

THE DANCING GYPSY

BY

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The “pub culture” a twenty-eight year old dairy farmer’s son takes with him while he’s on the run from cows, and a pregnant school-leaver, equips him poorly when he becomes entangled with the children and the sexual needs of three distinctly different women. Two of them are married and problems ricochet between them. Apart from the daunting tasks of understanding himself and working to carve a business out of native bush, not the least of his additional problems is comprehending the emotional significance of a dancing gypsy tattooed on the arm of one of the women.

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CHAPTER 1

You don't need to know my real name. Lately I've been calling myself Wayne. That should be enough for you. As it happens over the last few years I've been getting more than my share of young women largely due to mothers warning their daughters about what's likely to happen to them if they associate with guys like me.

Hopefully if anyone's looking for me they're still looking in Taranaki. Trouble always seems to be hiding in the bush waiting to ambush me. As soon as my life turns a corner Trouble says to her mates, "Here's that ex-farm boy from Taranaki. Let's trip him up and kick him in the balls just to show him he's not as smart as he thinks." Did you notice I said Trouble says to HER mates? That's how it is. Trouble is invariably female. I feel like I'm living in a war-zone. Wherever I go some woman has been there already and booby trapped the track. I guess that's why women have boobs, just to trap us guys! Look at it like this; in a war-zone you can be walking along an innocent looking path and it suddenly explodes under your feet. Stepping on a land-mine fits every description I can think of concerning women.

I've been on me Dad's farm in Taranaki but I couldn't face hosing out the milking shed one more time. I reckon those damn cows, being female, used to hang on to their shit till they saw me. Can you imagine it? You've had a few beers with the

boys the night before. Then at some impossible hour in the morning you go into the milking shed. By the time you've got your eyes to work all you can see are two rows of rear ends and tails swinging for no purpose other than splattering cow shit in my face.

Yeah! And then there was Ginger who'd just left school and got a job working at the travel agent. It wasn't my fault if she forgot to take her pill. So I told her she had to take responsibility for her own mistakes and not blame me. Then she went spastic... You'll know what women are like.

So with shitty women and shitty cows behind me I took off in my old ute with the canopy on the back. I've got a sheet of ply that provides a flat surface above the rear-wheel arches, then I can spread my sleeping bag out on that and use the space underneath for storage. I've got a gas cooker with me, but mostly I eat McDonalds. That'll be fine till my money runs out and right now it's getting low. Before I left I borrowed the petty cash box from the rugby club with a few hundred bucks in it. I'll pay them back one day when I'm a millionaire. Since then I've been bumming around in the Tararuas doing a bit of this and that and avoiding anything that looked like a bloody cow. Then I discovered a private block with some good pig and deer sign. I can always sell a bit of wild meat at the pub.

Having been thrown out of other hunting blocks this time I decided to try to do everything right. So I put on my good Swanie, instead of my old one that's got a few rips and bloodstains, and walked up to the farmhouse. It was a pretty flash place. The house stands back from the road in about five hectares of flat irrigated paddocks. On a place like this to get anywhere I suppose I'll need to polish up my image a bit.

Alongside the house there was a yard with stables and a hay barn. The paddocks were all fenced with white painted post and rail and not a fence staple in sight. It must've cost a bomb. Or more likely a land-mine! Anyway I parked in some bushes back up the road. It's only a couple of hundred metres but my old ute isn't what you'd call impressive and I'd got a

bit of vegetation in the back under my bedding. Yeah! Well you don't need to know about that. Anyway I arrived at the front door and pressed the button. I know it worked OK because I heard the door chimes ringing inside the house.

There was no answer although the windows were all open... I'd just decided no one was in when I heard what sounded like a kid.

'Mum there's someone at the door.'

'Yes I know; I'll be there in a moment.'

Yeah right! Women always seem to have a strange idea about how long a moment is. Eventually I heard footsteps and she came to the door along with the kid. They had the same blond curls and both had bare feet. I guessed the woman to be about the same age as me, twenty-eight. She was wearing a light cotton dress that showed enough cleavage to convince me her suntan extended to where her bra would be if she had been wearing one. The hem of her dress that came just above her knees left me in no doubt that exploration of her upper legs and thighs would be stimulating. Her left hand was on her daughter's shoulder in a restraining or protective mode. She was wearing both an engagement ring and a wedding ring. I'm no expert but I only have to walk past a jeweller's shop and half the single women I know want to stop and look at the rings. They never seem to learn that's my cue to dump them. Anyway this woman's engagement ring had a single large diamond on it. Assuming it wasn't a fake, it probably cost as much as a good second-hand tractor. Surprisingly she was wearing no other jewellery, not even a watch. Also there was no white mark on her left wrist to display the place where a watch is normally worn. So I guess that means she doesn't usually wear a watch which says something about a timeless lifestyle. She displayed no earrings and her ears had not been pierced. Also, as far as I could tell, she wasn't wearing any make-up. With a questioning flicker of her eyebrows and a slight uplifting of her chin she raised her eyes to meet mine. This unconscious movement was accompanied with an encouraging smile. I smiled back, and glancing down at the

kid, I gave her another smile and a conspiratorial wink. I find it always pays to make some recognition of a woman's kids.

'Good morning, I'm Wayne. I'm wondering if you'd give me permission to hunt in your back block. In exchange I'd drop you off the occasion leg of wild pork or venison.'

She paused for a moment and I saw a slight frown flicker across her forehead.

'Oh! I'm not sure what it'll involve... Still I don't see why not. I'd have to ask my husband and talk it over with him. He's in Perth in Australia right now. We exchange emails every day while he's away so I could ask him tonight and if you call back tomorrow morning I should be able to let you know.'

'That's real good of you. What time would you like me to call round?'

'Because of the time difference he replies in his evening and I read them in our morning. Say you called at about ten-thirty I should have his reply by then.'

'Thank you. That's very kind of you. You have a lovely place here.'

'There's rather more of it than we can handle. There's about a thousand acres in total but we are mainly just using the few acres of flat land round the house to graze the horses and there's an acre or so of gardens at the back of the house. We're letting most of the rest of it revert to native bush.'

They must be mad to let all that land go to waste but I'm sure that's not what they want to hear. If it really is a thousand acres it's a damn sight bigger than our family farm in Taranaki. Mind you Dad's farm used to be bigger than it is now because, when Mum took off, Dad had to sell half of it to pay her off. At least Dad's place is still a working farm.

'It's great to hear you are so dedicated to the conservation of native bush. There are so many people who just want to clear it all. I'm convinced we'll regret it when it's gone.' I backed this up with what I hoped was a friendly smile and made some complimentary comment about her daughter. I forget what I said; but I always find it pays to say something

flattering about a woman's kids to get them in a responsive mood. Next I said what a lot of potential their place has. Quite honestly there's not much else you can say about a block of bush that's not been cleared. Potential is all there is.

'It's nice of you to say so. I think it has as well but sometimes I get a few doubts, there seems so much of it. But we have plans and I suppose getting rid of animals that are causing damage to the bush could be a good start.'

'We could also make use of them. I'd be only too pleased to drop you off the odd leg of pork or venison.'

'Oh no! We won't need that; we're all vegetarians but we are still keen to get rid of the predators out of the bush to enable the birds to come back.'

To understand hunting I reckon you have to have hunted. Of course there's hunting for meat and most people can appreciate the value of that. But there's also the primeval thrill of moving ghost-like through the forest scarcely daring to breathe as you come up-wind on a prime stag. I swear you can hear your own heart beat as you see him raise his head and watch his nostrils flare as he tests the air. Finally there's that strange mixture of elation and sadness when the kicking ceases and you see blood in his mouth and nostrils and watch the light fade in his eyes. Then almost reluctantly the butcher takes over and a beast is cut into bloody lumps of meat while the entrails are left for the flies and maggots. Like I said most people can understand hunting for meat but for the life of me I can't understand why anyone would want deer and pigs or even goats hunted for no other purpose than protecting a handful of useless birds whose time had come. There are some strange people about! But I gave her the full bull-shit story about how much damage pigs and deer do to the bush and how conservation minded I am. She seemed to swallow the whole saga and nodded her approval.

So next morning, still wearing my flash Swanie and clean jeans, I called round to her place. I arrived at exactly ten-thirty which I reckoned should be just on morning tea time. It was, and I got invited in for a cup of coffee. So I left my

gumboots at the door and went into her conservatory in my socks. Her little kid, who was called Katherine, brought in a plate of freshly cooked scones and put them on the coffee table in front of me. They had already been cut in half and spread with whipped cream and blackcurrant jam. Her mother invited me to call her Jasmine. While I was getting stuck into the scones she was busy with some bloody machine in the kitchen that whirled and farted and looked more like an asthmatic steam engine than a coffee making gadget. Anyway after about five minutes she came back in with a mug of coffee on a tray along with a bowl of cream and some weird looking crystals that were supposed to be sugar and a special little pot with a spoon already in it that had “honey” written on the handle. She had a cup for herself and an explanation that she only drank home-grown herbal teas which she knew weren’t to everyone’s taste.

She sat opposite me on a sofa and curled up in the cushions with her feet under her and her left arm resting on the arm of the sofa. She pulled her skirt down to cover her knees but left her toes peeping out at me from below the hem. A shaft of sunlight rested on her toes. Her second toes were significantly longer than her big toes. The guys at the pub reckon it signifies something; the trouble is I can’t remember what it is. Probably it’s something to do with being an easy lay! Those toes peeping out at me seemed to be inviting my eyes to trace the curved outline of her legs and thighs beneath her dress. She placed her tea on the corner of a marble topped table that supported a trailing potted plant with tendrils reaching almost to the carpet.

Between taking sips of her herbal mixture she explained that she had received an E-mailed reply from her husband and he had said it would be OK for me to go hunting in their block but, because of the birds, I mustn’t take any dogs onto their place, and it was essential that I report to the house every time I entered their property and every time I left. Apparently sometimes she took their daughter into the bush and they wanted to be certain there was no possibility of a

hunting accident. Also I had to be careful not to disturb any nesting birds. Then came the catch. They also wanted me to try to get rid of all the predators which included rats, stoats and possums. Possum skins and fur were still getting a reasonable price then, although the winter skins would be better. I explained to her that getting rid of all the predators would be an impossible task because, as fast as I trapped, the area would be re-infested out of the Tararua ranges and the only way to clear the area would be to build a predator proof fence and that would cost a zillion and a half and it would still require constant maintenance and ongoing trapping.

She just said, 'Yes, we know. We've had some quotes.'

I guessed this was just an item on her wish list so, to test her out, I asked how much of her land she intended to put inside the fence and expected to get a vague 'not sure yet' so it came as a surprise when she said, 'I'd like to show you. With your farming background you might have a few more ideas as right now we're having to take the word of the contractors who have given us the quote.'

'What's the land like Jasmine?' I was trying to show interest. Well! I suppose I was interested.

'The enclosure we are proposing encompasses eight-and-a-half hectares of mainly flat land behind the house. Most of our land wouldn't be suitable as it's steep and might be subject to slips and land instability, but that area contains some regenerating scrub as well as a couple of hectares of maturing native bush. There are some surprisingly big rimu and matai in there. There's also a secluded grassy knoll. It overlooks a small lake which is a little under a hectare in area with an associated wet area at the far end. But the contractors have said it wouldn't be practical to include the lake inside the enclosure because of the difficulty of predator proofing the little stream that runs out of the end of the lake. They reckon at times of flood or drought, the integrity of the fence would be jeopardized. So I'm not quite sure where that part of the fence

would go. You see I particularly want to include the lake inside the enclosure.’

I noticed an involuntary far-away look in her eyes as she described the lake. Then she asked me if I’d ever sat and watched dragonflies.

‘Yeah! I’ve seen dragonflies.’

‘So have most people but have you ever watched them.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Have you watched them perform a vertical take-off? Did you know for example that they can fly forwards and backwards and can carry loads that current aerodynamic theory says shouldn’t be possible?’

‘No I didn’t know about that.’ Then she went on at some length to tell me about the dragonflies dancing above the reeds and how, on a still night, she was able to watch the reflection of the stars on the surface of the water shimmer as the ripples spread from an occasional fish breaking the surface. I doubt she even realised that her eyes as well as her words suggested a sensual attachment to the place. Experience has taught me to note these spontaneous insights into the subconscious.

I made a lot of mistakes before I discovered that. Even if a woman’s words are saying one thing but her eyes are telling a different story, invariably it pays to believe what you can read in her eyes.

After leaving my boarding school, which was supposed to indoctrinate me with Christian values, I burned my presentation bible and bummed out of university big time. It didn’t take me long to realize women are creatures whose lives are framed with erotic thoughts but culture dictates they attempt to suppress them. Watch their eyes and sometimes you can expose what’s brewing beneath the surface. That was brought home to me with Tanya. She was eight years older than me. I first met her at the races in New Plymouth and we got talking at the bar. At one point I mentioned that, before going home, I had to pick up some hydraulic fittings from a

place in town. It turned out it was the same place that her husband worked. As she told me I noticed a cagey movement of her eyes and a sudden increase in the rhythm of her breathing. I guessed, perhaps I just sensed... Well over a few more beers I discovered she reckoned her husband was having an affair with a woman who also worked there. Tanya had come to the races with her friend Sandra but, as Sandra had to leave early, I offered to run Tanya home. Of course it was a set-up; but at the time I was still too naive to recognise it. It was much later that I realised they had gone to the races to enable Tanya to pick up a guy. I just happened to be the lucky guy. Anyway when I dropped her off at her place she asked me in for a coffee. Well I guess we all know what that means!

She not only wanted it in the matrimonial bed but she wanted me on my back specifically on her husband's side of the bed. If I said she did all the work it would be an understatement. I was blown away by her ferocity; she rode me with all the savagery of a cornered wild animal and even drew blood with her fingernails. I saw a lot of her over the next few months. She told me of the satisfaction she got from mundane chatter with her husband in the knowledge that all the time she had my sperm squiggling inside her and he didn't have a clue about it.

One time there was no car on her drive so I walked up the path and tapped the kitchen window as usual. But her husband answered the front door. He'd just taken their car in for a service and had called in at home. My first thought was to do the key trick. You'll know the trick. I pull out my own keys and tell him I'd just picked them up outside their house and wondered if they belonged to him. Then he'd look at them and say they weren't his and then I'd say, "Sorry to trouble you. It was worth a try before I hand them in at the police station". Then, just in time, I thought better of it. You see they were still warm from being in my trouser pocket. If he touched them he'd know I hadn't just picked them up in the street. I saw Tanya standing in the doorway behind him. She shook her head to me. Instead of my keys I pulled out my cell-phone.

‘Good afternoon Sir. I’m doing a door-to-door survey on fluoridation of the town water supply.’

‘What’s fluoridation?’

‘Oh! Minute amounts of fluorine compounds can be added to the town water supply. It seems to increase the amount of enamel on people’s teeth and prevent tooth decay. It is considered particularly beneficial for children but many people only want pure uncontaminated water. The subject is controversial. What do think?’

Tanya, standing behind him rolled her eyes at me.

‘Can’t say I care much either way.’

‘Thank you Sir. Then I’ll put you down as a two.’ As I said it I punched a letter two onto my cell-phone.

‘What does a two mean?’

‘It’s just an app I’ve got on my phone. I punch in one for opposed two for undecided and three for supporting fluoridation. The cell phone automatically takes an average and if the average is above two then we know most people support the proposal.’

‘What’s the cell-phone saying now?’

‘It’s just on two. That means, like you, most people are undecided.’

He then made some comment about how much people could do with their phones. I could see Tanya bite her lip as deep lines appeared on her forehead. Just out of devilment I said, ‘I know you don’t I? I’m sure I’ve seen you at the hydraulic place in town.’

‘Yes that’s right. Sorry I can’t remember all our customers.’

‘Oh that’s OK. When I go I usually try and see that sexy looking Chinese girl. Do you know the one I mean? I can’t remember her name?’

He looked decidedly uneasy. ‘Oh! You must mean Tammy.’

‘Yes! That’s it. Tammy! Gee if I worked there I’d be into her like a rat up a drainpipe. She’s got a great figure hasn’t she?’

‘Yes! I suppose she has now you mention it. You’ll have to excuse me as I’ve got to go back to work and I guess you’ve got more survey work to do.’ I couldn’t help grinning to myself at the look of fear in his eyes as I said what a good figure Tammy has. Before he shut the door Tanya, who was still standing behind him, winked at me and flicked her head towards the bedroom. The tip of her tongue protruded between her lips. In, out, in out, I guess we all know what that means!

I walked downtown, went into a cafe, bought a coffee and sat in the window seat where I would be able to see him walk past on his way back to work. It took about forty-five minutes before I was able to get back to Tanya. The near miss with her husband left her supercharged. It was great but unfortunately that was one of the last times I had her and it was nothing to with her or her husband. A couple of weeks later she rang me. She had missed her period but was going to leave it a week or two before she told her husband. Apparently if she told him now he’d know for certain it couldn’t be his but over the next couple of weeks she’d make sure the problem was resolved. You’ll know what I mean! I guess one of the good things about having it with married women is that the husband can be led to assume the baby is his, so everything ends up clean and tidy. That’s more than can be said about single women. By coincidence, at the same time I’d been having a similar spot of bother with Ginger who had forgotten to take her contraceptive pill and was trying to blame me. “A spot of bother” is quite an underestimate of the situation, but I won’t bother you with that. She wasn’t very mature and I guess her problem was probably something to do with female hormones. She’ll probably come right when the baby arrives. Anyway I needed to be out of the way till Ginger calmed down. But if I get back to New Plymouth I’ll be looking for Tanya and her naughty-girl wink. I’m not one to leave a genuine fallen angel to fade out of sight in a box of memories.

Sorry I got digressed there. But there was something in that reflex movement of Jasmine’s eyes that told me other thoughts were percolating beneath the surface that had nothing

to do with the predator fence which apparently they could only afford to do in stages. In the meantime they would love me to make a start on thinning out the vermin. Then she asked if I was likely to be free tomorrow around the middle of the day to go and look at the area they planned to enclose.

Of course I agreed. I didn't have anything else to do. She went on to explain her husband was a mine safety inspector and was working a month-on and a month-off out of Perth and he flew back home for his four week break. I figured that meant she was probably going for a whole month without getting it. If I had to call round every time I went in or out of the bush... Well you don't need to be a genius to work that one out. On the wall behind her I could see a photo of them in swim suits on the beach holding little Katherine's hands. The photo must have been taken a year or two ago because Katherine was smaller then. He was just a little guy with no meat on him and a bicycle-frame for a body. His bird's beak of a nose stuck out beneath frameless glasses topped with bushy eyebrows and a bald head. He had to be a lot older than her and I guess that meant... Well you know as well as I do what that meant and I'm talking here about sexual vigour. While my brain was manoeuvring its way through possibilities I realised she was still talking. I had to drag her last few sentences back out of my subconscious and piece them together to get the drift of what she'd been saying.

Apparently she had only owned the place for about a year. The wife of the previous owner had been seriously into dressage. Then there had been a marriage break up and the whole place complete with eight horses, ten stables and a huge tack room had been put up for auction by the bank. This seemed a good moment to show some interest. I find it usually pays to use a woman's name instead of the impersonal "you".

'So Jasmine, what do you do with eight horses?'

'That's a bit of a problem. I don't really want to sell them as they seem so at home here but it's not just the cost of feed and getting the farrier every few weeks or cleaning the

stables and the paddocks, they also need exercising and quite honestly I don't have the time or the skills to...'

'Why don't you run a riding school? Then you'd get a bit of cash coming in from the customers and your horses would get a work out.'

'That's what my husband says, but neither of us have the time or skills. In fact I'm not really convinced I know how to put all the tack on correctly. There are so many straps and buckles...'

'I could run it for you and we could split the profit.'

'Do you have the skills to...?'

'You're talking to an ex-farm boy from darkest Taranaki! I can do any damn thing from riding rodeo to sweet-talking a gaggle of giggly girls who are poised between grooming horses and discovering boys.'

I chatted her up for an hour or so, as a shaft of sunlight reached through the glass of the conservatory and I followed its path as it slid from her toes and onto her more interesting curves. If she wasn't dumb; she'd have known. Only two things hold most married women back. One is lack of opportunity and the other is fear of their husbands if they are found out. With her husband in Perth for months at a time these expeditions were looking more promising by the minute. Then her daughter Katherine skipped in, took a scone off the table, and skipped out again without saying a word. Gee! If I'd done that when I was her age and my Mum was talking to some guy she would have clouted me round the ears. But Jasmine didn't say a word. That kid could be a problem if I wanted to get Jasmine on her own.

'It must be hard for Katherine having to go for a whole month without seeing her Dad.'

'Yes. It's tough on me too. But on Tuesdays and Thursdays a group of five mothers get together and we organize a bit of a playgroup for a dozen or so of the local children. That way Katherine gets to interact with people other than just me. We take it in turns to have the children at each

others place. I drop her off at ten and pick her up at three so it gives me a chance to get on with other things.'

As she said it I realised tomorrow Katherine would be at her playgroup in the middle of the day and that was the time Jasmine had asked me to go and have a look at her land.

The next day we went through her vegy garden at the back of the house. There was a patch of freshly dug soil and I was surprised to see how unusually black the soil was compared with the other soil in the region. Also as far as I could see it was totally devoid of stones. We started off along a well worn trodden earth track through the regenerating bush. In the places where the grass had been scraped away I noticed the same black soil I had seen in the garden. She told me that at night the sides of the track were lit up with glow-worms to such an extent that she found it hard to imagine she wasn't looking at the night sky. This left me imagining what she was up to out here at night! Eventually we met up with the line that marked the proposed predator fence.

It was hot. We were able to keep in the shade most of the way. The path never wandered very far from the slow moving stream that meandered towards the gardens. A number of trees had already been marked with orange paint to indicate they would have to be cut down when the fence was constructed. Whoever had marked out the route seemed to have done a reasonable job keeping within the natural contours by enclosing only the flat land before the hills rose up at the back. I could see the problem trying to enclose the lake inside the fence because of the stream running out of the end. It would be bad enough trying to make it stock proof let alone predator proof. At times of flood or low water that crossing would be a problem. A thought was beginning to run through my mind so I just told her it might be a-bit-of-a-snag and said I'd have a think about it and try to come up with a solution. I knew that's what she wanted to hear. After walking up a gradual incline the track wove its way through grassland that was knee high in buttercups and clover. We reached the top of her secluded grassy knoll. It was about three metres above the

lake level. The ground sloped away on either side in two arms which seemed to be surrounding and cradling the lake. It was as if the water was being held in two giant cupped hands with the tips of the fingers trailing away to the reed beds at the far end to meet the outflow from the lake.

She had bare feet and was wearing a white cotton dress. With the sun behind her the shafts of sunlight made her skirt translucent and I could trace the outline of her thighs through the cotton. We stood for a few moments looking at the lake then we sat down in the buttercups.

Turning to me she said 'This is a very special place. At least it is for me.'

'Why do you find it special Jasmine?'

Looking at me and smiling she said, 'For the same reason that you do.'

'What do you mean Jasmine? I haven't said anything about it.'

'I know but when you sat down here and looked at the lake you did the same as everyone else does.'

'Did I? What's that?'

'You started speaking in a much lower voice. Everyone walks along the track speaking in their normal voice but when they sit down here their voice drops to little more than a whisper. You sense the intimacy of the place the same as I do. That's one reason why I want to add it to the enclosure.'

As I see it, when women talk about intimacy all they really mean is they need a good shag. Perhaps she sensed what I was thinking because she continued to explain.

'Sometimes, when there's a big high sitting over the country and we get those lovely clear skies followed by a warm windless dusk, as a treat I bring Katherine up here and we listen to the sounds of the forest and try to identify the birds and insects by the sounds they make. At those times I feel very close to her. Sometimes, perhaps on a stormy night, when I'm tucking her up in bed before she has her goodnight kiss we make up stories about what the creatures in the forest

are doing. We've even given the birds and insects names and characters although, by and large, we only know them by the occasional fleeting glimpse and the sounds of the night. At bedtime when the full-moon is rising and it peeps in through Katherine's bedroom window she wants me to leave her curtains open because it's her story-telling-moon and she has decided the moon wants to listen to the stories. Silly things like that are examples of what I mean by intimacy.'

'This place is important to you isn't it?'

'Yes and so is intimacy. In fact I believe intimacy is the most important and least recognised commodity in the whole world. If it was left to me wealth would be measured by it. I'm convinced some of the richest and most powerful people in the world are starving for lack of intimacy and as a result are leaving a trail of destruction behind them. Some people spend their lives working their way through every substitute they can imagine. Some people die never having discovered all their substitutes are counterfeit because intimacy with another human being has no substitute.'

'What do you mean by substitutes Jasmine?'

'We all have our surrogates, don't we? I'm convinced there are lots of examples of testosterone cowboys stampeding their way through life because they've failed to engage the emotions they need.'

I couldn't make up my mind whether she was saying she did or didn't want a shag or was driving at something else. 'What sort of substitutes do you have in mind Jasmine?'

'From what I've seen of the world it could include: religion, drugs, pornography, politics, pets, prostitutes, gambling, money, sex, self-harm, the list just goes on and covers most...'

She broke off mid-sentence and laughed, 'Oh! This is all much too serious. If you're game I'm going for a skinny-dip. Do you want to join me?'

Without waiting for an answer she started to undress and I wasn't slow to do the same. As she bent over to put her clothes in a pile in the grass she answered one of the things I

had been wondering about. Yes! Her suntan really did extend over her entire body. There were no strap marks over her shoulders and no white patch over her arse. There was however a slight paling of the tan under her boobs and on the inside of her arms. So I was damn sure it was a genuine all-over suntan not a sunbed job.

As we walked through the grass to the lake I made the comment, 'You've got a great suntan Jasmine.'

'Yes, I spend a lot of time outside in the vegy garden. I like to grow all our own fruit and vegetables then we can be sure they are organic and haven't been contaminated with chemicals. I don't like anything in or on my body that's not natural. Our garden is totally secluded, like the lake, so in this weather there doesn't seem any point in wearing unnecessary clothing. And the sun on my skin makes all the vitamin D my body needs.'

Together we swam breaststroke side-by-side out to the middle of the lake and chatted all the way. She explained that she particularly wanted to include the lake inside the predator proof enclosure as this would protect the water birds that nested in the reeds at the far end of the lake and the other birds that came down to the water to drink. She also went on to tell me she had several sun-loving friends who also liked to spend time here, swim in the lake enjoying the natural environment and the freedom of not needing to wear clothes. It turned out they were the same group of mothers that formed the child minding circle. She made the comment that the predator proof fence would also keep out human predators. At this point I decided the real reason for the enclosure was her desire to construct an invitation only nudist colony and the bird sanctuary must be a decoy. She kept talking about her naturist friends and their families. I must admit I got confused and couldn't remember which one was which and I was beginning to wonder whether they were a group of tree hugging lesbians or a witches' coven dancing in a circle at midnight on her grassy knoll. Yeah! Well I got that wrong. But that comes later.

While we were treading water out in the middle of the lake she asked me if I had noticed there was a stream running out of the lake and no stream feeding it. I hadn't noticed but she went on to explain without waiting for a reply.

'My friend Jan first noticed it. Both she and her husband are geologists originally from Norway. They're a very interesting couple. Mind you we don't see Thor very often as he spends a lot of his time overseas. They both have PhDs and are employed by a Norwegian firm of consultants. They've been over here supervising the exploratory work on the new gas fields around Taranaki and in other places as well. I can't remember where they all are. Thor's the big boss when he's here. He has a team of Kiwis working under him, but he's also supervising geological survey work in other places round the world at the same time. So we don't see him very often. They have a four-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son who were both born here. So Jan only works part-time from home doing some of the data processing and occasionally she goes out on local field-trips. She's one of the group of mothers who contribute to our playgroup; so she comes here fairly often and has taken quite an interest in the lake. According to Jan there's an underground spring feeding it. Apparently some of the rain falling in the ranges trickles down through the rocks and gravel and comes out as spring water right under our lake. She reckons it could take up to two years filtering its way under ground until it gets here. That's why the lake is so clear. We run some of the water from the outflow through a pipe and it supplies the house and gardens as well as providing all the water for the horses and hosing out the yards. The spring comes up more or less directly beneath where we are now.'

I asked how she knew where it came up and she told me her little Katherine had worked it out. She went on to explain.

'One night while we were sitting here looking at the gigantic rotating wheel of the stars and the reflection of those stars on the surface of the lake Katherine noticed that the stars here, in the middle of the lake, were shimmering and the other

ones weren't. Then she asked if that was because our spring was ruffling the surface. When we got back down to the house I asked Basil about it and he said he was sure Katherine was right and she had correctly identified the position of the spring.'

'You have a very astute daughter Jasmine.' As I said that I touched her hand but she drew it away making it clear she didn't want any physical contact with me. But she smiled and said, 'I'll race you back.' And she did. With her freestyle she was back on the shore getting dressed while I was little more than half-way there. It's a bit bloody deflating for a farm boy from Taranaki to be beaten by a woman. I guess that's why she did it. But it was also a bit of a surprise. I'd call it an enigma. OK they ain't all like Tanya but in my experience, given the opportunity with a regular guy who is more or less their own age, most women will flirt. In this case Jasmine didn't hesitate about coming up here alone with me in the bush, she had even suggested skinny-dipping and apparently had no problem with undressing in front of me. Yet as soon as I touched her hand she pulled it away and took off back to the shore like a rabbit escaping from a snare. You can't tell me she suggested coming up here to go skinny-dipping and not been aware of both the implications and the possibilities. I guessed she was playing catch-me-if-you-can. And at the speed she can swim I don't stand a chance, at least not in the water. I guess it's a bit like the angler who is winding in a lure. He spots a fish following the lure so he speeds up the retrieval and the fish becomes excited, takes the bait and is hooked. Yes, and once the hook is driven home, if it's a specimen fish, it needs to be played before it's landed. Or did I have it all wrong? I didn't attempt touching her again.

'You're a great swimmer Jasmine.'

'You could say it's the sign of my misspent teenage years. I was in a volunteer surf life-saving club. I think the main attraction was the fact that there were about equal numbers of guys and girls in it. We spent most of the days on the beach in and out of the water and the evenings were party

time. To support our life-saving we also did a St John's first aid course and I kept that up for quite a few years after I dropped out of the surf life-saving. First aid has proved a lot more useful than being a partied-out beach-bum. But I still enjoy swimming.'

Jasmine led the way back along the track. We walked in single file without speaking. With her bare feet on the trodden earth path she seemed to be moving between the trees as noiselessly as a shadow. My gumboots clumped and complained at every step. Normally when walking behind a woman who's wearing a translucent summer dress, and very little else, I'd be mentally undressing her. Well to be honest I probably was on that occasion but, as unlikely as it seems, my mind also kept drifting back to what she had told me about Katherine. It was an image that seemed so alien yet Jasmine spoke of it as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I'm talking here about a mother taking her daughter into the bush at night just to listen to the sounds of the forest, or sitting on Katherine's bed and the two of them making up bedtime stories about the forest creatures while the story-telling moon listens in. My mother image is of a constantly angry woman who smacked her kids round the head for nothing, swore at her husband in drunken rages and deliberately smashed things. I regretted nothing when she took off with someone else, except Dad had to sell all the land down by the river just to pay her off.

As we walked through the vegy garden behind the house she asked, 'Do you like strawberries?'

Of course I said 'Yes'. Lifting up the hem of her clean white dress to use as a container she picked a dozen or so and took them into the kitchen while I sat down in the conservatory. A couple of minutes later she came in with strawberry stains on her skirt, spoons and two bowls of strawberries and yogurt which she assured me was home-made.

‘I’ve just put the jug on. Would you like some tea or a coffee? I’ve still got half-an-hour or so before I need go to pick up Katherine.’

‘Oh Thanks! A cup of tea would be great as long as I’m not holding you up.’ As I said it I remembered the time it took for her coffee farting machine to make coffee. Although I’d have preferred coffee I decided to settle for tea, figuring it would be quicker. As I said it I realised that if anyone else had asked me I’d have said, ‘Coffee please’ and wouldn’t have given a damn about the time it took. But I was starting to realise Jasmine wasn’t just anyone else. I think it must have been because of the way she’d talked about Katherine.

OK! I don’t expect you to understand, I don’t either!

I left Jasmine’s place a few minutes before her. I know because she passed me in her car as I was almost back at my ute. She was wearing a different dress.

I must have been turning the idea over in the back of my mind without realising I was doing it. It wasn’t till I started walking back along her drive that suddenly it all came together. The clues had been there all the time. First there was the stoneless black soil in her garden, then the flat land with the grassy knoll, the regenerating bush and the spring beneath the lake. I couldn’t think why it hadn’t occurred to me before. It was so obvious. The lake was artificial. Once this had been a swamp and, judging by the age of the regenerating bush, about forty or fifty years ago some previous owner had gone up there with an excavator and dug out the bottom of the swamp till they found the spring. He must have used the spoil to build up the sides of the lake and dumped the remainder to create Jasmine’s grassy knoll. Presumably he must have dug out a drainage channel that became the stream running out of the lake. The net result of all that work is about twenty acres of good agricultural land and a lake instead of useless wet-land. A couple of question skipped through my subconscious. Did Jasmine have any idea that the lake was almost certainly artificial? If she was told would it detract from her image of the place? I decided it probably wouldn’t be wise to tell her in

case it hadn't occurred to her. Feeling pleased with myself because I'd worked it all out, I drove to the supermarket in town and bought a notebook, pencil, ruler and a rubber. I had some work to do and I wanted to get it finished ready for the next morning.

CHAPTER 2

At ten-thirty I arrived back at Jasmine's place clutching my notebook. I rang the bell and Jasmine answered.

'Hi Jasmine! After I left you yesterday I started thinking about the problem of including the lake inside your predator proof fence and...'

'Oh! It's nice to see you again Wayne. Come on in for a bit and have a cup of coffee.'

I was tempted to ask, "Come on in for a bit of what?" but thought better of it. Instead I just said, 'Thanks that would be great providing I'm not holding you up.'

'Oh no Wayne. You're not holding me up at all.'

As I pulled off my gum boots to go inside she added, 'I'd be pleased to hear any suggestions you're making.'

I thought to myself, Any suggestions? The suggestions I'd like to make are probably not what you had in mind. They can come later after I've softened you up a bit! Instead I answered, 'I've been thinking about what your contractor said about the problem of predator proofing your lake. I think they've missed an important point which could make all the difference between doing it and not doing it.'

As I sat down in the same chair in the conservatory she replied, 'That sounds hopeful Wayne. I'll just get some coffee on the go and then I'll be all ears.'

'The idea occurred to me when we went up there to have a look. The problem's not as difficult as the contractors are making out.'

'Why's that?'

'Remember you told me about your lake being fed from an underground spring?'

'Yes.'

'You also told me the water would take two years filtering through the ground before it gets to the lake.'

'Yes. That's what my friend Jan says. At least she said it could be that long. You ought to talk to her about it; she's a geologist. Technically she's my neighbour. By road we live

about six kilometres apart but her land runs up to the ridge line and as our land also goes along the same ridge line we have a common boundary fence. So she's got quite an interest in the flow of underground water inside these hills.'

'Well if the lake is being fed by an underground spring a sudden rain storm or drought will hardly make any difference to the flow of water into the lake from the spring. The water flowing in will stay more or less the same all the year round.'

'Yes but heavy rain in the hills will still run down as surface water and flood into the lake.'

'No Jasmine I don't think it will. That's the mistake I think the contractors made when they decided to put the whole thing into the too hard basket. You see I had a good look at your lake yesterday. You have that grassy knoll and on either side of it two arms encompass the whole lake except for the outflow from the lake which is of course at the outflow end. More or less the only rain that'll get into the lake will be what falls directly into it. Because of the grassy knoll and its two arms stretching round the lake, run-off from the hills will pass either side of the lake but not run into it. I think most of the surface water from the hills will join the stream from that side creek below the lake, not via the lake, and then it will simply travel down the stream bed on its way to the sea.'

'Yes you could well have a point there Wayne. I don't think any of us considered that. But what about the rain that falls directly into the lake won't that...?'

'I'm coming to that. You said the lake is about a hectare in size.'

'Yes. In fact I think it's a little under that.'

'OK let's assume it is a hectare for the time being. That's ten-thousand square metres right?'

'Yes.'

'Now what's the heaviest rain you're likely to get round here?'

'I dunno.'

‘Well, for the sake of saying something, let’s assume its a hundred millimetres in twenty-four hours. That would be pretty heavy even for Taranaki. One-hundred millimetres falling onto a ten-thousand square metre area would be one-thousand cubic metres of water in twenty-four hours. That works out as about eleven litres per second. That’s not an impossible amount. I’m just a farm-boy from Taranaki not an engineer but I reckon if the pipe had a reasonable fall on it that flow of water would all go through a length of a hundred millimetre diameter pipe. You’d need to get an engineer to check that but even if you needed two or even three pipes it wouldn’t be impossible.’

‘OK but how does that help?’

‘I reckon you need to cap one end of the pipe and drill hundreds of say six millimetre holes in the last two or three metres of it. Then that end is laid so that it slopes down into the lake and you make sure the water totally covers that end of the pipe and all the little holes drilled in it. Then we bring the rest of the pipe out at the shallow end of the lake by the existing outflow. After that we can back fill and cover the existing outflow with soil and as long as we provide enough fall on the downstream end of the pipe all the water will flow out of the pipes and a predator proof fence could be built across the place where the outflow used to be.’

‘What was the point of capping the end of the pipe and drilling all those holes in it?’

‘It’s to make the pipe predator proof. If it was just a pipe, a predator like a stoat or a rat could crawl or swim up the pipe and get into the lake but if the end is capped it would have to be a pretty small predator that could get through six millimetre holes under water.’

‘I’m really glad I showed you the lake yesterday. I think you may have come up with a solution that the contractors seem to have missed. Thank you Wayne.’

‘I’ve done a sketch showing how I think it could be done.’ I opened my notebook to show her the drawings. She

sat next to me on the sofa as I pointed out how I thought the pipe should be laid.

‘If it’s OK with you Wayne I’d like to put your book through the scanner and email a copy to Basil in Australia. I’m sure he’ll be more than interested and want to talk to you about it when he gets home in a couple of weeks.’

‘Yeah! That’s fine.’

‘While I’m thinking about it, I wonder if you’d mind if I also send a copy to my friend Jan. She’s the Norwegian geologist I told you about yesterday. Whenever she comes round the conversation often drifts round to the predator fence. She’s almost as interested in it as I am. I’d love to know what she thinks. Do you think you could explain it to her as well? Because of the work she does with oil and gas she has lots of experience of working with pipes.’

‘Of course, it’ll be a pleasure.’

‘I’m sure it will.’ Jasmine gave me a smile. ‘She’s a very attractive woman.’

I faked a gasp. ‘Oh dear, I’m just a farm boy from Taranaki, I don’t think I could handle being with two beautiful women at the same time!’

‘Don’t worry Wayne. If you collapse under the strain we’ll call an ambulance!’

‘I’d prefer you to give me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.’

‘OK! The ambulance driver is a friend of mine, I’ll get him to do it for you.’

‘That’s not quite what I had in mind.’

‘Really! Then what did you want?’

‘What do I want? I want to lift the lid on my box of fantasies.’

‘Then you might get an opportunity this afternoon. My friend Jan usually brings her children round on Wednesday afternoons on the way home from her shopping. She keeps a dozen or so milking goats on her place and she uses the goats’ milk to make cheese which we buy from her. It’s real nice cheese and she makes it from a traditional Norwegian recipe.

Being vegetarians we get through quite a bit; so her weekly deliveries are quite opportune.'

'So she's likely to be coming this afternoon.'

'Yes she usually drops by at about three-thirty and only stays for about forty-minutes or so. It's just long enough to have a coffee after the shopping and give the children a couple of biscuits or a scone to tide them over while she gets them home and starts preparing dinner. Would you be free to stay for a bite of lunch and explain to her your suggestion about the outflow from the lake?'

I glanced at my watch; it had just turned eleven-thirty. I know what I'd like to do with her in the next few hours but not wanting to push my luck I just made a neutral observation. 'That's a few hours away. Is there anything I could do for you in the meantime?'

'Yes there is, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. I mentioned to Basil that you've had a lot of experience with horses and we discussed the possibility of setting up a riding school. Basil is very keen on the idea. In the tack room at the end of the stables there are helmets, saddles and crates full of straps and buckles and all sorts of horse gear. I haven't a clue what most of them are for. Some of it looks quite worn to me and might need replacing. I expect some of it is just for dressage and might not be suitable for a riding school. I'm sure some of the horses will need different sizes of gear and I couldn't even imagine how many sets of anything we've got. I suppose we'll have to spend some money if we go ahead with the riding school idea. We might even find there's some stuff we don't need and could sell. But right now we've no idea what financial outlay would be required. If you could make a start on a stock audit it would give us some idea about what's involved.'

'Yes, sure, I could make a start on it. It sounds as if there's a fair bit to do; so I doubt if I can get it finished in two or three hours.'

'Even making a start would be fantastic providing its not too much trouble. But, before you start, would you like to

have another coffee and a bit of vegetarian lunch with Katherine and me. I've still got some of Jan's goat cheese left so, if it appeals, you could sample some of that.'

'That sounds great.'

'Katherine is usually ready for her lunch about midday. I put a loaf in the bread-maker earlier so, if you'd like to have a look at the paper for a few minutes, I'll slip out to the garden with Katherine and we'll try to find something else nice for lunch. We'll probably only be about five minutes.'

As I picked up the newspaper Jasmine added, 'You might be interested to look at page three. It contains an article about the geological investigation that Jan and Thor have been doing. I've only scanned the article. I haven't read it properly yet. Jan's been getting their report printed ready for release to the minister next Monday. She says it's highly confidential because of the financial implications. But I don't know any more about it than that. Jan's keeping the whole thing under wraps. The newspaper report is probably just "stirring-the-pot" as they can't know what the report says yet. There's a photo of Thor but it has to be an old one because he's been busy overseas for ages. Have a look and see what you think. I'm just off to get some lunch. We won't be long.'

I turned to page three. The article took up about two-thirds of the page. At the top was an obviously staged picture of Thor Jorgensen holding a raised geologist's hammer. It was under the caption, "THOR'S HAMMER ABOUT TO FALL".

The article continued:

Nordic mythology depicts the thunder god Thor as the bringer of gifts. Will this Thor bring us a wealth of oil and gas, or a geological disaster with contaminated ground water and increased risk of earthquakes and geothermal activity?

At an estimated cost of ten million dollars the Norwegian geologist Dr Thor Jorgensen has been heading a major geological survey on the rocks beneath Taranaki and other regions in the North Island. After five years research, his confidential report will be handed to cabinet this week. The future is poised under his hammer as Dr Jorgensen refuses to

release any indication of the contents of that report despite the fact it affects us all. The contentious issue is fracking. "Fracking" is a made-up-word combining the words "fracturing" and "cracking". This is what the oil companies want to do to the rocks beneath our feet to enable a greater quantity of oil and gas to be extracted. The oil industry is adamant it is a safe and proven technique. But reports arriving daily at our desk from around the world indicate massive problems arising from fracking. Are we being deceived? Is it, as one reporter suggested, "Enough to make the hills tremble"? Is our future poised under the hammer of a foreign geologist and his secret report, or has a decision to go ahead already been made? Despite the fact we have again been assured by the Minister that, "No decision on new areas has been made and none will be made until Dr Jorgensen's report has been studied" our office has received reports that for several...

I didn't read any more as Katherine came back to tell me her mum was putting lunch on the kitchen table. Then she asked me if I was going to wash my hands first. I must admit washing my hands wasn't the top of my priorities. I guess she'd been taught people had to wash their hands before eating so, to save undermining Jasmine, I did as Katherine suggested and let her point me in the direction of the washbasin. For the first time in my life I was allowing a four-year-old girl to manipulate me!

I suppose the lunch would be OK if you happened to like vegetarian tucker but a couple of steak pies and a jug of beer would be a hell of an improvement. It's no wonder her husband looks such a skinny runt if that's what she usually feeds him. I suppose the bread and goat cheese was eatable and at least it was free. The free bit was significant as the cash I'd (sort of) borrowed from the rugby club was just about gone. I needed to sell a pig or a deer soon or end up skint.

After lunch I picked up my notebook and pencils and Jasmine took me over to the tack room next to the stables.

Most of the gear was in crates marked lot 26, lot27, etc. right up to lot46. She explained the horse gear was originally going to be sold at auction but she and her husband had put in an offer to buy the whole estate as is, and the auction was cancelled.

Jasmine wanted me to go through, what she called an audit, and sort out how many sets of useable equipment we had, and estimate of how much work needed to be done on the older gear and how much new stuff she'd have to buy and what it might cost.

'There's at least a week's work sorting all that out Jasmine. Most of the leather work needs cleaning and oiling...'

'Well if you have the time and don't mind doing the work I'm sure we should be able to work out a reasonable hourly rate for the job. If you have a look through the gear and estimate of how much work is involved, I'll let Basil know by email and I expect we could agree on something that's satisfactory for both of us. Does that sound OK to you?'

'Yes that's fine.'

'I'll leave you to it then Wayne. If you hear Jan's car on the drive come back up to the house. Otherwise we'll give you a shout. I'd like you to meet Jan and explain to her your idea about the predator fence. I know she'll be interested.'

All the gear was hopelessly mixed up. It seemed to have been thrown at random into the crates. If I found one stirrup leather then I had to rummage through all the other crates to make up a matching pair. Then it was a job of collecting lengths of baling twine from the nail on the hayshed wall and tying the two leathers together, before looking for the next pair. Racing saddles, pack saddles, western saddles, stock saddles, cart saddles all of assorted sizes as well as two horse collars with the straw stuffing spilling out and harness racing gear littered the loft and spilled out of the crates. Almost all of it needed cleaning and oiling. Much of it was covered in a white powdery mildew. There was some excellent gear that looked in new condition but the majority of it would need to have stitching replaced. I suspect some previous owner

couldn't resist buying any piece of second-hand horse gear they could find regardless of its condition, or whether it was needed, or fitted any of the other gear. Some of the leathers were broken, cracked and worn and the only sensible place for them was in the rubbish bin. Some of the bits needed either replacing or re-plating as the plating was coming off and would cut a horse's mouth. Most of the helmets needed replacing and a selection of sizes purchased. Just as I'd decided there would be at least two weeks work trying to make any sense of this lot I heard tyres on the gravel. Looking up I saw a late model four-wheel drive Volvo pulling up outside the house. A woman I assumed to be Jan was getting her two children out of their seat belts. The children seemed to know where they were going. As soon as they were out of the car they both ran up towards the house without waiting for their mother. Jan picked up a shoulder bag slipped it onto her shoulder and taking a jute shopping bag out of the back of the car carried it up to the house.

I picked up my notebook and as I started to walk towards the house, Jasmine and Katherine appeared at the ranch-slider leading to the conservatory. Jan was just handing the shopping bag to Jasmine as I arrived. I presume it contained the goat cheese. Jasmine introduced me. I'm six-foot and I found myself at eye-level with Jan's black eyes. She held out her hand. Some women have slender hands with fingers tapering to painted petals where their nails ought to be. Jan's hands weren't like that. She had the hands of a woman who knew how to use tools. When we shook hands our hands met as equals. Her grip was firm and almost masculine. She wore a watch on her right wrist. I guess that probably meant she was left-handed. You can often discover a woman's personality from the style of watch she wears. Jan's watch had a practical stainless steel bracelet. The watch-face was black with white hands and numbers. I've found people who spent a lot of time outdoors prefer watches with matt-black faces as they give less reflection when viewed in direct sunlight. Jan was wearing a practical watch devoid of fancy trimmings. She

had black hair. The roots of her hair were black. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were black. I'd assumed Norwegians all had blue eyes with blond hair and a fair skin. It shows how wrong it is to jump to conclusions because she had olive skin. Her straight hair had been pulled back into a single plait which in turn had been coiled up in a bun. Obviously she was a woman who didn't want her hair getting in her eyes but still wanted long hair presumably so she could let it down at times. She wore stretchy black jeans with a wide belt which was probably intended to emphasise her narrow waist and her very feminine pelvic bones. Her white blouse had short sleeves and buttoned up down the front. Both the two top buttons were undone exposing a generously supported and suntanned cleavage, made all the more eye catching because of the contrasting effect of her white blouse and the shadow beneath her boobs. The suntan extended down her arms to the tips of her fingers which terminated in trimmed fingernails devoid of paint. They were the hands of a woman who had work to do and her left hand supported a single gold wedding ring. But at the top of her right arm, just below the sleeve on her blouse, a tattoo of a dancing gypsy woman suggested to me there might be another side to Dr Jan Jorgensen's personality. The only other jewellery she wore was a large pair of gypsy style gold rings in her ears. Despite her calm exterior I was starting to suspect if I could find a way to light the blue touch paper she could provide some spectacular fireworks. I glanced at Jasmine with her blond curly hair and blue eyes and back at Jan. A silly jingle skipped across my mind, "Blue eyes say love me or I'll kill myself; while black eyes say love me or I'll kill you!"

As Jasmine introduced me I noticed Jan's eyes gave a questioning glance towards Jasmine. I've seen that glance before and I know what it means. I guess you do as well. It asks, "What is this guy doing at your place while your husband is away? Is there something going on here that I don't know about?" Perhaps Jasmine sensed the unspoken question because she explained.

‘Wayne has had a lot of experience with horses so Basil and I have asked him to try sorting out that jumble of riding gear in the tack room so we can look into the possibility of setting up a riding school.’

Jan glanced at me and I suspect she was looking for an answer to the imagined question, “Is that all that’s involved?” but she simply said, ‘Nice to meet you Wayne. I haven’t seen you around before. Do you live near here?’

‘No I’ve been working on my Dad’s farm in Taranaki and I couldn’t face the rear end of one more cow so I’m having a bit of a holiday down here and I intend doing a bit of hunting.’

Jasmine continued, ‘And we’ve taken advantage of him being down here and persuaded him to look into what would be involved in getting those horses to earn their keep.’

Jan cut in. ‘If you start doing any horse trekking up in the hills, I’ll be your first customer. I’ve not been on a horse since I left Norway. I’d like the children to learn to ride as well.’

‘Well, Wayne’s working on it and in the meantime he’s come up with a suggestion about enclosing the lake inside the predator proof fence. I’ve been hoping you could spare a couple of minutes to look at his ideas as it seems to be in your line.’

‘Yes sure! What’s the plan?’

Jasmine smiled. ‘Well, the kids seem to be sorting themselves out in the sandpit so if we go into the conservatory we can watch them, have a coffee and possibly you’d have a moment to squint at Wayne’s idea.’

Jan and I sat facing each other near the open window and I opened my notebook and placed it in front of her. As she looked down at the drawings, of their own volition, my eyes inexplicably focused on her cleavage. I tried explaining about the outflow from the lake but my mind was elsewhere and some of my words got confused. Nevertheless she seemed to understand what I was trying to say and called out to Jasmine to see if she could provide a scientific calculator. By the time

Jasmine had arrived with the calculator Jan had already borrowed my pencil and was doing some calculations in the margin of my notebook.

I looked on uncertain whether to sit in silence or speak and interrupt her calculations. So I pretended to look out of the window checking on the children in the sandpit while I kept silent and let my imagination explore her cleavage.

After several minutes of silence she looked up and said, 'I can see two problems but they aren't hard to fix. We need a bigger pipe than you have envisaged. We should put in a two-hundred millimetre pipe instead of a one-hundred millimetre one, to cater for the outflow from the spring combined with the storm flow under extreme conditions. A two-hundred millimetre pipe works out at four times the cross sectional area of a one-hundred millimetre one. The other snag is you've inadvertently introduced a method of siphoning all the water out of the lake! That can be simply fixed by providing something like a twenty-five millimetre hole in the top of the pipe just outside the predator fence that would act as a siphon-breaker. The trouble with a simple hole is that it could become blocked with floating debris so instead of a single hole I'd install a "T" piece in the top of the pipe and put in an open-ended vertical pipe, say a metre high with a "U" bend at the top to get above the debris problem. Then I think we'd have a workable system. I certainly like your idea of blocking off the end of the pipe and drilling small holes in the last few metres of the pipe. You suggested six millimetre holes. That sounds good to me. I've just done some sums. You would need to put in about one-thousand-two-hundred holes. That's slightly more than necessary to have the same combined cross sectional area as the pipe. But you'll probably need those few extra holes because the pipe could be sitting on the lake bed and some of the holes would probably be blocked as a result. It sounds a lot of holes but with an electric drill you'd do it in less than an hour. Keeping track of how many holes you've drilled would be the hardest bit!'

At that moment Jasmine returned with a tray containing a jug of milk, a bowl of sugar, two cups of coffee and herbal tea for herself. There were three cut and buttered scones on a plate with a dish of blackcurrant jam. I watched her instinctively look out of the window checking on the children before she placed the tray on the coffee table. With an instruction to help ourselves, she went back into the kitchen and returned with a second tray containing three glasses of orange juice and a packet of biscuits. Then she stood in the open door and called the children to come in and have a drink. The kids did as they were told and to my amazement Katherine took the other two into the bathroom to wash their hands. And she did it without being told!

As Jasmine sat down Jan said, 'I've suggested a couple of modifications to Wayne's system and with those modifications I think you'll have a totally practical system. Wayne's come up with a good solution. You could talk it over with Basil first in case he has any other ideas. If he can't see any problems I'd instruct the contractors to do it Wayne's way, and if they don't like it then perhaps you should get another fencing contractor.'

'Thanks for that Jan. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. The other thing I want to hear is how you're getting on with your report.'

'The report is finished, all four hundred and forty pages of it, and I'm getting twenty bound paper copies for cabinet. Also, of course, I've already sent an electronic copy to our head-office in Norway. I know it sounds backwards but although the paper is printed here and all the work has been done here, officially it comes from our head office in Norway. It is issued under the signature of our Norwegian general manager. That way it is seen as an independent report. Sorry I can't tell you what's in it as its highly confidential and very controversial.'

'Yes, we saw the article and Thor's picture in the paper.'

‘The paper doesn’t know anything about it either. They are just trying to “stir-the-pot” or “whip-up-a-storm” or whatever they think will sell newspapers. I don’t think I’m giving away any secrets when I say there are going to be some very excited people when our report is made public.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because of the clash between vested interests in the oil, gas and financial sectors and the closed-mind of the opposition. None of them are prepared to live in a society that endorses a free-market of ideas where issues can be examined and decided on a rational basis. Decisions usually evolve from misinformation circulated by the chattering classes. That’s why the report has been purchased from an independent scientific source outside New Zealand. All the senior people, including Thor and me, who worked on it had to have their scientific qualifications examined in microscopic detail before we would be accepted. That way it’s harder for anyone to assume the conclusions reached by the research of have been locally manipulated.’

‘But you’re still expecting trouble?’

‘Yes, there’s going to be trouble.’ Jan stood up. ‘And what’s more the kids seem to have finished their drinks and I’m going to be in trouble if I don’t get a wriggle on and make their dinner. Sorry to rush off Jasmine, but I really must get the children home and thanks for the coffee. We all appreciate our visits here.’ Jan turned to me and added, ‘Nice to meet you Wayne and if you can organise some pony trekking we’ll be your first customers.’

Jasmine stood up and, picking up a twenty dollar note from the coffee tray, handed it to Jan adding, ‘Thanks for the goat cheese Jan. We always appreciate it.’

‘Thanks! Glad you like it.’

With that Jan and her children headed out to the car. A few minutes later they drove off and as they turned the corner I was left wondering if I’d see her again and what was in her report that might get people so excited. Also I couldn’t get it

out of my head that the gypsy dancing on her shoulder seemed out of place for a practical scientist.

CHAPTER 3

It was seven days before I saw Jan again. It occurred when she delivered the goat cheese the following week. At the time I was working in the stables and I heard her car on the drive. I'd already decided it was about afternoon tea-break time so, with Jan arriving, it seemed opportune to start walking up to the house. I subsequently discovered a storm had been building in the papers and on the TV but I wasn't aware of any of the unfolding political circus. Apart from evenings at the pub and one trip to town when I bought some saddle-soap, waxed thread, an awl and a few other related items, I hadn't had the opportunity to hear any news. The first hint I had was when I saw Jan. Her eyes seemed lifeless as if unwilling to focus on anything other than some abstract point in space. Stress lines cross hatched her forehead. She was "too busy to stop for a coffee" and told us Thor was in Norway and couldn't be recalled urgently at virtually no notice.

Jasmine asked her what was wrong and Jan just told her to watch the TV news and she didn't have time to explain.

Jasmine put her arm round Jan's shoulders and gave her a hug. 'You're not going to brush me off like that Jan. Also I'm not prepared to find out about my friends' problems by watching TV. You've got plenty of time to come and talk to me and if you haven't you can jolly well find it because you're coming in with me to have a coffee.'

At that Jan spoke through tears, and her voice was choked with emotion. 'I can't. You don't want to see me like this. What about the children?'

Jasmine turned to me. 'Wayne, would you help the kids with their seat belts and take them to the sandpit? Like it or not Jan's coming in for a coffee. She's certainly not going to drive the kids anywhere in that state.'

'Yeah sure.'

Jasmine added, 'If the children are OK you could come on in and join us for afternoon tea.'

Kids seem to know when there's something wrong, and it was two very subdued children that I took to the sandpit.

Little Katherine came out almost immediately. I suspect Jasmine had sent her. I connected up the garden-hose ran it out to the sandpit and showed them how the trigger-nozzle worked. Within a couple of minutes of Katherine arriving all three children were getting themselves and their clothes in a mess with sand and water so I guessed they were probably OK. I joined Jasmine and Jan in the conservatory and sat near the ranch-slider so I could watch and hear the kids. Listening wasn't difficult, there's something about water that makes children loud.

Jan and Jasmine were together on the sofa turned towards each other and talking so softly that I could only catch the occasional word. It wasn't enough for me to even catch the drift of what was being said.

As I sat down Jasmine looked up at me. 'You'll join us for a coffee won't you.' It was a statement not a question. Then she added, 'I'm just popping into the kitchen for a couple of minutes. I won't be long.'

Jan still had tears in her eyes as I asked, 'How is the geology report going.' Possibly it was because she was talking to me but she appeared to become more rational as she replied.

'Not well.' She seemed to summon up a little more energy and continued. 'I should qualify that. The work Thor and the rest of his team have done is excellent. Every conclusion is solidly backed by exhaustive research. I don't believe any scientist could fault it.'

'Then what's the problem Jan?'

'The problem Wayne is the conclusions are not what either the government or the oil and gas industry wanted to hear. The evidence embedded in the rocks is conclusive. Fracking should not be undertaken in many of the places where it is proposed. But that's not all. I don't suppose you've heard parliament recently.'

'No, it's not the sort of thing I listen to.'

'Not many people do. It's probably just as well.' Jan's eyes flashed anger. The softness in her vocal cords was vanishing. Now there was no mistaking the edge of steel in her

voice as she continued. 'We've all put a hell of a lot of work into this project, but instead of being thanked for our contribution Thor has been publically criticized as "incompetent" by technically illiterate politicians who wouldn't know shale from magma. In parliament they said his work is "flawed" because he comes from Norway, spends too much time in Norway and doesn't understand New Zealand geology.'

Just at that moment Jasmine returned from the kitchen with a coffee tray. She must have noticed the change of tone in Jan's voice because she asked her what she was going to do.

Jan looked up. 'What am I going to do?' She hesitated, as if contemplating the alternatives before giving us a definitive answer that left us in no doubt she meant it. 'What are we going to do? We're going to fight. A man or woman who won't stand up for their beliefs isn't fit to be called human. Thor's in Norway and our gutless wonders in Government thought it provided an opportunity to criticize him in his absence. But I'm backing him every step of the way, because he's right.'

Jasmine asked. 'What are you going to do Jan?'

'I'm going to make a start by ringing the minister explaining that Thor is overseas and as I'm his wife, and familiar with his work I'd like to discuss it live on TV.'

'Do you think that'll work?'

'I think it might. Government is brimming over with inflated egos. I imagine the Minister will assume he'll be able to make me look stupid on air and as a result further discredit Thor. After all I'm just a wife and mother who is famous for making goat cheese.'

Jasmine looked doubtful. 'There is a rancid side to politics and...'

'Then it's time it was exposed. What do you say Wayne? What would an ex-farm boy from Taranaki do? Would you lie down and let politicians wipe their feet on you?'

‘You’re asking what I’d do if someone shit on me from a great height? Do you want me to be honest?’

‘Yes of course.’

‘I’d probably go to the pub with my mates. Play pool or watch the rugby and get stinking rotten drunk. In the morning I’d feel like a cow pat that someone has trodden in and I wouldn’t come right till after lunch.’

Jasmine grinned at me. ‘Well Wayne I think your solution is a lot more rational than Jan’s.’

Jasmine’s voice was soft as she turned to Jan. ‘When you arrived here Jan you were numb with the injustice, within minutes you were in tears and now half-an-hour later you want to go into battle with the whole Government and take on the prime minister’s mistress as well. It’ll all backfire on you Jan. You won’t help Thor rushing into something like that. Think it out. Wayne’s solution could be a lot better.’

‘But...’

‘No, listen to me Jan. When Basil comes home he’s usually pretty tense after a month in the mines and a long flight. So we usually go down to the Compass and Sextant, find a table overlooking the sea and get a meal. It’s quite informal and lots of people pop in straight off the beach. We like it because it has a vegetarian alternative menu as well as the usual menu. Quite frequently they have a group playing there, but they don’t use amplifiers, they just move between the tables and often sing requests. It’s always just light background music, not an airborne attack on your hearing. Basil and I find it quite relaxing. Before you go rushing off to Parliament with a battle axe in your hand I’d like all six of us to go to the restaurant this evening. It’ll be my treat...’

‘But I can’t...’

‘Yes you can Jan. And don’t try telling me you don’t have a change of clothes for the kids in the back of the car because I won’t believe you. Thor’s not home so you don’t need to rush back to get his dinner. It’ll be a chance for all of us to unwind. Wayne deserves it after all the work he’s been doing sorting out the horse gear. And you Jan need to calm

down and plan your next moves carefully. I can't think of a better way to do it than sitting out on the deck in front of the Compass and Sextant and listening to the music while we make our battle plans.'

Jasmine turned to me. 'In case you're wondering Wayne we are not going to get stinking rotten drunk tonight or any other night. That's not my way. I'll buy the meal and either one jug of beer or a single bottle of wine to share out between all three of us while we have our dinner. That's going to be the lot apart from soft drinks for the children...'

Jan interrupted. 'I'll pay...'

'No you won't Jan. This is my suggestion and my treat. Our car's got seven seats, so if you fix Ryan and Melody's car seats in the back I'll drive us all down there.'

'Are you sure, it's real generous of you.'

'Of course I'm sure. Besides we've got to go somewhere to formulate our battle plans haven't we? We'll only get one shot at this.'

'Then I'd better go and turn the hose off and get the kids cleaned up and changed. Would it be OK if I gave them a shower?'

'Of course. And while you're doing it I'll ring up and book an outside table for six on the deck. By the time we've got the children sorted the time will be getting on, so I'll try to get the table for six o'clock and I'll mention we'll need the high chair for Ryan. I think the two girls should be OK with ordinary chairs won't they?'

'Melody has a normal chair at home but if the restaurant doesn't have a high chair available I can take Ryan's booster-seat out of the car and either strap it onto a dinning chair or clip it onto the table, either way it works pretty well as a high chair for him. Thanks Jasmine.'

In the restaurant I sat at the table between Jan and Jasmine. The tables at the sides and the back all faced inwards towards the centre of the deck leaving a clear passage and a view of the sea. Also they provide a space without any tables in the middle of the floor. A little sand had blown in from the

beach onto the deck which was slightly gritty underfoot. Bamboo had been planted down both sides of the deck presumably to provide a windbreak and some shade from the summer sun. It was in the space in the middle of the floor that the singing group were circulating between the tables. While we were still at Jasmine's place Jan had washed and dried her hair which now hung halfway down her back. The gypsy tattoo on her arm was dancing next to me. The light breeze coming off the sea was carrying with it a hint of her perfume. The singing group consisted of two guys and a woman who called themselves The Balladeers. Jasmine reckoned the woman, who appeared to be in her twenties, was the daughter of the owners. Moving between the tables they paused to sing a request before moving on. They must have had a big repertoire because they didn't have any difficulty singing whatever was requested. We had a bottle of white wine on the table and orange juice with straws for the three children. While we waited for the main course the Balladeers moved on to our table and asked for a request. We all hesitated until Jan broke the silence. 'Do you know, "The Gypsy Rover"?"

The group looked at each other for a moment and one of them played a few chords on his guitar. Then the other guy picked up the tune and the woman started singing. She had only got through the first few lines when Jan took hold of my arm saying, 'Come on Wayne'. We stepped onto the floor and slowly circled the deck several times for the duration of the song. Her boobs touched my chest as my fingertips explored her back tracing the undulations between her ribs. Before returning to our seats as the last verse faded, I kissed her neck and my hand received a squeeze of approval. Possibly by coincidence or more likely by design our meals were brought to our table as Jan and I returned to our chairs.

Jan seemed proficient at the dual task of eating her meal while helping Ryan spread his food in a half-metre radius around his mouth. At least both the little girls seemed to know how to find their mouth. While we ate our dinner and watched another couple dancing Jasmine asked me how I thought Jan

should defend the rejection of the report. I noticed Jan turn her head a fraction, so I know she was listening.

‘I don’t really know much about politics and stuff like that. Back home Pancho, who’s one of my mates, has got this cool computer game that he pirated off the net. It works like this, we are both Generals. I’ve got this city in the desert. My job is to defend the city and he has to attack it. We both have the same financial resources and we can purchase whatever weapons we can afford. I’ve put a ring of anti-tank guns all round the city. But my anti-tank guns are vulnerable to being captured by infantry so around each big gun I have a three machine gun posts. Then the machine guns can protect the big guns against infantry attack and the guns can prevent the enemy tanks from providing cover for Pancho’s infantry.’

A puzzled frown trampled across Jasmine’s forehead as she glanced at Jan wondering where this conversation was going. But I continued. ‘My city in the computer game is like the ground beneath Taranaki. The enemy is the oil and gas industry backed by government. Jan is an expert and is like one of my big guns with all the know-how and firepower to blast the enemy tanks, but she’s still vulnerable to attack by infantry and needs the grouped protection of my three machine gun posts or the PBI will get her...’

‘What’s PBI?’

‘Poor Bloody Infantry!’

Jasmine nodded. ‘I suppose it could also stand for “Petroleum Based Industries”. What I think you’re saying Wayne is that despite Jan’s intimate knowledge of geology, she, Thor and the rest of the geological “big-guns” need the support of other groups or they’ll be swept aside by the PBI. But providing they can get the required support they should be able to mount a successful defence and save the rocks beneath our feet.’

‘Yeah! That’s right.’

‘For someone who claims to know nothing about the way politics works I’d say that’s a very astute observation Wayne. I reckon you’re spot-on.’

Jan nodded. 'How well is your computer game going Wayne?'

'It's ongoing. But my defence strategy is working and Pancho hasn't managed to break into my city yet. But I've got a new problem. Pancho has captured my seaport which is a hundred kilometres away and has cut off my supplies to the city and it means I can't get any more ammunition. So I'm going to have to withdraw some of the city defences to try to recapture the port, or my city will starve. But if I take away too many of my defences I won't be able to hold back the enemy.'

Jan cut in. 'I can see the similarity. Since the report came out the government has cut our funding or, to put it your way Wayne, they've cut off our supply routes. They are trying to starve us into submission.'

Jasmine nodded. 'But they haven't taken into account your friends and the support groups that will come to your assistance Jan. As I see it, your first job should be to let people understand the problem and appreciate the help you need and you'll get it. There's no question about it. Only a fool would want the rocks beneath our feet smashed into little pieces. The world belongs to us, the people, not to corporate financial interests. Oil companies and the like don't have friends they only have conditional accomplices.'

'So how do we rouse support?'

'I think you already know the answer to that Jan. Letters to the newspaper, blogs, facebook, twitter – in the history of the world it's never been easier. And you don't need to do it alone. Your support is there waiting for you. No one I know wants to live in a servile state. Thor might be in Norway but in reality he's as close to you as his fingertips are to the keys on his keyboard. To put it Wayne's way you have all the firepower you'll ever need and it's all available. Activate it and the PBI will never stop running for cover.'

Jan was still only halfway through her dinner as she was helping Ryan, but Jasmine and I had finished. The Balladeers were still singing.

‘I’ve looked at life from both sides now...’

‘I held my hand out to Jasmine. ‘Feel like a flip round the deck?’

She glanced at little Katherine and having decided she was managing her dinner OK smiled and said, ‘Thanks.’

As Jasmine and I moved round the deck the sun was sliding down towards the horizon. With her back to the sun the edges of her hair turned to gold.

‘Jasmine, I’ll let you into a secret that no one else knows.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes in the back of my ute I’ve got an eloping mat.’

‘Have you! What’s that?’

‘It’s a magic carpet and if we both sit on it, it’ll carry us away to where ever you want to go. Where shall we go?’

Jasmine hesitated for a moment. I’ve often said this sort of thing to women and most of them usually say, “Yeah! Come on let’s go.” Just a few look down their nose, “Oh No! I’m a married woman. What about my husband?” No guy should waste his time with women like that! Jasmine didn’t disappoint me.

‘Let’s fly up to that fluffy white cloud over there. We’ll spread the mat on the top, sit down and watch the sun spin the edges into gold. Then at night we can watch the stars peep through the holes in the sky.’

‘And make love on top of the cloud.’ I suggested.

‘Oh no! If we make love on top of the cloud it’ll start rocking and all my friends will know what we’re up to.’

‘That’s wonderful Jasmine. Most women have to work hard at getting a murky reputation. It’s the finest social asset any woman can have. One night on the top of a rocking cloud with me and you’ll be set up for life.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely! I’d never tell you anything that’s not genuine.’

The Balladeers had finished the song and Jasmine playfully boxed my ears saying, ‘I don’t believe you Wayne. I

think we'd better see how the children are getting on.' As we returned to the table she added, 'It's their bedtime already. I expect they'll sleep in the car on the way back.'

Jan was already getting a damp flannel out of a plastic bag she had in her shoulder bag. While she was wiping Ryan's face and fingers, Jasmine picked up her handbag and headed towards the counter to pay the bill. Within five minutes we were back in Jasmine's car with the children in their car seats.

Jasmine was proved right. Katherine and Ryan were both asleep in their car seats by the time we got back to her place. Melody was sleepy and would probably have dropped asleep in the next few minutes. Jan unclipped her and the two of them walked to Jan's car while I undid her booster seat, carried it across to Jan's car and fastened it onto the back seat. As soon as the seat was fixed, Jan lifted Melody into the seat, did up the seat belt and gave her a kiss. I had moved aside to give Jan access to the car's back door and I had my hand resting on the door pillar. As Jan straightened up to go back and get Ryan she put her hand over mine saying, 'Thanks for that dance Wayne. I needed that.'

Jan pushed the back door of her car shut and together we walked the few steps back to Jasmine's car. Ryan was still sleeping so I went round to one side of the car while Jan went to the other. Between us we undid Ryan's seat and I helped lift it out of the car while he remained asleep inside. Jan carried Ryan, who was still buckled into his seat, back to her car and fitted him into the other back seat next to Melody.

Jasmine had taken Katherine indoors and came back to see Jan off. Jan gave Jasmine a hug and thanked her for a lovely evening. It was all so civilised. Jan got in the car, closed the driver's door and opened the window. Our eyes met. 'I'll try to come round and see you again Wayne. Thanks for your company and your advice.'

It may be because I'd just been looking at the dancing gypsy on her arm which seemed to change its pose as Jan's shoulder moved, but in that instant I believe I caught an impish flash in Jan's eye that seemed to promise anything I

wanted. I've never yet met a woman who doesn't know exactly what men want! But I reminded myself she's a Doctor of Geology. The dancing devilment I fancied that I saw probably existed only in my imagination. Self deception can be very rewarding. As always, it's not other people we don't understand it's ourselves. Whatever I thought made no difference, she drove off with her children and the last I saw of her that evening were the tail lights of her car as they disappeared down the drive and turned the corner.

I turned to Jasmine and gave her a hug and a kiss on her lips. 'Thank you Jasmine for a great evening. It was kind; you're a very generous woman.'

'And thank you Wayne for leading me astray on your magic carpet. I'll be able to dream about that. Now I suppose I'd better go and tuck Katherine up and give her a goodnight kiss. See you in the morning Wayne. Goodnight.'

'Night Jasmine. See you.' With that I started walking back down the drive to spend the rest of the evening and all of the night in the back of my ute with my imagination working a night-shift.

CHAPTER 4

Despite what Jan said about coming to see me soon, it was five days before I saw her again. But during that time I had established a routine. Jasmine provided me with morning and afternoon tea which usually included a home-made scone or a muffin. Katherine generally ran or skipped over to the stables to find me and tell me when it was ready. At lunchtime Jasmine usually made something like lentil soup with salad rolls, often accompanied with Jan's goat cheese. If Jasmine had to go out during the day, before she left she always brought my lunch over in a plastic box with a teddy bear on the top. She showed me where the key to the back door was hidden in case she was out, so I could make myself some tea or coffee. In the evening I either went down to McDonalds or got a bar meal at the pub. She paid me after work each day based on the hours I'd worked. It seemed to be working OK and she said she was pleased with the progress I was making. But it was simply a business arrangement. There has been no slackening in the formal relationship apart from the dance at the Compass and Sextant, despite my dubious attempts to instigate something more sensual.

If the previous owner had names for the horses we certainly didn't know what they were. We got a few clues from the name on the odd bridle or a name on a stable door but we had no idea which name applied to which horse. As I was trying to match up saddlery with individual horses, it was important to have permanent names. When I mentioned this to Jasmine she gave Katherine the task of suggesting suitable names, providing I told her whether we were looking for a masculine, neutral or feminine name. I must admit I invented the rule that the name had to be one word after Katherine's suggestion of Frilly Knickers. I was damned if I was going to go out in the paddock and call in a horse called Frilly Knickers! I compromised and settled for Frilly and Sun Flower became Sunny.

Three days after we went to the Compass and Sextant Jasmine showed me a newspaper containing a head and shoulders photo of Jan with her computer screen and a full-page article written by her. In it she explained that the team had spent five years obtaining data on the geological characteristics of the area. Some of this was from existing sources and some from test results. Following that data-gathering, the data was processed by computer to obtain geological information. That geological information was then further processed to obtain knowledge of the physical structures and how they interact. Then they made an interactive geomatic computer model of the whole area. This made it possible to introduce the effects of fracking and, by computer simulation, predict the effects. The article contained a diagram of the physical structure and substance of Taranaki and other areas that extended well out to sea and included offshore sea beds. Also, there was an explanation of what the proposed fracking would do and a warning of the likely effects should it occur. Another computer generated map showed the areas that would be affected and what the effects would be.

I must admit I'd never heard of the names of the different sorts of rocks she talked about and as a result I had difficulty following her argument about why water tables would be affected and land instability would occur in some areas and not others. I guess the reason why I had difficulty is because she's a doctor of geology and I'm just an ex-farm boy from darkest Taranaki. You know what they say about us? "Taranaki born and Taranaki bred, strong in the arm and weak in the head." But be careful as half of the guys in the pub are likely to punch your head in if you repeat that in the bar. But whether the readers understood the article or not, Jan left them in no doubt that she knew what she was talking about and that serious effects would follow if fracking went ahead in some, but not all of the areas. I guess that's all we need to know.

I'm not much into computers, apart from computer games. And I haven't got one in my ute, but Jasmine reckoned there was a heap of traffic on the web about the proposed

fracking and everyone had an opinion, even if they didn't know what it meant. And more to the point almost everyone was opposed to it, even if they didn't know why.

Then it was on the TV and Jasmine asked me if I'd like to go and see it. The programme started with a link to Norway and the interviewer talked not to Thor but to Thor's boss who explained that the research Thor had supervised was carried out in a highly professional manner and the report couldn't be faulted. Then the programme switched to the studio and the interviewer sat between Jan and the Minister.

The interviewer introduced Jan as Dr Jan Jorgensen stating that she was a doctor of geology and had been involved in the investigation from the start. She was wearing a red dress with short sleeves covering her gypsy tattoo. Her plait was coiled up in a bun which was held in place with a carved bone comb. She was significantly taller than the Minister who was balding and dressed in a grey suit with a white shirt and a blue tie. Visually, Jan dominated the screen. The interviewer turned towards Jan and asked her to explain what was meant by the term fracking.

'There are many places in the world where natural gasses are trapped deep underground and frequently it is contained in shale rocks. Normally the gasses have been there for a very long time and some date back to the Devonian times. Please note I said gasses not gas. What is down there is invariably a cocktail of gasses and some liquids. Not all of them are useful and some are definitely not wanted. However, there are very large quantities of gas contained underground that can be used to fuel industry. The term fracking covers a range of techniques that can be used to extract some of this gas. I said some of it because we can never get all of it. In some cases we might get say twenty percent of the potential gas but that figure varies with the location and the techniques used.'

'What is involved in extracting this gas?'

'Horizontal hydraulic fracking is now the most commonly used technique. This involves drilling a deep

vertical hole to the required depth and then drilling horizontally into the rock that contains the gas. Sometimes a gel is used but this is expensive. Normally a mixture of water and sand or ceramic beads, together with radioactive isotopes and various other chemicals are forced into the rock formation at pressures that could be up to a thousand atmospheres. This high pressure shatters the rock and allows the trapped gases to escape. These gasses are collected at the surface bore hole and eventually used to fuel industry and can be used as an alternative to oil and coal, both of which tend to be worse greenhouse gas polluters.'

'This sounds an excellent technique. Are there any snags.'

'Yes, there are many and there can be very serious problems. As you might expect, the problems will vary with the geology of the area and the surface infrastructure. In some cases it can be done with few problems and in other areas the problems would be severe. That's why a geological survey is needed before fracking is undertaken. Also, the availability of surface resources needs to be assessed. For example, huge quantities of water are needed and often this can only be obtained by robbing irrigation water for agriculture.'

'Can the water be re-used?'

'Only for fracking, it is too polluted for anything else. In fact it is so polluted disposing of it is a major problem as it often has to be stored in specially created ponds and taken away from the site in trucks.'

'Are there any other problems?'

'Yes a large number. For example, I mentioned fracking usually takes place deep underground. Pollutants can leak into naturally occurring underground fresh water sources and contaminate these to such an extent that they can't be used. Earthquake prone areas are particularly vulnerable as the seal round the bore hole can become fractured.'

'And New Zealand is on a major fault line.'

'Exactly.'

‘So why are additives used instead of just using fresh water?’

‘To prevent pipe corrosion, to kill bacteria and assist with fracturing the rock which of course can never be repaired if and when things go wrong.’

‘What other problems do you foresee Jan?’

‘The installation, storage and transport required can extract a heavy environmental cost.’

‘To your knowledge have any countries banned the use of fracking?’

‘Yes Bulgaria, France, Germany, Ireland and Luxembourg. The last I heard was that the Czech Republic was considering a ban. There could be others that I’m unaware of. I’m a geologist not a politician. Probably you should direct the question to the Minister.’

‘Are you aware of any other countries that have banned fracking Minister?’

‘Not off the top of my head.’

‘The one thing I know that viewers are anxious to understand, Minister, is why you have decided to reject the Norwegian report and what was the flaw in it that forced you to make that decision?’

‘To start with I must correct you. The decision wasn’t mine but a unanimous cabinet decision.’

‘Quite so! Perhaps I could rephrase my question. What was the flaw in the research that compelled Cabinet to reject the whole of the conclusions made by the Norwegian research team? After all, I believe you commissioned that research didn’t you Minister?’

‘No it wasn’t me that commissioned it. It was Cabinet.’

‘I see, and what was the flaw in their research?’

‘As far as I can tell the research seems to have been carried out professionally, but it was done without understanding the difference between New Zealand geology and Norwegian geology and that’s why it was flawed.’

Then Jan cut in. ‘Geology is a physical science and the laws of physics apply universally. If you consider that geological science doesn’t apply in New Zealand do you also consider the second law of thermodynamics doesn’t apply here either?’

The Minister replied, ‘That’s not what I’m saying at all. I think you’re trying to cloud the issue. Government has no problem with the second law of thermodynamics.’

Jan replied, ‘I’m delighted to hear it Minister. For the sake of the less informed would you explain the law and say why Cabinet approves of the science of thermodynamics and not the science of geology?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You said you had no problem with the second law of thermodynamics so would you explain it to our viewers?’

‘This isn’t the time or place to discuss complex laws of physics that have nothing to do with the subject.’

Jan looked shocked. ‘Are you saying the laws of physics have no place in this discussion minister? I thought the validity of science was the core issue, or am I mistaken? But for the sake of the viewers I’ll explain. The first law of thermodynamics basically says, “You can’t win” and the second law of thermodynamics says, “You’ll always lose” but of course it’s talking about energy transfer not the result of the next election!’

‘Thank you! I’ll remember that if energy transfer ever becomes an election issue. In the meantime I’ll tell you what the nation needs and it’s INCOME. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yes Minister, I think I understand what you’re telling me. Tell me if I’ve got it wrong. If I were to say to you that your proposals would cause infrastructure damage to the roads and resources of Taranaki, or that pollution of the environment would be a problem, or that the quantity of water consumed by the project would damage the agricultural sector, if I said any or all of those things, in your eyes I wouldn’t have challenged the right of the project to go ahead. To challenge that right the

only thing I could say, that would mean anything to you, is to say that the project is uneconomic.'

'I wouldn't have put it like that and...'

'Neither would the people who are likely to be affected by it.'

'I hope you're not trying to imply that Government doesn't care about the people in areas where fracking is an option.'

'No Minister I'm not implying that, but you would be if you permitted the project to go ahead as proposed.'

'I don't think you understand what the project will mean to New Zealanders. It will mean jobs, energy and income...'

'And pollution, infrastructure damage, and loss of irrigation and loss of income.'

'Loss of income? Nonsense! The project will be profit-making and that profit...'

'If it existed my guess would be that the profit would go overseas to foreign investors. The local rate-payers and the Government would be left with the financial burden of clearing up the mess left behind. Have you read Appendix four in the report yet Minister?'

'Appendix four?'

'Yes, it's the one where a financial analysis is done of the projects. In case you haven't read it yet I'll tell you what it says. It takes into account the projected income and the costs involved. The bottom line, which seems to be all some people are interested in, indicates the project would make an overall loss in many of the proposed sites. The reason for that loss is that geologically some are poor sites and could well prove to be unworkable. It is all outlined in the report.'

'It may interest you to know I've received another report this week written by our local experts that concludes that the project should go ahead and would be profitable.'

'Then I can only say they must be brilliant experts. I feel humbled by their ability. Our team has spent five years on research, gathering data, processing it to obtain information,

then this information was again processed to obtain a scientific understanding of the project. We have produced computer models and used the results to arrive at the conclusions. It seems your experts have been able to arrive at the conclusions without having carried out the research. That's a remarkable achievement! I think the whole scientific community would appreciate understanding their methodology.'

The Minister looked angry and shouted at Jan, 'I hope you're not implying...'

Jan gave a pleasant smile back and said softly, 'I'm not implying anything Minister. As I said, I feel humbled by their ability.'

At this point the interviewer interrupted. 'Well I'd like to thank you both for bringing our viewers up to date with the latest opinions on this controversial issue. As so often happens in these cases, we've arrived at two conflicting scientific opinions and doubtless more work needs to be done...' Jasmine pressed the remote off button.

'What do you think of that Wayne? Didn't Jan do well!'

CHAPTER 5

Over the next few days even I became increasingly aware of the undercurrent of protest about fracking. Posters were starting to materialize on walls and in the shop windows in town. Very early on Saturday morning Jan brought Melody and Ryan for Jasmine to mind while she went to New Plymouth to attend a protest march. Apparently the march started at the waterfront and ended with Jan and others addressing the protesters in the park by the lake.

I'd been working in the stables most of the day. There was an old spring cart in the end stable and Jasmine was keen to get that going again so they could take little kids or wrinklies for rides into the hills. I'd been working on that for the last couple of days and it had involved several trips into town. In the workshop I'd found a 180 amp arc welder plus mask, chipping hammer, and gloves. But I had to buy more welding rods and a cheap-and-nasty angle grinder together with metal cutting and grinding discs. When I say I bought them, what I mean is I selected what I needed and Jasmine paid for them. The original cart had solid tyres but the wheels were shot. So I went to the wreckers and bought two Holden rear wheels and a pair of stub axles. Then I did a bit of welding and fitted them to the existing cart axle. As I'd bought rear wheels I was able to make a wooden handbrake and connect up the cable to the drum-brakes on the wheels. So, if the cart was going down hill, the driver could use the brake instead of having to get the horse to do all the work. With pneumatic tyres we should get a much smoother ride over rocky ground than using the old solid tyres. There was a cart-saddle in amongst the horse gear and all I needed to do was to stitch together a breast-plate and things were starting to look good. But of course I'd no idea whether any of the horses had been broken in to harness, so it was possible I'd have to break one in myself. A couple of times during the day Katherine, Melody and Ryan came over to see what I was doing and help,

but Jasmine took them back and told them they mustn't keep bothering me.

About five o'clock Jan turned up to collect Melody and Ryan and told us TV One had been filming part of the protest march. So Jasmine made Jan and me some coffee while she was preparing dinner for all six of us to enable us to watch the News at Six. There were shots of the protesters with placards and banners and two bored looking cops who said there had been no trouble. Then we had a two minute shot of Jan addressing the crowd in the park. There was a brief interview with the New Plymouth mayor and the news moved on to the rugby. So Jasmine turned off the TV and we got on with what she called dinner which consisted of more salad and a mash of stuff that might have been lentils and beans. After dinner Jan took the children home and I went down to the pub to get a steak pie and chips together with a few beers to wash down Jasmine's rabbit tucker. After a couple of games of pool, which I won, I went back to my ute to sleep totally unaware of the events that were taking place during those critical hours of darkness.

The first hint I had that something wasn't normal was when I arrived at Jasmine's place between half seven and eight o'clock the following morning and discovered the gate to the drive locked. I climbed the gate but the house was locked up with no one home and Jasmine's car was gone. Wondering where Jasmine might have gone with Katherine so early in the morning I went along to the stables and got on with my work which consisted of making some slatted wooden seats for the spring cart as the old stuff was rotten.

By morning tea time Jasmine and Katherine hadn't returned so I let myself into the house and made a coffee and ate a couple of Jasmine's muffins out of the cake tin. By lunchtime they still weren't back so I climbed the gate, got in my ute and bought myself a Double Mac Combo with coke and fries. It was just on afternoon tea-time when I heard Jasmine's car on the drive. As soon as the car stopped Katherine jumped out and ran over to tell me that "Aunty" Jan

had been attacked and beaten up and was in hospital. Jasmine arrived a few moments later and said she was just going in to make a cup of tea and that she had spent most of the day at the police station and the hospital and would I like to go and have a coffee with her.

Once inside Jan put the jug on and I followed her into the kitchen. While it was heating she started to explain what had happened.

‘At about quarter-to-three in the morning four men broke into Jan’s house by smashing the glass in the back door. They reached through the glass and opened the door using the handle on the inside. Jan awoke with the noise and by the time she had got out of bed to investigate the men had found her bedroom.’

‘Might the neighbours have heard it?’

‘Jan’s nearest neighbour is about half-a-kilometre away. Jan was on her own. They tried to grab her but as you know she’s a pretty strong woman and when she was at university in Norway she used to be a member of a martial arts club. It sounds as if she put up a hell of a fight and she reckons she broke the arm of one of them. Apparently she felt and heard the bone crack and the guy backed off yelling, ‘The f’ing bitch has broken my arm’. Just at that moment Melody ran into her mum’s bedroom screaming with terror. One of the guys grabbed Melody and said to Jan, “Either you get it, or she does. It makes no difference to us.” Faced with that alternative Jan gave up trying to defend herself and let the guys rape her. At least three of them did, the one with the broken arm backed off and wouldn’t go near her. Little Melody tried to bash the man who was attacking her mum, but she was thrown at the wall and left cowering in the corner yelling. Ryan came in and Melody pulled him into the corner and they hugged each other while sobbing and pleading for them to leave their mum alone. While each of the guys took turns with Jan the others stole both her laptops, her cell-phone, smashed her land line, took her car keys out of her shoulder bag, poured petrol on the kitchen floor, threw in a match and departed with her Volvo.

Jan emptied the fire extinguisher into the fire but it wasn't enough. If it had happened to me I'm sure my brain would have gone into lock-down mode, but fortunately Jan has a cooler head than me. Grabbing her handbag she took the children into the goats' milking shed. Their home burned. But the men had missed something important in Jan's handbag. It was her Personal Locator Beacon. She keeps it in her handbag where the children are not supposed to get at it. I know she took it with her when she was doing her geological field work, in case of accident.'

'What's a Personal Locator Beacon?'

'Jan's often showed it to me and said I ought to get one. Now I think I will. It's an electronic gadget about the size of 250 grams of butter. It has an aerial attached and if you release the aerial it springs out and transmits your position with an accuracy of a few metres. The signal is detected by a satellite and the position is relayed to search and rescue. As a result a police car arrived at Jan's place after about half-an-hour, during which time she'd watched their house burn to the ground. The police radioed for an ambulance and the fire brigade. From the hospital the police rang me and told me Jan had been attacked and asked me if I could go to A and E as soon as possible as Melody and Ryan were very distressed. I woke Katherine and within ten minutes we were both on our way not knowing what to expect when we arrived.'

'How was Jan?'

'As well as you might expect having been beaten up, gang raped, her children terrorized and her home burnt down. But I'll say this for her she's a hell of a lot tougher and more cool-headed than I could ever be.'

'How were Melody and Ryan?'

'Quite honestly Katherine did more to calm them down than I could. They didn't want anything to do with me. All they wanted was to be with their mum.'

'Is Jan going to be OK?'

'Women have to get over being raped. We don't have any choice. It's an occupational hazard when you're female.'

The way Jasmine answered made me want to ask whether she'd ever been raped but I thought better of it and simply asked, 'Does Thor know?'

'Yes, the police rang him in Norway. The policewoman explained what had happened and put first Jan and then me on the line to talk to him.'

'What did he say?'

'I think you can work that out for yourself. Hopefully he'll be coming home as soon as he can arrange flights. I pointed out that Jan is expected to make a full recovery and she's likely to be released from hospital before long then she and the children can come and stay at our place.'

'How are the children?'

'I don't know. Melody had a bleeding nose and Ryan was physically OK but they are both so traumatized I think it could be a time before they recover. I know kids can be resilient but... Oh hell! I don't know. I don't even know if it will affect Katherine, and she wasn't involved thank God.'

'Does anyone have any idea why Jan was attacked? Was it anything to do with the fracking report?'

'I have no idea. If the police catch the men who did it we might discover a motive.'

'Have the police any ideas about who did it?'

'If they have they aren't saying. But they're confident they'll get them. It's likely the guy with the broken arm will need medical attention and they've already put out an alert to all hospitals to report any men who are seeking treatment for a broken right arm. Also the police have obtained semen samples for DNA testing so, if they get an arrest, they'll probably also get a conviction. Jan has provided a description of all four of them. I heard the policewoman had unsuccessfully tried talking to Melody and Ryan. But Jan told her they had to leave her kids alone as they'd been traumatized too much already.'

'What about Jan's car. If they can find that...'

'No success yet, but they're trying.'

'What's happening about Jan's house?'

‘It’s a crime scene that’s already being investigated but the house was so badly burned they probably won’t get much from it. The grounds are a different matter as they have vehicle tracks and footprints.’

‘What about the neighbours?’

‘They’re quite a distance away and the first they knew about it was when the police siren woke them up. I believe the police have already interviewed them but got nothing positive except one of them, who also has milking goats, has offered to look after and milk Jan’s goats.’

‘What’s happening tonight?’

‘The doctor wants to keep Jan in for observation tonight and the ward sister has fixed up two beds in Jan’s room so Melody and Ryan can be with Mum. Anything else would be far too traumatic for them.’

‘Might Jan be discharged tomorrow?’

‘I don’t know. Most of the abrasions and bruises are probably superficial but they have given her some antibiotics. I don’t know whether that’s for external or internal infections. I wouldn’t like to ask. As far as I know no one has said anything about internal injuries. I hope Jan is still on the pill. I know she used to be but she was talking about...Oh, I think I’m talking out of turn. It’s nothing to do with us... I think it’s quite likely she’ll be out tomorrow. There’s something I’d like to ask you.’

‘Yes?’

‘I haven’t asked Basil about this yet but first I’d like to know how you feel. I know you’ve been sleeping in your ute along the road but we’ve got those flats above the stables that aren’t being used. I’m wondering whether you’d consider bringing your car up here and stay in the stableman’s flat as an extra pair of eyes to make sure nothing nasty happens here. With Basil away and just Jan and me staying here with three young children having a big guy like you could provide a bit of extra security. The accommodation would be free and...’

‘If it’s OK with Basil, it’s fine by me. If you like I could bring my ute up here tonight.’

‘I want us all to make sure the gate at the end of the drive is kept locked all the time.’

‘OK that’s fine. I’ll need to slip into town after work today then, when I come back, I’ll bring my ute back up here and park it in front of the stables. As long as it’s OK with Basil, I could move into the flat tomorrow.’

‘I think it’s quite likely there could be something on the tele tonight about Jan and the children. Would you like to come in and see the News at Six?’

‘Thanks, that sounds good. I’ll make sure I’m back from Mc Donalds by six.’

Jasmine was right, there was quite a bit on the TV. First they showed a flashback of Jan addressing the protest march. Then the fire and a couple of shots of her in a hospital bed with bruises to her face. Melody and Ryan were with Jan and the announcer explained how Jan had been woken up in the early hours of the morning by four intruders and she had fought them in a single-handed attempt to protect herself and her children and ended up being beaten and sexually assaulted in a serious and cowardly attack. The attack had also resulted in her being robbed of computers her phone and her car. Then there was a shot of a Volvo similar to hers and a cop held up a piece of cardboard with Jan’s car number on it saying the police would like to hear from anyone who may have seen a green Volvo in the vicinity bearing that number, or a similar car even if it was displaying a different number-plate. Then there was a warning that if anyone was seen driving it members of the public should avoid approaching them. A brief description was given of the four men and it was emphasised one of them had received a broken right arm in the attack. They concluded by repeating the warning that the four men involved should be considered dangerous and they shouldn’t be approached but any sightings should be reported to the police.

The inspector then came on and said the police were confident of apprehending the offenders and they were already following several promising leads.

I guess that's a euphemism for, "Right now we haven't a clue where to start looking but we're hopeful something might turn up. And if we rattle your cage hard enough you might do something to give yourselves away."

I guess the News at Six didn't have any more news so they filled in the rest of the allocated time before the sports by telling us what some damn politician had said. It was so interesting that two minutes later I wouldn't have been able to tell you which politician it was or what he had said. I'll guarantee most people in New Zealand would be the same.

Jasmine started giving me details about how she'd have to re-arrange the beds ready for when Jan and the children came. I haven't a clue why she might have thought I'd be in the slightest interested in her beds and what bed-covers would go with what curtains! I can't believe some of the things women seem to think guys would find interesting. Mind you she did ask me what I thought she should do as her family were vegetarians but Jan and the children weren't. Did I think they'd mind having vegetarian food! To me a question like that is like asking an alcoholic if he'd mind settling for orange juice for the foreseeable future! I'm not sure if I said the wrong thing but I suggested, as a compromise, she could make a vegetarian salad and I could fix up a BBQ and slap some steak and onions on it to go with the salad.

Even after Katherine had gone to bed Jasmine and I sat and talked about possible motives for the attack on Jan. We talked round it for hours and arrived at no conclusion. It seemed likely that it might be something to do with the geological report and the protest group that Jan had encouraged. No one trusts the oil and gas industry. Their interests are in achieving the privilege of being able to exploit a skewed financial sector. Neither of us could envisage them resorting to attacking and robbing a mother and her children. In any case, if it was ever discovered they had done that sort of thing in a fit of revenge it would be the most counter productive thing they could possibly have done. That thought raised the possibility that the attackers might have done it in

the hope of laying the blame on the oil and gas industry. But that seemed no more likely than the Government having had a hand in it despite the fact no Parliamentary fingerprints were left behind. If this had happened in some Central African dictatorship it could be a possibility, even a probability, but neither of us could imagine it happening in New Zealand. That left us with the possibility that rape and robbery might have been the motive in its own right. But if that was the case why burn her house down? That must have been pre-planned as they would have had to have gone to the trouble of bringing a can of petrol with them. I've always thought of rape as a spontaneous act not something that was planned in advance. Perhaps I'd got it all wrong and Jan's appearance on TV or at the protest might have turned them on, because she appears to be one of the most bed-worthy women I've had the good fortune to encounter. I'd welcome any opportunity to have consensual sex with her and I'd have difficulty believing any guy who said anything different. But wanting to have sex with her is very different from attacking her and her children, then robbing her and burning her house down! There must be some other key component that would unlock the motive and explain everything. We decided it was something to sleep on.

I went to bed back in my ute with the thought still churning through my mind. And, I might add, also speculating what sex with Jan would be like. Before all this happened scoring with Jan seemed a more likely possibility than having Jasmine. In the meantime I guess I'll have to work at both of them and enjoy speculating on which one will turn up first. With that thought edging in between my conscious and subconscious I must have dropped off to sleep and into the realm where fantasy seldom fails to score.

CHAPTER 6

With the cart operational the next morning I made a start trying to discover which, if any, of the horses had already been broken in to harness. The most promising looking was a skew-bald gelding that Katherine had christened Donut. The name seemed to come from a hollow brown ring on his flank. I suppose, by stretching my imagination, the mark could look like a donut. I'd had my eye on him for some time. He seemed one of the calmer horses. Judging by his teeth I guessed he was also one of the older horses and could be about ten. I led him into the stables and he allowed me to put the harness on him. So far so good! I shut the stable door and went up to the house to find Jasmine. Experience has taught me when dealing with an unknown horse it pays to have a second person on hand the first time I put the shafts through the saddle and he feels the weight of the cart. I was hopeful Donut would be OK but it's not unknown for a horse that's not familiar with harness to panic. Jasmine and Katherine came together. It wasn't what I had intended. The last thing I needed was Katherine getting in the way. So, with Katherine standing inside an open stable door, I got Jasmine to hold Donut's head and while speaking softly I slid the shafts through the saddle and did up the straps. Donut barely moved. Taking the horses head from Jasmine I gave the instruction, "Walk on". I led the horse and trap out into the paddock and we walked the perimeter. I'd been damn lucky; Donut must have already been broken in to harness. After one lap of the paddock I climbed into the driver's seat and drove round a second time. Jasmine and Katherine were watching by the gate. There were whoops of delight from Katherine when I stopped and put the brake on. Jasmine helped Katherine aboard then, climbing up herself, she sat on the seat with Katherine between us. There were smiles, congratulations and constant chatter from Katherine as we did one more lap of the paddock before returning to the stables.

Jasmine touched me on the shoulder and said. 'The cart is great Wayne. You made a good job of that. I guess now we'll have to be calling you, Wayne the Wainwright.' I realise now what an effect Jasmine's gratitude had on me and how much I needed that success and the congratulations.

It was just on ten-thirty and Jasmine suggested that as soon as I'd put Donut back in the paddock and put the gear away that I should go up to the house for morning tea and she'd put some scones in the oven to celebrate. She explained she needed to be indoors to catch the phone in case Jan rang up because it was likely she could be discharged from hospital as early as this morning. Apparently they wouldn't know for sure until the doctors had done their rounds. As soon as they got the word she was going to pick up Jan, along with Melody and Ryan, and bring them home to stay till things got sorted out. When women talk about sorting things out it usually means providing everyone within range, who they assume to be interested, with an endless tirade about changing beds and airing sheets, providing bath towels, sorting out kids' car seats, providing soap powder for the washing machine, an urgent need to clean the windows which look perfectly OK to everyone else, and go to the shops for a hundred things starting with toilet paper and cinnamon sticks and finishing with kitchen wipes and scouring pads which suddenly become vital! It's enough to leave anyone breathless. Fortunately I had to put Donut away and I only copped the tail end of that lot.

To show willing I offered to fix up the barbie in the garage and go to the supermarket and get some steak and bacon. I saw Jasmine wince and hesitate for a moment before agreeing.

While I was eating the scones and drinking my coffee as luck would have it Katherine changed the subject away from lists of jobs and asked if we'd be able to go and visit Auntie Sophie in the cart with Donut. Jasmine hesitated before answering, 'I don't know. We'd have to get a lot more used to driving the cart before we could think about something like that.'

She looked at me. 'I must admit visiting Sophie is something I've been contemplating. I'm wondering what you'd think about it.'

'Where does she live?'

'In what we call the Greek village?'

'Where's that?'

'It's not really a village. I suppose in a way it's more like a commune. Perhaps we should call it the Greek Community not the Greek village. There must be about a hundred people living there. Anyway, it's at the back of our place. If you cross the range of hills at the back the land drops away to a narrow valley. Most of the valley has been cleared and is divided up into small paddocks.'

'And they're all Greeks living there?'

'No they're not. Not any more. I suppose technically they're all Kiwis now. The last of the original Greek nurses died about eighteen months ago. She must have been in her nineties. Sophie is a third generation Kiwi. She comes over here by horse from time to time, provided the weather is fine. I think she must be rather lonely as she rings up quite frequently just for a chat. I'd like to go and visit her but the track isn't suitable for a car and you have to cross several fords and a swamp. Some of the banks are quite muddy but I must admit I had wondered whether it would be possible to take a horse and cart through there. I'm sure she'd like us to visit her. She doesn't get on very well with the other people there.'

'Do you know why?'

'It's rather complicated. She's a very small woman I doubt if she'd make five foot tall and she's very slightly built. I don't know how old she is. She looks about fifteen but in reality she's old enough to have a seven-year-old son and a three-year-old daughter. The trouble is she lives in a small community and the father of both of her children is another woman's husband. I'm not sure if it's more to do with being a Greek community or a small minded community; but the "fault", if you want to call it a "fault", is automatically with the woman not the man. As a result the other women shun her.'

It's sad, but in my experience most women have done more in private than they pretend to be shocked by in public. I'd go even further and suggest the reason they are shocked is an attempt to divert attention from their own conduct.'

'Couldn't Sophie take her kids and move away?'

'I've suggested that but she's always lived in that community and can't seem to visualize any other life. I'd love her to appreciate there's a wider world out there than any of us can begin to imagine. That's why I'd like to be able to visit her occasionally.'

'They must have some means of getting out by road and getting supplies.'

'Yes they have but it's over the other side. Their road access, if you can call it a road, is into the Wairarapa and that's a hell of a way. Nevertheless, all their provisions go that way. Sophie doesn't have any access to a car. Coming over here by horse is her only practical route out.'

'How come there's a Greek community there at all?'

'Sophie has explained it all to me. It's quite complicated and quite interesting. I've even gone to the trouble of getting books about the history from the library to fill in some of the gaps. The chain of events started in Greece early in the Second World War when the Italians invaded Greece. But Mussolini had underestimated the Greeks. The relatively small Greek army with hardly any heavy weapons sent the remnants of the Italian army back to Italy to think again. Then Hitler, having seen his ally humiliated, sent a massive German army into Greece. Hopelessly outnumbered and under-equipped the Greeks hit back and the German advance faltered. Britain was in a desperate situation. But to show support for anyone who had the resolve to face the Germans Churchill sent in the Kiwis supported by some Australian and British troops. It was a gesture without hope of success. It was only a question of time before the allies would be overwhelmed by the massive superiority of the German force. In the confusion of the retreat six female Greek nurses became separated from wherever they were supposed to be

and were rescued by the Kiwis. But the Kiwis had more injured soldiers than available nursing staff. So guess what happened! You won't find any reference to this in military records but when the Kiwis were evacuated from Greece the six Greek nurses weren't left behind. They stayed with the Kiwis during the brief and bloody campaign in Crete. As so often happens in war, even when the time for romantic relationships and courtship is often reduced to twenty-four hours, liaisons are still formed. On the eve of the evacuation from Crete one of the nurses married a wounded Maori soldier. The ceremony was performed by the soldier's Commanding Officer. That meant the nurse was then a New Zealand citizen and entitled to be evacuated to New Zealand. Wounded soldiers needed medical care and in the scramble to get aboard the ship the other five nurses were unofficially included. All six eventually arrived in New Zealand. The married soldier had already inherited the five-hundred acre farm at the back of our place. Before the end of the war the soldier had died, mainly because of the injuries he had sustained, and the ownership of the farm passed to his wife. By that time all six of the nurses were living there. Soldiers returned after the war, men came out of the bush and one by one the nurses became pregnant and a Greek community grew out of the soil. With it they retained their language; and their children grew up bilingual. Even several generations later Sophie speaks English and Greek.'

'It doesn't sound a very healthy place for her to live if she's being victimised by the other women.'

'That's what I feel Wayne. I'm not sure if it's a result of the victimisation or whether she's naturally like that, but she tends to be rather timid and lacking in confidence. Perhaps that's why she got pregnant in the first place.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean perhaps she was flattered by masculine attention and didn't have the confidence to say no. Who knows! I certainly don't. But I do feel a degree of sympathy for her.'

‘And now she has two kids.’

‘Yes, and I’ll say this for her, she’s a very good mother but her children are her life. She has nothing else.’

‘That’s sad.’

‘Yes it is, and I’d like to try to do something for her. I couldn’t get a car up there but I’ve been wondering whether it would be possible to take the horse and cart along the track, through the fords and go and visit her. Perhaps one day I might be able to persuade her to come back here with me for a holiday so she can see how other people live. She doesn’t appear to have any other friends outside the village. What do you think?’

‘I’d have to have a look at the track. Horses can go most places, and you said Sophie has already ridden down here to visit you, so I guess the track’s OK, assuming no big trees have fallen across it and there haven’t been any serious slips. But because a horse can get through it doesn’t follow a cart can. Have you ever seen her place?’

‘Once I tried to go by car. I had to drive down to the Hutt Valley then go over the Rimutaka hill road, through the Wairarapa and then do about twenty kilometres up the worst road imaginable. Eventually I came to a ford. I looked at the water and after going backwards and forwards about twenty times I managed to turn the car round and drive back home. So I never did get to her place. It involved nearly two-hundred kilometres to get to somewhere that’s only five kilometres away at the back of our place. I swore I’d never do that road trip again. The car was covered in dust and mud and it took hours to clean and after that rocky road Basil had to get the front wheels re-aligned.’

Just at that moment the phone rang. It was Jan and she was being released from hospital. Within five minutes Jasmine and Katherine had departed in the car and I checked on the gas for the BBQ. The cylinder needed filling so I took the cylinder to the Caltex station for a refill and then on to the supermarket to get some steak and bacon for dinner.

It was mid-afternoon before Jasmine returned. Apparently on the way to picking up Jan she had to call into a friend's house to borrow a couple of car seats for Melody and Ryan as theirs' had been inside Jan's car when it was stolen.

I was in the stables when Jasmine returned. I saw Jan get out of the car. She took Ryan out of the car seat and carried him into the house. Melody and Katherine walked. Obviously Jan wasn't too badly injured as she was able to pick up Ryan and carry him without any apparent difficulty. I figured if it had been difficult Jasmine would have taken Ryan out of his seat and carried him instead of leaving it to Jan. I walked up to the house to see how Jan was. In any case it was afternoon tea-time and while I was at the supermarket I'd bought a packet of six cream buns for us to share out. They were all in the conservatory and as I entered Jasmine was going into the kitchen to make drinks. Jan had a black eye and heavy bruising on her cheek bones. Her lip was split and swollen and it was clear she'd been bashed in the face.

'How are you feeling Jan?'

'Battered, but I guess I'll be OK in a day or two, thanks Wayne.'

She seemed to be speaking with difficulty probably because of her swollen lip. I asked, 'Do you know why they did it to you? Was it anything to do with the report?'

'Not directly.'

Jasmine returned as I asked, 'Why do you think it was?'

'I'm pretty sure I know why, but the police want it kept secret as it may affect their investigation. So can I rely on you not to repeat any of this?'

'Yes of course.'

'In the course of our geological survey work we had to spend quite a bit of time doing field work. Because of Melody and Ryan I didn't do much of it as I was mainly office bound, but once or twice I had to make brief trips into the hills. On one of my trips I discovered an extensive crop. I reported it to the police and gave them the latitude and longitude. The

following day I understand a police helicopter raided the plantation and tore up all the plants. When I found the crop I didn't see anyone but possibly someone saw me or alternatively someone in the police force could have accidentally or deliberately conveyed to the owners of the crop how it was discovered. That's another line the police are following as part of an internal investigation. Anyway either when I appeared on TV or when I was addressing the march someone must have recognised me and decided I was the one who reported the crop. It probably wouldn't have been difficult to find where I lived and I think I was attacked to teach me, and anyone else, a lesson about keeping my mouth shut when I discover things in the hills.'

'Have the police any leads about who did it to you?'

'Not that I've heard, although I've given them a pretty good description. I suppose a male cynic would say that's the advantage of being raped. You get the face of the perpetrators burned into your memory. I'd recognise them anywhere. Also the police obtained their DNA samples from me.'

Jasmine commented, 'I can't believe how you managed to stay aware. I'm sure if it was me, my mind would just shut down and I'd never be able to recall a thing.'

'I suppose it's a safety mechanism Jasmine. Amnesia must be a mental anaesthetic to help you shut out the pain. You might eventually succeed in shutting it out of your consciousness and even close the door on it. But I'm going to smell their body odours in every crowd. I'll feel them touch me every time someone brushes against me. I'll see them hiding in every shadow and every time I fall asleep I'll hear their footsteps outside my bedroom. I don't think I'll ever be able to walk in the garden without searching the ground for strange footprints. There are two things I'm going to do. One is to resume my martial arts classes because I haven't been involved since I left university. And the other is to get a dog and it won't be a little dog. I know I'm going to have nightmares about them harming Melody and Ryan. God knows what effect all of this will have on them.'

Jasmine put the coffee on the table. 'In the meantime Jan no one, other than the police, knows you're staying here with me. We're going to lock the gate to the drive every time we go through it. We already have deadlocks on all the outside doors. Basil made sure of that as he's away half the time in Australia. Wayne has offered to bring his ute up here and he's going to live and sleep in the flat over the stables so he'll hear any car or footfall on the gravel.'

I suggested, 'Until you get a dog why don't we get some geese, they're probably better watchdogs than dogs. They kick up a hell of a noise if anyone else comes in. You could put them in the paddock with the horses. Lots of farms up our way use them to warn off rustlers and...'

Jasmine cut in, 'Sophie reckons she has dozens of geese on her place. I bet she'd sell us some. I was talking to Wayne about the possibility of going to visit her. It'd be great if we could go in the cart.' Turning to Jan she added, 'Wayne's got the cart repaired and he's got Donut pulling it. Katherine and I went for a ride round the paddock. It was great. You ought to have a go as well Jan. I bet Melody and Ryan would love it.'

I nodded. 'I wouldn't take the cart up there unless I've had a look at the terrain. If you like I could saddle up, take a ride up there and check it out. I could go first thing in the morning and probably be back in plenty of time for lunch.'

'Thanks Wayne. For several reasons I'd love to know if you think it would be OK for the horse and cart.'

'Hopefully we won't need to get an excavator to sort out the track. They ain't cheap to hire, but if we got one I could drive it for you. It's an option if the going is too tough.'

'I'd be very grateful if you could look into it Wayne.'

'OK, Thanks for the coffee Jasmine. I'll slip down to the stables, sort out some gear and get the barbie ready for dinner.' Turning to Jan I asked. 'Would you care to bring Melody and Ryan down to the garage in a little while when I fire up the BBQ?' As an afterthought I added, of course

Katherine could come as well if she wanted and that would leave Jasmine free to fix the vegetarian side of the meal.'

Jan smiled. 'What's on the menu Wayne?'

'I've got some steak and bacon and, if you feel like it, you could help me cut up some onions. We could do it together and both end up in tears.'

'Wayne, you've no idea how grateful I'll be to have a different reason to cry.'

CHAPTER 7

The next morning was the first time I woke up in Jasmine's flat over the stables. Shortly after dawn I fired up the barbie again and cooked up some bacon together with the remaining couple of the eggs I'd got from Jasmine to go with last night's steak. This was a definite improvement on spending the night in the back of my ute and having a stale left-over roll for breakfast. Going to the tool-shed I had a guess at the tools I might need to open up the track. A chain saw along with a tractor with a grader blade and a bucket would be good, but failing that I sharpened up an axe on the grinder, found a planting adze, a shovel and a slasher. Using one of the stock saddles, I clipped on the axe together with a coil of twelve millimetre rope. I tied the adze, shovel and slasher together with baling twine from the hay loft onto the D rings on the back of the saddle. Setting off on Sunny, I started up the hill at the back of the gardens to investigate the track. It was relatively easy going initially. Further up through the trees I had to stop and drag a few fallen branches off the track. Just below the first ridge line there were a couple of fallen rocks that I was able to roll away into the bush. Along here the track undulated a fair bit but was reasonably wide and flat. Someone in the past had obviously cut and levelled the track using an excavator. Most of the timber up here was second-growth; so my guess was the track had been used to take the logs out. There was a bit of gorse on the track but a lot of it was being starved of sunlight by the bush and wouldn't be enough to cause a problem to a cart. Once over the first ridge things got more difficult. There was a fallen tree about a foot diameter right across the track. Half of the roots were still in the bank and the other half providing something for the supplejack to climb. I really needed a chain saw. What I had wasn't exactly a racing-axe but fortunately I'd sharpened it and after about twenty minutes I'd made the first cut through the stump leaving the roots staring down at the wood chips littering the track. It was another hour before I'd trimmed away the

branches and made a second cut through the trunk. I tied a timber hitch round the log. Putting a couple of turns round the pommel I got Sunny to drag the log to one side and leave a wide enough track for a cart. After that it was another ten minutes before I'd thrown the cut limbs and branches down the bank and cleared the track, apart from the legacy of wood chips which I decided to leave so, if Jasmine came along here, she'd be able to see what I'd done. After that the track got narrower. Whoever had originally benched and graded this part of the track must have been on happy-baccy. If I tried to bring the cart along here the outside wheels would only be supported by fresh air on two of the corners. I was on the point of returning and telling Jasmine I needed to hire an excavator to finish the job when I decided to ride on a bit and see what the next section of the track was like.

To my surprise round the next corner the track improved. I rode on for the next half-mile or so and decided if I could fix up the bad bit perhaps I mightn't need to hire the excavator. I figured that if I cut a couple of cubic metres of soil out of the bank on some of those bends and scraped it over to the down-hill side I could end up with a wide enough track for the cart. I untied the planting adze and shovel and hitched Sunny's reins round a sapling.

It ended up with me cutting a damn sight more than two cubic metres and it took till early afternoon before I had the job done. Never let it be said any job is too tough for an ex farm-boy from Taranaki! Of course you might prefer, "Taranaki born and Taranaki bred, strong in the arm and weak in the head!" In this case probably both would apply. Anyone with half-a-brain would have hired an excavator to do the job instead of cutting it all back with a planting adze and a shovel.

I rode on down the track for the next kilometre or so without any problems apart from having to duck my head as I passed under overhanging branches. I guess anyone in a cart would have to do the same but I wasn't into trimming all those branches. I reckoned if anyone was stupid enough to crack their head on an overhead branch they deserved the lesson and

if they were slow learners they might end up with several bruises.

I stopped at the ford. Jasmine had been right. You wouldn't get a car through there. I suppose you might make it in a big tractor. But I only got my feet wet when Sunny and I rode through. She went slowly, testing her footing, but it was OK and we climbed up the bank on the far side without any difficulties. It was a gradual gravel bank without much mud. We could get a cart up there no problem. Of course this was summer, the water was slow moving and we hadn't had much rain for a bit. It'd be different in winter after heavy rain but right now I reckoned we could get a cart through even if the bottom boards did get a bit wet.

I looked at my watch. It was three o'clock. Jasmine usually got dinner ready for five so I turned round and headed back. The exploration of the rest of the track could wait till tomorrow because I was pretty damn sure that if I didn't do something about getting some meat on the barbie I'd be stuck with rabbit tucker for dinner and so would Jan and her kids. As I was supposed to be living in the flat it wouldn't be easy to drive off as soon as dinner was finished to go the pub and buy some proper tucker. Even so, it would still leave Jan and her kids without having had a proper meal. She'd had enough problems lately without adding to them.

I rode back having seen quite a few goats on the track. I decided that in future I'd take my rifle, then at least we could cook up a goat curry and it wouldn't cost a cent. Possibly Jan would cook it in my flat. If Jasmine found out I decided we could say I'd made a start on getting rid of the animals that are damaging the bush; which was what she wanted me to do initially. It crossed my mind to tell her we just saw the goat curry as a side-dish to go with her vegetarian meal. I didn't want her to be offended because I've found her quite considerate, even if she had a blind spot about vegetarian meals and didn't understand that sooner or later I'd have to kill something.

As I rode back into the grounds I met Jan on the lawn playing ball with Ryan. I think she was waiting to see me. Because she came over as soon as she saw me and gave me the best smile I've seen in days and said in a conspiratorial tone, 'I borrowed Jasmine's car today on the excuse of having to post some letters and I've bought some lamb-chops and a six-pack from the supermarket. Do you think we could fire up the barbie again?'

It's times like this when you know who your real friends are.

The following morning I set off early on Sunny taking the same gear as yesterday but with the addition of my rifle. Nothing had rolled or fallen onto the track since yesterday so I trotted most of the way and at one point we broke into a canter. We reached the river without stopping. I forded it and started up the gradual moss covered slopes on the other side. Moss, lichens and palm fronds as ancient and straggly as God's beard hung from the overhead branches. Supplejacks criss-crossed the track and were interwoven with a variety of young saplings which extended for the next hundred metres or so. I could barely see where the track was supposed to be. Cutting it all back with the slasher and clearing the path must have taken a couple of hours of hard work. Further on, the track doubled back in a horseshoe bend as we circled round a rocky moss-covered outcrop. Water draining from below the rock face ran into a hollow. The next hundred metres or so was reed covered swamp in pools of black water. Fortunately it had been dry for months but at times of heavy rain that swamp would be a nightmare. Beyond that the track was a bit more open as we went through an area of red beech complete with wasps feeding on the honey dew. A fantail flitted backwards and forwards and around my head as it followed us for several hundred metres feeding on the insects Sunny was stirring up with her hooves. Although it was summer, at the bottom of a steep gradient the ground became very soft again. I'd be doubtful if a four-wheel drive, even with mud grips, would find enough traction to get through. But other than the fact

Sunny and I both got mud splattered there were no problems. There are times when four legs are better than four wheels. I remained hopeful that Donut would be able to drag the cart through.

After the mud the track became harder with rock and tree roots which would be rough enough to make passengers in the cart end up with a compressed spine and jagged lips. It's just as well I put pneumatic tyres on the buggy!

Further on I hit a snag. I'd reached the second creek. This stream was smaller than the last but faster flowing. The problem was on this side; the bank was undercut and the track dropped about a metre straight into the water. The other side was gradual enough and consisted of sand and shingle. Even if we dropped the cart over the edge on this side it would be a one way trip, we'd never get back up the bank on this side. I tied Sunny to a sapling and standing in the water I got to work with the planting adze cutting away at the bank. Initially most of the stones and soil I cut out were swept away by the fast flowing water. Later as the slope became more gradual I had to shovel the spoil away and throw it down the bank. With an aching back and biceps that felt as if they had just been through a hay bailer I untied Sunny and we crossed the stream at least two hours after arriving.

That was the last big problem, which was just as well because I couldn't have faced another job like that. We climbed a slope, rounded the bend and below us the track fell away down a reasonably steep incline. Between the trees I found myself looking down onto what an optimist might call a couple of dozen houses. I guess a real estate agent would describe them as either a "handyman's dream" or a "potential" building site. They straggled over the higher ground at the head of the valley. Below the cabins a patchwork of small fields were separated by a meandering stream that was lined on both sides by willows. A dozen or so people were working the fields. Instead of fences many of the paddocks were separated by dry-stone walls or hedges. In some places there was a combination of stone and earth walls with hedges on

top. There was no mechanised machinery in sight and the bent over figures, which included quite small children, seemed to be doing everything by hand. They didn't seem to be speaking to each other. Not one of them looked up in the ten to fifteen minutes that I watched. Was there something almost sinister in their apparent disinterest in anything around them? Further on I could see two Clydsdales being used to cut hay. To me it seemed a bit late in the season for haymaking unless it was a second cut. There were Fresians in ones and twos in individual paddocks with their calves. So I guess they were hand-milked house-cows and the calves would be either for replacement, or beef. There was something almost repulsive in the thought of all that hand-milking. Like I told you, I never wanted to see the rear end of a cow again. The idea of machine, or worse still hand milking, was "udderly" repulsive to me. In any case there'd be no possibility of getting a milk tanker in there. Numerous pigs with piglets seemed to be wandering at will. They were mainly black and from the look of them I'd say they were probably Captain Cookers with a bit of Berkshire in the mix. I guessed that was where any surplus milk went! My eyes followed the stream. I couldn't be sure from this distance but I'd bet my last beer that, in a walled paddock sheltered from the wind and nestled into a "U" bend in the river, there was a crop. If I was right, presumably no one in the village would welcome strangers! If they had one crop, in all probability they'd have more hidden in the bush so I decided to keep my eyes open. Apart from that ducks, geese and hens seemed to be free-ranging and if my experience was anything to go by they'd probably be getting into stuff that they shouldn't. Two horses caught my eye. They were both chestnuts and about the same size, which could be close to fourteen-hands. I'd say they'd make pretty good cross-country hacks. They were grazing together in the paddock. As I looked across the valley I noticed another very unusual feature; there were no power poles anywhere. I was damn sure they wouldn't have underground cables out here so that could only mean one thing, kerosene lamps and candles! When Sophie

rings Jasmine she must be using a cell phone. Wondering how the battery got charged I guessed they could have solar panels or a petrol generator. If so, neither of them was obvious from here. When I arrived the village was in full sun. In the fifteen minutes I'd been sitting there I'd watched the shadow slide across the valley. It was three o'clock and summer. I reckoned in winter they might not get any sun at all and I presumed that was why the hay making was so late.

In the still air, twists of wood-smoke combined into a brooding cloud suspended over the village. It permeated my senses even up here on the crest of the hill. In this age the whole village looked like a macabre scene out of Europe in the dark ages instead of rural New Zealand. I'd seen enough. It was clear that the last couple-of-hundred metres into the village would present no problems for the cart. It was time to go.

I turned Sunny round and started to trot back towards Jasmine's place. Before I'd gone far along the track I saw a couple of goats, probably a mother and kid. They were in the trees but moved away into deeper cover as I approached. I suppose I could have dismounted and followed them but I'd decided against it as they might belong to someone in the village. Or, even if they were wild, someone down there might hear the shot and decide to claim ownership. Also I wasn't sure where Jasmine's land started and the village land ended.

The guys in the pub would laugh at me but, for some inexplicable reason, my antenna told me there was something foreboding in that place. Perhaps it was a reaction to seeing milking cows! No, I'm only kidding! Probably I was just bugged after all that digging. In any case I've been in enough trouble over the years for poaching despite the fact that goats are normally considered noxious animals. Shit! I dunno what went wrong with me; all of a sudden I seemed to have gone all law-abiding! I shall have to do something to restore my reputation.

I'd only gone on another couple of hundred metres when I came round the bend and saw them again. At least I

presume they were the same goats. They could equally well be different ones. They were on the far bank of the creek nibbling at branches. It would be an easy shot. With no idea how Sunny would react to a rifle shot, I was on the point of dismounting when a shot from somewhere up ahead made Sunny rear up. I still had my left foot in the stirrup and I ended up falling to the ground onto my back while Sunny turned round and almost trod on my head as he started back the way we'd just come with my foot twisted in the stirrup. My left knee was twisted and it felt as if I'd just received an electric shock that seemed to travel the whole length of my leg and into my spine. The involuntary spasm coincided with my shoulder slamming into a protruding tree root and somehow my foot was wrenched free. The whole incident probably took no more than five seconds. By this time Sunny had disappeared round the bend in the track at full gallop. As I tried moving to find some relief from the pain in my knee and my shoulder I heard a second shot. For the next thirty seconds I lingered on the ground wondering which part of me was the most broken and which part I could move that didn't produce stabbing pain. I hadn't heard her approach possibly because she was bare foot. My eyes rolled towards her and I became aware of a young woman standing over me.

CHAPTER 8

She was small and slightly built, possibly a teenager and wearing shorts and a tee shirt. Olive skin and dark eyes were complimented with black shoulder length hair. It was loose and uncombed. From my position on the ground I was looking directly up at well proportioned firm thighs. A Second World War Enfield 303 rifle was slung over her shoulder. The butt had been shortened by two or three inches and the rest of the butt had been shaved down. All the timber on top of the barrel had been cut away and the wood below the barrel had been thinned down to turn a military weapon into a lighter hunting rifle, which was probably tailored to her small size. She was wearing a wide masculine-looking leather belt with a brass buckle and a sheath knife. Judging by the curved shape of the sheath I presumed it to be a skinning knife.

‘Are you OK?’

‘I’m buggered if I know. I feel as if I’ve just been run over by a spike harrow.’

She held out a hand to help me get up. Her hand was mud stained and her nails had been bitten down almost to the quick. A smudge of mud stretched up her lower forearm almost to her elbow.

I took her hand and moving one limb at a time I eased myself into a standing position. This would be a story for the guys at the pub! Me not only needing but being glad of a hand up from a slip of a girl! I’d never live that down if they found out about it! But I must admit it did help.

At least I could stand, which I guess probably meant my back was broken and my knee was wrenched apart only in my imagination. ‘Thanks Sophie! It is Sophie isn’t it?’

She turned her head away and looked at the ground as if mentioning her name was a cause of embarrassment. I even detected a catch of emotion in her voice as she asked almost in a whisper, ‘How do you know my name?’

‘It was a guess. I was talking to Jasmine and she said how much she enjoyed the company of a young woman called

Sophie who lived in the Greek village and she sounded a bit like you.'

'What else did she say about me?' The words were snapped out.

'Not a lot! Oh, she said you had two children. And, while I think about it, she would like to buy about half-a-dozen geese from you if you could spare them.'

'Did she say anything about... It doesn't matter, forget it. I'll get your horse back for you.'

She put two fingers in her mouth and gave a long whistle of surprising power from someone so slight. Within a few seconds a pony, that probably wouldn't have made much more than eleven hands, came trotting up to her. I'd say it was primarily a Welsh Mountain gelding possibly with a bit of Icelandic pony in the genetic mix. He trailed a halter and had no saddle. He walked up to Sophie and in a second she had picked up the halter was astride him and riding bare-back. She dug her heels in and cantered back along the track. I tried imagining how hard she must be gripping the pony between her thighs to be able to ride like that without saddle or stirrups. Turning the bend in the track they disappeared from view. The sound of hooves on bare earth faded.

I took a few toddler-like steps along the track to the stream bed. The kid goat was dead on the further bank. It had died with a clean head shot. Looking along the track on the further side just before the next bend I could see the dead mother goat. Obviously Sophie had first shot the kid. The mother would have taken off at the sound of the shot, and paused in her flight to look back for her kid. That would have been the moment Sophie had waited for to fire the second shot. This young woman was rapidly gaining my respect.

I tried remembering what Jasmine had told me about her. Apparently she reckoned Sophie lacked confidence. I guess she must just mean social confidence because from what I'd seen of her riding and hunting abilities there was nothing lacking there. Despite her size she was as good as a guy and, dare I say it, a damn sight better than a lot of them.

When I asked her if her name was Sophie she had only hesitatingly confirmed it by asking the whispered question, "How did I know?" Most people would have replied enthusiastically with a welcoming curiosity. Then, as soon as she knew I'd been talking to Jasmine, she almost aggressively wanted to know what else I'd been told about her. Then she had started to ask if Jasmine had told me about something else, then she changed her mind and stopped mid-sentence. I guess Sophie has something she wants to hide. Come to think of it I reckon most people are the same and, more often than not, it involves what they consider to be their sexual misdemeanours. I reckon even the words sexual misdemeanour says more about peoples' sexual hang-ups than their sex lives, despite the fact that life favours women with a robust conscious and a murky reputation.

At that moment I heard trotting hooves and looking up I saw Sophie approaching on her pony leading Sunny by the reins.

'Thanks Sophie you're a wonder woman. Had she gone far?'

'Not far. She was just nibbling grass at the edge of the track when I caught up with her. She was OK. She just let me take her reins and lead her back. She didn't want to go past where you stopped to spy on our village.'

'I wasn't spying. I was just interested.'

'You rode out here just because you were interested! Huh! I saw you arrive. I watched you sitting there for at least fifteen minutes spying on us. You should think yourself lucky I was me who saw you and not someone else.'

'Why, what would have happened if it had been someone else?'

'You wouldn't want to know. Just think yourself lucky it was me. There're people in the village who don't like spies.'

'It seems you were spying on me! I rode out here to check out the track because Jasmine asked me to do it. She wants to know if it would be possible to take a horse and trap along the track from her place to yours. You must have seen

where I've been widening the track in places and levelling out the river bank to make it suitable for a cart.'

'Why does she want to come to our village? She's got a place of her own.'

'She wants to visit you. She said how much she enjoyed your company and getting phone calls from you. Also she was hoping to buy some geese if that's possible.'

'She can see me and buy geese without having to come to our place. Tell her visiting is not very convenient just now. She should stay away. And so should you. There're people in our village that don't like spies. Why are you carrying a rifle?'

All of this more or less confirmed to me that I had been right when I fancied I saw a crop growing in the paddock.

'I've brought a rifle because I'd hoped to pick up a goat while I was out here. I was on the point of dismounting to get a shot at those goats when you beat me to it.'

'Yeah! Well I'm sorry if I spooked your horse. I'm going to take the nanny back with me but you can have the kid if you want. Did you bring a meat bag with you?'

'Thanks, I'm Wayne by the way. Yes my meat bag is rolled up in the saddlebag.' I said this as I was tying Sunny's reins to a sapling that was growing by the side of the track. By the time I'd taken the meat bag out of the saddlebag Sophie had waded across the stream which came up to her knees and had cut the kid's throat. Then I watched her hold it up by the hind legs draining the blood onto the ground. Leaving Sunny secured to the tree and feeling every joint in my body protesting I waded across the stream to join Sophie with the meat bag.

I offered, 'I can skin that if you like, while you get the nanny.'

'I'm quick at this Wayne. You look like you need to get all your ribs back in the right order first.'

She was quick. I stood and watched while she did in about five minutes what I'd have taken about fifteen minutes to do.

'I can see you've had a fair bit of practice at this Sophie.'

'Yes my kids like goat curry.'

'It's two children you've got isn't it?'

'Yes Crete is seven and Athenea is two, nearly three.'

'Who's looking after them now?'

'Crete is minding Athenea.'

'Seven isn't very old; isn't there an adult...'

'No. I don't have a partner.'

'What about your parents?'

'Mum hasn't spoken to me for years. Dad's OK, he always says he loves me every time he visits but he doesn't come often. His wife plays up when he visits me. He gave me my pony Sparta. He was just a foal at the time and I've trained him myself.'

'Wouldn't your Dad help minding your children when you're out?'

'Dad's got another family now and in any case he has a broken arm.'

'A broken arm! Which arm?'

'His right one, and he's right handed.'

'Do you know how he did that?'

'He fell over and it twisted under him when he fell.'

'I suppose the hospital put it in plaster.'

'No he wouldn't go. He reckoned it was bad enough without having any damn doctors making it worse. Do you know sometimes, even when bones are healed, the doctors deliberately break them again just to create jobs for themselves.'

'No I didn't know that. You don't have any brothers or sisters who could help?'

'I'm my mother's only child; but my Dad has six children including me, they're all younger.'

'No grandparents?'

‘I’ve only got two. I’ve only ever had two and my children have only got two grandparents as well.’

‘I suppose some of them must have died.’

‘Piss off Wayne and stop keep asking me questions. It’s got nothing to do with you. And just for the record none of them have died. I’ve only ever had two and so have my children, now work it out for yourself. I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Sorry Sophie I didn’t mean to pry. I’m grateful for your help and it’s just that I found you a very interesting person.’

‘Well I’m not.’

She was sitting cross legged on the ground with the goat between her knees as she finished skinning it. I stood in silence as my eyes kept drifting towards her thighs. For several silent minutes she gutted the kid jointed it and didn’t look up to me until she handed the joints to me to put in my meat bag. When she’d finished and I’d done up the draw string she added as if she’d been considering whether to tell me or not, ‘I’m just twenty-one.’ Then she added, ‘Now get back on your horse and piss off back to Jasmine and leave me alone.’

As I carried the meat bag back over the stream I was mentally doing the sum, If she’s only just twenty-one and she has a seven-year-old son she probably got pregnant when she was thirteen! That left me wondering whether her frosty reply was related. Also I couldn’t figure out what she was on about concerning her apparent lack of grandparents. By the time I’d secured the meat bag on Sunny I was more concerned with how I’d get back in the saddle without dropping all the discs out of my back. I had just pushed Sunny up close to the bank so I could try to climb up the bank to get on her when I heard a voice behind me. I hadn’t even known she was there.

‘I’ll give you a hand if you like.’

I must have been twice her weight but she interlocked her fingers and with a heave she helped me struggle back on. Thank God the guys in the pub didn’t have a video of that!

‘Thanks Sophie I couldn’t have done that without you. And thank you for the meat. I hope I’ll see you again before long; you’re a real magic woman.’

I made Sunny walk back and the last I saw of Sophie that day was an over-the-shoulder glance as I turned the bend in the track and saw her sitting cross-legged next to the second goat with her skinning knife in her hand.

CHAPTER 9

Jasmine, Jan and the children had already started dinner when I got back; and they'd finished by the time I'd taken Sunny back in the paddock and put the saddle away, the tools back in the tool shed, locked my rifle back in my ute and put the goat meat in the fridge. By the time I'd been into my flat for a shower and got dressed into something cleaner the children were all playing with Jasmine on the grass.

Jan was in the conservatory when I limped in.

She looked up. 'What the hell happened to you? Have you been in a fight as well?'

'Yes with a horse and the lumpy bits on the track. The track won. But how are you after your ordeal Jan?'

'I'll survive. When I was at the hospital a woman came in and offered me counselling; but I refused it.'

'Why was that?'

'I'd sooner work things out for myself.'

'You've got your own strategy have you?'

'I look at it like this. The physical attack happened. It happened once, it isn't happening now. It's in the past. The only remnant of the rape is what is stored in my own memory. It would be possible for me to re-experience it every day by allowing my memory to regurgitate it on a daily basis. Then re-living it every day would affect me for the rest of my days. If something is going on inside my head then it's under my control. It's up to me to decide whether or not to allow it to resurface.'

'How are you going to do that?'

'I'm doing it now. I'm talking to you. I have beds to make, children to wash and a life to live. And should my brain try to bottle me up in a corner, I'm also working my way through a back-up strategy.'

'A back-up strategy?'

'I'm still figuring it out. If we say something is true what we mean is that we believe our memory of it is correct. That's right isn't it?'

‘Yes I guess so.’

‘But what we remember is seldom exactly what happened. That’s why there are so many different versions of the truth. I reckon we all tell ourselves lies every day and end up believing them. So as my back-up strategy I’ve already started modifying my memories of the event into something easier to handle. In any case the whole problem, if there is a problem, is inside my own head; no one but me can do anything about it.’

‘It seems to me you have it all sorted out already.’

‘I’m more worried about Melody and Ryan. They watched the whole thing. Melody is playing outside with Katherine just now. Katherine is a real treasure. That’s about the first time Melody has left my side; they’ve both become terribly clingy. I’m hoping it’ll be better if Thor comes back and we can be a family again.’

‘Do you know when he’ll be back?’

‘No I’ve talked to him several times from the hospital phone and he said he’d be back as soon as he’s organised his flights. But he didn’t know when that will be. Things seem to have got delayed and I’m not sure why. When I was in hospital I told him I broke the arm of one of the guys and Thor said if he can find the guy he’d be very tempted to break his other arm just below his chin! But I’ve tried calling him today, and I can’t get through.’

This seemed a good time NOT to tell Jan that I had my suspicions who her attacker was and where he lived.

‘I suppose the hospitals will be looking out for all the patients who come in with broken arms won’t they Jan?’

‘Yes, they questioned a few people but they haven’t found anyone yet who answers the description.’

‘I guess they’ll eliminate all the women and children and any guys who have the wrong arm broken, and then they’ll see who’s left.’

‘Talking about what’s left Wayne, I’ve cooked your lamb chops and put them in the fridge and Jasmine has done you a salad. It would only take a couple of minutes to pop the

chops in the microwave and heat them up. The kids were getting hungry and we didn't know what time you'd be getting back, so we started dinner without you. I hope you don't mind.'

'Of course not. It's damn good of you to go to the trouble of getting me a meal otherwise I'd have to be off to the pub right now.' I gave her a smile and a wink and added. 'I'd a lot sooner stay here and talk to you. And while I think of it I've just put a young goat in the fridge in my flat. We could have a goat curry tomorrow with, I suppose, the inevitable regulation-salad!'

'It sounds as if you've been doing a bit of hunting while you were out in the hills.'

'No I haven't. I met Jasmine's friend Sophie on the track and she had just shot two goats and she gave me one of them. Have you ever met her?'

'Yes I've seen her a few times when Jasmine has the playgroup children here. Sophie came on her pony with her daughter Athenea. In fact a couple of times I've given Sophie a lift into town for a bit of urgent shopping. I haven't found her easy to talk to and I don't know much about her. According to Jasmine she's rather lonely as some of the village women ostracise her. Do you know what all that's about?'

'Not altogether, but we had a chat. Apparently she's her mother's only child but her mother won't speak to her. I guess that might have an effect. She also told me a few weird things that have been bugging me. They don't seem to make sense.'

'Like what?'

'She said she only has two grandparents and has never had any more. I assumed two of them must have died but she said that wasn't the case.'

'It's possible Wayne. If a brother and sister copulate and have a child between them then that child would only have two grandparents.'

‘Oh! I hadn’t thought of that. But she also said her two children Sparta and Athenea also only had two grandparents. She’s her mother’s only child so there’s got to be something wrong there.’

‘You’re right there is something wrong – something morally wrong but not something impossibly wrong. Think about it Wayne.’

‘That’s what Sophie told me to do and I’ve come to the conclusion it can’t be true.’

‘Unfortunately it could be true Wayne. If her own father is also the father of her two children then Sophie would be correct and her two children would only have two grandparents. They’d be her father and Sophie’s mother. It’s called incest.’

‘Oh I suppose so, I hadn’t thought of that. It doesn’t sound very probable does it?’

‘On the contrary, it’s very probable; incest has been a major feature in human history. Would you like me to prove it to you?’

‘I don’t believe you can.’

‘Then let me prove you wrong. Everyone must have two parents, right Wayne.’

‘Of course.’

‘Then let’s take you as an example. Both of your parents had two parents so normally that would make four grandparents.’

‘Yes.’

‘And those four grandparents would have had two parents each so you’d expect to have had eight great-grandparents.’

‘Yes.’

‘So if we go back in time starting from you and counting your ancestors, the numbers at each previous generation would increase in the series, 2 for the first generation, 4 for the second, 8 for the third, 16 for the fourth, 32 for the fifth, and so on.’

‘Yes.’

‘Nowadays since contraceptives have been available people generally assume a generation is about thirty-years but for most of our history it has been more like twenty-years.’

‘Yes OK.’

‘Just to enable us to do the sums in our head let’s go back exactly one hundred generations. That would take us roughly to the beginning of the Roman Empire.’

‘OK.’

‘So to find the number of your ancestors we’d be looking at the number two raised to the power of one hundred. We can work that out in our head.’

‘Can you? I can’t. I’m just an ex-farm boy from Taranaki.’

‘The log to the base ten of two is 0.3 or, if we want to be pedantic, 0.301. But let’s just take it as 0.3 I’m sure you can multiply 0.3 by one hundred and get the answer of 30.’

‘Yes!’

‘So if we take the antilog of 30 and round the answer we get a one with thirty noughts after it. That is one million, trillion, trillion. Of course that is far more than the world population then or now. The answer is obviously wrong. You couldn’t possibly have had that many ancestors. Two and a half thousand years ago the world population was miniscule compared with today’s population. And for most of that time people were mainly living in small self-contained villages’

‘Perhaps you did the sum wrong.’

‘No I didn’t. The maths is correct and so is the assumption that everyone must have two parents. But that leaves us with the assumptions that there was no inbreeding and no incest. That is where the flaw lies. In practice I’m sure you’d find every conceivable combination of sexual partners but, until recent times, mainly within the confines of the village. Probably the only time significant new blood was introduced was when war parties went through the village and killed the men and raped the women. The numbers and common sense tell us we are the product of massive inbreeding. Just look at the numbers! Despite what people

would like to believe incest has played a major part in human history.'

'Even now?'

'Probably it's less now than in earlier generations. People and animals have the same hereditary compulsion to copulate.' She looked me straight in the eye and added, 'That's right isn't it?' But without waiting for a reply she continued, 'But, because of greater mobility, people have more partner-options nowadays and they naturally prefer an attractive stranger to a blood relative. Why? The only reason I can think of is that it's an unconscious and inbuilt desire to expand the gene pool.'

'Yes. I guess so. I'd never thought of it like that before.'

She smiled. 'Just think of the implications if you took away the conceptual, "Tall dark stranger". It would leave be a huge hole in women's popular fiction.'

'Then I guess women would have to start doing it instead of reading about it.'

'I think they do already, given the opportunity. But given a closed community, and from what Jasmine tells me that could apply to the Greek commune, the reluctance to indulge in incest is likely to be overwhelmed by the urgency of lust.'

'You're saying if there's no one else available then they...'

'Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying.'

'So you reckon it's quite possible that Sophie was telling the truth.'

'Yes, but one interesting thing is that she told you. You were a stranger to her. She didn't need to tell you anything. And the other interesting thing is that she chose not to tell it straight. But she left you the opportunity to work it out, providing you were sufficiently interested. And it seems to me her intuition was correct; you not only went to the effort of working it out but you also chose to discuss it with me. Interesting!'

'What are you saying Jan?'

‘Come off it Wayne you know exactly what I’m saying. You found her an attractive woman didn’t you?’

Conscious of the fact I was talking to another woman in reply to her question I simply gave Jan the offhand and unenthusiastic answer of, ‘Oh! I suppose so. She seems OK.’ I think she saw through my nonchalant answer as easily as the guys in the pub would! But there was something else that interested me. When Jan and I were at the Compass and Sextant it was Jan who asked me to dance with her and the body contact between us had been close enough to be arousing. Her choice of song was interesting, “The gypsy rover”. It was primarily a song about a lady, not a woman but a lady, who abandoned her husband to go off with a gypsy who came out of the hills to become her “tall dark stranger” and her lover. I’ve since wondered whether any of that crossed her mind as we moved together on the floor. Now she had gone to considerable lengths, involving some meaningless mathematics, to explain to me that Sophie was a child-of-incest in a closed society. Could Jan have an ulterior motive, involving me? Or is that just my imagination working overtime? She’s aware that women run an eye of appraisal over the tall dark strangers that they meet. I guess it’s similar to what guys do with women. She wouldn’t have known that if she didn’t indulge! I’m beginning to think women scientists are a lot more emotional than the popular impression would imply.

‘What sort of a recommendation is that Wayne? You reckon Sophie Seems OK. You can do better than that!’

I grinned when I replied, ‘Well what I really mean is I like her, but of course she’s not a scientist like you.’

‘You like female scientists do you?’

‘I haven’t known any before you. In fact I tended to think scientists were all men.’

‘Not any more Wayne. Nowadays there are roughly equal numbers of male and female scientists. But that hasn’t always been the case. You’re a hundred years out of date. Then there were hardly any female scientists. Mme Currie was

one notable exception. She did some outstanding work on radio activity and the elderly male establishment in Paris refused to publish her work.'

'Because she was a woman?'

'I guess so. Officially it was because they were "shocked" by the "outrageous affaire" she was having. In Paris of all places! Even the word "affaire" is French. I guess a male scientist would have been treated differently.'

I winked at her when I asked, 'So women scientists indulge in affairs do they?'

'Some do Wayne; I don't think women scientists are distinguishable from the rest of the female population in such matters.'

'That's encouraging!'

'You need encouragement do you Wayne?'

'Try me and find out. I believe experimentation is something at which scientists excel.'

'True but many of our experiments are failures.'

'And I guess by implication many of them must also be successful. But I suppose you won't know which-is-which until you try.'

'Wayne I like talking to you. I need to talk to someone to take my mind off the horrible experience I've just had. If I wanted to be cynical I'd say it's part of my brand new survival strategy. But try to understand, I've been beaten up and gang raped, my children are terrified, my home has been burnt down, my husband is away and I still don't know when he'll be back. Added to that, my brain feels as if it has just been fracked. I enjoy talking to you. Flirting talk is great, it makes me feel wanted, it makes me feel like a woman instead of a victim but that's all it will be. Just talk, meaningless talk, nothing more. I need time to recover, especially after the police investigation.'

'Why? What did the police do? Is it OK to ask?'

'Yes it's OK. I don't mind talking about that. The police kept asking me the same questions over and over again in different ways. Then they started on Melody and made her

cry; Melody crying made Ryan cry. So I yelled and swore at the cops TO LEAVE MY KIDS ALONE. I also used some choice words and phrases in Norwegian. They couldn't understand a word of that but everything was recorded and if they take the trouble to get it translated they'll find out exactly what I think of their investigation techniques. With all my yelling two nurses came running into the ward and, pulling back the curtain, saw me yelling in Norwegian, and Melody and Ryan crying. Then they ordered the police out of the hospital; which was my main reason for yelling at them in the first place. None of us could take any more! As soon as the police had gone Melody and Ryan got into bed with me for a cuddle. Then within a few minutes they dropped off to sleep and I was left thinking. Time to think isn't what I need just now. Please give me space and don't expect anything more. Well, you should be able to expect one thing from me and that's to take those lamb chops out of the fridge as I promised and drop them in the microwave. You look as beaten up as I feel.'

'Thanks Jan.'

'And if you feel like any extra salad I'm sure you'd only have to mention it and Jasmine will be only too pleased to oblige. Her vegetable garden is almost limitless!

'In the meantime I'm going to give Ryan his bath and get him ready for bed. Even if we're in a strange house I want things to be as normal as they can be for both of them. They've had a hell of a time and I'm quite worried about Melody. Thanks for not bringing that up in our conversation. That was considerate. I wouldn't want to cry in front of you. While I'm putting the kids to bed I hope you'll enjoy your salad! Goodnight Wayne.'

When she reached the door she turned and grabbed my hand and pulled me down to sit next to her on the sofa. 'There's one more thing Wayne.'

'Yes.'

'If I tell you something I want you to promise me that you'll never to repeat it to anyone, anyone at all and, should

you ever meet Thor, this specially applies to him. I couldn't tell him and I need to tell someone. And if you ask me why, I'd have to say I don't know. I don't know why I want to tell you. Perhaps it's part of my survival strategy or maybe it's because you didn't question me about the attack. That was thoughtful. Beneath that exterior you're... It doesn't matter what you are. Do you promise?'

'Yes, I promise.'

She hesitated for several seconds and then spoke quickly in bursts. 'In Norway I was in a martial arts club. I did quite well at it. We never attempt to harm each other... Martial art is an art form – a bit like dancing; both have moves and counter moves and they're based on respect for our partners... But when those men broke into my bedroom something happened to me that I didn't think possible, it was as if some ancestral Viking blood stirred... You won't repeat this will you? Panic or instinct took control. I attacked. I used and misused the skills I'd been taught. I fought for several minutes and got pleasure from breaking one of their arms. I did it deliberately. I know now anger builds like an orgasm... Do you know the Norse word "berserk"? That's what I'd become... They broke in while I was in bed. I didn't have anything other than my body to use as a weapon; if I had, I'd have used it. It was only when one of them grabbed my little Melody and threatened to rape her that I reverted from being a crazy woman to become a mother, with a mother's instincts. So I let them rape me, in preference to having them do that to my little Melody. There, I've told you; now don't say anything to me or pass any comment I don't want to know what you think because I'm going to get Melody and Ryan ready for bed.'

Without waiting for any comment she ran out of the room and pulled the door shut behind her leaving me as confused as she seemed to be. I think she was crying when she went out. That must be about the weirdest thing any woman has ever said. To start with, I couldn't imagine why it was such a big deal. If four guys break into a woman's house they

deserve what they get. What was it she said? Anger builds like an orgasm! Is that the clue to what's upsetting her? People don't act rationally when anger or orgasms are involved. It's crazy to expect anything else. An orgasm builds until, like a super nova, it blows itself apart. Then the debris dissipates and a great calm settles in that corner of the sky. In terms of anger Jan was left half-shagged. I reckon her problem wasn't that she broke someone's arm; her problem was that there were still seven arms left to go. It still didn't make any sense and I didn't have a clue why Jan needed to tell anyone if it upset her, let alone me. I'd only met her a few times! If, for some weird reason she wanted to tell someone, I could imagine she might confide something like that to a close female friend or even to a sympathetic relative, or depending on their relationship possibly to her husband but certainly not me. I'm damn glad she didn't wait for a comment as I wouldn't have any idea what I could say except, to me, it didn't seem a big deal and she had a right to defend herself and her children. In any case she was outnumbered four to one. So what's happening to her? Is she secretly pleased she broke the guy's arm? In her position I would be. But perhaps she can't live with the idea of being pleased about it and wants to blame someone and I guess her "ancestral Viking blood" is as good as anyone. I guess it gives God or the Devil a break from being in the hot seat! Perhaps she just trying to tell me she's not the sort of woman who normally goes round deliberately breaking men's arms. I simply don't understand women.

I remained sitting on the sofa pondering the improbability of the discussion we had just had. First she had rambled on in a detached way about maths and the Roman Empire and then the facade seemed to collapse and intimate details seemed to spill over like froth on a freshly pulled beer. As I was trying to extract some sense out of this Jasmine came in.

'Hi Wayne! Jan is just giving Melody and Ryan their bath so I'm glad I've caught you alone. I noticed you talking to Jan just now. I think we'll have to try to be 'specially nice

to her. Something has happened to her and she's still in denial about it. Did she mention anything...?'

'No nothing. Of course I know she was attacked but mostly we just talked about mathematics and the Roman Empire. We hardly mentioned her attack.'

'Well there's something else. But please don't tell her I've told you because she's still in denial about it. You won't say will you?'

'Of course not.'

'I was with her this morning when the phone rang. A foreign sounding woman said her name was Karen and asked to speak to Jan. Anyway I handed the phone over. I don't think Jan knew who the woman was. It was a brief call, too brief. It only lasted about sixty seconds and I couldn't hear what was said. I think they were speaking in Norwegian. It seemed strange for Jan to get a call as not many people know she's staying here. After the call Jan turned to me and said, "A woman called Karen is moving into Thor's flat." Jan seemed quite shaken.

'Did she pass any other comment?'

'At one point she said, "Thor's flight had been delayed." but that was all.'

'How did Jan react?'

'That's what worries me; Jan showed no emotion. Nothing at all! She just said, "Oh I see" and hung up.'

'Might she have been expecting it?'

'I'm certain she wasn't. But she didn't say anything else to me. I wish she had, then I might be able to do something to help. I don't know what, but at least I could try. With this on top of everything else she could... Well, trauma victims often exhibit rapid and, what seems to us, irrational mood swings. Right now she's probably at her most vulnerable. I wouldn't like to think she was being left alone for long. That wouldn't be healthy. We did quite a bit about that in the first-aid course. I think one of us should try to spend a bit of time with her during the day and perhaps try to make her feel special. I'm sure it will help. I've noticed she likes

attention from you. I guess she'll be all right now as she's bathing Ryan and Melody.'

'OK I'll do what I can. Perhaps talking about mathematics and the Roman Empire wasn't such a crazy thing after all.'

'I think we should forget we've ever had this conversation don't you?'

'I won't say a word about it to her. I wouldn't know what to say anyway.'

'I feel so sorry for Jan; she's had so much thrown at her, and none of it's her fault.'

'OK. Leave it with me and I'll do what I can.'

'There's one thing I thought we might all do tomorrow if the weather's OK. How would you feel about taking all the children on the cart up to the lake for a picnic lunch and a swim? If you could drive the cart I suppose Jan or I could go on the horses. Jan told me she used to do a fair bit of riding in Norway. Organising the lunch and getting the children ready might take her mind off all the things she seems to be bottling up inside.'

'Yeah. That sounds fine. I don't see any snags.'

'Thanks Wayne. I expect Jan must have just about finished giving Melody and Ryan their bath so I'll need to go and bath Katherine. In the meantime I'll suggest the idea to Jan and leave you to get your dinner.'

I sat in the kitchen watching the chops go round in the microwave and it seemed my head was going round just as fast thinking about why Jan's "orgasm of anger" had seemed such a big deal. No one else needed to know! There must be more involved than she'd told me.

When I was a student one of the guys had a "Lucky" tee shirt. It had *LUCKY* printed on the front. At some point he must have been wearing it when he passed an exam. After that he always wore it for every test and exam and, despite the fact he was a reasonably clever guy, he became convinced that as long as he wore his lucky shirt he'd pass everything, whether or not he attended lectures. Of course his luck ran out but he

blamed his failure on the fact that by washing his shirt the word *LUCKY* had faded. So his eventual failure was his mother's fault for washing it! It seems crazy to everyone else; but he believed it.

There seems no limit to intelligent people taking totally unrelated events and inventing a fictional cause and effect. Could someone as clever and rational as Jan be so stressed out to link her imaginary orgasm of anger with the coincidental phone call she had received about Thor? Might she have thought that was related to the possibility that he'd left her and the children for someone else? Perhaps in the past...

The microwave pinged and I got my chops out. I decided to worry about Jan tomorrow.

CHAPTER 10

In the morning I made a start by getting three of the horses in from the big paddock one at a time and putting them into their individual stables for a brush and grooming. I was still trying to get to know the horses. Sunny, that I rode yesterday, seemed OK apart from the fact that she was spooked by guns. Another horse I had my eye on and wanted to try was a big black gelding of about fifteen hands that Katherine had named Marmite. I guessed his age at about five. I saddled up and took him for a canter a couple of times round the paddock. He seemed responsive enough and I didn't notice any vices, so I reckoned Sunny and Marmite might be the easiest horses to ride. After the saddle blankets I put stock saddles on both of them as I've always found the stock saddle easier for beginners and I still didn't know much about Jan and Jasmine's riding experience.

I was about to sort out Donut for the cart when Sophie rode into the yard. She still carried the rifle over her shoulder and her skinning knife on her belt. In addition she had two sacks that she had partially stitched together at the top to create a pair of open-topped saddlebags that she had thrown across her pony Sparta.

'Hi Wayne, I've brought a breeding pair of geese for Jasmine. They're in my saddlebags. I've clipped the wing feathers of both of them on one side so they won't be able to fly back to our place. But probably if you put them in a paddock with plenty of grass they'll just stick around and won't try. Where do you want them?'

'Thanks Sophie, I didn't know you were bringing them. But I'm pretty sure Jasmine will want them in the big paddock next to the drive along with the horses.'

'Do you want to walk down there with me now Wayne? If you show me where they've got to go I'll put them straight into the paddock as I get them out of the sacks.'

'What should we do about paying for them?'

‘I want fifteen dollars each for them; but Jasmine can pay me once I’ve brought all six. I didn’t want to put more than one in each sack. So I’ll bring two tomorrow and two the next day.’

‘OK, I guess we’d better get them in the paddock and out of the sacks right away. I’ll fix up your money later with Jasmine.’

We walked to the big paddock together, with Sophie leading Sparta by his halter. Sophie still had her rifle over her shoulder while the two sacks remained slung across Sparta’s back. Sophie, still bare footed, walked on the gravel without seeming to notice the stones. The soles of her feet must be as tough as the leather on her belt. I opened the gate and we walked into the paddock. Once we were inside and we’d shut the gate, Sophie lifted the two sacks from Sparta’s back put them on the ground and, tipping them up, allowed the geese to tumble out onto the grass. As soon as they discovered they were in the sunlight they squawked loud enough to drown out a teenagers’ party and took off to the other side of the paddock while both of them flapped their one-and-a-half wings. I picked up the empty jute sacks.

‘Would you like to leave Sparta in here for a while and come up to my flat for a coffee before you go back?’

‘Yes thanks. But I’ll come back tomorrow and bring you another breeding pair.’

We went through the gate and shut it, while Sparta started grazing and we walked back to the stables. I guess she didn’t normally wear shoes as her toes spread out as she walked. Not like the cramped together toes you see on women whose shoes pinch their feet and their sex appeal. As we climbed the steps to my flat I was just wondering whether her open toes were an indication of an open sex life when we reached my kitchen door. I left the two sacks on the steps outside.

As I opened the door to go inside she said, ‘You can fuck me if you want.’ And, as if anticipating my response,

lifted her rifle off her shoulder and leaned it against the wall next to the fridge.

Of course I'd thought of sex when I invited her up to my flat. Guys don't invite women into their flats without thinking about it. And in my experience women are certainly no slower, and often a hell of a lot faster than guys, at working out the possibilities and implications of going into any secluded place with them. But for some reason I've never understood, perhaps I'd have to be a woman to understand it, etiquette seems to require the woman to pretend the suggestion of doing it came as a shock. And, before it can be contemplated, the guy has to start by clambering through the boggy ground and foothills of social intercourse before assailing the loftier peaks of seduction. Excluding women like Tanya, this protocol normally seems necessary as a prelude to enjoying a wild and uninhibited sleigh ride down the other side of the mountain and finally accelerating through those trembling hills where fantasy and form merge to become a living creature that exists for one explosive moment. It is the moment that provides both a reason for living and the possibility of life.

But an up-front offer like the one I'd just had from Sophie is enough to rock the foundations of female etiquette and leave me trembling with anticipation! I was surprised. Not because of what she said, obviously we'd both worked it out, but what surprised me was the relaxed way she dispensed with the feminine protocol and came straight to the point. "You can fuck me if you want!" Surprised I might have been, but I wasn't slow to respond. She wanted me to undress her. When I undid her belt both the skinning knife and her belt fell with a clunk on the floor. It wasn't until we were both naked that we moved from the kitchen to the bedroom.

Her body felt lithe and firm as I drew her towards me just so that I could experience the softness of her breasts against my skin. With my arms encircling her body my fingers traced the length of her spine until my wrists rested on her pelvic bones and my hands gripped her buttocks. I pulled her

against my arousal. She tilted her head back to search my face for a response as her hands slid down between us and her fingers probed. A minute later she sank to her knees. Her mouth lay siege to the tip of my manhood, her tongue moistened and her teeth teased. I closed my eyes as the nails of both hands blazed a trail up the inside of my thighs.

My hands slid beneath her arm pits. With her muscles rippling under her skin combined with her black hair I felt as if I was lifting a lithe black panther and placing her on my bed. Anticipation surged.

I slipped into her as easily as a kayak slides into a river down a wet grassy bank. Within a few dozen strokes we glided into the flowing current while rhythmic strokes increased in pace and carried us faster downstream. Within moments we were heading for the big “V” in the centre of the rapids where the current was fastest and would take us into the heaving white water which we both knew inevitably led to the foaming chasm ahead. For a moment the kayak poised on the edge of the falls. Our world tilted. Together we slipped over the edge and into a free fall through space until, in a single shared explosion, we clung to each other and plunged deep into the foaming water below the falls. We surfaced gasping for air and, holding each other, we drifted round in eddies and let the water flow over us transporting us downstream until we grounded on the river bank. Naked we moved into long grass and lay gazing up at the puffy white clouds as they ambled across the sky changing into a fantasy of forms. Holding hands we listened to the flow of water as it gurgled past us. Fantails hovered over our heads and from somewhere in the tree tops we heard a bell bird call.

We whispered to each other not wanting to disturb, or hasten the end of, the magic. I don’t normally remember much about pillow talk but apparently I must have told Sophie how much I loved her. She must have asked me if I’d still love her and want her if we made a baby. Presumably I’d have told her what she wanted to hear as one does in those circumstances.

Eventually the fluffy white clouds recombined to form the plain white ceiling of my bedroom and the sounds of the river and forest drifted back into the bush until all we could hear were the sounds of the horses in the yard. We dressed and Sophie buckled on her skinning knife and picked up her rifle from beside the fridge. I asked her if she still wanted a coffee but she said she had better be getting back to her children and she was hopeful of getting a pig on the way back as a family of them had crossed the track on the way here.

We paused at the kitchen door and kissed. She promised to come again tomorrow with another breeding pair of geese. She walked down the steps picking up her two sacks on the way. At the gate of the big paddock I heard her give her whistle and Sparta trotted up to her. Obviously he was a well trained pony. I'm not a trained pony and in my case she got me to respond with seven words! "You can fuck me if you want." I'm not likely to forget them.

I was busy getting the cart ready for the children and I didn't notice when she rode back past the house and disappeared from view along the track.

Half-an-hour later when I'd finished getting the horses ready I walked up to the house to see how their preparations were going for the picnic at the lake. Everything was in chaos. Katherine was dressed and she seemed to be trying to help Ryan with his nappy but he had other ideas and was kicking and yelling. Melody was still in her pyjamas with an unfinished bowl of porridge. There was a pool of something sticky dripping off the kitchen table onto the floor and some one must have trodden in it and left a trail of footprints over the lounge carpet. Jan was in the conservatory in tears and Jasmine had her arm round her trying to console her.

As I went in Katherine abandoned the nappy she was trying to put on Ryan and came and told me, "Aunty Jan is sad because she's just had an Email from Uncle Thor."

I walked into the conservatory. Jasmine started to tell me. 'Jan's just had an Email from Thor...'

'What did it say?'

‘Nothing, that’s the trouble. He said he was going to be delayed for several weeks and didn’t give any explanation.’

‘Have you tried phoning him?’

‘I’ve been trying all morning. He’s not answering his cell phone.’

‘There could be a million and one reasons for that Jan and most of them would be entirely innocent.’

Jan turned a tear streaked face towards me. ‘I’ve just been telling Jasmine. Yesterday morning I tried phoning Thor in our flat; it would be late evening there and a woman called Karen answered the phone.’

‘Do you know who the woman is?’

‘She spoke Norwegian. I didn’t ask her anything. I just hung up.’

‘Did you have a big bust up with Thor before you left?’

‘No, of course not. When he left he just gave me a big kiss at the airport and told me he’d be back as soon as he could get away from Head Office. We’ve already booked the air tickets and our accommodation to take Melody and Ryan to the Sunshine Coast for a holiday in a few weeks time.’

‘Then, if I were you Jan, I’d assume that the holiday is still on unless Thor personally tells you anything different.’

Jasmine cut in. ‘That’s exactly what I’ve been telling her.’

‘You must have spoken to him recently about being attacked and you told me he would ring the neck of whoever did that to you, providing he could find the bugger. Did he give you any indication then that there was another woman waiting in the wings?’

‘No nothing at all like that. Of course he was upset about the attack but he wasn’t different in any way to me. Perhaps I shouldn’t have told him I was gang raped. It never occurred to me before that I should keep it a secret from him. The rape wasn’t my fault. I didn’t ask for it. I know lots of men reckon women only get raped because they ask for it but it wasn’t like that, it never is. I was asleep in bed when they

broke into our house. Do you think that would make a difference?’

‘No I don’t Jan. I’ve never met him so I only know what you’ve told me but I’d expect having his wife raped and children attacked would make most guys want to come home earlier, not go off with someone else.’

I don’t know what else to do. I’ve tried phoning, leaving messages and sending Emails but I’ve not heard anything back. What can I do? Should I get a flight to Norway, and what about Ryan and Melody? Should I take them?’

I rested my hand on Jan’s shoulder. ‘Would you like a suggestion from me, Jan?’

‘Yes anything.’

‘We have a picnic planned for lunchtime today and we’re going to take the children up to the lake in the cart and all have a swim. I think we should still go ahead with that and perhaps by the end of the day we’ll all feel a lot less stressed. I don’t think we’ll achieve anything by staying down here and spending the rest of the day alternately asking if and why. What do you think Jasmine?’

‘I think that’s the most sensible suggestion I’ve heard all day.’

I put my arm round Jan and gave her a hug. ‘Come on Jan don’t let’s waste the sunshine. And I’ve got the horses all ready for us.’ As I took my arm away from her shoulders I gave her hand an affectionate squeeze and for a brief moment we made eye contact and it wasn’t accidental.

If there was the flicker of a mutual thought that passed between us in that moment it was interrupted by Jasmine who asked, ‘Do you think we might be able to leave in an hour or so, as we need to get the children ready and pack something for lunch?’

‘That’s fine by me. I already have the horses ready. I thought Jan could ride Marmite and you could have Sunny. I’ll use Donut to pull the cart and I’ll drive the three children. As far as I’m concerned we can leave any time. In fact I’d have

been ready a few minutes earlier except for the fact that Sophie brought a couple of geese for you.'

'Oh! That's nice, is she still here?'

'No she had to get back to the children and couldn't stay long.'

'I'm sorry I missed her. She doesn't manage to come very often. She's a very lonely woman you know and doesn't seem to have any close friends. It's made her independent, in some ways too independent, but she's also lacking in social contact. I'd really like us to try to do something for her to make her feel a bit more wanted. Did you think to offer her a cup of coffee while she was here?'

'Yes I offered, but she had to hurry back for her children.'

'Oh that's a pity; I hope she doesn't think we're ignoring her. From what she tells me she gets very little support in the village.'

'She's coming back tomorrow so maybe you'll get a chance to see her then.'

'Coming back again?'

'Yes, I told her you needed six geese to help with the security and she can only bring them two at a time on her horse Sparta. So I expect she'll be back tomorrow and the next day.'

'Oh that's great. If possible I'd like us all to try to let her know that we aren't ignoring her. It would be nice if we could make her feel special. Everyone needs that.'

'I'll definitely try to do that tomorrow Jasmine.'

I put my arm round Jan and gave her a hug. 'I'm sure you'll find things are not anything like as bad as you suspect. Let's go and enjoy the sun shall we?'

Jan smiled through a tear stained face. 'OK I'll try. See you in a little while.'

CHAPTER 11

With Donut between the shafts I drove the cart to the house, put the brake on and tied the reins round a fence post. Then I had to wait ten minutes before Jan brought Katherine, Melody and Ryan out. She lifted all three of them onto the cart. The two girls were fine, it was an adventure for them but Ryan instantly started to cry. So Jan picked him up and held him. He put his arms round Jan's neck and sobbed and wouldn't let go.

Jan turned to me. 'If it's OK with you Wayne, I think I'd better travel in the cart with Ryan instead of riding on Marmite. Ryan's got very clingy in the last few days. It's ever since we were attacked. I expect he'll grow out of it but I don't think he'll settle without me. Would Donut be able to pull you, me and the three kids? I've never driven a cart before and I wouldn't like to try it by myself with the children aboard.'

'With five people aboard we'd be starting to load the cart up. I'm not too familiar with the horses yet. I think it might be better if I walk and lead Donut with you four on board. These horses are still a bit of an unknown quantity just now. I'm pretty sure he'll be OK and pull all of us without any problems, but I'd feel happier if I led him. That way I can make sure he doesn't act up. In the meantime if you can keep an eye on Donut I'll slip back to the stables, return Marmite to the paddock and bring Sunny up here for Jasmine. It'll take a few minutes as I'll have to take Marmite's saddle off before I put him back.'

'I'm sorry to put you to all that trouble Wayne, especially as you got everything ready for us but Ryan won't go without me.'

'That's OK. The problem lies with me for not being familiar with the temperament of all the horses yet. If I work at it, in another week, I should have a better idea about each of them. I haven't even ridden most of them yet. But if you feel bad about getting me to take Marmite back I'll give you the opportunity later to make it up to me with a big kiss!'

‘That’s a promise Wayne. In fact I might even give you an extra one for luck.’

‘Then this looks like being my lucky day.’ As I said it I thought to myself, It’s already been a hell of a lot luckier than you can imagine.

‘If I can help I’d really like to get to know the horses Wayne; and do a bit of riding because I haven’t been on a horse since I left Norway. I hate saying it, because it makes me sound like a drama queen, but since we were attacked and I had that horrible phone call my world seems to have tilted and all my confidence has run out. And now I’ve made you do some more work.’

I rested my hand on Jan’s arm and let my thumb trace tiny sensual circles on the soft skin on the inside of her forearm. ‘I don’t mind moving the horses round. It’s my job; it’s what Jasmine’s paying me to do. But doing whatever I can to help you feel better and restore your confidence would be recreational for me.’ As an afterthought I added, ‘And for both of us.’

Her eyes, which had been looking at Ryan, flicked a glance towards me. She knew exactly what recreational activity I had in mind. That implied to me that the idea wasn’t totally alien to her.

At that moment Jasmine came out carrying a basket covered with a table cloth which presumably had lunch in it. Under her other arm she carried two rolled up towels. I made some comment about lunch as she loaded the basket and towels into the cart. Then I noticed Jasmine’s bare feet.

‘Jasmine, could I suggest you might find it easier if you wore shoes with a small heel, gum-boots would be fine. If you haven’t ridden for a bit there’s just a chance your foot could slip right through the stirrup and you could injure your ankle. A heel on your shoe makes that less likely.’

‘Oh! Thanks for that Wayne. I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll slip indoors and get my gum-boots. I won’t be a moment.’

‘I’m just on my way to take Marmite back to the paddock as Jan’s travelling in the cart with Ryan and the girls. I’m going to walk and lead Donut.’

Ten minutes later I returned with a riding helmet for Jasmine and helped her adjust the strings inside. While I supported Jasmine’s knee she mounted Sunny and we set off at a walking pace. Ryan was still clinging to Jan but Katherine and Melody were both standing up in the cart and seemed in danger of falling out if we hit too much of a jolt. Jan told them they had to sit down but five seconds later they were standing again. I was wondering whether it was my job to tell them they had to sit down when Jasmine did it for me. And they didn’t attempt to stand up again for the rest of the trip to the lake.

We took the cart to the top of the grassy knoll and I put the brakes on. Ryan seemed to have fallen asleep sitting on Jan’s hip and supported by her left arm. I lifted Melody and Katherine down and offered a hand to Jan, but she managed fine using her one free hand. In the meantime Jasmine had dismounted and led Sunny to a small red-beech tree that was growing at the edge of the grass. Having tied Sunny’s reins round the trunk and loosened the girth, she walked back with her riding helmet in her hand. I was in the process of leading Donut from between the shafts when she put the helmet in the cart.

Jan was unloading the lunch basket using her free hand while the two girls were already at the water’s edge.

Jan glanced up at Jasmine. ‘I’ll get the rest of the gear if you’d like to see that the girls are OK by the water.’

By the time I’d found somewhere to tie up Donut, Katherine and Melody were already undressed and in the water. Jasmine, ankle deep at the water’s edge, was with them. Jan had spread the table cloth on a piece of flat ground at the top of the hillock and was starting to unpack the food. Ryan appeared to have woken up and was standing on the table cloth watching. I helped Jan unload the basket while she attempted to keep Ryan from upsetting the bowl of salad, treading on the boiled eggs and getting into the butter.

We were kneeling together on the table cloth when Jan glanced up at me and giving me a conspiratorial grin showed me a small plastic package. 'I picked up a packet of shaved ham from the supermarket and slipped it into the basket when Jasmine wasn't looking.'

I put my hand on her knee and asked, 'Is that the naughtiest thing you intend doing today?'

While she was cutting the bread rolls in half and buttering them without looking up she answered, 'It depends on what other opportunities I get.' Without pausing she called to Jasmine and the girls. 'Lunch is ready.'

Katherine and Melody splashed their way out of the water, ran up the bank and dripped water close to the table cloth. Jan handed the girls a towel each and told them to get dry before starting their lunch. I glanced towards the water and I could see Jasmine picking up the girls' discarded clothes from the grass. She carried them up the bank and dropped them in a heap into the cart. All were quite normal actions for a mother but the next thing she did was – well different! She stood by the cart and getting completely undressed tossed her clothes onto the floor of the cart and, completely naked, came and sat down beside us.

She turned her head towards me and explained, 'I want Katherine to grow up believing being naked isn't shameful as society often implies but is as natural and healthy as the herbs that grow in our garden. I hope I'm not offending you.'

'No! No not at all. Men aren't normally offended by naked women.'

'That's what Basil says. In fact that's how I met him, at a naturist club. Now this little lake is evolving into being a special place for both of us. After Basil has had to wear all that protective clothing and been exposed to the noise and dirt in the Australian mines one of his first priorities when he gets home is to come up here with me and Katherine. We take off all our clothes and lie down or go for a swim and sometimes all three of us just lie still holding hands and listening to the

sounds of the bush and the birds. That's why we want to put up the predator proof fence and turn the area into a bird sanctuary where we can leave our clothes behind, and become part of the natural environment, not just a visitor. It seems so important to be able to feel the sun and wind on our skin. Look at the kids. They love the freedom of not being hampered with clothes. But far too soon social pressures get in the way and as a result most people go through the rest of their lives never experiencing this, which should be their birthright. So Basil and I would like to be able to share the experience with our friends and of course that includes you. So, if you want to, feel free to take your clothes off as well.'

I glanced at Jan. She shrugged. 'Why not!' This picnic seemed to be getting better by the minute. Together Jan and I stood up, we got completely undressed, walked to the cart and placed our clothes in it before resuming our places on the grass beside the table cloth.

While the others took turns filling their bread rolls Jan undressed Ryan and he too sat on the grass beside us munching at half of a dry roll.

Jasmine looked at Jan and me. 'Doesn't it feel gloriously free to dispense with our clothes and leave civilization's clutter discarded in a heap on the ground? Basil and I always feel it's more than just putting aside our clothes. We're also sidelining the suffocating symmetry of civilization before it chokes us to death.'

'Wow!' I commented, 'I'd never thought of it like that. But sitting here naked with you is proving to me this is the perfect antidote to milking three-hundred and twenty-six cows twice a day.'

'I hope you don't find working with the horses equally stressful.'

'As long as I don't have to milk them I'll be fine. I like working with horses, but if we start to run a riding school there could be a hell of a lot of work for one person. If it takes off we'll need extra staff.'

'What would they have to do?' Jasmine asked.

‘It seems to me we have several possibilities. One is to teach riding to beginners or to extend riding to jumping and dressage.’

‘I hate to admit it but I don’t really know what dressage involves.’

‘It’s riding to develop obedience, flexibility and balance. All of these things could be set up and done in the big paddock in front of the house. The other thing we could offer is to run horse-trekking parties into the bush and hills at the back. This could involve half-day, full-day, or even weekend treks.’ Depending on how many people go, we’d need one or two guides. We’d need to supply food and drinks and carry emergency gear as well as having a safety plan. Maintaining the saddles and gear is a significant job in itself. The horses will need to be shod and groomed. If they are going to be expected to work all day they’ll need hard feed. We’ll want fresh straw and hay as well as oats. The stables will need mucking out and the big paddock will have to be cleaned or it’ll get more horse-sick than it is now. You may be able to use some of the dung in your garden or sell some of it to other gardeners. We’ll need a web site and someone to do the booking. We’ll need a changing room and a range of helmet sizes and protective clothing for the riders. Running an outfit like that will make a full-time job for several people but when it’s up and earning it should also be a profitable business. You have an ideal property to run a riding establishment and if I was you I’d be looking at charging top dollar.’

‘When you put it like that Wayne it sounds like a lot of work, but I’m sure you’re right. Basil reckons he would be only too pleased to give up his job in the mines. I suppose that’s right. But he’s very well paid in Australian dollars. In fact he gets paid more than the New Zealand prime minister. It’s why we were able to buy this place. Funny isn’t it, I’ve lived with him for years and all I’ve ever seen of his character is a gentle loving husband. By chance I met an Australian trade union official who was over here on holiday. He knew Basil and said his union members loved him. They reckon

Basil is the only person who stands between them and a mining disaster. They call him Basil the Bloodhound. Apparently he only has to get the scent of a problem and he'll sniff it out back to its source. Then, when he's unearthed the problem, he'll sink his teeth into management and won't let go until it's fixed. This guy told me about a confrontation he's witnessed between Basil and the mine manager. Apparently the mine manager is big, brash and Australian and manages the mine with his fists. Basil is about half his size and quietly spoken. There was going to be a confrontation and one or two union members had picked up crowbars because they weren't going to see Basil beaten up. It was late in the day and the sun was low in the sky. Basil had positioned himself carefully. He said Basil fixed his gaze on the manager through his frameless glasses then turned his head so that the sun reflected from his glasses directly into the manager's eyes. Apparently it was like two fireballs and the manager had to put his hands over his eyes as Basil told him, "There are two possibilities. One is you fix the problem immediately or I will shut down the mine. You have no alternatives." This union guy reckoned nobody ever spoke to the manager like that. But Basil got his way. The manager turned his head, saw the crowbars and bawled, "You useless sons of bitches do what the inspector says or I'll ram those crowbars down your throats." If I hadn't met that union guy I'd have had no idea Basil's work was anything like that. Now I realise the toll on Basil is much heavier than he'd ever admit. I'm certain it's why, as soon as he comes home, he always wants to come up here with me and Katherine and let the stress blow away like leaves in autumn. I suppose he'll need to keep going to work; but I'd love it if we could earn a living from this place and he could leave those horrible mines for ever. This place is freehold and paid for; so do you think a riding school could be a possibility, assuming we lived modestly?

'Other riding establishments are run as a profitable venture and your potential with this place is better than most

of them. But there's a lot of work to do before that could happen.'

Jan cut in. 'I don't know what my plans are from one day to the next. I don't even know whether I've still got a husband; but I'd love to do what I can in exchange for your kindness in letting me and the children stay with you now that I'm homeless and I haven't got an income. With my work I do a lot on the computer. I could probably fix you up with a web site.'

'It's a privilege to be able to have you staying with us Jan. You don't have to do anything in return; but I'm sure Wayne and I would be very grateful for any help you can give.'

Jan looked up from helping Ryan get another roll as the one he was eating had dropped in the dirt. 'It's nothing to do with the riding school but there's one thing I guess I could do right now and that's have a look with Wayne at the outflow to see what's needed to include the lake inside the predator fence.'

'That would be great Jan. The girls always seem OK together, but do you think Ryan would stay with me if you and Wayne went by yourselves?'

'He had a sleep on the way here and something to eat so he shouldn't be too cranky just now. The bush and water always seems to calm kids down.' Jan looked at me, 'Do you feel like swimming across the lake Wayne?'

'Yes sure.'

'I'll tell you why I'd like to swim across. We reckon the lake is fed by a spring and we think the spring is roughly in the middle. The spring water could have been filtering underground for up to a couple of years. So, if that's the case, the spring water should be cold. But the surface of the lake is being warmed by the sun. My hypothesis is that, when we swim over the spot where the spring wells up into the lake, we should find the water sufficiently colder at that point to be able to detect it on our skin. Feel like it Wayne?'

I grinned. 'Feel like it? Yes, of course I do. I always feel like it! It's something to do with being masculine!'

'Then hopefully the spring water will be cold enough to shrink your masculinity till it's only this big.' And she bent her little finger and waggled it in front of me.'

Jasmine's eyes grew round. Later as we swam breast-stroke across the lake I kept level with the dancing gypsy on Jan's arm and we talked. We both reckoned Jasmine appeared shocked at this light-hearted interchange. Because, we both agreed, that's all it was, just a light-hearted interchange with no serious sexual undertones. At least I think that's the conclusion we arrived at! Then we got talking about the water temperature and the bit about the serious sexual undertones got left on hold. Jan was right; there was a significant difference in temperature when we swam over the middle of the lake.

At the tail end of the lake we splashed ashore through reed beds where black mud squelched between our toes, climbed our lower legs and stippled our thighs. As we slithered and laughed our way up the bank our hands and arms became mud covered. I scooped up a handful and rubbed it into her boobs. She responded with one of her martial art moves. It was so quick that I still don't know how she did it, but it resulted in my feet vanishing from under me and me falling face down into the black smelly stuff with her kneeling on my back and rubbing mud into my back and hair. Neither of us could stop laughing until she rolled off me and lay in the mud next to me. We lay still and held each others' wrists for long enough for me to feel her pulse betray some disturbance going on inside her. Covered in mud she stood up and offered her hand to pull me up. I took it as she commented, 'You're giving me emotional hiccups Wayne.'

'Mud's pretty harmless compared with the full repertoire of mischief that we could indulge in.'

We looked at each other's mud covered bodies. 'I don't think we've left ourselves any options other than swimming back.' And added, 'Even then it might not all wash

away. I'd probably tell my kids off for doing to each other what we've just done.'

Still laughing I put muddy arms round her and gave her a muddy hug. But as our pelvic regions touched she pushed me away speaking firmly.

'I'm not ready for that Wayne. I think we should get on with what we came here to do and that's having a look at your proposed water outflow, check what approximate length of pipe we're going to need and how and where we're going to lay it.'

'We spent about an hour, and we were busy all the time, looking at the various options for routing the pipe and pacing it out. Eventually we concluded we'd need sixty metres of two-hundred millimetre plastic pipe. Also, we would need to hire an excavator to lay it. Jan knew what she was talking about. Obviously at some time in the past she'd worked on, or had dealings with, civil engineering construction sites.

With the plan formulated in our heads and with the mud on our skin and in our hair starting to cake we decided it was time to swim back. Especially as Jan seemed to be getting increasingly agitated about the time she'd been away from Melody and Ryan.

We waded back in through the mud and swam side-by-side. Gradually the sun-baked mud washed off our bodies but as we both swam breaststroke keeping our heads out of the water our faces and hair remained mud caked. We looked at each other and were still laughing about it when Jan commented, 'Do you know Wayne rubbing your face into that filthy black mud did more for my state of mind than a dozen visits to the rape crisis centre would ever achieve.'

'Then I guess Jasmine was right suggesting coming up here for the day. I like being with you Jan; perhaps we ought to roll in the mud together more often.'

Jan didn't comment, which left me wondering if her mind had doubled back to speculating whether Thor would be returning to her. We swam in silence through the cold heart of the lake. It wasn't until we were in the shallows again and

could touch bottom that we stood up and started washing the mud off our faces. Then, unable to see what remained, we washed each others face and hair. There was something sensual about feeling Jan washing me. I got the impression she felt the same when I did her face and hair. She made no mention of it. I think I know why.

Jasmine was holding Ryan and, as soon as he saw Jan coming out of the water, he started to cry. Jan ran up the bank and gave him, what must have been, a very wet cuddle. Almost as soon as Jan picked him up he stopped crying. Melody and Katherine were in the water and seemed oblivious to our return.

Jasmine explained, 'Ryan has been fine all the time you've been away and didn't cry until he saw you come back. Most of the time we've been in the water or going up to visit the horses. He's had a drink of orange and about one-and-a-half biscuits. Oh, and we've been playing rolling oranges down the bank. The two girls have been in the water virtually the whole time.'

Jan smiled. 'Thanks a million Jasmine. Wayne and I have worked out what you'll need to put the pipe in and we've figured out a route for it. We'll need to get an excavator in for about six hours to lay the pipe.'

Jasmine looked at Jan's hair. 'A bit muddy along there is it?'

'It sure is. It's thick-black-mud that sticks like a contact adhesive and sets like concrete. We both slipped over in it several times. So it's just as well we have the lake to rinse off most of it. I guess we could both use showers when we get back.'

Jasmine looked at her watch. 'We should probably think about going back. Ryan and I have already made a start by getting the lunch things together and I think the girls could be coming in and getting dry.'

It was almost an hour before we started back. The children, Jan and I got dressed but Jasmine left her clothes in

the cart and rode back on Sunny naked, apart from her gum-boots.

I helped Jan get the children out of the cart when we arrived back in the yard. As the kids ran indoors she whispered to me, 'I wish we'd brought a camera today.' Then she added, 'Thanks Wayne, you've done more for me today than you can realise. Oh! And here's that kiss I promised you.' She kissed me lightly on the cheek and followed the children in while I moved off to put the horses and cart away.

CHAPTER 12

Have you ever noticed how you can walk right past something and not see it? Well I guess you see it, but the significance of what you're seeing doesn't connect somewhere in your brain. That's how it was for me when I led the horses back to the stables to take their saddles off and give them a rub down before returning them to their paddock. I must have crossed the yard four or five times and still not become aware.

I was rubbing down Donut inside the stable when Melody appeared behind me.

'Mum says would you like to send some of the goat meat across and she'll make us a goat curry. And she said it's OK with Auntie Jasmine.'

'Oh yes. Of course Melody, I'll go and get it out of the fridge. Then would you take it to Mum for me?'

'Yes.'

As I stepped out of the stable Melody pointed across the drive. 'Mum's car has come back.'

She was right. I must have walked past it several times with my brain disengaged. I ran up the steps to my flat, put some of the meat in a plastic bag and handed it to Melody. Then I returned to the yard and sprinted down the drive to the gate. I knew the gate had been locked when we left to go to the lake because I checked and I still had the key in my pocket. Now the gate was wide open and the chain was on the ground. It looked as if it had been cut with bolt cutters. I picked up the two halves of the cut link as well as the chain and carried them back up the drive. Melody must have told Jan about the car as she was already standing by it when I arrived; the others were emerging through the ranch-sliders.

'It might be an idea not to touch it yet in case the police want to collect fingerprints.'

I held up the cut chain. 'How many people know you're living here Jan?'

'Only the police, Thor and my neighbour Collette who is milking the goats for me and there's no one else as far as I

know. Oh yes there is! They also know at the hospital because I had to give them an address when I was discharged.'

'Perhaps the police found our car and brought it back.' Melody suggested.

Jan shook her head. 'That's the next thing I'm going to check, love. But I don't think they'd cut our chain and leave the car here without telling us.'

As Jan went indoors to use the phone she picked up Ryan on the way and added over her shoulder, 'Could you all make sure no one touches the car.'

Jasmine guided Katherine and Melody away from the car. 'I think we'd better all go inside and start to get some dinner.' She looked at me. 'This doesn't feel good to me. If the padlock is still intact could you find any more chain in the garage or the stables? I'd feel happier if we could lock the gate again.'

'I'll have a look; but I haven't noticed any.'

She glanced at her watch. 'If you went now I think you might be just in time to catch the hardware before it shuts. Would you slip downtown and see if you can get a heavy chain that might be harder to cut. Do you need any cash?'

'I should have enough to buy a short length of chain.'

'Then I'll give you the money when you get back.'

'OK I'll be off. See you shortly.'

Jumping in the ute I drove off with my mind speculating on something I'd noticed but I think the others had missed. The keys were still in the car and through the driver's window I could see that the driver's seat had been pulled as far forward as it would go. That implied to me that the driver was a particularly small person, probably a woman.

Earlier in the morning when Sophie called I'd been getting the horses ready to go for the picnic lunch and an afternoon at the lake. Sophie would have a pretty good idea we'd all be out most of the afternoon. And of course Jan's car must have been returned during the afternoon.

Speculation doesn't prove a thing and it certainly doesn't answer the question why anyone would steal a car and

then return it. And it doesn't follow that the person who stole the car was the same person who returned it. Also Jan had been careful not to advertise the fact she was staying here with Jasmine. But Sophie had been here; it was possible she had caught a glimpse of Jan. As they had met several times before, and Jan reckoned she had given Sophie a couple of lifts to town, Sophie would certainly be able to recognise Jan. They may even have met other times, as Jasmine reckoned Sophie visited her from time-to-time and Jan must have been a regular visitor because of the goat cheese and the friendship between Katherine and Melody.

I tossed the thought into the, think about it tomorrow compartment of my brain and went into the hardware shop and bought a metre of twelve millimetre galvanised chain, which was the heaviest they had. I noticed the guy used bolt cutters to cut it but they were very big and he needed to put one handle on the ground and throw all his weight, which was quite considerable, onto the other handle. Probably not many people would be able to do that if the chain was half-way up the gate. Cutting a piece of chain with a hacksaw isn't easy unless you can hold the link in a vice.

Back at the gate I took the key out of my pocket and unlocked the padlock from the two cut halves of the old chain. Then I drove through the gate and locked it behind me using the new chain. Short of getting a high tensile alloy chain I reckoned I'd done the best I could with the time available.

In the kitchen Jan was quite openly cooking the goat curry in a frying pan while Jasmine was cutting up salad. I noticed the fan on the range hood was going flat out and all the windows and the ranch slider were wide open. Doubtless Jasmine, being generous, wanted to share the delightful smell of the goat curry with her vegetables in the garden!

Over dinner all the talk was of getting a guard dog. We all had different opinions about what breed to get. Jan wanted an Irish wolf-hound. Katherine wanted a poodle. Melody wanted a kitten, Jasmine wanted a terrier, my suggestion was a Rhodesian ridge-back, and Ryan wanted

more goat curry and threw his salad on the floor to prove it. I guess, providing we discounted Melody's kitten, it might be possible to end up with a dog that might claim ancestry back to an assorted mixture of all of them.

While I had been at the hardware Jan had phoned the police and, as we suspected, they knew nothing about the return of Jan's car. They said they'd be round first thing in the morning to check it out and look for fingerprints. In the meantime Jan wasn't allowed to touch it.

The table-talk reverted to dogs and my mind meandered through the day and squatted on the conviction Sophie returned Jan's car and she probably knew more about the attack than a young mother should. Four men attacked Jan. Could Sophie be linked by association? She told me her father had a broken arm and refused to get hospital treatment.

For Jan to have been targeted there must have been a motive. I'd seen a crop in the paddock in the village. People who plant crops don't risk restricting it to one site. Crops get pirated, or discovered by police, so most planters diversify. During her geological work Jan ventured into a patch and subsequently reported it to the police. There are usually eyes in the bush close to a crop, and brains to speculate that the unknown woman informed. Then they see her face plastered on posters and on TV. It wouldn't be difficult to discover where she lived and decide to teach her a lesson. So they beat her up, rape her, burn her house down and, to prevent her rushing off to the police too soon, they take her car. But they can't use it. Within a few hours the police would have the number. So it gets dumped in some deserted track. Word travels in a village. Sophie knows Jan. She's had lifts from her. She knows Jan is staying here – she's seen her. So collecting Jan's car, Sophie returns it. Unaware of the consequences, might she leave her finger prints behind and end up being linked with the worst of adult play-grounds – drugs and brutality?

I guess life is a game of cards. The dealing commences at conception. Not many get the aces of privilege

and wealth and amongst those that do, few know how to play them. Through life we pick up more cards. It seems Sophie has never had a single picture card in her hand.

I made my decision as the dinner started breaking up. Jasmine was scraping plates into the chook bucket and Katherine and Melody were taking them from her and putting them in the dishwasher. Jan was on her knees picking up the food Ryan had thrown on the floor. I picked up the pepper and salt containers and put them back in the cupboard along with the tomato sauce and Jasmine's bottle of rhubarb relish.

I thanked Jasmine and Jan for a nice dinner and took off back to my flat. I switched on the television while I waited. Katherine and Melody would shortly be having their bedtime stories and Ryan would be getting cleaned up and have his nappy and pyjamas on. Probably no one would be looking out of the window but I wanted deeper darker shadows before I went outside again. The horizon was swallowing the sun as I went into the stables. Without switching on the light I found a pair of riding gloves that fitted. The evening glow in the sky changed to blood red. I waited another ten minutes as all the colours vanished. I turned up the volume on the TV. The evening was still; sounds would carry well and I had to walk over gravel. No one was on the drive and no outside lights were switched on in response to the crunch of gravel under my feet. I put on the leather gloves and opened the driver's door on Jan's car. The internal light came on. I switched it off as quickly as I could and fumbled until I found the catch to slide the driver's bucket-seat fully back. There seemed no point in leaving any clues about the size of the driver. Next I wiped the steering wheel, gear change lever, the trafficator switch, the air conditioning unit, the driver's door catch and anything else that would have been in easy reach from the driver's seat, including the floor pedals, in case Sophie had driven in bare feet. I left the rest of the car untouched. Sophie had recently been driven by Jan to the shops so it would be surprising if a forensic examination of the car failed to find any trace of her as a passenger. I closed the car door and wiped the outside

door handle before returning to my flat. I saw no evidence of anyone having been disturbed by me. I believe the police would call it, “Attempting to pervert the course of justice”, or some such pompous sounding expression. But as I see it the police always have had a singular talent for interpreting the law to suit themselves, and I’m also convinced the law is a particularly inferior vehicle for distributing justice.

I walked back to my flat over the gravel and no lights came on, so I went back into my lounge, opened a can of Lion Brown and watched the back end of a highly unoriginal and equally improbable smash-car movie which was interlaced with scenes of a couple doing it. I’ve often wondered how often they really do it on the film set and how often it’s fake. I’m sure people would watch the credits with interest if they put that in rather than the long lists of names and an obscure statement that, no animals were harmed in the production of the film!

At about eleven o’clock I’d just decided the rest of the movie was so typically American that it wasn’t worth watching when I heard footsteps outside my door followed by someone knocking. This wasn’t what I expected.

She was bare-foot and wearing a nightdress and housecoat.

‘Jan! Come on in.’

She didn’t move. ‘This isn’t what you think Wayne. I need to talk to you. I saw your light was still on and...’

‘OK but don’t just stand there, come on in.’

‘Don’t rush me Wayne. I know it seems strange; no, it doesn’t seem strange, it is strange. I know it’s the middle of the night but I need to talk to you. That’s all I want. I just want to talk and nothing else.’

‘Yes, OK.’

‘I’ve already been to bed but my brain had too much company. I couldn’t sleep. Everything was upside down... I thought for an hour about coming. I was sure you’d think I’d come to... I don’t want to be seduced or ...’

I grinned. 'Jan it's not lady-like to refuse before you've been asked! But OK I get the picture; you just want to talk. Come on in.'

'Then take that grin off your face first.'

I ran my hand down my face and, as I did so, I acquired a solemn expression and holding my "grin" in my hand I pretended to throw it on the floor and stamp on it. 'Is that better?'

Jan grinned. 'OK you idiot.'

I held the door open for her. As she entered I closed it behind her and indicated the sofa where I'd been sitting. Instead she pulled up a wooden kitchen chair and sat opposite me with her feet flat on the floor and her knees together. I waited for her to speak first. She seemed to hesitate then asked, 'What did you think of dinner this evening?'

Puzzled I answered, 'It was great; you cook a mean goat-curry. Ryan loved it didn't he.'

'No that's not what I mean. Oh! I don't know, perhaps I do. Did you see Jasmine?'

'See her? Of course I saw her; she was sitting opposite me. What you mean?'

'Did you notice she opened all the windows, the ranch-slider and turned on the extractor fan?'

'Oh yes! That's right.'

'This is her house; she shouldn't have to do that. If she wants to have a vegetarian household then she should be able to without us introducing our cooking smells. She's a lot too considerate to mention it but I don't like what we're doing. Jasmine likes to keep her house neat and tidy. Did you notice Ryan threw his beetroot on her carpet? It left a stain. I think I managed to get it out. But this isn't fair to Jasmine. Then there's another thing; Basil is coming home next week. They like to be able to walk naked round their house and garden; it's their house and their lifestyle. What am I going to do? How do I fit in? Jasmine has been the best friend I could possibly have had. Everything I owned has gone up in smoke. I don't even know if I've still got a husband. We had nowhere to live and

Jasmine welcomed me and the children. We had no clothes other than our night-wear. She bought clothes for me and the children and took them into us in hospital. My handbag was lost in the fire and along with it I lost my credit cards and cheque book. Jasmine has lent me money; and what am I doing for her? I'm stinking her house out with my cooking and staining her carpets. Melody does her best, but Ryan's only two. It's not his fault...'

At that point her voice choked with emotion and she started to cry. I stood up and walked over to her and rested my hand on her shoulder.

'Sorry Wayne, I didn't mean to do that. I shouldn't be loading all my stress onto you. Now you'll be thinking I'm crazy.'

'No I don't think you're anything other than an overstressed victim who's trying to do her best for everyone. I respect that. I don't know how you've stood up to everything as well as you have.'

'Oh please go and sit down again Wayne. I'll be all right. I need to talk to you and I get confused with you touching me.'

'I sat down again on the sofa as she continued. 'Your flat has got three bedrooms hasn't it?'

'If you count the two bunk rooms it has five. The accommodation spreads the whole way across the top of the stables. I guess the bunk rooms must have been built to accommodate riders who came for special events. Now they're a bit of a mess, why?'

'I don't want you to misunderstand this Wayne.'

'I can't do that unless you tell me what's on your mind.'

'You've been flirting with me haven't you? Look, it's OK; I don't mind. No that's not what I mean. I'm a mother with young children. Every day there are nappies to change, washing to be done, food to be prepared, floors to sweep, every day is the same. I'm not complaining; I wouldn't want anything different. But if a guy shows some interest in me, as

a woman, well it's flattering. Providing the guy is reasonably attractive and treats me with respect... It's the respect that's important, respect and dignity. If there's no respect most women simply want to stub their cigarettes out on his wandering hands. But you're not like that.'

'I guess I'm lucky you don't smoke.'

'Oh hell, that's not what I mean. I don't know what I'm saying. This isn't what I wanted to say. In the last few weeks my life has turned into a disaster area, and I seem to be messing up Jasmine's house and...'

'I'm sure Jasmine doesn't think like that.'

'But it's only because she's kind. And you, you're kind Wayne. Yes you're kind; but that's part of the problem.'

'I think the problem is tonight you're tired and stressed. In the morning it'll seem better.'

'Tomorrow there'll be a fresh set of problems. Oh dear, I'm not saying what I wanted to say. When I was in bed I planned it out so carefully what I wanted to say to you and now it's got all garbled and turned into nonsense. Now I've been here ages and Ryan's probably waking up and if...I only wanted to talk to you for a few minutes. I had it all planned.'

'I'm sure Ryan will be fine. I'll pour you a beer Jan and let's try and take it slowly. I want to help.'

As I said it without waiting for a reply I opened a can and getting a glass from the cupboard I poured it for her.

'Thanks Wayne.'

'I think I know what you want to say, but I'd sooner hear it from you. You started to ask me how many bedrooms there are in my flat. Shall we go back and take it from there? I told you there is a total of five bedrooms if we include the two bunk rooms. But I'm not sure we can count them as bedrooms; they're in a hell of a mess. Someone has been using one of them for storing hay and the other for straw. In fact there are still about half-a-dozen bales of straw in that one.'

'That's something I can do to help. I'll clean them out.'

'They're in a real mess.'

‘Don’t you reckon that’s what women are good for – cleaning the mess guys have left behind? And don’t you dare say yes!’

‘With your martial art skills I wouldn’t be that foolish! There is also a single kitchen and one toilet at this end of the building and another at the far end. Now what was it you wanted to ask me?’

‘You know don’t you. I’d like it if I could move into your flat Wayne, but not to move into any intimate relationship with you. I’m not ready for that. I’m hoping Thor will be coming back soon. If there are separate bedrooms Melody and Ryan could share one with me and...’

‘OK. No problem. Just talk to Jasmine about it in the morning.’

‘You do mean that don’t you? Ryan can manage the stairs fine, but he needs watching.’

‘Yes of course I mean it.’

‘If it’s OK I would like to move in before Basil comes home. Would that be all right?’

‘Any time you want.’

‘You do know don’t you that I’m only moving into your flat? I’m not ready for another relationship. I like you Wayne. I loved it today at the lake when we plastered each other in mud. Days like that are as elusive as marsh-light. It was fun; it was like we were children. I desperately want to keep you as a friend.’

‘I want that as well Jan. So let’s finish up our beers and you go back to the children and I’ll see you in the morning, unless I visit you before that in my dreams.’

She drained her glass and stood up. As she turned to the door I put my arm round her shoulder and gave her a hug. She turned to me and smiled. ‘See you in the morning Wayne.’

With that she walked down the steps and into the night. No lights were showing in the house.

CHAPTER 13

In the morning the radio was on and I was still having my breakfast when there was a knock at my door.

A cop stood outside. 'Good morning sir. We need to have a look at the Volvo on the drive. The gate is locked and we'd like vehicle access. I believe you have a key to the padlock?'

'Yes of course. I'll unlock it for you.'

Leaving my unfinished breakfast on the table I walked down the drive with the cop. The police car was sitting directly outside the gate and he explained he'd had to climb the gate. He asked me who I was and if I lived here. So I told him I'd only recently moved into the flat above the stables and as an employee I was helping Jasmine get the horses sorted out with the intention of using the place as a riding school. He seemed happy with that. I suppose there's no reason why he shouldn't be; it was the truth.

'It's a bad business with Dr. Jorgensen and her children being attacked like that.'

'Yes, have you any idea who did it?'

'We're following up a number of leads and we're hopeful of making an arrest. In the meantime forensics want to investigate her car for evidence.'

We arrived at the gate and, as I unlocked the padlock, he made the comment, 'This looks like a new chain.'

'Yes it is. I only bought it yesterday afternoon at closing time. The old chain had been cut presumably by the person who returned Jan's car.'

'Have you still got the pieces of the old chain?'

'Yes. They're in my flat and I've got the two halves of the cut link as well.'

'Excellent I'll need them. We'll drive up and I'll pick it the pieces in a few minutes.'

The cop car passed me on the drive and by the time I got back to my flat the cop was waiting for me. I ran up the steps and put the pieces of chain into a plastic bag and handed

it to him. I watched him put the lot into another plastic bag and label it. Then I sat down to finish my breakfast.

Looking out of the open window I saw Melody walk across the yard. She put her hands on her hips and I heard her tell the police. 'That's our car and no one's allowed to touch it.'

The cop smiled at her and told her, 'Your Mummy has said it's OK for us to touch it because we are trying to find the bad men who hurt her and burnt down your home.'

'My Mum bashed them and broke one of the bad man's arm.'

'Wow! How did she do that?'

'She bent it backwards and jumped on it with her knee.'

'Well that serves him right doesn't it? It's lucky you've got a strong Mummy to look after you isn't it?'

'Yes! We've come to live at Auntie Jasmine's house; but we're going to move into Wayne's flat when Mum and me have cleaned the straw out of the bedroom. But Ryan can't help, because he's too little.'

'It sounds as if your Mum's going to have a busy day?'

At that point Jan ran across the yard to take Melody back into the house and telling her she mustn't disturb the police because they had a lot of work to do.

'She's OK. She's a nice girl. Eh?'

'I think so. But we've got a lot of work to do and I guess you have as well. Come on Melody.'

Five minutes later Jan came across to my flat with Melody and Ryan.

'Would it be OK with you Wayne if we made a start on cleaning out those two bunk rooms? After that I'd like to get some air through the place to get rid of that musty smell.'

'Yes sure. There're still half-a-dozen bales of straw in that one room. I'll have to do something with them first.'

'I didn't want to make more work for you Wayne.'

‘That’s OK. I’ve done most of the stables but I’ve still got to shift the old straw out of the last three, then I can use the fresh straw from the bunk room. Probably Jasmine could use the old stuff for her garden compost. I’ll slip across and ask her where she wants it.’ I grinned and added, ‘I mustn’t do the wrong thing in her garden.’

I returned ten minutes later. ‘It’s rather more complicated than I thought. We’re going to have to layer the existing compost. Jasmine and Katherine are going to supervise. Apparently it involves taking the new compost pile apart and alternately putting in layers of straw and layers of weeds and grass clippings. In the meantime perhaps you could make a start on the bunk room that’s had hay in it. There’s no hay now, but you might need a machete not a broom to hack your way through the cobwebs!’

I looked at Melody and said in my most serious face, ‘When you go into that bedroom Melody you’ll have to make sure none of the spiders picks you up and carries you up into the roof!’

‘If one does I’ll bash it with my broom.’

‘Good for you Melody. You get them. Eh!’

I spent the next hour with a pitchfork and a wheelbarrow cleaning out the last three stables and delivering the straw to Jasmine’s garden. I had finished and was about to start hosing out when Sophie rode into the yard.

She was astride Sparta with her arms round a young child. I presumed the girl was her daughter Athenea. A boy, probably her son Crete, walked alongside the pony. He had Sophie’s rifle riding on his shoulder. Slung over the pony were the two sacks, which presumably contained another pair of geese. She approached, startling me by the difference since yesterday. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It was as if I was looking at a different woman. I dropped my pitchfork and sprinted over to her. She pulled Sparta to a stop. Holding out my hands I offered to lift Athenea down. She turned to her Mum and gave a little whimper as if asking if it was OK to let the stranger pick her up. Even at her age she knew something

was terribly wrong. She held out her little hands and I picked her up under her armpits and lifted to the ground. Immediately she ran to her brother and stood close to him.

My eyes drifted to Sophie's face; then I looked away in case she would think I was staring at her deformities. With Athenea on the ground holding her brother's shirt I stood close to the pony and offered my arms to Sophie. She slipped her arm round my neck and started to slide off the pony like a sack of potatoes tumbling out of a wheelbarrow. I was able to take her weight and lower her feet gently to the ground. Her face winced with pain but she said nothing.

Crete started to lead Sparta away heading towards the big paddock. I called after him, 'Crete' hoping that was his name because I'd never seen him before, 'You can put Sparta in the end stable. Tip the geese out of the sacks and shut the door on them. Then come up the steps to my flat with your Mum.'

There was a good reason for that. If he'd crossed the yard to get to the big paddock he'd have gone past the cops who were still doing something with Jan's car and rubber gloves. Crete still had the rifle over his shoulder. A seven-year-old with a modified military rifle would have attracted more than casual interest. Little Athenea ran to her Mum and followed sucking her thumb. My arm was still round Sophie as she put her arm round me. Supporting her weight I led her towards my flat. At the bottom of the steps I picked her up. She winced and tried to find a less painful position. I guessed she might have one or more cracked ribs. From experience I know how painful they can be. It takes six weeks to come right and the doctors can't do anything for you, except suggest you take pain killers. If you're in doubt ask any rugby player. It's worse than having someone tread on your face with studded boots. Having carried her up the steps I supported her while she found the least painful way to slide onto my bed. Little Athenea followed without saying a word except for the occasional sob between sucking her thumb.

Sophie didn't seem to have a face; it was a mixture of fresh and dried blood. Her eyes were almost closed. Blood matted her hair. Beneath the blood I could see heavy swelling. Her lip was split and there was blood in her mouth.

'What happened Sophie?'

She spoke through her swollen lips. 'Dad and I were trying to catch the geese but they got past us and ran away up the track. Dad and I chased them. I'd already got Crete to put Athenea on Sparta to follow us so I could put the geese in the saddlebags and come straight here. When I go in the bush I always take my rifle in case I see any goats or pigs. As I was running after the geese Crete was following us up the hill leading Athenea on Sparta. He was also carrying my rifle. Dad and I had just caught the geese and put them in the sacks when a couple of guys on a motor-bike caught up with us. They must have driven past the kids and Sparta. They beat me up.'

'Why?'

'Because I brought Jan's car back.'

'Who did it?'

'Two bikies with loops of heavy chain.'

'Do you know them?'

'Dad knows who they are.'

'Did your Dad see them do it?'

'Yes. He was with me. We had just chased the geese into the bush and caught them. I was holding them and he had the scissors cutting their wing feathers before we put them in the sacks. The two guys came at me swinging their chains. Dad tried to stop them. When he saw they were trying to get me he went berserk. But he has a broken arm; and he only had the scissors for a weapon. They did him over with the chains. I thought they were going to kill us.'

'How did you get away?'

'Crete saved me, he's only seven but he had my rifle and he saw what was happening and put a bullet through one of the men. Then the other guy took off on his trail-bike. Crete fired at him as well. But he thinks he missed. I didn't see it; I was still curled up on the ground trying to protect myself.'

‘Did Crete know how to use a rifle?’

‘Yes, sometimes I take him hunting with me. I taught him.’

‘Oh hell! What happened to the guy Crete shot?’

‘My rifle was loaded with soft-nose bullets. He could be dead for all I know. He wasn’t moving. We didn’t stop to find out. Dad was badly injured and Crete helped me onto Sparta so we could come here to try and get help from you.’

‘Is the rifle that Crete was carrying just now the same one as he used in the shooting?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it might be a good idea to get rid of it. What’s happening about the body, assuming it is dead body?’

‘I dunno. I guess either pigs or someone in the commune will find it, after that I’ve no idea; perhaps it’ll get buried in the bush.’

‘I’m no lawyer but I think, if the police get involved Crete could be charged with murder.’

‘Murder! He’s only seven for God’s sake!’

‘If God hadn’t already been assassinated by the church he might be able to distinguish between victims and assassins; but juries can’t. Unfortunately rifles tend to be more accurate than juries. You might as well toss a coin as trust that lot. Lawyers can be more creative than fiction writers especially when they’re sending out their invoices. Did anyone other than you see what happened?’

‘Only Dad and Crete. But people in the village would probably have heard the rifle shots.’

‘Do you know why the bikies were so upset about you returning the car?’

‘I guess because the police would look for fingerprints on it.’

‘That suggests the police already have their fingerprints. The cops are examining the car right now.’

‘They might find my prints on it.’

‘I don’t think so. I guessed it was probably you who returned it. So last night I wiped the steering wheel and

driver's door. But I didn't bother with the rest of the car because Jan had given you lifts so it's quite likely your prints could legitimately be elsewhere. What happened to the spent cartridge cases that Crete must have ejected?"

'I dunno. Probably nothing, but if someone finds them I guess they'll pick them up. I usually collect them for a refill. It's cheaper than buying new ones.'

'We should think about getting you to the hospital Sophie.'

'No!' The word was shouted at me. Then she added, 'I won't go to hospital.'

'It looks to me as if you need...'

'I won't go. They ask too many questions.'

'But...'

'I'm not going.'

'Then I'll do my best to clean you up. But before I can do that I'm going to have to clean myself up as I've just been mucking out the stables. I'll get Jan and Jasmine. Hopefully Jasmine will have a first aid kit. I happen to know she's had a St. John's first aid certificate. It might be an idea not to say anything about Crete shooting one of the men. Tell them as little as possible.'

'My Dad's more bashed up than me.'

I moved through to the kitchen and started washing my hands and arms and continued talking. 'Unless I've got things wrong, I don't think you'll get any sympathy for him from Jan or Jasmine. Your Dad was one of the people who attacked Jan wasn't he.'

'Yes, but you don't understand.'

'What don't I understand?'

'You don't understand about Dad and Mylos.'

'Who is Mylos?'

'He lives in our village; and he's one of the men who raped Jan.'

'I hope he's not looking for sympathy.'

'You don't understand.'

'Too right I don't. But I'll listen.'

‘It might be best if I tell you before Jan or Jasmine arrive. So don’t get them yet.’

‘OK. I’ll make a start on washing some of the dried blood off your face while you tell me. But I think I’ll need some antiseptic before I can do much.’

‘We’ve always grown a bit of marijuana in the village. Initially we smoked it ourselves and we used to take a bit through to the Wairarapa and sold it. It was one of the few ways we could earn cash.’

‘OK. I get the picture.’

‘Then we started to want more money...’

‘I think I’ve heard this story before.’

‘These guys on motor bikes used to come and buy it. But they brought other stuff called “P” and gave it to Dad and Mylos. It burned into their brains and they kept on needing more. So the two guys on motor bikes kept bringing it, and in exchange Dad and Mylos had to start planting more and more marijuana. Some of it is on Jasmine’s land but I don’t think she knows.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. But go on.’

‘It got bad. Dad and Mylos started doing whatever the bikies told them. It was like they couldn’t work things out any more. Sometimes when they’d been on the “P” they’d go so crazy that they didn’t care what happened.’

‘OK.’

‘Mylos saw a woman discover a patch. She must have reported it to the police, because the next day the cops raided it. It was a big patch, almost ready for harvesting. Dad had sweated his guts out clearing the bush, preparing the ground, putting in fertiliser, planting and weeding, it was our commune’s chance to break out of poverty and making-do without the things other people take for granted. It meant clothes for the children, fuel to get into the post-box to pick up the correspondence school work, a change of diet, household linen, seeds for the gardens, possibly some new breeding stock, soap, washing powder, toilet rolls and the million other

things people need. So naturally Dad was mad when all his work was destroyed in a few hours.

Mylos must have told the bikies he'd seen this woman in the vicinity of the crop. A day or two later they saw her picture in the newspaper and found out who she was and where she lived. Probably they were high on "P" at the time and decided to teach Jan a lesson and you know what happened. It all went out of control. Do you know what they did?'

'Yes I do; she was asleep in bed when they broke into her house. Jan had to fight four thugs to protect herself and her children. She was raped, beaten up, her children were traumatized, her home was burnt down and her car was stolen. We all bend the law a bit but bastards like them don't deserve any sympathy.'

'I'm a bastard and so are Crete and Athenea.'

'Sorry Sophie I didn't mean that sort of bastard. Like Australians, New Zealand men are divided into good bastards and bad bastards. It has nothing to do with their parents. The men who attacked Jan were bad bastards.'

'My Dad must have been one of them, you know that. I keep telling you, it's not his fault. Those bikies burned his brain with their damn "P". He was mad about having his work destroyed but he didn't understand the how things would pan out. Just as I didn't understand the significance of returning Jan's car after it was dumped in our village. I just thought if the cops found it in our place we'd get all the blame for the attack on Jan. Also Jan's been nice to me and has given me lifts, so I drove her car here and left it. I had to drive all the way round from the Wairarapa.'

'Have you got a driving licence?'

'No but Dad taught me how to drive.'

'How did you get home again?'

'I walked back along Jasmine's new track that you fixed up. I ran some of the way and it only took an hour.'

'That would be a lot less than the time to drive round via the Hutt Valley.'

‘Yes but I didn’t know anything about fingerprints. I just thought if Jan got her car back that would be one less problem for her and for us. I didn’t tell anyone what I was going to do in case they wanted to keep her car and tried to stop me.’

‘How did you get through Jasmine’s gate?’

‘I guessed you might have put the chain on it, so I brought a small pair of bolt cutters. Dad often has to use them when he’s doing plantation work.’

‘And a big pair would be too heavy to carry back along the track.’

‘Yes. Fortunately it was only a light chain otherwise I’d have left Jan’s car on the road and climbed the gate. I thought that would be the end of it. But this morning the bikies found us. They damn near killed Dad because he tried to protect me. He had a broken arm and only a pair of scissors for a weapon and nothing else; but he didn’t hesitate to take on two men armed with heavy chains. They beat shit out of him but he still kept coming. They left him a bloody mess in the bush. Does that make him a bad bastard?’

Before I could answer she continued.

‘When I was born my mother rejected me; she wouldn’t feed me. She was going to leave me to die.’

‘Why? Because you were a girl? I’ve heard of...’

‘Because her brother was my father. But Dad took me away and fed me. At first he just dipped his fingers in goat’s milk to get me to suck; then he fed me goat’s milk out of a bottle until I was big enough to eat proper food. He did everything for me that a mother should. He changed my nappies, washed my clothes and when I was old enough we learned my correspondence school together. He bought Sparta for me and led him all the way back from the Wairarapa. Is that the work of a bad bastard?’

Again she didn’t wait for an answer.

‘Now he’s smashed up in the bush with no one to help him. He can’t walk, he can’t even stand and he’s bleeding and

in pain, real bad pain. Please Wayne will you take Jasmine's cart along your new track and bring him here.'

'We could get the rescue helicopter it would be a lot less painful for your Dad.'

'It wouldn't. All it would mean is that Dad would spend the next twenty years in prison. You must know that. Because of what happened to Jan, no one in the village will go looking for him.'

I'd just finished washing the blood off Sophie's face. Her arms were bruised and blood had soaked into her tee-shirt.

'I'll need to get your tee-shirt off, Sophie. Do you want me to try and pull it off, over your head, or should I get scissors and cut it off?'

'I haven't any more clothes. I came like this.'

'I'm sure Jasmine would lend you something. In any case I could drive into town and get you something from the op-shop. I guess we'll have to do something like that whether we cut your shirt off or not. Only you can tell me whether pulling your shirt off would be painful.'

She hesitated before replying. 'Cut it off, please.'

Getting the kitchen scissors out of the drawer I snipped the tee-shirt from the arm holes to her neck. Then starting above her cleavage I cut and peeled back the blood-stained cloth, revealing purple bruises and broken skin on her ribs where the individual chain links had struck. I could hardly believe this was the same body I'd made love to yesterday morning.

'Wayne, you haven't said whether you'll go and get Dad in Jasmine's cart. He's more beat-up than me. Please Wayne, I'll let you fuck me whenever you want.'

'I'm not sure whether...'

'Please Wayne, I've promised to let you fuck me whenever you want. I mean it. I haven't got any money; I haven't got anything else to offer you. Don't leave my Dad to die alone out there in the bush and in pain.'

'If I did...'

'You can leave cleaning me up till you get back.'

‘I wouldn’t know where to start looking for him.’

‘Crete will go with you. He knows exactly where Dad is.’

‘If I brought him here Jan could recognise him as one of her attackers and tell the police.’

‘I’ve thought of that. Jan likes you, doesn’t she? And you like her.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I can tell. I was in the bush on Sparta. Through the trees I saw the two of you play-fighting in the mud. It wasn’t long after you’d been making love to me. That made me sad.’

‘We were only looking to see where to run a drainage pipe. We were both a little drunk on mud and sunshine. We slipped in the mud and...’

‘A woman has to be blind not to be able to see when a naked man wants sex. I’m not blind Wayne. But it doesn’t matter; I’m over it now. Jan will listen to you. You could tell her Dad isn’t really a bad bastard. When she sees how they’ve beaten him up she’ll want to help him. I know she will. Jan is a kind woman. You can tell her I only got beaten up because I returned her car, and Dad got beaten up because he tried to save me.’

‘You’re asking for a hell of a lot from Jan.’

‘I know, but she’s kind and she likes you, so if you’ll back me up... Dad doesn’t deserve to spend the rest of his life in prison. He’s a kind man. Jan could tell the police he wasn’t one of the men who attacked her and they’d believe her. She can save him if she wants.’

‘I haven’t a clue how Jan would react. You know what happened to her when she was attacked. But there’s something else you don’t know. Please don’t repeat this but Jan’s husband Thor has returned to Norway and she doesn’t know whether he’s coming back or whether he’s moved in with another woman. She can’t contact him, at least she couldn’t yesterday. I don’t know if she’s managed anything overnight.’

‘If you won’t help him he’ll probably die out there in the bush and if Jan won’t help him he’ll spend most, if not all,

of the rest of his life in prison. I don't know which would be worse for him. Please Wayne, he's not done anything to you.'

'How much of this do you know, and how much is speculation?'

'What do you mean?'

'You said Mylos saw Jan discover the crop and he later recognised her from the TV or pictures of her. How do you know Mylos saw her? Were you there?'

'Of course not; I was with my kids at home.'

'Then how do you know Mylos saw Jan? Did he tell you?'

'No but it must have been Mylos; he was doing the crop that day.'

'But you don't know for sure that he was there at all. All you know is that you didn't see him in the village and you assumed he must be at the plantation. How do you know he wasn't secretly visiting some woman in Masterton?'

'He'd have been at the plantation.'

'But you don't know that for sure do you Sophie? You're just assuming that's where he probably would be.'

'I guess so.'

'Now there's your Dad. Do you know he was one of the people who attacked Jan?'

'He's got a broken arm hasn't he?'

'Yes and so have lots of other people. Did your Dad tell you he attacked Jan?'

'Of course not.'

'Did he tell you how he broke his arm?'

'He said he fell down a bank in the bush?'

'Jan would probably recognise him as her attacker but you don't know for sure your Dad was involved do you? He could have been telling you the truth and he really did break it falling down a bank. You weren't there so you don't know.'

'Did the men who attacked you explain why they were beating you up?'

'No, I just heard them say, "There she is." And they came at me with the chains.'

‘So you don’t know for sure it was because you had brought Jan’s car back?’

‘Why else would they attack me?’

‘For all you know it could have been sexually motivated. Do you have any proof that the men who attacked you were in any way related to Jan’s attackers?’

‘They must have been.’

‘I see; they must have been! But you can’t prove it can you, because you didn’t recognise them and you don’t know who attacked Jan? How many shots did Crete fire?’

‘I dunno I didn’t count. There must have been five bullets in the magazine. I suppose he fired all of them.’

‘So you don’t know how many shots there were?’

‘I guess it must have been five.’

‘And that’s just a guess. You said at the time you were curled up on the ground trying to protect yourself from the chains so presumably you didn’t actually see Crete shoot one of the men. You don’t know how many shots there were, so you don’t know for sure that the shot that hit the man was fired by Crete. It’s just possible that another hunter could have been in the area at the time and seen you being attacked and shot one of your attackers. You don’t know for sure that Crete intended to hit the man who was attacking you. If the men were attacking you with chains they’d have been moving about, not standing still. Crete could have just been firing warning shots and because he’s only seven and not experienced with fire arms one of your attackers walked into a warning shot.’

‘Crete’s a good shot.’

‘At the age of seven!’

‘Are you going to stand there arguing with me and leave my Dad to die in the bush? Please Wayne, it’s urgent.’

‘OK, I suppose I could get the cart along the track and through the rivers but it would be a hell of an uncomfortable ride for someone who is badly injured. I’m also worried about you and Crete. While I’m away don’t tell anyone what you

“suspect” happened. If necessary pretend you’re too injured to say more than a few words.’

‘So you will help. I knew I could rely on you. Thank you, love.’

The single word “love” bounced round my head like a light beam reflecting between parallel mirrors. Letting me fuck her is one thing but that other four letter word had different implications, and I wasn’t sure I could handle that.

‘There could be problems. I’m worried about attempting to carry an injured man out of the bush on the back of a cart along a rough track.’

‘You could take a mattress out of the other bedroom and put that on the floor of the cart.’

‘I’ve never met your Dad but I’m not sure I could lift an injured man onto the back of the cart without causing further injuries.’

‘I’ve thought of that. You could ask Jan to go with you. She’s strong.’

I smiled. ‘You’re a scheming little devil Sophie. You’re hoping Jan won’t see him as one of the violent men who attacked her but as an injured man who needs help.’

‘Yes. Providing you put it to her like that.’

‘I suppose there’s a slight, a very slight, chance that it might work.’

‘Thank you Wayne.’ Despite stretching her bruised and battered face she lit up with the warmest of smiles. ‘I knew I could rely on you.’

‘I didn’t say I’d do it Sophie. I just said it might work.’

‘I know but you’re already planning how to make it work aren’t you? And as soon as I can get my body moving again I’ll let you fuck me as often as you want.’

‘I think your Dad’s lucky to have such a loyal daughter.’ When I said that, I meant it. Of all the billions of people in the world there wouldn’t be one who would speak up for me as Sophie had for him. And I’m damn sure she didn’t say it because she was dependent on him; it was said because

she loved her Dad despite everything which would make many women hate their father.

‘OK Sophie, I’ll do what I can and talk to Jan. In the meantime I’ll ask Jasmine to come over and dress your wounds. She has a first aid certificate. All I know is what I’ve picked up in the rugby club. I’m guessing Jasmine will probably have a reasonable first aid kit as well with antiseptics and stuff like that. At least I hope she has. If not I’ll slip into town and get something from the chemist.’

CHAPTER 14

As I sprinted over to the house I could see the police were still working on Jan's car. Jasmine was bent over in the dishwasher loading it with breakfast cereal bowls. As I rushed into the kitchen Jasmine looked up startled by my urgency.

'I've just carried Sophie up to my flat. She's been beaten up. Have you got a first aid kit?'

Jasmine stood up leaving the dishwasher door open. Hurrying into the bathroom she asked, 'What happened?'

'Sophie and her Dad have been attacked while they were in the bush. Sophie has escaped with her children.'

Jan must have heard what I said and, alerted by the urgency in my voice, hurried to the bathroom in time to see Jasmine lifting the first aid kit off of the top shelf.

'How is she?'

'She's been beaten with chains. She's badly bruised and I think she has one or more cracked ribs. She's very sore and has a lot of broken skin that needs cleaning and dressing.'

'Should I ring for an ambulance?'

'No. She's adamant she won't go to hospital.'

I took the first aid box from Jasmine as we hurried over to my flat. The police were still on the drive with all the doors on Jan's car wide open. Nodding towards them Jasmine asked, 'Should we tell them?'

'No.' My reply was firm enough to surprise Jasmine. 'That's the last thing Sophie needs.'

Jan caught us up as we reached the steps to my flat. She was carrying Ryan on her hip. 'From my experience Sophie is being very sensible. All they did for me was to upset Melody and Ryan with their questions and now, even though I've got my car back, I can't use it.'

When we entered my bedroom Crete was standing guard over Sophie with the rifle at his side and Athenea was sucking her thumb and sitting on the bed next to Mum. I placed the first aid box on the bedside table. Sophie was still

lying on her back but she had pulled the cut pieces of her tee shirt so that they would cover her breasts.

I explained to Jasmine, 'I cut Sophie's tee shirt because, with her sore ribs, it would have been too painful to pull it off over her head. I think those abrasions will need dressing won't they?'

'Yes and cleaning up first. Could you fill the jug and put it on to boil please?'

As I went into the kitchen I caught Jan by the hand and with a slight movement of my head indicated I wanted to talk to her alone. She followed with Ryan still on her hip.

I spoke quickly and quietly. 'I need your help Jan. Sophie's Dad is badly injured lying out there in the bush. I've promised Sophie I'll go and get him. We'll have to ford two rivers, get up and down several banks and through a swamp. I've been along the track before but not with the cart. I think I can do it, but an ordinary car like yours would almost certainly get stuck. With his injuries, I think Sophie's Dad will need to be able to lie down flat. The cart may be slow but it could be the fastest way to get him out. It's lucky Jasmine got me to fix up the old track as best as I could. I'll need assistance getting him onto the cart. Jasmine is busy with Sophie. You will help me won't you Jan?'

'Of course! But if he's in the bush, how are we going to find him?'

'He's in trees not far from the commune. Sophie says Crete knows exactly where he is. He could come with us.'

'I did a first aid course as part of my undergraduate work in Norway but I've forgotten most of it.'

'Then you'll still know more than me. I can't think past getting him out of the bush.'

'What can I do to help right now?'

'If you go into the end stable you'll find a hammer and a box of four-inch jolt-head nails on the bench. Could you get the hammer and one of the nails and tap the pins out of the hinges of my bedroom door and lift the door off? Then I'll put it in the cart in case we need to use it as a stretcher. I'll also

need a single mattress out of the end bunkroom and several sheets and a blanket. I'll go and get Donut out of the paddock and if necessary could you help me harness him into the cart?'

'Would it be possible to get the Westpac rescue helicopter?'

'No, we've thought of that and it's not an option in this case. I'll explain why once we've got the cartwheels turning.'

'I'll need to check that it'll be OK for Jasmine to be looking after Melody and Ryan while she's dressing Sophie's wounds.'

'Then I hope she says yes because, if I know anything about Sophie, she'll tell Jasmine to go and look after the kids and her wound dressings can wait. Sophie is like that.'

'OK Wayne. I'll go and check now and see if I can get started. Do you think it would be an idea to take a container of fresh water?'

'Yes! Good thinking! Could you fix that as well please Jan? Hopefully Jasmine will have a plastic container or a juice bottle.'

'OK. I'll see you shortly.'

"Shortly", in this case turned out to be about three-quarters-of-an-hour. With Donut between the shafts and Crete holding the reins I helped Jan carry the foam mattress out of the bunk room and lay it on the door which was already on the back of the cart. I went back upstairs and put my rifle bolt in my pocket. I checked the magazine was full. Once in the yard I slipped my rifle into the back of the cart and buckled on my skinning knife. Jan watched me. I expected some comment from her but the comment, if it existed, remained firmly inside her head.

Crete clambered onto the back of the cart and I climbed into the driving seat next to Jan. I flicked the reins and with the command, "Walk on" we moved out of the yard. The pneumatic tyres and horse's hooves crunched gravel as we headed for the grassy track at the back of the house. Looking back down the drive I could see the police were standing in the

shade under one of the trees near Jan's car. They were eating pies. A second police car was now parked alongside the first one. Hopefully the second car had only come to deliver hot pies for lunch and not because of any clues Sophie had left behind. Whatever the cause there was nothing I could do about it and within a couple of minutes we were round the bend and Jan's car and the police had vanished from view.

Donut broke into a trot over the easy grass track. Jan was wearing raggedy jean-shorts and I could feel the warmth of her thigh moving against mine with every sway of the cart. Her hair danced in the same breeze that filled her open-neck blouse and explored her cleavage. I guess she'd been to the op-shop in town to replace what had been burned in the fire. While I'd been getting Donut from the paddock she must have slipped back into the house and changed, because earlier she'd been wearing a less interesting long sleeved sweatshirt and full-length jeans. Had she changed just because the sun was higher, or might she have other motives?

'The wheels are turning now Wayne. Are you going to tell me why we're here and why we can't call up the rescue helicopter?'

'I've been wondering how to tell you this Jan.' I paused for a moment looking into her eyes for a reaction as I continued. 'Amongst his other injuries Sophie's Dad has a broken right arm.'

Her eyes flashed but whether it was an "alert" or an interest signal remained a mystery. 'Are you saying what I think you're saying Wayne?'

'All I'm saying is that Sophie's Dad has a broken right arm, only you will know whether it's the arm that you broke.'

'Why the hell...'

'Sophie has convinced me things may not be what they seem. Can I explain?'

'I'm listening.'

'I only know what Sophie has told me. Sophie found your car dumped in the bush near the commune. She recognised it as yours and returned it.'

‘Sophie returned my car?’

‘Yes she did Jan. The men who beat you up and stole your car are probably the ones who dumped it at the Greek commune. Sophie had nothing to do with the theft. She recognised your car and returned it by driving into the Wairarapa and through the Hutt Valley. She thought she was doing you a good turn. But, possibly as result, she’s lying injured on my bed and her Dad is somewhere out here beaten up and too injured to move.’

‘I’m tempted to say it serves him right but...’

‘It doesn’t follow that he had anything to do with attacking you. Only you will know that, but he was beaten up because he tried protecting Sophie when she was attacked. And she may, or may not, have been attacked because she returned your car.’

‘Is my car that important?’

‘No but the fingerprints in it could be. I suppose that’s what the police are looking at now.’

‘Do you know why I was attacked?’

‘Sophie has some theories about you reporting the existence of a crop to the police. But it’s just a theory.’

‘It isn’t a theory; I did report it to the police.’

‘But it’s still only a theory that Sophie’s Dad was involved in your attack. Rumours resonate; but all we know about him is that he has a broken arm and has been beaten up. You’ll know whether he was involved when you see him. Assuming we find him, all you may see is an injured man lying in the bush needing help.’

Jan didn’t answer but I felt a ripple run through her body and I’m certain it was nothing to do with the cart jolting over tree roots on the track. We continued in silence.

The strangest thing about a prolonged summer is our assumption that it will continue. Reason tells us the weather can and will break; but as one sunny day succeeds another we give less thought to the possibility of change and don’t bother listening to weather forecasts or even taking the trouble to look skywards for tell-tale signs of a southerly cold front. We

were heading into the steeply rising foothills of the Tararuas. The canopy closed above us so, even if we wanted to, we could no longer get more than the occasional glimpse of the sky. The air seemed cooler beneath the trees as we were shaded from the hammer blows of the afternoon sun. If my mind hadn't been on other things I might have heard wind in the tree tops or seen the topmost branches starting to sway. But I was more conscious of what lay ahead and of Jan's body swaying against mine as the cart lurched over rougher ground. Holding the reins in one hand I slipped my free arm round Jan's waist. She moved closer and her left hand found its way onto my knee. We lurched together in silence. But it wasn't the vacant silence of an unfilled void between strangers but the silence of intimacy where the two-way traffic of thoughts and emotions need no words to kindle fire. We crossed the first ridge and left behind that narrow strip where market gardens rubbed shoulders with cars endeavouring to get somewhere else and back again via the state-highway. Stress coiled Jan's fingers until I could feel her nails digging into my knee. I ran my hand up from her waist to the centre of tension at the base of her neck. The muscles were constricted. I let my fingers explore the roots of her hair. She moved her head to allow my fingers greater access but her nails still dug as firmly as ever into my knee. I'm sure she didn't know she was doing it. As the cart rolled down towards the valley floor I needed to take my hand away from Jan's neck to apply the brake. Even the first few spots of rain were kidnapped by the canopy and never reached us. Lurching wildly we crossed both the rivers and made it up and down the river banks without any need for me to jump down and lead Donut.

The further we went the more nervous Jan seemed to get, presumably about the possibility of meeting one of the men who'd attacked her. She didn't need to tell me how she felt; it was written in her face and embedded in her breathing. I could feel it in her pulse. I hadn't anticipated this problem. I'd always thought of her as confident and capable. She'd already proved she could defend herself and she knew I'd be there to

protect her if necessary. Also the guy was supposed to be injured; so I couldn't see what her problem could be unless it was some psychological nonsense. And I guess no one can do anything about that.

I'd almost forgotten about Crete until he spoke. He'd been sitting in the back saying nothing. I suppose I should have included him in our conversation – such as it was. The trouble is I never know what to say to kids and Jan seemed too tense to conduct any sort of conversation with anyone.

It came as a bit of a surprise when Crete said, 'Can you stop by the next bend? We're almost there.' The surprise wasn't just what he said but the business-like confidence in his voice. It seemed strange coming from a seven-year-old. Mind you, I've not got much idea what a seven-year-old normally sounds like. But it still sounded strange.

For some reason I'd been envisaging it being a little bit further on. Also the place where he wanted us to stop looked like an impenetrable green waterfall of vines with lichens hanging from the trees which I'd swear were as long and old as God's beard.

Jan seemed reluctant to get down so I applied the brake, hopped off and, ran round to the other side. I was sure she didn't need it but I raised my hands to help her down. I had my hands under her armpits to take some of her weight.

I don't think I took some of her weight; I took all of it. She was heavy. It was as if I was supporting a lifeless body. As her feet touched the ground she put her arms round me and clung to me. 'I don't really want to do this Wayne.'

Crete had jumped off the cart and the words he didn't say were something like, 'What's the matter with these dumb grown-ups?' He stood watching us for about half a minute until he came out with, 'It's just through here.' And he pointed beyond the green waterfall of vines.

I kissed Jan's cheek. It wasn't a kiss between two adults where the chemistry of emotions was starting to evolve. It was more like the kiss between a father and a daughter who had just fallen over and grazed her knee. I spoke softly; I

suppose you could say I whispered it into her ear. ‘You’ll be OK Jan.’ I squeezed her hand as I said it, and I got a thin reluctant smile back in response.

‘Thanks Wayne. I’ll be OK now.’

Crete pushed aside the curtain of vines and held back the cobweb of supplejack for us to clamber through. Black and crunchy with age, punga fern fronds littered the ground. In the space between the roots of two red beech trees there was nothing. Nothing at all, except expectations, clipped off wing feathers and a pair of scissors which were still open.

Crete turned to us in amazement. ‘He was here, right here.’

It was at that moment we became aware that the heavy drops of rain were not just drips coming off the trees.

The fern fronds in the area had obviously been scuffed and turned over very recently. Lying on top of these fronds there was no random carpet of fallen beech leaves. Clearly a struggle had taken place. Crete had found the right place but there was not even one body on the ground let alone two. We circled the area beyond where the assault appeared to have taken place. We searched the extremities. The litter on the forest floor away from the attack site hadn’t been disturbed, except in the direction leading to and from the track. No one had moved further into the bush away from the track.

Crete ran about twenty or thirty metres and at the base of a beech tree he stooped to pick something up. He brought them back to show us. It was five empty 303 cases. There was no sign of tarnish on them, just a thin film of oil that was already making colour as it mated with the raindrops. He put them in his pocket with the explanation, ‘Mum refills them.’

The rain got rugged. It wasn’t fine spring rain that barely wets the ground; this was the real stuff that knew what it was doing. Drips were already coming off the end of my nose.

I was holding Jan’s hand and I felt a shiver pass through her body. But I didn’t know whether it was a shiver because rain was already running off her hair and soaking her

clothes or was it a shiver of fear. There was water on her eyelashes as her eyes tried to penetrate the bush which seemed to be closing in around us as the rain increased. Flurries of wind reaching down through the canopy flattened our wet clothes against our skin. The forest started to roar. Not only were the tops of the trees and the bigger limbs starting to move but whole trees were swaying.

Jan squeezed my hand. 'Come on Wayne, there's no one here. This is creepy let's go.' As she said it her eyes were still searching the heaving bush as if expecting men, or demons, to blast through the curtains of rain to attack us.

Wet vines grabbed at our clothes and skin as we hurried back towards the cart. We were both shivering. Crete was already attempting to shelter under the deck of the cart while rain soaked into the foam mattress above his head.

Donut was restless in the harness obviously as anxious to be moving as we were. Further along the track motorcycle skid marks in the forest litter were already filling with muddy water. Jan climbed back onto the front of the cart while Crete scrambled out from underneath and got on the mattress which oozed water as he sat on it. I got Jan to take the brake off as I walked round to Donut's head and attempted to manoeuvre the cart round in a track that was too narrow with a fidgety horse that didn't want to back up.

Above the noise of the wind we all heard a crack as distinctive as a rifle shot. It was close above our heads and was followed by the tearing sound as a limb of one of the red beech trees tore, and in falling, became entangled in lower branches and hung suspended above the track not twenty metres behind us. Only a shower of small twigs and branches hit the ground. The limb of the tree was going to choose its own time to fall. Donut lurched forward frightened by the explosive tearing of timber. It took more than all of my strength hanging onto the reins to attempt to subdue him. His eyes flashed white. I shouted the single word, "Brakes". Fortunately Jan understood and hauled on the brake lever. When I glanced at her a few moments later she was still hanging onto the brake lever with

both hands as the cart with both wheels locked started to be dragged forward. Distracted by trying to get Donut to back-up I hadn't noticed Crete climbing into the driving seat. He was now sitting close to Jan with his arms encircling her. Eventually with the combined effect of the brakes and me swinging on Donut's neck we brought the cart to a stop. Donut snorted as I glanced towards the cart. Both Jan and Crete were shaking; but I had no idea whether it was from fright or the cold.

Even if it was from fright Jan had done everything right. She'd hauled on the brake when I asked her and had hung onto it. Some women would have either screamed or frozen up; if she'd done either I don't think I'd have been able to restrain Donut. We could have ended up with the cart being dragged away out of control or turned over. Everything I'd done today had been wrong. I should have checked on the weather, but I didn't. I should have come prepared for a southerly storm, but I didn't. We had no communications. Now we had to get back across two rivers which, by now, would probably be fast flowing torrents and at least a metre higher than before. Probably the river banks, I had sweated to cut back only days ago, would at this moment be washing out. The swamp which had proved no problem on the way here could trap us on the way back. I had just seen a limb of a tree break off. More trees could be across the track and in my haste to please Sophie I hadn't brought any tools – not even an axe to enable me clear the track. We were all getting wetter and losing body heat...

At that moment Crete interrupted my thoughts with, 'My cabin isn't far down the track. We could stay there.'

Perhaps my mind was going numb because that thought hadn't occurred to me. Jan cut into my response with, 'We could all die of exposure out here Wayne. Can we go to Crete's cabin? I don't want to go back in this weather.'

In all honesty there wasn't a decision to make. I simply said, 'Yes.' I was becoming increasingly impressed with Crete. He had saved his mother when she was being

attacked in probably the only way possible for him. He had brought her out on Sparta to my flat so she could be cared for. He had correctly found the spot where his father should have been. It wasn't his fault his Dad had gone. Now his suggestion had probably saved me from making a possibly disastrous attempt to return along the track.

Donut was tossing his head and it was all I could do to restrain him with my hand gripping the reins beneath his jaw. His nostrils flared and his eyes showed white. Froth from his mouth spilled onto my hand making my grip on the reins slippery. The bush closed in. Forest giants were being tossed and torn like a ship breaking up on a reef. I had to shout to make Jan hear. 'Ease the brake off slowly and I'll try to lead Donut down the hill.'

I could hear fear in Jan's 'O...K'.

Donut and the cart jolted forward and downhill. His feet and mine were slipping as a river of silt overtook and washed past us carrying forest debris and small rocks with it. Tiny waterfalls hollowed out tree roots and eddies swirled in pools of dubious depth. I tried speaking calmly to Donut, but his ears were laid back and he was having to brace his forelegs to prevent sliding forward. The cart lurched. If he stumbled or the cart turned over... Turning my head to avoid shouting in Donut's ear I called back to Jan, 'Ease the brake on, just a touch. Don't lock the wheels.'

'OK.'

The distance to go was probably little more than half a kilometre – a kilometre at the outside. I felt like ten as we negotiated an ocean of mud, rock and root capable of capsizing the cart. The slope eased. Then, emerging like a row of broken teeth in blackened gums, we saw fence posts, then stone walls and a clutter of huts. None of us could have taken much more.

Crete directed us to one of the smallest cabins. Jan applied the brake.

Between us, Jan and I released Donut from his harness and I led him to the fenced paddock that Crete had said we

could use. We left the cart where it was. Other women would have run indoors and left me to fix the horse by myself. I felt my respect for Jan rise another couple of notches.

CHAPTER 15

As we entered, Crete was breaking up dead manuka brushwood that he had obviously just picked up from the pile of dry firewood in the corner of the room next to the hearth. Twisting it together he laid it in the fire place and struck a match. Whenever anyone I know lights a fire they invariably use paper or fire-lighters so I'd never realised how effective manuka brushwood can be. The fire was blazing and crackling in seconds and Crete was laying thicker pieces of manuka twigs on top. Come to think of it, I don't know how anyone living here would get paper. It's not as though they'd get a junk mail delivery several times a week. Crete's method was certainly quick and effective.

While we had been putting Donut in the paddock Crete had taken off his wet clothes and was now dressed in a shirt with trousers several sizes too big for him. I guess they probably belonged to Sophie.

My tee-shirt was stuck to my skin. Without saying a word Jan helped me pull it off over my head and I did the same for her. Our teeth were chattering so much I doubt if we could have said much if we needed to. There were two blankets on the bed in the corner of the room beneath a deer skin and several goat skins. Having removed all our wet clothes, and dropped them on the floor, we each pulled a blanket off the bed and, wrapping our shivering bodies up in it, we gravitated towards the fire.

A towel hung on a lashed-together manuka frame near the fire. Picking it up I moved to one side of Jan where I could still see the fire which was blazing with vigour if not with much intensity. I started to dry her hair and received a warm smile in return.

A large iron pot was hooked onto a chain over the fire and Crete was busy piling thicker sticks around it. He explained, 'It's goat stew; we put more meat and veggies in every day. It's already cooked; it only needs to boil.'

As we soaked in the increasing heat from the fire I glanced around the hut seeing things that had bypassed me before. Jan was doing the same.

Sophie's home consisted of a square log cabin without any internal walls. The external walls were simply horizontal logs that looked like red beech. Each log had been notched at the corners so that they locked each other in place and probably made a strong structure. The top and bottom of each log had been adzed flat and any gaps had been filled with clay. The only door appeared to have been made from rough-sawn timber and was fastened with a single wooden latch. It was a dark room, with only one small window in the north wall and even at this time of day, which was well before sunset, the main source of light was the flickering firelight. Half-a-dozen guttered candles were strategically supported round the walls. Doubtless these could be lit later when daylight, such as it was, finally faded. The trodden-earth floor was raised above the level of the ground outside. Near the fireplace river stones had been pressed flat into the ground and swept clean while the rest of the floor area was covered with goat-skin mats.

A tin bath hung from a nail on the wall and the water for it was presumably heated in the two black cast-iron kettles that took pride of place in front of the fire. As we came in I had noticed a row of plastic buckets destined to catch some of the deluge as it cascaded off the corrugated-iron roof. The remainder of the cataract was wind blown and, missing the overflowing buckets, inundated the path and garden. In prolonged dry spells I presume Sophie would have to carry water up from the stream some fifty metres away.

Glancing at the double bed I noticed Jan was doing the same at the same moment. I guess a single common thought skipped across our minds and arrived at the same conclusion. She pulled her blanket a little more firmly around her and rewarded me with a smile.

As we had pulled off the blankets I could see the bed consisted of a couple of logs about two metres long lying flat on the ground with horizontal boards nailed across to fill the

gap and form a flat bed-base. There was no headboard and the mattress was clearly home-made. The cover was made from at least two wool sacks and I could see the name of a sheep farm stamped on the side. They had been cut and hand stitched to form the outer cover for the mattress that had been stuffed, presumably with wool. There was a noticeable sag in the middle where the stuffing had migrated to the sides.

Two single home-made mattresses were spread on deerskin mats. I guessed these were for Crete and Athenea.

A plastic bucket sat on the floor next to the bed. It didn't take much imagination to work out what that was for as the long-drop was about twenty metres away next to a rain soaked hedge at the side of the garden. I'd noticed it when I put Donut into the back paddock. The sound of driven-rain drumming the window and tin-roof conspired, with the cascading cataract from the roof, to convince me of the value of that bedside bucket and the prudence of using it before the candles were finally blown out and the fire-light ceased to flicker.

Millimetre by millimetre the heat from the fire combined with the self-generating warmth of our bodies to soak into our bones. There is something smugly satisfying about being inside in the dry and regaining body heat while still being able to hear the storm and driven rain outside buffeting the cabin. Periodically Crete stirred the stew with a long wooden stick, presumably to prevent it from sticking to the iron pot. The stick was interesting. It was at least a metre long and significantly thicker than my thumb. Crete used it standing to one side of the fire to avoid the direct radiated heat on his face and hands. He'd obviously done this many times before. I was left wondering how many other seven-year-olds would manage this. Had he ever learned to play?

The stew started to boil. The aroma joined forces with the smell of wood-smoke and memories of camp fires by the river at the back of our farm before Mum moved out and Dad had to sell that land. Occasional sparks leaping out of the fire fell harmlessly onto the hearth or the trodden-dirt floor within

the semi-circle devoid of goat-skin mats. The intensity of the heat from the fire was starting to scorch our faces and Jan and I moved back and sat on the corner of the bed. I took hold of her hand and received an encouraging squeeze in response.

Crete handed me the stirring stick. 'Can you lift the pot off the fire? I'm not allowed to do it.'

Looking at the pot I wasn't surprised. I now realised why the stick was so thick. Holding one end of the stick with both hands I pushed the other end through the number-eight fencing wire handle and lifted. As I did so I realised I was lifting a nine kilogram gas cylinder. The top had been cut off and two holes had been drilled in it to hold the wire loop handle. It was heavier than I expected; which left me surprised that Sophie could manage it. Spilling boiling stew onto skin would be a disaster especially out here away from any medical facilities. Unsure of my ability to hold the pot on the stick I got Jan to move away and keep Crete well clear as I carried it from the fire and placed it on a single large flat stone. Steam rose as Crete got an iron ladle from a nail in the wall and handed it to Jan. Taking three bowls and three spoons from the shelf above the bed he asked Jan to share it out because we'd need to save some for breakfast.

Judging by the quantity in the pot I couldn't imagine that being a problem however much we wanted to eat. I was convinced there might even be enough for the whole of the next day as well. Crete and I sat on Sophie's bed as Jan knelt on the floor and ladled it into our bowls. Then she joined us on the bed. Unwilling to give it time to cool, we had to blow on each spoonful to save scalding our mouths. I still remember that stew. It was a life-saver. I've often wondered what was in it, beside the goat; which I presumed was the nanny I saw Sophie kill on the bush track.

Washing up consisted of Crete putting the bowls, spoons and ladle into a bucket, not the bucket and pouring boiling water over them from the kettle by the fire. He used a wooden handled dish mop to wash them and hooked each item out partly using the mop and partly using his fingers. He then

carried the bucket to the door opened it and threw the water onto the path. I couldn't get the disbelief out of my mind, "This kid is only seven-years old!"

When he brought the bucket back Jan took it from him and, picking up our wet clothes, she rung each of them out. By this time the burning sparks had expended their energy and the fire had aged to the bright glow one gets before the ash turns white and only cinders remain. Laying our still damp clothes out on the warm stone hearth Jan commented, 'Hopefully they'll be dry by morning.'

Daylight died early; and as the window became a deadlight into blackness Crete lit a single candle. From its light he undressed and climbed into his bed. Jan was probably thinking of her own children as she whispered to me so that Crete couldn't hear above the noise of the storm, 'I wonder if he ever gets bedtime stories.'

Light from the single candle illuminated Jan's body as, unwrapping herself, she laid her blanket on the bed. I did the same. We faced each other across the bed savouring the erotic ambience of our nakedness. We remade the bed aware that in a few moments there would no longer be a bed-width between us. We savoured the moment before Jan turned and, moving like a phantom towards the flickering candlelight, blew it out. In that moment of darkness we both experienced the unmistakeable smell of a snuffed-out candle. That smell has stayed with me and, while it no longer arouses me with anticipation, I can no longer experience it without recalling that precise moment.

The bed was cold. Our bodies were warm.

Our arms encircled each other. We kissed while our bodies pressed together. I ran my fingers up the length of Jan's spine and let my fingers rummage through her hair exploring the base of her skull.

She whispered to me, 'That's nice. I like you Wayne, but do you remember last night I told you that I'm a married woman and I'm not ready for anything else yet?'

'Yes. That's what you said.'

She kissed me on the lips adding, 'Well, that was true last night. But now it's today.'

I let the tip of my tongue make crazy little circles round her left nipple and felt it respond. I moved on to her right nipple before letting my tongue explore her cleavage and working its way down to hesitate on her navel before proceeding further. I kissed her in four important places. She put both her hands over my ears and pulled my head back to her level so we could again kiss on the lips. I moved on top of her and as I rested on my elbows she spread her legs and drew up her knees. Anticipating my next action she raised her hips to meet me but, drawing away, I whispered in her ear.

'Jan you told me yesterday that you're a married woman and you weren't ready for it. Only the strong permit themselves to change their mind that quickly. Are you strong enough?'

Again she lifted her hips up further to meet me. But I pulled back and sliding my tongue into her mouth our tongues embraced. My fingers played with her ear lobes.

'You're a married woman Jan; this would be adultery. That's reserved as the sport-of-kings and for wicked-women. You wouldn't want to indulge, would you?' As I said this I let the tip of my penis brush against her. Again she thrust her hips towards me. I drew back again.

'For God's sake Wayne!'

'God doesn't officially approve of a married woman committing adultery, for the simple reason most women don't have the strength of character to value it.'

I brushed her again with the tip of my penis. 'If you regretted it afterwards you'd give the God-given art of adultery a bad name.'

'I don't believe you're just a tease Wayne. I think you can't do it.'

'In that case I suppose I'll have to prove whether or not I can.'

She was moist and warm as I slid into her. Listening to each other's breathing and sensitive to every body

movement we paced each other. We were dancers leaving a trail of stars behind as we circled closer to the ever tightening curves of the great vortex. Until, with increasing urgency, gravity took control of time and space. We were sucked further into the black hole at the centre of the universe where time stands still and couples are crushed together in the mind-shattering eruption that is simultaneously both the reason for life and life's turbulent source. With our bodies inextricably fused together we passed through the worm-hole at the centre of the fire and brimstone and drifted into another universe where time and gravity had no meaning and only fantasies were real.

Stars drifted across the night sky. And within the darkness we floated across an ocean of satisfaction.

Before dawn something stirred. It began as ripples on the surface of the sea begin. At first our bodies barely noticed any dishevelment of the calm. But imperceptibly a quiver in the light air became an up-draught. Wavelets formed. Possibly it was no more than a sigh in the wind but, before long, the bed beneath us became restless and the air became warm and moist. We rocked to a gentle swell that started as little more than an undulation. But the undulation became a heave. And as the heave surged into our consciousness we tumbled together out of our misty dream to ride into a wild reckless storm. Morning found us washed up in a pile of debris on the beach but still locked together in an embrace.

A small boy discovered them not far from the high tide mark. He was standing in a pool of weak sunlight as he spoke. 'The goat stew is boiling. Do you want some yet?'

Jan and I were entwined and naked on top of the bed. All the bed clothes lay discarded on the floor. I pulled my left arm out from under Jan and extricating my thigh from between Jan's legs I rolled onto my front thinking to myself this half-hearted piece of discretion or modesty, or whatever it was supposed to be, had come rather too late. I glanced at my watch. It was twenty-to-nine.

Jan answered. 'Thanks Crete that goat stew would be great. I'll put some out for all of us as soon as I'm dressed.'

Crete nodded, 'I've had mine. I got it out with the ladle while it was still on the fire.' He added as a form of apology, 'Mum lets me do it if the fire's not too burny.'

Jan smiled at him. 'Well I suppose it's OK now that you've done it but it's best to be careful; it would be so easy to burn yourself.'

I had to keep reminding myself, "This kid is only seven not seventeen!"

He asked, 'Am I allowed to go to Wendy's cabin to see if Dad's there?'

Jan asked, 'Does your Mum let you go there by yourself?'

'Of course! I go heaps.'

'Where is Wendy's cabin?'

'Next to Petra's cabin.'

Jan looked blank, 'I don't know where Petra lives.'

'It's by the bridge.'

'Oh! Well I suppose we could find it. I think I saw the bridge yesterday when we arrived. Will you come straight back Crete? We have to try to get back to your Mum once the rivers have gone down.'

'And the swamp has drained.' I added. 'I suspect we're about to find out why everyone in the village uses the route through the Wairarapa instead of this one.'

'You will come straight back won't you Crete, otherwise we'll have to go and look for you.'

'OK.' Crete opened the door and as he did so I got a glimpse of the paddock behind the house and, in the thin morning light, I could see Donut streaked with mud but grazing quite happily. That was one less potential problem for me to worry about.

As Crete left, Jan looked at me. 'I hope it's OK letting him go off like that. We are supposed to be looking after him...'

‘I think he’s been looking after us. I can’t believe he’s only seven.’

I put my arm round Jan and pulled her towards me.

Jan kissed me on my lips. ‘I don’t think we’ve been setting him a very good example have we?’

‘Do you think we shouldn’t have done it last night?’

‘I didn’t say that. But what would you say if we made a baby last night?’

‘You’re on the pill aren’t you?’

‘No Wayne I’m not. I used to be, but about a year ago on one of Thor’s trips to Norway he had a vasectomy while he was over there. I’d no idea he was planning it. Apparently he booked the appointment privately on-line before he left New Zealand. He just told me about it when he got back. He knew I wanted another baby, and I thought he wanted another one as well. I simply wanted to wait till Ryan was at least two-and-a-half. He was two, six months ago.

I counted up the days recently; do you know in the past twelve months Thor has only been home for fifty-one days.’

‘Is that because his company has sent...’

‘It’s not like that Wayne. Thor is in senior management. He alone decides how and when and where he spends his time. If he’s only been with me for fifty-one days in the last twelve months it’s because that’s how he wanted it. It averages out at less than one day per week. Most of the time he’s been in Norway I’ve been busy with the report; but that contract is finished. Now could be a good time to start a baby. He never even discussed the vasectomy with me.’

‘And do you still want a baby?’

‘I guess I wouldn’t have done what I did last night if I felt it was such a bad idea.’

‘You were raped recently...’

‘Like every other woman I’d like to be able to choose my baby’s father. At the hospital they said their tests showed I wasn’t pregnant but they gave me a “morning-after” pill just in case. I suspect it was for mental rather than biological reasons

because I was very distressed at the time. I've had my period since then, so there's definitely no possibility that incident could have made me pregnant.'

'But you haven't had a morning-after pill this morning.'

'It's not the sort of thing I carry about with me in my handbag.'

'If you had one with you would you take it?'

'No Wayne, I don't think I would.'

'Is that because it would be my baby?'

'You can draw that inference if you want.'

'What would Thor say when he comes back if he were to find you pregnant?'

'I don't think I'd care what he said. In any case I don't think he's coming back.'

'Have you been in contact with him?'

'Yes I spoke to him early yesterday morning before we left.'

'Oh! You didn't say.'

'I wasn't in the mood to say anything about it then.'

'What happened?'

'He rang me on my cell phone early in the morning when I was still asleep. I told him I'd been trying to contact him. He apologised and said communications were difficult because he was in Lebesby...'

'Where's that?'

'I don't blame you for not knowing; not many Norwegians would know where it is either. Probably he thought I wouldn't know. It's on the Lakesfjord which is about as far north as you can go in Norway. It's close to the Russian border. He told me his company had a contract to investigate the feasibility of signing a major contract to research the geology of the Barents Sea area in a joint-operation with the Russians. It's with a view to prospecting for oil. And he'd been sent up there to investigate. OK I accepted that, it's an odd time to travel north but it's the crazy sort of thing we have to do from time-to-time. We chatted on for a bit. I told him

about what we're doing here and how Jasmine is keen to set up the riding school and that it was just possible Basil might come back home permanently if they could make a living out of the riding school. You know all the usual news about what we're doing and what the kids are up to. He seemed interested. Then I just happened to say what nice sunny weather we'd been having... Yeah! I spoke too soon didn't I; but right then the storm hadn't happened. Then he told me he'd been having a sunny day there as well!

'Yes?'

'This is December. It's mid-winter in the Northern Hemisphere and Lebesby is well inside the Arctic Circle. They would have permanent night there for months to come. Wherever he was, he certainly wasn't in Lebesby. That made me angry. Perhaps it was a reaction to being woken up and told more lies. It's not the first occasion either. But this time I blew my top and told him if he didn't have enough respect for me to at least lie convincingly he might as well not bother to come home. Then I hung up on him.'

'Wow! That doesn't sound like you. Have you told anyone else?'

'No but I was real mad and I traced the number he had rung from. I discovered it was from a landline in Oslo.'

'Oslo! Is that in Norway?'

'Yes, it's the capital.'

'Is that where you live?'

'I live here in New Zealand. I'm a permanent resident. Melody and Ryan were born here and I've got no intention of going back to Norway. But we still jointly own a flat in Bergen, if that's what you mean. It's close to our head office.'

'Is Oslo near Bergen?'

'No it's a hell of a way across the mountains.'

'Do you think Thor will come back after you told him not to bother?'

'I doubt it. This isn't the first time I've been told a pack of lies. Everything has changed in the last six months. I can't take any more. Melody and Ryan are both his children. I

suppose he might come back to see them; but he'll be wasting his time trying to repair bridges with me.

I don't want to think about it any more. Come on Wayne, let's get dressed and have some breakfast before Crete comes back. Hopefully our clothes dried by the fire during the night but I guess we'll have to put them on even if they're still wet.'

Pondering on what Jasmine had told me about trauma victims having rapid and irrational mood changes we got dressed in front of the fire. Our clothes were not only dry but they were also warm.

CHAPTER 16

Jan and I were sitting on the bed finishing our goat stew when Crete came back. His face was red, he was splattered with fresh mud on top of yesterday's dried mud and he was out of breath. I guessed he'd been running.

'No one has seen Dad. He's not in the village.'

Having seen those fresh motorbike tracks in the mud yesterday this was more-or-less what I was expecting. 'One of the men who attacked your Mum got away on his motorbike didn't he Crete?'

'Yes, I shot at him but I missed. As soon as I got the first guy the other one kept running. The trees were in the way and I couldn't get a clear shot. Then he took off on his motorbike.'

'If he got out he could have called up other gang members. The track we saw yesterday had clearly been churned up by a number of bikes. Some of the tyre marks were from quad-bikes. Probably the rain will have washed away most of the evidence by now. No one passed us on the track so I guess they've gone out via the Wairarapa and, I suppose, picked up your Dad and the man you shot.'

Anxiety showed in Crete's voice when he asked, 'What will they have done with my Dad?'

'I don't know Crete...'

Jan interrupted, 'If they didn't want to look after him they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of picking him up and taking him out of the bush. As the weather changed, it's just as well they did. Hopefully they got out before the southerly arrived.'

'Might they beat Dad up again?' Crete asked.

Jan answered. 'I don't think so Crete. I think the bad men only wanted to hurt your Mum because they don't like kind people and she was kind and brought my car back. But your Mum and Athenea are safe at Jasmine's house now because of you.'

'Yes, I led Sparta and brought them out didn't I?'

‘You sure did Crete. Those bad men hurt me as well, but I didn’t have anyone brave like you to defend me.’ She added under her breath either to me or to herself, ‘It would have been nice if Thor had been there to support me instead of...’

I cut in. ‘I don’t think they’ll hurt your Dad any more Crete because he knows where all the plantations are hidden in the bush. Jan’s right; I’m sure your Dad only got bashed because he tried to protect your Mum. But they didn’t count on a tough little soldier like you, did they?’

Jan smiled. ‘I bet right now they are trying to make your Dad better, just like Jasmine is making your Mum better.’

Both Jan and I made the effort to sound convincing. It was time to change the subject. ‘I’m real keen to get back as soon as we can to see how your Mum is. But before we do that I think I’m going to need a bit of help from you Crete.’

‘Yep, I can help.’

‘I knew I could rely on you. It’s like this, soldier.’ Crete seemed to stand about a foot taller when I called him soldier. I pretended not to notice and continued. ‘For the last month or more we’ve had dry weather and the track to Jasmine’s has been good and dry. But now the swamp will have filled and the rivers will be in flood.’

My mind flashed back to that night in Taranaki. It was years ago but the memory still haunts me. It was one of those black nights when you can’t see a thing. Even the tractor lights wouldn’t cut through the rain. The river paddock flooded and I had to go the long way round to cut fences and get the stock out. There were thirty of them expected to calve soon. They were up to their knees in water with a rising river. I should’ve taken them all the way back to the bridge. I thought they’d make it across OK. But the bank on the far side was too steep, too muddy. They kept slipping back in. The more they slipped the worse the bank got. Only eight out of the thirty made it; the rest got swept downstream. I could hear them bellowing all the way to the waterfall.

‘We’ve got a problem Crete. I don’t think we should risk the track until the floods have receded and the swamp’s had time to drain. Would we be able to stay in your cabin till tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

I turned to Jan. ‘I’m a bit worried about what Jasmine might do if we don’t return or contact her today. She’d have been expecting us back by last night.’

Jan nodded. ‘She’s certain to have discussed it with Sophie; and Sophie would have explained about the rivers and the swamp. I’m sure they’d assume we’ve been staying here. There’s one other thing; since I was attacked I’ve made a point of taking my personal locator beacon with me everywhere. I’ve got it now. I always keep it under my pillow at night. Jasmine knows I’ve got it and her name and details are on the contact list. If I’d activated it she’d have known about it within a minute or two.’

Crete interjected. ‘Mum’s got a cell-phone. Dad bought it for her when Athenea was born. But it’s only for grown-ups.’

‘Where is it Crete?’

‘Under the bed with the solar-panel. The battery is always flat but if it’s sunny Mum takes the solar-panel outside to charge it up, then we have to walk to the top of the hill to make it work. Mum would let you use it.’

Jan looked up. ‘I’ve got my smart phone in my handbag. The battery should still be OK but it’s not smart enough to work out here. I tried yesterday, there’s no coverage.’

‘Mum gets hers to work when we walk up the hill past the punga trees.’

‘Well if you’ll show us the spot I think we should try phoning Jasmine and your Mum.’

‘Am I allowed to talk to my Mum?’

‘If we can get through of course you can Crete.’

‘Can we go now?’

‘I’d say so. That’s OK isn’t Wayne?’

‘When we go up there Mum takes her rifle because there are lots of hares. Sometimes she lets me have a shot, as long as I pick up the spent cases.’

‘Well I could take my rifle but I think I’ll leave it to your Mum to give you shooting lessons. But I’ll still need your sharp eyes to point out where all the hares are before they run away.’

Jan smiled, ‘I bet you’re good at that aren’t you Crete?’

‘Yes, I’ve got sharp eyes. Sometimes I see them before Mum.’

That turned out to be the case. Crete led the way walking about a dozen paces ahead of us.

For some reason I’d assumed we’d be going back up the hill that we came down last night. But that wasn’t the case. Crete led us past several other cabins and we headed up the hill on the other side of the valley. The ground was wet; droplets hung suspended from the tips of the grass bending the blades. Each footstep sank a fraction into the soft soil leaving behind an imprint on the ground ringed with mud-stained water. It was obvious what had happened. We’d had a long dry period and then a deluge. The water was saturating the surface and sitting there. Nothing was draining into the subsoil. Trying to keep clean was pointless. With each footfall tiny spots of mud leapt from our heels and clung to our calves and the back of our legs. Alongside the track, cobwebs heavy with raindrops sagged, the fibres glinted in the thin morning sun. I slipped my hand into Jan’s and we walked together while Crete led the way. Several times Jan paused to examine rocks either on the stone walls or ones that she’d picked up along the way. Every time she cast the stone aside.

‘What are you looking for Jan?’

She gave me a far-away look and hesitated before answering. ‘It’s a bit of nonsense really. Most geologists can’t resist picking up rocks and I guess it’s little more than that. Well perhaps it’s slightly more than that. When we were doing our survey work further north I picked up a sample and

discovered significant traces of cobalt in rocks where I wouldn't have expected to find any. I tried a few more samples and got more-or-less the same results.'

'What's cobalt?'

'It's a silvery-white magnetic metal – quite a rare metal. Its atomic number is twenty-seven. It's not found in many places in the world. It is often obtained as a valuable by-product from nickel or copper mining. I believe it is mined in PNG and...'

'What's it used for?'

'I'm a geologist not an industrial engineer but I know an important use is in making permanent magnets and it's also used together with aluminium oxides in the production of blue pigments. There's a significant industrial demand for it and, as a result, it tends to be quite expensive. What I've found so far wouldn't provide a high enough yield to be anywhere near commercially viable.'

'So why are you looking?'

'It's a bit of nonsense really. Have you been in that German cafe not far from the clock tower?'

'No, I usually go to McDonalds.'

'Well this cafe roasts and grinds their own coffee; it's called "Demon Coffee". The poster advertising it contains a picture of an imp. You've probably seen it even if you haven't tried it. You can buy the same coffee in the New World supermarket. The packets there also have the same picture of the imp on the packet. I bought some and looked on the back and found that the coffee beans come from PNG.'

'Oh yes?'

'Now this is the interesting bit. As I told you, I found traces of cobalt in rock samples where I wouldn't have expected to find any. There are also traces in these hills. The word "cobalt" is ancient German and is spelt *kobalt* with a "K". The name comes from the seventeenth century and means "imp or demon". They called it that because they believed cobalt was harmful to the ores in which it occurred. Can you see the connection?'

‘I think so. As there are traces in these hills, I guess you’re wondering if there could be a connection between that and the German cafe.’

‘Yes something like that. I’ve been to that cafe quite a few times. Strange isn’t it. Because of the German invasion of Norway during the war, and the things the Nazis did, my grandparents would have crossed the road rather than walk past a German cafe. I don’t think it ever crossed their minds that the German people were also victims of the Nazi regime.’

‘Obviously going to a German cafe doesn’t worry you.’

‘Of course it doesn’t. If I started indulging in national prejudice, I’d be no better than the Nazis. I remember waking up one morning in tears. I don’t know why; perhaps I’d been dreaming. Thor was away in Norway. During my married life I’ve spent a lot of nights lying next to an empty space. Don’t misunderstand me, I love my children, they are my life, but I would also like a bit more adult company, just for a break. I was pregnant with Ryan at the time and on this particular morning for some reason I just couldn’t stop crying. So I got up and dressed Melody and drove downtown and went into the German cafe for breakfast. We were the only customers. I ordered a glass of apple-juice and a German pastry for Melody but all I wanted was black “Demon” coffee. The background music playing was Sibelius’s “Finlandia”. That, and the smell of the coffee, took me straight back to the spring mornings I’d spent in the fiords back home. I remembering closing my eyes listening to the music and seeing the lemon light on the mountains lighting up the snow on the ridges and revealing the deep crevices mirrored in the black water of the fiord. I could hear a trickle of water between the rocks where fingers of ice crystals were woven together by the edge of the stream. Then Melody spilled her apple juice all over the table and it ran onto me and onto the floor. Karl, he’s the owner and a hell of a nice guy, got a cloth and mopped it up. After that he brought Melody a fresh glass and didn’t charge me for it. The next morning I ordered my usual black “Demon” coffee, apple

juice for Melody and, for the first time, “a Big Kiwi Breakfast” to share with Melody. Karl fetched a high chair and I lifted Melody into it and strapped her in. When Thor was away, which happened quite frequently, I took Melody down there for our early-morning breakfast. I told Karl in advance when Thor would be away and on those mornings Melody’s high chair was always set out ready for her. As long as I got there just on opening time Melody and I were usually the only customers. Karl used to sit and have his breakfast with us and we’d talk until more customers came in. One day my hand was resting on the table. While I was helping Melody, Karl rested his hand on mine. Out of instinct I pulled my hand away and spent the rest of the day and some of the night wondering whether I should have reacted differently. After that I tried resting my hand on the table in the same place but Karl never did it again. One time I could see his hand on the table next to mine and I was tempted to lay my hand on his; but I thought better of it. With Thor away there weren’t any other adults in my life. At least none I could talk to. I never told Thor about those breakfasts; I don’t think he’d have understood. Melody could have told him but I don’t think she did. If she did, Thor never mentioned it. He didn’t have a lot of time for listening to toddler-talk. I haven’t told anyone, except you. Those breakfasts with Karl set me up for the day. It never went any further, except in my imagination. There were times in bed even when Thor was home when I used to imagine Karl next to me. Thor never knew. In the real world all that happened was talk between Karl and me with Melody listening. Then Ryan was born and I got too busy. Breakfast in town got more difficult and somehow our “Big Kiwi Breakfasts” and cups of “Demon Coffee” got further apart until they more-or-less stopped. About that time I started selling the goat-cheese to Jasmine and visiting her at least once-a-week. But the “Demon Coffee” is still good and occasionally when we’re in town I take Melody and Ryan to get something at lunchtime. But, at that time of day, the cafe is busy and it’s not the same. For some reason looking for cobalt in the rocks with you reminds

me of those early-morning “Demon Coffee” breakfasts.’ Jan shrugged. ‘But as I said, geologists can’t resist picking up rocks.’

At that moment Crete stopped and pointed. A hare was watching us about thirty-metres ahead. I lifted the rifle off my shoulder, worked the bolt and removed the safety catch. The hare would never have heard the shot. I’d have been a lot better off with a .22 for a job like that. A rifle this heavy tends to make a mess of the carcase. More by luck than skill this had been a head shot so most of the meat was OK. I had my skinning knife on my belt so I skinned and gutted on the spot throwing the guts into the fern down the bank. We left a trail of blood on the ground as we continued up the hill. Periodically Jan looked at her cell-phone which kept telling her there was no signal.

Crete pointed to a group of punga trees. ‘Just past there Mum can make her phone work.’ Crete was correct.

Jan grinned as she said, ‘We’ve got coverage.’

She dialled and put the phone on loudspeaker. Jasmine answered.

‘Hi, Jan here. We’re staying in Sophie’s cabin because of the weather.’

‘We guessed that was what you’d do when the weather changed so suddenly. Is everyone OK?’

‘We’re all fine. How is Sophie?’

‘She had an uncomfortable night with her ribs and the bruising but she is still quite adamant she won’t have any hospital treatment. I’ve washed and dressed the broken skin and the abrasions. I think they should heal OK and not leave any permanent scars. Most of the cuts are only skin deep. The bruising and swelling is still quite extensive. It looks bad but I think it’ll go down in a few days. Athenea is OK but quite upset. She had a boiled egg for breakfast that Katherine helped her eat. Probably only half of it went on the floor. She just wants to sit next to Sophie sucking her thumb but, having said that, at this moment Katherine’s playing building blocks with her on the floor. What’s happened about Sophie’s Dad?’

‘We don’t know Jasmine. He wasn’t where Sophie left him. But there were quad motorbike tracks on the ground and we think he has been picked up and probably taken to the Wairarapa to get patched up. Crete has asked around and no one in the commune has seen him and he certainly didn’t come past us on the track. I suppose the good news is that he’s not lying out there in the bush in this weather.’

‘Should I ring Masterton to see whether...’

‘I think you should ask Sophie about that. I doubt she’d want you to. The whole family seems to have a thing about hospitals. My guess is that he’d refuse to go to one.’

‘Will you be coming back today Jan?’

‘That’s up to Wayne, but from the way he was talking I rather doubt it. He’s concerned about the state of the rivers and in particular the swamp. I think he’d rather wait till the floods have had a chance to recede. He doesn’t want us to get stuck. Donut has some grazing and we’re quite comfortable in Sophie’s cabin. Crete has been showing us where everything is kept and how everything works. You could tell Sophie he’s been a great help; I don’t know how we’d have managed without him.’

As Jan said this I saw Crete glow with pride. And quite honestly he deserved everything Jan said about him.

Jan continued on the phone. ‘Where are you Jasmine; are you anywhere near Sophie?’

‘Yes, I’m with her now and using the extension phone. It’s on loudspeaker so she’s been able to hear everything we’ve said.’

‘Great, Crete is here and he’s just about bouncing up and down with eagerness to speak to his Mum. Could you put her on the line?’

‘Sure!’ there was a slight pause, ‘Sophie, Crete wants to have a chat?’

Sophie came on the phone. ‘Hi Crete. Jan says what a great job you’ve been doing helping them.’

‘Yep, I lit the fire and heated up the goat stew last night and this morning. I saw the hare on the track before

Wayne did, and he shot it. When we get back I'm going to put it in the pot with the goat stew.'

'Don't forget you'll need to get the veggies out of the garden Crete. Jan or Wayne will help you. You'll need to get at least three big carrots, two leeks and dig up a root of potatoes and put all of them in.'

'I know what to do.'

'That's good. Did you sort the beds out OK last night?'

'Of course, I had my bed and Jan and Wayne had yours.'

Jan and I glanced at each other. Sophie hadn't asked that question accidentally. I think I detected a sarcastic note in Sophie's voice when she answered, 'I hope they were comfortable.'

Jan and I looked at each other wondering whether we ought to take the phone off Crete. She whispered to me so that it wouldn't be heard on the phone, 'Is there any point now in trying to say, "We didn't do it" or "It didn't happen"?''

'If we did I don't think anyone would believe us. At least we'd better tell the same story. I reckon if anyone even indirectly asks us, if it happened we should just smile and say "Of course it did, and it happened more than once." Then at least we'd retain our credibility, if not our integrity. Attempt to deny it and we'd lose both.'

Jan added, 'Especially if I happened to start a baby. If we did start a baby at least it would be a love-child resulting from our decision. I'd want everyone to know it was yours. I wouldn't want anyone to think my baby had come from me being gang-banged. That would be a terrible stigma to inflict on our child. I'd like to think it wouldn't have any effect on how I thought of my baby but I wonder if there would be moments when... I don't want to think about that; it doesn't apply anyway.'

Crete was finishing talking to his Mum when Jan asked, so that Sophie could hear, 'Could I have a word as well please Crete?'

‘Mum, Jan wants to talk to you.’

‘OK put her on.’

‘Hi Sophie, how are you feeling?’

‘My ribs are sore but they’ll get better.’

‘Well I hope it doesn’t take too long. We had a good look for your Dad. Crete found the place straight away. We could see where he’d been; but there was no sign of him. There were quad bike tracks leading away. Someone has picked him up. Crete has checked in the village and he’s not here so he must have been taken out to the Wairarapa. I don’t think we can do anything else from here, unless you can think of something else.’

‘Thanks for looking Jan. Are you going to stay in my cabin another night?’

‘I believe so. Wayne doesn’t think we’ll be able to get through until the floods have gone down. Is that OK Sophie?’

‘Is Wayne fucking you?’

Jan paused for a moment before answering. ‘We slept in the same bed last night. Yes Sophie, we have done it.’

‘He’s been fucking me as well.’

Then the phone was hung up. Jan made direct eye contact with me. She let go of my hand before she asked, ‘Is that right Wayne? Was Sophie telling the truth?’

I looked away as I answered. After she had been talking to me about the possibility of us having a love-child between us somehow I couldn’t look her directly in the eyes. Something was happening to me. A month ago I’d have had no problem looking a woman straight in the eye and telling her whatever I felt like, even if it contained downright lies. But now, speaking almost under my breath I nodded. ‘Yes Jan, Sophie did tell you the truth. It only happened once, but yes, it did happen.’

‘At least you had the guts to admit it. I’ll give you the credit for that. But I wish you’d volunteered the information rather than leaving me to hear it from Sophie. Did you intend telling Sophie about us?’

I shrugged, ‘I guess events have sort of overtaken me.’

‘That’s what women say when they discover they’re unexpectedly pregnant. But we can’t shrug it off.’

There was no anger in Jan’s voice when she spoke, just disillusionment. I’d have preferred anger. I can handle angry women. That’s about the only thing I learned from my Mum before she took off for good. But we walked in silence side-by-side retracing our former muddy footprints without holding hands. Jan didn’t seem interested in looking for rocks any more. The only sound we made was the squelch of mud beneath our feet.

My mind drifted back to my fifteenth birthday. It’s about the only birthday I can remember with total clarity. It was a Saturday and I was home from boarding school for the weekend. The ground was puggy, just like today; it was dark over the mountain and it looked as if the rain was going to set in for the evening. I’d been helping Dad in the top paddock. Dad hadn’t mentioned my birthday; I reckoned he’d forgotten so I wasn’t going to tell him till tomorrow, just to make him feel bad.

After dinner a car pulled up outside. It was Dad’s regular prostitute come for the night. When she arrived they always went straight up to his bedroom but on this occasion they hung about in the kitchen talking and Dad gave her a beer and had one himself. The woman – I forget her name, even talked to me. They were obviously waiting, but I’d no idea for what. Then sometime later – probably it was about half-an-hour later, another car drew up outside. Dad didn’t answer the door directly but said to me, ‘Son this is going to be the one birthday you’re going to remember.’ I didn’t know what he meant at the time but I do now and he was right.

Then he answered the door and bringing in a black haired Asian woman said, ‘This is Suzy. She’s come to spend the night with you, Happy Birthday son!’ Before Dad’s partner went upstairs with Dad she whispered something to Suzy. Some private message passed between them, but I couldn’t hear what it was; and I still don’t know. For a couple of minutes Suzy and I were alone in the kitchen. An advert in the

local paper would probably say she had a petite figure but at that time I just thought of her as well proportioned and not very tall. It was only when we went to my bedroom that I made other discoveries.

We sat side-by-side on my bed. I can still remember not knowing what to say to her. At first I just answered, 'Yes' or 'No' but she laughed a lot as she told me wild stories about herself. Before long I was laughing with her. At the time I think I believed every detail. Sometimes I wonder whether she still remembers me after all this time! She said she was twenty-eight with a six-year-old son. To me that seemed almost as old as Methuselah. She asked me about my boarding school, and didn't seem to know it was a boys-only college. So I told her. Then she wanted to know how I liked coming home at weekends and whether I'd had any girl friends.

After a bit she said how much she liked talking to me. Then she asked whether I'd ever seen a naked woman. When I said 'No' she asked, 'Would you like to?' I nodded and my answer of, 'Yes please.' got a bit stuck in my throat. She gave me a smile and an 'OK'. While I was still sitting on the bed she stood up, took all her clothes off and put them on my bedside table. Standing in front of me she slowly turned right round until she was facing me again. 'There you are. Now you've seen a naked woman!' She added, 'You know why women get undressed for guys don't you.'

I nodded. 'Yes.'

'Is that what you want?'

I hesitated.

'You can say no if you want; and I'll get dressed again. Or do you want us to carry on?'

'Yes please.'

She took a step towards me and taking hold of my hands which were resting on the bed she picked them up and said, 'You can touch me if you want.' She lifted my hands to touch her boobs. Her reaction to the sensitive way I touched her was, 'I won't break.' She clasped my wrists and pressed

my hands firmly against her until she could feel my fingers kneading her breasts.

She pulled me up from the bed to a standing position and, putting her arms round me, gave me a hug. I couldn't hide my erection as my hormones established their own priorities. I pressed my thighs against hers. She whispered, 'It's time to get you undressed.' and, without waiting for a response from me, started unbuttoning my shirt. Moments later it lay on the floor. Sliding from my chest her hands drifted to my waist and fingered my belt. Her eyes locked onto mine while first my buckle and then the zip relaxed and slid to the floor. I stepped out of my shorts and she slid down my boxers. Her fingertips discovered the source of my impatient testosterone.

The back of my knees touched the bed as she gave me a push. Sitting on the bed she waggled her finger at me. 'You just wait there.' From her handbag, which was on my bedside table along with her clothes, she took out a package and held it up. 'Do you know what this is?'

Uncertain I didn't have the confidence to say 'Yes'; so I shook my head. 'It's called a condom. You know what they're for don't you?'

I nodded.

She continued. 'You'll have to wear it. In fact you must always wear one unless the woman says you don't have to. I'll put it on you this time. Next time you can do it yourself. Lie on your back in the bed.' As I did so she showed me how to open the packet without damaging the contents. She held it between her finger and thumb to show me. I lay still as she unrolled it onto me.

She smiled. 'Stay exactly where you are.' Climbing onto the bed she kneeled astride me. With the palms of her hands on my chest very slowly she raised and lowered her pelvis and each time I slid deeper inside her. I responded by lifting my pelvis with each downward movement she made so I could drive deeper into her. I still remember how incredibly smooth it felt.

Piloting me in my first migratory flight she led me through updrafts and downdrafts through thermals into the gathering storm closer and closer towards the inevitable thunderclap when my existence erupted into fragments as I was ejected into space. Gasping for air she clung to me during the free fall until the shute opened and we hung suspended in time. My eyes closed while we drifted like clouds in a tangerine twilight, through a damson dusk and into an hypnotic night.

I awoke with our arms and legs entwined and our bodies pressed together. A single shaft of morning sunlight came through a gap in the curtains. It traced a line across the pillow and, lingering on her hair, made individual strands glow. I lay still looking at her face. Minutes passed. I watching the shaft of sunlight inch its way across her hair. My hand was resting on her hips. I could feel her pelvic bone stir as I slid my hand over her pelvis. Her eyes opened and smiled. We whispered to each other. She kissed my lips and licked the inside of my lips. The tips of our tongues touched. With my hands still on her pelvis I pulled her towards me. She smiled, 'Do you want to do it again?'

'Yes please.'

'Do you remember what I said you had to do first?'

As I remembered she told me, 'Don't worry about last night's condom. You fell asleep and I took it off without waking you. You wouldn't have wanted to spend the night wearing that thing. When you take one off remember to tie a knot in it. Then men usually throw it on the floor; that's OK but as-often-as-not they expect their partner to pick it up and dispose of it in the morning. You could do better than that couldn't you?'

I nodded.

'Good lad! I've got more condoms in my bag; so it's OK for us to do it again. I know I came as a surprise to you this time but usually men should think ahead and make sure they have a supply of condoms and not leave it to women to remember.'

She reached over to the bedside table and opening her bag took out a packet and handed it to me. 'When you have an erection I want to see you open the packet without causing any damage; then you put it on.'

Suzy rolled over onto her back. 'Last night I sat astride you. That meant I had to try to sense where you were at, and control the pace accordingly for both of us. Now I'm lying on my back. This time you're going to lie on top of me and it's going to be your turn to regulate the pace and try to make us climax together. It's not easy. I'm not sure if it's a skill or an art but whichever it is some men never even attempt to achieve it. That is selfish, and many men are selfish. But amongst those that do try to satisfy their partners many never achieve it. If you're on top it's up to you to read as many clues as you can from the woman. I'll try to help you all I can.'

An hour-and-a-half later we were sitting on the bed. Even now I have no idea whether we achieved it or whether Suzy faked it just to encourage me. I was still overwhelmed when I asked if she'd come back again.

She smiled when she explained this was what she did for a living. 'Your Dad has paid for you this time for your birthday. I don't do it for free. But there are thousands of girls about your own age who do. Most of them are looking for any opportunity to find a guy who doesn't look like a complete idiot and who'd show them four things.' She asked me if I knew what they are. I shook my head. 'Then I'll tell you and you should try and remember them. They are respect, affection, loyalty and commitment.' She gave me a friendly punch and a wink. 'I think you'll find most women would settle for any three out of the four as long as the sex is great.' She tapped my nose as she continued. 'I'll let you into a secret. Most men want to either, enter the woman from behind, or adopt the Missionary Position on top. That's what you did just now. The man generates most of the movement and so is in control of the pace and timing. If he's a selfish lover he has his orgasm and leaves the woman to catch up if she can. As a result many women seldom achieve full orgasms. The woman-

on-top position means she can control the depth of penetration and the pace and timing; so if you want a satisfied partner, let her ride you sometimes; she'll thank you for it.'

She continued. 'I know it might not be socially acceptable with many people and religious sects but I believe every college-age boy or girl should be able to spend at least one night with an experienced sex instructor as part of their education; just like we did last night. Kids are only ever taught the mechanics and not the art of sex. Sex is the single most important feature in most peoples' lives and emerging adults are normally left to fumble and experiment by trial and error. Is it any wonder so many end in tragedy? What do you think; did you find last night rewarding?'

Did I ever! After the weekend I went back to boarding school and one of my class mates had also had a birthday. He got a new computer for his present. I smugly felt quite sorry for him. It is only now, at this moment while I'm walking in silence next to Jan that I'm appreciating what Suzy told me half-a-lifetime ago. If I hadn't spent so much time with the rugby club and listening to the guys in the pub I might not have made such a hash of things.

The four things I remember Suzy saying that women wanted were: respect, affection, loyalty and commitment. I guess I've been economical with each one of them. Seeing Jan, Jasmine and Sophie with their kids made me realise it's not just women who need those things; it's their kids as well. Suzy never told me that. I guess I'd have known, if I'd stopped thinking about kids as being no more than contraception failures.

This silence from Jan was getting oppressive. The barrel of laughs I shared with the guys in the pub now looked decidedly empty. I put my arm round her waist and pulled her close to me.

'Jan don't let's destroy the magic we discovered last night. That was real for me and I thought it was for you too. There could be a permanent future for the two of us providing

we don't let the path become so confused and overgrown that we lose sight of it.'

She looked me straight in the eye raised an eyebrow and said nothing. As I said it I knew it sounded corny – like something out of a woman's magazine. I could imagine the guys in the pub giving me a hard-time if they'd heard it. I could imagine them chanting it back at me one word at a time! But I'm not likely to tell them! To those guys a permanent relationship lasts until they can no longer have sex whenever they want it. A month ago life was simple; my mates had it all sorted – no problems.

Now I'm getting confused. Seeing Jan with her kids is different. I couldn't believe it when I heard her say she took Melody with her to a cafe so she could chat up Karl! God knows where that was supposed to lead!

Come to think of it, God must have been spending time with the rugby club. People reckon he nicked down here one night, knocked up a Jewish teenager and hasn't been seen since and he left some poor mug of a carpenter to take the blame and end up bringing up his kid.

Still God's example doesn't help me with this problem with Jan. Guys don't have a problem with having sex and walking away with, or without, someone else. But when women have sex they expect the guy to commit to everlasting fidelity even if they don't consider it as an option for themselves if someone new turns up. Before long the whole thing gets turned on its head; no commitment from the guy to everlasting fidelity means the sex is likely to dry up.

I guess Jan doubts my ongoing commitment just because I've had Sophie. But I still like Jan. I like the way she talks to her kids. I like spending time with her. That girl's got guts.

'Jan, there are so many things I want to say to you but my problem is I don't know when or how to begin.'

'When or how! That's two problems Wayne not one. With regard to when I'd suggest a good time would be when I'm listening, which is now. But before you start I'll say this.

How you tell me the story will depend on whether I believe you or not. I've had enough experience of men to know that if a guy comes to me with a story that he thinks I want to hear and it has no loose dangling ends and every seam is so carefully constructed that it appears seamless I know the fabric of the story is false and has been tailored just for me. Life's not like that. Life isn't seamless with no loose dangling ends.'

'I want you to believe me Jan.'

'I'll believe anything as long as it's incredible.'

'Incredible? You believe incredible things. That doesn't sound very much like a scientist talking.'

'On the contrary Wayne to be a scientist you have to believe in the incredible. The rock beneath our feet that feels rock solid is mainly space, and if we could squash all the space out of the earth the world would shrink in size to be small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. Isn't that incredible? Then there's us. Every atom in our bodies was once part of a second generation star that exploded and we know it would have had to have been a big star. You and I are made of star dust Wayne. Isn't that incredible? Yet we believe it. And I'll tell you something else that sounds incredible. It would only take one out of all the millions of sperm you left inside me last night to combine with one of my eggs to start a baby that would grow into an entirely unique human being. What do you think Wayne; would you say such a thing was credible or incredible?'

'I'd say it was neither Jan. I'd say, just like the whole of last night, it was magic. And if you are still willing I'd like to spend tonight trying to double the chances of that happening.'

'OK but on one condition.'

'What's that?'

'The condition is that you don't ever tell me, I'm the only woman in your life, or that in the future you'll never ever enter another woman. I couldn't stand being lied to again.'

CHAPTER 17

Several hours later we were picking blackberries. Crete had suggested it and both Jan and I needed a change of diet having had goat stew for dinner last night and the same thing for breakfast this morning. The only change we could anticipate for the rest of the day was that some of the goat in the stew would be replaced with hare.

So we'd each collected a bowl from the cabin and were trying to find blackberries that either the birds or other members of the commune had missed. Crete said he knew a good place because his Mum took him there. We had to walk up the slopes at the back of the village and over the ridge for about a quarter-of-an-hour until we found the spot. We had to push our way through wet fern. This part of the hill must have been cleared once. I couldn't help wondering if it had been used to plant a crop and, at some point in the past, had fertilizer applied. The growth was prolific. The grass was thigh-high interspersed with patches of ragwort, pig-fern and blackberry. Crete was right; there were plenty of big ripe blackberries. We started picking. Crete wandered off amongst the bushes while Jan and I stayed together talking. But it wasn't about us.

She seemed particularly interested in the village. She wanted to talk about it right there and then. I don't know why; certainly the place was weird, I'll give her that. At first I couldn't help wondering if it was because the commune seemed to have been involved in both her and Sophie getting beaten up. I think something like that must have been preying on her mind and I guess that's understandable. Possibly she felt uneasy about discussing it while Crete could hear.

Whatever the reason Jan reckoned the village had hardly been touched by modern infrastructure. It was like a remnant from the Dark Ages with tentacles from the twenty-first century probing the edges. I couldn't get the hang of what she was so excited about. As far as I could see it was just a run-down commune. But there was more to it than that for Jan.

She wanted to look at it as if it was some academic study. According to her the intrusions of the twenty-first century were as evident as the plantations of marijuana. Sophie had a cell-phone, despite the fact she had to walk a kilometre up the hill to make it work! Every cabin had a corrugated iron roof and they weren't available in the Dark Ages. Somewhere there was supposed to be a car that went into the Wairarapa every week. According to Crete the children were all home-schooled and studying by correspondence. But Jan reckoned these things seemed more like tokens to modern society than part of it. She suspected there must be some darker reason why, until now, the commune seemed to be avoiding modern entanglements. From what Sophie had told us, an undercurrent of antagonism pervaded the village. Jan reckoned the village was balanced on a social knife-edge. It would either become part of the twenty-first century or the village would revert to the bush. She thought the village and its possible demise would make a great PhD study for an anthropology student.

Then she added, 'But it would have to be done soon before the village finally topples off the knife-edge and vanishes into the bush.'

'Why? What makes you think the village is going to revert to bush?'

'Just look at it Wayne! The grass leading to the doors is knee-high on some of those cabins. No one is living in them. If that's not enough, Sophie should give you enough clues.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm not sure what I mean. Lately my brain's been an electro-chemical soup with too many bits-and-pieces floating around in it for me to think about other people. But since you've told me about "you and Sophie" I've forced myself to think about her.'

'Have you come to any conclusions?'

'One or two! I'd be very surprised if Sophie ever goes back to live in the village.'

'Why do you say that?'

‘Even before you came on the scene Sophie must have picked her weather and brought her children on foot all the way from the village to spend a couple of hours at Jasmine’s place. She did that quite a few times. Then the track wasn’t as good as it has been since you worked on it. Now that I’ve seen that track, I’ve been trying to contemplate the logistics of Sophie getting herself and her two kids there and back. And for what? Just to spend half-an-afternoon talking to Jasmine and any other women who happened to be there! To me it could indicate either a degree of desperation to escape, or a desire to become involved with the outside world: possibly both, if only for an afternoon. But I think it’s more than that. Sophie is bright enough to have worked out that the future is coming whether or not the commune is ready for it. I guess the rest of us have the same problem, only we haven’t recognised it yet. In an evasive sort of way she told you her father has fathered both of her children. Arithmetic tells me that, give or take a year, she must have been about fourteen when Crete was born.’

Jan gave me a smile and a nudge as she continued. ‘Adults seem to be genetically compelled to want sex with the people they find most attractive: don’t they! Doing it is the one thing biology requires from us, and implicit in that obligation is the requirement to exclude our siblings and children. If what Sophie tells us is true those rules have turned rancid in the commune. Her past has betrayed her. But Sophie loves her children and wants something better for herself and for them. In the past most of the chattering classes had no choice other than playing the cards life dealt them and taking a chance on picking up a lucky card along the way. Now it’s possible for a few, like Sophie, to attempt to get a fresh deal. In her position I think I’d want the same.

But Sophie’s problem is she’s bewildered by our world and restricted by her children. What should she do? What can she do? Breaking out of a locked-down society has always been a problem for women. Then, quite unexpectedly, you turn up and by chance mention that Jasmine wants to buy

some geese. I'll guarantee her brain was firing on all cylinders when she offered to bring the geese to you. I bet she wasn't slow in bringing them was she?'

'No she brought them the following day.'

'That's exactly what I'd have done if I'd been in her position. And by bringing them two at a time she'd be hoping to get familiar with you, I guess in all senses of the word. I know it's nothing to do with me but did you do it on her first goose delivery?'

'Yes, she offered, she just said, "You can fuck me if you want." And I did want it and I did do it.'

'Thanks for telling me Wayne. I admire your honesty.' Jan paused presumably thinking how she would proceed. 'This has got even less to do with me and you'd be quite entitled to tell me to mind my own business. I'll try not to be offended if you do.' She paused again and I had already guessed what she was going to ask. 'Would I be right in assuming the subject of taking precautions didn't enter into the conversation?'

'That's right.'

'So, as things stand at the present: neither of us, one of us, or both of us could be expecting your baby.'

'Gee this sounds heavy; I've only done it once with each of you.'

'Actually you did it twice with me. And there are a lot of women who can verify that once is all it takes.'

The conversation was getting too heavy so I picked a big juicy blackberry and popped it into Jan's mouth. She picked one out of her bowl and did the same for me. Our eyes met. I've always been fascinated by her black eyes; now they were smiling. I picked a blackberry off the bush and, putting it between my lips I pulled her close to me, using my tongue I pushed it into her mouth. She responded by taking one out of her bowl and did almost the same except as she passed hers to me she pressed her mouth against mine deliberately squashing purple juice on my lips and then used her tongue to spread it. I retaliated and within a couple of minutes of feeding each other

and kissing we both had purple faces with juice dripping off our chins and tears in our eyes from laughing.

It was about then that Crete came back with his blackberry bowl full to overflowing. He'd collected as much as Jan and I combined. Seeing how much we had between us we decided we'd got enough and started to walk back to the track through wet grass to Sophie's cabin. The track was narrow as it wound its way through pig-fern, gorse and blackberry. Instead of walking single file as we had done previously Jan walked with Crete and, between occasionally pinching blackberries out of each others bowls, they were talking about the best sort of sticks to hook down blackberries they couldn't reach. I was walking half-a-dozen paces behind them and my mind drifted back to the implications of what Jan had been saying before we got distracted by messing up each others faces.

I don't get the impression it was a casual comment when she referred to Sophie and said that, "Neither of them, one of them, or both of them could be pregnant." The more I thought about it the more convinced I became that Jan was envisaging a race between her and Sophie to see which of them I would get pregnant first so they could lay-a-claim on me. Huh! If that was her idea, it proved she didn't know much about how an ex-farm boy from Taranaki thinks! If it wasn't such a dumb idea I'd be tempted to give her Ginger's telephone number. She'd put Jan straight!

Then like a flat pebble skipping across a lake a thought bounced across the surface of my brain until it sank from view and left me thinking about blackberry-faced Jan and wondering whether the advice she'd get from Ginger would be the advice I'd want her to have.

To guide my feet I had my eyes focused on the clumps of grass and firm ground between the pools of mud on the track. When I looked up I noticed Jan and Crete were whistling a tune and holding hands! I couldn't help speculating on which of them had initiated it and why. Touching hands has more protocol attached to it than any other act I can think of.

Shaking hands is an aloof greeting between adults and has no undertones. Between two people who are married (but not to each other) the first secret touching of fingers or hands says, "I want to flirt with you; are you game?" A mother holding the hand of a toddler spells security. Two teenage girls holding hands carries with it sensual and possibly erotic undertones. Teenage boys would never hold hands and the most intimate contact between them would be a friendly punch on the shoulder. An older couple holding hands signifies a mixture of affection and memories. A young couple holding hands carries with it the promise or memory of intimate sex. There must be as many motivations as there are couples.

As I walked behind them I tried to unravel the motivations of Jan and Crete. The more I saw Jan the more I became aware of the complexities of her character. Apart from being a very attractive woman she was the doctor of geology who was confident enough to take on a cabinet minister in a live television interview and win every round. She could address and fire up an open-air audience of thousands. When four nocturnal intruders broke into her house she didn't cringe in fear or scream for help, she went into the attack against impossible odds to protect her children and finally only submitted to being raped to protect her daughter. We were only here today because we were attempting to rescue one of the men who attacked her! Unbelievably this same woman who rolled naked in the mud with me on the outing to Jasmine's lake and had just squashed blackberry juice all over my face told me on another occasion she lay in bed crying without knowing why and, taking her daughter with her, had to drive downtown to buy coffee from the German cafe. Two days ago she explained that she wasn't ready for an intimate relationship with me but last night we did it, twice. But more than sperm and blackberry juice has passed between us and I believe it's been travelling in both directions. It has left me pleased that the river was probably too high to ford safely. I could have walked back along the track to investigate; but I didn't, and despite wanting to get back to Melody and Ryan, I

noticed Jan just took my word for it. I think we both knew it meant we could spend another day and night together. Without the distraction of her children I could allow my brain to try to unravel the implications of wanting Jan not only as a sex partner but also as a companion.

Thor must be a fool to spend so much time away from her! He had an attractive, intelligent wife who is fun loving, sexy and enjoys her family. They don't seem to have any money worries. OK! If they're honest most guys, and women will tell you they like a bit of a variety when it comes to sex partners but that doesn't mean they need to walk away from each other.

Walking behind Jan and Crete I could watch the two of them together; they were chatting. But now we were on the ridge and the wind coming over the top was blowing their words away so I couldn't hear much of what was being said. I picked up the occasional word and I could see Crete turn his head to look up into Jan's blackberry-stained face and laugh. That was the first time I'd seen Crete laugh. Since Jan got wet yesterday she's let her hair down and now every black strand was riding the wind. With her blackberry bowl in one hand and Crete's hand in the other she just left it wind-wild with the occasional toss of her head to get the hair out of her eyes. I've learned one thing in the last few days; Jan's not as confident as she appears. Beneath that exterior there's something sensitive and a little fragile. The more I thought about it the more I decided I wouldn't want Jan to know what Ginger thought of me. That was best left back in Taranaki.

Jan and Crete were still holding hands. Although only seven, Crete gives the impression of independence and confidence. When I called him a tough little soldier he glowed with pride. I guess, like all of us, he needs the reassurance of others. Is it mutual reassurance that's passing through their two clasped hands? If so I'd be prepared to guess that it's two-way traffic.

As I watched them I saw their linked hands start to swing to a tune. Crete didn't seem to know the words so Jan

sang it first and then they sang it together and combined it with the occasional stamp in a muddy puddle accompanied with squeals of laughter. This was the first time I'd seen Crete laugh. The song was "*I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair*". They sang it again and this time they let go of each others' hands and as the line came up in the song, which was quite frequently, they tossed their heads and used their free hands to "wash" their hair. "Washing their hair?" To me Jan's head became a volcanic eruption of black hair. I couldn't help wondering if the choice of song had little to do with the already windswept nature of Jan's hair and was intended as a message sent on the wind to Norway. But perhaps Jan just saw it as an action song to amuse Crete. If so, it certainly achieved its objective. Hopefully it wasn't intended for me; because I was aware Jan was becoming increasingly important to me.

When they had finished Jan asked, 'Do you know this one? It's called *Happy Talk*.' She sang it and used the fingers and thumb of her free hand to represent a talking mouth. Crete copied her and they progressed all the way back to the cabin doing, Happy Talk and laughing. As we entered the cabin I heard Jan explaining to Crete that both of the songs came from a film called, South Pacific and when we got back to Jasmine's place she'd get it out as a DVD and play it for him.

As soon as we were inside the cabin Crete took my bowl of blackberries and tipped them into Jan's bowl which ended up full to over flowing. While Jan and I looked at each other wondering what was next he went back outside to the garden and came back with half-a-dozen sticks of rhubarb. Holding them in one hand and picking up the combined bowl of blackberries in the other he explained, 'I'll take these to Wendy.' With that he disappeared out of the door.

Jan and I sat on the bed and I rested my hand on hers. 'I guess we can say goodbye to our bowl of blackberries.'

Jan grinned. 'Looking at your purple lips I'd say we've already kissed many of them goodbye.'

Jan lay back on the bed; I kissed her again and then rolled onto my back and we lay side-by-side holding hands.

I detected a touch of nostalgia in Jan's voice as she reminisced. 'There should be plenty of blackberries on our place if my goats and the birds haven't eaten them all. But I'm not sure I could face going back by myself, and I wouldn't take Melody or Ryan.'

'If you need to go back, I'll go with you.'

'That's good of you Wayne. I might well take you up on that; but it should really be Thor's job not yours.'

'You said you reckon Thor's not coming back.'

'I don't know what to think Wayne. There are times when I can't make him out; and I've been married to him for seven years.'

'Why's that?'

'He can be a very private person. He bottles things up. I suppose he didn't have an easy childhood.'

'Why's that?'

'His father left his Mum when he was only two and as far as I know he hasn't seen or heard from him since. He doesn't talk about it much; but I know his mother had problems that weren't all financial.'

'How did you meet him?'

'After I left school I went to Cambridge in England so I could improve my English and study geology. My parents could just afford it. But after I graduated I returned to Norway to do my masters and went on to get my PhD. While I was working for my doctorate I met Thor. My Mum and Dad supported me but he'd managed to keep himself at university by winning scholarships and working night-shifts. That should tell you something about him. Do you know he passed every exam with distinctions? But, typical of Thor, if he got less than 100% in an exam he considered himself a failure. Unlike me! I just scraped through with "Bs" and "Cs". I was starting to think if I did any more work than was necessary to be last person to scrape through I'd been wasting my time! Sometimes I worry about Thor. He's held together by stress. He demands too much of himself and of everyone he comes into contact with. We got our PhDs in the same year and

celebrated by getting married. Then we both went to work for the same geological consultancy company. I fondly believed being with me and having a family would remove some of the intensity from his life and we'd be able to relax together. Even something as simple as just lying on a bed like this, holding hands and talking would be great. At first I was real proud of his rapid rise into senior management. In the meantime I became a full-time mother and a part-time geologist. Now I've come to the realization that Thor's success has come at a terrible cost to me and our children.'

'He must be a hard-working guy.'

'Yes, Perhaps too hard-working. It's not always a virtue if you don't know how to stop.'

At that moment the door opened. We understood then why Crete had rushed off to Wendy's house. Instead of blackberries the bowl now contained some cream. In Crete's other hand he was carrying a plastic bag containing three scones.

Lunch consisted of all three of us sitting on the bed and each of us dipping into Crete's bowl of blackberries, spooning out the cream and munching on the hot cheese scones. That lunch was another success for Crete.

As we ate it he explained he'd seen smoke coming out of Wendy's bake-house chimney and that always meant she was baking. According to Crete, she's got a bad leg and can't get about so usually he takes her a wheelbarrow load of firewood but as his Mum hadn't split any more logs he took blackberries and rhubarb and she gave him cream and baking in exchange.

I'm sure he didn't intend it as a hint but Jan and I simultaneously decided getting in more firewood could be a job for the afternoon.

'Where do you get your firewood Crete?'

'My dad cut down a big pine tree with his chainsaw, and cut it into rings. Mum splits it; and we fetch it in the wheelbarrow.'

I glanced at Jan and an unspoken message passed between us.

‘Crete, could you show us where the wood is?’

Jan added, ‘Wayne and I were wondering if we could split some more logs and bring them down. Would that be helpful?’

‘Yes.’

I asked, ‘Do you know where the splitting axe is kept?’

‘It’s by the logs.’

‘So could you find it for us?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the wheelbarrow?’

‘That’s outside.’

Jan ruffled Crete’s hair in a friendly gesture. ‘Then let’s go shall we; because Wayne wants to show me how strong he is when it comes to splitting the logs.’ As she said it she gave me a wink and I grinned back screwed up my nose and poked my tongue out at her.

Crete added, ‘I’m strong too.’

‘I bet you are Crete; and I’m wondering whether Wayne can split logs as well as your Mum. Shall we watch him, then you can tell me if he’s doing it right and if he’s as good at it as your Mum.’

‘I have to hold Athenea’s hand when Mum is chopping the wood and we have to wait till she puts the axe down before we’re allowed to pick up the wood and put it in the wheelbarrow. I can do heaps and heaps more than Athenea. She only puts little bits in; but I can put big logs in. Mum says I’m real good at loading the barrow.’

‘Well, as Athenea isn’t here, you and I could hold hands and watch Wayne doing the chopping couldn’t we? Then would you show me how to load the wood into the barrow?’

‘It’s easy.’

‘I bet it is for you; but I’ve never had anyone to show me before.’

I think I'll always remember that little conversation between Jan and Crete and the subsequent chopping of the firewood. Crete wasn't her son, yet Jan was making him feel wanted and important. I don't remember anyone ever doing that for me when I was Crete's age. It's seeing her with children that made me realise what's special about Jan. While I was chopping the firewood I made quite a few deliberate mistakes and missed the logs all together amidst squeals of delight from Crete which was encouraged by Jan. So that at the end of the afternoon after we'd brought down half-a-dozen barrow loads of firewood I was able to hear Crete's pronouncement supported by Jan that, I wasn't as good at doing it as his Mum. That was a kind thing that Jan did. Sophie meant nothing to Jan, yet she was doing her best to raise Sophie's stature in Crete's eyes.

Later that night, when the breath taking surge of love-making had subsided, Jan's head was touching mine on the pillow. We were both breathing the same air and our bodies were enveloped inside a single bubble that excluded the rest of the world. She gripped my hand as she whispered how she felt a bond establishing itself between us when I missed the logs with the axe just to amuse Crete. Then turning her head she kissed my ear and added, 'You and Thor are so different. Thor tries so hard at everything he does. It would never occur to him to deliberately miss the log just to make a small boy laugh'.

I didn't tell her the only reason I thought of it was because she had put the idea into my head. Without that suggestion I would have attempted to split every log right down the middle with one swing of the axe, just to prove how well I could do it. Thor has already shown her how much he can do. But perhaps I don't need to show her what I can do. I reckon I'll get much closer to her by making mistakes she can laugh about.

With my mind pondering the fun I could have making mistakes I must have dropped off to sleep and in my sleep

rolled onto my back. The next thing I knew was being woken by Jan kissing my closed eyelids.

‘I’ve been lying here thinking. What are we going to do Wayne when we get back?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Things are going to be different then aren’t they?’

‘Don’t you want to go back?’

‘Of course I do; I can’t stop worrying about Melody and Ryan.’

‘I’m sure they’ll be fine. Jasmine will look after them.’

‘I know she will. They’ll be fed and bathed and dressed but that’s not what’s worrying me.’

‘Then what’s the problem?’

‘They need a mother and a father as well as an ongoing sense of security. Their home has been burnt down, their Dad has gone away and I’m here with you when I should be with them. I’ve run out of ways of distorting the mirror to convince them everything is going to be all right.’

‘Hopefully the river will have gone down and we should be able to get back today.’

‘Yes Wayne, but what is going to happen then and to us?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘My husband is their father. What are they going to think of me if you... Things are going to be different aren’t they?’

‘They don’t need to be. I know you’re a married woman so of course I wouldn’t ask you to come and live with me.’

‘The fact I’m married doesn’t seem to have deterred you from making love to me.’

‘Oh! I hope I won’t have to stop having sex with you; but I’ll let you into a secret. I’ve fallen in love with another woman and I intend to ask her to come and live with me.’

‘Is it anyone I know?’

‘Yes you know her, but she’s quite a bit younger than you.’

‘Are you going to tell me who she is?’

‘I’ll give you a clue. She’s single, not very tall and has waist-length black hair.’

There was a hard edge to Jan’s voice as she asked, ‘Is it Sophie?’

‘Sophie fits the description doesn’t she? But it’s not Sophie.’

‘As far as I know the only other woman we both know is Jasmine.’

‘Well it’s not Jasmine. She has blond curls and she’s a married woman and as I said I wouldn’t ask a married woman to come and live with me. It wouldn’t be ethical!’

‘Being ethical hasn’t stopped you sleeping with me. Who is she?’

‘I’ll give you another clue.’ I leaned over and kissed the tattoo of the dancing gypsy on Jan’s arm. ‘She must be younger than you, she’s never been married. She isn’t very tall and has waist-length black hair. And I intend asking her to come and live with me when we get back. I’d have asked her already but the trouble is I don’t know her name.’

Jan gave me a playful punch on the shoulder. ‘She’s Rona. That’s a Scandinavian name. It means a courageous and wise advisor. I could do with both just now. But I’ll need to think carefully whether I’d be prepared to trust Melody and Ryan to her care; there’s an imp of mischief in her eyes and she’s as wild as her mother. Do you still want my Rona?’

‘Yes I do. She looks fun. She was one of the first things I noticed about you.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course I’m sure. I’ve been flirting with her ever since I met you. Haven’t you noticed?’

Jan raised her eyebrows and shook her head in disbelief. ‘Thor hated her and wanted me to either get her surgically removed, or failing that I had to cover her up

whenever I went out with him. But I liked my Rona; so she's stayed.'

'Does she have any other special significance?'

'Yes she does. In the Spanish civil war, as a young man, my grandfather went to Spain to fight with the International Brigade. He was wounded. Then he was cared for and hidden from Franco's fascists by a band of gypsies. One of the gypsies became my grandmother and, shortly before the Second World War, Grandad returned to Norway with his Spanish gypsy bride. Now you know the origin of my black hair, black eyes and olive skin. And why I love my Rona. Also my grandmother brought these earrings with her. She passed them on to my mother who passed them on to me. They are real gold. But I tell Melody and Ryan they are "Spanish gold" that was stolen from the Incas and brought to Spain in a Spanish treasure ship. I've even made up a few stories about who they were stolen from and described the adventures the Spanish galleon had bringing it back to Spain and how they narrowly escaped being attacked by pirates! In reality I've no idea of their origin. But gypsies don't usually have the sort of ready cash available to buy twenty-two carat gold earrings. I've had them valued and they definitely are real gold and quite valuable. I'm sure I'm right when I say they were stolen but I suspect the theft occurred much closer to home and more recently than from the ancient Incas in the Americas. Thor doesn't like them; he thinks they look "big, cheap and brassy". If they'd been small, delicate and discrete I guess they'd be OK but I'm not small, delicate or discrete and women wear jewellery to match their personality and not someone else's image of how they ought to look. Besides gold looks great against black hair and I'm not going blond to please anyone or get rid of my Rona.'

'What doesn't he like about her?'

'Thor reckons with her on my arm it brands me as a tarnished woman.'

'And are you?'

‘I guess so. You’ve seen to that. But my Rona seems to have survived with her virtue intact, even if I haven’t.’

‘Well I love her and want to live with her. If I proposed to her do you think she might accept?’

‘I imagine it would depend on what you proposed.’

At that point I believe Rona must have given Jan’s arm a nudge. The morning sun was lighting up Jan’s hair which had fallen like a waterfall across my face. I pulled her close to me, the tip of my tongue found hers. She rolled on top of me and I could feel the weight of her body embracing mine. Either its own volition or guided by some primeval instinct of which I had no control I found myself inside her. A force, awesome in its intensity, was gathering momentum. The forces that move continents, push up mountain ranges and create islands in the middle of the ocean are normally slow and sullen. The force acting on me was neither slow nor sullen but no less compelling. The bed of the ocean trembled. Extraneous thoughts, like small fry, scattered as primordial forces moved beneath the sediments on the sea bed. Layer-upon-layer these sedimentary rocks had been laid down by the “guardians-of-morality” to disguise the molten magma of lustful humans. In this case the layers groaned and bulged totally inadequate to contain the strain of the forces welling beneath surface. Seismic waves passed through my body. My knees trembled as subterranean magma heaved and exploded with such violence that the sedimentary layers, like yesterday’s morality, disintegrated and fell scattered like rocky debris on the sea bed. But the outpouring from the sea-vents grew to become a seamount which breaking the surface created a volcanic island that belonged to Jan and me and no one else.

The tsunami moved away. Picking up a shard of shattered morality my mind turned over the brittle fragment and it crumbled in my hands. But in front of me was a brand-new island already cooling and waiting for me to step ashore with Rona and Jan’s children.

CHAPTER 18

We finished the stew for breakfast. Jan washed the pot and boiled fresh water in it before we let the fire burn out. While Crete and I went outside to harness Donut into the cart Jan swept the floor, to leave Sophie's cabin clean and tidy. As Jan said it, I was having doubts about whether Sophie intended to return. Probably the same thought had already occurred to Jan, but I guess it was part of her feminine instinct to leave the place clean-and-tidy. Women are like that. Next Jan insisted we should all walk back up the hill to get cell-phone coverage and tell Jasmine when we expected to leave and give her our estimated time of arrival. So Crete and I had to abandon putting the harness gear on Donut.

It was mid-morning before we left the cabin and started walking up the hill with Jan's cell-phone. I took my rifle but despite keeping a lookout we didn't see anything other than deer sign and an area that had been freshly rooted by wild pigs since yesterday.

When Jan got through to Jasmine she put her phone on loud speaker so Crete and I could hear what was being said. Jan explained we were hoping to be away by eleven o'clock and we should arrive back before three but for most of the trip we'd be out of cell-phone coverage. She went on to explain that if we couldn't get through, and had to return to Sophie's cabin, we'd ring up again and say what was happening. All of this sounded like a lot of overkill to me; but it seemed to be what Jan wanted.

Then Jan asked the question which I guess was the primary reason for the phone call, 'Are Melody and Ryan OK?'

'Yes they're both fine. They've had a cheese omelette and toast for breakfast. Melody ate all of hers and Ryan had most of his. Then they had some strawberries and yogurt for their morning fruit and a glass of apple juice. Now they're out on the swing. I can see them out of the window and Melody is pushing Ryan. Earlier they were in the sandpit and fighting

over the plastic spade; but I took it off them and gave them a serving spoon each out of the kitchen. But as soon as they had one each they didn't want to play that any more.'

'That sounds like my kids. Are they sleeping all right?'

'Yes they're fine. I think Melody was missing you at bedtime but we sang a song and read a couple of stories and eventually she dropped off to sleep.'

Then Jasmine had some news for Jan and the mood changed. Apparently there had been several Norwegian phone calls from a woman called Karen who wouldn't say what she wanted except to say she needed to talk to Jan. Jasmine had told her we had been delayed in the bush by the weather but she'd heard that we were OK and would be back when the rivers were passable.

Apparently Karen told Jasmine she'd keep on trying the phone during her night as it was imperative that she spoke to Jan personally. But she wouldn't leave a message.

There was venom in Jan's voice as she snapped, 'If that woman rings up again just hang up on her, after you've told her that's what I'm going to do if she tries contacting me again.'

Jan had been holding my hand and I felt an involuntary clenching of her fingers. As we walked back down the hill I could feel and sense the tension. Jan was explosive.

'What's the matter Jan?'

'If you don't know, I'll tell you. I've been attacked and gang raped, my home has been burnt down, that woman has stolen my husband. Now I know why Thor had a vasectomy without even consulting me. It was because she didn't feel like going on the pill while she was making love to my husband. Everything has been taken away from me. The only thing I have left is my children and if bloody Karen and Thor think they're going to take them away from me they'll find they'll have to kill me first.'

"Bloody Karen"! I think that's the first time I've heard Jan use a swear word. Admittedly it was only a mild one. I

swear all the time, especially with the guys in the pub. For me it doesn't mean a damn thing. But for Jan it's out of character. It says to me she's under a hell of a lot of stress: and probably quite vulnerable. I guess we'd better get back so she can see for herself that Melody and Ryan are still OK and haven't been abducted or whatever else it is worrying her.

'Has Karen said that's what they want – to take custody of your children?'

'She's taken my husband. What have I got left other than Melody and Ryan? Why else would she be ringing me?'

'I don't know; but you've got one other thing Jan.'

'What's that?'

'Me! You've got me; and I'm backing you one hundred per cent. I admit I've told a lot of women a load of shit in the past. But that was before I met you and your kids. But now, for the first time in my life, when I say I'm backing you and your kids I mean it. And anyone can doubt that at their peril.'

There were tears in her eyes and a catch in her throat as she said, 'You've no idea how much it means to me to hear someone like you say that, and to say that you mean it. Everything has been going wrong for me lately.'

She put her arm round my waist and gave me a hug. 'Thank you Wayne. You and the kids are the only positive things left in my life.'

If the guys in the pub heard me talking like this they'd never believe all I've been on is goat stew. But when I said that to Jan I meant what I said.

Figuring running would absorb some of Jan's mounting adrenalin, I pulled her hand. 'Come on Jan let's run. Then we'll be back all the quicker. What do you reckon Crete? Can you beat us back?'

Jan and I were still holding hands when we arrived breathless but laughing. Crete had beaten us by at least a hundred metres. We spent a couple of minutes regaining our breath before leading Donut out of the paddock and harnessing him to the cart.

Only Crete looked back as we drove the cart back along the track and up the hill. He was on the back while I drove the cart sitting on the bench seat and rubbing shoulders with Rona. The ground was soft but not waterlogged. Wheel marks and hoof prints showed where we had been. The track was strewn with freshly broken punga and nikau palms as well as branches and limbs of red beech. At one point a slip had brought rocks and soil down blocking the track and all three of us had to use our hands to push rocks down the bank until we could bump the cart over the remnant of the obstruction. It must have taken all three of us about twenty minutes of hard work. Then we got to the first river. I looked at it in dismay. Previously I had spent what felt like forever shifting several cubic metres of soil and rock to make a fording place. Now the river had shifted and undercut the far bank leaving a solid looking metre-high wall of soil, rock and tree roots. If I'd had half a brain I wouldn't have attempted this trip without the tools for clearing the track.

'When I was building the cart I managed to turn it over by myself to weld the brackets for the half-shafts. I'm wondering whether between the three of us we might be able to lift the cart up that bank.'

'What about Donut?'

'I reckon providing he's not harnessed to the cart he'll get up there by himself. As I see it we've got two possibilities. We could go back to Sophie's place and leave Donut and the cart over there while we walk out. Or we try to get the cart up this bank and take a chance on getting through the swamp and the next river.'

Jan made her priorities clear. 'I want to carry on and get back to Melody and Ryan.'

Crete chipped in. 'I want to go on to see my Mum.'

'OK I hope we're all feeling strong. Let's get the door and the mattress off the back.'

It took us about half-an-hour to unload the cart, get Donut up on the far bank and turn the cart round and pushed backwards into the water. I reckoned if we could turn the cart

upside down and manage to lift the back onto the far bank we could use the shafts to provide a bit of leverage to lift the body and swing it onto the bank. Fortunately we still had the length of rope I'd brought in case we needed to tie Crete's Dad onto the makeshift stretcher.

Jan and I were wet to the waist and Crete was wet to his chest before we managed to get the cart upside down with the back up against the river bank. Jan and Crete went on one side and I went on the other.

'We need to get hold of the deck not the wheels, because a wheel can turn and force us to break our grip. But the most important thing is, what ever else happens, we mustn't get anyone trapped in the water underneath. To reach the deck with our hands we're going to have to take a deep breath, bend our knees and reach down putting our faces in the water and lift. Once we've lifted it clear we'll need to walk forward and try to get the back of the deck resting on the bank. Then we can rest. Before we start we'll have to make sure that our feet are on firm ground. When we step forward we need to make sure we aren't going to slip and lose our footing. So we should get to our lifting position, try shuffling forward and check the ground before we take the weight of the cart.'

Gravel and small pebbles washed over our feet. We shuffled to find a firm foothold. Eddies downstream became stained with stirred up silt.

'Are you both ready? Are your feet on firm ground?'

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

The wheels were just breaking the surface and the flow of the current was turning one of them in a lazy spin.

I pointed to it. 'See that Crete; the cart is anxious to get going again. OK then! On the count of three. One, two, three.'

Plunging our arms and part of our faces into the water we gripped the sides of the deck and took the strain. First the wheels and springs emerged; then water poured off the deck as it came up. Lifting the deck clear we staggered forward. With

one heave I managed to get my corner onto the top of the bank. It was only on by a hand width, but it was there and didn't slip back into the stream.

'Jan would you and Crete try holding it there while I attach the rope.'

I'd already passed one end of the rope round a tree on the far side. I climbed the bank and, putting a loop round the stub axle, I tightened up with a trucker's knot. Having found a suitable stick I gave the rope a further tightening with a Spanish windlass. It was then as tight as I could get it and I was reasonably sure it wouldn't slip back down the bank.

Joining Jan and Crete back in the water all three of us took hold of the shafts and lifted the rest of the cart up onto the far bank. I removed the rope and used Donut to drag the upside down cart a dozen metres or so away from the edge. I knew we'd be able to turn it over because I'd just managed to do it by myself when I was building it. With Jan and Crete helping it went over quite easily. We'd done it! I shook Crete's hand telling him how we couldn't have done it without him. I gave Jan a kiss and a hug for other reasons.

We hitched up Donut and now faced the swamp, the next river and the possibility of fallen trees and slips. But I was beginning to believe with Jan at my side we could do anything. And that's pretty much how it was for the rest of the ride back. A dozen or more times we had to stop for slips and branches over the track. I know now why the old wainwrights put such big wheels on their carts. In these days of tar-sealed roads I didn't think about rough country and river crossings when I put car tyres on the cart. As a result we came close to getting stuck in the swamp when the wheels went in up to the axles; but with Jan and me up to our knees in mud, Crete driving and Donut pulling his heart out we made it through. As we came out of the swamp onto firmer ground Jan and I looked at each other covered in mud and simultaneously we both burst out laughing. I felt very close to her at that moment. There are heaps of women who spend their lives gift wrapping themselves and wouldn't have been prepared to jump into the

mud to help haul a cart out of the swamp. But not Jan! She looked the odds straight in the eye and got stuck in. A guy respects a woman like that. I guess occasionally you meet a woman you want to live with on a permanent basis. And there are some that you pick up and decide to drop in the bin marked, "Reduced for a quick sale" or "Passed their best use-by date". Seeing Jan with mud on her arms, face and in her hair I knew exactly in which category I wanted to place her – providing she would have me.

As we approached Jasmine's garden Crete jumped off the back of the cart, passed us running and headed at top speed towards the stables, presumably to find Sophie. Jan and I pulled up outside the stables. While she helped me unhitch Donut, Melody and Ryan came out of the sandpit to meet us. While Melody clung to her Mum's muddy leg, Jan picked up Ryan, which resulted in both children and Jan sharing her mud with their sand. While Jan was preoccupied with her children, I finished taking off Donut's harness and led him over to the hose and washed him down, brushed him and took him back to the paddock where he trotted over to the other horses. He'd done well. In the process of hosing off Donut I'd washed the worst of the mud off myself.

Jan was sitting on the ground with Melody sitting on her knee and Ryan in her arms. As I walked over to them Melody told me, 'My Mum's all muddy.'

'Yes I know. That's because she was very good and helped get the cart out of the muddy swamp.' I smiled at Jan as I added, 'I think you've got a real good Mum.'

Melody asked, 'Do you love my Mum?'

I was making eye contact with Jan not Melody when I answered. 'Yes I do. I love your Mum very much.' We continued making eye contact for several more seconds.

Jan turned her head away as she spoke to the kids. 'I got real muddy in the swamp so I need to get a shower, because you won't want to have a muddy Mum will you?'

Ryan answered, 'Yes.'

‘Well I don’t want to be a muddy Mum and make my little Ryan a muddier boy than he is already.’ As she said it she affectionately pressed the end of his nose before adding, ‘I think we all need a shower. So I’ll hop in the shower with Ryan.’

Turning to Melody she added, ‘After I’ve showered Ryan, I need to shampoo my hair so if you could help Ryan get dry and dressed you could have your shower straight after me.’

As Jan and the children went indoors to get their shower and I was wishing it was me, and not Ryan, who was sharing a shower with Jan I saw Jasmine walking towards me. In retrospect I think it probably wasn’t coincidence that she came at the precise moment that Jan and the children had gone indoors. I think she must have been watching us and intended to catch me alone.

‘Hi Wayne it’s great to see you all back safely. I was quite worried about you all when that southerly went through.’

‘If Sophie’s hut hadn’t been available we’d have been in trouble. But as things turned out we were fine – wet but fine.’

‘All’s well that ends well I guess. I’ve just made a few muffins. Would you like to come over and have a coffee; there’re a few things I’d like to discuss with you.’

I sat down in the conservatory on the two-seater sofa. Jasmine put four muffins on a plate and placed them on the coffee table in front of me. Above the whirring of the coffee making machine she told me about Sophie’s physical and emotional injuries and how difficult it had been for her to look after Athenea who only wanted to be with her mother. Eventually Jasmine fetched two coffees and placed one in front of me on the coffee table and sat on the lazy-boy facing me. She hesitated; and I guessed she was having difficulty knowing where to start.

‘I’ve been feeling I’d like to have a little chat in private with you. Would it be OK if I asked you not to repeat it to Jan?’

‘I guess so. What’s it all about?’

‘I know this is nothing to do with me Wayne; and probably I shouldn’t get involved. But Jan has been a good friend of mine for some time and I’d hate to see her hurt. I guess you’re both adults and will do what you want anyway. I just wanted to remind you she’s had a difficult time lately and she’s very vulnerable. Because she’s tall with an athletic figure it’s easy to forget she’s just as emotionally sensitive as any other woman...’

Just at that moment Katherine came in and helped herself to a muffin and was about to sit down on the sofa next to me.

‘Katherine love, would you like to go and play in the sandpit for a few minutes as I’m just having a little chat with Wayne?’

‘OK’. With that Katherine skipped out eating one of the muffins as she went. I was already halfway through my second muffin. After several days of goat stew the muffins were a welcome change; and Jasmine was a good cook.

Jasmine continued. ‘I’m sure you like Jan just as much as I do and would hate to see her hurt.’

‘Of course I don’t want to see her hurt Jasmine. Quite the contrary I want to make her happy and put aside the trauma she’s been exposed to recently. There is nothing I want more than that.’

‘That’s great, but I’d be very disappointed in you Wayne if you picked her up when she’s so vulnerable, and then dropped her. I don’t think she could take another blow like that. She has two lovely children dependent on her. Jan isn’t a rubber ball that bounces back again every time she’s dropped.’

‘You don’t understand Jasmine. Over these last few days I’ve become both emotionally and physically committed to Jan; and that commitment is one-hundred-percent. I know I shouldn’t be saying this about a married woman but it’s the reality of the situation. I would be dishonest if I said it was anything different. Jan knows how I feel about her and I

believe my love for her is reciprocated. If you're suggesting I shouldn't be acting like this because she's married then...'

'I'm not suggesting anything like that Wayne. As I said, you're adults and I'm sure you'll do what you want anyway. I just don't want to see Jan hurt any more. She's had too many hurts already.'

'And my only concern is that she recovers from those hurts; I won't hurt her any more.'

As Jasmine finished eating her last muffin she added, 'I hope not Wayne. I hope not.'

Then she smiled and shook her head. Standing and walking towards the kitchen she explained. 'Katherine's pinched my muffin. I'm getting another one for myself; could you manage one more?'

'Oh! Yes please, they're real good especially having just spent a couple of days eating nothing but goat stew.'

Jasmine returned with two more muffins. But instead of returning to her previous chair she put the plate on the coffee table and sat next to me. Superficially so we could both reach them without having to get up. But something I couldn't define in her body language made me suspect that might not be her sole reason.

Jasmine continued. 'Apart from all Jan's other problems Thor has been away for long periods and that can't be good for any marriage. Do you know what I'm saying Wayne? Women have needs. Those needs make us susceptible when an attractive guy like you comes on the scene.'

I must be slow, because up till that moment I really had been thinking Jasmine had been talking about Jan. Until she spelled it out to me I hadn't occurred to me Jasmine had been talking about Jasmine's needs and Jasmine's emotions! This whole conversation together with the muffins and seat changing was just because she wanted the inside story on how committed I'd become to Jan. That was the origin and the essence of Jasmine's concern over Jan's emotional needs. Sex with some women is like going on a treasure hunt. First they leave ambiguous clues all over the place. If you ever manage

to decipher that lot you find the treasure is all wrapped up in pretty paper with strings attached and tape that sticks to your fingers when you pull it off. When you finally peel off the layers the message in the middle is still the same. "You can fuck me if you want." Life would be so much easier if all women were like Sophie and weren't afraid to come out with it. That way there's no confusion and you know exactly where you stand. But not many women seem to be able to cope with a refusal. Guys don't have a problem; they manage to get over it and move on without becoming simpering angels. But right then, for the very first time in my life, I wanted to make a commitment to one woman and that woman was Jan.

I looked at Jasmine. She was waiting for a response from me. I intended letting her know I'd understood the motivation for her concern over Jan's emotional needs.

'I suppose it can't be long before Basil gets back from Australia to take care of your emotional needs. He works a month on and a month off, doesn't he?'

'Yes but his flight doesn't arrive for another three days.'

'Only three more days to go Jasmine!'

'Yes, It occurred to me that as I've been looking after Melody, Ryan and Athenea for the last couple of days that Jan might keep an eye on Katherine for me. Then I could go up to the lake for a swim. Would you like to join me?'

Invitations don't come much more obvious than that. I looked at Jasmine. The sun coming through the window was lighting up her hair giving her a golden aura. Perhaps that was another reason why she had decided to sit on the sofa next to me. I touched her arm.

'Thank you, I'd love to go with you Jasmine. But as the children enjoyed the last trip so much why don't we all go together. That would be so nice for them. I'll slip out right now and suggest it to Jan. You don't mind if we all go do you?'

If the guys in the pub heard that they'd think I'd fallen out of my tree. But, as I said, I was making a commitment to Jan and I meant it.

CHAPTER 19

Going back to the stables I found Jan.

‘How would you feel about taking Melody and Ryan for a swim in the lake?’

‘Wayne! We’ve only just got back.’

‘Would you do it for me please?’

‘I’d much prefer to stay here with you. We’ve been up to our waists in mud and water half the day already. I’d like to just stay here with Melody and Ryan. I haven’t seen them for a couple of days. Besides I’m tired. You go if you want.’

‘I don’t especially want to go.’

‘Then why don’t you stay here with me?’

‘Jasmine has asked me to go for a swim with her. Oh Hell! She specifically asked me not to repeat this to you but I’m going to anyway. When you went inside to get cleaned up Jasmine asked me to go and have a coffee with her as she had something she wanted to discuss with me.’

‘What did she want?’

‘She suggested I shouldn’t be taking advantage of you because you are too vulnerable.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘I told her I was totally committed to you and implied I’d do what I thought was best for the two of us.’

‘What did she say about that?’

‘She invited me to go for a swim with her in the lake. I presume she meant going for a skinny-dip.’

‘And you said yes?’

‘I didn’t like to refuse; but I said I wanted all of us to go together, including the children. I was hoping you’d agree.’

‘In that case I do agree. Thanks for telling me Wayne. I won’t let on you’ve told me. Huh! I thought Jasmine was my friend. If she thinks I’m vulnerable why the hell is she trying to get between us?’

‘Are you sure that’ll be all right Jan?’

‘You can bet on it.’

Crete wanted to stay home with Sophie and Athenea. But half-an-hour later the rest of us started walking up to the lake. Jan made a point of walking next to me, talking exclusively to me and holding my hand while I gave Ryan a shoulder ride most of the way. When we were almost there he wanted to get down and run. Katherine and Melody ran ahead most of the way. Jasmine walked by herself and carried the towels. Once on the grassy knoll Jan pointedly stood next to me and talked privately to me while we got undressed. When we were both naked she turned to Jasmine and asked, 'Would you mind looking after Melody and Ryan? Wayne and I want to swim across the lake to have another look at the outflow where we're going to put the pipe.'

Without waiting for an answer Jan took hold of my hand and together we walked into the water. When we were fifty metres out in the lake Jan asked, 'Do you think Jasmine has got the message yet?'

'She'd be pretty thick skinned if she hasn't. I think we're in danger of being discourteous to her. She's been damn good to us and I suspect she only had your interests at heart. Don't you think we ought to tone it down a bit?'

Jan didn't answer; which I guess meant she didn't agree.

When we reached the outflow we held hands as we waded through the mud and reeds. Once we were ankle deep in mud I turned and faced Jan and held both of her hands. Our bodies touched as I kissed her.

'Is there anything here you want to check on, Jan?'

'Not really! I think we already know what we're going to do, don't we?'

'I guess so.'

'Then let's swim back shall we. I've spent too much time away from Melody and Ryan recently. If I'm away any longer they'll be thinking they haven't got a mother any more.'

‘I don’t think there’s any danger of that Jan. But if we’d attempted coming back through those floods that could have been the outcome.’

We splashed back through the mud and reeds and started to swim.

‘The other outcome Wayne could have been that we only met as flatmates and not lovers. The floods sort of forced the issue, didn’t they?’

‘I don’t think I could ever settle for seeing you every day only as a flatmate Jan.’

‘Now you won’t have to. And I think Jasmine should be catching on about the way things are and how they’re going to be. OK, I have been stressed recently. I’d be the first to admit it. But I also think it’s quite insulting that she should even think I’m so weak minded that I don’t know what I’m doing. Also it’s insulting to you to assume that you would take advantage of me because you thought I was vulnerable.’

‘There was a time, not very long ago, before I’d listened to the way you talked to your children, before we added the magic ingredient of sex, before I understood what motivated you, and before that moment when I first started to fall in love with you when I would have taken advantage of your vulnerability, if I could. But now it’s changed. If it were true that you are vulnerable, now my only hope is that I could find a way to help you regain your confidence.’

‘You’ve done that already Wayne. And that’s the message I want to send to Jasmine. As far as I’m concerned Wayne, my relationship with you is non-negotiable and I’d like to think you thought the same about me.’

‘You can lay money on it Jan.’

‘Money! I’ve already done more than that. I’ve laid my reputation, my emotional future and the remnants of my marriage on it.’

‘I know this sounds glib and promises are cheap but I’ll do my best not to let you down Jan. And I mean it.’

Jan’s hair was loose and as we swam it flowed out behind her. She turned her head to look at me and discovered I

was already looking at her. A smile flashed between us. We were both swimming breast-stroke and with every stroke Rona the dancing gypsy popped her head out of the water to check on my sincerity. When our feet touched the bottom I held out my hand, together and delightfully naked we walked out of the water and back to Jasmine.

‘Thanks for looking after the kids Jasmine. Have they been OK?’

‘Yes, they’ve been fine. Did you get everything sorted out?’

Jan glanced at me as she answered, ‘Yes Jasmine, I think we did. So, if you want to go for a swim by yourself or take Katherine, Wayne and I will look after the children. The water is real nice.’

‘Thanks Jan, I was watching you in the water. It looked good.’

‘It was. It was one of the nicest swims I’ve had.’ Jan’s eyes drifted over to me for confirmation. I winked back.

‘That sounds a good enough recommendation for me. Come on Katherine.’ Jasmine held out her hand and, already naked, they both walked into the water.

Jan turned to me. ‘We’re already wet shall we see if Melody and Ryan want to go in as well? I think I know the answer without asking them.’

We probably spent about half-an-hour in the water. I played gentle splashing with Ryan; while Jan spent most of her time trying to get Melody to float on her back as a start to learning to swim. Eventually Jan and I played violent splashing much to the delight of Melody and Ryan who were joined by Jasmine and Katherine to give me a drenching. Eventually they chased me out of the water. Jasmine helped Katherine get dry before she dried herself. Jan dried Ryan and Melody; then using the same towel Jan and I rubbed each other dry while Jasmine pretended not to watch us.

There didn’t seem much point in getting dressed again; so we all ended up walking back through the trees naked. We travelled more-or-less as we came. Katherine and

Melody ran on ahead: I carried Ryan on my shoulders, while I held hands with Jan. Jasmine carried one of the towels. Under her arm Jan carried our clothes wrapped in the second towel.

When we arrived back Jasmine and Katherine went back into the house, presumably to get themselves a vegetarian evening meal. The rest of us carried on to the flats over the stables. My bedroom door, the foam mattress and the sheets and blanket that we took with us to make a stretcher were still on the back of the cart. Having been through the rain, the river and the swamp they were considerably dirtier and wetter than when we took them. The door was reasonably straight forward. As soon as I was dressed I cleaned it up and, taking it upstairs, put the pins back in the hinge. Because of the soaking it had received it was slightly warped and stuck when I re-hung it. The bed sheets and blanket would have to be washed and dried and would probably be OK, but mud had soaked into the pores of the foam mattress and I guess it could be easier to buy a new one than try to fix that one. That could be a job for tomorrow.

Once they were dressed Jan took Melody and Ryan into the kitchen. Sophie was able to move round the kitchen with some difficulty. Her ribs were still painful and any reaching, stretching or sudden movement could only be achieved with considerable pain. If we'd had an atom of sympathy, and not focused on ourselves, Jan and I should've stayed here instead of going off to the lake and leaving Sophie to look after Athenea and Crete all by herself.

None of us had eaten; so I jumped into my ute and drove into town to get fish and chip take-a-ways for a combined evening meal.

In my absence Jan had made a start on sorting out beds and bedding for everyone. That included making a double bed for us, with single beds in an adjoining room for Ryan and Melody. Sophie must have been aware of the implications of the double bed Jan was organising for the two of us. A month ago I wouldn't have given Sophie's emotions a second thought. Now I did care. But I still intended sleeping

with Jan in the full knowledge that I was going to add emotional pain to Sophie's physical pain.

I placed the fish and chips on the kitchen table, unwrapped them and passed around a handful of tomato sauce sachets. We all helped ourselves out of the paper. But my eyes kept drifting towards Sophie. Everyone else was laughing, eating and squirting the tomato sauce as if the sachets were water pistols. But Sophie seemed to be eating reluctantly. Perhaps reaching forward across the table was hurting her ribs. I pushed the pile of fish and chips closer to her. It wouldn't do the others any harm to reach a bit further across the table. The lower lids of Sophie's eyes were moist. She was trying not to cry. Only Crete was sitting close to his mother. His hand rested on hers while he ate with the other one.

When we finally screwed up the fish and chip wrappings Jan took Melody and Ryan into the bedrooms informing them that they could help make the beds.

Sophie was still sitting in the same place and Crete was still holding her hand. I walked behind Sophie and laid my hands on her shoulders.

I spoke softly to her. 'I'd like you to know what a help Crete was while we were away. He's a credit to you. If we respected mothers in the same way we respect the All Blacks you'd be able to stand on the podium reserved for champions and point to Crete and say with pride, "That is my son." I don't know how you've done it and I guess there are millions of parents worldwide who would love to know your secret. Sophie you're a bloody good mother and Crete is the proof.' I leaded over and kissed the top of her head. She turned her head to look up at me and smiled, but she couldn't hold back her tears. I left the room to go and find Jan, who I could hear making beds along the corridor.

Later, when Melody and Ryan were both asleep, Jan asked me to listen out for the kids as she needed to go to Jasmine's to check on her emails. Apparently she was expecting something from the insurance company concerning her house insurance claim. I made a comment about insurance

companies being finely tuned mechanisms for avoiding paying and shifting responsibility. But I wished her luck all the same.

Sophie, Crete and Athenea had gone to their bedroom so I sat in the kitchen and picked up a book that must have been left behind by the previous owners. The cover was mashed. I guessed it had been used to prop up something like a damaged table leg. By the time I got to the end of the first page I'd decided the pages were only held together with clichés so, if there was no longer anything that needed propping up, other best uses for the book would include emergency toilet paper or fire lighting.

I dropped it on the floor as it wasn't worth reading and my mind was too busy. I couldn't stop thinking about Sophie. I'd only said that about her to try to cheer her up; but the strange thing was the more I thought about it the more I realised I meant every word. I tried imagining what sort of life she'd had: pregnant to her father at the age of thirteen or fourteen, and again at about nineteen, she'd brought those kids up alone on a dirt floor in a cabin without electricity or running water, she'd grown their food, or hunted for it with a cut-down Enfield rifle, she'd had virtually no access to shops, been ostracised by many of the villagers but had still found time to home-school Crete and as a solo mother had brought up her children to a standard that would bewilder parents in wealthy suburbs. Despite all of that she was a charming and seductive woman. Any guy would be a fool to walk past her!

At that moment Jan came back in. Angry eyes and tense limbs told me things had not gone well.

'Anything from the insurance company Jan?'

'No, nothing! But there were six emails from Karen Jorgensen. Karen Jorgensen! Jorgensen! The damn woman has the audacity not only to move in with him but to use my husband's name.'

'What did she want?'

'I haven't the faintest idea. I deleted them without opening them. She might steal my husband but she's not

having my children even if she wants to call herself Jorgensen.'

'If Jorgensen is a common name in Norway might it genuinely be her own name?'

'Do you believe in trolls and leprechauns as well?'

That was the first time Jan snapped at me. We went to bed shortly after that but we didn't make love. Jan turned away from me to sleep on her side and I lay awake on my back looking at the ceiling and thinking about the differences between Jan and Sophie. I guess I must have dropped off to sleep at some time during the night because the next thing I knew was being woken up by Jan getting dressed.

CHAPTER 20

When she was dressed Jan went into Melody and Ryan's room, got them up and as she was going out the door told me there was no food in the cupboard and she was taking them down town to have breakfast at the German cafe. After that she intended to drive to Wellington to talk to the insurance company. She didn't invite me to join her and I was left wondering what I'd done wrong. I couldn't think of anything except possibly my casual remark that Karen might genuinely have the surname Jorgensen. I don't know whether Jan saw that as me siding with Karen; but that wasn't the case.

I seemed to have used my nightly allocation of sleep and I could hear Sophie talking. I dressed, knocked on her door and went into her room. She was in bed with Athenea.

'Hi Sophie, how are you feeling this morning?'

'My ribs hurt when I move; but I'll be OK.'

'There's not much food in the cupboard so I'm going to slip down town to the supermarket and get stocked up. I'll cook you all some breakfast when I get back.'

'There's still some oats in a bag and water in the tap. The kids and I can manage.'

'Yes I know you can. And Crete and Athenea are living proof of how well you manage; but I'd like to cook some breakfast for all of you. Jan has already taken Melody and Ryan to the German cafe for their breakfast.'

'Without you?'

'Yes, that's right. Jan's been strange. Yesterday she made a point of snubbing Jasmine for no good reason. She didn't want to know me last night. And this morning she's taken off with the kids. I don't know what I'm supposed to have done.'

'Don't you! I think I do.'

'What have I done?'

'Think back, I'm sure you haven't forgotten. It's not difficult; you should be able to figure it out.'

'Well I can't think of a thing I've done.'

‘Can’t you? I don’t know why I’m telling you this, Wayne. In the first few days of a woman’s pregnancy her hormones become as scrambled as eggs in an omelette. Some women listen to what their bodies are telling them. We feel different and act differently. Our bodies can tell us when we’re pregnant. Now think back. Is there anything you might have done to account for that?’

‘You mean she might be pregnant?’

‘Didn’t you consider that a possibility at the time?’

‘I suppose so. But...’

‘That “But” says a lot about men. There is no “But” as far as women are concerned. For women it’s always a possibility. Think about it while you’re walking round the supermarket. If you’re still in any doubt try asking the girl on the checkout!’

It wasn’t until I was pushing the trolley that I started to think about Sophie and the things she said. Sometimes she can be straightforward: “You can fuck me if you want.” But talking to her can also be as bewildering as trying to read a Chinese handbook, like the time she told me she had only ever had two grandparents and she left me to work out, with Jan’s help that it meant her parents must have been brother and sister. Then she told me her children only had two grandparents. That completely baffled me, until Jan pointed out, the only way that could happen, would be if her father was also the father of her children. Jan sorted that out; but Sophie’s latest comments seemed to be bouncing round inside my head. I’d heard the words; but what was she telling me? She started by telling me she didn’t know why she was telling me all that stuff about how women feel when they first get pregnant. I’m darn sure she wasn’t in any doubt about why she hit me with that one. Then she came up with the punch line, and I still haven’t a clue whether she was talking about Jan or herself when she asked, “Is there anything you might have done to account for that?”

If she was talking in riddles again, this time I couldn’t ask Jan to unravel it. I didn’t think I could ask Jasmine either.

If Sophie was talking about herself how would she know if she was pregnant? She hasn't been anywhere near a doctor so she can only suspect she could be, based on some hormonal thing and feeling different. But she's hardly likely to be feeling good having been beaten up. I seem to remember Ginger waving some gadget at me and telling me it was a do-it-yourself pregnancy tester. So I guess it must be possible to buy them. Now what was that throw away line I got from Sophie? "If you're still in any doubt try asking the check-out girl." Is that what Sophie wants? Does she want me to check whether pregnancy testers are available at the supermarket and, if so, get one for her? I don't even know how those things work or how long a woman has to wait before they give an answer. I wonder whether Sophie knows. Maybe, like me, she's only heard about them and wants me to check-it-out with the checkout girl.

I finished the rest of my shopping and then had a look along the aisle that stocked condoms and body lubricants but I couldn't see anything that might be a pregnancy tester. At the checkout I asked the girl if they sold them. Apparently they didn't. But she gave me a knowing smile when she suggested I should be able to get one at the pharmacy.

She was right; the pharmacy did stock them. And the girl behind the counter explained it should be used several weeks after conception and the instructions were included inside. That was one of the questions I was going to ask.

I can imagine the comments I'd receive from the guys in the pub if they knew I'd bought a pregnancy tester. But I don't see it as buying a noose to put round my neck. In any case I'm not likely to see them again; and even if I do run into them, I don't give a damn what that bar full of no-hopers say.

As soon as I got back I got out the frying pan and cooked up bacon, eggs and mushrooms on toast. Even Athenea ate all hers. I reckon I hit the right spot for breakfast.

As I was clearing away the breakfast things, Sophie sent Crete to get a shower. While I could hear the shower

running I gave Sophie the plastic bag containing the pregnancy tester.

I told her, 'I've had a chat with the checkout girl and she suggested you'd find one of these things useful. So she wrote down the brand name on the back of the till docket and sent me to the pharmacist to get one for you. I don't know what it's for; but she said you'd know, and it could make you very happy.'

I could almost hear Sophie's brain working its way through what I had just told her. There was a slight pause before she said, 'Would you like to tell me what really happened.'

'We've made love, so I guess every time it has to be a possibility.' I didn't feel the need to tell Sophie that was a line Jan had fed to me.

'Every time! We've only done it once so far.'

'Those words, "so far" are important to me Sophie. Just as soon as your ribs have mended I'd love to explore the full implication of the words of "so far".'

'You still haven't told me what really happened at the supermarket.'

'I guess we'd both love to know if there's a chance we've made a baby. So I had a look along the shelves and I couldn't see anything that might be a pregnancy tester so I asked the checkout girl if they stocked them and she told me to try the pharmacist. And that's what I did.'

'It was thoughtful of you Wayne. I haven't any money at all.'

'I only have what Jasmine has been putting in my bank as wages for getting the riding school up and running. The trouble is, for the last few days, I haven't been doing any work; so I guess I'd better get on and show a bit of progress.'

'What are you going to do today?'

'Jasmine wants two signs erected at the end of the drive so they're visible from the road. One is for the riding school and the other is for the horse trekking. I'm getting the timber, sheets of ply and a selection of brushes and paints. I

think Jasmine is going to have a shot at the sign-writing while I'm concreting in the posts.'

'If you could set up a sheet of ply so that I don't have to bend too much I wouldn't mind doing a bit of the painting; and Crete could help you with the posts.'

'I'm sure he could, but if you're going to be living here Crete should be going to school and not doing correspondence. There's a primary school a couple of kilometres down the road towards town.'

'Crete's never been to school, and neither have I. We've both done correspondence school.'

'Then don't you think this could be a good time for him to start? He'll soon make friends there. If the riding school and trekking takes off and becomes a paying business, and it will, then Jasmine is going to need staff to help run it. You're an experienced rider and, once your ribs have healed, I can't think of anyone better to make the place a success. And there's another thing. Jasmine and Basil want to set up a bird-sanctuary and nature reserve that includes the lake. I'm going to be erecting a predator proof fence. Once that's done we're going to have to hunt and trap to extinction all the bush predators inside the enclosure. But the work will need to be ongoing because, however good the fence is, sooner or later predators will be getting into the enclosure. You're a hunter and if there are days when there are no rides you could be setting and checking the trap lines. If you like I'll suggest to Jasmine that she employs you full-time, to help run the place. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd already thought of that by herself. Then we could both work and live here together. What do you say?'

An hour later Crete and I were walking up the ramp to the school office. We found the head mistress's office. I explained that Crete was a correspondence student, had just shifted in from rural Wairarapa and his solo mother was temporarily incapacitated because of a riding accident. I thought if I said she'd been beaten up someone might start asking questions, but a riding accident seemed reasonably

innocuous. The head mistress seemed quite happy for me to sign the form as Crete's guardian. So ten minutes later I was walking back out to my ute clutching a pile of papers which might get read, if they didn't hit the rubbish bin first.

If those losers were still in the pub back home I reckon they'd need at least a couple of jugs each before they'd believe I was sober when I signed myself as the guardian of a seven-year-old boy.

It was morning tea time before I came out of the timber yard with their courtesy trailer behind my ute. Jasmine had already told me she wanted each sign to be a full sheet of ply. You can get a hell of a wind loading on a sheet of ply and I guess it wouldn't look great if the thing broke or fell down. So I bought a couple of sheets of nineteen millimetre flooring-grade ply. Fortunately they had some three-point-six metre deer-fence strainer-posts. The trailer was full by the time I'd secured eight strainer posts together with half a cubic metre of sand and gravel, a couple of bags of cement, half-a-dozen sticks of four-by-two, eight tins of paint, a chain saw with a fuel and chain oil can, and a spirit level. I put all the small stuff like brushes, nails, glue, threaded rod, nuts and washers into the back of the ute. The whole lot went onto Jasmine's account.

I carried the two sheets of ply into the end stable where I could work on them under cover. The trouble with ply occurs when you get rain water into the end grains and after a bit it can start to delaminate. I'd had a fair bit of time off when we went to look for Sophie's Dad. Jasmine had paid me for the whole time so I thought I'd better try to do an impressive job for her on these signs.

I put the fence in the Skill saw and ripped the four-by-two timber down to make an L shape. Then I mitre-cut the ends to make a picture frame round the ply and, using the waterproof glue, I sealed the edges of the ply and glued and nailed the picture-frame in place.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time I returned the trailer and picked up Crete from school. He told

me about school while I drove him home and the talk continued all the time we were preparing and cooking dinner. I presumed Jan, Melody and Ryan would be joining us, but Jan hadn't taken the trouble to tell me what she intended doing about dinner when she left to buy breakfast downtown at the German cafe. If I cooked it and if they didn't eat it someone could have it tomorrow heated up in the microwave.

Sophie was only managing to walk round the kitchen slowly and painfully but despite that she stood at the sink and peeled the potatoes. I decided to let her do some of the jobs. Because of her ribs it would have been quicker to have done them myself; but I figured she wanted to show she could still contribute.

I was in the process of carving the meat when Jan arrived back with Melody and Ryan. As they sat down to dinner I asked Jan how things went with the insurance company and all I got back was a non-committal answer of, 'I think it went OK.' So I spent the rest of dinner time talking to Crete and Sophie about school and the next stage of erecting the signs. Crete and I did the washing up.

Crete and I made the beds but left Jan to sort out her bed along with Melody and Ryan's. I decided to move into the remaining bedroom. Sleeping in the same bed as Jan last night had been too frustrating. When a woman goes to bed with a guy the availability of sex or at least some form of intimate relationship is implicit but it's as frustrating as hell if she back-tracks and turns everything into a "No Go Area" without any explanation. If it had been Sophie I could understand it. She's got broken ribs so I wouldn't expect her to have sex just now. But Jan had been acting strange all day. I never can understand women and their moods. As far as I could see nothing had changed since yesterday. She wanted it then but today she wouldn't even have breakfast with us. Instead she rushed off downtown to the cafe and when she got back she wouldn't say how she got on during the day.

I still had a fair bit of daylight left; so after helping Sophie get Athenea ready for bed, I went back the paddock

and made a start on hand digging the post-holes. It sure would have been easier if I'd had tractor with an auger. But at least it was easy digging. The soil was still soft after that deluge and there weren't too many rocks. I worked till the humidity and the light beat me. Then I stood the off-cuts of wood in the unfinished holes so the horses would see them and avoid stepping into a hole during the night. About the last thing we needed was a horse with a broken leg.

When I got back to the kitchen I slumped into the sofa. Despite her difficulty moving about Sophie made both of us a cup of tea and came and sat next to me. I'd sweated a lot doing the digging. Guys I know would only be interested in cold beer but that cup of tea on the sofa with Sophie was more than just a cup of tea. I was buggered after the digging; and it must have been obvious. Every movement Sophie made round the kitchen was painful for her; she must have put that aside and considered what I might need. On the sofa I rested my hand on hers. A guy would go a long way to find a more thoughtful woman than Sophie.

That night I slept alone in the spare room. First thing in the morning Jan took off in her car with Melody and Ryan. Jan didn't say where they were going but I presumed they were going back to the German cafe for breakfast. As soon as I'd cooked breakfast for Sophie and the kids and got things cleared away, Crete took off for school. He was going to be early; but as I looked out of the window I saw him running. I guess he probably ran all the way.

I went down to the end stable and cleaned the excess glue off the sign and painted one side in primer. Then I went back to the big paddock and finished hand digging the post-holes. At least the morning air was cooler. When I went back for morning tea Jan and the children had returned and they had the morning paper spread out on the table. On the front page was a report of the bodies of two men having been discovered by a fisherman on farmland at the edge of Lake Wairarapa. Apparently the police were attempting to confirm the identities of the dead men and were trying to contact relatives. The

report didn't say a lot except that the men appeared to have suffered a violent death and there was a suspicion it could have been a drug related killing. It didn't say one of the men had a gunshot wound in the chest or that the other man had a broken arm, but we were in little doubt that would be the case.

There were tears in Sophie's eyes when she read it. I took her arm, led her to the sofa and sat down with her. I put my arm round her as we talked in whispers. Athenea sensed something was wrong and sat close to her Mum sucking her thumb and holding a bunch of her Mum's shirt. Jan made morning tea for all of us. I asked Sophie whether she thought the police might come and visit her about her Dad but as she said she doubted it because he wasn't officially her Dad.

At times Sophie's voice was choked with emotion as she told me the story that went back to her birth. Sophie's mother had never admitted that her own brother was Sophie's father. The official story her mother had invented was that she had attended a weekend open-air concert and a number of guys had visited her in her tent, but she couldn't remember their names or how many there had been. Later she found she was pregnant. Apparently when Sophie was born her mother was going to get her adopted but it never happened. Her brother insisted on raising little Sophie and threatened to admit paternity if his sister refused. Apparently Sophie had been totally rejected by her mother. Her Dad had both brought her up, and made her pregnant. But according to Sophie it was because he "loved" her! I doubt if many people would accept the logic of that but it seemed to make sense to Sophie. Officially Sophie didn't know who had fathered Crete and Athenea. But she was quite adamant their paternity was nothing to do with anyone else, which I suppose, could be true. I'm certainly not in much of a position to be critical of casual paternity.

Jan seemed quite happy to sit with Sophie so I slipped down to the stables. The primer I'd put on the sign was touch dry so I turned it over and primed the reverse side before making a start on the second sign. By the time I had that one

glued and nailed it was lunchtime. When I went up to the kitchen Sophie seemed calmer and Jan had set the table and prepared a ham salad for lunch. I think she must have bought the ham when she was downtown because I hadn't bought any. Jan seemed to have gone to a bit of trouble. Melody, Ryan and Athenea were all sitting on the floor and playing without squabbling. They were using building blocks to make tunnels for a little car. I hadn't seen the toys before so I guessed Jan must have bought them as well while she was in town. Also she had made all the beds including mine in the spare room. I took it as a mood reversal since yesterday, and was beginning to wonder whether these mood swings were something we were going to have to learn to live with, or a one-off event. I rubbed Jan's tattoo. 'How's Rona this morning?'

Jan grinned back. 'She's feeling a lot better today. The trouble is I can't take Rona anywhere. She has an aversion to insurance companies; and yesterday they kept her waiting so long she jumped off my shoulder and carved her name on the insurance office counter top and told the insurance company to claim the damage on their insurance.'

'Well done Rona!' I kissed the tattoo on Jan's arm. It was an empty gesture. I was no closer to discovering what had caused Jan's mood change. We're all repelled by the insolence of the oafs in office who manage the terminal moraine of indecision. Everyone encounters them; they're an everyday irritation but someone as bright as Jan would have no difficulty in clearing that sort of blockage. I'd seen what she could do with that cabinet minister on TV. Something else was upsetting Jan and she doesn't seem inclined to tell me. I was certain of one thing. The problem would be a lot closer to home than an insurance company office in Wellington. But at least Jan and I were talking again.

I spent the rest of the day in the big paddock fixing up the supports for the sign. I'd have been quite happy with rammed earth for the posts but Jasmine wanted the posts concreted in and she's paying, so that's what she got, despite the humidity which was as bad as yesterday.

When I went back to the flat Jan had cooked dinner and was putting it out for all of us. She seemed to have gone to a bit of trouble and had even made an apple pie for dessert. After dinner I slipped down to the end stable and managed to get primer and undercoat on the signs. The kids were all in bed when I went back upstairs and Jan and Sophie were chatting amiably. I decided to leave them to it and went to bed in the spare room convinced that something crazy was going on. There were two women in my flat and I was sleeping on my own!

CHAPTER 21

It was one of those nights when you throw all the bed-clothes on the floor, lie on the fitted sheet with an open window and imagine you can feel a cool night breeze on your skin, when what you feel is the needle-sharp proboscis of the things that fly in the night. As you close the window you know it is already too late. The whine of wings attacks from every direction. So you pick up the discarded top sheet and attempt constructing a cocoon that inevitably fails. Eventually you admit defeat. Eyes droop as you unconditionally surrender. Those creatures require no more than a belly-full of blood. Unlike their human counterparts that always return for more.

I'm not sure if my subconscious heard the bedroom door open, or if it was the kiss on my closed eyelids that woke me. Perhaps it was a tilt in the mattress as Jan sat on the edge of my bed. In the moonlight coming in through the window I could see, like me, she was naked.

'I can't sleep; I've just been lying awake thinking Wayne.'

I rested my hand on her thigh.

'Thinking about what?'

'You, me, us. I need to talk to you Wayne.'

'You are now.'

'Yes I know. What would you say if I asked you to go for a swim with me in the lake?'

'You mean now?'

'It's a lovely moonlight night.'

'What time is it?'

'About one-thirty. Melody and Ryan don't usually wake up and even if they do I'm sure Sophie would see that they're OK.'

'You're serious aren't you Jan?'

'Yes. Would you go with me?'

'I suppose I'm awake now. Oh! OK, why not.'

I sat up in bed and reached for my shorts on the chair next to the bed.

‘Do we need clothes Wayne? I’m sure there’s no one out there, and even if there was, it’s dark. Do you fancy walking naked with me along the track in the moonlight?’

As we walked past the shower I picked up a bath towel. ‘I guess we can share a towel, as well as the moonlight can’t we.’

We held hands as we walked through Jasmine’s garden and onto the track under the trees.

‘I’m sorry I was such a shit yesterday Wayne. It was nothing you’ve done. I felt confused and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.’

‘Can I do anything to help?’

‘Yes, you are now. I’ll try to explain; but I think it might not make too much sense. I have two choices. If I only had one it would be simpler. I’m a married woman. Thor is the father of my children and we have been a family. We have been working here but that contract has finished and after that television confrontation with the minister I’m hardly likely to get any more work here, and neither is Thor. I did have a home here with Melody and Ryan. That has gone. All I have left of that home is an insurance policy and memories. Some of those memories are horrific. Even if our house hadn’t been burnt down after what happened I wouldn’t have wanted to stay there with just me and the children. So one obvious choice would be for me to return to our flat in Norway, go back to my old job and pretend none of this happened. I’ve always made a point of speaking to Melody and Ryan in English and Norwegian in the assumption that one day we’d be returning when the contract finished, and it has, permanently. My children are bilingual; language wouldn’t be a problem. The real problem is Thor and I have drifted apart. The fault lies with me, not with Thor. He’s a perfectionist. I was proud of his ability but I can’t meet his expectations. I knew that when we got married but I thought... Never mind what I thought, it didn’t work. My problem is I have a gypsy on my shoulder; and I’m not talking about my tattoo. Now something else has cropped up. She’s called Karen and she’s moved in with Thor.

Should I rush back to Norway with Melody and Ryan and try to compete? I think I may have lost already and it would be so demeaning to be seen to fail. While I'm here I have Melody and Ryan. Losing them as well isn't negotiable. They're staying with me. I don't know anything about Karen; and I don't want to know. She keeps trying to phone me but every time I hang up on her.

Now there's you. Lately I've been so mixed up I may already have driven you away. I never seem to have a time to talk to you. Either you're working or the children need something... I was lying awake thinking about you, about me, about us. At first I thought of getting into bed with you and then you'd want sex and so would I and we'd never get the chance to talk. Then I thought of this moonlight walk up to the lake. But I had no idea whether you'd agree. Sex was going to be my fall-back position, to prevent me feeling totally rejected. Do I sound like a devious woman?

'Not at all, it was a great idea. And sex sounds good as well.'

'I suppose the fact that you're here and you didn't tell be to bugger off back to bed tells me something. Initially I didn't give myself much more than a fifty-fifty chance of getting you to come with me. But I wanted to take the chance.'

'I'm glad you did. I could take a lot of these naked moonlight walks in the forest. I think your gypsy blood is showing Jan. Or is Rona giving you a nudge?'

'Perhaps she is. Thor would never have done this for me.'

'Then he's the loser.'

'I wouldn't have done it on my own. It only feels right because I'm with you Wayne. And the fact that you're prepared to do things like this with me is the reason I'd like to stay here and not go rushing back to Norway to compete with Karen for my husband and my children. Here I only feel I have to compete with Sophie.'

'It's not...'

‘Please don’t try to deny anything Wayne. I’m not stupid and I’m not blind. Sophie is a reality as far as you and I are concerned and I don’t blame you for it. She has the kindest nature of any woman I’ve met. She’s done miracles with Crete and Athenea. She’s younger than me. In your position I’d fall for her as well. I’m trying to be totally honest with you Wayne. Sex is important. Perhaps it’s my gypsy blood but sexually I’d like to think I can match her; and Rona and I still have a few tricks to show you. None of which, I might add, were learned from Thor. He wasn’t into experimental sex. Sex for him was functional – like having a glass of water when you’re thirsty. But I’ll say this for him he has always provided for us. In fact he still is. His salary is still regularly going into our joint bank account. In fact over the last few months he’s been taking out considerably less than normal. I suspect that means Karen has money. If she has, that could be something else I’d have to compete with if I returned to Norway. But right now I don’t think Norway would be a good option for me. I like it here. I like being with you. Of course I wouldn’t have wished Sophie’s injuries on her but I guess, right now, I have an unfair advantage over her because of her broken ribs. Exploiting that would be a cheap shot but it’s something I’ve been considering. In the end I think you’d think less of me because of it; and I’d think less of myself.’

‘Does it have to be a competition Jan, with winners and losers?’

‘I don’t know. You tell me Wayne.’

‘I like you both.’

‘I know, that’s why it feels like a competition.’

‘It only needs to feel like that if we choose to let jealousy decide that’s how it is going to be. We are all living here and I suspect we will all be working together shortly running the riding establishment and looking after the children. If sex happens, and it will, does it have to be exclusive?’

‘I don’t know Wayne. I don’t know if it would work. It’s not something I could have considered with Thor. He’s

traditional about things like that. So I find it very surprising that he appears to be having an affair with “that Karen woman”. It seems out of character; but perhaps I don’t know him as well as I thought I did.’

We had reached the grassy knoll above the lake. I pulled Jan close to me but instead of kissing her lips I kissed her tattoo. ‘Have you asked Rona what she would do?’

‘She always gives me bad advice. In the words of the song she always says, “Come on let’s go, just when I ought to say nix.” I’m not sure I ought to take her advice.’

‘I think you were lying in bed listening to her. Then, while the children were asleep, you came to my bed in the middle of the night and talked me into walking naked with you through the woods. Now we’re on top of Jasmine’s grassy knoll we’re going to make love under the stars and then go for a swim to wash our sins away. Rona planned all that; didn’t she?’

‘I think you’re getting to know Rona as well as I do.’

Black against the night-sky the forest looked down and saw two naked human forms standing knee-deep in grass and clover. Moonlight outlined their hair and skin. As they sank into the meadow the scent and memory of grassland rose to meet them and enveloped them. A hollow in the grass, larger than before, was all that remained to show where they had stood. As the silent forest watched, the hollow seemed to gather a life-force of its own. The night-air was still, but on the edges of that hollow in the meadow where moonlight dusted the tips of the grass, the grasses started to sway. Until it seemed that it was the hollow that had become a living creature with a destiny of its own. From the heart of the hollow welcoming gasps spread like ripples across the surface of the lake to mingle and become indistinguishable from the other natural sounds of the woodland. The forest was as unaware as the inhabitants of the hollow that, after entering the female, the fluid of life splattered into her womb was establishing within her a new living cell.

The gigantic wheel of the stars continued its sleepy transit of the sky; and the forest noticed no further movement of the grass surrounding the hollow. It wasn't until the moon had slid behind the tips of the trees that two naked humans stood and, holding hands, walked through the grass to the dark water's edge. There they hesitated.

We walked in up to our calves. 'Gee it's cold.'

'You can't back out now Wayne. It's what we came up here to do.'

'I thought we'd just done what we came up here to do.'

'No that's what Rona wanted to do. Remember what you said? Now we've got to wash our sins away or God won't be pleased with us!'

'In that case I think we ought to build up a big backlog of sins first. We don't want to bore God with trivia.'

'That wouldn't work Wayne.'

'Why not?'

'I'll tell you.' Jan reached down scooped up a handful of water and threw it over my balls. As she ran forward into the water she said over her shoulder. 'Because they'll stop working if you don't cool them down.'

I followed her into the water and we swam out to the cold patch in the middle before we turned to swim back.

'First back gets the towel Wayne.'

With that Jan broke into free style and beat me back.

Back on the grass Jan had the towel and was rubbing her hair as I walked out of the water.

'You lost Wayne.' She handed me the towel. I think we ought to get dry as we walk back. I'm concerned about having left Melody and Ryan for so long.'

'Get dry as I walk back? You're a hard woman Jan.'

She reached down and touched me. 'That's more than can be said of you. Can't the poor thing stand the cold?'

'It's just waiting for another opportunity.'

'Well I think it'll have to wait a bit longer. I shouldn't have left Melody and Ryan all this time. Let's finish getting

dry as we walk back. I'm sure Melody will be OK and Ryan hardly ever wakes up but it would be just my luck if he chose tonight to play up. He's in a strange bed. I'm not being fair to Sophie to leave her as the only adult in the place when she has all those injuries. But I did need to talk to you alone without any disturbances.'

As we started back along the track Jan continued. 'It's been a lovely evening. But now I'm feeling quite guilty.'

'Your wedding ring is tingling on your finger is it?'

'It should be, but quite honestly I don't feel guilty about making love to you. I suppose I ought to. But, every time I feel a tinge of guilt coming on, I remind myself that Thor knew I wanted more children and despite that he had a vasectomy without even discussing it with me. I'm convinced he only did it so he and "that Karen woman" wouldn't need to use contraceptives. So now I don't feel any guilt about what we do. Well that's not strictly true; I get just enough feeling of guilt to enhance our sex. What worries me right now isn't indulging in a bit of adultery; that was delightful. But I shouldn't have left Melody and Ryan for so long. That was disgraceful. Let's hurry back.'

We did hurry back. In fact we ran some of the way. But Melody and Ryan were still asleep and adultery happened again.

We were both asleep when Melody and Ryan climbed into bed with us for a cuddle. Melody got into Jan's side and Ryan got into my side. Melody asked why I hadn't slept in my bedroom.

Jan replied for me. 'Wayne is like you Melody; he likes to come and have a cuddle with me.'

Melody didn't answer but she seemed to be thinking about Jan's reply. Under the covers Jan squeezed my hand.

There was no chance of any further sleep; Ryan was wet. And it occurred to me that I had to get Crete off to school. I got out of bed and had to go back to my bedroom to find my clothes. I found Crete in the kitchen. He'd had a shower, and was busy making sandwiches for his lunch bag. I put a couple

of rashers of bacon and broke an egg into the frying pan and put a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. Crete was finishing his breakfast when Jan came into the kitchen. She must have smelt the cooking.

‘Don’t get any breakfast for us Wayne I think I’ll take Melody and Ryan to the German cafe for breakfast. I’ll go and put the kids in the shower now. Hopefully I’ll still be able to get there before the place fills up.’

As Crete went out the door and started running down the drive I couldn’t help wondering what sort of relationship Jan was having with Karl at the German cafe. I realised I had no idea how old he was. He could be thirty or eighty as far as I knew. What did they find to talk about over breakfast every morning? Did Jan talk about us, or Thor, or Melody and Ryan, or cobalt in the hills? Was she discussing last night’s nocturnal adventures, or were they too recent or too intimate to be reduced to cafe-talk. But were they too recent or too intimate to be pub talk? If I was back with the guys in the pub would I have bragged about last night? A few weeks ago I would have. Was German-cafe-talk Jan’s version of guys-in-the-pub-talk? I was wondering what would happen if I suggested going to the cafe with her. Would it stilt their conversation? Is it significant that Jan has never invited me to go with her? I wonder why. Am I getting jealous? Do I need to feel jealous? Would Jan still want to go to the cafe if it was a woman serving breakfast instead of a guy? I guess the answer to that is, would I chat-up a woman in the bar in the same way as I bragged with the guys.

Next time I’m in town I’m going to look by at the German cafe and see who this guy is. I think I’ll go in alone and buy a coffee.

While these thoughts were bubbling inside my head Sophie came into the kitchen walking with difficulty.

‘Wayne, would you mind helping me into the shower and also help Athenea? When you were away Jasmine helped us but I don’t like having to ask her and, right now, I can’t bend or stretch.’

‘Of course, how would it be if I got into the shower with you and washed you all over?’

‘I’d say, enjoyable.’

Sophie was right. At least that’s how I found it and I had the impression Sophie’s reaction was similar to mine. It was an experience in soap, skin and sensuality that departed on an exploratory journey for considerably longer than was necessary to soap and rinse.

Sophie grinned and gave me a kiss as my arms encompassed her while I dried her back. She commented, ‘Jasmine didn’t do it like that.’

Afterwards I offered to help Athenea but she seemed quite happy to put the plug in the drain and play with the soap while sitting in the shower tray as if it was a bath. All I had to do was help her get dry and hold the hairdryer for her.

By the time I’d cooked breakfast for the three of us and cleared away, it was getting on for morning tea time. I went down to the stables and Jasmine was already there. She had a photograph of the horses in the big paddock and was going to copy that onto the sheet of ply for the riding school sign. She’d got a ruler and marked off the ply into small squares and drew the same number of squares onto the photograph and, using a pencil, she copied each square until the whole scene was traced out. Then she started to mix the paints to fill in all the pencilled lines using the smallest brushes I had bought. It was a precision, time consuming job and I could see it would take quite a few days to complete. But she was determined to at least have it started to show Basil when he came home. And that was going to be the following day.

CHAPTER 22

Jasmine and Katherine picked Basil up from Wellington Airport and they arrived home mid-afternoon. Jasmine brought him over to introduce us. He was a slightly built, clean-shaven man – no taller than Jasmine but was obviously considerably older. Jasmine is twenty-eight, the same age as me, and I'd have put Basil in his mid-to-late forties. He was prematurely bald with bushy eyebrows that seemed to bristle over his frameless glasses. He was wearing a plain tan-coloured open-neck shirt with matching tan shorts and leather sandals. Jasmine had told me in Australia they had nicknamed him Basil the bloodhound. I'd have likened him to more like a fox terrier. His movements were rapid and he gave the impression of being alert especially when you saw his eyes. They were the only impressive part of him. They were alert eyes, constantly on the move; and I had the impression they wouldn't miss a thing.

Obviously he and Jasmine had been talking on the internet and she had passed on the news, as he seemed familiar with what I'd been doing. At least I hoped he wasn't too familiar with everything I'd been doing. Mind you I'm not sure Jasmine could have known all that much and hopefully she's not the kind of woman to pass on speculation – that's assuming such a woman exists. Apparently news is about what people have been doing; while gossip tells us how much they enjoyed it.

We shook hands and he just said that he'd heard I'd been doing some useful work getting the riding establishment moving in the right direction and we could have a chat about it in the morning. He reckoned he'd spent too long on the plane and far too long in the Aussie dust. Now all he wanted to do was have some dinner and go for a swim in the lake with Jasmine. I couldn't help assuming those quick eyes would spot the area of recently flattened grass at the top of the grassy knoll and make assumptions. He said he and Jasmine were going for a swim. He hadn't included Katherine. He'd been

away for a month; I couldn't help wondering if they'd use the same area on the knoll for the same purpose.

The following morning, just after Crete started his run down the drive on the way to school, Jan and I were putting out breakfast for Sophie and the other kids. For some reason, that seemed to make sense to Jan, if not anyone else, this morning apparently was not going to be a German breakfast day. There was a knock at the door and Jasmine came in.

'Basil wants to come over as soon as he's had his shower to discuss progress on the riding school.' She looked directly at Jan and me and asked if we'd mind slipping down to the end stable as she'd been trying to explain to Basil about some of the harness but she'd got a bit confused. She asked us if we'd mind explaining again what we still needed to buy.

'Would the two of you be able to slip down right now? It should only take a minute.'

Jan and I looked at each other a little puzzled and asked Sophie if she'd be OK for a few moments.

As soon as we were downstairs Jasmine said, 'Sorry to be a bit devious but I didn't want to talk in front of Sophie and the children. Last night Basil and I went up to the lake for a swim. Basil noticed the patch of flattened grass on top of the knoll. Do you two know anything about that?'

I answered, 'Yes'.

'I assumed it must be you. The trouble is Basil looked at it but he didn't say anything to me. He made absolutely no comment. That's unusual. Silence can speak volumes. I think he's suspicious that Wayne and I may be responsible for it. The implications are obvious. Jan if you're talking to Basil today would you mind casually dropping out that it was you and Wayne who were up there. That would carry a lot more weight than denials from me. You know why I'm asking don't you?'

Jan smiled. 'That's fine. Yes we're guilty.' She glanced at me as she added, 'In more senses than one.'

I added, 'Thanks for not saying that in front of Sophie.'

Jan gave me a glance that didn't need any explanation. I think Jasmine saw it as well and simply answered, 'You won't tell Basil we've had this conversation will you.'

'Of course not.'

'Thanks, I'm going to nip back now before Basil finishes his shower.'

As we went back into the kitchen Jan and I were discussing how many girths we had for the saddles. Then we got on with fixing breakfast. Sophie didn't seem suspicious.

It worked out well. Completely by chance Jan had just gone out to her car to fetch Ryan's sun-hat just as Basil was walking over to see me. I was in the stable and could hear every word that was said.

'Good morning Basil. I hope you're feeling better after that horribly long flight.'

'Yes thanks Jan. Are you OK now? I heard you were attacked in a home invasion.'

'Yes, and my house was burnt down; so I'm more than grateful you and Jasmine are letting us stay in your flats. It's so generous of you. I hope I can repay some of that by helping you get the riding establishment ready. I've offered to create a web-page for you and I'll be helping Wayne with the horses.'

'That's great, thanks Jan. The other thing Jasmine and I are keen to push along is the predator proof fence and Jasmine tells me you and Wayne between you have worked out a way of enclosing the lake inside the fence.'

'Yes I'm sure it'll work. Wayne and I have been up there several times to check where to put the pipe. I'm not surprised you want to include it inside the sanctuary; it's a lovely lake for swimming and just relaxing. In fact when the children were asleep Wayne and I slipped up there for a rather naughty nocturnal swim.'

'Oh yes! I noticed from the tracks in the grass and assumed someone had been up there recently. I suppose we should get that grassy knoll mowed. We'll need either a ride-on mower or a mower to tow behind a tractor, perhaps both.'

Once we have the predator proof fence in place we're going to have to maintain a clear track round the perimeter, and that'll need mowing. I'll have to talk to Wayne about the best type of mower to get. Is he in just now?

'I think he must be in the end stable.'

'I'll pop in to see him.'

Basil impressed me. He seemed to instantly understand what needed to be done. I explained about the tracks we'd need through the bush if we were going to do horse-trekking, as well as establish a riding school in the big paddock. He had no difficulty seeing that these were totally different activities with very little overlap in terms of the resources needed. On top of this he was anxious to press ahead with the nature reserve and the predator proof fence.

Then he said, 'Jasmine has been telling me about Sophie and her family being attacked near the Greek village and how you, Jan and one of Sophie's children went to try and rescue her father.'

'Yes that's right and I expect she told you as well that we were stuck over there for a couple of days because of the floods.'

'I just don't understand that. The village or community or whatever it's called has been there since the end of the Second World War. That's seventy years ago and we're still counting. It's at the back of our property for God's sake. It can't be more than about five or six kilometres away. In all that time no one has had the foresight to build proper access from this side and instead they're travelling in and out through the Wairarapa and that track is so bad that they can't get proper supplies, medical facilities and the children can't go to school.'

'That's right. It looks to me as if formerly someone's cut a track through but that seems to have been abandoned. I guess they discovered the same problem that Jan and I found. There are two river crossings and a swamp to negotiate and in heavy rain it becomes impassable. It was probably a combination of that and, from what Sophie tells me, former

owners of your land wouldn't grant them access. As far as I know, Sophie and her children are the only ones to have made it through here recently.'

'This is incredible. I'm certainly not preventing anyone coming through here. Under the Maori land act, land-owners are legally obliged to provide reasonable access to land-locked land and having to negotiate two rivers and a swamp certainly can't be defined as reasonable assess. From what I'm hearing from Jasmine, druggies and gangs are taking the area over. That's going to change. Now, you've been there; what's needed to get reasonable access? Is it just two bridges, a causeway through the swamp and a few days work with an excavator?'

'That's about the size of it. You might only need one bridge because the first stream could be handled with a concrete culvert.'

'Is there anything there you can't do given an excavator with a grader blade, a truck and the necessary materials?'

'Resource consent?'

'I might be legally obliged to provide assess to the Greek village but I'm not legally obliged to provide access to council snoopers but in any case, from what you tell me, the road already exists and all were doing is maintaining it. Now, would opening up that track be a useful addition for our horse-trekking venture?'

'Yes, it'll open up access into the Tararuas.'

'You're also going to need the truck and excavator when we put in the predator proof fence and you'll need to provide other tracks for the trekking. As I see it you're also going to need a good tractor, a mower and a post-hole borer to run off the PTO and a trailer. You can purchase hand tools and materials locally. You can't do the work without the tools and as I see it you need them now. I'll get on the internet and see what second-hand gear is available. Will you be available over the next few days to come and inspect them with me?'

'Of course.'

‘Then I’ll get on the computer and perhaps we can get started. Have you got other work to do?’

‘Yes, I’m fixing up the signs to advertise the riding school and the horse-trekking. And Jasmine is making a start on painting them.’

‘Excellent, when they’re ready we’ll need to cover them up until we’re ready to open and we’ve got the rest of the publicity sorted. In the meantime we’ll keep them under wraps. So I’ll get you to organise tarpaulins and make provision for secure tie-downs. We don’t want the tarpaulins blowing away or getting ripped with the first decent blow.’

Basil went back to the house leaving me feeling breathless and knowing nothing would stop this guy. He was like an Exocet missile. I remember Jasmine telling me his salary was more than the prime minister’s. Having spoken to him for ten minutes I was convinced there was a good reason for that.

I spent most of the next four days driving round the Kapiti Coast, Manuwatu and Wairarapa looking at and buying second-hand plant and machinery. When we weren’t driving we were busy with change-of-ownership forms, registration and insurance companies. I picked up a tractor from Sanson and drove it down state highway 1 to Foxton to get a road-trailer and then brought both of them back. That took a whole day by itself. The following day Basil and I had to drive to Palmerston North with the trailer to get the post-hole borer and some of the hydraulics for the excavator and truck that I picked up the following day from Feilding. I couldn’t remember all the machinery we bought but Basil had the whole thing planned out in his head. He seemed to know better than me what would fit with what and what wouldn’t. He also seemed to be able to sniff out problems in machinery that looked fine to me. He must have burnt through the best part of a hundred grand before we’d finished but his comment was always, “You can’t do the job without the right tools and those tools have to work properly.”

I hardly saw Jan during the following weeks except of course in bed at night. She was full-time looking after the children, washing, cooking, cleaning, supermarket shopping, getting Crete off to school and helping Sophie while Jasmine concentrated on painting the sign and all her usual gardening and housekeeping. I was up in the morning at dairy-farming hours and I was still driving tractors and diggers until the daylight beat me.

After several weeks Sophie was getting about better and one morning I helped her down to the steps to the end stable where the second sign to advertise the trekking still needed painting. Jasmine had spent a week on the first riding school sign and she'd made a precision job of it. Even when you got close to it every detail had been meticulously painted.

I think all that concentrated work had worn Jasmine out and she seemed reluctant to tackle the second sign. Sophie offered to give it a go. I was more than a bit sceptical about whether she'd be able to match Jasmine's precision job; but I reckoned if it didn't work we could still paint it out after a respectful period. Doubts compounded as I saw her pick up the biggest brush we had. I had work to do; and when I came back a couple of hours later to get more tractor fuel Sophie had not only finished the job but the paint was dry as well. When I saw what she'd done my doubts fell to the floor and kicked my shins for being a sceptical fool. With a few dozen lines she had captured the convergence of the mountains. She had used the curve of the hills to infuse into the scene the essence of horse and rider. Only light and shade separated them but in that separation the mountains, horses and riders merged to become a single entity. Jasmine's meticulously painted work looked pedantic in comparison. There was a lot more to Sophie than any of us had realised.

We decided to use both signs exactly as they were. The meticulous care of Jasmine's portrayal of the riding school wasn't out of place for a teaching and show jumping establishment and Sophie's essence of trekking in the hills evoked a fiercer and more compelling emotion. The contrast

of the two styles would leave no one in any doubt we were offering two very different experiences.

Jan had the job of constructing a website for both the riding school and the trekking. To do that she needed still as well as motion pictures. We had decided the target groups for the riding school would be girls in their early teens and the mothers of younger children who would want to give their children a safe horse riding experience. So Jan decided if we wanted to attract mothers and teenage girls in the promotion material we would need to film a male instructor – probably someone about my age! Also to persuade the mothers that it would be safe to let their daughters go, there should also be at least two female staff members on hand. Ideally they should be about Jasmine and Sophie's age! It was while we were talking this through over dinner that Crete came up with the idea that when we're ready to open we could offer a free riding lesson for one day to each of the classes at his school. That would provide filming opportunities for Jan, and the children would bring their parents and brothers and sisters. Then, if they liked it, they would come back later, bringing other paying customers.

We talked about Crete's idea to Basil the following morning and he immediately agreed. We decided we could probably cope with one class of about twenty children plus their families per day so, with the Easter break not much more than only a month away, we decided to invite each of the classes in the school for successive days during the holiday; and immediately after that we'd be open for paying business.

The next day Jasmine, Basil and I, as Crete's guardian and one of the instructors, went to the school to see the head mistress. Basil did most of the talking and explained the idea and suggested it could be a school-initiated holiday programme where families could bring a picnic lunch, but definitely no alcohol, and we'd provide free soft drinks plus tea and coffee in a marquee. He explained one of our instructors would be on hand to give each child a ride round the paddock on one of our horses. He nodded to me and I

explained how every child would be provided with a riding hat, shown how to adjust and put it on, and would be individually led round the paddock. I described the stables and said the children would be shown how horses were groomed and fed. In addition families could have a ride on a horse-drawn cart. Basil emphasised there would be no charge for this and explained it was intended as a goodwill gesture for the local school. If the school viewed the idea favourably he would issue a formal written proposal. He gave the head mistress one of his business cards and asked her to get back to him. It was obvious to me before we left that the answer would be positive. I watched her suspicion evaporate when Basil insisted there would be no alcohol. Jasmine explained that we wanted it to be family day out as some children from town don't get a chance to experience horses with an instructor in a safe environment. She expanded on this by emphasising we considered teaching safety around horses was so important, as too many children got into difficulties simply because no one had ever taken the trouble to show them how to be safe with horses. That was why we were offering this experience and we were doing it totally at our expense. As far as I could see, that clinched the deal.

I was right. Two days later we got a call from the head mistress and Basil personally took in a written proposal describing the deal.

Have you ever noticed the more work you do the faster jobs come in. That's how it was for me. I was working from sunrise to sunset and the list of jobs kept getting longer. I'll say this for Basil, he's a good boss. He just tells me what he wants done and trusts me to work out how I want to do it. He doesn't make suggestions unless I specifically ask for them. According to him there are only two rules for running a successful business. Rule one is that you never allow accountants to make decisions because they're always wrong. Rule two is that you never ask an employee to do something you can't do yourself. Having worked with Basil for the best

part of a month I could see why he was so popular with the miners in Australia.

During that time it was becoming obvious that Sophie was recovering from her injuries. Every day we could see her managing to get about better and achieve more. About a week before Basil was due to fly back to Aussie several things happened within the course of several days. The first one occurred when Sophie showed me the pregnancy tester that I'd bought. She pointed to the two lines on it and told me what that signified. Then on top of that a couple of days later Jan told me that she had missed her period. Then to cap it off the next day Basil came over to the stables to tell Jan that he'd taken a call from a woman called Karen in Norway who'd said she and Thor were flying to New Zealand and would be arriving at Wellington Airport two days later at 12.20 pm. on a domestic flight from Auckland. They needed picking up. Apparently he'd already told Karen he was certain Jan would be there to meet them.

I've never seen such a black look on Jan's face. 'If she rings you back again tell her I said Wayne and I...' And she emphasised the Wayne. 'Wayne and I will be there to meet them and if she thinks they can take Melody and Ryan back to Norway then they've just made a wasted trip because it's not going to happen. Then hang up on her.'

Basil wet the tip of his finger on his tongue and touched Jan's arm with it. He jerked his hand away and gave a hissing sound as if he'd touched something red hot. 'I think I'd sooner face a dozen fighting-drunk Aussie miners coming out of the pub on Saturday night than a couple of you Nordic women with the light of battle in your eyes.'

This had come as a shock to Basil. I think he was imagining Jan would be pleased Thor was coming home. I presume he was unaware of the evolving confrontation.

He staged an imaginary shudder of fear. 'I think if she rings up again I'll come and find you, in case I get my throat cut! After all I'm just a poor messenger!'

Jan grinned at his apparent trembling with fear and waved a reproachful finger at him. 'Bringing messages is dangerous Basil because I shoot messengers.' She made her hand into an imaginary gun and pretended to shoot him adding, 'If she rings up again you can do what I do and hang up on her.'

CHAPTER 23

I worked late that evening – like most evenings. I was cutting and clearing a track at the back of the lake. The light beat me; so I had to use the tractor lights for the last half-hour. It was past nine when I got back into the kitchen. The kids and Sophie had all gone to bed. Only Jan was still up. She put my dinner in the microwave and clung to me and kissed me until the microwave's ping told us my dinner was hot. She already had the knife and fork laid out for me. But when she placed my dinner on the table and I sat down to eat it she wanted to sit on my lap with her arms round my neck and her hair in my face. I think I must have got some gravy in her hair but she didn't seem to care. We left my empty plate and cutlery on the table and went to bed as soon as I'd finished eating.

Once undressed she wanted me to throw her on the bed and pretend to rape her so she could struggle and fight against me. She kept saying, "Harder you bugger." And "I'll kill you." In the end, I was concerned that I might genuinely hurt her. She clung to me with her arm round my shoulder and one leg over mine and dropped off to sleep. But in her sleep she kept arguing as if she was having a violent row. I'd no idea what she was saying. I think some of it must have been in Norwegian but I did catch the odd word in English that didn't make sense. I wondered whether to wake her up so, if she went back to sleep again, her dreams might be less troubled but after a bit I extricated myself from her without waking her and eventually I presume I must have dropped off to sleep. It was still dark when I was woken by her rolling on top of me and telling me Rona couldn't sleep. We had sex again with her lying on top of me and kissing me but this time it was as gentle as a boat rocking on its mooring and the final gasps were no more than a summer breeze stirring the rushes at the edge of the lake.

When we got up Jan told me she wanted to take Melody and Ryan downtown to get breakfast at the German cafe. As soon as they were dressed she drove off. At more or

less the same time Sophie, Crete and Athenea came into the kitchen while I was cooking my breakfast. Crete wanted bacon, egg and toast so I gave him mine and cooked some more for myself. Sophie and Athenea only wanted cereals, but Sophie made me a mug of tea and it sort of worked out that all four of us were sitting at the kitchen table together having breakfast. As Sophie put it, "This is just like a family with Mum and Dad, two children and another one on the way." I don't think the phrase was accidental.

I left Sophie to get Crete's school lunch and as I was about to go out the door Sophie touched my hand. 'Come back at lunch time Wayne and I'll have some lunch ready for you. Say at about twelve-thirty.'

'Thanks Sophie, see you at lunchtime.' I took off in the tractor to get on with clearing the track. I checked my watch and arrived back in the tractor at exactly twelve-thirty. Sophie had cleared the kitchen table and set places for herself, Athenea and me. She wasn't wearing her usual shorts and tee shirt but was wearing a long blue skirt and a yellow top. Sophie spun round, 'How do you like my new outfit? Jasmine gave it to me but it was too big for me so I've shortened it.'

'You look great Sophie – real sexy.'

'Do you think so?'

'I sure do.'

'I've got some lunch ready for you. I've just cooked for the three of us because Jan and the kids have gone into town because she wants to buy a new outfit and get her hair cut ready for Thor arriving tomorrow.'

'Thanks Sophie, it's good of you to take the trouble to do this for me.'

'Well you did a lot for me when I couldn't get about with my broken ribs. Besides, I like you and you're going to be my new baby's Dad.'

Sophie left me to contemplate the significance of that as she put some freshly baked rolls on the table along with a salad bowl and a hot pie she took out of the oven.

‘Have you done all this cooking this morning Sophie?’

‘Well you deserve it after all the work you’re doing out there.’

As she cut the pie she told me, ‘This is called a Gypsy Pie.’

‘What’s in it?’

‘Rabbit, a bit of bacon, some meat balls rolled in flour and parsley and some seasoning. Jasmine had been having trouble with a rabbit getting into her garden; so yesterday Crete and I set a wire snare and we got it. Last night I skinned it and soaked the joints in salty water over night. I hope you like it.’

I did. And I told her so. It was a darn good pie and a vast improvement on the sandwiches I usually make. As I was eating it, another thought occurred to me. Jan is proud of her gypsy heritage. Was it just coincidence we were eating gypsy pie for lunch? We chatted while Sophie made me a mug of tea and, while it was going cool, she brought up the subject of choosing a name for her new baby. I said I thought it was a bit early yet as she only just knew she was pregnant but she was quite adamant she wanted me involved in choosing the new baby’s name. She didn’t seem to know scans were available to discover the gender of the baby before it was born. But she said she’d like it to be a surprise and it would be fun thinking up two names instead of just one. She rested her hand on mine while she said it. It would be hard for any guy not to find Sophie an attractive woman.

I kissed her before I got back on the tractor and it wasn’t just a peck on the cheek either. I’m still not sure what emotions, and implications of emotions, passed between us but it was more than the warm smile Sophie produces for everyone.

While I pushed piles of dirt with the grader blade flashbacks of the last few months went through my head like armour piercing shells. Ready or not Sophie’s baby was on its way. Apart from her children she’s got hardly a thing to call

her own. Even that new outfit she was so proud to show me was something Jasmine didn't want any more and she'd had to modify.

I was running low on diesel. The gauge showed almost empty so I needed to go downtown and get a couple of hundred litres in cans. Even two hundred litres wouldn't last long; the excavator was a thirsty brute.

While I was in town I bought Sophie a silver chain bracelet and a matching chain and pendant. It cost me a hundred-and-thirty bucks. It's not a big deal because I had to go to town anyway to get the diesel and the jeweller's shop is only a couple of hundred metres from the filling station. I just dropped the package off for her on the way back up to the lake.

It was seven o'clock by the time I packed up for the evening. As I brought the tractor back I noticed Jan's car still hadn't returned. I went into the kitchen. Sophie greeted me with a hug and a kiss. She was wearing the bracelet and chain I bought for her.'

'Jan's not back yet. Athenea is asleep and Crete is having his shower tonight instead of in the morning as it could be a bit frantic and Crete needs to get out for school. The kids have had their dinner but I thought it would be nice if you and I had dinner together.'

I gave her wrist a squeeze. 'That would be great; I'd like that Sophie.'

'I'll put our dinners in the microwave while you have a wash.'

We sat next to each other and Sophie asked me about the new track: how many trees I'd need to take out; would I cut them into rings; would we need to get a log-splitter or would I do it with an axe; where would we stack them to dry out... Then Jan came in travel-worn and carrying Ryan who was asleep. Melody stumbled up the steps half-asleep sucking her thumb and trailing a travel blanket.

Instead of wearing her hair long, Jan now had her hair done up like a package on top of her head. Melody's hair was

trimmed. I couldn't see Ryan's hair but doubtless they'd done something to his as well.

As Jan walked through the kitchen Sophie said she'd cooked a dinner for them but it would need to be heated up in the microwave. Without any thanks or explanation Jan just said, 'We've already eaten.' She continued on her way to put Ryan to bed but he started to cry as soon as she put him down. Still half-asleep in the kitchen Melody stood listening to Ryan and sucking her thumb. Sophie held out her arm to give Melody a cuddle, and Melody moved close. 'Are you a tired girl tonight?'

Melody nodded without taking her thumb out of her mouth.

'Would you like me to put you in bed?'

Melody nodded again.

Sophie got up, held Melody's hand and took her towards her bedroom. At that moment Jan came out carrying Ryan who was howling. She looked at Sophie and snapped, 'I can put my own children to bed, thank you.'

Sophie smiled at Melody. 'Of course! There's no one like your own Mum is there for giving you that goodnight kiss. Night night Melody.'

Jan turned to me. 'And you can get all your rubbish out of my room and find somewhere else to sleep. I don't need you messing up my hair after I've just had it done.'

'OK Jan, I'll clear it out now.'

With that Jan took Melody into her kid's room and shut the door. Ryan continued to howl.

Sophie held out her hand to me. 'My ribs are getting better. I can get about better now so, providing you're gentle with me, you can leave your clothes on my bedroom floor if you want.'

While Jan was in her kids' bedroom I slipped into Jan's room and, picking up my clothes, I carried them into Sophie's room. As I did so Sophie commented, 'It's a shame. Jan has tired herself out and worn out Melody and Ryan as

well. I think all three of them must be over-tired. I hope they'll get a good night's sleep.'

I have no idea how Sophie manages to stay so calm after hearing Jan speak to her like that.

I looked at Sophie. 'I think it's lucky the three of them got back at all, if she's been driving in that state.'

'I think poor Jan is worried about what'll happen when Thor arrives at the airport tomorrow. You're going with her aren't you?'

'That was the plan; but now I'm not sure she'll want me.'

'I'm certain she will. Right now she's tired, worried and confused. She'll be a different person in the morning.'

Was sleep the only antidote for Jan's mood? And was lack of sleep the only reason for her mood change? Last night she had wanted me to pretend to rape her. I still had no idea why she wanted me to do that. Might it have been a self test to discover whether she was sufficiently recovered from her ordeal? Had that pretend rape brought back memories of when she was genuinely raped and was her present mood and her early morning visit to the German cafe a result of "refreshing" those memories? Might her mood change be the result of discovering she wasn't sufficiently recovered from her ordeal? Would sleep fix that?

While I was pondering possibilities Jan emerged from the kid's bedroom and shut the door behind her. Ryan was still howling and now Melody was crying as well. Without making any comment Jan walked past us and went to her car on the drive. She made several trips and came back with enough new clothes to fill a Sally Army collection bin. But these appeared to be all new. She must have shot the works to buy that lot. And why? Was it to impress Thor tomorrow, despite the fact she'd been saying, she didn't want to see him again? Was she shopping to relieve stress? If that was the case, it didn't seem to have worked! Was it just to spend up large on Thor's credit card in case he closed the account to stop her using it, might she just be spending his money to get revenge for associating

with Karen? I couldn't help wondering if she might have bought a whole lot of maternity clothes, despite the fact that as far as I can see her figure hadn't started to change – just her mood. She'd told me enough times she wanted another baby, and now she'd apparently missed one period, which is hardly the most conclusive evidence in the world. We'll probably uncover the real reason in the end.

Remembering what Sophie had said about being gentle with her, the two of us held hands and, as suggested, I left my clothes, alongside hers, on her bedroom floor. We could still hear Ryan bellowing like a rutting bull as Sophie and I lay between the sheets. The sex was soft, warm and bewitching. So was being with her and falling asleep with her and waking with her in my arms. I don't know of anything that could have stopped us doing it again as the glow of morning touched Sophie's bedroom wall. Sophie is such an alluring woman to be with. In the afterglow of simply spending the night with her and making love to her, I have no idea why I was even contemplating getting up and getting dressed just to take Jan to Wellington Airport.

The domestic flight from Auckland was about fifteen-minutes late. We heard the announcement that the flight had landed so Jan and I waited at the bottom of the steps by the luggage carousel on the ground floor.

Jan had been up since before dawn. She had gone through the flat tidying up and picking up faster than a hay-bailer on contract could go through a paddock of mown hay ahead of a southerly storm. Which I guess is what she assumed was about to hit the tarmac. Any panel-beater would be proud of the job she'd done filling and buffing up the stress lines in her face. She was wearing one of the new summer dresses she must have bought yesterday. It was white with tiny summer flowers embroidered on it and I guess had been engineered to contrast with her naturally olive and now suntanned skin. I guess it had more than crossed her mind that, after a Northern winter, Karen would have a pale white skin. The dress had short sleeves just long enough to cover the dancing gypsy on

her upper arm, and the neckline was cut away to display what I took to be a new greenstone pendant pointing to an inviting cleavage and the promise of more to come. The hem of her dress made only a half-hearted attempt to hide her lower legs. Being tall she was wearing flat gold sandals. I assume she didn't want to look taller than Thor. For the first time since I'd met her, the gold earrings had gone. To sum up I'd say she looked as if she'd been gift-wrapped for Thor's birthday.

But that was only on the surface. Reliable Sophie was home looking after all the children and at this moment was probably giving them their lunch on the kitchen table. We were standing in the corner of the luggage pick-up area and it reminded me of the time back on the farm when the farm dogs had a wild cat bailed up in the corner of the tractor shed. Jan was the cornered cat with sharpened claws.

Passengers spilled down the steps to gather round the carousel like flies round a dung heap. But Jan wasn't looking at the carousel; she was watching the steps. The spillage of passengers became a dribble and the dribble became individual drips. Finally the drips stopped and the carousel started moving.

Have you ever sat and watched the crew of a fishing boat tossing fish-guts into the sea. If you've seen the gulls skimming in low to grab-and-take-flight then you have a fair idea what a bystander sees once an airport baggage carousel starts moving.

The carousel was almost empty when a voice behind us said, 'Jan'.

Simultaneously Jan and I turned; but neither of us was prepared for what we saw.

The woman was probably about thirty. The contours of her figure were displayed by a slim fitting pale-blue sleeveless dress with a revealing neckline and a tight fitting skirt. She was blond with shoulder length hair and blue eyes. Dimples appeared in each cheek when she smiled.

The guy in the wheelchair looked as if he'd been trampled by a herd of cows.

He turned his head to look up at the woman pushing him. 'Karen, This is my wife Jan.'

'Hi Jan! It's lovely to see you at last. Thor has told me so much about you.'

Jan ignored her and spoke directly to Thor. 'What's happened to you?'

Thor replied, 'It's a long story Jan. I'll tell you later.'

Karen looked directly at Jan. 'If you could look after Thor for a few minutes I'll go and try to extricate our luggage from the carousel.'

I offered. 'Can I help?'

'It's OK thanks, I'll recognise our bags. We've only got two; and I can use a trolley. I'll be back soon.'

Jan looked directly at Thor. 'How long have you known her?'

'About six months, probably rather less than that. I met her by a lucky chance. She's a nurse at the hospital in Bergen.'

'Do you love her?'

Thor hesitated before answering. 'Yes I suppose I do. After all, she's my sister. Why wouldn't I?'

'Your sister?'

'Yes, well strictly speaking I should say she's my half-sister. She knew about me, and had been told my name, but until a few months ago I didn't even know she existed. You know my Mum and Dad split up just after I was born?'

'Yes you've told me before.'

'My Dad went off with another woman who became Karen's mother.'

'So it was your father's family name that Karen has had from birth.'

'Yes. We're both Jorgensen.'

'And she's moved in with you?'

'Yes – well sort of. I don't know how I'd have managed without her, particularly in the last month. The chemotherapy knocked hell out of me.'

'Chemotherapy! You've got cancer?'

‘Yes, and it’s terminal.’

‘Why the hell didn’t you come home?’

‘One good reason is I get medical insurance from work so I was able to go to a private hospital in Norway and everything was paid for.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you say something?’

‘At first the doctors hoped the radiotherapy would do the trick and I’d be able to come back to you cured. But the cancer had spread and was more aggressive than they thought. I lost my hair and you wouldn’t have wanted to be seen with me.’

‘Thor, Thor, Thor. You vain idiot! How can someone as intelligent as you be so stupid? You’re my husband for God’s sake. I married you for better or worse and in sickness and in health. I’ve never wanted a perfect husband. Ever since I’ve known you you’ve been trying to force an artificial one onto me. I don’t want perfect. I want to be able to love you and your faults.’

‘You deserve more than that. You’ve told me enough times. You want another baby – a healthy baby; and you wouldn’t get that from me after I’d been through radiotherapy.’

‘Is that why you had the vasectomy? For my sake! You did it for me? It was nothing to do with... Oh! It doesn’t matter what it was to do with.’ Jan hesitated for several seconds before continuing. ‘I have a confession to make Thor. I’ve been far from a perfect wife. As a result I believe I’m pregnant; and if I am Wayne is the baby’s father.’

There was a pause as Thor looked at me. ‘I hope I’m not too early to congratulate the two of you. Unfortunately I won’t be around to see your new baby; the hospital has given me about a month. It could be less than that.’

‘And you’ve used your last few weeks to take that ghastly flight from Norway to come back and see me and the children.’

‘Of course! I love you. I’ve loved you ever since I first met you.’ He paused and shook his head. ‘Love is like the hound from Hell. Once he’s tasted your blood he won’t let you escape and if you try running he tracks you down, even to the far side of the world.’

‘Why couldn’t you tell me that before? All I knew was a woman called Karen had moved in with you. I thought... surely you can guess what I thought. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Karen tried phoning you many times but...’

‘Sorry that was my fault; I thought... I thought a whole lot of nonsense. How did you meet Karen?’

‘I was in hospital in the surgery ward at the time. It seems some of the nurses must have been chatting in the cafe and one of them mentioned to Karen that she had another Jorgenen in her ward. Karen asked her what my first name was and when she heard it was Thor she came to see me. Thor isn’t a very common name so she asked me my father’s name. Between us we put two and two together. Then she came down to the ward to see me each day. She was my only visitor. After I was discharged we kept in touch and several times she invited me to her flat to meet her partner and have a meal together.’

‘What does her partner do?’

‘He works in the oil industry and seems to spend quite a bit of time away from home. When I was feeling very ill and sick because of the chemo he happened to be away in Venezuela for several months. Karen was damn good to me and sort of moved into our flat so she could clean me up, keep an eye on me and drive me backwards and forwards to the hospital.’

‘I’m your wife. I should have been doing that for you. I’d no idea...’

‘You had more than enough to do here looking after Melody and Ryan on top of all the other problems you’ve had, without worrying about a broken down husband whose time had come. But despite me not wanting to bother you, Karen tried contacting you, but didn’t have any luck.’

‘I feel terrible now Thor. I should have been with you. I’m your wife; don’t you think that’s what I’d have wanted?’

‘Well you’re with me now Jan. And I hope you’ll be with me at the end. Then there’s nothing I want more than to think, when I’m gone, you’ll be getting on with the rest of your life. It was a wonderful surprise to discover you’ll be having the new baby that you’ve wanted. How long is it?’

‘About seven months.’

Thor looked up. ‘Here’s Karen coming now. Is there anywhere at your flat where she could stay, or should she look for an hotel?’

Jan glanced at me before answering. ‘There’s an empty room above the stables where we live. She could stay there.’

Presumably Jan and Thor would be sleeping together. If there was going to be an empty bedroom Jan must have been assuming I’d be sleeping with Sophie.

I confirmed the situation. ‘Yes that will be fine. We have an empty room.’

Jan flicked a glance at me before asking Karen. ‘How long will you be able to stay Karen?’

‘I’ve only managed to get ten days off from work. I’ve used two of them already so I can only stay for six days before I’ve got to catch my flight back. Would it be OK for me to stay at your place for six days?’

Jan answered. ‘Of course it will be all right. Do you think we’d make you stay at an hotel after all you’ve done for Thor?’

We managed to get Thor into the front seat of Jan’s car. Jan drove while I sat in the back seat with Karen. Jan and Thor spoke in Norwegian so I have no idea what they were saying although Karen mentioned later that Thor had been telling Jan about the company’s life insurance policy. Apparently it was substantial and Jan would be putting it in a trust for her children.

I mainly talked to Karen about the work we were doing establishing the riding school, horse-trekking and bird

sanctuary. Perhaps she was just being polite but as far as I could tell she seemed fascinated by the whole concept and she definitely wanted me to show her around.

It was late afternoon when we arrived back. Jan stopped the car at the top of the drive, so Thor could sit and watch Melody, Ryan, Katherine and Athenea who for once were all playing remarkably harmoniously in Katherine's sandpit. I saw Thor rest a restraining hand on Jan's hand when she was about to release the handbrake to drive on up to the stables.

He spoke in English, 'This is one of the things I came all the way from Norway to watch.'

Jan switched off the engine. We watched in silence for several minutes before Melody spotted us, which was the trigger for her and Ryan to run to meet us. Thor pushed open his car door and the children were about to try to climb in on top of him. Anticipating what was about to happen and knowing how fragile Thor had become I got out of the car and caught Melody and Ryan by the hand. 'Come on kids; let's race them back to the stables.'

I jeered at Jan. 'You can't beat us back.' We stared to run as Jan started the car; Jan let us win.

Karen managed to get Thor back into his wheelchair and between Karen, Jan and myself we succeeded in getting Thor, still in his wheelchair up the stairs and into the flat. Crete was home from school and helping Sophie who was in the process of preparing dinner for all of nine of us.

I helped Karen carry their cases into their rooms. Then I joined Sophie in the kitchen, pulled out the extension on the kitchen table and laid nine places for dinner. When I saw Karen about ten minutes later she was wearing jeans and a tee-shirt with something written on it in Norwegian. I asked her what it said but she just grinned and told me I'd have to ask Thor or Jan.

It was some time before Jan and Thor re-emerged and I was able to ask Jan to translate Karen's tee-shirt for me. When she did so, I couldn't help wondering if Karen had got it

printed especially for this trip. There was a tear in Jan's eyes as she told me it said, "Never waste the spark-of-life." She added in a whisper just for me, 'That is about all Thor has left and he's used it to come and see me and the children.'

Thor could only peck at his food and after a few minutes Jan asked if we'd all mind if she took their dinners back to their bedroom. Karen carried the plates and cutlery while Jan manoeuvred the wheelchair back along the corridor.

We had all finished our dinners and were making a start clearing away when Jan returned to tell us Thor was sleeping. Sophie took the children outside to play while Karen and I did the washing up and Jan put the dinner things away.

As we finished Karen explained they'd spent two days confined in planes and airports and, if I could spare the time, she'd like me to show her around.

I saddled up two horses and we trotted along the track past the gardens. I could see Karen knew how to ride and we broke into a canter as we took the newly formed track towards the Greek village. We crossed the first river by the brand new culvert I'd just put in and we slowed to a trot as we followed the newly gravelled causeway through the swamp. We came to the second river where Jan and I had struggled to get the cart up the bank. The new bridge was still a work-in-progress but the water was now only ankle deep and the horses splashed through it. We rode on past the area where Sophie and her Dad had been attacked, through the village and up the hill on the far side where we'd managed to get cell-phone coverage. We topped the next rise and rested. In all directions the hills seemed to interlock around us. The sun set like a funeral fire and sank below the darkening hills. We turned and rode back, but after the final river crossing, we took a brand new track that I'd cut through the bush only a couple of days before. At this stage it was still rough with tree roots, and darkness seemed to be rising up out of the forest floor to envelop us. We slowed to a walk. This track was eventually going to be the fence-line for the new predator-proof fence where I would have to bury the wire mesh. We finally rested in saddles at the

top of the Grassy Knoll looking down on the lake. Above the trees and somewhere over the ocean the evening star announced that the glow in the sky was about to fade.

The moon hadn't risen and illuminated only by the Milky Way and the faint glow from the town I put the horses back in the paddock. The light was on in the kitchen and Sophie was sitting alone drinking a cup of Milo.

When Sophie and I got up in the morning only Crete and Jan were in the kitchen. Crete was fully dressed but Jan, wearing only a house-coat and in the process of fetching a cup of water for Thor, had stopped to chat to Crete who was buttering toast.

As we entered the kitchen Jan smiled as she told us she would like all twelve of us, that is the nine of us plus Jasmine, Basil and Katherine to go downtown to the German cafe for breakfast and she wanted it to be her treat.

It was almost an hour-and-a-half later when our little convoy of cars set off for town. When we arrived at the German cafe there was a sign in the window, "Closed for a Private Function." Jan knocked the door. Karl opened up. He already had a group of tables pushed together and set for breakfast. I counted thirteen places; there were twelve of us. Obviously Jan had asked Karl to join the group. Two of the chairs had a couple of cushions on them; presumably they were for Ryan and Athenea. One chair in the group was missing to allow for Thor's wheelchair. Between them Jan and Karl had worked the whole thing out.

Orders were taken, breakfast was served and Karl joined the group. I found myself talking to Karl, and I began to understand why Jan came here for breakfast following black nights when days seemed as intangible as a gambler's promise. Karl was a good listener and only saw difficulties in terms of eliminating them.

Towards the end of the meal Karen, who was sitting next to Thor, tapped her spoon on her drinking glass. She announced, 'Thor wants to speak to you all.'

The breakfast chatter fell to silence. People stopped mid-sentence and even the children paused waiting to hear what Thor had to say. I think we all understood this was an important moment. Thor spoke quietly and often paused while attempting to regain his breath. Only his eyes remained alert.

‘I believe I’m a lucky man. When most men die they may, or may not, have provided for the wives they’ve left behind. Only a very lucky few can look through the telescope of time to see, for good or ill, their partner’s future. I believe I am one of those lucky men. I don’t deserve it, because I have made some terrible mistakes. I know I’m dying of cancer but society doesn’t know it’s dying of civilisation. I chose to conform and became part of conformity’s cruel cross. I’ve spent a lifetime besieged by adult ambitions and become so obsessed with the accoutrements of life that I forgot to live and love. I’ve looked the other way as we drove our fellow creatures to extinction. I said nothing when we allowed the dollar to become the passport to heaven. I didn’t listen to other people’s cries for help. I never had the time to dry my children’s tears. Somewhere along the way joy got mislaid. But worst of all I never understood Rona, the dancing gypsy on Jan’s arm, and as a result I’ve never known the excitement of freedom’s wild reckless ride. But I believe every one of you has heard the message of the dancing gypsy. It has taken me a lifetime to discover there’s a dancing gypsy embedded in the heart of everyone. But we have allowed civilisation to trample on her. All of you are setting her free.

Jasmine and Basil are providing both a wildlife sanctuary and a sanctuary for us where instead of being an intrusion on the planet we can become part of our natural world where we can walk naked, step softly on the earth and love and make love as nature dictates.

When I look at Sophie I see the mother of Crete and Atheneia. I’m certain there can’t be another woman in the world who would not love to be able to point to those two children and say with pride, “I raised them.” It took Sophie’s painting to show me, not just the rocks every geologist sees,

but the spirit of the mountains hidden in those rocks. Sophie, I hope you never stop painting and showing us your wild love of mountain and sky.

Jan, my dear wife Jan, you have struggled for so long to please me and to do that you sacrificed half of yourself. I'm proud of the way you stood by me. Now you can release the dancing gypsy in your soul and become the complete woman you were meant to be. I am sorry for what I've done to you but, despite my failings, you have rewarded me with Melody and Ryan. Any father could be proud to claim them as his children.

Wayne when I look at you I see the backbone of this venture. Not only do we need your country skills and a strong, steady hand but Jan and Sophie both need you equally. It took me a lifetime and a lucky chance to discover what a wonderful half-sister I had. Before the year is out, Jan will have the new baby she has wanted for so long. And that baby will have a half-brother or half-sister who, thanks to you and Sophie, will be able to become part of a bigger family that never loses sight of the dancing gypsy in your souls. With her help I know you will bind this family together.

Karen without you I would never have been able to return here to see my family for one last time and to catch a vision of their future and repair the hole in my soul. It may be my imagination but within that future I think I caught a glimpse of the Southern sun flash in your fair hair but perhaps it was just another dancing gypsy.

And there at the end of the table I see Karl with his Demon coffee. I know you aren't just the purveyor of fine coffee you have an ear that listens to what people say and, more important than that, it hears the secret words that people do not say.

Death occurs when we cease to dream. I am one of the lucky few who will carry a dream with me to my grave. My dream is now your dream and I know you will keep it alive for me because there's a dancing gypsy inside every one of us

nudging us to take a chance and discover that spontaneity is the secret ingredient of life.'

As Thor stopped speaking we all clapped and Melody spilt her blackcurrant juice on the table cloth. But instead of mopping it up, the once meticulous, Thor reached forward and used the spilt liquid to draw a dancing gypsy on the white table cloth.

Now a blackcurrant stained table cloth remains pinned to the wall in the kitchen above the stables. I can't imagine anyone ever taking it down.

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE TURN OF THE TIDE TRILOGY

*THE TURN OF THE TIDE TRILOGY ******

I have read the three books by Peter Thomas – Driftwood, Tradewinds, Turn of the Tide – which should preferably be read in that order.

Their main strength is the stories, which keep the the reader turning the pages. The Author is very knowledgeable about everything to do with the sea and boating – so these novels are particularly fascinating to people with similar interests. You can learn a lot from the explanations that are given along with the stories.

*AMAZON KINDLE REVIEW ******

“DRIFTWOOD”

By

Peter Thomas

Truly a masterpiece! The author will capture your attention from the beginning with his witty humour, elegant metaphors and romantic undercurrents that will swallow the reader up in this changing tide of emotions. A must read that is hard to put down yet leaves you yearning for more.

*AMAZON KINDLE REVIEW ******

BOOK 1

DRIFTWOOD

By

Peter Thomas

Published by Good Hope Publishing House

PO Box 596 Picton New Zealand

ISBN 978-0-98644689-2-6

Also available as an e-book on Amazon Kindle

“DRIFTWOOD”

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 Ocean for its resolution.

The story of the scow and its crew is continued in the second book in the series.

“TRADEWINDS”
BOOK 2

Published by Good Hope Publishing House
PO Box 596 Picton New Zealand
ISBN 978-0-9864689-0-2
Also available as an e-book on Amazon Kindle

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”
BOOK 3

Published by Good Hope Publishing House
PO Box 596 Picton New Zealand.
ISBN 978-0-9864689-1-9

Also available as an e-book on Amazon Kindle

TURN OF THE TIDE.

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.

“FOREWARNED”

BY

Peter Thomas

Published by Good Hope Publishing House

PO Box 596 Picton New Zealand

ISBN 978-0-9864689-9-5

In the year 2063 chaotic world events are viewed from an undisturbed Pacific Island as tentacles of change probe the shoreline searching for a beachhead.

To counter the intrusion of sophisticated technology, sex is the primary weapon available in the island to uncover the abduction of children and the passage through the islands of shipments of cargo for ruthless racketeers.

But sex used as a weapon frequently backfires.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Thomas is a retired principal lecturer, electronics design engineer and past President of the New Zealand Playwrights Association. Previous work includes fourteen stage plays and twelve text books.

The Dancing Gypsy is his fifth novel.

Originally born in the UK he has spent half his life living with his wife and family on a small farm in the foothills of the Rimutaka ranges. When retired they lived aboard their cruising yacht based in the Marlborough Sounds for six years but have subsequently moved ashore and are now living in Waikawa Bay.