

Chapter 1

I held my green eye pencil steady as I lined my eyelids. I used my baby finger to smudge the lines in just the right places. Peering closer into the mirror, I noticed some new wrinkles. I pulled the skin back to smooth out the creases, then let go.

My attention shifted to my hair. I reached up and wrapped an unruly lock around my finger to make it curl in the direction I wanted. My hair rarely did what I wanted it to do, and if it did, it didn't last for long.

I released the curl from my finger, and ran my hands down the front of my favourite purple gypsy dress, stopping at the small roll of my protruding tummy. I sighed and prodded it. There was nothing to be done about it, at least not in the next ten minutes.

Closing my eyes I placed both my hands over my belly and breathed in deeply to calm my nerves and relax the anxious cramping that often appeared before social gatherings. The discomfort usually disappeared once I started talking with people.

After a few breaths, I opened my eyes and stepped back. I looked good. And when I looked good, I felt good. Confident. In control. I glanced down at my bare feet and the thin, silver ankle bracelet on my left foot. *Nice touch.*

I looked up again, and my eyes met my eyes. I paused

to look a bit deeper. Beyond the makeup, beyond the smile—a glimmer of angst.

I looked away and headed outside.

Stepping onto the deck, I took in a deep breath. *I'm celebrating today.*

It was my big day. My fiftieth birthday. Well, it wasn't really the actual day. My real birthday was six months earlier. I was born under the hot summer sun in Canada, and there was no way I was going to celebrate my fiftieth birthday in the cold New Zealand winter, so I'd decided to wait and have my birthday party in February.

Even though I'd had a few extra months to get used to the idea of this milestone birthday, I was still having a hard time believing it. *How can I be fifty?* In my mind my Mom was fifty and I was still thirty-six. I knew the maths didn't add up but then a lot of things didn't add up in our minds.

I contemplated the female archetypes: the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. I was no longer the Maiden and I had skipped being the Mother, having had no children of my own. *Am I a Crone?* I grimaced. Just saying the word conjured up images of an ugly, old woman with a huge crooked nose and warts all over her face.

"Hey birthday girl! Are you coming?" Emily shouted. I smiled. Just the sound of her voice warmed my heart. We'd met thirteen years earlier on a cooking course, and had become dear friends ever since.

Some people had already arrived, and Emily was happily organising them to play relay games on the grass. She was always so good at gathering people

together and getting them involved. *Much better than me.*

I watched as she jumped up and down laughing while giving instructions for the next game. *I love how people just love to have fun. It doesn't matter how old we are.*

I laughed and waved. "Be right there!"

My eyes took in the expansive lawn and, beyond it, the almond trees and the stream running through our farm. The day was perfect. The late afternoon sun was still high, and the sky was the brightest blue. Everything was lush and full of life.

After eighteen months living on the almond farm, I was finally starting to like it. If I told anyone else how long it had taken me to enjoy being there, they would have been puzzled. How could anyone not like it? The trees, the flowers, the land. Some would say it was paradise.

When Martin and I sold our house in the city and bought the country property looking for a more "back to the earth" lifestyle, we knew it was going to be hard work, but we were so excited.

When we first moved in, a particular bird call caught my attention. It sounded like the bird was saying, "Very good! Very good! Very good!" I had lived in New Zealand for nearly twenty-two years, and I had heard this bird before, but I hadn't heard it sing those words.

I nicknamed it the Very Good bird.

Maybe I heard that bird singing "Very good" because it was the message I needed to hear over and over again. There were a lot of things at the time that did not feel

Very Good.

My initial excitement about our move was quickly extinguished, and about a month into our new lifestyle, I was shattered. The farm work was so demanding that we needed help every day, which meant a constant flow of WWOOFers¹, three to eight of them at a time, living in and around my house.

As much as I loved meeting new people, hearing about their adventures and sharing stories, at heart, I was an introvert, and I preferred social time in small doses.

The lack of privacy and the added weight of attending to others' emotional and living needs was gruelling. On top of that, I had my career as a life coach and workshop facilitator—which was also about paying attention to what others needed. I desperately needed some 'me' time.

One winter morning when Martin was going to be out, I planned to curl up by the fire with a hot cup of tea and quietly meditate, with no one needing anything from me for a whole two hours. Bliss.

That morning was frosty. I could see my breath as I wandered downstairs to snuggle in by the fire, but the downstairs was just as cold as the upstairs—the fire wasn't lit. My smile disappeared. Martin always lit the fire in the mornings. *Why didn't he light it this morning?*

Unlike in our city house, where you pressed a button and, like magic, the gas heater came on, in the country a wood burner was our only source of heat. I

¹ WWOOFers are Willing Workers On Organic Farms, although it didn't matter that our farm was not certified organic. They are usually travellers from overseas, who work in exchange for food and accommodation.

rubbed my hands together, attempting to warm myself. My fingers were so cold I could hardly feel them.

I looked in the wood box. Empty. *Maybe that's why he didn't light it. There's no wood inside.* My gaze moved up and out of the window, through the icy rain, into the next paddock, and finally located the woodshed. We had been so busy settling in, that stacking wood by the house hadn't made the to-do list.

I took in a deep breath. *Okay, my day is not going to start like I planned.* Regardless of how I felt about it, there was only one thing to do.

I grabbed my raincoat, pulled on my gumboots and trudged through the rain to the woodshed, towing the little wood wagon behind me. The wind was bitterly cold, and I clutched at the neck of my raincoat, trying to seal the gaps. The woodshed was almost as big as a barn, and there were stacks of wood everywhere. I wondered why there were different stacks. I picked one pile and put as much wood as could fit onto the wagon.

Back at the house, I shook off my wet weather gear and filled up the wood box. Standing there dusting off the last of the dirt from my hands I thought with some satisfaction, *Step One accomplished.* Step Two was another matter.

I hadn't made a fire before. I'd never had to.

How hard can it be?

I crunched up some newspaper and stuffed it into the wood burner along with some small pieces of wood, like I'd seen Martin do. I lit the paper and watched eagerly while it burned, but the wood didn't catch.

No fire.

I stuffed more paper under the pieces of wood and lit it again. All the paper burned.

No fire.

Feeling frustrated but determined to try one more time, I crinkled more paper and added more kindling on top of it.

No fire and lots of smoke.

I opened the windows and looked at the clock. Somehow two hours had passed. The WWOOFers would be coming in for breakfast any minute. Feeling defeated, I hung my head and clung on to my cold mug of tea with my mittened hands. I was too tired to cry.



I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned. It was Emily. “Everything is ready, Leanne. We should probably eat soon.” I smiled and reached up to grab her hand, grateful for her support. She had taken care of all the important details, such as making sure there was enough cutlery, plates and cups for everyone—the kind of thing I would have thought about at the last minute.

I’d never had such a big bash before, and everything seemed to be going so smoothly. The bonfire was lit, and people had gathered around it. The trestle tables made from recycled doors had been filled with homemade food from all of the guests. Self-appointed chefs had been busy cooking on barbecues borrowed from neighbours. Everyone had pitched in.

“Wonderful!” I squealed, squeezing Emily’s hand. “Let’s have a blessing circle!” I said spontaneously, without

considering whether that would work with so many people from such different areas of my life. It was too late to change my mind, though. The circle was already taking shape. I imagined some of my neighbours standing with their arms staunchly folded hiding their hands under their armpits, but they didn't. I watched as they awkwardly reached out to hold the hands of the people beside them, and my heart filled with love and compassion.

As the circle formed, everyone fell silent, even the children. Their faces turned to me. For a split second I wondered if my hair looked alright, and my hands reached to fluff it up. Then I forgot about my hair as I took a moment to look into people's eyes around the circle. All I could feel was love.

One person was missing though—Miriam. We had met sixteen years ago at a women's business networking event, and became great friends since then. Over the last few years she spent more and more time travelling around the world with her consulting business. She said she was a 'global citizen,' and each year she returned to New Zealand for Christmas and New Year. She had already left. I was sad she couldn't be there.

Bringing my attention back to the circle, I was still uncertain if I would be heard at the outer reaches, so I spoke as loud and strong as I could. "I am so happy to be here with you all," I said. Finally I could say that and really feel it.

"Thank you to everyone who helped make this day happen. Thanks to our marvellous WWOOFers, who prepared this space for the festivities." It felt wonderful to be singing the WWOOFers' praises and truly meaning

it. “And a big thank you to my husband, Martin.” My eyes searched the circle for him but I couldn’t see him. “And to all of you for being here, for sharing your food, your hearts, your music and your glorious selves. We are truly blessed. Let’s eat!”

It all seemed Very Good.