

ALMOST PERFECT by Kelly Denley



CHAPTER ONE

'Has everyone got their shoes on?'

Without fail, every time we leave our house to go somewhere, whether it is to the shops, church or the park, one of us leaves our shoes behind. I find it amusing that complete strangers (my friends know me better) assume I am organised and disciplined, simply because I have eight children. To say I'm an organised person, however, is stretching the truth to breaking point. I am a flighty, head-in-the-clouds dreamer and totally at the mercy of my whims and creative desires. If it were not for my husband Robert, a down-to-earth accountant, I would probably never find the time to do everything I try to cram into my life, as it is only through his constant pressure to stick to a timetable that I get anything completed.

People always ask me why on earth we decided to have eight children. So many times I hear 'How on earth do you manage?' Or, more bluntly 'Why on earth would you want to?' I'm not from a large family myself, and as the eldest of three girls I never wanted more siblings – like most kids, at times I didn't even want the two I had. Robert grew up the second in a family of five and, although he wanted children, was not particularly inclined towards a large family of his own. My usual, rather facetious, reply to the question of 'Why?' is to speculate that I fell victim to the multitude of American sitcoms featuring big happy families that floated about in the late 1980s and early '90s – my formative years. Shows like *Eight is Enough*, with all those well-adjusted people helping each other through their personal trials and the family growing stronger together through it all. And it's true that I wanted to be one of those American sitcom 'moms' more than anything else while I was growing up. They always seemed to have the right answer to life's questions while maintaining an immaculate home, a career, full makeup and – for crying out loud – their children always cleaned their teeth, had shiny, well-brushed hair and were always dressed as if on their way to church.

But to be honest, I think the real reason I still wanted a large family as an adult was because while I was busy having children, I had something to hide behind. I always had a child in tow, on my hip or hanging onto my skirt. Being a mum – a really, really, busy mum – gave me a reason to not do anything else. I had a reason to not pursue my dreams – after all, how could I possibly find the time? I was way too busy for any of that hopes-and-dreams nonsense!

Then something happened to our family – or should I say a series of unfortunate events occurred – that led me to challenge myself in ways I never thought I could. It all seemed to start with that pink pregnancy test – and then, not long after, my best friend Kristie announced she was moving to the other side of Australia. As an adult I've never really had a lot of friends, and I'd put that down to the fact that when I married Robert, I cut all ties to nearly everyone I'd known in the teenage years that turned my parents white with worry. Within months of marrying we moved from Sydney to Canberra for Robert's work and, stuck at home with no driver's licence, a baby and miles from my family, my husband became my best friend. By the time we moved back to Sydney a few years later, our relationship was so close that I didn't really need anyone else and it was easier to stay at home with our growing family than try to find other young mums to bond with.

So when Kristie arrived on the scene, I was amazed to discover at the age of twenty-eight that I really loved having a girlfriend. She was someone I could complain to, exult or cry with, and simply be myself around.

We would meet at McDonald's every second day, where we'd place our charges in the care of the twirling, spiralling adventure land while we discussed anything from black-eyed beans to world economics. Kristie once turned up on my doorstep with a month's worth of packed school lunches and playlunches for five children to cram in my freezer so my mornings weren't so hectic. We even took off for a weekend one time, leaving the children with our husbands, to enjoy kid-free peace and tranquillity together.

Kristie was a soul mate, a confidante, and above all else she understood me – not such an easy task, I suspect – so when she told me her family was going back to Perth shortly after that plus symbol appeared, I was bereft. After showing me just how great it felt to have a friend to turn to just around the corner, my fellow harebrained schemer deserted me.

Then in October, only a few weeks after Kristie left, Robert was forced to take redundancy. Suddenly our family's secure existence was thrown into chaos and, with our baby six months from D day, I started to add a few grey hairs to my Brunette.

It had been eight years since Robert began his accountancy degree, and the needs of our rapidly growing family had often forced it to take a backseat to pretty much everything. Now, thanks to the redundancy, he felt the only choice he had was to head back to university as a full-time student and finish the darn thing. But university didn't resume until March so, rudderless and drifting, Robert jumped from part-time job to part-time job while he waited, the hope of completing his degree still seemed so far distant that instead of sustaining him, it only served to rankle and destabilise him.

Christmas came and went, 2002 was ushered in and after the usual resolutions – to lose some of my 129-odd kilos once my baby was born, be a better parent and find direction in my life – were made, I also sent up a fervent prayer that the year ahead would be good to our family. But by mid-February, just two weeks after school resumed, it was obvious we weren't off to a great start. Eight-year-old Taylor was suffering the flow-down effects of being the younger brother of two boys with Asperger's syndrome, an autistic spectrum disorder. Cameron and Scott had been diagnosed with Asperger's a few years earlier when their problems communicating and socialising, their obsessive behaviour and complete inability to handle sudden changes to their routine became too obvious to overlook. At school they were the weird ones, dismissed as loonies who no one seemed to be able to understand or deal with.

Obviously there was more to it, but that, combined with the more-than-usual Denley child sightings at school (there was one in almost every grade!), had created a family reputation that affected all our children to some extent, and Taylor in particular. Teased and bullied almost every day about his 'weirdo' brothers, things came to a head as his anger and frustration boiled over. Daily brawls and abuse from both sides saw me in the principal's office all through February and March as we tried unsuccessfully to reach a solution.

In April, Paige was born by highly unexpected Caesarean section and, thanks to a few complications afterwards, I found myself unable to drive for quite some time. I'd found the freedom of being able to get out of the house helped me cope with having a large family, so trapped at home with Robert back at university and no one to keep me company, I felt myself slowly but surely slipping into the familiar world of postnatal depression. Familiar, because I'd been there before.

I'd suffered severely from postnatal depression when Brittany was born, and so had my young family. It took me nearly two years to overcome the feelings of low self-worth and despondency I developed during this time. I would walk down the street with my three children and feel as though every eye was on me – disapproving, glaring; disgusted that someone so young (I was just twenty-one) could have three children. I took to hiding at home rather than face the eyes that I felt were constantly following me everywhere I went. I think it was my love for music that helped me survive. I had discovered that I had a reasonably good classical voice and started singing lessons, and learning and having something to focus on seemed to help me overcome my depression. A few years later, after Caitlin's arrival, I recognised the symptoms before they overwhelmed me and with counselling I was able to get through that time without antidepressants. Now the familiar greyness was falling around me again but I was hopeful this time I could keep it at bay.

Early in June, only a few weeks after I finally got my mobility back, we reeled from another blow when our four-year-old daughter Sheridan became seriously ill and was hospitalised. Two weeks of agonising worry, of juggling the needs of baby Paige, of driving back and forth to the Children's Hospital, of barely seeing Robert or the older children, of countless doctors and numerous unsuccessful treatments, took its toll on all of us before I noticed during yet another specialist's examination that her eye seemed to be bulging. A CAT scan revealed an abscess on the optical nerve that had the potential to take Sher's eyesight, or leave her brain-damaged or even dead. The operation immediately scheduled for that same evening seemed almost worse than leaving the abscess alone, but after three hours so tense I couldn't sit still, read or even pray, the surgeon emerged to tell me that they'd been able to clean out the abscess without sacrificing Sheridan's eye. Then a month after returning home from the hospital with Sheridan we wound up back in the doctor's office again, this time with Caitlin.

Five-year-old Caitlin had started school that year and, after all the disruption in our lives: the arrival of Paige, my Caesarean complications and Sheridan's illness, one morning she started screaming in class and didn't really stop. Rather than taking into account the problems we'd been experiencing at home, the school subtly and underhandedly accused Robert of something terrible via a letter to our paediatrician. I can't even begin to describe the horror and destructiveness that little letter contained or how deeply it affected my husband. I never had a moment's doubt, and perhaps that was the only thing that stopped him from completely falling apart.

In time of course Robert was cleared. Our paediatrician placed our little Caity on antidepressants to help her deal with a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by the trials our family had endured over the previous months and slowly she started to cope a little better with the requirements of school. But when my beloved Dad sat me down on his front porch two months later to tell me that the diabetes ravaging his liver would take his life within a year, I let the postnatal depression I'd been battling since Paige arrived consume me completely. I sat there that morning desperately trying to find a shred of warmth in the winter sun to take away a sudden chill. Dad was my rock, the one person in the world who never criticised or judged me. Every time he saw me he told me I was his hero and no matter how cruel and unkind the world could be, Dad could always make me feel like it didn't matter because he loved me. The thought of losing him was impossible.

The weather started to warm into spring, and purple and pink blossom burst out of the bare branches of my wisteria and weeping cherry, but a wintry coldness still seemed to hold our family in its grip. Robert seemed to be feeling the effects of the turmoil caused by the school's accusation. On top of that, the loss of his job plus the difficulty of coping with his study workload while trying to stay on top of our financial situation caused him to doubt himself constantly. His belief that things would get better slowly ebbed away. As he sank further into a sense of hopelessness and despair he withdrew from us all and I lost the only real emotional support I had left.

In September 2002, a year after I'd seen that pink plus and discovered Paige was on her way, I walked out of the local shopping mall with all eight children one evening and completely lost control. It was not unusual for me to be questioned or stared at when out with our eight children – even when they were on their best 'treats promised' behaviour – but that night, instead of being able to balance out the bad with the occasional smiles and friendly comments, I felt everyone was judging me. All I could see were frowns of disapproval, openly gaping mouths, incredulous counting of heads; could hear only whispered negatives and put-downs.

It wasn't really the children; they were just behaving like children do – touching things they shouldn't, running ahead and getting in the way of trolleys or almost tripping people over, squabbling incessantly. If there had only been a couple children it wouldn't have seemed so constant, but when all eight were acting like I'd fed them undiluted red cordial and sugar cubes for dinner, it all got too much, too fast. Thanks to my depression I withered under the condemnation I imagined from everyone around me as I compared myself to the parents of the well-behaved little angels that walked respectfully beside them.

By the time I managed to reach my car, manoeuvring the thoroughly overloaded trolley full of groceries (and the odd child or two) first through the busy mall and then the carpark, screaming all the while at the others to stay close so they didn't get run over by reversing cars, I had worked myself into an absolute rage. 'Why do you kids do this to me? Why can't we just go shopping and have a nice time like other people do? You are all so bloody embarrassing!' I hurled accusations as I literally threw the shopping into the back of the Tarago while ten-year-old 'mini mum' Brittany valiantly battled to get seatbelts onto her still-squabbling brothers and sisters and tried to ignore the resentment they felt towards what they saw as her privileged position as helper.

It was a five-minute drive to home and yet I drove for over an hour. Throwing the car around corners and accelerating to within an inch of out of control I drove aimlessly and unthinkingly, my rage growing with every incoherent expletive that left my mouth. All the while blaming my silent and terrified children, blaming them and their behaviour for the judgement I felt from others. By the time I finally pulled into our driveway I had nothing left inside, I felt broken, as if my emotions had all spilled out of me and been lost forever. Silently I carried in my shopping and put it away while once again Brittany heroically stepped in and got her brothers and sisters to bed. As they whispered their goodnights I could barely bring myself to look into their confused and anxious eyes, knowing that I had caused them to feel that way.

The very next day, Cameron, just thirteen years old and in his first year of high school, climbed onto the railing outside his second-floor classroom and threatened to throw himself off the balcony into the quadrangle below. After receiving the phone call I slowly walked out of the house and with a supreme effort of will forced my car to head to the school and not into the nearest telegraph pole. This is my fault . . . my fault . . . kept replaying in my head as I remembered how I'd behaved the night before. It sounds so selfish but I couldn't get past that guilt long enough to even consider how Cameron must have been feeling or what we would do next.

Robert met me at the school and, after I'd managed to pull myself together, we tried to find out just what had happened. What we discovered was that yet again Cameron had been the victim of some serious bullying that morning. It had got so bad that he'd thrown a garbage bin across the classroom at the boys who'd been harassing him and been sent to a special room where he was supposed to be able to feel safe. My terrible feelings of guilt diminished only slightly, however.

I knew that if Cameron hadn't been stressed by the previous night's difficulties he would have handled the bullying better, but as our investigations progressed I felt my anger and frustration grow as I discovered how badly mismanaged Cameron's Asperger's had been.

Despite numerous meetings with the high school before Cameron started there, it had been decided without our knowledge that Cam's teachers would not be informed of his disability. The powers-that-be believed Cameron would be better off if he was treated like any other child at the school and that it wasn't necessary for his teachers to be given any information on Asperger's. Consequently, when a problem arose in the classroom, Cameron was rarely allowed to leave to go to the 'safe room' that had been organised for him; when he was bullied for being different, it was his fault for being different and rarely did anyone step in to defend or help him. My wild ride may have been the last straw for Cameron, but the problems he'd been having for so long certainly hadn't helped.

Over the hours following our meeting with the school I sat beside Cameron at the Children's Hospital waiting to be seen by the psychiatric team, thinking constantly about what had happened over the past year and how it had affected my family and me. I had a choice to make: I could let the events of the past year be an excuse to keep on feeling rotten about life and continue down this self-destructive path I was on, or I could get some help and fix things. I had done enough damage to my family, my children needed a mother they could rely on. It was time to get that help.

I saw a counsellor, attended a course for self-empowerment, stopped looking around me while at the shops and took the whole tribe out with me less often. Our family attended counselling sessions individually and together, and that helped me realise how much my low self-esteem was affecting us all.

Whether I liked it or not, the mood I was in when I woke up each morning was like an emotional lighthouse and my kids were a bunch of moths attracted by its beam. If I was unhappy, it didn't take long before they were unhappy also; if I was cranky, sibling tension would reach all-time highs that even the best mediator would have trouble easing.

Although I'd give anything for Cameron to have not felt the pain that made him climb onto that railing that day, perhaps it was the event that made fate realise our family was seriously in need of a big break. Whether that was the case or not, slowly the winds of ill fortune abated and for a while at least, no more trials came our way.

A new psychiatrist took Cameron off the concoction of antidepressants he'd been on for years since the first diagnosis of Asperger's. Away from the pressures of high school and off medication Cameron calmed down almost overnight and was able to concentrate a little better at the new school he was attending for kids with emotional problems. Slowly he started to feel good about himself and we started to fight our way back to a place where we were all okay.

With room to breathe, Robert was able to study during the day and with a growing confidence in himself found the taxi-driving he was doing to support us less burdensome. Although they'd never go away, Taylor was coping better with the bullies, Caitlin was taken off antidepressants and was happier at school, and I . . . well, I discovered that I really needed something other than motherhood to help me feel good about being me.

I learned through counselling that my belief in myself was so tied up in my perception of what people thought of my family that every time someone looked sideways at me or asked rudely, 'Don't you know what causes it?' or in a startlingly unoriginal attempt at humour: 'Don't you own a TV?', my self-esteem would take a nosedive and I'd start questioning all my choices in life. That wild ride in the car may have been a first, but the feelings that prompted it had been there since our fourth child, Taylor, was born and we no longer fitted the 'norm'. And it wasn't just the frequent snide comments and looks in the street; those three television sets we owned that hadn't fulfilled their role as contraceptives were forever coming up with new 'perfect woman' advertisements I was sure were aimed expressly at me.

I often felt that I had bizarre multiple personalities warring inside me. I was constantly torn between trying to be perfect Conservative Mum, who baked fresh cookies for afternoon tea; Eccentric Mum, complete with paint-strewn shirt, who was always late for appointments; and Rebellious Mum, who just wanted to be herself and to hell to anyone else. Eccentric Mum was always getting fed up with Conservative Mum's preoccupation with what everyone thought of her and Conservative Mum thought that Eccentric Mum's 'creative' projects drew far too much attention to us. When that happened Rebellious Mum would strongarm her way in and get rid of the other two by simply picking them up and chucking them out of my head.

So at the end of 2002, standing amid the ruins of my insular existence, I surveyed my damaged ego and its surroundings. I was thirty-one, a mother of eight, I weighed a not so healthy 129 kilograms, was just emerging from a bout of postnatal depression and paranoid about other people judging me. My only real woman friend was across the country, my father in the last year of his life, my husband battling depression. We had no secure income; two children with Asperger's, one of whom had decided that threatening to jump off a building was the best way to alert us to his inability to cope with the stresses of family and school; a child suffering stress-related depression; and I was thoroughly confused about who I was and what I wanted to do with my life.

Something had to change and, instead of making excuses for myself, this time I would face up to the problems and fix them. I sat down and took a long hard look at myself and the things I didn't like so much. I'd been hiding behind the skirt of motherhood for a long time and I always had an excuse to not try hard at anything else. I was hiding from the fear that I might fail at something and invite criticism and there was no way my fragile ego could handle that. Once I realised this I came to the conclusion that I couldn't keep hiding because even if things were perfect, which they clearly weren't, one day my children would grow up and leave home, and then what? Then what would I hide behind? My granny skirt?

I figured my first priority should be doing something that would provide a future that wasn't so unsure and that helped me remember who I was all those years ago when I thought I had all the answers. In my teens, that is. As I'd been suffering morning sickness on the day of my school certificate science exam, I never actually finished my high school education. When all my school friends were choosing their subjects for Year 11, I was busy choosing between blue and pink cot sheets and wondering if I'd make macaroni cheese or spaghetti on toast for dinner that night.

So I decided the first change I would make was to complete my education. I needed to finish what I started and I also needed to prove that I wasn't that idiot mother of eight who didn't know what caused 'it' that I thought everyone thought I was. Unfortunately making the decision to do those things and then actually doing them required courage – and courage wasn't something I had in reserve.

I grew up in a two-storey house – the garage and laundry downstairs and the living areas upstairs. At the bottom of the staircase next to the garage door was a second door that provided access to the dark, damp and musty area beneath the house. I was always so afraid of what lurked behind that door that I never lingered on the staircase. Then, on my eighth birthday, after years of terrible fear I invented something that would save me from the monsters I was sure were there. That invention was 'the magic button'.

I placed the magic button on the banister railing at the top of the staircase. I never questioned its ability or where its powers came from, I simply trusted that if I slammed my hand down hard enough on it when I reached the top of the stairs, the area directly behind me would be sealed off and I would be safe. It is one of the clearest childhood memories I possess, the feeling of racing to the top of the staircase believing that at any moment grotesque fingers would catch hold of my leg and drag me back down before I could get my hand onto that button. All my life I have felt that hand snatching at my leg in some form. I wonder if when I was young the hand was symbolic of the bullies that waited around every corner. Then maybe as I grew older it was the resentment of my friends and schoolmates when I did something too well because my critical and perfectionist mother had overseen my every step. As an adult it was my own criticism of everything I did and my own judgement of how terribly badly I had failed that I ran from. To hide from this I blamed others for that judgement, and others then became the monster on my staircase.

Facing my fear of leaving the comfortable and insular little world I had existed in for so long and finding the courage to face the criticism and judgement of others by putting my intelligence to the test was like pulling

that magic button off the railing, looking the monster in its big ugly eye, and telling it to go take a hike. I was terrified: I was a high school drop-out, I'd been a mum for thirteen years and the doubts were whizzing around my head like bees around an upended hive.

Almost everybody thought I was nuts. My mum was worried I was taking on too much too soon, my dad was worried about my health. Some told me my job was to be at home. Others questioned my ability. Some said nothing at all, and a few, including my husband and – despite their fears for me – my parents, told me to go for it. It wasn't going to be easy, I was still breastfeeding seven-month-old Paige, our family was still recovering from the previous year's trials and of my eight children, two had Asperger's, six were in school and two under my feet at home. Rob was working full-time and studying part-time. There was no question, however. I really needed to take that button and – after stomping on it a few times just to show it who was really the boss – toss it as far as humanly possible and stare the monster down.

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