

The Mushroom

She was regretting the decision to go now. It all seemed like so much effort. Everything did these days. Helen sighed, brushing her hands down her apron and glancing vacantly around the kitchen. She'd loved baking once, she remembered that; but there didn't seem much point these days. It wasn't the same when there was no one to cook for.

Besides, everyone knew Sally's scones were better than hers. It was just out of concern that they had insisted she make hers. It was what people did around here. She'd known it then, when Valerie had called a few weeks back. Though knowing hadn't stopped her from being roped in.

She could still hear Val's voice down the line, "200 People coming, can you believe it?" Helen could. The CWA annual fundraiser always drew a crowd. "I don't know how we're going to cater for that many."

But of course she did. They'd been doing it for years. Right from the time Helen had arrived in town as a starry-eyed newly wed. It had seemed only natural to stop when Ron passed. Times changed. Lives moved on.

And this kitchen was so full of memories. Very few knew, but it was Ron who'd taught her everything she knew about cooking. She'd been lucky, not many men from her day would do that for a woman. Not like these modern day young ones who shared the chores. Or at least, that's what her grandchildren told her. Still didn't see too much of it here. Things moved slower in the country.

"Are you still there, Hel?" Valerie's voice had cut through her musings, bringing her back to the present.

"I'm here," she'd said.

"So you'll do it then?"

Helen had paused, trying to recollect what Valerie had been saying, "Well, I'm not..."

"It just wouldn't be the same without your scones. It would be such a shame."

So Helen had found herself agreeing, and now here she was, dressed in her apron staring unseeingly into the unknown. It was strange, the way these moods came over her. She'd never been particularly sentimental, but as one got older...

She shook her head. Enough. Regret or not she'd agreed to bake these scones, and Helen Ditchburn was as good as her word. Besides, she thought to herself as she

set the oven, she was picking up that new woman on her way in, the one who'd married Ben Cormack. She had to admit, she had a strange curiosity to meet the lady. He'd surprised the whole community when he'd come back with a wife. Everyone had picked him as a bachelor in the making. Fussy as a nesting hen he'd been when it came to girls, and that mother of his-

Helen cut off her thoughts. She'd never approved of gossips and she wasn't going to be one now. Not even in her own mind, more than enough of that in this town already.

Opening the pantry door she felt a small tug at her heartstrings. Ron had built this for her not long after they were married. Everything arranged just as she'd liked. Not that she'd known what she'd need back then, but Ron had done what she'd asked without question. And they'd made it work.

Selecting the ingredients she made her way to the bench, laying them down on the faded jarrah countertop, the wood smooth and worn from years of use. She wondered how Ben's wife – the name kept escaping her – was finding life in the country. It hadn't been easy when Helen had first moved but it was different now. Telephones, cars, why some farms even had the Internet. You weren't so isolated these days. But then again, she'd heard the woman – really, what was her name? It started with M she was sure. Melinda, Malissa? Well whatever it was, she'd heard she'd been a lawyer or something in the city. Some high-flying position. It must be strange to go from that to "just" a wife, even if it was a farmers wife.

She started fishing through drawers and cupboards, trying to find the things she'd need. It had been awhile and everything was out of place from when her family had stayed all those months back. She'd needed time to pull herself together after the funeral, and she hadn't been in here much since then. You didn't have to do much to feed one person.

It had taken her awhile to find her feet when she'd first moved here too. Learning to cook not the least of it. She sifted the flour and then added the butter. She could almost hear Ron's voice as she rubbed it in.

"Just until it looks like breadcrumbs, then we add the milk," and then he'd shown her, making a well and cutting the mixture through with a butter-knife, just as she was doing now.

“Little brother always made the best scones,” he’d tell her, “Lazy blighter would hardly mix it at all. But that’s the trick you see,” his eyes wrinkling up with laughter, “don’t want to over mix scone dough, makes ‘em tough.”

She was cautious of this now as she kneaded them on the bench. She’d never live it down if she served tough scones! She could just imagine the raised eyebrows and polite smiles. And she knew what they’d say when she was gone,

“Poor Helen, used to be so with it you know. Just hasn’t been the same since Ron passed.”

She shook her head as she began to lay the mixture on the tray, so wrapped up in her thoughts that the sound of an alarm made her jump, almost knocking the tray from the bench. Oh blast, she thought, as her hand flew up to her racing heart, it was that stupid mobile her son had insisted on giving her.

For emergencies he’d said, well the silly thing was going to cause the emergency as far as she was concerned! Ignoring the racket, Helen continued laying the mixture. As she opened the oven door her landline began to ring. The familiar trill didn’t cause her to jump, but she didn’t rush to answer it either. Answering the phone was how she’d ended up in this predicament in the first place.

She’d just shut the oven and was setting the timer when the call went to her recording machine.

“Hi Mrs Ditchburn, it’s Miranda,” Helen didn’t recognize the caller’s voice or name, “I hope I’ve called in time. Just wanted to let you know I can’t make the fundraiser this afternoon, so there’s no need for a lift. Have a great time, I’m sure we’ll get another chance to meet soon.”

Miranda, thought Helen, that was it. She’d known the name had started with M. She paused, feeling her brows draw together. But what was this about not going? She walked over to the machine and hit repeat.

Listening carefully this time, Helen could hear the forced composure in Miranda’s voice, as if the speaker was holding her breath and pushing the words out. It reminded her of the way her daughters spoke when they were holding back tears. She felt her lips press together thoughtfully, as she paused in front of the phone.

Miranda didn’t want Helen to know she was crying. She couldn’t put her finger on it exactly, but she was sure it had something to do with today’s event. Ron would tell her that she was reading too much into the situation, and to mind her own business. But then, Ron had never been able to sense things the way she did. Like that

time they'd had dinner at the Patterson's and she'd known something wasn't right, and a few weeks later Mrs Patterson had walked out. Or when she'd travelled to the city after their eldest daughter sent an overly cheerful letter, and she'd arrived to find her homesick and broke. And she'd always been able to tell when their son was lying.

Well, she'd been right all those times before. And it was the same feeling she had now. Sighing she rubbed her hand over her face. The real question was, what was she going to do about it?

She was regretting the decision to go. It seemed like such a stupid idea, now that she was here. After all, she didn't know the woman. Perhaps she always spoke like that. Or maybe Helen was being nosy, just another busybody in this small town. But it was too late to turn back. She was sure her arrival had been noted. There was an orange cloud of dust hanging over the gravel driveway, and the dogs and geese were making such a racket, she was certain the neighboring farm could hear them.

Helen gripped the door handle tightly as she opened it, one inch at a time, her eyes scanning the yard for any geese. She hated the vile birds. Ever since she'd been chased by that gaggle at Val's. Satisfied she was safe she climbed out, planting her feet firmly on the ground before turning and reaching across to grab the bowl and carton of cream sitting on the passenger side.

They were part of her plan. The one she was regretting. But there was nothing for it now. In for a penny in for a pound, that was how the saying went. Shaking her head at herself, Helen eyed the esky of scones in the backseat, making sure they were out of the sun, and then turned to take in the yard.

It was a mess. The picket fence gate was unlocked and the chickens and dogs had been at the lawn; any grass that wasn't dug-up was scratched and yellowing. The fruit-trees didn't look too bad, though their branches hung heavy with unpicked fruit; but the vegetable beds were overrun, and their leaves hung limp and wilting in the mid-day heat. For Susan's sake, Helen hoped the award-winning roses in the back yard had fared better.

She made her way to the front verandah of the Cormack's house. It was a large, old building, sprawled out across the skyline in true Queenslander style; the very image of country homestead that Helen had imagined when she'd first started courting Ron. Of course, very few farmers could actually afford houses like this. She still remembered her shock the first time she'd visited Ronald's family farm – two

bedrooms and made entirely out of wooden slats and a tinned roof! She'd been horrified. But love had won out, as Ron liked to say. And they'd shared so many good years in that house. She wouldn't have traded it for this one for anything.

She arrived at the front door. Taking a deep breath she pulled herself up straight, stepped forward and knocked. As she waited, she resisted the urge to adjust her cardigan or check her hair for stray locks. The seconds ticked by. There was no answer.

Helen leaned forward slightly, straining to hear through the heavy wood door. She was about to knock again when she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps echoing on a wooden floor. They drew closer and closer, stopping right in front of her as the door swung open.

The new Mrs Cormack with her short bobbed hair, framed glasses, pencil skirt and blouse, was the very image of the women she saw on the glossy magazine covers at the hairdressers. Exactly what she'd expected. Only she wasn't. Because she was also short, stocky and *covered* in flour. Even her hair had traces of the white powder, as if she'd been frantically trying to adjust it and dust herself off at the same time.

Realising she was staring and not wanting to appear rude Helen held out her hand, "Miranda? Lovely to meet you, I'm Helen."

The younger woman stared at Helen's extended hand for a few moments before taking it. Her shake was short and firm. Professional. And her hands were rough, not what Helen had expected after seeing the garden.

"Lovely to meet you too, though I hate to do so like this." She grimaced as she glanced down at her outfit, "I wasn't expecting you. You didn't get my message?"

"Message?" Helen asked, hoping that Miranda wouldn't be able to hear the lie in that one word. She had a feeling this woman was good at detecting the small things; she could feel her keen blue eyes watching her and was relieved when the woman continued on.

"Yes, I tried to call earlier. Let you know I wouldn't need a lift. I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing."

Helen smiled, "Not entirely for nothing," she held up the bowl, "I can't find my mixer. Nothing's ever in its right place after the family visits. I'm sure you won't mind if I use of yours?"

She could see Miranda hesitate, a small crease forming between her brows. Helen felt a twinge of guilt. It was a trick she'd picked up over the years, camouflaging a demand in a request.

"Of course, I can go and get it for you if you'd like?"

Helen shook her head, raising one shoulder in a shrug, "No power at the function I'm afraid."

"Oh" the crease between the other woman's brow deepened, "I'll do it for you. Do you mind?" As she finished speaking Miranda took the bowl and carton from Helen's hands and stepped back into the hallway.

Helen raised an eyebrow, her lips twitching in amusement. It seemed Miranda had a trick or two up her own sleeve. "That would be fabulous." she said, "Thank-you."

She was certain Miranda had intended for her to stay outside, but as she hadn't said so, Helen decided she was under no obligation to comply. She stepped through the doorway and almost stopped in her tracks. The old, narrow wood-paneled hallway she'd been expecting was gone. Instead, she found herself in a light and spacious entryway that opened out into the living areas. The old jarrah floors shone with their recent polish, and the timeworn brick wall had been converted into a feature with family portraits and wedding photos. It was contemporary and modern. Susan must hate it.

"I love what you've done with the place," Helen said, following Miranda through the entryway into the dining room, which looked as if it belonged in the latest issue of Home Magazine.

Miranda spun around, her eyes widening in surprise before they narrowed, her lips pressing into a thin line, "Thanks."

"No really," Helen waved her hand about the room, "It looks amazing."

Miranda folded her arms across her chest, "I think so. It's nice to be able to put our own stamp on the place." She froze, her eyes darting to Helen's face, as if she realised what her words might imply.

Helen only smiled, "My husband and I did the same thing, straight after we were married. Makes it feel more like home. You've been doing it yourselves?"

"Yeah," said Miranda, her shoulders relaxing slightly though her arms remained crossed, "We've been trying to fit it in between the farm work. There's still a few rooms to be done, but we wanted the living areas done first. Makes such a

difference having somewhere nice to come back to at the end of a hard day, don't you think?"

Helen nodded, "I do. Though the first room we fixed up was the kitchen."

Miranda's smile faltered for a moment as she said, "We haven't gotten around to the kitchen yet."

Helen's eyes followed Miranda's as she glanced to an open entryway, presumably the kitchen, the room obscured from view by the doorframe. She suddenly had a pretty good idea of what she'd find if she continued to follow Miranda, all of the clues she'd overlooked falling into place.

Silly old woman, she scolded herself, so full of your own intuitive powers that you've missed the obvious. It should have been clear really; the phone-call, the flour-dusted lady before her and Miranda's insistence that *she* whip up the cream.

She thought back to her first few attempts at cooking and baking, all those years ago. She remembered her terror at the thought of those initial CWA meetings, the forced conversations and ever-looming threat of those women discovering she couldn't cook. It was even worse than her fear of having to admit it to Ronald. And her mother-in-law wasn't a Susan Cormack. Even all these years later she still dreaded serving rock hard scones for those gossips to discuss and dissect at the next CWA meeting.

Helen rocked back on her heels, trying to think. She hadn't come to embarrass the poor woman. But she couldn't leave her like this either. She glanced back over at Miranda, at her folded arms and tensed shoulders. She'd made a real botch of things. Everything about the woman screamed, 'leave me alone'. But there was still one thing she could think of; another way around all of this.

She thought back to her youngest daughters high-school days. She'd been a fainter, the slightest drop of blood and she was gone. Helen tried to recall the signs she'd shown just before.

"Oh my," she said, raising her hand to her forehead, the way Sally always had, "I don't feel so good."

And then she collapsed, in what she hoped was a convincing mimicry of a faint.

It was a good decision she thought, taking a sip of her cuppa, feeling the warmth spread down her throat as she swallowed. Green tea and mint the packet had said. It was delicious. She'd have to get herself some.

Miranda sat across from her, hands cupped around her own mug. It seemed the idea of someone drinking alone had not sat comfortably with her host. Or perhaps it was just her love of tea.

Helen took another sip, racking her brains for the words to say. She could hear the hum of the fridge in the kitchen, the distant sound of chooks in the background. She cleared her throat and nodded to the tea box that sat on the table between them, "You have an impressive collection."

Miranda's eyes followed her own and she shrugged, "I know. Ben can't understand it at all."

Helen chuckled and shook her head, "He's a farmer through and through that boy. My Ron was the same, wouldn't have any of that fancy stuff." She ran her fingers around the rim of the cup before she continued; "It must be such a change for you, moving here. I know I found it so."

Miranda raised an eyebrow, staring at Helen, "You were a yuppie?"

"Oh yes," Helen nodded, "I was. Only they called me a city-slicker back then."

Miranda leaned back in her chair, hands still wrapped around her mug, "So what brought you here? Work?"

Helen smiled, "Heavens no, I moved here for the same reason you did." she met Miranda's eyes across the table, "Love. Though I suppose people don't talk about it much, these days."

Miranda looked down, swirling her mug in her hands, "I find that hard to believe."

Helen watched her for a few moments, remembering her own experiences of settling in to town. "It gets easier you know, they forget you're the outsider after awhile."

Miranda didn't reply so Helen continued, "You know, I was 19 when I married. It seems young now, but it was normal back then. I was so excited. Had all these dreams of being a domestic queen, waiting on Ronald hand and foot. Nevermind that I'd hardly set foot in the kitchen!" She shook her head, her gaze shifting into the distance, "Our neighbor, Mrs Kingston, shared her bread recipe with me. I

couldn't wait to try it. I followed the method to a T, mixing the ingredients just as she said, kneading the dough out on my new kitchen bench. I was pleased as punch when I covered the dough in the bowl. Couldn't wait to get it in the oven."

She paused to take a breath, and found Miranda watching her. She'd stopped her cup swirling and was leaning forward, her arms resting on the table.

"Go on," she said, inclining her head, "What happened?"

Helen shrugged, "It didn't rise."

"No!" Miranda bit her lip. Helen wasn't sure if it was out of concern or to hold back laughter.

She nodded, "That's right. The silly mixture hadn't moved an inch. I was so embarrassed, didn't want Ronald to know. Money was tight back then, and I was so ashamed I'd wasted all those ingredients. So instead of throwing it in the bin I decided to bury it in the backyard."

She smiled ruefully as she admitted, "It seemed like a good idea at the time. When Ron came home, there was no sign of my misadventure. I thought I was safe. Only, a few days later, Ronald comes rushing in, yelling in excitement. 'You have to come see!' he says to me, grabbing my hand and dragging me out to the backyard, 'There,' he pointed, 'Isn't that the biggest mushroom you've ever seen!'"

Miranda looked at her, eyes wide, "No, it wasn't?"

Helen nodded sheepishly, heat rising on her cheeks at the memory. "It was. Bursting up through the ground. My bread dough. It had finally risen."

"Ronald thought it was a mushroom?" Miranda's voice was incredulous.

Helen's lips twitched in amusement, "My dear, I'm very sure my husband knew exactly what that 'mushroom' was."

Her answer surprised a laugh out of Miranda, "But he never said?"

"No, never. And until now, neither have I." she paused, catching Miranda's gaze with her own and holding it, "But I want you to understand that, in time, it gets easier. I did learn to bake bread. It took me awhile, and my loaves were never as good as Mrs. Kingston's. But I got there."

She watched as Miranda sat back in her chair, arms folded over her chest, "I burnt the biscuits." She said at last, "The recipe was meant to be simple. Easy and foolproof it said. I guess just not for me." She laughed, her voice wobbling as she did so, "I forgot to set the timer. And then when I went to remake them – well, you can

see.” She waved her hand, indicating the flour over her outfit, “but you weren’t talking about the loaves were you?”

Helen cupped her hands around her mug, “Wasn’t I?”

Miranda snorted and shook her head, “No, of course you weren’t. It explains the fainting act,” she glanced over at Helen, and smirked, “You might want to work on that, by the way, before you try it again,” her smile faded and she was silent for a moment, sipping her cuppa before she sighed and said, “You’re probably right you know. But today, just the idea of turning up without those biscuits.” She smiled sadly and shrugged, “Well, I’m sure you understand.”

Helen looked at the woman thoughtfully, her mind wandering to the scones and jam in the car and the whipped cream in Miranda’s fridge. She hadn’t enjoyed herself this much in months. Not since Ron’s passing.

There’d be other CWA events this year, and nobody would miss her scones. Not really. Everyone knew Sally’s were better than hers.

She felt a smile tug at her lips, “I made scones you know, for the fundraiser. It’s why I needed the cream. I think I might like one or two, would you?”

Miranda looked up at her in surprise, “But the time, don’t you need to-”

Something in Helen’s face made her stop, and a smile spread across her face. “Tea and scones,” she said, “Sounds perfect.”