your chances like I did.’ He picked up the bucket and made his way to the back of the garden. ‘I’ll tip this lot down by the fence and, hopefully, it’ll all disappear into the earth before anyone heads down this way.’

Wolf watched his tall figure slope away to empty the bucket and thought Uncle Jem was somewhat of a mystery. He was a stepbrother to Wolf’s dad and he’d been a virtual stranger to their family, until recently. Mum hadn’t been mad keen on Uncle Jeremy until he’d started supplying venison and pork for the family. She said it was tough feeding three kids on one income and she’d be happy to let bygones be bygones if he kept delivering. She wouldn’t say what the bygones were.

‘How old’s Davey now?’ Uncle Jeremy asked when he came back with the bucket.

‘Twelve.’

‘A bit younger than my step-daughter, Trina.’ Uncle Jeremy pulled a gadget out of his pocket. ‘This is a blow torch,’ Uncle

Jeremy said as he set it on the table. 'It runs on Butane and I'll use it to singe the last of the feathers off. I want to make the birds as clean as possible for your little sister and your Mum. Some people don't like nature staring them in the face.'

Wolf wanted to ask about Trina but it felt as if he'd missed his chance. Instead, he said, 'Cindy's a baby,' in a sulky way.

'People of all ages prefer their poultry in a plastic bag with cooking instructions and the weight on the outside.' He laid the two birds on the clean table and turned the torch on. It was noisy for a little gadget. 'If Cindy's left alone, she'll come to understand the connection of the world around us and the food we eat.'

'It's gunna be different now, when I eat the ducks.'

'It will. Once you've been involved in the food prep like this, you never take your tucker for granted again.' He handed Wolf the finished birds. 'Why don't you take them inside?'

'Thanks, Uncle Jeremy.'

'You're welcome. And you can drop the Uncle bit too. Call me Jem.'