

Chapter 1

The sun was a foot above the horizon and there wasn't a cloud in the pale-blue sky. Another clear summer morning, thought CJ as she shut the door of her ute and walked towards the shearing shed. Normally it was calm at this time, just the pink and grey cockies screeching in the gum trees and the freshness of the cool morning air. But today a dog was barking nearby and she could hear sheep moving through the dry dirt, bleating out protests. The flies had already started to buzz and the air was warming up fast.

Nearly every farm had a shed like this one – rectangular in shape and covered in silver corrugated tin. Like a big, shiny spaceship on stilts. It had sheep yards off to one side and a portaloo parked next to a gum tree fifty metres away. CJ veered towards the sheep pens and ran her hand over the top rail as she walked. The metal yards were still cool under her fingers.

Catherine Jean Wishart looked every inch a vibrant 26-year-old but inside, her mind felt tired and battered. Instinctively she raised a hand to her face and felt the tenderness from the bruise that still throbbed slightly from last night's swelling. She couldn't bring herself to look in the mirror this morning. But not seeing it wasn't going to change the fact that it was there. It wasn't the kind of thing you could explain by saying you'd tripped and fell, although she'd used that excuse a dozen times already. You name it – ran into a door, knocked over by a sheep, elbowed by a shearer. It had almost been a pastime, thinking up different reasons, but now she didn't bother. She was way past caring what people thought.

CJ waved to Jim, the owner of Clearview Farm, who was penning up the last of his sheep from the mob he'd just brought in.

‘Morning, Jim,’ she called on her way past. Her jeans clung to her long legs, fitted to perfection, and her arms were lean, strong and tanned.

‘How you going, C...J?’ Jim stumbled over her name as he spotted the big, round bruise. It looked like someone had thrown a slice of beetroot at her. He shook his head. ‘It’s gonna be another hot one today,’ he went on, lifting his worn-out John Deere hat and scratching his bare hairline.

‘You bet,’ said CJ, and left Jim to his sheep. She’d seen the concern in his wise, aged face and was glad he was nice enough not to mention it.

Another four strides and she was in the shed. Inside, the dark coolness wrapped around her, along with the smell of wool and oil from the machines. To the left of her, a raised floor ran along the end of the shed. It was a blessing for rousies, who didn’t have to bend down to pick up a fleece. Up on the raised floor were six shearing stands, with pens laid out behind them. This was a flasher shed than most, as a lot of the smaller sheds could only handle four stands.

Sheep panted and shuffled in their small, tightly packed pens, ready for the shearers. In front of CJ stood the skirting table, and further to the right were the segregation bins and wool press. Yesterday’s bales were piled up towards the back of the shed, where a large door opened so the farmer could load them onto his truck.

CJ stripped off the chequered shirt she wore over her singlet, flung it over the skirting table and headed to the triple A stack of fleeces, tying up her brown, wavy hair into a ponytail as she walked. She scooped up an armful of fleeces and carried them to the wool press. The scent of the wool was pungent with lanolin and a hint of machine oil, but she embraced it. She loved wool. It was so soft, especially underneath where it was snow white and pure and the little crinkles reminded her of crimping her sister Emily’s hair for a blue light disco when they were kids.

Pressing bales wasn't her job but the presser was sick. CJ didn't mind – she loved working in the shed while it was so tranquil. She was the team classer. It was her job to grade the quality of each fleece, segregate it for baling and also to mark the bales with the farm name including her classers' number. So if they opened up a bale and found the wool graded incorrectly or containing contaminants, it was her arse on the line. But she'd never let that happen.

The morning light was glittering as it filtered through the nail holes in the tin walls and the sound of the press compacting the wool echoed around the shed. It wasn't everyone's dream job, working in a shearing shed. Some days the heat was so bad you ached for an ice-cold beer by midmorning, and the work was brutal on your bones, joints and muscles. It had started out as just a way to earn a living, but now CJ didn't think she belonged anywhere else. These sheds were familiar, her escape, her safe haven.

She managed to get one bale pressed and marked before the white minibus pulled up outside. The rest of the team poured out of the side door, like fish from a broken water tank. Half of the crew were Kiwis. More and more were coming to Australia to work. It seemed that the call of the high-paid jobs at the mines had the Aussies moving – Doug, her boss, was losing shearers to the mining boom all the time. He couldn't compete with those wages.

CJ nodded as they walked past her in the shed, their towels hung over their shoulders and water bottles in hand. She grabbed a bale hook and buried it deep into a finished bale. Muscles rippled along her arms as they strained with the weight of it.

'I'm glad I'm not that bale.'

She turned to see Marty on the end of her bale, pushing with some effort. He flashed a smile, causing her insides to churn – and not in a good way. Marty's insides

were as rotten as the arse-end of a maggoty sheep. He was as tall as her six-foot frame, with eyes almost as black as his hair. But he was as sleazy as they came and there was something menacing in his dark, almost sinister eyes, as if he would turn on you in a second.

CJ instantly remembered the time she got Sam, her beautiful dog. Sam's dad had suffered years of abuse, and had finally turned on his owner after being kicked. The owner had then threatened to shoot the dog, but Sam's dad was his top breeding border collie, so he stopped short. CJ, having turned up to buy a puppy, had seen the whole incident. She'd been tempted to tie the owner up to a dog chain and leave him there to rot, but instead bought the last three pups to save them from any more abuse. She'd sold two and kept Sam for herself. Her beautiful black and white collie.

This made her wonder whether Marty might've had a bad upbringing. She'd heard the rumours that his old man had been in and out of prison for God knows what. One minute he'd killed a man, the next he was a thief, or drug runner. Who really knew what went down, or if any of it was true? That was about the only sympathetic thought she'd ever had for Marty. She'd been trying to head off his advances for a few weeks now and it was starting to irritate her.

'Cheers,' CJ said, trying not to give him the wrong impression.

Marty gazed up and down her body, pausing on her breasts for much too long. 'Any time, gorgeous.'

Damn her mother for blessing (or cursing) her with a C-cup cleavage. Right now she wished she was still in a trainer bra.

He paused at her face, at her bruise, his grin fading as he winced. CJ wondered whether she'd seen pity in his eyes – or was it more like understanding? Either way, he'd blinked and it was gone.

CJ shivered with repulsion and felt like covering herself with a bale bag. She had hoped he'd realise by now that she wasn't interested, but Marty liked to get his own way. She adjusted her blue singlet, but it couldn't hide the natural swell of her breasts.

'Hi, CJ. Mr Occy came to hit on you again, hey?'

CJ laughed at the name she and Irene had made for Marty. Irene was about her best friend and ally out of all Doug's shearing teams. She was twenty-two years older, not quite as tall as CJ but just as skinny. She had come over from New Zealand when she was only seventeen and had never left.

'I hate working with him,' CJ replied. 'He ruins the day.'

They walked over to the CD player and flicked through the collection of CDs.

Irene held up a Midnight Oil CD. 'This, or Acca Dacca?' she asked. 'And did you hear Doug finally found a replacement for Duncan?'

'Go with AC/DC. And no, I hadn't heard.'

Irene put the CD into the player. 'Apparently his name's Lindsay. No one seems to know anything about him. We'll see how he shapes up soon enough – Doug's putting him with us.' Irene quickly tied her dyed-blond hair up into a scrappy knot at the back of her head.

CJ rolled her eyes. 'Great. Another one we have to babysit. *We* should get paid more.'

'Too bloody right,' Irene laughed.

CJ felt Irene inspecting her black eye and could read her friend's thoughts in her green eyes.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ CJ said, touching the bruise with her fingertips. ‘It was nothing.’

Irene nodded but her face twitched with worry.

‘You know I can handle it, Irene. Don’t stress.’

Irene wouldn’t push her for information. She knew that CJ would talk when she was ready.

The shearers were oiling up their handpieces and fetching the waiting sheep from their pens, while the rousies fiddled with their scrapers and waited in front of the shearers. CJ looked up at the clock just as it hit seven and the shed erupted with noise. Six handpieces went on and the hum echoed around the tin shed, like a million bees at work.

CJ leaned over to Irene. ‘Let’s just hope this guy Lindsay can take Marty’s place when we do the smaller sheds. I’d sure like to see him in another team for a while.’

‘With a bit of luck he might even be all right and you could go on a date for once in your life.’ Irene winked.

‘My life is complicated enough,’ CJ said, shaking her head. She’d had a rough trot with dating shearers – well, all men, really.

‘We’ll see,’ said Irene, and with that she walked off to wait by the nearest shearer, who was finishing the last couple of blows down the ewe’s back.

Following Irene’s lead, CJ headed to the skirting table. She knew the first fleece would come from Dave, the large Maori shearer on the end. He was good and she enjoyed watching him shear, but as quick as he was, there was usually a lot of skin in the fleece. Kate, their young rousie, threw the fleece up and over the table. As the cloud of white wool descended, so did CJ’s concentration. The day had begun.

At lunchtime, CJ grabbed a handful of ham and salad sandwiches and headed out to the pens. She left the other workers chatting together on a collection of mismatched chairs and a brown sofa in the corner of the shed.

People probably thought she was stuck-up or weird, but she liked being away from crowds. She preferred eating her lunch while watching Sam push up the sheep out in the sun, or chatting with Irene, if the farmer didn't want her help. When she'd first started, she had tried to mix with the shearers and other rousies, but they came and went a lot, which made it hard. Irene was the only other one who had matched her time here in Doug's teams. Plus she'd met too many people who were complete dicks, especially early on when she first left school, so it was just easier to stick to herself. Her track record with blokes was worse than a prison inmate's. One of the shearers she'd dated had a girlfriend and kids already, which she'd only found out about when they unexpectedly came home early one day. The other shearer did nothing but sit around and smoke pot while drinking. Then there was the classer, a control freak who'd watch her every move, even following her to the toilet. Yes, she was a magnet for crappy men. How she always seemed to find them was nothing short of amazing. She must have a sign on her head saying, 'Available to all idiots.'

Irene reckoned CJ's run of bad luck was over – she'd been saying that for the last four years. Her bad luck *was* over, but only because she hadn't dated anyone in that time. Between those blokes and her family problems, she'd sworn off men for life, or just about. She was no longer naive. She wasn't a weakling, either; her muscles were strong and she knew her stuff. Her hands were dry and callused from

the constant work. They didn't look like a woman's hands, but CJ wasn't out to win any beauty contests.

Much to her mother's dismay, from the age of eight onwards CJ had refused to wear dresses, skirts or anything pink. Even now, her going-out clothes consisted of a newish pair of jeans, a shirt or tank top and a pair of clean boots. Her mum had long ago given up on her – and everything else, for that matter.

Stuffing a triangle sandwich in her mouth, she watched Sam ride the back of the sheep, pushing them into the shearing shed. 'Get back!' she yelled, sending Sam around the back of the sheep, pushing more of the mob up the race.

Jim waited until the last sheep was inside before sliding the metal door shut and calling out to his old kelpie, who had been resting in the shade of the mallee trees that lined the edge of the pens.

'Thanks for the help. Poor old Sylvie is getting a bit long in the tooth,' said Jim as he made his way to CJ, his dog now faithfully by his side. Jim's jeans were up high on his waist, held with a leather belt, and his belly overhung by an inch. But he had a smile that was sweet and gentle.

'No worries, Jim. I bet you're glad to see the last of them in.'

'Too right, love. It's been a long and bloody hot week. Me and the missus are going down to the coast next week, and I can't bloody wait to feel that cool sea breeze.' Jim leaned to one side, his hip obviously causing him pain.

CJ smiled. 'And a spot of fishing too, I bet.'

Together they walked back inside the shed.

'So,' Jim said, 'I hear Duncan has finally pulled the pin?'

'Sure has. Jill has been nagging him to get out of shearing for years and when a little shop down south came up, they grabbed it. He's too old to be putting his

body through this kind of punishment. I'm glad he's going to retire. Do them a world of good.' CJ walked through to the pens and called Sam over. 'We have the new bloke starting next week, when we head over to Phil Robinson's place. I hope he can keep up.'

Jim nodded, and looked over at Sam. 'Will your dog take my orders?'

'Yep,' said CJ.

'Get back!' Jim called to the collie. By the look in his eye and the smile on his face, she could tell Jim was impressed by the response he got.

'Good. Sam and I will handle this. Why don't you put your feet up and have a rest before the last run?'

CJ gave him a look.

'Go on, piss off. You look after me too good as it is. Take your break. You're as bad as your dad was,' Jim said with a smile.

CJ smiled too. She headed over to the wool bales and sat down. For five minutes she let her body relax. The smell of the wool and sheep shit mingled with the sound of sheep bleating and the click of their hooves on the wooden boards as Sam and Jim moved them around. She closed her eyes and thought how nice it would be to have a quick nap, but the sound of shuffling feet and the changing of cutters brought her back to life after a few minutes. Before CJ could move, Irene had plonked herself down on the end of the bale.

'So are you coming to Duncan's send-off?' Irene asked, glancing over at CJ. CJ's skin shone from the greasy lanolin in the fleeces and her blue singlet sprouted little tufts of wool. CJ knew that look in Irene's eyes. She was daring her to say no to the party, daring her to leave the confines of her family and all that responsibility for one night.

‘Yeah, but only ’cos it’s Dunc.’

‘Great. Come on. I’ll help you get a bale started. Let’s hope John gets better by tomorrow. Aren’t you sick of pressing these?’

CJ shrugged. ‘It’s not too bad, especially with you helping.’

Irene gripped CJ’s shoulders and shook her gently. ‘Well I don’t know about you but I’m looking forward to meeting this Lindsay fella. I have a good feeling about him.’

CJ groaned and dropped her head forward. ‘Irene, I don’t know about your so-called good feelings. As I recall they tend to be a bit wayward.’

Irene scooped up an armful of fleeces. ‘Na, girl. I’m sure about this one.’

‘That’s what you said about the last one,’ said CJ under her breath with a chuckle.