

## PROLOGUE

A predator-free New Zealand? What a great idea. A Utopian vision requiring the kind of focus and resources you'd need to put a man back on the moon. Where there's a will there's a way – but is there the will? How many rats, stoats, weasels, possums, feral cats would need to die? How many stars are there in the sky? Still, all he can do is his bit, here in this slice of Eden, once a week, regular as clockwork. Tramping deep into the native bush around Pelorus Bridge to check and reset the traps, do a body count, and try against the odds to save a tiny native long-tailed bat from extinction – even if it is the ugliest little bastard you ever saw.

Bob checks his map. Follow the pink ribbons and there should be a set of possum, rat and stoat traps over to the right. He's done this countless times but sometimes his old eyes and mind deceive him: Alzheimer's or just a trick of the ever-changing light? God, it's beautiful in here. Yes, there's the constant throb of tourist and other traffic across the bridge along with the more distant roar of chainsaws on the adjoining pine plantation over the hill. But close your ears, open your eyes, and it's a dappled Rivendell of vivid mosses and ancient rimu; another world. Plus it gets him out of the house, breathing fresh air, staving off his dotage and the old worries that sometimes slink in.

Except the air isn't so fresh. You can smell a garrotted possum, a crushed rat or stoat from metres away. Something stinks today for sure. Ripe as. He can hear flies buzzing too; it must be a relatively fresh feast. Up ahead he sees a clearing, the tell-tale yellow of the wasp-bait box on a black beech tree, the blue funnel of a possum trap. Nothing hanging from it. The smell must be in one of the wooden boxes, the rat and stoat traps maybe.

Bob stumbles. Foot caught in a gnarly vine, aggravating the tendons from that snap when he fell downstairs last year. Old bones refusing to fully heal, muscles and sinew stubbornly resisting the mend. His nostrils

flare. Stoat or rat? That's a big smell for such a wee creature. The wind rustles the leaves and ferns and a black humming cloud lifts and settles again on the far side of a totara tree. He realises he's been holding his breath, not from the smell but from something more primal. Fear has crept under the skin and taken hold like the delicate fungi on dead bark. The emerald shimmer dims as cumulus covers the sun. Bob reaches the clearing, moss sponging and twigs cracking under his hiking boots. He edges around the totara to get a better look.

The body is sitting propped against the tree as if just taking a rest; held in place by a rope around the neck and around the tree trunk. A deer. Female, he's guessing, blanketed by flies and maggots. Liquids, dark and viscous, have seeped out – the face and front are open to the world. Bob fights the urge to spew but it's not like he hasn't come across such a scene before.

A rustle and crunch behind him. Ferns lift and a figure steps through in backwoods gear.

'You?' Where there's a will there really is a way. Of course there is. There always was and would be. Bob waves his hand sadly at the deer corpse. 'Poor bugger's come a cropper.'

'Shame,' says the visitor, nodding.

Count the seconds. A sob of anguish. 'Oh, God.' Then a sound somewhere between a thump and a cough. Barely enough to disturb the blowflies.

## 1.

The river is in fine form this Thursday morning, bubbling through the gorge and catching the green of the surrounding pine plantations. I even saw a trout yesterday in the deep part of the pool. Imagine that. Some days it's so clear you can see a bloody fish three hundred metres away through your window. Especially when you have a telescopic sight.

I'm locked on the centre of the man's back. He hasn't realised he's been spotted. Broad shoulders, he's an easy target. My finger curls on the trigger. One squeeze and he's gone. The river will carry him down to the Sounds and out with the tide. They keep on coming and I have to keep on sending them away. Otherwise it'll never stop.

'You can't shoot him, Nick.' Vanessa nudges me with her hip and plants a mug of coffee at my elbow. 'He's got resource consent from the council.'

'Fucking goldminers. Why don't they just piss off and leave us alone?'

'Two days a week, September to April. Even then the river needs to be low enough for him to get in with his dredge. It's rained most weekends since.' She pats my knee. 'It's just his silly hobby. One more week to go and that's it until spring. Relax, pet.'

Ever since a Canadian company discovered a significant deposit of the yellow stuff down near the pub eighteen months ago, gold fever has returned to the valley after a hundred and fifty years. Men, and it usually is men, from all walks of life but with the same greedy gleam in the eye knock at our door regularly. With friendly smiles they ask if it's okay to use our path to access the river to pan and fossick, to park their utes in our driveway, to store their dredging and excavation gear in our shed. Mate?

No. It's not. I'm beginning to see *Deliverance* from the point of view of the hillbillies. And then their smile slips and it's clear they never wanted to be your friend in the first place.

'Chancers and users the lot of them.'

'You better get to work, grumble-bum. You're obsessing again.' Vanessa swallows the rest of her coffee. 'Paulie!' she yells. 'Time to go.'

Vanessa's teaching at Havelock Primary but it's her turn to get Paulie to his high school twenty k's west in the opposite direction. Early starts all round but Vanessa is loving it and Paulie seems happy enough.

'Lunch?' he says, peering into his school bag anxiously.

'No, I couldn't be bothered today, sweetie. See what you can scrounge from the other kids.'

'Mum!'

'Joke. You. In the car. Now.' She leans over and kisses me, slips her tongue between my lips. 'Have a nice day.'

I promise to try. Paulie has found his ham roll and a banana. He gives me a thumbs up and heads for the door.

Through the window I see the miner has pulled on a wetsuit and started up the dredge. A souped-up lawnmower hum fills the gorge and drowns out the river and bird sounds. A plume of grey sludge blossoms from the infernal machine and clouds the pristine waters.

Driving down the Wakamarina valley road I pass more and more logging sites. As usual it's yin and yang: paradise around one corner, Mordor the next. I read somewhere recently a description of New Zealand as being like a beautiful woman with a ravaging cancer. Not sure what that's supposed to mean, cancer is nasty, whether you're beautiful or not. Maybe it's saying that the beauty is dangerously deceptive and by the time we all recognise the symptoms, it'll be too late. The trees planted a generation ago as a tax break are ready to be chopped down now. It's like that right across the top of South Island – several million more tonnes of topsoil waiting to be washed away by the coming winter rains – an environmental perfect storm in the making. Sometimes you think you're getting used to the carnage, other days you know you're not. And those hundred-percent pure rivers we promise in the tourism ads turn out to be swimming with *E. coli* and other bacteria. Even our own shimmering Wakamarina harbours mercury deep under the rocks from the gold rush days. All these time bombs, ticking away.

Maybe we should have accepted the offer last year from that Russian guy in his helicopter. Sold up while the selling was good. But we were in love with the place, we were safe and happy and our enemies had been

vanquished. I heard that Andrei bought another property further down the valley instead, an old hunting lodge-cum-resort that only a fool or a shady mafia-linked oligarch would waste money on. The Lodge is back on the market a year later. Poor old Andrei is in prison in Siberia awaiting a corruption trial cooked up by the authorities. Maybe he shouldn't have said those things on Twitter about the president.

In range, passing the Trout Hotel, my mobile goes. It's Constable Latifa Rapata, wondering what's keeping me. 'Ten minutes,' I say. 'Something up?'

'Some bloke here wants to make a fillum, Sarge.'

'Film?'

'Yeah, he's ...' a lowering of decibels. 'Pākehā. Dressed like he's from Auckland or Wellington, or somewhere.'

'And you need me to deal with it?'

'What do I know about fillums? See you in ten.'

When I get to the police station – a weatherboard shack with two desks, a photocopier and a big fibreglass mussel shell on the roof to show we're part of the community – he's there to greet me. He does indeed have a certain metropolitan look about him: hipster beard, tight suit, manbag, shiny sharp shoes. Behind him Latifa crosses her eyes, pokes her top teeth over her bottom lip and does a weird little dance.

'Mr Devon Cornish, Sarge. He's a fillum director from Wellington.'

'Producer, actually.' He offers me a business card.

'How can we help?' I try not to catch Latifa's mischievous eye as she disappears behind the partition.

'As I explained to your colleague, this is a heads-up that we'll be filming in this area for a few days next week.'

'And?'

'And it's a feature film, set in the gold rush. Did you know about those murders that happened around here back then?'

'The Doom Creek murders in the mid-1800s. Five prospectors ambushed by bandits in remote hill country for a few bucks. Yeah, I read about it once.'

'That's it – and the movie is called *Doom Creek*, and guess who's going to be in it?'

'Thrill me.' He rattles off a name and I'm none the wiser.

'Greg from *Shortland Street*?'

I shake my head, no, I'm not a follower of NZ soapies. 'Still not sure why you're telling me. You don't need my permission to film. You need the landowner, or government department, whatever.'

'There is something you could help with, and we've already run it past your district commander in Nelson.'

Marianne Keegan – newly promoted, following Ford's retirement – thanks for the tip-off, Marianne. Not. 'Go on.'

'We're hoping you can assist us with traffic management.'

A distant Latifa-like snort.

'Traffic?'

'We need to keep modern cars out of the frame – think *Braveheart* and the panel vans – and there's still quite a few head up that way. We'll have our own team directing people away but we need your presence in case anybody makes a fuss.'

'We do have proper jobs to do here, Mr Cornish. This isn't a priority.'

He pulls a sheet of paper out of his manbag and hands it to me. It's a letter from Commander Marianne to him saying she'll be delighted to offer my assistance to his bloody film.

'I understand you live up the Wakamarina valley, Sergeant?'

'Says who?'

An embarrassed cough from the other side of the partition.

'We'll be filming just up the road from you at Butchers Flat. Should be a nice quick commute to work for you on those days.' He stands up and offers his hand. 'Until next Tuesday. Eight a.m.' Shoulders his bag. 'Sharp.'

By midmorning I've had it with Latifa calling me 'Best Boy' and 'Key Grip' and head to the bakery to grab a pie and a coffee while she zooms out on to SH6 to nail some speeders. Autumn is a beautiful time of year. The weather can be crisp and fine and it's worth enjoying ahead of the winter chill. The tourists have moved on and the town quietens down, which means less work for us cops but slower business for the shops and cafés and for the tourist boats out on the Marlborough Sounds. It's a good time of year for Devon Cornish to be shooting his film, fewer people in the way, accommodation vacancies in town for his cast and crew, and the promise of calm weather for the next few weeks. I order my coffee and find a table, make a call to DC Keegan at Nelson HQ.

'Morning, Nick. Nice to hear from you.'

She has the power to sack me and knows most of my secrets, in and out of bed. It seeps through her slightly mocking, faintly Scouse-accented voice. Or maybe that's just my imagination.

'I've had a film producer in my office this morning.'

'Oh, Devon. I know him from Wellington. Friend of a friend. Real mover and shaker.'

'A heads-up would have been nice.'

'Didn't you get my email? Bugger. Server's been playing up the last couple of days.'

She isn't lying. It had been a godsend not getting all those OHS circulars and requests for stats and timesheets.

'Playing Lollipop Man is a waste of my talents and hourly rate. Crime does still happen over here you know.'

'I'm sure Constable Rapata will be able to cope. Your face is better known in that valley of yours now. They'll be putty in your hands. Plus you get a lie-in and an early finish. Win-win?'

A hidden agenda, no doubt, but I can't be arsed uncovering it. Probably some old-chums network in Wellington, favours owed, backs scratched. 'If anything more urgent comes up, I'm out of there.'

'Absolutely, Nick. You're in charge.' Some voices in the background, a muffling of the mouthpiece. 'Make sure you drop by next time you're in town. Be good to catch up.'

No time soon, I'm thinking. The permanent move from Wellington to Nelson killed off her shaky marriage. I can't afford to let mine go the same way.

My coffee has arrived so I sit back and enjoy the view. According to the tourist brochures, Havelock is the greenshell mussel capital of the world. The restaurants all serve mussels. There's one, The Mussel Pot, specialising in variations on the theme, with a dozen big fibreglass mussels on the roof so you don't mistake it. Across the road another mussel statue has appeared, two metres high and riding an outboard-powered surfboard. Why? Don't ask me. I'm thinking we might be at a thematic tipping point here; we've reached peak mussel. There's a commotion at the counter behind me, raised voices.

'What's this?'

'It's a cup.'

'Polystyrene? You don't have any crockery?'

‘It saves on washing up.’

I find American accents grating at the best of times. Maybe it was all those TV sitcoms we used to watch, with the shouting and canned laughter. Loud, aggressive Americans really piss me off. Even if, like now, they might have a point.

‘They aren’t recyclable. It all goes into landfill. Your sign says “Organic Fair Trade Coffee” and you serve it to me in this shit? What’s the goddamn point of that?’

‘No need to get offensive.’ Then, as an apparent afterthought, ‘Sir.’

A loud thump on the counter. ‘Who’s in charge here?’

‘Me, mate. Not you.’

Time to take a wander over. Janeen behind the counter, barely taller than Frodo, is squaring for a fight. I step in with a smile, tap on the display cabinet. ‘Giz a date scone as well, would you, Janeen?’

She glares at me. ‘In a sec, I’m busy with this f... fella.’

What the American doesn’t realise is that Janeen is capable of ramming his head through the glass cabinet window before he knows what day it is. I’ve seen her do it, and had to arrest her. She’s on a good-behaviour bond and can’t afford to stuff it up with three anklebiters at home. I turn to the customer. He’s not very big but he has a dangerous light in his eye which you usually associate with religion, drugs, or alcohol.

‘Nice day.’

‘Butt out, pal. Your uniform means nothing to me.’

Uh-oh. ‘I think we need to calm things down a bit, mate. It’s a lot of fuss to make over a polystyrene cup.’

He turns square to face me. ‘Like I said. Butt out.’

‘Leave the premises now, sir. Walk away.’

‘And don’t forget your coffee,’ says Janeen. ‘It’s takeaway. Chuck it in the bin when you’re finished. We don’t like litter louts around here.’

I turn to her. ‘Shut it.’

That’s when he sucker punches me high in the gut. The air leaves me and the day turns bad. I’m lying on the floor, not sure which to do first, vomit or gasp for oxygen. He leans down over me. ‘Keep out of my way.’ Then he pours his organic Fair Trade coffee on my chest and walks out. Luckily, during the time they’ve taken to argue, the coffee has cooled a tad.

‘Who was that?’

My breath has returned. Janeen is mopping my uniform shirt with a sponge scourer but seems to be making things worse. ‘Should’ve let me deck him, Nick. Stayed out of it.’

I stand and look out the door, up and down the main street. ‘Which way did he go?’

A few patrons take breaks from their pies and sausage rolls to thumb west in the general direction of Nelson.

‘Gunna arrest him or what?’ Janeen hands me the sponge to finish it off.

‘Was he in a vehicle?’ I’m still dazed and winded. In shock at the absurdity of it all. Floored over a polystyrene coffee cup? Really?

‘Motorbike. Harley,’ says a young bloke I’ve picked up for speeding many times. He swallows whatever he was chewing. ‘Black it was. New. Flash as.’

I call Latifa and give her the details and we put the word out to our Nelson colleagues from over the Whangamoia Saddle to head this way and look out for him.

‘Don’t worry,’ says Latifa. ‘If he gets as far as the ranges we’ll have him.’

‘Plenty of turn-offs before then.’

‘Most of them dead ends.’ She closes the call and I head out of the bakery to get the car.

‘Wait,’ says Janeen. ‘You didn’t finish your coffee.’

‘Another time.’

‘Still want that date scone you ordered?’

‘No, thanks.’

We meet up with our Tasman colleagues at the halfway point, Rai Valley – it was a one-horse town but the horse bolted years ago. It’s clear that the biker has turned off a side road somewhere between Havelock and here. I’d already done detours down the side streets and down by the marina. Nobody I spoke to had seen him.

‘So where?’ I say, uselessly.

‘New bike, he wouldn’t want to take it anywhere too rough, would he?’ says Latifa, and the Nelson boys nod knowingly. ‘So maybe we can narrow it down to the sealed roads.’

We divide them up between us and head back to our vehicles. ‘Nobody takes him alone. If you spot him, call it in and wait for back-up.’

‘Think he warrants AOS?’ says a Nelson constable, name of Blakiston.

Armed Offenders Squad? I think about it a moment. 'He's a scrapper for sure, but batons and tasers should be enough. Bit of pepper spray.'

Latifa looks like she relishes the prospect.

The Nelson lads will cover the area between Rai Valley and Pelorus Bridge and we take the rest between there and Havelock.

'He could be back out and on his way east by now,' I say glumly. 'I've stuffed up. Shouldn't have let him get the better of me in the first place.'

'Chill, Sarge. It wasn't your fault, you're not as young as you used to be.' Latifa checks an incoming message on her mobile. Her face softens, so it must be her fiancé, Daniel the Boy Racer – nice enough lad but hell on wheels. 'We'll get him, if not this time then the next.'

Latifa takes the ten-kilometre section between Havelock and Canvastown, me the rest. We agree to regroup halfway at the Trout Hotel. After two hours of back roads and doorknocks, it's well past lunchtime and I'm regretting not getting that scone at the bakery. Being midweek, the Trout is predictably quiet. Come to that, it doesn't really liven up at the weekend either.

'Usual, Nick?' says the proprietor like he only saw me yesterday instead of two months ago.

'On duty. Ginger beer'd be good. Got any food?'

He thumbs at the menu board on the wall behind him. 'But the kitchen's closed.'

I check my watch. 'One-thirty?' He shrugs. 'Packet of crisps then. Salt and vinegar.'

'Good choice.' He turns to my colleague. 'Latifa?'

'Same, thanks.'

I ask him if he's seen an American on a big flash Harley.

'Brandon? Yeah, he'll be up at the Lodge. Saw him go by a few hours ago.'

'I thought the Lodge was on the market?'

'Not anymore.' He taps his nose. 'Got my finger on the pulse.'

We're out the door. 'Your car?' I say, knowing Latifa's has the shotgun in the boot.

Behind us a shout. 'Sixteen bucks for the drinks and chippies. I'll put it on your tab, Nick.'

The Lodge is halfway up the valley opposite an open paddock with a couple of horses grazing. There was never a For Sale sign outside, it's too

expensive to warrant it. Anybody wanting to live here wouldn't be a casual drive-by. The gates are new. Big, strong, and shut. Our Nelson colleagues are on the way. ETA five minutes.

'Climb over?' says Latifa.

'There's a bell.' I press it.

Nothing. Press it again.

'Yeah?'

I jump. Has he crept up behind me? Brace for another sucker punch. 'Up here. Tree to your left.' I see it now. A camera and a small speaker.

'Police,' says Latifa. 'Open up, we want to talk to you.'

'What about?'

'Assault.'

'Get lost.'

'Open up or we'll be back with armed officers to break down your gates and arrest you.'

'This is private property.'

'We'll bring a warrant.'

'Yeah, do that.'

Latifa isn't used to being talked to like this.

The Nelson lads roll up. Blakiston admires the tall gates. 'Tawa. Good hard wood, inset with steel. Impressive.'

Latifa looks at me. 'Who is this Brandon fella?'

'Some Yank with a short fuse.'

The tree says, 'I heard that.'

'I don't know who the hell you think you are but you're digging yourself into a big hole.' Latifa shakes an admonishing finger. 'You assaulted a police officer and you need to let us in or come out and talk to us. We're not going away.'

A snigger, a click and the gates slowly swing open. I tell the Nelson guys to wait here and be ready for anything. Latifa and I get back in the car and roll up the steep driveway. There's what looks like a gatekeeper's cabin just a short way up the drive, immaculately kept lawns with a mix of native and imported shrubs and trees. Finally, at the top of the hill, a hexagonal pine lodge with floor to ceiling windows, lots of aerals on the roof, and some outhouses nearby. The surrounding slopes have recently been logged to hell and back. The contrast is stark, a manicured luxury resort nestled amidst such desolation.

'Rancho Weirdo,' mutters Latifa.

We mount the half-dozen steps to a long wide verandah, and the front door opens. It's the man who floored me in the bakery. He holds a hand up. 'That's close enough.'

Latifa shakes her head. 'I don't think you get it, mister. We're here to arrest you. Turn around, face the wall, hands behind your back.'

'You're making a big mistake.'

I draw my baton. 'Do as she says.'

Latifa has unclipped her taser. 'Three seconds.'

He smiles, raises his hands and turns around. 'What's your name, sister? I like you.'

Latifa puts the cuffs on him, kicks his feet apart, presses him down to his knees. 'What's your name? Brandon what?'

He breathes in slowly and deeply. 'You smell nice.'

She takes the canister of pepper spray off her belt and empties it into his face. 'How's your sense of smell now, dickhead?'

He lies there on his pine verandah. Eyes streaming, face burning, and still smiling. Chuckling even. 'I can see we're going to get along real well, sister.'