



A novel about
marriage, fraud and
goat's cheese

The **Good
Woman's**
GUIDE TO MAKING
Better
Choices

'CLEVER AND QUIRKY.
A WONDERFUL READ.'
JOANNA NELL



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Prologue

If Libby had known this would be the most traumatic day of her life, she would have dressed better. And eaten better too. Sort of like The Last Supper, but in reverse: all the enjoyment of the meal without the foreboding.

Because that's how trauma sometimes rolled. Out of a clear blue sky, without warning.

Well, there was an actual heavy thunderstorm that day, but still.

After it rolled in, every minuscule detail remained in her head, as though branded by a red-hot cattle iron. The smear of spilled milk on the stone kitchen bench. Ludo's jacket flung across the couch. Black clouds crowding the horizon, gathering pace and darkening as they careened in from the ocean. An open newspaper, its pages fluttering on the rooftop terrace before a powerful gust snatched and hoisted it over Bondi Beach towards the heads. A single blue feather, elegant and long, discarded from Miss Marple's tail. Ana's dirty kneepads dumped on the floor near the

penthouse lift, right where you stepped when you got out. The clash of Ludo's Bruno Mars phone ringtone with the violin sonata coming from Harrison's room. A single jar of Beechworth Goat's Cheese scraped clean and propped near the sink, ready for washing.

It was a bugger, because she'd always loved Bruno Mars, and now she couldn't listen to him at all.

At least she could change the cheese label to avoid nasty connotations. One perk of being the graphic designer. Dido might have something to say about unilateral revisions to the business branding, but it couldn't be helped.

The perfect synchronicity of her family's life all unstuck with one press on the intercom.

Hindsight, that useless, conniving second cousin of Trauma, gleefully told her afterwards that things had been far from perfect. Miniature warning signs flickering like pinpricks of light in a moonless night sky. Ludo's discarded jacket, for one thing. He was always so fastidious. And Ana was usually tidier, too. It was like she'd already sensed she could get away with more.

Plus, a new tension had sprung up around money. Nothing major, but Ludo had asked her about a few recent purchases. Libby didn't want for much – the penthouse was a world away from growing up on a goat farm – but it wasn't like him to check up on her.

'We've done well: all our hard work's paying off and now we're set for life, you, me and the kids. Take it easy, Libs! This is our time. We live on the most famous beach in the world. What more could anyone want?' he used to say.

She was hardly a Real Housewife of Beverly Hills. About her biggest indulgence was the occasional pedicure, and only then because her gross horny nails needed industrial-strength cutters to trim them. So when Ludo started questioning her spending habits, it struck her as odd.

‘Takeaway again? Don’t you think it’s time you learned to cook?’ His remark the night before had stung, especially as it was calamari and chips – his favourite and something she’d bought specially to lift him out of his slump.

That was another thing – his slump. She had noticed something was up without really knowing or questioning what. He’d never seemed nervous or anxious before – not when the kids were little or she was pregnant or the business was just starting – but now he was both.

And there was the strange new friction between Harrison and Ludo. At first, Libby hadn’t noticed it. It was hard enough to get them in the same room at the best of times. Ludo was flat out with running Malu, his investment business, and Harrison was hardly ever around, what with coming up to the last year of school and rehearsals. But then one time Ludo made a harmless remark and Harrison shot him a look of pure malevolence. Another morning, when Ludo asked her to make him a cup of tea, Harrison had retorted, ‘Make it yourself!’ before storming out of the apartment.

Other details from the harrowing day remained seared on her memory: a mountainous crack of thunder ripping the air and a streak of bright light connecting the sky to Bondi Bay. Libby had rushed out to grab what was left of the newspaper and scatter cushions. She made it back inside just as the second thunderbolt boomed, almost shaking the building. A thick grey blanket was squeezing every trace of light from the late afternoon sky.

So when the buzzer sounded, she’d only just heard it. Who would call in this weather? She padded across the room, rubbing her wet hair with a tea-towel, and pressed the intercom video link. An unfamiliar man with a heavy brow and a shorter woman with a platinum blond bob were staring at the camera. They both wore suit jackets and grave expressions. There was some other movement at the edges of the camera.

‘Yes? Can I help you?’ Libby said.

Lightning flared again, followed by a further mighty thunder crack. The woman was speaking and holding something up to the camera.

‘Sorry, what was that? Who’s calling?’ Libby said.

Light caught the object in the woman’s hand and revealed it to be a silver police badge. ‘Detective Senior Constable O’Reilly and Detective Sergeant Swift. Is Ludo Popovic home?’

Libby’s heart gave a painful thump. Her thoughts flew to her family. Had the kids been in an accident? No, the police officer had only asked for Ludo. So it must be his family. One of his parents? Or a brother? Both of them were plumbers. Was one of them trapped under a bathtub? Oh God, was it about when Ludo had pulled out of the underground garage before putting his seatbelt on? Wait, she hadn’t lodged her business activity statement, and it was past due. No, that couldn’t be it. Why would they ask for Ludo?

Such were the meaningless thoughts that ricocheted around her brain like bouncing lotto balls.

The intercom blared again, intrusive and unwelcome between thunderclaps. The police officer’s face reappeared on the monitor.

‘Ma’am. Can we come in, please?’ she said.

‘Yes – yes – of course,’ Libby spluttered, buzzing them into the lift downstairs. A wave of nausea swept over her.

She found Ludo in his study, stabbing at his keyboard. ‘It’s the police. For you. I – I hope your family’s okay.’

‘The – police? Here? Don’t let them in,’ he said, jumping to his feet, eyes bulging.

‘What do you mean? I can’t just leave them downstairs. It’s the police!’

But Ludo had turned ashen. His eyes rolled back and forth, and his breathing was ragged.

She took his hand and led him into the living room to wait for the lift.

‘They’re coming up now. Ludo, whatever it is, I’m here for you.’

He looked completely wild as he dropped her hand and fell to the floor in a crouch, head in his hands. Libby put her hand on his shoulder, and he gripped her fingers, squeezing so tightly her knuckles cracked.

The lift doors pinged open and the two police officers surged out, followed by two more in polo shirts, who were snapping blue surgical gloves on.

‘Ludo Popovic?’ said the woman.

Ludo stood up slowly. His jaw was slack. He was staring at the uninvited guests but didn’t seem to see them. Beads of moisture ringed his hairline. He opened his mouth, and all that came out was a dry croak.

‘You’re under arrest for financial fraud, under the *New South Wales Crimes Act, section 192E*. You do not have to say or do anything, but if you do, it may be used as evidence against you. We are also authorised to conduct a search of these premises by the *Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002*.’ The police officer held up an official-looking piece of paper. A lightning flash illuminated her face, followed by more thunder roiling into the distance. Libby stared as the other detective and the polo-shirted officers fanned out through the apartment. Someone called out ‘In here!’ from the direction of Ludo’s study. Everything felt suspended, frozen in time, like a paused horror movie as the dagger rises.

Arrested? What?

Don’t be ridiculous.

They must have the wrong guy!

But any microscopic relief at the obvious mix up vanished. Her husband turned towards her and she froze. His pupils were tiny pinpricks and his jaw sagged. A low, gurgling moan emanated from his throat.

‘Ludo. What is it? It’s OK, we’ll sort it out. Ludo!’

But he was shaking his head slowly, heavily. Before Libby could say another word, he croaked, ‘I’m sorry.’

Chapter 1

Before

It was a beautiful early spring September day in rural Victoria and the air smelled musty, fresh and sweet in equal parts. Libby inhaled deeply through her open window and edged the car past the old five-bar gate. She felt her whole body lift and lighten, like she'd been stuck indoors in the rain for days and this was her first time allowed out to play between showers.

She nudged the Audi into the far corner of the yard and jumped out, her boots scrunching on the gravel. An incredible racket was happening near the milking sheds – yelling blended with bleating and plenty of blue language.

‘Kim! Kim Kardashian! Come on, you old princess, move your feet! For Pete’s sake, it’s only a bit of water.’ Libby’s mother, Maggie Carter, was wrestling with a large goat who wouldn’t budge from the spot. She saw Libby and Ana and her eyes lit up. ‘You’re here! Come and give me a hand with this recalcitrant creature, will you?’

Ana dashed across the yard to open the side gate. Libby joined her

mum, shoulder to rump. Several sweaty minutes of puffing and heaving later, they finally pushed the goat through to the next field. Ana quickly bolted the gate shut.

‘Seriously, Mum, there must be an easier way,’ Libby said, wiping her brow.

‘I just need to clear those rocks. Water keeps pooling in between and you know she doesn’t like to get her feet wet. Now, how’s my favourite granddaughter?’

Ana submitted to a smothering hug. ‘Grandma, I’m your only granddaughter,’ came a muffled squeak from the depths of blue overalls and a back-to-front apron with *I ♥ Goats* on the front.

‘You’d still be my favourite, even if I had a hundred,’ Maggie said. She turned on her heel, marching at her usual warp speed back across the yard, even in giant rubber boots. Libby and her brother Evan had spent years trotting alongside their mother. She didn’t realise it wasn’t normal walking speed until well into her teens.

‘How was the drive?’ said Maggie.

‘Fine. We stopped in Jugiong for lunch. There was a family of possums nesting in the tree. Where’s Dido?’

‘In the milking shed, setting up some sort of goat scratcher thing she got off eBay. God knows how it’ll work, but you know your aunt,’ Maggie said. She cocked her head. ‘Can you hear something?’

Libby opened her mouth, but an almighty screech drowned any response out.

‘I neeeeed your love!’ shrieked the voice.

Maggie stared as Ana produced Miss Marple’s cage from the car. The parrot was extremely hyper after the long trip, and the sights and smells of the farm were adding to her agitation.

‘Well now! Who is this?’ Maggie said.

‘This is Miss Marple,’ Libby said. ‘We’re minding her for my friend

Hazel, who's in hospital at the moment.'

The parrot's life span would have been significantly shorter if she'd left her at home with Ludo. The two of them exercised a lively hate-hate relationship, though Libby secretly suspected the bird thrived on the conflict. The six-hour drive to the farm had been trying, even she had to admit. Ana spent most of the time with her headphones on so Libby had to endure the bird's nervous scratching, not to mention rainforest renditions of the soundtrack from *Back to the Future*.

Hazel was recovering from a broken hip, gifted to her after falling off her stepladder while changing a light bulb. She insisted she didn't 'have a fall', she just 'slipped and fell', because only old dodderly people 'had' falls, whereas accidents still happened to the fit and youthful. Libby's elderly friend would be in hospital for at least two more weeks. In the meantime, she had been keeping an eye on Hazel's place, cleaning out the pizza delivery flyers and shooing cockatoos away from the squat giant palm tree that filled the tiny front yard. Fiercely independent, Hazel still lived by herself in her original red-brick house in Bondi; it was one of the last post-war houses in the suburb that hadn't been renovated or bulldozed. At least it was a single storey, so no awkward stairs, but it was still much bigger than it seemed from the front, and perhaps too big for Hazel to manage now.

'Will she be OK here?' Maggie said now, peering closely through the bars of Miss Marple's cage. 'It's much colder in Beechworth than in the jungles of Africa.'

'Don't be daft, Mum, she was born and raised in downtown Bondi,' Libby said.

'Well, let's get her indoors before she upsets the girls,' Maggie said, using the collective she always did when referring to the goats. She grasped the cage and lofted it towards the door and away from the delicate ears of her charges.

In the kitchen, Libby opened the Esky she'd brought and unpacked the cheese samples from Bondi markets. The room was just the same as ever. Libby and her twin brother Evan grew up playing on the flagstones round the ancient pot-belly stove. Maggie still used the same old wicker basket for the wood. Libby and Evan would sit opposite each other, puzzling over their homework books, copying each other when one was stuck, while Maggie or Dido served up hot buttered crumpets and tea. These days Evan ran the local pub with his wife Suze, but he insisted on keeping tea and crumpets on the menu, just because they made him feel good. Libby never felt she'd missed out on having a father around. The farm was such a magical place to grow up. All her childhood memories felt like a series of chocolate-box images.

The old Welsh dresser was groaning beneath towers of teetering cardboard boxes overflowing onto the floor and every nearby surface. Behind the box stack, tacked roughly to the wall in cheap frames, was the picture gallery, a long-running family joke. Every Christmas, Maggie and Dido gathered the goats and put bows on them for their annual picture. There must have been over thirty and counting, though they'd dropped off in recent years.

'Mum, what's all this?' Libby said, gesturing at the cardboard stack.

'Extra packaging for the Open Day. We've been working overtime making extra cheese – it's all stored already, in that fridge box out in the yard. Did you see it when you came in? Evan picked it up from a customer for a song.'

Kim Kardashian and Miss Marple had taken Libby's attention when they arrived but now she remembered seeing a trailer wedged in the corner against the Murraya hedge. It was hooked up to the ancient farm generator, which was a mixed blessing – at best, it spewed oil and diesel fumes. At worst, it caused the entire property to fuse.

'It works a treat,' Maggie went on. 'We're hoping for big things this

year. The usual market people are setting up stalls out the front, and the artistic people will all be in Jake's fields. The only way they can get there is through our yard, so we can bombard them with your smashing flyers – Evan got them printed up.' Maggie waved at a stack of glossy flyers bound by a rubber band.

There was a rap at the back door before it swung open.

'Jake! Talk of the devil!' Libby jumped up and gave her old friend a hug. The advancing years had seen his head hair march backwards while his chin hair continued expanding in a huge, frizzy explosion. These days it had become a thing akin to the beard of local bushranger Ned Kelly. He'd had a bit of red in his too.

The Carters had lived next door to Jake Abercrombie and his family their whole lives. He, Libby and Evan spent so much time together growing up they considered Jake their third twin. The beard had appeared after his life took a sharp detour and he seemed in no hurry to lose it. Libby couldn't stand beards, but she loved him just the same.

'My ears were burning. Afternoon, all. Thought I heard the car. How are ya, Libs?'

'Cup of tea?' said Maggie.

'Sure.' He sat at the table and spotted Ana. 'Hey, squirt! What gives? If you're planning on any skating action, I covered our front yard in fresh flat concrete. And Daisy and Briony are up at the house.'

'Can I go?' Ana said to Libby.

She nodded and her daughter shot out, grabbing her skateboard from the car. One of the best things about coming back to the farm was how much Ana and Harrison loved it too. It was a shame he couldn't make it this weekend, but for some reason they made the kids start their year twelve school year in term four of year eleven. And the pressure from the music academy was intense. Libby was still surprised at his insistence on staying behind to study for his end-of-year-eleven assessments – the

academic side of things wasn't his forte – but she wasn't going to argue. Maggie was philosophical about it, saying that genius had to be nurtured. If it meant not seeing him for the odd weekend, that was the price you had to pay if you wanted a classical musician for a grandson.

Jake laughed as they watched Ana disappear up his driveway. 'That'll be the last you see of her this weekend. So, Maggie. I've put a chain on the gate to keep it open. All car parking in the left-hand paddock.'

Maggie clapped her hands. 'It's going to be terrific!'

Jake nodded. 'The grass is looking good, overflow space for picnics as well. I reckon keeping the food and drink stalls in the yard here will work a treat.' His freckled face was animated and worry-free compared with two years ago.

'How are your girls?' Libby said.

Jake's face shimmered like it was back-lit. 'They're tops. Looking after their old dad, as usual. Daisy's already in grade four. Can you believe it? She's mad about horses, which is great. I picked up a pony from a farmer in the next valley and she hasn't looked back. Mind you, she's growing like a weed. Won't be long before I have to upgrade her. And Briony's loving her first year at good old Beechworth High, when she's not clucking over me.'

'I forgot she started high school this year! Is it the same as in our day?' Libby said.

He grinned. 'It's beyond strange going back there as a parent. Do you remember Mrs Brady?'

'Don't tell me she's still there!' Libby said.

'Yes! She still has hair down to her waist, I don't reckon she's ever cut it, and if anything her glasses are even bigger. Which is weird as things usually get smaller when you grow up, don't they?'

'Can't believe she's lasted this long. Though geography never was my strong point,' Libby said.

‘Me neither. I was just desperate to get through school and out the other end.’

Briony carried a certain kudos with Ana just by being a year ahead of her. She was more studious and straight, while Ana was the wild, untamed one. Funny, given which one lived in the country and which in the city. Ana’s tomboy ways helped lighten up Briony, while Briony was a good steadying influence on her friend.

Maggie had disappeared through the back door and there was still no tea in sight. Libby put the kettle on and smiled to herself. She felt so happy to be at home; she was acutely aware of how fortunate she was in her happy family unit. She glanced sideways at Jake, feeling her heart melt into a puddle like it always did when she saw him. Bondi was too far to duck back very often, and she worried about him like a mother hen. Abercrombie Farm had always survived on a shoestring income and Jake struggled for years to make ends meet.

At least, he used to struggle, until his financial strains had all ended two years back. The massive irony being that he would far rather still be struggling with money than receive a payout for what he’d gone through.