
DRIFTWOOD

BY

PETER THOMAS

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A wounded family returns to the sanctuary of the ancestral whare. As family secrets become revealed, seemingly-unrelated events conspire to become a gathering storm. Dark secrets within the bush and estuary expose the scar tissue of human frailty. Like driftwood, emotions are swept in directions neither planned nor imagined. But those that conspire have no concept of the tenacity of the new liaisons, nor of the influence of a tiny bronze mermaid on the minds of social castaways. On the river and in the lagoon counter plans form and gather momentum. As time runs out, the final conflict uses the whole of the Pacific for its resolution.

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| | Chapter | Page |
|----|----------------------------|------|
| 1 | The Last Sandbank | 5 |
| 2 | Mad Harry | 16 |
| 3 | Man of Two Rivers | 29 |
| 4 | Elvina | 41 |
| 5 | Rurenga | 56 |
| 6 | Mermaids | 64 |
| 7 | The Watchers | 77 |
| 8 | The Gate | 88 |
| 9 | Admiral Nelson | 97 |
| 10 | Fish Hooks and Drum Sticks | 109 |
| 11 | Fishing Trips | 117 |
| 12 | Floundering | 129 |
| 13 | Driftwood Gathering | 139 |
| 14 | The Last Scow | 152 |
| 15 | Deception | 165 |
| 16 | Reporters | 176 |
| 17 | River People | 182 |
| 18 | Kidnapped | 196 |
| 19 | Marooned | 205 |
| 20 | Hunted | 217 |
| 21 | Glass Claw | 227 |
| 22 | Te Waka | 235 |
| 23 | Ngati Rurenga | 243 |
| 24 | The Green Parrot | 258 |
| 25 | The Rifle | 265 |
| 26 | Grave Events | 272 |
| 27 | A Bad Day | 283 |
| 28 | The Storm | 293 |
| 29 | The Rhythm | 314 |

DRIFTWOOD

They lived
In dappled light
Of ancient forest stock
When hope was young
And dreams were possible,
Until by storm
Their roots were washed away.

Swept by flood
Tribes of Driftwood people
Dwell within the narrow straits
Moved on by the ebb and flow
Of tides they can't control

Until
Pounded by surf
Or languishing in slack water
They lie discarded and forgotten
With bones destined to be bleached white
By an unrelenting sun.

Yet a wind blows out of the sea
The tide is on the flood
And rippling within the dune grass
The ghosts of a common purpose
Gather like a phantom fleet.

CHAPTER 1

THE LAST SANDBANK

Meriana couldn't remember when she made the decision. It started as the flicker of an idea while the children slept and she lay next to the empty space in her double bed. Gathering momentum the idea invaded every waking moment day and night. As they left for school she would decide to talk about it when they got home. Then she spent the rest of the day rehearsing how she would introduce the idea and tried to guess their reactions. But as coming home time approached ideas evaporated and were replaced by the single word 'tomorrow'. Should she talk to all three of them together and risk them ganging up on her or try sounding them out individually? The moment was never right. They had friends with them or she only saw their backs as they dashed out. The kids had enough to put up with since that Pakeha woman took their Dad off them – not that he was much of a loss, but now she was going to fail them. It was a Tuesday morning when she made the decision to talk to Huia first. If she could get Huia on her side she would have only Rangi and Hemi to convince but Rangi had a new girlfriend. When they came in from school all three came into the kitchen together, as she decided the moment was not right Huia brought up the subject.

"Mum! If the bank manager wants to take our house off us why don't we go and live at Grandma and Grandad's whare?"

"But this is your home!" Meriana blurted out.

“So?” Hemi asked.

“It would be fun; our home’s where you are Mum.” Tears welled in Meriana’s eyes and she hugged Huia so the boys wouldn’t see.

Huia helped Mum and her brothers load their remaining possessions onto the back of Grandad’s truck. As they drove away no one looked back. Keeping to the back roads meant the old truck didn’t need a warrant or registration and all four passengers could fit into the single passenger seat. And they fitted because they were still a family.

Engine noise in the cab drowned speech but not memories which jarred like ruts in the dirt road. Now, retracing her life, she was returning to her sanctuary embedded in the past where tsunamis of the mind fell on other beaches. They were all going back to her tribal homeland and into the old whare at the beach.

The whare emerged from behind the trees. Meriana’s eyes grew round at the same moment Huia uttered the single word, “look”. The lichen stained timbers were gone. There were three new bedrooms, one for Mum, one for Hemi and Rangi to share and Huia had a bedroom all to herself. And what’s more every room had an electric light bulb. There was even an inside dunny, which flushed when you pushed the button. Mum pondered what impossible insight into the future had prompted her father to rebuild the whare at that precise time. Could he have foreseen the hammer blows about to fall on her and her family? Looking into his eyes gave her no clue. It was Huia who asked if he had built all that especially for them. The answer, if there was one, became lost in

the smile lines of his face as he laughed and said the river had told him to do it. Disbelieving, Mum listened as he explained how winter floods brought down a huge rimu and the tide left it as driftwood on the beach. He cut it into sections, loaded it on the old truck, and took it to his cousin's saw mill for milling. Then the whanau spent months rebuilding the old whare and, just before Christmas, everything was ready. And this time his family wasn't just going to stay for the school holidays. This time they were staying for good. Grandad said it was the best Christmas present he could ever have. So many Maori had gone to the city. The city spat them out and turned them into wild animals. But his family was returning to their tribal homeland.

Hemi and Rangi were the first up on Christmas morning. Darkness lingered as they went into Huia's bedroom, pulled the pillow from under her head and hit her with it. In the yard the rooster was waking the hens. Huia's awakening cry and the roosters crowing drifted across the lagoon and became lost in the breaking surf on the ocean beach. Darkened windows spilled light across the empty beach. Oystercatchers and wrybills scattered across the sand and mud flats during daylight hours stirred in the dunes. They didn't know it was Christmas morning, but perhaps they dreamed of skimming across black water or of crabs and worms on the ebb tide. The stars went out, as the lemon light in the sky started a new day.

Hemi, Rangi and Huia pushed open the kitchen door, expecting three red stuffed stockings. But Grandma had made three woven flax baskets and inside each basket they found, not a bottle of coke, but a bottle of grapefruit juice pressed from the

grapefruit tree in the garden. They were about to start eating kumera cakes from the baskets when Mum, Grandma and Grandad joined them in the kitchen carrying presents.

Grandad was the first to give his gifts to Hemi and Rangi. They had identical packages. Tearing off the paper they found they each had a canoe paddle carved in the old Maori style.

Grandma spoke. "Your Grandad carved them for you."

Grandad explained. "You are both men now not boys. Your job will be to catch the kai moana, the sea food, for your whanau. This morning we will fish the lagoon. When the hangi is opened your fish will be in the first basket we take out."

"What if we don't catch anything?" Hemi asked.

"The lagoon will give us fish, Hemi." said Grandad. "We are not raiders who go to plunder the lagoon and rush back to the city. You and the canoe and the lagoon are one. Our canoe leaves no mark on the lagoon. We breathe the same air. The same gannets which visit our garden guide us to the fish in the lagoon. We catch our fish and plant our garden to the same rhythms of the moon that cause the tides to ebb and flow. My bones are old now. All there is left is the rhythm. The wisdom of that rhythm will be my special gift to you."

Mum gave Hemi and Rangi a parcel each.

"And these are my gifts for you." She said. Inside each parcel was a life jacket. "These are to keep you safe boys."

Grandad picked up his last parcel. It was heavier than Hemi and Rangi's present.

"This is my gift to you Huia." Inside the wrappings Huia found a stock saddle.

Grandma told Huia. "Your Grandad has stitched new leather into his old saddle and punched more holes in the straps so that it will fit you."

"Your Grandma has oiled and polished the leather," Grandad told Huia. "The oil has made it soft. You will need to do the same. My old joints are too stiff for riding so your job will be to get the sheep in off the hills. And my other gift to you is grazing in the paddock. My horse Starlight is yours. She is more to me than a horse, she is my friend. I have given you my friend. When you get to know each other she will be your friend as well."

"For me Grandad!" was all Huia remembered saying.

Mum gave Huia a kiss and a riding hat. "Wear it and keep yourself safe Huia." She said it unaware of the thought processes prompting her to choose safety equipment for her children. It may have been some primeval maternal premonition or simply a reaction to a disastrous year, because she could not have known the future was stalking her family and about to make a kill.

"Can I go for a ride on the beach Mum?" asked Huia.

Mum looked at Grandad and he smiled. Huia knew that smile meant "Yes." But there was a word of caution from Grandma.

“You will be safe on the beach Huia but don’t go near the river. A taniwha lives in it.”

Huia remembered her last teacher. “Mrs. Smith at school says there’s no such thing as a taniwha.”

“Then your teacher has too much book learning and not enough knowledge Huia.” Grandma replied, and Grandad added. “Your Grandma is right. There is a taniwha in the river. You can ride on the beach but you must not go to the river.”

Huia’s “OK!” was followed with a smile and a question, “Can I go and catch Starlight now?”

“No” replied Grandad. “You don’t need to catch Starlight. Just go to the gate and call her. She’ll come to you. Come on, I’ll go with you this time.”

Riding Starlight to the beach Huia saw Grandad and her brothers set off in the canoe across the lagoon. A hare dashed out of the grass almost under Starlight’s hooves but Starlight never altered her pace. They reached the top of the beach and the tangle of driftwood left by long forgotten tides. Huia tried to make Starlight go through the driftwood to get to the sand. But Starlight stopped and would go no further. However much Huia urged Starlight she would go no further. In frustration Huia tied her to a branch and walked to the beach. She could see the river.

Mrs. Smith said there was no such thing as a taniwha, but Grandma and Grandad both said a taniwha lived there. If she could see it she would write to Mrs. Smith and tell her. It couldn’t do any harm just to look.

Grandad and the boys paddled the canoe towards the other end of the lagoon.

"That's where we'll find the fish" Grandad told Hemi and Rangi. "See the gannets diving. They will be feeding on herring. Underneath the herring there will be kahawai driving them to the surface."

"Why do gannets go so high in the air to dive?" Rangi asked.

"Because they have a lot of oil in their feathers which makes them float to the surface. They have to get a fast dive to get deep enough to catch fish. They can only stay down for a few moments."

"And if they miss they have to fly up in the air again to get another try." said Hemi.

"That's right" replied Grandad. "Now look at the cormorant there. See how it swims. It has little more than its neck out of the water. That's because it doesn't have much oil in its feathers. It can swim and dive whenever it wants and uses its wings to fly under water. It swims faster than fish and stays down a long time. But when it comes up its feathers are soggy and it can only fly with difficulty. You often see them standing on a rock with their wings drying in sun and wind".

"Is that what that bird is doing?" asked Hemi.

"No that's a reef heron, they have long legs and they walk in the shallows looking into the water for things to eat. When they hold their wings out like that it's to shade the water from the sun so they can see down into it."

Huia walked to the river. The ranges must have had rain. Brown and fast the river carried trees and branches. Huia couldn't see a taniwha. Perhaps her teacher was right and there is no such thing as a taniwha. Then she saw one. She could see its eyes and back. It swam in the eddy towards her and came close to the bank. Creeping closer she realised it wasn't a taniwha, just a bit of driftwood. As she reached down to touch it the shingle bank collapsed. Flood water grabbed as she slid further. Clawed gravel became fluid under her fingers. She slipped further and her feet couldn't touch bottom. Her face went under. Swept by the swollen river she couldn't even shout for help. At the river mouth walls of water were rearing up and exploding across the bar as the salt devoured the fresh river water in a feeding frenzy. That was where the river was taking her.

Out in the canoe Grandad pointed out a white bird. They watched it take to the air as they approached.

"That's a kotuku, or white heron. There are not many of them left. It has always been special to our people."

Resting their paddles they watched its slow lazy flight across the lagoon only just above the water.

"It is going to land on the other side of the river," said Grandad. But Grandad was wrong. It suddenly swerved to one side.

"That's strange," said Grandad. "Your eyes are younger than mine boys; can you see what startled the kotuku?"

The morning sun flashed on the river.

"I think there's someone in the water." Hemi answered.

"There's only one person on the beach, and that's Huia. Quick boys dig deep with the paddles. Give me the speed of the shark boys, the speed of the shark. Head for the last sandbank. It's her only chance."

The river carried Huia into a back eddy. She circled round twice clutched at driftwood but it carried her into a welter of water that obstructed the sky. Gulping at elusive air, water flooded her mouth and windpipe. Air and water, cough and gasp merged.

"Faster boys." called Grandad. They dug their paddles deeper. The heavy hand of pain gripped Grandad's chest. He gave a silent cry. "Oh God not now. Please, God not now."

He shouted across the water to Huia. "The last sandbank! Try for the last sandbank!"

Beneath the surface Huia heard nothing. But at the top of the beach tied to a piece of driftwood, Starlight lifted her head. Her ears pricked up alert, listening.

The pain tightened its grip on Grandad's chest. He called again.

"The last sandbank. Try for the last sandbank."

Never before had such a shout been heard in the lagoon. Startled birds took to the air. The door of the whare opened and dogs, followed by Mum and Grandma started running. At the top of the beach Starlight's eyes flashed white, she reared and lunged. The branch tethering her snapped. Picking her way through piled driftwood she started down the beach.

On dry sand she broke into a trot. Reaching wet sand she thrust her head forward and broke into a gallop. Tiny rainbows splashed from her hooves as she went through pools left by the ebb tide. Crabs dived for their burrows. The distance to the last sandbank closed. The canoe still had a long way to go. Starlight reached the sandbank and didn't pause. Water washed the sand from under her hooves. A bow wave broke over her chest and neck. She drove deeper. A stirrup flashed under water. Huia's hand brushed against something. Instinct not consciousness made her grab, first with one hand, then with both. Breaking water covered her head. Unable to see she clung. With Huia's legs trailing Starlight turned, stumbled, found ground and stumbled again. Heaving flanks struggled for the bank. Gradually the bow wave over her chest receded. Before she was right out of the water Hemi, Rangi and Mum reached her. Mum grabbed Huia and carried her the last few paces to the sandbank. Mum was crying and the dogs barking. Starlight shook herself to shake off the water. It was Huia who asked the question.

"Where's Grandad?" No one took any notice. Coughing and shouting she asked again. "Where's Grandad?" Everyone looked round. Grandma found him lying in the bottom of the canoe, dead. Grandad put everything, everything he had into that last great shout. His heart had burst.

Even if Huia lives for five generations there will still be tears in her eyes when she tells, with total certainty, it was Grandad's wairua, Grandad's ghost, in the saddle when Starlight galloped down the beach and it was Grandad's hand not a stirrup leather she

held as Starlight pulled her out of river and gave her back her life.

CHAPTER 2

MAD HARRY

Harry was mad. The gully where he lived was called Mad Harry's Gully. The river foaming through the boulders by Mad Harry's Hut was called Mad Harry's River. The bush track leading to his hut was called Mad Harry's Track. No one doubted Harry was mad. If you crept up on him in the bush, real quiet, on a hot summer day you might see him sweating and staggering up hill with a huge log on his shoulders. You might hear him talking to fantails or encouraging himself, in short gasps, as he panted to the top of the bluff. Then with one final effort he'd launch his log off into space to fall into the river below. He'd stand, watch the splash and go back and do the same thing again, hour after hour, day after day, week after week. Eventually, even Mad Harry seemed to get bored. But Harry liked carrying things. If he got bored with carrying logs he'd carry rocks, huge muddy rocks, out of the bush to pile up outside his hut.

Sometimes in an evening he could be seen with an old Holden hub cap panning for gold in river sand. Lots of people panned for gold but they all did it in rivers where there was gold. The fact that he never found gold didn't seem to bother Harry. At least his Holden hub cap was always shiny. If anyone doubted whether Harry was sane they would look at his raft moored in the fastest flow of the river. A sane person would have moored it in the calm water above the rapids and been able to use it to cross the river. But Harry had put it in one place in the river where he couldn't use it. No one was in any doubt. Harry was

mad. Mad but cunning! Not many people had seen him. If he saw or even sensed anyone he slid into the bush. Whatever he was doing he would stop frequently, raise his head and sniff the air. He'd sway his head from side to side listening for any unnatural sound that might indicate the presence of someone else. But on stormy days, when the bush creaked and cracked you might be able to stalk him.

Parents tried to make sure their children stayed out of the bush by Mad Harry's hut. Mum was no exception. Once on the school bus Huia thought about nothing except riding Starlight. But if Huia wanted to ride Starlight she had to accept boundaries. She could go up the gully along the river bank as far as the beech trees. Then she had to take the track to the back fence and come down Manuka Gully to the home paddock, and no further. Had it not been for Grandma Huia would probably not have been allowed to go that far. But Grandma explained to Mum that Mad Harry always kept hidden and never went into open paddocks. So reluctantly Mum agreed to let Huia ride as far as the back fence.

If things had been normal that windy evening after school Huia would not have met Mad Harry. But to get to Starlight's paddock she had to go past the hen house. One of the hens had a bleeding head. The other hens were pecking the wound and without any doubt would soon kill their victim. Huia had gone into the hen house, caught the wounded hen and put her into an old dog pen. The hen hid in the darkest corner of the pen. By the time Huia had filled a water trough, put mash in a bowl and found a length of baling twine to tie the pen door, twenty minutes had passed.

Although Huia didn't know it, this delay would cause her path to cross Mad Harry's.

Heavy rain had caused a slip at the top of the back paddock leaving a fence post hanging on its wires. Six ewes had escaped and probably gone up the gully. Yesterday Hemi and Rangi climbed the hill as soon as they got home and worked till dark, fixing the fence. This evening Mum offered no objection to Huia going for a ride. To Huia's amazement Mum even suggested Huia could go up the gully to see if she could find the missing ewes. Huia rode Starlight along the river bank path, but had instructions to stay in the paddocks and not go into the bush. As she left the home paddock the broad summer shadows were starting to lengthen sweeping in grotesque curves across the path as the tail end of the storm shook the trees. Darkness was closing in. The same storm that wrecked the fence probably brought down the beech tree at the edge of the bush line. The top branches were in the river, but the trunk was a reef of jagged splinters blocking the track.

Riding uphill Huia reached the fallen tree at exactly the same moment that Mad Harry was climbing over it carrying a rock in one hand and a stick in the other. Despite his size there was fear in his cry when he saw Huia. Starlight reared, her hooves striking out at air. Above the sound of the wind in the trees there was the sound of a rush of wings as every bird that could fly took to the air. The rest ran for cover, as did Mad Harry. At least he tried to run, but he fell. His rock rolled away and landed in a tangle of branches in the river, and his stick caught in a clump of fern. Harry clawed at the undergrowth trying to break his fall as he slid down the bank

following his rock. Protruding from a shattered branch, like a meat skewer, a shaft of torn timber tore a hole in his trousers impaling Harry's leg. Bright blood flowed. Huia dismounted and held Starlight's head to calm her. As soon as Starlight stood calmly Huia turned to look down the bank. It was not the wound that made Harry cry out again. It was Huia. He put his arms protectively over his head.

"Don't hit me! Don't hit me!"

Huia had heard those same words before. Her memory flashed back to the playground where a ring of students formed to shout "Fight, fight." No teacher had been on playground duty. William kept shouting "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!"

George and Nathan had William on the ground. His glasses had come off and George kicked them down the storm water drain. Huia ran to the staff room to fetch Mrs. Smith who pushed into the circle of cheering students. She grabbed Nathan by the collar pulling him off William. No bigger than either Nathan or George Mrs. Smith ordered them to stand with their backs to the wall and their hands on their heads. They did so, but William kept shouting "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!" at Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith sat on her heels and brought herself down to his height, talking slowly and quietly to William. Blood from his nose had run onto his shirt and shorts. Mrs. Smith tried to get him to stand and go to the medical room but he just kept shouting "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!" Mrs. Smith sent the other kids into their classroom and asked Huia to get the janitor to bring a crow bar to remove the drain cover. They found William's glasses and it wasn't until he straightened them and

put them on that he would get up and go to the medical room.

Now Harry was shouting “Don’t hit me! Don’t hit me!” Just like William. Huia remembered what Mrs. Smith had done and also sat on her heels and talked slowly and quietly to Harry.

“Of course I’m not going to hit you. Can I help you get up the bank Harry?” She was looking down on pale watery eyes which focused on her out of a face burnt to the colour of a peat bog by weather and age. Buffeted by wind off the river his beard swirled to one side giving his face a lopsided appearance which drew Huia’s eyes downward to an open neck shirt as faded as a log of sun bleached driftwood.

Never having seen Mad Harry, Huia didn’t know for sure it was him but, because of that startled cry, was sure she had guessed right. She used his name. Anyone else would probably put her right. She needed to know if it was Mad Harry. Mum warned her to keep away from him. At school they told her about “Stranger Danger”. But Harry was trying to get further down the bank towards the river although hardly able to use his bad leg. Blood ran down the side of his boot leaving a trail over the leaves on the ground. Huia wondered if Mad Harry was trying to escape from her. She called to him.

“Are you OK Harry?”

“My wood! I’ve lost my wood. I’m just collecting wood,” this was despite the fact Harry had dropped a rock and not a piece of wood. Huia wondered whether she ought to get back on Starlight and ride home as fast as she could. She was pretty sure that’s what

Mum would want her to do. But she saw the trail of blood. The top of the bank near the path was almost vertical. Even if he got to the river to rescue his rock would he be able to get back up the bank again with his bad leg? Might he bleed to death?

Huia made up her mind realising she was putting herself in his power.

“Harry, I can see your wood. I’ll climb down and get it for you if you’ll let me help you get back up the bank.” It seemed stupid to her to say she’d get his wood when it was a rock he had lost but she thought she’d better go along with what he wanted to call it. That’s what Mrs. Smith would have done. She took the stirrup leathers off Starlight, fastened one end round a beech sapling, buckled the other one onto it and lowered the leathers over the steep bit down the bank. As she did so she realised she would need those leathers on Starlight if she had to get away from Harry fast.

Harry hesitated and Huia wondered if he had heard. Silently he picked up his stick and pushed himself up the bank. Pulling on the stirrup leathers to make it up the steep bit, he reached the track. Huia climbed down the bank, picked up the rock and scrambled back to the track. Harry took the rock from her and startled her with, “Thank you Huia.”

“How did you know my name?” she asked. His reply disturbed Huia more than the fact that he knew her name. Harry had watched her in the paddock and heard her brothers use her name. She flinched at the idea of Mad Harry hiding in the bush watching and listening. She wondered if playing with her brothers in the paddock would ever seem the same.

Separating the stirrup leathers she hooked them back onto Starlight. Should she mount Starlight, and ride home leaving Mad Harry unable to walk properly? Would Mum get medical attention for Harry? And would it be in time for him? Blood formed a puddle by his foot.

“Do you need the hospital?” she asked.

“Back in my hut I should be able to stitch it myself.”

Huia wondered whether his answer mean ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

“Can you make it back to your hut Harry?”

“I think so, if I could hold your arm and use my stick.”

“Is your hut far?” Huia asked.

“If we get down to the river by the next bend we only need to ford the river in the shallows and my hut is the other side.”

Huia noticed Harry’s use of the word “we”. He was expecting her to help. He needed help. If it had been anyone else Huia would not have hesitated. But go to Mad Harry’s hut with him after dark?

Huia made a decision. She looped the reins under the stirrup leathers turned Starlight round and smacking her across the rump told her to go home. Starlight trotted back along the track. If Starlight arrived home riderless Mum and the boys would come to look for her. Probably the first place searched would be Mad Harry’s hut.

As Huia watched Starlight trot back along the track she noticed darkness closing in and apart from wind in the trees silence had fallen on the forest. Without Starlight she started to feel scared. She tried to bury premonitions of what might happen alone in the bush after dark with Mad Harry. Would he act differently if he knew how frightened she was? Apprehensively she decided to talk to him. Harry leaned heavily on her as they made their way deeper into the bush.

“Harry, that piece of wood you found looks like rock to me.”

“You’re right Huia it is rock now. But millions of years ago it was wood. It’s called petrified wood. The timber has been replaced with silica, only the pattern of the grain remains. It’s like glass which has captured the spirit of a primeval world.”

“What do you want it for?” she asked, hoping to keep the conversation going.

“Because I can cut beautiful things out of it. As I work it the grain comes to life and I feel as if I am travelling back to a time before the age of cataclysms. But mostly I want it because it’s beautiful, like you.”

Huia felt uneasy hearing the words “beautiful like you.” It wasn’t what she wanted to hear from Mad Harry. She decided to change the subject quickly.

“If it is like glass, how do you cut it?”

“I have made stone cutting and polishing machines in my hut. I’ll show you if you like.”

“Mum and the boys are coming to meet me; I won’t have time to see them tonight.” Or any other time, thought Huia.

“Perhaps you could tell me how they work instead.” she suggested.

“It’s quite simple; they are driven by electric motors.”

“Oh! So you have electricity in your hut?” Huia asked.

“Yes, I made a raft and moored it in the fastest bit of the river. Underneath is a propeller. The flow of water turns the propeller which drives an electrical generator. A cable runs ashore to my hut providing all the electricity I need.”

“And you made that yourself!” Huia started to wonder if he was not as mad as people said. But did that make him more or less dangerous?

Turning off the main track towards the river Harry peered at the ground in gathering darkness. He stopped, pointing with his stick at disturbed leaves on the ground.

“Look Huia. Someone has been along this track in the last couple of days. No it’s two people. Two people have been along here.”

As she turned to look at the ground Harry grabbed her waist, threw her onto her back and fell on top of her. Fear gave Huia strength. Kicking out she heard him grunt in pain. She clawed his face with her free hand. Harry grabbed her wrist. Huia found herself screaming, “Don’t hit me! Don’t hit me!” Now it

was Harry who was speaking slowly and quietly to her.

“Huia, I promise you I will not hurt you.”

“Then let me go. Get off me.”

Harry continued to speak slowly and calmly.

“Huia I will show you something and then I promise I will let you go and won’t hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re hurting me now. Get off me. Let me get up.”

“There is something I want to show you first,” Harry told her.

“I don’t want to see it. I want to go home. It’s getting dark. Mum and my brothers are on their way right now to find me. Let me go, please.” Huia decided to add the word “please.”

Harry continued slowly and calmly.

“Huia I am not trying to keep you against your will. I will let you go but you mustn’t take one further step along this path. If you promise I will let you go but I want to show you why you mustn’t take a single step further along here. Is that OK?”

Huia managed a rather weak “yes”. Easing himself off her and using his stick to stand Harry offered his hand to Huia but she got up by herself. As she did so he pointed with his stick to the track ahead.

“Look but don’t touch.” Harry pointed. A wire stretched across the track about half a metre above the forest floor. Harry backed away from the wire

taking Huia with him. Blood dripped from the end of his nose where she had clawed him.

“Watch this!” he said as he threw his stick at the wire. Accentuated by darkness the flash lit the bush, and leaves to the left of the track were shredded. The explosion resonated inside Huia’s head long after the smell of burnt cordite had been dissipated by the wind.

“That’s why I grabbed you Huia, to prevent you walking into that.”

Shocked and shaking Huia gasped “That could have killed us.”

“I know,” Harry added “That’s why it was put there.”

“Why? Who did it?”

Harry continued speaking slowly. “People growing drugs in the hills want to keep visitors away. Looking into the bushes Harry found the shotgun nailed through the stock to a tree. Grabbing it by the barrel he levered it off and untwisted the wire from the trigger. The gun and wire went into the river and Harry observed, “That’s one less we have to worry about.”

“Are there are any more?” Huia asked.

“I don’t know, but probably. I had just smashed up one when I met you and mistook you for one of the drug dealers.”

“Don’t they care who they hurt?” Huia asked as they started to cross the river by the ford.

“Not when money is involved. And they are not alone in that attitude.”

Unable to put much weight on his injured leg Harry and Huia paddled slowly through the ford but with slippery stones and fading light each step was uncertain. Harry moved slower and put noticeably more weight on Huia. Stumbling and wet they reached the shingle bank on the far side. While Huia strained her eyes to see through the flax, Harry guided her along a track through broken ground. In the middle of the flax dwarfing Harry's hut was a pile of firewood. Some was cut and stacked and some remained a tangle on the ground. In darkness beyond the hut a little garden was surrounded by an unbroken line of flax backed by punga.

Huia couldn't help asking, “How did you get all that firewood? Have you got a tractor?”

Harry explained. “Further up stream is an overhanging bluff. The river below forms a deep eddy. When I throw logs in there the river carries them down and they end up stranded on my shingle bed. All I have to do is drag them up this path and leave them to dry in the sun.”

When they reached Harry's hut he was obviously weaker. He slumped on a chair and asked Huia to fetch his dish from the deck.

“It's just an old Holden hub cap.” Harry explained. “It fits perfectly on top of my wood barbecue. If you put water in it and open up the fire we'll have it boiling in a few minutes. I will need to sterilize the needle and thread before I stitch my leg.

There should be a needle and thread on the bench from when I was repairing my coat earlier.”

It was dark. Huia ran her hand along the top of the bench and touched what felt like a needle and thread. Holding them up against the night sky, she used the residual glow in the sky to check.

Huia picked up the hub cap. “Will I need to wash it out first?”

“No! I always scour it out well in river sand every time I use it. There’s water in the outside tap just there. If you boil the water it’ll be fine and... Huia heard voices.

Before Harry could finish they were blinded with lights in their eyes. Rangi and Hemi carrying torches and sticks rushed out of the flax shouting: “Mad Harry’s got her! Run, Huia.”

With stick raised Rangi rushed across the clearing shouting, “I’ll get Mad Harry.”

Huia dropped the pan of water onto the barbecue and picked up Harry’s stick blocking Rangi’s path.

Rangi shouted again. “Run Huia. I’ll get Mad Harry.”

“Only by getting me first,” was Huia’s reply. “He’s injured Rangi, and needs help not hitting.”

Rangi and Hemi lowered their sticks; tears came into Harry’s eyes. But the tears had nothing to do with the pain in his leg.

CHAPTER 3

A MAN OF TWO RIVERS

Losing blood, Harry slumped. The faces of Huia, Rangi and Hemi slid in and out of focus as he clutched at consciousness. Were these three children a life line? Would they help? Were they like the kids in town who threw stones and chanted “Mad Harry”? But he had to trust them. He asked Hemi to chop a single piece of kindling and bring it to him. Puzzled Hemi looked at the faces of Rangi and Huia for reassurance. He got none but when Hemi asked where the wood was it suddenly felt to Harry his life line became real.

Round the side of the shed Hemi found a pile of sawn logs and an axe under the lean to. Harry heard axe on wood. These children were helping him, not attacking him. Tiredness flooded his brain. The wind on the river moaned like a man in pain. The children’s faces faded again. He was falling, falling, falling. Deep inside his head he heard a voice. Someone touched his hand.

“Are you alright Harry? Harry, Harry are you alright?” His eyes opened. Anxious faces swirled at the end of a tunnel. Kind eyes peered. Not eyes that spat poison when he went to town. These were kind eyes. The long dark tunnel turned inside out and vanished. Blood leaked. He had to act.

He asked Rangi to go to the back garden and get a towel from the washing line. As her brothers left, Harry asked Huia to get his boot off. Huia kneeled. The blood-caked knot in his bootlace wouldn’t come

undone. She concentrated on the boot not on Harry. The tree tops rode the wind as the full moon, rising through the trees, scattered leaping shadows. To Harry the shadows became a pack of blood crazed dogs tearing at a doomed lamb. And he was the doomed lamb. Huia didn't see Harry reach into his trouser pocket and pull out a pocket knife. As he opened the blade a single shaft of moonlight gleamed on the sharpened edge of the steel. Were these the same children that threw stones at him in town? Knife in hand he reached down to where Huia knelt. Huia hadn't seen the sharpened steel.

At that precise moment Mum pushed through the flax into the clearing. An emergency existed for Mum when the kids fought, milk boiled, and rain splattered the washing while someone was knocking the front door. Mum had never learned to cope and wondered how she would manage a violent emergency, especially as she hated violence. Yet somewhere deep within her mind the wairua, the spirit, of an ancestral warrior slept. She knew he existed. In those terrible weeks before James left, the old warrior in her head had stirred in his sleep. When James punched her in the face the old warrior opened one eye. But Mum washed the blood from her lips and told the old warrior to go back to sleep. She hated violence.

Now Mum saw Huia on the ground and Mad Harry's steel blade close to Huia's head. Within the circle created by her torch light she saw blood on the ground. Rangi and Hemi were missing.

In less than the time it took her to shout the single warning word "Huia", everything changed. The

wairua of the ancient warrior took control. The torch in Mum's hand became a mere. An attack plan formed. Mad Harry had the knife in his right hand. She transferred the torch to her left holding it to the side, at arms length. Thinking her further to his right, Harry wouldn't transfer the knife to his left. Directing the beam into his eyes would blind him. She had to judge the timing exactly and at the last moment switch the torch off. He would be disoriented. A massive backward swing of her left hand would propel her to the right and avoid his blade. The same backward swing would smash the torch into the left side of his head. The old warrior in her head concentrated on the spot just behind his left ear. With the torch switched off she would be striking blind. The distance closed.

Huia looked up.

"Hi Mum. I'm OK. But Harry's injured his leg."

Huia stood and moved to Harry's left side. It may have been the fact that Huia now stood directly in Mum's path or the calmness of Huia's voice but the warrior vanished. The torch was thrown aside while Mum hugged Huia, and found herself shouting, sobbing and shaking all at once.

Hemi and Rangi appeared from different sides of Harry's hut. Hemi and Rangi looked at each other and at Mum. It was Rangi who spoke.

"Mum, Harry is hurt not Huia."

Harry leaned forward to continue using his knife to slit the leg of his trousers to expose the wound.

Mum's heart pounded and her body shook out of control. Hemi was talking, she knew he was talking, but couldn't recall a word he said. Huia took Mum's hand and held it before she applied a barely perceptible pressure and looked into her mother's eyes. Seconds passed. Huia said nothing. Mum's violent shaking drained away. When Mum looked into Huia's eyes she recognised something she had only been dimly aware of before. Now she knew it wasn't just chance that Huia stood at that precise moment to block her crazy attack. One thing puzzled Mum in the weeks to come. Did Huia know the ancestral warrior took control? Did Huia know she had prevented her mother from braining Harry? Whether or not Huia knew, Mum looked into Huia's face with awakened awareness. Hidden strength lurked behind those soft eyes. Was it just chance the pressure Huia had applied with her hand was the touchstone to push away her breaking point? Huia had proved herself more than a match for the wairua of the ancestral warrior.

Huia was leading her by the hand to Harry. He had hardly moved since Mum directed the torch beam into his eyes. Rangi picked up the torch and shone it on Harry's leg. Unaware of the civil war inside Mum's head, Harry asked,

"Have you got that towel?"

In reply Rangi held it up.

"Could you hold it across the top while I cut it please?"

Huia felt Mum quiver as Harry slit the towel down its length. His eyes found Mum.

“Thanks for helping. I have to stop this bleeding. I’ll make a pad with this half like this.”

Harry folded the towel as he spoke and held it to his leg above the wound. He looked directly at Mum again.

“Could you hold this pad for me please? I’m sorry but I don’t know your name.”

“Meriana,” Mum replied as she held the pad while Harry tied the other half of the towel round his leg on top of the pad. Taking the piece of chopped firewood from Hemi he put it through the loop and twisted it so tightly he stemmed the flow of blood to his leg.

“The next job is to stitch the wound together. Do you think you could help me again please?”

Mum hesitated. Once her own doctor put stitches in her arm but the doctor had given her a jab so the stitches wouldn’t hurt. Mum didn’t know if she could put stitches in.

Harry sensed doubt. “It’s just like stitching a piece of cloth.” he told her.

“A piece of cloth doesn’t bleed, get infected or feel pain.” Mum replied.

Harry smiled. “I am sure you will not feel a thing Meriana.”

Still Mum hesitated.

“I’ll try.” Huia offered.

Mum cut in instantly. “It’s OK I can do it. Yes, I can manage.”

Huia was sure Harry gave her a wink when Mum said “Yes.” Harry looked at Mum again. “It would be easier if I lay down.” He turned to Rangi and Hemi.

“Would you two guys help me into my hut?” I’m feeling a bit wobbly just now.”

Relieved they didn’t have to help with the stitches Rangi and Hemi took a hand each and pulled him out of his chair. Huia opened the door. Remembering what Harry told her about the raft on the river generating electricity she felt round the inside of the walls until she found a light switch. She turned it on. It worked. Leaning heavily on Rangi and Hemi, Harry almost fell as they edged through the door.

A bed filled one corner. Mum pulled back the blankets and the sheet. Rangi and Hemi helped Harry to his bed. As he rolled backwards onto it they lifted his legs onto the covers. When Mum mentioned protecting the sheets from blood Harry smiled and told her it was the least of his worries.

“There’s a river of water out there to wash them.”

Fetching the wooden stool Rangi laid it sideways across the bed so Harry could rest his injured leg. Mum placed a cushion on top and recovered the needle and thread from the water boiling in the hubcap on the fire.

“Don’t throw the water away.” Harry anticipated her action.

“Boiled water is sterile to wash the wound. If you look on the shelf you should see a bottle of Dettol, a box of bandages and some scissors.” While Mum and Hemi were getting them Huia noticed a door at the back of the room.

“Have you got another bedroom in there?” Huia asked Harry.

“Bedroom! No, there’s only one of me, thank God.” Harry replied. “That’s my museum in there.”

“A museum?” Huia asked.

“Yes you can have a look later if you want but first I would be most grateful if you could help me get my leg stitched.”

While Mum threaded the needle Huia cut a piece of bandage and washed and wiped the wound.

“I don’t like this,” Mum said. “It will hurt.”

“What you have to do is hold your breath while you put the stitches in Meriana.” Harry grinned.

But Harry wasn’t convincing. Huia held his hand and felt both Mum and Harry flinch as the needle went in.

Mum asked him, “Are you sure you want me to do this?”

Through teeth grinding together Harry replied, “Could you tie a knot in each stitch please Meriana.”

Huia knew it hurt. Not knowing what to do she held his hand and smoothed the top of his bald head. Tiny drops of blood oozed from needle wounds as Mum put the stitches in.

Rangi and Hemi both looked the other way and wandered onto the deck. Rangi called to Mum.

“Hemi and I thought we would head back to tell Grandma we’ve found Huia. She’ll be worried.”

“OK but leave a torch for us.” Mum answered.

“See you later.” Hemi replied as they took off.

“You have thoughtful boys Meriana.” Harry commented.

“Hungry boys.” Mum replied. “They’ve gone back to get something else to eat.”

“And because they don’t want to see the stitches.” Huia thought to herself.

As Huia watched Mum stitch the wound thoughts struggled to the surface.

“A museum! Harry has a museum? A real museum? What sort of museum?”

Huia tried to imagine the things Harry might have in his museum. A museum here in the bush? The more she thought the more the mystery grew. Unable to contain her curiosity she asked.

“Why have you got a museum Harry?”

“If I knew the whole answer to that Huia I wouldn’t need one. Perhaps I’m just a foolish old man but it’s what I do. You’re welcome to look if you want.”

“You mean right now, While Mum’s here?” Huia asked.

“Of course. Help yourself, and take from it what you will. The light switch is outside the door.”

Huia switched on the light and stepped into Harry's museum. The door swung shut behind her.

Bandaging Harry's leg had not prepared Mum for the gasp that came from Huia as it penetrated the walls of the room. Minutes passed. Mum found herself listening for more sounds from Huia. She had finished bandaging the leg before Huia came out and shut the door. Mum glanced quizzically at Huia who sat on the bed saying nothing for several minutes. Then a small trembling voice asked.

"What does it mean Harry?"

Outside flax leaves were chafing in the night wind. The river gurgled over rocks. Pleasing familiar sounds of a real world, a known world. As Harry looked at Huia she tried to see behind those pale watery eyes.

"It's a long complex story. Do you want to hear it Huia?"

She knew the same forces driving Harry to build that museum drove her to understand it. She also knew she would go back into that room again and again.

Huia looked at Mum and then at Harry before she replied. "I saw enough in there to know misunderstanding it would be a mistake."

"I suppose the story started many years ago when a theoretical physicist from Copenhagen went on a lecture tour of universities in Australia and New Zealand. In New Zealand a road accident terminated the lecture tour. For weeks Death was a patient companion waiting seductively at the hospital

bedside. As the sun climbed higher spring changed into summer. Echos and shadows swirled like mists. Eventually those mists solidified and became shapes and the shapes changed into doctors and nurses. Death became weary of such an unresponsive lover. When summer changed into Autumn Death's visits ceased. Pain and frustration took turns to sit at his bedside. When his bed was moved and he could see out of the window doctors and nurses changed into people with names. Then one name became more important than any other. Before the first of the winter frosts touched the grass, his days focused on the moment staff nurse Marama would enter his ward. Other patients began to notice staff nurse Marama spent longer at his bedside. At the wedding in the hospital chapel he stood without his stick as Marama walked down the aisle to take her place at his side. They had two sons, my elder brother Arlin and me. My father never returned to Europe but spent the rest of his life with my mother here within her tribal homeland.

Arlin and I were the children of two rivers, the river of traditional Maori and the scientific river of Northern Europe. Enthralled with the elegance of science, I wanted nothing else but to go to Copenhagen to my father's university and continue with the science he left behind. That's what I did. I studied theoretical physics in Copenhagen and later became a research fellow like my father. I became proud of the extent of my knowledge. Now after a lifetime of learning I feel humble about my lack of it.

In those early years I almost forgot the river of Maori flowing through me. In my arrogance I dismissed it as primitive. Science was the key to set

people free from lifetimes of drudgery. Then I met a young sociology student called Elvina. One day I explained to her how science set people free. She asked, "Free to do what to whom?" In those days I had all the answers but I couldn't answer her. Perhaps it was because I was in love with her, or it may have been the Maori river flowed more strongly than I realised. Throughout that summer, her question ran through my head. I started to see what I only looked at before. The science I had been passionate about was only a mirage. It took a young Danish woman to show me the smooth river of science flowing through me contained jagged rocks. I was no longer certain of anything other than my love for Elvina.

If anyone had told me she was just a piece of driftwood in the river of my life, and not the river itself, I would not have believed them. But Elvina left me. I felt as if all my summers had come to an end and only winter remained. I returned here to explore the other tributary from which I came. I live in the infinitely short period between past and future. To Europeans the past is finished, forgotten and useless. The future waits to be manipulated with an ever increasing urgency as we rush towards it. But to Maori the future never arrives. Like a carpet the future is the past unrolling.

When I left Denmark the university agreed to pay me a small stipend. My needs are not great. I create exhibits for their museum in Copenhagen. You saw some of those exhibits. It is an exhibition of time."

Puzzled Huia asked "How do you make an exhibition of time?"

Harry continued. "For someone travelling at speeds approaching the speed of light time runs more slowly and distances decrease. For example at point eight five of the speed of light a metre rule would only measure half a metre. The faster we travel the more distances are distorted from the familiar. I am showing this in the museum. The forest scene looks different if you look forwards or backwards. As European science gathers momentum our future is being distorted. So in my artificial forest as you look forward everything is distorted in exactly the same way as it would be distorted if you accelerated to speeds approaching the speed of light. But if you look backwards everything looks normal. By looking back we make sense of our future.

I am trying to show the pace of change in Western countries distorts our future into something ugly. The past is not finished and useless as Europeans think but our only means of understanding what we are about to lose. The birds and insects you saw in there are all carved from petrified wood. When it's finished hopefully my brother Arlin will take it in his scow to Auckland. From there it will go by container to the University in Copenhagen."

Huia was about to ask Harry how he had made the scene look so different forward and backwards when Hemi, wet and breathless, burst into the hut.

"It's raining in the ranges. The river's up. I've got Starlight and if you want to get back across the ford you'd better come right now."

CHAPTER 4

ELVINA

With shaking arms Harry pushed himself to a sitting position. His nostrils moved as he took deep breaths to give power to his lungs.

“With or without a horse, death lingers in the darkness of a rising river. Stones are slippery. You can’t see where you are putting your feet. I live by the river. I know the river. It can rise a metre in an hour when it’s heavy in the ranges. Don’t try. You mustn’t try.”

Huia noticed Mum’s right cheek twitch the way it always twitched when she didn’t know what to do. The kids had all learned when her face twitched like that Mum would usually agree to anything which sounded plausible. Shocked by the passion in Harry’s voice Mum spoke quietly.

“What do you suggest Harry?”

Harry responded by reverting to his normal voice.

“You’d be welcome to stay in my hut. But my brother Arlin lives in his scow just down river. It’s tied to the jetty in the river mouth. He’d probably row you across in his dinghy. It would be safer, so much safer, than trying to cross the ford at night in a rising river.”

“What about Starlight?” Huia asked.

“You could leave her here and pick her up in daylight when the river’s down.”

The twitching continued. "Do you think your brother would mind rowing us across?"

"I wouldn't say there'd be a problem."

"Well! Do you think if we said you sent us it would be OK?" Mum asked.

Instead of answering Harry looking first into Mum's face then his eyes traversed her body, to the extent Mum felt she was being mentally undressed. Still Harry didn't reply. Huia looked at Harry and again at Mum. It seemed a straight forward question, so why the hesitation? Why was he looking at Mum like that? Huia glanced again at Harry. His forehead creased into a frown as if trying to solve some immense problem and Meriana started to wonder if he had heard her question when he answered.

"It would probably be better Meriana if you asked him yourself and left me out of it, especially as darkness has descended. Just tell him you're stranded by a rising river and darkness. Tell him you have to get across. But don't tell him you've been to my place."

About to ask why, she thought better of it. Probably he and his brother were not on the best of terms.

"You might need to ask him several times." Harry added. "He forgets. He's got Alzheimer's. He remembers things that happened thirty years ago but forgets what you told him thirty seconds ago."

"Is he alright to row the dinghy?" Mum asked.

"There's no problem there Meriana. He knows every rock and sandbank along the coast. He can tell

you what the current below is doing from a disturbance on the surface you and I wouldn't see. He rebuilt the scow and could tell you the size of every bolt and nail on the boat and get it right. But tell him four times who you are and what you want and he'll still be confused. About five years ago he ran out of raisins in the galley. Every time he goes to the shop he thinks 'I'm out of raisins.' Then he buys another packet. Last time I was on his boat he had seventeen packets in the locker. All unopened!"

"He lives on the boat alone?" Meriana asked.

Again Harry didn't answer immediately. His eyes seemed to glaze over as if listening for the echo of some sound that never existed.

"Yes that's right Meriana. He lives alone on the boat. But it might be a good idea not to mention anything about him living alone, especially as I am hoping he'll take my museum pieces to Auckland. But you're right, he does live alone. We both live alone."

Instinctively Meriana knew from the way he said "alone" he was terminating that line of conversation as decisively as if he had been reading from a book and slammed it shut. Without knowing why she knew she had to change the subject.

"Is it a safe path to your brother's jetty?"

"No problem at all. It's a broad path through flax. If it wasn't for my leg I'd take you."

Meriana's cheek twitched as she replied.

"It's night and we've only got torches."

Reassuringly Harry touched her hand. "It's definitely a safe path to slip along even at night.

Hardly used now of course, but still a good path. Cut by my own hands. But that's a different story. Even after all these years I stubbornly keep it open." He added under his breath, "At my age I should know better."

Huia noticed the twitching in her mother's cheek stopped. That meant Mum had made up her mind.

"Are you sure you'll be OK if we go now?" Mum asked.

"Don't worry about me. I'll rest my leg tomorrow, and after that you won't be able to hold me back." Harry gave Mum a big grin adding, "I'll be fine. Now off you go before the weather closes in. If you have a problem getting Arlin to take you across in the dinghy, come back and wait for the weather. Don't try and cross yourself. We don't want another accident."

"Has there already been an accident?" Hemi asked.

"As like as not," Harry replied evasively, then he added, "Now off you go and thanks for helping me."

As they left Meriana turned in the doorway and said, "We'll come back to check on you as soon as the river's gone down. Look after yourself. Bye." They closed the door and went out into the night.

Harry was right. The path was easy to follow in moonlight. The flax, black against the night sky, flashed silver as moonlight found pitching fronds. Puddles gleamed blackness as moon and cloud fought to control the night.

Between flax fronds a kerosene riding light flickering as it stubbornly defied the wind. Two masts rose black against the Milky Way. Beyond the jetty a yellow light gleamed from the wheelhouse. As they left the shelter of the flax the wind tugged at their hair and flogged their clothes. Huia shone her torch along the length of the scow. The beam paused in its journey as the pool of light illuminated the boat's name. Keeping the torch on the name, Huia looked at Mum.

"That's strange isn't it Mum." Huia called above the wind.

"What's strange?" Mum called back.

"The name of Arlin's boat!"

"He has to call his boat something. Is it stranger than any other name?"

"Yes I think it is." Huia answered. "He has given his boat the same name as Harry's Danish girlfriend. 'Elvina!' I've never heard of anyone called Elvina. I bet it's not coincidence."

Mum stopped walking and looked at Huia. "I don't think we should mention anything about that. You're right Huia, it is strange."

Mum looked up to see Hemi climbing down the ladder onto the scow.

"Come on you two." Hemi called.

Hurrying after Hemi, Mum and Huia reached the ladder. Below black water scribbled circles between hull and jetty piles. Rusted rungs hung suspended by darkness. Was this safer than the ford?

Hemi was already on the deck of the scow. Either she had to call him back or commit herself to the ladder. She looked down again at the water and took a deep breath. Probably she was lighter than Hemi and the ladder held him OK.

Huia saw Mum look at her. "I'll go first Huia but don't get on the ladder till I'm on deck. Also remember the rungs could be slippery."

"I'll be OK Mum."

"Come on Mum." Hemi called from below.

The iron rungs disappearing into black eddies. She lacked her children's confidence. Did she lack guts or did they lack caution? She wished she knew because she had to be both mother and father to them. Holding her breath she transferred her weight onto the first rung. Was it the ladder or her imagination that moved? She felt it again. The jetty moved as rubbing strakes ground against timber piles. Halyards shook and slapped the wooden mast as wind whined through standing rigging. Was this the sound of fear? Testing each rung she transferred her weight. Her knuckles looked white in the moonlight.

As the deck rose to meet her feet Huia ran down the ladder in less than half the time she had taken. But once on deck Huia reached for her Mum's hand. 'Huia knew.' Mum thought.

A square of light from the window in the wheel house door left them in no doubt where they should go. The knock sounded puny compared with the noise on deck. Hemi would have knocked louder. Wondering if she should knock again or go back up the ladder

she heard footsteps. Through weather etched glass she made out a kerosene lantern moving towards her. The door opened and a lantern was held high. Beneath the lantern a pair of eyes emerged from a salt matted tangle of hair and beard.

For the last fifteen minutes Meriana had been rehearsing what to say. With the sight of that fiery face the shutters of her mind slammed shut. She managed a stammer.

“Oh! Good evening! Excuse me! I was wondering...The river’s up and ...”

Two powerful arms irresistibly crushed her body against his. A beard smelling of stale food was kissing her on the lips. Instinctively she lifted her arms to try and push this repulsive creature away. Thoughts of crossing the river short circuited. The ladder was safety. Would Huia and Hemi make a run for it and leave her? With the beard in her face she couldn’t even tell them to run. Immense arms dragged her into the cabin. Huia and Hemi followed.

Held by the shoulders at arms length she was aware of crazy eyes looking into hers. The mouth spoke.

“Elvina, I knew you’d be back. I love you. I love you.”

Huia interrupted. “Mum’s name is Meriana not Elvina.”

The beard ignored Huia and continued.

“I’ve kept our picture on the wall.” Mum was steered towards a black and white photograph yellow with age. It showed head and shoulders of a young

woman looking up into the eyes of an attractive young man. Her hand rested on his shoulder.

Magnetically Huia and Hemi were drawn to the picture.

“It does look exactly like you.” Hemi remarked. Mum looked again. Even she recognised the striking resemblance.

Trying to sound composed and pointing to the young man she asked the beard, “Is that you?”

“Of course it’s us. Don’t you remember?”

As panic dissolved she started to think.

“If that’s you, the photo must have been taken thirty or forty years ago, probably before I was born. It can’t possibly be me.”

Huia chipped in. “The woman in the photo has a mole on her face. Mum hasn’t.”

The beard looked again. “You are Elvina. I can see you’re Elvina. I’ve thought about you every day since that night on the river. I’ve always known you’re still alive.”

“I’m alive alright, but I’m not Elvina.” Meriana replied. Hemi cut in. “We’re stranded on this side of the river. It’s raining in the Ranges, the river’s coming up and Mum doesn’t want to risk the ford in darkness.”

Huia added. “We were hoping you would give us a ride in your dinghy so we can go home.”

Mum tried flashing a smile but it was only the reflection of a smile not a real one. She was sure it

wouldn't come over as sincere. But she couldn't help that. "I'd be very grateful if you could help us out."

"Why don't I take the children across, and you could spend the night here with me Elvina.

Panic answered. "I couldn't. I have a sick mother at home who needs me."

"Liar!" Thought Hemi and Huia together but said nothing. Instead Huia replied, "Yes that's right, Mum has to take Grandma to the dunny and give her special medicine." Huia said it so convincingly Mum thought she would have to remember what a convincing liar Huia could be. Right now she knew it was an accomplishment.

Alzheimer's! 'Arlin has Alzheimer's!' Harry's words resonated in her head. She could say whatever she wanted. She could trawl the limits of her imagination, be creative, and he wouldn't remember a thing. Pity all men didn't have Alzheimer's. Life could be fun.

"Arlin!" She decided to turn on her seductive voice. Lowering her voice an octave she whispered, "Arlin if you took the three of us over the river in your dinghy I could give Mum her medicine tonight and tomorrow I'll be back to spend all day with you, just the two of us together on your boat! It'll be like you've remembered it all these years." As she said it, she wondered what fantasies were locked within the sealed tomb of his mind. What might be released?

Arlin's eyes reflected the flicker of the kerosene cabin light.

"I'll take you right now." Picking up his coat he added, "In the morning I'll row across and wait for you by the concrete steps. I'll cook a real special dinner for you." As he opened the wheel house door the wind hit. Meriana's hair, lawless at the best of times, resorted to anarchy as her comb vanished into blackness. Arlin led them aft towards the davits. In the flickering circle of a kerosene riding light he lowered the dinghy. Huia whispered to Mum. "Are you really going to see him tomorrow?" Mum didn't answer but put her fingers to her lips, and gave Huia a wink.

Huia looked at Mum. Did a wink mean yes or no? Huia couldn't imagine Mum going back to the scow and neither could she imagine Mum making a promise she had no intention of keeping.

The dinghy hit water straining its pulleys as the wind caught it. In racing moonlight Huia glimpsed oars lashed under the seat. By the light from Hemi's torch Arlin untied the rope ladder. Uncoiled, the free end hit the water. No one heard the involuntary gasp as Meriana looked down.

Arlin climbed the rail and stepped onto the rope ladder. Horrified Mum watched the ladder swing as he descended towards the dinghy which seemed to want to be in any place except directly below the ladder. Catching it with one foot he dragged it towards him. Once in the dinghy he reached out and caught hold of a wooden rail and held the craft steady.

"Come on down one at a time." He called above the wind.

'Who me?' Mum thought but said nothing. Hemi was first over the rail. Mum watched. He was making it

look easy. As he reached the dinghy Arlin told him to sit on the thwart in the bow adding, "So that I can look at Elvina as we row across." Meriana did an involuntary shudder and caught hold of Huia's hand.

"You're next Elvina." Mum felt Huia squeeze her hand and whisper, "Go on Mum we'll be OK."

Meriana climbed the rail. Her hair swept into her eyes and mouth. With both hands gripping the rail she couldn't brush it away. She couldn't let go. Her foot searched empty space looking for the rung of the ladder. She was about to say, 'I can't do this, when Huia whispered.

"The rung is just below your foot. Move your foot to the right slightly and lower it."

Meriana felt the rung and managed a quick, "Thanks Huia." As she committed her weight to the rope she felt it stretch. Her other foot felt for the next rung. If she had dared look down she would have seen Hemi holding the bottom of the ladder to prevent it swinging. She felt Arlin's free hand hold her ankle and guide it into place. As her foot touched the duck boards Arlin let her ankle go and took her hand. She grasped it firmly as he guided her to the thwart. She sat clutching the gunwale unable to believe she had made it into the dinghy. Huia seemed to almost run down the ladder. As Huia got into the dinghy she asked Arlin, "Can I sit next to Mum?" Without waiting for a reply Meriana moved over and Huia sat next to her.

'Is that for Huia's sake or mine?' Mum wondered but said nothing and held Huia's hand.

Arlin took the bottom of the rope ladder and dropped it into the tide. The boat rocked and Meriana felt certain the dinghy was about to capsize and they would follow the rope ladder. She grabbed the gunwale as he unhooked the forward davit block. Turning again he unhooked the stern davit block. The dinghy swung away from the scow.

Arlin's hand drifted back to Meriana's ankle. When he did it before, she had been glad to have her foot guided to a safe place. But this time he put his hand round her ankle and pushing the leg of her jeans up, ran his hand up to her calf muscle and squeezed it, before running his hand back down to her ankle and letting go. She glanced at her foot and pulled the leg of her jeans back to cover her ankle. When she looked up the boat had drifted away from the scow.

Arlin untied the oars from their place below the thwarts, fitted them in the rowlocks and started rowing. The boat turned heading for the blackness of the far bank. Hemi noticed they headed upstream to allow for the flow of the river carrying them down. Arlin didn't look behind to see where they were going but, despite the effects of the wind, rowed directly across the river to the jetty on the other side.

Meriana tried to decide whether permitting Arlin to hold her ankle was considered payment for taking them across the estuary. When rowing at least he had to have both hands on the oars. All the money she had with her was the dollar coin she picked up in the supermarket car park. Neither Hemi nor Huia were likely to have any money. What would Arlin do if she offered to pay for the trip? She decided he would

probably not accept anything - well not money anyway! So was she safe offering money knowing she didn't have any? Would he pick up on the, not too subtle, hint that her ankles were not available as a "thank you" token? She decided to take a chance.

"Thanks for taking us Arlin. What do we owe you?"

Even in the narrow confines of the estuary the wind was breaking up the surface of the water smashing the moon's reflection into a pathway of stepping stones across the water.

The answer came back without the rhythm of the oars changing.

"Allowing me the privilege of taking you across the water has made me a wealthy man. When you come and visit me tomorrow Elvina I will consider I have received the greatest treasure I could imagine. I still have the Danish recipes you wrote for me. Tonight I will bake.

"Damn," thought Meriana "He still remembers."

Arlin continued. "What time will you come to me tomorrow?"

"Ten o'clock." She answered thinking it rather fun to be fixing a date she had no intention of keeping.

"Then I will row across at nine in case you come early."

How pathetic, Meriana thought. You're going to have a long wait.

Reaching the jetty Arlin lifted the oars into the boat and grabbed a ring bolt to hold the boat against the steps. Slime on the steps made Meriana wonder if she would be able to stand without falling. Hemi was first ashore and held the boat closer into the steps. Arlin held one of Meriana's hands and Hemi took the other as she got out. Testing the steps with her foot she wondered why she hadn't slithered back into the water like a freshly caught eel. Once on the stonework with Hemi holding one of her hands Mum offered her other hand to Huia.

Meriana looked at Arlin. "Thanks for the ride."

"Seeing you alive again is all the thanks I could ever have hoped for. Till tomorrow morning at ten! Goodnight Elvina."

"Goodbye and thank you." Meriana replied.

"Thanks for the ride," echoed Huia and Hemi together as they climbed the steps.

"Nice guy that." Hemi said to Mum who didn't answer. Reaching the top of the steps they looked round to see Arlin rowing back with his oars dipping into splinters of the moon's reflection.

Huia asked again. "Are you going to see him tomorrow Mum?"

"No way." Mum answered without a moment's hesitation.

"Don't you think it's mean to let him do special cooking and wait at the jetty for someone who isn't intending to go?"

"He's got Alzheimer's and probably won't remember a thing about it." Mum answered.

“And if he does remember?” Huia asked.

“Then he’ll be out of luck won’t he.” Mum answered.

“That’s mean Mum. It’s telling lies.”

“When you’re older Huia you will realise men tell women lies all the time. I’m just getting my own back.”

“What sort of lies?” Huia asked.

“In the moonlight men make promises to women and in the morning, after he has had what he wants, if the woman mentions his promises he will just laugh and say, ‘That was last night. Last night I would have promised you any damn thing but now it’s morning. You weren’t dumb enough to believe me were you?’”

“Does that make it right for you to tell lies to Arlin Mum?” Huia asked.

Hemi chipped in. “He didn’t have to give us a free ride across the estuary.”

Why were her kids so logical? Mum thought but instead answered, “Tell you what, let’s ask Grandma what she thinks when we get home.” Although none of them knew it at the time, Grandma’s reply was going to surprise them all.

CHAPTER 5

RURENGA

While relating the story to Grandma, Meriana explained about the coincidence of the striking resemblance between Elvina, the woman in the picture, and herself.

“Except the woman in the picture had a mole on her face.” Huia explained, and added, “It’s in exactly the same place as your mole Grandma.”

Grandma paused looking into Huia’s eyes. Opening her mouth to speak she was interrupted by Hemi.

“But your mole has hairs growing out of it.”

Mum cut in sharply. “Don’t be so rude Hemi.”

Grandma looked at Meriana. “If years were as kind to me as my grandchildren I would still look like my photograph.”

“Your photograph? It was a photograph of Elvina!” Mum was startled.

“I can assure you Meriana,” Grandma replied, “My Danish birth certificate carries the name Elvina.”

“But your name’s Rurenga and you’re Maori not Danish!” What was her mother saying? It couldn’t be true. She wouldn’t believe it.

Grandma continued. “I have never known how to tell you this Meriana. I have lived the lie so long the lie has become the truth. Now my name is Rurenga and now I am Maori.”

Horried Mum seemed to shrink as her face twitched. She backed away. Grandma smiled and spoke softly. "Meriana I'm still the same person I was five minutes ago. I'm still your mother." She held out her hand to Mum. Mum hesitated, and hugged Grandma who continued.

"I'll tell you the whole story. If you think worse of me because of it, that's how it must be. I am Elvina, and I don't have a single drop of Maori blood. I had a Danish mother and a Spanish father. I spent long enough in Copenhagen to realize I was being suffocated by civilization. I needed air but didn't know where to find it. I met Harry at university in Copenhagen. He changed my life. My life before I met him became trivial. To be near him was to be part of a universe expanding over horizons I never knew existed. When he returned to New Zealand I followed. It was not a decision I had to make. It was as necessary for me as food and drink. Nothing short of death would have stopped me. Even now after all that has happened I would do the same again. At least I think I would."

Huia interrupted. "Why did Arlin name his scow after you Grandma?"

"Because of the weakness of women Huia. Harry was all I had ever wanted in a man. With him my mind soared to regions I never imagined existed. I became an eagle looking down on a world of mice."

"Having finished re-building his scow Arlin was looking for a crew. Sometimes he moved machinery or stock but mainly he transported wool bales to Auckland, Wellington and Lyttleton. Harry and I thought it would be fun to go with him. Arlin's scow

was shallow draft. We could get into tidal inlets up and down the coast where other coastal shipping couldn't go. Every load became an adventure and Arlin the seductive adventurer. Harry could stimulate my mind but Arlin made my body tingle with excitement. In those days I had a figure every woman knows as an asset. It may have been a reaction to old Copenhagen or close proximity to two sexually exciting men and the encouragement they gave me, but during the whole of the summer of the scow, I went naked."

Mum cut in. "Huia you should be going to bed. This is grown up talk."

Before Huia could answer, Grandma replied for her. "If Huia doesn't know why women get undressed for men and what happens next, it's about time she did. Or would you prefer she learned by experimentation?"

Huia whispered a silent, "Thank you Grandma." to herself as Grandma continued.

"And in case you're wondering if it happened, I can assure you it did happen, at every opportunity. And what's more I divided my time equally between the two of them. As a result I still have no idea which of them made me pregnant."

"Oh! And in case you're thinking of being judgmental, all of you owe your existence to my behaviour during that summer of the scow."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Mum asked.

“Yes Meriana. I am. Your biological father is either Harry or Arlin and I don’t have the faintest idea which of the two it is.”

“What about Dad?” Mum asked.

“We both know who your Dad is, but your Dad was not your biological father.”

“Did Dad know?” Mum whispered the question.

“Of course he knew. But he didn’t want me to tell you while he was still alive. He worried all his life you might reject him or think less of him. I kept telling him if you rejected anyone it would be me and not him. But he wouldn’t believe me.”

“Do you want to hear the rest of my story Meriana?” Grandma asked.

“Yes please. It concerns all of us doesn’t it? And if you don’t tell us no one else can.”

Grandma nodded and leaned back in her chair. Her eyes seemed to glaze over as suppressed memories bubbled to the surface.

“That summer had been long and hot. Thanks to my Spanish father, in those days, I had naturally black hair and olive skin but as the summer of the scow drew to a close my all over sun tan was brown as bog water. I was too enthralled with my sexual adventures to be aware high tide had passed. The signs were there but I saw only the sun glittering on the surface of the sea. I should have been aware of slack water in the minds of men where dark eddies form. The creatures of the mind that hunt in those dark places were moving.

Here, in the estuary, we loaded the last of the season's wool onto the scow. The shearing had been delayed by rain, but on that day the bush steamed. Arlin and Harry had been hand loading bales in the humid heat of the day. The evening stank of lanolin and sweat as the sun slithered down the far side of the hill and insects claimed the night. Weary limbs and quick tempers sank beer. Shadows emerged from their hiding places. A cool wind rippled across the deck. I got up to get a tee shirt and shorts. The crash came before I reached the wheel house door. Arlin smashed his fist into Harry's face. Harry hit back. In a moment they were rolling on the deck hitting each other. I screamed at them to stop. I tried to pull them apart. I was as effective as a beached flounder trying to hold back the tide. I climbed onto the rail and dived into the estuary. I intended to swim to the far bank. The rain in the past few days had been heavier than I realised. The tide ebbed strongly. I heard Harry and Arlin lowering the dinghy on the davits. They called. Their shouts became fainter as I swept downstream. Desperate not to be found I reached the far bank but further down river than I anticipated. Gravel provided nothing to grip and no foothold. I couldn't get out. I was swept on. The breakers at the river bar were close. I made it at the last sandbank. But only just! Exhausted, naked, and shivering I staggered towards a fire at the top of the beach.

The Maori shearing gang was having a few beers by a driftwood fire. I wondered what would happen when a twenty six year old naked woman came to them out of the tide. I was past caring. Perhaps they could see I was in survival mode, but to my relief they didn't ask me who I was or what had

happened. Instead they found me clothes and a place on a driftwood log by the fire. One of them stood behind me and dried my hair. He didn't do it to get anything out of it for himself. He dried my hair because it was wet. At that moment I realized these people were different. They gave me camp oven bread and some of the mutton stew cooking on the fire. I remember the taste to this day. Someone pulled a guitar out of an old Holden. Because of the colour of my skin they assumed I was part Maori. And instead of asking me my name they started calling me Rurenga. Rurenga! I spoke no Maori and didn't have a clue why they were calling me Rurenga or what it meant but I answered to it."

"Did you find out?" Huia asked.

"Eventually," Grandma replied. "It is Maori for 'castaway'. They could call me what ever they wanted as long as it wasn't Elvina. After being the cause of the fight I was trying to obliterate anything to do with it, including my identity. And losing my identity was easier than I suspected. The shearing gang moved on before dawn. Rurenga went with them. All night Harry and Arlin searched the estuary for me. They reported a missing person called Elvina. After four days the shoreline search was called off and Elvina was declared, 'Missing presumed drowned'."

"I couldn't shear but there was other work. The gang found me useful. I've always been quick with languages. Somewhere between crutching and dagging and the start of spring shearing Rurenga was able to converse in Maori. Working with Maori shearers I started to think Maori. I had a Maori partner and by the time you were born Meriana no

one doubted Rurenga was Maori. I don't know when it happened but at some time the lie became truth, and the truth became a living thing with momentum of its own. With that momentum, came change. The stranger who stood behind me on the beach and dried my hair, became, not just my husband, but a lifetime companion and what was so important to me Meriana, he became your Dad. When it was time for you to go to school we left the shearing gang. Another life started here on our little farm. My family and garden repaid my attention with the gift of serenity."

"Did you see Arlin and Harry again?" Huia asked.

"No, I was happy for them to continue to believe Elvina was dead. In a way it was true. Elvina had passed away and Rurenga lived. The brothers split. The scow went away and Harry built his hut and hid from the world. I guess Arlin continued to carry freight. He'll never swallow the anchor and live ashore. He'll die at the wheel in a storm. It's only recently the scow returned to the estuary."

"Do you know why he came back?" Meriana asked.

"There are no harbour dues to pay in the estuary. The world has gone crazy. It takes thirty years to grow a tree but business can't wait three days to get it to the mill. It has to be there by three in the afternoon, even if the truck and trailer unit has to break the speed limit to get it there on time. No one wants coastal shipping any more, especially a scow. So the scow returned to the estuary where Arlin rebuilt her. It took Arlin's damaged brain to make the jump in time, but he's right. Meriana you're not just

my daughter, you are the walking image of me before Elvina drowned. Now he believes Elvina is still alive. Perhaps I can unravel a tangle of trouble. If it's OK with you, in the morning, I'll keep your date with Arlin. And God help me if it goes wrong."

CHAPTER 6

MERMAIDS

Whispering to each other over breakfast Mum and Grandma started chuckling and subversively reverted to more whispering. Huia thought if she did the same with Hemi and Rangi they would have got yelled at. With breakfast finished Mum and Grandma went into Mum's bedroom. Laughter spilled out of the bedroom. After ten Grandma came out wearing the clothes Mum wore the night before and had pinned her hair up exactly like Mum's.

Still chuckling Grandma shut the whare door behind her. Cobwebs heavy with last night's dew hung in the scrub sparkling in morning sunlight.

'I think I'm going to have an identity crisis. Indoors I'm Grandma and supposed to behave like a Grandma, as soon as I walk outside I'm Rurenga and by the time I get to the jetty I'm going to be Elvina. But the Elvina who was there last night was really Meriana and that's who I'm pretending to be because she was confused with me.'

The more she thought about it the funnier it seemed.

'It wouldn't be everyday a daughter gets confused with her mother by someone who might be the daughter's father, and makes a date, but Grandma goes on the date because the father thought he had made the date with a mother who was really Grandma, because he was confused.'

Newly formed mud puddles tracked towards the river. Wheels had spun in mud. Skid tracks hit the fence. Two battens and three broken wires marked the spot where a fence post lay broken off at ground level. Not only was the fence no longer stock proof but the gate to the river paddock was open. She intended saving that paddock for later when the ground dried. Now sheep were in it. She turned back to the whare. Mum looked surprised. "That must be the shortest date ever."

The sun had burned off the dew from the cobwebs by the time Huia fetched the dogs, and Hemi and Rangi returned from the barn with Grandma carrying the wire strainers, battens, fence posts, shovel, hammer, fencing pliers, a reel of wire and a box of staples. Heading towards the river paddock they reached the damaged fence. Huia and the dogs took off into scrub and blackberry at the far end of the paddock to get round the sheep. Had Grandma known where events were leading she might have stayed and helped Hemi and Rangi mend the fence. But she did not know, and instead made her second attempt to go to the jetty.

The sun hammered her back. At the jetty sunlight glinted on a car windscreen. The one which damaged the fence? She was about to find out. Two men leaned on the car talking. She didn't know what she expected to find on her date with the past, but this wasn't it. She'd gone to a bit of trouble to look like Meriana. Having mentally prepared herself during the night she realised last night's resolve had become soluble in daylight. Who the hell was the guy with Arlin? Getting closer she could see the side of the car creatively modified by the fence post. Corrugations as

deeply rutted as those felt like compensation for the fence. "The Suit" standing next to Arlin stepped forward holding out his hand.

"Grant Fergusson from Melbourne Australia."

'Yes I do know where Melbourne is', she thought.

His hand was soft and damp. Like shaking hands with a dead squid! The thought drew her eyes to his hands.

'If he ever gets his hands dirty it'll take him an hour to get the grime out of the display case of rings on his fingers.'

"I'm," she was about to say Rurenga but changed her mind. "I'm Elvina from the old whare at the beach."

Without any acknowledgment he replied. "See what that damn fence post did to my car."

Rurenga glanced at it and transferred her gaze to his, too close together, eyes.

"Grant I'm sure you will have taught the fence a lesson so that it won't get the other side of your car when you drive back."

His eyes narrowed into slits and disappeared into facial flab.

"There's no danger of that it's broken in half and flat on the ground." he snapped.

"Not any more." Rurenga replied with a smile.

"You've replaced it?" he asked.

“No! You have, because you’re paying for it aren’t you. That way you’ll know it’ll be considerate to your driving skills when you return.”

She expected an angry response but what she received was more disconcerting. His eyes focused on a point about a metre behind her head and his mouth smiled.

“Of course, I’ll write you a cheque. We can’t have it said Grant Fergusson doesn’t pay his debts can we.”

He pulled out a cheque book and started writing. Tearing out the cheque he handed it to her.

“That’ll cover it.” He told her.

‘You could have asked me what the damage cost.’ She thought as he put the cheque book away. Noticing he didn’t make any note in the stub she glanced at the cheque. It was made out for cash and was four times the amount she would have asked him for to repair the damage.

‘Something in that for the Grandchildren,’ she thought. He saw her looking at the cheque.

“Grant Fergusson’s cheques are good.” He advised adding, “I’m big in Agrichem you know.”

“I’m small in gardening, big in washing up and I wouldn’t know an angry chem if I saw one.” she replied.

“Agrichem! Agricultural chemicals! But I’m expanding into H.P.I.M.”

“Horizontal Position Instead of Missionary? Women on top eh! Having trouble with the knees are you?” she asked.

“I’m expanding into Hollow Plastic Injection Moulding.”

“I’m sure you’ll find them more comfortable than corsets.”

“And more profitable, which is why I’m visiting Arlin and his splendid little ship. I take it you’re the old crew member he was expecting to visit this morning.”

“Yes very old,” she agreed. “In fact I’m so old Arlin has been looking at me dumbfounded ever since I arrived. He’s bewildered I’ve aged so much since he last saw me.”

“A little older and a lot wiser I’m sure.” The dead squid fingers were on her shoulder as he spoke.

‘I wonder what this Aussie Cane Toad wants?’ she thought. She could identify nothing specific but was in no doubt she didn’t trust him, but why? Superficially he seemed OK. He damaged the fence but had paid several times the value of the damage. So what was it? Did this guy intend to exploit Arlin? Did it matter to her if he did? She had left Arlin in one of the cruelest ways possible, letting him think he had been responsible for her death. But she did care, which is why she was on the river bank dressed in her daughter’s clothes. She glanced at Squid Fingers. He was wearing a business suit. Yuk! People could be divided into two types. Those who knew what they were doing, and those that thought a flash set of clothes provided sanctuary for an idiot. Was it just his

clothes? No, he failed to impress because everything he did was designed to impress. He's not a business man; he has learned to pretend to be a business man by watching bad Hollywood movies. He's a fake. At least, she giggled to herself, he might be. She needed to find out. She owed at least that much to Arlin.

"Arlin, why don't we go to the scow and talk over a coffee?" There was more than a streak of sadistic pleasure as she said this, thinking of Aussie Cane Toad attempting to climb the rope ladder. And when he had done it knowing he'd have to get down again.

She made a point of running up the rope ladder and Arlin did the same. Cane Toad's difficulty was even more fun to watch than she had dared hope. The rope ladder swung. Dead squid fingers clung, with his legs horizontal his backside dipped in the estuary. There was satisfaction seeing a pretentious business suit arse-deep in the tide. What made it even better was the knowledge Grandmas were not supposed to think like that. Once in the wheel house she made a point of asking Arlin for a towel. "For Mister Fergusson to sit on."

As she looked round the wheel house her mind reared like a rodeo pony. Since the night of the fight she had joined a shearing gang, got married, had a baby, watched her baby grow into a woman, and have children of her own, who even now were dipping their toes into the dangerous waters of adulthood.

The intervening years on the scow had changed nothing. There was a television that hadn't been there before. Then she saw it behind the fiddle rail on the shelf over the starboard locker.

Memories like a flood tide filled the bays and inlets of her mind covering the intervening years like sand on the beach. It was her tenth birthday. Her mother was giving her the little bronze replica of the mermaid on the rock in Copenhagen and telling her it would bring luck. Throughout her years at school she stubbornly believed it. It sat on her desk at university while she sat her exams. She passed. Mermaids controlled destiny. Bored with crusty old Copenhagen Mermaid longed for blue Pacific waters. She met Harry and he brought the two of them to the Pacific, to Arlin and the scow. The day of the fight she abandoned her mermaid and almost drowned in the estuary as a result. Since then she had been on her own. Now Mermaid was within reach. She slid towards the shelf. Arlin moved towards the locker to get a towel. When he turned, Elvina's arm extended of its own volition. Her fingers closed. Elvina and Mermaid were together again. At that precise moment Elvina felt the scow sway as it strained against the mooring lines. But no one else seemed to notice.

Aussie Cane Toad was watching her. She moved towards the wood bin to get pine cones for the still smoldering galley fire. Getting it hot enough to boil coffee would take time, time to hear what Soggy Arse had to say.

"So what's your interest in the scow?" she asked as Arlin produced a towel. Before he answered, Dead Squid Fingers folded the towel, taking time to place it on the bench before sitting on it. Elvina had no doubt he contrived a pause of anticipation.

“I’d better start at the beginning,” he replied and nothing short of a bullet would have stopped him continuing.

“I told you I am involved in agricultural chemicals. You can’t be in the agri-chemical industry without involvement in packaging. Often this means heavy plastic containers. So I set up a hollow plastic injection moulding facility in Melbourne, initially just to support the agrichem business. The plastic side of the business expanded. We moved into other things, like water tanks and more recently, and this is where you come in, mussel farming floats. Mussel farming is big in New Zealand but could be a lot bigger. I’ve looked into costs. As I see it there are two significant limits to growth. One is the naturally occurring toxic algae bloom and the other is the high initial setting up costs and hence the return on capital invested. In Melbourne we produce low cost mussel floats and can get them to New Zealand at competitive prices, but from there on, it all turns to custard. This is the problem. No one wants mussel floats in busy deep water ports. So mussel farming is mainly centred on small shallow water ports. These farms need floats and ropes. My difficulty is getting our low cost floats from the port of entry to these out of the way fishing communities. Frankly the railways piss me off. Trains run to the wrong places, I have to use a combination of rail and road. Internal transport costs in New Zealand are destroying my business potential. I got thinking. Our product arrives at a port. Every mussel farm is operated on the coast. So why use land transport at all? Why not use a shallow draft vessel, pick up product from the port of entry and take it by sea to the little harbours up and down the coast

where it is required? I haven't done the sums but I guess it would take about twenty trucks to carry the quantity of floats you could carry in this little ship. And if you can't beat land transport on pricing for this job then you don't deserve to be in business. Now could you get this little ship into say Havelock?"

"I'd have to go in an hour or so either side of high tide." Arlin replied without hesitation.

"See what I mean. There's potential business in Havelock. Now let's expand this imaginary trip to Havelock to give you an idea of the sort of work I have in mind. On the way to Havelock you go past Bulwer. There's a mussel farm in there. Could you get into the bay and drop off twenty new floats?"

He's just looked that up to try and impress us. Rurenga thought. There's probably not one Kiwi in a thousand who could place Bulwer on the sea route into Havelock. But Aussie Cane Toad has memorised it and brings it into conversation to make us think that if he knows that sort of detail, he is well informed on everything else. The only reason for doing that is because there's something he's trying to hide either about himself or his proposal or both. It fits with wearing a flash suit and paying too much for the fence repair.

"Bulwar's easier to get into than Havelock." Arlin replied instantly.

"For your little ship. But I haven't finished this imaginary voyage yet. The fisherman in Bulwer has five damaged floats and wants these taken to Havelock so they can be pelletized in our recycling

machine for a credit on the scrap value of the plastic. Any problem with that?"

"No problem there." Arlin replied.

"Next time you're going into Havelock you will need to pick up forty seven sacks of pelletized plastic to drop off in Napier on your way to Coromandel. There's a fisherman in Coromandel who knows a lot about tax. Instead of purchasing mussel floats he leased them because lease payments are tax deductible but capital expenditures are not. In the Hauraki Gulf a fisherman has been leasing from us and is terminating his lease. So I need the used floats to be picked up and sold secondhand to a fisherman in Bluff, together with new floats which you can pick up in Lyttleton. Could your vessel handle work like that?"

"That's what she was built to do and what she's been doing for years." Arlin replied.

"So we've established the vessel is capable of the work, do you have the crew and the resolve to do it?" A much more observant question Rurenga thought to herself. She was pretty sure the truthful answer would be "no." She was also certain Alvin would give such a confused answer that a "yes" would be interpreted as a "no". How much did Aussie Cane Toad know about Arlin's problems? Time to intervene, she decided.

"Anything can be worked out, but before we go into those details tell me Mr. Fergusson how did you know about the scow?"

"That's very easy. I looked through the register of New Zealand coastal ships. And it didn't take long.

There aren't many vessels suited to the work I have in mind. This estuary was quoted as the ship's home port. I couldn't get any sense out of the telephone or internet, so I drove down to have a look. I stayed at the Swinging Lantern tavern in town last night and I asked the publican where the vessel was located and he filled me in with a few of the details about your operation."

"Damn!" she thought. "That crafty Cane Toad still has given no indication of how much he knows."

He continued. "Hearsay tells me this vessel has been under utilised in recent years. If you get your pricing right I could have work for you on an average of 10 days per month, with the likelihood of expanding the operation. Then there would be back loading business for..."

Rurenga cut in. "I take it this is just a preliminary discussion. We would need to know a great deal more about your proposals before we could, or would, fit it into our coastal shipping programme. Perhaps you could come up with a proposal we could seriously cost. Up till now you've been talking about imaginary voyages. We can give you imaginary prices to match if you want. But seriously you must realise you're asking us if we could do, 'A sort of a thing'. We've been in coastal shipping a long time. Should we decide to proceed we will have, not only all the resources necessary in terms of plant, machinery and personnel, but also the back up facilities which many other companies are not always in a position to offer."

'I hope he doesn't ask me what back up resources Arlin has got,' she thought. 'The only ones I can think of are my grandchildren.'

She continued. "The biggest problem I can see is the fact we don't have a definitive proposal from you."

Before she finished speaking a thought rippled across the surface of her mind as refreshing as a zephyr of wind on a sun burnt ocean. 'I'm as big a fake as him.' She giggled to herself as light airs played in the rigging of her mind. 'I'm Rurenga, I'm just Grandma. Grandmas don't talk like that. Not even to Aussie Cane Toads! But why am I doing it? I decided I didn't want anything to do with Arlin and Harry when I swam out of their lives and became Rurenga. Could my Copenhagen mermaid... No that's nonsense. She's just a piece of bronze.'

'Good! Cane Toad's looking puzzled. I don't think he expected that from me. I'm just little old Grandma wearing my daughter's jeans and tee shirt but at least I've got Cane Toad guessing.'

"You're quite right of course." Cane Toad was agreeing with her. "This is just a preliminary discussion, a broad brush approach. But if you're interested perhaps we could work on a draft proposal. I'll get Rachael to draw up something so we know what we're talking about. No obligation, and of course we can change it as much as we want. At least I've seen you and you've seen me. It could be a starting point." Without waiting for an answer he continued. "I've got to return to Melbourne tomorrow but I'll get Rachael to bring something for you to look at. How would two weeks today sound?"

'Doesn't want to dip his arse in the tide again, so he's sending Rachael! I wonder who she is?'

Rurenga thought as she answered, "I think it should be OK don't you Arlin?"

"Would what be OK?" Arlin asked.

"If Rachael brings a proposal to us in a couple of weeks." She answered cursing under her breath. 'Since Cane Toad arrived this was the first time Arlin had demonstrated his Alzheimer's. Did Wet Arse know about it already? If he'd been talking in town and staying at the Swinging Lantern could he not know? Yet he was still interested in going ahead with his proposal. Why? He couldn't possibly have known I was going to be here. I didn't know myself.'

'I wonder what his real motives are.' She thought. But answered, "I'll look out for Rachael in two weeks."

"If that suits you I'm sure we can work around it," he replied as thoughts like a flood tide edged into the inlets in Rurenga's mind. 'If he's trying to get Arlin to agree to something dubious he'll probably try and see him when I'm not here. I'd better make sure I am here. What the hell! I don't care! I swam out of Arlin's life forty years ago. I don't care! I don't care!' But the little mermaid in her pocket kept asking the same question.

"If you don't care, why are you here today?"

CHAPTER 7

THE WATCHERS

The amber glow of dawn flooded the black water of the estuary as the wheel house door opened and two pairs of feet made footprints in the dew on the scow's deck. Footprints, lit by the same amber light, led aft to the davits and the rope ladder. A pair of black swans, mated for life, saw the man and woman pause and kiss. The swans ebbed away with the tide as the man rowed the woman across the estuary and returned alone to the scow.

Decades slid in and out of focus as Elvina walked the same track Rurenga had used the previous day. She followed a second set of wheel ruts in the mud. The sheep were back in the home paddock and Hemi and Rangi had repaired the fence. Shutting the gate Grandma felt herself hover in the void between Elvina and Rurenga. Was she still Rurenga or had Elvina's missing decades evaporated as Arlin emerged out of memory? Had Mermaid dozed through Rurenga's doldrum dull domestic days? Despite the sleeping years Elvina knew she could hear her little mermaid's whisper. But now Rurenga needed to be back in her bedroom while the whare slept. No one need know she'd spent the night with Arlin on the scow, and was re-lighting those erotic thoughts Grandmas were not supposed to own. Was it her salty mermaid's way of demanding a return to the scow and wide Pacific skies?

Rurenga decided to tell Mum and the kids Arlin kept talking about mussel floats and she got back late

after everyone had gone to bed. Rurenga put her hand into her pocket and the mermaid made Elvina's lips smile, and eyes twinkle. She listened as the mermaid whispered. "The young know they are the first to discover eroticism, Grandma's are immune from suspicion."

Grandma felt she had no sooner fallen asleep when she felt someone touch her shoulder. Her subconscious was telling her to ignore it and find a deeper level of sleep. But the hand on her shoulder persisted.

"Would you like a cup of tea Grandma?"

Too insistent to ignore, Huia put a cup of tea on the bedside table. 'Why this morning?' Grandma asked herself. Huia never brought her cups of tea in bed. At least she didn't have to open her eyes to answer.

"Thanks Huia. I can't seem to wake up this morning."

"That must be because you got home late Grandma. Mum's cooking breakfast."

It crossed her mind to say she didn't want breakfast but decided someone would assume she was ill and there would be more questions. Damn! She was awake now anyway. It would be easier to get up than face their concern. Still thinking of her night on the scow with Arlin she replied, "Thanks Huia, I'll get dressed now." Then she remembered. "And thanks for getting the sheep back and fixing the fence. You and the boys did a good job."

“As you didn’t come back till after dark, how did you see it Grandma?”

“Oh! Oh yes!” That gave her a second to think. “The moon is only just past full. I saw it in moonlight but I’d like to go and have another good look in daylight. Shall we go and have a look together Huia?” Then she remembered. “I met the man who smashed it and he’s paid for the damage so I’ve got some money for all three of you. That’s good isn’t it?” She knew that was all she needed to say to Huia but from Hemi and Rangi she would have to answer the question, ‘How much?’ She’d need to work it out and she had only just got her eyes open.

“Thanks Grandma. I’ll tell the boys.” Huia closed the door quietly leaving Grandma to drink her tea and try to emerge from the flood tide of memories still swirling round the scow.

Over breakfast Mum explained the mystery of Grandma’s early morning cup of tea. It was so obvious! Grandma felt she should be asking herself, “Why didn’t I realize?” But she didn’t ask herself the question because she already knew the answer.

Huia’s eyes danced with delight across the breakfast table when Grandma replied. “Yes, as long as the river’s gone down enough to use the ford. I’ll take you to Harry’s hut to fetch Starlight...” The spoken sentence finished there and the unfinished sentence remained in her head. “...and spend some time with Harry by myself.”

Before Huia and Grandma reached it they could both see the gate to the River Paddock was wide

open. The sheep were back in the scrub and blackberry.

"The gate's open Grandma." Was there an accusing note in Huia's voice?

"I definitely closed it after me." The words sounded hesitant. So she added. "I made a point of being quite sure it was properly latched."

"Then someone else must have opened it during the night." Huia replied logically. More recently than that, thought Grandma, but said nothing because Huia continued. "Once we've got Starlight back it will be much easier for me to get round the sheep."

Grandma grinned to herself. I guess Huia's worried I might say we have to round up the sheep first before we get Starlight. In any case the spirit of Elvina was re-asserting itself within Grandma's mind and had no intention of being delayed.

"Then we'd better get Starlight first then you can ride back across the ford and get the dogs, while I walk back."

"I could dub you back on Starlight." Huia offered.

"No, I think I'd sooner walk but thanks Huia." Grandma replied. Had she realized a pair of binoculars and a telescope were trained on them she might have revised her decision to let Huia ride back alone. She would have been even more protective had she known the telescope was the scope of a hunting rifle. But they weren't aware of the surveillance or the reasons for it.

Bright sunlight followed Huia and Grandma from the River Track to the dappled light of the forest floor. Eyes adjusted grudgingly. Punga fronds as ancient as God's beard scattered their clippings on roots woven with time and supplejack. Searching for trip wires Huia found nothing, but from the vantage point on the hill, binoculars refocused as they progressed from forest shade to river shingle. Unseen eyes followed them splashing through ankle deep water to the flax beds on the far side. The watchers saw them take the track through flax to Harry's hut.

On the deck outside his hut, with the morning sun on his back, Harry wrote in a notebook. He frequently referred to the scientific calculator on the rough log table at his side. Cicadas penetrated every place of silence. Engrossed with his calculations and with his back to them he was unaware of Huia and Grandma approaching or of the watchers on the hill. Grandma greeted him with, "Good morning Harry." Three words were sufficient to trigger a forty year old memory of her voice. He turned to use his eyes for verification of the impossible message his ears were giving him. Rurenga watched him mentally erasing time's legacy on her face. He spoke one word.

"Elvina?"

In silent answer her hand opened to reveal her mermaid. Harry's reaction was quicker than the ability of his leg to respond. He tried to stand but Elvina moved to the back of his chair rested her hand on his shoulder and kissed the top of his head.

"Don't hurt your leg Harry. I'm not worth it. I've hurt you too much already and I don't want to hurt

you again. I deserve to be told to go away and not return. I'm not sure why I've come..."

Huia cut in, "We came to get Starlight back Grandma."

Harry turned to Huia. "I put Starlight in the goat paddock at the end of the garden. That was about as far as I could hobble. The saddle and reins are in the wood shed. Get her as soon as you like Huia."

As Huia turned to walk round the end of Harry's hut she threw a "Thanks Grandad." over her shoulder.

An electric fence would not have jolted Harry more. He looked at Elvina and spoke in almost a whisper. "Does she know something I don't?"

Elvina touched and held Harry's hand "If she does, she also knows more than me. I think she's just made her choice between you and Arlin. That was something I didn't have the character to do."

"You used the past tense Elvina. Is the future tense equally uncertain?"

"I was a young woman Harry. If male jealousy doesn't get in the way not many young women would choose to have one lover if they could have two. I'm still a woman Harry."

Harry's eyes met hers for a brief moment before they exploded in laughter. "Yes! The old Viking spirit!" He swung his open palm to meet hers in mid air. Their hands clapped and held, "A woman in the present tense. What more could a man ask?"

“You might ask a woman who swam away from you forty years ago to keep swimming.”

“What! And spend another forty years waiting for you to come back again!”

Elvina gave him a playful punch. “I’m not a comet that returns every forty years.”

“I don’t think anyone would ever accuse Elvina of being a huge block of ice.”

“Good. Otherwise you might want to carve me into something. Now that would be creative. Next time the comet comes round when people look through their telescopes instead of a block of ice they will see your carving. You could do something really subversive. How about a totally new set of Ten Commandments?”

“There’s no point Elvina. Finance houses and money manipulators have already produced a new set.”

“Oh so they have. Perhaps instead you should sell them the advertising rights to Harry’s comet.”

“Now that’s a much more interesting concept Elvina. If you were a comet you’d be ‘Harry’s comet.’ So I wouldn’t need to carve you into anything, because you are perfect the way you are.”

“That’s disappointing Harry. I’ve always thought my greatest social assets are my murky past and my escalating imperfections.” Elvina reached forward and gave his beard a playful tug. “I feel insulted Harry. Perhaps I should go away again for forty years until you have learned to appreciate my wicked ways.”

“Help! Elvina, help! In forty years I might get trapped in the cleavage between time and space, or be entombed in a wormhole with my only exit past virtuous women and the insufferable cruelty they inflict on helpless males. You wouldn’t be callous enough to throw me naked into the coliseum with virtuous women. Would you?”

“I’ll only agree to save you from the coliseum on two conditions.”

“Not the coliseum, anything but that Elvina. I’ll agree to anything.”

“My first condition Harry, you must be kind to bronze mermaids, and promise to defend their reputation if anyone says they are made of brass. And the second condition, you must show me round your museum.”

“What will you do Elvina if I break my conditions?”

“Then I’ll poison your nostrils by wearing ‘Eau de Cologne’ and start insisting you lower the seat of the dunny after use.”

“You’re so harsh Elvina. I’m just a weak male trapped between the coliseum and the dunny seat. Have you no pity. Show me just a little mercy.”

“No mercy. Now show me the museum.”

Huia came round the end of Harry’s shed leading Starlight by holding a piece of her mane. As soon as she saw Grandma and Harry she called to them. “Starlight was pleased to see me and cantered up to the gate before I got there.”

Elvina and Harry made eye contact and Harry whispered. "I wish I could canter up to you Elvina."

"There would be no point Harry. You're not Starlight with a thick mane. You haven't enough hair for me to drag you away Viking style."

Grandma looked at Huia. "I'm going to have a look at Harry's museum..."

Huia cut in. "Can I come as well please?"

Harry grinned. "Of course you can Huia."

"I'll just need to get Starlight's reins and tie her up. I won't be long."

Elvina held out her hand to Harry to help him out of his chair. Together they made their way towards Harry's door. At some point during those few steps the whirring from behind the wooden walls drowned out the cicadas in the bush. Diamond edged cutters spun in stone. Harry switched it off and turned off the water flowing over the cutter.

"What are you doing Harry?" Elvina asked as Huia came in. Harry held out his arm to Huia.

"You might be interested in this as well Huia. Remember the lump of petrified wood you helped me bring back. Well this is it." As he said this he took it off the cutting bench, wiped away the excess water and turned it over to show a cut surface. "It's beautiful!" Huia said in amazement.

Harry pointed to the grain in the stone. "What you are looking at is the spirit of a primeval forest. First I cut it into a rectangle so that I have straight sides to work with. In this piece I am going to carve a piwaiwaka (a fan tail)..."

“Are you going to do it like the other things? Make it different depending on which way you look at it?” Huia asked.

“Yes Huia this is the last piece for the museum.”

“How do you know how to make it look different when you turn it round?” Huia asked.

“That’s what I was calculating when you arrived. Each museum piece takes about two school notebooks of calculations to give me the co-ordinates. Then I mark these onto each rectangular face and cut away the excess stone. What’s left will be a fan tail distorted in one axis by changes in space-time relationship.”

“Are you still going to send it all to Denmark?” Huia asked.

“That’s the plan Huia. I’m hoping Arlin will help me ship it to Auckland.”

“After all that work you are going to have to take care with the packing won’t you?” Elvina asked.

“Last time I sent items to Denmark I made a separate wooden crate for each item and packed it with foam and paper. I’ll probably do the same again.”

“That involves a lot of work doesn’t it?” Elvina asked.

“Hopefully my leg will be better by then.” Harry replied.

“If it would help you Harry I could ask Hemi and Rangi to give you a hand making crates. They’d probably enjoy it.” Elvina offered.

“It would be a fantastic help if they were willing to lend a hand. The university will pay the cost of freight and packaging so the boys could earn some pocket money.”

“I’ll ask them when I get back, but in the meantime we both want to have a look at your exhibits.”

Harry led them through the door at the back of his room. The afternoon sea breeze was stirring the flax when they emerged and Huia splashed back across the ford on Starlight, leaving Elvina alone with Harry.

CHAPTER 8

THE GATE

Elvina intended crossing the ford and being clear of the bush and its tree roots before dark. Leaving Harry's hut she realised she had left too late. Only the memory of the evening glow in the western sky remained. By lingering in the doorway with Harry more minutes passed. Too late for the sun and too early for the moon she thought. Harry handed her a torch.

"If I lend you this it means you will have to come back to return it."

They kissed. And the kiss seemed to roll like smooth rounded breakers on the beach after the storm subsided.

"I have no intention of staying away Harry." With her mermaid in her pocket and the torch in her hand she pushed through flax towards the ford. She had no means of knowing the torch light in the flax alerted watchers on the hill and a night vision scope had replaced the daytime binoculars.

Reaching the bush Elvina's confidence vanished. She felt herself changing into Rurenga. Only the tiny pool of torch light, searching for the track, prevented her being transported to the merging world of glow worm and starlight, where up and down no longer have meaning. Snapping twigs, and rustling leaves, encircled her pool of light, which contracted as the battery faded and she stepped into the throat of the night. Whispered words came to her from dark

places. A shape without shape, moved between her and the glow worms. Her ears became eyes for the footfall behind. She ran. Branch and vine, fern and frond encircled her. Root and rock endeavored to trip her. Mud stole her shoe and the steep slope into the river seemed to be reaching out for her. Then the canopy opened in front of her. She was in the River Paddock running through scrub to the gate. It was open again. She didn't need to pause to open it. No time to close it. No point in closing it the sheep would be out. Gulping air she saw a sliver of light escape through a bedroom curtain in the whare. But she looked back over her shoulder not forwards as she reached for the kitchen door knob. Her hand reached for the light switch as she stepped into darkness. The light came on but her hand didn't stop shaking until several minutes after she locked the whare door, slid the bolt across and checked the window catches.

Lying awake in bed listening amplified every night sound. Sleeplessness questioned every familiar creak and hunted for explanations of unfamiliar movements of the night. Unaware that she had slept, she awoke to dappled sunlight on her bedroom window.

Ladling five bowls of porridge out of her comfortable iron pot, she almost believed last night's sounds in the bush had been sounds inside her own head. As the children came in for breakfast, chatter and sunlight evaporated those shadows of the mind that walk at night.

But gates don't open by themselves! Grandma looked at Huia as she handed her the bowl of

porridge. "Did you manage to get the sheep back in the Home Paddock yesterday Huia?"

"Yes they went back fine."

"And did you shut the gate with the chain afterwards Huia?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Because when I came through it after dark last night the gate was open and the sheep were back in the River Paddock."

"Oh no! Someone must keep opening it Grandma. I'll go and get Starlight after breakfast."

They were talking. All of them were talking, Grandma knew they were talking, but didn't hear a word they were saying. Huia's words resonated in her head. "Someone must keep opening it." Who? And why? Normally no one went down the track except the odd fisherman or hunter. But not at night. Supposing it wasn't just noises in her head last night. Could the footsteps in the forest have been real? They were real enough for her to know she wouldn't be leaving Harry's hut again at night fall with or without mermaid. But her daylight mind was already splashing back across the ford to Harry's hut. Then she remembered.

"Rangi and Hemi, you might be interested in this. Harry needs some wooden crates made to ship his museum pieces to Denmark. The university in Copenhagen is paying for freight and packaging so it's an opportunity for you to earn a few dollars."

"How much?" Hemi and Rangi asked together.

"I have no idea." Grandma answered. "But I don't suppose the university would expect you to work for nothing. We'll have to go up to Harry's hut and ask him."

"How big have the crates got to be?" Rangi asked.

"I think they all need to be different sizes. Harry wants one for each item in his museum."

"So how many does he want?" Hemi asked.

"Sorry I don't know. Probably about sixty I should think. You'll have to ask Harry."

"Has Harry got the wood?" Rangi asked.

"I wouldn't think so. You could probably get some from the saw mill." Grandma offered.

"Would Harry pay for it, or would we have to buy it and charge Harry for the wood as well as making the crates?" Hemi asked.

"We haven't got any money to buy wood, or nails." Rangi replied.

"We'll have to talk to Harry but we do have some money. That guy who broke the fence gave me a cheque. If I can cash it, you could use that to buy wood and nails" Grandma reminded them, while pondering whether mermaid pre-empted problems.

"How are we going to get sixty wooden crates up to Harry's hut?" Hemi asked.

Grandma's thoughts drifted in the tide between Harry and Arlin. "We'll have to ask Harry but I think Arlin will be taking them by sea to Auckland. Perhaps we could take the crates to the scow and carry each

museum piece along the flax track to the scow and pack them into the crates on board.”

“If Rangi and Hemi make the crates in the barn Starlight could carry them across the ford to Harry’s hut. Huia suggested.

“I think we’ll have to talk to Harry and Arlin before we do anything.” Grandma added.

“What about getting the sheep back in the Home Paddock again?” Huia asked.

“Yes, I suppose we should do that first.” Grandma agreed.

“I’ll get Starlight.” Huia offered.

“I reckon it’s Huia who keeps opening the gate so she can get Starlight to round ‘em up again.” Rangi suggested.

“Then I reckon you bust the fence just so you could have the fun of repairing it.” Huia snapped back.

“Stop talking nonsense, you two.” Mum interjected.

“Why don’t we go and get the sheep in and put a padlock and chain on the gate.” Huia offered.

“Cos we haven’t got one,” Hemi replied.

“We could get one in town.” Huia offered.

“And what are we going to use for money.” Hemi asked.

“The cheque money to repair the fence,” Huia replied.

“That’s for Harry’s wood and nails.” Rangi cut in.

Grandma hesitated remembering last night when she found the gate open and she didn’t have to stop running to open it. Suppose it had been locked!

“There’s never been a problem leaving the gate on the catch. Perhaps we should leave buying a padlock until we see if we keep getting a problem. We would probably lose the key between us anyway.” That was about the best she could offer without telling the kids fear itself had stalked her in the dark. “Why don’t we all go and get the sheep in and then go on to Harry’s hut and find out what crates he needs?” And the voice inside her head whispered, ‘It’s daylight now and I’ll be with Rangi and Hemi when we walk through the bush.’

Huia picked up her riding hat and headed for the door saying, “I’ll get Starlight and the dogs.”

As Grandma, Rangi and Hemi walked down the track with the dogs Huia, riding Starlight, noticed it first.

“Grandma! The gate’s shut.”

Huia was correct. The sheep were still in the River Paddock but the gate was shut. When they got closer they could see the catch was on as well.

Last night it had been wide open! Noises in her head couldn’t shut a gate. Someone had been out there in the dark!

“We’ll get the sheep back into the home paddock and go on to Harry’s hut.” None of them knew the thing about to prevent them going to Harry’s

hut lay only a few paces ahead. Both dogs squeezed through the gate. Even someone who didn't know dogs would have been in no doubt the barking had a specific purpose. Something significant lay on the other side of the gate. Grandma tried to call. "Pup, Blue, here. Get in behind." The barking increased.

Hemi and Rangi broke into a run. "They might have baled a pig." Huia urged Starlight into a canter.

The formless panic that tapped Rurenga on the shoulder last night still lingered. Could it have been just a pig? She hurried after the others. By the time she caught up, Rangi had the gate open.

It wasn't a pig. It was a cloud of flies, and under the flies a body. The recent owner of the body had formerly been a man, probably in his mid-twenties. Hair and grass shared a puddle, blackened near the edge, and bright red in the centre where Pup, the older of the two dogs, was both lapping up blood and barking. Blue barked, probably for no better reason than because Pup was barking. Rangi grabbed Pup's collar and pulled him off. But the late summer flies were unrelenting in their obsession with the splintered bone and soft interior behind the left ear. Unable to look away, Rurenga's eyes kept drifting back while her mind raced ahead. Might she have been a victim? Was her family in danger? Was Harry under threat?

Huia interrupted her thoughts. "I suppose he must have been trying to climb the gate and fell off and hit his head."

That hadn't occurred to Grandma. The daylight wasn't strong enough to dissipate last night's formless

shadows. Without believing it she agreed instantly. "Yes, that must be it Huia. We'll have to report it to the police and they'll sort it out."

"I could ride to the saw mill on Starlight and telephone them from there." Huia offered.

"A murderer might have clubbed him to death." Hemi suggested.

'I'm sure you're right' thought Rurenga but found herself answering, "I think Huia's idea is a lot more likely." Then the explanation hit her. It hit her as violently as the blow that felled the body on the ground. The idea, dredged up by the trawl net of her brain, horrified her. She had no idea how the thought occurred. Was her little mermaid generating these horrific ideas? She tried to eject the thought from her mind but it wouldn't go.

"Are we still going to get the sheep back?" Rangi asked.

A few moments earlier she would have said, 'No leave them where they are.' But instead answered, "Yes we had better get them back in the home paddock before the police come or we might find we can't get them back for ages."

"I bet Mum will want to come and see." Rangi suggested.

"I doubt it." Grandma answered and this time felt she was telling the truth.

"Starlight and I could get the sheep back for you Grandma." Huia offered hopefully.

"OK then love, we'll stay and close the gate after you." Grandma replied.

“They won’t go through the gate if you’re there.” Huia answered in time to get the scornful reply from Hemi.

“You just don’t want us to see the sheep get away on you when you muck up.”

“She’d just blame Pup and Blue.” Rangi retorted.

There was no way Grandma was going to leave Huia alone in that paddock with the body of a man who had just been murdered. His killer could still be around. And she still wasn’t certain, not completely certain, of the killer’s identity.

“We’ll spread out towards the river Huia and then you can get the sheep in yourself.” Grandma suggested. “We might even prevent them doubling back on you.”

As it turned out Huia made an easy job of getting the sheep back through the gate and, Grandma thought to herself, quite an effective job of churning up the mud leading to the gate and to the body.

As they closed the gate after the last sheep Huia again offered to ride to the saw mill and phone the police.

With suspicion growing out of control in her brain Grandma replied. “OK Huia you ride up there now and we’ll take the dogs back.” That could work out well, thought Grandma. She was sure Huia’s own words would be better than anything she could say and it would be good if it was Huia’s voice the police recorded.

CHAPTER 9

ADMIRAL NELSON

Grandma glanced at her watch. It would take Huia about fifteen minutes to ride to the saw mill and another five minutes to get to the phone and make the call. Then the police would need at least fifteen minutes to drive down the dirt road. She would have at least thirty minutes. As Huia rode off Grandma noted Starlight was trotting not cantering. That would give her an extra five minutes. Yes! She had time! So asking the boys to take the dogs back she told them she was going to see if she could attract Arlin's attention to tell him what had happened. Fortunately neither the boys nor Huia had seen what she had seen laying in the grass so could not know what she was about to do. She waited till they were out of sight before picking it up and heading to the jetty.

Walking to the jetty, down the same path she had run in terror only hours ago, she put her hand in her pocket to feel mermaid's bronze touch. Her mind peeled back the years to the dark alley in Dunedin's dockland. Then two guys had grabbed her. In response to her cry for help Arlin's flying fists came to her aid. One of the guys escaped and the other was still unconscious when they returned to the scow. But this time the guy on the ground by the gate wasn't going to regain consciousness.

She reached the jetty as the lower lid of the sun's eye opened below a cloud. The pathway across the water glittered. Close against the far bank the black hull of the scow tugged mooring lines. As wind

ruffled her hair, the bush and estuary vanished. Again she was standing on the deck of the scow on a sun soaked sea looking across empty horizons. Arlin's hands rested on her hips and she could feel his breath on the back of her neck as, using his sextant, she slid the noonday sun down to the horizon.

Two shadows crossed the water as, with feet outstretched, the pair of black swans landed beyond the sun's silver pathway. The ripples spread as irresistibly as waves of memory. Again she lay in the starboard bunk with Arlin. The dream had recurred all her married life; she could no more control it than a shadow could control its existence. When fact insisted her husband lay at her side the secret recesses of her mind kept returning to the starboard bunk with Arlin. In the twilight world when fingers of sleep and consciousness intertwined had she ever let her secret slip? Did he know? Would he have understood she did not love him less because she could not control her dreams?

The questions remained unanswered and she was back on the jetty looking at the hammer in her hand. Convinced she held the murder weapon she swung her arm and threw. The hammer performed a limping arc and fell exactly where she had aimed, in the middle of the sun's silver path. As the ripples died away she imagined it burying itself into soft mud at the bottom of the estuary. She glanced at her watch. It was exactly seven minutes past ten, on the fourth of April. Seven minutes past ten! It took the sun four minutes to change its position by one degree. She made a mental note to check the accuracy of her watch with the radio pips when she got home.

Turning her back on the estuary she walked back to the whare to write down the time and date.

She didn't know how far she had thrown it but she had thrown it to the limit of her strength. It would be a simple matter to get a similar hammer, go into the home paddock where the grass was short, and measure how far she could throw. I could probably do the same again to within about five metres she thought. The range would be a bit of a guess but she could be sure of the angle, it was a line from the end of the jetty to the position of the sun at seven minutes past ten on the fourth of April. She could probably position the hammer on the bottom of the estuary to within a radius of about five metres if she ever needed to find it. But the secret was her secret to share only with mermaid.

On her way back to the whare she listened for the tell tale sound of police sirens knowing they wouldn't be able to resist turning them on as they approached the murder scene. As events turned out she had longer than she estimated.

The police control room played Huia's message through a second time. She was obviously only a kid but sounded genuine. The sergeant made the decision to dispatch a second car. No trouble with the first one, it was only a few kilometers from the turn off. The only other vehicle available was heading the other way down the state highway.

A salesman for "Electroparts." was running late for a meeting. He had been doing about 130 K on the straight stretch of the state highway when a cop car pulled him over. The car door opened and a cop got out. Then, for no apparent reason, the cop jumped back into the car turned on the sirens and with lights flashing, did a "U" turn and headed back the way he had come. Obviously Saint Christopher had become the patron saint of speeding salesmen. Knowing he was either lucky or immune, he accelerated up to 140 K.

The first set of flashing lights hit the dirt road. The second set was still twenty minutes away. Flying in the face of long established police practice, neither daytime headlights nor siren-generated decibels at the sharp end of a cone of noise were able to provide dirt road traction for the first car. After pirouetting in gravel the car's siren gurgled its death rattle into ditch-deep bog water. Silence smiled at the headlight's attempt to police the world of mosquito larvae beneath the surface. From the driving seat Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart swore out loud.

"Damn, damn and double damn."

In the passenger seat Constable Susan Nelson mentally cringed. Being a poor driver was understandable. He had probably just written off an expensive car and the most imaginative words he could think of were, "Damn, damn and double damn!" Her two children were only eight and ten but their language was definitely more robust.

As he climbed out of the ditch and before he checked whether Susan was injured his mind was already filling out an accident report. He decided a

crash while investigating a homicide would look better than simply attending an accidental death. The circumstances of the crash needed embellishment; to achieve that Susan would have to sing the same tune. This thought, not concern for her, prompted him to ask, "Are you OK Susan?" He interpreted her reply of "More or less, I think." as "Everything is fine." Good, at least I don't have to explain an injury report. Her interpretation of "More or less, I think." was "I'm damn well not telling him my boobs are bruised from the seat belt and sore as hell." Prudery played no part in her decision. A squadron of schemes was leaving harbour.

She was a Nelson, and directly related to the famous English admiral, in her imagination. There were similarities. The "blind eye" was one example. She didn't have a blind eye but as far as she knew neither did Admiral Nelson. He received payment from the crown for faking the loss of his eye and she had learned a "blind eye" had earning potential for anyone smart enough to acquire one. Years ago as lead singer in 'Hot Toddy and the Weevils' she'd declared war on respectability, sung in bars and night clubs, and personally witnessed how easy it is to earn big money with the sort of "blind eye" people could rely on. "Blind eyes" were earning more than she did, and didn't have to live out of the back of the old Volkswagen van and never see her kids. Even when her song "Gimme a bit o' leeway" got to number fourteen in the charts everyone else made money not her. So Hot Toddy broke her contract, joined the cops, and cut the Weevils adrift to try and get on without her. They hit the rocks in three weeks.

Admiral Nelson hadn't got to be an admiral without using dubious techniques. She was in no doubt equally murky methods would ensure a rise in her fortunes.

To Senior Sergeant Bryan, pushing a wheelbarrow containing only second hand ideas felt comfortable. The force was comfortable. And Bryan liked being comfortable. Before he found the police, he'd had five jobs and been sacked from all of them. But the police promoted him. There was no hard physical work. He was only required to polish his shoes every day, not his brain. As long as everything looked right, everything was right. But even if something wasn't right the police made it look right. This meant who ever said, "It wasn't right" must have been mistaken, because as it looked right, it was right. In case of mishap he offered the standard short prayer, preferably following an All Black win. "Inspector forgive me. I have sinned but I have some excellent excuses." The inspector didn't really care what had happened as long as the excuses were plausible. But right now excuses eluded him. Every drunk in town used the excuse they crashed while trying to avoid that (non existent) 'little black dog'. Use that and Inspector Fitzsimple's reply would be cold enough to power a freezing works.

"Pity you didn't run it over, and not only save damage to a police vehicle but also save all those other accidents with that elusive little black dog. Are you sure it was a black dog and not just the hair of the dog?" Then he'd do a little laugh. "You know Bryan I'm thinking of renaming that little dog "The Black Pimpernel" Then he'd repeat that damn poem he always quoted.

*"They seek him here,
 They seek him there,
 Those drunks they seek him everywhere.
 Be he in heaven
 Be he in hell
 That damned elusive Pimpernel."*

Then his voice would change and his lips curl at the edges like a dried out sandwich as he stretched his neck and throat sinews, leaving Bryan to wonder whether the tension reached the other end of his digestive tract. "Well Bryan was it heaven or hell because it sure as hell wasn't on this planet was it?" The smile would vaporize and he'd punch out, "Now what really happened Lockhart?"

The more he thought about it the more he realised a little black dog, or even a little brown dog wouldn't work. What about swerving to miss a cow? Fitzsimple couldn't tell him to run over a cow. His brain felt like an egg timer which had run out of sand. Trouble is cows are owned by farmers and they might have all their cows accounted for. It has to be a big animal. What about a red deer on the road. There's bush round here. A stag could easily jump these fences. That's it! Testosterone was responsible for the size of a stag's antlers so the stag his mind created had to be a big twelve pointer. He started to explain his idea to Susan. As soon as he mentioned a stag on the road she thought, "I know it would have been at

least a twelve pointer to match his image of himself. So she answered, "Yes! A little spiker wasn't it."

'Damn her,' he thought, using the most imaginative word he could think of. He wasn't going to tell Fitzsimple it was a little spiker. His mind veered off course as suddenly as the car had done. 'I shall have to stop thinking of him as "Fitzsimple," I might make a mistake and call him that one day.' Ever since someone told him that the prefix Fitz meant "Illegitimate son of..." or "Bastard" he hadn't been able to resist mentally changing Fitzsamuel's name to Fitzsimple or "Simply a bastard." He could just imagine Fitzsimple's comment if he said it had been a little spiker on the road. And it would be an affront to his masculinity.

"No Susan, it was bigger than that, I'm certain it was a twelve pointer."

Admiral Susan Nelson grinned to herself as she changed tack.

"You crashed the car because you were groping my thigh with your left hand while trying to drive on a dirt road."

The narrowness of Bryan's eyes was genetic. The narrowness of his mind was cultured. Cultured to the point where he despised those who claimed to appreciate the broad picture. They didn't understand seeing the "broad picture" made them blind. Disdain glanced at Susan. If he'd had his way they would never have let either Maori or women into the police force. But as they had, why shouldn't he grope her thigh? If he wanted to soil his hands touching a Maori, that was his business. He was a white male

senior sergeant and she was just a half Maori female constable. She must have wanted it, women always did.

Admiral Susan Nelson deployed her ships into attack formation.

“You don’t expect me to fill out a false accident report do you? I feel a personal grievance report would be more appropriate.”

Every instinct Bryan had about women and Maori in the police was confirmed. Typical! She was trying to fake a grievance. Of course no one would believe her.

He explained “I don’t see it so much as making a false declaration as making efficient use of police resources. The car is damaged. Whatever we say will have no effect on that. Forms have to be filled out. You’re new to the force, I had better explain. Police procedure requires a plausible explanation and the matter is resolved in a tidy fashion. I can assure you, you won’t get very far in the police if you try to turn a nice tidy explanation into a confusion of irrelevancies.”

Admiral Nelson ordered the decks cleared for action.

“The reason you want me to drop a personal grievance complaint against you is nothing to do with making efficient use of police resources it is because of what will be written in your personal file, and its effect on your future career, or lack of one. I have no intention of dropping my complaint unless...” She decided to leave a suitable pause. She had to leave it long enough for the enemy to think he had found a

weakness and not realise he was sailing into a trap... “Unless... No damn it, why should I drop it. I don’t have to put up with you pawing at my leg.”

Bryan noticed her hesitation after the word “unless.” That could only mean one thing. Everyone had their price; all he had to do was to find what she wanted in exchange. As always in these situations everything is negotiable. So he forced what he would call a smile.

“I’m sure we could come to a suitable conclusion to this little matter. After all it is simply a matter of perspective.”

The admiral ordered the guns to be loaded but the gun ports closed. The enemy mustn’t appreciate the fire power available.

“I suppose a cheque for five hundred dollars could change my perspective.”

“Five hundred dollars! You must be crazy! You’re trying to blackmail a police officer. You don’t think you could get away with that do you?”

“Yes I do. You know the alternatives. And I also think in retrospect you would be prepared to pay more than five hundred to get my complaint taken out of your personal file.”

Like a squall on the horizon gathering in ferocity an approaching police siren prompted the admiral to open the gun ports. “From the sound of that siren I guess you have about three minutes to write me a cheque for five hundred dollars or I’m going to put on a performance Hollywood would

nominate for an Oscar, starting ten seconds before that car stops.”

Senior Sergeant Bryan looked at the car in the ditch and reached into his pocket and took out his cheque book.

“Make the cheque out to Susan Nelson and cross it.”

Bryan scowled at her. “You’re going to regret this you know.” He wrote the cheque.

“Not as much as you would regret not writing it”, the admiral replied. Folding the cheque she put it in her pocket as the police car arrived.

Bryan didn’t guess it was not going to cost him five hundred dollars. Admiral Susan had no intention of paying the cheque into her bank. She now had documentary evidence that Bryan had attempted to bribe her to keep quiet about the causes of the crash. Admiral Nelson had captured an enemy ship without firing a shot. The enemy captain had surrendered his ship and laid his sword at her feet, which she accepted graciously. She decided to allow him the freedom of her quarter deck. Her next move would be to man the captured vessel with the prize crew, which had arrived.

Both doors of the police car opened simultaneously. Admiral Susan hung her head like a school girl caught stealing lollies, and replied to their question. “You’d better ask Bryan, he was driving.” She smiled to herself as she thought how effective that opening line and her body language had been. She watched them make eye contact with each other in disbelief, as Bryan explained about the twelve

pointer stag on the road. He was a lousy liar. She even saw a flicker of a smile cross their faces when one of them showed surprise Bryan had time to count all the points on the antlers. A 'night club' wink from Hot Toddy herself was all that was needed to put the prize crew in charge of the captured vessel.

Bryan used the radio in the undamaged car to call the control room. Susan felt embarrassed listening to his absurd explanation about the "twelve pointer" on the road. He concluded with a decision to leave Sergeant Arundel in charge of the damaged vehicle while awaiting the arrival of the tow truck while he proceeded to the crime scene with Constable Susan Nelson and Constable Roland.

CHAPTER 10

FISH HOOKS AND DRUM STICKS

Needing the sizes of the crates for Harry's museum pieces Hemi and Rangi had to get to Harry's hut. Police blocked the gate to the river paddock. "Crime Scene" orange tape hung round the gate like electric fencing strung up by a drunken townie. Rutted tyre tracks and damaged pasture led to a police caravan and three police cars that were all parked in the home paddock.

"Can't come through here. You'll have to go back and play somewhere else." A uniform with muddy shoes growled at them. Of course Rangi and Hemi could not have known the cop in the muddy shoes was Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart. And neither could they have known his temper, like a boulder rolling down a mountain, was gathering real and imaginary grievances. Tempers and avalanches are meaningless unless someone or something stands in the wrong place. Bryan's temper saw boys. Even if Hemi and Rangi had known, they would not have considered it abnormal as they believed all cops were normally like that.

"I don't recall you asking permission to park in our home paddock." Rangi answered.

"Smart arse! This is a 'crime scene' investigation. This area is closed." The first pebbles of the avalanche were already bouncing out of control down the gully.

"We need to get up to Harry's hut. We've got a job to do for him." Hemi responded.

"Then you'll have to wait till my investigation is finished."

"You reckon your work's more important than anyone else's do you?" Rangi asked.

"I'm not arguing with you..."

"It sounds to me as if you are." Rangi replied.

"Piss off home. You can't go to Harry's hut or anywhere else beyond this tape."

"You're a public servant. I don't like my servants talking to me in that tone."

"Like it or not. I don't care. You're not going past here until my investigation is finished."

"And how long will your investigation take?" Rangi asked.

"As long as it takes. And in the meantime you can't go past here."

"Can't go past here? Can't!" It didn't occur to Bryan he had just issued a challenge.

"I wouldn't bet on it. Unless you know some way to stop the river flowing." Rangi called over his shoulder as the two brothers turned back towards the whare.

It took Hemi and Rangi about a quarter of an hour to fetch their paddles and life jackets and drag the canoe down the beach to the water's edge. The ripples from bow and paddles spread over the lagoon

and up the river before vanishing as completely as if they had never existed.

Satisfied the boys had gone, Bryan concentrated on the five hundred dollar blockage in his brain. Raindrops on a roof concentrate all their energy on finding the guttering and down pipe. Such is the nature of rain drops and roofs but should there be a blockage, once the gutter is full, water spills onto anyone standing in the way. And in this case there was someone standing in the way.

Constable Roland Rollinson was a 'nice guy'. Everyone said he was a 'nice guy' and this dated back to his college days. Mothers of college age girls pointed out Roland to their daughters. He didn't have those dreadful dreadlocks. He didn't swear. He didn't play loud music. He didn't drive round in wrecks. He didn't hang round the shops when he should have been doing homework. Although the mothers never voiced it out loud they were fairly certain he would not take advantage of their daughters' innocence. Unfortunately, the daughters thought about little else other than getting their innocence dispensed with at the first opportunity. So Roland had a lonely existence. Even in his early twenties the same mothers still considered he would be a 'nice guy' for their daughters. True he had never done very well in exams but he had a 'nice steady job' working in the accounts department at "Catering Appliances". And working with accounts was "respectable". He took work seriously. The company supplied catering equipment to the navy. He exuded pride when the company won just about every tender the navy put out for catering equipment. Each month he had to get all the dockets for factory made parts, external

purchases, and assembly time. They all had to have different mark ups. It was a fascinating job. Then at the end of the month he sent in the invoices to Commander Stuart Hawkins at naval headquarters. Sometime the accounts were for “contract price” and sometimes for “variation orders”. He found it exciting and imagined himself doing this until he retired.

Then one day he noticed a very strange thing. Some of the dockets he put into the ‘contract price’ invoices were duplicated and also going in to the ‘variation order’ invoices. That could only mean one thing. The navy was being charged twice for the same thing. So he rang Commander Stuart Hawkins at naval headquarters to tell him a mistake had been made. He offered to check back through his records to see if it had happened before. The next day Commander Stuart Hawkins came to see George the manager of Catering Appliances. Roland knew it would be alright because George and Stuart were such good friends. Roland didn’t know Commander Stuart Hawkins had a very expensive wife and an even more expensive mistress in a big “holiday home.” Few people knew. But no one, other than Roland’s boss George, knew where the money for this lifestyle came from. But of course George had to know because the payments he made guaranteed he won every contract with the navy and together they enjoyed the “variation orders.”

George was very nice to Roland the next day and thanked him for all the work he had done. He even wrote in the reference that Roland was a “Nice Guy” and when Janet typed it she used capital letters for the words NICE and GUY and put it on company letterhead to enable him to get another job. Roland

was sure the reference helped him get his position in the police. But he underestimated the ability of police to assess character for themselves. To police a positive character meant lacking negative characteristics. A police uniform meant police all looked the same, and the police training college, like a mental wool press, made police all think the same. Constable Roland knew he was doing well because even after he had made some mistakes Inspector Fitzsamuel had told him he would probably be a constable all his working life. It was nice to be thought well of. Since he passed the age of thirty some people were wondering why this “Nice Man” never had a girlfriend. Mothers who had pointed out Roland to their daughters began to suspect that if the fish weren’t biting perhaps the bait was no good. Perhaps their daughter’s judgment of boys was not as flawed as they suspected.

Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart was unable to vent his anger on Inspector Fitzsimple and unwilling to even approach Susan. The guttering inside Bryan’s head was filling. At the precise moment the water spilled out of control Roland materialized in front of him. Bryan used some words Roland had been taught should never be used and he was left in no doubt Bryan didn’t like “nice guys.” Roland found that quite hurtful and it came as even more of a shock to learn from him no one else liked “nice guys”.

That is no one except Admiral Susan. She liked nice guys. They were so easy to manipulate.

Roland had been given the job of watching the river bank. Bryan had been clear to the point of rudeness. No one was to approach the crime scene from that side. While Roland was concentrating hard

on his task Susan walked over to him and stood next to him. People didn't usually do that. Then it happened. Without any warning she hooked her little finger round his little finger and squeezed it. His mouth dropped open and his eyes grew wide as he turned his head to look at her. He found it hard to believe but he was absolutely certain she winked at him.

Having paddled the canoe across the lagoon Hemi and Rangi continued up the estuary as far as the scow. They tied the canoe to a jetty pile and, looking up, saw two cops. From the far side of the estuary Rangi waved and called out a cheerful, "G'day, Cops," and added, "We're just going up to Harry's hut. See you later." They climbed out of their seats in the canoe, scrambled up the iron ladder to the jetty, and took the Flax Track towards Harry's hut.

The sound of Rangi's voice carried across the estuary, passed Roland and Susan, until as intended it reached the ears of Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart. While still running his bellow echoed across the river.

"I want those kids stopped."

Admiral Susan gave Bryan an incinerating gaze and answered in a quiet speaking voice.

"What you want Bryan is of concern to no one but yourself. I have decided those kids can proceed with whatever it is they are doing without interference."

Roland's mouth sagged open. No one spoke to Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart like that. As Roland's mind was telling him this couldn't possibly be

happening, Senior Sergeant Bryan's mind was telling him to back off.

Only the pressure from Susan's little finger crooked in his, made Roland aware the voices were real.

Admiral Susan had seen the body on the ground. Either drugs or drug money would not be far away from that particular corpse. She had performed, in every sense, in enough bars and clubs to know who was pushing what, and what was pushing who. A good eye and a blind eye might be all she needed to find what the corpse of Al Diggins died concealing. The longer the police took in discovering the identity of the corpse the more time she would have.

Without moving from their vantage point on the river bank Susan and Roland saw the police helicopter arrive and later watched it depart. As it departed Susan glanced at her watch. 'Just enough time to get to the rugby, which must be why they used the chopper instead of a car,' she decided. Bryan's unease could remain in check as long as Constable Susan was out of the way when forensics and the inspector were on site. If Susan wanted to spend her afternoon with that idiot Roland it suited him fine. He could even explain their absence. They were officially keeping the public away from the crime scene.

Constable Susan remained on the river bank as the chopper departed. She needed the river bank. Those two boys would be back for their canoe. They were probably her best chance to find the crop before the identity of the corpse pointed the way to anyone with half a brain. But her uniform would ensure the boys stayed the other side of the river and knew

nothing. She walked the track until she found a dry stick about a metre long and thick as her thumb. She pulled it out of the grass. Handing it to Roland she got him to snap it in two. Puzzled and remembering the way she crooked her little finger in his he snapped the stick over his knee and handed her the two halves. But she handed them back to him.

“Those are for you Roland.”

Stunned he watched as she took off her hat, threw it on the ground, sat on the grass, took off her shoes and put them down next to her cap. Off came her jacket. Unbuttoning her blouse, she held out her hand for Roland to pull her to her feet. But once standing she didn't let go of his hand. Instead, she walked bare foot to the end of the jetty with Roland in tow in much the same way as a fishing boat, gutting its catch, tows a sky full of seagulls in its wake. At the end of the jetty she sat, tugging Roland's hand to get him to sit next to her. One bare foot swung in the tide while she tucked the other foot under her as she half turned to face Roland to watch his embarrassment at the sight of her unbuttoned blouse and his inability to look away. Taking the two sticks from him she put one into each of Roland's hands. Holding him by the hands she started to sing and guiding Roland's hands to beat the rhythm on the boards. She giggled. “This gives a whole new meaning to two cops on the beat.”

Singing “Gimme a bit o' leeway”, Roland learned quickly and after a couple of rehearsals was able to catch the beat without her needing to guide his hands.

She heard Hemi and Rangi talking while the flax hid them. When she started singing and Roland

drummed the boards, the talking stopped. They were listening. Susan imagined herself casting flies to a rising trout as she watched the boys get into the canoe and, instead of paddling downstream, crossed the estuary towards her. The trout had risen to the fly.

“Are you Hot Toddy?” Rangi called across the water.

“I don’t come any hotter lads.” Susan answered with a wave.

The “Wow” Susan heard sounded to her like the splash of a rising trout as it takes the bait without seeing the hook.

It took her only half an hour to arrange a day out in the waka fishing the lagoon with Hemi and Rangi. Everyone needs luck, but what makes Admirals different is the ability to recognize luck and exploit it. Luck made tomorrow a Sunday. She and Roland were off duty, Hemi and Rangi were off school. The saw mill would be shut so the boys couldn’t get their wood till Monday and they needed cash. Taking Susan, her two children and Roland out fishing was an easy way for Rangi and Hemi to earn twenty dollars each. If an Admiral couldn’t find out everything she wanted from boys in a day’s fishing with them, it was time to get a proper job.

CHAPTER 11

FISHING TRIPS

Like a boat with a short anchor warp in a storm-swept bay Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart's sleep pitched rolled and snubbed up hard against the anchor of consciousness. A rocky lee shore leered at him out of the darkness. Oblivious to the storm his wife Kate slept in the adjoining bedroom. The common wall between their bedrooms was the only point at which their lives touched. By dawn Bryan had written his crash report four times. The other thirty-six times existed only in his imagination. Each sentence was weighed and balanced for maximum impact. He checked the spelling of each word, and read and reread his final creation. Not that he needed to, he already knew the whole report by heart. With dawn lightening his bedroom window the doubts of the night evaporated leaving him certain his report was totally convincing. So convincing he had convinced himself.

As luck would have it Inspector Fitzsimple's office door was locked. That could only mean one thing. He was out. Bryan put the report in the inspector's pigeon hole, and returned to his own office and his own 'in tray.' He didn't need to open the letters to know there was nothing significant in any of them. Screwed up, the lot went into file thirteen. A tidy desk was a visible sign of an efficient Senior Sergeant. Better have a glance through his e-mails. Nasty things could lurk in there. But today there was nothing significant, just bits about the homicide. A cursory glance was all that was required.

The stiff's fingerprints had a name, "Al Diggins." A name that came with a list of convictions spread over two pages on his computer screen. He flicked down them. Mainly drugs and violent assault!

Death caused by heavy blow to the head with a blunt instrument such as a spanner or hammer resulting in a fractured skull and massive brain damage.

Time of death probably occurred between 7pm. and 10pm.

Crime scene disturbed by stock movements.

Victim carried a pistol under his jacket. Assault was probably a surprise attack.

Search to find the murder weapon.

Hell! There were pages of this garbage.

He hesitated. Should he log off, and switch the computer off advertising the fact he was out of the office or leave it on to make everyone think he was just away from his desk for a short time? He decided it would be safer to leave it running and people would think he had been delayed by something urgent.

Walking to the coffee machine he filled a paper cup, took a sip, and left it on the corner of his desk. The corner of his desk would be best. Near the middle would indicate he had been focusing his attention on coffee, but to one side would make it look as if he had been concentrating on his computer. A full cup of coffee on his desk would make people think he had been called away urgently. Once the coffee had gone cold observers would think, not only that he had been called away, but his services were needed for a

prolonged period. He would get a double benefit from that. It also implied he had put his work before thirst. He decided to get up quickly from his chair. Moving rapidly round the station made him appear busy and on top of his job. This attention to detail had made him a Senior Sergeant.

Just time for a few cheerful, "Good Mornings, I can't stop now, I'm on the homicide." He was careful not to slow his walking pace while speaking. He needed to make things look good before getting the hell out of it for the rest of the day, or at least until Fitzsimple had gone out. The longer the period between Fitzsimple reading the report and the two of them meeting the better. With luck the homicide would be a big investigation and the report would be overlooked. Just a few steps down the corridor past Fitzsimple's office to the exit...

"Damn." The office door opened.

"Bryan, could you spare a few minutes." Fitzsimple had seen him.

"I was just going out on the homicide....." There was just a chance Fitzsimple would say "OK I'll catch up with you later." But he didn't.

"This won't take long Bryan."

No escape now, at least I've written a convincing report.

"Just shut the door behind you would you Bryan." This sounded ominous. "I've just been reading your crash report."

“Oh yes.” He had to try and make the “Oh yes” sound casual. Make it look as if there was nothing to hide.

“A well written report Bryan. I congratulate you on it.”

I’d better go careful here Bryan thought to himself as he replied. “I always try and do my best...”

“You really have succeeded this time Bryan. I hope you kept a copy yourself.”

“Oh yes I always keep my files up to date.”

“That’s excellent Bryan because I’m wondering what to do with your original. I must admit my first thought was to send it to Walt Disney. He always needs good fantasy writers. Such an original touch I thought making the whole deer red. It’s so much more convincing than a reindeer with just a red nose. But perhaps we could get it printed in the police gazette then everyone could appreciate the joke as much as I did. My sides are still sore with laughter after I read it. I’d really like to get it framed and put on the wall. Then another thought struck me. We should have a word with Susan Nelson, she could write the music for you. A comedy duet would go so well in the bars and night clubs down town don’t you think? It might even be a career opening for you.”

Bryan’s mouth opened and shut several times but the words wouldn’t come out. He stumbled over replying, “I believe Susan Nelson is off duty today.”

Fitzsimple grinned. “That’s alright Bryan. I’ll catch up with her when I get your second version of the truth. I’ll let you into a little secret Bryan. I’m out

of the office till Friday morning. I want your real report on my desk when I return. I'm sure that will be no trouble for such a creative fiction writer."

"Oh yes! Right! I'll get on with it." was all Bryan could think of as he turned towards the door.

"Shut the door behind you Bryan as you leave."

As he did so the inspector started chuckling to himself. The only thing Bryan is creative about is his spelling and grammar. Suddenly I get a report with everything spelt correctly and with correct grammar. Doubtless it will all become clear on Friday when I talk to Susan Nelson.

At the precise moment the inspector was thinking about Susan, her Volkswagen van stopped at the gate to the whare. Roland opened the passenger door. He need not have bothered. Huia, leading Starlight, opened the gate for them.

Susan's two children climbed out of the back seat. Nahi ran to catch Rangi and Hemi at the canoe while Huhana found herself being drawn inexplicably back towards the gate and Starlight. As Huia closed the gate, Huhana's hand moved of its own volition to Starlight's neck to feel the body warmth of the mare.

"Hi! I'm Huhana. What's your horse's name?"

"Starlight."

"Is Starlight really yours?"

"Yes, Grandad gave her to me at Christmas."

“That’s awesome. I wish I had a Grandad like yours.”

“You wouldn’t. Grandad died Christmas day just after he gave me Starlight.”

As Nahi approached the canoe Rangi glanced to see what this cop’s kid was like. The glance changed into a stare followed by a “Wow”. That was enough to make Hemi look up as well, resulting in Rangi and Hemi leaving the canoe to meet Nahi. Not out of interest in Nahi but in Hot Toddies Volkswagen parked outside the whare.

“Is that your Mum’s van?” was the only greeting Nahi got as Rangi and Hemi passed him on the way to the van. Susan was proud of the paint job. The mural was worth more to her than the van, which needed a reconditioned engine and a new front tyre, as well as a new headlight unit and a warrant. Like tourists at Michelangelo’s roof job on the Sistine Chapel Hemi and Rangi circled the mural of Hot Toddy in Admiral Nelson’s costume. The Admiral herself had her hat pushed back and her shirt open to expose enough cleavage for Rangi to imagine more detail than the painting provided. Admiral Susan had one arm round the shoulder of a stripped-to-the-waist gunner, a pose intended to ridicule British naval tradition. Moving round the van, gun deck scenes merged into a collage of wrecked ships and drowning men. Having worked in bars and clubs Susan’s symbolism was not accidental.

Neither Rangi nor Hemi could have known the effect admiring the paint job on the van had on Susan. When Mum and Dad had given her the van for her twenty-first birthday it was brand new. It took

guts to start hand painting a mural on a brand new car straight out of the show room. Mum burst into tears when she had seen what she was doing. Her Dad told her the van was the last thing he would ever give her. Which wasn't true, for the rest of his life he was more than generous with criticism. When the painting was finished at least her Mum had grudgingly admitted it was "spectacular". The van had heavy use. She hit the road with the Weevils and toured the bars and nightclubs up and down New Zealand, accumulating parental disapproval more rapidly than kilometres. But disapproval became the reinforcing rods of a concrete wall of defiance. Nahi, and a year later, Huhana were conceived in the back of the van with unknown paternity. Like two plastic bottles jettisoned from a ship Nahi and Huhana ended up on the beach, pounded by successive waves in the surf and sucked back in the undertow. Perhaps the salt had preserved them. They were tough.

As Rangi and Hemi moved back to the canoe to drag it down the beach Susan noticed a strange thing. Without anyone having spoken a word Mum took her place at the canoe, Grandma came out of the whare and joined them. Huia rode to the canoe on Starlight. It occurred to Susan that subconsciously each member of the family was aware of what the others were doing. The whole family moved together to help each other without being asked or told what to do. Each member was a link in a chain. But who was the blacksmith that forged the chain? Susan's eyes flicked from one to the other. They rested a moment on Grandma's weather-beaten wrinkles. The intensity of Huia's eyes made her pause. What about the dead Grandfather? Was it his hammer that had forged a

chain out of bare metal? She didn't have time to ponder the question. Nahi, and Huhana joined the others. Roland did something she didn't expect. Instead of catching hold of the nearest part of the canoe he walked to the far side next to Meriana, the kid's mother. Te Waka hissed in wet sand as it slid down the slope of the beach to the lapping water that would free it from the rippling fingers of sand.

Hemi and Rangi left Mum and Roland to hold the canoe while they fetched the paddles, tackle boxes and the bags they would sort out once they were out in the lagoon.

Huhana tugged Susan's arm. "Can I stay and play with Huia? Please Mum."

"I thought you were coming fishing Huhana." Susan replied. Huia cut in. "Huhana and I can go fishing off the beach with Starlight."

"Go fishing with a horse?" Susan raised her eyebrows.

Grandma interrupted. "They'll be OK on the beach as long as they don't go to the river mouth. Huia knows where they're allowed to go. I'm not going fishing so I can keep an eye on them if you want."

Huhana's face shone. "Please Mum."

Susan turned to Grandma. "Would she be in the way if I let her stay?"

"When you come back with the fish why don't we have a BBQ on the beach? The girls could help me get it ready."

"What if we don't catch anything?" Susan asked.

"Then you'll have to rely on the fish the girls are going to catch off the beach won't you." Grandma replied adding, "I don't think we'll go hungry."

Susan looked at Huhana's expectant face. "OK Huhana but you've got to do what Huia's Grandma tells you and you're not to go near the river mouth." Had Susan known who else would be watching the two girls, she would never have let Huhana stay. But she didn't know.

"Thanks Mum." Huhana called over her shoulder as they started leading Starlight back up the beach to a more dangerous situation than simply going out in the canoe.

Susan heard Huhana say, "You've got an awesome Grandma." Susan wondered why Grandma had spoken and not Huia's mother. Did that answer her question about the identity of the blacksmith who forged this family? But perhaps if Mum was going fishing as well she wasn't in a position to offer to keep an eye on the girls.

With traffic lights against him, Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart braked; his brain screeched like tyres. Thoughts, restless as windscreen wipers, smeared traffic film across the limits of his vision. Susan Nelson was the problem. He pulled away from the lights. A cat ran across the road in front of him. He trod on the accelerator. The car surged and he felt a glow of satisfaction as both near side wheels got it.

Smiling he saw the twisted shape in his rear vision mirror.

By the time he had reached home he knew what he was going to do. He changed out of his uniform into his oldest painting clothes. He tried to tear them a bit more, but the cloth was stronger than he anticipated, so he used his pocket knife to get the tear started. Looking in the mirror he convinced himself no one would guess he might be a cop. Taking his binoculars off the top shelf in the wardrobe, he hung them round his neck and set off for the lagoon to find Susan Nelson. She didn't know he'd heard her chatting up those kids.

Al Diggins was dead. Drugs and drug money wouldn't be far away. It would be a real fishing trip she was engaged in, fishing for information from those local kids. If he could pin involvement on her before Friday when Fitzsimple came back all his problems would be over.

He couldn't resist slowing by the ditch where Susan Nelson made him crash. A gap in the manuka opened up by the side of the road just before the whare. Once in there no one would notice his car. Staying in the cover of the bush he walked the rest of the way.

Reaching the dunes he lay in the dune grass which bristled like the Devil's eyebrows. Picking his way on stomach and knees he rested on his elbows looking across the lagoon to the canoe. Although he didn't realise it, he also had a clear view of the strip of sand where Huia and Huhana would take Starlight. Meanwhile the watchers on the hill focused their

binoculars and curiosity on the furtive figure in the dunes.

CHAPTER 12

FLOUNDERING

Standing by the canoe Susan watched Huhana astride Starlight being led by Huia towards the barn. The rhythm of chatter and flow of excitement drifted to her like thistledown on a summer breeze. She grinned to herself. Huhana was experiencing things which had bypassed her own childhood. With the lagoon glittering like a sky full of stars she never suspected a sinister figure lurked in the dunes.

Water lapped the hull as Te Waka lifted from the sand and everyone started scrambling aboard. As Rangi pushed the boat into deeper water and climbed in himself the two girls emerged from the barn walking either side of Starlight who had the net in a wool sack hung across her stock saddle.

They paddled Te Waka to the far side of the lagoon. Susan rested her paddle and looked back at the beach. The two girls were leading Starlight past the whare, over drying seaweed to the wet sand.

Looping Starlight's reins over a driftwood stump Huia untied the baling twine from the pommel of the saddle. Hungry for fish, the net tumbled out of the woolsack. Piece by piece, sticks, shells and seaweed tangles were taken out. Tangle became order as the girls stretched the net to its full length along tide-swept sand.

Picking up the bailing twine Huia put one length into her pocket, tied the woolsack into a bundle and carried it to Starlight's stump. Searching

the driftwood she found a reasonably straight stick about a metre and a half long and as thick as her wrist. Wave action had stripped away the bark revealing dark red timber. She tested it. It was sound, but she had no concept of the role that stick was about to play. Had she known, she might well have selected the same stick.

Unaware of anything other than catching fish the two girls roped the end of the net onto Starlight's pommel. The other end of the net was lashed to the middle of the stick. Huia mounted and urged Starlight forward. The net swept the beach behind them. Huhana anchored the shore end of the net by digging one end of the stick into the sand at the water's edge and pulling on the other end. Towing the net, Huia rode into the shallow water. She looked behind. Like a family of white ducks, the floats followed in line astern. Beneath the surface the lead weights of the net swept the sea bed. Huia drove Starlight deeper. As it felt the weight of water the net formed an arc to the beach. Huia rolled up her wet shorts while turning Starlight for the long curve back to the shore. The net splashed silver. Huhana leaned her weight against the drag of the net. Reaching the beach Starlight shook herself dry while Huhana untied the stick and tied her end of rope to the pommel on the saddle. Starlight pulled. The pool of water within the net shrank. Splashes of excitement and flounders occurred simultaneously as the belly of the net emerged from the lagoon. The girls pounced on the four flounders and disentangled them from the net. Using her pocket knife Huia slashed the soft area behind the head and pulled out the guts. Each flounder was turned white side up on the sand while she finished the others.

Taking the spare length of baling twine from her pocket Huia strung the fish before starting the next sweep of the lagoon.

In the dunes Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart watched the girls. There was one thing he found particularly interesting. So interesting his original objectives evaporated as he focused, first his binoculars, then his attention and imagination. His lips twitched with every movement of the area of thigh Huia had exposed when she rolled up her shorts. His arm started shaking as he watched her bend to clear the net. Binoculars gave him both less and more to imagine. Imagination slid his hand up her thigh. He decided she was about twelve. The ideal age! The last time he visited a prostitute she laughed at him. She didn't laugh for long. He smashed her in the face. But twelve-year-old girls were ideal. They didn't laugh, they screamed and screaming turned him on. Pain was beautiful. His mind anticipated her thighs and body contorting like the writhing cat in his rear vision mirror.

The watchers on the hill turned their attention to the furtive figure hiding in the dunes. Several million dollars of marijuana was ready for distribution. Shadows had been moving in the bush but Al Diggins's corpse changed things. Why was that guy watching the sea? Did he know the marijuana was supposed to be going out by sea as soon as those forensic cops left? Was the guy a cop? Or had the word got out about the crop on the hill? Might he be a decoy? They spoke quietly to each other as if the world was listening.

"I guarantee he didn't walk here."

“So what did he do with his car?”

“Parked back up the road?”

“Poor guy’s going to have to walk back isn’t he.”

Only one watcher remained on the hill. The other moved through the bush. He found the car and something useful; a dead fern leaf turned silver with age. He picked it up. Under the car he saw what he was looking for. The bullet went right through the fuel tank. He took out his lighter, lit the fern leaf and threw it into the puddle of petrol. The woosh convinced him, and the heat confirmed his opinion, ‘Furtive in the Dunes’ would need a ride later.

About thirty minutes later there were again two watchers on the hill.

The next sweep of the lagoon netted Huhana and Huia three more flounders. Huia counted on her fingers. There’s going to be eight of us at the BBQ. One more flounder! In fact they netted another three with the third sweep. They had enough. Huhana ran back along the beach to pick up the woolsack.

Alone on the beach Huia started to remove the sticks and seaweed from the net.

“Caught any fish?” Bryan spoke quietly as he approached.

“Ten flounders.” Huia answered busy with the net.

“Let me give you a hand with the net.”

“Oh! Thanks.”

Huia sat on her heels taking a crab out of the net. It seemed as if every crab leg was tangled twice in

the net and determined to stay that way. Breathing heavily through his mouth Bryan moved behind her. "Let me help." One hand found the exciting place on her thigh. His other hand pulled the draw string to her shorts. Suddenly his head seemed to explode. He didn't remember hitting the ground. Waves of flame surged inside his head. Gradually the flames became swirling coloured lights. And the coloured lights merged to become a grey fog. The fog cleared and Huhana, stick in hand, stood over him. He put his hand to his head. It came away blood stained.

"Touch Huia again and I'll get your balls next time."

Perhaps it was the blow to his head. What he could see and what he seemed to be hearing didn't equate. This kid looked primary school age. Not even old enough to have boobs. His head felt like someone had hammered a nail through it. Huhana was speaking again. "What's your name?"

"Bryan Lockhart." He answered and instantly regretted it.

"I'll remember that and so will Huia." Huhana answered and added, "I'm Huhana Nelson and you would be well advised to remember it."

Nelson! The name jolted like an electric charge. Could this boob-less 'Kitten from Hell' who acted like a street hardened thirty year old, be Susan Nelson's daughter?

"If you're not off this beach in one minute we'll drag you off by your heels behind Starlight."

Her face was going in and out of focus. He needed two attempts to stand. The top of the beach seemed to be at the end of a long dark tunnel. Mechanically his feet started moving but the dunes didn't get any closer. He wondered how he would make it to his car. By the time he got there the flames had subsided and only the tyres were sending a twisted rope of smoke through the manuka.

He started to walk back up the road without the faintest idea how he would get back to town. But the watchers on the hill knew. They had already decided to give him another thirty minutes walking before picking him up. They needed to know who he was and why he had been in the dunes.

During the thirty minutes a police car returning from the homicide scene went back up the road, its siren and flashing lights claiming importance.

A police car was not what Bryan wanted to see. Painfully he climbed down the bank and hid in manuka until it passed. He walked on.

A four wheel drive pulled up. A huge Pacific Islander opened the passenger door.

"Need a lift mate?"

He climbed into the front passenger seat.

"Out for a walk?"

"Not intentionally. I crashed the car and bashed my head in the smash. I only just managed to get out before the fuel tank went up." Bryan hoped it sounded convincing. It didn't because the driver was the watcher on the hill who wasted the car and

watched the kid on the beach hit him with the stick. But he wasn't letting on.

"Yeah! Council ought to do something about this road. A cop car went in the ditch yesterday. That's two in two days. Was it your car I saw back in the manuka?"

"Well it was my car. It's hardly a car any more."

"Funny things cars. Eh! There's you smashed up with the impact, your car so damaged it bursts into flame and there isn't a single dent in it anywhere."

Bryan felt sweat as he answered. "That's the way it goes I guess." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

The driver continued. "As soon as I saw that car I thought to myself the owner of that car is a meticulous man."

"Oh yes," Bryan answered. "What makes you say that?"

"Well you're the first guy I ever heard of who only just managed to get out of a burning car and had the presence of mind to turn round and lock the car door after him. If that's not the sign of a meticulous man I don't know what is."

"Yes you don't always act rationally when you've just had a knock on the head do you." Rattled, Bryan asked, "How do you know whether the car was locked or not?"

"Oh I saw a burning car and had a look to see if there was anyone inside. If there had been it would be too late by the time the rural fire people get here."

“They’re coming are they?” Bryan asked.

“Oh yes. I gave the fire brigade a ring on my cell phone. Real joker I spoke to. He told me to try and keep the fire going till they got there. We’ll probably pass them on the road. You could always give them your keys so they can unlock the car.”

“Yes! I suppose I could.” Was the only answer Bryan could think of.

“It’s funny how people react when they’ve had a knock on the head isn’t it? Just before I came up the road I heard a police siren. A cop car must have passed you. So I wonder why they didn’t stop when they must have seen you’re covered in blood. Of course they might not have seen you but I don’t know how they could have missed you if you were on the road. So perhaps you were not on the road. So if you were not on the road the only other place you could have been is in the bush by the side of the road. So I couldn’t help asking myself why you would have been hiding in the bush when a cop car went by. And why were you eager to get a ride when I happened by? Bumps on the head are funny things eh.”

“Oh! I just stepped into the bush to urinate at the moment the cop car went by.” Bryan was clutching at straws.

“Of course that would explain it wouldn’t it. But I would have thought someone with a nasty gash on his head would have gone to the forensic people at the crime scene rather than start to walk all the way back to town. Wouldn’t they have organised a ride for a fellow cop?”

“A cop? What makes you think I’m a cop?”

“Dead giveaway mate! Short back and sides, clean shaven, smelling of antiperspirant. You’re not down and out like your clothes indicate. So why would you dress with artificial tears in your clothes? What I find more interesting is why you would be hiding from uniformed cops. If I was a betting man I’d bet you are a cop who has just been engaged in something naughty. But I’m not a gambling man and it’s nothing to do with me. Still it is a funny old world isn’t it?”

Bryan didn’t have to answer. Even if he had, his reply would have been drowned by the siren on the fire truck. They pulled onto the grass verge to let it pass.

“Which part of town do you want mate?”

“I live in Pohutakawa Place. That’s just off the top end of Rata Street by the Mobil garage. Is that out of your way?”

“No trouble at all. I’m going past the end of Rata Street anyway.”

Twenty minutes later they pulled up outside number 22 Pohutakawa Place. The driver got out of the car to watch Bryan walk the curved path to his front door. Before returning to the car Chris looked in the post box. Luck drifted his way. He found two letters addressed to Bryan Lockhart. He returned the letters to the mail box and wrote in his notebook. “Bryan Lockhart 22 Pohutakawa Place.” Taking the telephone directory out of the glove box he looked up the phone number of the police station. He dialed his cell phone. A woman answered. After asking her for her assistance he explained he had a pair of

sunglasses belonging to Bryan Lockhart and wondered if he could drop them off for him at the station instead driving to his place. The reply was instant.

“No trouble at all. I’ll leave them on his desk as he’s out of the office just now.”

So he is a cop Chris thought to himself. He continued, “I’ve put them in an envelope marked with his name but I wasn’t sure of his rank. Is it sergeant?”

“Senior sergeant actually but you don’t need to put that on. Just ‘Bryan’ would be enough. I’ll tell him to expect them. What was your name?” She didn’t hear a reply as the phone went dead.

“Senior Sergeant” was written in the notebook together with his name and address. An hour later there were two watchers on the hill who had nothing better to do than watch the canoe return to the beach.

CHAPTER 13

DRIFTWOOD GATHERING

The canoe hit beach sand. Jumping into knee deep water Rangi carried the anchor up the beach to the full extent of the anchor rope. As the others got out the canoe, it floated higher enabling Hemi to pull it further up the beach. Rangi set the anchor in sand.

“The tide’s on the flood. As long as it’s calm we can take the anchor up the beach and the tide will carry Te Waka to the top of the beach. You can leave the gear in. Let the tide do the work eh.” Hemi explained to Roland who was about to start pulling the canoe.

“Just take the fish,” Rangi added as he arrived back at the canoe. “Would you like Grandma to gut and fillet your fish for you? She’s real quick.”

“I don’t want to take any fish home Hemi. As far as I’m concerned you can use them all for the barbecue.” Roland replied and Susan added. “That goes for me too. It’s been a fantastic day out for us in Te Waka. I can’t remember a day I’ve enjoyed so much.”

As Roland made eye contact with Meriana his words stumbled over each other. “If I can’t pull the boat up, I’d like to do something to help if I can. What I mean is I’d like to do something to help you, if you’ll let me. If there’s nothing I can do today, I’d like to come back tomorrow, if that would help.”

Meriana grinned at his embarrassment. This must be the strangest pick up line she had ever heard. She touched his arm.

"You can help me get driftwood for the fire if you want." As she looked up she saw Huia and Huhana riding bare back on Starlight. The net and sack draped over Starlight's flanks gave them a comic appearance. She nudged Roland and pointed with her head at the girls.

"Did you catch anything?" she called to them.

"Ten big flounders and a kipper." Huhana called back.

"A kipper?" Meriana questioned.

"A two faced yellow bastard with no guts." Huhana answered adding, "Calls himself Bryan Lockhart." Roland's mouth dropped open; probably even he didn't know whether the intake of breath was because Huhana's language was not what he would have expected from a primary school girl or because of the name Bryan Lockhart.

As the two girls dismounted, their sentences intertwined and overlapped as the story spilled like bees from a hive.

Susan often had to field complaints about her kids but now she glowed, not only with maternal pride, but also at the thought of Bryan Lockhart being beaten senseless by her ten year old daughter. If Huhana had won a gold medal at the Olympic Games, Susan could not have been any more proud of her. And to top it off, between them, the girls had caught enough fish for the barbecue for everyone.

Roland grinned. "Shame about Bryan's head eh!"

Susan thought to herself, "A couple of days ago he would have said that and meant it." She grinned. "Yeah right!"

Grandma looked inside the fish box as Hemi explained Roland and Susan didn't want to take their fish home. "They just want us to use them for the barbecue." Grandma counted the catch. "We've ended up with more fish than we need Hemi. The girls caught enough for the barbecue and so have you."

"Harry's got a 'walk in' smoker." Hemi suggested. "We could ask him to the barbecue and see if we can put the rest of the fish in his smoker. Then we could share it with him."

Rurenga hesitated. "I don't know how he could get here with his bad leg."

"We could take Te Waka up the estuary as far as Arlin's jetty and he could probably walk from his hut along the Flax Track to the jetty." Hemi replied.

Rurenga thought of the implications. "We should probably ask Arlin as well, especially if we are intending to use his jetty. But don't be surprised if Harry can't make it along the Flax Track and only Arlin comes."

Hemi looked at Susan. "Rangi and I are going to see if Harry and Arlin want to come to the barbecue. We're going in Te Waka. Do you want to come for the ride?"

Susan's lips still tasted salt. Dappled reflections from the lagoon lingered on her retinas and

lapping water lulled her brain to the extent she had to force herself to remember her original objective had been to locate “the crop.” But was that still her objective? The imperative to find it before anyone else got to it had gone out with the tide. It had become obvious the boys knew nothing. They weren’t interested. Now she knew them she would have been disappointed if they had known.

They had been telling her about Harry and his museum in the bush. She could feel fingers of curiosity running down her spine. Without understanding her own motivation she answered instantly. “Yes I’d love to Hemi.” She looked at Roland. “How about you? Are you coming as well?”

Roland understood his motivation as he answered, “No thanks, I’ll stay and help Meriana get driftwood for the fire.” Saying this he made eye contact with Meriana and smiled. No one other than Meriana and Susan noticed he not only made eye contact and smiled, but he also linked his little finger round Meriana’s little finger. Susan also noted Meriana didn’t draw her hand away.

Looking back at the beach from her position in Te Waka Susan saw the girls gathering dried out driftwood from the tidal limit at the top of the beach. Working together they dragged logs, branches and tree roots, out of the sand to build a fire. She also watched Roland and Meriana walk together down the beach away from the girls, across the firm tide-swept region to the water’s edge. Susan grinned to herself. ‘No driftwood to be found there!’ As Te Waka slid up the estuary, Roland and Meriana still stood close together on the wet sand.

By the time the canoe returned, daylight had leaked from the sky and phosphorescence from Te Waka's paddles left ghostly footprints across the lagoon. As the canoe nudged sand, wood smoke flirted with the scent of black beech.

Susan offered her arm to Harry as support for his injured leg. Only the night remembered their footprints in dry dune sand, and listened to the crackle of fire. The brazier, charcoal black in daylight, now radiated a cherry red complexion inviting them to step into the circle of firelight.

Within that circle, Susan realised a metamorphosis was taking place. An ancient seed buried in her brain was struggling to reach daylight. Perhaps it was Harry's museum. It may have been the fire-glow reflections from the tiny bronze mermaid. Susan was not even sure Te Waka had not carried her to a land where ancient things still flourished. Whatever the cause she felt powerless to stop her horizon moving. She had come to find a cache of cannabis but instead discovered something within herself.

She looked at the seating arrangements and wondered who had positioned the driftwood logs to focus on the fire. There were enough logs randomly positioned to seat everyone. Like hell they were positioned at random. Meriana and Roland were on a log just big enough for the two of them as long as they sat close. Elvina or Rurenga, or whatever she was calling herself, sat between Arlin and Harry. Susan had a stump to herself next to Harry. Their knees touched. Huia and Huhana weren't on their log but instead lay on their elbows, head to head, on

Starlight's blanket. Rangi, Hemi and Nahi had their own log and were laughing like the flames which were shooting stars into the night.

When Harry spoke, Susan heard a raconteur skim ideas like stones across the lagoon of her mind. But Harry's ideas spun beyond her horizon to become islands she never knew existed.

Unlike most raconteurs he not only listened but also responded. Together their sentences intertwined and overlapped as stories tumbled over each other like puppies at feeding time. First he listened to the things she could tell him. Then the witch's caldron of the dark things she couldn't tell started to bubble. Jumbled words tumbled out of her brain. But Harry picked them up, turned them upside down, and handed them back to her. But what he handed back was not a dark brew but foaming fun. They laughed and their hands touched.

Susan looked into the fire. The dance of the spirits in the flames had faded, and now the heartwood burned. Across the fire the faces of Roland and Meriana shimmered in the heat. Probably it was only the glowing coals which made their faces glow and their eyes flash like mica.

Susan had not noticed Rangi, Hemi, and Nahi were missing until she saw them return carrying a steel gate between them. While she was wondering what the gate was for, they dropped it into place across the top of the brazier. It fitted, and became the signal for Rurenga to stand pulling Arlin to his feet and calling the girls. "Could you girls give us a hand to bring the food down please?" Susan saw Huhana

get up without protest, together with Huia they disappeared towards the whare.

Rurenga and Arlin returned with a blackened cast-iron pot carried between them. At the fire Arlin took the pot and lifted it onto the gate above the brazier. The movement made sparks fly into the evening air. The girls arrived with plates, forks and cups, then the wok, fish and bread. Harry reached into his trench coat pocket and pulled out a bottle, and turned to Susan. "Would you care to try a drop of the wine I make in my hut?" Susan picked up two of the cups the girls had brought down while Harry pulled the cork.

"Anyone else want to try my wine?" Harry asked. Only Nahi and Huhana called back. "Yes please." Harry looked quizzically at Susan. She grinned and nodded. Tonight they could have asked for anything and got it. Tonight Admiral Nelson didn't need to keep the gun-ports open. Tonight she was a woman with her head on Harry's shoulder and her hair tangled in his beard.

The meal came. For most of her life Susan's taste buds had been challenged by takeaways and TV meals, not seduced by the taste of fish, fresh from the sea. She had never known the subtle delights of vegetables straight from the garden. Neither had she ever experienced food cooked on a steel gate above a fire on the beach. And certainly never before had either of her children waited on her while she was seated. Surprise, when Huhana and Huia brought her dinner, became suspicion when they collected her empty plate. Suspicion she felt justifiable when

Huhana asked "Can I stay with Huia tonight?" Implications fluttered.

She gave the standard parental reply. "Have you asked Huia's Mum?"

Huia answered, "Mum says it's OK if you will let Huhana stay."

Susan looked at Harry. "I think I'll have a mutiny on my hands if I say no."

"Thanks Mum," was thrown over Huhana's shoulder as the two girls ran off. It took about fifteen seconds for Nahi to arrive with Hemi and Rangi.

"Mum can I stay with Hemi and Rangi tonight?"

Mum grinned. "There's only one possible answer to that if I'm not going to be accused of having favourites."

"Thanks Mum!" and they were gone.

As the tide reached full flood and started to ebb, Susan and Harry talked. As the blue flame in the coals vanished into the embers they talked. They talked of wine and babies, of nights at sea and all the time the little bronze mermaid listened and dreamed of the canopy of stars over coral sand.

Suddenly Rangi, Hemi and Nahi stood in front of her. Nahi was holding her guitar but it was Rangi who asked. "Could you give us a song please?"

Without waiting for a reply Nahi handed her the guitar. Susan took it wondering what she would sing. Never before had she been short of a song but tonight every song she knew seemed to curl at the edges like an unwanted sandwich left on a heater. She

looked at Meriana and Roland and noticed they had their arms round each other and their faces shone in the firelight. She listened to the night and heard the surf breaking on the ocean beach beyond the lagoon. As she looked at Harry she ran her fingers across the strings. A song created itself.

“I’m going to call this song ‘Driftwood’ because that’s how we built this fire and to the ocean out there that’s what we are, ‘Driftwood’. I haven’t a clue how it’s going to turn out.” She played the first chords.

“Here it is, ‘Driftwood’”

*Do flames in the fire
Reflect in your eyes
Or does love glow
In the dark?*

*Is it sparks out of driftwood
That burst in the night
Or the crackle of passion
That’s burning in me?*

*Are my messages lost
Like smoke in the wind’s song
Or is the smoke hiding
Your feelings for me?*

*Will the flames that are warming
Our bodies and spirits
Consume us completely
Until we are one?*

If flames and the sparks

*Subside and are finished
The heartwood will burn
In charcoal and heat,*

*Till we sit by the embers
Of fires long expended
Needing each other
To keep ourselves warm.*

*When night time has faded
And ashes are drifting
Like yesterday's hopes
In the fresh morning air,*

*Then scrape back the surface
The furnace keeps glowing
With fire and with passion
From when we were young.*

*Use heat from my ashes
And kindle a new love
With fire and with yearning
For somebody new.*

*But if you prefer it
Lay down beside me
Remember the flame
And the passion and heat.*

*Then we'll be together
Our spirits entangled
Like driftwood on beaches
Destined to burn
In the fires of love.*

Harry put his hand into hers. In the firelight her skin glowed like the colours of summer. He spoke in a whisper. "Susan that was the most beautiful song I've ever heard."

Susan thought to herself "He probably thinks that song was just for him." And the next thought to occur to her was, "He's probably right."

Rangi called to her. "Give us another song."

Meriana cut in quickly. "It's about time all you kids went to bed."

"Could we have one more song please Mum?" Huia asked.

Susan glowed. Every singer wants an audience, and tonight she was singing a new song. Tonight there was someone she wanted to impress. She was young enough to be his daughter, but mature enough not to care. She pondered about the men her own age she had slept with, but never known. Most were forgotten along with their names. She had known intimacy with none of them. Was that because she was an admiral, or why she was one?

The little bronze mermaid sat on a rock by the fire. Susan may have drunk too much of Harry's wine. Perhaps the flickering firelight was the cause. Most likely it was an effect of the heat haze from the fire but the more she looked the more certain she became the mermaid's tail moved. Was the mermaid dreaming of other islands? Was Susan dreaming of other islands? Was everyone an island surrounded by an empty ocean?

Susan picked up her guitar and looked at the ring of expectant faces. Her fingers moved over the strings as the first chords drifted past the faces across the beach and vanished into the Pacific night.

“I’m calling this song, The Mermaid’s Song.”

*There’s always another island
Just over the horizon
An island of sunlight
Just waiting for me.*

*When my moonlight is shattered
And dreams are all broken
Secret island is waiting
In starlight for me.*

*But dark storms are rising
With landfall uncertain
And friends and my memories
All want me to stay.*

*Then I’ll kiss and remember
And untie my vessel
To head for the tears
In the eye of the storm.*

*If my vessel should sink
In the black swirling memories
My spirit will rise
Through the cold surging sea.*

Till I swim down the pathway

*Of shimmering ocean
To my island of magic
That's waiting for me.*

Susan didn't listen to the clapping; she was more interested in eye contact with Harry. She whispered, "It's late to go back to your hut by canoe. There would be room in the back of my Volkswagen for the two of us." The slight pressure she felt on her hand was all she needed to know her offer had been accepted.

CHAPTER 14

THE LAST SCOW

The morning star faded, as Meriana and Roland slept. Like a field of sun flowers the sky turned its face towards the dawn. Pinheads of dew glistened on Starlight's horse blanket. Meriana lifted her left arm from under the blanket and looked at her wrist-watch. Her right arm remained round Roland. The ashes of last night's fire were grey. A corkscrew of smoke wound its way into chill morning air. A pair of black backed gulls tore at heads of the red cod Elvina filleted last night. Meriana leaned over Roland and kissed him.

"I'll have to get the kids off to school Roland."

As she dressed, Roland turned his head to look away. Meriana, fascinated by this modesty, grinned at his embarrassment and to fuel this charming feature added, "I shall have to have a shower. I have sand in places I'd rather not have sand. You know what I mean Roland?"

She loved the way he spluttered.

"Er! Oh yes. I suppose so."

She loved it because, unlike guys she had known, he didn't focus his energy into finding a crack in the edge of her comfort zone. For once she could safely explore the edge of his comfort zone. It was fun. Here she was, a mother of three, acting like a pirate prodding him to walk the improper plank and fall into the ocean of normality.

Picking up one side of the blanket she started to pull it off him.

“Should I take Starlight’s blanket now Roland or would you like to bring it when you get up.”

He did what she knew he would.

Holding the blanket firmly over his lower body and feeling the gravitational pull of convention he answered. “I’ll bring it back myself.”

“Then leave it for a bit before you come into the whare so the kids can see you come in.

He waited as the foot prints of the ebb tide tiptoed down the beach leaving pools in the sand. Despite an empty beach he put his trousers on underneath the blanket.

Wet sand mirrored the sun and Roland looked away as his eyes sought refuge from the glare.

Meriana made it into the kitchen before the children. It took only seconds for her to go into her bedroom and unmake her bed. She didn’t want Huia, or the boys to know she had spent the night on the beach with Roland. Kids wouldn’t understand how lonely it can be for a solo mother.

She lit the range, had the porridge cooking, and made a start on the sandwiches for school lunch before Huia and Huhana came into the kitchen.

“What do you take for your school lunch Huhana?” Huhana looked puzzled. “Mum gives us money and we get pies and coke.”

The curtains on the Volkswagen could no longer hold back the morning. Susan and Harry were

awake for each other but the knocking on the Volkswagen door seemed to be reaching them through a worm hole in space-time.

The knocking changed into Roland's voice.

"Hello! Anyone home?"

Susan swore to herself and made the decision not to pull a tee shirt over her head before drawing back a curtain and opening the window.

As soon as he saw Susan's breast Roland turned with his back to the van and stood looking out to sea.

"I was wondering what we're doing about getting into work this morning. We're supposed to be there in thirty-five minutes."

"I'm going to phone in sick. Tomorrow I'll write sick notes for Nahi and Huhana. You can do what you like." She shut the window and drew the curtain.

Roland made his way back towards the whare. Phoning in sick when there was nothing wrong with him was something other people did. But he'd come in Susan's Volkswagen and if she wasn't going back what could he do? He knocked on the door of the whare. Meriana opened it and greeted him.

"Good morning Roland. Did you have a good night?"

The kitchen was full of kids. He didn't know what to answer so he muttered, "Oh fine." He thought it sounded too casual so he changed it "Well, excellent thank you."

Meriana grinned. "I'm just getting the kids breakfast and doing their lunches. Help yourself to anything you want or we can have something together when the kids are off to school if you prefer it."

Roland didn't know if Meriana had said it with an intended double meaning or whether she was just a busy Mum at breakfast time. So he answered, "I don't want to put you to any trouble. I usually only have cereals for breakfast."

"Well if that's all you want you can help yourself." Meriana replied without looking up from wrapping sandwiches.

Rangi, Hemi and Huia had left to catch the school bus, Roland had finished his breakfast cereals, Meriana was finishing the washing up, and Roland was drying the dishes by the time the door opened and Susan and Harry came in. Roland glanced at his watch. He was already forty-five minutes late for work.

Harry eased himself into a chair and put his leg up on a stool. Meriana looked at Susan and Harry.

"Can I get you a cup of tea or a coffee?"

Harry wanted coffee and Susan wanted tea. 'That's at least another fifteen minutes late for work.' Roland decided. Looking directly at Susan he made a 'designed to be obvious' study of the face of his watch. Susan ignored the hint and sat next to Harry.

As Meriana poured the drinks there was a knock at the door. Susan opened it. A couple stood outside. She was pakeha probably in her mid twenties wearing tee shirt, jeans and jandals. Although of

average size she looked tiny next to the Islander beside her. His awesome features were accentuated by a thunder head of black curls. Barefoot, he wore only a tee shirt and shorts. The young woman spoke.

“Excuse me; I’m looking for the skipper of the scow which I believe is moored in the estuary. The police have the area cordoned off and...”

“Harry interrupted.”You want my brother Arlin. You’re in luck. He’s here right now. At least he would be if he got out of bed.”

“Oh Hi! I’m Rachael Watson, and this is my boyfriend Chris. I was hoping to have a word with Arlin.”

Meriana came to the door. She did not know of the existence of the watchers on the hill. And so had no reason to suspect the identity of the couple at her door. “Please come in. We all had a late night last night and I’m afraid Arlin isn’t up yet.”

Rachael walked in. Chris stooped in the doorway to avoid hitting his head and asked, “If we’ve come at a bad time we could call back later?”

It wasn’t what he said; it was his voice which startled Meriana. Her glance lingered into a stare. He spoke quietly and clearly it was a cultured voice, like someone who had received speech training. Meriana decided there was no reason why a big casually dressed Islander shouldn’t speak clearly. But she felt embarrassed that she had probably shown surprise.

She walked to Grandma’s bedroom door knocked and called out, “Arlin, Rachael and Chris are here to see you.”

Grandma answered from inside. "We'll be with you in five minutes."

Meriana turned to Rachael and Chris. "Sounds like you have time for a cup of tea. The kettle's boiling."

"That's very kind. Thank you." Rachael's reply was echoed by Chris.

"So you're interested in the scow?" Harry queried as Meriana poured two mugs of tea.

"Yes I believe my boss, Grant, came to see Arlin about a possible shipping contract. I've come to try and fill in some of the blank spaces in the proposal. By the way how old is the scow?"

"I'd say Arlin's scow was originally built at least a hundred years ago. But she's built of kauri and totara to last as long as sin, or until she was wrecked on the sandbank at the entrance to the estuary. She sat in sand for decades before Arlin rebuilt her. He's been trading up and down the coast on and off ever since. In recent years he's not been rushed with orders."

"Well I'm hoping we can correct that little problem. Rachael replied. "There can't be many scows still operational in New Zealand are there?"

"As far as I know there aren't any others." Harry replied.

"Why's that?" Chris asked.

"Engines were one reason. The original scow had an eight horsepower steam engine. A hundred years ago when the hull was built nothing else would have been available. Eight horsepower could

manoeuvre the scow round a harbour or move the scow when the sails hung limp in a windless sea, but it couldn't push the scow out of trouble in a storm. Scows are shallow draught flat bottom craft for working off tide-swept beaches. They manoeuvred in treacherous inshore waters without good charts. In those days there were no echo sounders, no radio communication, no radar, and no global positioning systems. They survived on the experience of the scowmen. Sooner or later luck went out with the ebb tide. Every scow had multiple accidental groundings. But sixty years later when Arlin rebuilt the scow I bought a four hundred horsepower single cylinder diesel out of a Norwegian fishing boat. I got it freighted over here. Then Arlin had a sailing vessel that could push itself off a lee shore in a storm."

"So with better engines scows could still be working?" Chris asked.

"Probably not." Harry replied. "In their holds scows carried the seeds of their own destruction. They carried steel and cement to bridge rivers. Land transport became possible. Road and rail finally sank the scows, not storms or uncharted rocks, and the scows and scowmen that built New Zealand passed into history."

"Not quite all." Rachael interjected. "Arlin's scow is still operational isn't it?"

"Yes his scow will be the last of the trading scows." Harry replied.

"I'm not so sure of that." Chris replied. "Given modern navigational equipment and good engines I

think there's a lot more work available for sailing scows than anyone realises."

"That's why we're here today." Rachael added.

At that moment Arlin and Elvina emerged from the bedroom.

Meriana did the introductions. "This is Arlin and my mother Rurenga who also answers to Elvina. It's just as well I call her Mum as nowadays I wouldn't know which name to use."

Rachael answered. "I'm Rachael and this is my partner Chris."

"Pleased to meet you," Elvina replied. She looked at Chris. "From the Islands are you Chris?"

"Yes Tonga." he replied.

Rachael added, "He's related to the king of Tonga."

"A very distant relative I can assure you." Chris replied and added, "But I've been living in New Zealand for the last seven years."

"He's a qualified doctor from Auckland medical school."

"Wow! Congratulations Chris." Elvina replied.

"We originally met at Auckland University." Rachael offered, and added, "I just did business studies, and now I'm working for Agrichem. I believe my boss Grant met you Arlin and had a few preliminary discussions about a shipping contract to distribute mussel farming equipment."

Arlin looked blank but Elvina cut in "Yes that's right. Grant talked to the two of us."

"Oh good," Rachael replied. "I'm not sure how much he told you but I'm here to try and tie up any loose ends and come up with a proposal that suits all of us."

Chris cut in. "I was also hoping we might look round the scow and see what navigational gear you carry."

"That won't take long," Arlin replied. "I have a steering compass, a hand bearing compass, a sextant, a log and a wrist watch."

"Don't you think it would be a good idea to have some modern navigational gear?" Chris asked.

"Like what?" Arlin asked.

"Perhaps a global positioning system, a chart plotter, a look-ahead sonar, an auto-pilot, radar, satellite communications, radio direction finder," Chris suggested.

"No electricity on the boat to run them." Arlin replied.

"You have batteries to start the engine don't you?" Chris asked.

"I start the engine on compressed air, and the engine recharges the cylinder. I've also got a hand operated compressor in case I need to manually recharge the cylinder." Arlin replied.

"What about your navigation lights and cabin lights?"

"Kerosene" Arlin replied.

“OK, so you could fit solar panels, a wind turbine, an alternator on your engine and batteries.”

“I haven’t got money for all that stuff.” Arlin replied.

Chris and Rachael made eye contact.

Rachael suggested, “Suppose Agrichem paid all the expenses.”

“Why would they do that?” Harry asked.

“Let me explain.” Rachael offered. “Conventional business practice says we should lease a reasonable sized warehouse probably in Auckland near the waterfront with truck loading and turning facilities. We employ at least two store-men, someone in the front office, and a manager. We need computers, fax, telephone, photocopier, a lunch room for the staff, fire fighting and evacuation facilities, a fork lift, a stacking system that meets health and safety standards, a security system. We would have to meet all the accounting compliance costs. I’m sure I don’t need to go on. We need to carry all these costs, and more, before we sell a single mussel float. In fact we probably wouldn’t sell any, because we would have already priced ourselves out of the market. Why have a warehouse in Auckland? We’re not likely to have customers in Auckland. Our customers will all be in the fishing villages and bays up and down the coast. The cost of all the navigational gear Chris proposed equates to a single one off payment of six weeks running costs for an Auckland warehouse.”

“But you still have to keep your stock of mussel floats and rope somewhere.” Harry replied.

“Quite right,” Rachael answered. “I’m coming to that.” She turned to Arlin. “What do you know about Motumanunui Island?”

Arlin shrugged. “It’s about five nautical miles offshore from the mouth of the estuary. It’s got a clear sandy beach with good holding on the eastern side. It’s sheltered from nor’westers and southerlies but character forming in easterlies. There’s a good jetty with water just down from the wool shed. Frazer McLeod used to run sheep there, but he’s got a crook leg and lives in town up by the Mobil petrol station. As far as I know only sea birds nest on Motumanunui now.”

“Quite right.” Rachael was genuinely impressed. “I should have talked to you earlier. It took me a week to get as much information as you had off the top of your head.”

“There’s not much Arlin doesn’t know about this coast.” Harry added.

“So I see.” She replied. “Frazer’s farm house and the wool shed are of particular interest to me.”

“He won’t sell. I can assure you of that.” Harry cautioned.

“So I found out. But he will lease it.” Rachael answered and added, “For one case of Teachers whisky delivered to his door. No other brand will do. It has to be Teachers. And it has to be the whisky in bottles not the money to purchase it.”

“Yes, that would be Frazer’s way.” Arlin added.

“It sure beats the cost of a warehouse in Auckland.” Rachael continued. “This is what I

propose. Initially we import a consignment of three thousand mussel floats and associated gear, shipped from Australia. You pick them up off the wharf in Auckland, and take the whole consignment to Frazer's woolshed on Motumanunui Island. The woolshed has a tractor and bucket to assist with the loading and unloading. Frazer assures me it was in working order but, if not, doubtless we could get it fixed, or pick up another one secondhand. The woolshed becomes a lock up warehouse. No one but you need know of its existence. If someone does find out about it, mussel floats five nautical miles offshore with a serial number, are not likely to be an attractive proposition to thieves. Especially as your scow is probably one of the few vessels with a shallow enough draft to get into the bay and have the hold capacity to carry that volume of floats."

"It sounds like it could work." Arlin observed and added, "But I'm not taking my scow out for a case of whisky a week."

"Of course I don't expect you to." Rachael replied and added, "I've never seen inside your scow. I was hoping to have a look but with the police stopping anyone getting to the jetty..."

Meriana interrupted, "We could go round to the estuary in the waka. We have to go anyway to take Arlin and Harry back."

"That would be great." Chris was enthusiastic. "I'd love to have a look and it is just possible I may have some other work for the scow later on."

As they walked down the beach to the waka Rachael and Chris walked together. No one else heard

Chris say to Rachael “I don’t think they suspect a thing. You sounded most convincing.” And neither did anyone else hear Rachael reply, “Well some of it is true.”

CHAPTER 15

DECEPTION

“Well Bryan, do you want the good news or the bad news first?” Inspector Fitzsimple’s mouth creased into a smile. ‘Like a mosquito about to get a belly full of blood,’ thought Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart. Fitzsimple had been waiting when he arrived. There had been no, ‘Good morning Bryan. How’s your head?’ Without speaking he held his office door open to guide Bryan into the tiger’s cage. A finger of the morning sun pointed through the window behind Fitzsimple. From where Bryan sat, to look towards Fitzsimple he had to look into the sun. If his eyes fell, the polished surface of Fitzsimple’s desk bounced the reflected rays into his eyes.

“Let’s get the bad news over first shall we.” It wasn’t the sun in Bryan’s eyes making him sweat.

“The bad news Bryan is the fact that I’m not happy. I’m not happy at all. In fact I’d go further and say I am very unhappy Bryan. And do you know why I’m unhappy Bryan?”

Temptation urged Bryan to reply, ‘Because you’re a miserable bastard,’ but instead replied, “No sir.”

“Then I will have to tell you won’t I Bryan? I’m unhappy because I keep getting phone calls Bryan. And do you know why I keep getting phone calls Bryan? I keep getting phone calls because of you Bryan.” He pointed his fore finger directly at Bryan. “They are the sort of phone calls I don’t like receiving

Bryan. And I don't suppose you have any idea what they are about, do you Bryan?"

"No sir."

"Then I will have to tell you won't I Bryan?"

"I suppose so sir."

"You suppose so! Is that what you said Bryan?"

"Yes sir."

"Well you suppose correctly Bryan. I am going to tell you. Yesterday I had a phone call from the mother of a twelve-year-old girl. This little girl and her friend were fishing on the beach. Ring a bell does it Bryan?"

"I can explain that sir."

"And I can assure you, you'll have every opportunity. Head hurt does it Bryan?"

"Yes sir. I crashed my car and banged my head."

"Ah yes! The car! Not having a lot of luck with cars lately are we Bryan? Was it Rudolf again or Donna and Blitzen this time?"

"It was my own private car sir."

"Yes so the fire brigade tells me Bryan. They're simple folk you know, and they're still puzzled about how you managed to get out of a burning locked car. Perhaps after you've told me, you'd like to explain the trick to them because they're rushing away with strange ideas like arson. But I stuck up for you Bryan. I explained to them you won't be doing anything silly like putting in an insurance claim will

you Bryan? And after all it is your own private car so why shouldn't you burn it out if you want to?"

"Well sir..."

"You needn't explain right now Bryan. I think we've had enough of the bad news don't you? So now I have some good news for you."

"Yes sir. Good idea."

"This is the first piece of good news Bryan. I've had a long chat with Susan Nelson and she has asked me to return your cheque to you. And this is it Bryan, your cheque for five hundred dollars. It seems she doesn't want it Bryan. Would you like to confide in me as a friend why you gave it to her in the first place?"

"It's a long story sir."

"I'm sure it is Bryan, and you'd be able to fill in all the details for me, but the basic story seemed to roll off Susan's thigh as quickly as a police car can roll into a ditch. Most plausible I thought and explained in a few short sentences, but of course not nearly as creative as your report about Rudolf. But don't worry about it Bryan. I have some more good news for you. I've come up with a solution that takes care of all these problems, and what's more it will make me a happy inspector."

"You have sir?"

"I just said so didn't I? It seems to me you have a nasty wound there on your head. You shouldn't be here at all. You should be taking your sick leave Bryan."

"Should I sir?"

“No question about it Bryan! And as long as I have your resignation in writing on my desk within the next hour, I’ll take care of all these little misunderstandings. Fortunately so far no complaint has been made in writing. You can rely on me to do my best to make sure it doesn’t go past me, and stays verbal. Then I can put it in the “forget file”. But of course if I don’t get your resignation I’ll have to ensure these complaints go through the prosecutor’s office. The trouble is sometimes the prosecutor’s office gets mixed up with the persecutor’s office and we wouldn’t want that to happen would we? Now I’ll let you into a little secret Bryan. Prison inmates are not always friendly towards police officers who join them. And to make matters worse they seem to take a personal dislike to men convicted of molesting little girls. Now as I see it Bryan with that nasty wound on your head you’re not going to be able to come back to work again until your notice has expired and you’re no longer on the payroll. Now Bryan do you agree that’s a tidy solution?”

“Er! Yes sir.”

“Excellent. Now here’s a pen and a clean sheet of paper. All I need is your written resignation. As you’re away on sick leave, I’ll make sure your resignation goes through the official channels. I don’t think we need this cheque of yours as a potentially nasty little piece of evidence, do we Bryan?” The inspector noted the blood vessel just below Bryan’s left eye was pulsing.

As Bryan started to write, Inspector Fitzsimple walked to his shredding machine and fed it a piece of paper. Bryan didn’t notice the inspector had slipped

the cheque underneath the shredding machine and was feeding a blank sheet of paper through the shredder.

As Bryan handed over his resignation and shut the door behind him he didn't see the inspector's face. Even if he had seen the delight in Fitzsimple's eyes he would not have known the reason. He had not the faintest suspicion about the opportunistic game evolving in the inspector's mind.

Standing, the inspector not only checked his office door was shut but locked it before returning to his desk. He picked up the telephone. The number already resided in the phone's internal memory of frequently called numbers. It required only one push button and the phone dialed the number for him.

At the other side of town the phone rang in Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart's house. Bryan's wife Kate answered.

"Hello."

She heard the inspector's voice. "That you Kate? Mike here. Is it OK to talk just now?"

"Oh! Hi Mike! Yes, I'm alone."

"Then how about driving down to the marina and seeing me on the boat for lunch Kate?"

"I can't drive anywhere today Mike. Bryan's got my car."

"Of course, yes! I was forgetting. OK if I slip round and pick you up Kate?"

Kate glanced at her watch. Loneliness made the answer, "I'll need an hour to get ready Mike." He was

male, available and not her husband. She lacked the will power to tell him to get lost.

"That's great it'll take me that long to get out of this place and drive across town. See you soon. Oh! I've got some news for you Kate."

"What's that Mike?"

"Tell you when I see you." The inspector liked to keep her in anticipation.

"You're a bastard Mike!"

"I love you too. See you!"

"See you."

Kate hung up. She had an hour. Routine meant she didn't question where loneliness was leading. Her brain slipped into auto pilot.

Have a shower...put on black underwear...the dress with the buttons down the front...white soled slip-ons. They won't mark the deck and would be quick to take off in the cabin. It was easy; routine had momentum of its own. She glanced in the mirror...The reflection of a stranger's eyes stared back. Tension scribbled lines across her face. Routine stumbled. Neurons sparked and turned rebellious. She shouted at the reflected face. "You're pathetic!" She tossed the slip-ons back under the bed and took out her brown lace up shoes with the black rubber soles, and grinned. The tension lines faded. Encouraged by the reflected grin in the mirror she hung her dress back in the wardrobe and took out her old jeans, and pulled a sweater on over her head. It ruffled her hair, but didn't ruffle it as much as pulling out the clips and running her fingers over her scalp.

At that moment the Inspector glanced at his watch. He had no intention of getting there on time. That would be a sign of weakness. So he had ample time to write to the mother who had rung about Bryan. He looked up her name on his answer pad.

Dear Mrs. Morgan,

Thank you for your telephone call about the alleged molestation of your daughter Huia. To enable me to proceed with your complaint could you please call round to the station at your earliest convenience and put your complaint in writing. We will then be in a position to proceed with the investigation.

Yours faithfully

Inspector M. Fitzsamuel

Next an internal memo to Susan Nelson.

Susan.

Could you please look by at my office urgently and put your complaint in writing about your verbal allegation of unwanted sexual advances by BL and the resulting destruction of a police vehicle. A signed statement from you will assist me in processing this investigation.

Regards Mike.

He tossed the letters into his out tray, and locked the cheque in his filing cabinet for future evidence.

Picking up the telephone he dialed a different number. The editor of the 'Weekly Reflector' answered the unlisted direct line to her desk.

"Hello Jane, Mike Fitzsamuel here. I've got a front page headline story for you."

"OK Mike! You've got my attention."

"How does this sound? Cop sexually assaults young girl on the beach."

"Does the cop have a name Mike?"

"If you were to ask me if it was Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart I would tell you I could neither confirm nor deny the allegation and add that he was simply helping police with their inquiries. Why don't we have a coffee tomorrow morning Jane and I'll fill you in with more details, which I can neither confirm nor deny?"

"Why are you telling me this Mike?"

"I thought it would be a great pick-up line. Ten o'clock at, 'Coffee Haven' tomorrow?"

"Ten it is. See you Mike."

Leaving the station he walked past Bryan's office and paused long enough for Bryan to look up and see the inspector watching him clearing his desk. The grin he gave Bryan was one of genuine pleasure.

Walking down the marina finger Kate took Mike's hand. A couple of boaties looked up as they walked past. Kate hoped it would make them curious about the identity of the woman with Mike. She dropped the shadow of a hint to one or two of the other nurses in the A and E department that she was having an affair but kept the identity a secret. Guessing and gossip would fill in more details than she could imagine. It was a device that meant she wasn't ignored any more. Since she had married a cop former friends became acquaintances and acquaintances didn't bother to return her calls. So now she wouldn't want anyone to think she was the faithful wife of a senior sergeant. A murky reputation was a much better social asset.

As they climbed aboard pinpoints of sunlight glinted on stainless deck fittings. She tossed her head like the woman in a shampoo advert on the tele. Even if Mike was only a mistake she wanted to be noticed. She was aboard the largest launch on the finger. Other boats were dull with salt crystals but not this one. Its topsides gleamed.

In the cabin she walked to the windows, looked out, and drew the curtains. She hoped the other boaties would notice. It would add intrigue and might add to the creation of fantasy. But the men seemed preoccupied with their ropes and boats. Women were much more observant. These men were acting like her brothers when they were teenagers. Do boys never become adult? Or do women just become boring when they pretend to be adult?

She was about to find out. Loneliness brought her here and being screwed by a two faced fumbler

was only marginally preferable to being ignored. Or was it? Mike wanted to show her the new engine. She had no idea why he thought it would be of interest. He kept talking about turbos, intercoolers and counter rotating props whatever they were. Probably he didn't know either.

She noted his pronunciation of "Killer Whats" so she asked him, "What are kilo watts?"

His mouth opened and shut several times.

"It's a technical term and is rather complicated to explain in detail."

"Oh I don't need to know in detail just simply in words a woman can understand."

"Well..." He hesitated again. "It's a special sort of gear box they have on boat engines but as I say it's a rather technical term..."

Kate didn't bother to listen to the rest. It wasn't possible for her to grow up on a farm with three diesel brained brothers and not know kilowatts were a measurement of power as an alternative to measurements in horsepower. Realising he was a fake was the only enjoyable part of the day even if she couldn't share it.

When they eventually went into the bedroom and shut the door she decided she might as well have stayed at home. When they came out of the bedroom she concluded being ignored was preferable. At least she could watch the tele and get properly bored.

Daylight sagged, the house lights were on and her car was in the drive when Mike delivered her to

her front door. She put her hand on the bonnet of her car. It was cold. Bryan had been home some time.

Two hours later, breathless and in tears, she knocked at Mike's front door. Blood stained her sweater. Stepping into his hallway she decided she was no longer a married woman. Mike shut the door behind her.

CHAPTER 16

REPORTERS

An unmarked red Toyota was parked in the place reserved for the school bus outside the school gate. Jane's last car had "Weekly Reflector" on the side. It had been a disaster. She was recognised as a reporter before she even got out of her car. So the only stories she got were the ones people wanted to tell her, making it virtually certain they were either boring or libelous. Certainly most of them weren't worth reporting. But since she had this unmarked car she had been getting scoops.

Mike Fitzsamuel could be infuriating. A typical bloody cop! First he half told her stories. Then he half untold the same stories and finished by telling her she couldn't use what she thought he had said because he could neither confirm nor deny having told her, and in any case it would be in breach of some damn thing or another.

What interested her was why Mike fed her this story. He only fed her stories to distract her from what she was investigating which, in this case, was the murder. What was it about the homicide he was trying to obscure? Were the two cases related? She was damn sure he had some motive. But what was it? Find that and she'd have a scoop.

She had been in the cynicism business long enough to know impressing other people drove the economy and gratification originated in sex, drugs and a feeling of superiority.

That left her with a gut feeling about this story. It had emotional appeal. Sex? Yes. Drugs? Probably. It also had a magnificent feeling of superiority for her readers with a cop attempting to rape a young girl on the beach. The 'rough justice' ending would appeal to her female readers. So she had been waiting fifteen minutes in case school came out early. This was probably her best chance of seeing the two kids without parents or teachers present. There was a period of about twenty minutes after they came out and before the school bus left. She would have to make every minute count. She moved from the driver's seat to the passenger seat to wait.

Three running boys were first out. She poured herself out realising they were probably too young to be interested in her thighs however much she exposed. Just in case she half leaned and half sat on the near side front mudguard. That bared most of her left leg, just in case. In her experience sometimes it could excite even young boys. And she had good legs.

"Hi boys!" They stopped to look at the owner of the husky cultured voice.

"I've got a gold coin for each of you if you point out Huia and Huhana as they come out."

"Is that a one dollar or a two dollar coin?" the largest of the boys asked.

"With them it's money! Mercenary little brats!" she thought as she hit him with a smile. "Two dollars of course. Two girls, two dollars for each of you. That's fair isn't it?"

Coins rattled in her purse as she stirred them with a plastic finger nail.

“What do you want them for?” The smallest of the boys asked. She had hoped they wouldn’t ask that. She couldn’t say she was a relative or a friend as she obviously couldn’t recognise them. She hesitated and looked at her red toe nails protruding from gold high heel shoes. She wiggled her toes.

“It’s a bit of a secret really boys. But I could let you in on it, if you promise not to tell anyone till tomorrow.” Her voice had become soft and seductive. Probably wasted on them she thought.

“Yes! OK! We promise.” The reply was a chorus. Good, she had their attention. Now she could play with them, as she played for time. Kids were streaming out of the gate. She chewed the ring on her forefinger.

“I’m not sure I ought to tell you.” She waited for a response.

“Is Huhana in the shit again?” The biggest boy asked.

“Oh no! Is she often in trouble?”

“Yes.”

“Oh! Well I didn’t know that. What sort of trouble?”

This is great, she thought. I’m deflecting the question.

“Swearing, ...”

“Well most of us swear from time to time. Eh boys!”

“She swears at the teachers and she threw a book at Mister Marshal.”

“Oh dear! Did she hit him?”

“Got him in the face! Knocked his glasses off and made his nose bleed.”

“What happened then lads?”

“We all laughed and she took off.”

“So she’s a bit of a fighter is she?” This is good it could add background to the story. Noise and kids jostled in the doorway.

“Here they are. That’s Huhana and that’s Huia with her.”

The boys held out their hands while fingers with red plastic finger nails handed them the two dollar coins. They shouted “Thanks!” She decided it wasn’t accidental they took off running before Huhana arrived, without waiting to hear what she wanted with the girls. I guess that means Huhana is a good fighter. Jane grinned to herself. ‘Perhaps I should have given them thirty pieces of silver!’

“Hi girls! I recognise you! You’re Huia and Huhana aren’t you.”

“Who the shit are you?” Huhana asked.

“Don’t you remember where you saw me last?”

The girls looked puzzled.

“Did you ever go to Mum’s nightclub when she was singing?” Huhana asked.

At least that bit Mike had told her was correct. Huhana’s Mum was a singer. But Huhana had said, “When she was singing”. She had used the past tense. So her mother was a “has been” night club singer. She

answered, "I can't quite remember when it was. It must have been some time since she stopped singing."

"Mum's a cop now. She bust up from the Weevils a couple of years ago."

Jane's eyes narrowed. So Huhana's Mum is a cop is she! I wonder why Mike left that out? It wouldn't be accidental, so it must be relevant. Jane mentally retraced the night club music scene. The Weevils? The Weevils? She had heard of them. Of course! Yes! Hot Toddy and the Weevils! Huhana's mother must be Hot Toddy. Take a chance.

"Hot Toddy was one of my favorite singers. I was devastated when she stopped singing and joined the police. Still I suppose you can see more of her now."

"Yeah! We're staying at Huia's place again tonight."

"That's where all the action is; isn't it girls?"

Huhana's answer wasn't what she expected.

"Sure is. Mum's having it off with Mad Harry. Huia's Mum spent the night on the beach with Roland under Starlight's blanket..."

"But Mum doesn't know we know." Huia interjected.

"And Huia's Grandma is sleeping with Arlin again. He's an old flame." Huhana explained.

More action on the beach than I expected Jane thought to herself. I wonder if I can include any of it.

"I heard you got attacked on the beach Huia."

By the time the girls got on the school bus Jane had as much of the story as she needed, and photos of Huia and Huhana. Even before she had spoken to them she had decided to link the murder of Al Diggins to the attempted rape of Huia. It was the obvious way to go. She had all the requirements of a good story, rape and murder set in a background of drugs, lust and police corruption. If she couldn't create a scoop out of that material she shouldn't call herself a journalist.

She decided to break the story on Wednesday. By Thursday her scoop had been taken up by the dailies in the big centres.

CHAPTER 17

RIVER PEOPLE

Just as the blackness of night knows nothing of the dawn chorus, so the police forensic team knew nothing of the spontaneous explosion of activity on the estuary following their departure. Neither did they have any suspicion of the motivating forces centred on the estuary. This was hardly surprising as Meriana herself had no concept of what was about to happen.

It arrived unexpectedly in the form of a white envelope which in one corner carried the name of the legal firm of "Sue and Hyde". She tore it open. Disbelief and anger took turns to obliterate belief.

Her ex, James, had never shown the slightest interest in any of the kids. Now he had read about Huia being molested by a cop. The letter claimed she was a negligent mother who placed her daughter in danger by lack of supervision, which had resulted in her being sexually assaulted and almost drowned. He claimed custody. The preliminary hearing was five weeks away.

Blackness overwhelmed her by day and vandalised her nights as dreams replaced conscious thought. In her most malignant dream, lawyers, social workers and counsellors closed in on Huia. Grabbing sticks Rangi and Hemi ran to their sister's defense. Meriana watched in horror as she saw her boys beaten back. The dream shifted and she was there with her children being pushed towards the lagoon. She struck out, and her fist smashing into the bedhead, woke Roland. She sat up but Roland had no

idea whether she was awake or asleep. Instead he was convinced she had entered some malevolent intermediate state. Sweat made her body sticky. Roland switched on the bedroom light. Often things were clearer with lights on. But in the light of a single bulb he saw nothing but dancing madness in her eyes.

On the river beyond the flax track Harry opened his hut door. Out flew his meticulously carved birds, fan tails, fern birds, pigeons and the rest. They swept over the dunes and turned but were no longer birds of the forest. As beak and talon dived out of the sun social workers, counsellors and journalists turned and ran from the sound of beating wings and tearing talons.

Roland spoke her name, held her hand, and massaged her neck and shoulders. Minutes passed. The frenzy in her eyes diminished as she looked down on herself thigh deep in water lifting Huia into Te Waka. Her breathing slowed as the canoe crossed the bar heading out to sea while on the shore the counsellor's voice drifted on the wind and faded as the vessel lifted to the ocean swell.

Suddenly her eyes were no longer wild and staring. The silent scream inside her head became a whimper as Roland's face came into focus. He was wiping the sweat from her face and telling her she had only had a bad dream.

Morning returned. The sound of breaking waves on the ocean beach washed over the whare. Shafts of sunlight slid down the hill. Rocks on the beach glinted in the morning air.

Out on Motumanunui Island on a ledge high on the cliff a mother gull watched her fledgling poised. She watched her spread her wings weighing the air. Rocks like a row of black teeth gleamed through feathers of white water far below. The nest was safety. To take the irrevocable flight meant success or death. Uncertain of the outcome it took all the love and courage the mother gull could find to push her fledgling off the ledge and follow her, as she spread her wings and made her first flight.

The spillage from Meriana's dream leaked into every waking moment and sloshed backwards and forwards through her brain. Unable to contemplate getting breakfast she grabbed Roland's hand and together they walked down to the beach.

Roland explained. "Just because you get a lawyer's letter it doesn't mean James can take Huia away from you. You're a good mother, you would win a ..."

"How could I afford a lawyer? I've lost my job and ..."

"I've got some savings Meriana. I could..."

"It's not fair. Why should Huia have to put up with being physically molested by a cop and then get dragged to court so she can be mentally molested by lawyers and social workers."

"It might not be like that Meriana. They..."

Meriana stopped and grasped Roland's shoulders with both hands.

"Too right it won't be like that. If they can't find Huia, they can't harm her."

Back at the whare Meriana went straight to the rubbish bucket in the kitchen. Carrying it out to the garden she raked through it and found what she was looking for. It was crumpled and had some tomato juice in one corner. Placing it on the draining board she wrung out a dish cloth and tried unsuccessfully to wipe it clean. The electric iron made a reasonable job of removing the creases from the envelope. She slipped the letter inside, sealed it with Sellotape and, using a felt tip, wrote "GONE AWAY" across the front, and gave it to Roland to post in town.

By mid afternoon Meriana, Hemi and Rangi were waiting on the wet sand for Roland to return in Susan's van. Huia, Huhana and Nahi had already gone on ahead with Starlight. As the sun warmed the back of her head she felt as if her brain had gone into overload and switched off. She knew she had forgotten things but could no more think what they were than sort out how many unnecessary things she had thrown into the bags. She wished Roland had been with her. He had a tidy mind. He would have carefully prepared lists and would be ticking off each item as they were packed. While she was wondering whether Susan's old van had broken down Roland drove it through the yard and stopped on the firm sand.

Her tongue explored his as she greeted him with a kiss before they unloaded the van and carried the cardboard boxes and bags to the canoe. The boys had Te Waka floating which meant they paddled in calf deep water to load. Hemi stacked while Rangi held Te Waka's bow pointing out into the lagoon. As they paddled away from the beach Meriana looked behind half expecting to see an army of counsellors, but only their own footprints remained.

Having already crossed by the ford and come down the Flax Track Huia, Huhana and Nahi were waiting for them with Starlight on the bank along side the scow.

Even with Starlight's pack saddle it took three trips along the track to transport all the packages from Te Waka to Harry's hut.

While Roland and the boys erected the two tents in Harry's garden Meriana put the mattresses on the museum floor and spread sheets and blankets for Huia and Huhana.

It wasn't until Meriana and Roland lay together in their tent at night listening to the drone of conversation between the boys in the next tent that her blanket of apprehension slipped away. A river flowed between her family and marauding social workers. She felt secure in the knowledge counsellors' dedication to work would prove soluble in river water and the ford an impossible barrier to high heeled journalists. Besides no one knew they were there.

But lying in Roland's arm and listening to the sounds of the night Meriana had no concept of the other plan already so well advanced it needed only implementation. Shortly after dawn Rachael irrevocably set her plan in motion. It started unobtrusively by driving to Auckland with Chris, Arlin, Harry, and Rurenga. They visited ship chandlers and returned with the back of Rachael's car and her trailer full of equipment for fitting out the scow.

But the car carried one other item. While Rachael had been writing out Agrichem orders at ship

chandlers, Rurenga trawled Auckland's second hand shops. Just before closing time she found it.

Some of her time had been wasted looking at things of no interest. Eventually she paid cash for a pair of shoes, two pairs of jeans and a cast iron frying pan. She talked about the shoes and jeans and the merits of cast iron frying pans compared with stainless steel ones. She left certain the woman hadn't noticed the other item she had shop lifted.

In Rachael's car she kept it concealed beneath her other purchases. She had no intention of letting anyone know she had it, or that it was so similar anyone could mistake it for the hammer she had thrown into the river.

Police divers had been searching the river. Possibly, perhaps even probably, they had found the hammer. They could even have identified it as the probable murder weapon. She was reasonably sure after the time it had been in the river there wouldn't be any incriminating finger prints or blood on it. She had the task of slipping an identical hammer into Arlin's tool box without anyone knowing. If she had guessed correctly, she was reasonably sure Arlin's hammer would be missing from his tool belt. Someone might identify the hammer in the river as Arlin's hammer, as she had done. But with Arlin's hammer still in his tool belt that line of investigation would need to change direction.

Excitement about the scow's new equipment ensured no one, not even Rachael, showed the slightest interest in the second hand shoes and jeans in the top of Rurenga's shopping bag. Excitement intensified as Arlin rowed people and boxes to the

scow. Rurenga was reminded of gannets in a feeding frenzy on a shoal of mullet as boxes were unpacked in the cabin. The discussion about positioning the solar panels on the cabin top where no shadow would fall, reminded Rurenga of black backed gulls fighting over fish heads on the beach.

Like a petrel grabbing a feed while black backed gulls squabbled, Rurenga slipped the hammer into Arlin's tool belt. She chuckled to herself, Alzheimer's had advantages.

A day later, with boat building work in progress, Chris noticed Arlin's hammer. He looked again to make sure, then made eye contact with Rachael and pointed with his eyes to the hammer. Rachael followed his gaze, and understood. She made a nodding eye contact with Chris to confirm understanding.

As watchers on the hill they had both witnessed the murder, and seen the hammer on the grass. They had watched Huia on Starlight drive the sheep through the murder scene. Finally through binoculars they had watched Rurenga throw the hammer into the river. They were also aware of police divers searching the river bed. Of course neither of them had any idea whether or not the police found the hammer or, if they had, whether they considered it significant. Probably Susan or Roland would know. But neither Chris nor Rachael felt they could ask, even indirectly without causing suspicion. Perhaps if they could get to know them better... But that wasn't likely. Roland spent most of his time with Meriana while Susan had buried herself with Harry in his hut. Possibly the kids might be a better source of

information. Kids, especially the younger ones, were more likely to tell the truth than adults. But even seeing the kids alone would be an impossible task.

Restless as leaves in an autumn gale people and packages were sucked into the cyclone of activity centred on the scow. By day Harry's hut was an island. Beyond his hut the wind and wave of human endeavour surged through the estuary. The scow shook and vibrated under hammer blows as tides of tradesmen ebbed and flowed each leaving the flotsam of their work. Chaos became order, only to be swept aside by the next flood tide of tradesmen. Above decks and below, things were changing. Chris and Rachael decided to tell the others the real reason for the changes, but now was not the time. A boat caught in the eye of a tropical cyclone is more interested in the size of the waves than the principles of latent heat that sustains the cyclone. At this stage telling anyone their plans would not only be counter productive but could stop the project.

The navigational gear was seen as a potential advantage to everyone except Arlin who didn't understand how it could be better than the old ways. Rachael and Chris found an unexpected ally in Roland. To their surprise he seemed to understand and had been invaluable in explaining the advantages of the GPS, amazing Rachael by his persistence in explaining to Arlin over and over again how it worked and what it would do. Unable to move the terminal moraine of Arlin's mind he fended off protests and kept explanations going. The ongoing arguments and explanations about navigational gear had the unexpected result of allowing Chris to build his "special room" almost unnoticed. That room, built in

the scow's stern and consuming a third of the space below deck, was vital. Without it everything was useless risk. Like unseen sharks circling in the darkness Rachael knew killers would gather. She had until the end of the month. Then the pack would close in. If they found out about Chris's special room, and the reason he needed it, they wouldn't even have until the end of the month. But Chris exuded confidence; at least Rachael thought he did. Perhaps everyone was too busy. Perhaps none of the others understand enough about medical procedures to know the requirements for a "first aid room." Whatever the reason, the special room progressed without question. Rachael was grateful Harry spent his time in his hut with his stone carvings. If he turned up on the scow he would ask penetrating questions and be hard to fob off. "Thank God," she confided in Chris, "Susan keeps Harry out of the scow."

Although Rachael didn't realise it, "Thank God", was an appropriate choice of words. Captivated, Susan watched Harry cut his petrified wood as he fashioned the last piece for his museum. His hands fascinated her. They were rough countryman's hands, calloused and cracked from chopping wood and cutting stone. Yet these same hands measured and cut petrified wood with infinite precision. "If God had retired and engaged in less demanding work this is what his hands would look like." She decided. She also knew from experience how gentle those hands could be with her.

Harry was unlike any man she had ever met. And you couldn't sing in bars and nightclubs without experiencing more than your fair share; and regretting more than a fair share of the tricks loneliness and the

urgency of lust had played. But Harry was different. Harry showed her how to think, like the time he cut his lump of petrified wood into a rectangular block.

As he was about to transfer his calculated cutting lines onto it, he made the comment, "Inside is the shape of whatever I want. It could be a fish, a bird, a mermaid or anything else I want. All I have to do is scrape away the parts I don't want, to reveal it. That's like life, isn't it?" And added "And quantum physics." She'd never heard of quantum physics before but with Harry's explanation, she peered into his world of particle physics.

A glossy woman's magazine would say she had fallen in love with an older man, and put a full stop at the end of the sentence. But neither Susan nor Harry could contemplate any full stop. The only punctuation mark either of them would contemplate would be a hyphen between their names.

Museum pieces and the memory of Elvina had floated in and out of Harry's consciousness like driftwood on a tidal estuary. Now something new swept through the estuary as welcome as a cool breeze on a sweat soaked day. Harry could hear tinkling laughter as water danced over stones. Now he could hear the bell bird finding nectar in flax flowers. The fern fronds of his life were uncurling because a playful woman with moonlight on her hair and songs in her heart had shown him how to laugh. He felt like a cicada emerging into sunlight after spending seventeen years underground.

There had been a time when the only human voices Harry heard were voices in his own head. Now, several times a day, he heard Starlight's hooves on the

path from the ford mingling with the sound of young voices. Harry found himself listening for the sound of Starlight shaking water from her sides as she came out of the ford and hearing excited shouts from the children as they pretended to avoid the shower, and push each other down the increasingly slippery river bank. With the wooden crates slung in pairs across Starlight's back Huia, Huhana and Nahi brought each pair from the saw mill as Hemi and Rangi made them. Seeing the pile of crates mounting outside his hut, Harry squeezed Susan's hand.

"You know Susan I don't think Darwin got it right. It's not the fittest or strongest who survive. It's those who co-operate."

"And those that have fun." Susan added with smile.

Harry's eyes lingered on Susan savouring the touch of her smile. Was the bond between them as transient as a smile, or as warm as a smile? She was a mother with two children to support, and he old enough to be her father. She seemed genuinely interested in his museum pieces. Would she become enveloped in the new project, strengthening the bond between them? Or would she drift away like a piece of driftwood on an ebb tide? He had lost Elvina, was he about to lose Susan? Was losing the people who mattered most his destiny? Copenhagen needed a reply but his reply hung suspended by her reaction.

It had all seemed to fit together so well. The museum was finished. The scow was not only almost ready but likely to be spending long periods at sea. Copenhagen would fund the new project. And he wanted to do it.

He made up his mind, smiled back at Susan and held her hand.

"I see co-operating and having fun as lifelong partners."

"Is that how you see us?" Susan asked. "Lifelong partners!" She emphasised the word lifelong. Partners she had known left her half shagged at midnight when they went home to their defactos. But Harry had used the word "lifelong". While she pondered the significance of the word she realised Harry had been talking to her about a research project. Reaching back into her subconscious she recovered the lost words... "Greenhouse gases..." "Shellfish..." She started to listen.

"...Increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere gets into the ocean and reacts with water to become carbonic acid. The ocean is becoming more acidic. If it continues, shell fish will have difficulty making shells. With inadequate shells they die, along with the fish that feed on them".

Looking into Harry's eyes Susan could almost taste Harry's enthusiasm.

"Couldn't we collect sea water and test it?" she asked. The corners of Harry's mouth momentarily twitched as the smile lines in the corner of his eyes lengthened. Unaware how accurately Susan could read his reaction but encouraged by her interest, he continued.

"Acidity levels vary. We..." (And he slipped the word in deliberately) "We need to gather data over a wide area and over a long time. It would mean spending long periods at sea in the scow."

“Harry, if we’re just testing sea water...”

“It’s not that simple Susan.” Now they were both using the word “We”. Harry continued. “Shells are either made of calcite or aragonite. The aragonite is more susceptible to increased acidity levels but if the calcite has magnesium in it then it too becomes at risk. Shells in cold deep water are the most threatened. We know so little about them. Most shell fish don’t even have a biological name let alone a chemical analysis of their shells. It’s a massive project. A hundred lifetimes would not be enough...”

“If you’re testing shells Harry you’re going to need someone to help collect them aren’t you? Could I be of any assistance?”

“Of course, and Nahi and Huhana could help as well. It could be a family project.”

Harry could have said nothing better. He considered her kids! He had used the word family! A flood tide of enthusiasm welled up. Nights at sea with Harry, merged with days of exploration. Susan opened her mouth to speak but her words became buried beneath the crash of a crate falling onto the deck of the hut, followed by shouting and laughter.

Susan pushed her chair back and placed her hand on the table managing a “Sorry about the kids,” as she tried to stand. But Harry placed his hand on hers and smiled.

“I didn’t hear kids. I heard young people trying to tune the instruments of adulthood. We choose whether we hear the war cry of the Valkyries or music of such beauty we suspend belief it came from human form.”

Without knowing why, Susan realised tears were welling up. She brushed the back of her hand across her eyes.

As the shouting moved away, Rangi and Hemi led Starlight along the track to the ford. As they passed the whare on the way to the saw mill a car emerged from behind the manuka.

“Excuse me lads, I’m looking for Meriana Morgan. Do you know where I might find her?” The speaker flashed a grin as she climbed out of her Toyota. Her close cropped hair revealed fifty-year-old lines on her neck. A tight fitting yellow jersey encouraged twin shadows under her boobs.

Rangi glanced at Hemi. “Meriana! That’s the woman who lived in the whare isn’t?”

“Do you know where she is now?” The woman asked.

“Yes she works as a cook for a shearing gang. Last I heard of her she was in Waikato.” Hemi answered.

“Wasn’t it the Wairarapa?” Rangi asked.

“Might have been,” Hemi replied. “Somewhere up that way.”

“Sorry can’t help any more than that.” Rangi added as they moved on.

Meanwhile, entanglements lurked in the bush as ex Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart watched the children and counted packing cases.

CHAPTER 18

KIDNAPPED

Vengeance exuded from ex Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart as visibly as hot breath on a frosty morning. Vengeance focused his brain, and three names lashed his brain like the tail of a stingray. His fists clenched with the names Susan Nelson, Inspector Fitzsimple or Kate.

Smoldering vengeance hid in the bush watching and planning. He counted 72 wooden packing crates being delivered to Harry's hut. He had been a cop long enough to know only a fool carries out his own vengeance. And he didn't consider himself a fool. Those who had betrayed him would destroy each other. Down river, below the rapids, the scow was being prepared to put to sea. The final pieces were slotting into place.

While Harry carved his last museum piece, Susan helped him pack the finished pieces into crates. Needing packing materials she called her cousin Jimmy. He arranged to call her back on her cell phone when the boss went to lunch. Usually it was about 1.15 pm. What ever else Jimmy was supposed to be doing he seemed to have limitless access to a paper shredding machine. Susan drove round the back by the stores, and most days he came out with six or seven sacks of shredded paper. She dropped them off in the barn by the whare. Huhana, Nahi, and Huia took them on Starlight to Harry's hut. None of them had any idea Bryan watched their progress through the bush. Bryan had no doubt he

was seeing sacks of cannabis being carried to Harry's hut for packing in the wooden crates. From there they were going to be loaded into the scow.

The bar at the "The Swinging Lantern" overlooked the wharves and marina. From his seat by the window in the bar Bryan could see Inspector Fitzsimple's launch and watch who went, who stayed, and how long "they" stayed. Unable to see into the cabin, his imagination created the facts he wanted to create. But today "they" hadn't walked along the marina finger. "Their" usual time had passed. He kept glancing out of the window. Others in the bar would probably put it down to a nervous habit which was becoming a more and more accurate diagnosis as the days passed. If anyone had been sufficiently interested to watch him, they would have noticed his drinking hand shake so violently beer sloshed onto the table. Then the shaking would pass and he became thoughtful, drawing pictures in spilled drink. In this mood patrons left him alone. But today he sought company. It was not company in general but the company of a drunk by the name of Frazer McLeod.

At one time Frazer had tried to combine drinking with running sheep on Motumanunui Island. Eventually he decided he had to give up one or the other. Now wind, birds, and salt spray inhabited the Island, along with the remnants of his flock of unshorn long-tailers. Frazer's enthusiasm for procrastination ensured broken fences stayed that way. As a breed his sheep seemed addicted to foot-rot and fly strike and were unsurpassed in their ability to

walk through fences and scatter. Naming them “Johnnie Walkers” seemed unfair to Frazer McLeod as he only drank “Teachers” whisky. The smell of whisky on the island had long since gone and his old boat, visited only by sea birds, had become a sanctuary for crabs burrowing in the mud by the engine waiting for the next tide to flood the timbers.

Frazer had been talking to Bryan for several minutes, with Bryan answering him with phrases like “Yeah. With you there! Right on mate! Struth, Is that right?” But his head drifted as his eyes glanced along the empty marina finger. If anyone asked he wouldn’t be able to recall a thing Frazer had said. Listening to Frazer was like being enveloped in an alcoholic fog. But a man in fog can become aware. Something within that fog emerged and took form. Suddenly Bryan listened, backtracking on words which had already vanished over the horizon of time. The words and their meaning tumbled together.

Rachael was giving Frazer a case of “Teachers” every week in exchange for using the old barn on Motumanunui Island. They wanted to use it for storage in conjunction with the scow.

It fitted. Packing cases of cannabis loaded onto the scow would be hidden on Motumanunui Island to be delivered when the time was right. It made sense.

At the precise moment he was thinking about Motumanunui Island he saw the two figures walking down the marina finger. Perhaps if Kate and Fitzsimple had chosen any other time to walk down the finger to the boat their futures might have been different. Like possums unaware of the open jaws of a

gin trap Mike and Kate were unaware of the plan forming in Bryan's mind.

Although Frazer was talking Bryan wasn't listening. His mind flicked back to a gang rape case that had gone to trial. Six university students had given a female student a drug in her coffee which left her in a drug induced coma for many hours. The offence occurred while she was in this state. The case only came to the notice of the police because one of the six volunteered the information. Bryan instantly recognized the drug's potential. Unconscious women could neither resist nor laugh at him. The trial judge ordered the suppression of the name of the drug but Bryan had already made a note of it, along with where and how the students obtained it. What they could do, he could do. Now he had a brand new application.

The following morning, when Kate and Fitzsimple were ashore, Bryan walked down the finger. He had to create the appearance of casual interest. Being uncertain how to look casual, he looked at all of the boats. Strangers looking at boats were as common as tides. But the more casual he tried to be, the more certain he became that suspicious eyes and questioning minds were following him.

Was it only a year ago Fitzsimple had taken him and Kate out in the boat for the day? Bryan had thought nothing about it at the time. But Fitzsimple had spent most of the trip out of earshot talking to Kate while he gave Bryan a free hand to drive the boat. Fitzsimple made two mistakes that day but he had yet to discover them. The first mistake was getting familiar with Kate and the second mistake was

letting Bryan get familiar with driving the “Plume of Power”.

This morning Bryan’s interest focused solely on the instrument panel inside the cabin. The cabin door was locked but the curtains were open. Unable to read the meters from the marina finger he realised he would have to come back later with binoculars. But could he risk being seen peering into a boat with binoculars? He decided to take his binoculars to the end of the sea wall with a folding chair, a fishing rod and a packet of sandwiches. Then he could sit looking out to sea long enough for curiosity to become bored, while he waited for the marina fingers to become deserted. It took longer than he anticipated. As soon as the last person left someone else would turn up. He only needed five minutes and it took most of the day to get it. Then he made his move.

Once level with the “Plume of Power” he focused his binoculars on the instrument panel inside the cabin. The fresh water tanks were half full and contained 350 litres. In three days time Fitzsimple would be away for two nights on his monthly trip to Wellington. He always made sure he caught the afternoon flight and came back on the morning flight two days later. He could have caught the morning flight, gone to his meeting, and returned the same day but for some reason he wanted two nights in Wellington. And the reason had nothing to do with the police. So for two nights there would be no one on board. Five days later, from his usual seat in the bar, Bryan watched daylight leak away. The light came on in the cabin windows of the “Plume of Power”. Fitzsimple was back from Wellington just as Bryan knew he would be. Bryan wasn’t drinking, he needed

a clear head. He had a near full jug of beer. It had been there all evening, as solitary as his mood. Yesterday he had visited the inspector's boat. Remembering how long he had to wait to find the marina deserted, this time he arrived at four in the morning. It had been easy. He used his torch to check he had the filler cap marked "Fresh Water", and not the "Diesel" filler cap next to it. The finger tight cap unscrewed. The cabin curtains were still open. Good! He shone the torch onto the instrument panel and focused his binoculars. Some water had been used since he looked last, 270 litres remained. He did a piece of mental arithmetic. 270 litres divided by thirty gave exactly nine. He had twelve sachets but only needed nine. Just to be sure he poured in ten, replaced the filler cap, wiped away his finger prints, and emptied the remaining sachets into the sea. It hadn't even been necessary to get onto the boat. He had done the whole thing from the jetty at night, and no one had a clue. All he had to do was wait and watch. But waiting and watching churned his guts as afternoon dawdled and bar patrons looked and moved on, sensing the ebb and flow of malice in his moods.

Eventually the horizon swallowed the sun and the cabin lights aboard the "Plume of Power" flicked on. Through drawn curtains Bryan could see shadows moving. By lining up the edge of the bar window with the edge of the cabin window he watched for the almost imperceptible rolling of the hull as bodies moved within the cabin. Then everything was still. He was unaware he was grinding his teeth and breathing faster. He felt a prickly sensation in the back of his skull. He waited almost half an hour. Beads of sweat on his forehead glittered in the light above the bar.

His hand trembled as he pushed on the table to rise from the window seat. But the boat swayed again. He sank back into the chair and out of habit or frustration or both he poured a glass of beer from the jug. When he got the comment "Not drinking tonight mate?" he decided to skull the jug.

Two jugs later the bar began to empty. Across town lights in the windows gradually went out. Street lights made newly formed dew gleam on cars parked for the night alongside sleeping parking meters. Silence whispered and nothing moved on the boat. Walking down the marina finger Bryan startled a pair of sleeping ducks who launched themselves into black water with cries of alarm. The cabin lights were on as Bryan knocked the side of the hull. He filled his lungs in anticipation of having to run if there was any response. There was none. He knocked louder. His heart pounded. Nothing! Taking surgical rubber gloves from his pocket he pulled them on, and hesitated. They might not have drunk any of the water and gone straight to bed. Obviously that was why they had gone to the boat. Even if they had drunk some, the powder might not work. They might have tasted it, decided it tasted foul and thrown it away. They could have drunk too much and he might find two corpses.

He didn't need to carry out the rest of his plan. He could just walk back along the finger and go home. He didn't need to know what had happened. He didn't need to know. But he wanted to.

Reaching the grab rail he pulled himself aboard. He listened. Still no movement! The cabin door squealed in its tracks.

Two empty coffee mugs squatted on the table. Fitzsimple lay on the floor. Bryan stepped over him to reach Kate who lay sprawled across the seat, her dress unbuttoned, and bra discarded on the floor. He looked for the rise and fall of her breasts. She was alive. Those university students knew what they were doing with the powder. He said a silent, "Thank you".

Shaking her shoulder she responded with an unconscious slide to the floor. He taped her ankles together using a reel of duct tape from his jacket pocket and rolled her onto her front to tape her wrists behind her back. Sitting on her back he pulled her head up, winding tape round her mouth and the back of her head. Her hair stuck to the tape and tangled. Cutting away the tangled length of tape, he stuck another piece across her eyes. Her hair tangling his tape proved irritating. But it was malice which slammed her face into the cabin floor. And blood mixed with malice pooled on the carpet. With Fitzsimple immobilized, he went to the galley, pulled out the sink plug, and turned on the tap. He left the tap running the fresh water tanks dry, while he tried to remember how the navigation gear worked. Fitzsimple had showed him last year, but that was last year. He stabbed push buttons like a man killing ants on a kitchen table. Twice he switched off and started again before he got it going. The fresh water pump was still running but the tank was dry. Unscrewing the fresh water filler cap he refilled the water tanks, using the fire hose on the jetty.

Back on board he tried the twin engines. They turned over a few times. First one and then the other gave a comforting roar. With engines in neutral, he climbed onto the jetty, unplugged the shore power,

took off the springs, turned off the hose, and replaced the water filler cap. The fresh water tanks were less than half full, but the incriminating evidence had drifted away with the tide. He climbed on deck, threw the bow and stern lines onto the jetty, and put the engines slow astern.

As the boat moved from the jetty, he clipped the next boat on the finger. It was too dark to see any damage and he didn't care anyway. Once out of the dock he put the engines "slow ahead". The entrance to the marina slid past. Once out of the protection of the marina wall he felt the boat lift to the incoming short chop. Things looked different at night. Unsure where he was going he followed the track on the chart plotter out past the harbour lights. Red, green and white lights approached from the sea. Just in time he remembered to switch on his navigation lights. He didn't know which way he was supposed to turn. As soon as he switched on the navigation lights he saw the other boat turn. A red light showed so he copied the other boat and turned to starboard. The boats passed.

Pushing the throttle open he felt the surge as the bow lifted and a cockerel plume of spray rose behind. Water and darkness hit the windshield as the hull descended into a trough and hit the oncoming wave. Water exploded. With decks awash the boat staggered and shook itself free. He throttled back. Black night was not the time to test the strength of his nerves or the integrity of the hull. The motion eased. The half moon peered from behind a cloud and a shape, darker than the night sky, rode the horizon. He steered towards it.

CHAPTER 19

MAROONED

The morning star faded in a lightening sky as Bryan rounded the headland at the western arm of Motumanunui Island. A rocky inlet narrowed to a sandy beach, from which ancient timber piles supported the black line of a jetty. In a smooth curve twin parallel lines of wake traced his passage round the headland. Bryan pulled the gear lever towards him to put the engines in neutral. He was unaware that momentum already dictated a collision course with the piles. Using both hands he grabbed the gear lever and pulled. The deck quivered. The twin screws cavitated before they bit to pull astern. Bryan neither knew which way to turn the wheel nor had any idea about turning circles, but even if he had known, it was too late. The bow hit and caught. Bolts tore out of the fibre glass and the pulpit contorted to impossible shapes. Piles moved in the sea bed. Splinters from the jetty fell into the sea. The boat shuddered as the pulpit jerked itself free and hung suspended over the bow, caught by a twist of metal round the anchor. One bent bolt trailed torn fibre glass. The bow struck one more pile before the boat slid astern into water churned by the diesels.

Cursing the boat Bryan pushed the engines back into neutral. The boat drifted in an arc across the inlet as if contemplating the line of ripples already breaking on the sand. A hesitant hand hovered over the gear lever. The combined throat of exhaust and cooling water from idling engines seemed to be asking, "What next? What next? What next?" He wished he

knew. Four sausage shaped fenders complete with short lengths of rope slouched in stainless holders. While securing them to the rail he wondered how the hell to get them to hang in the right place to protect him from the timber piles.

With engines slow ahead again he pointed the bow towards the jetty. Half way across the bay he pulled back the gear lever and, in neutral, inched towards the jetty. With low water speed and idle props the rudder had less effect than the wind which turned the boat away from the jetty metres early. Those few metres seemed to taunt him. Several loops of rope hung in the cockpit. By the time he had uncoiled the first one the boat had drifted further from the jetty. He threw a rope at the piles and watched the loop fall into the sea. 'At least the propellers weren't turning to get tangled!' He pulled in the line, put the engines slow ahead and steered back out into the bay.

He decided to approach the jetty just a little faster. When almost there he spun the wheel to turn the bow away from the piles, which were coming up fast, in doing so he learned the wheel moves the stern, not the bow. The boarding platform struck, splintering one of the piles. A shard of wood about a metre long hit the sea. The boat bounced along the jetty and as the next pile approached he looped rope round it. The boat's momentum almost tore the rope out of his hands before he managed to secure it to a cleat. The rope creaked but the stern line held. Climbing onto the deck he heaved one end of a coil of rope onto the jetty. It landed on the boards without falling back into the sea. Fastening his end to the deck cleat he climbed onto the jetty and pulled the bow alongside. The boat was secure, damaged but secure. Pulling the

lines up tight he tied the rope in a knot to a pile. The knot didn't have a name and he would have been hard pressed to duplicate it. But it would hold, of that he was certain.

Back on board Fitzsimple and Kate lay unconscious in the cabin. He dragged the inspector across the carpet to create a clear passage. Pulling Kate from under the table he dragged her into the cockpit. From the jetty he was able to use her shoulders for leverage as he pulled her onto the boards.

A hundred metres up a mud track the roof of Frazer's hut protruded above the bush. At some time old Frazer must have laid a mixture of punga logs, fern fronds, and beach stones in the mud. Now lichens covered the rocks, and ferns straddled the track. Water trickled down the path and vanished into blackberry and flax. Dragging Kate along the jetty and over sand and shingle had been hard enough. Reaching the clawing fingers of blackberry he tried to carry her unresponsive body, but she fell. Breathing hard Bryan stopped to get his breath and think. 'Old Frazer must have taken his provisions up this track.'

Leaving Kate in the blackberry he continued up the track and round the back in the shed. There it lay, half full of rain water from a leaking iron roof. A fleece which once must have been left to dry covered the handles. Generations of maggots had allowed most of the wool to drop into mud. Brushing the fleece onto the floor he tipped the water out of the wheelbarrow.

Kate lay as he left her. Tipping the wheelbarrow onto its side he pulled her into it. It was heavy work even with the barrow. He reached the hut. Three steps

led to the deck. He tried the door. It was locked. A chair with a broken leg lay on its side on the deck. Picking it up, he smashed the window, reached inside, and moved the window catch. But the window stuck. Smashing the rest of the glass out of the frame he climbed into the hut.

The door key was in the lock on the inside. Frazer couldn't have locked the door when he left. Climbing back onto the deck he crashed his shoulder against the door. It opened. Kate fell heavily as he tipped her out of the wheelbarrow and bumped her over the steps to lie in a bed of broken glass on the hut floor.

Almost an hour later Kate and Fitzsimple lay together in the broken glass. Removing the duck tape from their wrists, ankles and face he pulled the door shut, took the wheelbarrow back to the shed and started back down the track to the jetty and the "Plume of Power."

He sagged as panic punched him in the guts. "Shit!" Instead of floating upright the boat listed to port at a frightening angle. His brain gasped for breath before his legs realised he was running. It hadn't occurred to him he holed the boat when he hit the piles. He had to get off the island. Would the engines still work if the water had reached them? Did the boat have bilge pumps? If he could find them would they be adequate to match the inflow of water?

Emotions, as taught as a wire hawser, snapped and ex Senior Sergeant Bryan Lockhart burst into uncontrollable laughter. The boat was not holed. He had tied the boat to the wharf and the tide had dropped. The boat lay partially suspended by its

mooring lines. But the knots, as tight as a miser's fist, were beyond his ability to untie. Clambering onto the slanting deck he fetched a bread knife from the galley and, from the deck, sawed through the warps. As the final strands parted the boat lurched, striking the jetty and spreading waves rolling across the bay. As the boat bounced away from the jetty Bryan just managed to maintain balance, and the knife slipped into the sea.

With engines running again he put them slow astern and the launch slid into deeper water. Once clear of the jetty he moved the control to slow ahead, turned the wheel, and the boat headed back out to sea.

Satisfaction broke like waves on the sand. Fitzsimple and Kate wanted each other, and that's what they were going to get starting the moment they woke, and going on day after day, until weeks became prison walls. They would smell hopelessness and eventually taste it, and the taste would be bitter, turning lust toxic. Would it take a week? A day, perhaps even an hour? Could metamorphosis begin in just one hour? Would one hour of suspicion be enough? Or would they wait for the steady drip, drip, drip, of distrust to freeze into icicles of despair? Would hope be stillborn or would they experience hope's slow lingering death? How long would it be before solitude made them crack? When it did would they attack or poison each other as the lips of lust curled back to expose the fangs of hatred?

Sooner or later Susan Nelson would turn up in the scow to unload her wooden crates of cannabis. She would be expecting to find an empty island.

Instead she would find Inspector Bloody Fitzsimple and Kate, assuming they hadn't killed each other by then. Speculation became fascinating. Escape, and plans to escape, would become predatory. Both Kate and Fitzsimple would be making counter plans. But Susan wouldn't want them returning to tell tales of a cannabis island. Fitzsimple and Kate would work that out as well. Would an accident be arranged? The sanctity of life always had been soluble in large quantities of drugs. But who would be the victim or victims? Intrigue would rule. Bryan imagined Kate and Fitzsimple individually trying to liase with Susan to the exclusion of the other. Or would Susan be the victim and one or both of the others seize the scow? The more he imagined the better it resonated.

Heading away from the island Bryan didn't have time to indulge in fantasy. He had plans to execute. He had pondered what to do with Fitzsimple's boat. He cracked the problem by asking himself where he would hide a beer bottle if he didn't want it found. The answer was obvious. He would hide a beer bottle in a brewery along with hundreds of other bottles. So where do you hide a boat? In a marina with hundreds of other boats. Too many people would recognise the "Plume of Power" in her own marina. The next marina up the coast was forty one point six nautical miles according to the chart plotter. The sea was calm. He set the boat on automatic pilot. He had to give himself time to get a shower and wash his hair. He opened his plastic bag and took out Kate's red hair dye.

Thirty minutes later a red headed Bryan was back at the controls. He had to wait for the log to get round to eighteen miles before he reset it to zero. First

he had another job which involved climbing the steps to the fly bridge. Using binoculars from the locker he scanned the horizon for the complete 360 degrees. Apart from one sailing boat with its hull already below the horizon there was nothing. Even in light airs the “Plume of Power” was bouncing too much for binoculars. Using the fly bridge controls he put the engines in neutral and the boat slowed. He checked again looking for any sign of small fishing boats merging with the sea. Nothing! Back in the cockpit he pulled both life belts out of their holders and threw them overboard. The dan buoy followed. Going on deck he pulled the cord on the life raft. It inflated and was set adrift. He put the engines in forward gear. The log started to register. He watched the miles clock round to eighteen and zeroed it. When he arrived at the Basin Marina the log would show the distance from Fitzsimple’s marina to the new one, but would not show the detour he had made to Motumanunui Island. He wondered about the engine-hour meter but decided no one would be likely to know how many hours were on the clock before he left, and even if they did, they wouldn’t know how fast the boat had been going. It could have been left idling for hours running the freezer or charging batteries. Also disconnecting the engine-hour meter might be tricky. Probably it would be best left alone.

Listening to the steady drone of the diesels he remained satisfied knowing he had thought of everything. He watched the chart plotter indicate two point six nautical miles from the entrance to the Basin Marina. At that distance he could catch sun glinting on masts protruding above the harbour wall. Perhaps his subconscious had been secretly working

through an imaginary check list. Whatever the reason the thought struck like a tsunami out of a calm sea. He had almost missed the obvious. His hand shook as he pulled the throttle lever back to neutral and the VOG (Velocity Over the Ground) on the plotter dropped as the boat slowed. How could he have been so stupid? He undid the two wing nuts, pulled the chart plotter out of the console, unplugged the cables, carried it up to the cockpit and threw it over the side. He watched it sink out of sight.

He had been using the Global Positioning System. His route, including his trip to the island, would be recorded in the chart plotter memory. Anyone could have turned it on and followed his route. It would probably be easy enough to delete the route from memory but he didn't know how, and this wasn't the time to try and find out. He didn't even know if it could be recovered from memory even after it had been deleted. Those software freaks could play weird tricks like that. At least the sea bed would delete it permanently. Was there anything else he had forgotten? He hadn't used the radar, the VHF radio, or the echo sounder so they couldn't be a problem. He didn't even know if they had memory but as they had been switched off it must be OK.

There would be people in the marina. The rubber gloves he had been wearing to avoid leaving fingerprints would attract attention. He had to get rid of them. Putting them in his pocket he took the two bandages from his bag. Wrapping one round his left hand and wrist he left his finger tips free. He had to leave his finger tips free on his left hand to bandage his right hand. From now on he had to be careful to touch nothing with his left hand. If he did it would

have to be wiped clean. Even putting on sun glasses with bandaged hands was tricky, He motored towards the marina sliding past sleeping boats and headed for the visitors' berth outside the yacht club. The berth was little more than a boat length long. How the hell was he going to get into that? Luck appeared in the form of a barefoot young woman wearing shorts and a tee shirt. The more he looked, the more certain he became she didn't have a bra under that tee shirt. With engine in neutral he glided towards the jetty and the braless boobs. She called to him. "Throw me a line and I'll give you a hand."

He did so. Even that was difficult without the proper use of his fingers. The rope fell into the sea. Pulling it in he tried again. She caught and cleated it. Throwing her the stern line he fastened his end to the cleat and she pulled the boat alongside the jetty. He watched her boobs lift as she leaned her weight against the rope. He wanted to push his hands up the inside of her tee shirt. But only the fingertips of his left hand were free and he didn't want to be remembered. Instead he called "thanks" and switched the engine off.

She noticed his hands. "Been beating yourself up?"

"Yes, spilled a pan of boiling water over them."

"Makes handling the boat difficult doesn't it? Especially if you're single-handed."

"It sure does. But right now I'm no handed." He wondered how much she would remember about him in the weeks ahead. She would certainly remember his bandaged hands and probably his red hair. He

knew enough about the reliability of witnesses to know most of what they remembered was wrong.

“Let me give you a hand with the springs.” She offered.

“Thanks.” He picked up two more hanks of rope from the cockpit and handed one end to her. She ran it along the jetty. He looped his end over a deck cleat and she pulled it tight. His eyes kept wandering to her boobs. While securing the other spring she looked at the tortured pulpit still hanging from the anchor. “Had a bit of a collision have you?”

Great! It was just the introduction he needed. “Well I haven’t, you see this isn’t my boat. In fact I haven’t the faintest idea whose boat it is.” She was listening and would remember the whole conversation. He continued. “I live at Kamaka overlooking the bay. When I got up this morning I looked out of the window and saw this boat bouncing beam-on in the surf. Obviously someone was in trouble. I ran to the beach and managed to climb aboard over the back step. I was wrong, no one was in trouble. The engine was running in neutral with no one on board. I gunned the engines. The props stirred sand; I had no steerage and surf breaking over the boat made it bounce like a washing machine with an unbalanced load. I kept gunning the engines. Either I would smash the props or get off the beach. Somehow the boat got through the surf. I brought it round Greg point and into the marina. I’m just on my way to find the harbour master. I expect he’ll know the owner.”

“He might, but I don’t recognise it as a boat from here.” She answered as he climbed onto the jetty and they started to walk up the finger.

“Well someone must own it.” Bryan answered. “I hope they turn up soon because I can’t lock it.”

“It sounds like the owner must have fallen overboard doesn’t it.” She suggested.

“That’s what I figured. I tried the VHF but either it wasn’t working or I had it on the wrong channel or no one was listening. Perhaps it was just me not operating it right. I see the life raft is missing, so hopefully the owner is in it. But right now I’ve got to find the harbour master’s office. Then I’m going to ring my wife and get a lift home.”

She pointed out the harbour master’s office and they parted. She could have been any woman. Family resemblance gave Bryan no clue that the braless boobs belonged to Susan Nelson’s younger sister.

But Bryan had no intention of going to the harbour master’s office. He didn’t need to. If he knew anything about women she would do more than all the talking necessary for the two of them. He slipped into the ‘coin in the slot’ showers. With the bandages removed it was easy to take the second bottle of hair dye out of his bag and dye his hair back to its original colour. He removed his sun glasses, changed his clothes and walked from the marina to the bus station.

Four hours later he was back in the bar of the “Swinging Lantern” talking to old Frazer McLeod. But it wasn’t until the next day the case of the “Kiwi Celest” was on the news and both the newspapers and the public could start inventing their own versions of the truth. But old Frazer knew what had happened;

he had seen the alien space craft abduct all eight of the crew.

CHAPTER 20

HUNTED

It may have been sunlight peeping through the broken window, or perhaps kidneys and liver working silently through the night were succeeding in clearing toxins from Kate's body. Whatever the cause a splinter of sunlight splashed into the inner darkness behind Kate's closed eyelids. Like a camera looking for an image, her eyes flickered open for a brief moment and shut again. They may have shut because the brief image invading her subconscious was a direct assault on the rearguard action her memory was trying to assemble. Whatever the reason, all her reserves were in hand to hand combat with the remaining toxins in her blood. She became aware oblivion was being denied as a refuge from the spasms which plowed furrows of pain through her body.

Broken glass on the floor scraped as she moved her hand to cover her eyes. Shapes, fluid as ghosts in a witch's caldron, ricocheted from each other leaving a blood red trail between her fingers. The square sun burned off the mist, and shapes became solids and solids became a room and the square sun became a round sun framed in a square window. A shaft of sunlight painted a streak across rat droppings and illuminated Mike's unconscious body.

Raising her head made it throb like a heart beat but the beats were either twice their normal rate or time was hibernating inside her head. Which ever it was the drum beating out its rhythm in her skull had a life force which was not her own.

She lay next to an empty apple box. Nails protruding from the top punctured her hand as she used it to push herself up. She felt like a water logged ewe dragging herself out of the river. Resting one hand on the table she left a smudge of blood while the essence of the room soaked into her brain. Where was she? How did she get here?

Kate steadied herself on the table before tottering six steps to the door and leaned on the door post. Minutes passed. A gecko ran across lichens on the deck, over the edge, and into scrub. Beyond the scrub an empty sea ran its tongue along a deserted beach. She followed the gecko to the edge of the deck. With a post as a prop she lowered herself to sit on the steps. Using knees to support her elbows she rested her head in her hands. The sun climbed and shadows walked. She did not see the ticking movements of piwaiwaka, the fan tail, along the old path through the bush.

The hinges of the door behind Kate creaked. Had she known what was about to happen, the flicker of a smile across her face would have been a flicker of terror. She looked up. Seeing Mike she moved towards him, unaware of her mistake. Mike was a police inspector. He was her lover. He would protect her. She had no reason to suspect being alone with him could be life threatening. She didn't even know she was on Motumanunui Island or any other island. And neither did she know the significance of Motumanunui compared with any other Island. As she didn't appreciate regaining consciousness before Mike was an advantage, it didn't occur to her that advantage had been evaporating like morning dew as she sat in the sun. Neither the example nor the significance of

the gecko's escape into scrub touched her consciousness.

Recovery from the effects of the toxins earlier than Mike, could have given her a start. Had she vanished into scrub like the gecko, Mike might never have known she was on the island. That advantage was lost. Mike's brain was still heavy as gum boots in wet clay. He knew he had been drugged. He knew he was in Frazer's hut on Motumanunui Island. And now he knew Kate was on the island. Why she was on the island? His brain pulsed like a thermal mud pool. Two questions bubbled to the surface. Why had he been drugged and abducted? And who did it? Answer one and the other answer would follow.

As he leaned on the door post more bubbles popped into his brain. Doubtless he had been drugged on orders from Grant Fergusson in Melbourne. But why? It wasn't his fault someone disarmed the shot guns and trip wires he had set to guard the crop. The crop remained untouched. Killing that idiot Al Diggins had been his master stroke. It frightened off anyone tempted to help themselves to the crop. Forensics on site were not exactly a welcoming committee for potential cannabis thieves. Taking the chopper backwards and forwards to the murder site enabled him to keep an eye on the crop. And the police paid for the chopper. He had done everything expected of him and then some. If Fergusson was serious about future crops he needed a well positioned cop. Dumping him made no sense.

His mind drifted to the other question. Who poisoned him? Kate had opportunity. Had she been just a free shag? Could she be on Grant Fergusson's

payroll and operating on instructions from Melbourne? If so why was she here? What did he know about her? He met her for the first time about a year ago. The only things he knew were things she told him. Everything she had told him was transient. Was she a proficient liar? Was she a plant? Did Fergusson suspect him of playing a double game? Did Fergusson think he was about to betray Agrichem? The critical time for harvesting and dispatch had arrived. Had he been brought to the island to prevent him talking? Was Kate observing and reporting back to Melbourne? Alternatively was it conceivable she could be an undercover cop investigating him? Do the police ever use undercover cops to investigate themselves? Could that happen without him knowing? Who ever she was she made a mistake coming here. He grinned to himself. Yes, a fatal mistake.

Kate stood and walked towards him. "What the hell happened? Where are we? How did we get here?"

Just the questions someone acting a role would ask, Mike thought as he moved inside the hut. She followed. Perhaps some primeval fear of dark places, combined with a robust survival instinct. Perhaps she had learned to respond to threats only her subconscious recognised. Whichever it was she didn't see it coming but, at the precise instant, swayed away from his fist as he hit her. She crashed against a mirror on the wall. It fell and shattered. Her legs crumpled and she found herself in a crouching position on the floor with her back to the wall. It may have been an abused woman's instinct which made her ride the blow so that the full force was dissipated but it was pure luck her hand closed on the only long

splinter of broken mirror. Mike came at her again, unaware of her glass dagger. As he moved forward a shaft of sunlight glinted silver. Kate crouched and for an instant her eyes flashed blue lightning. He hesitated. But it was the fact she lowered her voice to a whisper and spoke slowly articulating each word with care which made him hesitate.

“I’ve already decided whether this is going into your throat or your eye. If you want to find out which, just keep coming.”

His hesitation gave her time. Her mind flashed back to her childhood, she must have been about seven at the time. Her uncle often came to dinner at weekends. He had been lightweight boxing champion in the navy for two years and he reminded everyone of the fact every time he came. Something he repeated over and over again stuck. ‘You win a fight with your brains not your fists. Always do what the other guy least suspects.’ She had fallen with one foot underneath her. She had to have the balls of both feet on the floor. Putting her left hand on the boards, she moved her leg. One twist and she was crouching. She could feel her heart pounding.

Lowering her head she contrived to produce a stifled cry followed by a whimper. It worked. To Mike it was a sign of weakness. He closed in. Her second whimper brought him into range. She sprang at his face screaming one word, “Kill”. Her dagger hand moved. He flung up his hands to protect his face against the blow which never came. The impetus of her spring carried her through the open door across the deck and into scrub. By the time he reached the deck the scrub had swallowed her. Had he really slept

with that cat from hell? He should have strangled her when he had the chance. With the echo of the scream resonating in his brain and his lower jaw quivering out of control he returned into the darkness of the hut.

At the back of the room he lifted the three loose floorboards. Picking up the bundle he unwrapped it, operated the bolt and opened the breach. It was empty. Picking up one of the boxes of ammunition he loaded the magazine, clipped it into the rifle, and checked the safety catch. Like a professional he laid it down with care to avoid knocking the telescopic sights out of adjustment. He took a tin of corned beef, a tin of baked beans and a packet of noodles from the darkness below the floor before replacing the boards. He hated baked beans but never suspected he was going to have to eat the damn things himself when he stored them there. Picking up the rifle he followed Kate into the scrub.

Kate pushed on. Traces of wool marked sheep tracks. Beyond the tracks not even sunlight penetrated the supplejack and fern. In every direction leaf and branch limited vision to a few metres. In here Mike could find her only by luck, or by her stupidity. Memories of the family crib stumbled out of her past as years retraced their steps. At first her steps into the past faltered then, gaining strength, they stepped over the disastrous intervening years. When hiding from her brothers in the bush she always heard them crashing about long before the rare occasions when they found her. They never learned her secret of fading silently into fern, and using her ears as eyes.

Mike tried to peer into the scrub, and what he saw was scrub. He tried to push his way through, and the scrub pushed back. Which ever way he held it vines snagged his rifle. As he untangled it supplejack caught his feet. It was like trying to walk with shoe laces tied together. It was worse. Supplejack snagged him; root and mud conspired to make him fall, while fern and frond stole his vision. Somewhere a feral cat with a glass claw was hiding. She could be watching. She could be behind him poised to pounce. He turned. Behind mirrored the scrub ahead. Yet a glass claw was out there poised to strike. He had to finish her but needed a clean shot with her framed in the cross wires. He could wait, he had food and shelter; he'd starve her out.

Kate was lost. She hadn't got lost. She had no idea where she was when she started. She seemed to be on a headland. The other side of the headland there might be a road or houses where she could get help. There might be something she would recognise. The scrub dropped into a gully. She could hear a creek below but couldn't see it. She pushed towards the sound but a steep bluff forced her to take the easier slope. Every few minutes she paused to listen for the sound of Mike following her. The only sounds she heard were the sounds of the bush. She was hungry. She picked supplejack tips and tried eating them at the same time as using her hands to pull aside scrub. Another bluff barred her way. She turned. Thickening cloud blocked the setting sun. Shadows stalked. Cold spreading from her feet to her legs stiffened her joints. Her feet slipped more often but she still clung to her piece of broken mirror. Should she discard it? If she fell it could cut. Blood

streaked her arms and legs as the scrub demanded payment for passage. Would it demand more as darkness intensified?

Beneath a rock outcrop she wedged herself into a hollow, drew her knees up to her chest and stifled sobs. The night stole her sight and amidst that blackness questions over-toppled each other evading answers and bludgeoning belief.

Where was she?

How did she get here?

Why had Mike attacked?

What had been done to her while she was drugged?

She tried to control her shivering least any sound attracted attention while her ears penetrated the night searching for footfall or rustling fern. Unaware of the primeval instinct that prompted it, she sniffed the air to try and catch any odour of approaching danger. But the forest creaked and breathed to a time orchestrated by the wind and moving shadows. Time became motionless and eyelids, heavy as moss, numbed her concentration but throughout the night with every snapping twig the whites of her eyes flashed wild with fear searching for any shape darker than the hollows in the buttress of ancient miro. At these moments her hand gripped her glass claw as she scanned the tiny lights from the glow-worms trying to detect a shape moving in front of them. But the night moved at its own pace and damp decay on the forest floor reached through her clothing as her body closed in on itself and finally consciousness drifted away.

The sky lightened but joint and sinew repulsed any desire to move. It wasn't until sandflies attacked in squadrons that complaining muscles pushed Kate into a standing position. She picked up her glass claw and slid down a bank. As fern and supplejack parted a gap revealed breaking waves. Without realising it she had spent the night on a bluff which fell away to a rock strewn beach. A shore line meant mobility, and direction. It also meant discarding her cloak of fern and scrub.

Preoccupied with its own affairs the bush gives reluctantly but in rare moments of generosity gives in abundance. Reaching direct sunlight Kate experienced a moment of nature's generosity. As she pushed aside the final curtain of bush, she stepped through a reef of banana passion fruit. Having eaten nothing but supplejack shoots she grabbed at the cream coloured fruit, breaking them in half and squeezing the orange cells into her mouth. Crushing them with her tongue the juice ran down her chin, while the sun's heat attacked the chill in her bones.

The beach curved away on her left to a bush clad headland. The tide had ebbed, revealing atolls of blue mussels. She pulled one off a rock, smashed it with a stone and scooped the flesh off the shell with her thumb nail, savouring the salty taste of tidal zones. In doing so she had broken her thumb nail. Days ago that would have been a disaster. She looked at the broken nail, grinned and chewed the end off the other thumb nail to match and spat the torn off piece of nail onto the beach. A skirt of water cress clothed the stream bed below the gully. She cupped her hands and drank from the creek before picking a handful of water cress and continuing toward the headland.

Apprehension mounted. Staying close to the bush line at the top of the beach, she was looking behind more frequently now, and gripping her broken mirror. The bulk of the headland grew close. She was beginning to dread what she would find on the other side. The supplejack shoots in the scrub had been prolific. The banana passion fruit had been undamaged. She had spent a night in the bush but had not heard the chatter of a single possum. This indicated one thing. There were no possums. Why were there no possums? She already knew the answer but was refusing to accept it until proof was indisputable. The proof waited ahead.

A wave-cut platform extended from the base of the headland to a line of breaking surf. She scrambled across rock terraces. Eventually the bay behind vanished and she could see into the next bay. And beyond the next bay was more sea. Her suspicion solidified to reality. She was alone on an island with a man who was trying to kill her.

CHAPTER 21

GLASS CLAW

Kate saw him. And she saw the rifle. He was standing on the cliff above her. She shrank into a crevice behind a boulder. Remembering hiding from her brothers she moved slowly. Rapid movements attracted attention. But 'hide and seek' with brothers didn't risk a bullet tearing a jagged hole through her body. She realised she was holding her breath, waiting for the bullet. Being a target sharpens concentration. But the only bullet which hit her was in her imagination. She was in a rock pool. Cold clamped her legs but she dared not move. Her ears strained for a different sound. A sound to indicate she had been seen. She had read somewhere bullets travel faster than sound so the bullet would hit before she heard the explosion.

A crab crawled across the rock pool. Could she sit still if it had her in its pincers? Any splash or sudden movement could give her away. But the crab slid under a stone at the far end of her pool. Sea anemone tentacles wafted in the pool, one touching her ankle. She moved her leg, thankful that human skin was too thick for their toxins. But it wasn't too thick for sand flies. She watched them bite her hand. Tiny trickles of blood marked the spots. She knew they were biting her face and neck but doing something about it risked being seen.

Mike could have moved away. He might be the other side of the headland. But he might be working his way along the rocks behind her. She imagined him

lining the sights on the back of her head. She wondered what it would feel like. Would there be a sudden explosion of pain in her head and then nothing. He had told her about police fire arm training. They were taught to aim for the body and fire twice. "Tap tap" he called it. She decided the second bullet must be to double the injuries and the pain. She wished he hadn't told her. It had been a strange thing to tell her. Did he know at the time she was going to be his target?

The sun shone directly into the beach. If he was still where she saw him last he would be looking into the sun or into the sun's reflection off the sea. Not many people stay looking into the sun for long. He might have moved to a new vantage point where he could see along the beach. He might, at that moment, be working his way along the beach looking behind every rock, or he may have decided to move on. No bullet had slammed into her, so probably he had no idea she was there. If she moved would he see her? One thing learned from her brothers was not to look over the top of anything. Look round or through but don't pop your head above it. She lowered herself deeper into the rock pool. Cold water rose over her body. She slithered dragging her body towards the end of the pool. Between boulders part of the cliff became visible. It was empty. She could hear wave on rock and the gurgle of rock pools filling and emptying in time with the waves. Like the hair of a dead woman, trapped forever in a rock pool, kelp streamed backward and forward as breaking waves ebbed and flowed. Gulls rode the updraft above the cliff. There was no screech of alarm at a human intruder. She moved. Other parts of the cliff came into view. They

were empty. Stomach, elbows and knees wriggled between boulders. Rock and shell cut. Staying behind cover meant she had to backtrack again and again. It would be so easy to stand and run the few tens of metres and risk a bullet. Or would it be the double “tap, tap,” consistent with police training?

Rounding a rock shelf she could barely control a groan before wriggling back the way she had come. Slithered between two rocks she shut her eyes clenching teeth and fists. At the top of the beach lay a strip of wave swept sand. There was no possibility of crossing it without leaving a track like a motorway. She would have to wait for the flood tide to cover it.

Sunset leaked gold before breaking waves licked the sand clean and she was able to cross the strip of sand, and embrace the dark shadows in the narrow strip of bush between beach and cliff. Curling into a fern-lined hollow she dozed, shivered, and waited for dawn with her broken piece of mirror, her glass claw, beside her. As a little girl she needed her Raggedy Ann doll to sleep with. As a young woman she wanted a man. Now she dozed wondering about the dubious mental state requiring her to sleep with one hand resting on her glass claw.

With the sound of surf on the beach she listened for the suck of shingle as each retreating wave foretold the hollow boom of the next oncoming breaker. In a waking dream it seemed her adult life was being sucked away like shingle only to be followed by the boom of a new disaster leaving her rolling in surf. Her pretend years lay broken and scattered along the high tide line with the flotsam of

failure. Only the life-raft of her childhood remained afloat.

She had been lucky. The probability of luck turning mean would increase with time. Eventually he would find her. As soon as the sky lightened she pushed through scrub towards the cliff. A creek running through the bush spread into a swamp where flax struggled for sunlight. Using the broken edge of her glass mirror she cut a flax leaf and tore off a narrow strip. Pulling a piece of hanging bark from a kanuka trunk she placed it on her glass claw, binding and lashing it in place with the flax. She gripped it. It felt good. Clutching branch and root she moved through swamp. Calf-deep mud stole both shoes. Legs and hands bled from cutty-grass wounds. Rock gullies slashed the bush. Finding a suitable hollow needed luck and time as vision in the bush reached only a few metres. She found a few ripe bush lawyer berries. They were as tasteless as she was hungry. Glimpses of the beach below her flickered between branches. Ahead a rock face dropped sheer into the sea. A rivulet gouged its way through moss and rock before tumbling into a pool a few metres wide. Kanuka branches on either side of the gully closed the canopy above her. On the far side of the gully the rock face fell away into deep water. But most important of all she could climb up onto the rock and the sun shone directly into it. She looked behind and up. Scrub obliterated everything except sky.

She stank of mud. Torn wet clothes became a wick to suck heat from her body. Heat she didn't want to lose. Undressing she dunked her clothes in sea water, and rinsed them in the trickle of fresh water flowing through her gully. Laying them on the rock to

dry the direct sun warmed her naked body. Blue mussels just an elbow depth below the surface clung to the rock. Hunger took control. Tearing them off she placed the shells on the rock to smash them open. With the stone poised above the first shell she stopped, amazed at her stupidity. Hunger was making her careless. Mike could be anywhere. She was alive because he didn't know where she was. The crack of stone on rock could lead him to her. She placed the stone on top of the shell and leaned on it. She transferred all her weight to it. It broke. Water and juice spurted over her hand. Pieces of shattered shell became embedded in the mussel flesh. Picking them out, she removed the beard and scooped out the flesh with finger nails. She pressed it with her tongue to search for more pieces of broken shell and savour the juices before swallowing. One followed another. By the time she had finished a trickle of mussel juice ran down the rock face and back into the sea. With cupped hands she drank from the rivulet of fresh water. It had the earthy taste of bush and moss.

She grinned, imagining the other nurses' reaction if they could see her naked on a rock, eating raw mussel and drinking from a creek. It would be fun to tell them just to see their reaction. But would she ever see them again? Would she die here on this island and her body not be found until new generations of nurses who had never heard of her staffed the Accident and Emergency Department? Would her bones, like her life, end up tangled in driftwood on the beach? Would she die because she didn't have a telephone? Would it be better, she wondered, to die because she didn't have a telephone rather than die having a cell phone which worked,

except for the fact it had a flat battery? She looked at her glass claw. It felt comforting. It was curved like a telephone. Could she use her glass claw as a telephone?

Looking across the sea she could see the line of dark hills on the horizon. She glanced towards the sun which warmed her skin. That light and heat had travelled one hundred and fifty million kilometers. Could she bounce a bit of it off her glass claw, to travel the last few kilometers to that line of dark hills? Even if the light could get there would anyone see, know, or care that she needed help like never before? Just about everyone knew SOS. Dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot. How far could someone standing at sea level see because of the curvature of the Earth? She remembered her brother telling her it was little more than a kilometre. But how far away was the line of hills? She didn't know, guessed it might be about ten kilometres. If her eye was about one and a half metres above sea level and if she could only see one kilometre she would need to be about ten times that height to see ten kilometres. She had to climb higher up the cliff behind her keeping in the cover of the trees. Mike could be anywhere. Only in the morning would the sun be in the right position to make it possible, if it was possible.

Kate looked at her broken mirror. A glass claw looked back at her. She held it point down onto the rock, and adjusted the angle till she could direct the sun's rays onto a whitey wood leaf. Rotating the glass claw she watched light flash on and off the leaf. She changed rotational speed. She could illuminate the leaf with long and short pulses. It would be easy if she had to send her SOS ten metres. But what about ten

kilometres? Could she direct the beam to sweep the coast ten kilometres away? Even if she could, would anyone see it at that distance? A sinister thought crossed her mind. She probably had the rest of her life to try, and wondered how long that would be. She glanced at the sun's position and tried to estimate the angle needed to reflect light to the mainland. If she kept trying at some time she would probably get it right by a fluke. Her survival relied not only on a fluke but on the double fluke of someone seeing it and doing something about it. But she didn't have a better plan. Not to try would be certain failure. A remote chance of success, however remote, was better than certain failure.

She tried for the rest of the morning and into the afternoon. She tried until she decided she had done so many dots she was going dotty. Sitting naked on the rock she flashed so many dashes she felt like a streaker. She tried till the sun, tired of her mindless game moved on.

Wearing dry sun-warm clothes she picked fern fronds to make a dry nest for the night under a rock overhang. Before darkness crept out of the shadows she carried a piece of bark back to her nest, placed it at her side, and laid her glass claw on it to sleep with her. She kissed it. Stars reached through holes in the canopy to mingle with glow-worms on the rock walls. Kate lay in her nest and looked at the reflection of stars and glow-worms in her glass claw. When she slept it was with one hand on her claw.

The sun, climbing above the horizon, illuminated a lone figure squatting on a rock ledge

flashing her message towards the distant dark line of hills.

CHAPTER 22

TE WAKA

The morning sun warmed their backs as Huhana and Huia rode Starlight through dune sand towards the estuary. They had taken the long way round to the ford. Only six packing cases remained to be taken from Harry's hut to the scow. Out in the lagoon a gannet dived where Rangi, Hemi and Nahi fished from Te Waka. Huhana looked across the waters of the lagoon. She had good eyes. Even at that distance she could see gannets working and wondered if it was a good omen for fishing. Her eyes drifted towards Motumanunui Island.

Just over eight minutes previously photons in the river of light leaving the sun began their 150 million kilometre journey through space towards Earth. They travelled at exactly the same speed and in an exactly parallel path. Simultaneously they struck a reflecting surface which resulted in a momentary sliver of secondhand sunlight focusing on the retina inside Huhana's eyes. As a flash of light it was insignificant compared with the total energy from the sun reaching Earth. But unlike the rest of the sun's light output one splash of photons followed another in a regular pattern. It was this regular pattern which made these particular slivers of sunlight different, so different that Huhana took the trouble to mention them to Huia.

Together they looked past the gannets towards Motumanunui Island. It happened again. To Huhana they were flashes of light but to Huia there was a

pattern within the flashes of light. "Dot, dot, dot, Dash ,dash, dash, Dot, dot, dot." She recognised Morse code. With the advent of radio and satellite communications Morse had become all but extinct. Morse code was being buried in cemeteries along with those who once used it. One piece lingered. And it was that one piece which Huia recognised. It was the letters SOS. "Save Our Souls" or just plain "Help."

Huia and Huhana turned Starlight towards the top of the dunes and dismounted. Huia took off her tee shirt. She waved it above her head. She waved it for several minutes. She changed arms and continued to wave, but the boys were fishing. She changed arms again, and then Huhana took over. Hemi had just taken a gurnard off the hook when he saw the girls waving.

"They must have seen the gurnard" he thought and waved back. They continued waving. "It wasn't that big," he thought. Huhana changed arms. Several minutes later Hemi decided they must want something. "Just when we're into fish" he thought. And then decided "Let them wait, they've probably just found a baby rabbit or something." Hemi waved back and dropped his line back into the water. Five minutes later the girls were still waving. If they were trying to disrupt the fishing for nothing he'd take the damn tee shirt off Huia and throw it in the sea after using it to sponge out the bilges. They pulled up the anchor and headed towards the beach.

As they paddled Te Waka towards the beach the girls were back on Starlight. The water had risen to Starlight's belly before they were within shouting distance.

Rider-less Starlight trotted home. Huia's hand gripped the spare paddle more tightly than normal. Her breath came in gulps as Te Waka headed towards the river mouth and the bar. She turned her head away hoping Huhana wouldn't see the salt tear run down her face and kiss her lip like the memory of Grandad. Perhaps Huhana would think her face was wet with spray. Seas steepened as they crossed the last sandbank. The bow buried into the incoming wave. Spray replaced tears. She brushed them away with the back of her hand. She couldn't let the boys see tears. They would taunt her about being afraid. Were they right? She bailed harder to pretend she wasn't afraid. Then they were through the breaking sea. Te Waka rose to the swell.

"That was fun. We ought to do it again." Rangi was talking and Huia understood. He too had been afraid. It must be hard, she thought, being a boy. She could wipe tears away and if anyone saw them they would just think it was because she was a girl, but Rangi not only couldn't show he was afraid but had to pretend he enjoyed it. The speed with which Hemi and Nahi agreed with him proved they too had been afraid, and would have to think up excuses for keeping away from the bar in future. Perhaps Mum and Grandma would forbid them to go there again and the boys could blame them for spoiling their fun. But Rangi would get the opportunity. They had to cross the bar again on the way back. Huia realised no one knew where they were. There would be no external help. Starlight returning alone might give Mum, Grandma and Susan an indication something was wrong. But they would probably assume everyone was at Harry's place or on the scow. If anyone else saw the SOS they

might investigate. Otherwise they had only themselves.

Te Waka was a mile off the island when Kate first saw the rhythmic rise and fall of paddles. Had they seen her message? Was the waka here by chance? Kate watched Te Waka head directly towards her. A thought swelled like baker's yeast within her brain. She had neither seen nor heard Mike for twenty four hours. Why? What would she do in his position? Would he search the whole island for her? Did he need to? He was a cop and as lazy as most other cops. If he could wait for her to go to him, that's what he'd do using the old cottage for shelter. From the window or the deck he could see the only jetty on the island. If she was going to get off the island it would be from that jetty. He could sit on the deck with the rifle across his knees and wait.

What would happen to the waka's crew if they went to the jetty? Were they paddling into the sights on Mike's rifle? Could she use the jetty, even if they had come to rescue her? If Mike shot her in sight of the waka's crew what would be their fate? Could Mike let them return and talk? He could pick them off one at a time without moving from the cottage, and use their boat to get back to the mainland. Had she made a terrible mistake signaling for help?

Kate watched paddles rise and fall and Te Waka heave in the swell as it moved relentlessly forward.

If Mike returned to the cottage to watch the jetty he was assuming any vessel arriving at the island would be big enough to require a jetty to tie up. The idea of a canoe being paddled silently across ten

kilometres of open sea would probably not occur to him. It hadn't occurred to Kate. Mike would not have known about her glass claw message. He would not be expecting a boat to arrive.

Gripping her glass claw she stood on the rock. In the lee of the headland with this offshore breeze the water beneath her was calm. Farther out beyond the protecting headland she could see a line of rough water. Could she guide the Waka into her? They could nose in and she would be able get aboard without rounding the headland and getting within gun shot of the jetty. She flashed her SOS across the ever closing distance. She was taking a chance. If Mike had not returned to the cottage to wait, he could be on the cliffs above her. She could see kids in the canoe. She might be guiding kids into the sights of Mike's rifle.

There was only one explosion. It took Kate completely by surprise. She had no idea where it came from. It was something she had not even suspected. It happened at the moment her foot touched Te Waka, as it nosed into the rocks at her feet. The result was not fatal but Te Waka's crew sagged under the impact. The explosion was an explosion of tears from Kate.

Huia realised boys could take Te Waka across the river bar but lose their paddles if a grown woman burst into tears in front of them. Huia reached out for Kate's hand and squeezed it.

"Is there anyone else with you?" Huia asked.

Through tears Kate shook her head. Every reserve had been consumed. She wasn't a woman. She was a little girl and this child at her side was

Mummy and the boys her brothers. Kate slumped onto the duck boards and curled into a ball clutching her glass claw. Te Waka heaved in the swell as they paddled beyond the protection of the headland into open water and the distance from the island increased. Huhana and the boys dug deep with their paddles. Huia put down her paddle and sat on the duckboards with Kate to try to still the tears and waves of bodily shaking washing through her. Normally Rangi and Hemi would have made Huia do her share of paddling, even if both her arms were broken, but this was not normal. They'd never seen a deranged woman dissolve into sob stuff for no reason. For all Rangi and Hemi knew she might flip and upset Te Waka. If anyone could calm her it would be Huia. But if Huia couldn't manage it Rangi had decided he could probably knock the crazy eyed woman unconscious with a paddle before she did too much damage.

Huia discovered the woman's name was Kate. But when she asked where she lived Huia received a fresh burst of tears and the answer, "I don't know. I'm just a bit of driftwood no one wants."

"We want you Kate. That's why we've been to the island to get you." Was all Huia could think of. It had an effect. Kate squeezed Huia's hand and smiled tears.

"You're brave kids."

Huia had got her talking. The closed door to her mind had opened a crack. "The boys are brave but I was terrified when we crossed the bar."

“There’s nothing brave about doing something that doesn’t frighten you. Brave people are those who go ahead and do something even though it terrifies them.”

Huia was delighted. By starting to think of how other people felt, the log jam inside Kate’s head was breaking up.

The afternoon sea breeze picked up and drops of spray splashed Huia and Kate. The boys maintained the pretence cold spray didn’t affect them.

Huia’s curiosity tried to imagine the events resulting in Kate becoming stranded on the island. What trauma had triggered that avalanche inside Kate’s head? Asking could result in the avalanche moving again. Huia decided when Kate was ready words would come like spray, soaking them all.

Kate had said she didn’t have a home to go to. What were they going to do with her when they got ashore? Dump her on the beach, and point out the road to town? Huia thought of the scow and the medical room Chris had built in the stern. Chris was a doctor. Did she need a doctor? Would Kate know whether or not she needed a doctor?

Spray blew from the paddles onto clothes already wet with spray. Neither straining muscles nor the late afternoon sun could prevent the chilling effect of wind on wet clothes. Huia thought of the wood range in the scow’s galley. Grandma would be preparing dinner for the workers on the scow.

Huia made the decision. “Instead of going back to the beach we could take Kate to the scow.”

The boys weren't going to argue. It was half a mile less. Their arms and backs felt like a wheat field after a combine harvester had been through it. Wet, cold and hungry with stamina failing, they still had to cross the bar. White water lay ahead. The wood range and hot soup drifted through their imagination like shoals of mullet past the jaws of a barracouta.

As breaking seas foamed on the bar Huia picked up her paddle and handed the bailing bucket to Kate. It was a psychological decision as much as an allocation of work. The estuary and scow became visible inside the bar.

CHAPTER 23

NGATI RURENGA

Between them, the kids rescued Kate from the island but now it was Kate's turn to rescue them from maternal retribution as dark as the black island. They had broken two rules. They took Te Waka out of the lagoon and told no one they were going. Only Kate stood between them and a lightning strike. But Kate was praising the children's skill, courage, and stamina. Baffled Susan and Meriana couldn't say Kate shouldn't have been rescued, especially as both Susan and Roland knew Kate. Admittedly they only knew her as "Bryan's wife" which was a poor recommendation. They had only met her at police functions. Now it seemed she was Bryan's ex wife. To Susan and Roland that was a much higher recommendation.

Kate said nothing about the inspector having been on the island. Mothers didn't need to imagine the danger to which she had exposed their children. The only person who could know about Mike being there was the person who drugged the two of them and took them there. She knew who had the motivation. And Bryan wouldn't be likely to own up. So she talked about eating mussels off the rocks and her piece of broken mirror and, and...

And Chris interrupted. His bass Tongan accent resonating in the cabin commanded attention.

"Did you see any sign of Inspector Mike Fitzsamuel on the island?"

Kate gulped, lowering her eyes.

“No, I didn’t see anyone.”

Chris and Rachael made eye contact. They read the lowering of Kate’s eyes and translated her answer as “Yes.”

“Then you’re lucky Kate, very lucky.” Rachael replied.

Chris interjected. “What are you planning Kate?”

Tears of despair filled Kate’s eyes.

“I don’t know Chris. I’m feeling like a lump no one wants.”

Chris looked into Kate’s eyes.

“A Lump!” Chris’s belly erupted in laughter. Placing his hands round her waist he lifted her off the cabin floor.

“You’re not heavy enough to be a lump!” The barrel burst. Stored tension drained down the scuppers. Everyone recognised Chris alone could have achieved that, but Mum recognised something else as baffling as it was certain. When Chris lifted Kate off the cabin floor he tossed his thunderhead of black curly hair, an identical action to the way the ancestral warrior in her dreams tossed his head. She looked at Chris, studying his face, his arms, while her eyes drifted over his whole body. Thoughts she wouldn’t admit to owning skipped like pebbles across the surface of her imagination. So it came as an irritating surprise to hear Chris speaking to Kate and not to her.

“Susan tells me you are a state-registered nurse Kate. Is that right?”

“Yes. A state registered nurse who can’t go home. I’m driftwood.”

Chris smiled. “Maternally I’m distantly related to the Tongan Royal family but my paternity is open to enthusiastic speculation. So I’ve spent much of my life overseas and now I’m a New Zealand overstayer. I don’t have a home either. I’m just “Driftwood.” Before the end of next week Rachael will be on the run from a drug syndicate. As long as they don’t catch her, the best she can hope for is to become homeless “Driftwood”. Look at Harry there. He’s a professor of theoretical physics but if he goes to town kids chant, “Mad Harry” and throw stones at him. Do you think that qualifies for the title of “Driftwood?” Elvina has a post graduate degree from Copenhagen University. But she changed her name to Rurenga. That means “Castaway”. Do you think that makes her “Driftwood?” Susan isn’t really a cop, she’s a singer, and a damn good one. But she had to try and bring up her children while living in a van. So she drifted into the police. Does that make her and her children “Driftwood”? Roland is a good honest guy but society can’t handle that. Is he “Driftwood”? The dairy factory took away Meriana’s job. Her husband deserted her for another woman, the bank manager took away her home and now social workers and councillors are closing in on her children. Are they “Driftwood”? Look at Arlin and the scow. Will anyone recognise their value before the last litre of oil has been burnt? Until then Arlin and his scow are just “Driftwood.”

“Every one of us is “Driftwood”. We’ve washed up here on the beach drifting between tides. It’s not just Rurenga who is a Castaway. We’re a tribe of Castaways. We are Ngati Rurenga.”

Mum’s eyes clouded over. The cabin slid out of focus while the ghost of a solution materialised out of the desolation left by the letter.

Susan interrupted her thoughts. “Ngati Rurenga! The Tribe of Castaways! That could be the name of a song we could all sing with pride. We can be proud of it because we are social castaways from a throw-a-way society.” She fingered the pounamu pendant round her neck before picking up her guitar. Running her fingers over the strings she started to sing.

*My greenstone is polished
But the moa has gone
And men from the northlands
Brought Bible and gun.
My forests of kauri
Have gone from the hill
And fences and lawyers
Turn men from my land.*

*Now people are drifting
Like logs in the tide
And dollars build fences
Round sadness and tears
For the land which we once had
Our language and pa
Are part of the driftwood
Upon our ebb tide.*

*Rejected but wiser
 The driftwood has gathered
 With the last of the scowmen
 The first of the friends
 To find the lost islands
 For Ngati Rurenga
 The islands where castaways
 Sail to the sun.*

Before Susan put down her guitar Rurenga was holding her little bronze mermaid.

“My mermaid has brought me luck all my life, now she will bring luck to Ngati Rurenga. Arlin and Harry, fit her to the stem of the scow.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked. “If we do that she won’t be yours anymore, she will be part of Ngati Rurenga. Is that what you want?”

Rurenga kissed the tiny bronze figure. “You’ve always craved for the wide Pacific haven’t you?” Rurenga looked up. “She’ll point to a low lying atoll below the horizon with a gap in the reef to glide through. On moon-white nights she’ll whisper the depth between coral cays.”

Huia’s forehead creased in confusion.

“Atolls? Coral cays? I thought we were going to deliver mussel floats round the New Zealand coast.”

“No we aren’t.” Chris replied. “I’m sorry we had to tell you that lie, because it was a lie, but I couldn’t risk the true nature of our work getting out.”

“What’s happening?” Rangi asked Chris.

"I'm from Tonga. I have specialised in tropical diseases. Throughout the Pacific countless islands and atolls have no medical facilities. People suffer needlessly with problems which can be prevented, treated or cured. But there's no doctor. Now a new addiction threatens entire Island communities. It is a fatal addiction for which there is no cure. It's an addiction by rich countries to motor cars and is called global warming. Civilisation will burn oil until the last litre has been consumed. As the ocean warms, Islanders watch their coral die and storm surges reach further across their atolls.

I have tried talking to the island governments, the world health organization, non governmental organizations. Everyone agrees something needs to be done but no funding is available. When a problem gets too hard to solve it's always someone else's problem. Then I met Rachael. She had just graduated from Auckland University, and got a job working for Agrichem which is based in Melbourne. They wanted her to set up a New Zealand distribution network for mussel floats. It didn't take Rachael long to discover Agrichem's main interest was in distributing large quantities of white powder round the world. They are powders which had nothing to do with Agricultural Chemicals, but were more sinister in nature."

"Drugs?" Kate asked.

"Exactly! If it makes a profit they are in to it. A mussel float is hollow. There are thousands of them in tiny ports up and down New Zealand. Agrichem wanted Rachael to organize a distribution network for the floats using inshore shipping. No sniffer dogs out in the bays, just the occasional person working on

mussel farms well away from inquisitive eyes and big ports. On the hill up there is a cannabis plantation, not as profitable as some powders but still worth several million dollars. Large open air plantations like that are easy to detect. But if the local police inspector is provided with a large and expensive launch then problems can be regulated. Trip wire shot guns keep interested people away. Agrichem engaged Rachael to set up a warehouse on Motumanunui Island. Can you imagine what was supposed to happen on the island? Or who was being set up for a stretch in the slammer? But Rachael worked it out. The inspector was setting up a twenty-four hour a day guard on the island just in case someone got interested. You said you were eating berries and shell fish Kate, but there was a food store on the island ready for the guards. But of course you wouldn't have known that.

A shipment of mussel floats arrives in Auckland in just over a week. Arlin is supposed to take it to the island. But the consignment is going to stay on the wharf in Auckland. Rachael had the responsibility of getting everything ready for the consignment, so she had an Agrichem order book. If legitimate sources of funds for medical care in the islands and atolls have dried up, I could either do nothing or look for illegitimate sources of funding. In this last month Rachael has spent a fortune on setting up the scow for blue water sailing. We have built a mini operating theatre in my First Aid room. It's been a frantic effort to get everything ready."

"There must be heaps of new boats. Why do you need to modify the scow?" Kate asked.

“There aren’t heaps of boats. As far as I know this is the last trading scow. And it’s in good... no I’ll rephrase that, it’s in excellent condition. Arlin has maintained it superbly. A scow is a shallow draft boat; it can get in and through shallow coral reefs. It is a sailing vessel. Our project could not afford fuel costs. It was built for trading. We can carry trade goods for the Islanders. It is big enough to support a reasonable sized crew between islands. Arlin’s scow is a once-only chance. Everything we need for it has been bought with Agrichem orders. On the last day of the month our suppliers will send in their accounts to Grant Fergusson in Melbourne. They are legitimate orders. He will pay but Rachael will need to be well out to sea by the first of next month.

“You’ve talked about setting up costs, Chris. But how will you meet running costs? It doesn’t sound as if you can go back to Agrichem.”

“A good question Kate. The scow is a trading vessel. We’ll carry freight between islands. Without trade the islands are doomed. Trade is as important to them as medicine. And trade will provide a small income to meet our running costs. I want to meet running costs and nothing else.”

“What about the cannabis plantation on the hill?” Hemi asked.

“Hours before we sail there will be fire on the hill. We can’t risk lives being damaged by leaving that stuff growing.”

“Who planted it?” Harry directed his question to Chris but Rachael answered.

“I don’t know who put the seeds in the ground but the whole project was organized by Inspector Fitzsamuel.”

This was a moment of sudden enlightenment for Susan and Roland.

“How did he get involved?” Susan punched her question at Rachael.

“I haven’t worked out the full story but your Inspector has a serious gambling addiction problem. He got himself hopelessly in debt. Somehow, and this is the bit I don’t know about, somehow Grant Fergusson found out. The worlds of drugs and gambling seem to be twin planets circling each other. I don’t know the full story but I do know Grant Fergusson paid off the inspector’s debts and purchased a large and expensive launch for him. Drug barons don’t do that out of compassion. I can guess at the payback. A police inspector knows criminals and the underworld. Freedom from prosecution is a great incentive for criminals but a dangerous game for a police inspector. All of this happened before I became involved.”

“How did you get involved?” Susan asked.

“I finished university and looked for a job. I saw an advert in the paper and answered it. The job was with Agrichem to set up a New Zealand distribution network for mussel floats. I had no idea I was getting involved in the drug world. Had I known, I would have run a four minute mile. But I didn’t know. I suppose Grant Fergusson thought a naive young woman with no criminal convictions straight from university would be ideal for the job. The first thing he asked me at the

interview. ‘Have you any criminal convictions?’ I was able to answer ‘No’ quite truthfully. In fact I was surprised at the question. Criminal convictions were in another planet as far as I was concerned.”

“I got the job and started to set up the distribution network for the mussel floats. Before too long what I learned at university and what I saw didn’t mesh. I talked to Chris. Have you ever seen one of those drawings children have where there are ten parrots hidden in a picture? As soon as you find one you wonder how you could ever have missed it at first glance. Then as you look at the picture more parrots emerge. That’s how it was for Chris and me. Suddenly the whole drug scene was in front of us. Chris and I spent a whole weekend talking about it. Chris is passionate about the outer islands and their people, and Chris’s passions are always contagious. Between us we came up with a plan.”

“Who put the shot gun trip wires in the bush by my hut?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know.” Rachael replied. “I imagine our friendly inspector had something to do with it. But Chris and I were involved. We left the guns in place but took out the shot gun cartridges and replaced them with cartridges loaded with dried parsley instead of lead pellets. If anyone walked into the guns they would get a fright from the bang, they might even feel a parsley blast, but wouldn’t be injured.”

“Why did you leave the guns there at all?” Huia asked.

Chris answered. “Cannabis causes problems. Without any protection for the crop every Smoky Joe

in town would be into the crop. Also if the crop was reduced to a few stalks Grant Fergusson could pull the plug on the project and we would not be able to help my Island people.”

Harry answered. “I pulled out some of the guns but I had no idea they were only loaded with parsley.”

“I know you did Harry. As a result Chris and I had to keep watch on the crop and do our best to frighten people away from the patch, but events were taken out of our hands. The inspector stepped in and Al Diggins was murdered...”

“You mean the inspector murdered him?” Rurenga interrupted.

“Yes, Chris and I witnessed it. But we were too far away to do anything about it.” Rachael answered.

Rurenga felt a wave of guilt wash over her for suspecting Arlin, or more correctly the Alzheimer’s inside Arlin’s head.

Rachael continued. “I suppose by not reporting it we were guilty of something. But things didn’t work out too badly. With all the forensic people and police activity the small time drug users kept away. I suppose that’s what the inspector planned. We kept quiet. In any case we might have had difficulty explaining what we were doing in the bush. But if anyone had been wrongly charged with the murder we decided to speak up but the investigation seems to have stalled...”

Chris interrupted. “Our project stands on slime covered rocks. One slip and we end up in the tide.”

But when he added, "But we will succeed," not a person doubted him.

"What will happen about Harry's museum pieces?" Huia asked.

"We're taking them to Auckland to be freighted to Copenhagen. They are a treasure the whole world needs." Rachael replied.

As Chris looked directly at Kate she realised she was being drawn into his circle of influence. Men and women would follow this man beyond all reason because of the raw power of his presence. When he spoke he was talking to everyone but each of them felt he was confiding in them alone.

"What we have told is secret. Rachael's life is in your hands. Drug barons are not noted for forgiveness. You talk, Rachael dies. And so will people in distant islands we have yet to meet. They have been cast adrift by economic savages who mistake purchasing the accoutrements of life for living. But when Island people are cast adrift they become driftwood on the beach of life and part of Ngati Rurenga, part of the growing tribe of Castaways who embrace each other and co-operate."

"If the ocean swallows their atolls what can Islanders do?" Huia asked.

Chris smiled. "When Europeans dressed themselves in skins and lived in caves Polynesians navigated and colonised the Pacific. There are still uninhabited volcanic islands. The scow could carry whole communities to new islands.

“Ngati Rurenga now has a figure head. Next time you look you’ll see it on the bow of the scow. It is a mermaid who searches the oceans for driftwood in distant islands.”

Rachael looked directly at Kate. “We have told you this because we need more crew. We sail in a few days time. And Kate, Ngati Rurenga desperately needs a nurse. Perhaps your glass claw has guided you to us. Will you be part of Ngati Rurenga?”

Days earlier Kate had been leaving lonely footprints on barren beach sand. She had a job, a home, a husband and nothing worth living for. Tides had swept away the footprints, only driftwood remained on shifting sand. Now all eyes in the cabin turned to look at her, waiting for a reply. She could hear herself breathing. She needed thinking time. Her lips parted to speak but words wouldn’t come. Seconds passed. She took another breath as reluctant words stumbled over each other.

“If we’re going to the islands we’ll all need passports won’t we?” Although her lips were moving an uncertain future seemed to be dictating the words to her.

“Have you got a current passport?” Chris smiled at her.

Feeling like a teenage girl in the presence of a pop star, Kate shook her head and whispered her reply. “No. It must have expired years ago.”

“What sort of a passport is that?”

“Now you can travel!”

“Now you can’t!”

“Now you have to pay me!”

“I’ll tell you. It’s a passport produced by petty people as paranoid as parking meters, who strut and preen themselves as if lack of vision is a virtue. The passport I use is a Pan Pacific Polynesian Passport. It is written by the wind and stretches island to island across the Pacific. It is the one used by sea birds and our people for thousands of years. It is a passport signed by God himself and authorized by our ancestors. I use it or betray those ancestors who sailed and drowned in storm raked seas for their vision of a Polynesian Pacific. The customs I go through are the customs of an Ocean Going Polynesian People. Are we Polynesian people such beggars that we need others to control our lives for us? Control isn’t given, it is taken. Would you, like me, settle for a Pan Pacific Polynesian Passport authorized by the trade winds and a thousand years of history?”

Mum realised his gaze had rested on her. She had not been aware of the moment her family started falling into the vortex surrounding this giant Tongan. Beginning like distant isobars on a weather map he seemed remote. But a deepening depression started to form the moment she tore open that letter. Since then the associated cold front sent shivers through her brain. No one was going to take Huia or her boys away. As she looked at Chris she could see her long dead ancestral warrior standing tall as totara in front of her.

Still holding Roland’s hand Mum squeezed and turned to look directly into his eyes. With the future coming at her like a thunder cloud she had to decide. Her mouth went dry and her tongue seemed to be sticking to the roof of her mouth. Roland’s eyes

seemed calm. No word passed between them. Unable to speak she raised her eyebrows to ask the question. Roland's eyes stayed fixed on hers. Since his school days he had known his job was to clean the blackboard of life not write on it. As Meriana raised her eyebrows he realized she was handing him a piece of chalk instead of a duster.

Chris looked at the excited faces of the crew.

"One thing worries me. It's your husband, Kate."

"Ex husband!" Kate corrected him.

"Sorry Kate! Ex husband! The children have spotted him peering through bushes near the scow and up by Harry's hut. It seems he was probably the one who drugged you and dumped you on Motomanunui. If so he's been on the island. How much does he know about our plans? Any idea Kate?"

Kate shook her head. "I've no idea."

"It's important. One word in the wrong place in the next few days and our entire enterprise could fail."

Susan cut in. "Leave Bryan to Kate and me. We'll take care of him." As she said this she caught Kate's hand and drew her towards the wheelhouse door.

"What are you planning Susan?" Chris called after them.

"Don't ask!" Was the only reply he received.

CHAPTER 24

THE GREEN PARROT

The bar of the ‘Swinging Lantern’ was close to grid lock. Empty jugs towed their drivers towards the bar, as full jugs manoeuvred for parking space. Noise resonated like an engine booth of badly tuned engines. Sentences ran on three cylinders; and single words backfired into road rage.

As Bryan’s fingers closed round a fresh jug at the bar a woman’s voice shouted in his ear.

“How are the hands?”

His hands tightened their grip on the jug before he turned. What the hell was she talking about?

“Hands? How are the hands?”

He was looking at a tee shirt which failed to disguise nipples beneath stretched cloth. At least his left hand was free. He reached for the stretched cloth and squeezed to prove his hand was in good working order. She winked and tossed her hair.

“Burns healed OK?” she asked.

“Burns?” Neurons fired in his brain reminding him where he had seen the bra-less boobs before. “Yes they’re healed and ready for action.”

She made an ear trumpet sign. They were shouting at each other and still couldn’t hear. She caught him by the hand and led him towards the door. They stepped outside. The engine booth faded and words became real in a still evening. He watched her boobs rise and fall as she breathed.

"You're a long way from the Basin Marina." Bryan remarked.

"Yes! I live in a little bed-sitter so I have to get away at weekends. I can't stand looking at flowered wallpaper seven days a week. We sailed down here today but the wind died so we're staying in the marina tonight and hopefully we'll get breeze in the morning."

"I'm glad the wind died or I might not have seen you." He ran his hand over her forearm.

"You mean it's no wind which blows you a bit of good." She was laughing at him.

He still held his jug. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No thanks, she grinned. I'll get my fenders bruised if I go back in there. I've got a better idea. I've got drinks on the boat. Why don't you bring your drink with you? I came with a couple of women friends and we were going to have a game of poker but it's not much fun with an all women crew. Know what I mean?"

His straight forward, "Yes!" seemed such an inadequate response to implications expanding with every step down the marina finger.

"My boat's on the end of the finger on the visitors' berth. It's only a twenty six foot trailer sailer so I'm afraid it'll be a bit intimate." She hit him with a grin.

"I'm sure it'll be great." His arm slipped round her waist. She responded by putting her arm round his waist. He decided he had found a dear little nymphomaniac. Poker wouldn't take long to turn into strip poker he decided.

"There's been heaps in the papers about that boat you found." She volunteered. He had read every line but decided he wanted to know how much she knew so replied. "Oh! I've not seen any papers this last week."

"Well I was on the front page of the "Star News" beside the harbour master and the boat. And it's been on National Radio and TV as well." She was glowing. Probably the only thrill she'd had for weeks he thought. His hand slipped from her waist to her arse.

"They found a dan buoy and the life raft, but no bodies. They've had an Orion out doing a square search but nothing so far."

"Do they know who owned it and how many people were on board?" He asked.

"I think it belonged to a cop. Can't remember his name but I don't think they know how many people were on board. Weird eh?"

They reached the end of the finger. This is my boat "The Green Parrot." How do you like my Kakapo on the side?"

"Gee it's fantastic. Did you get a signwriter to...?"

"No I did it myself."

"Wow! You're brilliant! I know a bit about sign writing myself and I would swear a professional did that. It's a real credit to you, well done." He paused to pretend to have a closer look. He hoped he wouldn't have to explain what he knew about sign writing, which was non existent. Flattery always helped providing he sounded convincing.

Cabin lights showed through drawn curtains and a light breeze held the boat away from the jetty. She stooped to pull on the stern line and he ran his hand over the stretched cloth of her shorts. He could feel the warmth of the flesh underneath. She turned and grinned, her face glowed in the sodium lights of the jetty.

“Get aboard. I’ll hold the boat in for you.”

Stepping over the rail he pushed the hatch. The boat rocked as “Dear Little Nympho” followed him. Below dim cabin lights illuminated the backs of two women. He wondered if they were as hungry for it as “Nympho”. What name should he use if they asked? Women liked names, which seemed strange as once they were horizontal names became irrelevant.

The two women turned to face him. He glimpsed Kate and Susan Nelson for the brief moment before the winch handle crashed into the back of his skull. He was unaware of falling down the remaining steps onto the cabin floor. He remained unconscious while his wrists and ankles were taped together. It wasn’t until the “Green Parrot” lifted to the incoming swell outside the marina entrance that the throbbing of his head synchronised with the throbbing of the boat’s engine.

Three hours later the black bulk of Motumanunui Island obliterated a swathe of the night sky as “The Green Parrot” nosed in under the headland. Below deck Bryan lay in total darkness. Someone had put a cushion under his head. But the problem wasn’t what his head was laying on. The problem was his head. He wanted to touch it but his hands were secured behind his back. He had no

means of knowing the broken skin on his bald patch had been washed and a plaster put on it. At least it saved him trying to understand the thought processes behind clubbing him over the head and then dressing the wound.

As the engine noise was cut, increased human activity replaced the pitch and roll of the hull. The cabin lights were turned on. He was looking directly at Susan's thighs as she bent to hand winch the drop keel. They must be in shallow water.

Kate came down the steps from the cockpit holding a bronze winch handle. The cabin light emphasised the hard lines time had engraved into her face. He felt malice standing over him. Susan finished retracting the keel and went to the drawer and took out a galley knife. She bent down and cut the tape from his ankles. He wanted to kick the bitch in the face but the knife in her hand and the menace of Kate's winch handle convinced him to think again.

With the blade in her right hand Susan put her left hand behind his neck and pushed him into a standing position. Insufficient headroom in the cabin forced him to stoop while the women could stand. Although the tape had been cut from his ankles reticent circulation immobilized his legs making his footsteps falter. A hand clenched the winch handle behind him, and the steps to the cockpit lay in front. Circulation or not, his legs had no choice. He climbed the steps. Beyond the circle of light within the cabin his eyes focused on nothing but blackness.

"We're in about half a metre of water." Kate's voice cut the night. "You can jump and wade ashore or we'll help you on your way. Either way you're going

over the side.” Hands were gripping his arms behind his back. He felt something sharp touching his back just below his left kidney. Was it the knife?

“Where are we?” He already knew the answer.

“Motumanunui Island!”

For the next question he genuinely didn’t know the answer.

“Which way is the shore?”

“You’re looking at it.” Hands twisting his arms behind his back propelled him towards the safety line. Feeling the pressure of the line on his knee he tried to back away. Again he felt the sharp prick in his back and his arm was jerked up violently. Now he was bending forward over the rail. Below he could see dark water in the sliver of light slanting out of the cabin window. Pushed forwards he tried bracing his feet against the toe rail. A hand gripped his ankle. They were going to pull his feet from under him.

“I can’t swim with my hands tied behind my back.”

“You won’t have to. The water’s only a metre deep.” That was Kate speaking.

The hand grasping his wrists behind his back relaxed momentarily. He felt the touch of a blade. Suddenly his hands were no longer tied but his arm was being twisted harder behind his back. He gave a genuine cry of pain. Susan responded. “That’s called a half Nelson.” The safety rail scraped his knees as his world tumbled forwards. His face went under. Cold shocked his body and sea water paralysed his brain. His arms flayed but his hands grabbed only water.

The boat was out of reach. Then his feet touched bottom. He lunged but his nails slid on smooth gel coat. There was nothing to hold. He was standing now. Lunging at the boat had pushed it into deeper water. Stumbling towards the shore he heard the engine change note as the boat picked up speed.

He had no idea which part of the island he was on. Kate got off somehow. But was Fitzsimple still there? He wished he'd asked. But could he believe her answer? Kate obviously knew he had dumped her on the island but did Fitzsimple also know? What would happen if they met? Questions without answers fuddled his brain

CHAPTER 25

THE RIFLE

As dawn dragged itself above the horizon the salt water Bryan tipped out of his shoes was stained brown with dye from the leather. Body heat had warmed the water in his clothes, but as he wrung them out, lingering night air danced with shivering footsteps across wet skin. Damp clothes conspired with the principles of latent heat to drag warmth from body mass and dissipate it in a malevolent breeze.

A few paces into the bush the breeze shrank to a leaf stirring whisper and vanished. The bank rose steeply. Root and sapling became toe and handhold. Breath gasped, and heart protested. Handholds became something to lean on. Fallen trees became seats. Rests lingered and closed in on each other. Skin became clammy.

Eventually the canopy thinned. Bush became scrub, and scrub became grass and scrub. Then a sheep grazed valley lay before him. At the end of the valley a rope of smoke twisted upwards through trees. Smoke meant human activity. He had left two people on the island. Somehow Kate had got off. Fitzsimple must still be there. Did he know Kate had escaped?

The hut was shelter. Caution and cover controlled Bryan's approach. A hawk, with wing tips spread like fingers, glided across the valley. Hawk eyes searched the grassland for minute movement.

Mike's chair on the deck creaked every time he reached for a beer. Reflected sunlight from the bay

stabbed his eyes. The incessant movement of water became hypnotic. If he kept his eyes open they drifted to the flickering waves. If he looked away darkness descended. The sun hammered his chest. He unbuttoned his shirt to soak in blood red solar light. He knew it was blood red because he could see it was blood red through closed eyelids. No boat headed this way. Why should there be? No one knew they were there. Kate couldn't escape. Sooner or later she would come to him. Food and shelter would drive her in. And he controlled both. The rifle leaned on the post.

The post, the deck and the hut walls scratched and crawled cicadas. Two were ticking on the rifle butt. He could reach it and knock them off without getting out of the chair. What was the point? Swatting cicadas was like filling out forms. If you did one two more buggers took their place. Why waste effort? The rifle was just as effective with or without cicadas. He was organized. In the unlikely event of a boat entering the bay he would hear the engine. He could see the jetty. He was so organized he could drift in blood red sunlight. He didn't need to keep his eyes open or look into the shimmering sea. With eyes closed he could float in blood red clouds through space and time. The cicadas ceased their chatter as the red tide swept over him.

He woke with a jolt. His half full beer can slipped from sleeping hands, hit the deck and the amber liquid flowed through the gaps between the boards. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and the six pack was empty. Reluctantly his hands pushed on the chair and his body tilted forward to enable his legs to push him into a standing position so he could move into the dark interior of the hut.

Broken glass crunched under his feet as he moved to the black hole in the floor. He kicked the broken glass from the edge of the hole before protesting knees bent. Lowering himself into a crawling position he reached down. In the darkness his fingers closed on another six pack.

He paused. Still-sleeping limbs contemplated the effort required to regain a standing position. Resting his hands on the six pack he used it to push himself up. Why risk putting his hands on slivers of broken glass? The fire was almost dead. He could leave it but that meant he would have to re-light it later to cook dinner.

He picked up a log from the bucket. There was even a cicada on that. He opened the door of the range and threw log and cicada into the fire. He heard the cicada's wings beat for a brief moment. One less to worry about! He turned towards the entrance and the deck. Beyond the deck the scrub stirred in the light breeze, and beyond the scrub ripples of sunlight winked at the sun.

Hesitating by the doorway he sensed something was wrong before he knew what it was. Something in his subconscious became aware. Perhaps he had drunk too many cans and his subconscious and his conscious thoughts were becoming dislocated, which was an excellent reason for drinking to excess. Like the inspector the cicada on the firewood felt secure until realisation produced a moment of fluttering panic. To the inspector the implications produced an involuntary gasp, as his diaphragm responded to some primeval instinct. He shrank into the darkest corner of the room as if it would provide a sanctuary.

Not unlike the cicada, he looked for an escape route while his brain tried to evaluate the changed circumstances. The rifle he had left propped on the post was gone.

Had Kate taken the rifle to use, or to prevent him from using it? Did Kate even know how to use a rifle? He had left the safety catch on. Would she know it had to be taken off? Women were useless with guns. She was dumber than most. If she did manage to fire it she would probably close her eyes to aim and the recoil would injure her shoulder. Then she'd decide not to use it again or she might not be able to carry her shoulder bag. Then where would she be able to put her lipstick?

Mike's confidence returned. The rifle had telescopic sights. They weren't much use in the bush or trying to hit a moving target. He should have thought of that when he took the rifle out of the arms locker on the boat. But of course he never seriously imagined it would be used. He only supplied the rifle to humour Grant Fergusson's paranoia about security on the island. It never occurred to him he would be using it, or having it used against him. In the circumstances it was just as well he had left the telescopic sights on it. Kate was a woman so Kate was about as bright as a lump of baker's dough. She would never think of taking the scope off.

But she could be outside waiting. He remembered how quickly she had crossed the deck and vanished into scrub. If he went out running as she had done there was no way a stupid woman would have time to aim the rifle before the scrub swallowed him. No one could be on both sides of the

hut at the same time. If he smashed a window at the back she would hurry round there and he could slip out of the front door, across the deck and into the scrub before she knew what was happening. Alternatively if she heard a window break at the back she might guess he was trying to distract her and be waiting for him to step onto the deck, in which case he could have slipped out of the back window unnoticed. How devious was she? He wished he knew more about the way women's brains work. Providing that wasn't a contradiction in terms!

If he tried climbing through the back window he would be inside the window frame for about ten seconds. From that side of the building even a stupid woman could aim a rifle in ten seconds. But out of the front door he would be a moving target not a stationary one. He still had the six pack in his hand. He threw it at the back window, waited fifteen seconds and went out of the front door running. He hit the scrub. No shot was fired.

The six pack split into six individual cans in transit through the back window. The cans landed in undergrowth. It took Bryan several minutes to pick them all up. He put the rifle down on the grass while he gathered the cans. Slinging the rifle over his shoulder he freed up both hands for the beer. Fitzsimple had not only lit the fire in the range but exposed a store of food and drink under the floor.

Bryan gnawed at the problem like a rat at a butter box. How did Fitzsimple know there was a food store under the floor boards? How did he get the rifle and ammunition? When Bryan brought Kate and Fitzsimple in here he was certain the floor was intact.

He had looked round Frazer's old place. If the floor had been up he was certain he would have seen it. He looked round the room, nothing indicated an under floor store. Years of dust and grease had settled between the boards. No other floor boards had been pulled up. Finding it by chance was about as likely as dealing a five ace hand from a straight pack.

There was no way, Bryan decided, that tight-fisted Frazer would leave hundreds of dollars worth of food under the floor. And Frazer hadn't been here since his old boat gave up trying to float. Bryan pulled out some of the packages. None of the cans were rusty. The packets of milk powder all had a use by date of next December. This stuff had been placed here recently. Fitzsimple knew it was here so who was the most likely person to have put it there? He could not possibly have known he was going to be brought here with Kate. Fitzsimple must have had another reason to put the stuff here. Why food and a rifle? There was a lot of food. That implied either feeding a lot of people for a short time or a few people for a long time. If it was a lot of people where were the cooking facilities for a large party, not the old wood range that was for sure? It had to be a few people for a long time. What would there be on the island to occupy even a few people for a long time? And why the rifle? The obvious answer was to protect or guard something.

Nothing old Frazer was likely to have left needed guarding. The rubbish outside contained only a few recently opened tins. Probably Fitzsimple had used them in the last few days. If whatever needed to be guarded was here already why wasn't the guard here? Probably whatever needed guarding had not arrived. Why hide something on a deserted offshore

island? Why not have a warehouse in town? Illegal was the only word that fitted. Going to the expense of having an armed guard on an offshore island implied something seriously illegal and seriously financial. The joints in all the fingers pointed to drugs, Fitzsimple, and the contents of the seventy two packing cases.

His brain blistered with the burning problem of Kate. How had she got off the island? Stupidity would prevent her involvement with a drug syndicate. He'd seen Susan Nelson with the packing cases. Susan Nelson had to be involved and Kate was with her. They both brought him here. Another thought drifted in from beyond the horizon. This is Frazer's island. Am I going to be framed along with old Frazer if things go wrong? Are the two bitches trying to set me up?

He looked out to sea. On the mainland smoke pursued white clouds from a distant hillside. A large two masted vessel was close hauled tacking up the coast. Distance prevented him from seeing the tiny bronze mermaid fastened to the bow. Even if he had seen it, he would not have understood the significance of the emblem of the newly formed tribe of Ngati Rurenga, the tribe of castaways. He watched the vessel till it sank below the horizon but failed to recognise the rig or attribute any importance to the start of that voyage.

CHAPTER 26 GRAVE EVENTS

“Incurably torrid” was the only description Grant Fergusson could think of to describe Melbourne in late summer. Tempers smouldered like bushfires waiting for a wind change. And for Grant Fergusson the wind changed when he tried to check the progress of the New Zealand operation.

His face creased. Till now Rachael had been good value. He’d been getting her daily reports. Everything seemed on track for the consignment. She was so naive she had no idea of its true nature. But now the daily reports had stopped. To make matters worse the inspector had sent nothing for over a week. Only Frazer McLeod was communicating, if you could count his originality in spelling and creative grammar as a communication. He tried reading it again.

“frier in tHe kRups AND. immSPuktas boot wINt mussin AND he bi mussin prizzuMed? drund tHe skow hus gOn awa.”

Grant re-read it. He tried to guess the meaning.

“Fire in the crop and inspector’s boat went missing and he is missing presumed drowned. The scow has gone away.”

Grant made the decision. With the oppressive heat hammering at the office window it wasn’t a hard decision to make. Sophie was painting her fingernails. She looked up. Why the hell did she always have to look injured when he asked her to do any damn thing?

“Sophie, I wish I’d employed you when you were alive.” This produced only a “Huh?” for a reply.

“Don’t worry about it sweetheart. Just book me a flight to New Zealand for tomorrow morning. I want a rental car waiting for me at Auckland airport and two night’s accommodation at “The Swinging Lantern” where I stayed before.”

“Oh! Are you flying to New Zealand tomorrow?”

“No you stupid bitch I’m walking all the way.”

A day and a half later while the scow had sailed a further two hundred nautical miles and was approaching the Hauraki Gulf on route to Auckland. Grant Fergusson sat in the window seat of “The Swinging Lantern” with Frazer Mc Leod.

The bar, like the jug between Grant and Frazer, was half empty. A couple in the corner were holding hands and trying to kiss across a table while a group of what looked like university students focused their attention on the drunken remains of two guys and two women competing in a drinking game. The game consisted of seeing which of the two guys could skull a jug fastest. The drinkers clasped their hands behind their backs while the women stood on stools and tried pouring the jug into their partner’s open mouth. The beer splattered face and hair, causing rivulets to run through shirts, trousers and shoes into a lake on the floor which grew as fast as the cheering from the surrounding circle of students.

Frazer pointed to the students with his eyes. “Good to see they aren’t wasting their student loans.”

"Yeah right! I guess we're looking at the future captains of industry." Grant grinned back.

I wonder if their teachers ever manage to teach them." Frazer asked.

"There are some people, Frazer who have a whole crate of Teachers delivered to their house each week and still never learn to spell. Don't you agree?"

"A crate of Teachers?" Frazer asked.

"That's right Frazer. Remember how I leased the island from you and then you rented it out again for a crate of Teachers each week from Rachael?"

"Er... Well I can explain ..."

"Don't bother Frazer. I've authorised payment to the bottle store. I've put it down to you showing a bit of imagination. I've been a lot more worried by your communication. If I read it correctly the crop's been burnt and our inspector has gone missing. Is that right?"

"I haven't been to see the crop. It seems like a good place to avoid. I don't know whether the trip guns are still in place and now it has been in the papers it'll be like open day at the brewery. There's no way we can harvest it now."

"Has anyone linked it with the inspector's disappearance?" Grant asked.

"Not as far as I know."

"But would you know? Might the inspector have found out I'm paying you to watch him?"

"No chance."

"That's something I suppose. Did he get everything ready on the island before he disappeared?"

"I know he fixed the food store. I watched him take it down the finger in the marina trolley."

Grant grabbed Frazer by the shoulder and punched his question "Did anyone else see him?"

"Probably but he did it over several days, at different times of the day and a little at a time. It wouldn't have been the same people about each time. If anyone noticed him they'd probably think he was putting tucker on his boat. They'd probably be more interested in Kate."

"Who?"

"Kate Lockhart. Bryan Lockhart's wife. She's been having it off with Mike."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen 'em on the boat together."

"Why didn't I know about it Frazer?"

"I didn't think it was important."

"Not important! Our bloody inspector has sunk out of sight. Your job is to check on him. That's what I've been paying you for. Now I find he's screwing the arse out of some woman and you didn't think it was important! She's a bloody security risk. Where is she now?"

"I dunno. She's disappeared as well."

"Where does her husband fit into this? What's his name again?"

"Bryan Lockhart. I've known him for years. He drinks here regular."

"Well where is he now?"

"Last time he was here he was with some woman I've not seen before. They went off together. I haven't seen 'em since."

"Is there a mounting pile of bodies somewhere or am I missing something? Who is this Lockhart guy?"

"A few beers and I get inside information about the cops. He's a senior sergeant and works with the inspector, or did till he walked a week or two back."

"Do you know why?"

"Bryan reckons he told the cops what they could do with their job but bar talk says he was forced to resign to avoid prosecution over molesting a kid on the beach and..."

"Nothing to do with the crop or security on the island?"

"Not as far as I know."

"The question Frazer is, do you know. I think we'd better take a trip to the island and see what's, been happening."

"How we going to get there with the inspector's boat missing?"

"I'll charter a chopper in the morning. You said the scow has left?"

"Yes I saw it heading up the coast. Wasn't it supposed to leave about now?"

“Not before I inspected it. It’s left early and Rachael said nothing. Why? Something’s wrong, very wrong.”

Frazer looked thoughtful. “What are we going to tell the chopper pilot if he gets chatting about why we’re going to the island?”

Grant finished his beer. “You’re the owner of the island Frazer and you’re taking me out to have a look at your old barn because I want to use it to store mussel floats.”

Damp mud clung to the shovel. Unaccustomed digging left Bryan’s back stiff and sore. The chopper touched down on the grazed land above the hut. Bryan heard it before he saw it slide below the level of the hill. He pushed the shovel into scrub without being seen.

He’d dug the hole at the base of a slip, which must have come down in the heavy rain before Christmas. It was still bare earth. That made it ideal. After a week or two no one would suspect the freshly turned soil was not the result of a natural occurrence. He never realised before how long it took to dig a hole two metres long and a metre wide and a metre deep. The loose soil had no lattice of roots through it. Back filling had been easy; he stood above the hole and pushed in soil from the slip face. Even so he was breathing hard and sweating. It was lucky he could dig the hole at the base of the slip. Anywhere else would have been worse. But perhaps it wasn’t entirely luck. If Fitzsimple had kept in the scrub Bryan would

probably not have seen him. Instead the simple bastard tried to scramble across the face of the slip. The bullet probably went through Fitzsimple's spine judging by the way his legs folded. Through the telescopic sights Bryan had watched Fitzsimple use his hands to drag himself towards cover on the far side of the slip. He waited until Fitzsimple almost made it. As his arm reached for a branch Bryan placed the next shot into the extended shoulder. The result had been delightful. Fitzsimple rolled over and over all the way to the base of the slip carrying a quantity of soil and stones with him.

Fitzsimple was still whimpering about half an hour later when Bryan returned from Frazer's hut with the shovel to start digging the hole. He explained to Fitzsimple he would be digging the hole slightly downhill to make it easier to roll him into it before back filling.

Fitzsimple had made a feeble and futile attempt to resist being rolled into the bottom of the hole. The light of the sun was obliterated as the soil landed on his face and in his eyes. For a while the sound of the shovel piling more weight of earth on top penetrated his brain. No one knew the exact moment Inspector Fitzsamuel passed into history.

Bryan's feet gripped barnacled rock as he clambered across beach boulders. The trajectory of the rifle culminated in a splash twenty metres out where waves were breaking over rock and kelp. Crustaceans, rust and time would make the rifle indistinguishable from, and part of, the sea bed. It also completed the work started by the inspector

weeks earlier when he used the angle grinder in his garage to remove the serial number from the rifle.

As the chopper blades slowed to a stop, Frazer and Grant climbed out. Had they got out in the reverse order Bryan might have hesitated before calling to his drinking mate.

Bryan didn't hear Grant ask Frazer, "Who the hell is that?" Neither did he hear Frazer's reply, "It's Bryan Lockhart. He's the ex cop I was telling you about. He gives me the 'stop press' news on the inspector."

"About the last thing we want is a cop or even an ex cop snooping about. What the hell's he doing here?"

"I haven't a bloody clue. Last time I saw him he was with some woman in The Flying Jug."

"The Flying Jug?"

The bar at the Swinging Lantern! It's not unknown for jugs to be thrown in there."

As Bryan approached, Frazer greeted him. "Missed you at the pub, Mate; 'Head Man' of Alcoholics Unanimous buggering off like that! I've bin looking all over for you. Worried about you I am. Specially as it's your turn to get the next jug. Where you bin Mate?"

"Killing time, waiting for you to bring me a jug."

Grant interrupted. And it was not the sunlight which made his eyes narrow to slits. "You don't kill time. It's time which will kill you."

Bravado had made Bryan answer 'Killing time' but Grant's 'time which kills' killed not only Bryan's bravado but also the bantering flow of conversation. After a pause of several seconds Frazer picked up the dislocated words.

"If spending time bouncing off that Sheila's boobs is killing time, time must have had a funny effect on you. Eh!"

"Where is she now?" Grant asked Bryan directly.

"No idea! I picked her up in the pub. She'd come from the Basin Marina in her trailer sailer. I happened to mention Frazer's island and she suggested the two of us could sail out here for supper. I guess my key didn't turn on her ignition, because the bitch wouldn't take her hand off the abstinence button. We argued. She said she was getting her coat from the boat but instead she sailed off and left me here."

"Did she go up to my hut?" Frazer asked.

"No we just stayed on the beach by the jetty."

"You sure of that?" Grant asked with surprising suddenness. "She didn't go up there looking for a dunny or..."

"No! We stayed on the beach. The hut's not much of a shagging shop. Does it matter?"

"It might and it might not." Bryan saw Grant and Frazer make eye contact.

"Seen any sign of anyone else on the island?" Frazer asked.

“You’re the first.”

“No sign of Inspector Fitzsamuel I suppose?” Grant asked and Frazer added, “He used to come here in his boat.”

That wasn’t a question Bryan wanted to hear. He just answered, “No! Last I heard of him he was missing at sea presumed drowned. Reckon I might run into his ghost out here do you?”

“His body’s never been found. After three days they usually float, because of gas in the guts.” Frazer added, “Weird eh!”

“Sure is, but his boat was found and taken into the Basin Marina.” Bryan answered.

“How do you know?” Grant snapped the question.

“That bitch who dumped me here told me. She reckons it’s been in the papers.” This wasn’t conversation. He was being interrogated.

“Strange Eh!” Frazer commented. “Seems they never found the guy who brought it in. You’d think he’d be claiming salvage, not hiding. So why’s he hiding?”

Bryan shrugged.

“I guess you’ve bin up my hut haven’t you?” Frazer asked.

Bryan decided even if he told them “No!” they wouldn’t believe him and would be wondering what he was covering up. So he answered, “Yes but I’m not the first. Some vandals left it in a hell of a mess. Windows smashed, door kicked in, broken glass all over the

floor, floor boards torn up, and a food store under the floor has been raided. I owe you for a few tins Frazer. I had to eat something. I'll give you a hand to clear up the mess and..."

"I ain't keeping a chopper clocking up God knows how many hours while you guys sweep the bloody floor." Grant interjected. I don't give a damn about the hut. I came to see the barn to store a consignment of mussel floats which is supposed to arrive in Auckland in a few days. You want a lift ashore do you?"

"Yes please." Bryan answered without hesitation.

"Then let's see the damn barn. I'll give you five minutes at Frazer's hut before we get the chopper in the air. We're going to the Basin Marina. That suits you?" Grant wasn't asking Bryan, he was telling him what was going to happen.

CHAPTER 27

A BAD DAY

A bad day dogged Grant Fergusson, which ensured everyone near him was also going to have a bad day. He discovered an ex cop, or possibly a real cop, poking about on the island without any reasonable explanation. Other than putting food on the island the inspector hadn't done a damn thing. Now he was missing. The flight over the estuary verified the scow had left and it hadn't been necessary to land the chopper to see the red rooster of arson had consumed several million dollars worth of crop before vanishing.

Grant Fergusson's day was about to get worse. Bryan said he had counted seventy two wooden crates being loaded onto the scow. Why was Bryan counting crates? What had he been doing on the island? It sure as hell wasn't to have a picnic with some woman.

The chopper hovered over the Basin Marina until they found "The Plume of Power". Bryan witnessed a smile flicker across Grant's face. He never suspected that particular grimace was the only indication he was ever going to receive that Grant Fergusson was at his most deadly. Bryan assumed the curl of Grant's lip was an indication of pleasure. The fact that Grant's smile also bared his teeth eluded Bryan's consciousness.

The chopper touched down in the marina car park. Grant, Frazer and Bryan climbed out and walked along the finger to the beat of chopper blades which increased in intensity, as the chopper lifted off

leaving a dust cloud drifting across parked cars. As they approached the boat, confirmation replaced suspicions. The boat was damaged. The curl of Grant's top lip became as pronounced as the damage to the pulpit. His bottom lip quivered as they climbed aboard to find the cabin unlocked and the chart plotter missing.

Was Bryan leaving a trail? For no explicable reason he'd been counting crates being loaded onto the scow. The remainder of the crop burned and the scow sailed. According to Frazer, Mike had been having it off with Bryan's wife. Then Mike disappeared! What did he know about Mike's vanishing trick? He'd been on the island. The Plume of Power had been damaged.

Grant slumped into the cabin sofa. His eyes narrowed to slits to watch Bryan.

"As I have just given you a free ride off Frazer's island I reckon the least you can do Bryan is to make us all a coffee."

As Bryan moved to the galley Grant talked to Frazer of marlin and yellow fin tuna, of hook sizes and the taste of charcoal-grilled fish straight from the sea. Grant's gut wobbled with enthusiasm for the tax advantages of purchasing a boat in New Zealand and getting Mike Fitzsamuel to maintain and service it. His voice lowered an octave as he talked of combining big game fishing with business trips to New Zealand. Bryan absorbed the enthusiasm as Grant watched. Twelve switches formed a column above the galley. Bryan's hand went directly to the switch to turn on the fresh water pump. Grant's brain worked as he talked. Someone unfamiliar with the boat would

probably have tried the tap first and when it didn't work would start to look for the reason. Perhaps he had tried the wrong tap. Perhaps there was no fresh water on board. Perhaps there was another tap somewhere he had to turn on first. Then he might look for the pump switch, which would entail reading the label on each switch. But Bryan had unhesitatingly gone to the correct switch. He filled the jug, and without hesitation his hand moved to the correct switch to activate the gas solenoid for the stove. Grant needed no further proof Bryan knew the boat.

As they sat drinking coffee Grant asked Bryan if Mike had taken him out in the boat recently.

Bryan shook his head. "I went out once with him and my ex a year or two back."

And you've remembered which switch is which for a year or two thought Grant and added to himself; "You're a lying bastard Bryan now I need to find out why." But instead he leaned towards Bryan and smiled as he spoke. Smiling while speaking relaxed his facial muscles and gave his voice a mellow comfortable tone.

"Bryan I'll let you into a little secret. I needed Mike not just to clean and maintain the boat but also as a boatman, while I fish." Grant lowered his voice in what he considered a technique to make lies believable. "Mike always arranged time off work but from what I hear he seems to have gone missing. I don't want to seem unsympathetic but I'm only over here for a few days, a week at the most, and I've been looking forward to this fishing trip. Frazer tells me you've resigned from the police and I'm wondering

whether you'd consider being my boatman for a few days. I'll pay of course. If you're doing an inspector's job, should we say inspector's wages?"

With the words "inspector's wages", Grant saw the involuntary movement of Bryan's eyes and knew he had gained control. To drive the hook home he added, "When I pay, I pay cashhhhh." With the word cashhhhh he put his fore finger over his lip and winked so Bryan would know it was tax free. Promises are cheap when you have no intention of keeping them.

Fifteen minutes later saw Bryan on deck with a hacksaw cutting away the remains of the pulpit. Marine grade stainless and the sun on his back made sweat run down his nose and drip onto the deck. His arms ached. As he cut away each piece of tortured tube he carried it to the rubbish bin at the top of the marina finger. He could have cut it all and carried the lot in one trip but by carrying each piece he could look busy and give his arms a rest between cuts. The idea that the steel had to be cut away so the anchor could be used hadn't occurred to him but it sounded plausible, especially as Grant planned to take the boat into Auckland to get a new pulpit made and fitted before going big game fishing.

Bryan was still hack sawing the pulpit as Grant returned from the "Nauty Chandler" with a new chart plotter complete with electronic charts of New Zealand coastal waters and a disc of chart upgrades. In the engine room Frazer checked oil levels and the fresh water in the heat exchangers.

By the time the last piece of buckled pulpit had been cut away and deposited in the rubbish bin Grant

had the domestic water tanks full and both diesels idling. They left the fixed mooring lines on the jetty and when the boat reached the fuel berth Frazer and Bryan had new warps and fenders ready. Preoccupied with fastening his warp to the cleat on the berth Bryan failed to recognise or even to notice a young woman putting five litres of petrol in a can. But she recognised him and slipped behind the fuel pumps to make her way back down the finger until there were several boats between her and the fuel wharf. She waited. The refueling seemed to be taking too long but she didn't move from her position until she heard the diesels restart and the boat move away towards the mouth of the marina. She slipped back to the fuel wharf. The pump indicated six thousand litres had just been dispensed. As the boat left the marina she was dialing her cell phone. She didn't need to look up her sister's number.

Only eight miles out of Auckland in the Huraki Gulf Susan Nelson answered her cell phone.

"Hi Sue! Sylvia here. Guess who I've just seen at the marina."

"Napoleon!" Susan answered.

"Nearly right. It was Kate's husband Bryan Lockhart."

"Did he recognise you?" Susan asked.

"I don't think so. I'm in disguise. I'm wearing a bra under my tee shirt."

"What was he doing?"

"That's what I'm ringing you about. He was on 'The Plume of Power' refueling it. They put six

thousand litres of diesel in the tank and headed out to sea.”

“Do you know how he got off the island?”

“A chopper landed in the car park an hour or two ago. I didn’t see who got out. It could have been them.”

“Was Mike with him?” Susan asked.

“I haven’t a clue. Who’s Mike?” He had two other guys with him.”

“What were they like?”

“One was old with a limp and the other bald, over weight, a business suit, an Aussie accent, wearing glasses...”

“Neither of them sounds like Mike. Spoke with an Aussie accent you say? Hang on a moment I’ll get Rurenga...”

Sylvia waited, mentally counting the cost of the cell phone call. Sue returned on the line.

“Sorry to keep you but it seems important. According to Rurenga and Rachael the description fits Grant Fergusson. Now, the old guy with the limp, did he have a full beard and a finger missing on his right hand?”

“Sorry Sue I didn’t notice his fingers but he definitely had a full beard.”

“According to Arlin and Rachael it could be Frazer McLeod. Did you notice whether they went up the coast or back down the coast when they left the marina?”

“Up the coast and in a hell of a hurry. They certainly didn’t keep to the five knots limit past the moored boats outside the harbour. They were doing more like twenty five.”

“Thanks Sylvia. As long as the wind holds we’re about an hour and a half out of Auckland and we have to drop off Harry’s museum pieces to the shipping agent. Things could get messy if we’re not well out to sea before Grant arrives. Keep your cell phone on and I’ll ring you back later. Thanks for ringing. It was important. Bye.”

As Susan rang off, Grant Fergusson hand-steered a course up the coast. He found himself gripping the wheel like sea weed clinging to a rotating propeller. His hand shook with the ferocity of his grip. His brain became a blood clot of anger which focused on Rachael. She had harvested the crop and packed it in crates before burning the remainder of the crop to try and conceal her theft. Now she was on her way to Auckland to sell it.

Grant looked at the stupid blank face of the chart plotter. He wanted to punch his fist through the vacant screen. He tried taking several deep breaths. It didn’t work. He looked up and saw Frazer’s alcoholic face staring at him. He hadn’t realised his fist was clenched as he yelled, “Get me a coffee damn you.”

Frazer tried disappearing into the galley. The boat lurched and Frazer’s crook leg twisted. The table both broke his fall and provided him with a hand hold to regain a standing position to get into the galley away from Grant.

Grant grinned to himself as he imagined Frazer trying to bring him a cup of coffee and being unable to

use both hands to steady his crook leg in a lurching sea. There was something satisfying contemplating someone else's pain. Using the chart plotter to programme a course he put the boat on automatic pilot so he wouldn't have to sit in the driving chair while the damned ocean kept trying tip him off and spray obliterated the windshield.

If the scow was trying to run with his cannabis they'd picked the wrong boat and the wrong man to cheat.

Five minutes later with the boat on automatic pilot, he looked in his pocket book for the number of the combination lock to the armoury. He should have done this before the boat started lurching. Grabbing at the hand rails he stumbled forward. He tried the combination lock. It worked. One rifle with telescopic sights was missing but the automatics were oiled and clipped in place. The ammunition lay in boxes at the bottom of the cupboard. Rachael might try running with the cannabis but the consignment concealed in the mussel floats hadn't arrived in Auckland. With the armoury secure he was in control. First he had one more job requiring attention.

Returning to the driving seat he flicked the anchor winch switch to "down" and briefly touched the button. The anchor slid forward half a metre and hung over the bow. He pulled the throttle lever back to neutral and the boat lost headway. He called Bryan, and when Bryan came running he remembered to smile.

"I've got an urgent job for you Bryan. The anchor winch isn't holding the anchor in place. It needs tying down or it might bash a hole in the boat

in these seas. I want you on deck, take some cord and lash the anchor to the bow roller. I've stopped the boat but be careful. We don't have a new pulpit yet. There's non slip tread on the deck so you should be OK. But put on a water proof coat for the spray. You can get on deck by the side door."

The boat wallowed in a fierce swell as Bryan climbed on deck. Grant changed the steering control from auto pilot to manual as he watched Bryan, on hands and knees, inch forward clinging to the side rail. Spray hit Bryan full in the face and water ran down his neck. He reached the anchor roller but with the pulpit gone only the deck lay between him and a pitching sea. Through that deck he could feel the vibration of the twin diesels running in neutral. Reaching over the bow to secure the anchor he felt the change in vibration as the engines changed from idle to full ahead together.

The Plume of Power turned into the incoming weather. The bow lifted to the first wave, accelerated down the reverse side and almost came to a stop as it plowed into the oncoming wave obliterating the wind screen with spray. Wipers cleared the screen and Grant caught a glimpse of Bryan clinging on. He had one hand on the sawn off stump of the pulpit and the other on the anchor chain above the roller. As the boat hit the next wave Grant touched the button to operate the anchor winch. The windshield went opaque with spray but the chain should have jerked Bryan forward trapping his fingers in the bow roller forcing him to let go. It must have worked because when the screen cleared the foredeck was empty. They continued for a few hundred metres before Grant operated the anchor winch again to re-secure the

anchor, put the steering back to auto and continued towards Auckland and the scow.

CHAPTER 28

THE STORM

Opening the wheel house door Huia stepped on deck. The vista of Auckland's skyline scratched the horizon with fingers reaching into the harbour. At home sand dunes and dune grass ringed the lagoon. Here skyscraper skulls stared out of a landscape numbed by the drone of traffic. On the water, boats moved as aggressively as boys in the school yard.

Then Huia sensed it, she didn't see it. But it bugged her. Something was wrong. But what? Some thought as imperceptible as insect wings on an evening breeze seemed to be floating across her mind and persisting. She walked across the deck. She tried to imagine what the harbour would have been like before people. But the thought became more insistent. Then she saw it. Eye contact wandered as silent as a shadow between the adults. Susan, Kate, and Rachael were not watching the boats ahead. Their eyes kept drifting to the horizon behind the scow. Behind the scow! Behind the scow? Suddenly there wasn't time to think. Activity exploded with jobs as Arlin shouted orders.

Rangi eased the head sail halyard in stages to lower the sail while Grandma and Huhana hauled, folded and lashed it. Susan and Harry dropped the mizzen into the lazy jacks. Sitting astride the boom Susan worked her way along it securing the sail while Harry coiled the downhaul onto its belaying pin. With Arlin at the wheel the scow glided under its own momentum towards the wood and stone jetty.

Seaweed on the jetty rippled in the ebb tide. Chris and then Roland jumped the last metre ashore. Mum passed the bow line to Chris. Grandma had shown Huia how to coil the stern warp so she could throw the loop end to Roland to pass over the bollard. Rope creaked. Timber rubbing strakes pressed rubber-tyre fenders. The scow swayed. Nahi and Huhana passed one end of the springs ashore while Kate and Hemi secured the inboard ends to deck cleats. It all worked.

Grinning Chris jumped back on board. "Ngati Rurenga, are not pieces of driftwood any more, we're a crew."

With the springs still being adjusted Arlin and Harry entered the side door marked "office" at the back of the long shed. Five minutes later they were back on board.

Before Harry spoke no one doubted something was wrong. The exuberance at having arrived had switched off quicker than a light bulb. Harry's cheek twitched. "They can't take my crates till tomorrow afternoon." Huia interrogated the facial expressions. She recognized both frustration and desperation, and tried imagining the key piece of information she needed to unlock understanding. Her thoughts were interrupted by Chris.

"He can't or won't take them?"

"Does it make any difference?" Harry asked.

"It might. Let me try." Chris offered.

"You can try but he's adamant tomorrow afternoon is the earliest it can be done." Harry replied.

Huia watched Chris walk up to the long shed. But he didn't go to the office side door as Harry and Arlin had done. Walking on past an Islander on a fork lift he entered the main shed. The Islander climbed off the forklift and followed. Chris didn't come out. The tide ebbed and the gunwhale sank below the level of the jetty. Huia tried to imagine what would happen if Harry's crates were not taken immediately. Why was tomorrow afternoon a problem? Mum had joined Rachael, Kate and Susan who were still looking back out to sea. Back the way they had come. Huia didn't see interest in their expressions, she saw concern. Huia heard her Mum ask Kate "How fast is his boat and...?" Looking up Mum saw Huia and the question faded. Both Kate and Susan followed Mum's eyes. The shadow of the unfinished sentence and the warning eye movements lingered long enough for Huia to understand Mum would not get an answer while she was there. Huia replayed the unfinished question through her mind. "How fast is his boat?" Whose boat? Why were they more concerned with what lay behind than what lay ahead?

Wandering alone to the bowsprit Huia sat astride it and rested her chin in her hands as strands of hair blew across her face. A gull perched on the tip of the bowsprit. Its head swayed side to side as it watched, poised for instant flight. Mum and Kate still looked astern as they spoke in a huddle. Their words blew away in the breeze. The scow nudged the jetty as if impatient with the delay. Startled, the gull launched itself, dipping for an instant below the level of the bowsprit. Wings gave lift and its shadow arced across the water in the afternoon sun. Huia watched it rise above the scow's stern where Mum was still speaking

with Kate and Susan. At that moment realization arced through Huia's mind. It all fitted together, watching the sea behind them, whispered words, impatience to get back out to sea. Why couldn't they have told her? Did they think just because she was a kid she didn't have the guts to face the knowledge Grant Fergusson was pursuing them by sea? It wasn't guessing they were being pursued which caused the involuntary clenching of Huia's fists; it was her own mother's inability to confide in her! What else was she hiding? Did Rangi and Hemi know?

Standing, she saw Arlin and Harry at the gunwale. But what she saw made her hesitate. The reluctance in the lines on Harry's face seemed to spill into his hands which moved at the pace of an old man as they untied the springs from the jetty. They were leaving without delivering the museum pieces! Harry, her real Grandad, spent years alone in his hut by the river. People had called him mad. Kids had thrown stones at him. But all the time he had been patiently carving. And within the carvings a concealed message was poised for the world to see. Rangi and Hemi had made the crates. Starlight had carried them across the ford and down the flax track. This should be Grandad's moment. If they sailed without delivering his crates to the shipping company he'd miss the ship to Copenhagen and be too late for the exhibition.

Grabbing Susan by the hand she dragged her towards Harry.

"Tell them we can't leave without sending Harry's museum to Copenhagen."

Before Susan could answer, the engine of the petrol driven forklift started. Returning with four Islanders, Chris called above the noise of the forklift.

“Can we give a motor bike a free ride to Avarua?”

Susan answered with a question. “Can they take Harry’s museum pieces?”

“Not unless we get on with it straight away.” Chris shouted back.

Harry’s hands moved much faster as he re-secured the spring lines. Huia thought she saw a tear well up in his eye but he brushed his hand across his face before she could be certain.

As the forklift stacked Harry’s crates in the long shed Rachael went ashore to find a post box. She had two identical letters to post, one to the Auckland police and the other to customs. The letters contained an anonymous tip off about the contents of a consignment of mussel floats due to be landed in Auckland from Melbourne.

The sky changed to indigo as Grandma lit the kerosene navigation lights, and the scow lifted her windward rail to the evening land breeze. The lights of Auckland faded to a low glow in the sky and by morning the city and the tentacles of the city had vanished below the horizon. The sky, streaked with wispy high cloud, reminded Huia of mares’ tails and she thought of Starlight and the dunes at home.

Astride the bowsprit Huia looked at the head sail which curved above her like a hole in the sky and below she watched a rainbow form in the arc of spray. On the edge of the rainbow the bronze mermaid seemed to shimmer with delight.

Sitting beside Huia on the bowsprit Grandma held her hand. Neither of them spoke for several minutes and Huia turned her head away looking out to sea so Grandma couldn't see tears welling in her eyes.

"The sawmill children may be riding Starlight but Starlight will never forget you Huia, any more than I will forget your Grandad because other people sleep in our whare and work my garden."

Huia forced a smile for Grandma and looked back to the horizon and her secret thoughts. The wind tugged at the roots of Huia's hair. No word passed between them for several minutes.

Grandma broke the silence. "Sometimes tropical cyclones sweep through the islands. Seas build. Palm fronds are torn. Coconuts fall. But they don't smash. The palm's given them tough husks; they bounce, roll and float. Sometimes tide and storm carries them to distant islands and they are thrown onto a beach with unknown driftwood. And there in the driftwood a new shoot emerges from the husk and puts down roots. A new palm is formed. It is a copy of the old palm but different with a life of its own."

Huia smiled and squeezed her hand as Grandma added, "You know I'm not talking about coconuts and palm trees don't you Huia."

“I know Grandma. You’re talking about me, about us.”

Bar room lunches were being served as Grant Fergusson sat on a bar stool in the ward room of the Victoria and Albert Yacht Club overlooking the Pacific Marina and Auckland harbour. The circle of bar room sailors were eager to help this Australian film director who had sailed all the way from Melbourne to make a documentary about New Zealand trading scows. They were eager to help but couldn’t help. A scow in Auckland was enough of an oddity for everyone to notice it. Grant had missed the boat. The scow had come in to deliver a cargo and sailed back out to sea yesterday evening. Every man at the bar was convinced he knew where it had gone. But they all gave different destinations. They were still discussing the merits of the various ports when Grant was back on board the Plume of Power. The only piece of information he gained in exchange for putting fifty dollars on the bar was that the scow left somewhere around five pm. yesterday. It was obvious what had happened. Rachael ripped off his crop, took it into Auckland, sold it and was trying to run with his money.

“How fast would the scow sail?” Grant asked Frazer.

Grant looked at the other sailing craft in the harbour before he answered. “My guess would be

about six or seven knots. But we don't know in which direction."

"It won't be overland." Grant replied as he unrolled a paper chart and spread it on the chart table using empty coffee mugs to hold it flat. "Let's say six and a half knots. They left yesterday at five pm. That's twenty one hours ago! He took a calculator out of the drawer of the chart table. Six and a half times twenty one is one hundred and thirty six point five nautical miles. Taking trammels from the drawer, he used the latitude scale on the side of the chart and opened them to two degrees and sixteen and a half minutes. Placing the point of the trammels on the marina entrance he drew a circle on the chart.

"If we've got the speed and time right Frazer, they should be somewhere on that line."

Two hours later 'Australian film and documentary maker' Grant Fergusson was drawing a fresh updated circle on a chart at the aero club. The pilot had to fly the route, and radio back the latitude and longitude of the scow when he found it.

The plane circled the scow, changed direction, and flew back towards Auckland. Huia noticed it first but Admiral Susan guessed the significance.

Grandma Arlin and Harry were in the wheel house when Susan and Huia entered with the news.

"It will have radioed our position and course." Harry observed.

“What’s our speed?” Susan asked.

Arlin glanced at the log. “Six and a half knots.”

“How fast can we go using the diesels?” Susan asked.

“Five knots.” Arlin replied and added, “If we use sail and diesel we might get seven knots right now.”

Susan cut in. “If Grant Fergusson left Auckland now he would catch us in about seven hours. If Kate is correct and he is carrying those automatic weapons we have no defense...”

Susan’s words trailed away, she had forgotten about Huia who knew nothing about the guns or men crippled with greed.

Looking skywards Arlin peered out of the wheel house windows. The mares’ tails Huia had seen earlier were thickening. The sun had become a circular disc they could look at, not an open furnace door. “The weather’s building, we’ll be pushing nine knots by dusk.” Arlin observed.

“Grant’s boat can do thirty.” Susan answered.

“Perhaps,” Arlin replied and added, “But sometimes an honest nine knots is faster than a dishonest thirty.”

“How do you work that out?” Susan asked.

Years of frustration exploded as Arlin answered. “His tupperware boat has all the sea-keeping characteristics of a floating caravan.” A grim smile flickered. “And the wind’s building!”

“Wind or calm he won’t catch us if he can’t find us.” Harry interjected and added. “All he knows is our

present position and our present course. Change that and he won't know where to look."

"Is there anywhere we can hide?" Huia asked.

"Heavy rain, fog, darkness, over the horizon," Harry answered.

Arlin banged his fist on the bulkhead. "I'm not hiding from a plastic toy boat till his diesels run on salt water."

"The Plume of Power has got radar and..." Kate's words were cut off by Arlin's "Huh! Radar's the cause of most collisions at sea."

"Radar's not much use over the horizon and wooden boats don't show up too well, especially if there's plenty of sea clutter." Harry interjected.

"What's sea clutter?" Huia asked.

"Waves, spray, heavy weather."

Admiral Susan cut in. "We're going to change course. Heavy weather will assist us and hinder Grant..."

"Someone's talking sense!" Arlin cut in.

"But how do we find heavy weather?" Susan asked.

"Go north." Arlin grunted.

"I could get a weather fax over the VHF." Roland offered.

"Huh! Made by some pasty faced university graduate on a computer in the met office I suppose." Arlin answered.

Rurenga cut in. "Arlin learned to read the sea and sky with his eyes screwed in slits rimmed in salt crystals."

"What does he look for?" Huia asked.

Harry raised his right arm and pointed. "The centre of the depression is out there."

"How do you know that?" Huia asked.

"In the Southern Hemisphere if you stand with your back to the wind and raise your right arm sideways you are pointing directly at the centre of the depression. The winds circulate in a clockwise direction round it. To the south of the depression the south westerly prevailing wind and the cyclonic winds will be in opposition and weaker. To the north they will be additive and stronger."

"Then we change course and sail north." Susan replied but before anyone could respond Roland interjected.

"We've got cell phones..."

"Which are out of range." Harry answered.

"Well radio then! Couldn't we radio the police? If we said we are going to be attacked, they'd get an Orion in the air, a coastal patrol boat..."

"And we'd give our position over the air. Grant Fergusson would like that!"

Chris cut in. "Roland has a point. It would be possible for us to radio Taupo using the short wave. But we haven't been through customs. We've ripped off a drug syndicate. Rachael may still be on their

payroll. Everything would be in the newspapers. Could we avoid TV, radio, lawyers?"

Or counsellors and social workers thought Mum as she added, "I'm sure there's less malice in the eye of a storm than in the eye of a lawyer."

Chris continued. "I'm thinking of our sea-going hospital; of Harry's shellfish research; and of our people watching tides reach further across their atolls. Should they wait until the fog of official failure blows away? We Polynesians carry the warrior gene – the risk taking gene – the gene which drove our people to explore and populate our Pacific when no one else dared. Should we hide until our genes turn in anguish and consume our flesh in anger at what might have been?"

Rurenga cut in. "Sorry Chris, I'm a European. I don't carry your risk taking gene. I'm a Dane. I carry Viking blood. Cram on the sail Chris. Head for the eye of the storm, and leave our wake for the Plume of Power to follow if he dares."

Arlin roared. "North it is then!" He spun the wheel. "The wind's building, I want safety lines above and below decks, no one goes up there without a harness."

Arlin looked towards Harry and Susan. "Harry! You and Susan rig lines on deck. Huia, I want you and Grandma to rig lines below deck, and fit lashings to the cot sides. When the sea builds we are more likely to have injuries below deck than above. I need the hatches bolted and battened, and I'll give you two hours to prepare all the hot food for the next couple of days, then we'll douse the fire."

As Susan and Harry put on oil skins Susan looked at Arlin with his legs braced against the slope of the deck. She asked him, "Would you find it easier to use automatic steering?"

"Most accidents at sea are caused by automatic steering. Put a boat on auto and no one keeps watch. A wheel has feel. The wheel tells what's wrong before the boat does."

These were the longest speeches she had ever heard from Arlin. This man was supposed to have Alzheimer's. He never knew what year it was let alone the day of the week. Despite, or perhaps because of, the water tight lockers in his brain he was running the scow and planning ahead better than an admiral.

Susan and Harry picked up a light line and a heavier rope before opening the wheel house door. A wind gust hit them as they emerged onto the spray swept deck. Thirty minutes earlier Susan had been able to talk to Huia. Now she and Harry had to shout to each other. The lee scuppers foamed as breaking waves pursued each other along the slanting deck timbers.

Clinging to the wheel house rail Harry showed Susan how to tie a clove hitch and two half hitches to secure the heavy rope to the ring bolt on the weather side of the wheel house. With the light line on his safety harness Susan put a half turn round a cleat. Holding the windward rail Harry edged along the deck as Susan paid out his safety line. Looping his safety line over a belaying pin, he attempted to cross the open deck. A wave hit him in the face as he passed the heavy rope round the fore mast. Water ran down his neck and back. As he hauled himself back another

wave struck and he found himself on his back sliding towards the lee scuppers. Putting a full turn round the cleat Susan felt Harry's full weight as the safety line took the strain. Still holding the end of the heavy line and struggling to his feet Harry hauled himself back along his safety line to the belaying pin and a handhold on the windward gunwale. At the wheel house he hauled in the heavy line and saw it tighten round the mast. Using a round turn and two half hitches he secured it to the second ring bolt on the leeward side of the wheel house. Despite oil skins even their underwear was soaked by the time they pulled the wheel house door open against the pressure of the wind. Stepping into the security of the wheel house Susan glanced at the log. It read nine knots. Wet clothes clung. She had to go below.

"Got the safety line secure?"

As Harry answered "Yes", Arlin continued, and Susan mentally groaned.

"We're carrying too much weather helm. I need to drop the main."

Reluctant to go back into the maelstrom Susan looked out, astounded by the speed of change. A predatory sky seemed to uncoil in front of her like a monster preparing to pounce. Fear spoke.

"Less sail will slow us won't it?"

"Less makes more." Arlin replied."

Alzheimer's! Susan muttered to herself as Harry stood in the hatch way and called "Sail crew on deck." In the wheel house the log still read nine knots,

as Rangī, Hemi, Nahi, Huhana Huia, Chris, Rachael and Rurenga crowded into the wheel house.

Arlin explained. "I'll need to get the pressure out of the main. I'll heave to." Susan looked blank.

Harry explained. "We'll come up wind, sheet the mizzen in hard, back the head sail, and put the wheel hard to windward. That should stop the boat and take the pressure out of the main. Then we'll drop the sail into lazy jacks and rope it down."

Susan silently decided to let her 'Admiral' status lapse as the 'sail crew' put on oil skins and clipped themselves onto the new safety line. She joined them, determined not to let anyone recognize the terror in her throat. Were they all pretending?

As Huia clung to the boom trying to tame and lash the main sail she didn't see her mother's white knuckles gripping the hand rail to climb step by step from the galley to the wheel house. Neither did she see her Mum just made the wheel house before depositing her last meal into a tea towel she had carried from the galley. Between bouts of retching into the towel Mum glanced through the wheel house window. Seas to windward became bursting bullets of brine, raking the deck before vanishing leeward in a welter of wild water. Through a window of distorted visions she saw her children, her life, spread out along the main boom. Disbelief dissolved into tears. The kids were lashing down a violent sail with rope and more guts than she could imagine. Mum's tears were tears of pride. Her children were not at home squabbling over the TV remote, or being delayed by a full length mirror, they had become Ngati Rurenga. And lawyers and counsellors were sinking below the

horizon. As if to confirm it, she looked astern to see white water washing away their tracks.

As the wheel house door opened it wasn't the blast of wind or the wet clothing Mum sensed it was confidence. They'd done it!

With the main down and the scow driving under headsail and mizzen the strain on the wheel eased, the scow was more upright. Only occasional waves washed the scuppers. Susan glanced at the log. It read a steady eleven knots. Arlin had been right. Less does make more.

The rooster plume behind Grant's boat had risen higher than the cabin top. It was his 'Plume of Power' and he wanted everyone to see it as he burned diesel through the Hauraki Gulf. The log read thirty four knots. Satisfaction grew as the distance between him and the scow closed. If those backwater Kiwis thought they could steal from him and run they would face a moment of reality before their long 'good night.'

Lying on his back in the bunk listening to the stereo the auto pilot steered a better course than he could. There was nothing on TV. Trying to talk to Frazer was a waste of time. He tried reading but threw the magazine on the floor. He couldn't even look out of the windows, salt spray obliterated every thing. In any case there was nothing to see but a sullen sky.

Even the bunk was becoming uncomfortable. The damn boat had started lurching, corkscrewing,

and slamming into waves with enough force to drive his teeth through his gums. He'd paid big dollars for stabilizers and they were not up to the job. Being thrown off his bunk convinced him to reduce speed. For the next five minutes he thought about telling the damn Kiwi boatyard what he thought about their workmanship. The log read fifteen knots. That meant he would have to spend twice as long out here. The boat yard wouldn't want to cost that out at an hourly rate!

He slowed again but the lurching got no better. Now something was wrong with the engines. They kept surging. The propellers must be lifting out of the water he decided. Obviously the boat yard put them in wrong. He slowed again. With the log reading eight knots, the jarring eased but the boat developed a gut retching wallow. A bottle hitting the cooker smashed. Frazer opened the locker door, dish washing liquid, cooking oil and bilge cleaner bottles rolled and spilled into the carpet. It may have been coincidence or the vapours rising from the carpet were stronger than Frazer's stomach in a seaway. Whatever the cause, the effect remained. Bottles rolled backwards and forwards through broken glass and Frazer's vomit. At that moment a fine spray hit Grant in the face. The windscreen had cracked. If it were to stove in The Plume of Power was in trouble

Grasping at handholds and lurching forwards Grant reached the steps down to the forward cabin. One moment he seemed to be floating in air and the next his weight doubled as the hull lifted and fell into incoming seas. Thrown against the bulkheads his hands locked onto the hand rails. He tried moving to the next step as the auto pilot and stabilizers

attempted to compensate. He didn't make it to the cabin floor before vomiting. Still retching he trod in water as his left foot touched the carpet. Daylight leaked through a split in the deck where the pulpit had been torn out. He saw the hole change shape as the deck flexed. Water replaced daylight as the bow shuddered under the weight of breaking seas. Back up the steps he lurched towards the locker behind the chart table and extracted a brandy bottle. Laying back into the sofa he unscrewed the cap, took a swig and left the locker door swinging.

Still clutching the bottle by the neck he reached the chart plotter. Scanning the menu he reached "inv" and pressed the "activate" button. The auto pilot responded and the motion changed as the boat turned to re-discover the route to the sheltered waters of the Hauraki Gulf and Auckland harbour. Grant throttled back and the log read five knots as he settled back into the sofa to devote serious attention to the brandy bottle.

Huia tried looking past fists of spray punching the wheel house window. Beyond the straining head sail black water pursued white breaking waves across the deck. She imagined the bronze mermaid laughing as she plunged into every oncoming wave and emerged lifting her head to hear the shriek of wind in rigging, and the boom and shudder as oncoming rollers broke upon the hull and swept astern.

The flash lit the wheel house. The horizon-shaking explosion struggled to escape from inside Huia's head minutes after the lightning strike vanished into blackness.

“Thank God for lightning conductors on the masts.” Harry remarked as starring eyes and the quivering voice of Roland appeared from below. “The screens on the chart plotter and the GPS went blank when the lightning struck.”

Arlin’s voice remained calm as he replied to Roland over his shoulder, “You’ll probably find the radio and radar have died as well. But I’d be a lot more worried if we’d lost my sextant.”

Panic stained Roland’s voice as he asked “How are we going to find our way?”

Harry answered. “By sun and star, the same way seamen have for hundreds of years.”

Even an unpracticed eye would see “The Plume of Power” was down at the bow as it motored into the marina keeping to the five knot speed limit past moored boats. No wake followed as it approached the wharf. A more practiced eye would spot the roll as bilge water cascaded from port to starboard and back again but would probably be unaware of the empty brandy bottle rolling across the cabin floor with each roll of the boat. The insurance company would shortly become aware of the damaged rail and bent stanchions on “Foxy Girl” which had the misfortune to be tied to the floating wharf next to the empty berth at the moment of impact. “The Plume of Power’s” twin diesels were still running in neutral as Grant stumbled onto the swaying jetty. Unsecured “The Plume of Power” drifted from the jetty into the lane between the fingers. On the cabin floor Frazer’s crook leg remained twisted into an impossible angle while

his fist clenched Grant's Agrichem credit card while the pin numbers 9999 remained indelibly etched in his brain. Drifting beyond his comprehension further bad news was gathering.

Fate is seldom generous with odds of thousands to one against. But as Grant approached the wharf Bryan Lockhart was being released from hospital after an overnight stay for 'observation' having suffered hypothermia following two hours in the tide, and two minutes watching Grant drive away from him.

The God of Impossible Odds had not only guided the stern trawler "Sea Reaper" within ten metres of Bryan's head but also tapped a deck hand on the shoulder and pointed to the bald head in the sea.

Sunlight and starlight had pursued each other eight times across the sky before the scow, under head sail, ghosted in light air towards the gap in the horseshoe atoll. The dolphins which Huia and Huhana had been watching all morning veered away. Outside the atoll Arlin dropped the sail and the scow drifted under bare poles on a light swell past white coral beaches and light surf. Having lowered the dingy on the davits Harry and Rangi rowed towards the ebb and flow of the swell at the entrance to the lagoon. Rangi rowed as Harry swung the knotted lead line to measure depth. Harry waved an OK signal and on deck Chris, Rachael, Susan, and Huhana started leaning on the capstan bars to raise the drop keel for the first time since they left the estuary.

Harry and Rangi returned with the dingy. As they climbed back on deck and secured the rope ladder, Meriana and Roland were hauling up the head sail. Regaining steerage the scow sailed for the gap in the reef. With the drop keel raised and the scow drawing only a metre they passed through the gap in the reef and anchored in the atoll's still water. The edges of the lagoon shimmered with the green reflections of coconut palms.

In light air the sun, hammering on the anvil of the deck, made it too hot for Hemi and Nahi's bare feet as they untied Te Waka from the ring bolts. By the time they put on jandals the first of the outrigger canoes had been dragged down the beach below the cluster of huts on the beach. Paddles dipped, dogs barked and pigs moved through the undergrowth behind the gardens.

Sitting astride the bowsprit Grandma and Huia watched and in a secret moment the boys wouldn't understand they both saw tears of delight drop from the eye of the little bronze mermaid.

CHAPTER 29

THE RHYTHM

As the sun slid below the horizon the sky burst into the fire of a tropical sunset. Susan and Harry sat on a fallen coconut palm. The rest of the crew and villagers gathered as Susan picked up her guitar and started to sing.

*We've come from the lands
Where too much is too little
From the place where mother's milk
Tastes of the weed
Where too many times
They've rubbed at the oil lamp
And tempted the genies of oil
To lie down.*

*And their ghosts are the wind
That blows in the dust bowls
Of dreams and delusions
Deception and tears.*

*But we've gathered together
Regrets and discarded
The fake and the falsehood
And found our new friends.*

*We bring you the people
The driftwood the scowmen
Discarded rejected
And broken or lost
But finding a new life*

Time has forgotten

*The skill of the surgeon
The hands of a nurse.
We bring you our friendship
The caution of science
The trader who's honest
The song of a friend.*

*The day that is dying
Is firing the kindling
Of tropical sunsets
And warm summer nights
As islands and scowmen
Join hands with each other
And swim with the tide
Of Ngati Rurenga.*

As Susan sang, the crew became aware of more and more stamping feet beating out the rhythm. And the rhythm spread across the lagoon out beyond the reef to the line of surf, until the cry of "Ngati Rurenga" merged into the Pacific.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The story of the scow and its crew is continued in the next book in the series.

TRADEWINDS

Published by Good Hope Publishing House

goodhope@clear.net.nz

PO Box 596 Picton New Zealand

ISBN 978-0-9864689-0-2

Having refitted a one-hundred year old trading scow, a group of three men and four women operate the vessel as a sea-going hospital to supply medical services to remote Pacific Islands. While responding to an urgent call, by chance, they discover a ketch aground inside a coral reef. By offering assistance they begin to unravel the circumstances leading to the grounding and the disappearance of a female crew member. They become involved and a series of events are unleashed which threaten to overwhelm the scow. Meanwhile cracks are forming within the relationships of the crew. Against this background they struggle to understand their own changing emotions and interpret the motives of those ashore, while trying to find a solution that will release the whole archipelago from a man-made danger evolving inside one of the lagoons.

The story of the scow and its crew is continued in the third book in the series.

TURN OF THE TIDE

Published by Good Hope Publishing House

goodhope@clear.net.nz

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Starting thousands of miles apart, two vessels converge. Aboard one vessel three fugitives are attempting to escape from the Indonesian police. The other boat crewed by two couples and a baby, carries medical supplies for a remote island hospital where hopeful refugees gather. But the Indonesian news is grim. Seamanship and intuitive cunning are the only tools available to turn the tide and restore hope to a new breed of Islanders.