

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I surfaced to a kind of wakefulness, and then sank again. It was as if I was floating on a sea of consciousness. A wave of awareness would swell beneath me, and I'd open my eyes to a race of clouds whipping across a pastel blue sky. Occasionally a break in the clouds would reveal a glimpse of the moon, or maybe it was the sun. I didn't care. The howling wind and the lonely cry of seagulls surrounded me always. My thirst was a terrible thing. I could hear the sound of teeth grinding. Was it me? Was I doing that? My hand wouldn't move, caught somehow. I let myself sink again into the deep, long, oily blackness.

I surfaced again. I knew time had passed. Deathly cold. Maybe I'm dead, I thought. Maybe this is what death is. A surging, swelling kind of nothingness. With that thought came a little bubble of fear. I noticed my legs were shaking so hard my ankles thumped on a concrete floor. Your body can't shake if it's dead, I told myself. I'm alive – and with that thought I gratefully sank again into a kind of semi-death.

That time, long, long ago, when Peaches had walloped me over the head with a cricket bat, there had been no sense of time passing. No sense of duration. One second I was in Snow's bedroom, and then, wham! What seemed like the very next second I was in a different room with one hell of a sore head, and the incongruous sight of Peaches in an evening dress swinging a Kookaburra.

But this time I surfaced again and again from consciousness, and at each surfacing, though I didn't know where I was – didn't care where I was – I knew more time had passed, and that at every surfacing I was colder and thirstier. And then eventually I became aware of myself in a place – a freezing, windy, lonely place. And then I sank again into the sweet, soft, breathing darkness.

Time surged by. An achingly slow, painful torture of minutes passed like a nightmare where you try and run but can't move. After what must have been hours, maybe days of this, I drifted to the surface of consciousness; and this time, like the flipside of going under an anaesthetic, I made myself stay there, counting one, two, three – willing myself with each subsequent number to reach a higher level of wakefulness. It was like slowly rising out of a deep hypnotism.

At twenty I opened my eyes. A whip lashed across my eyeballs, and I felt warm liquid dribble down my cheeks. I immediately fell back into the comforting blackness. Minutes, maybe hours passed, and then I was aware of myself again, and again I forced myself to stay

conscious by counting. This time when I reached twenty I kept my eyes shut and focused on myself. It was like opening floodgates as the awareness of pain and thirst smashed into me.

The torture of thirst was far greater than the pain. My tongue had swollen to an enormous hard dry muscle. It feels like a parrot's tongue, I thought, and rested on the image of a parrot – took refuge in remembering the sweet beauty of garish coloured feathers, paint box blue and Lego yellow – and from there my mind wandered to favourite children's stories I'd read aloud to Niki. Lines from *The Lighthouse-Keeper's Lunch* echoed in the distant, timeless void – out there? In my mind? I couldn't tell the difference any more. I tried to remember the name of the Lighthouse Keeper – Grinland? Grinning?

A part of me knew what was happening: my brain was comforting me with pleasant memories, free-wheeling from one anodyne thought to another, trying to help me out by imagining pleasant, comforting, everyday things, so I wouldn't have to face the horror of my reality. I felt a welling of gratitude for that and observed myself weeping. But there were no tears, everything about me was parched and dry as bleached, windswept driftwood.

I think it was hours later that I surfaced again. This time I lifted my eyelids fractionally, exposing only slits of eyeballs. Something lashed my cheek – a thick swatch of matted hair, crusted with blood and salt. So that's what the whip was – my hair.

I focused on my body. There was something wrong with my left hand. I couldn't move it. Okay, leave that for now. I forced myself to stay conscious as I took in the immediate surroundings. I was curled up in an enforced foetal position, my body wrapped around an iron ring cemented into a concrete floor, my left wrist secured to it by a hard plastic pull-through handcuff. I was inside what appeared to be a three-sided bunker, my body curled towards a concrete wall built into the clay bank.

Okay, I congratulated myself. Well done. Now for the big one. I needed to know where the bunker was, and that meant turning my body to face the freezing whip of wind at my back. I took a long, deep breath and rolled my body over. The wind slammed into me like a car crash. The open side of the bunker faced a heaving black mass of water skittered with moonlight. I counted ten deep slow breaths, willing myself not to black out again. I knew where I was – Fitzroy Bay on the hill above the Pencarrow lighthouse. I was in an old WW2 lookout bunker, dug into a hill above the deep, unsettled waters of Cook Strait.

Grinling. That was the name of the Lighthouse Keeper whose wife had fought so valiantly to stop the seagulls eating her husband's lunch. It was Grinling.

A couple of years ago, Sean and I hired mountain-bikes and cycled around the winding clay and shingle coastal track as far as Fitzroy Bay where the Pencarrow lighthouse winked at

the ferries, and container ships hacked their course between the North and South islands. I remembered it as a pleasant, easy jaunt of maybe six or seven kilometres from Eastbourne to the Bay. The memory of that was reassuring. Beyond this Bay, the track became rougher, stonier, and much more difficult to ride on, and then increasingly tricky for some twenty kilometres before it finally reached Palliser.

That's why we'd decided the lighthouse was far enough for us that day. We weren't doing the ride for fitness, and were happy to lie around on a little grassy knoll above the lighthouse and lick salt spray off each other's skin. I suddenly remembered with a lurch of excitement that there was a lake, somewhere inland and not far from where this bunker was. Rather than return by the same coastal track, we'd ridden our bikes inland from the Bay looking for a short-cut back to town, and we'd come across a small reedy lake where we stopped to watch the resident ducks skidding in to land on the water, their webbed feet stuck out in front like toppling water-skiers.

The memory of the lake was excruciating. I knew I didn't have a hope of finding it again. Reluctantly, I forced myself to abandon the possibility, and turned my thoughts back to the coastal road. Presumably Ross had driven his Commodore in from the Eastbourne end, but I had no idea how he'd got me from the dirt track up the hill to the bunker. Maybe I'd climbed with him; maybe he'd dragged or carried me. I couldn't remember anything after realising his car was heading along the foreshore of Petone.

I imagined myself dying up here on this wild, windswept outcrop of land, and merged that image with one of Niki dead on the manicured lawn of the Island Bay golf course. There was some strange sort of rightness to it. Niki had always been the tidy one, had never lost her compulsion to put things in order, tidy them away. She'd stopped counting lampposts once I'd convinced her that the *Good Luk!* knickers would work their charm, but she'd continued to snip, trim, and pluck at herself obsessively. She tried to keep it hidden from me and I let her think she succeeded, but there was little she could keep secret from me. That's what I thought until recently, anyway.

I slitted my eyes open again, and this time made out a sprinkling of the city's lights in the distance. So it was coming on to evening. I let this thought ping-pong around in my brain for a while until I could work up the courage to accept what it meant. This wasn't the same night I'd been kidnapped. One whole day at least had passed while I'd risen and then fallen back into unconsciousness. I had to work very hard to hold down the panic that threatened.

Broken glass, graffiti, and the remnants of a fire meant people had been here in the bunker at some time. The thought brought some comfort. I wouldn't let myself dwell on the

possibility the debris was years old. I wouldn't let myself think about what a god-forsaken place this was. Bikers and even walkers did the coastal track, but that was way below where I was. No matter how loud I screamed, only the seagulls would hear me, and they didn't care. I couldn't make any noise anyway. My swollen tongue made even breathing difficult. Some hardy, intrepid off-road bikers might take it into their heads to come up here, but it was unlikely.

I took a ragged breath, and opened the floodgates of sensation again. Thirst. My whole being craved water. I pushed that down, down. What else? Cold. Freezing. Ice cold. Wind. I realised I was still lying down, curled around the concrete plinth in the middle of the floor. I dragged myself inch by inch into a half sitting, half crouched position. The plastic tie had sliced into my wrist and the wound was raw and oozing, crusted with dried blood. There was a lot of blood too on my free hand, my face and hair. I figured it must have come from my smashed nose. The light summer dress I had put on for my dinner date with Robbie was filthy with blood and whatever else I had been lying in – it smelled like shit and urine from some animal, possibly human. Possibly me.

Both my legs were scratched, knees grazed. No one ever died of grazed knees, I told myself. No shoes. No feeling at all in my feet. Numb with cold. With my free hand I systematically prodded and pressed every part of my body, forcing myself to register pain so I'd know how bad a shape I was in. I was sore from bruises and abrasions over roughly 80% of my body but no bones broken as far as I could tell. There may have been some smashed cartilage in my nose – it was encrusted with a mix of blood and salt from the freezing southerly whipping water-spray up off Cook Straight – but my face was entirely numb so no matter how hard I pressed I couldn't feel anything.

There was something I still had to check. My brain told me not to do it but I ignored that advice. My undies were gone, vulva swollen and sore to touch, pubic hair caked with dried semen. I registered what this meant. My brain said, 'I told you not to do that', and then everything went black again.

This time I knew I was dead. I was in a freezing cold hell. Spirits screamed all around me, and Satan's eyes with their burnt amber vertical irises studied me impassively. I tried to cry out but there was no sound from my swollen, parched throat. I was beyond thirst. Even the sibilant sound of the word 'thirst' tinkling in my head drove me mad. The constant shushing of the waves below was a torture.

Dawn. Cold, harsh, white dawn. The devil was no longer there but the thirst was worse than any pain I'd ever endured. I'd have done anything for water. I'd have killed for water.

What a beautiful word it was. Water. I went over all the words – water, moisture, stream, liquid ...

Seagulls circled overhead, screeching insults at each other. So that was the sound I thought was the screaming of spirits. It was only seagulls. If I was to survive, I knew I had to use my desperate craving for the one and only thing I still cared about – water. I thought again about the lake Sean and I had found, but I knew I could roam for days in these barren hills and never find it. I wouldn't last 'days'.

Reluctantly, I let that thought go, though the fantasy of it – a big blue mass of shining water – still shimmered in my imagination. Then, with a yip of pleasure, I remembered a trickle of water, maybe a mile or two back along the coast road – a beautiful little run-off trickle of water that drooled down the hill and across the shingle into the surf. Sean and I had stopped to watch a line of ducklings follow that trickle across the track. The memory of it was a sweet torture. It was little more than a two-finger width dribble of water, but it was a thing of shimmering beauty in my memory. If I could just get my hand free I could go to it. I could drink. Van Morrison's words, 'And I will drink clear clean water for to quench my thirst,' sang in my head.

The plastic tie looping my hand to the iron ring looked flimsy enough but proved to be unbelievably resistant to everything I tried. Yanking and tugging opened the wrist wound until it oozed and then poured, but even using the blood as lubricant I still couldn't pull my hand free. My thirst was dreadful. I whimpered in a kind of shame as I licked at the blood.

What must have been an hour of rhythmical sawing on the rusted iron ring resulted in nothing more than a few scratches on the plastic handcuff and a lot more on me. I tried using my mouth but my cracked lips bled profusely before my teeth could get any purchase. I persevered, starting with my front teeth I tried to snip at the tie and when that failed I snarled my lips back for the bicuspid to have a go. I worked away at it for a long time before I rewarded myself with a look to see the result – bleeding gums, a cracked cuspid, and painfully split top lip, and just the faintest of fraying to one edge of the handcuff. This wasn't going to work.

From the position of the sun, I figured it to be late morning. I forced myself to do the math while I scabbled around looking for anything sharp I could use as a tool. Start with Tuesday. I was kidnapped on Tuesday night. My fingers closed on a small round stone and I tried rubbing that against the plastic handcuff. I was pretty sure a whole day had passed since then. A whole day of bright light and seagull cries. A whole day my brain had slammed a 'do not disturb' sign up on.

The stone was useless. I put it in my mouth for comfort while I systematically searched every centimetre of the floor within my reach. Okay, after that full day, I'd seen the lights across the harbour as night was falling. That would have been Wednesday night. And now it was day again. So it must be Thursday. Late Thursday morning.

For the first time I allowed myself the luxury of a thought that until now I hadn't let myself indulge. They'll be looking for me. Someone will be looking for me. I'd been missing for two nights and a full day. As if in response to this realisation, my stomach clenched.

Manoeuvring my bum as far from the shackle as possible, I held my dress away from the hot, stinging shit that burst out of me. When I was sure the spasms were over, I used my bare foot to kick loose leaves and rubbish over the stinking acrid mess.

Squatting back at the concrete ring, forehead resting on my handcuffed wrist, I fought back waves of nausea. I'd never believed in tying dogs up, and vowed if I was freed from here I would never, ever tie any animal up, ever.

Dog-god must have been listening. I'd just finished making the vow when I saw it – the rusting lid of an ancient tin can. Whimpering in anticipation, I lurched towards it, almost severing my wrist in the process. It had been hidden under the leaves I'd scuffed up to cover my foul-smelling discharge. With some clever toe work I managed to slide the lid close enough to grab it with my free hand.

Half an hour of sawing and slicing at the plastic tie and I was free.

I stood and fell over half a dozen times before accepting that my legs wouldn't hold me upright. There was no option but to slide down the hill on my arse. It ended up being more a scabble than a slide. What looked like a smooth slope of tussock turned out to be deep clay furrows with ridges covered in hair-plug tufts of sharp reeds. Forced to grab at them to stop myself pitching forward was like being stabbed by a handful of bamboo skewers.

As I scrambled, crawled, and skidded my way down, I thought this is why girls should never wear dresses – in case they're abducted and raped, have their underwear stolen, and are held captive on top of a hill in freezing cold weather and forced to slide down a slope covered in tufts of pick-up-sticks. But sliding was still easier than trying to walk down the practically vertical slope with legs that didn't work any more. When I'd manoeuvred myself about half way down, the sounds that had been background noise for what seemed like my entire life became louder and more distinctive. What I'd thought was the grinding of teeth was the rattle of beach pebbles being clawed back under by possessive waves.

When I couldn't slide any more, I crawled on hands and knees. Half-moon shapes pitted the cracked dry mud tracks. My spirits lifted. Hoof marks. Sheep! Not that sheep necessarily meant farmers but I let myself nurse this tiny spark of optimism.

The clay was softer now, and my heart pounded in anticipation of there being a puddle at the bottom of the hill. It helped me do what I had to do next. My knees had refused to carry me any further. Stretching my body horizontally along one of the ridges, stomach flat against the tussock, chin tucked into my chest, I pitched my body off the edge. Niki and I used to roll down sand-dunes. It was one of our favourite games. Actually, it was my favourite game because I usually won. We'd roll ourselves in beach towels until we looked like brightly coloured cigars, and then we'd pitch ourselves off the top of the dune. The one who rolled the furthest won. Only now did it occur to me that I'd rolled further because I was bigger and heavier than Niki. At the time, both of us had credited it to my incredible older-sister skill.

At the bottom of the hill was a small depression like a gutter where the track met the incline, and in the middle of it was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen in my life – a little pool of water the size of a saucer. I crawled towards it whimpering pathetically, and then, dropping my body to the ground, I rested my cracked lips in the puddle and licked.

It tasted of salt and the acrid pungent bitterness of animal piss. It was divine. The salt on my split lip stung like a bastard. I knew I probably shouldn't drink it all but did it anyway. There's no way I could have stopped myself. It was a tiny cupful of urine-flavoured nectar of the gods.

I lay in the ditch holding the pain at bay and figuring what to do next. The taste of water had given me new strength, but I knew I couldn't make it all the way back to Eastbourne. I knew too that I had no choice but to try.

Putting one foot down in front of the other, I could manage ten steps before my legs would fold under and I'd sink slowly to the ground like a camel. I'd count to a hundred, then make myself stand and put left foot, right foot again, one after the other, until I'd made another ten steps. I saw the blisters on my feet form, peel and then bleed. I didn't feel a thing. I was too numb with cold, or maybe just too numb.

I used the tyre tracks in the middle of the road for the first few blocks of ten steps, and then realised the chances of finding water on the hill side of the trail were better, so moved closer to the bank for the next block. I staggered along like this, ten steps at a time, my eyes searching for any little dribbles of water leaking from the clay bank. My left wrist leaked blood into the crook of my elbow where it was cradled.

That little trickle of water the ducklings had made use of had to be close by. I convinced myself it was just around each bend in the winding track, and each time it wasn't there the disappointment was overwhelming. I staggered on, ten steps at a time, and died a little death every time I came to a bend and it revealed another identical bay and no little trickle of water. There was no end to this track.

On the left side of the path, waves clawed and raked at the foreshore. Oyster catchers prodded their bright orange beaks at stones, trying to convince themselves a slimy morsel was underneath, and shags perched on jutting rocks, their iridescent wings outstretched as if offering an embrace. I remembered this was where the *Wahine* survivors had huddled together waiting for be rescued. I'd seen photos of survivors on the backs of pickup trucks, grey emergency blankets wrapped around their shoulders, their faces revealing nothing but a kind of shamefaced acceptance. They knew even then that they'd be known as 'the lucky ones' forever after. They'd seen their fellow passengers drown out there in the crazy madness of the storm, or pummelled and shredded on the rocks as they tried to swim to shore. Not many of the survivors wanted to talk about it afterwards, except perhaps to honour someone else's act of heroism. Mostly they wore that guilty look all survivors have. Why me? Could I have done more to save others? Am I pleased it was someone else who died instead of me? Was it a mistake? Were they supposed to live and I supposed to die?

I must have been walking for half an hour, but it wasn't really walking, it was more a shuffle, and progress was tortuously slow. I reckoned at this rate it would take about three days to get to the Eastbourne gate. I knew I couldn't make it, but was determined to keep going until I couldn't get up any more. Each time I slumped to the ground, it took longer to struggle to my feet again. And then, finally, I knew the next time I folded would be the last.

I stumbled around yet another bend, and there in front of me, right in the middle of the track, was a goat. We looked at each other, that goat and I. He was definitely the prettier sight. Those amber marble eyes gazed at me with no sympathy. It was as if it had been waiting for me. Maybe it's a hallucination, I thought, and stumbled one step closer. It stood its ground and just looked at me. These were the devil eyes I'd seen as I slipped in and out of consciousness up in the bunker. The creature had massive devil horns too.

Despite my exhaustion, I was curious now. Was it real? Was this thing simply a goat, or had the devil come to claim me, as the nuns had always told me he would one day? I staggered another step towards it. It stamped a petulant hoof in response, and then turned its head to look behind. For one moment I thought that head was going to turn right around and back again like the possessed girl in *The Exorcist*, but no such luck – it turned its baleful look

back at me before walking stiff-legged towards the bank and leaping up it. Swaying on my feet I watched the unlikely legs continue to climb the hill to where an audience of smaller goats huddled together, waiting.

I told my foot to lift but it wouldn't. I waited for my legs to fold – and that was when I heard it. The crack and pop of tyres on gravel. There was a vehicle coming towards me on the track. That's what had spooked the goat, not me. Unable to move, I waited in the middle of the track, focusing the last of my strength on making myself stay conscious. The truth of it was that I no longer knew if I was conscious. The driver would have water. I was sure of that. But now, at the end, I almost didn't even care about water. Didn't know if the mythical nectar I thought of as water even existed. Maybe I'd dreamed its existence like I'd dreamed the devil.

I was aware of a car coming into view and skidding to a stop in the middle of the track in front of me. I was aware of the cloud of orange dust, the sound of a car door slamming, someone coming towards me. It was all I could do to lift my head to look at my rescuer.

It wasn't a rescuer. It was Chris Ross. He was carrying a rifle. He didn't need it. I was dead anyway. My legs gave way, and I sank to the ground. It was over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

When Robbie hefted the John Doe backpack on to the sink bench, Jane's hands flew to her cheeks and her eyes filled with tears. They just stayed there those tears, enlarging her eyes like miniature spectacles, refusing to drop. To my horror I realised mine were filling in sympathy. This was new. I'd developed quite a thick skin in my years on the job. I'm not sure if it was working with the dead or working with the cops, but whichever it was, the result had been a definite drop in empathetic response.

I put the lapse down to recent trauma and made a mental note to put a stop to it before I went out in public again. Luckily, neither Jane nor Robbie seemed to have noticed. He placed the diary on the spotless stainless steel sink bench beside the pack. I took a chair beside her so as not to be in her direct eye-line. I didn't want my face to interfere with her grieving process any more than it already had.

I was wondering how Robbie was going to play this. I'd done this sort of thing so many times I was interested to see how someone else went about it. Jane was still staring at the

items on the bench, but showed no sign of wanting to inspect them, and no inclination to speak. Robbie waited, apparently in no hurry.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” she said.

It was as if she’d been waiting for this moment her whole life. The tension in the room was as powerful as a séance, and I almost expected John Doe’s voice to answer her from inside the backpack, but it was Robbie who responded.

“His body was found in the Rimutaka State Forest out past Wainuiomata. We suspect it’s been there for a long time. Possibly since as early as 1970.”

She nodded once, keeping her eyes fixed on the pack, and then with some effort wrenched her gaze away and spoke directly to Robbie.

“His name is Boris Pasternak.”

I placed my notepad on the table quietly so as not to disturb her flow.

“When his mother was still just a young woman she was standing in the front line of a Moscow parade of some kind, and Pasternak saw her and leaned over the protective railing and kissed her on the lips.” Jane paused to smile to herself. “At that very moment she made a vow that her first born son would be given the famous author’s name.” Jane let go of the image, and shrugged. “Or some such story as that.” She glanced at the shorthand hieroglyphics I’d made on the notepad. “That’s what he told me, anyway,” she said, throwing me a complicit smirk. “But he was a born liar,” she added for Robbie’s benefit, though I was pretty sure he’d got that. “And sexy as all hell.”

I saw Robbie’s lips twitch in a grin, but he didn’t look at me. In my best Pitman’s I dutifully wrote down ‘sexy as all hell’, thinking maybe I’d been wrong about Jane.

Robbie asked if she was ever called Lara, and she laughed softly.

“No. My name is Jane. Plain Jane,” she added, and gave a secret smile.

So she’d been a beauty in her day. Studying her closely, I could see the ghost of it in the large luminous eyes, the high cheekbones, the full bottom lip, but now at sixty-odd, everything about her had softened and draped. “But I was his Lara,” she said. “That’s what Boris called me. ‘His Lara’.”

She looked at Robbie again as if searching for her long lost lover in his looks, and then she looked away, disappointed.

“I thought your email said there was nothing written in the diary,” she said. “You said all the writing was gone. So how did you know Boris called me Lara?”

She was looking at me so I answered her. “We think he broke his ankle and spent some time sheltering in a cave in the bush. It was there that we found a message scratched on the wall.”

She was staring at me with an intense expression of excitement, as if she thought I had a key of some kind, one that would unlock everything she’d closed away all these years. I spoke quickly to put her out of her misery, picking my words carefully, so there’d be no confusion. The message had been for her and I owed it to Boris to deliver it as he’d intended.

“He wrote the words ‘Sorry Lara’. He may have written more, but that’s all that survived.”

“‘Sorry’,” she repeated, flatly.

It wasn’t a question, and from her look I’d say it sure as hell wasn’t an answer either. She sat there, slumped into herself, her lip trembling with the weight of the ‘sorry’ still on it.

Robbie picked up the diary, and with one hand on top and one underneath he presented it to her like an altar boy. She looked at his hands, and then tilted her head to look up into his face.

“I think Boris wrote everything in here, Jane, everything he felt for you, everything he wanted to say. He’d wrapped the diary tightly and tucked it carefully in his pack. I’m sure it was all written in here, before the rain washed it clean.”

She smiled gratefully at him, and then she took the diary and rested her cheek against it. She stayed like that for a long time, her eyes closed, and a faint, secretive smile on her lips. I kept my head bent as if in prayer, but I wasn’t praying.

Finally she opened her eyes and smiled. “He was always so eloquent,” she said, as if she’d heard him speak.

Jane made us tea, and told us her husband had died a month ago after thirty years of marriage.

“A reasonably happy one,” she added, and paused in her tea-making as if surprised by the realisation. I wrote it down, realising as I did that Jane had lost her husband about the same time as her lover’s body had been found. I didn’t think I’d draw her attention to it.

Robbie sipped his tea and crunched his way through a plateful of biscuits, helping Jane out with the occasional narrative nudge, while I jotted down the relevant dates and details for the report I’d need to write up for McFay. She was relaxed, happy to display her memories for us like a draper throwing a roll of cloth across a table – all the flaws, the wefts and weaves on display for our inspection.

She was vague on some of Boris’s background details, but she did remember he’d told her he’d decided ‘on a whim’ to go to sea. At eighteen or nineteen, fit, strong, and keen to see the

world, he'd had no trouble signing up on a Russian fishing vessel about to set sail. Whether this was true or a romanticised version of the truth Jane didn't know, but she'd believed Boris when he told her that he'd left his family and his life in Russia without a backward glance, and that he would never return.

When he subsequently abandoned her, or so she'd believed until now, she assumed it was his pattern when things got tough. Boris had hated the sea, had been intimidated by the constantly drunken captain and violent crew, and when the vessel docked in New Zealand Boris had simply jumped ship. By the time Jane met him he'd already been living here as an illegal alien for a couple of years. It didn't surprise me he could do that. It was easy to fly under the radar in those days before electronic ID and internet. He would have been fine as long as he stayed out of trouble.

"I'm a sixty-two year old grandmother now and no doubt you can't imagine me as a young woman," she said, aiming it at Robbie, "but we were madly in love," she said and shivered at the memory of it. "He was, quite simply, the love of my life."

I followed her gaze to a little three-legged 'occasional' table on the far side of the room. On it was what looked like a memorial selection – a dramatic Greek-style urn of ashes surrounded by a horseshoe of family photos. This, no doubt, was all that remained of *Mr* O'Neill. I wondered if he'd known that Boris Pasternak was the 'love of her life' through their thirty years of 'reasonably happy' marriage.

A plastic-framed photo sat proudly beside the urn. It was a snapshot of the deceased pointing to someone and smiling, beaming really in their direction, but the person he was pointing to had been excised from the photo. Maybe it was Jane he'd been so proudly drawing the photographer's attention to, but with her gone it appeared as if he was wasting that expansive smile on his own urn – as if he was pointing at his own ashes with a boyish 'Hey, check *this* out!' gesture. It was both funny and macabre. Had Jane not realised that the photo cropped this way was in bad taste? I hoped not.

Suddenly the ashes, the photo, the talk about corpses were oppressive, and I slid the notepad and pen across to Robbie, excused myself, and went through to the bathroom where I threw cold water on my face, luxuriating in the sparkling wetness of it.

I didn't need to pee, but since I was there I thought I might as well sit and fill in a bit of time. The bathroom was of the pink fluffy kind, full of female accoutrements. Chiding myself, I checked out the medicine cabinet. No shaving brush or razor. No nose hair clippers or snoring remedy. *Mr* Jane O'Neill, it seemed, had been quickly and thoroughly tidied away. Erased.

I sat on the lid of the toilet and wondered what it would be like to live in a marriage for thirty years knowing your partner always held that special place in their heart for someone else. All the time she was married to Mr O'Neill, Jane didn't know Boris was dead, though she must have considered the possibility. If Boris had lived – if they'd married, had kids, all that – would he have remained the love of her life? I think for some people it's easier to hold the dream or the memory of love than to put it to the test by living it.

Neither Jane nor Robbie looked up as I re-entered the room. Jane was deep in storytelling mode, and I suspect enjoying the attention of this honey-eyed man. I could understand that. Robbie slid the notepad back to me but kept eye contact with Jane so as not to disturb her flow. He'd drawn a little smiley face in the corner of the page. I flicked back through what Robbie had written, catching up on their conversation while I'd been out of the room.

"We had what you'd probably now call 'a volatile relationship'," she said, and then gave that secret smile again before adding, "Russians are like that."

"Can you remember the last time you saw him?" I asked. "Any idea of the date?"

She shifted her body around to face me as if only now realising I was back in the room, and took a good thirty seconds before answering. I think she'd held these memories close and secret to herself for so long she found it hard to share them.

"We had a fight. An argument," she said tightly, and turned back to face Robbie. "And, you know, over all these years I've tried to recall what we were arguing about, and for the life of me I can't remember." Jane stared at the heavily cushioned sofa across the other side of the room. "He sat on the couch, put his boots on, picked up his pack, and left. That was the summer of 1972." She took a deep breath before continuing. "And that was that. I waited. He never returned. Eventually I had to accept the truth – he'd abandoned me just like he had his family." She glanced again in my direction. "That's what I thought anyway, until I saw the piece in the paper and then the photo of his pack on the police website. I'd always imagined he was in Canada for some reason. A grandparent, like me." She turned her gaze back on to Robbie. "I want you to tell me where you found his body. I want to know everything that happened to him."

I listened as Robbie laid it all out for her, explaining about the body being found by the Ranger, and then later our finding the pack with the diary inside. He didn't mention the head being found at a different time and place from the rest of the body.

She listened without interrupting, her head bent, big splashes of tears dropping into her lap. She made no effort to wipe them away but just let them fall. I'd never seen anyone cry that

way – it reminded me of an *Alice in Wonderland* illustration. When Robbie reached across the table and put his hand on hers I realised I could have done that and probably should have.

“All these years I thought he’d abandoned me, but he hadn’t,” she said, that little secret smile appearing again. “He didn’t mean to leave me.”

Robbie suggested the scenario that perhaps, after their argument, Boris wanted to be alone for awhile, wanted to walk it out of his system.

“Maybe he wanted to be alone to think,” Jane agreed “He did that sometimes,” she added, and smiled at Robbie as if he’d given her a gift.

“It looks like he broke his ankle and couldn’t make it back to the hut to call for help,” Robbie concluded.

“How long did he survive?” she asked, determined to know.

I saw Robbie hesitate, weighing up how much to tell her.

“He survived for some time in the cave,” I said. “That’s where he wrote the message to you.”

She nodded without turning to face me.

Robbie picked it up from there. “It looks like he may have crawled out of the cave to look for water, and then was unable to climb back up to the cave again.”

I saw her take this in. So did I. For the first time since my kidnapping I realised how Boris had actually died.

Jane voiced my thoughts. “Oh my God. He died of thirst.”

I allowed myself a single lip-lick. “No, we don’t think so,” I lied. “Most likely he died of exposure. It’s one of the most painless ways to go. He would have just drifted off.”

In the silence I could feel both Robbie’s and Jane’s eyes on me. By the time I looked up again Robbie was talking to Jane about the body, asking if she’d like to claim the ashes, but before she could answer, the door opened and a big blond-haired man filled the doorway. His smile faltered as he took in Robbie’s police uniform and my battered appearance.

“This is my son,” Jane said by way of introduction.

Robbie held out his hand to the man. “Robbie,” he said simply.

The big man smiled tentatively at his mother as he shook Robbie’s hand.

“Mischa O’Neill,” he said. “What’s all this about?”

“Nothing,” Jane answered, before we had a chance to respond. “Apparently there have been burglaries in the neighbourhood, and they’re going door to door reminding people to lock up.”

Mischa glanced at the backpack on the sink-bench.

“I found it in the attic,” she said simply. “Now that I don’t have your father to worry about, I thought I could go for a tramp. But it’s a bit past it.”

On the drive home we talked about Jane’s lie, and I admitted to Robbie that I wasn’t a very polished fibber. I said he needed to know that if we were, you know, going to see more of each other. Without taking his eyes off the road Robbie grinned, and said that was fine with him, because he was a bit of a truth-fan himself. Except when it came to avoiding telling people the gorier details of how their loved-one died. That kind of lying was cool with him. We drove in silence for a while. It was a first-class silence, and right in the middle of it I noticed that Robbie had very sexy wrists.

He pulled the car up outside my place but kept the motor running. Wolf barked once – his greeting bark. He’d recognised the sound of Robbie’s car. Robbie screwed up his face in apology.

“We kind of bonded,” he admitted.

“Yeah, I noticed,” I said. “Okay, he lives with me, but you get visiting rights. Deal?”

He turned that grin in my direction. “Deal,” he said, and took my fingers in his. We sat like that, fingers entwined. It felt good. It felt more than good.

“Give me a day or two, okay?” I said. “I need to let some bruises heal.”

“Okay,” he said, giving my fingers a little squeeze. “You let me know when you’re ready. I’m not going anywhere.”

He kissed my fingers, an odd, courtly gesture. Sexy as all hell.