

# Butting Heads

“It took us the better part of the morning to catch the little fiend,” Jeff said, chucking into the phone, “and even longer to get him to admit he’d tampered with our water supply.” He leant forward and closed the blinds on the woolly face staring back at him, “I can’t imagine how he managed to accumulate nine litres of pink food colouring without raising any suspicions. Let alone how he got it in the fire engine tank without anyone noticing.”

Naomi laughed and Jeff felt his heart skip a beat. He was glad she was in Italy for the weekend, because her tone indicated that she was up to mischief. It was the same sound that had got him in trouble throughout their childhood.

“So how is my beautiful Aries going? He’s not missing his mummy too much is he?” She said.

Jeff snorted. “He’s a little terror and you know it,” Jeff shifted one forearm off the chair back to peak through the blinds. The lamb was still looking at the window. It baaed balefully at the twitching blinds before bounding round the corner.

“I don’t even want to know how you got a permit for him. He’s been tearing round my yard like a child in a lolly shop.”

“Oh Jeff, he’s an inside lamb-”

“Not in my house.”

Jeff looked beyond the lamb and shook his head at the state of his yard. Aries

had only been here two days and already he had torn out clumps of grass, creating potholes of mud everywhere, and left hoof prints all over the fence posts. There was no way he would let Aries do the same thing to the house.

Jeff let his sister ramble unopposed as he finished off the rest of his beer. She talked for a good ten minutes about how Valentines was the next day and commiserating his lack of girlfriend or steady relationship. Jeff mumbled a response when it seemed required, but, it wasn't until she turned the conversation back to Aries that he focused back on what she was saying.

"...have you been keeping him from his flock? I left them in the guest bedroom, remember? Really Jeff, sheep are social-"

"You what?" Jeff grabbed the phone from his shoulder and raced up the stairs. The chair rattled behind him as he knocked out the wedge on the way. "Naomi, I swear, if you've left me with more sheep to look after..."

He grabbed the railing post at the top of the landing and swung his weight to the right, barreling down the corridor to the guest room. Panting, Jeff rested his ear against the door. All he could hear was the blood pulsing in his ears and his sister's muffled laughter from the clenched phone. Jeff let the handle click open and pushed the door with his fingertips. The door swung open to reveal cream walls and slightly dusty furniture. Jeff stared at the flock of sheep arranged on the flowery quilt and swore. There must have been at least twenty of them. Jeff stepped closer and shook his head at their wide-stitched grins and cloud-white, woolly bodies. What impulse would drive her to buy so many stuffed sheep? A real one was bad enough. As he rounded the bed, he

could see a couple that lay feet-up by the base of the bed and the head of another sticking out from underneath it.

Not feeling in the mood for more games, Jeff made his excuses and said goodbye. He could hear an echo of Naomi's laughter even after he hung up. Picking up a fallen sheep, Jeff walked over to the window and lifted the sash. Aries was tearing round the yard again- this time running away from a curious magpie. Jeff turned the sheep over in his hands, noting the tag sticking out by its tail. His sister was sticking her nose in his business again. She meant well, but he had no interest in meaningless short-term relationships. He was perfectly happy spending his Valentines Day alone. With a baby lamb. That was terrorizing his backyard.

Jeff lobbed the stuffed sheep out the window and craned his head see Aries's reaction. Who was he trying to kid? No one wanted to be alone on a day that celebrated love and connection to others. Jeff sighed, he might as well celebrate Valentines with Aries. It was sad that looking after the lamb has been the closest he had come to a commitment in years. Jeff watched as Aries finally approached the toy and snickered. Aries was bouncing around and bleating happily, butting the toy with his head. In two days Aries had taken over his life; he couldn't leave the lamb by itself to go to the pub, he couldn't watch his guilty pleasure—Discovery Channel documentaries—any more, because Aries bleated constantly when the TV was on, and he made a policy to never invite people over without planning first. Maybe it would be a good idea to take the lamb for a walk tomorrow, Jeff thought, he could tire it out and get some human company too.

Valentines Day arrived as a cheerful Sunday morning. Aries was looking adorable in a blue ribbon and golden bell that matched his freshly washed, white coat. And, after a thorough shower, Jeff, too, looked decent enough for a jaunt through the park. As they passed through the park gates, Jeff could already see an abundance of couples dotted around the oval: most lying on picnic blankets, or playing games with their dogs. Maybe this wasn't the best idea after all. Jeff looked down at Aries, but the lamb didn't seem too worried as he bounced along on the end of his lead. Despite this, Jeff still skirted the main oval in favour of the overlooked dog enclosure at the back of the park. There was really no need for it, since everyone used the oval, but Council regulations required each inner-suburb park to have one. Aries bounded away as soon as the leash was released and promptly rolled in the muddiest spot he could find.

Aries's presence was a point of interest to other celebrators and, as the lamb was exploring his temporary paddock, many people drifted over to have a closer look. Alarmed, Jeff moved to intercept a couple that had brought their dog with them, but Aries had already noticed the growing crowd. Aries started tossing his head as the dog started barking and by the time Jeff had managed to get the dog owners to leave, Aries was racing round trying to find an exit.

"What do you think you're doing to that poor sheep?" a female voice demanded as he turned around, the owner poking a finger into his chest, "He should be frolicking in a field somewhere, not being terrified by suburban pets."

Jeff's looked past her to Aries's frantic state and his stomach twisted in agreement. He grunted as the edges of her perfectly manicured nails dug into his chest and looked down to see a stylishly impractical business suit, topped off with red heels.

"You think I haven't realized that yet?" Jeff said, forcing himself to remove her hand gently, "I'm taking him home. This was obviously a bad idea."

Ignoring the rest of the people gathered round, Jeff jumped the fence and started rounding up Aries. By now, he'd had a fair bit of practice at it. After a number of narrow escapes, accompanied by the cheers of his onlookers, Jeff managed to trap Aries in a corner of the fence. He grabbed the muddy lamb into a full-body hold and held on as the lamb tried to twist away. Distantly he heard giggles and catcalls, as he tumbled to the ground. Then, finally, Aries gave up his struggles, but not before Jeff was covered in mud and grass. Standing up, Jeff let out an ooph, and got a mouthful of wool, as Aries shifted and butted his head back into Jeff's cheek. Jeff looked down concernedly as Aries started shivering and didn't stop; they needed to get out of the park. As Jeff strode towards the gate, his foot impacted with something that clanged. Looking down, he saw Aries's bell covered in mud. Jeff shook his head and kept going.

The woman was still there, clutching the gate's opening mechanism, as he walked over.

"Could you open the gate please?"

"You're an ignorant brute who doesn't deserve to own a pet." she declared, ignoring his question, "I'm going to call animal services on you."

Jeff stared at her, shifting his grip on the struggling lamb, "Look lady-"

“My name is Suzannah.” She snapped back.

“Look, Suzannah-“

Suzannah glared at him, “Don’t even think about it pal. I’m married, see,” she said, flashing her ring, “I know your type and I’m not interested.”

Annoyed, Jeff lost his temper and said, “Just get out of my way, lady. I’ve got to get Aries home before he has a heart attack from stress.”

Suzannah looked at Aries, then at the curious onlookers, and seemed to deflate under their curious eyes. Without a word, she turned around and walked back towards the nervous man standing by a picnic blanket. This seemed to be a signal as couples drifted back to their activities.

Sighing, Jeff rested his chin on Aries’s back as he contemplated how to open the gate with his hands full. A group of women, all in their mid-thirties, were the only ones not to go back to the oval. Instead, they had moved closer along the fence. A brunette detached herself from their midst and walked to the gate.

“I see you’ve got a hot date tonight, there.” She said, as she undid the clasp, but didn’t open it immediately, “I hope you’ve got better plans for him than this stunt.”

Shocked, Jeff replied, “What? No. I’m not into that sort of thing. I’m single.” She laughed and moved out of the swinging gate’s path. Jeff nodded stiffly at her and slid sideways through the opening, making sure Aries’s coat wouldn’t catch on the mesh.

“Thank you.”

“No worries, pal.” She replied cheerfully. She slipped her hand into Jeff’s back pocket and squeezed his butt as he went past.

Jeff jumped, "Whoa, what are you doing?"

She chuckled, blatantly sizing him up. "Just being a Good Samaritan." She said as she walked backwards to her friends, refusing to break eye contact until she reached them, "Happy Valentines Day."

Jeff shook his head, smiling, and strode towards the park entrance. Aries started bleating as they went past the oval and Jeff sped up in response. He knew he should have just stayed at home. At least then he wouldn't have to take a ribbing from the boys at the station about dating a sheep. He was sure he saw one of the senior firefighters in the park with his wife, so there was no way he could keep this secret.

Later that evening, after he had settled Aries on the verandah with a pool of blankets and his flock of sheep, Jeff was checking his equipment for the next day. As he pulled his uniform out of the clean washing basket, he decided to put in a load of dirty laundry. He shook out each pair of jeans upside down, checking for coins and loose notes. When he came to the mud-stained jeans he had worn earlier that day, a slip of paper fell out. Jeff picked it up nervously. Unsurprisingly, it had a phone number written on it, however next to that was a stick-figure sheep. Jeff chuckled at the brunette's cheekiness and chucked the jeans and the rest of the shirts into the washing machine.

"I wonder if she's serious?" Jeff mused, as he turned on the washing machine and went to find his phone.

