

A Place to Stand

The first part of a novel

by

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Chapter 1

“Trust me. You don’t want to miss this.” Brian pulled George off the park bench, down the hill, to stand at the fork in the path. Away from the traffic, a clamour drifted up to them. Below them, like a mob of sheep just mustered into the yards, hordes of people surrounded the statue of King Dick, voices and banners raised. The air pulsed around them.

George glanced at his watch; the lunch break was nearly over. Brian grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the path that went away from work, around the other side of the rose garden

Oscar dashed from one end of the hall to the other, his face brimming with his version of a smile when Mary let herself into the house. She dumped the books on the dining room table. They could be sorted later. For now, Oscar needed her attention. She clicked her fingers; he bounced onto her knee.

“And hello to you,” she said, scratching behind his ears where his wiry coat gave way to soft fluff. “Long day?” He nuzzled her neck. “Me too.” He jumped down, trotted over to the back door and turned to her. “Sorry, matey. You’ll have to wait for your walk today.” He cocked his head to one side. She laughed. “All right. Just a few minutes.”

On their return from the tablecloth-sized lawn, she knelt down and flicked through the records stacked on the floor. Nothing bubbly. Opera was out, that wouldn’t help her concentration. She settled on a Bach cello suite, placed it on the turntable and sat back on her heels. The scratches and pops reminded her that she needed a new copy. Christmas soon. She’d hint for a voucher.

She spread her work across the table, the only place large enough. The sooner it’s started, the sooner it’s done. She picked up one of the report forms, filled in Hohepa Allen’s name, and readied herself to write the first comments. Oscar curled up at her feet and went to

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sleep.

Mary heard the key in the door. Oscar bounced into the hallway.

“Hey boy, how’s your day?” George ruffled his coat, making him look scruffier, if that were possible. “Where’s your mother?” The table was obscured by neat piles of books and papers. Mary’s hair hid her face. She was writing in her tight script. “Report time, I see.”

“Yep. I’m sure I told you this morning.”

“Time for a quick drink? End of the week and all that.” She gave him one of those looks. He patted her shoulder and wandered off to change.

“You’ll never guess what happened at lunch time.” George called to her from the bedroom.

“What?” she yelled. For goodness sake. Surely he knew by now that she couldn’t hear him when he was in the bedroom. She’d told him often enough. George walked back up the hallway, Oscar close on his heels. “Give me ten minutes, I’ll finish the one I’m on, and then we’ll have a cuppa.”

By the time he’d shed his working skin and replaced it with shorts, shirt and jandals, Mary had the jug on. George grabbed a bottle of Müller Thurgau from the fridge and poured himself a drink.

“As I was saying...”

“You want tea?”

“I’ll stick with this.” The first sip eased its way down, cooling as a glow spread through him. The week slipped off his shoulders. “Sure you don’t want one?”

“I’d end up making a mess and have to rewrite them.”

“Anyway. Brian...”

“Him.”

“He’s all right. Good for a laugh. He’s interesting.”

“A bit fancy, isn’t he?”

Probably not a good time to tell her about what happened at lunchtime. He was onto his second glass by the time she’d finished her tea and returned to work.

He grabbed the dog’s leash, which set off a volley of yapping. “Let’s go boy.” Oscar leapt in a series of attempts to snatch the leash from George’s hand.

George took the steps two at a time. Oscar scrambled to keep up. Once at the bottom they fell into their usual pace, Oscar trotting along with just the slightest loop in the leash. Most of the time they kept to the middle of the road; the footpaths appeared and disappeared with frustrating frequency. As they wound their way up Lookout Road, there were times when George saw through the trees across the water to the airport. On the other side of the knoll the view stretched across the harbour to the city. At the top George ignored the monument and the car park, and pushed on to the peak. There, his city once again captivated him. Cars came and went from the Freyberg Pool. White foam surrounded the fountain in the bay, disturbing the unusually calm sea. He was contained by the hills that surrounded him. Below, the Beehive had yet to be drawn into the shadow that was creeping across the valley. The houses clinging to the hills above the ferry terminal were already in its grip.

They returned dishevelled and revived. Oscar sought his water bowl. George flicked the TV on to watch the news. There it was; first item. The signs waved over the heads of the crowd. “Remember Biko”. “Stop the Tour”. He searched the faces, unsure if he wanted to see evidence that he’d been there.

When the ads came on he was glad that his face hadn’t been caught by the camera. What might’ve happened if it had? Even if his father was caught up in some farming thing or other, so that he had missed the news, someone would’ve been sure to let him know.

Everything was ready by the time Mary emerged, bleary from concentration, Oscar by her

side. George took the salads and dressing from the fridge, and placed them beside the plates on the bench. “You want to eat in there, or in front of the TV?” he asked. She turned to look at the papers that had taken over the dining table.

“No TV, thanks. There’s enough going on in my head without adding more to it.” She stretched and rubbed the back of her neck. “What about on the deck? Let’s grab the last of the sun.” They headed out to the area that did double duty as the roof of their garage. Oscar took up residence under the table. He might be in hope of a scrap or two, but not if she had anything to do with it.

“Thanks, George.” Mary rearranged the asparagus on her plate. “What a day. This year has just about done me in.”

“Next year’s got to be better.”

“If I make it that far. I couldn’t care less if I never had to drive into that car park again. And if someone told me I’d seen the last of Shane Parker, I’d be overjoyed.”

The phone rang. Mary sighed and went inside to answer it.

“Hello.” George listened, silently. *Listen, silent.* Those words hang so closely together that they share the same letters. She walked as far as the cord would allow. “I’m sorry to Did she?” she said. “Are you ...?” Must be his father. “You want to talk with him?” She turned to face George, still holding the phone to her ear. She gestured to him. But when he put his hand out, she replaced the receiver.

“What’d he want?”

She sighed, and shook her head. “It’s about Christmas.”

“Isn’t that settled?”

She lifted her dark blond hair off her neck, twisted it and held it in a knot on the top of her head. “They want us to go down.”

“Our first married Christmas. I wanted to show her around. Don’t tell me, he had to

stay for the hay.”

She let her hair drop. “It’s your mother. They hadn’t said anything earlier. Didn’t want you to worry.”

“What about?”

“She’s not feeling too good. Certainly not up to travelling. Seems it was her idea to change plans.”

“There’s always next year, I suppose. You wouldn’t mind?”

“We can go as soon as the term’s finished,” Mary continued. “You reckon you could wangle a couple of extra days? It’s not as if the House is sitting, or anything.”

“I’ve some time owing. You think your folks would find room for us?”

“In a flash.”

At first the old place looked the same as it always had. Mary and George drove between the wrought iron gates that read *Longcroft Farm* across the top in looping letters on the rare occasions they were closed. The oaks reached overhead, as if, it seemed to her, to join their branches in a guard of honour. The lawn could’ve hosted a bowling tournament. George let Oscar out to stretch his legs. His turn. Mary brushed the dog’s hair from her skirt, and went towards the house. A few chickweeds raised their heads amongst the salmon and lilac-blue stocks along the path to the back door. Dandelion clocks tossed their seeds around. Mary let herself into the kitchen. The breakfast dishes were stacked beside the sink. Betty sat in a wingback chair, her head lolled against the crocheted rug. Mouth agape, eyes closed, her hand rested on the cat curled up on her knee. Her mother-in-law looked like she belonged to the family who’d come from the U.K. one summer, their skin so transparent that she’d thought they were ghosts. She stopped beside the stove and listened. Betty’s gentle wheeze was the only sound in the room. Mary let out the breath that she hadn’t realised she’d been

holding.

Her movements must have stirred Mr Darcy, for he stretched, began to purr and rubbed his face with his paws. Betty's hand stroked the cat. After a while she opened her eyes.

"Hope I didn't wake you," Mary said.

"Just a wee doze." She held her hand out. "You look well. Come here, dear, and give the wicked mother-in-law a kiss." Mary took her hand and bent down to peck her cheek. It felt like plastic.

"You look..." She struggled for a word to disguise her shock... "comfortable. So nice in the sun. This spot must get it all day. Isn't this chair usually in the lounge? Did T.C. move it for you?" Now she was using too many words. She stopped those waiting in line.

George brushed the silence aside when he entered, crossed the room and pulled a chair up beside his mother.

"How was the crossing? And the trip down?" she asked.

"Smooth across the strait. The Sounds haven't gone completely brown yet. Oscar wasn't too keen on having to stay below."

She gripped George's hand. "If I were feeling up to it, you'd be the first people I'd want to stay."

"It's O.K. Mum. Just get well, that's all."

Mary crouched down and looked directly at Betty. "How are you? Really?"

"I'll be fine." Her eyes slid away, darted back, and slid away again.

"If there's anything we can do, Betty, just let us know."

"There is something, dear. A cuppa. I'm spitting feathers here. Can you?"

"Surely. The usual?"

She nodded. "And a little something to go with it." Betty had a way of balancing the

crunch and the softness of ANZAC biscuits that Mary never seemed to manage. Perhaps, now that she was part of the family, Betty might share her secret. She shook the top tin. Nothing rattled inside it. Mary could tell by the weight of the Spaniel tin that there was no Louise cake or Tan Square this week. Even the red fruit cake tin at the bottom of the pile was empty. The only treat was an open packet of Krispie biscuits that were no longer crisp. They'd have to do.

Through the kitchen window she saw T.C. tinkering with a tedder which was stopped in the gateway between the yard and the home paddock, hay as yet unturned. The driver stood beside him, cap in hand as he scratched his head. He flicked it at her, spoke to T.C., who turned, and waved before continuing to fiddle with the connection between the tractor and the hay rake. Just like Dad, he wouldn't come in till the job was done.

Betty's eyes peered over the top of the convertible's door. He swung the Jag in a wide circle around Mary as she walked glass in hand, across the yard. She'd just delivered Oscar to his kennel, "Sorry, boy," she'd said. "You'll have to wait 'til later for your Christmas lunch." Still, the dog had yelped as she walked away.

T.C. parked under the macrocarpas. He was careful, though, she noticed, to find the spot that provided shade, but where the birds perched above couldn't ruin the deep green gleam or the tan leather seats. He opened the passenger door and, with a nod to the men leaning on the gate to the ram's paddock, offered his arm to Betty to make her way across the yard to the back door. She reminded Mary of a recently arrived migrating bird: tossed and bewildered in the middle of a paddock, in sore need of a decent meal. At the back porch T.C. passed her on to George and wandered off towards the other men.

"You all right there, Mum?" George said.

"Don't fuss, Poppet. I'm right as rain." Betty took his hand and reached out for

Mary's. She found it tremulous, tentative. Words that had never belonged to her mother-in-law. The three of them juggled their way towards the kitchen door, but found that it was too narrow. Mary released her hand and hovered beside the wooden kitchen table.

"We're all ready for you, Betty," Mary's mother Joan said, and pulled out a chair. George supported his mother as she sat down. Mary placed her wine glass on the table. Joan noticed Betty looking at it. "You want a wee one. Just to start Christmas Day off right?" Betty shook her head.

"We thought you could sit and top some strawbs, if you like." Mary carried the bowl overflowing with red, lowered her face into it and inhaled. "Ah, summer." She placed the bowl in front of Betty. "That's if you want to help out. Be here in the middle of it all. Plenty you can do from that seat. Or course, if you'd rather, there's a lovely chair in the lounge." Stop blathering on. She didn't listen to herself. "Midnight mass was lovely. George wasn't keen, but I told him that it was tradition and he had to come along. Lucky for him St Stephen's low church. Remind me to show you the nativity scene on the piano. It's all made from carved wood. One of Dad's lot brought it out."

"You showed me last year, dear."

"That's right." Mary went to the cutlery drawer. "This is the best knife for the job." She passed it to Betty, handle first. Various members of her family were chopping, peeling, and scraping. Right, next task: picking the peas for the older children to pod.

The kitchen fell silent in her absence, except for the radio quietly playing Christmas Carols. George slid into the chair beside his mother. Her hands moved expertly as she turned the strawberries to remove the hull. "You haven't called me that in such a long time," he said.

"Called you what dear?" She handed him a berry.

He put it into his mouth and squeezed it so that the juice ran down his throat. He closed his eyes to block out every other sensation. When he opened them, she repeated her

question.

“Poppet,” he replied.

“Did I? I didn’t notice.”

“I’m hardly a poppet anymore.”

“Of course I know that, dear. But, you’ll always be my poppet. Just as Thomas was my pumpkin.”

“Careful you two. No soggy pirates allowed at lunch,” Mary’s mother called to her two eldest grandchildren. She crossed the lawn, hands filled with cutlery, on her way to the table under the oak trees. The boys rolled down the slope beside the creek.

“Aye aye, Captain Granny,” they called back, adjusting their tumbles slightly to end up under the gunnera. That game wouldn’t last long. The plant might be an extraordinary visitor each year, but the prickles would get them, the same as they used to get her.

Her mother beamed as she paused to watch the boys. Joan’s eyes flicked across to her husband’s. The smallest of smiles passed between them, before Joan began to lay the cutlery at each setting. Morrie returned his attention to the men standing around T.C.’s car. Joan sighed. “Everyone’s here.”

“Joan.” Betty released George’s arm and eased herself into the wicker chair that overflowed with cushions. “It looks beautiful. And such a good day for it.” She smoothed her dress as she sat.

“Who knows when we’ll get another Christmas Day like this?” Joan said. Mary looked across the table to the tennis court on the other side of the creek. The boys had abandoned their shoes and their rolling game. Wheelbarrow racing was the game of the moment. The boys hoisted the little girls’ legs around their waists and ran from one end of the tennis court to the other, the girls’ hands barely touching the ground. Mary wasn’t sure if

their squeals were of terror or joy.

Mary echoed her mother's sigh. It surely was a picture.

"Bathroom, you lot. Faces, hands. Shoes on." Mary's eldest sister Anne called across the creek. The children ran inside. She placed a green salad and a bowl of pickled beetroot on the red cloth that ran down the centre of the table. "We're nearly there. Sit, everyone. Betty, I see you've found your place." She looked around, nodding her head as if she were counting sheep. "You men. Time to get over here." The men moved as one towards the lawn. "T.C., you're at this end. Dad. You and Mum are at the other end," she called. "The children are scattered along the table. We don't want a repeat of last year."

Mary floated around on the edge of the bustle; sure that any offer of help would be brushed away. She moved towards her father. At least he might appreciate a hand.

"Could do with a bit of rain," her father said. "The bottom paddock's coming away. The top one that needs it." He shook his head and nodded in agreement at her unspoken offer to distribute the drinks.

"How about we put in an order for a spot or two every night? Just for the next couple of weeks. Reckon that'd do it?" Morrie laughed. Anne swooped around the table. She removed her apron and flapped it in an attempt to muster everyone into their places. Mary wove in and out of her family, with cordial, wine and beer, then slid in beside her sister, Jenny. The old form had been rescued from the woolshed and scrubbed up for the day. Mary bumped Jen with her hip. "Want to fall off and split your head open again?"

"I swear. To this day. You pushed me."

"Wasn't me. It was Trixie. She missed the jump."

"You twerp. Trixie wasn't real. Surely you've worked that out."

"She was to me."

Anne glared at them. "Everyone seated? Right. Dad. A toast."

“To family. Especially those who’ve joined us recently.” A nod each to George, Betty and T.C. “And those who will join us soon.” He looked across at his middle daughter, Jenny, who blushed, and rested her hands on top of her swollen belly. Merry Christmas.”

Once they had all filled their plates and the food had been praised, the men’s conversation drifted back to their earlier discussion of crops, weather and lambing percentages.

“Now Dad. None of that today.” Anne looked across at him. “I’m sure you can find something to talk about that interests us all.”

“Who’s not interested in farming? Keeps this country going,” T.C. said.

“Tell us about Wellington, Mares,” Jenny said. She leaned over and spooned vegetables into Sammy’s mouth. “I sometimes wonder what it’d be like to live somewhere else. Your neighbours wouldn’t know your business, would they?”

“They hardly know who we are, let alone care about what’s going on in our house. They wave from their cars, if we’re on the street, but that’s about it. At least people here’d recognise you if they saw you at the shops.” She hadn’t intended complaining, not today. She swirled the wine in her glass, and took another gulp.

George nudged Mary under the table. “That’s a bit harsh. It just takes a bit of time to get to know people. As a matter of fact, I met some really interesting people just before we came away.”

“It’s all right for you, George. You’re in the middle of town. And it’s all pretty gentlemanly in that library of yours. M.P.s and other important people wanting your help. It’s not like that for me.” She turned to Jenny, who was still coaxing Sammy into eating any vegetable other than peas. “Honestly. You are so lucky with your lot.” Mary dropped her voice and moved towards her sister. “I tell you, Jen. Some of the little mites have a few clues, but One girl just doesn’t turn up some days. When she does, she has bags under her eyes.

Fell asleep the other day during silent reading. Of course Shane Bloody Parker had to bump her desk so that she woke up. I could've throttled him."

"So, what'd you do?" T.C. asked. "Cane him?"

Hadn't she been talking to her sister in private? Apparently not.

"Canes aren't used in primary schools."

"The strap then."

"That's out too. No, it's all about relating to them, these days." She was making it sound as if she didn't agree.

"Relating? They've gone all soft, if you ask me. I got the strap tons of times. Didn't do me any harm. Buck their ideas up."

"I tell you, T.C., sometimes it would've been a darn sight quicker to reach for the strap. Just to remind the likes ..." She stopped. Those words had come from her mouth. And with so much venom. Catch them. Return them to their dark place. Too late. She squirmed. A whole year had passed and she hadn't found a way to get through. Not to all of them. Especially the boys. "It's not their fault, though. Poor things."

"Tell Jenny about the time we walked around the coast," George said. He waited for her to speak, but she seemed to be somewhere else. "Totally stunned me. The raw strength of the sea pounding and the fur seals basking on the rocks. You can see the ferry crossing the strait. There's nothing like it around here."

Perhaps she'd underestimated him. As much as he was telling the others about Wellington, he was reminding her of that day. They'd walked, talked and marvelled at the power of the sea as if they were inside a bubble, just the two of them.

"Never been too keen on that strait," T.C. said. "Look what happened to the *Wahine*. A big ship like that. And all those people." He hesitated. "Yeah, nah. They can keep their volcanoes and earthquakes and pen pushers. Cut the cable and let them see how long they

last. Give me the Mainland any day.”

“It takes all kinds, T.C.,” Betty said.

Mary glanced at her mother-in-law. No surprise that she’d also heard George’s unspoken words, but hadn’t she nodded off after the meal?

George leaned across the table towards his mother. “We’ve got all sorts of plans for when we go back. Did I tell you there’s a chance our house’ll be on the market soon? We might put in an offer.”

“You’ll need two incomes for that kind of thing,” said Morrie.

George frowned. “We have two incomes, Morrie.”

“Once the children come along, you’ll be struggling to manage a city mortgage on your income.”

“Plenty of time for that,” George said. “Besides, there’re opportunities in Wellington. We’re quite happy to wait until we can afford children.” He looked at Mary. She looked away. Maybe not fast enough. Had he seen? She mustered together a smile, which she hoped was convincing.

“Give us time, Morrie. It’s only been just over a year.”

“Speaking of it being a year,” Morrie said. “It’s been more than that since the Barker family played together. Come on girls.”

Despite their feigned protests, it wasn’t long before the family was gathered on the porch. Jenny used her advanced state to claim the piano, Anne had collected her viola from the car, Morrie picked up his double bass from beside the piano, and Joan offered Mary the choice of her cello or her violin.

“Cello, if you don’t mind, Mum? Just for a change.”

Chairs scraped on the wooden floor. Bows were sawn, strings were plucked, and notes were bent. A hush fell. Their eyes met, a nod, and Schubert’s notes from Jenny and Joan

launched them into their performance.

George watched Mary and her family. The music was like a fence around them. He looked across at his mother. His father stood behind her chair, hand resting on her shoulder. A glance passed between them. His mother stroked his father's hand. He sought Mary's eyes, but they were closed. She looked startled when she opened them again at the end of the piece.

Mary pulled herself back to the present. Little Sammy toddled across the lawn and climbed onto his mother's knee. Jenny winced when he bounced against her. "Mares, can you get Matthew? Just go quietly. I don't want a fuss."

"Fuss about what?" Jenny cast her eyes downwards. Mary saw the dark pool that was spreading across the piano seat. "Does Sammy need to be changed? I can do that." She looked at Jenny, who shook her head. "Oh. Now?"

Jenny nodded.

Jen was out to it when Mary arrived. Even in sleep, her arms shielded her baby. Mary peeked into the bundle of cloth. Two blue eyes met hers. While holding the wrap back so she could see her niece, Mary eased herself into the chair beside the bed. Her sister had earned her sleep.

The baby watched her, wriggled and cooed. Mary whispered to her, "Hello baby. It's so nice to meet you." As she spoke, the baby held herself still. Mary stopped talking. The baby began to move. The noises started again. The baby seemed to be taking her turn in the conversation. She tested her theory. "I can't wait to play with you. Will you come over to stay the night when you're bigger?" The baby lay still. As soon as Mary stopped, the baby replied. She stared at Mary, only blinking occasionally as they conversed, backwards and forwards. Until that moment, only music had made her heart swell.

Jen began to stir.

“Well done, sis,” Mary said, when her sister was fully awake. “She’s a little beauty. Talking already.”

Jenny didn’t ask for any explanation. She just smiled, and held her daughter close. “That’s it for me. You’ll be the next,” she said.

“Can’t see that happening any time soon.”

“No hurry. Or are there things you’re not telling me.” The baby started to whimper, so Jenny opened the front of her nightgown, and her bra, and latched her on. “Milk’s not come in yet. She’ll be drowning in it in a couple of days.” She stroked her baby’s head. “So, everything all right in that department?”

Mary looked away. She fixed her eyes on the bright green leaves of the oak trees outside the window. “Right as it’ll ever be, I guess.”

“And that means?”

“Look. Forget it.”

“All I’m saying is don’t rush. Once they come, everything changes. You can’t put them back.”

Mary turned her attention back to the baby. The little mouth worked at her mother’s breast. She could almost feel her skin tingling as she watched and imagined milk flowing from her like water released from the irrigation race to spill over the parched land.

After several days of nor’west winds, when the temperature hovered over thirty, they welcomed the relief of a brief southerly change. After the drizzle had cleared, George and Mary headed into the herbaceous border.

For an hour they laboured silently. Oscar darted back and forth between them, dropping sticks at their feet in the hope of a game. Mary found herself humming the same few bars. “It’ll be, just like starting over.” The words had been stuck in her brain ever since

she'd heard that John Lennon had been killed, last month. She upended her bucket onto the wheelbarrow, but some of the weeds slipped off and fell on the path. She picked them up and shoved them down as hard as she could.

"Barrow's full. Your turn. I'm taking a break." Mary sat down on the wooden park bench that was nestled amongst the hydrangeas. Oscar followed George to the compost heap.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she began, when George lowered himself onto the seat beside her. Oscar wandered off, probably to find something disgusting to roll in. She should've called him back, but now she'd started, it was better to keep going. She tried to force the words flying around her head into some kind of order so that they'd come out right.

"What?"

"Have you contacted work? You know, about going back?"

"Not yet. I was thinking, perhaps, I could take some leave without pay. Just until Mum's better. Shouldn't be too long. She seems a bit brighter this week." He must've read something on her face because he continued, "I'm sorry. I should've asked you."

"It's not that. It's..."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. They're pretty good about that kind of thing." Now he was prattling on. She shot him a look, but he didn't even understand that. "Sorry. You'll want to get back and set up your classroom."

"That wasn't..."

"I don't need to take more leave if you're in a hurry to get back. Perhaps one of the neighbours can pick up the slack here. We'll head off soon, if you want."

"George. Stop. Will you just listen for a minute?" Her teacher tone worked; he paused and waited for her to continue. She picked at the dirt that had dried onto the secateurs' handle. "Fact is, George. I don't want to go back."

"I wondered about that. We can postpone buying the house while you look for another

job. I'm sure we'd manage for a while."

"George. Don't." He frowned, but did, at least, stop and wait for her to continue. "Not back to the job. Back to Wellington. I want to stay here. I've missed this. Even the weather. I'd rather have a string of nor'westers than their winds, any day."

"We can't. My job. There's nothing here."

"There's your family. People who've been friends from way back." That was no argument. She still had friends here; he didn't. In fact, he'd been overly quiet lately. It'd been a while since she'd heard him laugh. Not like he did when he was with Brian and that crowd. He'd even stopped playing with Oscar. She brushed that aside. "And your mother needs you right now." Any improvement was wishful thinking on his part. The chirpy Betty had disappeared. She was now a listener.

"She used to say that I wasn't to hang around. Made me promise to get out in the world, leave Astonforth. It was as if she knew. She wouldn't want me to give up what I have up there."

"You wouldn't have to. There might be something here." Mary reached out to touch George. When her hand met his, he twitched, as if to pull away. A moment's hesitation, then his fingers lay still.

"Sounds like you've got it all worked out."

"Why would we go back to a place where there's hardly any blossom in spring, and the background noise is cars? I'd rather hear the bellbird in the totara tree, like I did this morning." Her voice dropped. "If we stay here, we can start a family."

He rested his elbows on his knees and placed his head in his hands. "You want to leave what we were building at home? To live here?"

She leaned against the back of the seat. "It wasn't home to me." She'd never admitted this out loud before; she'd barely even acknowledged it to herself. "I used to drive to work

hoping that I'd have an accident." Her voice became softer. "So I didn't have to get there.

Chapter 2

Mary leaned on the open fridge door. She sighed. Another trip to town. The apricots were too far gone to eat fresh. No point in wasting them. It'd have to be a pie, or a crumble. Either way, custard was on the menu.

George offered to pop into town for her. She'd have the place to herself. Her mother off to the city for the day, her father down in the back paddock, and George out from under her feet. For a while, at least.

With a grocery list so short he hadn't bothered to write it down, George was soon standing outside the Harrowgate shops. These streets were as familiar as the scar on the back of his hand. After what happened with Thomas, he'd bike into town to escape the silent sheds and accusing glances. He'd turn out of the drive, put his head down, and pump his legs until they tingled. He laid the shopping bag on the back seat and flicked through the latest copy of *The Listener* before tossing it on the front seat. No concentration for that. A walk, perhaps.

The avenue that led to the main road had once been lined with majestic elms. He ignored the footpath, choosing to walk between the elms' replacements. The skinny bike path was still there. He followed it under the dark canopy until it emerged into the sun and spread out and disappeared into dust. The main street went through a section of town that gave no shade, so he crossed the railway line and wandered through the Domain. Here too, he was overcome by memories. The bridge where they'd counted trout, the island that was large enough for adventure, but now was only big enough for a few ducks that had forgotten to move on at the end of shooting season and the oval where the annual County Sports were held. In the distance he saw Jimmy and Fiona Carroll with three children in tow. They'd been an item since primary school. He'd last seen them the year before when he'd been dashing around town following his last minute wedding list. They'd soon run out of conversation. George didn't want to repeat the experience. He turned towards town.

On every street he saw buildings that were smaller than they had once been. Some houses opened in his mind as if they were the Victorian dolls' house at the Museum. He saw a little boy, in his Sunday best, holding the hem of his mother's skirt, while his brother whooped outside with a crowd of children. "What a good boy," they said, as they patted him on the head, and sighed at Thomas's antics while they dusted off his pants, smoothed his ruffled hair and smirked with pride.

If only he were in Wellington. There, he was sure to find the peace he craved. Here, all he found were flashes from the past and disembodied images that hovered waiting to pounce and remind him of the person they expected him to be. Yet, the city had begun to seem like a dream. When he imagined himself walking its streets, there were times when his mind would turn a corner and he'd be lost. Left to Kirks, or right? Did the paper boy call, "Paper, get your paper," on the corner of Cuba and Manners, or Cuba and Dixon? A fog like the one that sometimes visited Evans Bay had begun to creep its way inside to obliterate his home.

"Did the cow kick the bucket over?" Mary asked, as George entered the kitchen, groceries in hand. She was careful not to look at him. She didn't trust herself yet.

"What cow?"

"The one you must've milked."

"Milk? I got bread."

"George." Mary shook her head. "I said we had enough bread." The words left a bitter aftertaste. Even so, she continued. "I wanted to make custard to go with the apricot crumble."

"It'll be all right. There's cream in the fridge." He was pedalling backwards, in an attempt to stay upright.

“Sorry would be good.” Where had that come from? She turned back to her task. “By the way, Brian phoned while you were out.” Mary tossed the information over her shoulder, busying herself with the crumble topping.

“What did he want?”

“I didn’t ask. He didn’t say.” Her head was down, as if rubbing the butter into the oats needed all her concentration.

He glanced at his watch. “I’ll give him a quick call.”

She worked at softening her voice. “Don’t take too long. This’ll be ready soon.”

George went into the dark hall. Oscar followed him. His nails made clicking noises as he trotted up the hallway and poked his nose into every room. There was something about the old Bakelite phone perched on a lace doily that made George hesitate before he dialled Brian’s number. It seemed better suited to ringing the operator and asking to be put through.

“Brian. It’s George.” He sat in the straight-backed chair that had been placed beside the phone in the days when calls were short and comfort unnecessary.

“Good to hear from you. How’s it all going?”

“Whatever Mum’s got is hanging around a bit longer than we’d like.”

“Do they know what it is?”

“No one actually says. Typical. I’ve taken her to the doctor a few times. Tells me how lovely it is to have me around to drive her. I sit outside and wait. When she comes out, she just says that she needs rest and time.”

“Bit boring, is it?”

“It’s O.K. Nothing to write home about. What about you? What’s been happening up there in the big smoke?”

“Plenty, as usual. Me and some of the lads went up the coast to Makara last weekend. That bach we had a couple of years ago. Went there again.”

“Did they forget who you were?”

“Ted was in charge, so they had no idea.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“You name it. Midnight swimming. Couldn’t find my grunds on the beach in the dark. Had to run back as I was, and hope they’d be there in the morning. Drinking games. Serious philosophical discussions. Paua. Even tried some kina. Never again.”

“So, a good time was had by all?”

“Indeed, my son, indeed. When are you coming back?”

“Not sure.” George leaned towards the kitchen. The pips played on the radio and the announcer began to read the news. He lowered his voice, even though he was certain that the news and meal prep would fully occupy Mary. “It’s not just Mum now. Mary’s got this bee in her bonnet. She thinks we should stay here.”

“Where the hell did that come from?”

“Who knows? Don’t worry. We’ll sort it.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d be back soon. HART is having an open meeting. It’s a good time to get on board. See if we can’t persuade those silly buggers next door to change their minds. I mean, why’d they sign Gleneagles if they were just going to turn round and do what they like? Can’t let those rugby bastards have it all their own way.” Brian paused. “It’s what I was ringing about, really. They’re looking for people to do all sorts. Lots of things that’d be right up your alley. You’d be handy.”

“You really reckon we can make a difference?”

“I tell you, George. Since that rally before Christmas, Wellington is humming. It’s all anyone is talking about. I reckon we just might be able to make them sit up and take notice. You never know. They’ve cancelled before.”

“Yeah, but, that was Labour. This lot’ll never give in.”

“Maybe. Worth a try.”

“How many times have we seen Friday protests since we’ve been working there? If you ask me, they don’t give two hoots.”

“I dunno. Can’t put my finger on it, but something’s definitely changing. You won’t be aware of it down there. But up here, there’s a buzz.”

“What’s winding you up?”

“You won’t believe this, but it started with a couple of books.”

“Do tell.”

“Some we were forced to read in the Fourth Form. Bit different when you don’t have to study them.” The line went quiet.

“You still there, Brian?”

“Just thinking. It’s the talk as well. The other night, three of us were having a bit of a chat at the Vic. Before we knew a dozen people were going at it. In the end we were asked to tone it down, or leave. First time that’s happened. Over politics, I mean. What’s become of me?”

“You love it. You’re the first to turn the conversation in that direction.” If he’d been there, they’d have walked out more than a little tipsy, even though they mightn’t’ve touched a drop. “I’d love to get up to speed before I come back. Suggestions?”

“You could start where I did. The town does have a library, doesn’t it?”

“Of course, it’s not completely the ends of the earth, you know.”

“Tell you what, get ready to read. And then, suitably informed, you can get your sweet little arse back up here where you can be useful.”

The honeyed tones of the newsreader were yielding to the evening concert programme when George floated back into the kitchen, surrounded by the light of possibility. Mary ignored

him. She crossed the room to turn the volume up. The sound of Mozart's Requiem filled the room. From the first hesitant notes, through the swelling chorus, Mary busied herself with the final preparations to the evening meal.

In the noisy silence he counted cutlery for three and laid it on the kitchen table. Through the intertwined voices coming from the radio he heard Morrie returning to the yard on his Massey Ferguson. Through the open back door George could see him crossing the yard towards the house, overalls stuffed into his gumboots, despite the lack of rain. This wasn't the time to begin a conversation of any significance with Mary.

"Good timing, Dad. Wash up and it'll be ready." Mary turned the radio off and went to set the table, then noticed that George had beaten her to the task. She moved the spoons from where he had placed them beside the knives, to the top of the setting.

He held back from joining the dinner banter. Brian's words ran around his head. He kept them there. If he started, he was sure that his excitement about the goings-on would bubble out. No, he wasn't ready for that subject. Not yet.

Morrie'd disappeared as soon as the meal was over, leaving them to clean up. The only sounds were the clank of dishes on the bench, and the occasional bark from the dog kennels in the yard. "I'm off," Morrie said, when he returned.

"Looking a bit swish there, Dad." His grey stubble was gone. He'd scrubbed his skin, but no amount of washing would remove the line that divided his forehead into a startling pink above, and a leathery brown below. He stood at the back door and tossed his checked shirt and overalls through the washhouse door. He tapped the pocket of his short-sleeved summer shirt, then the pocket of his tan slacks. He withdrew the corner of a handkerchief, before stuffing it back down.

"Lodge tonight."

"Even in January?"

“Well, not normally, but there’s some council thing or other that we all have to vote on.”

“Give my regards to T.C.,” Mary said. “Tell him to let us know if he needs anything.”

“Will do. Have a good evening. I imagine you two’ve got a few things to talk about.”

He grabbed his best hat from the hook beside the back door and, with a wave, was out the door.

“What’ve you been saying to him?”

“Not a lot. I had to talk with someone, seeing as you’d clammed up.”

George still said nothing. Any words that came to him were dismissed in favour of silence, which was quickly becoming obscured by the pounding in his ears.

“You don’t seem to get it. We can’t just wait and hope this will go away.”

“So you say.”

“I had lunch the other day with some of the crowd from West Primary. Apparently, Sue’s pregnant.”

“And what’s that got to do with this?”

“It means...” she emphasised the word. “... there’s a long-term relieving job coming up. Funny thing. Her class is the one I taught just before I moved away. Best class I ever had. It’d be like drinking from a stream after being forced to use the sheep trough. Never mind that. We’ve got to make a decision.”

George folded his arms across his chest. “Sounds to me like you already have.” The bubble of light that Brian had lit was already fading.

“It’s pretty obvious. There’re so many reasons for us to stay.”

“And they are?” Why’d he bother to ask?

“One: Your mother needs you.” She ticked her points off on her hand. “Two: There’s a job that I’d actually like. All I’d need to do is say the word. Three: Something’s bound to

come up for you. And, four: We could afford a house here so much easier than up there.” She bent her little finger back hard, stretching the tendons so that the skin turned white. “Which means that we’d be able to start a family far sooner than we would if we stayed in Wellington.” She snapped her hand closed, as if her ideas were beyond dispute.

“And, the fact that I’d have to leave my dream job, that the best I could hope for here would be to go along cap in hand to beg for a job as a part time shelver. Where does that come into it?”

“That’s ridiculous. A man with your qualifications is bound to pick something up. Don’t forget that the College has a library and surely the research station has one. The main one isn’t the only one.”

“You’re seriously suggesting that we live here? What would that do to us? I’d hate myself if I ended up like them.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re talking about our fathers and their friends. They’re good men.”

The kitchen table separated them. She sat at one end, in the place normally claimed by Morrie. He was at the other end where visiting farm hands normally perched hesitatingly. Oscar sat under the table, between them. The table’s length grew as they sat and stared at each other. Mary was the first to shift in her seat. She moved forward, leaning towards George.

“I. Don’t want. To go back.”

He restrained the scream that threatened to escape, instead hissing at her, “Do I get any choice in this?”

“Of course you get a choice. You can stay here with me. You can go back to Wellington to all your so-called mates up there. I’m sure that after a while you’ll hardly even notice that I’m gone.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a choice to me. I stay here and drown, or I go back and we get a divorce.” Something inside George’s chest began to flutter. “It’s been one year, Mary. One year. What happened to sickness and health and all that? You’d force me to stay in a place which suffocates me, or the marriage is over. Is that what you’re saying?”

“It’s up to you. I can’t go back there. I’ve got no one to talk to. Everyone at work treats me as if I’m some kind of uptight country bumpkin who knows nothing about anything. They even insinuated that my teaching experience down here counted for nothing because I taught in, and I quote them, a nice little middle class school.”

“What the hell would this do to Mum? She’s got enough going on without worrying about us on top of everything.” The fluttering intensified, as if a butterfly had become a small bird.

“You know what to do about it then.” She paused and looked directly at him. Her voice softened with her next sentence. “It’s a bit soon to be talking about divorce. We should be able to work this out. It’s not as if either of us is looking at anyone else. Or even that we argue much.”

She was right about that. Most of the time they moved around each other quite harmoniously.

“And I remember how our first argument ended,” she said. “That time you came home as the sun rose.”

His face reddened as he recollected the heat of the argument that was transformed into another more primal kind of heat.

“You want this one to end the same way?” she said.

“That was a oncer. You can’t seduce me out of this.”

“Well someone’s got to do the seducing. Left to you, I’d be waiting forever.”

The jangle of the telephone interrupted them. Relieved to escape from the kitchen, he went into the hallway to answer it.

“Barker residence. George speaking.”

“It’s your father.”

“What’s wrong? Is it Mum?”

“No, no, nothing like that. Just back from Lodge. Got talking to Percy Jones. Town clerk.”

“Of course.” George waited.

“Seems that Paul Coulter is heading off. He’s been caught with his leg over the children’s librarian. His wife got wind of it, and it’s all over. Leaving as soon as.”

“And?” As if he needed to ask.

“I mentioned you. Percy didn’t know you were still here. Wondered if you could be persuaded to step in. Just until they get things sorted out, mind.”

“Sounds like you’ve got things all organised.”

“Works out rather neatly, if I do say so myself. You’ve got the right bits of paper. You’re hanging around, with nothing better to do.” George gripped the receiver. A roar of blood pounded in his ears. Words were forming in his mind, words that couldn’t be taken back once they had escaped. His father continued, “I’ve told him you’ll give him a call.” He recited the town clerk’s contact details. George didn’t bother to write them down.

“Got that?” he said. “Let me know how you get on.”

“It’s market day tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. How about you come over and sit with your mother?”

“Of course. Don’t I most days?”

“She’s not too good today.”

“Did you call the doctor?”

“What do you take me for? You know how she is. I’m not about to force her. Made a bit of a fuss so I let it drop. I’ll be off to the sale yards, soon as you get here. I’m after some store lambs. Bottom paddock’s getting away on me. It’s a bugger to mow. They’re running out of feed on the other side of the river. Still got plenty, seeing as our land’s a bit heavier.”

George interrupted. He’d heard it all before. “Right I’ll be there first thing so you can get away.”

“You’re looking gorgeous this morning.” George greeted the garden that had responded to their attention. “Some of you are going to have to come inside with me.” Blooms in hand, George entered the kitchen only to find it empty, closed up and stuffy. He stuck the flowers into a vase, placed it on the windowsill and threw the windows open to let the house breathe.

His mother was propped up in bed, her half-consumed morning cuppa nestled amongst an accumulation of books, tissues, crosswords and pens on the bedside table. He kissed her on the cheek before gathering the dishes and rubbish to deposit in the kitchen. When he returned, she’d brushed her hair and had found another pillow so that she was more upright in the bed. Even these small measures made a difference to the impression of illness and fatigue he’d gathered on entering the bedroom.

It had been years since he had been into her room, yet little had changed. She hadn’t yet caught onto the trend towards the duvet; the familiar pink, cream and green checked woollen blanket was tangled with the candlewick bedspread and pushed back towards the foot of the bed. She was covered with a white sheet that she’d smoothed across her stomach. Despite this attempt at discretion he noticed that her hands covered a swelling of her belly that he hadn’t seen before. The neckline and armholes of her nightgown looked as if they’d been fashioned for a much larger woman.

“Pull that chair up,” she said. “I want to see you.”

“Do you need anything?” he said.

“Just you. To myself.”

George placed the white cane chair beside the bed.

His mother reached out and held his hand. “Dad said you’re staying. A job at the library?”

“Not sure about that yet. I’m mulling it over.”

“Not keen?”

“I don’t know, Mum. There’s a lot to think about.”

“Son.” She placed her other hand on top of his. “Forget him. Is it what you want?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“He means well, but He loves you. Doesn’t know how.” She paused. She began stroking the scar on the back of his hand. “Ever since Thomas went. It was different for him. I had to take care of you. I don’t know. I kept going. One day I realised I hadn’t cried for a week.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“I cried. Not around you, I suppose. It was hard enough. And like that.”

A sentence had lived inside his head forever. As he sat with his mother, it fought its way to the surface. “It would’ve been better if I had died, instead of Thomas.” The words spilled from his mouth. The room expanded around him. His mother seemed like a tiny figure in the distance. He no longer felt her hand. The chair tilted forward. He pulled his hand from his mother’s to grasp at the arms to stop himself from falling onto the floor.

Her voice, now firm, penetrated. “You must never ... Do you really...?”

The chair tilted back, its four legs now on the ground, where previously they had hovered in mid-air. “I don’t know. Sometimes. Not all the time. But if he’d lived, he would’ve been the son that he wanted. Face it, Mum. I’ve never been that.”

“George.” Her voice, though soft, cried out to him.

“He blames me.”

“For what?”

“Thomas.”

“Look at me.” He obeyed. She paused, gasping for breath. When her breathing returned to normal, she continued, “Losing him was hard.” She closed her eyes and seemed to drift away with her memories. “No point in regrets,” she said as she opened them to look directly at George. “I remember your chatter.” She grasped at her heart and smiled. “Took me a long time to understand you.” Again she paused, as if considering what she’d say next. “Promise me. Have children. She’ll be a lovely mother. It’d be the makings of you.” She sighed. “You were so tiny. You frightened him.”

Now firmly present in the room, something changed inside him, as if hope had flown in to take the place of the doubt that had lived alongside the trapped words. “I’ve always imagined I’d be a father one day. But not yet. We could if we came back here, but...” He trailed off.

“Don’t let him.... If it’s not right. You’ll know when it’s time.”

For several minutes they both sat in silence. A harvest fly began to buzz around the room. George crossed to the window, caught it, opened the window and threw it out.

“How about a little of something tempting? I picked up your favourite custard squares from the Harrogate Bakery. Feel like one of those?”

“Hmm. Just half. The small half.”

George floated down the hall to the kitchen. He brushed a hand across the bench. His fingertip found the groove where the ladder had dug into it. Thomas was determined to climb higher than him.

He had been released, as if he had cast off a skin that had been itching him as it aged. A celebration was in order, with the best china. He selected her favourite cup and placed it on the tray beside his grandfather's moustache cup that sat with the same delicacy as hers, but with more substance, more masculinity.

A wind whipped through the kitchen window. The curtain billowed, caught the flowers and knocked them into the sink. The vase shattered, leaving crystal chips and pink petals to lie on the yellow dish cloth and the curled metal pot scrub at the bottom of the sink. The southerly had arrived, earlier than predicted. George scurried around the kitchen shutting the windows he had opened. Calm restored, he began picking the broken crystal from the sink.

By the time he'd sorted the kitchen and returned to his tea making, the rain had arrived. The downpour had become so loud that it was impossible to hear his own footsteps on the polished wooden floor as he walked up the hallway towards his mother's room.

Her bed was empty when he entered. He looked back up the hall and noticed that the bathroom door was closed. He poured the tea. He called to her. Silence. He waited. Called again. Still silence.

He wandered down the hallway and tapped on the bathroom door. "You O.K., Mum?" No reply. Perhaps she hadn't heard. The storm was unleashing its wrath. He bashed at the door, loud enough to be heard over any gale. In his mind's eye, he saw her lying on the bathroom floor. When he finally burst through the door he found her in the exact position that he had imagined.

Chapter 3

“I’ll drive,” Mary said, placing a blue overnight bag on the back seat of the car. “You don’t look up to it.”

It was only when she stopped at the lights on the main road that he became aware they had arrived in town. The people crossing the road in front of them looked as if they were in the distance, even though they must have been just in front of the car. George focused on the last few to cross. A woman pushed an old man in a wheelchair. The light turned green before they reached the footpath. Mary waited for them. The woman acknowledged Mary with a wave; her face lit up in recognition. Mary waved before driving on.

“You know her?”

“So do you.”

“Don’t think so.”

“That’s Margaret Bishop. As was. Anderson, now.”

“No idea.”

She opted for silence, which seemed to suit George. When they arrived she was afraid that he would need coaxing, but he strode towards the entrance before the car was locked. She scurried after him.

He disappeared into the room as she came through the double doors at the ward’s entrance. He was seated beside the bed, gently touching his mother’s hand, which lay on the smooth white sheet. She walked across and placed a kiss on her mother-in-law’s cheek.

“You gave us a fright, Betty,” she said.

“Just a wee turn, dear. Must have stood up too fast.”

“It’s more than that, Mum,” George said. “Those...” He gestured towards the table over the bed. “... are not because you fainted.” A paper bag printed with the large word “Pharmacy” sat next to a bowl of nectarines and a large bag labelled “Patient’s Property”.

“Here’s the orderly. I’ll get changed. Then, let’s be off.”

George passed her the blue bag and went with Mary into the hallway to wait.

“Aren’t they letting her go too soon?” she asked.

George kept his voice low. “Must say, it surprised me a bit. We’ll have to keep more of an eye on things. For a while anyway.” He looked away from Mary. “Just until we can sort things out.”

Betty’s door opened. Dressed, she looked slightly less fragile. She handed the medication and fruit to George. An orderly manoeuvred the chair so that she could ease herself into it. Once settled he placed her bag on her knee, and strode out of the ward. Mary and George followed in his wake.

George, after retrieving the keys from Mary, drove the car under the portico, to make it easier for his mother to slide into the car. He leaned across and clicked her seatbelt into place.

“Thank you so much for coming,” she said. “Your father would’ve, but today was the only day to pick up the new rams. I really didn’t want to wait until tonight.”

Mary leaned forward to rest her arms on the back of the driver’s seat. “Here’s hoping things are sorted out, and you’ll be on the mend.” She reached her hand through the gap between the front seats to touch Betty’s shoulder. Her bones felt as if there were more fabric than flesh covering them.

George glanced across at his mother. The seat had sucked her into its pseudo-leather confines. He eased off the throttle and moved towards the verge of the road. At the intersection with the main road a red Mini pulled up alongside him, despite there being only one lane. The woman driver gave a couple of quick honks on her horn and took off with a squeal and a puff of smoke from its front wheels into a minute gap in the traffic. George waited for a larger space, crossed the road and nursed the car over the railway line.

“Anything you want on the way home? Something to read? To eat? Stop at the shops?” he said.

“Nothing, dear. The girls dropped off a pile of weeklies. They’ll do for now.” She turned to look out the window. “Just take me home.”

The rest of the drive was made in silence. Betty stared out the window at landscape she must’ve seen thousands of times before. In the mirror George saw Mary, apparently deep in thought, look first at Betty and then at him.

George pulled the car as close to the back door as possible. T.C. was in the yard, the stock pen on the back of the tractor. The dogs circled, waiting for their work to begin. One of the rams bunted his head against the wire mesh.

“Settle. Another month. You can have all the girls you want,” he said to the ram, before wandering over to the others. “We should be so lucky, eh boy?”

“Do you have to talk like that? Surely we are a little more advanced than a pack of sheep?” George glanced across at Mary and Betty.

“Don’t worry on my account George,” Mary said. “I’ve heard worse. I’ve been in the shearing sheds since I was knee-high.”

“Even so,” George protested.

“Mob,” T.C. said.

“What?”

“Mob of sheep. You said pack. That’s wolves. We don’t have them here.” He turned away. “You all right, Mum?”

“Fine. I’ll just head on in.”

“You need help?” Mary hovered like a bumblebee over the flower bed.

“Can you get my bag, there’s a dear?”

They watched her disappear into the kitchen.

“How’re you going to manage? She’ll need help.” George faced his father across the path.

“Maybe it’s time to get someone in. I don’t reckon I can do it on my own.”

“That’d be a good idea. You’d be able to spend time with Mum.”

“Not farm help. Someone to help inside. Do the meals, bit of dusting, that kind of thing.”

“You can’t? Won’t, more like,” George thought, then wondered if he’d spoken out loud.

He can’t have, because his father continued. “I’m not much chop inside. She’d be better off with someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“What about us, T.C.?” Mary spoke up.

George frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

“Move over here and look after her.”

His father moved towards Mary. “I had wondered. Didn’t want to be a nuisance.”

“It’s not that,” George said.

“It’d be ideal. Between the two of you. Cooking, housework, and there’d be someone to sit and talk to Mum. Good idea, Mary.”

“Do you mind? This is something that Mary and I need to talk about.”

“All right, Mr Snarkey.”

“Let’s get inside, then.” Mary opened the boot of the car.

“Here, let me.” T.C. went to the back of the car and lifted the bag out.

“I’ll take it,” she said. “You finish up out here, T.C. We’ll see you before we leave.”

“There are a few things that need doing.”

“Off you go,” she said, and gathered the bags from the back seat.

By the time they got to the kitchen Betty had retired to her room, leaving Mary and George to face each other over the kitchen table.

“Honestly Mary, you’ve dumped us in it now.”

She shrugged. “How can you even consider going back now? Anyway. I sent off my resignation letter.”

“You what?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed the holidays are nearly over.”

“Resignation. Honestly Mary. What about just asking for leave? You could, at least, have discussed it with me?”

“You act as if it’s a surprise.” Didn’t he see what was happening right in front of him? “I’ve resigned, but I won’t completely rule out going back. I’m not ready to, you know.... If, and it’s a big if, we decide to go back, once things are sorted here, I’ll look for another job. But just so we’re clear, when I get pregnant, you’ll need a convincing argument to hold me there.”

“What about my job? I can’t just expect them to ...”

“Sorry. In the middle of everything, I forgot to tell you. Your boss phoned a couple of days after your mum collapsed. You were at the hospital, so I filled him in. He said it was fine to take long term leave until... things change. Don’t worry; they’ll hold your job for you.”

“And what are we going to live on, meantime? I won’t sponge off him and I’d rather not eat into our savings. They’re for the house.”

“You seem to forget that I can go back to West just as soon as Sue finishes up.”

“We won’t be here that long. Surely.”

“There’s always relieving. That job T.C. was talking about? Just until they get someone.”

“I wouldn’t get to see Mum much. I’d be at work all day.”

“And every night and all weekend you won’t. You’d only be away for a few hours on week days. In the meantime I’ll be here while you’re at work; you can take over as soon as you’re home.”

“But I’ve got a job, friends. Things are about to happen. I want to be there for that.”

“Surely that can wait.”

“This town. It’s so small. The only thing it’s the centre of is this bloody self-satisfied, smug little district.”

“Listen to you. Can’t you put up with that, if it meant being here to help your mother? You haven’t lived here, not really, since you went off to boarding school. There must be lots of things you want to ask her, things you’ve never told her. Let’s face it, you won’t be telling T.C. any of those things any time soon. This is your chance.”

George put his head in his hands. Mary drifted into silence. He pictured himself with Brian. He saw them working into the night together, joining with others to take a stand. He saw himself talking, really talking to his mother. If he had the chance, no matter what he said, she was the one person who’d listen. He was being ripped down the middle. If he stayed, he might wake up one day to realise that the town had fed on him and that there was nothing recognisable left. But if anything happened to his mother, it’d haunt him. The clock’s ticking broke into the quiet. He stared at the fruit bowl in the middle of the table. One of the nectarines had a large brown mark extending across the top. He picked it up and pressed his thumb into it. Juice dribbled down his arm. He cupped the mess with his other hand, dropped it in the chooks’ scrap bowl, and rinsed his hands in the sink. He wanted to walk out the door and keep going. Instead, he stared out the window, past the tamed lawns and hedges, to the shearers’ cottage under the macrocarpas at the bottom of the garden.

“I won’t sleep in the house. It’ll have to be the cottage.”

“O.K.”

“As soon as there’s a change and we’re not needed, we’re off.”

“Let’s talk about it when the time comes.”

“You won’t rule out Wellington?”

“I said I wouldn’t. Let’s just wait and see.”

“I’m a cleaner, not a packhorse,” the woman said, when she let George into his office. “His lordship’s left it in a bit of a state. Heard he’s shot through already. I done my best, but there’s a limit.” With barely a pause in her flow, she waved her hand towards a second door. “The others work out there. Not far if you need them.” She tugged at the front of her apron. “Must get on. Won’t be cleaning itself.”

In the workroom piles of books waited to be wheeled out for shelving, index cards nestled in their wooden boxes, and date stamps sat on the front desk. Even the sweet smell of glue and the background musty scent of paper and dust made the room feel like home. He hadn’t realised how much he’d missed being surrounded by books.

Returning to his office, he made a mental list ordering the immediate jobs. Clearing, sorting and stacking were first. He was absorbed in this task when he heard voices coming from the workroom. Scrambling up from the floor, he saw that his hands were covered in dust. He brushed off as much as possible, but they were damp. Rubbing them together made them look as if he’d shown up to the new job after changing a tyre on the side of the road. Running them down his legs didn’t work because he immediately became aware of grey streaks on his black trousers. Hardly the best presentation for an acting Head.

“Must be here already. That or someone’s parked in the wrong spot again.” There was nothing for it but to venture out.

A woman with wild red hair was standing with her back to George. Her colleague faced him and began to nod her head in a combination of greeting and warning. The redhead must've picked up on her cues; she swung around to face him.

"You're joking," she said.

"I'm afraid not," he said, as he walked towards her.

"I'll never," she said, throwing her arms around him. "George, George. Where have you been all my life?"

"As far away as possible. But I give up, Pip, you've got me now."

"It's been too long. I lost track."

He stepped back from her. "Looks like you've been busy."

She caressed her rounded belly. "Bet you didn't take me for the maternal type."

"Now that you mention it..."

"Number two. There's a two-year-old at home."

"Last I heard you were in London, terrorising the British Library with your antipodean enthusiasm. What on earth are you doing here?"

"I ask myself that all the time."

T.C. drove the tractor through the yard gate, its bucket filled with posts, wire and chains.

George had been mucking around in the kitchen, but as soon as the tractor passed the cottage, he picked up a tin of baking, pecked her on the cheek and headed over to Betty.

He'd not been gone long, when Jen arrived with her brood.

"I know. I'm early. Thought I'd get them settled in, have a chat. Anne's precious schedule will suck us in as soon as she arrives."

Mary had set out some Afghans for the children to finish. Icing sugar, butter, cocoa, walnuts and Betty's old piping set waited for their attention. Soon, plates were covered in iced biscuits and the two older children were perched on the back step licking the bowl.

"You sure you'll be alright with all of them? All night? Why not start with Anne's lot on their own? It's not too late to take mine around to Matthew's mum."

"I'm a teacher. I'm used to thirty or more. Piece of cake."

"Don't you go getting clucky."

"What would be so wrong if I did?"

"You're the one."

"Sorry. The one what?"

"The one who got out of here." Jen shook her head. "I couldn't but, somehow, knowing you had... It made a difference."

"I've hardly gone far."

"Far enough. It's practically overseas." Jen caught Mary's eye. They laughed.

"Hey sis, in case you didn't know, Cook Strait doesn't qualify as a sea. It feels like it sometimes, though." For a moment all was quiet. Oscar lay with his head on the frame of the carrycot. The baby slept. Tongues wrapped around spoons. "You having regrets?"

"Not really. Yes. No. I don't know. Not much point. I just wonder what would've happened if I'd gone to university."

"Not too late."

"With this lot. I doubt it. And we're stuck here. Matthew's job. Besides, there's no time. It would mean hours at the piano. Hours, I don't have."

"Jen. I thought it'd all worked out for you."

"It has. It is. Just sometimes... I had to tell you, while you have the choice."

Stepping inside the big house was like entering through an invisible skin: separate, contained. Toast crumbs were scattered around a circular space where T.C. usually ate. At the corner of the bench pill bottles were lined up beside a sheet of paper. George recognised his father's scrawls.

"G," it began. Not even his full name. "Waited, but you're late. Medication changed. Two orange pills. Maximum. Next dose at 10:00. Three hourly. No sooner. Had a rough night. Keep it quiet." He'd scribbled what could be deciphered as his initials, if you already knew what might be written there. George grabbed the paper, scrunched it into a tight wad and tossed it into the rubbish bin, before moving through the house to find his mother.

He headed for the drawing room. Now that she spent a lot of the day in bed, they'd moved it for her. There, the morning sun warmed her, and she didn't have to endure the heat later in the day. Exhaustion usually overwhelmed her after lunch; mornings were generally her best times. She hadn't lasted long today. He crept in and selected his old copy of *Swallows and Amazons* from the bookshelf that filled one wall of the room. His mother prided herself on having read every book, his father on having read one, *The Guide to Better Grassland*.

The bed fitted neatly into the bay window. The Queen Anne chair had been left close enough that he could watch her, but not so close that any movement would disturb her. He lowered himself into the chair and opened the book. Silence held him. An interruption came from the totara tree. The bellbird began with a loud call, a leading note signalling the others to pay attention. A soft lower one, in answer, was followed by short trills to complete the sequence. Once ended, the bird began its song again. George laid his head against the back of the chair and noticed that prisms in the leadlight windows scattered the light so that it danced across the wall in time with the wind that moved the branches of the willow beside the creek.

Had it been later in the day, he might've drifted off and missed the whimper that escaped his mother's lips. Must be time for her pills. He reached out to touch her. She turned her hand and grasped at his fingers. Her eyes opened and looked directly into his.

"At last. You're here. I've been waiting for you to come inside."

"I've been here a while, Mum."

"Silly me. No time to nod off. Lots to do."

"It's all taken care of."

"The bottling? The peaches won't wait."

"I didn't see any peaches when I came through."

"I'd be surprised if you did." She struggled to sit up and untangle her legs from the sheets.

"No need to get up, Mum. I'm pretty sure there aren't any peaches to do today. I'll check, and if there are, maybe Mary and I'll do them."

"Mary. Such a lovely girl. Is she here?" She leaned back on her pillows and stroked his hand. "Good. It's been a while."

"I popped in last night. Remember. I brought the hydrangeas on the oak table."

"Sorry, Pumpkin, not your style. That would've been your brother." Her voice was soft and distant, as if she were whispering down a long tube from another room.

George opened his mouth to correct her, but no words came. His chest tightened. A flush of heat rose in his body. He stopped dead, uncertain whether to bring her back, or follow her to where she was.

"I've missed you, Pumpkin." She stroked his hand again. "You made it in time."

"In time for what, Mum?"

"The harvest. Dad's got a job. Why don't you let George join in? Teach him to drive, maybe?"

She might've been confused, but he wasn't. Every moment of that day was etched deep in his bones and written on his body. He yearned to be rubbed clean and overwritten.

It was dark by the time he left the big house. The full moon and the outside light led him across the yard, through the gate and up the path to the cottage. The shadows of the macrocarpas played with the light, causing him to take care with each step. He hoped that Mary'd be awake, but one peek inside the bedroom revealed a sprawled mass of children, Mary at its centre. Even Oscar had piled in. He raised his head, and seeming satisfied that the intruder was familiar, nestled down again.

Mary was finally on the verge of sleep when she heard him come in, or thought she did. She couldn't be sure that he was standing by the door, or if she just dreamed it. Either way, she had no strength to lift her head. It'd wait until morning. His dream shadow moved away.

He tried pacing the tiny lounge. His steps were reduced to shuffles and sidesteps around the hut the children had built in the middle of everything. Noticing that his jaws were clamped together, he rubbed his face below his ear. It was too late to phone Brian. Pip might be awake, but he hadn't memorised her number. He stood at the doorway to the bedroom, hoping Mary would rouse. She turned away from the light, murmuring as she did, but didn't wake.

In Mary's dream someone shut a door and drove off without her. She wanted to follow, but she couldn't move.

George took the familiar road to town. He stuck to the outskirts: right at the Harrogate shops, past the rugby club, left at the Showgrounds, and on to the end of the block. From the car he

saw that the main gates were held together by a heavy chain. He got out and tested the side gate. It creaked open.

The gate clanged shut behind him, as if he had been admitted to the forbidden lands of fairy tales. He stared down the yew-lined tunnel; the moonlight led him through the darkness to the silence beyond. The rows all looked the same. He found the place, then realised that the dates were all wrong. An image came to him of his mother filling a jug with water, while he held the flowers for her. He'd never forgotten their name: Love-lies-a'bleeding. Whenever he saw their cascading florets he was jolted back to this place.

He found the tap, and soon after found the place he had last seen when the soil was newly turned. So dark and final. Now, Thomas was blanketed by soft mown grass. A simple headstone was concrete evidence of his life and death. George stood at the foot of the grave. The flood of words that had driven him to this place threatened to drown him. He closed his eyes, the deluge eased, the babbling lessened. The wind played with his hair. The road that led north to the city hummed with traffic. He opened his eyes. The moon's light cast his shadow upon the grass. The outline of his head matched the place where Thomas's head lay. His shoulders, his arms, his whole outline were Thomas's. He fell to his knees. The moan he had held in for so long escaped.

"I never meant to hurt you." These words had been lodged inside him from the moment he'd seen his father rocking Thomas, head bent so low that it touched his brother's chest. He'd turned away and let the shade of the gorse hedge conceal him. From there, he had watched as Thomas was laid on the ground. Sheep surrounded them. People ran towards them. It was as if it were a strange Nativity scene.

George found more words amongst his sobs. "The dark swallowed me when you went away." He paused, and the world grew around him. "I wasn't a twin any more. That went with you." As he dared to tell his secret, it was as if his brother were sitting beside him,

listening. “All those times I ran here from school. Day after awful day. It was all wrong. I wasn’t sure if you were here. That last time, did you see him come? ‘Back to school,’ he yelled, and told them that if they didn’t sort it out, he’d send me far away, where I’d have nowhere to run. I tried to be good, but he did it anyhow.” He’d been so small, less than half a person. “I hated it. You know what I’m like at sport. And that’s all they care about. You would’ve looked after me. But you weren’t there. Even when they were sleeping, they took all the air from the room. There was none left for me.” The sense of suffocation threatened for a moment to return. He pulled in a large breath, and listened to the traffic in the distance. “I’m doing O.K., I suppose. But I’d give it all up to have you back. Carrying on without you. It’s just so bloody hard sometimes.” The world began to shrink to its normal size. “He won’t talk about you. About what happened.” As he spoke, George saw the way Thomas would grin, as he planned adventures. “Without you, I don’t know where I’m going.” He lay on top of Thomas, curling around him as they would’ve before they were born.

The cold ground eventually reached George’s bones. He was reluctant to leave, but his twin was no longer with him. No point in staying.

Chapter 4

George was woken by Oscar's bark at the end of the couch. Whispers and giggles came from the hut. Their idea of quiet wasn't conducive to sleep. Despite the sun only being in the early stages of lighting the sky, he was sure that they were all crammed in. One foot and Oscar's tail stuck out from under the floral sheet.

"Pretend I'm not here," he said to Mary, as they passed at the bedroom door. Not ready for children, or questions.

The second waking came with voices outside the bedroom window and slamming car doors. If they were leaving already, he'd better get a move on.

"Early start?" he said. Mary was folding the sheets, revealing the table and chair structure underneath.

"Seems there's no other sort when you have kids."

"Lucky it's not every day."

Mary upended a chair. She looked as if she was about to say something, but paused for a moment before asking. "Everything O.K. with Betty?"

He hesitated. Too complicated. Relating the night's events could wait. "More or less the same." George stretched and rubbed his head. He wondered if she noticed that something had changed in him. The night's events had left him flailed. Today a new skin was beginning to grow. He didn't know if his pink rawness was as visible as it felt from within.

It was the man's arms that caught his eye. There was something about the way his shirt sleeves cut across his biceps that made George stare. The man held a giggling, squirming toddler upside down as he strode across the pedestrian crossing. When he reached the other side he turned towards George, who looked away, perhaps not quickly enough, for the man gave him a slow deliberate wink before turning his attention back to the child. His red curls

bounced as the man flipped him upright, and set him safely down on the footpath. George watched as the little boy reached up, and took the man's hand, who turned back and raised an eyebrow at George, before heading off down the street. George looked after them as they walked up Bankside Road towards town.

A toot roused him. A black van loomed in his rear vision mirror. The driver waved at him, as if shoos him through a gate. He let off the clutch and accelerated away from the crossing. As he passed the man and the little boy, he saw that they had stopped at the notice board beside the information centre. The man had placed his backpack on the ground and was pulling at something protruding from the top of it.

Prevented from driving slowly by the black van behind him, George lost sight of them when he turned the corner into the main road. Work beckoned, but George found himself rounding the next corner to head around the block in the hope of seeing the man again.

A familiar car approached. Mary had taken to driving Betty's white VW, now that he needed the car for work. She saw him as she passed, gave him a quick wave and eased over to the verge. He turned and pulled up behind her.

He leaned on the roof. She unwound the window and turned the music down. Even so, he could hear David Byrne saying the same lines again and again over the backing music.

"Same as it ever was."

"I thought you'd be at work by now," she said.

"Nearly there, then I realised that I'd forgotten something." The lie slid from his lips.

"Bit early for shopping, isn't it?"

She didn't want to reveal her suspicions, or her destination. She poked through her handbag. "Just a couple of quick jobs, then I'm back to your Mum."

"How was she when you left?"

“And I’d know this because I’ve had time to pop in since you left.” There was that edge in her voice again. She cleared her throat in the hope of softening it before she spoke again. “No. T.C. is with her until I get back.”

There was nothing to say to her. “Better be off then. See you tonight.”

“See you then.” She drove off, across the railway lines, away from the shops on the main street and headed to the west side of town.

By the time he parked beside the noticeboard, the man and the boy had gone. George double-checked that the V.W. hadn’t returned. Leaving the car running, he crossed the street and looked at the notice board. Only two posters were displayed amongst the cards seeking babysitters and flats. One advertised a movie, *Blue Lagoon*, which ran at the Regent before Christmas. Not the poster the man had been putting up. The only other one had the words ‘Fight Apartheid’ marching in bold letters across the top of the page. Below it the poster questioned the reader’s interest in this issue and named the date, time and location of a meeting to gather concerned people.

“You were hard at it last time I looked,” Pip said from the doorway to George’s office. She scanned his paper-strewn desk.

“Trying to get my head around the budget.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Hmmm. I was wondering. Did anyone have anything to do with it while Paul was here?”

“Right here.” She frowned at him. “No need to be so jumpy. You’ll be fine. Back in the Valley, remember, you were the original Mr Worrywarts over your assignments. Even though you always got As, you’d fret that you would fail. Same thing now. You’ll be fine,” she repeated.

“You think?”

“What say I get these loan requests sorted, and then we can go over what you need? I owe you. Saved my butt so many times.”

“Isn’t that what flat mates do?”

“Only the good ones. Hold it there, I’ll be right back.”

He returned to the notes he had been taking. She appeared at the door just as he reached the end of his first page.

“Coffee first?” she asked.

“That’d be great.”

“Bet you I can remember how you take it.”

“Go on then.”

“No, I meant a real bet. I get it right. You make it.”

“You’re on.” She was sure to be the one to make the coffee.

“Not too strong, no sugar, a dash of milk. Just a little, not too much.”

“How on earth...?”

“You’ll never know. Have I got a great memory? Or are you just obvious? I’m black with two. I like it hot and dark.” She grinned at him and bustled out of the office. He headed to the staffroom, gathering wayward cups as he went.

Two steaming mugs in hand, he was ready for the task ahead. Voices came from his room as he approached. Both familiar.

Mary was in his chair. Pip was leaning back in hers, feet on the desk.

“You’ve met my wife, Mary.”

“We introduced ourselves.”

“I told you about Pip. Lost track of her, but like a bad penny, here she is.” Pip gave him a flick with her foot, but missed.

“Didn’t you flat together, or something?” Mary asked.

“Up the Aro Valley. Right through uni and library school,” George said.

“Along with a hundred others.”

“Surely not,” Mary said.

“Don’t take any notice. She can hardly count.”

“And you’re the twit who thinks I can help with the budget. More fool you.” She turned to Mary. “You want a cup?”

“Water perhaps. If that’s O.K.”

“No problem.” Pip nudged George with her hip as she passed through the doorway.

“I’m surprised to see you here. Aren’t you looking after Mum this morning?”

“I am. I will be. I just needed to pop in.” Now she was in his office, she wondered if this was the right place.

“You know that I’m busy with the budget today.”

“You told me.”

“Was there something urgent?” he asked.

“Not exactly urgent. No one’s dying or anything.” Mary hesitated, then got up and crossed the room to shut the door. “There’s something I need to tell you. I just found out.”

“Well?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“What?” He sank into Pip’s chair. “But that’s not possible.”

It was a bit of a shock, but denial? “Of course it’s possible, George.”

“How? When?”

“George. As if you don’t know. How? The usual way. When? That’s easy. The night after Jen’s baby arrived.”

“Once? That’s all it took?”

“Right time. Right place.” She wished he’d walk across the room and hug her. It wasn’t really his way, though. “Aren’t you excited? A baby, George. Our baby.”

“It’s just a bit of a shock. It’s not exactly what we planned.”

“Maybe it’ll help us make plans. Anyway, it’ll be a while yet. The doctor says mid-September. Plenty of time to get used to the idea. You’ll see. Once it’s here.” She rose from the chair and went towards him. She put her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder. “I can’t believe it. I thought it might never happen.”

George was surprised to realise that there was a thrill of anticipation in amongst the jumble of reactions her news had provoked.

Chapter 5

George pulled in behind the red Mini, and flicked on the light to check the address he'd written down. The house was ordinary enough, a neat weatherboard villa. Ten minutes early. If there were no signs of anyone else turning up, he'd leave. It mightn't be too late to catch a movie, or there was always the library. He'd steer browse the shelves for the change.

Cars were being parked around him. Greetings were tossed into the air. One man had a beard, long hair and sandals, but the rest of them wouldn't have earned a second glance. No one he recognised. They went through the wooden gate, up the path and across the veranda to the front door. No sign of the man on the pedestrian crossing. Perhaps the poster had already been there, and he'd taken something else from his bag. It might be better not to go in. Best left alone. Especially now.

An elderly couple leaned against each other as they went up the path. As the man stepped onto the veranda and offered his hand to the woman, George saw the white of a clerical collar in the outside light. He was about to talk himself out of going in, dreaming up the excuse he'd make to Brian when he spoke to him next, when he heard a tap on his window. A smiling woman waved at him. He wound down the window.

"You here for the meeting?" she asked.

"Yes, but..."

"Would you mind walking in with me? I'm new in town. It's silly, I know, but I hate walking in alone." She stuck her hand through the window. "Dianne's my name, Dianne Adams. And before you ask, I am related to those Adams. Don't judge me though."

He laughed as he shook her hand. "George Howard. Ditto."

She waited on the footpath while he locked the car. They knocked on the front door, which was immediately opened.

“Welcome, welcome. I’m Peter Moore. The convenor of this little group. Come in. Have a seat. We’re about to start.” He led them down the hallway into the lounge. People had taken every available space. George looked around for somewhere to perch.

“Shove along,” a man said. “Make room.”

George turned towards the voice. The man, that man, looked directly at George with amusement on his face and patted the space on the couch beside him. George stood back to allow Dianne to take the space, but as she stepped forward the man held his hand out to indicate room on the opposite couch. George squeezed into the gap. The man held out his hand to George.

“Frank. George Howard. Right?”

George shook his hand. When they touched, it was like holding onto the top wire of an electric fence. He pulled his hand away. George suddenly felt overdressed for the room. Shrugging his jacket off involved a bit of manoeuvring so he wouldn’t land on top of Frank, or the woman on the other side. His arm refused to let go of the sleeve. He attempted to heave himself out of the couch, but it had drawn him in so far that it was like pulling gumboots out of tractor ruts in a muddy gateway in the middle of winter.

Frank leaned towards him, “Need a hand?” He held the back of George’s jacket and lifted the garment from him, folded it and handed it back. His hand brushed George’s shoulder, who forced himself to move away.

“So. How’ve you been, George?” he said.

“How do you...?”

“Know your name?” George nodded. “1960. You lost all your marbles and I got them back for you.”

“Frank? Frank O’Hara?”

“What d’ya reckon?” Frank asked, as they walked towards the footpath.

“Should be able to get things moving,” George said. It was as if the words falling from his mouth were being spoken by someone else. Someone who didn’t wish to reach out. Or run away.

“Good on ya,” he said. “Would’ve shoved your hand up if you hadn’t of. Beat me to it.”

“It seemed the right thing,” he said. “Besides, I’m a backroom boy.” Frank raised that eyebrow. A flush rose up George’s face. He was grateful he was in the shadows.

“You were a little pipsqueak back then.”

“That was our first day at school. Of course I was small.”

“It’s bloody good to see you.”

George held Frank’s gaze for a while before looking off at the streetlights converging in the distance. “I’m looking forward to seeing that film about Steve Biko,” he said.

“You reckon the Council will let you have the room?”

“Don’t see why not. It’s Granada after all. Hardly subversive. Besides, the upstairs rooms can be rented by anyone. I’m sure it’s just a formality.” Words might stop him from being sucked into the darkness of the vacuum between them.

“We’ll see.”

“You sound unsure.”

“Not of you. Just know what their sort is like.”

George looked away and examined a cigarette butt in the gutter. Say something. Hold him here. “How did you know it was me? It was so long ago.”

“It was the eyes. They haven’t changed.” He grinned at George; the streetlight gave his face a golden glow. His cheeks folded into the dimples that George had forgotten, yet were familiar as soon as he saw them. He yearned to reach out and touch Frank’s face. He

stuck his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket. “Heard you were back. You used to follow me around at school.”

“You saved me. You were my hero.”

“Hardly. What from?”

“Joey McConnell.” His primary school tormentor loomed, making his stomach clench.

“That little asshole. He’s inside. Or so I heard.”

“I should be off,” George said.

“Right you are.”

“I’ll see you again?”

“Try and stop me.”

Once again, George was glad that the light was behind him so that his face was in shadow. “See you later then.”

“As you were.”

Frank walked away from George, unlocked the Mini and performed the miraculous task of folding himself into the driver’s seat, before driving off down the road with a toot and a wave of his hand.

Red flashes and a siren’s wail invaded his dazed drive home. Whose life was changing? The car behind might slam into the back doors if the ambulance stopped suddenly. It wasn’t until the car was nearly past that George recognised his mother’s VW, Mary at the wheel. He fumbled his way through a U-turn. He crashed through the gears, foot hard to the floor.

He left the semi-darkness of the sleeping street and entered the glare of the hospital’s entrance. In the dimmed light of the reception area, the desk was deserted. Did they not have

night staff on the desk? A clinking noise came from an open door down the hallway. He hurried towards it. A woman stood at a bench, pouring steaming water into a mug.

"Excuse me," he said, breathless after his rush from the car.

"Staff only," the woman said.

"It's my mother," he started.

"Visiting hours are over."

"It's not that. She..."

"There is a waiting room. For waiting. I will be out to attend to you shortly."

"Please," he began. The door was shut in his face.

The light in the reception area spilled into the waiting room. George attempted to sit on one of the low-slung metal-framed chairs. Not comfortable; walk. Around the room. Into the hallway. The door remained closed. Somewhere behind the double doors, perhaps. He tried them. Locked. He needed to find her. The ambulance entrance. Back onto the street. Past the old stone building. Just as he rounded its corner he saw the ambulance slide out of the hospital grounds, the rear compartment now in darkness. A light shone through glass doors at the top of a ramp. Shadows moved behind the doors. Down the path. Up the steps, two at a time. No door handle, no call button. The shadows were gone. The light went off. George pounded on the doors. No-one came.

He paused and took a few gulps of air. Return to the main entrance and demand entry.

The receptionist was there. She sat, papers spread across the desk in front of her. She was bent over the knitting that was sitting in her lap.

"Excuse me," he said. So much for demands.

"One minute. I'm counting." She flicked her fingers across the needle, moving the stitches in pairs while muttering under her breath. Couldn't she see his desperation? Yet he waited. At the end of the row she picked up a pen and wrote a number on the pad in front of

her. She put the needles together, stuck them through the ball of wool and laid them on the desk in front of her. "Right. I'm all yours."

"My mother arrived by ambulance. I don't know where they've taken her."

"An accident?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. She's been sick." This woman. "Just tell me where I can find her, for goodness sake."

"Keep your shirt on. It's probably Ward 4." She picked up the phone. "Name?"

"George Howard."

"Hers. Not yours. Unless that's short for Georgina." He felt like a fourth former with socks around his ankles.

"Sorry. Betty, Elizabeth Howard." Why had he just apologised? He tapped his fingers on the counter as she made a phone call.

"Certainly. I'll send him right up," she said, before replacing the receiver and turning to him. Her voice changed. It was almost sympathetic. "It's Ward 4. Second on the left. You can't miss it." She pressed a button to open the doors that finally let him into the hospital.

When he got to the ward, the only illumination came from hooded lights that cast patterns across the corridor floor. All the doors, except two, were closed. Bright rays streamed from both of them. George crept down the hallway, torn between wanting to run to her and not wanting to wake the whole ward. He peeked into the closer room. A desk, cupboards, shelves and shiny instruments indicated that this was a nurses' room. He crossed the hall. His father and Mary stood beside the bed. Two nurses and a young man who must have been a doctor were bending over the bed. Mary looked across at him as he entered the room.

"George. How did you know? Thank God you're here." She sounded on the verge of panic, which somehow calmed him.

"I'm here now. What happened?"

"One minute she was sleeping. The next she sat up, coughed and slumped over. I shook her. She wouldn't move." Mary leaned against him. "Oh, George."

He slipped his arms around her. She seemed small; as if she had shrunk since the last time he had held her.

"You O.K.?" he asked.

"I'll be fine. Just took me by surprise. I know she's been sick, but not ... you know."

The doctor stepped back from the bed. He picked up the thick wad of notes that the nurse had placed on the table that lived over the foot of the bed.

"End stage cancer," he muttered to himself, as if there were no one else in the room.

"Sorry. What?" George said. "Did you say cancer?"

"Of course it's cancer. Isn't it bloody obvious?" T.C. spat his words at George who stared at him.

"And you.... You.... You didn't think to tell us," he finally snapped back.

"That was up to her. Didn't want anyone to know. Refused treatment. Not that it would've done any good any way."

"I can't understand." His voice became shrill. He imagined punching his father on the jaw. Or scratching at his face. His father glared at him. George looked away. The words, when they came, were hissed in his father's direction. "How long have you known?"

"Before Christmas. Cancelled our holiday just after she had surgery."

"Surgery?" He was standing on the edge of a cliff. He grabbed at the bed to save himself from tipping over.

"Not that it did any good. Opened her up, and closed her right back up again."

"Mr Howard."

"Yes," they said together. His father stepped forward with his hand outstretched.

“Tom Howard, her husband. Call me T.C..”

Sounded like they were at the hall on a Saturday night, rather than in this stark room.

The doctor leaned forward and shook T.C.’s hand. “Doctor Tainui. I’m the registrar this evening.” He paused and looked down at the chart, as if for confirmation. “Are you aware that Mrs Howard has a DNR on her chart?”

“What’s that?”

“DNR stands for Do Not Resuscitate. It means that the patient has requested that no extraordinary measures be used to extend life.”

“Let’s take this outside.” George’s father opened the door and beckoned to the doctor, who followed him into the corridor.

“A couple more chairs?” Mary asked the nurses.

“The day room’s best for that.”

The room was empty, except for George and his mother.

His eyes drifted to his mother’s chest. A butterfly would’ve disturbed the air more than she did. His head had gone numb, yet it was sharp at the same time. His hand reached out to touch hers. She was cool.

“I’m not gone yet,” she said. “Forgive me, George.”

“Was this his idea?”

“Let it be.” His mother closed her eyes.

He pulled the chair up beside her. He held her hand and stroked her face. She opened her eyes and pulled him into them.

“Mary told me.” He waited for her to continue. “Wonderful. My boy. A father.” She closed her eyes again. The room was quiet.

Chapter 6

A thin man stood alone framed by the yew tunnel. His hands entwined, black suit crisp, and shoes polished. He stood, as if he had no wish to disturb the air around him. If it weren't for the white skin peeping through strands of hair slicked across his head and the gleam of his shirt, he might've disappeared into the surrounding shadows. As he moved towards them, the newly appointed vicar passed him in a flurry of fabric; white and purple for this occasion.

“Mr Howard. Tom. Once again, my condolences.” He shook T.C.'s hand, nodded towards Mary and George and continued. “Are you ready? Right. I'll sort the pall bearers; they're awaiting their orders.”

“Give me a minute,” George said to his retreating back. He walked towards the hearse, the coffin poking out on the tailboard. He laid his forehead on the top of the casket; his hands gripped the edges. The wood was smooth. Hard. Her curves, her smell, and her love had been stolen. He heard people gathering behind him. He let his head rest above her heart. They could wait.

He paused so his body would tell him when the time was right. A hand was placed on his back. He turned to see Mary standing behind him. He wanted to cast her off, but he breathed, once, twice, again, until her touch was no longer alien. He waited for her to cajole or coerce. She did neither. The warmth of her hand spread until he was able to lift himself from the wooden lid and step back from the car.

The men chosen to carry Betty moved in and grasped the brass handles. T.C. fell in behind them, Mary and George took their places. As they walked faces turned to greet the procession. Only a year before, some of these faces had beamed approval and hope when they'd left the church together. Someone from the Women's Division stepped forward and placed roses fashioned into a wreath on the smooth coffin lid. George inhaled. A sob ruptured his chest. He tried to gulp it down. They smelt like her. He heard a choking sound which he

knew must have escaped from him. Joan leaned across and brushed her hand across George's. Her fingertips were like a moth.

At every other funeral he'd attended, George'd been at a distance; he was one in a sea of heads bobbing up and down to the vicar's direction, unable to see much of what was happening. There was no one to hide behind this time. He wondered if Thomas's coffin had stood in the same spot; if the same people had turned out with same expression on their faces. No doubt, back then, they would have had an added air of bewilderment.

He'd said he didn't want to go. He'd still been in a wheelchair, his arm in a sling. They'd all seemed relieved. They took him to the Barkers' where he'd been given a jigsaw puzzle of two otters frolicking in a lake. For a long time he'd sat and stared at the pieces spread across the table. At some stage, Mary had sat down beside him, and quietly assembled the edges. Watching her hands selecting the pieces had pulled him into the task. If only he could put things back together and make everything right again. He didn't remember much else. Just Mary, the puzzle, and how calm it was around her. Then his father picked him up and drove him home in agonising silence.

The vicar began. "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies,' says the Lord." The vicar's words flowed through George like poisonous treacle. She had gone. Pain was all he had left. Pain, and memories. He held them close. His words stayed inside his head, while the vicar's rose and commanded the space. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," he continued. Hand over hand she was gently lowered into the ground. The vicar raised his arms. "Ashes to ashes; dust to dust." His cassock quivered in the breeze. "In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life."

At the bottom of the hole she awaited their final farewell. George's father stepped forward with the dirt he had taken from the mound beside them. He let it trickle from his

fingers, and with barely a sound it kissed the top of the coffin. He paused at the edge of the hole. The giant who'd towered over George's childhood had, in that moment, shrunk into an old man, smaller and frailer than he'd ever seen him. George moved to stand beside him, taking his own handful of dirt as he went. His father didn't move away. George slipped his free arm through his father's, and let the earth fall. Their arms drifted apart as they stepped back. Mary moved in between them. The moment was gone.

Two men waited under the liquidambar, its red and gold leaves nodding in farewell. She would love that. Would have. A tree, her son, peace. Without thinking, George walked over to the men.

“Could I?” He gestured towards their shovels.

The young man's tattooed arms pulled his shovel closer to his chest. “That's my j...”

“Here, use mine. Give us a shout when you're ready for us.” As George walked away he heard the older man's soft tones instructing his colleague.

When George returned, the gathering around the grave had thinned out. Most people had retreated to chat in small groups in the pathways between the graves, or under the shade of the gossiping trees scattered around the cemetery. He hauled the canvas cover further off the mound and pushed the shovel into the loose dirt. The first shovelful clunked as it hit the lid. It vibrated through him, shaking him apart. He had expected to feel liberated by the action of piling the dirt into her grave. He was tempted to throw the shovel down, to walk away. He heard his mother's voice encouraging him to keep going, to trust himself.

At first, tears were shed every time the soil fell from his shovel into that dark hole. Gradually, the sound of the dirt began to change, his arms began to move rhythmically, and his body ceased its trembling. It was right that he bury his mother. He stopped to remove his jacket and became aware of someone standing beside him.

“Let me help,” Frank said. Shovel in hand, he waited for permission. Had he asked earlier, his offer would’ve been an invasion. Now was the right time to join together to complete this task. He wished that there were more shovels, so that others could perform this last service for her. As it was, there were only two shovels so Frank and George worked alongside each other, one shovelful after another until there was neither hole, nor mound left.

“I’ll catch a ride back with this lot,” T.C. called across to George. “Don’t be long. Sounds like quite a few are coming back home.”

George spotted Mary on a park bench with Pip. “Thanks for the hand,” he said to Frank. He tried to say more, but his mind was blank. All he needed was to go home, and chase the sleep that had eluded him since his mother had died.

“No worries,” Frank replied. “You ready?” He walked towards Mary and Pip.

“You two haven’t met, have you?” Pip said. “Mary, this is Frank. He’s the father of this one here,” she patted herself, “and of Billy, our little ball of mischief.”

The evening concert blasted out from the radio on top of the fridge.

“I’m suffocating.” Mary pushed herself out of the kitchen chair. She rubbed her back. Oscar echoed her movement, rising from his place under the table and stretching, before wandering over to collect his evening pat from George.

George propped the back door open with a cobbler’s last that had once lived on the shelf in his father’s workshop. Oscar slid out the door, his nose searching for any new and interesting scents in the air. The sky was smouldering, touching the kitchen with streaks of gold.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said. “It’s a bit late to fling all the doors open.” The pile of cards she’d placed on the table when he left for work that morning had been reduced to a handful.

He flicked through the stack. “Most of them are addressed to him.”

“I don’t mind. It’s just a bit hard to know what to say.”

“You want me to take over?”

“Nearly there.” She sat down and picked up the next card. George cast around for something that might inspire the evening meal.

“There’s one here from Frank and Pip.”

“Oh.” He took care to keep his back to her. “What did they have to say?”

“The usual,” she said. “I reckon we should be thanking them. She was great. So easy to talk to. And as for Frank.”

George chopped the onions: his eyes reddening, tears spilling over.

“There’s a P.S.” She paused. “It’s an invitation to dinner. We must. It’d be nice to get to know them better.”

“Shit.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Where are the plasters? Just took a nick off the end of my finger.”

Mary arrived early so she could wallow in waiting. Her sisters wouldn’t be far away, and when they arrived there’d be few gaps for her to drink the place in. The tea room was far from full. Doubtless, before long, it would be, but for now, she had her choice of tables. She eyed the prime spot, gratifyingly empty. Long ago she’d worked out that the table near the rear, to the left away from the kitchen door, under the portrait of the Queen and the Duke, was the best place.

“Fruit square and a pot of tea.” She had to stop herself from calling it Fly Cemetery. Probably too old now, but the sultanas still looked like plump insects trapped in a sticky

sauce, sandwiched in pastry. Anne, even back then on their Friday visits, had frowned at her when she ordered it. The waitress always knew what she meant and didn't flinch.

It was Jenny who asked after George. "There must be a real gap. Now that his mother's gone. I can't imagine what it'd be like. To lose your mum. I mean, they've always been there." She wrangled a high chair for Sammy, while balancing the baby on her hip. It wasn't until Sammy was chewing a sandwich crust, the baby was discreetly tucked under Jen's shirt, and Anne's girls were perched on big people's chairs, their little legs swinging in unison, that Mary could answer her sister.

"He's doing fine. Considering. I think." She wasn't sure how George was doing. He went to work. He cooked, although the meals were more likely to be the kind she might prepare, rather than his normal creations. He spent evenings flicking through books he brought home. On the whole, he was pretty quiet. The only times he showed a spark of the old George was when he came home from one of his meetings. "He misses her terribly, of course. It'll take a while. Thank goodness we have the baby to look forward to."

"Who was that man?" Anne asked. "Use your serviettes," she said to her daughters. Mary frowned at her. "Which man? You've lost me."

"You know. The one who helped George." Mary was still none the wiser. She shrugged her shoulders. "At the cemetery," Anne said. No matter how many years went by, Anne would always be the oldest sister.

"Oh. That's Frank. They went to primary school together. Apparently. I can't remember him. But then, I think he's even a bit older than you. No, he's married to Pip. You know that redhead who works with George."

Anne's lips narrowed. A slight shake of her head.

"You know her?"

"Only by reputation."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing. If I’m going to dinner at their place, might be best that I know what’s being said.”

“Really? Dinner? Well.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Just surprised, that’s all.”

“For goodness sake, Anne. Stop being so cryptic. Spill.”

“I’m not one to gossip, but I have it on good authority as it happens. Jo, you won’t know her, she’s on the kindly committee with me, she was in the home with her when that poor little boy was born...”

“What do you mean, poor little boy? Is there something wrong with him? No one said.”

“Nothing physical, as far as I know. She went back to work not five minutes after having him.” She paused, as if expecting Mary to reel back in shock at this revelation.

“Sorry, Anne. So far, I don’t see the problem. Lots of women juggle a career and children. It’s much more common in the city than here.” It had seemed that Anne had promised to serve up an argument. If this was it, her first shot had been weak.

“On top of that she had hordes of women visit her in the home.”

Mary still didn’t understand how visitors to the maternity ward caused gossip. “And?” she said to her sister. Jen had absented herself from the discussion and was focussed on the children.

“They weren’t like us.”

“Still don’t understand.”

“They all had short hair. And they laughed really loudly. Not at all ladylike. Not one of them wore a dress.”

“Hardly a crime.”

“From what I hear, they’re not married either.” Anne spoke as if she had just delivered the winning shot. “She doesn’t wear a ring and one night, she told Jo that she didn’t hold with that nonsense.”

Despite only having met Pip a few times, she was now much more interested in their dinner invitation.

“You want to do the honours?” Pip attempted to extract herself from the confines of the couch. She held a picture book out to Mary. The boy on her knee had pyjamas and a striped dressing gown on. There was a pink shine to his cheeks. “Billy loves it. Don’t you wee man?” She kissed him on his damp red hair. “I’ve read this one so many times; I’m about ready to hide it.” She turned to George. “The last children’s librarian suggested it. She was discerning when it came to kids’ books. Pity her taste in men was askew.”

“What about you? Interested?”

“Not likely. For one, I’m not looking for full time work. Juggling babysitters is bad enough with one.” She handed the book to Mary. Billy clung to his mother, like a baby possum.

“But he doesn’t know me,” Mary protested. “I’m practically a stranger.”

“No one’s a stranger when that book is in their hands. He’d cheerfully go with an axe murderer if he could take *Brown Bear* with him.” Pip hauled herself out of the couch’s grip. “Sit. I’ll pop Billy on your knee. He’ll scarcely know the difference.”

Mary nestled in with Billy. She began the story. “Brown, Bear. Brown Bear. What do you see?” As George moved away, he noticed the change in her voice. He looked back. Billy was curled in her lap, his head on her chest.

Mary read to the little boy more gently than if she’d been in the classroom. No need to worry about searching for teachable points as she read, or to make sure that he was engaged. The way he moulded into her as she read was proof enough. He smelled like a glass of warm milk that had been infused with a drop of vanilla and a dash of honey. He pointed to the pictures with his chubby little fingers and turned the pages for her at the right time, every time. His bath time glow melted her.

“Looks like she was born to that,” Pip said.

“It’s what she wants,” George said. “You fancy a hand in the kitchen? Be like the old days. I’ll search the fridge for something edible.”

“Are you implying that my culinary skills, let alone my domestic ski have not improved since then?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” he said. “Have they?”

“Probably not,” she said. “Luckily Frank doesn’t seem to notice. Or care. He’s just as likely to throw something together himself.”

Despite her claim, the meal was well underway. The smell of roasting meat filled the kitchen.

“Apple crumble for afters?” she said.

“Sounds good. Can I do anything?” George rubbed the butter into the rolled oats, while she peeled and cored two enormous apples.

“Peasgood’s Nonsuch,” she said.

“You what?”

“Never heard of them myself, until we came here. They’re from an old tree behind the hayshed.”

“Now you come to mention it, I’ve heard that name before. Mary’s mother, perhaps.”

“You surprised me.”

“How?”

“I never took you for the marrying type. Confirmed bachelor and all that.”

“Well. You know how it is. One grows up.”

“What do you mean? You were born grown up.”

“I’m curious,” he began.

“Sorry I’m late.” Frank burst in the back door, removed his floppy cotton hat and flipped it across the room to land on a hook on the wall. “Seventy.”

Perhaps it was too soon to ask. It might’ve been just as well Frank arrived home when he did. “Seventy what?” he said.

“Direct hits. Landed it seventy times. Up on the same time last year. Billy in bed already?”

“Mary’s got him. They’re through there.” Frank went to the sitting room door. George looked through the frame made by Frank’s arm and the door. Mary looked like a portrait of a twentieth century Madonna. She’d hoisted Billy up so that his body snuggled into hers, his head against her shoulder, her cheek resting on his head. Her blue dress and the white blanket she’d wrapped around him enhanced the image. The book lay on the couch beside her.

“Let me take him,” Frank whispered. “Looks like he’s done himself in again.” George watched them from his vantage point against the door jamb. Frank crossed the room and rolled Billy from Mary’s arms into his own. Billy stirred, but the transition was so smooth that he was soon nuzzling into Frank as he was carried from the room.

George smiled at her before returning to his tasks in the kitchen. Mary could hear him talking with Pip. She mightn't've been able to hear the words, but George's voice sounded lighter than she'd heard it in a while. She missed that George.

"Sorry you got pinned down there," Frank said to Mary, on his return to the sitting room.

"I didn't mind. He could've stayed there."

"Dinner's up," Pip called. "Hope you don't mind the kitchen table, chaos and all. There's a dining room, but we might have to be on our best behaviour. Can't have that."

While they'd been out of the room, Pip had whisked the table clear and set it with an assortment on mismatched crockery and cutlery. The casual cobbled-together table looked more inviting than any orchestrated dinner where everything matched.

"Hear you're in the family way, too," Frank said to Mary. "Got long to go?"

"Not for ages."

"Let's not talk about it, just yet." George joined them. "Don't want to jinx it."

Mary frowned at him, and then moved to help Pip put the last of the dishes onto the table.

"How's the week been, George?" Frank asked.

"Strange," he said. "I don't quite know what to do with myself."

"Hope it's not too quick off the mark, you know, to have you over. Seems Mary and Pip have hit it off. Nattering most days, I'm told."

"Sit. Everyone," Pip said. When they were all settled, she continued. "Today's a pretty good score." She pointed at each dish as she worked her way around the table. "From the alleyway, the garden, and lamb, poor dear delicious thing. Rosemary from the front fence and sauce from mushrooms in the bottom paddock. Billy helped with that. Sorry folks, we

break down with the dessert. I'm not about to roll the oats, or make the butter. A woman's got to draw the line."

"No stamina is all I can say." Frank said. "Back in my day, we had to milk the cow before we went to school."

"Don't tell me," George said, "you had to lick road clean wit' tongue."

Pip laughed. "Tell young people nowadays..." She laughed again.

"What on earth are you two on about?" Mary said.

Pip replied. "Monty Python. A flat favourite. Apparently George had a sense of humour after all."

"I never got into them. They were a bit weird for me," Mary said.

Frank said, "I'm with you on that, Mary." He put his head in his hands. "No, no."

"What's wrong?" Mary asked.

"She's got back-up now." He raised his head and grasped Mary's hand. "Just you wait. It'll be whole sketches. Every. Single. Word. Run away with me. Now, before it's too late."

They all laughed. Frank's large hand covered Mary's small one and rested on the table. Neither of them moved away. George averted his gaze.

"Smells delicious, Pip," he said, even though he wasn't sure if he could summon an appetite to do the spread justice.

"Dig in. There's only the quick and the starving around here."

"Do you seriously grow all this yourselves?" Mary's fork was stacked like a sack barrow: meat at the bottom, roast vegetables and steamed vegetables on top, and sauce dripping down the sides. "I didn't know what to have first. It had to be one of everything." She raised the fork to her mouth. Frank leaned towards her and nudged her arm. "Don't. You're putting me off my game."

“It’ll never fit.”

“Watch me.” She manipulated the fork so that when she took it away from her mouth not one speck spilled onto her chin. “Told you. I gave my sisters a fairly good run for their money.”

“The first to produce?”

“No. Our lot is fast off the blocks. I’m the last.”

George glanced across at her, ready to give her the look, only to find her already looking at him, her eyebrow slightly raised. He gave the tiniest shake of his head. They returned to eating their food.

Mary said to Pip, “I can’t wait to put in a garden. It was mostly weeding and sorting out someone else’s plan at Betty’s this summer. It must be even more fun when it’s your own. And the taste. You’ll have to give me a few pointers.”

“I don’t know much about gardening in Wellington. You’ll be going back soon, won’t you? Now that your mother’s gone.”

“There is that,” Mary said, looking across at George. They should’ve talked about it before. Now certainly wasn’t the time, but at the cottage they walked around the topic as if it were a rotting haystack that no-one mentioned in case they had to move it.

“I’m working on it,” he said, knowing he’d revealed nothing. He needed a bit more time to work out the lay of the land before making any decision. He was happy, for now, to leave well enough alone.

And so the meal continued. Mary and Pip chattered as if they had known each other for years, Frank teased like an older brother. Only George, who knew everyone, was quiet.

“Where’s the little boys’ room?” he asked Frank.

“Down the hall, right to the end. Light’s a bit bung though. Tell you what, I’ll check on Billy and turn it on for you.”

“Excuse me ladies,” George said.

“Women,” said Pip. “Never had any ambition to be a lady. You should know that.”

He followed Frank down the hall. At the bathroom Frank opened the door and reached in to locate the light switch. Rather than stepping back from the door to allow George room to enter, Frank stood so that George had to pass him. Heat rose within him as his arm brushed Frank’s chest.

"Thanks," he said.

"I'll leave you to it," Frank said. "Unless you need a hand."

Chapter 7

“Hold your horses. Last minute instructions.” Pip yelled across the yard. She turned back to Mary. “If there’s nothing on either channel, that pile of books might be worth a squiz. I staggered home with them the other night.”

“You sound just like George. Must be the librarian’s curse. Too much temptation.”

“Couldn’t even heave them over into the back seat. Had to belt them into the front seat. If I braked, the words would spill everywhere. Imagine the sound of them rearranging themselves back into the right books. ”

What a strange image. She laughed.

“Appreciate this Mary. Damn near impossible to get out at night. Most of the time we take Billy with us. Wouldn’t work tonight, though.”

“What is it exactly? George just said it was a meeting.”

“You know, this tour thing. It’s as if Gleneagles never happened. We’ve got to see what we can do.”

“From here? Astonforth?”

“We won’t know till we try.”

“Bit of a lost cause, isn’t it?”

“I reckon it’s only just got started.” She swooped towards Mary, and gave her a hug. Pip’s touch took her by surprise. It was friendly, but foreign. After she’d enveloped Mary, and rubbed Oscar’s head, Pip sailed out the door.

Mary wandered through the house, gathering Billy’s toys. Oscar kept hard on her heels. This’s what it’ll be like every night. She tiptoed up the hallway and peeked around the door at the little boy in his cot. He was flat on his back on top of the blankets; arms flung wide, head where his feet should be. When she picked him up, turned him around and tucked him in, he stirred, mumbled, stuck his thumb in his mouth and went back to sleep. She

stroked his head and wound his curls around her finger. She had no wish for the television's babble to bring the world inside. She turned the main light off, leaving a lamp on a side table to cast a pool of light onto the overstuffed armchair. On the mantelpiece were some candles and a box of matches. She lit three and spaced them evenly so that their flickering light danced across the wall. It was a still night, cooler now that autumn had set in. The back of the chair was draped in a granny square crocheted blanket. She selected a pile of books, placed them on the table beside the lamp, tucked her feet up and wrapped the blanket around her. Oscar nestled in beside her.

She flicked through a couple of books from the top of the pile. Interesting photos, but she was in the mood to fall into a book, rather than skim across the surface. The third book was *The Grass is Singing*. Nice title.

"Sounds like lying in the wheat field on a nor'west day." The book had a promising start and it wasn't long before she was absorbed in southern Africa. So much so, that she jumped when the door opened beside her.

"It's just us. Didn't mean to startle you," said Pip. "The others are on their way. Just mucking around outside looking at something on the back porch. I'll put the kettle on. Tea?" Mary nodded. Pip closed the door behind her. Mary heard her moving around in the kitchen through the wall. She returned to the book.

"Looks like you've made yourself at home," Pip said, carrying a laden tray, which she placed on the wooden tea trolley. "Find anything interesting?" She flopped down in the chair opposite her.

"This one's an eye-opener. I'd love to finish it. After you?"

"Take it. I'm not exactly short of reading material. Half the time I return them before they even get opened. Having trouble getting used to the idea that I can't get through as many as I used to."

“Anything else you might recommend? Something to get my teeth into.”

“Subject? Fiction? Non-fiction?”

“Might as well find out about South Africa. If it’s going to come to something, might as well be informed.”

“Let me see.” She went through the pile of books. Some she quickly moved aside, with some she paused to read the blurb on the back, and others she flicked through before returning them all to the pile. “Wait there. I’ve got an idea.”

Mary hadn’t long returned to her book when George and Frank entered the room.

“What’ve you two been up to out there in the dark?” she asked. Their cheeks were flushed, as if they had been carrying heavy loads, or chasing a ram across a paddock.

“Frank’s been showing me his new chainsaw,” George said. “This tea ready?” Frank moved away and sat down on the couch.

“You can pour, if you like, thanks George.” Pip returned, carrying a stack of books. “Don’t worry, Mary. I won’t expect you to read and review these by next week. I’ll put them right here. It’ll be a ‘Mary Pile’. You can work your way through them. I reckon you should start with these two.”

The top book was a slim volume and the bottom one looked as if it might be useful as a flower press. She took them both.

“It’s new.” Pip pointed to the larger book. “Michener takes his usual sweeping view. The other one’s much older. You might’ve read it at school, but even so, it bears re-reading as an adult.” She thumbed through the smaller one, *Cry the Beloved Country*.

“I didn’t so much read it back then, as skim through,” Mary said. “I was certain, with the arrogance of youth, that if a teacher had selected it, it couldn’t be worth reading. Not too fond of being told what to do.”

“That’s for real,” said George.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ve a mind of your own. That’s all. Don’t panic. It’s a good thing. Most of the time.”

“All of the time, if you ask me.” Pip said. “Which I guess nobody was. Oh well, I said it anyway.” She turned her attention back to Mary. “It’s fiction, which makes for an enjoyable read. I’ll hit you with the heavier stuff a bit later. Can’t have you fuming with indignation with the first book.”

“I didn’t know you were interested in politics,” George said.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. Just that you’ve never shown any curiosity before. I just thought, what with your father being so involved in rugby, you’d be all for the Springboks coming here. You would’ve been raised on the grand tradition of the rivalry between them and us.”

“And you weren’t?” She frowned at George and ran her hands through her hair. “I don’t get it. One minute I’ve a mind of my own. Next, you think that because my father is rugby mad, I wouldn’t be interested in human rights?” For a moment there was silence in the room. Her voice had been more strident than she had intended, but she wasn’t of a mind to apologise for her reaction. The silence threatened to become awkward.

Frank spoke up. “Look at me. Front row forward, even played provincial. Doesn’t mean my toes are touching any kind of line,” Frank said.

“My point exactly,” Mary said.

“I know. I’m early. Again. Only way to see you alone.”

Jenny herded her older children into the cottage and laid the carrycot in front of the sofa. Oscar wandered over and sniffed the contents. He flopped down, chin resting on the edge.

“You don’t have to wait for her to organise a visit, you know.”

“I know but, somehow it doesn’t happen.” She joined Mary at the bench. “You want these chopped?” She held up the carrots that Mary had peeled ready for the soup that had just come to a simmer.

“That’d be great. Thanks. Something in particular?” Mary began to measure the flour for cheese scones into the old china bowl.

“Not really. It just seems that the only time I see you, there’s always someone else around.”

“You can talk.” Through the kitchen door the sisters watched Jen’s two older children hauling out Matchbox cars from the bag she had dumped on the floor. Sammy followed his older brother’s directions to line them up against the skirting board.

“Point taken.” They both laughed. By the time all the vegetables had been chopped and popped into the soup and the scones were in the oven, the baby was awake and grizzling to be fed. Mary sat on the floor with her nephews. Although she no longer fitted into her jeans, and mucked around the house in overalls she’d borrowed from Pip, she was still able to get down and help them build a racetrack. Jen flopped on the sofa, kicked the carrycot out of the way, and lifted the baby onto her knee. In a matter of seconds she had changed her nappy, and tucked her under her blouse. Once the baby was sucking noisily, she picked up the little pamphlet that was sitting on top of the pile of books beside the sofa.

“Glorious. You still have time to read. Pregnancy books?”

Mary had meant to clear the stack away. Anne’s arrival might lead to an awkward conversation. A peaceful lunch with her sisters and their children had been her plan.

“No. Just a bit of research.” She wanted to whip the pamphlet away. That’d only make it more interesting.

“*A Crime against Humanity*,” Jenny read. She flicked through the pages. “Apartheid? You’re not getting involved with that, are you?”

Mary hesitated, just for a moment, while she tried to interpret Jenny’s tone. In the end words burst out, seemingly of their own free will. “I reckon if you read it, you would too.” Out spilled the facts and figures that had shocked Mary. She took the pamphlet from Jenny and pointed to the relevant words and numbers as she spoke. “Why should a white person be paid twenty times more than a black person? For doing the same job. Why should white children get free education and black have to pay? Not only that, their classes are huge. Imagine. Sixty in a class. It’d be crowd control, not teaching. It’s unbelievable that 400 black children in every thousand die.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t believe it. How do you know it’s true?”

“Look at the cover, Jen. United Nations, no less.”

“Even so, it’s got nothing to do with us. We don’t do that here. Who are we to say how other people should run their lives?”

“What happens if we don’t?”

“We can’t do much from here? Besides, as Matthew was saying the other day, politics and sport don’t mix.”

“Jennifer. Since when...? Where did the girl who wrote that essay go?”

“What essay? What are you talking about?”

“Fourth Form Social Studies, from memory.”

“What?”

“You were so proud of it, you showed it to me. One of the sentences has stuck with me. Something about prejudice being silly because we’re all desperate to get a tan in the summer. Where’s that girl gone?”

“She grew up and there were more important things. Kids’ll do that to you. You’ll see.”

“It’s not too late, you know. I could lend you some books.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. As if I have time to read.”

Mary poked with her spoon at the chunks of cardboard soaked in milk. Breakfast. Not today. She took the bowl to the bench and emptied its contents into the chooks’ dish. The room was still; nothing indicated that George was present. She was pretty sure she’d heard him come in, though, while she’d been staring out the window at the sheep that were searching the paddock for any fresh patches of grass they might’ve missed the day before. He hadn’t said anything. As she’d suspected, he was there when she turned to face him, one hand grasping his mug, the other picking at something that was stuck to its handle. “About the other night,” she said. “Your assumptions. It’s not as if you haven’t had all our lives to work me out. Sometimes I wonder.”

“I wondered when you’d bring that up.”

“You were quite aware that it bothered me, but you said nothing.”

“You’ve been sitting on this for over a week. Can’t it wait? I have to leave for work in ten minutes,” he said.

“That’s right. Let’s avoid this.”

He took in the way her jaw and shoulders were set, locked and dogged. They showed angles and edges that were sharper than usual. Yet pregnancy was beginning to soften her curves. “How well does anyone truly know anyone else? I don’t know what you’re thinking. You have to tell me.”

She dipped her head and raised one eyebrow. It wordlessly challenged him. “Really? Getting abstract is a great strategy right now?” it said. He tiptoed around her; no doubt he hoped she’d drop it. “You know what I mean,” she finally said.

“I’m serious. I had no idea you were interested. You gave no indication.”

“You never asked. Or told me what you were doing. As it turns out, I am.”

“And, as I said, ten minutes. They’re yours, if you want them.”

“Thanks for the kind offer of your precious time.” As the words came out of her mouth she could’ve whacked herself. Why hadn’t she counted to ten and let the flash of indignant sarcasm pass through her mind? Once her words had emerged into the air she backed them up. “I promise I won’t take it all.” Too late she paused and took a breath. She’d give him his due; he didn’t react, just sat and waited.

“Sorry. Rewind that,” she said.

He looked directly at her, his gaze penetrating the sharp air that hovered over the table. When he spoke, his voice had dropped its defensive edge. He was once again the serious man-boy she had grown close to when Thomas had died. “And you think I don’t know you. When things like that come out of your mouth, I know it’ll only be seconds before you regret them. I only need to wait and you’ll apologise.”

“Sorry. Again. I don’t know what’s got into me. It’s as if there’s something niggling away inside me and I’m searching to work out what it is. I want to blame you, but you’re no different.”

“Want to start again?” he said.

“I don’t know where to start. And we there’s not much time right now.” She scratched at a dent in the wooden table. “I want to know what’s happening with the tour. Get involved.”

“You’re sure? You know it won’t be easy here. We’re sure to be in the minority.”

“I’ve found that out. Seems my sisters have turned into mindless, spineless automatons.”

“That sounds a bit harsh.”

“Hmm, maybe. Just expected more from them. Maybe not with Anne. But Jen. Seems I was wrong. Again.” In Wellington her struggles with being an alien intruder had made her ache with longing for her family. There, the urge to return had been so strong. She’d had visions of cosy afternoons with her sisters, muddied now by their last encounters. Instead of being able to sink into familiarity, there were times when she wondered which of them had changed. Perhaps the reasons she’d been drawn back had nothing to do with family. She needed to find her place in the town. Maybe there, she’d find what had called her back.

“There’s got to be something I can do.” She let the silence take up space in the room. He didn’t try to fill it, either. After some minutes had passed she needed to explain. “It’s just the reading I’ve been doing. I can’t believe that only ten years ago Maoris weren’t allowed to play in South Africa. Honorary whites, for goodness sake. And things have got worse. Something needs to be done. I mean...”

“Sounds like you’ve been doing your research.”

“There isn’t a lot else to do, at the moment. My friends are all back at work. Not much relieving until teachers start to get sick.”

“You want to come to a meeting? Help organise?”

“Something along those lines.”

For the first time in a long time George remembered the things that had drawn him to Mary so long ago. Lately, he’d been living with the prickly, irritable version. Here was a spark of his old mate who was the first to pull on sensible shoes and set off on long walks, just so they could talk about whatever came into their minds. “You’d be perfect for our letter writing campaign. It’s background stuff. Right up your alley. You’ve got the words to let

Piggy know that it's also ordinary people in small towns who don't want this thing to go ahead. He needs to realise how many people believe he's made the wrong decision."

She laughed and squeezed his hand. "Listen to you. Better not call Muldoon that in front of your father. You know what T.C. thinks of him," she said. "Does he know that you're anti-tour?"

"Probably wouldn't occur to him that anyone in Astonforth'd be anything but pro-tour. He's never been interested in what I think. Can't see any reason to let him know."

"I'm surprised that you didn't put your hand up for letter writing. You're far better at that than me."

"I've been roped into helping with the film showing and public meeting on the first of May."

"Public meeting? I thought you'd prefer the background?"

"I'm not speaking or anything, just helping to organise. Brian's used his contacts in Wellington. Some top dogs from up there've roped in someone from Christchurch to be front of house for us. We can stay in the background. There'll be a film. Bit of an education session. We're hoping they'll have some ideas about what we can do."

"That doesn't have to be public, though. Why aren't you just meeting where you usually do?"

"Preaching to the choir, as they say. No. That'd defeat the other purpose. Consciousness raising. They've specifically offered to come down to give people who think they're the only ones against the tour a chance to get involved."

"They don't know what it's like here."

"Surprisingly, they have a fair idea. When I was on the phone to one of them, he mentioned our bravery. He reckoned it was harder to come out against the tour in a town like Astonforth, than it was to join a march with hundreds of other people in the cities."

“Fancy that.”

“I suppose some of them grew up in their own version of this town. This can’t be the only place like this.”

“Is it really as bad as all that?”

“We’ll soon see Astonforth for what it really is. This tour is going to shake things up.”

Chapter 8

The clock above the stage seemed to have become stuck at a few minutes before seven. It made a clonking sound. Its hand moved forward half a minute. After a year, another clonk, and another half minute had passed by. George glanced at the door. It remained unlocked but closed, just as they had left it.

“We shouldn’t’ve arrived so early. There’s still half an hour before it starts,” he said. The chairs were out. The screen was in place, the projector had been tested, and sound system checked, the Zip had been topped up and boiled, cups had been laid out, and tea-towel-wrapped biscuits sat on plates lined up on a trolley ready to be wheeled out after the meeting was over. “Now that we’re here, it doesn’t seem such a good idea. Maybe nobody will turn up. Maybe we’re kidding ourselves and wasting Rob’s time. Surely, he’d be more useful back home with all the other people on that march, rather than down here in Astonforth in a community hall with just us for an audience.”

“She’ll be Jake, George.” Frank stood beside him. His towering bulk radiated warmth. He reached over and touched George’s hand.

George snatched it away. “Not here.”

“Settle. Can’t have you chewing your fingers off. No need to spill blood over this.”

George shoved his hands into his trouser pockets. “I’m so pleased they said the room at the library was too small. I’d be ten times worse if we were there.”

“That’s the excuse they used?”

“What do you mean?”

“Say one thing, mean another.”

“I agree with them. It is a bit on the poky side,” he said. Frank stood beside him in silence. George breathed in and dropped his shoulders. He wanted to move closer to Frank, to feed on some of his calm, but concentrated on keeping his feet firmly in place.

Peter Moore appeared at the hall door with a man George didn't recognise. "This is George, the man behind your trip," he said. "George, Rob Cooke, our esteemed guest."

"I understand you're a friend of Brian's," Rob said.

"We worked- work- together."

"I met him at varsity. Good man, if a little wayward at times."

"That's him. No real harm done," he muttered. He looked down at his shoes, only raising his eyes as Rob began to speak.

"Nice to meet you George. We'll catch up later. Peter and I have a couple of things to go over before we start."

"All set?" Peter asked George. "Of course. Silly me." He swept Rob to the back stage area.

"Tell me more about Brian," Frank said, with cocked eyebrow and twitching mouth.

"Just a guy from work."

"Mmm hmm. Anything worth telling?"

"Shouldn't you be on the door by now?"

"Now there's a slippery move." Frank chuckled and moved off towards the table that had been set up beside the front door.

"Be careful," George called after him.

"I'm not an O'Hara from Davidson Crescent for nothing."

The hall door opened. Frank wandered over to greet the first arrivals. It was Dianne Adams and the elderly couple from the first meeting. They waved and went to sit with Mary and Pip, who had claimed a space near the front.

Mary patted the seat beside her. Dianne stood back in the aisle as her companions took their seats. The woman hooked her walking stick over her arm, before proceeding down the row towards them. The man held his wife's elbow as she made her way along the row.

She steadied herself by running her hand along the back of the chairs in front of them. The man made sure that his wife was comfortable before taking his seat beside her. She reached over and touched the back of his hand; he turned his over and held her fingers. There was something about the tenderness that passed between them that made Mary hopeful. She wondered if their love had come in a rush, or whether it had grown over time. It was so lovely that they were united, that they were doing this together.

As the hall filled, George began to breathe more easily. He recognised several people from the meetings. Others he had met at the library: one of the local doctors who, with his wife, came every Friday on their way to dinner, the woman who came on Wednesday afternoons to exchange three books, never more, never less, and two of the nuns from the convent who swept silently to the 780s in their search for sheet music on their fortnightly visit. One young couple had brought their baby with them in a sling the mother wore around her body. She settled into her chair, lifted her shirt and placed the baby to her breast. George looked away. Five minutes before they were due to start, the hall was half full of people, far more than he'd expected on an autumn's evening. There was an air of anticipation and festivity as people greeted each other and took their seats.

As the official group mounted the steps onto the stage, the knot began to unfurl in his abdomen, and he no longer had to fight from putting his hands to his mouth. His fears for Frank were unfounded. If only he had his confidence, even if his cynicism about some people went with it. He'd rather have that than the fears that badgered him from inside. All he had to do now was attend to the projector in the aisle between the two sections of seats.

Peter began his introductions. George waited for his cue. The main door squeaked as it opened. He heard Frank's voice as he whispered to the new arrival. Heavy footsteps approached from behind. People murmured around him as the steps got closer. Prickles of

alarm began to creep up his back. “Don’t turn,” he told himself, even as he found that he was facing the person behind him.

“Scuse,” he said, and squeezed past the projector. Sergeant Harry Evans took the aisle seat, two rows in front of him. Even though he wasn’t in uniform, he carried the air of authority that he had acquired along with his stripes. Gone was the oaf who had lorded over the swimming pool every summer of their childhood.

“Welcome, welcome,” Peter said. “It’s nice to see the constabulary showing an interest.”

“Sorry to interrupt. Carry on.”

“Where was I?” Peter looked at his notes. “Welcome, introductions, film, right,” he muttered. He dropped the paper onto the lectern and raised his head to face the audience who had been waiting quietly for proceedings to continue. “Rob will introduce the film we are about to see. At the end of which, he will answer any questions that you may have on matters that arise from film. There will be time after that for discussion on the upcoming tour. We anticipate that this would be the place to put forward ideas for future action. Rob.”

“You may not’ve heard of Steve Biko.”

Peter gave the signal, Frank turned off the lights and George started the projector. The familiar Granada image filled the screen. Tonight it wasn’t accompanied by the dirge that is the *Coronation Street* theme, but quickly faded to reveal another familiar image, that of da Vinci’s *Virtruvian Man*, one that was fitting for this film about a man who believed in equality. The words “murdered under torture”, spoken by a man who was delivering a eulogy from a lectern, stilled any remaining movement in the room and focussed their attention.

A thump came from the foyer, as if someone had stumbled against the wall. George turned to look at Frank. Just as he moved towards the doors to investigate, they burst open. Several figures were silhouetted in the light from the foyer. “Traitors,” a voice rang out. It

was joined by a tangle of discordant voices. Gradually their noise became coherent. “We want rugby. We want rugby.” The group of about twenty men stood together at the back of the room, their chants competing with the sound of the African voices singing their laments on the screen. The hall was suddenly filled with light. Frank stood with his hand on the switches.

“Settle down boys. No need for this ruckus.”

“This is public property. We’ve got a right to be here.” A man stepped out of the group and puffed his chest out. Barely reaching Frank’s shoulder, he looked like a bantam rooster taking on the finest Australorp in the yard. Harry Evans moved up the aisle to stand behind Frank. Some of the group continued their chant, although quieter now. It seemed that, having got this far, they were uncertain of their next move. As they spread out against the wall like a back row waiting for the half to feed the ball, they became individuals rather than the jumbling forward pack they had been when they entered. It was then that he saw, through the sea of heads that separated them, that one of the group, right down the end where the right wing would be, was his father.

George was still seated beside the projector; T.C. didn’t seem to have seen him. Hide and hope for invisibility, or stand up? A jumble of words sparred in his brain. “Reneging on international commitments” bumped into “fascist regime”, which nudged “for a game of rugby”. He slouched lower in his seat and turned to face the stage. He’d take his cue from them.

Peter spoke in low tones to Rob Cooke, who stood up. “You’re quite right; this is public property, which means that we can’t prevent you from staying. If you’re interested in learning more about the things that happen in South Africa, and what we here in New Zealand can do to help, you are most welcome to stay.”

The chanting began again. “We want rugby. We want rugby.”

Rob Cooke used the microphone to make himself heard above the rabble. “Sergeant Evans. I understand that you are here as an interested citizen, that you aren’t on duty this evening.”

Harry Evans nodded.

Rob continued. “Frank. Could you escort these gentlemen to their seats?”

As Frank approached them, they picked up their chant.

“Come on boys, fair’s fair,” Frank said.

“You,” said the bantam halfback. “You’re a bloody deserter. Worse than the lot of them. That lot,” he tossed his head toward the stage, “are ignorant about rugby. Their heads are so far up their arses they don’t know diddly-squat. But you. You know the game. Some people around here reckon you could’ve been a bloody All Black. I don’t reckon you’ve got the guts. You don’t have what it takes.” He stepped up to Frank and spat at him. He might’ve aimed at his face, but his size meant that the spittle landed on Frank’s chest.

George didn’t know what came over him, but before he knew it he was standing beside Frank. Several others had had the same reaction and arrived at his side at the same time. Amongst them was Pip, Mary close behind her.

“Come on,” Pip said. “You want to have a go? I’ll take you on.” Frank put his hand on her shoulder.

The invaders huddled together as if they were getting ready to pack down in a scrum. They resumed their chant. The man who had spat at Frank stomped his foot in time. Others picked up the rhythm. Their actions transformed into the familiar pattern of the haka. “Ka mate, ka mate,” they roared. Their faces became grotesque as they shouted. They stumbled through the middle of the haka, few being certain of the words. George was sure that there’d be a crescendo as they built to the final words “Ā, upane, ka upane, whiti te ra!” Somehow they mangled these, so that instead of a rousing final note, only the ringleader’s voice rang

out as he fronted up to Frank. Some of the others had joined him in his advance, while others milled around, unsure what to do.

Frank stared straight at the man and began to clap very slowly. "I'd suggest a bit more practice boys," he said. "As for borrowing from Maoris. A bit of Morris Dancing might be more up your alley." Standing behind Frank made George realise how much power radiated from him. It strengthened him and seemed to drain the intruders.

"Time to leave boys," he said. George didn't understand how Frank stayed so calm amongst that rabble, but it didn't appear to have ruffled any of his feathers.

"It might be best if you listen to the man," said Harry Evans.

By then most of the people in the hall had stood and moved towards the back.

It wasn't until he was face to face with his father that George realised that his acute awareness of T.C.'s presence had been outweighed by his concern for Frank. His father stood in front of him and looked him straight in the eyes for what seemed like several minutes. T.C. shook his head. "Just as well your mother's not alive to see this."

"How dare you?" George said. He was struggling to conceal his rage. He did not turn away from his father. He lowered his voice. "She would've told me to do what I thought was right. This is right."

His father turned away and followed the others out of the hall.

As the group gathered in the foyer in preparation for leaving, their chant recommenced. "We want rugby. We want rugby."

"That about sums it up," said Pip.

"Last night. What the hell was that?" T.C.'s bulk filled the frame of the cottage's back door. "You're a bloody embarrassment. I had to admit to my friends that my son was sitting

amongst those people. It beggars belief. You do know that they hate rugby and that's why they're stirring up trouble."

"That's completely irrational. Frank doesn't hate rugby. I've heard that he was quite the hero around here in his day."

"That's even worse. You, I might understand. You always did want to hang around with people like that."

"People like what, Tom? School teachers, doctors..."

"Don't you dare call me Tom. I am your father. You do not use my first name."

"People like what? Kind, compassionate, concerned. Educated."

"Don't you be so bloody smart? You know what I mean. People who're too good for the rest of us. You look down on the likes of me. I might not've gone to university like you, but you just remember who paid for it, whose blimmin' hard yakka bought your la-de-dah ways."

"What makes you think I hate rugby? Can't you see? Whether I love it or hate it has nothing to do with it."

"Have I ever seen you at a game? Have you ever sat beside me on a Saturday and watched the All Blacks play? Not once have you been down to the clubrooms with me. Even when you were little, your brother would come, but you, you'd find any excuse to do something, anything, else, rather than go to the club. Hell, I reckon you'd rather stay home and wind wool for your mother than set foot inside the rooms with me."

"Have you ever wondered why?"

"I've got a pretty good idea." He paused. George refused to fill the silence that surrounded them. T.C. stared at him. For once, George didn't look away, or succumb to the temptation to respond. Eventually, his father continued. "I don't know why you're still living in my cottage. Rent free, I might add. What kind of man bludges off his father at your age?"

You don't even get out and help around the place when I could do with a hand. Too busy looking important to your poncy mates." He shook his head. His cheeks had become so red they were almost purple. The veins in his temple had swelled so that they looked as if they were laid on top of his skin. "I should never have let you go to Wellington. Look at my hands." He held them palm up right under his nose. George stepped back, but found that he looked down at them regardless. They were shaking as if he had just stopped using a posthole digger. "Look at these callouses. That's from hard work. The only callouses you're likely to get are on your arse. From sitting around all day while you criticise the likes of us, the only ones that make any real money for this country."

He turned and stomped across to the tractor that he had left chugging at the gate. He climbed into his seat, whistled to his dog, which came running from the gorse hedge, and drove off towards the bottom paddock. Mary appeared from around the corner where she had been hanging washing.

"Bit upset about last night?"

"You might say that. Gave me my pedigree." George ran his fingers through his hair. "It's beyond repair this time."

"No. What did you say?"

"Very little, as it happens. It was as if... A volcano perhaps. Yes, that's what it was like. One minute it was calm, and the next, this thing had risen spewing molten rock everywhere. How the hell long he'd been storing that lot up, I'll never know."

"You could've come and stayed with us, you know," Frank said. He heaved the box of books onto the deck of his ute. It was lacking its usual jumble of hammers, rolls of wire and boxes of essentials. Lass wasn't on duty behind the cab. Her chain dangled from the ring onto the bed of the ute.

“Thanks, but it’s better this way,” George said, shoving the box containing the glasses from the kitchen into the gap beside the book box.

“It might’ve been fun.”

“Not sure about that.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“That’s more than I’m willing to take on right now. Thanks all the same.”

“Come on you two.” Pip stood at the back door with the next box ready to be carried to the ute. “And they say women natter. We’ve got nothing on you.” George went up the path to take the box from her. What with the weight of the box and her pregnant belly she was leaning back to maintain her balance. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “You made the right choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, George. I know you. You’re like a brother. Staying would definitely not have done you any good.”

“In the end he made it easy to leave.”

She looked across the lawn and nodded her head. She was standing as she often did, protective hand on her belly. He followed her gaze. Billy was running along the edge of the garden trailing a piece of binder twine behind him. Mr Darcy had wandered over from the big house and was attempting to pounce on the mysterious creature that bounced and flicked across the grass. Billy’s chortling laugh grew to a crescendo when he reached the fence. He dangled the twine so that Mr Darcy leapt and batted it with his paws. When the adults began to laugh the cat suddenly regained his composure and wandered a short distance from Billy. He sat down and began to lick himself.

“That cat,” said Mary, who had appeared beside them. “Betty would’ve loved that.” She slipped her arm through George’s. She sighed. “It’s not the same without her.” Pip

walked over to Billy and picked him up. She tossed him onto his back, pushed his top up and blew raspberries on his stomach. He giggled.

“Stinky baby. You need changing.” She headed over to the ute.

“George. Here.” Mary pulled his hand so that it rested on her belly.

“It’s getting bigger,” he said.

“Just wait.”

His fingers spread across her stomach like a plane tree leaf, cupping her roundness.

The heat of her body warmed his hand. He held still, wondering about the life inside.

Suddenly there was a fluttering under his fingers. He looked at Mary.

“Is that...?”

She nodded. She’d noticed something strange that morning, more than the butterflies she’d been feeling for a while, but had dismissed it. Now she was certain. That he’d felt it too, confirmed it.

“It’s real then,” he said. He was going to be a father. “Make it do it again.”

“I’m not doing anything.” She laid her hand on top of his. “I’m surprised at you, George,” Mary said.

“What do you mean?”

“I was absolutely certain you’d bring up the idea of returning to Wellington. Yet there’s been no mention.”

“Are you suggesting that we return? Now? I thought you wanted to be here for the baby, family, all that.”

“No, no, of course not. Just curious, that’s all.”

“I’m just not ready yet.”

“And you truly don’t mind moving into the cottage at Mum and Dad’s?”

“I’m getting used to living in a farm cottage. It’s peaceful, quiet. Maybe we should’ve moved after Mum died.” His throat began to constrict. When he next spoke, his voice was higher and less certain. “It’ll be more final once we leave. Give him time to calm down. You never know, things might be a bit different once we’re not under his feet. Nothing’ll get patched up if we go back now.”

“Maybe we just need to let things settle. And Frank and Pip are just down the road.” She looked across at them: Billy on Pip’s hip, Frank’s arm leaning on the roof of the ute. “He’s a good man, George. It’s better, in a way, when he’s around. Like he’d catch me if I were falling. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

Chapter 9

Pink socks drew Mary back to *Longcroft Farm*. She was sure they'd turn up, but when everything was unpacked, they still hadn't materialised. She looked in the drawer for the tenth time. The last load of washing. Still on the line, back at T.C.'s cottage.

Something about the garden side-tracked her, leading her up the path to the big house. They'd left it looking as good as the days when Betty had tended it, but now it looked almost as bad as when they'd arrived. The lawns were unkempt, autumn leaves had been blown by a southerly into a pile against the trunk of the plane tree. The roses had swollen hips developing at the end of straggling twigs.

T.C.'s dog yipped a soft greeting and ran down the path towards her. Mary frowned. Trusty, reliable, and honest she might be, but she was never invited onto the back verandah. Mary scratched the dog's ears and stuck her head around the back door. T.C.'s usual place at the kitchen table was empty. He wouldn't be far away. The dog was either in the run after the day's work was done, or within cooee of T.C.. She called out. No answer.

She tiptoed through the rooms looking for him. Not in the farm office wrestling with the accounts. Nor in the lounge stacking the wood box. The front room? Why would he be there? Yet there he was, sitting in Betty's chair.

His boots had traipsed dirt across the carpet. Mr Darcy was on his knee. T.C. was stroking his head and talking to him. The last time Mary'd seen him with the cat, T.C. had tossed him out the back door, and told him earn his keep in the hay barn. Nevertheless, there they were.

Despite her presence, T.C. didn't stir. Her gaze moved from the cat to T.C.'s face. Her stomach clenched at the sight of its flush. It wasn't the red of mid-summer, but a distinct blotchiness around his cheeks, his eyes, and his nose. She paused before sliding back into the shadows.

Once back in the kitchen, she hesitated. She couldn't sneak back out to the car. He might glance up and see her. Or hear the car start. She crept out the back door. There she roughed the dog up, encouraging her to join in a game. She barked with joy, as planned. Mary yelled out to T.C.. He came into the kitchen, the cat trailing behind him.

"Mary," he said. "Wondered if it'd be you to make your way over in the end."

"I wasn't sure. Thought we were in your bad books."

"Not your fault he's led you astray."

She hesitated. She wanted to defend George, and let him know she could think for herself, but what she'd just seen made her hold back.

"Can we work this out?" she asked.

"Up to him."

His obstinacy was familiar. George and his father both wore boots so weighed down by mud they'd collected over the years that they were no longer able to move. "That's what he says."

"He would. Never takes responsibility for anything. When things get tough he just runs away. It's time he became a real man. Don't you let him hide behind your skirts too."

"Biwy walk," he said.

"Not tonight, Buffles. Pushchair for you." Pip pulled on Billy's mittens, wrangled him into the pushchair, and tucked a blanket around his legs.

Under the streetlights the footpath looked as if it had been sprinkled with glitter. Frank covered the windscreen with pages from the *Guardian*. George retrieved the placards from the boot.

Pip buttoned her coat, but Mary saw that she only managed to close the top two buttons. Below them, her belly protruded, preventing the rest from meeting. The two women headed off with the pushchair, the men followed.

“You’re sure about this?” Mary said. “You look as if you’re ready to pop.”

“I’ll waddle along. Do me good. Fresh air and all that.”

“But what if something happens?”

“Like what?”

“You know. Those people who came to the hall.”

“It was fine then, it’ll be fine tonight. Such worriers, sometimes.” Mary looked down so her hair covered her face. “Sure they might yell. That’s nothing,” Pip continued. “It’s legal. The police will be there beside us to keep an eye on things. We have right on our side.” Mary changed her stride to match Pip’s. It’d be nice to borrow some of her confidence. “Don’t worry about me. Billy and I can always cut out and wait for you.”

They arrived at Victoria Square to find that there were only a few people milling around. Mary had imagined that she’d be able to wriggle into the centre of the group. With these numbers it’d be difficult to hide. The men busied themselves with placards and loud hailers. Mary took hold of the pushchair’s handle and rocked Billy. She pointed to the sky. Soon he was practising new words. He couldn’t quite manage the *s* in star, but moon came easily to him, although with a few more vowels than usual. She pushed Billy across the park, away from the light where the stars were more easily seen. When she turned to retrace her steps, she saw that their numbers had swollen to close to a hundred. She hurried across to join them.

Harry Evans, the police sergeant, approached Peter Moore, who was to be at the head of the march, loudhailer in hand. “It’s after 7:30. Better get a move on.”

Peter gestured for them to gather closer. He held the speaker to his mouth. “A reminder about our conduct tonight. This is a peaceful protest. To show our presence. Nothing more.” With little fuss the group formed into ranks four wide, banners high and headed off down Church Street, to swing into Bankside Road before turning right into the main street.

Friday night was late shopping night in Astonforth. The streets were usually scattered with families, shoppers and wanderers weaving in and out to see who else was in town. At the south end the shops thinned out and, normally, only the families who were shopping at Starlings, the menswear store, trickled down to this part of town. The boys parked their cars further up the block and there, safely separated, ogled the girls who walked, in groups of four or more, to the book shop before turning to pass again. If the boys were lucky they might speak to one, if she were someone’s sister, or cousin. The good girls were warned about getting into any of the cars. Alliances were made nonetheless.

Tonight there were crowds of people lining the street, right from Starlings corner. Across the road in the darkness of The Green, where the streetlights struggled to penetrate, people gathered under the towering oak trees. Mary had never seen the footpath packed as it was, except when the annual Christmas parade jollied its way along the road. Harry Evans moved so that he was walking between the marchers and the people on The Green. The marchers pulled closer together, aware that the eyes of the town were on them. Their feet began to move in time. Mary linked her arm through George’s. His warmth spread through her. Flanked and sandwiched, she looked around her.

At first, only an occasional hoot came from the parked up boys. They leaned out of their windows. “Go back to Russia,” one said. “Show us your tits,” said another. Some of them waved cheerily, others gave them the fingers. The policeman stared at them, and they slunk back into their cars.

As the march made its way along the main street, the crowd moved in waves as people jostled for a better view. Mary caught a glimpse of Margaret Anderson standing behind her father's wheelchair. He'd come out decked in his war medals and shook his fist as they passed. His toothless mouth opened and croaked, "Traitors." Further along she saw Sue from school with her husband. She held a bundle of fabric that must've been their new baby. She waved when she saw Mary. "Good on you," she said. Mary saw the people around her turning to look, as if they'd discovered an impostor in their midst. Mary was carried along by the group and, despite dodging her head to catch a glimpse, Sue was no longer in sight.

"You O.K.?" George asked her. A flash from a camera lit up the street.

"Nearly there," she said. Their goal was the Post Office past the shops down the main street. Only three blocks to go. Usually most people gathered in the block between Tonkin and Robert Streets. Mary figured that once past Robert Street the crowds would thin. From there it'd be plain sailing to the Post Office. She'd forgotten about the pub on the corner.

As they approached the intersection, a wave of noise surged towards them. The pathway had narrowed. Men had spilled out of the pub to line either side of the street. They stood jugs in hand. A chant had been set up. "We want rugby." Mary recognised some of the faces from the film night. She cast her eyes around the crowd. T.C. was not there.

"Time to cut out?" she asked Pip.

"Reckon it's safer to stay together," she said. "Hold on."

George tucked Mary's arm closer. She followed his lead, linked her arm with Pip's and locked her hands together in front of her. Billy began to grizzle.

"Coward," one of them called. "Filling your kids with fucking bullshit," he screamed at Pip. Until then, they had maintained their silence. Pip shouted back at him. As the man lunged at Pip, Frank placed himself between them.

Mary stared at the swarm of faces that seemed to be an assortment of wide eyes and open mouths. She gripped George tighter. Her hands slid against each other. Would she be able to hold them firmly enough? For a moment her eyes focussed on Anne's husband, Bob. She looked past him to see if her sister was with him, but she wasn't. Not that she could see in the jumble of faces. Bob's eyes slid past her. He narrowed in on someone else he recognised and began haranguing hm.

By now the protest was almost past the pub corner. The safety of the Post Office was within sight. Harry Evans caught up and kept pace with George. "Get the women out of here," he said. "This could turn ugly. I don't have enough men. Not for this." Just when safety was within reach, she saw that further down the street the road was almost blocked by a wall of people, and behind, the men from the pub were gathering to follow them.

Between the end of the block and the Post Office, the street was flanked by The Green and a square where the town clock stood. If they were to leave, they needed to do it before they reached the gloom that surrounded the square. There, with no shops behind them, people might be able to come out of the dark and retreat just as quickly.

Mary caught George and Frank exchanging glances over her head. Soon, Mary found that she, Pip and Billy had been directed away from the other marchers and onto the footpath. There, the men from the pub ignored them, intent as they were with dealing with the protest as a whole. Picking on women and children can't have been their plan, if they had one.

They joined the families walking away from the main street. Mary wondered if anyone would recognise her as one of the marchers. They'd dropped their placards as they left, when they realised that they could've been used against them. Nothing about them showed that they were out of step with the rest of the town.

It wasn't until they were home, mug of hot chocolate in hand, fire roaring in the grate that Mary let out a huge breath. "Promise me we won't do that again."

"Not here we won't," Pip said. "And I'm not taking Billy next time."

"I don't reckon there'll be a next time for you. Look at you," Frank said.

Pip put her hands under her belly. "Perhaps you're right," she said.

"Thank God that's over." Mary leaned her head in her hands.

"That's it?" George asked. "It's over?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Everyone knows who everyone is around here."

Oscar ran ahead. Pip always had treats in the cupboard for him, right next to his water bowl. He waited at the back door. She opened the door, her arms cradling a bundle. Oscar bounced up and down in greeting, and then ran inside. No doubt he was off to find his friend, Billy.

Pip brushed Mary's cheek with her warm lips. The sweet smell of milk clung to her. She slung her daughter over her shoulder, relieved Mary of her bag, and led the way inside. "At last. Mary. My baby sister, Carrie."

"Bit less of the baby, Squeak." She held out her hand. The strong grip was at odds with her slender frame. Her version of her sister's red curls had been matted into fiery dreadlocks which cascaded down her back. A gold nose ring flashed in the afternoon light.

Oscar sniffed his way around the room. He rubbed himself against Carrie's legs. She scratched him just behind his ears. Before long he was on his back, leg twitching.

Mary smiled at them, and turned to Pip. "My turn." Mary held the baby close, cupping her head. Holly slept on. Her dark eyelashes rested on her cheeks, her budding lips quivered as she breathed, and her fontanel pulsed. Mary ran her fingertips over the baby's

ears. Glancing up, she noticed that Pip was gazing at them. A smile played with her mouth. Mary squirmed. “Where’s Billy?”

“Heard him hollering when you arrived. Quiet can’t be a good thing.” Pip went into the hallway.

It’d be pathetic to follow Pip up the hall. She sidled into an armchair and crooned to Holly. Jenny’s hand-me-down blue smock looked dowdy beside Carrie’s patch emblazoned red overalls.

Carrie roughhoused Oscar by rolling a ball against the wall so hard that he was sent spiralling around the room in his attempts to catch it. Carrie tossed her head back and roared at his antics. Mary drank in the joy that radiated from them both.

Pip arrived back with Billy whose hair was ruffled, his sleepy face aglow. As soon as she put him down, he ran over to Mary and climbed onto her knee. Mary juggled things around until all three were comfortable. She mightn’t yet be able to rest a plate on her belly, but even so there wasn’t much room left after Billy had nestled in.

Carrie crawled across the floor to flop against the couch. She tossed back her wine, placed the empty glass on the floor beside her, lifted her hair, and flicked it so the copper she’d wrapped around the ends of her hair shone. “So, Mary. How’d you meet my big sis?”

Mary found her voice and filled her in, or as much as she was willing to go into this early in the piece. “Frank has gone to Wellington with my George. Our stuff’s being shipped down soon,” she concluded. Perhaps she should’ve gone instead of Frank, what with the baby being so new, but Pip didn’t seem to mind. George was almost excited that Frank was going with him. Must have been the relief to know he’d have some help, certainly more than she could give.

“That’s how you met. But that doesn’t tell the full story. What do you talk about? When no one else is around. If I know my sister...”

“Forgive her attempts at subtlety. Mum did her best.”

“You love me anyway.” Carrie lunged at her sister and smothered her in loud smooches.

Pip wriggled away. “As for what we talk about. Everything. Nothing. Just as it should be.”

“Books.” Mary spoke up. “She’s amazing at finding the right book, at exactly the right time. She’s opened my eyes. In so many ways.”

“Your newest convert, Pip?” Carrie leaned across to Mary and in a stage whisper said, “Everyone falls a little bit in love with our Squeak.”

“Take no notice of her. The whole family knows she embroiders the truth.”

“Better than turning into a domesticated pet who embroiders doilies.”

Pip poked her tongue at her sister before returning to Mary. “I’m pleased you liked the books. Any favourites?”

“The ones on apartheid, but probably *The Women’s Room* tops them all.”

“Interesting. It’s a cliché, I know,” said Pip. “But that one changes lives.”

“Did that happen, Mary?” said Carrie.

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” George was nothing like the men in the book. “I’m lucky. George is far better in the kitchen than me. Never complains. Gentle, considerate. You’d agree, wouldn’t you, Pip?”

“George is one of a kind. That’s for sure.”

“Too good to be true. Not gay is he?” Carrie asked.

“Of course not. We’re married. Having a baby.”

“Don’t look so shocked, Mary. Just a joke.”

“I’ve never met a gay man.” Neither Pip nor Carrie responded, but Mary noticed that their eyes met briefly. Something passed between the sisters. A tingling sensation moved up

Mary's back and spread across her face. "How would I? They don't hang about primary schools. None in Astonforth, as far as I know." She might've been back in the Wellington staffroom.

Carrie retrieved Oscar's ball from the floor and tossed it from hand to hand. "Enough of the cabin for one day. Who's up for a drive?" Carrie asked.

Pip stretched her shoulders and scratched her head. "I'm quite happy here. Might curl up and watch the wedding."

"Who stole my sister? The bra-burning, placard waving one?"

"She's still here, but right now she's bugged, and watching the Royal soap opera is about it for now."

"Babies. Cute and all. Damn shame they suck the brain right out of you."

"Yeah, yeah. Off you two go. Leave Oscar. He'll keep Billy entertained."

"I'll be back to make dinner," Mary offered.

"No worries. Plenty in the fridge. Make the most of your freedom, while you can."

It made sense. Soon she wouldn't be able to drop everything and just go. Not that she'd ever done that, not really. Might as well, while she had the chance. She looked at Pip for hints of resentment, but she was already kneeling on the floor laughing at the half-naked Holly who waved her chubby little legs in the air.

Pip grabbed a nappy and shoved it under Holly. "One good thing about girls. They don't pee in your eye." She rocked back on her heels. "Go. Take as long as you like."

"I'll drive. You navigate," Carrie said.

"Where to?"

"The beach."

"Really? You know it's wild. No sand. No rolling waves. They crash on the stones and threatened to suck you under if you look at them the wrong way."

“Perfect. A bit of wind in the hair and spray on the skin never hurt anyone.”

Mary followed Carrie to her Kombi. It was a bit of a heave, but she managed to pull herself up into the passenger seat. “Right. Left at the end of the drive.”

“Right? Left? Which way?”

“Left. Right at the corner and straight through.”

Mary took in the interior of the Kombi. A platform which took up most of the back compartment was covered in a mattress, tangled bedding, and piles of clothes. Charms and chimes swayed as they drove towards town. When Carrie screeched to a halt to let a car full of young lads swing past, they jangled into each other.

Once they were on the country roads that led to the sea, Mary’s curiosity overflowed.

“Don’t you live overseas somewhere?”

“I do. New York.”

“New York? But isn’t everyone there pretty swish? How do you get away with those?” She pointed to Carrie’s hair.

“I thought they were pretty swish.”

Mary looked out the passenger window.

Carrie laughed. “In my industry they’re pretty standard. Why?”

“Your hair?”

“Not that. The overseas bit.”

“This stuff.” Mary waved her hand indicating everything in the van.

“My version of home. You know, the place you can be yourself. No one can kick me out of this. I return every once in a while. I know I should get rid of it, but... Fossick around in the glove box, will you? Let’s have some music.”

A pile of tapes tumbled out as if they had been perched there, awaiting their escape. Mary grabbed at them to stop them falling onto the floor. She piled them onto her knee and flicked through them.

“I don’t recognise any of them.”

“Try Laurie Anderson. I reckon you might like that.”

“Who’s he?”

“She. Tricky to describe. Best to listen. Plays the violin, amongst other things. But not as you know it.”

The labels were identical. Plain white, with black writing.

“Are these bootlegs? You know that’s not fair on the artist. They work hard, you know.”

Carrie laughed. “Good on you, Mary. Wish more people thought like that. Never fear. They’re samples. Or gifts. Part of the job. There it is.” She pointed at a tape that had a gold star in the top left hand corner.

Mary handed it to her, and without taking her eyes from the road, Carrie put the tape into the player. A strange recitation filled the van. A clapped rhythm joined in. What was she hearing? When the violin’s notes began to swell, her heart lifted. Her arm twitched as the bow slid across the strings; her hands moved in her lap as if they were fingering the violin. Not technically difficult. But that sound. Something inside her, long forgotten, stirred. A simple rhythm was overlaid by notes spilling from the violin. It lifted her until she was suspended outside herself.

“Can we play that again? Louder, drown the engine.” Carrie obliged.

They parked at the end of the road as the last notes played. Language, beyond words.

“How did you know?” Mary whispered. She didn’t want her voice to shatter the spell.

“Know what?”

“That I play the violin. Or used to. Can’t have been Pip. She doesn’t know.”

“I didn’t.” She looked across at Mary. “Get to you, did it?”

“I didn’t realise how much I’d missed it.” Mary shook her head.

“You coming? Get that wind in your hair?”

“Bit cold for that, isn’t it?”

“Don’t travel with all that lot for nothing.” She nodded towards the rear of the van.

“Can you manage if I lug the comforts of home?”

After the music, it seemed wrong to just sit in the van, turn around, and drive home.

“Why not?”

“Why not, indeed.” Carrie emerged from the back of the Kombi with blankets thrown over her shoulder. She held a guitar up to Mary. “You play?”

Mary nodded.

“Why am I not surprised?”

Mary led Carrie down the path between the gnarled trees. From there the sky opened up, framed at the sides by the cliffs that rose on either side. The beach seemed even wilder at night than Mary remembered. They moved forward into the darkness only found in the country.

As their eyes adjusted, Mary saw the old log above the high tide line. “We’re here,” she said. “The only seat on the beach, just for us. And some driftwood.”

“You smoke?”

“Sorry?”

“If you smoke, we’d have matches.”

“Sorry.”

“Hold it. There’re bound to be some in the van.”

“Don’t bother,” she was about to say, but Carrie was up and off.

Mary threw a grey army blanket around her shoulders. Not warm enough. She gathered the crocheted granny square blanket Carrie had discarded and flung it over the first. Better. The guitar nestled in her arms; she picked out a few notes. Nice. Tuning, the simplest of acts, reached inside her. She took a deep breath. Salty air. Crisp air. She rubbed her hands together and laid them on the guitar. What to play?

Her class's favourite, *Green Door* came to mind first. Even Shane Parker would smile and sing with that one. No need to play that boppy strum to keep them interested any more. She could play what she liked. She stretched her hands, and closed her eyes. The first notes of *Stairway to Heaven* unfolded. She hummed; the words stayed inside her mind, ambling alongside the notes. She played and at the same time watched herself playing, marvelling at the way her fingers remembered the notes her brain had forgotten.

As the last note faded, she became aware that Carrie had returned and sat down at the other end of the log.

"I'm a bit rusty."

"Sounded pretty darn good to me."

"I'd be better with a bit of practice."

"Well, practice then."

"Sorry. Here's your blanket."

Mary busied herself with grading the wood by size. Carrie arranged dry twigs into a pyramid before setting them alight. Before long a fire warmed their faces. They sat side by side and held their hands up to the flames.

They chatted, moving around each other in the dance of the newly acquainted. Soon, words faded into the night.

"Look, Mary." Carrie leaned towards her; their heads almost touched. Mary followed her gaze to the sky. From the south a curtain of greenish light pulsated across the sky.

“Aurora Australis,” Mary said. They ebbed and flowed above the cliffs, as if a screen stretched across to the Southern Alps. There, flashes of lightning punctuated the display. The thunder was inaudible, like silent music.

“Wildfire,” she said, pointing it out to Carrie. “At least, that’s what Dad calls it.”

“There must be something auspicious about this day. Gaia has blessed us.”

The fire died down. Although Mary shivered, she was reluctant to end the day. It was Carrie who moved first. “I’m starving. Time to raid Squeak’s fridge.” She kicked some shingle over the fire.

Carrie drove slowly home; neither talked. This, then, was freedom.

“Meet me just before five,” Brian had said, when George phoned him about the trip. “There’s a protest. Just a short one. Plenty of time for dinner after.”

“That’ll work.” George’d said. “I have to talk to the boss about the secondment. That’s what it’s turned into now. Kill two birds and all that.”

“Can’t wait to meet Frank.”

George hadn’t been so sure about this, but he needed help with the furniture and Frank had offered. “See you at five,” he’d said.

He’d told Frank about the arrangements. “It might be our only chance. You know, to be in the middle of a big protest. Good timing, really.” They’d be... well, maybe not in the majority, but at least the minority would be bigger. “It’s not going to be another Hamilton. Game’s in New Plymouth. Should be good. No women to worry about.”

Frank and George crossed over on the lunchtime ferry. They had all the next day to pack the truck. The afternoon was free for a tiki tour. Wellington could’ve been anywhere in the world. No one gave them a second glance, or if they did it was probably to note Frank’s face which was white at the top where his hat usually sat, ruddy across his nose and cheeks,

his chin gleaming with a freshly shaven shine. Everyone they passed on Lambton Quay looked pasty beside him.

George noticed Frank watching him when he fossicked through the piles of books at Parsons. "Sorry. I won't be long," he said.

"No worries. I'm enjoying the view."

George turned away and forced himself to concentrate on his search. When he'd found most of the books on his list, he made an appointment to discuss purchasing for the library. Good to use his contacts. Widen the choices in Astonforth. He could think of several regulars who would devour them.

They headed off to keep George's appointment with his boss. As they made their way down Lambton Quay, George glanced across at Frank. There wasn't much to interest him in the heart of the city, yet he seemed happy enough to tag along. Far from bored, he had a smile which seemed to hide a secret.

"What're you grinning about?"

"You're like a pig in mud."

"What makes you say that?"

"There's something. Bit of a shine."

George squirmed. Should he tell Frank about the things they used to get up to? Not worth the risk, yet. They reached Parliament Grounds. "Wire fences now, eh?" George said.

"Keep us out, or them in?"

"Both. I'd say. 'Cause we're so dangerous. And they're so precious."

"You want to wait inside until I'm finished? Can't have you wandering off and getting lost. It's not the bush, you know."

"I'll be tickety-boo. I'll have a squiz around. Been inside long enough today."

“If you’re sure. Meet back here. By the statue.” George watched Frank saunter across the grounds. His long strides ate up the ground, just as they did when he was strolling across a paddock.

After his meeting, George bumped into Brian at the bottom of the stairs. He bounded down the steps two at a time to land right beside George. Phone calls were no substitute for that bounce, that grin. They shook hands, before standing back and slapping each other on the back.

“Frank about?” Brian looked around the foyer.

“Meeting him by King Dick.” He looked at his watch. “Five minutes ago. Come on.”

The crowd in front of Parliament must’ve been twenty times the one that had turned up to the Astonforth protest. The wire fences and the ranks of police hadn’t interfered with the festive atmosphere. Waves and smiles welcomed friends into the clusters that were gathering. He scanned the crowd for Frank.

“You go,” George said. “I need to find Frank.”

“I’ll hold a place for you, if I can.”

“Be back, soon as.” He walked past the ranks of protestors that were forming.

Some of the luminaries in the protest movement were addressing the crowd. Their words generated ripples of laughter. The large police presence surprised George. How was he to know what a normal turnout was? As he searched the faces for Frank’s familiar one, he heard the announcement that they were going to the place where the South African Consul lived. Wellington. This was what it was all about, right in the thick of things. When he finally found Frank, the march had started to move towards the gate at the top of the grounds, just past where he used to work. Still worked. They fell in at the back of the group. Frank, as the larger of them, took the outside. George slid his arm through Frank’s and flexed his bicep so that Frank was pulled in towards him. For the briefest of moments, their eyes met. Everything

around them receded into the background, for an instant, before George was pulled back by the touch of the elderly woman next to him as she linked her arm through his. She introduced her young companion as her granddaughter. He nodded at the two men in suits at the other end of the rank.

A wave of uncertainty flowed through the crowd, bouncing from one person to another. Murmurs flowed back that the top gates were blocked. The order of an about-face trickled through the crowd. George and the others around him were now at the front of the march. His shoulders tightened. He searched around. What was happening? His little patch of the world became smaller as people pressed closer. A group scurried past and took up position in front of them, unfurling a cloth banner as they went. George loosened his grip a little. They were a few rows back.

A rumour was sent back that there might be police action. Preposterous, they weren't about to invade a field or anything. It was just a quiet mid-week march up a street before dinner. The police had protected the group in the middle of the field in Hamilton. They weren't the enemy. This was New Zealand.

The march began to chant. Words that George did not understand. He figured that they were South African, Bantu wasn't it? He took a mental note to find out over dinner. Brian was sure to know.

At the bottom gate, they turned towards Molesworth Street. By the Cenotaph the street was lined with rows of police. A bit of overkill for a week night. Besides, they weren't headed there. Some of the constables walked alongside them, just as Harry Evans and his men had done in Astonforth. George smiled at one of them, but he looked away. Before long the constable had increased his pace. A stream of police, moving faster than the crowd passed them up the hill.

“Would you look at that?” Frank said.

“What?”

“Up ahead. The road’s blocked.”

George looked around him. Others had noticed this too, but there was no call to halt. They kept walking. As they approached the lines of police facing them across the road, the front line turned, so that they walked ahead of the march, as if leading them forward. What a peculiar dance.

George wasn’t really sure what happened next. If he’d been asked, he would’ve had trouble working out the details. One minute he was following the rank ahead, the next his footsteps had become so short that, in the end, he couldn’t move. He held tight to Frank. The faces around him mirrored his confusion. They were sandwiched between those in front who had halted and those behind who weren’t able to see what was happening ahead of them. With all the pushing and shoving as people fought for space, his arm slid out of Frank’s. He grabbed at his jacket, but it slipped through his fingers. The last George saw of him, Frank went down, blood on his head from a policeman’s baton that appeared from nowhere over the ranks in front. George was pushed into a gap between two parked cars. Instinctively he fell to the ground and crawled to the footpath. He tucked himself in close to the fence. The elderly woman, her granddaughter leaning against her, stumbled to the ground right beside George. They huddled together, trying to keep their heads down, but unable to resist staring at the scene being played out around them.

Screams and flashes of light punctuated the night. In the flashes George saw batons raised high. It was as if they were dancing under a nightclub’s strobe lights. A baton shuddered down onto a man’s head. As he fell, a boot smashed him in the back. It looked like it was personal.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over. People were stunned into silence. He hoped Frank or Brian would be amongst the people hunting for things they had dropped. Neither of them passed by. He pulled himself up from where he'd taken shelter beside the fence.

He headed up the hill, leaving the two women to care for each other. If they were still there on his way down, he and Frank could help them. People were strewn around the road. He searched for a familiar face. Finally, near the top of the hill, he saw Frank in the distance and ran towards him.

“Thank God.”

He turned. Blood trickled down his face and into his beard. It was just someone who looked a bit like him. Up close, the only similarity was his size. Surely he would've gone downhill, back where they'd come from.

At the Cenotaph people were gathering. There was talk of marching up Lambton Quay, but George'd had enough. At the edge of the crowd the light from an ambulance lit up the faces of the people gathered around it. He pushed his way through, looking for Frank's large frame. He saw the young woman helping her grandmother into the back, but there was no sign of Frank.

George bustled in and out of the crowd, hoping that Frank had suddenly materialised on the paths he'd taken several times before. The crowd thinned out, and soon George was left standing with a few others who also seemed uncertain of what to do next. He rubbed his arms in an attempt to relieve the ache in them. If only he hadn't suggested the march. They could've been at dinner. What would he tell Pip? How would he face her? What if Frank were dead? He'd never forgive himself. For the things he'd done and the things he'd left undone. He should've said something long before now.

It was how Brian found him. Alone, looking down Lambton Quay after the group that had headed off to the Central Police Station.

1. Introduction

Many creative disciplines have their version of the art versus craft debate. The balance between content and technique, and the value placed on each, seem to generate these discussions. The concept behind the work often seems to be held in higher esteem than the technical skills used in the creation of the piece. The work may express an idea or belief, or make social comment, but lack of technical skills may detract from it. Creating an object may rely on technique, but without a meaningful context the work arouses responses that relate to the technical skills and the effort of the creator. In undertaking the MFA I wanted to learn to balance these elements. I wished to understand, and master, technical aspects of fiction so that poor execution did not interfere with the characters' stories or the themes I wished to address. It is this desire that led me to study literature and creative writing to honours level, and to continue on to the MFA. In this essay I will reflect on the process of working on this first part of my novel, attending to my experience of researching the content of the project, and the development of my creative writing practices. I will situate my work within the traditions of similar novels, and explain how *A Place to Stand*, adheres to, and departs from these.

A Place to Stand is the result of a three stage process, which began with my response to a writing exercise from Bret Johnson's *Naming the World*, "George never would have guessed a coffin could hold so many marbles" (332). The character and situation created in that first incarnation remained with me after the exercise was complete. When I began working on *Looking Over My Shoulder*, my submission for the creative writing paper that was part of my honours degree, I returned to this exercise and expanded the story. For the MFA, I wished to develop this piece further.

2. Aims

My broad aims for *A Place to Stand* have not changed since I began. They were to produce the first nine or ten chapters of a novel that explores the alienation experienced in a

conservative community for those people who do not, or cannot, conform to its narrow confines. Throughout the process, I have wanted to show how various people are affected by the constraints of a small town in the South Island of New Zealand. To this purpose I have selected a young couple who have drifted into marriage through proximity, friendship, and convenience. The relationship is placed under stress through change of location, death, unresolved grief, emerging feminism, and unexpressed sexuality, set against events during the 1981 Springbok Tour. This was a useful setting as the issues raised by the Tour challenged some of the unspoken tenets at the core of New Zealand society. The specific aims of the project have changed in an attempt to more effectively show the characters as they act out, and work to resolve, their conflicts. Point of view, chronology and structure have been the most obvious examples of these changes.

3. Technique

Initially, I saw the work as a bildungsroman which explored George's growth. While the latter part of the story came easily, I reflected in my journal that I was struggling to set an interesting first chapter in childhood. I did not want the reader to have full access to George's early years, preferring his backstory to be revealed throughout the novel. Reverse chronology was one way of doing this. The opening scene in *Looking Over My Shoulder* was at Frank's funeral; following scenes worked backwards through time. My rationale behind this was that when someone is met in adulthood, their past lives are revealed slowly. The person is accepted at face value; their identity is more thoroughly understood as tales of their past are told. I wanted the work to reflect this process. It was a challenge to write with this order, one that I was happy to undertake for a 10,000-word piece.

I was willing to continue the unconventional chronology for the MFA project. As the time to begin approached, it became clear that this not only would be a difficult task, but also would not tell the story as I wished it to be told. By this time the themes that I wanted to

explore were becoming clearer to me. My supervisors, Dr Christina Stachurski and Professor Patrick Evans, agreed with my decision to restore a more orthodox chronology and shorter timeframe. I settled on the idea that the novel would take place over one year around the time of the 1981 Springbok Tour.

Looking Over My Shoulder was drafted in first person from George's point of view. With the change to reverse chronology, I chose to use multiple first person points of view, which I continued when working on *A Place to Stand*. On completion of the second draft Christina suggested that I might better serve the story if I rewrote the work using third-person omniscient narration, with some free indirect narration. Rather than being overwhelmed by this suggestion, I was excited to rework the piece. Changing the narrative point of view was an opportunity to learn more about writing the first part of a novel-length work, a primary goal for my MFA.

In order to write a longer piece than I had previously done, I needed a sound knowledge of plot and structure. My loose understanding of the three act structure had to be tightened for this work. To this end I read several novels to analyse how they had been structured, to recognise the portrayal of normality at the novels' openings, and to identify the disturbances or interruptions that generated later events. Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* and Linda Aronson's *Screenwriting Updated: New (and Conventional) Ways of Writing for the Screen* assisted in my understanding of how to structure a novel. While these texts are aimed at the screenwriter, the principles of storytelling they contain are relevant to the novel form. From this reading I understood more about creating a framework for the story so that it followed a traditional story arc. The creation of spreadsheets as visual aids to an overview of the whole work led to improved scene and chapter planning. On these documents I plotted scenes so that fictional

events connected with real ones, but allowed the story, rather than historical accuracy, to dictate the shape of the novel.

After much of my writing had been completed, Christina introduced me to an article by James McCreet in *Writing Magazine* that helped me break through the struggle I was having with some scenes. The article suggested that the writer “apply compositional techniques even before approaching the keyboard” and that she “make every single line contribute towards the narrative” (70). My spreadsheets contained the structure of the novel, but did not always help with scene composition. McCreet reported that he directs his writing with three questions: “What purpose do I want to achieve with today’s word count? What went before, what will follow and how does this section bridge the gap? What effect must the writing have upon the reader?” (70). Asking these questions helped me to rewrite troublesome scenes, delete those I considered redundant and more effectively plan new scenes. Understanding how to structure the novel as a whole, and the individual components within it, allowed me to create my first drafts, but they still needed extensive editing before completion.

I turned to the editing process. I was able to recognise aspects of my writing that needed to be refined, but was not always sure how to improve them. My supervisors asked pertinent questions helping me to recognise the cause of my concerns, allowing me to learn from this process and to trust the instinct that had alerted me to the difficulties within the piece.

Patrick suggested in his feedback on the second draft that Mary’s story was weaker than George’s, filled with domesticity and would be improved if it had more substance. I understood his criticism, but thought that this reflected life for many women in rural towns at that time. I needed to separate my memories and initial feminist reaction to his suggestion, in

order to understand that he was guiding me to serve Mary's story. From this recommendation, I reviewed Mary's character study. I knew George's character and backstory more intimately than I knew Mary's, as he had been with me since that first writing exercise. Mary was a minor character in *Looking Over My Shoulder*. I wrote in my journal that I had dismissed her as one of those conservative rural women that I had little time for. I struggled to see her clearly, so it was important to understand her desires and goals, and to develop her story so that it had equal weight to George's. As a result of this review, I decided that her mundane existence would be transformed through her musical prowess and her introduction to feminist ideas. This change helped me to formulate a clearer plan for the end of the novel and to introduce a new character, Carrie, who would become a catalyst for the changes in Mary's life.

As the submission deadline approached, I developed a guide for the final editing process which helped me examine the work as a whole, and in detail. A broad view was needed to ensure that the obstacles to the protagonists' progress were able to be tracked across the novel and that these intensified before the final crisis and resolution at the end of act three. Once I was satisfied that the overall structure was sound, I turned to the finer details. These included ensuring that the reader experienced the fictional world through all of the senses. Visual description predominated, but others were also represented. Changes were made to bring more balance between the senses. I looked at the relationship between dialogue, action and description. As the world of the novel was clear to me, I had a tendency to write elaborate description in order to provide the reader with the same image I experienced as I wrote. Editing these descriptions led me to delete some of my favourite sentences, but also alerted me to passages that were overwritten. While I was editing my work I read some self-published work and immediately recognised that, while the topic may have been worthwhile, it was overwritten and needed to be edited, creating a frustrating

reading experience. Prior to editing my own work, I might have become impatient with this self-published work, but not realise how it could be improved. Close reading of all the characters' dialogue was necessary to ensure that their speech and mannerisms were consistent throughout. As George and Mary came from very similar backgrounds, their speech patterns are quite alike, and are probably like my own. I found it easier to create differing speech patterns for other characters, as they were less similar to me, and more like people I have observed. While focussing on speech patterns, I was surprised at how little some characters said, even though their words changed the story considerably. Another aspect I looked at closely as I edited was that of voice. It is easy for the narrator's or the author's voice to intrude. I reviewed the work to ensure that the point of view remained from either of the protagonists' centre of consciousness. This prompted me to read the free indirect passages to ascertain their intrusiveness and value to the story. I did not want it to be just a clever device, but for it to serve the purpose of pulling the reader inside the character, if only for a brief moment. In his final reading, Patrick questioned my strategy of switching narrative viewpoints within scenes, as he felt that this could be intrusive. I decided to leave the scenes as they were written for submission, but removed some that I thought interrupted the flow. I am willing to explore this further as the novel progresses.

As submission time approached, I was forced to make a final decision on a title for the novel. The name of the earlier work reflected the reverse chronology. With the change to a more conventional timeframe, it no longer conveyed the novel's themes well. I considered many before rejecting them as clichéd or familiar. I favoured *A Place to Call Home* until an Australian television series came out with that name. The title I settled on, *A Place to Stand*, was chosen because I wanted my protagonists to find a place in which they no longer had to disguise themselves for acceptance in the community. It also references a term that became more generally known within the wider New Zealand community after the Tour, that of

turangawaewae, which can be translated as meaning a place to stand. By the end of the novel George will find that his place to stand is Astonforth, where he becomes free of the need to shape himself to others' expectations. He sought this through moving to Wellington, but will eventually find it in the place he believed he could least experience it. Mary will also find her place to stand, not as she had thought at the novel's opening through marriage and motherhood, but as a session musician in New York.

4. Content

Often first novels have an autobiographical aspect. This work is no exception, but it is not a memoir. I was born and raised in a small town in Canterbury. Early pregnancy and marriage held me in the town longer than was optimum. In 1981, my marriage of ten years ended. The turmoil of this was heightened by my involvement in the anti-tour movement and a growing feminist sensibility. For many people of my generation the Tour was transformative. It was a time of great upheaval and conflict. New Zealanders did not seem to be the passionless people of Gordon McLauchlan's book, published five years earlier. Like many, our family was, and remains, divided. I have not attempted to reproduce personal events or situations, but have borrowed from them in order to place the characters in circumstances that brought about the external and internal conflict that was prevalent during the Springbok Tour.

While, ostensibly, the 1981 Springbok Tour was about the situation in South Africa, for many it became the point where they examined New Zealand's belief in itself as a tolerant society. The country's unacknowledged racism was examined after the Tour. I chose not to address this issue, as South Island towns were not forced to consider it in the same way as those in the North Island. In the 1976 census, 72.5% of the population lived in the North Island. The population density at this time in that island was also greater: 19.79 people per square kilometre, compared with 5.56 people per square metre in the South Island. 93% of

New Zealanders who identified themselves as Maori in that census lived in the North Island.¹ These figures show that South Islanders had much less chance of interacting with Maori. Instead, I focussed on how the Tour brought the male stereotype into question, by weaving together the multiple layers of homosexuality and feminism in small-town rural life, against the backdrop of events that year. I might have come to this belief through experience, but Jock Phillips supported this idea when he wrote in *A Man's Country?: The Image of the Pakeha Male – A History* that “the protest also represented a challenge to the male stereotype” (262). Rugby was the dominant symbol of masculinity. While this was true for the nation generally, it was even more so in country areas. The definitions of masculinity were narrow in rural towns. For those raised to accept these definitions unquestioningly, the idea that anyone would not adhere to them was outside their experience or imagination. Phillips, in his chapter, “The Bloke Under Siege, 1950-86”, suggested that “the pressure of small-town conformity remained strong, and for men the camaraderie of the male subculture was difficult to escape” (274). Rugby under attack from within their own communities was the cause of some disquiet for many pro-Tour supporters. These issues were brought into the families at the centre of the novel. Although there was conflict within families over the Tour, my experience has led me to believe that differences were already present, but suppressed. The situation in 1981 brought them out, in a way not experienced previously in many New Zealand families.

In the initial writing exercise, and in the subsequent work, George was a gay man who lived a secret life with his partner, Frank. At the beginning of *A Place to Stand* George exists behind the veil of normality that marriage gives him. I have placed him at a time when changes to the forms of masculinity that were publicly acceptable had just begun to occur in

¹ **THE NEW ZEALAND OFFICIAL YEAR-BOOK, 1981**

http://www3.stats.govt.nz/New_Zealand_Official_Yearbooks/1981/NZOYB_1981.html#idsect1_1_19
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cities. Following the Second World War masculine and feminine roles were delineated: domesticity and motherhood for women and a narrow definition of what it meant to be a 'bloke' for men. George has attempted to escape the confines of Astonforth by living in Wellington. He has become part of a sub-group that he did not believe possible in Astonforth, although later chapters will reveal another alternative. A research paper for my honours degree, "The Blind Leading the Blind: Rites of Passage and Contemporary Young Adult Literature" which looked at the impact of the lack of clear rites of passage for adolescent boys in contemporary culture, reflects my interest in learned masculinities. It was apparent to me that a father would have struggled to accept a son like George, at that time.

The friction caused between father and son when the son expresses his masculinity outside of the father's experience did not seem enough to carry the story. For the purposes of the novel, I wanted to complicate this situation. I needed to make the struggle between the father and son more personal. Observing the favouritism that men can show towards sons who conform to gender stereotypes, and the rejection of those who do not, led me to consider the impact that the father's ideas about masculinity might have on future relationships when these sons are twins. Like many, I have long been fascinated by twins. My closest friends at primary school were twins and I have twin grandsons.

I pondered the impact that the loss of the favoured twin might have on George and on his relationship with his father. Having lost a partner suddenly and faced the emptiness that followed, I was curious about the experience of losing a twin, reasoning that twins present the unusual situation of having always had another person present from conception. I imagined that the loss of a twin must be one of the most fundamental of losses. Initially I considered death by illness or cot death, but felt that the added complication of accidental death in early adolescence, with the suggestion that George had caused the accident, to be more likely to continue to affect the father-son relationship between T.C. and George. Their estrangement

needed more complexity than just their differing beliefs and values. Unresolved grief is, for both George and his father, the source of their conflict.

In order to understand this loss I first explored Joan Woodward's work, *The Lone Twin: A Study in Bereavement and Loss*. One story, told by Timothy Knatchbull, encapsulated the feeling of isolation I sought to create for George. Knatchbull refers to the commonality between him and another man who also lost his twin in late childhood when he wrote that "we were both so close to our twins that imagining life without them had been impossible" (62). Knatchbull's identical twin brother was killed in the explosion that also killed their grandfather, Lord Mountbatten. Further research uncovered his memoir, *From a Clear Blue Sky*, in which he expressed his loss, his survivor guilt and the struggle to continue with life in the absence of Nick, his dead twin. I thought the intensity of this loss would also explain George's yearning for, and fear of, intimacy. This will be explored as the novel continues when his relationship with Frank develops.

From the beginning of the novel it is clear that there is little intimacy between George and Mary. George understands the reason for this lack of closeness, but it brings frustration to Mary. I needed her to actively challenge this situation, rather than passively wait for change to happen. Reflection on the period between 1980 and 1981 brought me to recall the power of literature and friendship as a catalyst for change and decided to use this experience as a basis for Mary's transformation. I undertook little research into feminism, preferring to use literature to jog my memory. I reread Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* with concern that it might be more flawed than I remembered it. It seemed dated, yet I could see how this book was said to have changed the lives of many women. I scanned articles that had been reproduced in *Broadsheet: Twenty Years of Broadsheet Magazine*. This reading allowed me to access my state of mind in 1981 and to use this as a source for Mary. It is my intention that Mary's transformation will become more dominant later in the novel and that she will be the

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one to call an end to the marriage, not because of George's homosexuality and their lack of intimacy, but as a result of feminist awareness, her child's stillbirth and her search for autonomy and a larger life than she thought was her destiny as a wife and mother in a small country town.

Personal experience informed most of my portrayal of country life. Houses and paddocks were mapped from my memories of three farms I knew well. My background led me to an early awareness of the importance of seasons and weather to those associated with farming. I made sure that, not only were the details of farming tasks correct and in the right season, but that they also served the story by showing character and relationships. I used rural imagery when metaphor or simile was needed to cultivate an image or feeling within the reader, and to connect the reader to the characters' perspective. In an early draft of the first scene when the protestors are gathered around the statue of Richard John Seddon in front of Parliament, I used a simile which compared the milling crowd to a Brueghel painting, but rejected that image in favour of that of a mob of sheep. This choice foreshadowed the importance of rural life and acknowledged the mentality that was about to bring turmoil to the nation. Animals are central to farm life, especially on mixed cropping farms such as the ones portrayed in the novel. While not central to the story, they were included as part of the background and were selected to enhance character or plot. Some terms that are understood in a rural environment were changed so that they were more easily understood by an urban reader.

I read personal accounts of the Tour, revisited familiar published images, but found Geoff Chapple's book *1981 : The Tour* the most valuable resource. Not only did it provide a chronology of Tour activities, but it reminded me of the depth of feeling prevalent that year and provided details of protests I had not attended, but which were useful for the story's development. Chapple's writing, my memories and imagination provided the material for the

protest scenes I recreated or invented. As I did not want the Tour to dominate the storyline, I needed to be aware that I was not writing in order to educate the reader, but to use the peculiar circumstances to facilitate the emergence of the protagonists' desire for a more decisive life.

I needed this emergence to originate from George and Mary's primal responses to situations. Left to reason and logic, neither would have been prompted to change. George's first sight of Frank reawakens his sexuality. His control and resolve are interrupted by the internal responses brought about by physical attraction. Prior to Frank's appearance, George had relegated his homosexual experiences to his life in Wellington. The Tour and his feelings for Frank will force him to face matters he has avoided by leaving Astonforth. For Mary, I chose the power of music as a conduit for change. I could have chosen any artistic pursuit, but decided that music often stimulates a visceral response. Visual art would not have been as readily available in forms that prompt this response, as originals are not often shown in country towns. Music is more accessible, as a recording is a closer reproduction of the artist's work. Sound can influence mood and penetrate a person's defences directly and has the potential to bring about change. I have not researched these ideas for validity, but have trusted experience as a source.

Experience also informed my choice of places in which to set the novel. Astonforth is a fictionalised version of a town similar to the one in which I was raised. In choosing a name for the town I considered several that indicated that the town's colonial past was predominantly English, before inventing the word 'Astonforth.' Research of common generic terms used in place names in Great Britain led me to Wikipedia², which listed the following interpretations: Ast for East, ton for homestead, and forth for river crossing. This combination described the town because it is on the eastern side of the South Island, it developed because

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_generic_forms_in_British_place_names

it was a place to cross the river in colonial times, and it represented the concept of home which is important to the novel. I was happy to accept Wikipedia as a source for these terms as I was not undertaking academic research. I renamed and disguised the town so that adherence to fact did not dominate the needs of the story. In September 2012 at the Christchurch Writers' Festival, I heard Carl Nixon read an excerpt from the novel he was writing that was set in a city, to which he had given a fictional name, but which was clearly Christchurch. I had the opportunity to speak with him afterwards and asked him about this. He said that the fictional name gave him the freedom to invent aspects of location without the need for extensive research for accuracy. This discussion affirmed my earlier decision. A reader suggested that I disguise Wellington also, but as it is the centre of decision making and power, and as the Tour was a New Zealand story, I chose to retain the name. It is the city of possibilities for George, a place where he could escape the South Island, using Cook Strait as an effective barrier between him and the things he wanted to leave behind. Auckland may have a larger population, but would have been overwhelming to a person with George's personality. From the distance of a Canterbury town, Wellington appears to offer the anonymity of a city. Throughout the 1980s and 90s I was a frequent visitor to Wellington allowing me to understand the attractions for those who lived there.

5. Location of novel within Literary Tradition

A Place to Stand is a New Zealand novel. It could not be transplanted to another situation, being as it is about a specific place and time. The events surrounding the Springbok Tour in 1981 are particular to this country and have been used as a background to the changes that occur in the characters' lives, as they did for many that year. It is also a small-town novel. Small towns in other places may have similarities, indeed underlying attitudes within *A Place to Stand* are often characteristic of rural communities. Unspoken divisions in other small towns in other countries may have been brought to the fore by external events, but few

would have highlighted those divisions throughout the whole country as the 1981 Springbok Tour did.

It is principally a South Island story. Rural towns in the North Island have different dynamics to those in Canterbury brought about by numerous factors including population, topography and history. The legacy of the colonial past is carried proudly in Canterbury; the province developed as a planned settlement which referred back to Great Britain as home. These and other factors are beyond the scope of this essay, but have a bearing on the community within which the work is set. *A Place to Stand* must have been informed by Laurence Fearnley's writing, although I was not aware of this as I wrote. I have read several of her novels closely, focussing on *Room*, *Delphine's Run* and *Edwin + Matilda* when exploring mother-daughter relationships through feminist psychoanalytic theory in an essay for my honours degree. Fearnley sets some of her novels in small towns in the South Island. Perhaps this gave me permission to validate rural New Zealand as a source of story. Regardless, I wish to acknowledge her writing.

The work could be defined by some as a gay novel; the male protagonist's story arc follows his 'coming-out' story. I do not see it this way. Witi Ihimaera's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* could more accurately be called a gay novel as the focus is the protagonist's struggles with identifying himself as a homosexual. George's sexuality is a complicating factor; I wanted to create a character who belongs to the community, by all outward appearances, but who feels that belonging comes at great cost. Others may define the work as a feminist novel; the female protagonist's story is one of developing aspirations to fulfilment as an individual, rather than through service to others. Unlike Sarah, the protagonist in Barbara Anderson's *Portrait of the Artist's Wife*, Mary is not subjugated by her husband's egotism. She is pulled towards feminism, rather than using it to pull her out of a desperate situation. While these two aspects of the novel are important to the protagonists, they

symbolise the move from suppression of individual desires for acceptance within a community, to fuller expression of the characters' individuality and the shedding of the need to keep within the confines of the community's beliefs as represented by the families of origin.

Fictional works with the Springbok Tour of 1981 as a central component were included in my research as I wrote the novel. Two of those were young adult fiction written some time after the tour. David Hill's *The Name of the Game* was published in 2001, twenty years after the tour, and Bill Nagelkerke's *Sitting on the Fence* was published in 2007. Both of these books appear to have been written with the view to educating young people about an event in New Zealand's history. Both use protagonists who are the same age as the target audience. They are set in cities: Auckland and Christchurch, respectively. The Tour is the principal focus of these books, as seen through the eyes of the protagonists. While both central characters are anti-tour by the end of the books, neither starts that way. They are both situated in families which portray the divisions within society at that time. Carl Nixon's *Rocking Horse Road* features the Tour but, as the protagonist is a young man absorbed in his own world, it is dealt with from a distance. Marilyn Duckworth's *Disorderly Conduct* features the Springbok Tour as a background to, and incidental to, a family story. While *A Place to Stand* is similar in that the Tour remains in the background as the characters' daily lives are not overwhelmed by anti-Tour activities, Duckworth's novel is located in a city and does not address the issues that arose in smaller communities. My work differs from these examples in several ways. It is not constructed with the Springbok Tour as an educational device for a younger generation, although this could be a side-effect for a younger audience. The Tour remains in the background, but is used as a device to reflect and intensify the conflict which drives the story. The main essence of the story is about family, small towns,

conventional thinking, beliefs about gender, and how the Tour affected those within a fictional family.

Although the protagonists are adults, I see this as a type of coming-of-age novel. Until the events occur that force them to question the decisions they have made, they have limited awareness of their own lives. Mary had automatically accepted the expectations for her life while growing up in Astonforth. She struggles with the choices she has made, never realising that, and while acceptable to her peers, they confine and restrict her, creating frustration and a sense of displacement wherever she lives. At the beginning of the novel she imagines that Wellington is the source of her discontent, and that it could be rectified by her returning to her home town. It is not until she returns that she realises that the restlessness is within her. When she is introduced to feminism and the anti-Tour movement she begins to grow up. Similarly, George has attempted to push Astonforth away, blaming it as the source of his anxiety, rather than face his internalised homophobia. Avoidance of his feelings about his father's rejection, his brother's death and his sexuality has not allowed him to truly grow up. Escaping these feelings through change of location is the same as not dealing with them at all. He and Mary have tried to use each other to find an inner contentment which will not come until they grow up and face themselves.

6. Conclusion

The completion of my submission for the MFA brings with it the desire to reflect on my aims and to assess the effectiveness of the work in achieving them. *A Place to Stand* is evidence that I have achieved the aim of writing the first nine to ten chapters of a novel length work. I wanted to effectively use techniques to enhance the content of a work so that the reader's experience was satisfying. The subjectivity or objectivity one brings to the evaluation of an art work is complex. It is difficult as the writer to maintain objectivity or even, after numerous readings of the work, to have the fresh approach of that of a first-time

reader. It is my belief that a creative work is not complete until it has been exposed to an audience. I have taken heart from the feedback I received from the few early readers with whom I have shared the work. One was concerned to know what would happen to the protagonists later, another was upset that she would have to wait for more chapters. These evaluations are subjective, but provided me with enough information to recognise that the story interested the readers and that, presumably, lack of technique had not marred the reading. Discussion with these readers led me to believe that they had grasped the themes I wished to portray.

Plans for later chapters are ready for scene development and writing. If I were to start this process again I would pay less attention to researching content and more to the development of technique. It is easier to research facts that I may, or may not use, in a work than to struggle with the construction of a scene. With the skills I have gained throughout the MFA process, I feel prepared to continue writing in a way that satisfies my demand for a balance of the art and craft that constitutes worthwhile creative work.

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