

Analysis of the Messy Data

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Time and Location

This story takes place over a period of three weeks in the middle spring months of New Zealand in 1990. Being in the southern hemisphere the seasons are reversed, with spring occurring from September to November.

The two locations for this story are Christchurch and Birdlings Flat. Christchurch is a university town in the province of Canterbury and is the largest town in the South Island, a city of approximately 320,000 people in 1990.

Birdlings Flat is a small settlement of holiday homes or 'baches', about 40 km away from Christchurch, on the Pacific Ocean coastline.

Chapter 1

A Frost Fish

Tuesday 16 October, 1990

The phone made a bleating sound through the dark room, and Mary Spark found herself half crawling across the bed. Even though Vince had not been living in the house for two years the phone was still on his side.

Yes, yes, ok, 15 minutes, yes. She sat up, yawned, and looked at the clock and was halfway down the hall to yell at the kids to get a move on, when she realised stupidly that they were not there. It was school holidays, and they were with Vince skiing in Queenstown. He had a sports shop now, and doing pretty well, so he said. The shower peeled the layer of sleep off her, and she dressed quickly, not caring to look too closely into the mirror.

Several short lines ran between her nose and lips, which her daughter Sophie nicely called ‘curtain callers’, because as she patiently explained to her mother, it was curtains for your youth once you got them. Spark had tried unsuccessfully to fill them in with make-up. Her blonde hair had some grey in it, but she had attacked that with dye, and she was satisfied that her trim body fitted her business clothes smartly.

That was the horn, and she fiddled at her hair a final time, grabbed her bag and latched the front door behind her. By the time she was in the car she had left behind being a woman and had become a senior police officer in the Criminal Investigation Department.

‘Morning sir’ Daryl Cummings spoke crisply, in a direct imitation of Spark’s style.

‘What do we know?’

‘Girls body at Birdlings Flat. Looks suspicious. Apparently been cut up. Found by local fisherman about 6.15. He rang the Halswell cop and he went out for a look and rang me at 7.15.’

Mary Spark looked at her watch, 7.45. She had been enjoying a good sleep-in. Cummings grinned, as if guessing his bosses thoughts.

‘Always happens on your day off sir’.

‘What’s the local officers name?’

‘Dunnings, Jim Dunnings. He said it didn’t look accidental. Could be interesting eh?’

‘You’ve got the murder team out? asked Spark.

The murder team was a group of specialists, including a photographic and a forensic team, and they had a truck loaded with tents and screens to cover the murder scene if necessary, and it usually was. Most bodies stayed *in situ* for more than a few hours these days.

‘Already there sir’.

Daryl Cummings smirked as he accelerated out of town. Mary Spark had closed her eyes, but she could still hear the smirk, and wondered why he was such a pain in the bum. Or was it just that Daryl reminded her so much of Vince. She firmed her lips, and tried to think about Birdlings Flat.

‘Watch your speed, she’s already dead’ she tartly reminded Cummings.

The police car left Christchurch city and followed the highway between the fingering spurs of Banks Peninsula and the sprawl of Lake Ellesmere. Mai mais and clumps of Canada geese specked the surface of the lake, whilst raupo stood stiff by Kaituna Lagoon. Toe toe waved their little flags of feathery silver, even though there was no wind. A single white heron stabbed cautiously on the edge of the lagoon, and a Harrier hawk flapped heavily against the blue sky, scouting for last night’s road kill. The day was sharply blue, almost a winters day, despite being well into so-called spring.

‘A great day to be alive eh sir?’.

Mary Spark did not bite. She knew that Daryl was just trying to be clever, and being young and clever at the same time was rarely a successful combination.

For no apparent reason she had counted on the highway two dead rabbits, one possum and a hedgehog smeared extravagantly at the junction with Beach Road. A large black-backed gull was picking over the entrails as the police car turned off the highway and then got swallowed into the sea-mist.

‘Hell’ muttered Daryl and slowed down the car ‘it’s a real pea-souper ain’t it’ he said in a mock Cockney accent and switched on the headlights, which made it worse.

They crept forward on the short road from the highway to the sea, passing shadowy baches, and paddocks full of emptiness and dry dead grasses. The headlights bounced off the strained fence wires, shining with moisture. Spark vaguely remembered that Birdlings Flat had a low rainfall, and got out her notebook and wrote that down as if it was important. The car scrunched into the carpark and shivered to a stop alongside two more police cars and an ambulance.

A few uniformed men were standing around, and the fog made them whisper. Spark got out and she could smell the sea, and hear it, a low graunching, rumbling sound

that washed through the sea-mist like the heavy breathing of a old dying man. She pulled on her police-issued parka with quick movements and watched as a white-overalled figure walked out of the mist and gave a passing nod. A police constable also emerged from the murk.

‘Morning sir’. Spark nodded.

‘Jim Dunning?’ he nodded.

‘Who found the body?’

Dunning jerked his head to someone sitting in the police car.

‘Oily McGregor, sorry Jack McGregor. About 6.30. He was looking for frost fish’.

‘What?’ said Cummings ostentatiously.

‘It’s a sort of fish that gets stranded on the beach, usually on calm mornings. There was a bit of frost here last night’.

‘The sea doesn’t sound calm’ interrupted Spark.

‘It is for this place sir’.

‘So the body wasn’t thrown up on the beach by the sea?’

Jim Dunning looked surprised by the question.

‘Well it’s just above the high tide line, and it’s swollen a bit’.

Spark thought about this and asked to speak to Mr McGregor. Cummings went off to get his raincoat and Mr McGregor turned out to be an old nuggetty man, short of height and temper. He had a grubby trilby hat rammed on his head. Spark did not think he looked promising but sometimes the first person to find a body see some detail that gets lost in the delicate trample of police feet.

‘I’m detective senior-sergeant Mary Spark of the Christchurch CIB, I would like to ask you a few questions Mr McGregor...’

‘Don’t see why, I’ve already told ’im’ he jerked his head at Constable Dunning.

‘But I’d like to hear it in you own words if you please, one more time, then you can go home. You live at Birdlings Flat?’

‘Yeah, in that bach over there’ which McGregor demonstrated by pointing into the fathomless fog ‘bloody mist. Can’t see a bloody thing’.

‘Do you often get sea-mist here?’

‘Nah. Three, four times a year’ and then Mr McGregor was off and running ‘there was a frost last night too, bloody cold. Went all winter without a bloody frost and that buggger of a southerly did it to us. So I got up early, well, about the usual time and went for a look for the suicide fish’.

Mary Spark didn't interrupt, though Mr McGregor's sly look seemed to expect she would.

'Frost fish they call em, you get 'em on cold nights. They just flop themselves on the beach, bloody yard long they are, and good eating if you get 'em fresh. That's when I saw the girl...'

'What time?'

'I told 'im, sixish, 6.30. I haven't got a watch, bloody pension doesn't go to one of those, and you don't need one out 'ere anyways. It was a bloody shock you know. Seeing 'er. I've seen lots of bodies on the convoys to Murmansk but this is just a girl yer know. No clothes or anything. Bit of a shock. She was a good looker too'.

'Did you touch her?'

'Don't be bloody silly! Didn't touch 'er at all! Didn't get close enough. My eyes aren't so bloody good and I thought for a mo...'

Then McGregor shrugged and clammed up like a grumpy crustacean. Cummings had come back and with another conspicuous gesture flipped opened his police regulation notebook.

'Go on Oily. You've told me already' said Dunning.

'Nah... I thought she was asleep, sort of curled up. But I knew she was dead. Seen plenty of bodies. She was a gonner all right'.

He stopped abruptly and stared angrily between them.

'Why do they call you Oily?'

He seemed surprised by the question, and suspicious.

'From that bloody derrick down the way. But there's oil here all right, you ask the Maoris. They know all about it but they won't bloody tell yer. Cunning bastards, though I got nothing against them personally of course'.

Spark looked closely at the old man and realised he was exhausted.

'Thank you Mr McGregor. We will get you to make a full written statement, but perhaps you should go home and warm up'.

McGregor was offended.

'I was in the bloody Russian convoys yer know, I don't get cold so easily. You should get some more clothes on love if yer bloody cold' and with that unasked for advice he hobbled back into the mist.

Jim Dunning smiled apologetically.

'Sorry sir. He's a grumpy sod most of the time'.

Spark smiled thinly.

'You know him obviously.'

‘Ah well, there’s been a few neighbourly disputes out here over the years. I’ve got called out a few times. He’s been here twenty years now. He started up the oil derrick down on the spit, though they never found any payable stuff. Don’t get him started on the subject, he reckons the whole spit is floating on oil’.

‘How long have you been constable here?’

Jim Dunning scratched at his broad neck.

‘Fourteen years sir’.

So he knew the place well, that was all to the good. Mary Spark liked him straight away, and he was reassuringly solid in this fog.

‘You think it’s murder?’ she asked quickly and he silently nodded ‘ok, can we see you tomorrow at central Jim? We will need an overview of the area and the people who live here’.

‘Sir’.

Spark zipped up her parka again, and she could not think of any other good reason to delay seeing the body. Cummings was scribbling away in his notebook.

‘Let’s go and see her’.

Jim Dunning led the way, and the three of them walked off the carpark into soft gravels, which suddenly became hard work.

Spark had glanced at the map on the way out, and despite the smothering fog had managed to picture Birdlings Flat. It was at the fulcrum of several landscapes, with Lake Forsyth and the great sea-cliffs of Banks Peninsula on the north side, and the rough and ready collection of baches huddled underneath the cliffs at the top end of the Kaitorete Spit. This huge bank of gravel was almost two kilometres wide at Birdlings Flat then ran for forty kilometres, slowly tapering down to Taumutu, a Maori settlement at the other end. The spit trapped in Lake Ellesmere, which had an occasional outlet by Taumutu. Even on the map it looked bleak, and Spark remembered that the last time she had been here was with her dad, sea fishing, on a grim and grewy kind of day, where the surf had sucked at the gravels from under her feet.

That must have been thirty years ago now, was that really the last time? She looked about for the sea and suddenly saw it, blending almost seamlessly with the flat horizon, with a surf stroking the unresponding beach.

It took them several minutes to walk across the mounds of gravel, and down two storm terraces to a bright orange tent. It stood incongruously, and uncomfortably, close to the high tide line. The walk had given time for Spark to brace herself and she dipped her head under the tent door where two white-overalled men were fussing over the body. People would never die if they knew that it came to this she thought.

The men stood up and let her have a look. Jim Dunning squeezed in underneath and gazed silently at the corpse, too good an officer to make casual remarks. Years ago murder scenes might crackle full of jokes from officers and forensics, relieving some

of the tension they felt in the presence of the corpse. But times had changed, and it was taken all very seriously now, but she sometimes missed the jokes. Cummings crawled in, so the tent got cramped and his presence momentarily irritated Spark, until she glanced at his face and realised just how young he was. This was his first corpse, and he looked like a kid staring at the guts of a rabbit he'd just shot.

Well it wasn't so bad, she'd seen worse.

The woman was naked, and young, lying on her side with one arm flung out and her long black hair sprayed out like a floral arrangement. The skin was white and puffy. From the side her face looked composed, with her lips and eyes closed and Spark could see immediately what Oily McGregor said. She could have been asleep, if such a girl fancied to doze naked on frosted gravels. Suicide? Like the fish, a sudden determination to end it all and provide dead meat for the human race to paw over. Spark did not think Birdlings Flat was a good choice, and besides...

All over the girls body were shallow cuts, like the bright red thin lines that were inked on management graphs. The cuts did not interlink, and were often in odd places. Spark could see one in the girls armpit, and another couple of cuts on the right knee, one on the front and one on the back. Spark bent down and looked closely. The cuts weren't bleeding, and they did not look as if they had ever bled much. Spark bent over more and peered between the partially spread legs. There were two cuts above the pubic hair, and one longer one in the right inner thigh, but no cuts directly into the vulva — at least as far as she could see.

That made her feel better, if not a lot better. It looked ritualistic. But there were no obvious wounds, and her wrists and ankles did not show any signs of being tied up. Perhaps some sort of cult had got hold of this girl, and tortured her, except why dump her in the sea here? As Spark studied the body she realised that some of the girly look was partly the result of the puffiness of the skin, swollen by sea-water. The girl was probably an older woman, maybe late twenties, and McGregor was right — she looked lovely. Despite the girls nakedness there was no obvious clear sexual positioning of the limbs. In fact there was a calmness in her face that was disconcerting, as if this quiet unnamed girl had found peace at last.

'Have you counted the cuts?' she addressed one of the overalled men who was dusting the body with a substance that might highlight any surface liquids, such as semen. A bright flash was followed by another as the second man moved around the body photographing the position.

'Hard to say sir till we move her, but maybe twenty.'

'Any other possessions lying around? Clothes? Bag?'

Jim Dunning replied.

'I checked that carefully sir, I thought it was odd. Nothing. Two of the boys have done a preliminary scout along the beach, but didn't find anything. There was no car in the carpark either.'

Spark nodded and made her mind up quickly.

‘Is that surf going to get bigger Jim?’

‘Yes sir. The marine forecast was for two metre swells by midday.

‘Once you’ve finished you can move her’.

She saw no point in extending the girls embarrassment much longer. If the surf picked up then the high tide could sweep through here, destroying the crime scene, although in fact there did not seem to be any actual crime scene to investigate, apart from acres of cold wet gravel. She escaped the tent and started to breathe again, walking back quickly to the carpark where four more policemen and the ambulance team were quietly gossiping. Cummings and Dunning followed mutely.

‘Mark off the general area where the body was found please, and once the tent is pulled down, have another careful look around the area for clothes or other personal possessions. Look for rings, bracelets, ear rings that sort of thing, they might be buried in the gravel. The body can be moved for an autopsy once the men have finished’.

‘Cummings and Dunning? Start working the beaches, she must have got here somehow. Someone must know her. A quick survey, see if we can get a fast result on this one. Work in teams of two, each take another constable. It looks like murder, and we’ll make that assumption. You have a good description? Read it out’.

Constable Dunning looked at his notebook.

‘Woman, aged about 25-30, shoulder length black hair, no obvious identification marks. About five foot six, I dunno what that is in metres?’

‘One point seven’ said Cummings smartly.

His face was controlled now, looking sharp and eager.

‘Don’t suppose many of the folk in Birdlings Flat work in metres anyway’ added Dunning dryly ‘weight, I’d say 9-10 stone?’

Spark nodded, and they dispersed. The two men in white overalls came back and loaded their equipment in the truck just as the hearse arrived. The driver and his mate took the stretcher and with the two remaining policemen they followed the men back into the sea-mist. One of the men was whistling tunelessly.

Spark was suddenly alone, scribbling notes down and filling her brain with professional thoughts, mainly she admitted, because now she felt a certain sickness in her soul. It was murder of course, but why do people do these things, and how had she ended up with a career investigating this sort of detritus?

Perhaps it was a sex thing, or a boyfriend gone berserk, or there was a husband tired of his old wife. Or his old life. This was her sixth murder case and not once had the result been anything but sordid and unnecessary. Husbands killing wives, a drug deal gone horribly wrong, gangland patch wars, it was all the same stuff one way or the other. Cummings had remarked that it could be interesting, but Spark had her doubts, if only this bloody fog would lift. She was starting to swear like Mr McGregor.

The four men came back, two lugging a tent, the other four carrying a stretcher. It was hard work in the soft gravels. They slid the body quickly into the ambulance and the ambulance men gave a cheery goodbye and started up the diesel and smoothly eased out of the carpark and were gone into the nothing. The truck followed shortly and Spark was left with two police constables who waited for something to happen.

The mist had seeped in under her parka and was making her jacket sodden, and the quick make-up she'd applied this morning, was melting away. She glanced at her watch, 10.45. Hadn't taken long at all. She snapped the notebook shut and gave orders for both officers to put up the tape and keep the rubber-neckers out, although so far only one car had turned up, it's lights probing inquisitively through the fog, and a friendly dog had come sniffing out and was agreeably rubbing the policeman's shins.

The absence of people was curious, though the carpark was a little beyond most of the baches. There was one untidy hut quite close, and she had watched Dunning visit it, but there was no answer to his big knock. A new satellite dish was an odd detail on the rusting roof, and in the yard was a small four-wheeler motor-bike, a pile of stacked driftwood, and a 40 forty gallon drum, still smoking, and adding a noxious taint of rubber to the air.

She started up the police car and blasted on the heater to warm up. Spark felt instinctively that the girl must have come from Birdlings Flat, and she wanted to get an idea of the layout. The baches seemed to be strung out, some along the main entrance road, but most down a side-road that paralleled the shoreline, and she drove slowly along it. Clumps of macrocarpa loomed thickly out of the sea-mist, and the baches huddled underneath. Many looked empty, some just desolate. There must have been forty or so on both sides of the road, with the wasteland occupied with mounds of gravel and rusting cars. The whole village could not have looked more depressing if it tried, and it wasn't trying very hard.

There was her first inhabitant, an old woman gripping a black japura coat around her throat and watching the police car glide by. Jim Dunning and his mate were talking to an older Maori-looking couple, and Spark nodded and speeded up. At a right-angled corner there was a large iron gate, quite artistically wrought with sea-horses and dolphins writhing across a metallic ocean. Through the gate Spark could see a few buildings and a couple of people moving about. A rather florid sign beside the gate said 'Welcome to the Sea People', and beside it a covered stall with various stone knick-knacks and driftwood mobiles, all bejewelled and bejangled by the mist, and rendered momentarily attractive.

She paused enough to take in these details then speeded up to a junction with Bayleys Road. The map showed this road continuing remorselessly down the Kaitorete Spit and fading out past a farm, then into a farm track and finally, just nothing.

She got out the car and stood for a few minutes at the road junction, studying a dead sheep that had mummified into a sculpture by the thin dry air of the spit. A few living sheep pulled at the edible bits of the land, and a telephone line of poles plodded exactly into the distance. She could smell the sea but not hear it. There was a hint of

blue sky above the sea-mist, and she really wanted just a little puff of wind to loosen this grip of silence.

Come on Mary, get your bum moving, you've got a job to do. She flicked her hair back in place, and started the engine which destroyed her momentarily anxiety for companionship. She was certain they would have the girls name by the end of the day. The dead sheep grinned wickedly.

Chapter 2

Undercurrents

Wednesday 17 October

At 8.30 am the next morning Spark was sitting at her desk in the Christchurch central police station, and contemplating the error of her ways. The jigsaw had not come together.

All the early interviews conducted yesterday revealed little, no that wasn't true — they revealed nothing. No one knew of a dark-haired girl in her twenties, no one had heard anything suspicious or saw anything untoward. It was as if the sea itself had spat out the girl. Perhaps she was a mermaid? There were however no lost mermaids in the missing person files, and no anxious mother had yet rang, or nervous husband. People sometimes vanish into thin air but in Spark's experience they rarely do it the other way around, appear out of thin air, born out of the cold dank fog.

She shifted to the room next door which had been set up for the murder inquiry team. Someone had even given the investigation a name, scrawled extravagantly in black marker pen on the whiteboard — Operation Frost Fish.

'Was that your idea Daryl?' she asked Cummings who was busy arranging the seats.

'Good one eh?'

'Has the police pathologist rang in yet?'

'No sir, should I chase him up?'

'Yes'.

He exited. They desperately needed to know the cause of death, and the time, although she had already surmised that both or either would be problematic. Another detective came in, drafted on the team yesterday.

'Has no one rung in today?' Spark asked him as she started to write on the whiteboard.

'No sir. Nothing that fits anyway, it's real funny isn't it?'

‘No. Any chance of a coffee?’

‘Sure, white?’

Spark nodded grimly. The white was not milk, but some powder that was whisked up impressively by the machine that stood in the hall. Most of the police had given it up as a bad job, and got their coffee in takeaway cups from the cafe over the road. Cummings came in followed by two other constables on the team.

‘He’s on the line now sir’.

Spark picked up the receiver and was listening to the carefully groomed tones of the police pathologist, Mr. Henry R. Creighton, a perfect prat in Spark’s opinion. One pathologist was on holiday and the other was sick, so she had ended up with the turkey.

‘Mr Creighton?’

The ‘Mr’ was added as a bit of sugar for the bird, to keep him chirping.

‘Yes Mary, about the Birdlings Flat woman I suppose? I have only just started of course, but I should be able to complete the post mortem today. As long as I am not too rushed. I am going to Sydney today to give the keynote speech at the Australasian Pathologists Conference, about the relationship of pathologists to police. It is quite fraught as you well know...’

‘What have found so far?’ Spark interrupted the waffle. What had his Sydney conference got to do with anything? Creighton was rude in return.

‘She’s drowned of course’.

‘You are sure of that?’

‘Oh yes. There’s some water in the lungs, and typical asphyxiation structure about the neck and face. No evidence of assault bruising anywhere on the skin that I can see...’

‘Any semen?’

‘My dear Mary, I will have to cut her open for that’.

‘What about the knife cuts?’

‘None seem life threatening, but I have only given a cursory examination so far, no doubt by the end of the day...’

‘Any guesses on the time of death?’

‘I don’t guess Mrs Spark, I don’t guess’.

‘Thank you Mr Creighton’.

That ‘Mrs’ bloody annoyed her, and Creighton must have known it would. The room was filling up with detectives and constables, some holding the nasty machine coffee. Jim Dunning was chatting and laughing with a mate and Cummings was paying close attention to a pretty woman police officer, who looked bored.

‘Are we ready?’

She addressed the room and the officers took their seats with the usual scraping of chairs and last chatter about the rugby.

‘This has been called Operation Frost Fish, not my choice, thank Daryl for that. Don’t smirk Daryl, it isn’t that clever. I’ve called everyone together this morning to get an overall assessment of what we know so far and to plan the direction of the inquiry’.

Everyone was quiet now, listening and some taking notes.

‘So far we have very little to go on, and that’s a concern. I’m not even sure we have a murder either. I spoke to Dr Creighton just now and he believes after his preliminary assessment that the girl drowned. So we have a murder team established, but no murder. We should get a full autopsy at the end of today, but Mr Creighton was not prepared to give any indication of time of death, or how long the girl had been in the water. Ok, I’m worried about those cuts all over the girls body. They were certainly made by a knife and we need to get a reasonable explanation of them before I am prepared to downgrade the investigation into an accidental drowning or suicide’.

One of the forensic men had slipped into the meeting late and nodded to Spark.

‘Did you find anything Mike?’ Mike looked at his notes.

‘No sir. Obviously no sign of material on the body, which I think must have been in the water for a while because of the puffiness of the skin. She had no rings on, or earrings even, which we thought was a bit unusual. Fingernails all intact, nothing underneath them like dirt or blood as far as we could see, though the pathologist might get something, we thought...’ he hesitated.

‘Go on’.

‘She seemed very peaceful. We both thought that suicide by drowning was the most likely story’.

‘Except we have no clothes, or car, so how did she get there? And so far no one at Birdlings Flat wants to know her. Sergeant Cummings can you report on your first interviews, then Constable Dunning’.

Cummings stood up (he didn’t have to) and looked impressively at Spark, keen to get her full attention. It suddenly reminded Spark again that he fancied her.

‘We went to about ten baches in the immediate vicinity of the carpark and beach. Most are empty, holiday homes I think sir, although some look as if they haven’t been visited for years. The whole settlement has a derelict look about it. We first talked to a Mrs and Mr Bromart...’

Out of Cummings words a picture began to emerge of the citizens of Birdlings Flat. Jim Dunning chipped in from time to time.

There were about sixty baches or summer cottages all told, mostly gerrymander built

as fisherman's or duck-shooter places from the 1950's, and then gradually added onto. The whole place looked like a series of sheds, propped up by the wind. There was only 20-25 permanent inhabitants in about a third of the baches, mostly either elderly couples or single males. There was a farmhand, two men commuted every day to Christchurch, a history student ('though he was out'), a retired dockyard worker ('that's Oily McGregor') and a lot were on a benefit of some kind, whether a pension, sickness beneficiary or DPB (Domestic Purposes Benefit) for there was a couple of solo mothers with young babies. They had not managed to see everyone yet.

'Either oddballs or old' remarked Cummings 'but I did a quick police check on two of the people. One of the solo mums has a conviction for cannabis, and a Maori guy, Billy Matawai has got quite a long record of dealing in marijuana, driving unlicensed cars, driving unregistered, a couple of assaults, etcetera etcetera, and one burglary as well. Real small-time crim, probably deals in cannabis. He wasn't at his home, so we need to follow him up I think sir'.

'How many people did you get to interview?'

'About seven.'

'How about you Jim?'

Jim Dunning looked at his notebook.

'Six only. The place is pretty quiet at the moment'.

'Do you know some of the locals?'

'Bert and Becky Maihi are well-known. Kaumatua, and well-respected. Between them they are on half-dozen committees I'd say around the district. Bert is on the Selwyn Council Maori Advisory Board and Heritage Committee, and Becky is part of the Little River Community Group and Maori Woman's Welfare League, and lots more besides. They really know the place backwards and forwards, but they didn't know the girl'.

'There's a few Maori out there?'

'Oh yes, Birdlings Flat had a few pa sites around it in pre-European days, and Taumutu at the other end of the spit still has a marae. The eel fishery from Lake Forsyth is exclusively Maori, you might have seen some of the frames they dry the eels on?'

'I didn't see a damn thing...' chipped in Cummings.

'I asked about Billy Matawai, but Bert said he'd gone over to the West Coast for a few days'.

'Did we scare him off?' Cummings again. Dunning grinned.

'Well he doesn't like police much. I've had words with him over the years, he's a bit of a lad'.

'Did you talk to The Sea People?' Spark cut through the chit-chat.

‘Yes sir’.

‘Tell me about them’.

Jim Dunning rubbed his broad face as if hoping the right words would ooze out of his skin.

‘They’re a bit weird sir. A sort of hippie commune I suppose, with about eight to ten of them there, with a few kids, although it changes all the time. Always someone new every time I visit’.

‘Why do you visit?’

‘Cannabis sir. Their leader is a man called Josho and he smokes the stuff a bit, and so do most of them. I reckon they get it from Billy Matawai’.

‘That’s obviously not his real name?’

‘Josho? No, but I’m buggered if I can remember it now. We’ve charged him once I think’.

‘Only once, despite being regular users?’

Dunning looked a bit awkward at Spark’s quiet challenge.

‘Yep, only once, ahmm, it’s pretty small stuff. Low use I’d say, and to be honest sir I could nail them every time I went out, but, well, I can’t really be bothered. They don’t seem to get up to any serious mischief as far as I know, and I think I would know sir’ he added defensively.

Sparks eyebrows lifted but she did not pursue it. It was his beat, and local cops often had to make personal decisions on who and what to prosecute. It was unusual for Dunning to be so explicit about it.

‘They didn’t know the girl?’

He shook his head sadly.

‘They are quite a young group, twenties and thirties. I would have picked that the drowned girl might have come from there, but...’

‘They are not covering up something then?’ there was Cummings again, looking for a juicy conspiracy.

Dunning shrugged.

‘Maybe with a photo sir’.

‘We are going to have to interview the whole lot again. I need a list of baches and their owners, and who the permanent’s are. I want you to do that Daryl, and talk with Jim first. Draw up a list of people to interview. I want to talk to the Sea People myself. You won’t get a photo, the super doesn’t like it’.

The superintendent did not approve of showing the photos of people after they had died to help identify the victims, unless there was no other avenue of inquiry. Besides, victims often looked very different after death, and sometimes hardly recog-

nisable.

‘Should we check the backpackers sir?’

Cummings was keen, she had to grant that.

‘Yes. All the hostels in Christchurch?’

‘Err, just an idea sir’ Jim Dunning crawled back into the conversation again ‘there’s a strong coastal drift up from the Rakaia and Rangitata Rivers. That’s where all the driftwood comes from. We’ve had one body from the Rakaia, a salmon fisherman I think, get washed up at Birdlings Flat. And there was a little girl drowned two years ago, down the spit someway I think, and we found her by Lake Forsyth.’

Death did not seem to happen at Birdlings Flat, but just arrived on the undercurrents. Spark looked at the map and could see what Dunning was suggesting. With strong northern currents then it would be worthwhile checking all the little settlements on the coast, right down to Timaru.

‘So we should check the Timaru police, and get them to check their hostels. Ok?’

‘All the gemstones get washed up from the rivers don’t they Jim?’ That was Mike the forensic man.

‘Yep. Amethysts and garnets and stuff. I’ve picked up a few there. There’s quite a lot of semi-precious stones in the gravels sir’ he added as an explanation to Spark ‘they come off the mountains and down the rivers’.

Mike was obviously a fisherman.

‘Fishing is lousy though, these days. Just dogfish. The trawlers come too close’. Jim nodded. ‘It’s a windy place too, and Never rains. Like a desert. Nothing grows out there, I dunno why people would want to live there myself’.

Obviously the lack of decent fishing gave Mike the justification to slam the whole of Birdlings Flat. Jim nodded, but offered a defence.

‘Yep, though the sunsets are something’.

‘Yeah, they’re great...’

Spark had to rap forcibly on the whiteboard to get the team back on track. She had pinned up a topographical map of the Kaitorete Spit. Bayleys Road ran right down the middle for half the distance.

‘Bearing in mind what Constable Dunning said about the currents we should search all these road ends here’ she pointed to several access roads that lead off Bayleys road and crossed the spit to the coast ‘and also check Taumutu and as far south as Rakaia.

‘We are looking for bundles of clothes, a bag, a parked car. If it’s suicide there might be a note. I’m in court most of today, so I think we should organise a search beginning tomorrow morning. Then we can do interviews again as well’.

She plunged into the minutiae of police organisation, booking cars, establishing two-person teams, a working method, interview questions, all the standard guff that made police work. She only had three detectives including herself and Cummings, and three constables at her disposal, and she was sure once the super got to hear that it was a drowning rather than a murder, then she would be stripped of even those. There were Never enough human resources, and the senior detectives often had to jostle and bargain amongst each other to get enough manpower to carry out an effective investigation.

The newspapers loved to say that ‘forty police officers were delegated to this murder operation’, but did not say that next week, only twenty police officers were on the team and the week after ten, five, two. Results were wanted, and good results kept the team large, whereas negative results melted the team as if they were butter on crumpets.

‘Thank you’ and the chairs scraped and jostled as the men and women went to their purposes.

‘Daryl, what was in the paper today?’

‘Just a girls body found, said she’d drowned. They knew before us’.

‘They always do’.

The police had an uneasy relationship with the media, sometime using them for publicity, other times cursing them for exactly that same publicity. It paid to work quickly.

‘There’s been a TV crew sniffing around this morning sir’ one of the constables remarked.

‘We are not commenting at this stage’.

Spark still wanted to try and find the girls name without the help of the media. When she got back to her office she wrote down a reminder note: ‘no rings or jewellery on victim’.

The day got longer and longer, waiting around in the courtroom of a dreary trial of a weasel man who had been abusing his daughter for several years. The weasel pleaded not guilty, they always did, and the court was obliged to listen to the dreary evidence of the weasels touching, groping, sexual intercourse and even the penetration by a carrot for God’s sake. The weasel’s wife was two sandwiches short of a picnic, and the only sensible person was the victim who told her story in low dignified tones. The jury did not take long, and the weasel actually cried as he was pronounced guilty and remanded for sentencing.

She was pleased the case was over but went home feeling exhausted, with a few sick images in her mind. The house was empty and Spark sat down and poured herself a gin and tonic. She would not have done this if the kids were about, but tonight she needed it. There was a letter in the mailbox with the solicitors elegant names on the envelope ‘Bywaters, Courtenay and Barker’. She well knew what was inside of course, it was Vince, asking for a formal divorce.

She had a second gin and tonic and felt sorry for herself.

She remembered reading in the *Woman's Weekly* that the partner that wants out of a marriage, quickly establishes themselves with someone else, whilst the partner that does not remains alone, and gets increasingly bitter. Vince already had a woman, fifteen years younger than him. The kids liked her, though Sophie said 'she's not as good as you mum', which eased the bitterness.

Sophie was thirteen, Oliver eleven. Good kids, and they had handled the break-up pretty well. She and Vince had been civilised about it, not too many yelling matches, and there hadn't been any access difficulties. She had kept the kids and Vince had quit the police and moved down to Queenstown. Her career had been boosted without Vince, and she had gained in rank quite quickly, leading two successful murder investigations under her belt. She knew she was respected in the force, and also fancied, yet she could not bear the thought of marrying another policeman. It had been too hard with Vince, too much subtle and not so subtle competition. His career had been marred by some serious mistakes, and getting out was probably the best thing he had done for a while. Apparently the sports shop was booming, and Vince employed several young female assistants, who he assured her were 'most athletic'.

She flicked on the television with the remote, but there was nothing on the local news channel about the girl on the beach. Oh Mary, don't cry.

She mopped a couple of tears out, and tore open the letter angrily. It was a standard printed form, that simply required her signature. The irreparable breakdown of a marriage. Both she and Vince had agreed. She just had to sign. Fifteen years of marriage, two years of non-marriage.

She had had two flings since her separation from Vince. About a year ago, she had a weekend trot with her archery instructor, who later told her he was part-gay, whatever the hell that meant. She had to get tested for AIDS. Then there was Trevor, or was it Terry? Anyway, a sales rep from Hornby, she'd met at a Spanish cookery course on Wednesday nights, until she discovered he was also doing Italian cooking on Tuesdays and Mexican cooking on Fridays, and he was a bloody hopeless cook anyway.

Did she have a weakness for unsustainable relationship flings? Or was it just loneliness?

Mary Spark put the letter on the table and walked around heating up yesterdays leftovers and listened to Mozart swelling and soothing the insinuations of self-doubt that crept into her mind. The dead girl on the beach did not seem to have anyone who loved her, anyone who would come forward and claim her, and Mary Spark found herself making comparisons which were quite absurd. It was better to be alive than dead. Come on Mary, pull yourself together, and she turned on a sitcom with loud canned laughter and one or two good jokes.

Chapter 3

The Sea People

Thursday 18 October

It was a brilliant transformation, the day was clear and warm with distant cloud bubbling over the southern alps, that heralded a soft nor'wester. The surf had picked up tempo and was thumping determinedly against the gravel, and sweeping well past the site of the orange tent and doing battle with the brown waters draining from Lake Forsyth. The lake outlet had been bulldozed open a few days earlier, to let out the accumulation of water that would otherwise flood the upstream farmland, but in a few days the sea would win, and stymie the outlet again with thousands of tons of gravel. Every six months the council unblocked the lake, and six days later the sea plugged it up again.

A huge flock of terns roosted near the outlet, pointing sharply into the wind, and out to sea Spark could see a sinuous, wavering line of spotted shags heading down the coast towards their feeding grounds. What surprised her was the great blocking red cliff, that stopped the shift of sea gravels from the Rakaia River, and marked the start of Banks Peninsula. All this had been hidden by the sea-mist and now they could see along the line of cliffs as they swooped and swallowed into remote bays where penguins nested. The whole coast seemed fresh and fertile, such an abrupt change from Tuesdays graveyard. Spark did not agree with Mike the forensic man: she could live here. The landscape had a rawness that satisfied, and a confidence about itself that was very much on its own terms.

Cummings had driven her back to the carpark, and they were waiting for Jim Dunning and another constable.

'It's quite a change, eh sir?'

Spark nodded and walked around, savouring the space. The baches still looked grotty, ok, authentic then. Like piles of driftwood hurtled together by the elements, and by sheer damn luck made into a home. A spiral of smoke drifted from one bach and an old Maori man had waved at the police car. Is that Bert Maihi?

'I think it is. You want me to speak to him sir?' asked Cummings, keen as ever.

'Let's wait for Jim, where is he?'

The only blot on this perfect day was that the super had got wind of the pathologists report, and had promptly reduced her team down to four. Sod the man. There had been nothing from Timaru police, and the back-packers hostels had all drawn a blank. It was the strangest thing, and even if the girl had drowned naturally there was something very peculiar about this case. She had talked to other officers about it, and they agreed that no one had come across anything like it. The best guess was that she was a depressed tourist, who had chosen the bizarre location of Birdlings Flat to end it all, but Spark wasn't having that. A tourist has to have clothes, luggage, a destination, a home, family that would miss her, eventually.

'I've been reading up about this lake sir' Cummings followed her about the car-park, anxious to pass on his knowledge 'they say it's heavily contaminated by fertiliser run-off and it's dangerous to swim in. Cattle have died in it. Toxic algal bloom they call it'.

Lake Forsyth looked pleasant enough today, though it was surprising that they were so close to it on Tuesday and Never saw it.

'Last century it was open to the sea naturally and they called it Maori Harbour, but the gravels have closed it up. The spit is expanding here'.

'You have been busy Daryl'.

'I like to please you sir'

Spark looked sharply at her junior detective, but he was watching the dust trail of an approaching police car.

Jim Dunning seemed even broader in the sunlight, and they quickly organised their door-knocking day. Spark got Cummings to drive her to the Sea People gate, and they drove carefully into the small compound to avoid the two small children playing in the home-built sandspit. Around the central yard was a hotch-potch of luridly painted sheds and huts, none of which seemed to claim any eminence over the other. Seaweed was drying on a rack, and a woman was suckling a baby on the front steps of one hut, talking to another girl who was sewing.

'Very bucolic' muttered Spark.

She stepped out feeling over-dressed and beaurocratic. It was the girl who put down her sewing and stepped lightly over to them. She was dressed in a longish pale yellow dress, that trailed over the stones, and a skimpy bra-less top, with her nipples poking through the thin material. Spark glanced sideways at Cummings whose eyes were out on stalks.

'Hello, my name is Miranda, welcome to The Sea People. Won't you sit down? It's about that girl isn't it? Oh what a shame'.

Her smile was wide and friendly.

'Thank you, Miranda...?'

'Oh that's not my real name, Josho gave it to me. He's good with names, it comes from *The Tempest* of course. She's the virgin daughter of the wizard, no my actual

name is Janey James. I mean' she giggled ingenuously 'Miranda is an improvement isn't it?'

Cummings smiled, he was a gonner already, but Spark put up more resistance than that.

'Is Josho here?'

'Oh somewhere' Miranda looked about hopefully as if Josho was lurking under a stone 'he's probably meditating. Shall I find him?'

Spark thought that this girl might be helpful, so she delayed the search.

'Can I ask you, Miranda, there's no one missing from The Sea People?'

'Well, I don't think so, but people come and go here. I mean do you have a name?' she asked helpfully.

'No. Five foot seven, 8-9 stone, long black hair, late twenties...'

'Oh it's terrible. I cried all night when I heard. The police were here on Tide Day, that's your Tuesday I think'.

Miranda looked quite upset thinking about the girl.

'Tide Day?' queried Cummings with a half-smile.

'Oh yes we call the days differently from the Land People. There's Ocean Day, that's your Sunday, Salt Day, Tide Day, Winds Day, Thirst Day, Fish Day, that's Friday of course and Wave Day'.

'Who are the Land People?' asked Cummings stupidly, entranced by Miranda's gorgeous blue eyes and heavy unfettered breasts.

She smiled warmly.

'Why you of course, silly, I should have explained'.

Spark felt they were rapidly losing the plot, and a mongrel dog was sniffing at her skirt. It looked like the same dog she saw on Tuesday.

'Shoo, shoo Seadog' Miranda clapped her hands at the dog who wagged his tail happily.

'How many people live here Miranda?'

'Well, there's me, and Spray here' she was counting on her fingers 'and that's her baby Anemone and little girl Gracious. The boy there belongs to Wavecatcher, the father who works in town, and his bond-partner is Anemone who is at Little River today helping at the shop. Oh, there's also Orca, but he's in prison at the moment but his bond-partner is Cirrus — I don't know where she is — and Josho of course. So that's seven isn't it?'

'Do these people have real names?'

'Oh I'm sure they do, but we don't usually use them. You would have to ask. Oh

there's Josho'.

Spark turned and looked closely at the approaching male. Miranda was obviously hopeless, and Josho did not look more encouraging. He was very tall and thin, with a dark beard and long hair that looked unwashed. He wore a faded pair of tie-dyed trousers and a T-shirt with 'The Sea People' printed on it.

'Josho, these police people wanted to talk to you'.

Josho nodded, and stood very close to Spark, intimidating her with his height. His eyes were blue and metallic.

'Mr Josho? We are investigating the death of the girl, whose body was found on the beach. Did you know her?'

He shook his head slowly.

'She was never a member of your group?'

Again a slow shake.

'Josho is not your real name?'

'We shed those unnecessary land names when we made our commitment to the sea'.

His voice was gravelly and slow. An impressive voice, and Spark could see that with those staring eyes and grave manner he could have a sway on people like Miranda. She immediately disliked him, and thought he was a fraud.

'You would not mind telling me what that unnecessary name was?'

Spark dug a little deeper, but Josho just smiled, as if a fly was buzzing him.

'It is of no account. I am part of the sea now, and you must ask the ocean if you want answers for the saved girl'.

'Saved?'

'For the sea to take her she was indeed saved'.

Cummings had managed to take his eyes off Miranda's tits and had rolled his eyes at Spark.

'Who said she was drowned?' he interrupted.

Josho turned to him and stared.

'I listen to the tides and the surf beating like a heart, and last night I heard them talking, and they spoke of the girl. They said she had returned from she was lost'.

'Lost?'

'Lost on the land' replied Josho unsmiling. Miranda had been following the conversation closely.

'We believe that the souls on land are doomed to wander and that only peace can be attained at sea, with the sea, and conjoined with the sea. Shall I get you one of

our pamphlets?’

‘Sure’ said Spark, irritated with all this twaddle, but with no idea of how to penetrate it.

‘We would like a list of your real names please Mr Josho’.

He smiled, said nothing and walked away. The interview was apparently over.

‘Jim could have bloody warned us we are dealing with nutters’ muttered Spark under her breath.

‘Are they hiding something or are they just plain weird?’ asked Cummings, as Miranda trotted back with several pamphlets.

‘Thank you Miranda’.

‘Oh a pleasure, please come again’.

Spark shook her short hair in a plain indication of annoyance and with Miranda smiling gracefully after them, they got back into the car and drove off feeling very foolish. They cruised slowly along the line of baches, back towards the carpark.

‘I smelt something on Josho’ Cummings said ‘we could nail him for cannabis right now sir?’

‘Yes, we could, but I can see why Jim Dunnings doesn’t bother any more’.

What good would it do? Arrest them, find some cannabis, maybe an unregistered car or two, but what would it achieve? She would have liked some proper names though.

‘Shake ‘em up a bit I reckon’ insisted Cummings.

‘Winds Day, instead of Wednesday. Thirst Day instead of Thursday. Get it?’

She looked Daryl, who clearly didn’t get it. It was quite a neat echo, but did not divert her attention from the fact that the Sea People had been wasting police time.

‘Tomorrow, check on the land titles. I would be surprised if they own the land. If you want, you can talk to Miranda again as she looks rather more approachable’ and Spark looked ironically at Cummings ‘I thought you might like that’.

‘She was pretty good-looking sir’.

He was actually blushing.

‘And with no bra, that helps doesn’t it? So you’ve given up on me now?’

Spark had no idea why she chose that moment to bring the matter to a head. Over the last few weeks Cummings had been making little sly statements of interest, rather indirect, sometimes slimy, and she had noticed with some embarrassment that other people had noticed. It was time to kill the business.

Cummings went suddenly quiet.

‘I don’t know what you mean sir’.

‘Don’t you want to ask me out? I’m single now?’

This was being cruel, but that was the way it was. Love was cruel. Ask any separated woman.

‘Well, I mean, I wouldn’t mind, I mean if you were...’

‘Forget it Daryl. I’m 42, you’re 24, and I’m not interested. Our relationship should be professional, otherwise I will ask for you to be transferred to someone else. Is that clear?’

A rabbit watched the car pass with no apparent fear.

‘Perfectly. Sir’.

‘You are a good officer, but use your brain. You can’t fart in this world without being noticed. People have seen you hanging around me, and they are talking. I ignored it for a while, but it’s time for it to stop ok? Stick to Miranda. I won’t talk about this again. Agreed?’

Cummings nodded.

‘Sorry sir’.

Spark was keen to get some reality into her lungs after the surreal meeting with The Sea People. It would be good to get away from him for a while. He stank of self-pity.

‘Stop here. I will do these baches, I want you to check the road ends down the spit, and the farm’.

The police car drove off and Spark felt better already. She had already half-decided that it would be appropriate for Cummings to get moved on, his efficiency was tiring the hell out of her.

The bach she was dropped off by looked as good as any other to start with. It was small, with corrugated iron fences on every side with several tall macrocarpa sheltering the bach, particularly on the sea side. There was a coil of smoke from the chimney and a Hillman Hunter in the opened garage. There was a blank section on the north side and on the south side was a dune wasteland of gravel mounds and pingao grasses adding a smear of orange colour to the relentless grey of Birdlings Flat.

She walked over the yard of ice-plants to the open back door and knocked.

‘Hello?’

Spark jumped a mile for the voice had come from behind her, and out of the outside toilet. A man stood with a paintbrush, and a high forehead with a dab of red paint on it.

‘Detective Senior Sergeant Mary Spark. We are talking to people at Birdlings Flat about the dead girl who was found on the beach on Tuesday’.

He seemed unsurprised and wiped his hands carefully.

‘Gordon, Gordon Micklethwaite. Did you say Spark? I knew a policeman named Spark once, although I didn’t like him very much. How do you do?’

Both the personal directness and the formality was unexpected, and Spark looked dubiously at the outstretched hand. She took it.

‘My husband was in the force. Vincent Spark.’

‘Oh yes, I did know him. I’m sorry. Was?’

‘He’s left. We are separated. I didn’t like him much in the end either’.

Spark was amazed at how much of her private life had just spouted out of her, but he had a nice smile and eyes that seemed candid. Micklethwaite gave a wry grin.

‘Tea?’

‘Yes. Can I ask some questions first please Mr Micklethwaite?’

But he had his back to her so she had to follow him into the lounge that was built around the pot-belly woodburner in the middle. A whole shelf of books ranged on one wall. On the far side was the kitchen area, with a benchtop and the modern touch of a microwave. She didn’t see a television, but on the table there were two books, one called *Zen in the Art of Archery* and the other *1001 Nights*. In the first few seconds of their conversation the entire formal nature of what should normally constitute a police interview had been completely undermined, and she found it refreshing. For the life of her she should could not bring it back on track.

‘Are you interested in archery Mr Micklethwaite?’

‘Zen’.

Of course! That high forehead must be full of something.

‘And you would be keen on archery, I can see that’, Spark looked surprised ‘you are short and pointed, with a golden tip’.

She almost smiled, and when he handed her the mug of tea his eyes sparkled with humour, and something else that Spark had found was rare in men — wit.

‘You seem to get to the point quickly Mr Micklethwaite’.

‘I’m tactless, actually. Are you an archer?’

‘What interests you in zen?’

‘Well...’ he rubbed his head, and looked around ‘Birdlings Flat is rather a zen-like place. Have you read it?’

Spark picked it up curiously and started to flick through. She had heard of the book before but never seen a copy. It seemed a peculiar place to find it.

‘No’.

‘You can borrow it. If you want’.

Always a slight hesitation in his sentences, which could be nervousness or just caution.

‘I came to ask some questions...’

As she put the book back she saw the *1001 Nights* beside it, and knew of its reputation. He followed her thoughts exactly.

‘It’s disappointing in the sex department I’m afraid. But there’s quite a bit of archery in it’.

‘Really?’

‘Slaying of jinns and such’.

Spark made an effort to keep the show on the road.

‘And what is your job Mr Micklethwaite?’.

He pointed to the sofa and they sat down, side by side, which was an unexpectedly compromising geography Spark realised. It occurred to her that the only people who sat closely side-by-side on sofas were lovers, or people who wanted to become lovers.

‘I’m writing a history of Kaitorete Spit for the Selwyn Heritage Committee. I got a grant from them’.

So this was the ‘history student’.

‘Is that interesting?’

‘Very’.

Monosyllabic men were Spark’s speciality.

‘In what way?’

‘Well, errr, the Maori have pa sites up and down the spit, and used it as a travelling route for centuries. There was a gold rush here, down at Taumutu. There’s an oil derrick, from the 1960’s...’ That interested Spark immediately.

‘Where?’

Micklethwaite unfolded the topographical 1:50,000 map, and she followed his careful finger. It was only a few kilometres down the spit, near the university research station.

‘I think it’s run by the physics department’ he replied when she asked about that ‘but I’m not sure’.

‘We’ve interviewed a man called Oily McGregor. Does he have some connection to the oil derrick?’

‘I’ll say. He built it, do you want to have a look?’

Spark had several seconds to hesitate. She had a lot of work to get through all the other baches, but it was still only mid-morning. She glanced at her watch. Much

later, about a week later, she realised that the casual decision she then made, was actually going to change her life.

‘Yes. I’ll keep asking questions if I may. Thanks for the tea’.

They got into the Hillman Hunter, and Spark noticed Micklethwaite did not lock the back door, or close it, and she kept her word and questioned him as he drove down to the derrick.

‘You have heard about the girl being found on the beach? You don’t know her, or know anything about the matter?’

He matched the question with a question.

‘Was she murdered?’

‘Drowned. That’s what the autopsy said’.

‘Oh. You think it was suicide?’

‘It is possible. You can’t help then?’

He looked at her and she exchanged the glance. Both seemed to have other thoughts on their mind. Micklethwaite asked abruptly.

‘You don’t seem very sure she drowned’.

Spark became slightly pompous and regretted it.

‘We always keep an open mind Mr Micklethwaite.’

‘I wish I could’.

She smiled faintly.

‘We go left here’.

He turned off Bayleys Road and followed a short rough road past the poles and wires of the university research outpost, and then Micklethwaite turned down onto a rougher road still. It was hot and dusty, and they threaded down the spit through low gravel mounds and two big holes, filled with dumped cars. A couple of times Spark worried about getting the car stuck, but Micklethwaite seemed to trust the road and they stopped right beside the old oil derrick.

She was disappointed, it wasn’t very tall. About twenty feet she guessed, and tilted on a lean as one of the four wooden support legs had splintered. There were several chunks of red cast iron amongst the marram grass, but nothing much else to see. They got out and stared at the forlorn scene.

‘The bore hole has been filled up. I think they got to 800 feet, not very far really. This is what’s interesting’.

Micklethwaite pointed to a shallow greasy pond, twenty yards away from the derrick. A thin scum of black had made elaborate patterns on the surface of the water, that would variously reflect brilliant rainbows as they moved around.

‘Is it oil?’

‘Sort of. An oil and water mix, rather waxy’.

He picked off a solid piece of black oil that had congealed on the edge of the pond. It was quite rubbery in her hand, not particularly oily at all.

‘Well, it hasn’t been refined. It’s not like oil we put in a car, but it’s petroleum all-right. The Maori used it as a poultice for wounds, and even chewing gum. Though I haven’t tried’.

‘So it was not a paying proposition for Mr McGregor’.

‘I think he lost his shirt on it’ Micklethwaite paused, and added ‘and some of his marbles. You’ve talked to him?’

‘He found the girls body’.

‘Oh’.

The nor’west wind was picking up, blowing warm gusts over the dunes and swirling dust about the oil derrick. Spark made a move to leave, but Micklethwaite didn’t seem to notice, and had disappeared into a daydream.

‘This oil sump is almost unique. There’s only one other natural oil soakage in New Zealand. It’s on the West Coast.’

Spark did not look impressed, and said so.

‘No’ he agreed ‘it does look a dump. You would not believe the number of geologists who come out to look over the place’.

Then added as an afterthought.

‘It’s sacred to Maori too’.

They walked back to the car, and Micklethwaite carefully reversed out. The cloud was thick over the mountains and the blue sky full of pale streaks of white cirrus like a stampede of horses tails.

‘Look at that sky’ he pointed to it, full of admiration.

‘How long have you lived out here’ she had cut out the Mr Micklethwaite by now.

‘Only a year. I bought the bach out of some inheritance money. It was cheap, \$12,000 plus all the furniture I wanted’.

‘Do you know the Sea People?’.

‘Oh yes, Josho is hard work’.

‘Unco-operative I would say, do you know his real name?’

‘You’re going to laugh, it’s Trevor, and he’s got a terror of a girlfriend’.

She did laugh, and found herself reflecting that she didn’t laugh much these days.

‘Do you know what they are about?’

‘It’s Birdlings Flat disease. You hear that surf all night, going like a heartbeat, and it gets to you. The melancholy music that soothes the soul.’

‘Well that explains everything Mr Micklethwaite’.

But she did know what he meant. Birdlings was a blasted heath of open sky and endless wind, so far removed from the city that it lifted the spirits. They had driven back onto Bayleys Road now, and Micklethwaite squirted the windscreen washers to get some of the dust off. He was musing to himself.

‘I always try to have one barbecue a week down on the beach, with a fire and cook some fish and watch the sun setting. I try catching fish, but I’m hopeless. Have to buy it in town. Don’t you feel it?’

She was being confronted, again, well, there was no harm in giving as good as she got.

‘I have a city soul. An urban soul, busy, busy, busy...’

‘You mean tired, tired, tired’ and that was exactly what she did mean, and was about to stutter out something when Micklethwaite continued ‘when friends come out here, all they do is sleep. Just go to sleep’.

It sounded nice, so why could she not say it? They pulled up in front of Micklethwaite’s bach.

‘I’ll get that book’ and he was gone before she could say anything. This was awkward. She got out of the car and stood waiting and observing. There was a seat under the shade of the twisted macrocarpa, with a teacup and book beside it. Not a bad life at all.

‘You left your notebook behind’.

That made it more awkward.

‘Thank you, look I don’t really think I’ll get time to read...’ and then thought, oh shut up Mary, busy Mary. The guy was just being kind, and he made you laugh twice, that’s a kind of record.

‘Thanks, I’d like that. But I’ll have to post it back’.

He nodded amiably as if that was the limit of the arrangement, and she suddenly found herself saying.

‘A barbecue sounds nice, I could bring some wine...’

A millisecond is a long time when two people are trying to say much more than they have the courage to say. If Micklethwaite had looked surprised it would have destroyed everything, but he didn’t.

‘Ok. Next week. I’ll write down my phone number in the book’ and he scribbled it down casually just as a police car came roaring up behind them.

Spark swung around as Cummings jumped out of the car and waved excitedly.

‘Sir!’

He glanced at Micklethwaite who weakly waved and walked away. Cummings leaned urgently close to his boss and managed a stage whisper that the nor’wester carried out to sea.

‘We’ve found a bag of belongings. Clothes, and a letter and a name, half way up the spit. Valerie Solarnes.’

‘Ok’ Spark snapped into overdrive ‘let’s do it. Have you seen Jim Dunning?’

‘Yes, he’ll meet us there. I was looking all over for you. Whose that old geezer?’ he jerked his head at the vanishing figure of Micklethwaite.

Spark was annoyed but didn't bite back. As they drove off down the spit, Spark belatedly realised that she had been chatting up Micklethwaite — or had he been chatting her up?

Chapter 4

A Non Person

Thursday 25 October

A week had passed since they found Valerie Solarnes's bag, but of Valerie Solarnes herself — zilch.

She might as well not have existed, indeed in Spark's madder moments she wondered if Valerie was an imaginary being, except everything in the bag pointed to a flesh and blood person. There was a short unfinished letter, written to a friend in Toronto called 'Deb'. The bag contained a pair of knickers, a T-shirt, khaki shorts, towel and jandals and that was it. Still no earrings or finger rings. Would a suicidal person have taken the rings off? So perhaps Valerie was drowned accidentally, and she had taken the jewellery to stop them getting tarnished by the sea-water — but where was the jewellery? Not in her bag. There was no make-up, or lip-salve, suntan lotion, hairbrush or tampons. No keys. That was strange, in fact the bag was anonymous, apart from that damn letter. The underwear and T-shirt had been manufactured in Canterbury, the shorts were American.

Valerie's bag had been found about halfway down the spit, at the end of gravel side-road that wound discouragingly among the sand-dunes and soft gravels, and petered out in a sort-of carpark about two hundred metres from the high-tide line. Twice the police had been back to Kaitorete Spit, to check the beach area again, but apart from the usual litter of coke cans and burnt-out fireplaces, nothing more had been found.

Between them Spark and Cummings had rung all the Christchurch and Timaru backpackers and youth hostels, and checked immigration (twice). They had contacted the Canadian consulate and for good measure the American embassy, but no one had any record of a Valerie Solarnes entering New Zealand. Everyone at Birdlings Flat had been spoken to and no one knew her name. She lived nowhere, knew no-one. Her name and description had been published in both the Christchurch *Press*, Wellington *Dominion* and Auckland *Herald*.

All the international airlines had been contacted but they had no record of any such person arriving in New Zealand, and apart from deep-water yachts, there was virtually no other way to arrive in New Zealand. If it had not been for the bag Spark

might have supposed that Valerie fell off a passing yacht. No single person had come forward with any information at all. It was incredibly frustrating.

Then a motorcycle gang squabble broke out in Christchurch, and one member lay in hospital with a gaping wound in his head from where a four-by-two had smashed it open. Just the normal stuff, but the public was sick of it, the newspapers rarked up the local politicians and the superintendent decided that this week would be a good time for a big crackdown on the gangs. He stripped Spark of all her team (apart from Cummings) and raided every gang house in the city, and the police laid numerous charges of offensive weapons, cannabis, Ecstasy tablets, unlicensed cars, and anything else they could think of, against over forty gang members of five different gangs.

Spark's investigation had fallen into a vacuum, and when she walked into the operations room, it was stark and empty, with the large words 'Operation Frost Fish' marked rebukingly on the whiteboard. A young, pretty and mysterious girl, with multiple knife cuts, lay chilled in the morgue and Spark did not think anyone cared. After a flurry of interest even the media had moved on, a sure sign of failure she thought, and that was how it felt. A strange girl doomed to non-existence, just another drowning. If it had been murder the media would have been camped outside the police station, but a drowning? Spark personally felt so bad about Valerie she had started swearing at the kids. Which helped a lot of course.

She glanced at the calendar. It was a week since she had spoken to Micklethwaite, and she had made that vague promise to ring. She had been out twice to Birdlings Flat but there was Never a good time to drop by, since Cummings was on her shoulder, and anyway, she was not sure it was such a great idea. One evening, after the kids were in bed, she had made a movement towards the phone, but then stopped herself. And a few minutes later she was crying her heart out.

The letter from the solicitors had been sitting there for a week.

'Are you going to sign it mum?' Sophie asked deliberately one evening.

'I guess so love'.

'Dad seems pretty keen on Melody'.

That was the she-beasts name.

'She's a great skier, but we love you the best'.

Spark gave her daughter a hug that almost squeezed the life out of her, then tucked her in bed.

She tapped her pen vacantly on the desk, thinking of that moment and looking over her case file. She had dozens to work on. A burglary and serious assault, one attempted rape in the school grounds, although there was some doubt about the complainant, and a hit and run at Templeton, but always her thoughts kept going back to Valerie.

Where are you girl? Where did you come from?

Her face haunted her, and Spark read the letter for the twentieth time trying to find some whiff of a clue. At the top was Valerie's name with one word 'Christchurch' written underneath. No other address, the date was the 10th October.

'Hiya Debs, hows Toronto? Looking forward to coming home soon and catching up with you. Did you get my postcards? Been fab down here. Got the ferry to Picton and we had a gorgeous smooth crossing over to the South Island. Then walked the Abel Tasman track and it has fantastic beaches (some nice tanned men as well!). Then hitch-hiked down through the Louis Pass (I think). Everyone said hitching is dangerous but I had a dream run, and met a really nice guy who took me to Christchurch, all the way. Yeah I know what you're thinking, but he was real nice. We went up and swam with the dolphins at Kaikoura, it was fantastic. You could touch them!

I'm staying at his place for a few days then shifting to a hostel, although I'm thinking of heading south to Mt Cook. But everyone says that I should wait as the weather is lousy.

How have you been, and mum and dad? Really miss you guys. Hows Jim, must be cool starting a new relationship. Yeah, I might be too! Can't say anymore though...'

And that was it. It wasn't signed.

The writing was well-slanted and joined, and quite aggressive. Home was Toronto. A friend, or sister named Deb? She sounded happy and healthy. She was starting a new relationship? Spark found that troubling, and it was probably the only reason the superintendent kept her going on the case, for he found it suspicious too. Why hadn't that man come forward? But he still vetoed any possibility of a photo in the papers, no matter how touched up. The public would find it 'macabre' he said, though the public saw dead bodies everyday on tv, but he wouldn't budge. Certainly it was a strange case he agreed 'but it isn't murder Mary, it isn't murder'.

It was a big bloody blank.

The Kaikoura Swim-with-the-Dolphins had no record of a Valerie Solarnes, and they were quite strict about identification with overseas visitors, showing passports and stuff. Cummings had spent hours on the phone to the police in Toronto and they had been most helpful. They found four Valerie Solarnes in the city, including one retired, and every single one accounted for. In fact their diligence was extreme, for they had checked every Solarnes in the Toronto phone book and no parent with the surname Solarnes had a missing daughter. Cummings had gone on to check Canadian immigration and they confirmed the New Zealand immigration's opinion, that no such person had entered New Zealand.

She was a fraud. A fake. A nobody.

She jotted the three issues that bothered her about Valerie, murder or no murder.

First: no one claimed her, either in Toronto or New Zealand, and she was a pretty and lively girl apparently, not a social misfit.

Second: why was her body covered with shallow cuts if her death was accidental drowning?

Third: where was her jewellery. Call it a woman's thing, but the absence of it bothered Spark. Had it been stolen from the bag? Or from the body?

The post mortem report had come back late on last Wednesday, with more details which Mr Creighton explained to her over the phone in slow, patronising, clinical terms.

'There was no sperm or sexual abrasions around the vulva, nothing to indicate she had been raped.'

'What about those cuts?'

'They were all shallow, as I indicated before, none opened an artery, or vein. Made by a good sharp knife I would say, about eighteen cuts in all. Most are quite short.'

Spark persisted with the knife wounds.

'She couldn't have mutilated herself?'

He paused, somewhat taken aback.

'Well I had not considered that. It is beyond my scope of investigation. It is physically possible, yes.'

'But unlikely'

'I could not comment'.

'They must have been painful?'

'I imagine so'.

Spark remembered something she wanted to ask.

'Was there any sign that she might have worn a ring, or earrings?'

'The answer to the latter question is that there were holes made for earrings, and to the former question, I think that the fourth finger of the right hand might have had a ring on it. I recall an impression.'

'Were the earring holes fresh?'

'My dear Mary she had been in the water a considerable time...'

'How long?'

'Look I must get going soon, I have a plane to catch to Sydney in two hours...'

'How long Mr Creighton'.

'8-16 hours is my estimate'.

'That's a wide margin'.

No answer to that.

‘When did she die?’

‘Very difficult to estimate. Rigor mortis was not present, but then it wears off after anything from several hours to several days after death, and of course being in the water may well affect that’.

‘Why?’

‘Temperature, and saturation of liquids will affect the chemical metabolism of rigor mortis, in fact it might entirely negate it’.

‘So, in terms of time?’

‘She was found on Tuesday morning, I would say anything from one to three days, judging mainly from decomposition. It was not advanced’.

‘That figure doesn’t match the time in the water?’

‘I know’.

Jesus, Creighton was bloody hard work.

‘Do you wish to elaborate Mr Creighton?’

‘It’s in the report Mrs Spark, but I believe that the body may have spent periods out of the water, perhaps deposited up on the beach at a low tide, and then perhaps, pulled in again by the high tide.’

‘So she drowned?’

‘Definitely’.

‘Can you tell from a corpse whether someone has accidentally drowned or been deliberately drowned?’

‘You mean held under water?’

‘Yes’.

‘Not that easily, unless there have been signs of a struggle. There are some abrasions on her arms, faint ones, and a slight scratch on her cheek, but no bruising. Someone held under water would put up a fight I would think, and the victims hands might lacerate themselves against who was trying to kill them. There’s no evidence of that’.

‘What if they had been sedated first?’

‘Something should have come out in the blood tests. Any sort of sedation would have to be heavy, alcohol or whatever, and I think, despite the time she spent in the sea, that our tests would have picked that up’.

Spark was disappointed.

‘What about the volume of water in her lungs?’

‘There’s not much water in her lungs. A few spoonfuls’.

Spark found this hard to believe.

‘I thought their lungs would be full?’

‘No, not always. For most people a simple reflex forces them to struggle for air and so involuntarily gulp in water, but’ and now Creighton was enjoying himself, the urgency of Sydney temporarily banished ‘for some others, about 10% of people, and in this case the victims reaction, there is a stronger reflex — to stop the water coming in. It is quite interesting, the sensation of water touching her vocal chords probably caused a contraction of the muscles around her larynx, overcoming her breathing reflex and suffocating her. It’s called laryngospasm. That’s why new babies do not drown if you throw them in water, although they will eventually. Their desire to breathe is overcome by their desire to live’.

This was more than Spark wanted to know and she had an involuntary image of a beautiful woman clawing her way through water.

‘So it’s like self-asphyxiation?’

‘That is a way of looking at it. Now look Detective-Sergeant, I must get going...’

Spark interrupted.

‘Is it horrible to die that way? Would it show on a face?’

‘Drowning? No, not necessarily. Probably for a few seconds of panic, then your airway passages block up and you pass out through lack of oxygen. A bit like fainting, unpleasant at first, but then calming perhaps, though I haven’t tried it. I believe that some people who were rescued from near drowning experiences describe it as rather pleasant after a while, almost mystical, look I have to go, or I will miss that plane. It’s all in the report, and with the courier now’.

‘So, no sign of murder at all’.

‘I told you, no, it’s all in the report, although there is one matter I can tell you now’ a deliberate pause ‘she was four months pregnant’.

Spark put the phone down slowly. Why did that make it worse? She drove home to an empty house. The kids were having a sleep-over at a friend’s place for the 40 hour famine. She gave them a ring and got Oliver, who said he was really, really hungry and getting tired of water. The famine had only been going two hours. Sophie on the other hand thought it was cool they were helping all those African kids and they were watching some really excellent videos.

She wandered about the house for a while, wondering why it was that she needed the kids now, but they did not seem to need her so much.

She dialled her friend Sally but got the answer phone, and realised belatedly that Sally was still shopping in Melbourne. So she talked to her mum in Hamilton for twenty minutes then looked in the mirror and brushed her hair, which looked like it might need dyeing again. The curtain callers needed filling in, and she was working on this when the impulse seized her.

At five that evening she rang Gordon Micklethwaite, pulled on jeans and a warm top and by 5.30 was driving out to Birdlings Flat.

Chapter 5

Intercourse

Thursday 25 October

It must be the fourth time she had been out to Birdlings Flat, and each time the weather dominated the landscape. Fog on the day they found the body, a blistering nor'wester when she first met Micklethwaite, a grey gritty southerly, when they hopelessly searched again the bleak beach where they found Valerie's possessions. The sky was huge here, and the monotonous expanses of Lake Ellesmere and the Kaitorete Spit seemed to give permission for the winds to ravel and reeve any which way they wanted. Spark could not understand why such a majesty of nothing could be satisfying. Lake Ellesmere was little better than a massive muddy pond, a spiritless, anorexic lake, lapping up against the stony gravels of the spit. It was no more beautiful than a gravel pit was beautiful, and the spit itself was just a dumping ground for seaweed, bleached sticks and the corpses of sooty shearwaters caught by last week's storm, and yet, and yet... The sky seemed to sing, and it was as if the architecture of landscape had been turned on its head, and the dull footling land became the place for sky and clouds to make great theatre.

This evening the clouds were thin threads of white cirrus that were colouring in the sunset, and being echoed in the placid lake like pink streamers. The gravels were tinged with yellow from the declining sun. It was beautiful and powerful at the same time. Most of the snow had gone from the mountains, making them shrink and as a consequence the plains looked broader and hazier, for the crystal days of late winter were being smudged by spring heat and the smoke from farmers' burning off scrub. As Spark turned into Micklethwaite's front yard the sun dipped below a cloud and brilliantly lit the walls of red corrugated iron like deep blood.

The bach was open and empty. She followed instructions, and looked in the kitchen draw for a bottle opener and then went around the back of the bach to a gate in the fence, which led past a big macrocarpa onto the wide beach plain. There was a driftwood fire on a sea terrace, and she could see him bending over and prodding something. Two fishermen were walking along the beach, otherwise it was empty, and a big surf was crushing the gravel again and again.

If she was honest with herself she was here because she was just damn lonely. She could disguise the visit under some sort of official pretext, that she needed to re-interview the Sea People, but that was all trollops. She simply did not want to spend the evening in the company of herself. That the scene happened to be gorgeous took her by surprise, and Micklethwaite's smile was honest and she replied by waving the bottle and the bottle opener. He had pulled up two large pieces of driftwood to the fire and she sat down on one as he prodded four silver balls into the fire. The sun was turning red as it slid towards the sea and the wind was barely whispering over the beach.

'Hello. Did you read the book?'

'Some of it. I think you told me a fib though, it's not about archery'.

'What is it about then?'

Spark started to uncork the bottle, and worked up a sweat.

'Meditation. Finding god in yourself.'

The cork popped and Micklethwaite handed over two wine glasses, and she poured the wine generously. He had plotted this well she thought. A crackling fire, the wine glasses, a gorgeous sunset.

'Cheers, Mrs Spark.'

Now that was strange.

'Mary. Cheers. You do have beautiful sunsets'.

She attributed the bald red disk of the sun to Micklethwaite's personal handiwork. He moved the silver balls around into the embers, and shifted two thin silver shapes more out of the heat.

'Baked cod and potatoes. It does work' he frowned at the blackening silver foil 'sometimes. I had to buy the fish' he admitted with a half-smile 'I fished all day and caught one dog-fish. This wine is good'.

It was odd talking to a stranger like this, and Spark had been momentarily chilled by the use of 'Mrs'. He was trying at least, and she took a swig of wine and tried back. Neither of them had used their personal names so perhaps it was time.

'I think you would more likely find God out here Gordon, than from a book'.

'There's a woman for you. Men like books and women like the emotion of sunset'.

'Oh come on, it must move you?'

Micklethwaite looked hard at the sun setting, and then at her.

'Yes it does Mary, but I'm used to it'.

It was odd, her own name sounded very odd.

'Ouch'.

He leapt around licking his fingers. He was trying to roll out two of the baked potatoes.

‘The Sea People find God out here. Damn! Wretched potatoes’.

Mary noted the quaintism. She would have let loose a good volley of medieval expletives, but his language was politely Victorian.

‘What do you make of them?’

There, she managed to squeeze in some official business after all. He sat down on the other log and sipped his wine cautiously.

‘I like their attempt to escape the world. Do you know any of their philosophy?’

‘I read a couple of pamphlets that Miranda gave us. It didn’t make any bloody sense to me’.

He grinned and she liked that. It was wicked look.

‘We’ll you know all there is to know’ and he paused and re-arranged some of the fire with a stick ‘Miranda is a lost soul. Wanders the beach sometimes, searching, always searching’.

‘She seemed a bit loose.’

‘Ahh, that’s because she doesn’t wear a bra’.

She giggled and looked about for the wine bottle for a top up.

‘Men. They always look don’t they? My junior, Daryl, his eyes were out on stalks too, and’ there was a fractional pause ‘not just his eyes’.

Micklethwaite thought about that.

‘I think women are just as desirous as men’.

He said this emphatically, and she looked at him curiously.

‘You have evidence for this theory Gordon?’

‘Hope, always hope’.

‘So you’re not gay? That’s what Detective Cummings suggested’.

‘He’s really called Cummings?’

‘Yes. And he’s a virgin’.

The wine was allowing the conversation to get out of hand but Spark did not care. It was stimulating, and adult and flirtatious, and made her feel good about herself, that a man found her attractive.

‘Oh look at that Mary!’

The red sun had reached the sea and was slowly being extinguished by it. But there was no steam, just a quiet absorption of colour from red to orange and then at the final moment a piercing gold. Then gone. It was a great performance and they

watched in silence.

‘So you are moved by sunsets’ she reminded him.

He shrugged.

‘I got into an argument with a man about the orientation of Kaitorete Spit. He said it was north-south but I took him down to the beach and showed him the sun setting in the sea.’

Spark had not realised this and did not really care, absorbed by the clouds changing hues.

‘The spit runs roughly east-west. On a clear day you can look down the spit and see Mount Cook, which is due west of Christchurch. I think we can eat’.

An old man was walking along the beach with an older dog trailing behind, Micklethwaite rolled out the silver balls and started unwrapping them, giving little yells as the heat prickled his fingers. He unrolled the fish and the aroma was heavenly. Spark needed food to sober up, and accepted a crockery plate that had come from nowhere and a plastic carton full of salad. He dumped the potatoes and fish on her plate, and gave her butter and a slice of lemon.

‘You’re organised Gord’.

The abbreviation seemed to come naturally.

‘I suspect you would be an organised person as well’.

‘You like analysing people’ she munched through a hot mouthful of potato.

‘Well it’s no fun analysing dogs’.

It was getting darker with a smoky light running along the edge of the horizon. Gordon pointed out the line of shags struggling home.

‘Hi Bert’.

The old man had come up to the fire, and Micklethwaite stood up, rather old fashionedly.

‘She’s a beaut sunset eh?’

‘This is Mary Spark. Bert Maihi. He’s my boss’.

The old Maori man laughed, his eyes wrinkling with amusement, and looking slowly and carefully at Spark

‘Don’t pay you’se much do we? Heh heh?’

His breathe was in short gasps and the dog sniffed at the fire then lay patiently at his masters feet.

‘No. Do you want a potato?’

‘Orrr no, no, the missus will have some kai ready for me. I’m late already, and she’s a terror eh? But this sun’ he waved a stick at the long gone sunset ‘lights up

my ancestor, so I had to say goodnight.’

His old face seemed lit up with pleasure as if he had seen some treasure. The pupils of his eyes looked almost black in the dusk, and his face was ribboned with lines so deep that they looked carved out of totara. It was an impressive face and Spark wanted to run her fingers over it.

‘Is that Te Urua?’ asked Micklethwaite.

‘Orrr yes. He’s here watching. I’m like a mokopuna to him eh?’.

‘How’s Betty?’

He replied slowly and with gravity.

‘Good, good, orr sad about that girl tho. Bad mana for this place. I got Bill Parsons to lift the tapu on the beach. Well, must rattle me dags eh? You young fellahs enjoy your spuds. Nice to meet you miss, bad business eh? Come on dog’ and the two of them shuffled away up the beach.

‘He knew who I was’ Spark said after they sat down and carried on eating.

‘He’s not slow Bert. I don’t underestimate him, he runs pretty deep. He’s on the Selwyn Heritage Committee that employed me to do this research’.

‘What that about the tapu?’

‘Bill Parson is the Anglican vicar from Taumutu. There was a tapu once they found the girl, so that meant that no one could fish from the beach. Well, the Maori wouldn’t anyway. So they brought up the priest to lift the tapu’.

They finished the fish in silence, somewhat dumbed by the sense of Valerie Solarnes’s body floating by in the sea. Spark did not want to talk about Valerie.

‘Thanks. That was good, shall we finish this?’

She waggled the wine bottle. Micklethwaite nodded. The wine had loosened Micklethwaite’s tongue.

‘There’s quite a battle going on here between two Maori tribes. The main Canterbury tribe is Ngai Makariri but Bert Maihi is Ngai Tapore, they are a much older tribe. That oil pond I showed you has always been a Maori reserve, and the title was given about 1848. That’s very early, but here’s the surprise. I was looking through old documents of a farmer who bought the land, and he stated that the Maori reserve was granted to Ngai Tapore, not Ngai Makariri. But Tapore are not supposed to exist then, they are supposed to have been taken over, blended, merged, intermarried into Ngai Makariri centuries ago’.

Spark was staring dreamily into the fire and was not sure she grasped the point.

‘What does it mean then?’

‘Well, it means if there is any oil there, and it is commercial, and if Tapore can prove that their use is traditional, than they may be able to claim royalties on any oil brought up. But I don’t think that’s the issue really. It’s about identity, about the

right to exist for Ngai Tapore’.

It was just about dark, Micklethwaite threw on several more logs and the sparks raced around like night fairies.

‘I can’t think when I last sat by a fire. It seems to finish the day’.

‘The celts started the day at sunset’.

‘That doesn’t make sense’.

‘No. So did the Old Testament Jews I think. No, it doesn’t make any sense’.

She kept remembering the old Maori mans eyes, quite deep and penetrating.

‘What did he mean by Te Urua?’

‘Oh that’s their legendary ancestor. I don’t know, Maori are so different to us. They see things differently. For them the world is full of spirits and ancestors, perhaps it is. Bert talked to me one evening, it was a bit like this, and I had a fire going. The sun was setting. He went on about saying goodnight to Te Urua. He was a great chief of Ngai Tapore that landed in a waka up the coast, but had his main pa was here at Birdlings flat. He was supposed to have had a mask made out of pure greenstone, an amazing thing, it glittered with green fire and merely putting it on was supposed to scare his enemies away’.

Spark shivered. She liked the story but it was getting cold.

‘You want coffee inside?’

She nodded and they picked up the plates and glasses and stumbled back over the dark beach plain. When Spark looked back she saw the fairies still dancing over the flickering fire.

At the bach Micklethwaite lit the woodstove and plugged in the jug. Spark was curious to see if Gordon would make a move on her, and not entirely sure how she would react. Probably she should go. He put on a Bruch violin concerto and as the notes filtered around her, and the coffee smell started to percolate into the room, and the fire bit and ate into the log, the reasons for going became less convincing. She would wait till after coffee. Otherwise it would be rude. Is this crazy Mary?

Micklethwaite brought over the coffee and sat beside her on the sofa. There was only one light on, over the kitchen and the rest of the house was dark and illuminated by the log fire. It was very planned she decided. An organised man.

‘We should talk about the girl, on the beach’ said Micklethwaite flatly.

‘Why? I don’t want to. Not now’

Spark, still drunk, still thinking about other things, missed the slightly anxious tone in his voice. Micklethwaite looked hesitant, and Spark leapt in first. She was heartily sick of the mystery girl on the beach and did not want a corpse to ruin her night out. Melancholia was not on her game plan tonight, so she asked the question that had been on her mind all evening.

‘How did you know Vince?’

He looked surprised, but understood immediately.

‘From Tekapo. There was a young girl murdered there. He was the chief detective I think?’

‘What were you doing there?’

‘Researching old shepherds huts, for the High Country Directorate. It didn’t pay much, but it was good experience’.

‘Does history ever pay?’

He look wry.

‘Not in money anyways’.

‘Vince got wrapped over the knuckles for that case. We were separated already, but he got involved with someone. Did you know that girl?’

Micklethwaite looked steadily into the fire.

‘We were both after the same girl, oh, I shouldn’t have said that’.

‘No, you shouldn’t have. Did you win?’

‘No’.

‘Vince Never told me about that, but I heard. I’m pleased you didn’t win.’

There was a long moment of heightened tension. A thick blunt silence. She was curled up in one corner of the sofa and her hand was lying between them if he wanted to hold it. He did, and took it and squeezed it gingerly, as if it was a bomb that might blow up in his face. She abruptly felt she was giving away the goods too easily. Too much like a lonely old married woman.

‘Why did you do that?’

He blushed, and Spark thought it was odd seeing a man blush like that. As if he’d been caught out in a sincerity. His next words were even more sincere.

‘Because... I want to make love to you’.

She laughed.

‘Well you can’t. I’m a married woman’.

‘Separated, you said’.

She gazed drunkenly and hopelessly into the fire.

‘Bloody near divorced’.

In the end it was the richness of the evening that did it, a feeling of being spoilt. The romance of Te Urua, the red-blood sunset, and the open fire with fresh cooked fish and the cheap red wine. Dammit she didn’t have a chance, and anyway, she wanted him. It also had something to do with Vince, as if his name reminded her of that lost

love. Oh don't be bloody romantic Mary. It's gone down the gurgler, and the timid attempt of Gordon to make love to her sharpened her sense of loss. She wanted the comfort of love. The comfort of intimacy, and sex. Vince was getting it, why not her? As Gordon held her hand, she remembered that it had been two years since she had received any affection by anyone. She should really leave it up to him she decided, it was properly the job of the man to make the first move. If he chickened out again, well, she'd done her best, and it was probably an insane thing to do anyway. Making love to a man on the second meeting. God. That's what happened to her and that archery whatsit, or was it the first time? Come on Gordon, please, oh to hell with it. She turned and kissed Gordon.

So that was that.

He reached for her and they became entangled. Quite quickly parts of her clothing became bedraggled and undone, and her hands got stuck somewhere on his chest and the whole bloody thing was what she had wanted for ages, and they boiled over so quickly, you could almost feel the steam venting from their anxious bodies. They managed to manoeuvre onto his bed and the few words they exchanged were their own personal names repeated in a hasty sexual mantra. And when he entered her, with some of their clothes still stuck on odd limbs, it was good. Strong and good.

It was about an hour afterwards when Gordon got up and placed a log on the wood burner, and she had time to lazily admire his body.

He would not throw a log, he would always place it. Not bad at all, it was a shame his head seemed a bit misshapen. The thought made her giggle and she stretched out. Somehow she had got one sheet over her before the copulation got going.

'Tea?'

'Okay'.

Spark sighed. Those were the words that closed the chapter on passion. Men's romantic expressions rarely lasted beyond the first trip to the bathroom. Vince had been worst. Just grunts, at least Gordon lived in a romantic spot, and kissed her in romantic places, and it had been a long time since anyone had done that. She suspected it might have been a long time for him too, since it seemed they touched off a mutual explosion.

'You have milk?'

Spark nodded, and hunched up her knees and propped the pillows behind her back. It was nice feeling naked, except her legs felt sticky. Gordon sat on the bed, still naked, and looked at her in a peculiar way. Quite anxiously in fact, and she misinterpreted the look completely.

'It's ok Gordon, I've got a diaphragm on'.

It was not the best protection in the world but it was better than nothing.

'Oh I wasn't thinking about that.'

‘Men never do’.

‘It’s just, well, it all happened so quickly, I mean’ he hesitated ‘our lovemaking...’

‘Thank you’ she meant it, even if this was to prove the beginning and end of the affair. She had no illusions.

‘I wanted to tell you something else, before we made love, I mean about, the dead girl...’

She smiled but looked puzzled. This wasn’t the time Gordon. This was work.

‘Her name isn’t Valerie. It’s Sonia Blackwater’.

That was how the bottom dropped out of Mary Spark’s world.

Chapter 6

Gordon's Story

Thursday 25 October

'Eh?'

'Her name is Sonia Blackwater' he repeated quietly not looking at her.

It took a while for this news to sink in, and Mary Spark sat up, clutching the sheet around her body.

'The letter said Valerie Solarnes'.

'I know. It's a fake, I wrote that letter'.

'What?!'

Her voice rose a doubting semi-tone.

'I should have told you earlier in the evening, it's just, I couldn't, I mean, see how to...' he shrugged uselessly.

Mary Spark was still some way behind in this conversation but by now her legs had closed and her mouth was dry.

'Why' she was starting to shake 'did you write a letter, and why...?'

Hold on Mary, one question at a time. Micklethwaite had started to make some tentative moves to pull on his clothes, but now gave up.

'I was being threatened. Someone said they would kill me'.

This was totally confusing.

'You know who she was? You've met her before?'

'Yes'.

'She was a friend of yours?'

'Yes, no, not really. We met a few times, well three times I think. She was doing a Ph.d. at Canterbury, on social geography'.

He seemed to think that explained everything but Spark was still mentally flounder-

ing and trying not to think of her nakedness.

‘If you knew her name why didn’t you tell the police. Or tell me, you, you useless bastard’.

The full realisation of her utterly compromised position was like a shaft of ice.

‘Well I just did. Now’.

She gaped at that one. Before a stream of invective came Micklethwaite’s way he got in first.

‘I was afraid’.

‘Afraid of what?’

‘When I found her body I thought...’

At this point Spark’s horrified look froze Gordon in his stumbling speech like a possum caught in the headlights of a big mac truck. At last Spark took control.

‘I’m getting dressed. You get dressed. Look away you bastard’.

In two separate corners they pulled on their clothes. Gordon put on a log and opened the damper on the wood burner. Spark went to the toilet, came back silently, brushed her hair back, straightened her clothes and made the transformation from a lover to a police-woman. A senior detective. A senior detective who has just had sex with someone who found a body and kept it concealed from the police for over a week, and then wrote a fake letter which helped conceal a victims real identity for a week. Shit, shit, shit was she in trouble.

‘I want you to tell me the truth. God knows why, but I’m prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt that you did not kill this woman’.

‘Of course I didn’t...’

Spark looked daggers.

‘Shut up’.

She paused.

‘My tea is cold, make me some more please. No, a coffee, a strong one’.

Five minutes later in complete silence with the coffee in her hand, Spark pulled out her note-book and was ready.

‘Let’s start with the body’.

Micklethwaite nodded helpfully.

‘It was Monday, the 15th October about 6.30 in the evening, not much earlier. A thick sea-mist had come in again, it’s been bad for days, every morning, every evening, Never seen anything like it. I went out to the back of the bach for a leak, and see what the weather was doing. There’s an old corrugated iron fence there, and a big macrocarpa tree. Sometimes I think I’ll chop it down, because it blocks my

view of the sea, but I haven't.

He paused and looked away.

'There was something under the tree. It was her, Sonia. I was bewildered, shocked I suppose, but that came later'.

'How was she dressed?'

Spark was into trick questions this evening. Her career depended on it.

'She was naked. There was her satchel there, with some things in it. Undies and stuff. Her body, it was covered with knife wounds, lots of them, all over her. Initially I thought she'd been attacked and killed that way, but later I wasn't so sure'.

'Why?'

'Well I carried her into the lounge here, and she wasn't bleeding or anything. And the wounds looked shallow. It was weird. It was hard work carrying her, I hadn't realised bodies were so heavy and she flopped all over the place'.

That was revealing Spark thought and wrote a note to herself.

'Why didn't you call the police?'

'I almost did, but...' she waited.

Micklethwaite swallowed and drank his cold coffee.

'You are going to think this is pretty strange, but I thought someone was after me. Maybe watching me right then. I had had threats already, and I thought Sonia was muddled up in the business..'

'What business?'

'I don't know' he said helplessly.

Micklethwaite went over to his desk and brought out some papers and showed them to Spark.

'I got these under my door. I've dated them, this one is a month ago. This one last week, or ten days ago. Here's a picture. Someone did this between the two letters.'

It was a picture of dead seagull nailed to the bach's front door, the blood had drained down the door to the step.

'You can still see the blood, it was dried when I got back and it took me ages to scrape it off'.

'You don't know who sent these?'

'No'.

'Why Gordon?'

'I don't know. I really don't. I'm just doing my thing, minding my own business. But since I became involved with Sonia it wasn't just me anymore, it was like there

were others looking over my shoulder’.

Spark glanced at the letters which were strange but explicit. Individual letters had been hand-cut out of newspaper. They were brief and badly spelt.

‘You, dont medal with us.

we know what your about and we dont like it.

if you know what’s good for you, leave everything alone.

We watch and wait.

this is a final warning’

The second letter was more direct.

‘Dont you listen?

dont you lern?

we will wait and see to you, just when you think you are safe.

No more warnings.

Next you’re going to be a dead bird’.

She read them twice and found their baldness rather chilling.

‘Can I keep these?’

He agreed. She tucked them away in her bag.

‘This does not explain why you did not call the police when you found Sonia’s body. That would be the normal thing to do’.

Micklethwaite looked at her for the first time in an hour.

‘I know. I thought I was being drawn into a business that was none of my business. Someone dumped Sonia’s body there. Maybe using a quad bike or something, it was deathly quiet but the sea was crashing. Sometimes the sea crashes so hard you can feel the vibration, and I’m 500 yards away...’

Spark was expressionless.

‘I thought I would try and gain some time. I panicked, someone had moved her body there, so it would not make much difference if I moved her body somewhere else. It might throw the murderers off completely.’

‘You used plural’.

‘Murderers, murderer, I don’t know. I did not think it through. The sea-mist was claustrophobic, I just thought I had to act, get her away from me. This way I thought I could gain time and perhaps find out myself what had happened’.

It was getting worse for her, worse and worse.

‘I’m convinced she’d been murdered. I couldn’t believe it when you said she was drowned’.

‘Okay, you wrote that letter?’

‘Yes. I just invented a personality on the spot, and a nationality. Can’t remember what I used now, and added a few vague details, all pretty ordinary. I didn’t have much time. It was almost seven so I scribbled a fake half-letter, you can compare the writing. It’s mine alright. My fingerprints too.’

‘To buy time?’

‘Yes. It doesn’t sound very plausible does it?’

‘It sounds bloody stupid, and a few hours ago I was admiring your intelligence. What did you do with her?’

‘I took her down in my car to another road-end, about two miles from here. It’s a road that goes through the dunes. You’ve been there. I laid her down carefully, and put her satchel beside her. With the letter. She still looked stunning...’

Spark interrupted this beautiful detail.

‘What time was this?’

‘About 8.30, probably 9 pm by the time I got there’.

You made no attempt to conceal her?’

‘Just a blanket’.

They never found any blanket.

‘What was your relationship with this woman?’

He dithered.

‘It’s hard to explain really, I met Sonia at Kaikoura, at a Tribal Lands Seminar. She seemed really interested in my work and came down next weekend. She was doing a thesis on tribal geography she called it. Maori disputes and the like, it was interesting and I had some good material I had researched about the tribes on the spit.’

She might as well get all of it over and done with, but Mary Spark’s heart sunk as she asked the next question. Her face held steady.

‘You were lovers?’

He did not seem perturbed.

‘Just one night. That same weekend as the seminar. I was surprised, she seemed to think it quite normal to have... to... make love so quickly. It was only the second time we had met’.

Spark really did not need that. How much worse could it get? A quick shag like Sonia, or like Mary. Take your pick. After the calm evening she heard the wind pick up, and rustle the old macrocarpa tree. It must be almost 10 pm now.

‘This is the truth?’

‘Yes’.

‘You will have to make a formal statement’.

‘Yes’.

‘Can you say anything but bloody yes?!’

She was screaming inside now. His statement could basically end her career.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier’.

She started picking up things and assuming some sort of dignity she no longer felt. Micklethwaite stood up and faced her.

‘Look, there’s more...’

Spark stared at him.

‘I realised I was stupid, writing that letter. So I changed my mind and went back to the dunes again. I was going to pick up the letter, destroy it and then tell the police where I’d found her.’

‘Found her where?’ Spark demanded ‘by your fence or in the sand dunes?’

He look surprised, an infuriating habit.

‘When I got back to sand dunes she was gone’.

Mary Spark could hardly believe she was hearing this.

‘What?! Her body gone? What time was this? I don’t believe...’

‘I must have returned about midnight at least, no maybe 1 am. Her body was gone. The mist was still thick but I had a good search, all round the dunes, everywhere. I found the satchel, but no body. Nothing. I thought I must have been dreaming’.

Spark sat down again. Perhaps she was dreaming as well. Already the story this evening had verged on the incredible, but she was now doubting her sanity.

‘Gordon, please. You’re telling me the truth?’

He sat down beside her, looked into her eyes and said ‘yes’. She looked hard back, and then slumped forward holding her head in one hand as if in pain. Her other was scribbling madly in her notebook. There was a long silence as she wrote down and Micklethwaite stood up and poked awkwardly at the fire in the wood-burner.

When their eyes next met he pulled at his mouth wryly.

‘I know it’s hard to believe. Someone placed Sonia at my back fence, I don’t know who. I moved her to the dune road. I come back, maybe four hours later and she’s gone’.

‘Why did you choose the name Valerie Solarnes?’

‘She was the girl that tried to murder Andy Warhol’.

‘What’s that got to do with Sonia?’

He shrugged infuriatingly.

‘Nothing’.

Spark packed away her things again. She had become very tired but her brain was ticking away, and the odd thing was that the more incredible Micklethwaite’s story was the more inclined she was to believe him. There seemed to be no good reason why he should make this up, unless he had murdered Sonia, and even then would a murderer come up with such a ridiculous plot?

He waved one hand aimlessly.

‘You see the position I was in. How could I tell the police about Sonia when I had no body to show anyone? What a stupid story’.

‘It’s a pretty stupid story anyway. You’re sure she was well away from the high tide line?’

‘A hundred, two hundred yards at least. I can show you. The sea never gets in there.’

He repeated again, more firmly.

‘Someone moved her.’

Spark pondered this.

‘We found her satchel still there’.

He shook his head.

‘I just lost the plot and left it there. It was as if someone was toying with me, look at the letters, and the dead seagull’ he gestured appealingly at her.

Mary Spark pulled on her coat and thought to herself. You could have written those letters. You could have nailed that seagull. You could have spun me the biggest pack of lies in Christendom Mr. Micklethwaite.

‘Gordon I’m going now. I will ring you tomorrow. Thank you for a lovely evening’.

She picked up her bag and walked out. He did not say a word, and privately she was disappointed, even though she was pleased with her exit line.

The drive back was nightmarish. Her brain examined every corner of Micklethwaite’s story and found most of it wanting. Sometimes she found herself clutching the steering wheel so hard she thought she would break it. On one bend she was way on the wrong side of the road, and thanked her stars the highway was deserted.

It just did not make sense! His story was stupid, bloody stupid, but why tell it, and why tell it now? Did he deliberately wait until they had sex before spilling the beans, was that it? She was his safety net, a cold blooded and mercenary use of her status to try and conceal his crime. But what was his crime? Valerie, I mean Sonia, or

whatever her God-given name was, was actually drowned, definitely drowned! The man who stroked her so tenderly only a few hours before, the man who amused her with his intelligence... surely he could not be that stupid! Oh God!

When she got home she was exhausted, her brain numb. She moved through the house in a sort of slow motion dread. Undressing, and finding to her disgust she'd no knickers on. Brushing her teeth, lying down in bed, eyes wide and alert, searching the ceiling for unneeded cracks. When the phone rang she almost did not answer it, what now?

'Yes, Spark speaking' it was meant to be a vicious tone, but even to her ears it sounded desperately tired and lonely.

'Heh? Is that the lady cop? On the girl case at Birdlings Flat. Eh?'

'Yes?'

'Well that sheila's name, girls name, it's Sonia. Sonia Blackwater, that's all I'm saying.'

'Who are you?'

'That's all I'm saying...' and a dead click.

Spark was wide awake now. Yesterday nobody knew the girl, now everyone in town was ringing up and shouting her name. But she had listened closely to the voice, it wasn't Gordon, not even a disguised Gordon. Actually it sounded like a Maori voice.

Chapter 7

The Edges of the Jigsaw

Friday 26 October

At 7 a.m. she had gotten Cummings out of his shower and passed on the new name. By 8 a.m. she had driven to central police station and he had rung back to say he was at Sonia Blackwaters flat, and the photos that the flatmate had of Sonia were picture perfect for the girl on the beach. At 8.10 a.m. she was talking to the registry of the University of Canterbury, and by 8.30 a.m. talking to Professor Douglas Eherton, head of department of geography and Sonia Blackwater's supervisor. At 8.45 a.m. the immigration people confirmed the existence of Sonia Blackwater as a thirty-one year old American who carried a passport and was on a study visa.

The pieces were falling together. It was amazing what a difference it made when you had the right name.

That late night phone call was fortuitous, as Mary Spark began to realise. She could honestly call Daryl and say that someone had given her a tip that the body on the beach was actually of a woman called Sonia Blackwater, no need to mention Gordon at all. Yet. She could even fudge matters and say that the caller said that Sonia was a Ph.d student at Canterbury. It was a perfectly plausible lie, but it was still a lie. Each hour she said nothing about Gordon's story, was getting her deeper and deeper into murky inconsistencies. She was quite certain that her principles upon joining the police force were not suppose to extend to concealing key witnesses, holding back vital information, or indeed shielding a lovers identity because it might make her look a complete idiot — and was Gordon her lover anyway? One shag, was that it? That was enough for poor Sonia.

Be honest Mary Spark, you are fighting for survival. Husband gone, kids almost grown up. You are fighting for your validation as a person, and your precious career, because you know what girl? You don't have anything else left to fight for.

Spark booked a police car and drove to a quiet street in Ilam, an elegant tree-cluttered suburb whose existence revolved around the University of Canterbury. The streets were mainly old style wooden villas, some turned into student flats, some academics

homes, but all looked well-kept and indistinguishable from each other. However there would be a few raised eyebrows on Kirkwood Avenue as two police cars were now parked side by side at the house Sonia Blackwater lived in. Spark had got so used to saying Valerie that the name 'Sonia' sounded peculiar on the flatmates lips.

'Oh yeah, Sonia, she was always away. Kaikoura, Dunedin, West Coast, she didn't lack for blokes you know, though they didn't come round that often...' and giggled.

The flatmate was a drab, brittle blond that in an electric nightclub and with a short black skirt on, would be surrounded by a huddle of men. Only afterwards might they reconsider. She was still in her dressing gown, which impressed Cummings.

'Here's her picture sir'

Cummings passed over a photograph. That was 'Valerie', sitting on a beach somewhere.

'Yeah, she loved swimming. I think she had medals or something from the States you know. Got the body for it too' and giggled again.

Cummings smiled, they were getting on famously. Spark looked again at the photo and then went into Sonia's room. Cummings was busy taking a statement and she listened whilst her eyes observed all the intimacies of a dead woman's interior.

'How long had you known Sonia?'

'Oh about six months, or maybe eight you know. I advertised for a flatmate and she turned up. So that was about March I think, start of varsity anyway'.

'Did you advertise in the paper?'

'No, I put a notice up on the geography board. I'm doing Honours'.

'Really?'

'Yeah'

Spark could hear the flatmate simpering. That girl would flirt with a fencepost.

Sonia's room was tidy, and she expected that, although she couldn't have explained why. There was a photo of an old man on the table, perhaps her father? But not much else in the way of personal possessions. The clothes cupboard was basic but functional. A couple of good dresses, otherwise lots of polar fleece and practical outdoor gear. There was no computer, but that might be at university. The furniture was simple stuff that had probably come from a garage sale, and the single bed might have been the reason why the men did not stay.

'She didn't have a steady boyfriend, but she wasn't short of men, if you know what I mean'.

No, Mary didn't know what the flatmate meant, but she kept listening. The girl seemed very eager to spill the beans.

'There was Maori fellah, he was around a few times, and she must have been go-

ing out with him a while.’

‘You know his name?’

‘Oh, Billy I think. Now I couldn’t tell yer his surname, but he lived out Birdlings Flat. You know, it’s a bit of a dump. Is that where you found Sonia, heh you don’t think that it was the Maori fellah do you?’

The flatmates ponderous thinking had got her excited, but Cummings squashed that notion.

‘She was drowned. The post mortem confirmed it’.

‘Oh, that’s sad. I didn’t think much of him. Didn’t trust him. Well, better than being murdered eh?’

That was a joke Spark believed. There was an attache case by Sonia’s bedside table and Spark picked it up. It was heavy and locked.

‘Any other boyfriends you remember?’

‘Well’ the flatmate thought hard ‘she didn’t usually bring them round much, you know what I mean? Three or four maybe? I’ve only known her six months, course we talked a bit. She kept herself to herself Sonia. A bit secretive.’

‘She was keen on men then?’

‘Oh yeah, but she didn’t stick with any, bit ruthless I’d say. Said they were all after the same thing’.

‘Do you stick with many?’ Cummings asked boldly and the flatmate appropriately giggled.

‘Oh yeah. I got a bloke now, engineering school. We’re thinking of getting engaged soon’.

Every engineering student that Spark had ever met was dead boring, so she richly deserved her fate. She hated prying into Sonia’s private world but she had better look through this case. Drowned or not, she still wanted to explain those knife cuts.

‘You said she used to talk about her boyfriends a bit?’

‘Oh yeah’.

The flatmate had positioned herself on a kitchen stool and swung one leg over so that Cummings could get the benefit of a long exposed leg. Spark suspected she was enjoying her moment of fame.

‘I mean one morning she came back, all mussed up, and I said ‘you had a good time’, meaning well, you know, and she looked all flustered and bright you know, and said she’d made love on the beach under a full moon. Said you couldn’t do that in America. Too many people’.

Spark came back into the kitchen. She had heard the last few sentences, and it cut deep.

‘Why didn’t you report her missing?’ asked Spark bluntly, bringing the interview out of it’s eroticism and back to reality.

‘Well, she wasn’t missing’.

The flatmate pulled the dressing gown over the leg and became defensive.

‘She told me she was down at Dunedin, doing some research or something for two weeks, she was always away. I used to complain to her sometimes, it’s spooky being on your own I told her, though my boyfriend came around a lot. It wasn’t like having a flatmate at all, we didn’t cook together or anything...’

‘When did you last see her?’ Spark cut through the twaddle.

‘I suppose, last week. About a week ago. We didn’t see much of each other’.

‘Did you like her?’

The flatmate looked unprepared for the question.

‘She was all right. Just a flatmate...’

The girl’s flirty confidence had become suspicious and sulky. Spark looked hard at her.

‘You may have to identify the body’.

‘Oh, Jesus...’ that shut her up.

They got back into their respective police cars and drove to the university which was a maze of access roads around the grey concrete buildings. After driving around in a conspicuous circle for a while they found the geography department, and the secretary took them to Professor Eherton’s office. They shook hands.

He was a tall, elegant man in his early sixties Spark judged, with silver hair and a cautious polite manner. His room was orderly with books on two sides and a calm view over the courtyard. A manufactured academics room, and there would be hundreds like it on the campus.

‘You were Sonia’s supervisor for her Ph.d?’

‘Yes. I must say this has come as a shock to the department. I knew her father at Houston University’.

‘Texas? Do you know her parents address?’

‘Yes I have it all here. It is only her father, her mother died some ten years ago. He is quite a distinguished member at the university. Will you contact him?’

‘Yes. We may need you to identify her body’ Spark said.

He grimaced and placed his hands together in an arch.

‘We have her flatmate, but she might get somewhat hysterical’ Spark explained.

‘I understand. Obviously I do not wish to do so, but I will do what you ask’.

‘How well did you know her Professor Eherton? Did you know any of her

friends?’ Spark asked.

‘Well, I did not see her regularly. We met quite a good deal at the start of her Ph.d but only on occasions since. It seemed to be going well. I happen to know her father through academic circles and he is a leading expert in the field of Social Geography. Sonia was following in her fathers footsteps I think, and doing very well’.

‘Was she close to her father?’

‘Yes indeed, and admired him tremendously’.

‘What’s her thesis on?’ butted in Cummings.

‘Well it did not have a definite title at this stage, but it was in the main about Maori tribal boundaries and the issues that emerge from a boundary dispute. It is quite an interesting and new field, and as you can imagine, somewhat contentious’.

‘Contentious?’ queried Spark.

‘Maori tribes do not always get on very well, at least no better than pakeha tribes. With the Treaty of Waitangi issues slowly being worked through quite a number of boundary disputes, or even what constitutes a boundary, have arisen lately’.

He looked like a man who would say ‘arisen’. Spark pressed further.

‘Any particular tribes she was studying?’

‘Indeed yes, now, let me think’.

Whilst he thought Spark was studying him carefully. She once read a senior English policeman’s autobiography and he had given the sage advice always to observe and listen carefully. A New York cop on a TV detective show had said the same thing, though less politely: ‘watch the bastards’, and she was watching.

‘It was Ngai Makariri of course, the main Canterbury tribe, and a smaller tribe...’ he hesitated again

‘Ngai Tapore?’ she suggested helpfully.

He looked surprised, and she had no doubt it was feigned.

‘Indeed yes’.

‘What kind of person was she professor?’

‘Industrious, ambitious, reasonably thorough, a dedicated Ph.d student. Really, this is tragic loss for the department. We will probably hold a memorial service for her tomorrow or the day after. It was definitely drowning?’

‘We think so’ and he looked genuinely upset.

‘Thank you professor, may we see her room?’.

‘Certainly, I will show you the way. It is a regular rabbit warren’.

The room was as tidy and sparse as her bedroom. Eherton had excused himself, and Cummings, who professed to understand computers, turned it on, and slowly went

through various folders and files glancing at the text.

‘Yep, Maori stuff. Yep, more Maori stuff. No address list yet I can find’.

‘Any names of anyone?’

Spark was leafing through a copy of the University Calendar, which was the complete book on the University and listed all its courses, its lecturers and heads of department. Under geography department she found ‘Eherton, Douglas Matthew Harua: professor of geography and social geography’. She showed it to Cummings who whistled.

‘He’s a Maori too? Doesn’t look it eh. It’s all pretty straight down the line here sir’ and he screened through more files ‘if you want I can take it back to central?’

Spark shook her head. She had to keep telling herself that it was not a murder investigation, but an accidental drowning. Despite the fact that Eherton’s sluggish memory needing some jogging, and also in spite of the fact that despite his sterling commendation of all of Sonia’s excellent qualities, there seemed a lack of personal enthusiasm for her. Same old story.

There was another picture of the old man on the wall, and when they came in Spark pointed at it. Eherton nodded ‘that’s her father, Professor Edward Blackwater’. She looked at the photo a long time, a rugged, confident male, his smile betraying a rather knowing look, but that was a harsh judgement. The flatmate had irritated her, and for some reason so had Eherton, or maybe it was her period. Or maybe she was just pissed off with the world, or Gordon in particular, for wasting her time.

Cummings had switched off the computer and was following Spark’s eyes.

‘It’s odd isn’t sir? I mean all her fathers photos on the wall?’

‘Aren’t you devoted to your father Daryl?’

‘Of course, but I don’t have his photo everywhere. Well, he’s alive of course, but you know what I mean’.

Spark stretched and stood up from the desk she had been leaning against. It was odd, and she did know what he meant.

‘We need to track down Billy Matawai. That’s your job, try Jim Dunnings first. Have you checked the land titles for the Sea People yet? This afternoon? I’ll take Eherton down to the morgue, better get it over with. I don’t want to ring up Mr Blackwater and get the wrong girl’.

Eherton was ready, or at least he was standing by the window when Spark looked in again. It was a mostly silent drive into town with odd pleasantries that were mainly about the weather. At the police morgue Spark went in first and spoke to the attendant.

‘Can you reveal her whole body? Take the sheet right off?’

‘Sure, sir. Any reason?’

‘Yes’.

She motioned Douglas Eherton into the cold room and the attendant, went over to the small bank of body trays. There were only four, and Sonia was the only present occupant. A lonely soul, although technically she supposed that had departed. Spark composed herself, she didn’t like these viewings any more than the poor sod who had to do the identifying.

‘I must warn you Professor there has been an autopsy, though as is normal, the body has been re-sealed (she could not think of a better way to put it? how do you describe a body put back together again?) so you will see some of the pathologists incisions as well as a number of unexplained knife wounds on her body. The body has been embalmed to preserve it’.

He stiffened

‘I see. Well, I saw worse in the war, at Cassino and such, thank you for the warning. I’m ready’.

The attendant pulled out the tray fully and unravelled the sheet as instructed.

Sonia had been tidied up somewhat, her hair was tucked underneath her and her pale arms and legs were straight alongside her body. The cuts did not look as severe now, as the red had gone from them. There were various incisions where the pathologist had made his inspection and the stomach area was slightly slumped from where he had removed the organ. Her face still seemed to be at peace with the eyes and lips were closed. The nipples were starkly upright, and Spark had time to notice two more cuts under the breasts that she hadn’t seen before.

She kept looking at Eherton’s face and was disappointed. He stared mostly and carefully at Sonia’s face but did not shrink from taking in the rest of her body. Spark nodded at the attendant who silently pulled back the cloth and wheeled the tray back in place. She lead Eherton out of the room.

‘No worse than Cassino I hope Professor?’

‘No. It was Sonia of course’.

‘Thank you. We need you to sign this identification form. Did you see the knife wounds? Not the pathologists incisions, which are much longer, but the short ones. There are eighteen all told and we can’t understand them’.

‘No’ he hesitated ‘I don’t know. I thought she drowned?’

‘Yes’.

‘Can I go now?’

‘Yes’.

That was that, worth a try, or maybe it wasn’t. She got Eherton to sign the interminable papers and he said he’d take a taxi back. She put on another detective to contact Houston University and went to her room and started doodling on a piece of a paper. The wandering lines became neatly geometrised with squares and triangles,

and she could hear the echoes of her children's psychoanalysis that 'you're always trying to get order into your life mum'. Perhaps she was.

The phone rang.

'Mary Spark? It's Gordon, Gordon Micklethwaite'.

The fact that he had to tack on his surname spoke volumes. You know the Micklethwaite bloke? The one you screwed last year, or was it last night?

'I'm sorry Mary about the trouble I've caused. I wasn't thinking really...'

'No' she agreed with that

'...but I want to say' and he struggled on in spite of Spark's loud silence 'that my feelings for you are genuine' the words came out slowly 'and I would like to meet you again, but I understand if you feel that's impossible'.

'I should think so Gordon, bloody impossible. I took Professor Eherton to identify Sonia at the morgue today, I should have taken you perhaps?'

Silence at that one.

'I'm truly sorry. I was under pressure, but that's no excuse...'

'Do you know Eherton?'

'I think I met him once, at a Tribal Lands Seminar.'

'Same place you met Sonia?'

'Yes, at Kaikoura'.

'Did you like Sonia?'

'Pardon?'

'You heard me. I'm getting the feeling that people did not like her that much'.

'I felt used'.

'Even though you had sex with her?'

'Yes. She used sex as a weapon. I know it sounds strange, and women probably think men use sex as a weapon. And she stole some of my papers'.

'You weren't using sex as a weapon? What about me?'

'Mary. You are my love'.

The superintendent looked through the door at that significant moment and waggled his eyebrows suggestively that a meeting might be in order. Spark cut the phone call with an abrupt 'gotta go Gordy'.

The superintendent crooned.

'Sorry Mary, I hope I didn't interrupt anything important?'

Only the catastrophe of my love life Mary thought, but she did actually feel better,

and followed her boss down the corridor to his superior office with better views and much better furniture. The superintendent settled into his chair and motioned Mary into hers.

‘The reason I wanted to talk to you, well there are two reasons actually..’ he laboured. The superintendent was Never very good at getting to the point, though this was worse than usual. She was dreading his retirement speech, and she looked at the calendar behind his head. Due in three months now.

‘What’s the story with that girl on the beach, you have a name now?’

She explained the mysterious phone call and the events of the morning, including Eherton’s identification. She did not mention Gordon, of course.

‘Douglas Eherton eh? I knew him from army days myself. He’s come on, although like me, he must be near retirement. He’s a busy man, I see him from time to time, though not for years. He represents the Ngai Makariri Trust Board on the Treaty of Waitangi issues. Funny old world, people you know from forty years ago, popping up like that...’ he mused on a while ‘he didn’t take it too hard? Good, good’.

He had a copy of the autopsy before him.

‘I was looking at this, it is odd, all the cuts on her body. It looks like a murder but isn’t. Unusual I must say, where do you intend to proceed from here Mary?’

Well boss, I’d like to find out who shifted the body to Gordon’s place, and why Gordon (my ex-lover by the way) shoved the body onto the beach, and then who was the bastard who dumped the body back in the sea. Simple eh?

She lied.

‘I think that who is ever responsible for those cuts is someone at Birdlings Flat, someone we might even have talked to.’

‘Such as?’

‘The Sea People. They are pretty peculiar sir.’

‘A cult?’

‘Sort of’.

She moved the conversation along, because she did not want to get into discussions of cults with a strong Presbyterian superintendent who barely liked Methodists.

‘There’s a man called Billy Matawai. We haven’t talked to him, but he lives at Birdlings Flat and used to be a boyfriend of Sonia’s’.

‘A Maori?’

He was really on to it. She had long suspected he did not like Maoris.

‘Yes. Seems to have done a runner’.

‘Ahh, was that your mysterious caller you think? Ok, ok, after that?’ she shrugged

‘I understand you are concerned to explain the knife wounds, but I cannot really justify a team for you on a case of drowning, albeit with some strange circumstances. You can suffice with Detective Cummings? You are too valuable Mary to keep on a case that may not go anywhere’.

That was nice if it was true.

‘Which inadvertently brings me to my other reason, ermm..’

Come on man, get to the point.

‘Your performance has been excellent over the last two years, and I am quite sure, in fact I am recommending that you be considered for a promotion.’

That was right out of left field. She stared. She could not have been more surprised if she had been told she was pregnant.

‘I am aware, as all the staff are, and your team of your marriage break up with Vincent Spark. It cannot have been easy for either of you, and I sympathise, ermm. It must have made your circumstances awkward, but your work only seems to have improved. Vincent chose to leave the force and I think that was a good choice on his part, he’ and the superintendent studied the desk intently ‘was having difficulties in his job. I hear he is doing well down in Queenstown? A sports shop? Yes, yes, that’s excellent. What I wanted to say, ermm, that as I near my retirement that I want to leave the CIB in good form, and I consider you as one of the key members of that future team. You are a good detective. We want to keep you on the team, so let me know if I can be of any... ermm personal assistance’.

The superintendent ended his speech with relief as if glad to get the words out of his system, like a well-squeezed zit.

Spark left the office reeling, and tidied up her desk. She was having the half-day off to go to school sports that afternoon and cheer Oliver on. He was hoping to win the 100 metres.

Everything the chief said was flattering but it only made her feel worse. She was a better police officer than her ex-husband, which was true, but that was also wounding in a strange sort of way. She had never intended to be better than Vince, she just wanted the family to stay together. And what would the superintendent say if he knew of her behaviour in the last twenty-four hours? There was no such excellent skills there. Sleeping with the enemy, and then concealing it deliberately and methodically, all for a man who had to mention his surname in case she had already forgotten. Jesus!

She slammed the car door hard and gave the engine an unnecessary revving. Tears of frustration welled up and she had to dab angrily at them with the back of her sleeve. At that critical moment the superintendent himself hurried by, and must have glanced in, and saw her crying, for he hurried on nervously.

‘Stupid bastard. Probably thinks I’m crying because I’m so bloody happy at getting promoted’.

She slammed the car in gear and drove off, all the more frustrated because she had no real idea of why she was blubbing.

Chapter 8

Collecting Driftwood

Friday 26 and Saturday 27 October

The full moon had come handsomely through his bedroom window and blighted the room with its hard probing light. He had slept so badly that he was sure he had not slept at all. It was a terrible mess, no point in denying it. He had stuffed up, yet what else could he have done? He had turned over every possibility through the night, hearing the crashing surf and counting the slow seconds before the next one. Mary's face appeared several times in his dreams, a soft, bright-eyed face with the sharp swish of blonde hair. Well, he'd stuffed up there too. It had been a good opening to the night, and a great symphonic middle section as well — it was just that the ending was a little weak.

At 5 am Micklethwaite got up and dressed, unable to see the purpose of just fretting away at foolish choices and lost loves.

He went down to the beach where dawn was flitting along the edge of the sea, just as the terns were doing. A nervous uncertain dawn, with a little colour that quickly got swallowed into grey banks of clouds that swelled blackly on the horizon. They matched Micklethwaite's mood and he walked along the soft shingle throwing an occasional stone into the battering surf. This made him feel better, and he decided that out of this godawful mess he should at least put his mind into what he was going to do about Sonia. He had done nothing, paralysed by the soft hope that his participation in Sonia's movements might Never get revealed. Now it was time to act his own detective, especially if he wanted to win back Mary.

The day, like Micklethwaite, had crawled out of bed and finally arrived, and as he slogged back to his bach he glimpsed a delicate female figure walking down to the sea. Miranda was going down to the sea again, the lonely sea and the sky. He watched her for a while and shook his head. She haunted the beach, day after day.

He tidied up the bed and found a pair of knickers in it. That made him smile, although he was somewhat unsure of how he could return them — by post? A little light rain began to thrum against the iron roof and he put on the jug for a coffee and slipped into a daydream, jotting down notes and ideas as they occurred to him. Which was not very often.

It had seemed to all have happened by accident. Last year he was talking to Bert Maihi, shortly after he had bought the bach. When he told Bert that he did historical research, Maihi's creased eyes opened wider and his hand slapped his knee. 'You're just the boy for us' and gave Micklethwaite a hearty welcome clap on the back. Bert was on the Selwyn District Council Heritage Committee, and they were looking for someone to do a four month stint to research and write up a short history of Kaitorete Spit.

'You're just perfect, and you live here. We won't have to pay you'se any travelling allowances eh?'

Micklethwaite got a letter a month later and last November paid a formalising visit to the committee, where, since there had been no other applicants, of course he got the job. He was to be paid \$5000 on a contract and given four months to do the research, and it had already taken eight, but he sensed that Bert was in no hurry.

Every so often he would find Bert on the beach, using a kontiki with long lines to catch 'more stinking dogfish eh?' or working at his eel trap. By May the lake outlet was blocked up with gravel, and the eel traps were trenches dug between Lake Forsyth and the sea. At night the migrating eels crept down the water-filled trenches attempting to reach the sea, but few made it. The eelers, all Maori, some from the West Coast, used strong torches and 'pushed' the eels with the beams of light up to a deeper pool at the end of the trench, then gaffed them out explosively, the eels twisting like possessed demons on the gravel till the knives decapitated them, leaving the bodies squirming aimlessly. It was fascinating and horrific.

Micklethwaite had come home at 2 am, and written some lines of a poem that began

*A church night,
with stars that wriggle as you stare,
a flaying on the pliant earth....*

He'd given up after the third line. He didn't have the knack for word songs, but day after day, month through month, Birdlings Flat had quietly sung to his soul.

It wasn't like other isolated communities. You were a local as soon as you lived here. One of the gang, one of a select group of people that perversely enjoyed the sheer bloody-minded bleakness of the spit. Enjoyed the banging corrugated iron as it flapped in the southerly, and the gleaning of driftwood from the beach. Bert had given him some dried smoked eel, and it tasted of Birdlings Flat.

He had kept Maihi up to date about his work, particularly on the Maori Reserves, and Bert seemed happy. When Micklethwaite went around in June to apologise for his slowness, Bert and Becky seemed amazed. Bert had been watching the footy on the television and had had quite a few beers.

'I'm Maori Gordon mate, I take a long view. Couple of centuries, pu!'

He pretended to spit as if to demonstrate his contempt for time.

‘Have a beer? Now matey...’

Once Micklethwaite was settled, and the momentarily diversion of an All Black try had flickered across the screen, and Becky had thrust several cup cakes at him, Maihi turned to him with an inspired face.

‘There’s a big Maori land and talk stuff up at Kaikoura. You could do a paper eh?’

‘No Bert, I’m no good at public speaking...’ he shrank from the prospect.

‘Now don’t wriggle like one of those bloody eels eh, you don’t worry about that. Get up there and do your stuff eh? Don’t suppose they’d be anyone listens anyways?’ he chuckled and Betty looked reproofing.

The invitation arrived and for weeks he had laboured over each excruciating detail of a paper on the tribal boundaries of Kaitorete Spit. He had found some good stuff, and read out aloud to himself to practice. On Friday night in early July he drove up to Kaikoura to the Tribal Lands Seminar, and at 11 am on Saturday morning found himself delivering his paper in a slow dull monotone, fixing his eyes on the words and not looking up once. At the end he was obliged to look at his audience of five, and reluctantly asked for questions.

‘You said that Ngai Tapore have a Maori reserve on the Kaitorete Spit, but what evidence do you have for that?’

The question came from a beautiful dark-haired and open-eyed girl, with a distinct American twang.

‘Errr, well, I have two pieces of evidence, really, there’s a map from 1844 which marks the Ngai Tapore reserve, which is also the oil pond, and also a letter from W. F. Birdlings. He was the cattle farmer who bought the land from the Maori. He said that the oil pond was Ngai Tapore’.

There were no more questions and Micklethwaite stood up and shuffled his papers with relief, but he wasn’t going to get off that lightly.

‘Hi, my name is Sonia Blackwater. I’m doing a Ph.d on tribal boundaries in Canterbury, I was very interested in your work. Particularly in reference to the oil pond and where two indigenous peoples collide over the same resource’.

She was as gorgeous close up as far away. She was forthright, intelligent, knowledgeable, intimate. Micklethwaite was charmed, as indeed he realised belatedly, he was designed to be charmed. Hell, he went with the flow, and how often did a pretty girl chase a lonely man? And how often did a lonely man turn down a pretty girl? When Micklethwaite offered her a lift back to Christchurch she accepted, and they talked away the journey. Micklethwaite wanted to ask her out to Birdlings Flat, but he suddenly got shy.

Two weeks after the Seminar he attended a Society of Friends Meeting in town, and there was Sonia. What a piece of luck, he thought at the time, but later he wondered. Perhaps they’d talked about the Friends, and didn’t she say her father was a Quaker?

This time he did have the courage, and mid-July she came out. She ate his meal, drunk his wine, and although he made up another bed that evening, she was disinclined to accept it. She stood in the warm moonlight of a nor'wester and pulled off all of her clothes.

'I like to moonbathe' she said, and waited for him.

They moonbathed together and the love-making was fast and matter-of-fact, almost professionally directed by Sonia. His solitude felt assuaged by her strong organised caresses and well-practiced sexuality, but it had happened so fast that he was bewildered when it ended abruptly. She never stayed again, and never spoke for long on the phone. She was always about to 'go out', or 'see someone', and that short sweet sexual act began to seem to Gordon that it had happened to someone else. It's memory was intangible.

Then about two weeks later Micklethwaite discovered that some of his papers were missing, in fact all the ones referring to the Ngai Tapore reserve. The map, and the letter from W. F. Birdlings was gone. He searched everywhere for them, and even asked Sonia, but she said she knew nothing. He saw her once in the Sea Peoples compound, but she didn't return his wave. In fact that one night of sex seemed to finish off the relationship as if they were tigers, hunting each other out solely to continue the species, then shifting nervously away. Micklethwaite was left in a vacuum of doubt, and a feeling unusual for him, heartache. He felt used, but could not really understand why she had even bothered with him.

The missing documents were not originals, but as good as, because the originals had been lost. At the Tribal Lands Seminar he was taken to task over them by a man who professed to be the Ngai Makariri tribal secretary.

'That's all codswallop you know. About the oil pond being Ngai Tapore. They're forgeries those papers. Ngai Tapore don't exist anymore, they were defeated by Ngai Makariri four hundred years ago, and all the women were intermarried long ago with Ngai Makariri. You need to get the real story, from us'.

It baffled Micklethwaite, and when he passed on the comments to Bert, he only grimly chuckled.

'Must be bugging 'em eh? Don't let them bother you matey. You're doing a good job'.

But whose job was he doing? Micklethwaite then grasped that Bert Maihi was Ngai Tapore. He had unwittingly strayed into a web of tribal jealousy and paranoia, a muted struggle for supremacy between two rival tribes, that had also engulfed a beautiful American girl with a long strong body. But this was all months ago, and he relaxed. It was interesting work, and good pay, by his standards, and he began to feel he was just taking the whole thing too seriously. He had copies of the stolen papers anyway, and maybe he had just lost the originals somewhere. He was always losing stuff, papers, women, what was the difference? Sonia was a mysterious moon-goddess, who had waxed into his life, desiring some temporary companionship. It was good luck for him, but unfortunate that, like the real moon-goddess, she waned.

There was no other way he could explain it. He resumed his research, tried to stop lonely thoughts and talked himself out of getting paranoid.

The rain had settled in and it was getting cold. Micklethwaite stoked up the log-burner and put a pot of water on the hotplate, which started to spit and hiss as the long afternoon crept by. Then the letters came.

The first one was slipped under his door in the middle of September, and seemed too bizarre to be real. But when he came home one night, and groped for the front door knob he instead got a handful of bloody dead seagull entrails, and felt a deep shivering of fear. When the second letter arrived in early October he talked himself back into getting genuinely paranoid.

He should go to the police. He should leave Birdlings Flat. He did not want to talk to Bert, in fact wondered if Bert was part of the problem, or Billy Matawai? Hadn't he seen him with Sonia? Or even Sonia herself, except she could at least spell, but she evaded him as if he had the pox.

Then on the 15 October he found Sonia's body at his back fence and knew that he was getting the blame.

Everything else followed. There was no logic to it, and it sounded desperately pathetic when he explained it to Mary. A hasty, nasty sequence of hiding her body in the bach, then scrawling a frantic letter. The adrenalin was pumping and his thinking was fluid and hot, but slopping ideas all over the place. The course of action he took was not sensible, it was simply an escape plan. He wanted to make time for himself, to give the police something to mull over and turn the tables on whoever was dumping on him. If it hadn't been for the sea-mist he probably would never have undertaken this madness. Just one, calm, cup of tea would have convinced him that it was stupid, but he didn't have time. He wanted to get rid of Sonia so he wrapped her tenderly in a blanket, and man-handled her into the back of the Hillman and drove her down to the lonely road end. It wasn't part of the plan, but he did kiss her. Her face was stony cold, and he laid her down and ran away.

It was a godawful mess. Telling Mary Spark was at least a relief and he initially supposed she would arrest him or something. He rang her to apologise and he could sense her anger down the phone, and when she said 'gotta go' he knew he'd lost her, and that hurt.

He looked at the clock and it was past 6 pm. What a great way to spend Friday, and Micklethwaite looked at his notes which were a long urban sprawl of words and conjecture. He had posited three general questions: who had dumped Sonia's body at his bach, why were they trying to incriminate him, and why did her body disappear? He wrote down: 'no idea', and wondered if Mary was making any more progress. For some reason he had placed a question mark beside Eherton's name, and he wrote down in strong letters 'Sonia Blackwater was killed by Ngai Makariri, about a disputed land claim on the spit', took two Panadol for his head and went to bed.

On Saturday morning he got and tore-up the notes of last night. What a load of rubbish. Sonia had drowned. There was no murder, no killings, he was dreaming.

The rain had cleared and the skies were shining, but the southerly brought long lashing swells to the coast and the gravel terraces had been re-shaped overnight. Micklethwaite went for a walk and steered carefully away when he saw Oily McGregor down on the beach, but not carefully enough, for McGregor came hurrying up with short impatient steps.

‘You see that cop car, eh? Can’t leave the bloody place alone. Been nothing but bloody trouble ever since I found that girl. Shouldn’t have gone down, didn’t find a frost fish anyway’.

Micklethwaite looked down the spit and saw a police car pulled up in the carpark. He wondered if Spark was there, and didn’t bother listening to McGregor who was raving away.

‘I heard that girl drowned but I reckon she was done in. Who ever heard of someone swimming naked at Birdlings in October? Bloody daft! It’s those Sea People mark my words, they’re a sick bunch. Reckon the cops should take them all in, between you and me Mr Micklethwaite’ and he dropped his voice into a subtle shout ‘they’re all on drugs. Yeah, that’s what I reckon. That girl’s a lost bloody soul, wandering about. What’s she on? I reckon she’s on something. Eh?’ watching as Micklethwaite edged away.

He followed determinedly alongside.

‘I’ve been here thirty years and I’m bloody sure the Maori are all behind it. Billy is a bloody blighter, I wouldn’t give him the time of day even if he asked me...’

Micklethwaite smiled inwardly at the delightful alliteration that was coming out of Oily McGregor’s mouth, and speeded up his walk though the old man hung on doggedly before giving up and shouting after him.

‘Yer can’t bloody trust ‘em. I could have made them a fortune in oil you know, but would they help? Nah! I tell you it’s the bloody Maori at the bottom of it all, you mark my words...’

Micklethwaite managed to scrape off the raging limpet who was now out of range. Of course McGregor was a bigoted old fool, but he might be right, he just might be right.

Bert Maihi was mucking around his eeling frame, keeping an eye on things, and there was one police car in the park. He saw Billy Matawai talking to two people, one of which he was sure was Spark. She was a head shorter than the other policeman, and her blonde hair caught the sun as she turned to the car. He wanted to run to her but kept walking faster, and as the police car reversed, it brought the passenger side closer to him. He saw Spark look at him and he waved, and there was an anxious terrible pause, and then she made a hand movement back. It was a sort of wave, unless he was being dismissed.

Chapter 9

Fishing

Saturday 27 October

She had planned to take the kids to a show today when the phone rang at eight and Daryl apologised.

‘Sorry sir, bit early, but I checked out that land title for the Sea People and I found it registered under the name of a Mrs Gertrude Pierce, so I thought I’d see her this morning. She’s in Hornby.’

‘What’s that? Olly! Turn the bloody stereo down!’

He had wound up his favourite boys band and was jiggling to the beat whilst eating weetbix.

‘Mum...’

‘Turn it down I can’t hear, and eat your cereals properly, sorry Daryl. What’s her name? Ok.’

Five minutes later the phone rang again and Jim Dunning was in her ear, saying it was a bit early but Bert Maihi had rung him.

‘Said that Billy Matawai had turned back up at Birdlings Flat, thought perhaps you might want a chat?’

‘Oliver! Turn it down, sorry Jim. The kids are playing up this morning’.

She walked outside to get away from the noise.

‘You’ll pick me up Jim? Good’.

Well that was her morning stuffed.

‘Mum you promised we were going to see a film?’

‘We’ll go this afternoon, look you don’t wreck the house while I’m away? I don’t want that Jimmy friend of yours around ok Olly. The guys a menace. You’ve both got homework to do and I’ll be back by one’.

She was aware that there was absolutely zero chance of them doing any homework unless she was standing over them, but she added a threat.

‘No homework done, no film’.

‘Ahhhh mum?!’

Only kids could make that word sound whining and ingratiating at the same time. She made a strong coffee and went outside in the garden to get away from the stereo, and tried to remember all she knew about Billy Matawai.

II

Daryl Cummings lived in Upper Riccarton, so after ringing his boss, he hopped in his car and drove around to a quiet cul-de-sac and number 12.

Such are the easy adaptations of a young mans love that Mary Spark’s quiet and quick decapitation of his hopes only meant that he immediately shifted them onto Miranda, a girl who he had met only once, but which he felt in his heart could be his soul-mate. His mind briefly lingered on the lovely full-breasted Miranda. He needed a reason to go out there, and he was hoping that Mrs Pierce might supply it.

His knock brought a worried looking, middle-aged woman to the door who looked even more worried when he displayed his police licence.

‘Oh dear, it’s Trevor again isn’t it? Well I’m glad you’re not in a police car, the neighbours are pretty nosey round here, come in, come in. What was your name again young man?’

‘Detective Daryl Cummings ma’am’.

‘You look dreadfully young but at least you are polite. Please take a seat, I really had hoped that Trevor would settle down, there’s been so much trouble you know. Oh I know it’s not major crime or anything but I worry a good deal.’

Daryl had twigged by now.

‘Trevor is your son’.

‘Yes, of course, that’s him there’ but the photo displayed a handsome man of about 20 or so, and no facial hair.

‘Of course he doesn’t look that now, he goes for the hairy look. Says it attracts the women, although it doesn’t do anything for me I must say’.

‘But he doesn’t call himself Trevor...’

‘Oh gracious no. That’s too boring for Trevor, he’s called, what is it now’ she pondered, then remembered ‘Josho’.

Cummings was pleased that Josho was called Trevor and quickly elicited from Gertrude Pierce that her husband had bought a section out at Birdlings Flat many years ago.

‘He was keen on the fishing, but they tell me it’s no good now, but after his stroke had never used it. So Trevor moved out there. He was always in trouble, drugs, protests, well we thought it would quieten him down being out there. But he started these Sea People, and I can’t make head or tail of it. Tell me what’s he done this time. I love my son, but he’s a mystery to me’.

‘He hasn’t done anything Mrs Pierce, apart from being somewhat obstructive’.

‘That’s Trevor all over, so you are not arresting him this time?’

‘No, unless we get him on cannabis charges of course’.

Mrs Pierce looked prim at this point.

‘I don’t want to discuss that. His wife is just as bad...’

‘He’s married?’

‘Not properly of course, but to, oh she’s got a funny name too? Spray, that’s it and they called the new baby Anemone, dear wee thing, but what a name! She has settled him down a bit, I’ll grant that, and she’s quite clever with the ornaments they make, here’s one here’

She handed Cummings a beautifully polished piece of paua, shaped into a dolphin brooch.

‘It’s nice isn’t it. They go all over the South Island in their own truck, markets and arts festivals and such. Spreading their message they call it. They often go up to Nelson and let’s see now, the local paper did a spread on them, photos and everything’ she rummaged around and said triumphantly ‘here it is’ and she waved newspaper.

Cummings decided to bring the interview to a close. Mrs Pierce was obviously keen to show off the talents of her son, despite his dodgy life-style.

‘Thank you Mrs Pierce, I should get going...’

‘Tch, I left it in the sun’ and she turned the pages ‘it was on the inside, a whole page on the sea-fest market they call it, and a big picture of the Sea People. August it was, full colour. They have a nice stall don’t they?’

‘Thank you Mrs Pierce I should be off now’.

‘You haven’t looked at it’ she reminded him briskly.

Cummings looked reluctantly, and then looked again.

‘Thank you Mrs Pierce, you have been unexpectedly helpful. Can I keep this paper?’

‘Well... I...’

‘It will be returned. I’ll write a receipt’.

‘Is he in trouble?’ she asked plaintively at the doorstep.

‘Well’ he grinned ‘he’s been telling us fibs’.

‘That’s Trevor, a good boy, but not reliable’.

Cummings congratulated himself as he got into the car for a quick escape, and for finding some gold. So often police work just uncovered dross, but in the full coloured photo of the Sea People it showed a stall with three people working behind it. One was Miranda looking rather lovely, with a wide floppy hat. Another was Josho, dark but with a sort of grin, as well he might be grinning, for the third person was a tall black-haired girl whose face was captured in a big smile with one long arm draped attractively over Josho’s shoulders and the other waving to the camera. Sonia.

III

When they got to Birdlings Flat Mary Spark was pleased to see the smudges of smoke coming out of Billy Matawai’s chimney. She wanted to catch him a little off-guard and decided against ringing. Jim Dunning approved although made the observation:

‘Billy is a bit of a joker you know. Comes on to everyone and knows police and police procedure well enough to give us the run around’.

Yesterdays cold southerly had blistered through and left behind a long rolling swell that thumped grandly on the gravel, Never ceasing in its confident belief that it was going to bust through the spit one day. The sky had blue puffs in it, but not enough to make a sailor suit out of. It was strange being here again. For twenty years she had Never been near the place since that fishing trip with dad, and now she had been here practically every day. She had started a love affair here. And ended it here.

Bert Maihi waved to them as they went by and it reminded her of Micklethwaite’s view of the old Maori ‘don’t underestimate him, he runs pretty deep’. She must talk to him.

They pulled into Billy’s front yard, and he was busy burning rubbish in a 40 gallon drum. He wore a large red-checked bush shirt and a back to front cap, and jeans torn out at the knees. He looked a bit like Billy T. James, a popular Maori comedian, and certainly did everything to live up to his half namesake.

‘So Jimmy boy, dropped in for another chat eh?’

‘Not me Billy, Detective Senior-Sergeant Mary Spark, Christchurch CIB’.

‘Hey, I’m moving up in the world eh? Never been grilled by a lady cop before.’

Good looking too’.

Spark had various ways of handling this sort of introduction but for the moment took a softly softly approach.

‘Thank you Mr Matawai. I wanted to ask some questions about the girl who was found on the beach here. Pretty much right beside your bach here’.

Billy was stuffing some more rubbish into the fire and bits of paper were fluttering away like moths.

‘Can’t blame me love, I wasn’t here. I was on the West Coast, and anyways it wasn’t by my bach, it was way down on the beach’.

Billy interrupted every third or fourth word with a congenial obscenity, as if they were semi-colons.

‘How did you know that?’

He grinned.

‘Bert there, he knows everything’.

‘Did he also tell you the name of the dead women?’

Billy kept over rigorously stuffing the drum. Then came a soft ‘yeah’.

‘What was that Mr Matawai?’

‘I said yeah lady cop’.

‘What did you think when you knew it was Sonia Blackwater?’

Matawai did not look anywhere in particular.

‘I didn’t think nothing of it’.

‘Really. You were lovers for several months according to Sonia’s flatmate’.

‘Nah, that she-bitch wouldn’t know anything. Just a blonde wig on a stick she is. Me and Sonia, we went out for two, three weeks. A month at the most I reckon’.

‘Was Sonia out here to see you?’

‘Nah, I wasn’t here anyway, how would I know?’

Spark was trying to pin down his continued defensiveness.

‘We only have your word for that’.

‘Well you talk to mate in Hoki, and he’ll tell yer. I can give you his number. He’ll tell yer, you don’t lay anything on me like that’.

Spark did not at first understand what Billy Matawai said, for as his temper got hotter, his rate of obscenities thickened into a soupy language that was more lumps than broth.

‘We are not trying to lay anything on you Mr Matawai, merely trying to find out why she drowned’.

He looked smart.

‘Round here they are saying she was murdered’.

‘Who is saying that?’

‘Everyone. Even the wind, but I don’t think so. She liked swimming Sonny, always liked a swim’.

‘Pretty cold for a swim Billy?’ that was Jim Dunning.

Matawai shrugged and started putting in pieces of carpet followed by several old plastic paint tins, which made a black stink.

‘Did she leave her clothes here, while she went for a swim?’

‘Nah. Have a look if you want...’

Spark sensed a half-second before Jim Dunning that that was a good idea.

‘Thank you, Jim?’

Matawai watched Jim Dunning walk into the house with a shrug and a slightly disagreeable ‘huh’.

‘He won’t find any dope if that’s what you’re after. I’ve smoked it all, heh’.

He took out a packet of fags and lit one, watching with some satisfaction the column of filthy black smoke that retched out into the air. Spark was not going to get smoked out that easily.

‘Actually Mr Matawai we are not interested in dope at the moment. When did you start going out with Sonia Blackwater?’

Matawai pretended to think about this, but Spark was sure most of his answers had been pre-prepared.

‘I dunno, about July I guess, yeah that’s it’.

‘And it lasted three to four weeks...’

‘Yeah. She was a girl that moved on, yer know? Quick flick and then on’ and he flicked the ash off his cigarette as if to demonstrate how Sonia’s life was managed.

‘So you have no idea of why she was swimming here?’

‘Not a clue love. Tell you the truth we didn’t end on the best of terms. She had another man tucked away and I wasn’t too happy about that...’

Same old story, no one seemed to like Sonia very much. A beautiful smiley long-legged girl that everyone had sex with but did not like.

‘You didn’t kill her?’ worth a try.

The reply was fast and assured.

‘I wasn’t here love, besides I don’t kill people. Not even cops’.

A very disagreeable man. The conversation was not jokey now.

‘Very pleased to hear it, Jim?’

Dunning had come out and shook his head. He had heard Billy’s last remark.

‘Don’t be so clever Billy, your tongue runs away on you’.

‘So do some of my other body parts eh’.

He giggled though Spark did not really get the joke.

‘You don’t seem very sad about Sonia’s death?’

‘Yeah I’m sad, but life goes on eh? She dumped me and got dumped by the sea. That’s the way eh? Life’s great dynamic’.

‘You know she was four months pregnant’.

Now that was a shocker and Billy Matawai had no prepared answer for that. He spat on the ground and looked out to the sea, then ground his cigarette out on the gravels.

‘You’re not the father?’

‘Shit no! I use rubbers, all the time’.

Spark looked at him and wondered at what point the lies began and the truth ended and decided that she did not have a clue, and probably neither did Billy.

‘Thank you Mr Matawai’.

‘Ta’ and he strode off into his bach.

They walked back up the main road to the side-road. Bert Maihi’s place was right on the corner of both roads, and you could watch just about everyone who came and went to Birdlings Flat. They paused at the gate and talked softly for a few moments.

‘Well, I can’t say I’m happy with Matawai’s answers. I suppose he’s worked out an alibi with his mate?’

‘Should think so sir’.

‘Why? Why go to the trouble at all? Is he just nervous about the police anyway, or has he genuinely got something to hide? You know him Jim, what do you think?’

Dunning looked up at the sky for some sort of inspiration.

‘Can’t see him killing anyone really sir. He’s all talk. It’s strange that they were lovers and she died here’.

‘Bloody peculiar. The autopsy said there were no drugs in the bloodstream of Sonia’.

Jim Dunning caught on.

‘Oh, you think they were having a drug session and it went over the top?’

‘Something more than cannabis. What’s that new drug that makes people crazy for a while?’

‘I think they all do sir. Crack? Ecstasy?’

They considered the theory in silence.

‘Why does everyone think Sonia was murdered?’ asked Spark aloud, more to herself than anyone else.

‘Do you sir?’

‘Yes’.

Bert Maihi came out.

‘Cheery Jim, long time since we saw you out. Becky will be disappointed. She likes giving you a hard time eh?’

Dunning made the introductions and the conversation, like the sunshine that was coming out, stayed on bright safe topics like the sea and fishing. Dunning brought the subject around to Sonia and Bert looked puzzled at the name change.

‘You guys came around asking about a Valerie and then a Sonia. It fooled us all eh, Jim, even us smart ones’.

‘Yep. Fooled us too Bert. You didn’t see anything funny that night, I know I’ve asked you before...’

Bert’s face suddenly went grey and he had a coughing fit.

‘Look, sorry Jim. That sea-mist was bad eh, and bad for me lungs, so I keep inside on those nights’.

Spark was tired, and could not think of any questions to ask Maihi. She glanced furtively at her watch and had to refuse the cuppa.

‘Sorry, I promised the kids I would go to a film this afternoon’.

They walked back to the police car.

‘Poor sod, he has emphysema. Dunno how long he’s going to last. Got it from the coal mines on the West Coast. Miner for forty years Bert. Quite a character, he’ll let us know if he hears anything’.

As Dunning reversed the car Spark suddenly saw Gordon out of the side window. Her promises were more important to her kids, but she saw his wave and gave a quick wave back. It didn’t mean anything.

Chapter 10

Sonia

Sunday 28 October

She was beautiful and open eyed, with long black hair and that ready, easy sort of smile that all young Americans seemed to have. Her eyes were blue, her skin smooth and strokeable. She was thirty-one but few wrinkles showed on the passport photo and her nose and chin were attractively moulded, which in an older person, you might suspect has been assisted by plastic surgery. Her black hair fanned out behind a neck which looked strong, with a hint of athleticism. She was smiling, welcoming, the sort of face that most people willingly helped. A face that would open doors, and some of those might be bedroom doors, but wasn't that hindsight? It was a good photo and Mary studied it for some time, trying to second guess the personality that lay beyond the sheen of plastic.

There was nothing in the structure of her face you could hold a grievance against, and yet everyone who met her did. They felt 'used', 'she dumped me, the sea dumped her', 'a bit ruthless'. Spark had broke open the locked attache case and had spread out on the kitchen table all the life that was Sonia Blackwater. It was 9 pm on Sunday evening, the kids were in bed and at last it was peaceful. The cat vibrated quietly on her lap and a hot chocolate steamed unnoticed on the table. Here was a passport and a copy of a birth certificate, and there were several letters of introduction by Edward Blackwater, one to Professor Eherton starting 'Dear Douglas...' and there was a copy of a reply from Professor Eherton, along the same warm and welcoming terms. So Sonia had had a good start at Canterbury University, with a room, and excellent contacts. There were two copies of references from academics at Houston University in language that would be churlish to describe as anything other than glowing. There was also a copy of her academic record, scattered with copious amounts of A's. Sonia was clearly a brilliant student, so why didn't anyone like her? Even Eherton had praised her professional abilities, not her personal attributes.

'Maybe she was a monster, eh pussy?'

Spark sipped at the chocolate and the cat, got up, arched it's back, swivelled around and deposited itself back into the warm hollow of Mary Spark's dressing gown. She

stroked the warm fur absently and was rewarded by a rich deep purring.

Spark opened up the report Cummings made of the flatmates comments. This was typically over-efficient Cummings, for there was no need of this sort of detail, yet, annoyingly, it was rather helpful. Flatmates tended to have insights into people's characters that even lovers might miss, and this flatmate had got stuck in.

'She didn't have a steady boyfriend', 'but she wasn't short of men, if you know what I mean', 'she kept herself to herself Sonia, a bit secretive', 'she didn't stick with any, bit ruthless I'd say, said they were all after the same thing', 'she was alright, just a flatmate' there was hardly a note of enthusiasm anywhere in the interview. Cummings must have fancied the flatmate, for all they talked about was sex, but maybe he was on the right track. Sonia's killer might well be amongst one of these occasional men — except that she drowned. Everyone mentioned Sonia's swimming abilities, and seemed surprised that she had drowned. Could the pathologist be wrong? Creighton was a prat, but enormously experienced.

Spark started to scribble quickly. If she assumed Gordon was telling the truth then Sonia's body was moved at least three times. Once to the back of Gordon's back, once by Gordon and a third time back into the sea? Perhaps number one and two movers were the same people, but how ridiculous was that?

It was getting a strain: pretending she did not know as much as she did. Only her and Gordon knew of Sonia's restless afterlife, and now she was imprisoned by her silence. To tell the superintendent the story now was to admit that she had been loose with the truth for the last two weeks, goodbye promotion, goodbye validation girl. She had to go it alone somehow, and (it was a sneaky side-thought), she might actually need Gordon Micklethwaite's help. Spark threw down the pen and said loudly to the cat.

'What a bloody mess'.

The clock chimed ten. She should head to bed soon, next week was going to be busy. Spark dug out the remaining papers from Sonia's attache case. There were some early drafts of thesis material, with some notes on Maori tribal identity and such. Leafing through them she came on a copy of an old map, with Kaitorete Spit and Lake Ellesmere and the tiny reserve halfway down marked in old fashioned but precise pen 'Ngai Tapore'. At the top of the map was a date and the words 'G. Micklethwaite'.

So Sonia had stolen that stuff, and a copy of a letter from W. F. Birdlings was underneath. Spark found herself reading it out loud for the script was hard to decipher.

'Moved the cattle along the beach, but lost two in the scrub. Went in search of them and found a curious petroleum pond in the middle of the spit, with a thick edge of black coal-tar around the edge. One of my beasts was trying to drink the water and I had to yell and hurrah a great deal to get the animal out of the pond, and got myself quite sticky with the black tar. One of my Maori hands pointed to the pond and said they made a poultice of the coal-tar for spear wounds.'

Jackie Rua said it belonged to the Tapore tribe, which surprised me. Made good progress down the spit and reached the Maori settlement of Taumutu in the evening, where they invited us in for tea and fish.

I asked the Ngai Makariri people about the ownership of the pond thinking possibly to purchase it, but they said I would have to see the chief of the Ngai Tapore at Poronui, as it belonged to them...'

Spark did not make anything of it and started putting away Sonia's papers. She yawned, and the cat on cue did the same.

'Off you go pussy'.

She shoved the cat onto the floor, where it took offence at this treatment and rattled through the cat door, leaving it swinging noisily.

She would probably have to see Gordon again. That wave had been ambiguous and she needed to find closure on this sordid little affair. She made a note on the paper: ask him about Maori connections and Te Urua, and get more exact times as to when he moved her body with the relationship to high tides. The phone rang and Spark stared at it, somewhat reluctant to answer it this late. It was Vince.

'Hallo Mary, just ringing about the kids. Did they want to come at Christmas? Need to book the flights if they do, or the bus. Oliver talked about it, and you know what he's like when he gets an idea in his head, very focussed. Got it from you I reckon'.

That was typical Vince. Always a little dig at her expense.

'I thought I was taking them up to Hamilton to see mum?'

'Pretty boring isn't it? They'd have more fun down here'.

She was tired and scratchy now. They'd been over this. He got them for skiing and she got them for Christmas. They started to have a low-level disagreeable argument, the kind of argument that all people should avoid at this time on a worn-out Sunday night.

'Look Vince, we've already talked about this...'

'Yeah I know, but I don't see the kids much..'

'Well you shouldn't have moved down to Queenstown'.

It was the same old arguments. Soon they would be getting into blame.

'Well I was still prepared to give it a go'.

'You can't have girlfriends and me Vince, look it's late...'

'Well you ask Olly and Sophie, give them the choice'.

Vince said that knowing full well that the kids would choose an exciting Queenstown over old smelly granny any day.

'I don't think so Vince' that was Spark's warning message.

She was tired and then made a mistake. She thought by changing the conversation it might shift Vince off the topic of kids. Well it did.

‘I met a friend of yours, Gordon Micklethwaite. Said he knew you at Lake Tekapo’.

‘Huh, not exactly a friend, devious bastard if you ask me. Did you mention my name? He’s a one man operator, keeps back stuff, I almost did him for obstructing police work, and he doesn’t open up much’.

‘He seems intelligent’.

‘Too bloody smart. How didja meet him? Birdlings Flat, that’s a good dump for him’.

Spark found herself in the curious position of implicitly defending Micklethwaite.

‘I like it. It’s wild.’

‘Well give us a ring about the kids. I think you’re hogging them all to yourself...’

‘Goodbye Vince’.

She put down the phone and reflected on why police marriages did not often work. It was just too close, and police were a kind of club, and once you were a member you could not unclub yourself. There was no shortage of policemen interested in Mary but she had tried that, and it had failed. Perhaps that’s why she went for that archery instructor. Bruce wasn’t it?

Chapter 11

A Kiss

Monday 29 October

Monday morning and the central police station was busy with the aftermath of Saturday night parties that had got out of hand. Several drunks had enjoyed the hospitality of a hard square cell, and an Armed Defenders call-out on early Sunday morning had resulted in an unexpected haul of drugs and firearms. Mary Spark found the place humming and busied herself with the court cases she had to attend today and tomorrow. Almost certainly she would have to be a witness for one of them, and she looked through her notes to practice her statement. Cummings popped his head around the door and showed her the picture of Josho and Sonia.

‘Shall I go and see him? Give him a rark up?’

Spark was a little annoyed, for she would have rather gone herself. She knew Josho might be a tough nut to crack and wasn’t sure Cummings would be able to handle it.

‘He’s not going to be easy you know, what about Miranda, have you seen her yet?’

Daryl looked pleased.

‘She’s on my list. Don’t you think I can handle Josho?’

‘No’.

‘Well thanks sarge’ though he didn’t seem too offended and Spark softened the comment.

‘You’ve done well, that was a good follow-up.’

But the investigation was losing coherency, and like a Canterbury river, splitting into many braids. She felt they needed a more careful plan of investigation, rather than plunging into the thick of it. Billy Matawai might be more bendable in the police station, although somehow she doubted it. Of course Miranda might be more helpful if Cummings could get her alone, which seemed to excite him, and some nuisance across the room was waving a phone at her and mouthing the words ‘for you’.

The thoughts collided together in Spark's brain for a few seconds and with a nod to Daryl 'ok, but don't go heavy' she pressed a button and took the call.

'Detective Senior-Sergeant Mary Spark'.

'Miss Spark? Dave Crossland from the Internal Affairs department, I'm ringing from Wellington. A Mr. Edward Blackwater has applied for a temporary visa to arrive in New Zealand, are you acquainted with him?'

'Never met him before in my life, but his daughter lies in our morgue'.

'Ah, that explains it. So he is coming to collect the body is that right?'

She looked at the clock. Court started in thirty minutes so she'd better bustle.

'Yes, of course. Is there a problem?'

'No, not exactly, now that you have explained it. We can let him in on compassionate grounds. He has a record you see, a criminal record'.

Something new every day.

'Edward Blackwater is a Senior Social Geography Professor from Houston University' Spark pointed out.

'That may well be true I know, but his conviction is sufficient to bar him from entering our country'.

'What was it?'

'Well, strictly I shouldn't tell you, with all these privacy laws etcetera, but no doubt you will keep it confidential?'

Spark nodded into the phone then realised that was futile.

'Yes'.

'He was convicted of interfering with a little girl in 1970, child abuse we would call it these days. Not imprisoned, I don't know why, the details we have are sketchy. He took photographs as well, of other little girls, although there is no mention of rape or anything. So we will give him a temporary visa, just thought I'd check with you first. Thank you Mrs Spark'.

Spark was rattled by the call, and gathered her papers hastily together. She made a quick calculation and decided that if Sonia was born in 1964 she would be six when her father was convicted. Photographs as well, this bloody case was getting murkier and murkier. She just hoped Cummings would not do anything stupid.

The stereo was on loud and Daryl Cummings was banging the steering wheel hard in time to the music. He was on a high. Going to see the lovely Miranda and to get the boot into Josho. ‘Ya, ya, heh heh’. At sixty-seven decibels even Cummings voice sounded musical, particularly when swamped by a couple of electric guitars and a drummer going berserk. He swerved into the courtyard of the Sea People and braked sharply to avoid running over a languid dog. He snapped off the music and got out with a tidy brush at his hair and jacket. There was a strong nor’easterly running off the hills of Banks Peninsula, and blew out his tie and scuffed up dust in the yard. His entrance would have been more impressive if there had been anyone to see it, but apart from the dog that was sniffing his foot, the yard was bare. And silent.

He looked about the collection of huts and sheds that made up the Sea People’s compound. The huts were painted in bright primal colours that looked toy-townish, and a few cabbage trees were struggling in the gravel garden. There was a big old bus parked in the yard with a sort of red psychedelic motif on it and The Sea People in elaborate scroll design — quite well done. Cummings turned his back to the bus and scanned the huts again.

‘Anyone here?’

‘Yes’.

Cummings jumped to find Josho standing behind him. The creepy git must have been behind the bus, and he immediately felt off-balance. Josho one, Cummings nil. So Cummings took back the offensive role.

‘Mr Trevor Pierce?’

Josho stared with his two metallic eyes and Cummings tried hard to stare back, but he was out of practice and made a pompous effort to look at his notebook. He showed Josho his licence.

‘Detective Daryl Cummings, we spoke about a week ago?’

Josho did not shrug or give any indication whatever.

‘You are Trevor Pierce aren’t you?’

‘That was my former name, the name I shed when I became one with the sea. My name is now Josho’.

‘Oh cut the stupid sea bit out eh? Do us a favour Trev and stop telling us lies. I talked to your mum yesterday. She said you weren’t very reliable...’

‘My name is Josho’ and he made a move to walk away.

Cummings began to get annoyed, partly because his subtle method was not working very well, and partly because he didn’t have any other method. The guy was just a jerk.

‘Mr Pierce I need to talk to you...’

‘You are talking?’

Replied Josho who had walked to the front steps of a hut and sat down on them, slowly pulling off his boots. It revealed two large grubby feet. Josho two, Cummings nil. Cummings took a deep breathe and tried again.

‘You told us that you had never heard of the girl who was found dead on the beach’.

Josho looked at Cummings with a slight hint of amusement.

‘You had no name. She was just a girl on the beach’.

Now unfortunately Cummings remembered that was exactly right. They had no name, and the next name they got, Valerie, was no better than the first name. Josho 3 Cummings 0.

‘Ok. Her name is Sonia Blackwater, do you know her?’

‘She was one of us for a while, but she did not linger. She wanted to find her way on the land, but I told her her soul would be certain of home in the sea’.

‘What’s that suppose to mean?’

Josho shrugged as if his meaning were perfectly clear, and he started rubbing off the dirt between his toes. Cummings waved the *Nelson Mail* photo at his face.

‘Do you recognise this?’

Josho took it and studied it carefully then handed it back in silence.

‘It is Sonia’.

‘I bloody know that. When did you last see her? What was your relationship with her?’

Daryl was losing his temper, and forgetting that firing multiple questions at a subject was not recommended in the police officers interview method. Firstly it might confuse the subject, and secondly it enabled the subject to answer any of the questions they chose. Josho did not look confused, and did not in any case answer any of the questions in a helpful way.

‘She was of the Sea People, her land life I know nothing of...’

‘When did you last see her Trevor?’

Cummings interrupted, trying anything to needle this self-appointed guru. Josho rubbed his toes and thought.

‘It was the time of the Spring Tides’.

‘What?’

‘You call it August or September’.

‘That was definitely the last time? What did she did do here?’

‘She helped us with our purpose, spreading our message and distributing our words. Helping to spread sea-calm onto the land. The message of Te Urua’.

‘Who the hell is he?’

Cummings was losing his way. Josho stood up and pointed at the wide blue sea that filled half of the horizon.

‘Te Urua is the sea god, the sea my friend’.

‘I’m not your bloody friend. You seemed pretty friendly with Sonia, you had your arm draped over her? Were you having a relationship?’

Josho seemed to find that amusing.

‘We all loved her...’

‘And she ended up dead, killed on your beach, killed by your sea God mate, Te Urua huh?’

That got a bite. Josho frowned and stood up, his height magnified by the steps.

‘You are one of the evil ones, Te Urua said you would come. You should go before harm comes to you’.

‘Are you threatening me Mr Pierce? I am a police officer, and I think you are not helping us Mr Pierce, not helping us at all’.

Josho then did something unexpected. He raised his long arms and started to sing, a strange song, almost a Maori-like karakia, and he sang it well and it carried around the compound. At that point a woman came out and started to sing as well, and Cummings stared between them as they warbled in partnership. It was threatening, and was intended to threaten, yet he didn’t believe he could arrest someone just for singing. It was unnerving entertainment, if that’s what it was, and it achieved the purpose of ending the interview.

‘I will be back Mr Pierce or Josho or whatever you call yourself’.

The singers stood with raised arms and sang on. Cummings slammed the car door, revved and reversed it, and cleared the Sea People gate with a spin of tyres and the exhaust metaphorically between his legs. He crunched a gear, and swore that he had not even got to see Miranda — when he saw her, out on the beach walking along slowly. He braked heavily and walked over the soft gravels intersecting her path.

‘Miranda?’

She turned and smiled and looked as lovely as ever. Her dress was a pale blue decorated with serpents, and she had shawl around her shoulders. Her feet were bare.

‘Do you remember me? I’m the police officer that came out a week ago to talk about the girl that died on the beach’.

‘Oh yes, such a shame. I sang a waiata for her’.

‘Can we sit down?’

Cummings indicated a large log of driftwood that was half out of the gravel and probably too big for the small four-wheelers to drag away. She nodded and sat down

lightly, like a butterfly.

‘We know her name, it’s Sonia Blackwater’.

Miranda looked dumbly at him.

‘Yes we heard. Poor Sonia I said a prayer for her’.

‘Who did you hear from?’

She seemed to think the question odd.

‘Well Te Urua told us, but Billy was here yesterday’

‘Billy Matawai? What did he want?’

‘Oh, he fancies me. But he did bring us eels as well, have you eaten eel?’

Cummings was upset that Billy Matawai was sniffing around.

‘It tastes sweet, like cod, and full of nutrition and vitamins. Would you like one of our pamphlets on the benefits of eating sea food Daryl?’

‘No. I came to see you. Who is this Te Urua, is he your God?’

She nodded calmly.

‘I like to talk to him on most days, he calms me’.

The sea did not look very calm to Cummings. Today there was big surf breaking and hustling the stones back and forth.

‘He?’

She smiled.

‘Yes, we use ‘he’ conventionally. The men use the female pronoun and the women the male pronoun. It seems fair’.

She gave Cummings such a sweet smile that it went right to the bottom of his stomach and sloped around. Not for the first time it occurred to him that Miranda was well-educated.

‘You haven’t always live here Miranda, with the Sea People. Where do you come from?’

‘Oh no, I’m from Christchurch, my family are there. I like Christchurch though I don’t feel it is home so much. I like being here’.

‘You went to school...?’

‘At Girls High and then I did a Fine Arts course at the university. That was a wonderful time’

She stared dreamily at the sky, then turned to him bringing her face and breasts very close.

‘Do you do art Daryl?’

‘No, I’d like to’ he lied.

‘You should, it opens us to the world. You would see things differently’.

She looked at him earnestly, and with such a fullness of honesty that it made him uncomfortable and lusty at the same time. He wanted this woman, he wanted this woman badly. It just came out.

‘Can I kiss you?’

‘I don’t think you should’.

He kissed her, and her lips were moist and full, but unresponsive. Some silence as they both looked away.

‘You don’t like me?’ he asked eventually.

‘Oh no I like you a lot Daryl, but I’ve decided to remain pure till I’ve had a revelation of my purpose on this planet’.

‘Eh?’

He put his hand on her leg and she did not seem to mind.

‘Josho says that this will come soon’.

‘You believe him?’

‘Oh yes, he is very wise’.

‘Very randy if you ask me’.

She giggled.

‘Yes and that. He’s been trying to get into my knickers for ages, but I’ve told him I’m waiting for instructions’.

Daryl was dumbfounded by this remark.

‘Who from?’ he asked curiously.

‘From the sea. from Te Urua’ and she gazed raptly out to it ‘I haven’t always been good. I know that, because bad things have happened to me, and they don’t happen to you unless you have been bad’.

Cummings could not make head nor tail of this.

‘Did Josho get randy with Sonia?’.

‘Oh yes, but Sonia was a very passionate person anyway’.

It seemed to the unfortunate Daryl that at this point in time that everyone in Birdlings Flat, was either sexual, or getting sex, or had had sex, except him. A man was walking on the beach and Daryl thought he recognised him.

‘Is that a bloke who lives here. Micklethwaite?’

‘Oh yes, Gordon’.

‘I suppose he wants to get into your knickers too?’

She giggled.

‘Daryl, you say funny things, no, I don’t think so’

She waved at him and Micklethwaite waved back and walked on.

‘I see him a lot’.

‘Miranda, I want to see you again’ and he faced her.

She gazed sweetly at him.

‘Well I’m always here, with Te Urua. I will never leave here’.

Cummings had to digest this remark and whilst he did so a thought occurred to him.

‘Sonia and Josho. How long were they lovers?’

‘Oh, not long I think. I think she was very beautiful don’t you?’

‘Yes’.

‘She deserved burial at sea’.

‘Eh?’

‘That’s what we believe in. When we die our bodies should be lost into the sea from where we emerged’.

‘Oh’.

He kissed her again. She was batty but she was beautiful, and he knew he was now utterly in love with her.

‘You aren’t in love with me are you?’

‘No’.

‘But you want to have sex with me?’

‘Well...’

She giggled again and stood up, brushing her dress and his hand off her leg.

‘I’m not ready yet. I may not ever be. Don’t fall in love with me Daryl, it will hurt us both.’

Daryl nodded wisely as if he had already weighed the decision in his mind and decided not to fall in love.

Chapter 12

The Hunchbacks Story

Wednesday 31 October

It was the time for bogies, punkies, ghouls and beasties. The dead risen from their graves on this one night, came back to haunt the living, and would steal their souls if they had half the chance, but the living fought back, and concealed themselves with grotesque masks, shabby cloaks and spell stratagems to make them look as horrible as the living dead themselves, and so escape being eaten. As she drove out of town Spark saw several straggling parties of children dressed in a weird assortment of clothes. Her children were out there on the streets of Christchurch tonight, mingling with the living dead, and exploiting this new Americanism of trick or treating. The taller children with black cloaks and vivid masks and the littlies trotting behind, clutching the remnants of their cardboard disguises, which were self-destructing in little bits along the pavement behind them, bewildered by these strange doings, but far too excited to miss out.

She disliked the fact her kids were turning into yanks. Pants instead of trousers, coke instead of L&P, hi instead of hello and Oliver tried out 'mom' one day, but she put her foot flat down on that. Clearly she was going to have to cut down on the television allocation. She had dropped Sophie and Oliver at her sisters place, who had two similar aged children, and all for would no doubt be prowling the streets, wildly excited. They would sleepover, another bloody Americanism. The city glow fell away and she speeded up on the open highway, keen to get this meeting over and done with. The curves of the road felt very familiar to her and she put on a tape of Miles Davis and let his kind of blues weld the blue-dark night.

One of Monday's court cases had crept into Tuesday, and been shifted to today when miracles of miracles the complainant suddenly pleaded guilty, and that was that. It sometimes happened. She went back to the station and had time to read the paper, where there was a long article on the customs of Halloween, and where she learned that the celts had a cult of the dead and that the 31st of October was the start of their year. The celts seemed to do things differently, and thinking of them moved her onto Micklethwaite which made her think she had time to fit him into her busy timetable, and personally tell him what an utter bastard he was.

She rang, he sounded surprised and pleased, and as Spark followed the black Lake Ellesmere it did occur to her, not for the first time today, that there was a sort of correspondence between the night of the living dead, and Sonia's apparent refusal to let her soul be buried quietly. Every turn of the case had got more complicated, with increasing half-truths, lies and male enemies, but Spark actually liked Sonia. She was spunky girl and seemed to get what she wanted, even if men didn't appreciate it. She could have been a friend.

There was still a pale light under a leaden sky at Birdlings Flat. The light from Gordon's place stood out and he came to the door quickly and took her coat.

'That's very old-fashioned of you Gordon?'

He nodded.

'I was trying to soften the blow. I thought you came to tell me it was all over'.

'I came to tell you you were bastard for dropping me in the crap like that'.

'Coffee? What did your boss say when you told him?'

'I didn't' she replied icily 'you see Gordon you were bloody lucky. That night I got home, after our bit of a bonk, the phone rang, and a voice, a Maori voice I think, told me that the girl on the beach was Sonia Blackwater'.

'A Maori?'

He looked surprised and stood poised with the coffee cup in one hand and the metal percolator in the other.

'Who?'

'I don't know and my coffee is getting cold'.

'Oh' he poured, and then said thoughtfully 'I wonder if it was Bert?'

She was interested now.

'Bert Maihi. Why would he do that?'

'You've spoken to Bert? Did his voice sound the same as the one on the phone?'

'Could be, but that's a hell of a jump'.

'I'm a jumping kind of guy'.

In reference to historical deduction that might have seemed an apt remark but in reference to sexual matters Spark found it distasteful.

'Well no more jumping on me thank you very much Gordon. I came to tell you that. You betrayed me'.

Micklethwaite nodded agreeably and something burst out of her heart.

'Seems you had a bloody good time with Sonia anyhow. Her flatmate said she came back one morning, all mussed up from a night shagging on the beach at Bir-

dlings Flat’.

Gordon digested this.

‘Well someone was lucky, but it wasn’t me. Honest Mary, we were just one night, and that was it. Sonia had a lot of lovers. I saw her car at least once at The Sea People commune’.

‘Josho?’

‘I suppose so. She was after something, Te Urua probably, that’s all he ever talks about’.

Spark sipped the coffee and in spite of herself felt mollified, and became more relaxed.

‘What is this Te Urua thing again?’

‘It’s at least several things. The Sea People call the sea Te Urua, but it is also the mythical ancestor of the Tapore tribe. A sort of half-man half-god, a warrior leader who brought the Tapore to these shores. Te Urua also means the greenstone mask, which is the legendary mask or helmet worn by Te Urua in battle, and made out of a single piece of greenstone, so they say.’

‘I saw a few masks this evening, mostly cardboard though. My kids are out trick-and-treating. Do you believe in Te Urua, the mask of greenstone?’

He handed her a book.

‘It’s all in there about the Ngai Tapore tribal history. I’m sceptical, I mean the skill needed to craft from greenstone a single ornament the size of a face mask, I think that was well beyond Maori carving ability of that date. It’s not even clear that the Tapore tribe had access to the greenstone, which would have had to come from the West Coast. They arrived in New Zealand very early according to one version, 1500 years ago. That’s five hundred years before Ngai Makariri, so it’s a touchy topic for Sonia to get into’.

Spark leafed through the book desultory. Try as she might she could not get interested in all this Maori stuff. He sat beside her on the sofa, a movement that made her frown, and Micklethwaite changed tack.

‘I saw your detective friend on the beach, with Miranda.’

‘Cummings? Yeah, he was supposed to be interviewing Josho. Made a complete hash of it’.

‘They were kissing’.

Spark was surprised.

‘I knew he fancied her, I didn’t think he had the skills frankly to move that quickly’.

Micklethwaite hesitated.

‘She’s a lost soul, and wanders the beach all the time, I think they are worried about her, the Sea People. I’m not sure it’s a good idea for Cummings to get involved’.

‘Nothing I can do Gordon, love and all that’.

She snapped the book shut. Once the coffee was finished, and she asked a few questions she would leave.

‘She’s searching for the spirit of her child’.

‘What?’

‘She had a child, at about sixteen I think. Angel she was called, about three years old, and she drowned on the beach here, must have wandered into the surf’.

Spark then remembered what Jim Dunnings had said. So that was Miranda’s child? Like any woman, she felt a horrid sense of pain.

‘That’s horrible. Ok, I’ll better tell him that, where did you get this from?’

‘Josho’.

‘Actually he’s Trevor. Trevor Pierce. His mum owns the land’.

Micklethwaite nodded in silent amusement.

‘Well, you have to admit, Josho is a better name. I don’t much like mine. I was called ‘mickey wait’ at school’.

Spark wasn’t that rapt with her name, but did anyone like their own names?

‘Josho was definitely a lover of Sonia’s according to Cummings. So was Billy Matawai. And you, anyone else you can think of?’

She tossed that out flippantly. She was feeling in a boisterous, put-down-the-bastards type of mood.

‘Look Mary, I’m sorry. What I did was wrong. I know that. Sonia came into my life and is still in my life, but not in any way I like. We weren’t lovers, we were...’ he stumbled here and resurrected a cliché ‘ships that passed in the night, it meant nothing to Sonia. A one night stand’.

‘So are we...’

‘But I need you, I still do...’

Spark felt uncomfortable with this declaration and changed the topic.

‘I found your papers in her case. The map and letter. I’ve kept them for the moment, why did Sonia want them so badly? I mean sex in exchange for old documents, it doesn’t seem like a good deal to me?’

‘Another coffee?’

She hesitated then nodded reluctantly, and he cleaned out the percolator and stuffed it full of fresh coffee, the aroma wafting into Spark’s memory. Then he put on some

music, Mozart she thought. Trying it again eh Gordon?

‘You must have a picture of Sonia now? Her passport and stuff, what did you think of her?’

‘I like her. She seems go-getting, gets what she wants, and is not dependent on any bloke’.

She looked meaningfully at Gordon but it was a wasted irony.

‘What about her father?’

Spark looked curiously at Micklethwaite. He was a bit too sharp sometimes, could end up cutting himself.

‘He’s arriving here in a couple of days. Sonia had his photo on the wall of her bedroom, and in her office. Professor Eherton said she admired her father enormously’.

That Eherton name again, it made Micklethwaite think, but he kept his end of the conversation going.

‘She did, she even showed me a photo of him. I think she was very ambitious, perhaps driven to match her father’s success, and I think she liked to take short-cuts’.

‘Any evidence of that?’

‘Just her attitude to research, she wanted quick results. Wanted to have a good Ph.d, a very good Ph.d. I’m quoting her now ‘I’m a winner Gordon, not a loser. To get a good Ph.d you have to have an original topic, one that upsets the folk around here but gets you noticed. That’s what my father did’.

Micklethwaite handed Spark her second cup and the caffeine came bursting out in words.

‘It so bloody difficult to conclude this case. I like her because I don’t know her. Everyone knows her except me, but they didn’t like her, nobody did, not even her supervisor. Why Gordon?’ she appealed to him.

‘She used people, ambitious, lovely yes, but there was a ruthless, even driven streak in her. She used her looks to get what she wanted. It worked on me’.

‘I don’t think you’d put up much resistance Gordon’ she said tartly ‘but what did she want from Billy Matawai?’

‘You’ve asked him? I don’t know, I’m sure with Josho she wanted Te Urua, the greenstone mask’.

‘You just said it doesn’t exist’.

‘Maybe it does, maybe it doesn’t. I’ve talked to Josho several times, well actually, he talked at me. You’ve just got to be patient with him, maybe you’re detective mate wasn’t so patient. He swears by this greenstone mask, says he knows where it is. Talks about some sacred urupa, under the lake, guarded by Ngai Tapore elders,

full of treasure and Maori artefacts’.

‘What’s a urupa?’

‘Burial ground. I don’t know if there’s a word of truth in any of it, but, he can be convincing’.

‘Wouldn’t the bodies get wet?’

‘What, oh, it’s not actually *under* the lake, but in a cave, but supposedly you can only access it by diving underwater’.

‘Isn’t Bert Maihi Ngai Tapore tribe?’

‘Yes. He knows a lot, a lot more than he says, and sometimes I wonder about his silences’.

‘He said he wasn’t on the beach that night, because of his emphysema. So how could he know her name before we did? Did you tell him?’

‘No. But he hears it in the sea or in the wind. He’s a real old-time kaumatua’.

Micklethwaite was sitting back beside her again.

‘Look I drew up this timeline, I thought it might help’.

She looked at his list of events with dates and times next to it. She opened her hand-bag and silently showed him hers, they matched almost perfectly.

‘Great minds...’

He started to murmur but she got irritated.

‘We’re not in this together Gordon. This is our last session. I came to ask questions, so don’t go thinking that we’re a team or anything.’

He was silent for a while, then looked directly at her with a defiant face that Mary Spark found rather attractive.

‘We *are* in this together Mary’ he insisted ‘you and me. We know more about Sonia between us than almost anyone else. You haven’t told your boss, so who else can you go to? Look how involved we are, we’ve even thinking on the same lines with these timelines. Do you think it’s still murder?’

‘Yes’.

She looked at him doubtfully, and said with a certain pleading.

‘But Gordon, *you* could have killed her. You are a suspect’.

‘Oh, well that’s logical’ he admitted reasonably ‘I shall have to prove to you I’m not’.

‘How you going to do that?’

She liked his forthrightness, and felt a wave of temptation again.

‘Let’s look at this timeline’.

Micklethwaite's sheet was quite neatly drawn up.

| | | |
|----------------|--|----------|
| Sunday 14 Oct | Unknown person(s) drove Sonia to Birdlings Flat | ? |
| Sunday 14 Oct | Sonia drowned, washed up where? | ? |
| Monday 15 Oct | Unknown person(s) moves body to Micklethwaite's bach | early am |
| | Micklethwaite finds body | 7 pm |
| | Micklethwaite shifts body | 9 pm |
| | Unknown person(s) move body into sea | 10-12 pm |
| | Micklethwaite finds body gone | 1 am |
| | (high tide 1 am) | |
| | Body drifts back to Lake Forsyth | 12-6 |
| Tuesday 16 Oct | Body found by Oily McGregor | 6.15 am |

'She didn't get much rest did she?' he murmured.

If their assessments were correct, Sonia was as lively after death as she was in life.

'You think Sonia's body got shifted to your place early on the morning of the 15th?'

'Well she wasn't there on Sunday evening, I'm sure of that. She would only be moved during darkness surely?'

'We found her car in the garage. No one has admitted to driving her out yet, unless you care to volunteer Gordon?'

He accepted the dig with good grace, and thought perhaps that Mary might be going through the prickly process of forgiving him.

'Not me. But she must have been in and out of the water a lot. Drowned, then washed up. Found by someone, than dumped on me. I carried her up the beach. Someone then dumped her back in the sea, and she washed up on the beach'.

'We don't know that. She could have been dumped by the last people directly on the beach where we found her, except' Mary rubbed her forehead 'that she was found just on the high tide line'.

Micklethwaite put his head on his side. It made the blood move.

'It's a long way to carry a body from the carpark, even for two people, and you can't drive there, except with a quad bike. Were there any tracks?'

Spark thought pretty hard, but could not definitely remember.

'I go for the sea theory only because it seems hard to believe someone would expose themselves to the risk of carrying a body to the last beach site...'

‘But why do it at all unless number one shifter, was the same as number three?’

‘Which means someone was watching me?’ Gordon said thoughtfully.

Spark threw up her hands in frustration.

‘Too many bloody questions. The pathologist said that Sonia might have been in and out of the water, but he didn’t give any bloody times. Just said it did not look like it had been immersed for long. Did she have jewellery on when you found her Gordon?’

‘No’.

‘But she normally did?’

‘Yes, I think so. I’m not very good at noticing these things. She had a nice green-stone ring’ he added tentatively

‘I don’t think she would have taken off her jewellery if she was going to kill herself, and if she was going for a swim, then she might. But we didn’t find the stuff, and neither did you. If we *believe* you Gordon. And anyway why would a suicide’s body get moved three times, oh it’s bloody hopeless...’

She was exasperated and stood up, quite torn between leaving and not leaving

‘Just trust me Mary. I wasn’t wrong about the papers being stolen, you can find my fingerprints on that letter I wrote... I only lied once. At the beginning, and never again.’

She looked at him, his face and then his eyes.

‘I want to believe that’.

Well that was something. He asked quickly.

‘Who else do you suspect? Josho? Billy Matawai?’.

She nodded.

‘Matawai is not telling the truth. He did a runner to the West Coast and covered himself with an alibi. We have a Hokitika cop checking that, but it will probably hold, Josho is just bloody strange. Lovers once, dumped by Sonia. She was a dumping kind of gal’.

She sat down again, as Micklethwaite got up and put on another tape, this time with an eastern flavour. Spark had relaxed by now, or was she just bloody exhausted?

‘Perhaps we should look at the why rather than the how’

Micklethwaite brought over the *1001 Nights* and turned to a page.

‘Read that story from there to here, it’s only four pages. Are you hungry? I was going to make pancakes’.

‘Gordon’ she protested ‘I should go’ but made no move.

‘Story then pancakes. Then you can go’.

‘Ok, ok’

He busied around the oven top she started to read ‘The Hunchbacks Tale’.

‘Once upon a time, in the great city of Baghdad, there lived a prosperous tailor who was fond of sport and merriment. It was his custom to go out with his wife from time to time in quest of pleasure and amusement. It chanced that on evening, when they were returning home from a long jaunt, they met a sprightly little hunchback whose comic aspect banished grief and sorrow from his presence and drove away all care. Elated with drink, he was clashing a tambourine and singing gleefully. The tailor and his wife were so amused at the hunchback’s drollery that they invited him to spend the evening with them as their guest. The hunchback accepted, and when they had returned to the house, the tailor hurried out to the market-place where he brought some fried fish, bread and lemons, and honey for dessert.

The three sat down to a hilarious meal. Being fond of practical jokes, the tailor’s wife crammed a large piece of fish into the hunchback’s mouth and forced him to swallow it. But, as fate would have it, the fish concealed a big, sharp bone which stuck in his throat and choked him; so that when they examined him, they found to their horror, that the hunchback was dead.

The tailor lifted up his hands and exclaimed: ‘There is no strength nor power save in Allah! Alas that this man should have met his fate at our hands, and in this fashion!’

‘Your cries are of no avail’ said his wife. ‘We must do something!’

‘What can we do?’ whimpered the tailor.

‘Rise’ she said’ and take the body in your arms; we will cover it with a shawl and carry it out of the house this very night. I will walk in front crying: ‘My child is ill, my poor child is ill! Who will direct us to a doctors house?’

Encouraged by her plan, the tailor wrapped up the hunchback in a large silken shawl and carried him out into the street; his wife lamenting: ‘My child! My child! Who will save him from the foul smallpox?’

So all who saw them whispered together: ‘They are carrying a child stricken with the smallpox’.

Thus they proceeded through the streets, inquiring for the doctor’s house as they went, until at last they were directed by the passers-by to the house of a Jewish doctor. They knocked, and the door was opened by a black slave-girl.

‘Give your master this piece of silver’ said the tailor’s wife ‘and beg him to come down and see my child; for he is very ill’.

When the girl went in to call the doctor, the tailor’s wife slipped into the vestibule and said to her husband:

‘Leave the hunchback here and let us run for our lives!’

The tailor propped up the body at the bottom of the staircase, and the pair made off as fast as their legs could carry them.

The Jew rejoiced on receiving a piece of silver. He rose in haste, and hurrying down the stairs in the dark, stumbled against the corpse and toppled it over. Terrified at the sight of the lifeless hunchback, and thinking that he himself had just killed him, the Jew called on Moses and Aaron and Ezra and Joshua son of Nun, and bethought himself of the Ten Commandments, and wrung his hands, crying: 'How shall I get rid of the body?'

Then he took up the hunchback and carried him to his wife and told her what had happened.

'Why then, do you stand there doing nothing?' exclaimed the terrified woman. 'If the corpse is still here by daybreak we are lost! Come, we will carry the body up to the terrace and throw it into the house of our neighbour the Moslem.'

Now the Moslem was the steward of the royal kitchens, from which he seldom departed with his pockets empty. His house was always infested by cats and mice, which ate the butter, the cheese, and the corn; and on fine nights the dogs of the neighbourhood came down and feasted on the contents of his kitchen. So the Jew and his wife, carrying the hunchback, climbed down from their terrace into their neighbour's house, and propped him up against the wall of the kitchen.

It was not long before the steward, who had been out all day, returned to his house. He opened the door and lighted a candle — than started at the sight of a man leaning against the wall of his kitchen. 'So our thief is a man after all!' he thought; and taking up a mallet, he cried: 'By Allah, to think that it was you, and not the cats and dogs, who stole all that meat and butter! I have killed almost all the cats and dogs in the district and Never thought of you and your like, who come prowling down the terraces.'

So saying, he knocked down the hunchback with the mallet and dealt him another blow upon the chest as he lay on the ground. But the angry steward soon found that the hunchback was dead. He was seized with fear, and exclaimed:

'There is no strength nor power save in Allah! A curse upon the meat and the butter, and upon this night which has witnesseth your death at my hands, you wretch.' Then perceiving his deformity, he added: 'Is it not enough that you are a hunchback: must you also be a kitchen thief? O Allah, protect me in your mercy!'

The steward took up the hunchback, and carrying him on his shoulders, left the house. The night was already approaching its end. He walked with his burden through the deserted streets until he entered a lane leading to the market-place, and came to a shop that stood on a corner. There he leaned the hunchback up against the wall, and hurried away.

Soon after, a Christian, who was the King's broker, passed through the lane on his way to the public baths. Fuddled with drink, he reeled along muttering to himself 'Doomsday has come! The Last Judgement has come!' and staggering from one side of the lane to the other. When he came close to the hunchback he stopped, and without noticing him, turned round to make water.

Now it so chanced that earlier in the evening the Christian was robbed of his turban and was forced to buy another. Therefore, when he suddenly saw the figure of the hunchback against the wall, the drunken broker, imagining that he was about to snatch off his new turban, took him by the throat and knocked him down with a resounding blow.

Confounded at the swift dispatch of his victim, the Christian began to call on Jesus and Mary: thus, as the proverb has it, intoxication departed and meditation came in its place. It was now nearly dawn, and fearing discovery the Christian carried the hunchback to a darkened doorway and leaned the hunchback's body against it and then fled.

And so dawn swept over Baghdad, city of a million souls, ruled by the Caliph Haroun al Rashid, where Moslem, Jew, Christian living together in mostly gentle harmony. As the new day lit the closely packed houses of the old bazaar the tailor's wife woke up with relief that they had got rid of the hunchback. She flung open the shutters and in a determined mood she swept the house from top to bottom, and then opened the front door to brush out all the dust and greet the new day.

The hunchback's body fell on top of her''.

Spark laughed.

'Here's grub'.

He handed her a plate of two pancakes, with some Golden Syrup and a squirt of lemon. It was delicious and Spark wolfed it down. She knew Gordon well enough by now that he didn't do much without thinking about it first.

'You had this book on the table the first time I met you'.

'Another pancake?'

'No. Yes'.

He stood poised with the pan in his hand ruminating.

'I keep thinking back to the Hunchback's story, I mean it is a comedy, but all the characters had good reason to shift the hunchback somewhere else. They did not want to get the blame. Sonia's movements after her death look comic as well, but everyone moved her for a reason, I did. Not a very good reason, but still a reason. I was scared, perhaps others were scared. This is a woman who has not been in New Zealand that long, she did not know that many people, and yet she knew an extraordinary number of people in Birdlings Flat, and that was where she died. That isn't a coincidence. She knew the Sea People, Billy Matawai, me...'

‘And they all bloody denied it’.

Spark remembered with clarity how she assured the superintendent that it was someone at Birdlings Flat had made those cuts. She told Micklethwaite and he nodded in agreement.

‘Look at it this way, we now know what Sonia wanted from me. We suspect we know what she wanted from Josho, Te Urua. What did she did want from Billy Matawai? What did they reveal to her? And once they revealed this how did she react?’

‘You’ve lost me Gordon. I think you’re enjoying this. This is good by the way.’

Her kids always moaned at her flaccid pancakes, which she tried to conceal under a ton of ice-cream. He sat down beside her and finished his pancake.

‘I don’t understand this Maori stuff, you think that’s what’s driving this?’

‘I’m sure of it’.

Spark glanced at her watch. It was getting late. Should she go or should she stay? Then the classical music from the tape deck swept into a dreamy piece of strings, something mushy and romantic. Spark did not think Micklethwaite had a romantic bone in his body, but in fifteen years of marriage to Vince she could not remember him once choosing any of her classical records to play. It was God’s mystery how some people ended up with each other.

The music gained momentum then wandered off into some Middle Eastern bazaar with arpeggios of flutes and clarinets. She was sure she knew the piece.

‘What is this music?’

‘Scheherazade by Rimsky-Korsakov’.

Spark nodded in vague recognition.

‘She’s the girl in *1001 Nights*. The king distrusted all women and would sleep with them once and then kill them. But a beautiful girl was brought to him, Scheherazade, and after their love-making would tell the king a fantastic story which whetted his appetite for the next story and the next. One of these stories is The Hunchback. So every night Scheherazade told him beautiful stories, and tragic stories, weaving a veritable magic carpet of story-telling, and so delaying her execution day by day, until three years later, and three children later, the king could not bear to have her executed and indeed had fallen in love with her. Those stories constitute the *1001 Nights*’.

Spark had hardly listened and was wafted back on the music into some small paradise of her mind.

‘She had a beautiful name’.

They both listened as the Young Princess danced with the Young Prince.

‘Why did the king kill those women?’

‘He had been betrayed’.

She nodded sadly.

‘Perhaps Sonia had been too. She was pregnant, three, or four months pregnant’.

Micklethwaite looked down at the floor and when he and Spark exchanged a look, she could see he was ashamed.

‘I didn’t know that. That’s terrible.’

He rubbed his forehead and continued musing.

‘That could have been my child, or Josho’s. Why does it make it so much worse now Mary?’

Perhaps at this moment Spark began to feel for him again.

‘We have to finish the job somehow. We are in this together Mary’.

She grimaced. Why had she come out? Any questions she needed to ask she could have asked on the phone, any harsh words she had practised could have been said down the safety of a telephone line, there was no need for this journey, no need at all. She could have cut him down and got on with her life, but no Mary you had to take the hard way. Or was it the easy way? He took her hand and she looked down on it, a little shocked. He was the one she wanted? Him? They kissed, and their embrace began to be closer and warmer. She was nine tenths a senior-sergeant and the other tenth an utter fool.

‘I want you Mary’.

She pulled back from the brink, incredulous.

‘You want to make love?’

He nodded. She was dumbfounded.

‘Let’s get this straight Gordon. After your relationship with Sonia, and your lies to me, and general bugging me around, you would be quite keen to make love to me to the music of Rmsky-Korsakov?’

‘Rimsky’.

She would never understand men. Did they lack the moral dimension or something?

‘I think you’re pretty special’ he added.

‘I’m almost five years older than you’.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

Spark was not exactly sure.

‘It’s impossible’.

‘Pity’.

They kissed again and the storm of Scheherazade passed over them, and the long unwinding, softening solo violin eased the progression from kisses to love-making. This was the comfort she wanted, God knows what they both wanted.

This time he lay in her arms for a long time, and she pulled at the thin strands of his balding hair and stroked his pale back. She broke the silence.

‘I won’t stay. The kids are expecting me at breakfast. No more secrets to tell me Gordon, no sudden surprises?’

He lolled over and grinned up at her.

‘That was a sudden surprise’.

It was strange standing naked as he watched her dress. The bodily inspection seemed to pass muster though.

‘Vince is crazy, leaving you’.

‘I left him’

She reminded him tartly, clipping her bra on and pulling up her jeans.

‘Well, that’s not exactly true. I was tired of his flings’.

‘I’ll see you to the car’

He dressed so quickly that he caught up with Spark and they met again at the door. It was a nice kiss there too. The night sky had cleared and she was stunned at the glitter of the stars. It was easy to see why people could live out here.

‘There was something I was going to ask... Oh yes, the water in Sonia’s stomach, was that sea-water?’

‘Yes’.

‘Oh’.

Mary frowned.

‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

Gordon shrugged, and kissed her at the door. It was another nice kiss, perhaps a tad patronising, but her body had moved responsively into his. She had given in again, so much for the steely will of a senior police officer. She was just mush underneath, and Mary Spark drove home on the long bare road in a mood of both quiet appraisal, some degree of exhaltation, and a nagging sense of belief that there would be no easy exit from this affair.

Chapter 13

All The Way From America

Friday 2 November

At the office in the morning the first thing Mary Spark did was to look through the autopsy and discover that the salinity content of the water in Sonia's stomach was not detailed. She rang the pathologist Mr Creighton. He was busy. He rang back, an hour later, affable, in control, certain of himself.

'Did you do a saline test on the water content in Sonia Blackwaters stomach?'

A longish pause.

'You mean that girl that was drowned, by the sea?'

'Yes'.

'No'. A confident negative.

'Why not?'

'My dear Mary, she was found by the sea...'

'Don't bloody dear me Dick. You assumed it was seawater.'

'Of course...'

'You were in a hurry that day Dick, off to Sydney weren't you?'

'I think you should calm down.'

'What if I tell you that Sonia may not have died in the sea, but was moved to the shoreline to make it look that way. You've got the idea Dick? We want the salt content. I was talking to the super this morning, and he wasn't happy about it. When can I get a result?'

The bit about the superintendent was pure eyewash, but she knew it would galvanise Creighton more than if she was the only authority to the request. His complacency had oozed out a little. The tone was defensive

'Well, I've a busy day and...'

‘This afternoon then, it’s about a month late.

She slammed the phone down before she vented some of her annoyance at a pathologist who did half a job. That casual farewell remark of Micklethwaite’s had nagged her all night. However, on the drive out to the airport she could not keep up the pretence of annoyance and hummed to a background pop tune. The kids had noticed the change immediately when she picked them up that morning.

‘You’re happy mum’.

‘Well I can’t be miserable bastard all my life can I? You didn’t hear that word by the way. Did you play any good tricks?’

‘Nah’.

She could tell from their glances that they had, and also realised that they were happy that their mum was happy. She really must have been a miserable so-and-so the last few months. Shows what a divorce can do to your soul.

The international airport terminal was quiet with just the one flight due in from Sydney with Mr Blackwater on board, and it was running later. Spark amused herself in the coffee shop, read a magazine and looked out of the vast tarmac and thought of Gordon Micklethwaite.

She no more regretted the first night of sex than she did the second. It was a halfway point to love, not love itself, and he was a plotter she decided, weaving in that 1001 story with the music of Scheherazade as well. What had Vincent said? ‘Secretive bastard, plays his cards close’. The air conditioning was very cold, and she involuntarily shivered. God help her if he was playing a double-game. He seemed genuine, and to be looking for answers this time, and she hoped that some more answers would arrive with the huge silver plane that was sluggishly pirouetting before the terminal.

Mr Edward Blackwater took some time to appear, accompanied by an immigration officer. He was tall and robust, with jowls, but overall not a bad looker now, and probably good looking in his younger days. His suit did not disguise the handsome build that might have suited American girls. Made you wonder why he wasted his time on little girls.

‘Mr Blackwater? Detective Senior-Sergeant Mary Spark. Welcome to New Zealand’.

He shook her hand but did not look into her eyes, and Spark nodded a thanks to the immigration officer. Blackwater travelled light, one tightly bound suitcase and a briefcase. Obviously he did not intend to stay long.

‘If you don’t mind sir we will go direct to the morgue to re-identify the body of your daughter’.

‘Yeah’

He still hadn’t looked at her. Loquacious. They got in the car and drove down the cherry-blossom avenue that was the main route into town.

‘Pretty place’.

He said at last in a broad Texas drawl, perhaps conscious that his silence might appear odd.

‘Sonia liked the place a lot. People were friendly, so she said?’

Spark ignored the question mark at the end of his sentence.

‘Yes they are, Mr Blackwater, are you going to be here long?’

‘Nope, booked out for Tuesday Miss Spark. The embassy here has made arrangements for the body to be flown out then. You have no objections?’

Spark had been pondering that issue for a while, but could come up with no sound reason to hang onto the body. The coroner would not need it, indeed would be happy to release it, and the autopsy had probably revealed everything that would ever be revealed about Sonia’s internal organs.

‘No problem Mr Blackwater. Will you see Professor Eherton at the geography department?’

‘Yeah’.

The Texan drawl turned the word into at least five syllables. There was no more conversation until the morgue although Spark tried a couple of times. He seemed guarded, tired, true, but guarded. Spark was sure that Blackwater already knew that she knew.

At the morgue she made the usual warnings, about the embalming process and the requirements of the autopsy, but as with Eherton, she did not mention the eighteen shallow knife cuts. She drew back the sheet. Not a flicker of emotion appeared on Dr Blackwater’s face. Academics must be all made of the same hard unfeeling clay. He did ask though, which was something, after the tray had been slammed back into its stainless steel cupboard.

‘Jeez, we’re did she get all those cuts?’

‘We don’t know’.

‘Really?’

‘Really Mr Blackwater’.

He was sitting down at the desk, signing various release papers that Spark slid under his pen. For the first time he looked her in the eyes, but they quickly flicked away. His eyes never seemed to want to rest on anyone else’s.

‘She was drowned right?’

‘Yes, that’s what the autopsy said. I have a copy here for you if you wish, though it gets somewhat clinical’.

‘Yeah, thanks’

He took it reluctantly. Spark waited. She was not going to help this unfeeling brute

one more inch than she had to.

‘Maybe she was dragged over some sharp object, in a river’.

‘They are knife cuts, deliberate we believe’.

‘Jeez’.

That at least was an emotion, if not much. Blackwater was obviously floundering somewhat and Spark took pity on him. After all the sod had lost his daughter, even if he was the coldest fish she’d seen in a while.

‘Was she a good swimmer?’

‘Champion, at the university. Won medals, but that was at sixteen, nineteen you know. A while ago, she was’ he shrugged ‘a mite overconfident at times. Sonia liked to be first. Didn’t like to lose’.

‘Like her father?’

That question was going for the jugular but curiously Blackwater did not seem to mind, indeed rather took it as a compliment.

‘Yeah, maybe, can we Miss, talk elsewhere, if the paperwork is done. It’s kinda freaky here...’

‘Certainly, last paper. We can go to my office. I have some of her things to return to you’.

‘Sure, sure’

The Texas drawl seemed glad to escape the deathly silent room. In her office he sat down and looked over what was left in Sonia attache case, and included the first draft of her thesis. He leafed through it.

‘I guess she was just starting Mr Blackwater, I’m sorry’.

He nodded and did not look at the papers much before putting them into his own brief case.

‘She seemed to get on well here Mr Blackwater, her supervisor, Professor Eher-ton said she was outstanding in her work.’

‘Yeah, she was a bright girl. Had her whole life in front of her. Her mom died a while back. She’s got a sister back home, in Wyoming. I guess I don’t know how I’m gonna get over this.’

More conviction please Mr Blackwater, just some feeling will do. Tears don’t have to fall, but that would be nice.

‘Miss Spark, I’m bothered by those cuts, err, do you have an explanation?’

‘No sir. Possibly she was interfered with after death.’

‘Oh Jesus, you mean sexually’.

‘No, there’s no evidence of that, just the cuts. Perhaps a weirdo’.

‘Yeah’.

Spark deliberately did not mention the pregnancy although he would find out if he had read the autopsy report, which he had already left behind in the morgue. Well, she couldn’t blame him for that. Would she want to read about her daughter being dissected on the slab? There seemed to be nothing more to say.

‘Which hotel are you at Dr Blackwater? Noahs, thank you’.

Daryl Cummings came in the open door as Dr Blackwater was being escorted out by a police constable who would usher him to a car, load the luggage and drive the 500 metres to Noah’s hotel.

‘Thank you Miss’.

Cummings kept out of the way then whispered conspiratorially.

‘Was that the father? Phew! How’s he coping sir?’

‘Pretty well I’d say. He’s another bloody frost fish, ok Daryl, where are we up to? You stuffed up with Josho’.

Cummings looked crestfallen.

‘You were right sir, hate to admit it. I lost my temper a bit’.

Spark flapped the interview record around.

‘I’ll say, what about Miranda?’

‘I, I talked to her, and she confirmed Josho and Sonia did have a short relationship’.

‘Why were you kissing Miranda?’

Cummings went bright red and made no reply. Spark frowned but let it go. She did not even bother to pass on Micklethwaite’s warning.

‘You can’t fart in this world Daryl without someone knowing. What’s that stuff?’

‘It’s a whole lot of literature sir, on the Sea People. Miranda gave it to me’.

‘Are you becoming a convert?’

He blushed again.

‘I don’t think so sir. It’s pretty weird’.

‘Don’t suppose Josho will accept you anyway. I’m going to talk to Professor Eherton this afternoon, what’s your plan?’

‘I’m in court again sir, been there all day’.

That was the trouble with the law. Catching crims was easy, but processing the sods took forever. Spark once calculated that half of her time was spent on paperwork and in the courts. She had been thinking.

‘Daryl’.

‘Sir’.

‘I don’t want you to go to Birdlings Flat this weekend’.

He flushed for the third time.

‘I wasn’t thinking of it sir’.

‘Are you in love with her?’

‘Miranda?’

No a cuttlefish you twerp.

‘No sir’.

‘Ok, I had to ask you understand? I don’t want to jeopardise police procedure’.

She picked up the Sea People’s pamphlets.

‘I might keep this stuff, are you free Monday? We are going to visit Josho again, though I’m bloody sure it’s futile. Try my woman’s charm, and I want to get everything we know on Billy Matawai. Can you do it on Saturday? Also get that alibi stuff from the Hokitika cops. We are going to have to go after him I think’.

‘The squeeze sir?’

‘Like a lemon’

She drove out to the University again, pondering her dire hypocrisy. It was ok for her to tell her junior not to get involved with a client, when he was a virgin anyway, but she had been twice shafted by a man who had concealed a body. It was a hell of an effort keeping up the pretence, but that’s what she had to do. She warned Gordon never to ring her in her office in case Daryl got given the phone and put two and two together. She spun the wheel round in the yard and parked the police car prominently in the disabled carpark. Stuff it! They were two and two together already. Her good mood this morning had evaporated, melted on the tide of a hopeless case and a dead cold father.

Eherton was not much warmer than Blackwater, but she had two questions she wanted to ask to his face.

‘We’ve dropped off Dr Blackwater at Noah’s hotel. He says he is flying out on Tuesday, but mentioned he might call you’.

‘What a terrible thing, to see a daughter like that. Terrible’.

Perhaps Spark imagined it but the Professor looked notably older since they had last talked. More haggard at least. Eherton scribbled down the name of Blackwater’s hotel.

‘You explained Sonia’s Ph.d thesis in general terms last time we talked professor but I had one or two specific questions to ask’.

‘Of course’.

‘What is Te Urua?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Te Urua, it was mentioned in Sonia’s notes?’

That was a lie, but she was getting polished at this lying game.

‘Well, I’m not fully competent to say exactly of course, Maori studies is not my field’.

‘But you are on the Ngai Makariri Trust Board?’

He seemed distinctly off guard.

‘Why yes that’s true, but I’m no expert of course. What did Sonia say about this Te Urua exactly?’

Spark pretended to think.

‘That she was looking for it? Is it an object?’ A second lie.

The charming thing about academics was that through their intellectual grounding they nearly always felt obliged to tell the truth, even if they did not want to, and Professor Eherton clearly did not want to.

‘A mask, supposedly, made out of greenstone. I do not believe it exists, and I cannot imagine why Sonia was searching for it’.

‘Who made it?’

‘I told you Miss Spark it does not exist. It is a’ he struggled for the words ‘a fable, a mythology if you like of a certain tribe in Canterbury...’

‘Which tribe?’ asked Spark naively.

‘Ngai Tapore I believe, a tribe that does not really exist’.

‘But, if it doesn’t exist, why was Sonia doing a thesis on the conflict’ and Spark struggled to remember Micklethwaite’s explanations ‘...between Ngai Makariri and Ngai Tapore’.

‘It’s an assumed conflict. There are some people who believe that Ngai Tapore exist, and therefore are challenging the tribal boundaries of Ngai Makariri’.

Spark waited, whilst Eherton struggled both in his face and his language. The sentence that came out had a good many pauses and commas in it.

‘It is the Ngai Makariri position, that Ngai Tapore, were effectively destroyed, or intermarried, into Ngai Makariri some centuries ago’.

‘It seems a weak Ph.d thesis, to study a non-existent tribe in a non-existent conflict with a non-existent mask, doesn’t it?’

Perhaps with this question Eherton got a little annoyed, though he certainly did not show it in his face.

‘I do not believe that was going to be her thesis. It was on resource conflicts between two Nelson based tribes, originally, but she changed tack. I’m sorry Miss Spark but I have a lecture in a couple of minutes’.

‘Of course professor’ and Spark stood up ‘about Dr Blackwater. He is widely respected in his field?’

‘Indeed, one of the best social geographers in the world’.

‘Do you have any of his books I could borrow?’

‘Why certainly. Here, and here’

Eherton reached out from his bookshelf two hefty volumes.

‘He will be pleased with your interest I’m sure, now if you’ll excuse me.’

‘How long have you been on the Ngai Makariri Trust Board professor?’

‘Thirty years, at least’.

‘Thank you’.

Spark threw the books in the back of the car well satisfied. She had a means of arranging to see him again if necessary, to return those grim looking books, and with two simple lies had pinched a nerve or two.

Home, and she drove into a horrible tangle of traffic that was caused by an accident on Memorial Avenue and extensive road works from Glandovey Road through to Idris Road. She used the police car phone and rang up Dr Creighton again, and just caught him before he went home. The conversation was exactly as she had already supposed it would be.

‘I have re-tested the stomach contents, and there seems to be a low salinity level’.

‘So?’

‘It seems unlikely she drowned in sea-water’.

‘Thank you Dr Creighton’.

So where the hell did Sonia die?

Spark was not unduly upset by Creighton’s folly, a mistake is a mistake, and she had made a few, but blast the man for his arrogance. She disliked that. They had been basically going in the wrong direction for weeks now, although, and this was the rub, a drowning was still a drowning. Sonia’s story was getting as strange as the hunch-backs story, and all credit to Micklethwaite — if it had been a guess — but Vince was right, he was a secretive sod. Would this traffic ever move?

On the dashboard was the pile of Sea People pamphlets and with the leisure of a long tail back she had plenty of time to skim through them. They were surprisingly well written, and just as weird as Cummings suggested.

‘We are The Sea People, we are from the sea and we will return to the

sea. The sea is our father and mother, as it has been the father and mother of all of us. As the sea breathes, so we breath. When the sea lives we live, when she dies, we die'.

The pamphlets were full of such stuff. There was one on eating healthily.

'We eat exclusively sea-food, or food grown by the use of sea-fertiliser. Fish is the most naturally healthy food of our planet, with high concentrations of vitamins and natural components that help ward off land diseases. We gather kelp from the rocks and compost that into fertiliser. Our vegetables are exclusively fed by sea-fertiliser and produce healthy vegetables at a far greater vigour than any land-based fertilisers.

It was full of attractive nonsense. I mean why didn't they live on boats for Gods sake?

'We choose to live next to the sea and not on boats so that we may encourage other land peoples to see the benefits of sea-calming meditation. The sea is not just a playground, it is a soul'.

Sure, sure. The traffic was starting to move, and Spark barely glanced at the last pamphlet on 'Birth and Redemption'.

'Our bodies or ashes are released back into the sea, for we believe we should return from whence we came'.

And then the penny dropped.

Chapter 14

Burial at Sea

Saturday 3 November

He believed in the theory that as physical exercise improved the quality and flexibility of the body, so the mental exercise of thinking improved the quality of thought, and thinking was his sole occupation of late. He was reminiscing over Wednesday night, which had removed the persistent doubt that Mary might dump him as a bad job. He fondly recalled the quiver of her blonde hair, and her strong eyes softening into a desiring mush. Of course he wanted her again, but he had to think! These two women were the threads in his life, and Micklethwaite was coming to accept that winning Mary Spark was to some extent dependent on trying to untangle the curious story of Sonia Blackwater's life and death. Or was he trying to weave together too many story elements?

His father often told him that thinking was an activity that never paid, although he himself did lots of it. On some Sundays he took Gordon along to the meetings of the Society of Friends and everyone there seemed to be thinking hard and silently, and then occasionally stood up and spoke. But his dad said no, they were not really thinking, but allowing the spirit of God to enter them and resolve that spirit into speech. Not thinking? Gordon was puzzled, and he was still puzzled by it. His attendance at Friends meeting was sporadic and episodic, and in some ways, although he never admitted it, it was done more out of a sense of duty and honour to his father, who died when Gordon was 16. His dad would have liked him to be there. He thought, but rarely spoke. The spirit never really seemed to get into him. Sometimes he thought he was wasting the Friends time, but one quaker told him he had been coming for thirty years and some people had never spoken once.

The day was grey and featureless, an uninteresting swathe of cloud, that nothing short of a southerly buster would shift, and which the radio said was on its way. He had not paid much attention to the absence of jewellery on Sonia's body, but later began to try and remember what the ring looked like. It was a greenstone ring, he was sure of that, with some sort of Maori motif on it. Sonia was quite proud of it and had showed it to him, and wasn't it given as a present? Who had done that? Not

Josho, or Billy Matawai? Hardly! Micklethwaite had met and chattered to Billy a few times. He was a regular lad, and a bit of a crook, and had offered Micklethwaite some ‘good stuff’ if he wanted it.

‘West Coast grass, the best boy, the best’.

Micklethwaite had declined and somehow did not think that Matawai had the dosh to buy that sort of ring, of course he could have stolen it. The more Micklethwaite looked at the timeline he had drawn up the less convinced he was that Sonia had gone swimming in the sea, at least not voluntarily. So how did the body get on the beach? If it was dumped there, did that imply that there was another person involved? It had always seemed to him that there were far too many ‘unknown persons’ in his list, as if Birdlings Flat was cluttered with people whose sole intent that dark and stormy night was to shift Sonia’s body around. But it wasn’t: it was misty, misty, misty, was that it?

He gave up and went to see Bert and Becky. The beach walk refreshed him and he waved to Miranda who smiled back. The Maihi’s garden was a treasure trove of kitsch, swans cut out of car tyres, cheerful hobbits perched on toadstools, and a splendid paua and concrete bird bath. There were rows and rows of coloured stones, ranged in spirals and waves and Bert was pottering outside pulling out couch grass from this stone sea.

‘Giddy matey. Beckies hot in the kitchen right now’.

Bert’s breathing was bad today, and Micklethwaite looked alarmed as he doubled-up with a coughing fit.

‘You come inside Bert’ Becky heard the coughing ‘it’s too cold for you, oh Gordon, come in luv. I’ve got scones just coming out the oven’.

It was this very likelihood that had encouraged Micklethwaite to visit and he ducked into the little house lounge, self-consciously trying to avoid touching any of the ornaments that overwhelmed every space. If ever knick-knacks decided to get together and take over the world, they would launch the attack from Bert and Beckys bach. Probably win too. There was one shelf of dolls dressed in national costumes, and another shelf of blue glass animals. In one corner there was a pottery shepherdess with her cute lambs, and in another corner a lusty shepherd boy eyeing up the shepherdess, who was returning his affections. Between was them was the resulting liaison of seventeen Staffordshire sheep. A long fishing gaff hung over the fireplace, and a rather fierce collection of knives were arranged on Bert’s military wall, interspersed with many small-framed black and white pictures of brown nutty men in khaki shorts and fags hanging out of their laughing mouths.

They always seated guests here, and Micklethwaite took a plateful of scones and a mug of tea, glancing uneasily up at the big Gurka kukhri that hung on one hook above his head. He knew exactly what Bert would say next.

‘Got that from a Gurka guy in Egypt, said he’d killed 15 men with it, orr those Gurkha were mean so and so’s’.

Bert lowered himself down into his seat, and seemed pleased to stop weeding.

‘Not feeling too good today Bert?’

‘Orr it comes and goes Gordon, bad today’.

Gordon had often glanced at these faded war-time photos on Bert’s wall, because they reminded him of similar photos his father had got, only his dad was standing in a potato field near Te Puke. As a ‘conscientious objector’, he refused to fight, but was happy enough to work on a farm and later as an ambulance officer. Some of the Quaker ‘conchies’ refused even to do that, and so spent five harsh years in prison and farm camps. He’d never told Bert this. It was not the kind of thing old soldiers want to hear.

‘You need some stronger medicine Bert’.

Becky yelled this from the kitchen, as they were both a little deaf.

‘And we’re going to the doctor tomorrow and get them super pills’

Bert winked at Micklethwaite.

‘She’s got great faith in those damns pills, eh’ and he roared out ‘I’m a gonna Becky’.

‘Don’t say it, the *patupaiarehe* will take you up on that’.

Micklethwaite had originally thought that Becky wore the pants in the house but as he had got to know the Maihi’s, he realised that she always deferred to Bert.

‘You’ve seen those fairies eh Gordon?’ as

Bert munched on a big scone and spluttered pieces over the carpet.

‘Freaky little devils’.

‘Not me Bert, Miranda has though, she says’.

‘She’s a sad girl eh’ yelled Becky from the kitchen ‘I’m worried about her’.

‘Maybe she should get pregnant again?’ said Bert mischievously ‘Billy would be keen eh?’

‘Do you see much of Billy?’

Micklethwaite had seen some smoke from Billy’s bach this morning.

‘Nah, a bit, but the police like ‘im eh? Old Jim Dunning reckons he’d be out of a job if it wasn’t for the Billy’s of this world’.

Becky came in.

‘I don’t like him burning all that rubbish in his drum, always does it on my wash day. I told him Mondays I do washing, but he doesn’t listen. You want more tea Gordon? Good’.

She bustled away like Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. She never sat down with them, but preferred the conversational option of yelling from the kitchen.

‘Hoo yes, big stink eh, the day before that girl was found eh? Thought he was burning his mother or something’ Bert giggled.

‘Bert...’ she remonstrated with the analogy.

‘He’s not a bad lad. Always in trouble, though. Haven’t the heart to chuck him out’.

It was Bert’s bach that Billy Matawai lived in.

‘You should though Bert, it’s getting a real mess’ she handed Micklethwaite a second cup of tea.

‘You reckon Doug should take him in hand? That’s his uncle, there he is’ and Bert pointed to a picture on the wall.

The caption read ‘Rome 1944’ and there were two army mates in khaki shorts, with their arms around each other.

‘We were mates at Cassino, me and Doug. That’s us in Rome, boy those Roman girls, now they were something’.

Bert slapped his lips appreciatively and loudly hoping to get a bite out of Becky

‘Of course we don’t see eye to eye now. He’s Ngai Makariri’.

‘Here we are in Florence, orr Doug was educated and we did a tour of the galleries eh, but most of the pictures were gone. Germans poached the lot. Girls were still there though...’

‘Keep trying Bert’.

He laughed and supped his tea noisily. Micklethwaite had seen the photos many times but only now started to look closely at the tall soldier who was often next to the broad beam of Bert Maihi’s smile. A fag jauntily in his mouth, a head higher than Bert with a slightly superior attitude.

‘I didn’t get his name, Doug?’

‘Eherton, orr it’s hard to say eh. He says it almost without the ‘her’ in it’.

That was it! Of course he’d heard the name before, from Bert Maihi’s lips, reminiscing about his old army days, but he didn’t realise that Billy Matawai was his nephew.

‘Billy Matawai is his nephew?’ he said stupidly.

‘Yeah matey’.

Bert gave him a look that was part nostalgic and part sharp.

‘It’s a sad thing, you know when mates fall out. Me and Doug, we fought side by side in Italy, but he’s a high-up now in Ngai Makariri and I went over to the coast, coal-mining, did me in. But Ngai Tapore is stronger over there. Orr there’s been all sorts of trouble between the tribes since the Treaty got going. Opened up a right Pandora’s box eh Becky?’

The Treaty of Waitangi was signed between the Crown (England) and the Maori tribes in 1840 and it had taken Maori almost 150 years of protests and civil disobedience before the crown started to give compensation for the land that was stolen.

‘I thought that would have made things better Bert?’

‘No! Made things bloody worse. Wasn’t a problem if there was no land, no oil, no mana attached to it. You see? But now, they think we’re stealing mana from Ngai Makariri and the furs flying I tell you. I dunno why I’m telling you Gordon, but’ he whispered ‘my times nearly up and I don’t reckon you can solve one injustice by creating another one’.

Micklethwaite looked blank.

‘I mean you can’t give one tribe mana by taking away another’s eh?’

He coughed, and then took a swig of tea.

‘Any more juice girl? Hee, well I reckon you’re doing a good job on this history stuff Gordon, knew you would, yer keep it up. That detective woman, she’s pretty eh?’

The last remark came out of left side of an All Black scrum and Micklethwaite was taken aback. Then it was distressing to see Bert double-over in another coughing fit, and he needed to think.

‘I’d better go’ he stood up ‘look thanks for the tea and scones Becky, superb as always’.

‘No problem Gordon. Yer going now? If you see that Miranda girl try and cheer her up, and tell her to come down and see me. I worry about that girl’.

He nodded, and turned to thank Bert, but who had suddenly fallen asleep. Gordon nodded to Betty and crept away, and out on the beach he deliberately went down to the high-tide line to avoid Miranda, and ploughed through the soft gravels barely looking at the rolling surf.

He had read somewhere that people who fall asleep suddenly might be suffering from a mini stroke, so maybe Bert was right after all, his clock was ticking down. How could he have missed the bloody obvious? Micklethwaite gave a vindictive kick at the million tons of gravel which constituted Kaitorete Spit, and of course it hurt the spit immensely.

That’s why he’d been chosen, that’s why his historical project existed in the first place. Bert Maihi knew perfectly well that the oil soak was Ngai Tapore, probably could have told him months ago, but he it wanted it official. Wanted it written down, and documented in a fashion that bureaucrats and politicians could understand, and would not deny. Given as evidence in an historical court, maybe in the Treaty of Waitangi tribunal itself. He said it out loud, and it sounded silly.

‘If there’s one person who is pulling the strings at Birdlings Flat, it’s Bert Maihi’.

He strode along barely looking at the Pacific waves and strong textured patterns of water. Half a kilometre out a gaggle of seagulls floated and fought over a patch of silver sea.

Here was a clear connection from Sonia to Professor Eherton onto Billy Matawai, who was lovers with Sonia, and who lived in a bach owned by Bert Maihi, who in turn used to be a good mate of Professor Eherton. This was pushing coincidence to its lawful limits, but what in the end killed Sonia? In his mind Micklethwaite hesitated as an awful thought occurred to him, and he physically mimicked this mental hesitation by stuttering a few steps. Bert knew about Mary and him.

That was scary, how could he know? Micklethwaite resumed walking, temporary blind to the world around him. So if Sonia was studying the conflict between two Maori tribes, then did her research get her into trouble? Like himself, did that explain... and he practically walked into Josho, who was standing facing the waves. This was bad luck, for Miranda was at least pretty to look at, and somewhat sensible, but Josho raved like a lunatic.

‘Te Urua has been speaking to me...’

His tall stark body was almost leaning into the surf. He only had on a T-shirt and trousers, and with bare feet immersed in the wash of seawater must be perishing, but he seemed uninterested in bodily discomfort.

‘Look Josho, I...’

‘Stay Gordon. I can hear Te Urua very well today. She is singing well today. All will be buried in the sea, for we will be engulfed by the rising seawaters and be consigned to the seas encompass. Such is our fate. Are you ready to believe it?’

‘Sorry, not yet, look I must go...’

He took Micklethwaite’s refusal calmly, as Micklethwaite started to move away, as much as anything to avoid wet feet. Twice Josho had helped him start his car and he did not want to be rude to him. People had to stick together out here, but there are limits. Then Josho took his arm.

‘You are too eager to go, Miranda is troubled. Can you see her?’

‘Well, Josh, I don’t think there’s much I can do. Becky wanted to speak to her too. You must talk to Miranda sometime?’

‘She does not listen to me. Ever since that girl was buried at sea she has not wanted to listen to me. She listens only to Te Urua’.

‘She might listen to Becky?’

This was the nearest thing he had had to a conversation to Josho for months, so he must be worried. Josho released Micklethwaite’s arm and turned to the sea.

‘Yes, she might, oh Te Urua, tell us what we must do’

He raised his arms and Micklethwaite took this as a sign of dismissal. The guy really had lost the plot. He was halfway back to his bach when the penny dropped.

II

The phone rang and Spark picked it up wearily. The kids were watching tv and doing their homework at the same time, an impossibility in her opinion, although not in theirs. So negotiations were ongoing.

‘Mary? It’s Gordon. It’s ok to ring you at home?’

‘Yes, how are you?’

Sparks tone softened as she heard her new lovers voice, and took the phone out into the garden to get away from the television. The kids nudged each other, and Oliver, reached for the remote and flicked over to the Countdown 10 Top Pop videos.

‘I was having a good day until the kids started arguing. They’ve changed channels now, to get more pop into their brains’.

The garden had been neglected for years but every now and then, completely without any effort, produced a spring show of azaleas, thistles and hollyhocks from God knows where. She sat down in the most scented part.

‘I had an idea about Sonia’s body being moved from the sand dunes...’

‘She was buried at sea by the Sea People’.

‘Oh, how did you know?’ he sounded deflated.

‘I was reading their literature. It seems obvious when you think about it. How did you find out?’.

‘I had a strange conversation with Josho’.

‘Could Miranda have moved the body on her own?’.

‘No. I went down to the beach again, it’s a long way and Sonia was a big girl.’

‘But with Josho helping’.

‘Yes’.

‘How did they know you’d taken her there, were you followed?’

This had bothered Micklethwaite too.

‘I don’t think so, but they do get arrangements of driftwood down there, and once I found little rings of stones in the dunes’.

‘A sort of ceremonial site?’

‘Possibly’.

‘We’re going out there on Monday, so we should get to the bottom of it. You were right about Daryl, my junior. He’s in love with Miranda’.

‘She’s almost taken up residence on the beach, I’ve seen Josho out there too. They are worried about her’.

The flowers were churning out the fragrance, and the wind had dropped away to nothing.

‘Sonia had three lovers, all at Birdlings Flat. Something in the air?’

‘Hmm’.

‘That’s your best reply?’

‘Well we suspected she was after something, she always was’.

‘What exactly Gordon’.

‘Well, I think she got interested in Te Urua’.

‘Then there’s Billy Matawai as well. He made no secret of it. Scored as you men say, what did she want from him?’

‘Knowledge. Local Maori knowledge’.

‘You don’t like her much do you Gordon?’

Silence. Spark thought he was stunned but then realised he was just composing his reply.

‘It’s not a question of like or dislike, it’s her motivations that interest me. Everything she did was for a reason. Every lover she had she was after something. Me for the land titles, Josho for Te Urua, Billy, well I don’t know yet’.

‘I spoke to Professor Eherton today and he stated emphatically that the mask of Te Urua did not exist. Very emphatically, and that Ngai Tapore don’t exist either’.

‘Is that right? I bet Bert Maihi would have a few things to say about that, he’s Ngai Tapore. I saw him today, he was coughing his guts out’.

‘I met Dr Blackwater at the airport too’.

‘Oh, what’s he like?’

‘Like a frost fish’.

That momentarily chilled both of them.

‘Does he look like Sonia?’

‘Not really. Gloomy, reserved, mind you, seeing Sonia’s cut-up body wouldn’t have helped his temper’.

Despite the gravity of the topic Spark was getting a curious comfort from talking to Gordon, and deliberately prolonged the conversation, for they seemed to be going in the same direction now.

‘Why did you ask about the water content in Sonia’s stomach?’

‘Just an idea really....’

‘It’s freshwater’.

‘Oh’.

It was almost as if Gordon was her side-kick now, with Daryl off on some mad love chase. A long pause.

‘You are going to tell me your theory? Vince warned me off you, said that you play your cards close to your chest’

‘Vince? Your ex-husband?’

‘We still see each other. Seems he doesn’t like you very much, but that’s a point in your favour actually, although he thought you were excessively secretive. I’m still waiting’.

‘Well, I never could really see why Sonia went swimming in the sea’.

‘A midnight romp. Pleasure Gordon, cooling down after a hot bonk on the beach. Apparently she was keen on that sort of thing according to her flatmate’.

Gordon considered it.

‘Well it might come down to that. Do we have a definite date for her death?’

‘On or about Sunday 14 October, hey, what do you mean by ‘it might come down to that?’

Gordon ignored her.

‘The lake was opened about then’.

Spark had already learnt that Lake Forsyth had to be regularly opened by council bulldozers, to allow the water to escape, otherwise it flooded the farmland. Gordon was fussing around with something.

‘The lake was opened on the late afternoon, hold on I’m looking at my calendar, I marked it. Yes’ he muttered ‘it was 13-14, I saw the bulldozers on Sunday still at it, so they would not have finished till the afternoon. You could probably check with the council.’

‘So what was Sonia doing in the lake?’

‘I don’t know, yet.’

There was a wail from the kitchen, as Oliver, it had to be Oliver, had climbed up onto the kitchen bench and reached the forbidden biscuit jar and in his haste to get the contents out before mum noticed, had toppled the jar and biscuits and himself with a delightful crunch to the floor. That was the wail. A combination of guilt, pain and disappointment.

‘Oh God, Oliver. Gotta go Gordon, might see you Monday. I still want to know

your theories. Don't hold back on me' she warned.

He put the phone back and rubbed his cheek. That's exactly what he was doing. It was a bad habit.

Chapter 15

One Step Forward

Monday 5 November

The knick-knack stall still offered the same choices as two weeks ago. The big psychedelic bus was parked in the same position, although Spark noticed a small four-wheeler quad bike beside it, and the same woman was suckling the same baby in the same warm spring sunshine. In the Sea People compound things obviously moved at a predictable pace. As they parked Josho came out and stared at one more police car arriving in his life. Spark got out confidentially. The kids had behaved nicely this morning, and last night she had read some of Dr Blackwaters book which had a remarkable soporific effect, and lead to one of the best nights sleep she had had for a long time. She knew Josho was going to be difficult and she had an arrest warrant for both Trevor Pierce and William Horomona Matawai, should it come down to it — and it probably would.

‘Josho? Can we speak to you sir? It’s about Sonia Blackwater’.

Josho was standing beside a woman who Spark guessed was his wife. Quite a lot older than him, though the baby looked barely four months old.

‘Go on Josh. You tell ‘em’.

‘They return like the sea, leaving their hopes stranded’.

Cummings found it hard to look at Josho who stared with his pencil sharp blue eyes at Spark, who met them unflinching.

‘We have reason to believe that you were involved in concealing or moving Sonia’s body on the night of 15th October. Would you care to say anything?’

Nothing apparently, but Spark glanced at the woman who seemed ready to speak. She shifted the baby matter of factly from one nipple to the next.

‘Go on Josh. We talked about it yesterday’.

‘Excuse me are you his wife?’

‘Yeah, well, bond-partner anyway. Miriam, come on Josh’.

She did not look unfriendly, but seemed resigned to a good deal of non-compliance from her de facto husband.

Cummings had looked around for Miranda, and saw her at the far end of the compound working in the veggie garden. She had hitched up her long skirt into her knickers and exposed long brown legs that even from this distance looked absolutely perfect.

‘We believe that Sonia’s body was moved to the gravel pit road on that evening, and that you may have helped move the body again’.

This was all new to Cummings and he tried hard to keep a non-committal face as he stared at his boss.

‘People of the land should be buried in the sea, we believe what comes from the sea must go into it’.

‘Is that all you are saying? Did you move Sonia’s body into the sea that night?’

‘Come on Josh’

Miriam urged him though not without too much conviction.

‘She wanted Te Urua too badly, and Te Urua reclaimed her.’

‘Do you mean the greenstone mask? Is that what Sonia was after? Have you seen it?’

‘Only the chosen few see it. In the last light of day, when the sun sets like a gemstone into the ocean of Te Urua you may see the visible mark that He made on the land. For He was a great god, half-man and warrior, and lead the Ngai Tapore people onto these shores to live and prosper for ever’.

Spark tried frankness, hoping to get Miriam onside

‘That does not make much sense to me Josho. It’s a lovely day and you’ve got a great spot here. Look, I have an arrest warrant, if you can answer two questions than we let the matter go, otherwise I will have to take you into town for questioning, which I don’t want to do.’

‘Question one, did you remove Sonia Blackwater’s body into the sea on the 15 October. Question two, oh forget about question two. Well?’

‘Te Urua knows, and had taken Sonia to His home. Te Urua understands’.

‘Come on Josh, look’ and Miriam flicked her head significantly at Spark, ‘try Miranda, she knows’.

Then Josho started to sing a song, which Cummings recognised from last time. It was a sort of begone-strangers-begone sort of song, which Josho sang in a high-pitched warbling shriek. Miriam flicked her head again and Spark accepted the notion and they walked away from the caterwauling towards Miranda. Spark overheard Miriam scolding Josho and getting the most normal reply.

‘Really Josh, yer getting worse? They’re not after you? You could have told

them?’

‘But Miriam, they’re police, I don’t want to help them. They’re the worst of the Land People...’

Miranda was rigorously attacking the soil and working up a sweat all over her slim figure. Tucking her shirt into her knickers was eminently practicable and quite unmentionably erotic. Spark remembered a fey girl in her school who used to engage in similar uninhibited and innocent actions, and drove the boys completely wild. It upset the girls as well.

Spark recognised rows of early potatoes and carrots, but there were also little earth mounds dotted all around, each with a small individual piece of corrugated iron offering shelter against the sea spume.

‘What’s that Miranda?’ she pointed.

‘Oh yes, that’s a bit of an experiment. Josho’s idea actually, kumara. I don’t know if it will grow but we are really going to try. Hallo Daryl. It’s a lovely day isn’t it?’

She smiled winningly at Cummings and wiped her forehead which left a smear of dirt there that made her look as ravishing as ever. Spark made a bet that all the boys at her school fell in love with her, and she hated it. She glanced at Cummings who was staring enraptured at his bride-to-be.

‘Miriam said we should talk to you Miranda. We want to know if you moved Sonia Blackwater’s body back into the sea?’

‘Oh yes, Josho said we had to. It was a sea-burial, rather lovely. Poor Sonia’.

‘Why didn’t you tell us that before?’

‘I don’t think you asked me that question did you?’

Miranda replied disingenuously, screwing up her forehead as if trying to remember.

Mary Spark had to laugh at this one. Hundreds of times she had heard from witnesses and accused alike make the plaintive excuse, that they had not been asked the correct question, and if only the police were savvy enough to read their minds, they would only be too happy to oblige. Except, that in Miranda’s case, it was perfectly true. They had not asked the right question: this girl would tell them anything, if they only had the courage to ask her. Cummings looked a bit shocked but Miranda smiled happily.

‘Did you see the man unload the body? Is that it?’

‘Sir...’

Cummings was going to interrupt that he hadn’t been informed of any of this, which was true.

‘Oh yes, we were doing a roundel, a sort of dance to Te Urua. There’s a lovely circle of sand dunes there...’

‘At Gravel Pit Road’ Spark interrupted.

‘I think that’s the name, though I’m not very good on names. Yes, that’s it. A beautiful hollow like an amphitheatre and we act out stories sometimes. There was Josho and me and Spray, but I don’t think we saw a man though? It was very mysterious and misty. There were headlights and a car came and went quite quickly and when we went back to the carpark, there was Sonia.’

‘Was she wearing anything?’

Miranda thought hard.

‘No, but she was wrapped in a blanket. Josho said we should bury her at sea, and so we carried her down to the sea and sang a *karakia* and launched her out, it was beautiful’ and tears flooded her eyes ‘poor Sonia, but we all must die’ she ended on a practical note.

Cummings had made a hesitating movement to hug her, but Miranda moped her face with her skirt and brightened up.

‘She is at rest now, I know. It’s us land people that suffer’.

The sun was getting hot and a light wind brought the sound of the sea brushing gently back and forth, back and forth. It was a peaceful scene. Miranda pulled down her skirt more properly and tugged stickily at her close-fitting top. Spark asked.

‘Is Miriam also called Spray?’

She nodded.

‘What time do you think this was Miranda?’

‘I’m not very good at times, but I think we were there to end the old day and start the new one, like the Celts, but it must have been very late. Midnight?’ she said hopefully.

Cummings looked baffled, but it all made sense. Spark almost asked Miranda if she was in love with Cummings, but that was too cruel, and she knew the answer anyway.

‘Thank you Miranda. You’ve been very helpful. Daryl?’

He was hesitating again, then said goodbye gently and she waved them off. When Daryl glanced back anxiously, Spark followed his eyes, and saw Miranda take off her top and reveal her tanned and wonderful upper body. It was something of a vision and even Spark was jealously impressed.

‘Calm down Daryl’.

She said this intending a joke as they walked back to the car.

‘But she’s trapped here sir!’

‘Eh?’

‘This Josho guy, he’s a cult leader. I think Miranda wants to escape but doesn’t

how to. She needs help’.

Spark slammed the door and started the engine. She couldn’t take this seriously.

‘She’s told you this? She looks happy enough to me’.

Cummings shook his head.

‘Aren’t you going to arrest the nutter?’

‘Who Josho? No’.

‘Concealing a body, lying to us, running a cult?’

‘Calm down. What’s the point. We’ve found out all we need to know, besides I don’t think it’s a cult.’

‘We? Who’s this man who dumped Sonia at the carpark’.

This was awkward.

‘Is it Billy Matawai?’

‘Let’s go and see him. Let me do the talking’.

Cummings nodded and seemed satisfied as the lie, well not precisely a lie Spark told herself, a misdirection, tripped easily off her tongue. Thank god he was too love-sick to notice.

At the beach carpark was Bert Maihi with a fishing rod slung over his shoulder and yarning to Oily McGregor. Bert looked at them curiously, then recognised Spark.

‘Hiya, Miss Spark ain’t it?’

‘Mr Maihi. We were looking for Billy?’

‘Orrr yeah, he’s over there. Burning stuff I wouldn’t wonder, hee’.

‘He’s a bugger, wouldn’t trust him yer know’ was Oily’s input.

‘Do you trust anyone Mr McGregor?’

‘Nah’.

Spark knew that she wanted to ask Bert some questions but for the life of her she could not think what they were. Looking over his brown corrugated face it reminded her of the fences that people put up around Birdlings to protect their baches from the sea spume. Oily spat and said.

‘Well I’m going Bert, any luck?’

‘Them bloody trawlers got the lot eh’

Bert swung his empty bucket full of some squishy bait. After Oily had shuffled off Spark asked.

‘Mr Maihi, is there bad feeling between Ngai Tapore and Ngai Makariri tribes’.

He seemed to think this was a serious question.

‘Well, Miss Spark, that’s a long story eh. Everyone’s after their bit of time in the sunshine. Mana we call it’.

‘What is mana?’ chipped in Cummings.

‘Well I don’t hardly know, how to explain. It’s sort of’ and Bert scratched his head ‘you see Maori know what mana is, but it doesn’t translate that well to pakeha. Honour? Maybe power. Some say it’s just pride, pure and simple. Maori they are a proud people, and you have two proud tribes meet, well, those jolly sparks are gonna fly right?’

‘Is it a dispute over land? Resources? Oil?’ she suggested.

‘Orr, don’t you listen to Oily, between you and me’.

Bert whispered although the old man had long out of earshot.

‘He’s a bit touched I reckon. No, there’s no oil here, apart from that pond? You’ve seen that? Maybe out there though’.

He waved out to the brimful sea.

‘Out there?’

Cummings was incredulous. Bert laughed.

‘Did you use the oil?’

‘Me? It don’t burn very well, you’d be better off trying to light sheep turds I reckon, hee. Orr I see, the tribe you mean, sure, sure. Stopping wounds and stuff it was good, still is. My sheila takes some and puts it on my sores sometimes, reckons its better than all those fancy stuff you get from hospitals, and cheaper...’

His spiel was stopped by an outburst of coughing.

‘Are there Ngai Tapore pa sites here?’

‘I’ll say so, look up on that hill there always, you see the terracing? It’s jolly hard to see in this sun.’

They were standing in the carpark looking across the shingle bank that had closed in Lake Forsyth again, and across to the big cliff that stopped the north end of Kaitorete Spit like an exclamation mark. The cliff had strong red and ochre colours running through it, and behind the cliff were basins and folds of open green grazing land, rolling up to the old volcanic hills of Banks Peninsula.

‘There was one pa there, a good spot on the headland, couple of hundred feet up and you could see all your enemies coming eh? The terracing was for kumara, you see, where those sheep are grubbing’.

Bert pointed and Spark could make out faint lines in a basin.

‘And over there, by the lake is another pa. Good kai here you see, in the lake and all down the spit. Orr it was good site. Flounder in the lake, tuna, eels to you’ Bert smacked his lips ‘still catching ‘em’.

‘Was there an urupa?’

Spark said the word hesitantly, because she was unsure of how to say it.

‘Dead got to be buried, eh Miss’.

Bert said this thoughtfully, and then had another prolonged fit of coughing.

‘Thanks Mr Maihi’.

‘No problems Miss, if you want to know more you’se come and see me and Becky eh, for a cup of tea’

His smile creased his face. Spark said she would, and watched him shoulder up the long gravel road.

‘Poor sod, hasn’t got long has he’ Cummings observed.

Spark wasn’t so sure. She had an uncle like that, and he hung on years after the plot was bought. And those coughing fits seem to come at convenient places in the conversation. She had listened closely to his voice and was convinced it must have been Bert Maihi who rang her that night, and told him Sonia’s real name, but Cummings interrupted her day-dreaming.

‘Let’s see Billy Boy sir, are you going to arrest him?’

‘Yes’.

‘What charge?’

‘Obstruction’.

‘Fair enough, he deserves a shake-up’.

They walked into the yard where a Holden Ute was pulled up and laden with furniture. Matawai came out grunting under the load of a mattress and heaved it up on top the table, unsuccessfully, for it fell off with a clump on the other side.

‘Ow bugger’

He swore pleasantly before he noticed the two police officers

‘Giddy mates. Come to help?’

‘You’re moving?’

‘Nah, I like stacking furniture eh’

He nodded in the direction of Bert Maihi.

‘He’s given me the shove.’

An observation which he followed with a number of inventive obscenities.

‘Bert Maihi? Why?’

‘Said I was trouble, causing too much trouble round here. Can’t understand it myself, Saint Billy they call me. Solomon that’s my name. Wise man’.

He made a joke which completely backfired, because neither of the two police understood that Horomona was the Maori version of Solomon.

‘I don’t think you’ve been too wise’ Spark said quietly.

Billy was heaving at the mattress from the other side.

‘Don’t ya?’

‘Telling us lies isn’t wise’.

Billy shrugged as if to indicate he neither knew or cared what Spark was saying. The mattress stuck this time and Billy got out a rope and started tying the whole mass of goods down. Spark did not have much leverage and so had to make things up.

‘Your mate on the coast doesn’t back you up’.

‘Eh?’

‘Pete Hodgson, fisherman at Hokitika. You were staying with him right? That’s what you said?’

Billy kept tying up the rope.

‘Not possible, Pete was still on a fishing boat that day’ Spark looked at her report ‘15 October. So where were you?’.

Billy Matawai had several options here, but he choose the worst one.

‘Well he’s a bloody liar. I had drinks with him in the bar, half a dozen blokes could confirm we was there. Good night it was’.

‘What bar?’

‘Hokitika’.

‘Name Mr Matawai, name?’

‘I dunno, I was drunk wasn’t I?’

‘That’s not clever Mr Matawai. If you were that drunk how did you remember your mate’s name?’

Cummings was adding in his tune to the song of frustration. Matawai had finished the tying up the mattress and came round to them, all puff and bravado. He stared Cummings disdainfully in the eye.

‘If you don’t believe me lock me up eh?’

He thrust out his hands in a mock movement ready for the handcuffs.

‘Not a bad idea Mr Matawai. This is an arrest warrant. Better get your tooth-brush’ Spark said firmly.

‘What...’

Billy was taken aback

‘You’re bloody joking?’

Spark shook her head.

‘Obstruction. When you and your mate sort out your story maybe we’ll let you go. Better grab your pjs’.

‘I don’t wear ‘em’.

‘We’re waiting’.

‘Jesus’.

As Matawai finally realised he was being nicked. He stomped off inside. Cummings glanced at Spark and she read his thoughts.

‘Probably won’t make much difference, but he’s hiding something’.

‘Is that true about his mate?’

‘Not exactly. The Hokitika cops reckon his mate is lying, and was on a fishing boat at the time. Besides with Billy gone we can execute that search warrant. You fancy a job? Turn the place upside down, drugs anything.’

Cummings was pleased.

‘I bet we get something. How did you persuade the super?’

The superintendent was notoriously stingy with approval of warrants, except when it involved illegal substances.

‘Said Billy was in the drugs trade’.

Cummings grinned.

‘I bet he is’.

Matawai shut his bach door, and climbed sulkily into the back seat without a word. On the way out from Birdlings Flat they passed the old shuffling figure of Oily McGregor, who gave them the fingers in his usual appreciative way.

Chapter 16

Fireworks

Monday 5 November

On a warm explosive evening, two cars headed out from Christchurch on two separate journeys, but aiming for the same destination. Neither were aware of each other, and it would have caused considerable embarrassment if they had known. One car arrived twenty minutes ahead of the other, but then Cummings was a much faster driver. He was getting plenty of practice. After driving back to central, he dropped off Billy Matawai and Mary Spark, picked up the search warrant and two police officers experienced in searches and drove all the way out to Birdlings Flat again by one o'clock. They went through Matawai's bach with a careful ruthlessness, and turned up several packets of cannabis (just lying in the food cupboard under the word 'green tea'), a revolver and 303 rifle and a fishing knife (under a carefully concealed loose floorboard) and a plastic bag full of unidentified white tablets (inside the back of the video recorder).

'It was the little shine on the screws that gave it away'.

Cummings was impressed. All he had found was a packet of print photos showing Billy in a wetsuit and holding a huge crayfish, and several with Sonia Blackwater on a sandy beach somewhere. There was a snap of Billy with more fish and one of Sonia topless. She was a good looker, any man would want her. There was also a couple of shots of them cuddling up in a bar. Cummings put them in a plastic bag and wondered if Sonia was another of Billy's fishing stories — only this one didn't get away.

They drove back to Christchurch by five and he handed the collection over to Spark who was not impressed, except by the white powder, which she sent down to the chemists.

'Where's Billy Boy?' asked Cummings.

'In the cell. He did us a favour and got stropky with the cell officer, so now he has a sore head and assault to add to his list. He's not having a happy time. This has been worth it Daryl, they are good aren't they?' referring to the search officers.

‘Amazing. They just did the place over and you’d hardly know a butterfly got in there. Night sir’.

‘Night’.

He was a good keen cop, pity he had to fall in love. Then Mary Spark smiled at the incongruity and said aloud to herself ‘no, there is no comparison Mary, you are not in love, are you?’

Well it was a reasonable theory except that by seven that evening, after dropping the kids off at her sisters, for a Guy Fawkes night bonfire, barbecue, and sleepover, she found herself heading back out to Birdlings Flat herself. Unknowingly, Daryl was ten minutes ahead of her. By the time she got there tiredness was coming in like waves on the tides, and the air was warm and sultry. A good night for lovers although it was sleep she craved. Micklethwaite greeted her with a glass of wine and her eyebrows raised.

‘Didn’t think you had the bloody cash Gordon for this?’

‘Drink and enjoy. I’m celebrating’ a pause ‘you believe me now?’

Spark drank and believed him.

‘Give me a hug, I need one’.

When that was done with they got dressed and walked down to the beach in the dusky gloom. They sat on a driftwood log. Further down there was a big bonfire and every now and then a whoosh of colour and stars exploded in dense colours. They could hear kids shouting excitedly.

‘We have a sequence from me to Miranda and Josho, then Sonia floating back to the beach’

Gordon drew arrows in the sandy gravel.

‘No luck with Billy Matawai then? I went down to see him today, I wondered where he’d gone. Bert told me’.

Another rocket soared over the sea, an expensive one for it crackled with noise and the starshells trailed a long way across the black warm clouds.

‘But Sonia drowned in freshwater...’

‘Lake Forsyth?’

‘Unless she drowned somewhere and she was moved to Birdlings Flat, and chucked in the sea there? And then moved to your bach. That’s three times. We still only have half a story.’

‘Gordon, this is really weird, you know?’

He gave her a hug and she snuggled in. She didn’t mean to ask the question it just popped out.

‘Do you love me?’

It was true that Micklethwaite had been anticipating this question already, and equally true that he had wanted to avoid it. Love was a word that he struggled to give meaning too. Women used it too much, and men seldom used it at all. Women seemed to require large dollops of the expression of love, and any average man found himself utilising a word that both guaranteed an entrance to a woman's heart, and ensured that the exit would be painful.

'Of course I love you... oh, look, there's another couple on the beach down there, one is Miranda I'm sure, and the other...'

Two figures could be made out in the gloom, highlighted against the white surf. She had a light and careful walk, almost hesitating to tread on a stone in case she harmed it.

'Oh God, it's Daryl! I hope he hasn't seen us. I've never told him about us Gordon.'

They sat carefully still, as the figures reached the beach then walked away from them.

'He's too busy to notice us'.

Micklethwaite stroked Mary's hair.

'What bad things happened to you?'

'Oh, it was a long time ago, aren't the fireworks gorgeous, look a rocket!'

He took her hand and she did not seem to mind. Two more rockets leapt and fizzed against the black oily sea.

'I think you are in love with me?'

'Utterly'.

'Oh Daryl. It will hurt us, don't you see?'

No he couldn't see.

'It is odd isn't it? Both you and Daryl falling for Birdlings Flat lovers?'

'And Sonia' added Mary Spark

'She's never loved anyone'.

'That's cruel Gordon, maybe no one loved her?'

Micklethwaite had to admit it was true.

'What about her father?'

'I think she worshipped him'.

'I wonder if she got any sense out of Josho. Ever found Te Urua?'

'He's mad'.

'No, he's not that mad. He plays a game, but plays with his kids too. Played with

Sonia’.

Cummings hand tightened on hers, and she, yes he did feel a response.

‘Did Josho hurt you?’

‘No Daryl, of course not, I can’t tell you. I wish I could, but Te Urua knows and I will be with him’.

‘Josho is dangerous, the Sea People are a cult and they have trapped you Miranda’.

‘No it isn’t like that. Josho is kind and so is Spray, they helped me a lot, get over things. The bad things...’

‘Can I kiss you?’

‘It won’t make any difference...’

So he kissed her, and despite their love-making only an hour ago Mary Spark felt another powerful surge of desire. This strange, nerdy guy was unleashing something in her.

‘That was nice, wasn’t it?’

‘Oh yes, but I don’t love you. I’m sorry’.

‘I want you to come with me, tonight, away from Josho. He’s evil’.

‘Oh no. You don’t understand us Daryl. We are together, The Sea People...’

‘What about Sonia?’ Cummings cut in cruelly ‘was she part of your togetherness?’

‘Sonia, oh I’m tired of Sonia. I’m going for accidental drowning or suicide and I don’t care which. Just solve the mystery Gordon, present her on a plate for me, and kiss me again. I want you, oh I want you so badly’.

‘I want you Miranda’.

‘No, I’m sorry Daryl’ and his hand slipped from hers.

Micklethwaite pulled her to her feet.

‘Come on Mary Spark. What an excellent name for Guy Fawkes night.’

‘I’ve heard all the jokes, can you carry me?’

‘Miranda, please stay’.

But the graceful girl with the sad eyes was turning away from him.

‘You’re heavy’ Micklethwaite complained.

‘Miranda...’

Down along the beach the bonfire was burning brighter and Micklethwaite smelt a whiff of plastic on the air, and then somewhere deep inside of him a little key turned in it’s lock, and on the other side — was daylight.

Chapter 17

Heading Home

Tuesday 7 November

That was the trouble with the sea: it made her sleep, and sleep and sleep. When Detective Senior Sergeant Mary Spark fumbled at her watch that morning she gave a groan and decamped from Micklethwaite's bed with half a dozen muttered obscenities. She dressed furiously whilst Micklethwaite barely had time to roll over, receive a perfunctory kiss on his stunned lips, and she was gone. Starting her day without coffee was miserable and Spark tore down the empty highways adjusting her hair, fiddling with one hand into her make-up bag and dabbing stuff on her face like an impressionist painting. She rang Daryl who wasn't at work or home, so where the hell was he? At the Halswell cafe she stopped and bought a coffee 'to go', and went like a rocket through town and got to her friends place at 8.35.

'Mum you're late!' said Oliver 'we had a cool time, you should have seen the bonfire. The guy was enormous'.

Sophie was more attentive to her mum's generally harassed appearance, and did something unexpected. She gave her mum a kiss and a hug, and a look of understanding well beyond her eleven years. Spark dashed home and threw the kids into their school clothes, thrust money into their eager hands for lunch and was bundling them out of the door when the phone rang. It was Vince.

'Have you signed the papers yet Mary'.

'I've been busy Vince'.

'So I heard'.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I rang last night. Have you got a boyfriend?'

'Well it's nothing to do with you'.

'I think we should move on this divorce thing eh'.

‘I’m bloody late Vince, gotta get the kids to school and get to the airport..’

‘Sophie said you had a boyfriend, it’s not that Micklethwaite git is it?’

She slammed the phone down, yelled at the kids and tore around to the school. It was now 9.15.

‘See you at 3’.

She yelled out and left them to cross the empty playgrounds to the school hall, where the massed drone of the school hymn had already begun. The roads were mercifully clear out to the airport and she rang Cummings again, still no answer, where was the sod? Bloody Vince and his bloody nosiness, and his bloody, bloody divorce. Spark had worked herself into a foul temper and parked prominently in the ‘5 Minute Zone’ at the international terminal, and glared at the parking attendant to do his worse. She strode up to the flight information board and found the plane had been delayed an hour.

She did not have to rush at all and stood there feeling full of anger and bitterness, and also as if she’d had fallen into a vacuum.

‘Hiya Miss Spark’.

‘Dr Blackwater, sorry I’m late’.

He was dressed in much the same casual way, his eyes guarded or tired, she couldn’t tell.

‘Yeah, well, the flights kinda slowed up too’.

‘Has Sonia gone through customs?’

It was peculiar. A dead body had to go through customs like everyone else, and possess a passport, so anyone listening would have thought she was inquiring about a living person.

‘Yeah, they’ve been real nice about it. Everyone has, and I wanted to thank you for your help’.

‘You go to LA then transfer?’ he nodded ‘do you want a coffee Dr Blackwater?’

‘Sure Miss Spark’

‘It’s Mrs actually’.

‘Oh ok, sorry’.

They went up the escalator onto the upper floor and shuffled through the thin queue, sitting with a grand view of the Air New Zealand plane and the mountains beyond.

‘Sure is a pretty place here.’

That was the trouble with Americans she decided. Did they mean it, or did they say that about everything, and if they did say that about everything, was it politeness, or just a lack of imagination? But the coffee was hitting the spot, and calming her down. She was not exactly sure how to broach the subject, but Dr Blackwater beat

her to it.

‘Did you find out any more about what happened Mrs Spark, about how Sonia drowned?’

He seemed calmer today, less tense, more resigned.

‘No Dr Blackwater, but we have taken a man in for questioning. We think that he may be able to help us with our inquiries’.

What a terribly ghastly thing to say.

‘I see’.

‘There may have been drugs involved’.

‘Sonia, hey she wasn’t that kinda girl...’ he protested.

‘Ever?’

‘Well, I don’t suppose a father really knows. What kind of drugs do you mean? Pot?’

That was a very seventies expression.

‘Possibly. We found some on the man, and he knew Sonia... well’.

A euphemism for lover, but the little pause contained the truth and Dr Blackwater nodded.

‘Possibly, they were taking drugs, and it affected her judgement. She went for a swim and drowned, there is no doubt about that. I can assure you that there was no foul play’.

What a weird expression! In a sense the play did turn foul, but every little lie helps when a parent is grieving.

‘Well, that is kinda comforting, but Sonia, she was such a good swimmer, such a good swimmer’.

‘Over confident?’ Spark wished the boarding announcement would come soon.

‘Yeah, well...’

He stared at the coffee he had not drunk. Spark changed the subject.

‘You spoke to Professor Eherton?’

‘Yeah, he was really kind, talked about Sonia’.

‘You knew Eherton well before?’

‘Yep, he was on sabbatical for a while at Houston, we got to know each other real well. I guess that’s how Sonia came to be here’ he warmed up ‘and Doug said there were plenty of good projects here, I mean in the states it can be hard to get your teeth into a good subject area. Everything seems to be darned used up’.

‘A good subject means a good Ph.d, and a good career afterwards?’

‘You got it miss, sorry Mrs. That’s what Sonia wanted...’

‘And what you wanted?’

‘Sure, I wanted the best for her. You’d want the best for your kids’.

‘Was she lonely?’

He was caught off guard by that comment.

‘Well, I don’t think so. She had a boyfriend, you said’.

Spark did not want to hurt him but this was her last chance.

‘Several we believe. We know of three’.

‘Well, she wasn’t lonely then I guess, what are you getting at here?’

Dr Blackwater stared hard at Spark, who looked hard back.

‘She had at least three lovers at the same time, if we believe their evidence’.

That brought on silence.

‘What do you want me to say, she was a normal girl with normal appetites, hell I don’t know’.

There was the boarding announcement. One last try Mary, to break into this man.

‘She was four months pregnant’.

‘Jeez... you picked a helluva time to tell me.’

‘It was in the autopsy report I gave you, but you left it behind’.

‘I did, I didn’t want to read that stuff, hey, that’s my boarding call, I’d better go’.

He stood up, and looked old and shaken. Spark felt a certain compassion for him, except for that ghastly criminal report that kept reminding her that he enjoyed little girls. At least once, and could you really only enjoy them once?

‘I think she really admired you sir. She had your photo on her office wall’.

He looked awkward momentarily, but then nodded gratefully at the escape sentence he had granted her.

‘We were close, since her mom died. Real close’.

How close Mr Blackwater? That was the one question that she really wanted to ask, and yet could see no subtle or suggestive way to put it. Perhaps Gordon might have managed it, or even Cummings. It needed someone with less sensitivity, a bit of a blunderbuss who could go for the jugular and ask: the question is Dr Blackwater, the little girl you photographed and stroked naked, was that your daughter? Was that Sonia? Did you get an erection doing it, and did she see it? How close Dr Blackwater, how close?

Mercifully the second announcement of boarding came over the speakers, and both

stood up relieved. They shook hands and Spark watched him stride through to customs, eating up the ground, keen to escape.

In the car she rang Daryl and got him.

‘Where have you been?’

‘I was late in today, got held up I suppose’

An unusually grumpy response, and she could not resist a tease.

‘An active love life?’

‘Not exactly, I’m sorry sir, I went to see Miranda again’.

Well that was not a surprise.

‘And?’

‘Well, she’s not in love with me’.

Spark felt truly sorry for that. He said it so flatly and honestly that it made her wince.

‘I’m sorry Daryl. Are you ready to interview Billy Matawai? He’s cooled down I think? OK, I’ll meet you. He’s still in central’.

Normally a charged prisoner got shifted to the remand wing in Addington prison, but it was so full of gang members after the superintendents big crime bust, that Matawai was stuck in a police cell. The interview room was stark, with four chairs a table and a tape recording machine. Someone had put up a poster ‘Crime Doesn’t Pay’, but there was no other scenery. Even the window looked into another concrete wall four metres away. Matawai came in cocky as usual, but the look he gave Spark lead her to hope that this time he would start talking.

‘William Horomona Matawai you have been charged with obstructing the course of justice, with two charges of holding cannabis, two charges of possessing unregistered firearms, one charge of possessing an unwarranted and unregistered car, one charge of assault on a police officer and one charge of possession of a Class A drug ‘ecstasy’. Not a bad list’.

Cummings added tartly after his recitation of wrong-doing. Matawai pretended to look bored.

‘Mr Matawai, what happened between you and Sonia Blackwater on the night of the 14th and the 15th October. Were you on ecstasy? Both of you?’

‘Eh? You guys don’t give up’.

‘Your mate on the coast, Pete what’s his name, says he didn’t see you to the 16 October, in the evening. He couldn’t have seen you because he was on a fishing boat, we checked that. So why the lie?’

He shrugged and looked uncooperative. Spark spoke reasonably and slowly, and sensed that he was listening.

‘I spoke to Sonia’s dad about an hour ago. He was taking her body back home. He thought Sonia had died suspiciously, so do we. We want to know what happened that night. Those charges against you, firearms, drugs, even the assault charge, they won’t keep you in here, but not telling us about Sonia will. For a long time.’

‘I didn’t kill her eh? You’ve got the wrong bloke’.

‘We don’t think she was killed. We think she was drowned, but we need to know how it happened’.

He was thinking, though it looked a painful process.

‘We know that someone moved the body to a bach on the morning of the 15th October, we know that The Sea People put Sonia back into the sea, round about midnight of that same day, as a sort of burial. We know her body floated back to near the Lake Forsyth outlet, where she was found on the morning of the 16 October. Did you move her first? On the 14th or 15th October?’

She heard Cummings shifting in his chair by the tape recorder, no doubt mystified as all this new information came pouring out about Sonia, but she kept focussing on Matawai’s face. For some time now she had had a theory of what may have happened that night, now it was time to try it out.

‘Ecstasy is known to cause euphoria in people, particularly if it is poor quality, or if the user is unused to it. Sometimes the euphoria can become irrational and manic. People don’t know what they are doing, and do silly things. I think you and Sonia were taking ecstasy that night and she couldn’t handle it. She loved swimming, so she went for a swim, the last thing she ever did’.

Matawai was still silent, a long time, but Spark knew he could be tempted. Clearly the night in the cells had done his attitude a power of good.

‘Yer not gonna do me for anything else?’

‘Failing to notify a death, that’s about it. If you’re straight with us’

Spark kept her matter-of-fact tone, and Billy began to talk.

‘Yeah right, well that’s not worth more than a week or so eh? I mean Sonia, she was a wild girl, she’d try anything. I mean sex, she was keen yer know, and good, and she was into experiments’.

Billy’s language was less ripe in the stilted official atmosphere of the police station.

‘You broke up though?’

‘Yeah, but we kept in touch. She was keen to come out and see me about something...’

‘What?’

‘I dunno, just Maori stuff, real hot in that she was. Always keen to know stuff, asking bloody questions, real yank eh? Confident, bit of a know-all...’

‘But good in bed?’

He grinned, and swore, the irony was lost on him.

‘Yeah, anyway. I told her I had some stuff and we met up in town and came out and got stuck in’.

‘To the ecstasy?’

‘Yeah, well the dope first but then she wanted the harder stuff, real keen. I wasn’t so sure she’d handle it, but...’ he shrugged.

‘Was there alcohol as well?’

‘Yeah, some good rye eh’.

A lethal mixture. Cannabis, whisky, ecstasy.

‘Were you re-starting your relationship with her?’ Spark asked indifferently.

‘Well, yer know, I mean’.

‘Did you have sex?’

‘Course we bloody did, then she went sort of crazy. Said she wanted to go for a swim, I said it’s bloody winter, and the fog, it was a crazy idea. Oh she was keen, just walked out and I was following her...’

‘Was she naked?’

Matawai hesitated.

‘Yeah, starkers. Would have been midnight I suppose, no one else around, or anyone could see us anyway. In she jumped, that was that last I saw of her’.

‘Where did she jump in?’

‘Err, well the lake’

‘But the outlet had been opened?’

‘Yeah right, and out she went, well I didn’t bloody even see her. She’s was gone. A gonner.’

‘Did you call out or try to stop her?’ Matawai swore.

‘Course I did’ and real emotion seemed to come flooding out ‘the stupid bitch, I grabbed hold of her once and pulled her back, but she just giggled, silly bitch. I remember that giggle, then she just ran into the lake like. Jesus, I didn’t think the stuff would get her like that’.

‘Did you like her?’

‘She was a great bonk eh!’

That was Matawai’s cheerful way of dismissing his lover. Spark was shocked, but she didn’t show it. There were more questions, more answers, more or less satisfactory, and the night of October 15 unravelled in Matawai’s words.

‘I looked for her in the morning and found her all washed up on the beach eh.’

‘Were there cuts on her body?’ asked Cummings. Matawai nodded.

‘Plenty’.

‘What caused those?’

‘Dunno. Dragged over something I ‘spose’.

‘And then you moved her body? Why?’

‘Bloody obvious, I wanted to get rid of her. Didn’t want to get the blame eh?’

‘The blame for what?’

‘For giving her drugs, that’s what’.

‘Why did you move Sonia to Gordon Micklethwaite’s bach?’

‘I dunno, good as place as any’.

Sometimes the best reasons are no reasons at all. Matawai’s answers became shorter and less detailed, and somehow Spark could not care. She had got to the nub of the matter, and if not every ‘I’ was dotted or ‘T’ crossed then it was hard to expect otherwise with someone like Billy. A whole life lived on marginal crime. He had a stupid cleverness that kept him inside prison walls just long enough for him to learn new tricks and forget about old captures. Cummings started to take a long statement, which was all rather sordid in the end. A night of sex and drugs, somehow she expected better of Sonia.

‘So when do I get out here?’

‘When the judge says. Tomorrow, or the day after maybe?’

Privately she doubted that. Assault on a cop was always taken pretty badly by the judicial system. He would be remanded for sure.

‘Just as long as I ain’t remanded. Addingtons a stink hole’

These were Billy’s last words as he exited the room with a constable in tow.

‘Sir’ Cummings protested ‘you’ve been holding back on me. I didn’t know all that stuff about Micklethwaite?’

‘No, I’m sorry Daryl, but love got in the way. It happens doesn’t it?’

She was just being honest but he completely misunderstood her.

‘I know, I sort of fell for her. Miranda is trapped you know, she needs help. I guess it distracted me’.

She looked at him more kindly, he was just a kid after all.

‘Type that up will you?’

It was late and she went home and had a lovely evening with her kids, and told Oliver his favourite bed-time stories, and talked to Sophie about love and fairies, for she had still not entirely given up on that hope. After they were asleep she went around switching off the lights and poured herself a small celebratory wine, and then another

and became a trifle maudlin.

Sonia slept with Micklethwaite because she wanted a good Ph.d, and then she slept with Josho because he claims to know the secret of Te Urua. And then she slept with Billy Boy, because he knew Maori stuff, and she dumped all of them, because that would get in the way of her good Ph.d. She was originally chasing the tribal conflict story, but then became obsessed with the mythic greenstone mask of Te Urua, about which everyone agrees does not exist, but saw it as a quick way to gain intellectual credibility, on the way to get a good Ph.d. There were still the cuts to explain, and the missing jewellery, so Matawai might have to talk some more before she was done, and she thought he would. Not the whole story yet, but damn close.

The divorce papers were still sitting on the kitchen table. They had been there three weeks now, but she was no closer to signing. Every day she seemed to be more tired, and wondered for the umpteenth time if this job was getting to her. What a miserable rotten bastard Matawai was, and she made a determined mental note to hit him with every statute in the book.

A big yawn escaped, and she glanced at the calendar, well it was her period, so that was an excuse. It was late again. So the stress was getting to her after all, trying to run a half-decent family life and then manage a full career was just an absurdity. These bloody feminists, someone should have told them, you can't have it both bloody ways. Now she had a lover in the mix, and an ex-husband pestering her for separation. It was enough to make anyone drink.

She drank.

Then the phone rang. Oh God, not Vince again. It was half-past ten, late but she was a police officer and police officers answered phone calls.

'Mary, it's Gordon'

'Well that's a relief, I thought it was my ex'.

'Vince?'

She detected the question mark at the end of his sentence.

'That's a bit thick Gordon, how many exes do you think I have?' she giggled 'hey, we've got a confession. Billy Matawai, yep. Taking drugs, moving the body, the works'.

She explained the bare facts of the long interview. Micklethwaite seemed quiet, miffed perhaps?

'Pretty impressed eh?'

'You seem very bright and breezy for this time of night Mary?'

'I've got a confession, and I've been drinking. Vince wants me to sign his divorce papers, what should I do Gord? Go for it?'

'Well...'

‘It was a rhetorical question Gordon, so are you pleased about Billy boys story?’
There was a pause as he heard Micklethwaite sigh.

‘Mary, it’s the biggest load of bollocks I’ve ever heard’.

Chapter 18

Billy Gets the Point

Wednesday 8 November

‘Would you care to explain’ she said icily ‘since you wouldn’t explain last night’.

‘You were tired, I was tired, it wasn’t the time’.

They were sitting at an outside table at a cafe on Oxford Terrace, with the afternoon sun beaming down benevolently on these turbulent beings called humans.

There was no kiss, it was too public for that. They were only a block away from the central police station and already she had seen two police officers she knew. The superintendent had read Billy Matawai’s statement and call her in to praise her, and she had a copy for Micklethwaite to read, which he did, slowly, sipping his coffee and ignoring her impatience. He looked up and smiled. She tossed her head, which shivered golden in the sun and he wondered what it was that made her so attractive to him. Efficiency? She was all of that. No nonsense, straight to the point, lusty, yes, all of those. He did not mind the curtain callers, or the two children he had never seen, although perhaps she was welded to her career, and that might be an issue.

‘What are you smiling at?’

‘I’m happy’.

‘Great, are you explaining anything? Vince was right, you’re bloody secretive Gordon. It’s a fault’.

‘I agree. I’d like to talk to Billy’.

‘Are you out of your mind? There is such a thing as police procedure, following the rules and all that bloody stuff’.

‘We haven’t been following the rules so far?’

‘That’s beside the point. Waiter? Another flat white, thanks. Why do they call them flat whites? Ok, we’ve bent the rules, but I cannot go on bending them. The

super has practically promised me a promotion Gordon, what will he say if he knows the lies I've spun on him?'

'Didn't you say he was going to retire soon?'

'Next month. So, are you are going to tell me anything?'

He nodded.

'How did Billy Matawai know about the cuts on Sonia's body?'

He showed the relevant page to her, running his finger along Matawai's comments 'plenty... dragged over something I 'spose'.

'Who told him? You? No, then me? No. Bert Maihi, I don't think he knew. Oily McGregor? Don't think he saw them, his sight is so bad'.

'Perhaps Cummings said something to Miranda, and passed it on to Josho and that way' she suggested.

'Possibly. Can I see him?'

'Why?'

Micklethwaite leaned back and spoke carefully.

'He lied to you, but I think he will open up to me'.

'Why?'

'Let me try? This is a load of rubbish' he pointed to the statement 'oh it's true in part, but it's not the substance, please Mary. Can't you find us an interview room with one of those hidden mirror thingies, so you could watch?'

She laughed scornfully.

'Christchurch police resources don't run to hidden mirror 'thingies' Gord, though there is a room with a microphone. Why?'

'Please'.

'This is daft, bloody daft. You're lucky he happens to be in Central, if he was in Addington it would be hopeless'.

Spark looked at her watch, nearly 4.30. She could arrange it, although it was irregular to say the least.

'Turn up at five and ask for me. I'm making no promises'.

'I love you'.

'Do you now?' and she scampered off.

At 5.30 William Horomona Matawai was once again seated in an empty interview room. The hidden microphone was on and in a room next door Spark switched on the speaker and opened her newspaper. Micklethwaite nodded to her and walked in, his heart beating. He could be making a first-class dope of himself here.

‘Gordy? They got you to? What are you in for eh?’

Billy grinned and they shook hands.

‘Nothing yet, but I wanted to talk to you. You know, about Sonia’.

‘Oh yeah, poor kid’.

‘You know we were lovers?’

Matawai looked a trifle embarrassed.

‘Yeah, well she did say something. She dumped yer right? Just like me to Gord, bit of a bitch’.

‘And you dumped her on me. Why me?’

‘Just bad luck Gord eh’ and Billy roared at his joke ‘got any smokes?’

Micklethwaite shook his head, and pulled up a chair beside Billy,

‘It’s not that simple Billy’ and he bent over and whispered conspiratorially ‘the cops are blaming me for shifting her’.

‘Don’t worry mate. I’m in more shit than you eh? Heh, why did you shift her?’ whispered back Matawai.

‘I was scared, thought someone was trying to get me, set me up’.

‘Who’d do that?’

‘You.’

‘Now come on mate, why would I do that eh? We’re locals right, mates right?’

‘You know I had threatening letters? Telling me to stop doing my research? And someone nailed a dead seagull to my door’.

‘Wasn’t me mate’.

Spark was listening, and she liked Micklethwaite’s style, but nothing much was being admitted to.

‘You know Sonia stole stuff from me? Did she steal anything from you?’

‘Just my virginity eh!’

‘Not a wetsuit?’

There was no reply and even through the microphone Spark could sense a tension. That one little word had meant something. She sat closer as Micklethwaite explained.

‘It was Bert that put me onto it. He said that Monday morning there was a real stink coming from your bach, ‘Billy was burning his mother’ he said. It was the 15th October, that’s right, because Sonia was found by Oily next day. The morning after you moved Sonia’s body to my place, the sea-mist had cleared and you had a burn-up. Burning your wetsuit’.

Spark was not reading now.

‘Yer nuts Gord’.

‘Why would you burn your wetsuit Billy? Because it was useless, because it was covered in cuts made by a sharp fishing knife, your knife. You’d made those cuts’.

‘Yer nuts’.

‘Of course, you had no choice. It was your wetsuit and Sonia’s body was as rigid as a stone statue. The only way you were going to get that wetsuit off, was to cut it off’.

Spark had strained closer to the microphone, catching every word, but Matawai was not saying anything. After a long silence he said.

‘What have you told the cops?’

‘Nothing’.

‘I don’t get it mate’ Billy swore out of habit ‘what’s it to you what happened to Sonia eh?’

Gordon leaned closer.

‘I was in love with her. She was pregnant with my child’.

Spark nearly fell off her chair, that slimy bastard!

‘Hey, hang on mate, it could have been me...’

‘Yeah? But you didn’t love her. You screwed her, and then killed her!’

Micklethwaite spat the words out. Matawai started swearing furiously as he defended himself.

‘Now wait a minute Gord, I never killed her. Hey!? What yer doing with that knife!?’ he screamed.

Spark was halfway out of the door, and then pulled herself up short. Micklethwaite was either a homicidal maniac or he was doing a very good imitation of one.

‘You cut her wetsuit off to stop yourself being incriminated...’

‘Jesus! Hey’ and Spark could hear a chair being dragged in defence.

‘She was already dead mate, I didn’t kill her. Calm down Gord, Jesus! She was already drowned, I just wanted to get rid of her. He told me to...’

Matawai hadn’t confessed to murder but Spark felt she had to intervene before a real murder took place. She banged open the door and found Billy Matawai holed-up in a corner with a chair pointed out, and Micklethwaite approaching him menacingly with a sheening knife and wicked, wolf-like grin. It was an excellent impression of a love-sick desperate maniac. She believed it.

‘Mr Micklethwaite, what are you doing?’

‘Having fun Mrs Spark, having fun. Here, it’s sharp’.

She took it from him and Billy was staring stupidly at them.

‘Sit down Mr Micklethwaite, you too Mr Matawai. Ok, tell me now Gordon’.

Micklethwaite sat down and dug out of his pocket some pieces of metal.

‘These are zips and stuff I found in the bottom of Billy’s forty gallon drum, his burning drum, the remains of his wetsuit. Doesn’t prove much, though that’s what happened’.

‘I didn’t kill her!’

‘I know you didn’t Billy. But you did cut off your wetsuit and burnt it, and you did dump Sonia at the back of my bach, and you did nail that seagull, and you did post those letters — but it was all under instructions. All for someone else’.

Matawai swore under his breath.

‘What’s going on eh?’

‘Just listen Mr Matawai’.

‘I need a lawyer if you’re trying to pin something on me...’

Micklethwaite leaned forward and said, not unkindly.

‘You must have been utterly freaked out when her body turned up again? That would have spooked anyone, and that’s why you did a runner. Sorry about the drama Billy but I made my point’.

‘Which was?’ asked Spark.

Micklethwaite rubbed his head as if it was all obvious.

‘He didn’t kill her. He was just another merchant with a body to get rid off. One more link in the tale of the hunchback. He got rid of her, then found her washed up again on his doorstep’.

‘I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about mate, though I’ll tell you something, I’ll get yer for this’.

Matawai had regained some of his cockiness, though he kept the chair ready.

‘But I know what he’s talking about’ replied Spark.

She pressed a button and a constable came in, who ushered out a still bewildered and obscenely mouthing Billy Matawai. The door shut and she turned on him.

‘What a bloody stunt! And you’re supposed to tell me all this stuff? Have you got any more tricks in your bag?! And what about you and Sonia’ she quietened her rant for a moment into a rasping whisper ‘were you in love?’

Micklethwaite had sat down and looked surprised.

‘No of course not, but if I was, then waving that knife about would scare Billy more than if I wasn’t. Love lorn men do strange things, I’m sorry, but I had to be real you see?’

‘Oh boy you were real all right’ Spark was still very angry ‘and what have we got out of all that drama?’

‘The truth’.

‘Don’t get clever with me Gordon’.

‘I’m not, I’m...’

‘You have to trust people, tell them what’s going on. Trust me! Pulling a stunt like that’.

Micklethwaite felt drained but still purposeful.

‘You haven’t asked me yet?’

‘I’m getting there, give me time. Jesus, this is the maddest case I’ve ever been on, everyone’s a nutter, including you’.

She breathed deeply, gave her hair a shake and then smoothed it down.

‘Ok, ok, Sonia was drowned in the lake, but her body got washed up on the beach. Matawai found it, but then he was looking for it right? So who told him?’

‘You know?’

‘I think so’.

‘We should see him’.

‘Yes’.

‘I’m sorry Mary’.

‘You bloody well ought to be. I thought you were going to kill him’.

She suddenly giggled, and then went silent.

Chapter 19

The Study of a Human Heart

Wednesday 8 November

On the drive out they were both silent, slumped in the car and watching the first streetlights twinkle against a pink failing sky. Spark had rung up her sister, to get her to look after the kids, not the first or last time this had happened, and her sister was getting a wee bit grumpy.

‘Have you tried a career as a rocket scientist Mary? Nice sensible hours?’

‘Sorry sis’.

It was true enough, her hours were crippling her home life. The kids deserved better, but this was all she could do. All she was good at, well, used to be good at. This sort of thinking made her gloomier than ever and she broke the silence first.

‘I don’t see a hope for us Gordon. All of this stuff you could have told me days ago, instead of making such a secret of it. What is it with you? You like your secrets?’

‘I only realised last night, after we talked’.

‘You must have known more before then? Police work isn’t this dramatic stuff. It’s boring legwork, and house-to-house interviews, and statements and more bloody statements and then more bloody statements. We build up a zillion pieces of inconsequential evidence to make a case, and they deny everything in court, that’s the usual game. We nail them in court if we’ve done the footwork, otherwise they’ll scarper free. We’ve got nothing on Billy Matawai, except a clever little theory...’

‘But he virtually admitted to it?’

‘Under a knife attack! Do you think that’ll stand up? The defence would crucify us’.

‘But that’s what happened. I know it, you know it’.

Spark started peering for road numbers in the gloom of evening.

‘Sure, but it is not an acceptable level of proof to convict for a crime’.

Micklethwaite said quietly.

‘But there’s been no crime’.

She pulled over and switched off the engine.

It was true, shifting bodies around was a sort of crime, but this? It had everything: passion, lust, a beautiful naked woman, a mythical greenstone mask, great scenery — but no crime.

Neither of them moved for a while. Spark was thinking gloomily that they were now so far out of the rulebooks that it could not get any worse. If Billy Matawai made a complaint, well she was stuffed career-wise. Might as well give up now. But perhaps there was still a crime in here, and she looked across at the lighted window of a tree-shaded and well-appointed Ilam home.

‘Let’s do it’.

He ushered them into his study, a large comfortable room, with leather seats that would have cost a years salary for Spark. Books lined the walls, and there was a gentle Mozartian sound filtering through the thick air. A very last tint of a pink sunset was coming through the window and then it was gone.

‘May I offer you sherry? Good, please take a seat. Here’.

Micklethwaite and Spark sank down in two chairs clutching a large tumbler of sherry while Professor Eherton sat opposite behind his desk, which Spark fancifully thought, was the last defence available to him. It was civilised. She looked at Gordon who suddenly seemed shy.

‘Professor Eherton, we spoke to Billy Matawai this afternoon’.

He nodded.

‘We think that you might owe us a fuller explanation as regarding Sonia Blackwater’s death’.

She was speaking police language, but just couldn’t help it. They were bluffing of course, but the formal language helped to conceal it.

‘I see, well I am not overly surprised to see you of course. Is this an official police visit?’

Her bluff was called, and Spark looked at Micklethwaite who kept looking at the blob of black that was the window. She spoke reluctantly.

‘No, not really. There has been no crime committed, as far as we know. Just the concealment of a body. We are both personally involved, to some extent.’

‘Yes of course, I realise Mr Micklethwaite’s involvement, but you are the investigating officer Mrs Spark? How are you personally involved? Oh...’

She nodded.

‘Exactly, we’ she glanced at Micklethwaite and hesitated over the correct word ‘are together’.

It felt a very peculiar thing to say publicly, and Eherton was the first ‘public’ she had tried it on. She could not manage to say ‘lover’, which sounded French and foreign. ‘Item’ made it sound like a joke (and it had been anything but a joke this last two weeks) and ‘partner’ seemed too formal. There was no good word in fact.

‘Congratulations, I think you will last longer than myself and Sonia’.

Spark gasped at that.

‘You too?’

‘Yes. We were lovers, she was a very attractive girl, and I was flattered. I met her in Houston when I was working with her father, about ten years ago. She was only sixteen then but attractive and vivacious, I...’ and Eherton leaned forward and put his hands together to make a finger nave ‘...supposed that I was in love with her then, though nothing happened of course. But when her father contacted me and said Sonia was interested in coming out to New Zealand to do a Ph.d, I encouraged her’.

He looked a long way into the past.

‘We did not become lovers straight away, but after a month or so. I am sixty-six and she was thirty-one, over thirty years difference in our age. I did not feel this difference, I felt like a young man again. I acted like a young man as well. You might like to see this’.

Eherton handed Spark a sheet of paper. She recognised it immediately, for she had seen something similar last week.

‘This is a pregnancy test?’

‘She asserted I was the father’.

Both Spark and Micklethwaite were a little taken aback by that. Spark spoke carefully.

‘We knew she was pregnant, but her flatmate suggested to the police that she had several lovers. We are aware of at least three others’.

Eherton did not seem surprised.

‘It’s true. Billy was one, and you Mr Micklethwaite?’

He looked at Micklethwaite who unexpectedly blushed. Eherton smiled thinly and elegantly.

‘I was aware of this, but in a curious sort of way I was flattered, and besides it did not matter. We had been lovers, that was no denying it. I was infatuated, and it was adultery, pure and simple, no matter how much I could try and colour it differently in my mind. It was a terrible error of judgement on my part and I will suffer the consequences. My reputation is, well, compromised’.

‘It doesn’t need to be known’ said Spark

‘It will be, and it always is’.

Eherton gazed out of the window as if watching his reputation sliding away into the shadows.

‘I have told my wife already’.

Spark looked around, she thought the house seemed ominously silent.

‘Has she left you?’

He found that amusing.

‘Good Lord no, she is at a women’s book club tonight, oh no, you misunderstand me. My wife is very forgiving, indeed she did not seem that surprised. She told me off, and told me that we had to get on with our lives’.

‘Does she know about this?’ Spark waved the pregnancy test.

‘No’.

‘Sonia was blackmailing you?’ asked Micklethwaite.

‘Yes. Sonia was a witch, a very beguiling, very beautiful witch. I perhaps should not have been surprised, but I was, for the emotion was genuine on my part. It was only then that I started to realise about her other lovers, and realised that her feelings were not so reciprocated as mine’.

‘Your wife is forgiving, but not so your colleagues’.

‘Thank you Mrs Spark, that says it precisely. The department would have been shocked if they knew I was having sexual relations with a student, so would the university. It was utterly inappropriate. I would have been reprimanded, perhaps even been persuaded to resign. Publicly humiliated, and then of course, her father would know’.

Eherton leaned back and sighed.

‘One can do good works for a lifetime, establish a formidable and highly successful academic career. You can be a respected kaumatua in your iwi, and have dedicated your life to help others, but if you are found chasing a bit of skirt at my age, almost seventy, you look a fool, and people remember the fool. A whole life turned to custard’.

‘She was no mere bit of skirt’ remarked Micklethwaite softly.

‘No indeed, as you already know. A fine girl, handsome, intelligent, articulate, a raven-haired beauty, which many men would be attracted to, but I was lucky enough to attain. So it was worth the risk, or so I thought’.

‘Why did you keep quiet so long, you could have helped us?’ pleaded Spark.

‘I was scared, for my soul. She did terrible things to my soul, or if I’m honest, I allowed those terrible things to happen’.

He stood up and pulled the curtains, then switched on the desk lamp and switched

of the main light. It made the room dark and conspiratorial, as if they were plotters. When he sat by his desk again, the lamplight showed off his handsome features.

‘Have you ever read *1001 Nights* professor?’

Spark gave Micklethwaite a filthy look, as if to say ‘what’s this about?’ But they seemed to be in no hurry at all, and the conversation developed between Micklethwaite and Eherton as if they were old friends.

‘Scheherazade? Why a long time ago. The hunchback’s tale? No please, remind me off it’.

Micklethwaite told the story briefly and Eherton listened attentively.

‘Yes, very apt, poor Sonia’.

‘So I worked backwards and forwards’ explained Micklethwaite ‘from Billy to me, then the Sea People. But what I couldn’t understand was why Sonia was swimming in the lake at all, and why at that time? Then I wondered if there might be a connection between the lowering of the lake and her swim, and then it was obvious really. She needed a lower lake level to access the urupa’.

The professor agreed.

‘Billy is a nice boy, but superstitious, like a lot of Maori. When he saw Sonia’s corpse back on the beach it was like a *taniwha* returned to haunt him. A beast from the sea. Your friend the hunchback of course. As if the spirit of Sonia had come back from the underworld to caress him one more time. I don’t believe he stopped driving till he got to the West Coast and drank himself stupid, and concocted that silly story with his friend. He rang me from Hokitika, but what could I do? It was fate, except Maori have no word for fate’.

Micklethwaite kept chugging away.

‘Sonia stole papers from me, the idea of Te Urua from Josho, who believed in God knows what. From Billy Matawai she was after the location of the urupa, but gave up when she realised he didn’t know — but someone else did’.

‘Indeed, but I do not believe in Te Urua, or in this fabulous greenstone mask. But Sonia did, or rather she wanted whatever was in the urupa’.

‘She changed tack in her thesis didn’t she? Starting with oil and resource conflict between Ngai Makariri and Ngai Tapore, but then focusing on Te Urua. Did she hit a nerve?’

For the first time Eherton looked uncomfortable.

‘Yes, a considerable one. I must say I am impressed by your knowledge Mr Micklethwaite, Sonia was ambitious. It was a difficulty. She was astute enough to see that there was a battle between Ngai Makariri and Tapore for tribal identity, mana if you will. For years Makariri was the tribe that represented both parties, accepting the view that we were a blended tribe and that Ngai Tapore simply did not exist. But lately, in the last twenty years, several people have claimed direct Ngai Tapore

descent, utilising our very own whakapapa to do so. This is most insulting. It was bad enough that you found evidence of a Ngai Tapore reserve on the Kaitorete Spit, but if the whole idea of Te Urua gained credence than it could influence the pakeha politicians in Wellington and the distribution of monies under the Treaty of Waitangi, and most important, the distribution of mana’.

Eherton was in full flight, and the passion was uncoiling like an eel ready for it’s great migration.

‘I felt I was the guardian of Ngai Makariri’s mana and it’s history. If these Ngai Tapore people undermined that, then would all my life’s work be unravelled? Years of patient research and effort, not lightly spent. Some of my work got into the wrong hands, people who had sympathies to Ngai Tapore, and they would use it to help their cause. This greenstone mask is simple nonsense, but it is a powerful nonsense’.

‘You wanted to destroy it?’

‘Yes’.

‘So you told Sonia where the Ngai Tapore urupa was?’

‘Well, it is Ngai Makariri as far as we are concerned. I did not believe there was anything of value there, but I did not know. It is a very sacred site, and kept very secret. Besides... I had little choice in the matter. Sonia bluntly told me that she would make the results of our affair very public if I did not help her’.

‘Wouldn’t that affect her Ph.d as well?’

‘Possibly, a little, but she might gain some sympathy, whereas it would destroy my mana’.

‘Where is this urupa?’ Spark interrupted.

‘This is between us Mrs Spark?’ she nodded ‘on the far bank of Lake Forsyth there is a low line of volcanic cliffs, plunging straight into the lake. There’s nothing remarkable about them, they are only a few metres high, but at one point there is a large cave which can only be accessed from underwater, and then only at low water if you have no diving equipment. Originally Lake Forsyth was known as ‘Maori Harbour’ and was open to the sea, so the lake level was a good deal lower than currently’.

It was utterly dark now, and the wind had picked up and some tree branches stroked resignedly and softly against the house walls.

‘What happened that night professor Eherton?’ she asked quietly. He steadied his hands together and spoke softly.

‘We drove in my car to the lakeside. The lake had been opened that afternoon, Billy had told me, and he also said that sea-mist was extensive. I told Sonia it was a good time to go, for the lake levels were low and she would be well concealed. At the lake she stripped off completely, I remember this because it was such a typical Sonia thing to do. She had no sense of the sexual nature of her body, or then again perhaps she only thought of its sexual nature. I thought she was taunting me, teasing

me. She put on Billy Matawai's wetsuit, which she had borrowed for some weeks I believe. You will have to talk to him about that, I think they went crayfishing on the coast or some such outing — and in she went'.

'What time was this?'

'I remember exactly, for I got back into the car and looked at the clock, it was 10 pm. I waited an hour, but she had not returned. I was getting anxious after another hour passed. It was very dark and the mist made matters worse, and exaggerated the sounds as well. Twice I thought I heard splashing, and once I thought I heard a cry, but I was in the car, trying to keep warm, so when I got out I heard nothing again. I took out my torch and walked along the lake edge some way downstream and near a group of willows I saw something. It was Sonia, she was trapped under some willows lying face down, and as far as I could see was dead already'.

I went back to the car and got my *patu* and returned and hacked at the willows, trying to free her, but the effort exhausted me. She had two dry bags around her neck and I hauled them out, and they were heavy. Do you know what was in those bags?'

Micklethwaite leaned forward and concentrated.

'Our *taonga*, the bones of our ancestors. A skull, *kete*, some personal ornaments, even a nose flute. I was astounded and enraged. She was a simple grave-robber. I thought she was just going to have a look, for Te Urua, satisfy her unquenchable thirst for it, but not this, this brutal robbery...'

Words almost seemed to fail him, and his hands moved into the air to express the inexpressable.

'I hacked at the willows to try and pull her out but only succeeded in loosening her, and she floated away out of sight'.

Micklethwaite leaned forward even more and asked:

'Why were you carrying the *patu*?'

Eherton nodded and reached into a drawer, bringing into the light a magnificent greenstone *patu*, or cutting knife. He weighed in his hand, then placed it on the table where it glowed with the rich green of envy.

'I honestly do not know. Was I thinking of destroying her? I do not know, I just do not know'.

'What time did you find Sonia?' interrupted Spark.

'I am not exactly sure of that, but about midnight? I drove home in something of a state of shock and then realised that I had left her satchel, with her clothes by the lakeside. So I rang Billy Matawai, my nephew.'

'Your what!' Spark was shocked.

'Oh, you did not realise that Miss Spark? Ah but Mr Micklethwaite did I think, anyway, I asked him to find the satchel, which he does, and then he finds Sonia of course. I did not realise that he cut off his wetsuit from Sonia's body until I saw

Sonia in the morgue. That was a shock’.

Micklethwaite tried to ignore the dirty looks coming his way from a certain female. There was a strange compromising silence between the three of them.

‘You hid it well’ murmured Spark.

‘Yes, I thought that might have been a test. But I had seen worse at Monte Casino Miss Spark, much worse’.

‘Was it his idea or yours to dump her at my place?’ asked Micklethwaite.

‘His I’m afraid, Billy is not that bright. He must have panicked, and I don’t really know why he did that, and of course you know what happened to Sonia after that. Perhaps he was trying to continue the trend’.

Then a revelatory idea occurred to Micklethwaite.

‘So *you* wrote up those letters?’

‘Of course, and Billy posted them’.

‘Just to scare me off?’

‘Yes. The dead seagull however was Billy’s idea, I’m afraid he always had one idea to many’.

‘Why the letters? They seem clumsy?’ Spark interrupted.

‘They were, deliberately of course in the crude spelling, I considered it important that you did not find more material.’

‘So there is more material on Ngai Tapore?’ said Micklethwaite excitedly.

‘Why yes, but Bert Maihi would know all about that’.

‘I saw all his old war photos on Bert’s wall, you were at Cassino together, and he told me Billy was your nephew. That’s when I made the link’.

‘Yes we were old mates, Bert and I, but ended up on different tribes, well so he believes. I think it is all one tribe’.

Gordon had a sudden revelation.

‘Bert utilised me to find out about Ngai Tapore reserves.’

‘Of course! It looked more sensible and believable coming from a *pakeha*, and he is a crafty man Bert Maihi. A worthy adversary’.

Spark was finding this chit-chat a little too amicable.

‘Can we return to the basic point here. Sonia died accidentally, swimming back from the *urupa*, loaded down with too much stolen loot?’

‘I think so’ Eherton agreed.

‘But she was a champion swimmer? The wetsuit also has a lot of buoyancy, so do those dry bags’

‘Yes, yes I agree, but they might have made it worse. Sonia was very confident, over-confident I think. She was a champion swimmer ten years ago, and I think she had too much faith in her ability. The water exiting from the lake was very strong, and on the way back I imagine found it a struggle dragging the two dry bags behind her. I found her a good five hundred metres below where she went in. I believe she became exhausted and got snagged under the willows.’

They all considered the theory and Spark for one was not very happy about it.

‘We found some scratches on her professor, some faint ones. I would have thought there would have been more marks if she was struggling against branches?’

It was treated as a rhetorical question and was left unanswered in the air. Spark thought of something else.

‘What happened to Sonia’s jewellery?’

The old academic stood up and walked over to an elaborate roll-top desk, unrolled it and opened a drawer.

‘A ring and two earrings. Are these what you are after sergeant?’

The ring looked even to Spark’s inexpert eye looked to be expensive, and probably gold, with a carved greenstone serpent poised in the middle. The earrings continued the theme, and each with a small gold chain holding two exquisite greenstone carvings.

‘They are beautiful’.

‘Yes. They were a gift, a love token from me to Sonia. Billy recognised them and rather foolishly perhaps pulled them off. He’s is a good boy, he was trying to avoid me being incriminated’.

Spark put them back on the table alongside the *patu*. It was very late and something more should be said, but she could not think what it was. So she resorted to police jargon.

‘I appreciate your honesty in this professor Eherton, of course we will need a full statement in due course, but not tonight’.

She stood up and he lead them silently to the front door, then Micklethwaite dithered at the door.

‘I was going to ask about a translation professor, a Maori song I came across. This word here’ and from out of a pocket Micklethwaite magically produced a small book and pointed to the phrase.

‘In this poor light I can’t quite see. Oh yes, it means sun’.

‘Not setting sun?’

‘I don’t think so’ and he looked steadily at Micklethwaite.

‘It’s your translation isn’t it?’ Micklethwaite asked steadily.

'Yes'.

'Thank you'

'Goodnight' and the door closed quietly and finally.

Chapter 20

The Lonely Road

Wednesday 8 November

They got back into the car and Spark started the engine to run the heater, but made no move to drive anywhere.

‘Ok you win Gordon, and you won, but he could have bloody killed her you know? It’s his word against hers’.

Micklethwaite mulled this over.

‘If he did, he didn’t use the *patu*, that was sharp, I felt the edge’.

‘He wanted to kill her’.

That was a damning admission.

‘Well he may have wanted to salvage his professional career. Are we going?’

‘Not yet Gordon. Eherton knew the lake had been opened, and knew about the strength of the current surely, so isn’t that a way to kill her? I mean who told Sonia that this was the right time to go? Eherton it seems. I think that makes him culpable’.

‘Culpable yes, but not a killer’.

‘You like him don’t you?’

‘Yes, in a way I do. He was used by Sonia, again, same old story. She had a method and she stuck to it’.

‘He used her though, for sex, for love, if old men can love’.

Micklethwaite let that slide by.

‘I didn’t think he would open up like that, I was expecting more reserve’ he said thoughtfully ‘and his motives for telling Sonia about the *urupa* are oddly mixed don’t you think?’

‘The whole bloody thing is ambiguous’

Spark thumped the steering wheel angrily, the motor muttering at this static progress

‘He was being blackmailed and revealed the location of a *urupa*, ok that seems fair enough, his whole career was on the rack, but then he expected the *urupa* to hold nothing? I don’t get that.’

Micklethwaite mumbled something.

‘What was that?’

‘Sonia would not have been content with nothing’.

‘No, that’s it! So either there was something there that Eherton knew of, and was prepared to risk the theft, or there was nothing there and he was tempting her into a trap’.

‘He said he was shocked when she brought back the skull?’.

‘I think he was shocked she’d come back alive’.

He tossed and turned this in his head for a while.

‘So you think he killed her, or manipulated her into taking a risk that might cost her her life? Hard to prove Mary’.

She switched off the engine and looked at him.

‘I’m a romantic’ he said unexpectedly ‘I think Sonia died from her own ambition. Perhaps Eherton was being culpable to some extent, but how will we ever know?’

‘You haven’t got a romantic bone in your body Gordon. Men don’t’.

‘That’s not fair, Eherton was in love with her.’

‘Really? Or just a trophy girl, a little bit of something on the side, one of the rewards of being a professor is that you get your pick of student lovelies’.

Spark sounded bitter and she got worse. All her frustration over the case started to erupt in short molten outbursts.

‘You men are all the same. You keep saying Sonia used you, but Sonia was used to, she just played the males game and got shat on for her troubles. She was pregnant by one of you, God knows which one, but isn’t that being used? A typical male triumph. Shoot a slimy bullet then run, who is using who eh? It’s too bloody convenient that explanation’.

‘You’re angry’.

‘Well done Gordon, well done. Of course I’m bloody angry. I’ve been given the regular run around by you, and Josho, and his stupid bloody mystic sayings. Billy Matawai lied through his teeth, and Professor Douglas Eherton lied by his silence. For weeks, all men, all using me! How do you think I feel?’

And she proceeded to tell him, and the spleen once started to vent was hard to stop, like a lava flow.

‘You betrayed me twice, three times if I count tonight, because you would not be honest, all this boys own secrecy and treasure bloody hunting. What is it with men? This is the sort of crap I got from Vince you know? Oh we must be honest with each other he said, but that didn’t stop him sniffing around other women and having a quick shag here and there whilst I looked after the kids and tried to hold the family together’.

She was almost crying now, and Micklethwaite could not look at her but stared at the black road and white streetlights leading down to the orange lit junction. She held back her tears and became calmer.

‘I’ll tell you something else too, about being used. We had to grant special permission for Dr Blackwater to enter the country, because you know what, he’s got a criminal conviction. What for? Taking photographs of little nude girls, and touching them up. Sonia would have been six years old, so was it her? Did she get stroked at night by her father in funny places that made her feel dirty? Was she used?’

Spark started the engine again.

‘Think about that Gordon, you’d better go’.

‘Go?’

‘Where’s your car?’

‘In town’.

‘Well you’d better get walking then’.

Micklethwaite looked dismayed at Spark’s bald suggestion. It was a good five kilometres back into town, and it was too late for buses now.

‘I didn’t know that about Sonia’ he muttered.

‘No, you didn’t.’

She had calmed down a mite. She was exasperated because it looked as if there was no murder, only a bizarre series of events. She was a cop after all, so it didn’t seem right.

‘Sorry Gord, but it’s been so bloody frustrating. We’re finished ok? As an item, as lovers, all done with. Agreed? Final this time.’

He shook his head as if he wasn’t prepared to accept that.

‘It’s never gonna work. We just don’t connect, except for sex, and that isn’t enough. Besides, it’ll all come out in a report, Sonia’s body being moved all over the show. Eherton, Billy Matawai, you, the Sea People, it will have to come out, and it will make a great story. The papers will love it. It will finish my career. So it’s better to make a clean break of everything, hey maybe I’ll leave the force and become a teacher’ she said with a false brightness.

Micklethwaite couldn't say anything, even sorry did not seem right, so he got out the car and stood by the open door leaning in. Spark got in a parting shot.

'Vince was right, you just keep too much back. You've got to involve people. Trust them. See ya'.

He closed the door, and Spark drove off. It seemed a terrible shame at one level, that a sort of nothing had replaced a hope of something. One Night Stand Mary. She was tired, unresolved and as she drove back home she kept putting on the windscreen wipers by mistake, thinking it was raining.

Chapter 21

Te Urua

Saturday 11 November

‘Mary, it’s Gordon’.

‘Oh.’

‘You must come out’.

‘It’s over Gordon’.

‘No it’s not. There is something you must see’.

‘Gordon...’

‘Look it’s not about our relationship, it’s about Te Urua. I’ve found Te Urua’.

‘Have you lost the plot Gord, there is no Te Urua’.

‘Yes there is, but it’s not what you think’.

‘So what is it?’

‘You have to come and see’.

All of Mary Sparks significantly under-employed warning signals were flashing away, as usual.

‘Even if I could, I wouldn’t. I’ve got the kids’.

‘Bring them out. It’s a beautiful afternoon here, they can have sausages on a beach fire’.

God, bring the kids? He must still be serious.

‘Are you mad? Didn’t I say it was over? Which of the various parts of no didn’t you understand Gordon?’

‘None of them Mary’.

And that sounded like the truth. Her triumphant scene outside Eherton’s house had

left her mournful and as disconsolate as the girl who was never picked for the school team.

They were fine words, and she meant every one of them, but now, what did they mean? Why was it that just after the moment you had scored great points, you felt ashamed of your own clever rage? She was only lashing out at Gordon because she had made such a sad mess of it and the divorce papers were still lying open on the kitchen table, with two coffee stains and some of Olivers paint as a homely decorations. They were becoming part of the furniture. She was becoming part of the furniture.

‘Mary are you there?’

‘I don’t know Gordon, I just don’t know’.

‘Come for the evening that’s all, see what I have to show you and then run home’.

‘And I can bring the kids?’

‘Of course, it would be good to meet them’.

‘The kids are in Queenstown with Vince. A camping trip’.

‘So you will come?’

It was so hard to say yes, and reluctantly she decided that despite the severe temptation to try and match up with this lover again, she knew well in advance it was doomed. Better to cut her losses now. Pretend a headache (which was not true) or she felt nauseous (which was) and try Spanish cookery lessons again. It was a nice try Gordon, nice try, but every girl has their limit.

‘Ok’.

He was right of course, the late afternoon was beautiful and long lines of liquid light ran over Lake Ellesmere and disappeared into the hazy horizon. Large flocks of Canada Geese strutted around the lake margins and were indifferent to the occasional cars on the highway. Spark felt she had the road to herself, it was so quiet. Maybe there was a big footie match on, or everyone who was going anywhere had already got there. A farmer on a tractor waved to her and she waved back, feeling better. At the turn-off into Birdlings Flat she noticed the same squashed hedgehog that she had seen over two weeks ago, though by now a thousand cars had melded the hedgehog into the road surface so that all that remained was a brown nondescript stain.

She stopped at the beach carpark, and several cars were already there. Along the sea edge was a line of seven or eight fisherman, patiently standing by their tall sea-rods and staring at the incomprehensible surf.

For over ten minutes she watched the scene, remembering and yet trying to forget. Billy Matawai’s bach looked all tidied up and empty, of course Bert had thrown him out. He’d been bailed by someone (probably Eherton) and gone to live over at the West Coast, and would face charges next month on drugs and firearms, if they ever caught up with him. She started the car and turned along the familiar line of beach

baches, with a wave to Bert, who was leaning extravagantly on his shovel — just for looks she suspected. He waved back and she felt suddenly at home. She knew all these people, it was a bizarre feeling of home coming.

Micklethwaite risked a kiss but she still turned and displayed a frosty cheek. Don't give away the goods too soon girl, this guy has to work hard.

'Thanks for coming Mary, and fruit juice too?'

'Like old times Gordon'.

So much had happened since that first memorable night that it was hard to credit that it was only three weeks past that a girls naked body had washed up on Birdlings Flat.

'Let's go down to the beach'.

The sun was sinking and spreading a gorgeous orange light over the sky. Several small clouds were being transformed into deep red embers of fire that were drifting incongruously into, oh you were always hopeless on adjectives Mary. It's bloody nice. The fire was licking at the driftwood and smoke was salting the air.

'Didn't have time to buy fish' apologised Gordon who brought out a box of pizza. 'They've just started a pizza place at Little River'.

Mary was hungry and munched through her slice, and swigged back a cup of juice.

'This is better than town pizza. Where's Te Urua Gordon?'

'Be patient we have to wait till sunset, a few more minutes'.

God he wasn't going to propose? You fool Mary, and then she looked sideways at Micklethwaite who was poking the fire with a pleasant rapture. Please Gordon, I'm not ready, I may never be ready.

'You know I asked Eherton about a translation? Of a Maori word?'

She mumbled through a mouthful of pizza.

'Well it's an old poem, celebrating Te Urua, Bert Maihi gave me a copy months ago. I think that Bert was pushing me along all the time, but I didn't twig, he must have thought I was dim, another piece? He gave me an English translation with the Maori, and said it was Ngai Tapore poem, very old he said, and it was Josho who said something that made me wonder. He raves about everything that guy, but if you listen he sometimes makes sense. I often didn't listen, my fault I guess, but I think he knew. And Bert knew too...'

'What are you blithering about Gord?'

She was thirsty and drank again, but the pizza was sitting in her stomach uneasily.

'There was something in that poem that made me think. It said 'the end of sun shines on Te Urua's face', but when I asked Eherton he deliberately avoided making that translation. He was still hiding something, so I spent yesterday in the museum trying to find someone who could make a definite translation of the Maori expres-

sion. They translated it as the ‘setting sun’. You see?’

‘Nope’.

‘What if that were literally true? Look!’

He stood up excitedly and pointed. The sun was a round and bloodied gemstone sinking into the sea, and washes of golden syrupy light were illuminating the cliff and the grass hills beyond with an unearthly glow.

‘Look? Where?’

‘There! Get up, you see?’

Spark looked at the cliff a complete blank.

‘It’s nice...’

‘No, you see the top of the cliff, now go up from it to that stub of a spur. Now imagine that is a nose and now look!’

Micklethwaite was so excited that his description was less than adequate, but Spark looked and suddenly saw it.

On a steep green grassy face above the cliff there was a nose, with a piece dropped off like the sphinx, and on either side two dark shadowed hollows were his eyes. Below the nose there was carved a shape like a mouth, but parts of it had been eroded away by the creeping cliff. A face! Te Urua, the semi-god, demi-god, warrior leader of the Ngai Tapore, some hundred feet high and staring remorselessly out to the Pacific.

‘My God, it’s a face. Carved out of the hillside...’

‘A thousand years old and still there.’

‘This is the greenstone mask’.

‘Yes. Te Urua is watching over his people and has done so for a millennium’.

‘But you can hardly see it...’

‘No. It’s been softened by hundreds of years of rain and wind, but just at this time, when the light strikes low...’

As they stood transfixed the red dragon disk got swallowed by the purple sea-god and Te Urua vanished into the shadows of gloom. Spark felt an absence of spirit. Gone again until the next sunset, and at some point Gordon had moved his arm around her and she had not protested about what was technically a personal infringement.

‘That was amazing, if people knew, there would be thousands here, every night, watching, what a sight. It was real wasn’t it?’ she was suddenly unsure ‘not just a trick of the light?’

‘I’ve been for a close-up look, but there’s not much to see, and it’s crumbling away. I don’t know how long it will last. Bert has known, of course, known all his life. Remember that first night we had here? He said he was out taking a stroll and

talking to his ancestors he said, ha, I should have taken him literally. Might have saved Sonia a lot of trouble’.

‘Might have saved her life’.

‘Josho knew too, he’d seen it one night I think. So he wasn’t quite so mad after all’.

They drew closer to the fire and Micklethwaite threw on more wood that joyously crackled and spit.

‘What are you thinking?’ he asked softly.

‘I feel sorry for Sonia, yes I do!’ she insisted quietly ‘I understand her, and who knows what drove her to do what she did? Sometimes I think I am the only person who understood her. As a woman I can see her point of view, and she paid a high price just for being pushy. That was unfair. I mean she gave plenty of pleasure to men, yet no one thanked her for it, oh I’m sorry for her Gordon. And I’m sorry for myself, I did a bad job.’

Micklethwaite hugged her tightly.

‘I bent rules, I lacked integrity. I told Cummings off for seeing Miranda yet I was seeing you. Getting involved with you was a mistake professionally, yes it was, and do you know what’s really bloody bugging me?’

A worried look came over Micklethwaite’s face.

‘I’m not going to get any blame. No one will know. There was no murder, that’s what the Super kept telling me, no murder Mary. The existing report will stand and the coroner will give a verdict of accidental drowning. Billy Matawai will give a statement to the effect that he cut off her wetsuit with his knife, and that’ll be it. He’ll live with a half-truth to conceal his uncle, and it’s not even untrue. He won’t even get a sentence — and you know why? Because no one wants a different verdict. Not you, or me. It would embarrass you, it would ruin me.’

If the true facts became known she would have had to retire, or at least would have such a blot that her promotion chances would be blown. Even worse than that, people who had believed in her would be disappointed in her lapse, although they would not say it out loud. They would think it. The old police club would support her but something will have changed irrevocably, some sort of loss of soul.

‘Nor Eherton and his wife. They want Sonia to drown. Not Josho or Miranda, or especially Billy Matawai. Not even her father wants the full story, for her behaviour implicates him, but there is a murder here, Sonia was murdered. Not criminally, but emotionally. Everybody she knew murdered her a little bit, and it started with her father. Every single person in Sonia’s life is happy that she slips away into the silver sea from whence she came — it’s so bloody unfair. Do you understand Gordon?’

He nodded.

‘She died alone, and no one cared’.

Spark began to weep.

‘All her life she has been alone, yet she died with a baby inside of her, that was ready and willing to love her. And whose child was it? Billy Matawai’s? Josho’s? Professor Eherton’s?’

She didn’t have to say ‘Gordon Micklethwaite’s’, for they both thought it. Micklethwaite looked around the horizon, flat and milky with sea-haze and came to a decision.

‘I would have cared for it. I would like a child’.

Spark mopped up her tears and cheered up.

‘Keep holding me Gord. It’s not good to be alone’.

‘It’s getting cold, we should go inside’.

‘I like Te Urua watching me’.

He nodded and positioned himself so she could lean back into him and he could wrap two arms around her and keep her from the cold air.

‘I signed the papers today’.

‘I don’t know what you mean’.

‘It’s ok, I don’t know what I mean either’.

‘I love you’.

‘I’m a fool Gordon, and... oh, I’ll tell you later. You’re right, let’s go inside’.

It was now completely dark and the fire had gone into a dozen embers of hot eyes, and only the white foam from the surf showed that the sea was there. Ever restless, hungry.

This great beach of the Kaitorete Spit ran from Banks Peninsula down to Taumutu, some forty kilometres of lonely and desolate beach gravels, that every day were sucked and sawed at by the waves of the Pacific Ocean.

Humans visited this beach fleetingly, to sometimes fish on the margin, or glean driftwood that glowed in the moonlight like ancestral bones. Sometimes fires were lit, and figures huddled around or got drunk and shouted defiantly into the sea, but the sea didn’t care. Occasionally a leopard seal might haul ashore, and although one of the predators of the sea, it felt uncomfortable on the exposed beach, and did not linger long. Terns roosted on the beach sand in large numbers, and banded dotterels pattered about day and night, seeming never to sleep, trying to raise chicks that seldom survived the gamut of wild cats and the patient sweeping V-wing of the harrier hawk. The wind was part of the spit, flattening the waves in a nor’wester and then pushing them into sharp crests in a southerly front. The fine sand got scoured and lifted high, and added to the sting of the air.

That night the wind increased, and flickered the long dead fire into life, but one slim figure did not notice. It moved carefully down over the beach plain, treading lightly

as if not wanting to hurt the stones, and stared longingly at the sea. A seal had hauled ashore for a rest, and sensed the figure, but when it sniffed around to investigate, the figure was gone. All night the sea clumped against the gravel and at dawn an old man shuffled down to the beach. He never slept well and his head was full of memories of Russian convoys and oil ponds, and they did not seem to mean much anymore to anyone. It had been a cold clear night and he was trying his luck again, seeing if a fish had decided to leap to it's death. That morning he was in luck, and stared at something on the beach. Another frost fish.

The duty sergeant of Christchurch central police station got the message at seven in the morning and immediately rang Mary Spark's phone. The phone rang but he only got the answer phone.

'That's funny, she's on call'.

The duty sergeant scratched his ear, and looked at who was next on his list, and rang Daryl Cummings number, and this time there was a sleepy answer.

'A body on the beach sir.'

It took some time for this to sink in.

'Eh? You're kidding? A girl again? At Birdlings Flat? Again? Ok, I'm on my way'.

Miranda had tried to go home, but the sea had returned her to the land.

Authors Note

This is a work of fiction utilising an existing landscape for my own convenience. None of the characters in this story are intended to represent anyone living, and any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Birdlings Flat of course does exist, as does Lake Ellesmere (or Te Waihora) and the great gravel tongue of Kaitorete Spit. The opening of the two lakes, Forsyth and Ellesmere, takes place as I have indicated, approximately twice or three times a year. In the past the exit channels were dug by hand but now modern bulldozers can dig the channel in a couple of days. The water comes out in a rush and it takes several days for the lake to lower sufficiently, where at this point the sea begins to win the battle again, and remorselessly closes the outlet with gravel.

A 'bach' is a contraction of bachelor, a small cheaply built summer or holiday home. The decline of the kiwi bach has been predicted for many years, but there are still many thousands around New Zealand. The current baches at Birdlings Flat are in a more compact settlement than I have indicated, and there is no such cult group called The Sea People.

There are no natural oil sumps on the Kaitorete Spit, or indeed anywhere in New Zealand for that matter. However a gold-miners shaft in 1867 at Kotuku on the West Coast brought up oil, and this has remained a tantalising seep ever since. Test drilling for oil has taken place in the sea off the Canterbury coast in the 1980's. Maori used many natural types of medicine, and 'oil', or hinu, from plants was regularly used as a poultice and chewing gum, but my suggested use of the Maori medicinal use of petroleum oil is entirely conjectural.

Zen in the Art of Archery is written by Eugen Herrigel, and the quotation from 1001 Nights comes from the *The Thousand and One Nights* Penguin (1954) translated by N. J. Dawood. There are several different variants to 'The Hunchbacks Tale' and I have altered the ending to better suit my story. The spelling of 'Scheherazade' is equally diverse.

My loose discussions of Maori culture are superficial and fictionalised for my own purposes. Although inter-tribal conflicts do exist in modern day Maoridom, it was not intended that my story was meant in anyway to represent them. The tribal names in this story I invented, 'Tapore' means footprint, or impression in the sand, and 'Makariri means 'cold', and I was surprised to find that there are over thirty expressions in *The Reed Dictionary of Modern Maori* for the word 'cold'.

Maori still have exclusive eeling rights over Lake Forsyth but I have taken a liberty with frost fish, which are unlikely to beach themselves at Birdlings Flat, although I did hear of one instance (see the information below). There are pa sites around the northern end of Kaitorete Spit, and an old Ngai Tahu pa site on the cliffs, with some evidence of terracing for kumara. As far as I know there is no urupa on the edge of

Lake Forsyth.

Te Urua is of course pure fiction, both in name and meaning. The sun however does set into the sea at Birdlings Flat, from mid-October to mid-February, and as I can personally attest, it is a magnificent sight. With or without Te Urua.

Glossary of Maori Terms

Iwi

The smallest unit of Maori tribe is the family, or *whanau*, which belong to a *hapu*, and several hapu belong to an *iwi* or 'nation' or 'people'.

Kai

This means eat or consume, but most speakers use it colloquially as 'food'.

Kete

A woven basket, usually of flax.

Karakia

Ritual song, particularly at funerals.

Kaumatua

Respected elder

Mana

A difficult word to translate, but 'authority' is a close approximation, bearing in mind that mana can be gained, and lost. Others translate it as prestige or power or influence.

Mokopuna

Grandchildren

Pa

A small refuge fort, usually on an easily defended position such as a hilltop, peninsula or headland, and surrounded by high palisades.

Pakeha

White man or European.

Patupaiarehe

Spirits of the night, fairies.

Patu

A short greenstone blade or club, usually belonging to a high chief.

Paua

A large shellfish, with rich fluorescent-turquoise colours on its inside shell. Known in the United States as abalone.

Raupo

Bullrush, a lakeside plant.

Taniwha

A fabulous monster of the deep, but also of the soul.

Taonga

Treasure, or highly prized property.

Tapu

Forbidden, or off-limits, or under religious restrictions. Tapu can be imposed on a building or beach or in ancient Maori culture on a person. A chief might be so tapu that his cloak and eating mat could not be handled by anyone else. Tapu-lifting ceremonies are still common in Maori and New Zealand culture, and are used in some way like the Christian blessing or exorcism by a minister.

Treaty of Waitangi

A treaty signed in 1840 between Maori tribes and the Crown of England, giving up certain rights in exchange for English protection and law, and retaining their own land, culture and mana. None of the latter actually happened, hence the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in the 1980's and the gradual process of government compensation for seized land.

Tuna

Eel.

Waka

Canoe.

Whakapapa

Family tree, or genealogy, particularly important in Maori culture.

Urupa

Burial ground or graveyard. Many urupa were kept secret for fear they would be desecrated by rival tribes. This was especially so in the burial of important chiefs.

Frost Fish

The following extract was taken from *The New Zealand Fisherman's Bible* by John Wilson (1981) pp 66-67.

FROST FISH *Lepidopus caudatus*: The Maori name Para means 'to spring' or 'to leap' and refers to the last moments of the average specimen when it seems to leave its own element to spring to its death. *Lepidopus* means 'small scaled' and *caudatus* refers to the small tail. It is sometimes called the 'suicide fish'.

This very narrow, ribbon-like fish is related to the New Zealand barracouta or snoek, to which it bears some superficial resemblances. It without scales; the name *Lepidopus* refers to the ventral fins, tiny degenerate limbs which resemble scales. The body is strap-like, with a dorsal fin running the entire length from the head to the small, deeply-forked, well-shaped tail. Colour is bluish-silver, shading to a darker blue at the root of the dorsal fin. As in the barracouta the lower jaw is long. The upper jaw has about forty sharp teeth, with long fangs at the point.

Frostfish have been taken, though rarely, and apparently by accident, on set-lines in deep water when small fish — pilchards or minnows — have been used for bait. On autumn nights one is sometimes caught in a seine — an unusual occurrence. They are predator fish found also in the Northern Hemisphere where they are known as Scabbard fish. Both the European and Maori names are derived from its suicidal habit of casting itself ashore, always on beaches with a gentle slope where the line of surf begins some distance out, and nearly always on frosty nights in autumn. The fish is nearly always in good condition on these occasions and has not spawned, and displays no evidence of illness or damage. On its passage to the sand it has been observed to swim in a regular fashion.

Moonlit nights are the best for finding this fish, which is reckoned a great delicacy and brings a high price. In early mornings, a gallop along level beaches on a good horse just at break of dawn is the best method of 'frost fishing'. When the fish is discovered the tail may be looped through the gills for easy carriage, bandoliered over the rider's head or the horse's. The hunter has to be early to beat the sea-birds, which like humans find the best of eating. A four foot fish [1.3 metres] will weight no more than four pounds [2 kg], about half or less the comparative weight of a barracouta. A coating of what looks like fine aluminium dust rubs off with too much handling.

There is little information about habitat, food or breeding habits. The flesh carries a high proportion of fat in autumn and winter seasons in which it is found, and there is very little bone.

The name 'suicide fish' comes from the fish's apparent sea-shore 'suicide'. No reason has been confirmed for its strange, invariably fatal, behaviour. Some theorise

that the intense cold of a winter frost paralyses its movement and it is washed ashore against its will. Others claim its swim bladder is burst (it normally lives at great depths) while still others claim the fish are old-timers that are spent after the annual, in-surf mating ritual for the last time.'

words

65,900

