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**MARLBOROUGH  
MAN**



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## PROLOGUE

*He is well overdue for a treat. He has been very patient but temptation is everywhere. The woman in the next car looks at him a second time, not in an unfriendly way. He smiles back, rolls his eyes: chauffeurs, that's all we are. Today? Swimming lessons. She's waiting too. Smooth skin but the neck showing signs of those creeping years. Perhaps a little more jowly than she should be. Her fingers play with her fringe as she checks herself, yet again, in the mirror.*

*They're coming out.*

*The parents who went inside are now zapping the locks, throwing in school bags and swimming gear, kids clambering inside, some with junk food in their plump little hands. Some whining because they're overtired. Others nattering ten to the dozen, their faces animated, bursting with life, curiosity, wonder.*

*A blonde girl climbs into the next car. A serious thing, pinched face, feeling neglected no doubt, like her mother. She too will grow up needy for attention and reassurance, unable to distinguish between the good men and the bad. Mum gives him a last lingering look, hoping maybe for something more than the complicit smile of another long-suffering overcommitted parent. She wants the flash of danger and passion that's missing from her existence. You won't get that from me, he thinks. Loving mothers aren't on my radar. He winks at her. It makes her day and she pulls out of the parking space to go home.*

*And there he is. The treat. Father is away, trying to pay their mortgage from a mining camp in Western Australia. His mother still at work in the real estate office in the city. Their only child.*

*Roll out of the parking space and pull up at the bus stop. The car door opens. He speaks the child's name.*

*The child looks up from his daydream, not expecting anybody to be there for him. But there's always a first time for everything. A smile of recognition.*

*'Hop in.'*

*'I'm meant to get the bus. Stranger danger.'*

*'But I'm not a stranger, surely?'*

*The little boy climbs in.*

# PART ONE



It's the third night running that car has been past. Same time, around ten. A low rumble, the occasional cough, missing a beat.

It could be pig hunters looking for the track just up the road that takes you into the forest on the far hill. People don't come down this road for no reason or by mistake; it doesn't go anywhere. It stops about five ks up from here at Butchers Flat. The full moon slips behind the clouds and the silhouettes of the hills fade into the background dark. I can hear the river down below, rushing over the rocks.

It could be campers heading back to their tents at Butchers after a few beers in town, but it's too damn cold for camping. It could be scavengers after some firewood from the recently logged hills. It's meant to be spring but it still gets down near to freezing and there's no dry wood left in town. Besides, who's got two hundred bucks for a trailer-load when every other bastard is on the dole, and surely it's got to get warmer soon. In winter, the wind roars up from the South Pole across the Antarctic and Southern Oceans, dusting the Alps with snow and ice, snaking through the green fjords and lonely valleys, under the door and into your bones. It will freeze your core and consume your heart if you let it. If it wasn't for the fact that New Zealand is so bloody beautiful, there are days when you could happily shoot yourself.

I live in a two-storey timber house perched on the side of a steep hill that plunges down to the river. In summer it's a trickle but in winter it boils. If the Wakamarina isn't flooded and the land hasn't slipped, my house can be reached by a narrow road winding up the valley, but the bitumen stops well before that – we're not just off the grid, we're off the tarmac. The valley is a good place to hide, whether from the toils and tribulations of the modern world, or from real people and real threats. We're adjacent

to a tectonic faultline which is statistically due for a catastrophic seismic event – any day now, according to the doomsayers and geologists. That’s okay, I’ve been expecting a catastrophe ever since I got here.

It could be those weekend miners down from their day jobs in the city, here to work their claim on the hundred-and-fifty-year-old scratchings in the riverbank that never turned a profit back then either. It’s not about the gold they say, it’s about history, tradition and mateship. And an escape from whatever ails them in the big smoke.

But it’s not them. I know who it is. It’s Sammy Pritchard. He’s finally found me and this is his way of letting me know. His reach is long, even from maximum security.

‘Come back to bed.’

‘Yes, pet.’ I look at Vanessa lying there, sleep-gummed and irritable. I think of Paulie asleep downstairs. I wonder if Sammy will just come for me and let them live.

No. Of course he won’t.

\*

The phone goes shortly after six thirty.

‘You’re wanted down at the marina, Sarge,’ Latifa says.

‘Murder?’

‘Vandalism. A boat belonging to Mr McCormack.’

‘You’re getting me out of bed at this hour for vandalism?’

‘Special request from the District Commander. Him and Mr M play squash together in Nelson.’

We all know who Mr M is, and that he owns half of Marlborough.

‘You’re five minutes away, Latifa. It’ll take me half an hour.’

‘You want to live up there with the hillbillies, that’s your business. Anyway, speed’s not the point here.’

‘What is?’

‘McCormack’s a willy-waver. He wants the top man on the job. That’d be you.’

‘Tell the DC I’m on my way.’

I grab a mug of tea and try to kiss Vanessa but she pulls the blanket over her head. It’s been happening a bit lately. She doesn’t like New Zealand; maybe she’s stopped liking me too.

The Toyota coughs into life and I back out onto the gravel driveway. There’s a blur of black and rich blue as a tui flits into a nearby silver beech,

beeping and whirring. I wonder about that car from last night. Will they return and slaughter my family while I'm out?

No, Sammy would want me to watch. They'll wait for my return.

\*

At Havelock Marina, the sun washes the green hills across the water and glints off the rows of pleasure craft. A tall man with short greying hair is stamping his feet to ward off the chill. It's McCormack and he's dressed for a day on the boat. It's only Tuesday, alright for some. His companions, a man and two women, sit in a white BMW parked nearby, sipping takeaway coffees and looking bored. The boat is big and has an extra half-berth at the rich end of the marina away from the riffraff. I glance at the damage: spray paint on the starboard hull of his treasured catamaran. Where once it said *Serenity II* it now says *Smaug*.

'Smaug, sir?'

He looks at me like I'm a moron. 'The evil dragon in *The Hobbit*. The Desolation of.'

I take out a notebook to seem interested. 'Why Smaug, sir? Do you think someone might have some sort of grudge against you?' Like maybe half the population of the top of the South Island? I've seen his handiwork on the drive down the valley road to the marina: logged hills shaved into sad submission, once-stunning landscape become devastated moonscape.

'Try that hippie chicken farmer up your way.'

*Up my way?* I'm thinking. How do you know where I live?

He shoves an iPhone in my face. 'He's been sending me threatening emails.'

'*Die, you rapacious cunt.*' I nod. 'Rapacious. He knows his way around a dictionary then.' I tell McCormack to forward the email to us, and he does so with a few finger prods. The wind changes and for a moment I catch the rotten odour of bad breath. All that money and he can't even floss regularly.

'What's that accent of yours?' asks McCormack.

'Geordie. North-east England.'

'Dark satanic mills and all that stuff?'

'Not anymore, they closed them all down. Lovely and green now. Like here.'

A sniff. 'Maybe you should have stayed there.'

'Then I wouldn't have had the pleasure of meeting you, sir.'

Behind me the car window rolls down. A weary drawl from one of McCormack's travel companions, a smooth-faced man with blond hair that flops in his eyes. 'Let's just forget it, Dickie – back to the shack for brekkie, yeah?'

'This has ruined our day,' says McCormack, pocketing his phone. 'Sort that greenie prick out.'

'Leave it with me, sir. I'll have a word with him and see if he knows anything about it.'

'A word? Just arrest him.'

All around us there are cameras and signs saying twenty-four-hour surveillance. That's the kind of service you can command when you own a big flash boat. This shouldn't be too hard, Havelock isn't known for the quality of its criminals.

'I'll keep you updated on the progress of our inquiries, sir.'

'You know I play squash with your boss, don't you?'

'Yep. Me too,' I lie. 'I think it's his backhand that lets him down.'

\*

Latifa Rapata hands me a cardboard cup of coffee as I walk through the door. Two years out of police college and she has the jaded air of a thirty-year vet. 'The DC phoned five minutes ago. He'd like a word.'

McCormack didn't waste time whingeing to his squash pal.

'Nick,' says the DC. 'What the hell are you up to?'

'The pursuit of justice, sir.' My coffee is good and strong, from the bakery down the road. 'Without fear or favour.' Try changing the subject. 'Any news on that missing kid?'

'Nothing. It's been a week. Thin air. Look, Nick, give me a break, mate. McCormack's a dick but it's not just me he knows. He hangs out with all those government and public-service wankers in Wellington. Those people are reviewing my budget as we speak.'

There's a memo on my desk, calls for voluntary redundancies and early retirements. I can't afford that, not yet.

'Three per cent efficiency dividend. You know what that means, Nick. It means station closures, rationalisations, all that palaver.' A studied pause. 'How is that boy of yours? Paulie? Must be eleven by now?'

Subtle, I'm thinking. Really subtle. I know he doesn't mean it, he's just reminding me of the quid pro quo. 'Leave it with me, boss.'

\*

Latifa is in the driving seat as we wind our way back up the valley.

‘So McCormack is blue blood is he?’ I ask.

She nods and changes down for a steep, sharp turn. ‘Fifth-generation Scot, and an arsehole from way back.’

‘You’re not in his fan club either then?’

‘Why would I be? His great-great-whatever grandfather stole a big block of land from mine two hundred years ago and he hasn’t said sorry yet.’

I gesture at the scenery. ‘He owns all this?’

‘Bought and paid for.’ Back up to fourth for the straight, and nudging a hundred before the next hairpin bend. ‘That hill over there is next for the chop.’

A mountain of pine heading for matchsticks. ‘It’s like the fucking *Lorax*.’

‘What?’

‘A Dr Seuss book, I read it to my boy.’

‘Soows, boowk. I love that accent of yours, Sarge. If you weren’t already married I’d probably find you sexy or something.’

Latifa missed the police college class about how to talk to your superiors. ‘Your turn to buy the fush and chups today,’ I tell her.

‘At least I belong here.’ She lifts her chin. ‘Charlie the Chicken Man is next on the left.’

He lives on the same valley road as me but eight kilometres away. I must have passed his gate a thousand times and we’ve never even met. We pull up at a functional – dare I say, ugly – box of a house with open paddocks either side and a half-cleared pine hill looming behind. Chickens clucking in the field – that ticks the free-range box – and a rooster cockadoodling way beyond dawn. In the other paddock some recently shorn alpacas are chewing on straw bales. In front of me stands Charlie the Chicken Man. He is short and hairy, buttoned neck to toe against the sandflies, and his gumboots are caked in grey mud. He holds his hand out, a welcoming smile on his face.

‘Charlie Evans.’

‘Nick Chester, Havelock Police.’

‘I’ve seen you around but I don’t think we’ve actually spoken.’

‘You must’ve been keeping out of trouble, then.’ I let Latifa explain the McCormack situation to him. She needs the practice on her people skills.

‘McCormack.’ Charlie snorts. ‘Piece of work.’

Latifa shows him the email on her iPad. ‘Did you send this?’

Charlie reads it. '*Rapacious cunt*: yeah that was me. And he is.'

'Did you do this?' She shows him a photo of the vandalism.

He grins. 'Smaug. I like it.'

'So did you?'

'No.'

'Can you account for your movements over the last twenty-four hours, sir?' Latifa says sir like she doesn't mean it. I know from experience.

Charlie can account for himself and does. He worked the farm, fed the chickens and alpacas, and looked after his bedridden wife who's dying of cancer. 'Pancreas,' he says. 'Anything else you wanted to ask?'

I look at his boots. 'Where's the grey mud from? All I can see around here is brown.'

'Follow me.'

So we do. Trudging up the back of the paddock as the wind picks up, a bellbird chimes, and the alpacas bray. I slap a sandfly or two off my neck but I know they'll itch like crazy later. We're heading towards the bottom of the logged hill and a culvert channelling the run-off. Charlie turns and waves his hand at the hill behind.

'McCormack's handiwork. Bastards cleared this half about a month ago.'

'Harvested,' says Latifa. 'His trees, his harvest, his right. No law against it.'

'Bloody should be.' Charlie points down into the culvert, clogged with grey mud from the hillside. 'In the big rain a fortnight ago, this lot came down and clogged my drainage channel so the slurry spread all over my pasture and ruined the grass. Now I have to buy in straw to feed the alpacas. That's half my income from the chickens gone,' he snaps his fingers, 'like that.'

'Did you talk to McCormack about it?' I ask.

'Not interested.'

'Maybe try getting in a lawyer or something?' Latifa says.

'His will be bigger and better. He's got money to burn. They're clearing the other half in the next month or two.' Charlie gives the blocked culvert a last sad look. 'Maybe this is what they mean by the economic trickle-down effect.'

Latifa hands him our business card. 'Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to damage Mr McCormack's boat?'

'Join the queue,' he says, pocketing it.

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The rest of the day is spent doing paperwork. Reports, budgets, circulars and such, and answering more emails than a man should receive in a place like this. Havelock, population around five hundred, is the greenshell-mussel capital of the world according to the sign just outside town. That's pretty much the economy here: mussels, farmed salmon, sheep and logging. You could boil the population down to two personality types: those who like nature and those who would happily shoot it and skin it. Havelock is a two-cop station, a quaint little white weatherboard shack on the main street. Most of our work concerns bad or drunk drivers and their consequences, or bad drinkers and their consequences. Everybody knows it doesn't really need a sergeant in charge but I wasn't going to drop a pay grade to come and hide here, so that's that.

In theory, my chain of command goes east via Picton, the ferry port, then south through Blenheim, the capital of Marlborough, then west over to district headquarters in Nelson. Follow the dotted-line track and it looks like a man lost in the desert. In practice, I pretty much work to the DC in Nelson because the fewer people who know about me the better. The Tasman Police District covers the whole of the top of the South Island. It has to be one of the most spectacular beats in the world. There's a sprinkling of small towns and a couple of places that call themselves cities. There are remote farms, vineyards, pristine beaches, a thousand coves and bays: a bonanza of boltholes and last resorts. The compact fjord-like coastline of the Marlborough Sounds adds up to nearly two thousand kilometres, that's like two-thirds of the way across America. As befits a land that markets itself as Middle Earth, it is peopled by industrious and good-hearted hobbits, some fierce grumpy dwarves, haughty elves, and a smattering of orcs to keep the weekend patrols busy. For the most part, it's a stunningly beautiful and peaceful place to hide.

As I turn the last corner on the unsealed section leading to our home, the sun drops behind the hill. A dun-coloured weka darts from the undergrowth out across the road. Pulling into the driveway, I see a dark blue ute with a couple of bull mastiffs caged in the back. Pig dogs. They set up a frenzy of barking and I hope the cages are locked; I've seen what they can do to a fully-grown hog. In the ute tray there's a collection of guns and knives and tools, a chainsaw. Cold with dread, I unclip my Glock and head for the front door.

Sunderland, England. Four years earlier.

Sunderland's motto is *Nil desperandum auspice Deo*, or loosely translated, *Never despair, trust in God*. With the unemployment statistics, real or imagined, rarely dipping below twenty per cent for the last three generations, you need something like that to cling to. Or a win on the pools. The shipyards and coalmines that once defined the place are long gone, replaced by Poundland, and Gregg's the Bakers. But in this mock-Tudor mansion behind a tall fence in the select and secluded suburb of Cleadon, such grimy realities are out of sight and out of mind.

'Marty, get this lad a Stella.'

For a man who's a millionaire several times over and hangs out with captains of industry, Sammy Pritchard is a man of simple tastes. There's nothing he likes more than a hot curry and cold lager in South Shields every Friday, a season ticket to watch Sunderland at the Stadium of Light where the score is depressingly predictable. Sammy's gang. I'm looking at them now: a motley collection of beer guts, dead eyes, and cruel mirth. Sammy keeps a few of us lads close: some are hard men, like Marty, and some are clever or useful to him, like me. Some are just useless twats who are always good for a laugh.

Tonight is film night, the first Thursday of every month, unless business prevails. We gather in Sammy's basement den with its big screen, surround sound, comfy chairs and a full fridge. Sometimes it's comedy: Sammy can't get enough of *Blazing Saddles* – he loves the campfire farting scene and the one where the horse gets punched. Sometimes it's porn: Sammy keeps these old VHSs from the 1980s when the hair and mos were as big as everything else on the screen. Mostly we hoot at them but some of us go home with a stiffy later. Vanessa likes those nights.

And then there's Sammy's absolute all-time untouchable favourite.

Marty hands me that beer and winks. 'Y'alright there, Nicky?'

'Aye, mate.' I pop the tin and lift it in salute. 'Cheers.'

His look stays on me a second longer than it should. According to the intelligence file, Marty Stringfellow is the Godfather-in-waiting and he's down for at least three murders and several serious woundings. Two of the murders were street dealers caught skimming. Sammy runs a tight ship and he wasn't having any of that – people might start thinking he's soft. So he sent out Marty, who's very handy with a knife. The dealers were butchered and dumped at the town tip. The third was a teenage Ukrainian girl whom Sammy had gifted to a Newcastle businessman to sweeten a property deal. She ran away: embarrassment all round. She was found on display, throat slit, in a toilet cubicle in a city centre nightclub. No more runaways since. There's no proof on Marty yet, but I'll find it. I hope.

How come I'm in Sammy Pritchard's inner circle? He thinks I'm a bigwig in the Prisons Department. And so I am, showing up most days to earn my crust like I've done for the last twelve months we've been running this operation. I first met Sammy on the Whitburn golf course one brisk spring morning and cheekily challenged him to a bet; letting him win the hundred quid, not by much, so he'd think he earned it. Since then, in my capacity as a supposed logistics guru for Prisons, I've helped Sammy get some contraband and favours for friends inside, hurt some enemies, and moved guards and prisoners around at will to further Sammy's aims. And he pays me well – pity it all goes back into the evidence drawer. He also seems to really like me.

There's a lot of work gone in to trapping Sammy. He's flagged as a level three. SOCA – the Serious and Organised Crime Agency – want him locked up for a long time. I was perfect for the job: on the fast track at Greater Manchester Police and fresh back from a training course with the FBI. It's years since anybody in Sunderland ever heard of me, and even then I was just a pisshead student on the tap. And, last but not least, I went to the same school as Sammy: Monkwearmouth – the Monkeyhouse. I was five years behind him so he doesn't remember me but that connection is enough. It's noted in the file, quote: 'For a nasty piece of work, Pritchard can be remarkably sentimental and trusting.'

'Put the DVD in, Marty, there's a good lad.' We all know Marty is

ambitious, and Sammy is jerking his leash. He turns to me. ‘How’s that lad of yours, Nicky?’

He means Paulie. Yes, that’s how low I can go. I’m using my own Down’s syndrome son to build my undercover legend in order to entrap a shitty Sunderland gangster who’ll be replaced by ten others the day he goes down. ‘Aye, champion, Sammy. Thrilled to bits with the season ticket. He’s looking forward to the Man U game on Saturday.’

‘We’ll get hammered.’

‘He doesn’t care. As long as he’s got his Bovril and pie he could be anywhere, he could even be watching Newcastle United.’

‘The Mags? Fuckin’ hell. Little twat does that, I’ll have the season ticket back.’

‘And I’ll have his Bovril and pie an’ all.’

Sammy lifts his Stella and grins.

Movie time. I’ve been in the inner circle for about six months and we’ve already watched it five times. Sammy could recite the dialogue by heart and often does, under his breath; lips moving, face twitching. The movie is *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*. It’s by Sam Peckinpah, the Sultan of Splatter. Here’s the synopsis: an American bartender and his prostitute girlfriend go on a road trip through the Mexican underworld to collect a million-dollar bounty on the head of a gigolo. I sometimes wonder if Sammy’s fixation on it is just because it’s made by another Sammy P. No, there’s more to it than that. Violent retribution is his guiding mantra. Legend has it that when he was a lad in the 1970s, he ran with the Seaburn Casuals, Sunderland’s football hooligan hordes, and excelled himself by thumbing out the eyes of a Newcastle supporter. Sammy would have been about fifteen at the time.

The lights go down and we settle in.

All through the movie, Marty Stringfellow is casting glances my way. Sizing me up. We’re about the same age, same height, same build. I reckon I’m better looking though. He’s been to uni as well – Leicester. If he wasn’t an enforcer for Sammy Pritchard he could have been a middle-manager by now. He doesn’t trust me. He identifies with the bounty-hunting bartender. Me? I’m with Alfredo Garcia, the ill-fated gigolo.

New Zealand police don't routinely carry firearms but I've got special dispensation – well, a nod and a wink from the DC, really. I slip the safety off the Glock and slide the screen door open. A shape moves in the gloom.

'Dad!' Paulie gives me a hug. He looks down at the gun in my hand, purses his lips and shakes his head. 'I'd put that away if I were you. You know what Mam's like.'

He leads me back into the kitchen. There are two blokes with their backs to me and Vanessa is looking happier than I've seen her in ages. They turn and smile. Two big Maori lads, forties, nudging fifty maybe, they rise to shake my hand.

'Steve,' says one.

'Gary,' says the other. My hand is intact, but only just.

'Tea?' says Vanessa, pulling a mug towards the pot.

'Sure.' I take a seat beside her.

'Steve and Gary were wondering if the cabin was available for rent.'

We could do with the money, we both know that. Our rainy-day fund for Paulie. 'What's your line of work?' I ask Steve.

'This and that,' says Gary for him. 'We've just done five years in Perth, FIFO, but now they're laying people off. Lovely place, nice beaches, but expensive.'

'And too fucken hot,' says Steve. He realises his mistake. 'Sorry, missus. Sorry about the language.'

Vanessa finishes pouring my tea. 'We've heard worse.'

'Fucking right,' says Paulie, lifting his can of Coke Zero.

It breaks the tension. Everybody laughs, even me. 'And now?'

Gary again. 'Odd jobs, fixing stuff, fencing, chopping down trees. Whatever's going.'

I drink some tea. 'The guns and the dogs?'

'We hunt sometimes. People buy the meat.'

'We were thinking a month or two,' says Vanessa. 'See how we go.'

We? 'Was that you guys driving up and down the road the last few nights?'

'Yep,' says Gary. 'Sorry if it spooked you. We've been camping up at Butchers Flat but we heard about this place.' He nods at the badge on my uniform. 'Took a while to get our nerve up.'

I'm relieved. Me and my paranoia. Vanessa seems happy enough with the idea and the extra presence might be good if Sammy Pritchard does send somebody. I thumb over my shoulder. 'I don't want dogs or guns on the property.'

'No problem. There's someone we can leave them with, down the road.'

'They can take the dogs but they can't take you?'

'Their property isn't as grand as yours,' says Gary. 'Not enough room.'

We agree a price and shake on it. Gary hands over the first month in cash. I shove it in my wallet. 'Receipt?'

'No need,' says Gary.

'What's your surnames? I'll need them for my tax return.' It's a lie and we all know it.

'McCaw,' says Gary, and spells it out.

'Lomu,' says Steve, doing the same. McCaw and Lomu, All Blacks rugby legends, household names. Their eyes twinkle. Say it ain't so.

We've swapped lies. I leave it at that. 'If it doesn't work out for any reason you'll get a refund.'

'Seems fair,' says Gary.

They leave to drop off the dogs and guns and pick up their bags.

'Nice eyes,' says Vanessa.

'Steve or Gary?'

'You,' she says, squeezing my hand. We plonk Paulie in front of the Play Station and head upstairs to bed.

\*

The phone goes early again. If it's about McCormack and his damn boat, I swear blood will be spilt.

'You awake?' says Latifa.

'What is it?' I growl.

'The DC wants you to come in.'

‘McCormack?’

‘Not this time. They found the missing boy this morning. The one from Nelson.’

‘Alive?’

‘No. They found him on our patch. By the shoe fence just outside town.’ Her voice cracks. ‘Somebody messed him up badly.’

\*

A couple of kilometres south as you drive out of Havelock on State Highway 6 – the road to Blenheim and the vineyards – there’s a stretch of fence on your left. Three wires strung between pine posts, sheep in a paddock and green hills all around. The fence itself probably runs maybe a kilometre along the road but the shoes hang off just a one-hundred-metre stretch: little kids shoes with pink stars and sparkly bits, trainers, wedding shoes, dancing shoes, Sunday best, footy boots, you name it. There must be a thousand pairs, all hanging by their laces. I don’t know the story of how it all started. Maybe there was a car crash and some people died on this notorious stretch of road, and maybe a pair was left in memory. Maybe others were left there later to share the sadness of that day. Maybe even more were left to mark other people’s sadnesses. But most likely they’re there for no reason at all, just to be part of the crowd, some kind of belonging: Havelock’s answer to Facebook.

There’s a white tent erected halfway along and crime-scene tape flapping in the breeze. Uniforms are guarding the perimeter and blocking the road, and Latifa is telling some gawpers to get lost. There are forensics people in their zip-up jimjams sifting the ground and taking photographs. There are detectives with clipboards talking to locals or trying to get signals on their mobiles. They’ll be lucky, it’s pretty patchy out here. The sun is somewhere behind rain clouds; another hour and everyone will be shrugging on the wet-weather gear. Even the DC is here, his prop-forward shoulders straining his police windcheater. He summons me over to talk to one of his detectives.

‘Nick, this is DI Marianne Keegan. Wellington office sent her. She’s running things.’

Wellington? I’m thinking. All the detectives in Tasman and Marlborough on holiday, are they? We shake hands and say hello. She has strong features and looks like she does stuff to keep fit. Her hand is cool and smooth, the grip firm. She seems destined for the big league in a few years and

the DC can't be too far from retirement now. She thanks me for having my team – that's me and Latifa – help out, and asks for a list of locals we should be talking to, either because they're gossipy know-it-alls or because they're possible suspects. 'Living round here,' she says, 'a lot of people have to be hiding from something.'

I detect the hint of a Liverpool accent from way back. 'Scouser?'

'Yes, I was, but I'm a detective now. The list asap, hmmm?' She walks away to issue instructions to a flunky.

'Found the boat vandal yet?' asks the DC.

'No. How much do we know about this kid?'

'Jamie Riley, six. From Stoke, other side of Nelson. Good family, nice boy by all accounts. He didn't come home after a swimming lesson out at Richmond, Monday before last. We've looked into the parents and relatives and associates and so far all clean as a whistle. They're genuine, absolutely devastated. Don't know what's hit them.'

'How did he die?'

'Neck snapped. But there was other damage too. Somebody has had him for a week now.' He turns to me, he looks angry. 'Anybody round here top of your list?'

'Nobody jumps to mind. There's a few sniffers and flashers but I don't recall any with violence flags on their record.'

'Pull them in anyway. Maybe they know something. Maybe they've graduated.' He examines the screen on his warbling mobile. 'And keep me in the loop on the vandal thing.'

I spend the next couple of hours in the office drawing up a list of sad bastards and busybodies for Detective Inspector Keegan, zapping it through to her email. I offer to have myself or Latifa accompany her team if any local liaison is deemed necessary. She says thanks. By lunchtime I'm peckish and twiddling my thumbs. It's not what I expected on a day when a child is found murdered on my patch. The phone goes.

'Sergeant Chester?'

'Speaking.'

'Jessie James from the *Journal*. Latifa said I should call you?'

'What about?'

'Well, the murder obviously.'

'You need to talk to Police Media.'

'I'm not after a story, silly. I've got a tip-off for you.'

‘Go ahead.’

‘There’s a bloke out on the Sounds. You can only get there by boat. He’s got a past.’

‘What kind of past?’

‘Kids. In Australia. He’s from Perth.’

‘How do you know about him?’

‘My boyfriend works on the mail boat. He’s from Perth as well. A few months ago now he thought this guy looked familiar. He checked the name on the letters and then googled him. He got a result. After this morning, I thought you might like to know.’

I reach for a pen. ‘Tell me.’

\*

That rain rolled in and the wind revved up. The police boat came over from Picton to pick us up and now we’re out on the far reaches of Pelorus Sound bumping through the waves on a wet Wednesday afternoon. There’s Marianne, two of her detectives, a handful of ninjas from the Armed Offenders Squad, and there’s me. Coves and islands rear out of the water, sanctuaries for threatened prehistoric lizards and birds that never learned to fly. As we draw near Patrick Smith’s secluded cove, a pod of dolphins skips alongside, and a chopper hovers over the bach, a weatherboard cabin nestled into the folds of a hill.

Patrick is there on his jetty to greet us with a black hairy pig beside him sitting at heel like a dog. Smith doesn’t look particularly like a child molester, no more so than anyone else in Marlborough anyway. I wonder whether the tactical firearms guys were really needed but the Perth police assured us he has a temper. Or maybe they were having a laugh.

‘Patrick,’ says Marianne stepping onto the jetty. He holds out his hand but she ignores it. I don’t blame her. You never get used to the idea of shaking hands with a known kiddie-fiddler.

Having made sure that Smith didn’t go anywhere until we got there, the chopper departs to another job, or a nice hot cup of tea back at base.

‘You’ll be wanting to come in out of the weather,’ says Patrick. Middle-aged and nondescript, he looks and sounds like a private school teacher, which is what he was. Twenty years in one of Perth’s most prestigious; all those parents paying big money to have Patrick bugging their little boys. Over the years a few complained but the school hushed them up until finally they had to let Patrick go, with a nice payout. If it hadn’t been for

the Royal Commission he wouldn't have had to come here to hide, and Jessie James' boyfriend wouldn't have recognised him. The allegation of rough play by one victim has piqued Marianne's interest. She stalks off towards the back and the big pig munches on a biscuit, slobber dripping from its bristly gob.

'He answers to Ginger,' says Patrick, following my gaze.

'But he's black,' I say.

'He doesn't know that. He's not burdened by other people's expectations.'

'They're waiting for you inside.'

We sit around a pine kitchen table in a cosy, cluttered room with a view over to the nature reserve. A log burner crackles away and the kettle is on but nobody wants anything. The tactical guys are outside having a smoke.

'We need to take you into the station, Patrick. Get some samples of your spit. Ask a few questions.' Marianne gazes around the room. 'You won't mind if we take a look around?'

'Do I have a choice in the matter?'

'Not really.' She gives him a chilly smile. 'You might want to pack an overnight bag.'

She designates me to supervise his packing while they tear the place apart. The rain pounds the windows as I watch him fold a couple of shirts.

'Even somewhere like this, you can't escape your past,' he says, putting some undies, socks, and toiletries into a holdall.

'Yep,' I say.

'If you don't mind me saying, you seem a bit old for this.'

'Old for what?'

'Nursemaiding me while they do the real cop work.'

'Familiar with this routine, are you?'

'Every few weeks in Perth I'd get the treatment. Then it followed me to Adelaide. Then Hobart.'

'Looking for sympathy?'

'No. But usually it's one of the younger ones that watches over me.'

I step closer to him. 'Finished packing?'

'It must be hard not being at the centre of things anymore.' He zips up his bag. 'I feel for you.'

\*

By the time we get back to Havelock, it's late afternoon and growing dim. They've taken Patrick to the lock-up thirty-odd ks away at Blenheim

for questioning. Just before finishing for the day, I run my tenants Gary McCaw and Steve Lomu through the system and – guess what? – they don't exist. So why did I let them move onto my property? Vanessa likes them and it seems I will do anything, any stupid thing, to keep her happy. I set off home for the eighteen-kilometre drive back up the Wakamarina Valley. There is a police house available in town but I choose not to use it and now it's Latifa's. If I do need to stay overnight for any reason, there's a room at the motel or the camp bed and sleeping bag at the office. At the turn off at Canvastown, so named for the old gold rush mining camp, a few cars are parked outside the Trout Hotel. A *For Sale* banner has been hanging off the front for over a year now.

I pass Charlie Evans tending his alpacas and breaking up straw bales. We exchange a wave. The further you go, up past the hobby farms and weekenders, the more remote, beautiful and feral it gets. Finally, turning into the drive, I see the dark blue ute parked outside the cabin and wonder again whether it was such a good idea to invite Steve and Gary into our lives. They're cooking something out the back on the barbecue and sinking a beer and they give me a nod. Inside, Paulie is watching a *Spongebob* cartoon on TV and Vanessa is humming to herself while she boils soup on the stove.

'Nice smell.' I slip my arm around her waist and she lets me.

'Thanks. The soup should be good too.'

'How's it been around here today?'

'Quiet. Paulie's been hanging out with the guys. Gary's going to show him how to trap eels tomorrow.'

'Is that a good idea?' Eels around here can be as thick as your arm and twice as long. Paulie gets squeamish and it bothers him and us for days afterwards.

'Gary's good with him. He's got a brother the same.'

'Okay.' I study her. 'You seem happy.'

'It's a bit of a worry, a tick on the calendar two days in a row.' She's right. It's been nothing but crosses since we arrived. There they sit in the top left hand corner of each day square, two years' worth of calendars, two years' worth of crosses. 'What about you? I heard it on the news: the little boy, those poor parents.'

'Nasty. We've picked somebody up but I doubt it's him.'

'Who?'

‘A bloke out on the Sounds. He has a history back in Oz.’

‘Be good if it was him. It’d be over soon.’

‘That’d be nice.’

‘Why don’t you think he’s your man?’

‘Too much of a sad bastard. The bloke that’s done this, he’s a lot colder.’

She casts a warning glance Paulie’s way. ‘We need some wood chopped for the stove. Make yourself useful.’

Outside to split some logs. After I’ve chopped a wheelbarrow load there’s a crunch of gravel behind me. I whip round. It’s Steve. With a knife. My hand grips the wood axe tighter, I’m gauging distances, swing arcs.

‘Can I ask a favour?’ In the other hand he’s got a whetstone. He rubs the knife on it.

‘Go ahead.’

‘We’re out after a pig tonight. Wondering if it’s okay to gut and skin it out the back in that empty shed?’

I think of Paulie accidentally wandering in on the scene. ‘I don’t think so, mate. The boy.’

‘Your missus mentioned he’ll be at school tomorrow. We can padlock the door overnight. We’ll have it cleaned up, hosed out and away before he comes home.’ A pause. ‘She seemed okay with that.’

‘I’ll be out at work.’ I shrug and nod. ‘If Vanessa is happy, then I am.’ But I’m not, and he knows it. I don’t like being played off against my wife. Is it my imagination or does he seem to find this all a bit amusing?

‘Cheers, Nick,’ he says. ‘Appreciated. There’ll be a bit of pork in your fridge when you get home tomorrow night.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Bad business in town, I hear.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Catch the bastard soon, eh? We can set the dogs on him.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘These people keep on getting away with it.’ He strolls off, slapping the knife against his thigh. ‘That Latifa? She reckons you’re all right.’

A tick of approval from my junior. I’m blessed. ‘Glad to hear it. How do you know her?’

‘Latifa knows everybody.’

\*

In the middle of the night I hear the ute pull up out by the shed. Low murmurings and grunts as a weight is lifted. A curse and a chuckle. The clink of chain against roof beam. I hear, or I imagine, a tear and a wet slop as the pig guts fall to the floor. The hosepipe. The shed door padlocked against idle inquiry by Paulie. I spoon into Vanessa and she presses back into me, clutches my hand to her breast. When I close my eyes again, I see blood dripping from the pig's torn throat.