

Chapter One: Where it all goes wrong

Mum was going to give us a ride into town to see “Revenge of the Rotting Corpses” at the Carterton movie theatre. Normally we wouldn’t have been allowed in because it was an R 16, but Mrs. Hamble, the ticket lady, had lost her glasses and when she asked Tu what the rating was he said ‘G’. Everyone was going: Vinny, Tu and Tammy the Terrible Taiaroa Twins, Connor McDonald – even my brother Matt, and he’s way over 16.

The trouble was that Mum was still under the tractor. “We can’t go anywhere till I’ve got this tyre off, burnt the rubbish, washed the car and made a salad to take to Pam’s. You two can stand there looking like your throats have been cut or you can give me a hand.”

Mum’s really very nice when you get to know her, she’s just a bit rougher than your average Mum.

We went up to the house and got things organised. I put a pot of eggs on the stove for a lettuce salad while Vinny took the rubbish down the hill a bit; to the incinerator. I went to clean the car, it really needed it, you could hardly see the ‘Clean Me’ sign that Matt had rubbed into the dust a month ago. I pulled the hose out, but it wasn’t quite long enough to reach the front of the car.

I was 99 percent sure that I wasn’t allowed to shift the car, but since Mum was busy and I was doing her a favour I took the chance, unlocked the car, let the hand brake off and pushed it back a little with my foot. The car rolled gently back and stopped on a stone. I looked around to see if Vinny saw that fantastic piece of driving, but he was too busy burning something. I did see Rambo, our house cow, come barging through the gate that Vinny had left open.

“The cow’s getting in,” I yelled to him as I leapt out of the car, slammed the door and sprinted to head her off. I’m nearly the fastest kid in our class but I was no match for Rambo as she galloped across our lawn to the veggie patch.

I stopped and turned to Vinny, “Come and give us a hand.” Vinny shrugged and trotted up the hill. He stared at Rambo when he got there, she was munching happily on a salad of lettuce and silver beet. Vinny moved from the city about a year ago and he wasn’t too sure about stock. Rambo took a step forward. Vinny backed towards the house.

“She’s not going to charge, is she?”

“Course not,” I said as I skirted around the lawn, Vinny followed. He made sure that I was always in a direct line between him and the cow.

“Man, what if she charges; do you run or lie on the ground and play dead?”

“She’s not going to charge. She’s our house cow, kind of like a pet. Stay there and make sure she doesn’t go back around the house.”

Vinny stood still and started waving his arms like he was doing aerobics. He’s about my height but he’s really skinny with dark hair and a huge nose. He looked like one of those puppets on a string. I went through what was left of the garden and started to sneak up behind the cow.

Meanwhile Mum came back from the shed; she was rolling the tractor tyre in front of her. “What’s going on here?” she called. She leant the tyre over on the car and started to stride towards us. I froze as the car started to move. The weight of the tyre pushed it over the stone and it started to gently roll down the drive.

“Nnnnnghhhhaaar!” I screamed and ran towards it.

Rambo was directly between me and the car. She had never seen panic before. She thought she was going to be eaten raw. She ran for Vinny. Vinny dived to the ground and covered his head, Rambo ran back out the gate. Mum saw me running, then she saw the car. She made a flying tackle and pinned me to the ground. “You’ll get run over,” she gasped.

The car gradually picked up momentum. It left the drive and rolled down the grassy slope, picking up speed as it headed for the river at the bottom. “Awwwww no,” I groaned, but I hadn’t seen the incinerator. The car belted into the half-full drum; it crumpled and bounced ahead. The car caught it up and it wedged under the front bumper. Huge chunks of grass tore out as the car groaned and bounced to a halt on top of the drum.

“Thank God,” whispered Mum. I let out a huge sigh.

“Aaaarrgggh!” squawked Vinny. Smoke was wisping from underneath the car. The smoke got darker. Flames were creeping out of the bonnet and back towards the windscreen. Gradually they spread, smoke belched out from the body of the car and the paint turned black.

I turned to Mum, horrified. She watched for another moment then looked across at me; her face was crumpled, like she was going to cry. “My car...” she whimpered.

Vinny came and stood next to us. There was nothing we could do so we just stared. The flames had spread to the back of the car by now and they licked around the petrol tank. It blew up with a whooshing sound; a ball of orange flame erupted underneath the car and completely engulfed it.

“Faaaaaa!” said Vinny and I together. Mum just shook her head.

“How could I have left the brake off?” she muttered to herself.

I felt my stomach tighten up; I’d raced to get the cow without putting the handbrake on, this was all my fault. “M..Mum, I gotta tell you something.”

“It’ll have to wait,” she said as the neighbours pulled up in their ute to see what all the smoke was about.

I stood there feeling like I was going to throw up. I’d burnt our car out, it was completely ruined and it was all my fault. That was all that I could think about; it was like a nightmare, too bad to even tell Vinny.

Eventually the fire brigade made it, but there wasn’t much of the car left by then. All the tyres had burnt out, the windows melted and the interior was ruined. They hosed down the wreck but there didn’t seem much point.

Mum had had about enough of answering neighbours questions and went back up to the house. As soon as she opened the door a great black cloud of smoke came pouring out.

“Fire!” yelled Vinny.

The fire chief, Hank Hoser, had his back to the house. “Of course it’s a bloody fire,” he said, but when he saw the rest of the brigade tearing up the hill with hoses and axes he turned around, saw the smoke and started yelling at the running men. “Get that unit up here! Break the windows! Get the axes!”

Vinny was first to the house. He realized exactly where the smoke was from so he waved at the firemen. I couldn’t move, I just stood there watching.

“No, it’s okay. Stop!” cried Vinny. They took about as much notice of him as I take of the morning notices at school.

“If any one of you steps inside my house in those filthy boots or even scratches the paint with an axe I’ll have your guts for garters,” Mum yelled. The firemen stopped dead. She was standing in the doorway with a smoking saucepan in her hand. “Some eggs have boiled dry and blown up in there.” She stared very hard at me. “There isn’t a fire, but if you stay here for a bit I’m sure I can find a few cold beers.”

There was a cheer from the firefighters and they quite happily waited for Mum. While they were sitting around drinking I heard Mum talking to Hank Hoser “I can’t understand it,” she said. “I always leave the hand brake on. It’s second nature to me.”

“It’s okay Antoinette,” he patted her on the arm. “These things happen you know. It’s just an unfortunate mistake.”

Chapter Two: Where it gets worse

“Faaaa!” said Tu and Tammy together. We were on the bus and I’d just told them about the fire; I hadn’t told them that I’d left the hand brake off.

“D...D... Did it blow up, l...l...like they do on TV?” asked Connor McDonald, leaning over the seats so that his red head was between the Tairaoa twins.

“Yeah,” said Vinny, “It went up in a huge fireball. If we’d have been anywhere near it we would have been roasted alive. It was like a bomb going off.”

“Faaaaa!” said Tu and Tammy again. They often talked at the same time and they looked nearly the same too, except that Tammy had longer hair and she was bigger than Tu.

“W... w... what did your Mum say about the c... c... cow?” asked Connor.

“And the eggs?”

I shrugged, hoping the subject would change. “Not much really.”

“She couldn’t say much,” said Vinny. “She was the one that left the hand brake off.”

I sank further into my seat, trying to hide. I felt like the coyote in the Road Runner cartoon, always making a mess of things. I just wished that I could fall off a cliff and into a hole; that way it wouldn’t matter.

“What was Revenge of the Rotting Corpses like?” asked Vinny. “Was there heaps of blood and guts and sex and violence?”

“Nah,” Tu screwed up his face. “Should’ve gone to your place and watched the car blow up.”

“M... M... Mrs H... Hamble found her glasses just before the movie.”

“Reckoned she couldn’t show an R 16 so she changed the film,” said Tammy.

“What to?” asked Vinny.

“The F... F... Famous F... F... Five Go F... F... Fishing,” stuttered Connor. Vinny and I groaned.

“We had to stay for the whole movie because Mum was picking us up. If she’d seen us on the streets she’d have killed us,” frowned Tammy.

“Slowly,” added Tu.

“Man,” Vinny, put on his most serious face, “You guys have all the fun. I wish I could have seen the Famous Five instead of Smith’s Sizzling Subaru.”

Tu hit him for being smart.

“Owww, that hurt.”

“Lucky I didn’t punch ya first,” said Tammy. “Woulda been a lot harder than that.” I agreed. Connor might be the tallest kid at school, but Tammy’s the toughest.

Class was a real drag that day, I couldn’t think of anything but the car. Mr. Hottom (we call him Bottom) our form teacher, was talking about conservation. I was thinking that if I took my helmet off and rode into a power pole really fast I might get amnesia and forget that I wrecked our car.

“Davin Smith,” Bottom said. “Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

“Um, ah...” I looked at Vinny for help. He shrugged; he’d been tying a knot in his leather bracelet. I took a chance. “Absolutely not B... Mr. Hottom. I don’t think that’s a good idea at all.” The classroom was completely silent for the first time that day.

Mr. Hottom raised his eyebrows, “Davin doesn’t think that we should protect our endangered species. Why’s that Davin?”

“I... ummm.” I didn’t know what to say. I could imagine everyone thinking that as well as wrecking my home I went around shooting kiwis and chainsawing native bush. “I wasn’t listening to your question Mr. Hottom. I think that we should protect our endangered species.”

“That’s right Davin, and I think that you should have lunchtime detention for not listening in class.” I shrugged, I didn’t really care.

Detention was alright, it meant I didn’t have to answer everybody’s questions about the fire. Vinny must have talked about it through most of lunch time because nobody wanted to know anything during swimming or on the bus on the way home. That suited me fine.

I’d made up my mind that I was going to tell Mum about moving the car. I was ready to face the consequences rather than have this guilt hanging over me. Grounding for a year, no pocket money for life, bread and water. I’d done the crime I’d do my time.

The men from the tyre shop were at home when I got back and a new tyre was on the tractor. “Thanks,” said Mum as they were leaving, “I really need this old tractor now.”

We watched their truck drive up the road. “Are you going to make some hay?” I asked.

“No.”

“Then why do you need the tractor so much?”

“To get to town.”

I stared at the old tractor. Mum had bought it off a guy who had used it for taking his boat to the boat ramp. The salty water had covered it in a deep red rust, except for the areas that were crusted in gobs of dried mud from our farm. The engine leaked oil and the seat had great tears in it where the stuffing was hanging out.

“You can’t take that to town,” I said.

Mum folded her arms across her chest. “What else am I going to take?”

I shrugged. "Aren't we going to get another car from the insurance?" I knew we had insurance, Mum had given me an envelope to post to them.

Mum pulled the envelope from her pocket. "Insurance companies don't pay out if you don't pay them. You forgot to post the cheque." I stared at the envelope, it was the same one that she'd given me two weeks before. I couldn't believe it; now we couldn't even get another car. I hung my head so Mum couldn't see my face.

"Where was it Mum?"

"Under your bed with your comics." I remembered now, I'd picked up some of Connor's comics the same day I was supposed to post the letter. I hadn't read them yet, the letter must have got mixed up with them.

I had to tell Mum about the car. "Mum..."

"Look Davin, I just don't want to hear another excuse, I've had it up to here with your excuses. You're always being careless and messing things up. When are you going to learn?"

"But Mum..."

"No Davin, I'm going to town now. Matt'll be here shortly. Just have a long hard think about what you've done." Mum strode off toward the house.

It was the end of the world. I stood there and waited for the sky to fall in or an earthquake to swallow me up. I could feel the tears coming. I went and sat on the woolshed landing and yeah, I blubbed for a while. It felt pretty awful but I think I felt better after I'd finished. That's what it was like for me anyway.

Mum came out of the house after a while; she had her town clothes on. I tried not to look at her but I could see her out of the corner of my eye. Her hair had been grey for as long as I could remember and her face was tanned and lined, making her look a lot older than forty. She's still slim though and she likes to get dressed up when she goes to town. She had this colourful summer dress on and a straw hat and her handbag.

I could hear Matt's motorbike coming and I guess Mum could too because she put her handbag on the tray of the tractor and climbed on. She started up the tractor. She must have been pretty upset because she took off up the drive in a real hurry. She didn't even stop to talk to Matt, in fact she nearly ran his motorbike off the drive. I suppose it would have looked pretty funny, Mum flying up the road on a tractor, hanging onto her hat in one hand and trying to steer and hold her dress with the other, dust billowing out behind her. Normally I would have laughed, but I couldn't even raise a smile.