

PLENTY

Demeter had been born to cook. Everything about her proclaimed this fact, from her comfortable figure, cheerful face with its tip-tilted nose, wide-set blue eyes and a generous, smiling mouth that welcomed customers to her wonderfully aromatic bakery.

This was set cornerwise to the street and a short lane leading down to the jetty, where paddle steamers pulled in with hungry tourists, drawn by their noses up to the sheltered doorway of 'Plenty'. There they salivated over rolls, loaves, muffins and pies, some sweet, some savoury, and cleared the shelves as fast as they were filled. The bakery was famed beyond the little Aussie bush town. Although far from the coastal highway and tucked away in a bend of a meandering brown waterway, the locals knew to get their orders in before the river steamers were due. On Fridays, after the last crunchy roll had gone out the door, Demeter closed up and prepared for her week-end activity.

This hot Friday afternoon, when cicadas shrilled in the gumtrees and even their heat-sapped leaves drooped along the sandy river bank, Demeter wrung out the mop and straightened her tired back. With the 'closed' sign turned outward, she was about to lock up when from the corner of her eye she saw movement. Without visible means, a shallow wire basket was slowly sliding along a cupboard top. Fascinated, she watched as two stubby ... somethings ... rose over the edge, clutched at a savoury pastie that she had reserved for her lunch, and disappeared.

Definitely not mice, Demeter thought. There hadn't been a whisker twitch from her rodent exterminator who posed in his usual position on the counter. As she watched, the tray slid another inch and the second pastie disappeared. Flushed with annoyance, and remembrance of breakfast long past and forgotten, Demeter pounced.

'Come along, out of there.'

A brief scuffle led to the emergence of a crouching figure, held fast by both arms. From within the folds of a worn hoodie, dark eyes gazed up at Demeter. Cheeks bulging with illicit pastie, the culprit made no effort to escape.

Demeter drew in a deep breath, then paused. She saw that this was a boy of no more than twelve or thirteen, and a very worn and dirty one. When he'd swallowed, the hooded face showed pinched and hollow.

She drew the child to a stool and pushed him onto it. 'Are you so very hungry?'

He simply nodded.

Handing him a damp towel, she said, 'First, you wipe your hands and face, then you get hot milk and the rest of my lunch.' After all, her mirror each morning reinforced the fact that her Rubenesque curves daily grew more bountiful. It also reminded her that she'd never see forty again, which would have been depressing, if she'd been the kind of person who could remain melancholy for more than ten minutes.

Her unexpected guest had been surprised into obediently rubbing the towel over some exposed skin. He then handed it back to Demeter, saying in a voice that cracked, 'Thanks.'

She smiled, handing him the remaining pastie and popping the milk into the microwave. 'Well, someone's taught you some manners. It's a pity they didn't include not stealing what would have been freely given, if asked for.'

The thin shoulders shrugged. 'Nobody gives nuthin' for nuthin'.' The words came muffled in a layer of savoury chicken.

'Well, I just did – I think.' Demeter let the matter of grammar slide. Taking the warmed-up milk in a mug, she joined the boy on a nearby stool. 'Are you running away from something, or someone?' With the hood fallen back to display haystack hair he looked so bedraggled, she thought – like Finnegan, her ornamental rodent exterminator, when he'd first strolled in from the gutter, starved, his coat a mass of knots and tangles, and with several bits missing.

Again the boy shrugged. In avoiding Demeter's searching gaze, his eyes fell on the statuesque feline perched at the end of the counter, outstaring him with a cold, emerald gaze of his own.

'Is that a cat? He's gi-normous. And he's got no tail!'

Demeter grinned. 'I deduce a badly timed street crossing in his kitten-hood. But he manages to let his moods be known without something to swish. His moods are mostly bad, I warn you.'

The boy stretched a tentative hand, the one not busy stuffing his mouth, and the cat butted him graciously. His face lit. 'Hey guy.'

'His name is Finnegan.' Demeter paused, an invitation in her voice.

'Er... mine's Jack.'

'Well, Jack, I'm Demeter, and I think you owe me some kind of explanation.'

The boy turned pale. 'I can't tell you anything. If I told you...'

'I know. You'd have to kill me.' She couldn't help smiling. He looked exactly like someone's kid brother, freckled, pug-nosed and with something in the brown eyes that said there'd been trouble in the recent past.

She sighed and went to plug in the coffee pot, wondering why she felt a need to do something about that troubled look.

Three things happened at once: the door opened again and was filled with a figure tall enough and broad enough to block it completely; Jack gave a bleat of terror and vaulted the counter to land almost on top of Demeter; and Finnegan let out an unearthly wowl.

Winded, Demeter clutched the struggling boy and waited until she could gather herself. Why the hell hadn't she locked that door properly? It was turning into a highway. And it was long past her appointment with her Madame DuBarry bath foam and Mariah Carey warbling in the background.

A shadow leaned across the counter and a voice like melted chocolate asked, 'Need any help there?'

Demeter sat up and tightened her grip on Jack. 'No thanks. But do you mind telling me who you are and what you are doing in my shop after the 'Closed' sign is up?'

She scrambled to her feet, feeling dishevelled and even more annoyed as she took in the attributes of the man staring down at her. As she measured five foot seven from silky crown to large, but shapely feet, it was unusual for her to be looked down upon from a great height. The uninvited customer also possessed a cap of dark curls, a determined chin and the kind of eyelashes that she'd prayed for during her first ten years of life – until recognising that the saints were not going to intervene with the Lord on her behalf.

The man smiled and Demeter thought the window blind must have shot up, letting in the afternoon sun. Here was the most beautiful male she'd seen since Hugh Jackman first wowed her in *The Boy From Oz*. He was pretty good in *Wolverine*, too.

'He's getting away,' the male vision remarked, indicating Jack's imminent emergence from his hoodie.

Demeter wrapped an arm, made strong by kneading dough, around the boy's waist. 'No you don't, young man. I want to know what you're so afraid of.'

'Lemme go! Lemme go!' The words came out in a gasp, possibly due to an increased tightening across his diaphragm.

'Listen to me, Jack,' said the man. (Smooth, dark chocolate, Demeter registered, and very persuasive.) 'It's okay, lad. No need to run or hide – ' He broke off and made a leap of his own, missing Demeter by a hairsbreadth and fielding the boy. Jack had drawn in his breath and slipped away like an eel, headed for the back entrance.

What an escape artist, Demeter thought. Then looking at his captor she smiled. She'd have been squashed flat if *he*'d landed on her. What a way to go, girl.

She then pulled her wayward wits into line and closed and bolted the front door. Explanations were due. The gorgeous male had obviously pursued Jack, and just as obviously the boy was determined not to be caught. And since it was all happening in her bakery (with its back entrance already double locked), no one was going anywhere until she had the full story.

With a sullen and apprehensive Jack in an unbreakable hold, the visitor turned to Demeter. 'Is there somewhere we can sit and have a civilized conversation? I've been travelling hard and fast for the past 48 hours, and I'm bushed.'

In a moment of sudden awareness, Demeter hesitated. He was a stranger in pursuit of a frightened child, and capable of lifting a bullock, probably two bullocks, if they got in his way. She stared up at him, seeing beyond the powerful stance, the determined chin to a face lined with weariness, and as hollow as Jack's own.

'Only if you promise not to scare the boy.'

'I promise. Just let me sit down and I'll tell you what's going on.'

Demeter nodded towards one of the stools. 'Let Jack go, first.' She stood with arms folded, stern as a judge.

A grin transformed the man's tired face. 'If *he* promises not to slip through a keyhole or a crack in the wall.' He looked down at the boy. 'Will you sit still for a few minutes and let us both take a breather, Jack?'

At the boy's scowling nod, he released him and scooped up the mug of milk and emptied it down his throat.

Demeter said, abruptly, 'Are you hungry?'

'Famished.'

'Wait here and I'll fetch some extra sausage rolls I kept back.' She stepped into a large cupboard and re-emerged carrying an opened cardboard box that made his eyes glisten. When Finnegan yowled again and launched himself at the man, she almost dropped the lot.

Landing like a missile squarely on the man's chest, claws dug in, the cat started to purr. It was like listening to a cement mixer at work.

Demeter gaped. 'He never does that. He doesn't like strangers touching him.'

‘Then clearly I’m not a stranger. Have we met in another life, cat?’ The man tousled Finnegan’s head – something any feline would loathe – and remained unscathed.

Jack’s surly face lit. ‘He likes me too.’

Their eyes met and held, until Jack’s fell. His voice became hoarse, underlining his struggle with emotion. ‘I didn’t mean it. I s’pose you’ve come to take me back. But I can’t. I can’t.’ His voice broke on the last word.

His misery caught at Demeter’s heart. The poor kid. Whatever he’d done, he was too young to be shouldering such guilt. She wanted to gather him up. Instead she placed the box on the counter and confronted the man who had pursued him, perhaps with punishment in mind.

‘Can’t you see that he’s exhausted? He’s been through enough. Whatever he’s done, he has paid already in fear and loneliness. He’s just a boy, for Heaven’s sake –’ She broke off as Jack turned to her.

‘Don’t let him take me to jail. I didn’t mean it. It wasn’t me. I wish I hadn’t ... Oh, Dad ... Dad!’ He clutched at Demeter as if she were a lifebuoy in a raging sea.

The man laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s alright, lad. I’m trying to tell you that you’re cleared. Your Dad knows, we all know that you were not responsible. The others –’

‘I had to do it.’ Jack gulped, struggling with threatening tears. ‘Will’s big brother made me. He’s a real crook. He said I had to do it, but I didn’t want to... I didn’t ...truly.’ He snorted wetly into Demeter’s shoulder.

‘Lad, we know all about it.’

‘No you don’t! You don’t know what they said they’d do if I didn’t help them,’ bawled Jack. ‘I knew I’d get caught. I just knew. I had to run.’

Appalled at such misery and fear, Demeter held the boy. She was sick with anger on his behalf, and it was a moment before she fully took in the man's words.

'Listen to me, Jack. The police know that you were in it against your will. It's what's known as mitigating circumstances. You won't be blamed.'

'I don't believe you. I don't know you.' Jack's voice was muffled against Demeter's ample bosom.

'My name is Rob Gordon, and I'm a private detective hired by your very worried and unhappy father to find you. He's looking for you, too, as well as some of the force's finest. It just happens that I got on your trail first.'

Jack looked up with suspicion. 'Show me your licence then.'

Rob grinned and with some difficulty, due to weight of cat, produced a wallet from his hip pocket and displayed his credentials. 'You can believe me. The police want to interview you, of course, but yours will be a minor charge, if any.'

'What has he done? What's it about?' put in Demeter.

The boy muttered something about a car.

'What car?'

He raised his voice almost to a shout. 'Dad's car! I stole it. I took it for a getaway car. And I crashed it. So there.'

Startled, Demeter swallowed a smile. Ridiculous as this sounded, the episode was clearly a tragedy in Jack's eyes. She looked to Rob for an explanation.

The smile was echoed in his eyes. But his voice was grave. 'Jack got in with the wrong crowd. One of his buddies had an older brother who thought it would be a good idea to knock off the local service station. He and another hero with hold-up experience needed a car and driver, and there was Jack, whose father had let him practice on his BMW 4-wheel drive – ideal for a getaway.'

Demeter looked down, but Jack refused to meet her gaze. ‘Why did you do it, Jack?’

Rob was grim. ‘They promised to fire-bomb his home and cook his father and little sister alive.’

‘Dear Lord!’ Her arm tightened on the boy. ‘But is it safe for him to go back?’

‘It is, now. All tidied up. Jack, you did the wrong thing for a good reason. It would have been better if you’d trusted your father to deal with the problem, but in the end it was a lesson learned. I hope you learned it well.’

The boy pulled away from Demeter and faced Rob. ‘I know. I was stupid and scared. I didn’t think. Um... Do you think Dad’ll ever forgive me for busting the Beamer?’

‘He already has. If you’d seen how worried he was about you, you’d know. Rob tousled the thatch of hair, as he’d done with Finnegan. ‘Now, let’s give him a call, shall we?’ He pulled out his phone.

When Jack hesitated, Demeter grinned at him. ‘Clever you. The crash upset the plot and the villains were caught. The car will be mended and everyone is safe. A happy ending. Don’t you think your father will agree?’

Jack straightened. ‘All right. I’ll tell him I’m coming home. But ...Um... just before – do you have any more of those pasties, Demeter?’

‘Not before me!’ Rob Gordon shot up, dislodging Finnegan from his chest. He reached for the box Demeter had produced and selected two fat sausage rolls before handing it to Jack. Between the two, the contents disappeared within seconds.

The earth mother in Demeter couldn’t stand it. ‘Come along, both of you. My flat is upstairs and there’s a big pot of chili con carne waiting to heat up. There’s also a well-equipped bathroom for your use.’ She eyed the very grubby Jack and the man who had been travelling for 48 hours straight. They eyed her back, grinning, then started up the stairs, Rob with one arm around the boy’s shoulders, the other holding his phone to his ear.

They were trailed by Finnegan, whose uncharacteristic vocal approval of Rob Gordon was one more reason why Demeter had begun to hum.

They would need a place to stay tonight, once Jack's father had been reassured. And Rob could do with feeding up, poor man. Perhaps he'd like to stay on and see a little of the town's attractions. Those silky fringed eyes had been admiring. Perhaps he was one who liked women on the bountiful side.

Demeter's baking was not the only reason for her popularity in this riverside town. Locals knew to get their orders in before the river steamers were due – especially on a Friday.