

The Wish House

Mark Pickering

copyright Mark Pickering 2010

Chapter List

1	The Old Stone Hut	19 April	Tuesday
2	The Mask	19 April	Tuesday
3	Empty	19 April	Tuesday
4	Museum Piece	20 April	Wednesday
5	Chad	23 April	Saturday
6	Conversation Over a Heavy Meal	24 April	Sunday
7	Dawn Chorus	25 April	Monday
8	A Bite of Shark	29 April	Friday
9	Pink Bits	30 April	Saturday
10	The Dream House	2 May	Monday
11	Chilly Interlude	4-5 May	Weds-Thurs
12	Emerald	5 May	Thurs
13	A Short Time in the Circus Ring	9 May	Monday
14	Outsiders Disease	10-11-12 May	Tue-Wed-Thurs
15	Half Light	13 May	Friday
16	Two and Two	14 May	Saturday
17	Within a Circle of Friends	15 May	Sunday morning
18	Out Riding	15 May	Sunday afternoon
19	Ends Meeting	20 May	Friday
20	Man on a Mission	21 May	Saturday
21	Home Truths	21 May	Saturday
22	The Token	22 May	Sunday
23	Some Words Softly Spoken	23 May	Monday

Chapter 1

The Old Stone Hut

Tuesday 19 April, 1987

There was not much left of the old boundary hut. Three stone walls, a half chimney, and some corrugated iron caught in the rubble and almost twisted off, like a piece of scabby skin. One window frame sat in place, the other was eyeless. Nodding thistles choked the interior, and an old elderberry leant up against a wall for support, or was it the other way round?. The walls were yard-thick river stone, and over the chimney was a curved hearthstones, exactly set. It would not be hard to imagine the raw-faced Scottish shepherds in front of the fire, swearing in Gaelic about winter.

Gordon Micklethwaite spread out his parka and squirmed into the tussock. He wiped his forehead and it tasted of salt. Below him the high country valley had a sliver of water that glittered like a snail's trail on the grey path of river-bed. The heat was thick, and the wind rising. Occasionally it flapped the loose iron against the chimney, and the sound was not unlike someone wearily opening and closing a door.

He opened a book on his lap and mechanically chewed a jam doughnut whilst he read an early account of the shepherd's lives.

These huts were built before there were any fences on the stations, and they marked the boundaries of the run. The boundary keeper's job was to keep the stock on his bosses run, and keep other sheep off, and every day he would slog up to the tops, sun or blizzard. He had his own dogs for company, maybe even a cat or two, but basically he worked alone for months supplied by a 'Johnny Fortnight', a packer with supplies.

Some went queer on this diet of silence and solitude. One boundary keeper hid away when visitors came, another would harangue visitors until they fled. One mid-winter's night in 1872 a painter and boundary keeper called Edmund Norman left Burke's Pass pub, and started struggling up the long cutting to the pass. It was a difficult haul, and Norman was never to make it alive to the pass, but started talking to God in a snow blizzard, reviewing his past in a one-sided conversation.

'But what have I got to show for my life?'

'Why a life lived' God said 'mistakes, comradeship, smells, existence'.

‘But is that enough God? I’ve left nothing behind but have hid in the hills to hide my failings’.

‘There is your art, you have left that behind for people to enjoy, and your life itself, really, have you forgotten the pleasure in that?’ God’s tone was reproving.

‘Yes, yes, I suppose’ grumbled Norman ‘but was it enough?’

It is ample said God, and somewhere in the long cutting Norman lay down and the snowflakes filled in the crevices and doubts of his life, and smoothed the rough edges into a final sleep.

Micklethwaite’s head hit the book with a thump, and he jerked up, disorientated, until his back firmed against the stone wall. High streamers of white were coming over the tops, angelic harbingers of the nor’wester. The thermos tea was luke-warm but he drank it anyway.

He circled the ruin, taking photos and measuring the the thickness of the walls, their height, the width of the hearthstone, just about anything in fact. He was being over-zealous, but it was his first day on the job, and he wanted to get it right. A skink snapped away in a shiver of gold, and for a while a skylark made a noisy effort to break the silence of heat and light.

Down at the stream Micklethwaite splashed his hot face then ventured into the small copse of trees called Wisht Wood, perhaps the last refuge of totara forest in the Mackenzie country. Each thick-waisted totara stood alone with the dignity and melancholy of old age, the air underneath the leaves silvery and calm. Micklethwaite stroked the bark and wondered if people often wanted to touch the skin of a very old person.

The rising tone of the wind made him hurry back, and on the Survey Sheet he wrote ‘Wisht Hut’, though he thought ‘wisht’ must be a spelling mistake on the map. Micklethwaite looked at his new digital watch, dated the form April 1987, and put an approximate date of 1860? for the hut and 120 years as the age.

It was a twenty minute walk down the pack track to the road, and his trail bike was sulking in the heat. He clipped his helmet onto the back pannier and kicked off in a spume of dust and grit, leaving a satisfying trail of greywacke smoking behind him. A mob of sheep were angling down a hillside, and he had to swerve past a couple of cows straddling the road as if they owned it.

About ten miles down, he saw the turn-off to the homestead and he roared up a genteel avenue protected with grey hulks of macrocarpa. The house was large, with two stories, a verandah to promenade in and a conservatory off to one side. There was a ring-road driveway and steps up to a main door flanked by two concrete urns, and on the smooth lawn a fountain pissed with an elderly resignation. Micklethwaite was a little over-awed by the impressive house and the equally impressive silence he had shattered.

If the farmer had not insisted he drop in ‘for a cuppa’, he certainly would have avoided this duty. Micklethwaite was not a people person, but the High Country Heritage Directorate, had insisted that he not only get formal permission for all the places he visited, but that he establish relationships with the owners, earn their trust, and even conduct interviews if they had stories to tell.

‘Some of these high country farmers are like squire, gamekeeper, and God rolled into one Mr Micklethwaite, shut up in their little kingdoms, and touchy as hell about outside interference and advice. Rub them up the wrong way and it’s like using sandpaper for wiping your bum. We are dependent on you, to get it right’.

The bell let out an unwilling buzz, but everything remained stickily silent. Micklethwaite fidgeted, and there was still no answer.

Two magpies bossed over the lawn, and Micklethwaite was tempted to leave. Then he heard footsteps, and the door opened wide with a warm greeting, spoken in a soft, almost creamy voice.

‘Good afternoon. You must be Mr Micklethwaite’.

Micklethwaite stepped back involuntarily, shocked. For the face before him was not an ordinary face at all, but a white blotchy plastic mask where once a face had existed. The nose and lips looked stuck on, and disconnected from the flesh underneath. A normal face is mobile, pliable, but this face was rigid, and the eyes seemed to hover below the surface of the mask at a deeper level entirely, as if peering through a cardboard cut-out. It was as if a cave had been opened in the house and some sort of creature had emerged.

Chapter 2

The Mask

Monday 19 April

‘My husband did not warn you? He seldom does’.

She motioned Micklethwaite inside.

‘But do come in. I’ve boiled the billy, and made some scones. I was expecting you Mr Micklethwaite’.

The big door shut behind him and Micklethwaite tried not to think he was trapped. A long, panelled corridor led into a huge lounge full of polished furniture and broad windows. Undoubtedly it was a room planned for large scale entertaining for large high country families. The walls were lined with paintings and framed prints, and artefacts filled most spare spaces on the desk and table tops. It was tremendously full but not cluttered, and exactly tidy. Everything seemed in its place. It took Micklethwaite a few minutes simply to take in the breadth of the collection, and the portraits on the walls gave him that odd sensation he sometimes experienced at parties — that everyone was looking at him, yet he knew no one.

The woman turned to him.

‘So silly, I have not introduced myself. Dorothy Jago, Jim’s wife of course. Many people call me Dot, I presume because of my size, but it might be my lack of significance’.

Micklethwaite had no response to this comment and he stared unwillingly again at her face. She noticed his look.

‘Oh, this thing, I call it The Mask. Tea?’

‘Sorry?’ was Micklethwaite’s first utterance, ‘oh yes, thank you’. He sat down and she passed him a cup.

‘Actually I am a bit shocked myself to see your face, it reminds me of what I cannot see myself. I am inside it every day. One gets used to interiors. The scones are ready I think’.

Dorothy went briskly into the kitchen. It was a room with much to see and digest, yet Micklethwaite was not noticing anything yet. All he could see in front of his eyes was the plastic face.

The smell of baking filtered into the room and he drank from the teacup, then dropped in two sugar cubes. He did not normally have sugar but felt he needed it. There was some music, Mozart he thought, from the old fashioned gramophone, and it settled him. It was a room fitted in the fashion of thirty years ago, and the owners obviously preferred it that way. On the arms and backs of the sofa were cloths, they had a special name he knew, but for the life of him Micklethwaite could not remember what they were called.

Dorothy came back in with a tray.

‘Now try these Mr Micklethwaite, you’ve been out all day. You must have a good appetite.’

‘You know about my work then?’ he managed to get out in a half normal voice.

‘Of course, please try them, that’s my own strawberry jam’.

Micklethwaite suddenly found himself hungry and ate under Dorothy’s indulgent smile.

‘I do not know why, but women always derive a certain satisfaction from seeing their men eat well. The stone hut is sadly ruined. I can still remember when it had a roof and the shepherds used it on the autumn muster’.

This reminded Micklethwaite of his duty.

‘Do you have any photos Mrs Jago? Of the hut?’

‘Dorothy please. You are...?’

‘Gordon’.

Micklethwaite ate his third scone, and Dorothy poured another tea. The nor’wester rattled the windows.

‘A storm coming I think, now there’s a name. I knew a girl at school who was called ‘Storm’, but it isn’t a name for a boy is it?’

‘Was she bad-tempered?’.

‘Oh no, she was more of a drizzle really’.

She laughed. Micklethwaite was recovering himself, and laughed too, and noted how quickly Dorothy made him feel at ease.

‘Can I ask how old are you Gordon?’

‘Thirty’.

‘The start of life. Oh, yes it is’ when he started to shake his head.

Her plastic mouth did not move much with the smile so her humour had to be carried by voice. The lips were made too thin, as if the surgeon had run out of material, and formed an unpleasant slit. There were no wrinkles of course, except where the plastic ended, and Dorothy’s neck was lined as any normal sixty year old’s. The real face seemed to begin at the ears, and the hair was a gentle genuine silver that was

impeccably groomed and had a lively bounce to it that was jogged along by quick, jaunty steps.

She spoke easily, in well-formed, interesting sentences, and her hands moved quite expressively, as if to compensate for the immobility of her face. Her posture was good and her humour dry. Her voice had a soft tinge of Scottish burr resonant in it — it was like listening to butter. Which reminded him.

She noticed his strawberry battlements on a thick butter foundation. Shortly she came back with another plate.

‘I’m cooking up my own storm today, baking day. That’s probably why I didn’t hear you at first. Now I expect you to eat them all of course. Photos, yes we do, but it will take me a while to find them’.

She got out a small notebook and wrote something down.

‘My memory is excellent, but I do like making lists. Are you a list-maker?’

Micklethwaite nodded ruefully.

‘Yes, it is a curse, although why such a useful habit should become such a liability I cannot imagine. How many stone huts are you looking at?’

‘A dozen perhaps... er, Dorothy. I’m not sure, I’m sort of hoping that the local farmers will be able to help me there’.

‘And you have to make a report on them?’

‘Inspect them, mainly, make out a survey sheet, and record their condition. It is more about keeping a record of the huts before they vanish’.

‘Do stone huts vanish?’

He grinned at his solecism.

‘They fall down, and people cart away the stone for other buildings, or walls. Or even souvenirs I believe’.

‘Surely not? It sounds like a great job. You are lucky, although it is patronising when people attribute your good skill to luck isn’t it?’

Actually Micklethwaite thought he was lucky, damned lucky to get the job. He became enthusiastic, eager to practice his newly borrowed historic jargon.

‘There’s still a couple of huts standing I think, I mean with a roof and everything. Being still useable is important for their integrity, and their vernacular.’

He hesitated over the word ‘vernacular’. He wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, but it sounded officious and vaguely poetic.

‘Of course. Chad Jago has a stone hut, that’s Jim’s brother, although he doesn’t live in it, but he could do. He lives in a caravan’.

‘Oh...’

‘Yes, well, he’s a mite superstitious. Cornish of course, Jago is an old Cornish name’.

Dorothy got up and went over to a picture on the wall. Micklethwaite felt that the conversation was being hustled along at a pace he was not entirely comfortable with. Mrs Jago’s mind moved swiftly.

‘This is Irmelina Calvadnack, Jim’s grandmother’.

The woman was dressed all in black, like a widow, and one had to say that it would be hard to imagine any other colour on her. The eyes were flinty and battered, and there was no ornamentation on her all. No rings, or necklace, and Micklethwaite immediately thought it was odd that a woman would not bring out some of her best jewellery for such a large formal portrait.

‘She came out in 1928, her headstone is in the cemetery, after Jim’s mother and father died suddenly. Very Cornish. And religious. The Mackenzie country is about as far from Cornwall as you can go, but she brought some of Cornwall with her of course. That sideboard was hers.’

Micklethwaite noted it was a dark, thick brute, and he glanced inadvertently at the portrait again.

‘Have you been to Cornwall? No, it is another world, certainly connected to England by land, but not in spirit or soul. It is one of the last Celtic places left on earth, and she was one of the last Celtic matriarchs. I’ll make a fresh pot. I may be able to find those photos’.

She gathered up the scone remnants and disappeared. Micklethwaite, with a contented stomach, started to look around the room more carefully.

His father once told him that it was a waste of time looking into people’s eyes, watch their lips, and best of all, study the places they live in. Dorothy’s lips were hard to read, though you would think out of kindness or design, that the surgeon would have twisted the material into something like a smile.

There were lots of portraits, and several mountain landscapes, and it made him wonder why people who live in the mountains have pictures of mountains on their walls. His mother in Blenheim owned a large ugly print of sheep safely grazing, yet lived next door to a sheep paddock. There was also a map of Cornwall, an old one, printed in faded washes that barely hinted at the original colour — and look at the books! Micklethwaite’s mouth watered and was just beginning to explore this landscape when Dorothy came briskly back. His hand was caught, poacher-like, on a volume, and he felt he had to justify his nosiness.

‘I need a month at least...?’

Dorothy smiled and passed over a teacup.

‘Please Gordon, enjoy yourself. I encourage kindred spirits. The population in the Mackenzie is too thin not to. Those are only the prestige volumes of course. Jim’s study has another massive haul as well, prints, first editions, and Chad’s a collector

too. Very bookish the Jago's, but then Irmelina did not encourage radio much, and as for television... I'm sure she thought it was the work of the devil himself, but we do have a tv room' she assured Micklethwaite 'I should show you around'.

Micklethwaite suddenly felt intuitive about some of the paintings.

'These are yours?'

'Why yes, what do you think?'

That put him on the spot. Micklethwaite had noted the small 'DJ' in the corner, but what did he think? The oils were precise, understated and looked accurate. There was nothing slap-dash about the painting, and the creativity was tidy and to the point. So that's what he said.

'Thank you. Fair comment. I have exhibited in Christchurch, and sold quite a few, which is helpful for the ego. I teach some art at the primary school, it's one of my few weekly outings. Children take you as you are'.

'These two as well?'

Micklethwaite changed the subject, which he seemed to find more awkward than her. They were two portraits.

'Yes, very early. That was me of course, I still have the mole' she laughed 'I was twenty-one I think. I was influenced by The Group, do you know of them? Well, Rita Angus was a well-known member. I painted with her, although I would not say she was a friend. I've lead a solitary life Mr Micklethwaite, but you need solitude for creativity'.

The mole was on her neck, and Micklethwaite looked involuntarily. She nodded, and looked thoughtful, and Micklethwaite could see that she had been a pretty twenty-one, but then the portrait must have been painted later, after her accident. So would she paint a flattering picture of herself, in a sort of homage to a face that had been?

He really had to ask.

'When was the accident' he stammered 'that happened to your face'.

'It was part accident, part malpractice, but I shall not get into that today. I was twenty-one, but I should show you around the homestead'.

There was no denying that abrupt change of conversation, but Micklethwaite did not deem it inappropriate. It was none of his business, except, as Phillip Marlowe might have said, if he took that attitude he would not make any money. It was odd that detectives and historians were really in the same industry. Dorothy showed him up heavy staircases of mahogany (from India) through rooms with bulky furniture and one bedroom with damask curtains and a repulsive four-poster bed.

'Yes, it is not very nice, but it belonged to Jim's grandmother, and she died in it. You would think that we would be keen to throw away objects that had been died in, but the Jago's do not think like that. Actually the Mackays don't either'.

He did not see much dust on the furniture, and the act of keeping this house tidy and dust free would be a tremendous task. The tour took in the conservatory, with a luscious array of ferns and plants, and a collection of unwieldy wooden skis nailed to the walls.

‘Jim and I were very keen once, that is how we met’.

The study as promised was full of paper, books, accounts, receipts. There was a station book open, and the neat writing Micklethwaite guessed was Dorothy’s.

‘You do the accounts?’

‘Oh yes. Jim is a farmer, and his head is full of sheep. Mine is full of numbers. It’s a bonny partnership that way. There are almost a 150 years of station accounts here Gordon, believe me I know, and I think every receipt was kept. Quite a treasure trove really’.

Micklethwaite was altogether too new to the history business to appreciate what riches lay in receipts, so his enthusiasm was muted. The kitchen was very smart, with all the gadgets that the rest of the house seem to lack. Even a dishwasher, which seemed extravagant to Micklethwaite. At last they reached back into the lounge again where Micklethwaite made noises to leave.

‘Jim will be annoyed he missed you. I can’t think where he has got to. Probably shooting rabbits, at least you must come round for lunch next Sunday. I promise you rabbit, it is a delicious meat, and most underrated by the farmers’.

In the hall lobby Micklethwaite was attracted to a striking picture, a thick rich oil painting of a man with staring eyes.

‘Oh yes, I like that one too, but Jim doesn’t. He says it reminds him of too many half-mad shepherds. It’s a Moffat. Do you like it?’

‘Yes’.

‘It’s one of a series he did on Mackenzie the Reiver, the sheep stealer, you know of him. The Mackenzie country was named after him. He was caught in Lyttelton, trying to escape, I think this picture represents his capture’.

The eyes of the man looked white and fearful. His beard was blood-red.

‘He stole some sheep and tried to get them over a secret pass he knew, he became quite a folk-hero, to my husband’s disgust. Mackenzie lived on the margins of society I believe: borrowing, begging, a little work here, a little stealing there. Even though I am Scottish myself, and loathe to admit there is any such thing as a stupid Scotsman, I have to say he was not one of the brightest. He wasn’t even hardworking, and perhaps that is what really condemned him. Work was everything in this colony in the 1850’s, work was almost a God’.

This soliloquy in the lobby was eloquent and well-paced. Dorothy Jago was a good talker, and only the warm breeze from the open door reminded Micklethwaite he was supposed to be leaving. Dorothy smiled, as much as she could smile. It actually struck Micklethwaite more than at any other time that there was something hor-

rible about what had happened to Mrs Jago. She was obviously intelligent, quick-witted and once beautiful. It sickened him, but he must go. He mumbled a thanks for the scones

‘I’m glad we’ve met Gordon, and I look forward to seeing you on Sunday. One on the dot’, and she laughed at her own joke as the door closed.

Outside, Micklethwaite felt his brain reeling, and it wasn’t until he was back on the gravel road to Tekapo that he remembered what those cloth thingies were called that people put over armchairs — anti-macassars — and in an overly vivid passage of thought (just as he swerved past another startled sheep) he imagined Dorothy’s mask as a sort of anti-macassar for her soul. He belatedly realised, that amongst all the plethora of family portraits and photographs on the walls of the Jago station, he could not recall seeing any of children.

Chapter 3

Empty

Tuesday 19 April

From the homestead the gravel road climbed up onto a tussock shoulder, and the whole of Lake Tekapo was spread-eagled under the late afternoon. A crude, oblong lake, over twenty kilometres long and six wide, the surface was being beaten up today with the nor'west wind that flecked the entire lake with whitecaps. On a calm day there was a serenity to Lake Tekapo, a massive mirror to the huge sky, but it was too bulky a body of water to be lovable, and few recreational boats ever pestered its surface. A vast, cold, mountain sea.

Micklethwaite gunned the trail-bike down at the T-junction, then turned along the lakeside towards Tekapo town, another twenty kilometres away. Patches of mata-gouri and briar lined the roadside, with the red rose-hips glinting button bright. The tussocks were bleached yellow, almost white at the end of summer, and the mountains were dirty piles of rock, mostly stripped of snow. Two harrier hawks were scouting the road, hunting for any carrion that the cars might flatten, and the sheep moved through the dead grasslands, head-down and pre-occupied. Micklethwaite felt suddenly tired, and the trail-bike coughed warningly as he turned past a corner of the road and came up to Highway 8.

He managed to get some way up a small hill when the bike spluttered and jerked to a halt. For about two or three minutes he was completely puzzled. Then he saw the empty petrol gauge.

He really did not need this right now, and Micklethwaite got off his bike and the half-hearted kick he delivered to the trail-bike, resulted unexpectedly in the beast tumbling over on its side with the sad thump and bellow of an expiring whale. This panicked him, and he was just in the middle of a frustrating struggle to re-right the machine when a loud clunk of a truck changing gears made him jump, and he was startled by a mechanised medieval castle coming onto the brow of the hill.

The truck slowed down, belched a great black cloud from the arse end, then settled into a rhythmic coughing.

'Giddyay, need a hand mate?'

Micklethwaite had propped up the bike on its stand, and although normally shy to talk to anyone who called him 'mate', went over to the driver's side of the cab. A woman with long, dark hair streaked with orange leaned out.

‘You conked out? Need a lift?’

There was a small pointed child’s face peering from the other side of the cab. Micklethwaite nodded, and yelled thanks above the noise of the house-truck. The timber canopy overhung what looked like an old American Dodge truck, with a chimney out of the roof, and all sorts of odds and sods bolted onto the side. Micklethwaite manoeuvred his trail-bike onto the grass verge and clambered up into the cab. The owner offered a tight grip and smile with two teeth missing.

‘Rosie is my name, this is Em, me girl’.

The girl settled in comfortably between the two of them, holding onto a map and pencil.

‘Oi, Em, you’re not supposed to be bloody drawing on the map. You’re the navigator. Jeez, she draws on everything this kid. She’d draw all over my bum if I didn’t wiggle it’.

Every syllable Rosie spoke had ‘urban’ printed on it, and Micklethwaite tried not to look at the tattoos on her arm. There was also a fuggy scent in the cab, as if someone had been burning incense, or something. Rosie vigorously changed gear and the truck lumbered out onto the road and right into the path of a Holden ute that swerved and tooted angrily. Rosie gave it the fingers and turned calmly to Micklethwaite and asked.

‘Yer going to Tekapo mate?’

‘Gordon. I ran out of petrol.’

‘Bit bloody stupid eh?’ and she roared ‘I’m staying at Tekapo, with Chad, yer know him?’

Micklethwaite was too pre-occupied with his weird afternoon, to pick up on the reference.

‘Yeah, he’s a mate of mine. Got a house all lined up for me and Em and I’m booking her in the school tomorro’, bout time she got some decent lessons’.

‘Mum, do they have lots of kids here?’

‘I dunno, it’s a town isn’t it? Gord, what’s the population of Tek-town’.

That stumped Micklethwaite briefly but somehow the figure of four hundred came to mind.

‘Hear that Em? Four hundred, say sixty kids, thirty at primary I reckon. That’s yer answer’.

Rosie roared again, a sound quite similar to the truck engine, but possibly louder. That was unfair, and Micklethwaite later learned that Rosie’s guess was just about spot on, and the kid looked bright.

‘Do you think they have a painting class mum?’

The truck was going down the last hill to the lakeside town, with a motor-camp on one side and a row of shops coming up. Micklethwaite was fumbling in his pocket for money.

‘What’s the talent like Gord eh?’

Micklethwaite looked blank.

‘I’ve just moved here myself’.

‘Well, you’re no use to me. There’s the pub, Jeez the lake’s wild, eh?’

The wind had pushed a veritable surf onto the shore, and the waves broke in short, thumping hits. It was warm, and the New Zealand flag at the main hotel was stretched to the limit. The truck pulled into the petrol station and store.

‘Thanks.’

‘No problem mate’.

Micklethwaite clambered out, and smiled a tired smile at Rosie’s daughter, whose name he hadn’t yet worked out.

‘Thanks again’.

‘You’re welcome. Em, ask that petrol bloke, where’s Lake Alexandrina road? What mate? Back there, yer mean we passed it? Bugger.’

Micklethwaite caught only some of this interchange as he was wrangling with the miserly garage man to get some petrol.

He had to put \$20 deposit on a petrol can, and by the time he’d paid up, filled the can and struggled to the other side of the road the house-truck was gone. The wind was working itself into a lather and Micklethwaite held up the can and waved it to encourage a motorist to stop and give him a lift. It was twenty minutes before anyone felt so inspired, and Micklethwaite was carried back in the tray of a Holden ute, with a friendly dog that kept standing on him as it pointed itself into the wind and barked it’s head off.

By now the frustrating day, the mad dog, the madder hot wind were all giving him a bad headache and with a brief thanks to the driver, Micklethwaite filled up the tank, rode back to Tekapo, got his twenty bucks back and picked up some mail. He arrived at the bach at seven, hot, tired and grumpy.

It was getting dark already and he boiled the jug and put tea leaves straight in the cup and brewed it like that. Strong and hot. There was a packet of ginger nuts which he was going to take back to the store because they were stale, but he sat down and dunked them in the tea. By the third cup he felt better and had munched through the whole packet, watching the lake turn grey and then black. One of the letters was from Carolyn, in Sydney.

Her writing was always clear and careful, and had a springiness about the uprights that depressed him. The gist of it was she was happy, singing well, and in love.

She'd picked up some part-time work with the Sydney Operetta group, and had done some trial tapes of her voice for a scholarship for London. She did not linger long on the love interest in her life, perhaps sensing this was not a suitable topic to dwell on to an ex, but he was called Sebastian (poncey name thought Micklethwaite), and was a tenor with the same teacher as her.

Micklethwaite had found a can of Mesolithic baked beans in the cupboard and slowly heated it up on the stove while he read her letter again. It was nice of her to write, keeping the contact. The beans looked and tasted like little rabbit turds soaked in tomato sauce. Not so bad really. He sighed, feeling sorry for himself.

It was a brief love affair, culminated on a sand-dune, and ended on a Wellington park bench where Carolyn expressed her conviction that it was no longer appropriate to continue the sexual part of the relationship. This Micklethwaite thought was unfortunate, because that was the part of the relationship he had been the most keen on. He could still remember a leaf clinging to the back of her jumper when she walked away.

Certainly it was painful, but then he had little other love experiences to compare it with. Sometimes he thought the whole thing had truly tragic dimensions, and at other times he thought it was just a passing fling. He ran a bath, and felt better once the hot water had sweated out the tension of the fohn wind. He folded himself into bed, and lay there thinking.

Thoughts of Dorothy's strange face, and Rosie's wicked grin kept flicking through his mind, and as the wind died down outside he could hear the rattling evening call of an oystercatcher. Instantly he slipped back to Golden Bay, the mudflats and swing of the ocean around the sea-swept sands. It had been magical with Carolyn. He remembered a golden girl running on the shore, the movement of tides. It was getting to be a long gap between girlfriends and he encouraged a gentle despondency to grow over him, and he might even have wept quietly — if he hadn't started snoring instead.

Chapter 4

Museum Piece

Wednesday 20 April

In the morning it was raining a thin, warm, windless drizzle, and Micklethwaite woke up with sunburn and sore eyes, made a cup of tea, and squeezed behind the table to watch the wet, grey day happen. If it wanted to. The landlord had made quite a feature of the 'dINETTE', a miserable seat and table in the kitchen, which would have suited two midgets, but not if they argued. However, it did have the best viewing window in the crib, and looked down over an empty section across the shiny highway to the great lake beyond.

He caught sight of his face reflected in the window and studied it for a moment. He had a strong face, but perhaps pointed too far forward, and a gaunt, ungrateful frame, with a balding forehead and skin that burnt briskly. Micklethwaite listened much better than he spoke, which confuses people. From his father he had inherited bad dress sense and his father's dry Yorkshire humour, which, coupled with intense moorland silences, often made other people in the conversation unexpectedly verbose, volunteering information that they would later regret. It was the power of silence, and for Micklethwaite it was a gift he had only just lately become aware of.

He sighed a deep loud sigh, just to cheer himself up. The crib smelled as if every person who had stayed here had left an odour imprint. He jotted down the word 'crib' in his notebook. The bathroom had a claw-legged bath, and green slime on the windows and the cupboards were full of dearly-loved junk and Readers Digests. There were colourful crochet knitted covers on the chairs, and in the porch a macrame plant-holder, which spun in a melancholy rotation every few minutes when the front door was open. There was a fish-clock which flicked its tail on the hour, and a stone cat stood by the back-door, grinning with vicious optimism at the sparrows.

It was quiet, and cheap, and he could have it for as long as he wanted, that is unless anyone else wanted to pay more, in fact he could probably buy it if he was keen the landlord hinted broadly. He was an ex-farmer who'd moved into 'town' and bought several older cribs in the hope of returning a nice little income for his retirement, and instead watched Tekapo slowly slip off the tourist trail.

‘The sods’ he commented bitterly ‘they take a photo of the church, then hurtle down the road to the next gimmick’.

Tekapo had a lovely stone church on a promontory of the lake, and alongside was a bronze statue of a sheep dog that was permanently mustering the white horses that ran over the lake. Gargantuan tour buses would haul over, and stand muttering with their drivers, as the Japanese took photos and admired the pristine scene, but it was not enough to make people stay longer, or to make Tekapo rich. Half the town was summer homes. Most of those stayed empty, for although the highway was a life-blood for the petrol station and cafes, it was a draining wound for the town. As the road to Queenstown improved so the flow of traffic passed through. No one was tempted by the souvenir shops, or an ice-cold swim in the lake, so Lake Tekapo was a ‘town’ (though that was over-stating it) which had never lived life to the full, and in spite of the local promotions committee plotting another great revival, the town teetered on the brink of being chronically inconsequential.

The drizzle stopped as he remembered questions he ought to have asked of Dorothy. Unfortunately they had nothing to do with stone huts. He locked the back door and for want a better place slipped the key under the stone cat, which grinned happily at this new responsibility. The road smelt clean and the street was empty, and he wondered if this landscape would ever get full. It seemed to defeat all the best efforts of humans to occupy it.

He was going to buy a newspaper but paused at the yellow AA sign stating ‘Museum and Library’, on impulse he turned and walked down the side-road past the Catholic church to the small old building and studied the opening hours notice carefully. It was only 8.30 in the morning.

‘Can I help you?’

He jumped a mile high. The bright female voice immediately made him think irrationally of Dorothy, so it was relief to see there was no mask, and no grey hair.

‘It’s a bit early for the library?’

‘I’ll say’ she giggled ‘it’s not open till Friday, and it’s only Wednesday. Just a bit early, but I was opening up anyway. Are you local?’

She was lively, with short bobbing blonde hair and a laugh that rushed about like a breezy day. She unlocked the front door with a large key and replaced it under a stone by the back door. She swung round with a grin.

‘Well, honestly, who’s going to steal these books? Besides Mrs Nosey Parker lives right over the road and you’d be lucky to lift the door knob before she’ll be over to ask your business’.

She walked in, opened a large window and switched on the light.

‘Mind you, she’s in bed by 8 so you can steal the whole darn building then. Welcome to Tekapo Library and Museum. Do you want to join? It’s Michaelmass isn’t it?’

‘Eh?’

Micklethwaite tried hard not to look startled.

‘It’s Mick something, the man in the store told me’.

‘But I’ve never told him my name’.

‘He’s the postmaster too you know. You can’t fart in this town without someone knowing’.

She opened another window, using a curious rope and pulley system that reminded Micklethwaite of school.

‘Tekapo has only 400 people?’.

‘That’s dead right, 387 or thereabouts. I was talking to Mungo Davis, he’s the Historic Sites chairman, and he knew about you’.

Micklethwaite was surprised.

‘You have an Historic Sites Committee?’

‘Yep, me and Mungo. That’s it.’

She laughed at Micklethwaite’s odd look.

‘It’s enough you know, three people on a committee only causes arguments around here. The ideal Mungo reckons is two people for the committee, one of whom is actually dead. Trouble is he didn’t say which of us it was. So you want to join up? We’ve got loads of good stuff here.’

She sat at the main desk and pulled out a form. Micklethwaite looked around briefly at the shelves of books on one side and an accumulation of implements on the other.

‘Yep, we’re a museum too of course’.

She turned on the radio to what sounded like a Timaru station, and it was the Bee Gees singing Night Fever.

‘I’m Vicki’.

She held out a hand in a strong maleish way, which Micklethwaite accepted. She rattled on, and Micklethwaite had more than a moment to study her generous chest that was held-back by a low T-shirt. He could see a black bra-strap, yet the effect was not especially erotic.

‘I’m the librarian (not much pay!), museum curator (no pay at all!), resource co-ordinator (very voluntary). Did you realise this is the resource centre as well? Must get the AA to change the sign. They said they would. It’s quite appropriate for the old primary school really, like a wheel turning full circle’.

The immediate impression of Vicki Smith was engaging, and she knew this. Blonde, five foot not much, but physically strong, chatty and more than a bit of a gossip, and a laugh at every sentence. She never stayed around people long enough for them to notice the almost compulsive nature of her laughing, and she once desperately

described herself in her diary as ‘the girl who laughed too much’. She was plump in the active healthy way of outdoor women, and it encouraged men to think fertile thoughts. Vicki would have been surprised how many men did allow such thoughts to cross their minds, because her main regret about moving to Lake Tekapo was the chronic lack of good keen men.

She had noticed Micklethwaite glancing at her breasts. Men were so predictable! Still he was definitely talent, but he would need some improvement on the clothing side. Also physically he looked odd. His arms were too long for his body and he seemed to move hesitantly, like an insect warming up to the sun.

For his part Micklethwaite could see now that she was not as young as he first supposed, more like thirty than twenty, but her movements were all teenage, as if her body hadn’t grown up. He interrupted what he could see was going to be a flood of words

‘Tell me, what does the Historic Sites Committee do?’.

She looked shocked.

‘Make lists of course, and have committee meetings to rattle the business along’.

She put on a rather good Yorkshire accent.

‘...the committee, has decided, that hence forth, and forth with, we will call this committee, the Historic Sites Committte. Applause’.

She was a one-man show this girl, you didn’t need anyone else in the room. She would make jokes, provide laughter, applause, drum up the music and shift the curtain onto the next act. Quite a handful, in every sense, and Micklethwaite was entertained. Vicki also managed many different operations at once and had partially filled out the library application form and passed it over to him. She read upside down as he filled in the few blanks.

‘Gordon Micklethwaite, well I was close. This entitles you to five books a week, with a 20 cent surcharge if you take out popular fiction, and a 20 cent fine if you’re a week late. We’ve got a hot book by Wilbur Smith?’

She tempted him, and Micklethwaite looked around with a shifty eye.

‘Anything naughty?’

‘Well, we had Boswell’s London Journal that had a number of extremely rude acts in, but that was withdrawn by a general committee vote. Tekapo’s not the place for naughtiness I’m afraid’.

Vicki giggled again, and certainly did not look afraid.

‘Oh well, I’ll settle for a history of Tekapo then’.

She bounced around picking books off the shelves.

‘Risqué stuff Gordon, and there’s no such thing. We’ve got Fairlie District Council history, pretty gripping, and here’s a book on yarns of the Mackenzie district. You

know tall stories, Mackenzie the sheep stealer, that sort of thing?.

She prattled on, and she could hear herself prattling. It often annoyed Vicki that she was so helpful to people, giving her time and energy spontaneously and freely, yet she never received a commensurate amount of energy back. It was like when you hold a dinner party for six friends, but you only got one dinner invite back.

Micklethwaite was a sucker of energy she felt, he would take more than he would give back, but then realistically had she ever come across the other version? She had tried being mean with her smile and it only depressed her. It went against her grain. At school they called her 'Tigger', and it had taken her twenty years to realise that she did not need to accept it as an insult. Some people bounced, some slugged, and slugs were in the majority. Bad luck girl.

Micklethwaite studied the pile of books she brought over.

'You don't get many customers do you?.'

'You've guessed my secret. We don't get many readers either.'

Again Micklethwaite noted that friendly flirtatious eroticism that somehow was not erotic. Her approach was too congenial, too much of a have on. He smiled along with the joke.

'It would be a poor place that didn't have any sort of sin wouldn't it?.'

Vicki took this seriously.

'Oh well, sin's different'.

Then of course Micklethwaite realised that she was a Christian. Those engaging eyes, the sexuality without the actual sex. He turned the subject in another direction.

'Do you have archival material here? Like local histories, or family histories? I'm keen to find out more about who built the stone huts. It's possible it's just one stonemason who was contracted out, and...'

Finishing sentences was hard around Vicki.

'Have we ever, we've got tons of stuff here?.'

She pointed to a massive cupboard, which when opened revealed boxes and files jammed into every space.

'I've had a look through some of this stuff, it's really good, but it would take me years to sort out. Look a whole box of photos' and she pulled them out, 'trouble is hardly any of them are dated, and those that are don't have many inscriptions on them. Mungo knows some of these people and places, but you'll have to see him'.

Micklethwaite felt interested but overwhelmed by the mass of browning and crackling photos. There might well be some good pictures here of huts, but it would take days to sort out. This project was sprouting like a weed.

'You must get paid, Vicki? For all this?'

He always found it hard at the first meeting to use someone's first name, and was pleased he had got over this hurdle.

'Oh yes, part-time of course. I work at the back-packers too. As a cook and cleaner. A bit of everything really, you have to be in a small place like this. And I ride a lot, with the Mackenzie Horse Trekkers outfit up the road, on Highbourne station. That's what brought me here really. I love horses. I'll take you for a ride if you want. You ride?'

Micklethwaite was about to shake his head, but then said 'he'd love to', a silly vanity. He did not like horses much, but Christian or not, he could not resist the thought of an outing with a pretty woman. She sat on the desk and swung her legs like a kid.

'Then I really liked the place, you know. And they did not have anyone to manage the library, so I said I'd give it ago. Then there was the museum. Then they got keen on getting more tourists here, and I got sort of involved that way. The resource centre is supposed to help with getting more jobs going as well, so as Mungo says I'm as busy as a bee with a bum full of honey. Plus they gave me a great free house, it's the old schoolteacher's, behind the library here. A real, cute old cottage. Loads of history.'

Vicki had intended to stay one summer and had been here for two years, evolving into a general factotum for the community, and loving every minute of it. Her mother had once made the nasty observation that her very helpfulness was a security fence against her feelings, and Vicki had a diary bursting full of soulful searchings as she and her mother worked through their internal struggles. Their mutual love was conditional on both of them minding their tongues. Her father was mostly lost to her, and Vicki crudely understood that her interest in men was in part driven by the search for a father figure. She had learnt that you can keep secrets in a small town, but it's bloody hard work.

'You're with the Directorate aren't you?'

Micklethwaite might do, if he was tidied up. This unlikely thought made her grin, which made Micklethwaite respond with a smile without any idea why. He explained.

'It's just a summer job. I'm surveying all the old stone shepherd's huts in the district. Recording them, before they completely disappear, that reminds me why I came...'

He fumbled in his back-pack, and brought out a list. Vicki got up, brought down a folder stamped Tekapo History, and also shooed out a wasp. She couldn't sit still for a second.

'You might be able to help. I'm only interested in the ones built in the 1860's, very early.' He passed over the list to her. 'You see, I've got Top Basin hut, near the Tekapo River, Frobishers Face, I think that's down Hakataramea Pass, but it's in poor condition so I've been told. There's a stone hut, near Burke's Pass. The old boundary hut on the Jago farm, not much left of it really, I went there yesterday...'

'Oh, you met Jim?'

'No. His wife'.

'Oh, Dot' she looked hard at Micklethwaite 'what did you think?'

'Well...'

'She's a brave woman, with that face. It's horrible what happened to it'.

'What did...?' another unfinished sentence.

'Look, I don't know the details much, but she had a riding accident when she was pretty young. Really horrible it was, got dragged along the ground when her foot caught in the stirrup, and the horse broke away in a panic. Practically tore her face off. In those days they'd only just developed plastic surgery, you know after the war, there was a lot of demand for it, but the surgeon made a real botch of it. I don't know the full story but they say she had to go many times for face surgery but it just got worse and worse. It's like a mask. Horrible'.

Vicki grimaced in an exaggerated way. It was obviously a story she enjoyed telling, for her shoulders hunched up and she leaned closer to Micklethwaite on the table. He could see both bra straps now. She added.

'It would destroy your soul wouldn't it?'

'She seems pretty lively' observed Micklethwaite carefully.

'Well of course she is, a real brave person. I mean Jim's not the easiest to get on with you know, I shouldn't be telling you this, and she lives a reclusive kind of life. She comes into town occasionally. Helps the kids paint. Awful life really.'

There was a silence, and Vicki got up to chase another wasp out of the room. She continued the conversation whilst dusting a book shelf.

'He's important locally, Jim Jago. They've owned Goonhilly Downs Station for generations, what about Chad Jago's place, have you been there?'

That started Micklethwaite thinking again.

'No. Is this the brother?'

'Yep. He lives in a caravan out by the lake, and there's a beaut stone hut there. Perfect condition. Shep's hut they call it.'

'Oh, that's on my list. So that's Chad's hut, but he doesn't live in it? Is that odd?'

'I dunno. Some people say he's touched, but I think he's all right'.

Was that a hint of frost?

'Someone was asking after him, Chad I mean. A woman in a house-truck. She picked me up yesterday when I ran out of petrol'.

Vicki frowned, and shook her head. Micklethwaite could see she genuinely didn't know this. Like all gossips she became annoyed when other people had information before her.

‘Don’t know her’.

She carried on dusting, and Micklethwaite returned to his list.

‘There’s another hut, near Mackenzie Pass I think. Do you know that?’

‘Yep, there’s an old ruin up there. We could go for a ride Gordon, Sunday. It’s a great riding area’.

‘I’d like to, but Dorothy Jago invited me for lunch...’

She laughed ruefully, she had never received an invitation to dine at the Jago’s.

‘Well, dining with the nobs? Better not turn that down. Go and see the Jago church, see what you think’.

‘Is it old?’

‘A bit strange. No, I won’t give the game away, but it’s worth a look. Say hi to Dot for me. She comes to the library most weeks. She’s a great cook’.

Micklethwaite was trying to remember something.

‘Is Mungo his real name?’

‘Oh yes, you should meet him. He knows heaps about this area’.

She wrote out Mungo Davis’s phone number and street address.

‘It’s not very far away, just up Hay Street. **Mind** you, nothing’s never very far away from anything in Tekapo. So now you know where the key is, just help yourself if you want a look around here. Don’t forget that ride either’.

There was more than a hint of a come-on in her voice. Vicki had already judged Micklethwaite’s riding abilities, but at least he was game. A new man on the block too, probably a virgin. Micklethwaite had gathered his books and was heading out the door.

‘Thanks, for everything.’

He meant it too, she was a nice girl, although the more he studied her he realised that even thirty years might be placing her too young.

The air was warm and the street dry. He nodded to Mrs Nosey Parker who was polishing a statuette in the window, and surprisingly he got a nod back. As he navigated towards Mungo Davis’s house he began to feel more confident about Tekapo. Connections were being made, people met, things were leading to things, and a sense of belonging was coming to him. It was a very pleasant day, and Vicki was cute, yet, the strange absence of sexual appeal bothered him. It was not like he was talking to a potential lover at all but rather a potential sister, and (he struggled momentarily against the unfortunate mental image that was presenting itself to him) you can’t shag a sister.

Chapter 5

Chad

Saturday 23 April

Mungo Davis was cut and cleaved as the firewood he sold, a straight talker, knew everyone, and in short grainy sentences told him all about the history of the district, and marked on a map where there were any stone shepherds huts. Mungo had fought with Jim Jago at Monte Cassino, and well up the Italian peninsula.

‘Jim carried two bullets for a day, you know, and still cleaned out a machine gun nest. They should have given him a Victoria Cross for that, but the bastards settled for a DCM’.

Mungo also sold him a load of wood.

That’s what held him up in the end. He had the best intentions to go to Chad’s place straight after talking to Mungo, but his lorry came round that afternoon and dumped a huge mess by the front door, and the labour of love needed to cut, sort and stack a cord of macrocarpa kept Micklethwaite going for a day. He wrote ‘cord’ down in his notebook under ‘Curious Words & Expressions’.

Living in Tekapo had slowed him down, and a second day wandered past with some high cirrus that foretold a nor’wester. After days of clean, south wind, with a burnish of autumn in the lowering sun, this morning a lava of heat was being squeezed between the dark clouds and dry tussocks. At 9 am it was already twenty degrees, and Micklethwaite’s mountain of sweet-smelling, nicely cut firewood looked somewhat futile.

He kitted up, and rode the Honda 125 down to the main highway, past the row of shops that constituted town, and the bronze dog had already rounded-up four coaches and three campervans. The lake looked a sublime aquamarine, and a haze hung over the back mountains. Micklethwaite skirted the Tekapo Army Camp, with the accommodation huts tidily and emptily ranged up the hill, and then turned onto the Lake Alexandrina road. He threaded past some stray sheep around the back of Mt John, and after five kilometres or so, slowed down at the place Mungo had described.

An old iron post-box had been nailed to the gate-post, and the gate was propped permanently open. Micklethwaite drove down a shingle track to a peninsula that jutted into the lake. It was a bulb of land tied to shore by a thin orange willow-covered causeway, like a horizontal lollipop, with a caravan and stone hut on the high ground

at the end. It was a million-dollar position, exactly the kind of throw-away location that New Zealanders take for granted. Despite a fifteen kilometre drive from the township, Tekapo was only four kilometres across the lake; he'd ridden in a wide semi-circle.

The stone hut looked in superb condition, and he did not initially see the figure that emerged from the caravan. Micklethwaite pulled off his helmet and looked more closely.

The man was tall and probably rather handsome once, but now he was silver haired and walked slightly crooked to his right side. You immediately gained the curious notion that Chad would walk in circles. He had a formal jacket and trousers on with a shirt buttoned neatly up to the neck, and looked frail. He was taller than his brother, and apart from the Jago surname you would be hard pressed to recognise that they were brothers. Jim seemed as wide as a woolshed door, whereas Chad was more like a silvery poplar tree, thin, almost too thin, and seemed to be swayed by each and every wind.

'Chad Jago?'

'Yes?'

'Gordon Micklethwaite'.

He went into an explanation of his purpose, dropping in the name of Jim Jago to establish his credentials. Chad nodded impressively, but his eyes did not seem especially focussed on anything. An old border-collie dog sat patiently at Chad's feet, and his eyes seemed a good deal sharper than Chad's.

'Here's the hut Mr Micklethwaite, please you?'

Chad waved an arm gently towards the building. He took out an impressive key and turned it in the lock. Micklethwaite walked in followed by Chad, but the dog sat down outside with a slight whine.

'He don't like to come inside. Seldom is clever'.

The sentence made no sense to Micklethwaite until he grasped that 'Seldom' was possibly the dog's name.

Despite the warm day the stone hut was cool and dark. The fireplace dominated one end, with a fine hearth set with river stones. There were hooks dangling down, and a billy swinging eerily on one of them, just wanting a fire to liven it up. The fireplace had a neat pile of kindling all ready to be lit. Micklethwaite noted that all the gaps between the roof and thick walls were well blocked up. It was often a problem with birds, getting in and pooping everywhere. On another wall were two bunks, beautifully stained and partly carved in a decorative design and a big old table stood in the centre. It was a proper little house, clean as a pin.

'It's nice'.

'Yes, indeed Mr Micklethwaite. Built in 1863, and used as shepherd's hut until the 1940's. It is charmed'.

‘And charming’.

Micklethwaite joked, and thought Chad’s language quaint.

‘How long have you lived here, Mr Jago’.

Chad stroked his chin and smiled absently.

‘Now twenty years I’m sure, or longer. This has always been Jago land. James could tell you that’.

They stepped outside and Micklethwaite took off his jacket whilst Chad stood silently by gazing over the empty lake. Micklethwaite had yet to see a boat on it, and then noticed a small dingy tied up by the willows.

‘Your boat?’

‘Oh yes’.

‘You go fishing’ hazarded Micklethwaite.

‘I row to the beaches to get the firewood that God sends down’.

Well that was one way to put it.

‘Great day’.

Chad smiled again genially.

‘Do you mind if I survey the hut? I mean take measurements and photos?’

‘Certainly Mr Micklethwaite, and take some tea with me afterwards. I’ve got good fuggan’.

Every second thing Chad said seemed strange, and the old boy surely was a bit touched. Mungo Davis had told him of Chad’s firewood collecting habits, ‘he’s my only real competition’ joked Mungo, and beside the caravan there were two huge walls of driftwood, carefully sawn and stacked. Some of the pieces looked huge and Micklethwaite wondered how Chad managed with that tiny dinghy.

The wind had picked up on the lake and white-caps were sprinting down towards the town, but Chad’s caravan was protected in part by a small headland. In between surveying the hut, Micklethwaite kept glancing out over the caravan, which had flowerboxes instead of wheels. Seldom was slumped in a shady corner, and apart from the wind the only other sound were two magpies warbling with less and less enthusiasm until they were finally stopped by the heat.

He took about an hour to cover the hut, becoming more impressed as he worked. He noted the old willow rafters inside, perhaps original, and several inscriptions carved on them. One dated back to an autumn muster of 1889. Names like ‘F. Jago 41’, ‘Ben Thomas, cook’ were also legible. The place was rich with history, and Micklethwaite moved and measured with a certain reverence for the old shepherds and boundary-men who had lived here. He was almost reluctant to finish and face the fuggan. Mungo had filled him in on some of Chad’s background.

‘Went queer a while back, had a wife, but she left him. I don’t know all the ins and outs but still it’s a bit sad for Jim. Chad looks after the golf-course, and the cemetery. Always busy eh, and he’s always collecting driftwood. Surprised he hasn’t drowned himself in his little rowboat. Goes out with Seldom, his old border-collie, which most people think is smarter than him’.

Micklethwaite packed away his measuring tape, and filed the survey sheets into the folder. The Jago’s seemed a pretty unlucky lot, what with Dorothy’s face and now Chad’s madness. He had asked Mungo if the two events were connected. He seemed surprised, as if it hadn’t occurred to him.

‘Nah, don’t think so. She got injured in the forties, just after the war. No, Chad went funny much later, in the mid 50’s I think. There was a court case. He’s been to Sunnyside’.

The nor’wester had forced its way even into Chad’s protected piece of heaven and the willows were shivering nervously, losing leaves in a pre-autumn fright. The waves were slapping on the pebble shore. Micklethwaite knocked on the open door.

‘Come in, come in Mr Micklethwaite’.

The caravan was a small old-fashioned sort, with a round oval-shaped roof and small windows. One end was a bed, and at the other a small sink and gas cooker, with cupboards full of food. In between was a bookshelf jammed with volumes, sometimes two deep, and not much dust on any of them.

Micklethwaite quickly noted the titles as he manoeuvred himself into a tiny arm-chair, whilst Chad perched up on a stool. Bertrand Russell, Hume, Rousseau, lots of philosophy in fact, and four or five Bibles. A long collection of National Geographics and a ton of New Zealand history books on the bottom shelf. No novels much, although he spotted some Somerset Maugham.

Chad handed him a cup of tea and a plate of small stiff squares of pastry. It was chewy, and not unpleasant.

‘Good fuggan’.

Micklethwaite pointed, his mouth full. Chad nodded and smiled. ‘Do you read all these Mr Jago?’

‘Indeed Mr Micklethwaite. Give me a book and a cup of tea and I’m a genuine ashes cat’.

The conversation to Micklethwaite’s ears sounded Dickensian, all these ‘Misters’ and ‘indeeds’, but he could not resist getting into the spirit of it.

‘Who is your favourite philosopher Mr Jago?’

‘Why Mr Micklethwaite, the wind’.

That threw him, and his jaw dropped. Perhaps he deserved that answer, yet, even as Chad’s eyes seemed genial and absent, they flickered with a sharpness that made him suspect that there was an intelligence here — or at least there used to be an intel-

ligence. The next statement was worse.

‘The Jagos are a cursed family’ smiled Chad cheerfully.

‘Why?’

‘We just is. Pisky-ridden we is, pisky-ridden. The Jago’s are Cornish, oh yes. They fled the terrible times of the eighteenth century. The rot started that time ago, I date it from when an old wayfarer was taken into the great house late at night. A strange, broken creature he seemed. But harmless, at least he seemed so’.

Chad paused and became animated.

‘Yes a broken down wayfarer he seemed, and after everyone retires at night something happens. Everyone was asleep except the maid, who was having trouble sleeping so she came down the stairs to the main hall where the servants and travellers slept. All was black you sees. But she sees the wayfarer get up, stand up, and looking around pulls out of his black coat an old withered hand’.

Micklethwaite’s fuggan was eaten and his tea getting cold. He could not take his eyes off Chad’s face, which became sly.

‘Then, as the maid watched, the old wayfarer lit each finger of the hand. But the thumb would not light, because one of the household was not asleep. The maid who was watching. She was most afeard, and went upstairs and tried to rouse the other occupants, but they were all in a spell-bound sleep. She was mortally frightened, but kept her wits about her, and crept back down to where she watched the wayfarer rifling through the cupboards and stealing the family silver. She knew that she had to blow out the hand to waken her mistress and master, and she crept fearfully past the wayfarer and got to where the room was illuminated by the weirdly burning fingers. With one, mighty breath she blew out the fingers, the wayfarer started towards her and she screamed, waking the household who rushed downstairs to find the maid collapsed in a fit and the front door wide open and the sound of hooves thundering away in the night. They might never have believed her story, perhaps they would have thought she had tried to steal the silver with her accomplice the wayfarer, but in the grey morning, under the table, they found the strange withered hand, which they kept and called the hand of glory. It’s still in Jago possession’.

The wind blew, and Seldom shuffled and whined, as if sensing the strange nature of the story. Chad suddenly relaxed and smiled genially. It was as if the story had come from the ancestral family memory, and was now returned to it’s repository.

Micklethwaite coughed and smiled nervously. He had remembered something.

‘Someone picked me up, was asking after you, errr... Rosie. She had a kid as well.’

Chad’s face lit up.

‘Ah yes, my girl. She’s going to live here. Gone back to town today to get her

stuff, back on morrow.’

Rosie was a pretty rough customer to have as a daughter, and Micklethwaite did not pursue the point.

‘She’ll live here then?’

There was plenty of parking and the stone hut was empty.

‘Indeed, and her kiddy is going to school’.

‘Your stone hut is in excellent condition Mr Jago, when are you going to move in?’

A palpable veil of irritation came over Chad’s face, and he didn’t speak again.

In the awkward silence it took Micklethwaite some minutes to realise that the interview was over. He thanked Chad for his fuggan and tea and walked back to the trail bike. Chad watched him, and waved friendly enough as he left. He took one more quick glance round, but he didn’t see a fireplace.

After he got back to the bach and scoffed a basic meal, the evening was still too hot for bed, so Micklethwaite followed the road from his bach up onto the terrace, where it came to a dead end by a gate. On the other side a lonely farm track lost its way through the tussocks and under the heavy-lidded sky there was enough light to amble along the empty land for awhile. A tinge of pink was swallowed up by dusk, and stars started to prick through the early night as the cloud cleared. The wind was unsettlingly warm, and it must be 10 pm at least.

He was thinking of Chad Jago. Sure, his language was odd, yet wasn’t there something a bit contrived about it? On a couple of occasions, when Chad looked straight at him, his eyes contained a knowing intensity, almost as if Chad was, how to put it, pretending.

A scuffle under his feet made Micklethwaite start, and he stepped back to avoid treading on a hedgehog. He turned back, and to his right there were lights sprinkling up the black hillside, and that rather puzzled him. He did not remember houses up there during the day? Then he smiled, the shades of a Mackenzie dusk had tricked him, and there was no new town there, but the city of Orion rising quietly through a thick black night.

Chapter 6

Conversation Over a Heavy Meal

24 April, Sunday

The voice was strong and rough, and years of calling dogs down from the tops, and arguing matters with bloody-minded district councils had given the tone of Jim Jago's voice both grit and authority. You listened to it. It was loud anyway, so you had no choice.

'I remembered we were shot straight off the boat and went to the front, and in two days we were fighting a great battle, Alamein they called it. I never fired a shot or saw a bloody German, but it was supposed to be a great victory. Still, in Italy it was different, and we earned our keep alrighty'.

A slow story of war emerged. With vicious fights up the Italian backbone, hand-to-hand fighting, wounds, convalescence in hospitals, then back again, wounded again. It was a nasty war, rendered almost pointless by the Normandy landings. Jim Jago had been wounded several times, and reckoned he'd spent as long in hospital as on the battle line.

Micklethwaite's immediate impression of Jim Jago was size. He seemed to fill a room, both horizontally and vertically, yet an inspection of his physical dimensions did not reveal an especially large person. Five foot ten, maybe twelve or thirteen stone. So it was in his face perhaps, a great broad sweep of flesh, reddened by countless high country summers and etched so deeply in places you could run number 8 wire in the grooves and use him as a strainer post. His manner also impressed, with a natural slowness of someone who knew exactly what he was about. On his home turf he carried immense respect, mainly because most of what he said made sense, and he didn't waste his wisdom with prattle. You either got it or you didn't.

'The Germans never gave up, it wasn't their style, so I learned from that. Mind you, kiwis are much the same anyway, and I reckon more adaptable'.

'Have you got your gongs out Jim?'

Dorothy smiled wickedly.

'It's the dawn service tomorrow, Anzac Day. We always go. One of my few outings'.

They were sitting around the big dining table, facing out onto a view of a garden that ran down towards the lake. Though not as hot as Friday, the nor'wester still persisted with an unseasonal heat. A hot meal on a hot day, the Sunday roast that defied all logic and sense, yet was traditionally maintained throughout the high country with almost a fanatical ritual. Micklethwaite tucked in and sweated, and digested the meat and conversation so poorly that it took him several days to work through both.

It was rabbit, as Dorothy Jago promised, and it tasted like chicken. Dorothy Jago busied around them, fetching more gravy, apologising for the over-boiled carrots, and chipping into the conversation with decisive observations of her own.

'Jim developed quite a taste for Italian food, you used to make your own pasta once dear. And you got a taste for Italian nurses I heard'.

Jim munched through a roast potato and stabbed at another slab of meat.

'Nothing else to look at when you're lying in bed. They only had books in Italian.'

'And Italian art too?' suggested Micklethwaite.

He had noted the fine art prints on the wall, and a couple of original Italian oil scenes in the hallway.

'Well, a man has to take an interest in his surroundings. The Romans had an empire that lasted a thousand years. The renaissance was Italian-made. They have a fine history, though you wouldn't guess it today. The eyeties fought like limp spaghetti, they just didn't want to be there. If it wasn't for Jerry we've have been up the Italian peninsula in two weeks. Thanks dear'.

Jim Jago pushed his plate away and Dorothy picked it up and took a collection of congealing dishes into the kitchen. Micklethwaite was on his third serving of rabbit, and feeling the internal pressure building up. Jim poured himself another wine, and Micklethwaite nodded as more went into his glass. They lived well, and he could not see any obvious sign of friction between them. Dorothy's face still took some getting used to and he was interested to see how small were the pieces of food she tucked neatly into her mouth, as if the hole for it would not stretch wide enough to get a normal mouthful.

Jim Jago looked at him.

'Your father fought?'

Micklethwaite had been expecting the question for some time, and although it did not embarrass him, it seemed to have that affect on other people.

'No, he was a pacifist. He spent a few years in the prison farm at Palmerston North'.

'A conchie eh?'

Micklethwaite tidied up his plate, and nodded. The pause was long, and then Jim Jago sighed and showed the depth of the man.

‘Well I reckon, half of us would have been conchies if we’d had the guts’.

Dorothy as always appeared in the room with desert dishes at the crucial part of the conversation.

‘Is that correct Gordon. Your father was a conscientious objector? Was he a quaker?’

‘Yes’.

‘You too?’

‘Sometimes...’

He wanted to explain that it was on rare occasions when doubts assailed him. That is the occasions were rare, the doubts more common.

‘Well, what a bit of luck. We need new blood, even temporary new blood. You can imagine in Tekapo we have very small meetings. Only four last month. We only meet monthly you see, every Sunday is too much, even for deprived souls such as us.’

‘And you’ve got to spread yerself around Dot’ broke in Jim.

She giggled.

‘Yes I’m afraid I mix and match. Anglican here in our little church, sometimes Presbyterian, and a bit of Quakerism. Jim doesn’t understand it, but one needs something for the soul. Now are you ready for pudding?’

Jim Jago looked like a hot, red onion at his end, and Micklethwaite noticed that Jago’s hand shook, and wondered if he had a drinking problem. He had an odd mannerism of rubbing his forehead back and forth as if his head were bursting, or in pain, and he grimaced at the same time. Micklethwaite thought of something to say.

‘I went out to Chad Jago’s caravan on Friday. To see the hut’.

He wondered if this would introduce a note of awkwardness to the conversation but Jim did not seem to mind.

‘Oh yes. Gone a bit funny my brother, but keeps himself clean’.

‘He uses some odd words... he said he was ‘pisky-ridden’?’

Jim grumped.

‘Hah, he means accident-prone. It’s Cornish for accident prone. He speaks a bit of Cornish does Chad, his grandmother taught it to him’.

Jim gestured to the wall where Irmelina Calvadrack glared back at them.

‘Quite a woman Jim’ said Dorothy coming back with a jug of custard.

‘Oh yes, my parents died young Gordon, in the influenza epidemic of the late twenties, so my grandmother came out to bring us up. There wasn’t anyone else really who wanted the job. She was seventy then, at least. She put a manager on

the farm till us boys could grow up and take charge. I was only eight, Chad about four I suppose. A fine woman. Died at 85. Hard on us kids, but fair’.

‘Too hard Jim’.

Dorothy then brought out the steamed pudding to Micklethwaite’s pleasurable dismay.

‘Oh, you’ve never liked her much. She’s a tough old stick, but then she needed to be. Came from a generation of tin-miners, all God-fearing and Devil-hating, you know’.

‘And do not forget the other Gods Jim’.

‘Oh well yes. She was Celtic to her bones. She wasn’t going to give up her nature spirits. A lot of that sort of Christian folk ran both sets of beliefs side-by-side, didn’t worry them. Whatever worked, of course the priests didn’t like it...’

He got up and brought a book back to the table. Dorothy was piling steam pudding remorselessly into Micklethwaite’s bowl. Then custard. He made weak protesting noises.

‘This book is all about Celtic Cornwall, interesting stuff.’

‘We’re still eating Jim, not on the table’.

The book Jim had given him was relatively recent, 1970, and he noted that Dorothy’s name was on the flyleaf ‘Dorothy Mackay’.

‘Your family are Scottish Dorothy?’

‘Och aye, but as superstitious as the Cornish I assure you. The Mackay’s were a hard-working, hard-believing sort. Came out in the 1850’s, very early.’

Micklethwaite was reminded of Chad’s strange story, and he mentioned it.

‘Oh dear’ she laughed ‘you think we still have the hand? Now that’s a well-known folk-legend. How would you say these days? An urban myth, but I have a better story than that, shall I tell it Jim? The Scabbard of Skin?’

Jim wiped his vast face and shrugged. It occurred to Micklethwaite that Jim Jago was not a laughing sort of man. Dorothy told the story.

‘It was during the rebellion of ‘45, this is Bonnie Prince Charlie of course, anyway, during the rebellion a Sergeant in a group of English redcoats attacked a girl milking cows, and raped her. Now the Sergeant was badly wounded by the girl’s knife and later died, and was buried in a local cemetery in Scotland. The brothers of the Scottish girl swore vengeance on the Sergeant, so although they could not kill him, they dug up the body when the English had gone, and exhumed the Sergeant’s body. I must warn you this is rather gruesome, so I am pleased you have finished your pudding Gordon’.

The pause was well timed. Micklethwaite had finished, but was captured by the story. Jim Jago was munching on a dry cigar.

‘The body was exhumed as I said and they flayed the skin of the dead Sergeant and threw the rest of the body into the sea. The skin was turned into various ornaments. A drum, a purse, all sorts of macabre artefacts.’

Dorothy got up and went over to the glass cabinet, she unlocked it and took out an object. The case was just behind Micklethwaite and he looked over his shoulder as he watched Dorothy. It must be where they kept the valuable family heirlooms. There were books in there as well.

‘They made a scabbard of skin for this knife, here, feel it’.

She flourished it in front of him, and Micklethwaite rather reluctantly reached out for the knife. Then Dorothy brought out a book from the glass cabinet and started to read.

‘It was dark brown in colour, limp and soft to touch, and bore no ornamentation except a small piece of brass at the point, and a thin edging of brass round the opening’.

That was an exact description.

‘You see, this could be the very scabbard. Made from that Sergeant’s skin. Read here’.

‘Dot...’ Jim seemed bothered by something.

Micklethwaite was more interested in the book, and picked it up. Tales of Old Cornwall, and he lifted out the black silky book-marker. The description was uncanny.

‘You see the milkmaid was a Julia Mackay, and some Mackays came out to New Zealand. My grandmother gave me that knife many years ago, and told me that story’.

‘You think it is the actual knife?’

‘Possibly, this is an old book. 1870, and the Scottish can be a vengeful people, clannish, tribal. You agree it is a better story than Charles’s?’

The plastic face stayed rigid, but she laughed wickedly. Jim coughed.

‘This is an interesting book’.

Micklethwaite was turning the frail pages, filled with old drawings. On the flyleaf was the clear, thin signature of Irmelina Calvadnack.

‘It’s a bit old yer know. Valuable, my grandmothers. Couldn’t lend it to yer’.

Jim seemed quite definite. He had lit his pipe and stood up from the table.

‘I could give you a tour of the house.’

‘Oh I’ve done that dear, when Gordon was here last. Tea?’

Micklethwaite nodded and she carefully detached the book and knife from his hands and locked them in the cabinet. When she left there was a long pause as Jim gazed out of the window.

‘I should shoot the buggers’.

Micklethwaite could still feel the strange texture of the scabbard and it made his own flesh creep. Perhaps deer skin might feel like that, but in any case his mind had slipped out of joint and Jim Jago’s abrupt comment didn’t help.

‘The magpies’ Jim pointed.

‘Oh yes’.

‘They even chase the sparrowhawks away’.

Silence descended again and it seemed to Micklethwaite that both of them were waiting for Dorothy to hurry up and come back. Jim Jago’s conversation had rather dried up and Micklethwaite’s couldn’t think of any way of restarting him. The wind was calmer now, and possibly the heat was diminishing, though Micklethwaite was still sweating in most of his body corners. Must be 2 pm now, he looked surreptitiously at his digital watch.

‘Hows the hut business going’ Jim said abruptly.

‘Oh good. I’ve seen yours of course, and Chad’s, and I’ve been talking to Mungo Davis. He thinks that there’s a good seven or eight more I should look at. He was very helpful.’

Mungo had also supplied him with a lot of background on Jim Jago. Been on Goonhilly Downs all his life, and fought in the various high country campaigns against rabbits, briar, snow, poor wool prices and unhelpful politicians. Jim Jago was also something of a traditionalist, and still favoured horses over trail-bikes on the farm, and blade shears over electric. He’d been a New Zealand rep on the shooting team to Aussie, and used to be good at just about any sport he put a hand to, although these days the beer gut got in the way. He’d seen about everything and been on every committee to prove it. Local council, regional council, Federated Farmers president, Rotarian secretary, National party stalwart, irrigation committees, pest destruction boards, wool boards, it was a list of service that was good enough for a knighthood — and there were intelligent rumours about that one as well.

Negatives? Mungo Davis was happy to supply that as well. Stubbornness, and little liking for admitting he might be wrong. He was passionate about family, and had a disproportionate amount of family pride. Chad was an embarrassment to him, more than that — an insult.

Another longish silence, and Micklethwaite was feeling a guest’s compulsory politeness to speak. It was rare for him to be out-silenced.

‘I called your old boundary hut ‘Wisht Hut’, after the totara forest, but is that right? It seems to be spelt wrong.’

Jim stared at him. Dorothy came in with a tea-tray, and to Micklethwaite’s horror, a biscuit tin.

‘Oh the confusion with that name. People call it Whisperers, Whistlers, even Whipping Wood I heard once. Wisht is Cornish, for well...’ she looked at Jim

who shrugged, 'sad dear. Melancholic. Even miserable, was it named by your father? Perhaps he meant it was a miserable piece of forest?'

'What does Goonhilly Downs mean?' asked Micklethwaite interested.

Jim Jago looked surprised.

'I don't rightly know it means anything, I 'spose it does. Dear?'

'It's from a place on The Lizard peninsula, in Cornwall. It's a wild place. Moors and wild flowers. The Calvadnacks came from there, and perhaps this landscape reminded your grandfather of Cornwall Jim?'

She became thoughtful.

'The Mackenzie is not really like The Lizard in looks, but it has the same feel. It's harsh, open country. The Scots were at home here, sometimes I wonder if the Jago's took a wrong turn. They might have been happier down on the Otago Peninsula.'

The discussion seemed to stay in this Cornish corner now, and although Micklethwaite slightly sensed that Jim might have preferred to change the subject, it had a momentum of its own. They talked about the Cornish language 'it's dead now of course' said Dorothy, and she brought out several books. One was a Cornish dictionary. Micklethwaite could not help noting that although he had assumed all the books were Jim's, many of them had Dorothy's name written neatly in a top corner somewhere. Dorothy did most of the talking.

Cornwall's greatest export was tin, and it's people. The people followed shortly after the tin was exhausted, and Cornish miners disappeared to every corner of the globe. Wherever there was gold or coal or metal to be wrought out of the earth then 'Cousin Jacks' would be sure to be there. The joke was that when the mine manager asked his Cornish workman if he knew of anyone else who could do the work, the Cornishman loyally replied 'why, my cousin Jack could do this. I'll send for him'. So the nickname stuck, and with the men came the 'cousins Jills'. Cornwall was the last bit of England to lose its Celticness, some said it never had, and certainly Irmelina Calvadnack had been a formidable protagonist of all things Cornish.

'The early stone walls around the station were done in Cornish dry-walling style, and by Cornish labourers, even the initial arrangement of the steading (that is all the farm buildings) reflected Cornish farm practices by your father Jim, but carried on by Irmelina. She was not going to change her ways'.

Even Jim came into the conversation again here, as if he could not help himself. The memories stirring.

'She used all sorts of funny words, see if I can remember some of them... Fogou, that's a cave, and when she was in a hurry she said she was 'stroathing'.

'We ate figgy-hobbin, a sort of sultana dough bread. And saffron cake, fuggan too for crib time my grandmother called it. That was morning tea. As a special treat she'd give us 'niceys', sweets in other words. If we were bad, she'd threaten

us with mousey-pastry, a pastry filled with mice’.

He laughed grimly, and Dorothy looked thoughtfully at him.

‘It was a peculiar childhood. It was as if an entire generation was skipped and the boys were brought up in a style belonging more to the nineteenth century, than the twentieth. Here’s an early picture’.

Jim was eighteen in the posed photo, and Charles Jago was notably handsome beside Jim, who looked rather squat and ugly. Something like his grandmother thought Micklethwaite.

Tea and biscuits were eaten, and by 3 pm the conversation was petering out. Dorothy seemed tired, and Micklethwaite judged it timely to make a natural exit. He asked to see the station church.

‘Of course. It’s open, you should see it whilst the sun is coming in. Will you be at the Anzac parade tomorrow? The dawn ceremony?’

Micklethwaite had not thought he would, but he said yes anyway. He was poor at publicly disagreeing.

‘We always go, goodbye Gordon’.

The door closed on Jim’s ‘cheery’ and Micklethwaite let out the loud burp he’d been holding in for twenty minutes.

He parked his trail bike by the tractor shed and walked through the rustling shelter belt. The small weatherboard church was carefully detached from the station buildings and stood on a slight knoll. It was unsheltered and almost forlorn, but the view from the front porch was superb, with the late afternoon light pouring down on the landscape like liquid honey, sticking here and there to the dark hills.

There was a plaque fixed by the front door stating the church had been dedicated by the Jago family in 1956, and inside the walnut-red pews looked homely and clean. The flowers on the altar were long dead, but still held the shape and even the lingering fragrance of summer. There was one glass-paned window, a scene with shepherds and sheep, otherwise the design was simple and matter-of-fact. Micklethwaite looked around, and could not see anything unusual here, despite Vicki’s hint.

It was a calm place. A refuge from the mad Mackenzie winds. He sat for a few minutes then decided he’d better get going, and closed the front door firmly behind him, and that moment sensed something less ordinary.

Around the outside of the front door was a carved wooden surround, jostling with figures and creatures, which, when Micklethwaite studied it, did not seem especially biblical. There was a woman figure with what appeared to be a lizard’s tail, and a crooked man with a dog face. There was a unicorn in one corner, jousting with a gargoyle-like toad. The surround was so full of busy creatures, that they threatened to escape the confines of the carving itself. It was a sort of a Judgement perhaps, but hardly a Christian one. What role did a leopard have here, and with horns? Besides a Christian hell would portray creatures in torment, mostly humans, but these beast

and half-beings seemed to be having too much fun, as if at a pagan celebration. It was peculiar.

One grinning figure in the upper left corner Micklethwaite had noted, but was drawn to it again. It had a grotesque face and clawing hands, but when he looked closer he realised that it in fact portrayed a woman of sorts. There were two breasts, but with no body at all really, just two great elongated arms reaching between her legs and tugging apart a swollen vagina.

Odd.

He drove slowly on the way back home, and needed lights for the last part. It was not Micklethwaite's habit to feel lonely, and the empty Mackenzie landscape did not lead him into it. Loneliness could be cured by joining a club, or going down to the pub, and aloneness (what people really feared) was everyman's lot. You could not escape your own skin, that was a fact, so you endured life if you did not enjoy it, but on balance he did enjoy it. He wondered if Jim Jago enjoyed life, and why should the little church have such strange creatures all over it. All his life he had only come across families that were mundane and ordinary, so the Jago's were something of a puzzle. He had no particular excuse to go back and see them again, but he would love to get inside that glass cabinet. It was 'heedless curiosity' his mother had always warned him about it, 'just like your father'.

The bach was cold and dark and the midday heat had been brushed away by a southerly that had moved in like a brisk housekeeper. The 10 pm radio report was predicting a week of cold weather, so autumn had definitely begun, and you knew that winter was a deepening depression somewhere over the chill sub-Antarctic seas. The firewood would get used alrighty — and he immediately wrote that word down in his notebook.

Chapter 7

Dawn Chorus

25 April Monday

It was a dank, eerie morning as he shuffled on his parka and gloves and mildly cursed his easy ‘yes’ of yesterday. He felt obliged now, and the fog had sprawled over the township like a proverbial wet blanket. It was discouragingly cold, and the silence of the fog emphasised his footsteps as he stumped down the sozzled pavements. The street lights glowed like halos, and a car burned two yellow tunnels through the mist then was quickly swallowed. By the lake he heard Spurwing Plovers chattering like night fairies, and there was a strange tinkling sound, which was all the energy the calm lake could muster as it crept back and forth gingerly against the half frozen pebbles.

It was still black when he got to the cenotaph and there were a score or more muffled, shapeless figures making old jokes and passing round flasks. A house truck lumbered out of the mist looking like a gothic castle on wheels, and Micklethwaite saw Chad, Emerald and Rosie scramble out. When he looked around under the heavy clothes he saw some faces he knew. Mungo Davis was holding a wreath, and he heard Vicki’s laugh from a padded figure near him. There was Dorothy and Jim Jago, with a scarf wrapped around Dorothy’s face.

Then began an abrupt drum beat and the army boys sprang to attention. The ceremony had begun.

All over New Zealand on this day were hundreds of dawns, being greeted by drums, a lone piper, hymns and prayers, and huddled gangs of old men with chests full of dangling medals. This was Anzac Day, the commemoration of the Australian and New Zealand soldiers who landed on Gallipoli Cove in 1917 and were shelled, maimed, butchered and defeated by the Turks in the First World War. Micklethwaite always found it peculiar that such a colossal failure was celebrated so avidly. The French did not celebrate Waterloo, the Germans preferred not to think about Stalin-grad, but the ‘Anzacs’ dwelt on this one epic manhood attaining moment.

The fog still did not thin, but some sort of daylight started to creep underneath as a piper played an eerie lament. Tekapo had a small army base up the road and the parade of military men leant an air of drama and authenticity to the occasion. Someone passed around hymn sheets and Micklethwaite found himself muttering through ‘Abide With Me’, all the while glancing around at the ghostly parade. There was

a fair swag of medals on Jim Jago's chest, and he was surprised to see a goodly collection on Chad's. He had not expected that fey character to have fought in the war. Chad, Rosie and Emerald stood close together, and Micklethwaite discerningly measured the gaps between them and decided that they looked almost like a family group. The Jago's were off to the other side, facing the cenotaph and seemingly absorbed by the ceremony. The chaplain was explaining something about the meaning of Anzac Day and someone touched him on the shoulder. Vicki smiled and whispered under her hood.

'Didn't think you'd make it here Gord. Thought you'd be tucked up in bed'.

She was pregnant with clothing and promise. Micklethwaite hesitated over making some semi-smart remark, about being alone in a single bed was no more fun than a freezing morning by a black lake, but she had moved on with a whispered 'see you at breakfast'. He followed her with his eyes and imagined that under the layers of dark wool and nylon was a ripe, pink body. The chaplain was intoning some poetry in what he imagined was a poetic voice.

*'In Flanders fields the poppies blow
between the crosses, row on row
that mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
scarce heard amid the guns below.*

But Micklethwaite had lost interest in the poppies and skylarks and was following his own fertile thoughts as he watched Vicki joss with another acquaintance. There did not seem to be a face in the parade she did not know. Then she abruptly turned her head and stared at Chad and Rosie. It was a sudden, vicious look, and she held it for a few seconds till her hood swung away and hid her face. Micklethwaite did not think he imagined it. The light was strong now, and perhaps there was a wisp of blue above the mist.

He was jolted by the sudden attention to arms and a sharp volley of shots. Then from out of the army group a man detached himself and played a long bugle call that Micklethwaite recognised was 'The Last Post'. It prickled his back, and in the one minute silence that followed he could imagine the Anzac troops gathering in the pre-dawn waiting for the orders to land on the beach. Then there was some more miniature pomp and ceremony to go, with flag raising, a recitation, another prayer and two children singing an interminable song. Micklethwaite was getting cold and fidgety and he was relieved when the army boys started to congeal together and marched off, followed by the raggle-taggle of Tekapo people. A good hundred now he reckoned, not bad from a population of four hundred.

They all walked briefly to the hall, and the first real sunlight came through the fog, and a morning breeze swept in. The hall was crowded with noise and steam, with a large matronly woman dispensing teas and coffee as if her life depended on it. He managed a nod to Jim, but lost sight of Dorothy. He could not get anywhere near

Vicki, who was surrounded by army men — blast them.

Suddenly Rosie was before him.

‘Oi, I remember you? Eh? I picked you up that day? Good turn-out eh. Em liked the drums best’.

The little girl showed Micklethwaite a drawing of the ceremony. She had made the scene misty with blurs of white crayon.

‘That’s very good’.

He wasn’t just saying that, it was a damn good drawing for a five year old. Emerald looked chuffed.

‘Got a new teacher. She’s shown me how to blur’.

Rosie chortled.

‘That’s a great lesson to learn Em. I could do with that’.

The little girl chattered on.

‘We’re living with Chad now. Mum’s doing up the stone hut’ Emerald said.

‘Yeah. It’s a cool place eh Em’.

‘Bit windy mum’.

‘Orrr, that keeps the cobwebs out. I’m putting in some proper shelves, and gonna get a sparkie in to do the wiring’.

Rosie looked relaxed and happy, and Chad had materialised like a second shadow at her side. Micklethwaite was intensely interested in this bit of gossip but suddenly Mungo Davis tugged at his sleeve and pulled him away to explain where another stone hut could be found. After a lengthy session jabbing at the map, Micklethwaite got away to find his tea cold and the hall half-empty. Vicki had gone, so had the army men.

He stepped outside into sudden fierce sunlight, and it made him blink. The day seemed to sprawl in front of him and he was momentarily puzzled as to what he was going to do with it.

Then he saw Mrs Jago. Beside the hall was a small park, with trees and bushes on one side and a children’s playground on the other. Two children were swinging eagerly on the climbing frame, and on the seat placed under the bushes, Dorothy Jago was sitting quietly. Her face was pointed to the sun, but her eyes looked closed, and Micklethwaite was loathe to disturb her, but she lifted a hand and motioned him over.

‘Hallo Gordon. Jim’s gone off with his mates for a few minutes and I could not resist the sun’.

Micklethwaite rudely wondered if it made her plastic face hot.

‘I do like the sound of children, do you?’

Micklethwaite nodded unconvincingly.

‘Ahhh, defiantly single, well, do not hold back for ever. Did you enjoy the ceremony?’

‘It was nice’.

That was a very twee thing to say, and Dorothy jumped on it.

‘Nice? Hmmmm, don’t let Jim catch you saying that. There is blood in that ceremony you know, pointless blood, but blood nevertheless’.

‘The French don’t celebrate Waterloo’.

‘Good point, but we are not French and they reached their cultural superiority many years ago. We are still fighting for our cultural identity don’t you think?’

Micklethwaite stretched out his legs. He liked Mrs Jago, she made him think. He answered slowly.

‘Celebrating a failure is a sort of cultural attitude. A sort of modest kiwi thing. It makes us distinctive, simply because no one else would ever think of doing it that way’.

He thought this was a plausible argument. She smiled in her voice though the mask remained expressionless.

‘Strong, silent, quiet men, who get on with things. What a perverse lot we are’.

‘Like your husband, I mean...’

Micklethwaite then suddenly realised that his words could be taken the wrong way.

‘Perverse? I must tell Jim that! No, I know what you mean Gordon. We are not boasters. Our heroes must be silent and grim achievers. Humble, even if it is false humbleness’.

‘You don’t approve of this sort of hero’.

Dorothy looked at the children who were screeching on the swings.

‘Well I have no choice, I married one after all’.

Micklethwaite wanted to talk about the little church with its strange carvings but could not see any conversational opening. The child’s mother came over and gathered up her brood, with a hasty side-long stare at Dorothy.

‘You saw that? The children looked, and did not once take offence, and kept playing, but the mother has fear in her heart already. She won’t bring the children here again without checking that I am not here’.

Micklethwaite protested, even though he knew she was right.

‘Where is Jim? Heroes are not good time-keepers I’m afraid. I have a good deal of washing to do now that the fog has cleared. Fog is just cloud you know, lying on the ground’.

‘Is it? I thought it was a sort of cold drizzle?’

‘Now don’t get me started on rain. It is said that the Eskimos have a hundred different words for snow, well I am sure the English have twenty different words for rain’.

Her mind darted all over the place, it was hard to keep up. Micklethwaite started to count rain metaphors in his head.

‘And I haven’t forgotten about the Friends Meeting, here I have a card for you’ and she pulled out a station business card with the date and time of the next Quaker meeting ‘see, Sunday the 15th can you come? In our little church. Good, ah, here is Jim, the hut project is going well?’

They stood up.

‘Yes’.

‘You know you are a dangerous man Gordon. You do not say much so people feel impelled to fill your gaps, of course revealing more about themselves than they would wish. You observe a lot too’.

She glanced at him mischievously, the eyes closing slightly. Micklethwaite replied her glance.

‘You would have liked to have had children?’

‘You see? Dangerous, I knew it. As my mother used to say, ‘very sharp’, but mind you don’t cut yourself. Please come and see us again Gordon. Goodbye’.

Jim nodded, and he looked a little beery around the gills. There was a slight shakiness in his hand. Dorothy noticed it and held it.

He watched them drive off and as he walked back up the hill to his bach, he glanced back and saw the cenotaph with its shiny collection of red and green wreaths that looked like lollies. The day sparkled, and the only smudge on it seemed to be from the house-truck that was lumbering up the long hill out of Tekapo, and belching some of its blackened guts behind.

He watched, and tried to remember if the two halves of the Jago family had said a single word to each other, or even glanced over. He didn’t think so.

Chapter 8

A Bite of Shark

29 April Friday

It was a week of work, bustling about the Mackenzie country, and searching for the expletive dots that Mungo had pasted all over his maps. Micklethwaite wanted to make progress and he did, even though many of Mungo's dots turned out to be wooden huts with stone chimneys, or corrugated iron huts with concrete floors, or mud-floored huts with thistles waving at him with head-high cheek. In other words, they weren't the real thing, which, it now seemed to him, was getting thin on the ground. By the end of the week he was knackered, and ready to take stock. He had identified five stone boundary huts: the roofless shepherd's hut at Burkes Pass (Mungo had put him onto that one) and another hut in worse condition near Lake Alexandrina. There was the old boundary hut on the Jago farm, but Shep's hut by Chad's caravan was by far the best. He had sites to look at near Mackenzie Pass, and Vicki still wanted to take him riding there, and there was supposed to be a good hut over Hakataramea Pass.

He was also learning. Locals were not necessarily reliable, good stories were not necessarily true stories. The only trusted research was what you did yourself. Take notes, always take notes. He filled out survey forms even on huts that were not part of his project, for he was becoming aware of the layers of history that enriched the landscape. Grit and legwork were the secrets, and as Micklethwaite filled in the survey forms on Friday morning he appreciated that he was serving a first-class apprenticeship.

But several times over the week, for no obvious reason, a recurring image of Dorothy's ruined face starting to leer in front of him, and he could hear her soft, buttery words. Then there was a caravan stuffed full of philosophical books owed by the towns moron. A hand ignited with purplish flames. A grotesque figurine in a church with a swollen labia. The creepy brown skin-like texture of the scabbard. He had to admit it, the Jago's were getting to him.

This morning he was checking through the hut survey sheets and drawing up a list of work to do, when he quite unexpectedly started scribbling on a blank piece of paper a chronology of the Jago family. Dorothy's face was ruined in 1947? Chad went loopy in the 50's, and what about that court case Mungo had mentioned? That should be easy to date. Irmelina Calvadnack arrived in 1928, what was her age

again? Seventy, and she died at fifteen years later at eighty-five, so that would be 1945, just before the horse accident. Within five minutes the page was full of details, dodgy facts and half-guesses, and then Micklethwaite scrunched the sheet of paper in a spasm of annoyance. He was here to study huts not dysfunctional families.

By evening his sense of purpose had evaporated, the whole momentum of the week began to drain away leaving him thoroughly tired and depressed. Was it Vicki? No, it wasn't that, though he had thought of her in a lingering sadly hopeful way. He was sleeping well, no bad dreams, yet, the Jago's kept popping up in unexpected ways. Was he just pretending to be an historian? Maybe that was it Gordon, lack of confidence, a sudden surge of doubt, brought on probably by weariness and being too far away from his mum.

The fish-clock twitched it's tail and the big fin fell on six. Micklethwaite took the hint, and went out for fish and chips.

The street lights had already turned on except for one that flickered nervously, and the main street of Tekapo was lit up by shop-front lights and the large Caltex neon. There were the usual groups gathering in the dark, and car doors slamming as people got ready to leave for parties in Fairlie or Timaru, or even Christchurch 300 km off. The pub carpark was jammed with utes and the pub was roaring, with a bush band promised tonight. The Chinese restaurant had picked up a few meagre customers, but looked just about ready to close for the season. Between the two of them was the fish bar, though Micklethwaite had never seen any fish for sale. Some kids were shouting, like they always did on Friday nights. It was not really his scene but after several days on his own Micklethwaite felt a craving for some human company, and this evening he got more than he bargained for.

The fish and chip shop was steamy and crowded and as Micklethwaite edged in, he suddenly found himself beside Rosie and Emerald. The closeness unnerved him.

'Hiya Gordon! Belly rumbling eh? So what yer getting Em? The burger? Yeah, ok, two burgers and some greasies'.

Rosie jossed the chip man, who took up the challenge.

'My chips greasy? That's high quality fat that'.

'Yeah, yeah, you got it outa the sump of that diesel truck I reckon'.

Rosie nodded to a big truck muttering outside, and the truckie was standing right behind her. The chip man took offence at this and gave her a scowl, but Rosie did not notice. She was in high spirits.

'Me and Em gonna party at the bush band. You'se coming Gord? Do yer good' as he shook his head, 'be plenty of talent. Me for starters' and she roared at her own joke.

Her hair was streaked with a vivid red, and she had on tight short black skirt and a thin T-shirt. Micklethwaite put in his order, and because there were another eight or so in front of him, excused himself to go outside. Rosie followed him out.

‘Jeez its hot in there eh? I worked in a chippie once. Tough job’.

She light a cigarette and drew in deeply, and in the harsh neon light looked old and vulnerable.

‘Most of the fish is shark yer know, though they don’t call it that. Ling or white-fish, I mean Jeez, that’s bloody obvious eh’.

‘How’s the hut repairs going?’

‘Great! The local plumber came round, gorgeous hunk. Bunged in the pipes and stuff so we got new sink and taps now. Dunno about a shower. It’s gonna cost a bit’.

Emerald tugged at her mum’s jeans and whispered something that Micklethwaite overheard.

‘That man’s looking at you mum’.

‘Yeah? Not illegal Em, Jeez I’m not gonna complain about that’.

Micklethwaite saw the man, with his mate sitting on a ute parked a few metres away. He heard the man say something to his mate, and he laughed. He could sense they were laughing at Rosie, but didn’t quite catch what they said. But Emerald heard.

‘What’s that girl? Yeah? Pricks!’

Rosie suddenly exploded, and stepped over bristling to the men.

‘What yer call me?’

They’d been drinking too, and Micklethwaite could see with the clarity that comes from helplessness, that this was typical Friday night belligerence, and he couldn’t escape it. Other people were waiting outside the chip shop, and were all standing open-mouthed.

‘You’se pricks, what you call me and Em?’

Emerald tried to pull her mum away, she knew what was coming. But the standing man didn’t, and Rosie hit him with a power that surprised everyone. It came from nowhere, and staggered the man, who to Micklethwaite’s surprise didn’t fall over. The situation exploded: Rosie screamed expletives, Emerald tried to pull her mum away, pleading and crying at the same time. The man lashed back at Rosie with his fist, but missed, and his mate on the bonnet leapt up, but wasn’t sure whether to push his mate into the fight or pull him out of it. Two bystanders leaped in and tried to pull Rosie away, who was beside herself with rage.

‘Didja hear that? The prick called me a whore eh? And Em a whore’s kid. Didja hear that?! The pricks, I’ll kill them, no let me go.’

Such was her rage that she threw off the men, one of whom tumbled on the ground. By now the two men by the ute had partly retreated, and Emerald’s pleadings seemed to get through to her mum. It was all over in 30 seconds, but Micklethwaite had been paralysed. He’d even held his breath.

‘Just stay outa my way you bastards’ Rosie shouted.

Then she turned sharply on her high heels, and went into the chip shop, followed by a tearful Emerald. The two men on the ute started to joke in a forced way, then got in and drove off. Everyone else had drifted off, and this little drama was history. He started to breathe again and a few minutes later he went to hunt down his fish and chips and met Rosie coming out with her face buried in a burger.

‘Hiya Gordon. Coming to the pub for a brew? Nah? Ah, yer boring old sausage. never get a girl that way. Be a good band I reckon, sees ya then. Got some ragging to do eh?’

It was an unintended irony. She had completely forgotten her anger, and strode off to the pub with Emerald trotting after her. Micklethwaite was still shaken by the incident, and felt numb some ten minutes later as he sat at the cold picnic seat eating the half-warmed chips.

The cloud had thickened and Tekapo shops were dark and deserted now. Most of the chip shop customers had gone, and so had most of the cars. The wind was picking up and Micklethwaite could hear the waves slapping persistently on the foreshore. He had a good view of the pub scene through the wide windows, and could see the bush band tuning up. At one table was Rosie and Emerald, with several men, joking, laughing, swearing. She certainly added colour to Tekapo, yet Micklethwaite felt sorry for Emerald. It was all right for Rosie to drink with the boys and pretend she was a teenager, but dragging Emerald after her didn’t seem right. A big burst of noise of something Irish rattled the panes as the bush band took off, and Rosie jumped to her feet and started jiggling to the Celtic beat. He could see Emerald was happily bopping away too, so maybe it wasn’t so bad after all.

He felt lonely, and maybe he should go home. He finished his chips, stuffed the newspaper into the litter bin and walked home. Rosie was right, he’d never get a girl this way.

Chapter 9

Pink Bits

30 April Saturday

He had to get away. Last night was uncomfortable, and the magic light of the Mackenzie country cast shadows, and people, Micklethwaite belatedly realised, were much the same everywhere, and Tekapo had its share of anger and tragedy. He craved a change. Some bright lights, noisy music and the company of people he knew. His flatmate Roger was having a student party, and there would be girls, and drink, and it might get sordid. Good, how much clean air and healthy living can anyone take? There was a coin fair on too, maybe get some bargains, or at least gossip about something he knew about. He wanted to reassure himself.

Micklethwaite stood on the kick-start and roared the Honda to life. He was so keen to take-off back to his youth that he forgot to lock the back, and left the stone cat grinning wickedly outside. There was a long hill out of Tekapo and Micklethwaite stormed up it without a backward glance at the brilliant blue behind him because he still thought he was living his old life, and had not yet grasped that this had been blown away by the Mackenzie winds.

The plains were empty, a gridlock of paddocks and barbed fences with plumb straight roads that played noughts and crosses on the flat land. The cows looked bored as Micklethwaite waved to them. He ate some cow in a small town hamburger joint, and kept blitzing small towns and fields of sheep in a long satisfying crackle of exhaust.

His room smelt of dust and old clothes, like it always had, and Roger was smoking something illegal, like he always did. Roger had started the new varsity year with a bang: drinking, parties, drugs, easy girls. His degree in philosophy had given way to 'a degree in life' as he put it, and he was painting the lounge red. It looked bloody awful, but he assured Micklethwaite that his May Day Red Party was bound to pull in the chicks, and there would be 'plenty of good stuff' as well. Roger was fattening up under his new diet, had gained a beard, and a corpulent smugness.

'It's been party, party, party Gordon my friend. Should have been here, I'd have set you up'.

Roger gave Micklethwaite a patronising pat on the back.

'It's Maisie, she's the new flatmate. She moved in last month. Doing psychology. Blonde bombshell eh, she's got a bulk lot of gorgeous girlfriends, eh'.

Micklethwaite was annoyed that his room (for which he paid a full rent) had stayed only technically empty. He dug out a large box from under his bed, and on top was a pair of stale, male Jockeys. Roger watched him amiably.

‘Sorry Gordon, but an empty bed is an opportunity eh?’

Roger noticed the box under Micklethwaite’s arm.

‘Off to the coin fair eh? Gonna sell anything?’

‘Might’.

Roger blew a dense, aromatic cloud Micklethwaite’s way.

‘Real good to have hobbies I reckon. I envy you that Gordon. You know what you like. I’ve never settled on anything’.

‘Women? Drugs?’

‘But are they technically hobbies?’

‘I think they are supposed to be passions’.

‘Nah, a bloke needs hobbies. It’s a form of meditation you know. It’s a bloke’s thing, I mean women, they’re not calming’.

Roger was off into a great digression which explained why he was such an entertaining flatmate, and why his degree had taken four years so far. Micklethwaite disengaged himself, and went to the coin fair. In a sense he believed Roger was right, it was a bloke’s thing. Hobbies were an escape, but they were also a small boy’s thing, and it seemed to Micklethwaite that when men stayed overly attached to their stamps and train sets, it was expressing a psychological reluctance to grow-up.

There was a counter argument to that of course: Roger would ask why would you want to grow up? What was so great about growing up?

The coin fair was packed with stalls set up around the perimeter of the hall. Micklethwaite nodded to someone he knew, said hi to someone else, ok to an inquiry on how he’d been. It was comforting, warming. Old men with cardies were holding up the coins by the rim and examining the details with an eye-glass. Proof, Extremely Fine, Very Fine, these had been the classifications of coins that had ruled his life for a few years. He looked around, it was all Very Fine.

Micklethwaite took a deep breath and strode determinedly to a dealer he knew. The dealer was shocked.

‘Sell the lot? You sure Gordon?’

‘Yes’.

‘Well, it’s a great collection. Good stuff, I mean your dad built it up over years. Is this what you want? There’s some valuable stuff here?’

‘How much?’

‘Oh, couple of thousand maybe?’

Micklethwaite was disappointed. He knew how much time dad had put into the collection, and he himself had spent a fair bit of money filling in gaps.

‘Now?’

Micklethwaite nodded.

‘Does it have to be cash? Ok, give me half an hour to assess them’.

Micklethwaite bought a nasty coffee in a paper cup and walked around wondering what was behind the sudden disestablishment of his life. He knew his dad would have been hurt at what he was doing.

He left the coin fair with a thick wad of \$1800 in his pocket, more money than he had every handled in his life. It made him feel nervous. He looked around two car yards, then went back and got Roger, who didn’t know much about cars, but still knew a lot more than he did.

‘Jesus Gordon. This is serious eh?’

Roger was awed by the large amount of cash.

‘I’m seriously impressed Gordon. I mean yer can’t go wrong with this one. It’ll just chug away. My dad had one’.

So did Micklethwaite’s father, and with only three owners, no rust, built like a tank, it was simply a matter of a test drive and several gear crunches later. The money was gone and the coin collection scattered. Roger pulled out two beers from the fridge and spilt some of his over the bonnet of the Hillman Hunter station wagon.

‘God bless all who ride in her.’

He looked scientifically at Micklethwaite, who was wiping the beer stain off the bonnet.

‘You better be careful Gordon, you’re in a change of life mode’.

Micklethwaite drove to the university library and felt grown-up. With great care he reversed into a young sapling, but the car was ok.

‘Sorry tree’.

He was happy and keyed-up, and he needed the library to calm down. Every time he walked through the wide glass doors he remembered the opening line of a short story ‘The library, which some people call the universe...’

That was how he felt about it. Four floors of treasure, stacked in mazes of shelves which required labyrinthine skills to locate. He always mentally pulled his shoulders back at the entrance, for this was his competency, a domain he had mastered. People live on certain streets of the mind and never venture into strange suburbs. Other students placed themselves by an obvious desk by the door, as if they couldn’t wait for the chance to leave the place, but Micklethwaite fossicked into the peculiar nooks and crannies of the library, and as he found, there were no real corners to this universe either. He discovered the three shelves of Gandhi’s collected works, and

the picture books on Pompei, and the Celtic epic of Mabignion. He once spent an afternoon looking for books that had never been issued, and found three, including one printed in 1908 which was a book on churches in Moldavia, written in English. Some poor sod had laboured over it for years. In the philosophical and religious sections, the high, narrow corridors of books formed a series of dead-ends, which might be construed as a sequence of narrow private chapels, provided more for prayer than intellectual instruction.

Micklethwaite had a definite image in his mind, and he was sure that he had seen a picture of one before. He tried various books with little luck, then went back down to the index on the ground floor and searched through again. Perhaps under Celtic? Or old English? Back up on the folk religion section he found the volume he was after, *The Lost Gods of England*, and on page 52 was a picture of a sheel-na-gig.

He looked at it a long time.

Many of the sheel-na-gigs had been destroyed by the Christians, but a few had survived on early English churches, a testament to the potency of the pagan beliefs. The first Christians must have felt uneasy about including such queer symbols on their churches, but what choice did they have? Selling the new and very strange Christian ideals to peasants enclosed in a world view of nature spirits and magic rites. The tiny sheel-na-gigs were fertility figures, so cramped and distorted that only the head and vulva were prominent. They lodged in odd corners of the churches, under eaves, around doorways, as if purposely avoiding a deliberate scrutiny, but nevertheless catching the eye of the congregation in a way that must have annoyed the priests. Here they were preaching chastity and marriage on the ground floor, whilst over their heads were these leering figurines pulling apart their sexual organs in a blatant 2000 year-old come-on.

The text put the facts more politely. Mother goddess figures, designed to encourage or support fertility, Celtic symbols of creation and destruction, an echo of Shiva, the Indian goddess. Ancient charms, that the population refused to give up readily. So why was there a sheel-na-gig on a 30 year old church in the Mackenzie country?

The library buzzer screeched, ten minutes to close. Micklethwaite snapped the book shut, and he put back the volume and moved a shelf across, plucking out a copy of *Old Tales of Cornwall*, the book Jim Jago did not want to give him. It wasn't luck, it was next on his list.

The car started in a throaty way and Micklethwaite could not resist going around to a friend's place to show off the new acquisition. By the time he'd got through there it was after ten and the May Day Red Party was starting to throb. So it was a day early: red was a great theme for a party. His room was still empty but someone had replaced the light bulb with a red one and it cast an eerie, empty glow over his meagre furniture that he quickly shut the door again. The past was gone.

Despite Roger's fulsome promises to set him up, Micklethwaite was on his own. He drank a bit. Smoked some dope that was passing round. Yelled small talk above the noise, and as the rooms filled up with pretty blonde people (just as Roger had promised) Micklethwaite began to feel somewhat disassociated with the scene around

him. Deciding he should be drinking more, he went back into the kitchen where a crazy friend of Roger's called Pete was hacking up a large cactus that he'd stolen from a garden that night. He was boiling pieces and dropping them into the fruit punch.

'This man, is the real thing' said Pete, offering Micklethwaite a glass.

It was the most smoothest, sublime mixture that he had ever tasted. Like drinking liquid paradise.

'Great eh man?'

Pete nodded approvingly as Micklethwaite helped himself to another glass. He went to his room and found a couple already there, but he didn't mind. He felt an extraordinary sense of well-being. What was in that cactus? Pete had a beautiful smile and whispered in Micklethwaite's ear.

'Mescaline man, Aldous Huxley man, Brave New World man, Doors of Perception man'.

This made no sense to Micklethwaite but he didn't care. What a great party. What nice people. Even the dope tasted great. He could not resist looking into his room again. The couple were in his bed now, sweet. He left them to it, and the lounge was packed with writhing, gesticulating figures in some sort of dance. Pink Floyd was booming out and there was Roger looking gross in red tights, dancing with a girl in a pink chiffon number. Nice guy Rog. The fruit punch was almost gone, but Micklethwaite got some last scraps and beamed about him benevolently. Pete was under the table and Micklethwaite peered at him with great fondness.

'Man, I told you, it's good under the table. It's like seeing the world like a child. Everyone has legs man, just legs'.

Pete was a real nice guy and Micklethwaite floated back into the lounge and found a gap by the sofa and watched the dancers. Time was losing meaning at 3 am in the morning, and with Pink Floyd's Wish You Were Here was on its fourth trip round, his brain had completely lost its moral dimension. The room was full of incense smoke and his hands were massaging a girl's neck. He didn't know the girl, in fact never seen her before in his life. She had just plumped down in front of him, with her fat sweaty neck. All around the room, as far as he could see in the two candle-lights, were similar couples, and directly opposite was a girl who he was sure he recognised from somewhere. Her neck was receiving close attention from the mouth of a hairy man, and such was her blissful state that her knees suddenly pulled up and apart, racking up her short skirt, and revealing the dark joy cleft of her knickerless crotch. Micklethwaite found himself staring hard at another quim.

Chapter 10

The Dream House

3 May, Monday

Every Monday he remembered being taken to the land of the red boxes. People bustling about importantly, and his father saying that behind every box was a secret: a fear of something, an old sin, a passion to avoid failure, an outline of an escape plan. Then his father would unlock the box and take out sealed letters. This confirmed there must be secrets here, for why else would you seal something, post it into an anonymous box, then unlock with a special key? He must have been three or four he supposed, and he was impressed at his luminous recall of that Monday morning ritual. The curtain was filtering the autumn sunlight, and Micklethwaite was laying in bed in the bach with a flu head and a warm atmosphere beneath the bed covers. He called the sensation ‘unling’, feeling somewhat like a small furry animal in it’s den; snug, fed, secure, half-dreaming of the past and the future. A bright sharp southerly, the lurg, and a long and gentle melancholy had come to him all at once, and he lay for some time watching the sun make diamonds through the curtain material.

At some point in his half-dreams the girl’s open crotch kept coming into view, and then the sheel-na-gig on the church.

Both were sort of fertility symbols, which made sense put that way. Why else would a girl not wear her knickers to a party? Because she wanted to copulate, that was her signal, but such an explicit symbol was out of place on a modern church. Who would have approved a pagan fertility sign hitting you in the eye before you had even got past the front door? It was very odd. Those Jago’s... and Micklethwaite rolled over and immediately thought of Carolyn again. He ought to write but could think of nothing to say. Congrats on her love life? Her skin had a lovely darkness to it, a sort of copper sunlight. He shook his head and tried to side-track this attractive, but ultimately pessimistic thought-train.

What had happened to the fat girl? Oh yes, he remembered, she’d started dancing with Roger and disappeared and Micklethwaite had crawled out to sleep in his new car, since every bed, including his own, was occupied. He was too drugged to bemoan this undignified end to the evening, and woke up with a headache and the flu. He didn’t see Roger, though he heard the fat girl giggle through his bedroom door, and drove back yesterday over Burkes Pass and listened acutely to every unusual sound from the engine. It was freedom to have a car, but since he had arrived back in

Tekapo the Hillman Hunter had stayed motionless as Micklethwaite collapsed under a short, violent influenza.

A sharp bold rap on the door. Followed by another. Micklethwaite started heading towards the front door, in the strange cramped posture of a sick man who was feeling rather sorry for himself, when the door opened and Vicki's head popped round.

'Hi Gord, heard you were laid up'.

Micklethwaite scuttled back in his underwear to bed. She giggled loudly at his discomfiture.

'Tut, tut, you need some fresh air here Gordon, and what's with the new car? Cool.'

Vicki took control. She made him some tea, threw open a window, and gave him a packet of chocolate biscuits and chatted away.

'You need some fresh air, it's a nasty bug. I got it last week, but you'll be clear of it soon. The garage man said you were sick, and I hadn't seen you for a few days so I thought I should check you out in case you'd died'.

'I've been in town' croaked Micklethwaite, very pleased that someone cared for him.

'And bought a car, wow, that's pretty serious. I don't suppose you'll be interested in a horse-ride now?'

'Oh yes I'd love to...'

Rip this tongue out of his head!

'Great. Wednesday?'

'Errr, I was going down to Haka Station on Wednesday, if the flu clears up. To see a hut down there'.

'Oh, Charlie Jeffs, good mate of mine. Say hi. Ok, when you get back. Mungo says you're making good progress, and I might have found a few photos for you. See you, gotta dash, the backpackers want their lunch, enjoy the bikkies'.

Vicki went out with a clumping clatter of boots, and left Micklethwaite with a pleasant feeling of being wanted. He ate all the biscuits and in the afternoon went to see Chad.

The day was bright but not warm, and the willows around Chad's caravan looked orange when stripped of their leaves. Winter came early up here. His flu had retreated to odd extremities of his body, and the regular slimy drip of a nose, and a feeble cough reminded him of it. Beside the stone hut was the large house-truck and he could see Emerald playing outside. Rosie was clearly having an impact. The tidy wood piles were disarranged, with bits and pieces of timber lying all over. The place looked like a building site and when Rosie came into sight she had a hammer in one hand and a builder's leather apron strapped around her, full of tools and jingling like a Christmas fairy.

‘Giddy Gordon, come to see us have yer?’

Micklethwaite was nervous. He’d seen the violent side of Rosie’s temper, but all that seemed forgotten. Today was her sunny day. Emerald came dancing up, as Rosie selected a piece of timber and manoeuvred it into the stone hut.

‘This timber that Chad got is coming in real handy, some of it’s good planks eh. They must have had a barn collapse up the lake or something’.

Rosie was enjoying herself. She’d done a chippy course two years ago, and the work suited her. For a life spent mostly indoors, she felt oddly at home outside. Micklethwaite sat down on a willow stump and looked at her carefully. But his guesses at Rosie’s character were only a quarter correct. One of her boyfriends (the one who’d died from an overdose) had described Rosie as having a kind heart, with flecks of granite in it.

You don’t do time, do the streets, do drugs and half a dozen other ‘dos’ without coming out fairly battered, and which no amount of emotional panel-beating would ever straighten out. Her curriculum vitae would read as a list of what mothers would not want their daughters to achieve: stripper at 16, prostitute at 17, bouncer at a gay-lesbian bar, body-builder and body-guard for a loan shark and a barmaid just about everywhere. Her motto was: ‘no excuses, no explanations’.

Emotionally she was like a wind-vane, blowing with friendliness some days, then howling at you to bugger off when her emotional weather vane turned. Although she hadn’t touched any drugs for two years now (not counting alcohol of course) the damage was still working its way through her veins, and her skin would have fetched a good price at a tannery. Her house-truck, with its pieces of windows and gear bolted on as afterthoughts, was a metaphor for her own add-on type of personality. Here was a woman who had tried just about everything to get it wrong, and still had a smile as wide as a banana. A missing tooth gave that grin a black gap. She was still bitter about a lot of things, including most of the men in her life, several of the women, half the police force and her Presbyterian parents — but now she had Emerald.

Today she was in a good mood, and lit a cigarette companionably alongside Micklethwaite as he explained what his project was.

‘Really? Hear that Em. So you got brains eh? I haven’t got brains, but I’ve guts eh. Feel that.’

Rosie pulled up her shirt and made Micklethwaite nervously pat her stomach.

‘Steel eh? I used to roll Maori guys twice my size in the bars. Worked as a bouncer, and boy did some guys bounce. Em, leave that notebook alone.’

The little girl had picked up Micklethwaite’s notebook.

‘She’ll cover it with bloody kangaroos or something. She’s real talented eh? Not like me. I’m not talented but I’m a survivor. Now Em, I reckon she’ll do art eh. She’s my life. That simple really. You like this town?’

It was not an easy question to answer but Micklethwaite said yes.

‘Yeah. Me too. If I can find talent eh?’ and roared.

Actually she was not so sure, but she had to hang onto this hope. For Emerald’s sake she had to like this town, and this town had to like her — which was more problematic. Rosie had no illusions about the job ahead. She was like an ugly wart at a plastic surgeon’s conference, and lots of people would want to cut her out. But the drugs would kill her if she stayed in the city, and kill Emmie too. So few good chances had come her way that she badly wanted to grasp this one. Rosie had a street philosophy, that made no excuses for herself. She’d washed back and forth in so much oceanic self-pity from failures and street-people that she wasn’t having a jot of it. She knew she’d made bad choices, fact is, Emmie had been a bad choice. Bloody good choice in the end. Her blessing.

All this came bursting over Micklethwaite as he sat and squinted in the sun. With the cigarette finished, Rosie tightened her leather apron and Micklethwaite was pleased to shift the topic onto matters less personal.

‘Are you putting in new shelves?’

‘Yeah, and cupboards. I’m gonna build another table out of that stuff there, and I’ve gotta make some holes for the water pipes. Gonna get a shower after all’.

She immediately lit another cigarette and leapt into action.

‘See, Chad’s tank? We can take water off that, run a plastic hose down, get a shower inside the house, that’ll be cool eh’.

Rosie looked excited, and Chad came over with a look on his face that seemed unexpectedly serene. He said ‘she’s my daughter you know’. Rosie grinned sheepishly and bustled about, throwing around pieces of timber like matchsticks.

‘Emmy don’t draw on that piece. That’s gonna be for the table. Oh jeez that girl. Getting the electrician tomorrow, fix us up a couple of power points, and we’re gonna live here eh Chad?’

He nodded happily and repeated.

‘She’s my daughter’.

Micklethwaite watched Rosie as she started to hump another piece of timber inside. The girl was chatting away.

‘So when are you moving into the hut?’

‘Pretty soon says mum, but Chad won’t let us sleep in it cos of the Token’ she said seriously. Rosie came out.

‘C’mmon girl, shush, show Gordon yer work’.

She rushed off and came back with a fistful of drawings. She clearly had remarkable talent. Birds, trees, lakes, and lots of houses, lots and lots of houses.

‘I’ve always wanted to live in a house of our own but mum never had any money.

This is my dream house, like the one in the story’

She showed Micklethwaite a large big two-storeyed house, painted in bright crayon colours.

‘Go on Em, tell him the story of the Dream House. It’s spooky eh’.

‘Well, anyway...’

The little girl adopted a serious story-telling face as Micklethwaite sat down on a wood pile to listen and Chad stood upright but absent beside them. Rosie went back into the stone hut and started a roisterous banging.

‘A woman, a rich woman, kept dreaming of this wonderful house. It was as real to her as her own house, with all the furnishing and big windows and a huge garden that stretched for miles and miles, a wonderful house’.

Micklethwaite smiled and mopped his nose.

‘Well, anyway, this woman and her husband went to look for a new house, but the woman is very fussy and they look and look. Well, anyway, they get taken to one house, and find that it is exactly like the one in her dream. The furnishings are the same and the garden goes for miles and miles. It’s very strange. Well anyway, when the real owner turns up she jumps back in fright from the woman, and screams, because for years the house has been haunted and the ghost looks exactly like this woman you see. And the house was selling very low because the real owner wanted to leave because of the ghost, you see, it scared her, its strange isn’t it’, and the child ended in a rush of explanation, ‘and the woman, it’s as if in her dream she wandered through the house’.

‘A good story Emily’ said Micklethwaite, and the girl looked appalled, and said with great dignity.

‘My name is Emerald, like the gemstone.

‘Oh, sorry, how old are you?’

‘Five and a half’.

Rosie came back out.

‘Creepy story eh? Now where’s that nail box?’

Micklethwaite took some more photos and waved goodbye, looking back at almost an idyllic scene. Rosie hammering away off-view in the hut, Emerald building her own little hut out of the wood pile and Chad standing directly in the sun in a posture with the arms slightly stuck out, like a butterfly warming up his wings ready to fly.

He didn’t eat much for tea, and went around to the museum at about seven, with the evening light picking out fine details on the houses, and a flock of Canada Geese honking overhead. He found the key, and noticed the curtain flicker across the way as he turned on the light. He had no good reason to be here, it was just a little obsession. Or nosiness. He started with the clippings index and came across the name ‘Jago’ several times. In the large folders some keen local archivist had cut and

pasted much of Tekapo's local news as reported in the Timaru and Fairlie papers. The person seemed to have started in the 1930's and stopped abruptly at 1982, then perhaps gone to that great index in the sky. The 'Jago' mentioned was all 'Jim' and Micklethwaite quickly got a potted history of Jim Jago's life and times. He seemed to be involved in everything. No mention of Chad for a while, then he struck gold.

A clipping from 1951. Chad Jago's wedding at the Tekapo stone church, with photos of Chad and his new wife standing outside. They looked a handsome couple. Micklethwaite studied the other photos, but could not see any obvious person who liked Dorothy. Didn't Mungo say the court case was in the early 1950's? There was a pile of Fairlie Gazettes in one corner of the museum and Micklethwaite started looking through the court pages. Nothing obvious here, and then his finger jabbed at a column. April 15, 1955, Chad Jago charged with child abuse, just thirty words. Released on bail, summoned to appear next month in Fairlie District Court. Micklethwaite rummaged through the pile, searched May, then June and finally found the case in mid-July. Clearly the courts, as always, had a backlog of work.

The details were sketchy, and Micklethwaite was too absorbed to hear the door open behind him.

'How's it going?'

Micklethwaite nearly jumped out of his skin. This was the second time Vicki had played this trick on him.

'Thanks for the warning. For a noisy girl you can be bloody quiet.'

'What do you mean noisy?'

Micklethwaite hoped that the offence was feigned.

'You don't mind me borrowing the key?'

'Oh sure' said Vicki, though she didn't sound that sure, 'I saw the light, and thought it was Mungo. What are you looking for?'

'Chad Jago, the court case. Where he was charged with child abuse.'

'Oh. Why?'

That was a hard question to answer and Micklethwaite had rather been hoping that he would not have to answer it.

'There's a funny word here...'

He pointed to the newspaper and quoted it:

'The Sergeant who interviewed Chad said that Charles Jago stated that the child was a 'changeling'? Do you what that means Vicki?'

She shrugged, which was not a no or a yes. She seemed torn between her natural inclination to talk and an unnatural reticence.

'It's a funny kind of idea. Sort of medieval, or Celtic.'

It was remarkable how often the word ‘Celtic’ came out of any conversation about the Jago’s. He looked inquiringly at her, and Vicki obligingly filled the awkward silence.

‘Well, it’s like when a couple have a baby and it yells all the time, people used to say that their real baby had been stolen by the fairies, and the fairies had substituted a false baby, which they called a changeling...’

She was warming up now.

‘So the idea was that you beat the changeling and the fairy baby would get so sick of this ill-treatment that it would take off, and return the real baby.’

Vicki brought out a book on folk-lore and showed it to Micklethwaite. There was a passage on changelings, and he read it carefully. It was a clever idea. A sort of primitive way of explaining colic, or a hopelessly crying baby — and the remedy to cure it.

‘But what if the baby died under the beating?’

‘It’s still not your baby, it’s a fairy baby, so it’s better off dead’.

Vicki was sitting on the desk swinging her legs, clearly not that happy, if only because her sentences were shorter and she hadn’t laughed once yet. Micklethwaite was like a ferret to a rabbit on a topic once he got going.

‘So was Chad charged with beating his daughter? It doesn’t say here?’

Then another thought occurred to him.

‘That was his defence wasn’t it?’

Vicki nodded. That would certainly be a most odd defence indeed for 1955, to claim that you beat your child because it was a fairy baby.

‘Do you know what happened? It says the case was referred to the Timaru District Court. Was Chad convicted? Have you got the Timaru Herald here?’

Micklethwaite started to look around, and Vicki pointed vaguely to a shelf. Micklethwaite looked at her sharply.

‘You’ve had a look though haven’t you?’

‘Yes. He was convicted of child abuse, I think his wife left him or something. I think he was sent to Sunnyside for examination for a while’.

Micklethwaite was hardly hearing her, because he had found the pile of Timaru Herald’s and had started to look through the court pages. It’s not that he did not notice that Vicki was being unhelpful, he was just ignoring it. The court report was keenly short on detail, especially about the nature of the abuse, but there was that curious word ‘changeling’ again, that arose in the defence summary. This case must have been a sensation in Tekapo at the time. So Chad was convicted and sent to Sunnyside. What had he done to the child?

‘I don’t know really, Mungo said it wasn’t much. A bit of bruising or something.’

It was Chad's claim about the changeling that made everyone sit up. I suppose it was unusual'.

That was an understatement. Micklethwaite took down details of the court case and the dates and folded away the newspapers.

'You know Chad Jago said to me 'the Jago's are cursed', just like that. Out of the blue, so I'm beginning to wonder...'

Vicki swung her legs.

'I don't think it's like that, that's just Chad's way of talking. He says things like that all the time, just to scare people off I reckon. I mean the Jago farm has been really prosperous, some of the best merino wool in the district'.

'There's Dorothy's face...' mused Micklethwaite.

'I think that grandmother was a tyrant, really superstitious. She believed in all sorts of Gods, including the Christian one. You know, the nature spirits and what not...'

This statement seemed to come from nowhere and Micklethwaite found it intensely interesting. He waited.

'Chad told me she them read stories to them late at night before bed, not Winnie The Pooh, or Wind in the Willows stuff, or anything nice like that. One was called 'The Scabbard of Skin' (that's gruesome) and 'The Hand of Glory' or something. He told me that one too, that was gory. She was a real witch. Evil'.

Vicki got up to leave.

'I think she tainted the whole family'.

'Jim seemed to be grateful to her?'

She shrugged emptily.

'You know that Rosie and Emerald are moving into Chad's Hut?' Micklethwaite asked 'I saw them this afternoon, she's doing the carpentry work herself. Chad says she's his daughter'.

'Yep, I heard'.

The look on Vicki's face was carefully neutral, and since the conversation was struggling, he let that go.

'Thanks for the chocolate biscuits. I ate the lot'.

Her face lit up.

'You greedy pig. I knew you would, are you feeling better now?'

'Fatter certainly. I'll go down to Haka Station tomorrow'.

The sticky atmosphere had suddenly evaporated and Vicki was back to her chatty self.

‘It’s nice down there, Charlie’s a bit of a character. They’re an old Mackenzie family, he’s got some good stories too. We’ve got a whole wardrobe of family-type stuff, it’s never been sorted.’

Vicki pointed to the big old-fashioned wardrobe behind two rusting ploughs, and she took out a key (under the right-hand leg Micklethwaite noted carefully) and opened up the wardrobe.

‘See what I mean’.

It was full of boxes, with names scrawled on them.

‘For someone like you I bet there’s some real treasureGordon. Lots of descendants end with stuff that they don’t want and give to us. Mungo has been through some of it, but it would take years to do a good job on it. I bet practically every family in the district has stuff in there — the Mackleys, Dingles, Jeffs, Smiths, Chad’s got a box he didn’t have room for in his caravan, Arkwrights, Dunns — you could get another project out of it, and look at this, here’s these photos I told you about’.

They were undated but showed a shooting party beside one stone hut, and a shepherd and his dogs beside another. There was a lake in the background, so this could be Shep’s Hut.

‘It looks turn of the century. Thanks Vicki, it’s a good find’.

She looked pleased with herself.

‘And look at this. This was found near Shep’s Hut you know, a greenstone earring. The note says ‘Found on the shore of Lake Tekapo in 1858’. It’s gorgeous isn’t it?’

She brought it out from the glass case. It was beautifully polished and smooth as skin, and Micklethwaite fingered the smooth ancient stone. But there was no hole in it, so how could she be sure it was an earring? Definitely a decoration insisted Vicki, men were hopeless that way. She brushed her blonde hair away from her ear and placed the earring, which looked black in the dim light. It was an elegantly achieved distraction, and it might have worked, but for the fact that greenstone only looked beautiful against black hair. She should know that.

Chapter 11

Chilly Interlude

May 4-5 Wednesday, Thursday

A southerly had weaseled through overnight with a dusting of snow and scoured the air clean and clear. The day promised to be a cracker, but it was promptly spoiled by a veil of lowish cloud that came over the Mackenzie plain by mid-morning and trapped the chill air close to the ground. As Micklethwaite drove over Haka Pass the light was drab, and the sun a frosted globe. A farmer was moving a mob of sheep along the gravel road and nodded to Micklethwaite as he drove slowly through them. The Mackenzie is droughty country, and tussocks provide only a thin skin on which the sheep could manage a living. With the mountains blocked out with grey cloud and a wintry wind blowing, this sort of living seemed particularly hard today. Micklethwaite stopped and got out of the car, and watched the sheep smalling down the open road.

He looked for a long time, meditating on the vast sweeps of land. It suited him, and he thought he could live here, although like the sheep farmers he doubted if he could make a living. The town was struggling, and apart from school-age kids he could not recall seeing any teenagers. Vicki was about the youngest person he'd met, and he was probably the youngest available half-decent man; an unexpected thought that made him smile. Micklethwaite shivered in the cold, got back in and drove on.

The road climbed up from the Mackenzie Plain and gently ran over a low point in the skyline that was Hakataramea Pass. Two gates, and a sagging signpost, then the road slipped downhill, and would carry on that way to the Waitaki River, another 50 kilometres away. It was grasslands over the pass, with matagouri scrub on the flats and occasional bush patches up the gullies that reminded Micklethwaite of hairy armpits. The Hunter chugged past a few fences, a haybarn, some station buildings and then got to the sign 'Haka Station'. Charlie Jeffs had warned him he'd be out, and had given precise directions.

'Just go through the gate and follow your nose up the side-valley. Yer can't miss it'.

Micklethwaite got out the map, and the Hunter bounced over paddocks still hardened after a dry summer. A second gate in the macrocarpa shelter belt confused him, but he went through and after lurching around some large holes he finally found the actual road. It was getting dark as the track took off into a clump of trees. Switching

on the headlights the car bounced anxiously into a copse of mountain beech forest, where the old stone hut sat impassively in the deep gloom.

Micklethwaite ferried in gear and lit candles which illuminated the heavy stone walls and sagging bunks. Charlie Jeffs said hardly anyone used the place now, too cold, and too close to the station ('yer cant get the bloody telly here so the hands don't want to stick it') but he kept the place tidy ('a kinda respect yer know, for the old guys that hacked it'). Sparks leapt up from the kindling, bringing life into the hut. Micklethwaite ferried water from the stream and as the flames roared around the billy he looked around in appreciation.

This stool was hand-made and on the mantelpiece were remnants of a shepherd's trade: horse-shoes, an old-fashioned lantern, a jar of 'Nimrods Powder', and several old whisky bottles filled with dead blowflies. Propped in one corner was a massive two-handled saw. Huge gobs of candle wax had accumulated around the candleholders, and for a log-book shepherds had scrawled on pieces of paper and stuck them underneath the wire netting on the ceiling.

A hiss from the fire and the billy wobbled in fury. He flipped off the lid, chucked in a handful of tea and let the brew boil a few seconds before lifting it out. He tapped the billy with a stick to settle the leaves.

The fire felt good, and a comfortable inner glow filled his body. This was re-living history, exactly as the shepherds would have done a hundred years before. Add a few dogs, whining over their allocation of rotten mutton, a horse tethered and snorting in the damp night, and this could be 1860, or even earlier. The morepork called mournfully and the big logs cracked and crumbled on the fire. Micklethwaite felt close to the old boundary keepers tonight, and he could sense just how tough and rewarding such a life could be. Humans mistake the comforts of a civilised life for actual living itself, the world was simpler in a hut like this.

The embers glowed deeply but after a while he sighed. Of course, there was the other side.

Months of loneliness, and the rain would turn the tussocks into wet, cold, hair. Southerlies brought snow, and trees would splinter under the weight, and you would be lucky to see even a rat in mid-winter. The stupid sheep would have to be dug out of the snow, and chivvied here and there, but there would be plenty of frozen mutton for the dogs to gnaw on. Here you could die alone, and no one would know for months or more.

A low gust of wind rattled the tin roof as Micklethwaite snuck into his sleeping bag, and watched the flames flicker off the stone walls as he opened up Tales from Old Cornwall.

As he read the stories in he began to feel uneasy. Most of the stories were strangely warped. They were not horror stories exactly, but stories of uncertain, even malevolent, spirits. The Changeling was here.

A woman had a beautiful son, which after a while became disagreeable and cried all the time. When she went to see a wise-woman for advice she was told that the baby

was a changeling, a fairy baby, put there to replace the real baby which the fairies had stolen because it was so beautiful.

‘The only ways you can ever get your baby back my dear is to make the fairy baby miserable, beat it, feed it gruel, until the fairy baby will become so sick of your ill-treatment that it will run away and your baby will be returned’.

The mother did this and the fairy baby escaped and returned the mother’s own true baby. But the fairies were not happy with the mother, they felt cheated and they had not forgotten their beautiful boy. When her handsome son reached sixteen, the fairies lured him underground to their fairy kingdom. He never returned, and the mother was inconsolable.

He went outside for a pee the stars were like points of hardened steel, and the silence deep and sustained. He’d always thought fairies fluttered around prettily, and gave you wishes if you caught them. But in this book fairies were evil creatures, inflicting torment on humans. You could trick them, but never beat them. The stories conveyed a world of uncertainty, where life-forces were fickle, and nature-spirits were all around you, both spiteful and probably smarter. Did Chad see the world like that?

After putting two more logs on the fire Micklethwaite crept gratefully into his warm sleeping bag, and manoeuvred the book closer to the stub of candle. He concentrated to read a story which had caught his eye — ‘The Wish House’.

A young woman was very much in love with a man, but he is married with a fine wife and family of his own. He becomes very sick, and indeed is dying, and knowing her love is hopeless, goes to an empty house that was known to be a Wish House. It was said that if you whispered your request at the door, the Token inside would hear, and grant that wish. But it was not any sort of wish, but a special kind. An altruistic wish.

She whispered that she wanted to take on the illness that was killing her love, and bear the sickness herself. As she spoke she thought she could hear the Token breathing behind the door, and when she walked away she was sure she heard footsteps, and even a kind of chuckle coming from the empty house. The Token must have immediately granted that wish for she felt quite queasy even on the way home and within a few days was dying herself. She heard that the man had become better, and was miraculously recovering. She died that night. End of story.

He dropped the book on the floor, and blew out the candle. Chad’s life was pre-occupied by creatures that belonged in another realm, another time. ‘It was a peculiar childhood’ Dorothy had said, and now he understood why she had said that. He slept yet didn’t sleep, somehow hovering between worlds.

The next day Micklethwaite did the hut survey, and called it ‘Haka Hut’. He pulled the log book pieces of paper from the roof, jotted down the notes and dates, then carefully slipped them back behind the wire. He took photographs and drifted through the day. With the fire blazing and the billy hissing, and he found it hard to leave. In

the evening he re-read several of the stories in *Old Tales from Cornwall* again, but found them no less inscrutable.

In the morning the sun was well over the snow-touched hills as Micklethwaite tidied up the hut, and listened anxiously as he turned the motor of the Hunter over. It cranked wearily into life. The journey was back over frozen paddocks as the sun weakly thawed out the stiff grasses. On the last part of the highway to Tekapo he ripped down past pine trees and the motor camp, and it was hard not to race this last section into town, enjoying the moment of arrival syncopating with flashes of lake blue through the trees — but the pleasure was spoiled by a strange sight.

It was as if Tekapo had been invaded, and a long line of army trucks and police cars were parked in the commercial layby by the shops. The lights of two of the police cars were blinking red and blue in rather pretty way, as if a circus had arrived and they were trying to attract customers. Two police officers were talking by the car, and even as Micklethwaite slowed down, they stopped and looked at him. He turned right, and dragged the Hunter up the hill, and wondered why even though he had lived an exemplary life, with few obvious blots on a barely used copybook, he felt a deep sense of unease.

Chapter 12

Emerald

5 May Thursday

The woman's statement began.

'I was out walking the dog, along the lakeside. I often do at that time of day, and Benji likes a run then. There's a track around the lake and at one point it goes past a picnic area, I can't remember what it's called. Oh yes, Shep's Stream I think. You can get to it by road, but anyway, Benji, my dog ran off and came back to me barking. I did not take any notice at first, but he seemed agitated and I followed him from the track into the picnic place, there's a table on one side there. Benji was barking over something, sniffing it and he kept tugging at it, I thought it was just an old rag and I called him several times, Benji come here, but he wouldn't and I got angry with him and walked over and it was...'

She couldn't speak for a while.

'It was the arm of that little girl, I don't know her name. She's new, and her dress was all pulled up, her...

Again she stopped and cried.

'Sorry. There was something round her neck, I don't know what. She looked so lovely and peaceful, not hurt at all but I knew...'

Vincent Spark read the statement again, and said something shocking.

'As I see it Sergeant, there are two kinds of people who kill little children, perverts, or parents. Citizens' (it was a very Spark way of speaking) 'are paranoid about paedophiles and the like, and they see little dirty men in every hedge, whereas children have far more to fear from their parents: beatings, injuries, abuse, it's all on the records. But this looks like a child-killer all right. Do we know any more about the parents? How's Rosie Hilton?'

Sergeant Reilly looked at his sheet and thought that Detective Inspector Spark was a callous bastard, but instead said.

'She's in shock and under heavy sedation. She tried to slash her wrists, quite deep. I'm not sure sir that Rosie is her real name.'

‘But okay?’

‘Yes sir. The doctor doesn’t think we can speak to her for three or four days’

‘Bugger doctors, why did she cut her wrists? Do we know? Why are you unsure of her name Reilly?’

‘Local gossip sir, someone even thought she’d done time’.

‘Ok, you’ll initiate a search for her record? Mothers don’t often kill daughters but we cannot rule it out. She had a temper I’ve heard — who’s the father?’

Sergeant Reilly scratched his head in a slow way.

‘More local gossip sir, no one really knows. Some wonder if Chad Jago is the father. He kept saying ‘she’s my daughter’.

‘I’m getting confused Sergeant, who is Chad Jago’s daughter?’

Sergeant Reilly smiled reflectively.

‘That’s the problem sir. We’re not sure if Chad meant Rosie Hilton is his daughter or Emerald Hilton.’

‘Or both?’

Sergeant Reilly shrugged.

‘Jesus’.

Reilly did not enjoy that reference to the Lord. He’d been plucked off a nice cushie number and hurled into this massive police operation in Tekapo looking for a child killer. His qualification was that he used to be the cop in Tekapo for a few years, and Fairlie for quite a while now. He knew everyone, and they knew him. In a sense he was ‘street smart’, although these particular streets were gravel roads into high country emptiness, but he knew about rural matters, and rural minds. He was Catholic, and dabbled in rhymes under the pseudonym ‘Nor’wester’ for the Timaru Herald, and he expended more sweat working on these little poems than he did in police work. His inspiration came from his constant journeys, the winter snows and summer droughts.

The sun is beating on the fallow,

The sun is beating on the hay,

The sun is beating green to yellow,

And yellow into grey.

Soon the grey will crumble

And the farmer curse his greed,

*Then the sky will start to rumble,
And the rain will meet his need.*

*Season after season,
Through the drought and dry,
Forty years of right and wrong,
That will never come by.*

*This man is turning over
Clods of soil and mud,
His grave covered with the clover
That feeds the land it's blood.*

He did not like this murder case, it was not his style, and he had suspicions already on the second day that it was not going to be easy to sort out. Spark, on the other hand, was revelling in it.

‘What do we know of Chad Jago?’

Reilly shifted uncomfortably.

‘He was convicted of child abuse, in 1955. There’s a file here sir’.

Spark looked through it.

‘His own child?’

‘Yes sir’.

‘But Rosie might be his daughter, she’s the right age?’

‘Yes sir’

Reilly did not add that no one could seriously believe that. Let Spark work for his new promotion. The phone rang.

‘Yes Major, all along the riverside, from Tekapo to Shep’s Stream and beyond to that next point. Yes. Yes. We’ll be along shortly Major.’

He put the phone down and looked hard at the large scale map pinned up on the wall. The police and forensic experts were doing a detailed search of the picnic area whilst the local army unit along the road at Tekapo Camp had volunteered to search the foreshore, and Spark leapt at the offer.

‘Did we find anything else in the picnic area at all. Any info?’

‘No sir, the ground is still rock hard. No tyre marks. No footprints. I just talked

to Detective Marton, they haven't found anything yet'.

The community was shocked, stunned, in impotent disbelief that this could happen in their town. A young girl, sexually assaulted and strangled only a mile from Tekapo on her way back from school. The mother had tried to commit suicide, the father was a loopy. A sniff of incest as well. There was plenty for the Detective Inspector to sink his teeth into, and he was relishing it.

Spark had all the characteristics that make up a good cop but a lousy person. That was unfair, but people often found themselves being unfair to Spark — behind his back. He had diligence, a thoroughness over detail, was conscientious and usually calm under stress. He did not get flustered easily, but when he did lose it he looked stupid. He would say things like 'I'll consider that', or 'we've got to work to a system'. He had virtually no sense of humour, yet believed himself to be witty. He was a bore, but he was also a good cop. He should be, he'd been one all his life and would stay one until they kicked him out.

Physically he looked good, and women found him attractive, apart from the moustache. He ran tri-athalons, marathons and a few other 'thons' as well. He'd been running regularly since school and had even done a sub-four minute mile, and Spark watched his health and weight carefully. Emotionally he was teetering on a failure, and him and Mary were having a trial separation for three months to see if they could patch things up. She was a cop too, and she told him once that a good career cop can't be a good father, a remark that irritated him continually.

He'd been given a promotion to Detective Inspector and the Tekapo job almost simultaneously, and he was tempted to have an affair with a rather sweet young constable who was on his team.

'You're local Reilly. Would Chad do it?'

It was a silly question, and Sergeant Reilly hesitated. Spark had already given Charles Jago a tough interview and elicited nothing very much. Chad hardly talked, and what he did say was monosyllabic and strange. Chad's eyes looked completely vacant. Spark looked into them and did not see either fear or intelligence.

'I don't think so sir. He's not the type'.

'Really Reilly?'

There was a pretty sarcasm in that remark. Spark liked the new found alliteration.

'You as a policeman surely don't believe that there are types that commit murder, and types that don't?'

Reilly did think that but remained silent, he knew a smart lecture was coming up.

'We can all commit murder don't you think?'

A young woman constable came in with two cups of tea, and Spark looked at her admiringly.

'Haven't you wanted to commit murder Jessica?' he asked the constable who

blushed.

‘I don’t think so sir’

‘What about you Sergeant? Surely there was someone you wanted to kill’

Definitely thought Josh Reilly.

‘There’s a difference between thinking about it sir, and actually carrying it out’.

Spark slurped at his tea as he watched the attractive Constable Jessica Thornton’s bottom walk out.

‘What about all those strange men, who rather than just simply divorcing their wives spend years plotting how to kill them Reilly? Actually doing so in some cases.’

Reilly kept a straight face.

‘The fear of admitting failure sir. It’s easier to rid yourself of someone than admit that you made a mistake in marrying them in the first place’.

Spark looked sharply at Josh Reilly, but the old cop’s bland, broad face revealed nothing. Spark’s marital problems were well known, and Mary Spark was also well-liked.

‘Let’s go’.

With the delightful Constable Thornton driving, the three of them swept out of the community hall carpark in a police car and travelled around to the picnic area. The day was bright clean, in clear contradiction to the dirty work going on around them. Tape was strung all around the trees area sealing off the picnic area, and a line of policemen were moving very slowly through the grass, most kneeling. It was chilly, painstaking business. Looking for details, a killer’s oversight, a clue.

Reilly was looking, but his head was trying to fathom how a poem could be made of a murder scene.

The red tape unravelled like guts,

The ground specked with if’s and buts...’

Nice, but the Timaru Herald would hardly publish it. Detective Marton came over to them as they got out of the car and reported ‘nothing found yet sir’. Emerald’s body had been removed for autopsy, and the area was delineated by a painted line on the grass. It looked odd, as if a soul had briefly lain there and left an imprint.

Spark paced around, mainly because it was cold and he liked pacing around, and he liked being followed diligently by Reilly and Thornton. A romantic detective might sniff the air and suspect it smelt of death, but Spark only smelled rotten autumn vegetation. Reilly was wondering if death really had a smell, when Spark jerked him back to the matter in hand.

‘Any theories Reilly? Local man or outsider?’

Spark was not really interested in the answer, for he had already made his own assumptions. Reilly knew this but felt obliged to play along.

‘Could be an out-of-towner sir. He drives in for a break, maybe a pee, goes for short stroll and sees the girl. They get talking, she is friendly and shows him her drawings. Maybe lets out her mum is two kilometres away and he looks around, grabs her, fondles her, she starts to scream and he panics. Shoves her knickers in her mouth, then strangles her to death. Dumps her and gets back in his car and drives off. Opportunistic, spur of the moment if you like’.

Spark said nothing and Constable Thornton looked queasy. She must really be quite young thought Spark, hardly twenty. Maybe still a virgin.

‘Anything else Reilly?’

That was teasing and Reilly fell silent. He hadn’t meant to get carried away.

‘The problem is with your theory Reilly, well you know what the problem is?’

Reilly thought hard.

‘I’ll tell you’ Spark interrupted Reilly’s cogitations ‘the problem is that there is no problem. It’s too simple, and too bloody likely.’

Spark walked down to the lakeside and admired the view.

‘You see if I accept this theory, and believe me, I’ve had the same idea myself, then we are defeated. It’s plausible, but logically it means that we are all wasting our time. The chances of catching such a random murder are so slim we might as well pack up and go home now, but the community would not let us do that, and we would not allow ourselves to do that. To assess the worth of a child’s life as a statistical probability of whether we would catch the villain or not, the public would be disgusted if we took such a rational approach. Already the swings are empty, the kids are shut inside. The community thinks there’s a sexual predator out there and only one thing will regain their confidence. A conviction’.

‘But if Sergeant Reilly’s theory is true sir?’ Constable Thornton inquired timidly.

She had brains too thought Spark, besides a nice bottom. He was enjoying himself.

‘Truth be buggered constable. What the community wants is a result. They want a nasty paedophile put in prison and they want to believe that such random, motiveless crimes such as these cannot exist. Of course they do happen, we know that. They happen all the time, but I do not want them to happen either, I have children too. I do not like the idea of a cold-blooded fiend out there, but there’s something missing here...’

Spark was thinking hard, or at least pretending to.

‘It’s almost the lack of evidence so far that bothers me’.

‘There’s Chad Jago sir, he’s got a history’

Constable Thornton was trying hard, and she was prepared to admire Spark.

'Well he may have to do'.

Thornton looked shocked, although Reilly had seen this coming.

'Only if he's guilty sir' protested Thornton.

Spark stretched and yawned, a rather obvious preparation for the punch-line that was coming. He enjoyed having side-kicks, just like the television series.

'Oh I think he's guilty of something. What would you rather have? What would satisfy the community? A random motiveless killer who will never be caught, or locking away the local oddball who everyone suspects anyway? It's not the truth we're after here, it's results'.

Chapter 11

A Short Time in the Circus Ring

9 May, Monday

Although Micklethwaite had heard the expression ‘media circus’, the reality of it was a good deal worse than he’d imagined. At least a ‘circus’ sounded like fun; this was not fun.

Every accommodation place in town was booked out. Police, journalists, even TV crews, Tekapo was experiencing a boom. The petrol station had to get a double-delivery from the tankers, and the Chinese restaurant, which expected to close this week, suddenly had more customers than it could handle. Murder was good for Tekapo, it was bringing the town money. People were bustling about, and the farmers and the farmers wives started to make more trips in to town to catch up on the happening. They could not help themselves, even though they knew that their behaviour was reprehensible. This was human behaviour at it’s base level. Micklethwaite watched, was ashamed, and yet found himself dragged more or less willingly into the speculative whirlpool.

He got the knock on the door three days after he’d got back from Haka Station. He had been expecting it for some days and was almost surprised at how long it had taken them. The constable was a young pretty woman, rather too young he thought. Now he was sitting in a small busy ante-room of an empty shop that the police had taken over. Maps were pinned up on walls and several tables squeezed into the area, with phone lines, coffee cups, piles of boxes, pens and papers and a policeman at every table. Micklethwaite studied the tables carefully, assessing the personality of each policeman (or police person) based upon a criteria of tidiness. The pretty constable was just opposite, had given him a cup of tea, and was earnestly reading something and brushing her hair back over her fair skin every time it fell over her eyes. Her desk was neat, and the papers nice and straight. Once she looked up and smiled at him.

‘Mr Micklethwaite?’

He jumped up. Vicki came out of an office, and gave him a terse nod, almost cold, with a faint ‘hi’. He was ushered in to Spark’s office, just as cramped as the main room and with no windows at all. It looked like the storeroom of the shop.

‘Detective Inspector Vincent Spark’.

He took a seat after shaking Spark’s hand.

‘You know her Mr Micklethwaite?’

‘Why yes of course, that’s Vicki Smith. She runs the info centre’.

‘Attractive girl?’

Micklethwaite could not imagine why Spark put a question mark on the end of the last sentence, surely he could see for himself.

‘She’s offered to take me horse-riding, do you ride Mr Micklethwaite?’

He shook his head. Perhaps this was all in the manner of small talk as took a seat in the Detective Inspector’s office.

‘But you are going horse-riding arn’t you?’

‘Yes’.

‘I imagine she keeps an excellent seat’.

A comment, which although Micklethwaite had vaguely heard before, in the technical sense that horsey people use, but he found it found offensive the way Spark put it. He might as well have said she’s got a nice bum.

‘She certainly has a pretty bottom don’t you think? Anyway, the reason I asked you here was to ascertain your movements on Wednesday the...’ and Spark looked impressively at a piece of paper ‘...Wednesday, fourth of May?’

‘Well, I went down to Haka Station.’

‘What time?’

‘About afternoon I think, early on, about one’.

‘Not later?’

‘Well, I don’t think so. I didn’t get to the stone hut till dark’.

‘What stone hut?’

Micklethwaite suspected Spark already knew about his research project but for some obscure policing reason was quizzing him again. He outlined his work.

‘Yes, I know about that. Vicki Smith told me, and Mungo Davis’.

So they had been checking up on him. Spark got up and went to the map, and started to measure the distance from Tekapo to Hakataramea Pass.

‘Can you show me Haka Station on the map Mr. Micklethwaite? I see. It does not appear to be a very long car drive, but you took all afternoon to get there?’

‘I’ve got a slow car...’.

‘What kind?’

‘A Hillman Hunter station wagon’.

‘Ah yes, my dad had one of those. Good cars. You do not mind if we take tread castes of the tyres do you?’

Micklethwaite did mind but what could he say?

‘I was taking photos on the way, and there was another hut ruin just before Hakataramea Pass. Someone had mentioned it was there, Mungo Davis I think’.

Spark wrote something down, and waited, but Micklethwaite did not add anything.

‘How was the hut?’

‘Which one?’

‘Both’ said Spark in a friendly but irritated way; was Mr Micklethwaite being deliberately dim?

‘Well, Haka station’s stone hut is first class, probably built in the 1860’s. I stayed there a night, I couldn’t find the other hut, by the pass...’

‘Really?’

‘Well I looked for an hour or so, but I must have got the wrong location off Mungo...’

‘So recapping. You left about one o’clock, drove to Hakataramea Pass. Spent two hours there? Then went onto Haka station where you stayed one night at the old stone hut, is that right?’

Micklethwaite nodded.

‘Can anyone verify that you were at these places?’

Micklethwaite had known this question was coming and already had his answer carefully prepared.

‘No’.

Spark looked disappointed. He was not a talker this Micklethwaite.

‘No one at all saw you? That’s unusual. We live in a crowded world Mr Micklethwaite, and a nosy one. People are everywhere, you saw no one?’

‘Charlie Jeffs was out mustering, I only spoke to him on the phone the day before. He gave directions to the stone hut, but I never saw him’.

‘Your movements are largely unsubstantiated?’

Micklethwaite did not like that word, particularly the way Spark used it. His manner he supposed was professional, but he felt unduly irritated and alarmed, and more than that, patronised. The police were like doctors who expect all the information but give little information away themselves, or else give it begrudgingly, so the poor victim is stiff on the slab before any cut is made. He didn’t feel they had the right to ask all the questions they did, but they assumed that they had that right. And of course, a poor girl was dead, sexually assaulted, so they had all the moral justification on their side, and no one could protest about the infringement on their rights as a citizen.

Micklethwaite, who had had little contact with the justice system, was learning for the first time the outrage that innocent people feel about the gross intrusion of the law into their private world. It had never occurred to him that it was a privilege to live in this society, and that this privilege was granted to him conditional on his general good behaviour, and his willingness to cooperate with the authorities on demand.

He simply could not refuse, but it disturbed him that in practice he could not refuse. Free speech was largely a myth, as was free silence. Both were equally unacceptable.

‘Yes’.

Spark was getting a little annoyed with Micklethwaite’s ingenuous answers.

‘You see this puts you in an awkward position. Emerald Hilton was murdered as near as we can ascertain on that afternoon, Wednesday, about 3-4. She left school at three and was walking home via the lake. There is a good chance she was dead by 3.30. Do you want to see the pictures?’

Not particularly thought Micklethwaite, but Spark had taken his silence for assent and pulled out a manilla envelope with the explicit photos of Emerald’s last moments. Spark had sensed an unease with Micklethwaite, and sometimes a blunt approach, a sudden thrust of evidence before the suspect, could provoke all sorts of interesting reactions. He was disappointed.

Micklethwaite was grim faced. Emerald’s dress was pulled up tidily revealing her thin white legs, like a frogs. Her mouth was full of her panties. He pushed the photos away.

‘I didn’t need to see those’.

‘No. Unpleasant, we have a nasty little sex pervert in our midst Mr Micklethwaite.’

Spark put the photos away fussily. Micklethwaite had been thinking.

‘How do you know it was a sex attack then?’

It was an extremely odd thing to say and Spark seized on it.

‘Well. It’s obvious isn’t it Mr Micklethwaite?’

Reilly came in the door and caught the fag end of the conversation. Micklethwaite nodded absently. Spark was looking at him intently, but somewhat discomposed, and reluctant to finish the interview, yet sensing he needed to think more carefully about Micklethwaite’s answers.

‘Well Mr Micklethwaite, you will be available for further interviews of course?’

‘Yes, of course’.

‘Please do not leave town’.

Micklethwaite stared at him.

Reilly had to shift out of the way for Micklethwaite to make his relieved exit, and the door was hinged on one of those old-fashioned hydraulic arms, that close very slowly. In the main room his eye was caught on the photos pinned up on the wall, they were of Chad's caravan and the old stone hut, with the house-truck parked by. They were taken in black and white so the scene looked especially desolate. As he stared at the photos he caught the front-end of a conversation begun between Spark and Reilly.

‘A peculiar thing to say Reilly, eh, now would you say it unless you knew...’

The door drawled to a close, so Micklethwaite could not be sure what eye Spark was keeping out for, although he could guess.

He stepped outside and agreed with his inner voice that the interview had not been a success. The air was chill already at 4 pm and there would be a good frost tonight. He walked along the lake to get his thoughts in order again. It was a stupid thing to say but it had just popped out, probably from what he had seen from the photos. Emerald's panties looked as if they had been tucked into her mouth, but it was probably the sudden shift from the stuffy office to the cold air that made him shiver.

Chapter 14

Outsider's Disease

May 10-11-12 Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday

Then there were several days spent by the log-fire, tidying his notes and his thoughts. He filled up sheets of paper with speculations, for he, like everyone else, was becoming something of a detective. There was no helping it, you were drawn in, besides, Micklethwaite preferred to stay inside. He was not enjoying going into town. He felt isolated. Quite invisibly, there was a closing of ranks in Tekapo, and those who had been passing through, or were itinerant, or in some way not part of the community, felt squeezed outside it. It was not an obvious movement, but the wind off the lake seemed to carry a thousand muttering rumours and speculations, and conversations had a way of drying up when Micklethwaite appeared — in a polite way of course. He felt he had outsider's disease.

The garrulous garage-man suddenly became silent. The shop-assistant who always involved Micklethwaite in a long winded explanation of some pathetic drama in her life, no longer did. Now it was a quick, polite serving. On one occasion Micklethwaite was sure he interrupted a conversation explicitly about him, as the two women customers suddenly shut up and the shop-assistant went red. Maybe he was getting paranoid. He went round to see Vicki twice, but she was always out. At least it would have been a friendly face to talk to, and in this current vacuum, even the thought of a long horse-ride was something he could almost look forward to.

He'd gone for a walk to the cemetery, set high above the town on an old river terrace. There was a good view from here, which when Micklethwaite pondered it, sitting on a headstone, was rather odd. Most cemeteries were positioned on hills, but the dead would hardly appreciate the views. Perhaps it brought their souls closer to heaven? Would Emerald be buried here? He supposed the kid was still in some police forensic morgue, and he quickly got up and walked around to shake out the image. The lake was a sombre dark blue black, with the bleached gravel beaches gleaming white like a clergyman's collar. It was beautiful, certainly, yet also bleak.

Most of the names did not mean much, and some of the headstones were indecipherable. But he did find several Jago's, in a sort of family grouping. Two headstones had nineteenth century dates on them and might be Jim Jago's father and mother. And there was quite a modernish headstone with the words Roseanna Jago, and with

only one date 1951, which left Micklethwaite guessing as to whether that was a birth date or a death date.

Then a large imposing Celtic cross caught his eye and he read the weathered inscription — Irmelina Victoria Calvadnack, 1858 -1945, At Rest Ever More With The Lord. There were also some strange words in another language, Cornish he guessed. There was a vase of plastic flowers on the plinth, and the grave looked tidy. That could be Chad's handiwork. Eighty-seven years was a good wicket for the old girl. She must have been a hard-working woman, and fearless, at seventy to cross the whole wide world to look after grandsons she had never seen. Micklethwaite pondered the contradiction of a Christian prayer underneath a pagan cross.

He went home and the weather got colder, as he built up the log-fire and dozed in front of it. He couldn't even work somehow.

It had now become obvious to everyone in Tekapo that the police were struggling. Nothing could be kept secret in this little town. The police grumbled and gossiped in the pub, and the gossip went onto the barman, and then like many a Mackenzie river, spread into different braids, glittering with shallow light and shifting islands of innuendo. Rumours came and went in an afternoon, but as the days trickled by, the amount of facts dried up. Both television crews had left, the army had gone back to their camp, and the thorough search by the police along the lakeside had produced nothing. Forensic experts had turned over the gravel in the picnic area, and lifted most blades of grass. Every part of Emerald's clothes were examined, and they were still busy working the boundaries of her skin. Even a hair would be hope, but the hairs they found were the ones they expected. It was a blank. Witnesses, none.

Spark knew the details of the autopsy, and it told him little he did not already know. Emerald was strangled around three to four on Wednesday afternoon. There was no semen, no unusual hairs, or scraps of torn clothing. No evidence indeed of a struggle, which in a sense Spark ruminated was a sort of evidence. Did Emerald know the murderer? But she had only lived in Tekapo for about a month? Or was she just a trusting sort?

Like Micklethwaite, the Detective Inspector was also filling up bits of paper, and reaching no obvious conclusions. Everyone in Tekapo who might conceivably be involved had been interviewed once, but Spark realised that they were going to have to talk to everyone again. In such a small town this at least was possible. One person's statement might have a hole in it, or two statements overlap to produce the kind of contiguity that every policeman dreams of — the moment when the key turns in the lock.

The Superintendent had rung from Christchurch yesterday, and it had not been a pleasant phone call. Spark had a head cold that made his voice hoarse, the phone line was poor, and the Superintendent had a bad listening ear and interrupted every few seconds.

'No, not really sir, only two possible suspects. There's Charles Jago of course. Yes, the brother of Jim. Yes, he's very well known. Well... yes, he has a history of course. Child abuse. 1955. No, well... The problem is sir he has a very good

alibi. He was with the child's mother. Yes. Rosie Hilton. Yes, she claimed Charles Jago was with her all afternoon. Hard to prove one way or other. Yes, no, I know that's not her real name. Nothing on Emerald's father. Rosie Hilton is still sedated, and uncommunicative. I know it's been a week, but the doctors won't... I don't know if it's a sexual relationship sir. But, I will... Of course.... Still she absolutely confirmed Jago's location. Yes, could be lying, but why? Then slashed her wrists. Unfortunate... No, no one. There's a farm-hand, on Five Bullock Station, done time a few years ago for interfering with children.... but, he's got a good back-up story as well. Out mustering with another man all day. Yes, doesn't look good. Yes sir. We are trying hard, but there's not much evi... It's a small town, there's been some finger pointing. Yeah, Gordon Micklethwaite. I cannot rule him out, a bit of an outsider. I'll consider that. Yes. Possibly queer sir. He was out of town, no he can't prove it. Oh yes, don't worry sir. The search? No. Nothing. The army search revealed nothing either. No, they've finished. The town is very upset. No witnesses... I've never had a case where there is so little evidence, and no one saw anything. No. I don't think we're at a dead end yet. Interview everyone again. Yes. No. Thankyou sir.'

He had put the phone down with relief and annoyance. Even to Spark's ears the conversation seemed punctuated with too much 'no' and 'nothing', and he felt a wave of self-pity. He could not conjure up crims from thin air, and the air in this town was bloody thin. Two thousand feet, wasn't it? Perhaps his brain was starved and working slower. It was a lousy way to begin a new promotion, and failure was not a category he tolerated. It was bad enough with Mary and the kids, but at least he was a good cop. He had no doubts about that, his armour of self-assurance had not been dented.

However when Spark jotted down an immediate list of suspects, he was depressed by them: Chad Jago, Rosie Hilton, Gordon Micklethwaite, that farmhand...

He unconsciously started clicking his finger joints, a mannerism that came on him when he was feeling tense. None seemed likely, two had an alibi, including Chad, who was mad anyway. Micklethwaite had no clear alibi and the Detective Inspector drew spirals that closed in on themselves, and pondered why Micklethwaite would have killed Emerald? Motive may be unimportant, the sexual aspect was probably enough in this case. Micklethwaite knew Emerald, he'd forgotten that, and when you considered it, there were very few other people who did know Emerald. What had Micklethwaite said at the interview?

Spark felt the prickling of possibilities here. He had been put off by Reilly, who blandly said that Micklethwaite was 'not the type', 'like Chad Jago' Spark had sneered, but despite himself Spark had in some sense accepted Reilly's verdict. He was the local expert after all, but Micklethwaite was not local. Reilly would know no more about Micklethwaite's character than he would about a bar of soap. He should have interviewed Gordon Micklethwaite more carefully, and Spark wrote down the times of approximate death against Micklethwaite's stated times. With some tweaking, the bastard had time...

He pushed a buzzer. Constable Thornton came in with a notepad.

‘Get hold of Gordon Micklethwaite again can you, Jessica? I want another talk with him’.

‘Yes sir’ and he stared at her retreating trim figure.

What was it about uniforms, and black stockings?

‘Tonight sir?’ asked Constable Thornton from the doorway.

Spark looked at the clock, 5.50 pm. Besides, he had an appointment.

‘No. In the morning, but sharp. Make it 8’.

Most people were surprisingly out of sorts at that time of the morning, and it was in Spark’s experience a very good time to grill.

At seven that evening Micklethwaite got out of bed, put some more logs in the burner and pulled on his jacket. The evening was calm, with the wind backed down and the lake glowing with soft autumn light. He had spent all day tucked away at home, true he had a cold to justify himself, but Micklethwaite also felt he was just trying to keep out of people’s way. There was a good walking track along the lakeside, between the town shops and the water’s edge and it was popular in the evening with joggers and old ladies exercising their fat little dogs. It was almost dusk at the stone church but there was still a tour bus with Japanese gaggling around it. The church never seemed to get a moment’s peace to itself. A tourist was stroking the bronze sheep dog and Micklethwaite hurried on by, feeling pleased at getting away from the bach. He should have done this earlier.

By the time he got to the pine trees at the far end of town it was really dark and he retraced his steps along the lake frontage. Many of the houses here were empty most of the year. Only a few places had lights on, and the tour bus was gone. There were few street-lights along the lakeside, and some of those were not working. Without the moon to illuminate it the church looked like a large rock, or a stone hut.

There was a muffled loud stereo booming from a Cortina in the carpark, one of those souped-up ones with mag wheels and half-tinted windscreen. Micklethwaite stopped to look at the church when he immediately became uneasy. The three people in the car were approaching him, he could see they were teenagers. Although he was not scared his hands clenched.

‘Look here then here’s the history queer...’

‘Yer like the church eh mate? Yer like little girls too?’

‘What are you talking ab...’

The lead man suddenly pushed Micklethwaite back with his hands, a strong push that threw Micklethwaite off balance. It was all happening in seconds.

‘We don’t need bloody queers here. Stuff off mate’.

The second man had come around to Micklethwaite’s side and gave him a shove too. He was pushed back to the church steps. The carpark seemed ominously empty and dark, and Micklethwaite momentarily wished for a Japanese tour bus. Where were

they when you needed them? The attack seemed to come out of the night itself, like some malevolent fairy spirits. If he ran, he could probably out run them, but he was also consumed with a sense of irritated outrage.

‘What’s your problem?’

‘No bloody problem mate. He’s a slimy ponce eh.’

‘Bloody queer I told yer Nick’ shouted the second one as if trying to work up his rage.

Micklethwaite felt a punch land on his chest, and he was surprised at how little it hurt. It was aimed at his chin, but he had moved backwards and tripped over the church steps. Another kid gave him a kick and he rolled to one side as the third yelled and gave him an obligatory kick. If he could just get to feet... Then the leading man swung a bottle hard at Micklethwaite’s head and it was no skill on Micklethwaite’s part that the bottle missed, the guy just had a lousy aim. The bottle smashed loudly and someone said something rather conversationally, and sarcastically.

‘You don’t kill people by missing them you know. They don’t give you a second chance.’

If Jim Jago was impressive calm, he was awesome when roused. His voice was quiet, gravelled and disgusted, and the three teens seemed completely taken aback at his emergence from the murky night.

‘Little sods. I went to your parents weddings. Drank toasts when you were squalling at your christenings, so bugger off. Learn some courtesy. I’ll not have my guest threatened’.

They were already slinking away like black cats into the night. They were not as drunk as they had pretended, at least not drunk enough to challenge Jim Jago. He growled after them.

‘You tell the gossips that Mr Micklethwaite was down on Haka station this week, and has got Charlie Jeffs word on that. Get going lads. Now’.

They were gone, and in a defiant squeal of tyres the Cortina accelerated off. Jim Jago watched impassively.

‘Young enough to be stupid’.

He brushed away the broken glass with his foot. He seemed rather unconcerned, as if light-hearted community beatings were an everyday occurrence.

‘I’ll chat to their dads tomorrow’.

He sort of laughed, which offended Micklethwaite.

‘Their parents are scared. They talk, the kids take a pointer from their dad’s anger and off they go into the night. Wrong place at the wrong time. How’s yer head?’

‘They missed it’.

But Micklethwaite's ribs felt sore, and sort of scrunched up.

'If he hadn't, he'd be in police hands now, and you'd be news'.

Micklethwaite was recovering some of his composure, noting that Jim Jago had not lost his. They walked around to the back of the church facing the lake.

'Having a pipe'.

Jim Jago tended to say less words than more, even to the point of eliminating some syntax.

'Thanks. I guess I was lucky you were here'.

Jim leaned close to his pipe and the match flared on his beefy face. He puffed quickly and the air became full of rich tobacco scent. Micklethwaite sat down on a rock and practiced breathing deeply to calm himself.

It puzzled him, but the attack was not unexpected. Something blowing in the wind had warned him that in such a stressed town any stranger could feel himself at risk. The nastiness of Emerald's death betrayed the cosy image of Tekapo, and made the town well-known for all the wrong reasons. Anger was the cork from this bubbling, fizzing mixture.

He breathed more slowly. The lake water was almost still, although some water-birds were clattering away nearby. Neither spoke for a few minutes.

'Bad business all right' reflected Jim.

Micklethwaite was not sure if he meant Emerald's murder, or his being beaten up.

'Small town like this, can't really take it. Taints a town...'

'But why blame me...?'

'You're easy. Out of town. Not a regular, it might be you for all I know'.

Micklethwaite had been thinking that. Jim Jago could not really be sure that Micklethwaite had been away, so he must have interrupted the beating because he wanted it stopped.

'Thanks'.

Jago did not look at Micklethwaite but he seemed to be smiling, or perhaps it was a grimace.

'You've done most of the huts?'

'A couple to go, and some other ruins to check. I'm still trying to finish by June, but...'

'Lost interest?'

'No. No, it's just...'

Well it's bloody obvious really thought Micklethwaite. He sucked in his annoyance and said the wrong thing.

‘I want to go to the wish hut again if that’s all right’

Jim Jago looked at him and Micklethwaite noted how deep the eyes were. They reminded him of that portrait of Mackenzie.

‘Eh lad? You keep away from that place, and stop meddling... oh, that hut, Wisht Hut you mean’.

There was a plain look of savagery in Jim Jago’s eyes, then they relaxed as he realised his mistake. He growled again.

‘Oh, sure, anytime, well, I should rattle me dags. Dot will be wondering’.

Both stood up and faced the lake. The conversation, such as it was, was over, although there was a short test of who would out-silence who the longest. Surprisingly, again, Micklethwaite lost.

At one side of Lake Tekapo there was a flickering fire, perhaps three or so kilometres away across the water. It seemed to get larger, and it occurred to Micklethwaite with an uneasy stomachy feeling that the fire was close to where Chad Jago lived. There was a clear spurt of flame and a muffled thud came across the lake as if a gas canister had blown up.

‘Is that Chad’s place?’ Micklethwaite asked quietly.

Jago knocked out his pipe on the rock. It sounded flat and hard.

‘The clowns are active tonight’ and Jim Jago strode off into the night.

Chapter 13

Half Light

13 May, Friday

At 8 am Micklethwaite was again sitting in the police shop, watching Constable Thornton's loose hair interfering with her work, and interfering in his thoughts. He did not know why he had been summoned but it was not unexpected. He had not slept well. Every rustle of a hedgehog woke him, and two cats having a barney made him shout at them in frustration. He wondered if the toughs would come back, and half-expected a brick through a window. He was so on edge that he even drove the car down to the shops, instead of taking the five minute walk. The police were bustling around, looking stern and important. The attack on Chad Jago's caravan had been a wake-up call to them and Spark was snapping words away into the phone. He was not a good morning person at the best of times, and last night's events had already occasioned a bad attack of nerves. He was not getting anywhere. Time to grill Mr Micklethwaite. Constable Thornton's phone rang and she answered it and turned to Micklethwaite.

'Mr Micklethwaite' she smiled 'we can go in now to Detective Inspector Spark's office'.

Micklethwaite thought it was rather pretentious of Spark to make the constable get up and open the door, when he could do it more quickly himself. Must be the privilege of rank. Spark opened the attack briskly, and could not help showing off.

'So you had a run in with the local hoons Gordon'.

Micklethwaite nodded. How did Spark know, unless Jim Jago talked to him?

'Did they burn Chad's caravan?'

'Completely. A wreck. Finished. Kaput. Mr Jago has shifted to a motel'.

'What about Chad? Was he hurt?'

'Fortunately no. His brother said that Charles Jago was mowing the golf course'.

'At night?'

'It's his habit apparently'.

Pretty weird but Spark was getting used to Chad's weirdness by now.

‘Did they burn the stone hut as well?’

‘Ah yes, your research project. No, it’s ok’.

Now that was interesting thought Micklethwaite, but he did not have time to think about this.

‘But I did not invite you here Gordon to talk about Chad Jago’s problems, or your problems for that matter...’

‘Did you find them?’

‘Pardon?’

‘The people that threatened me last night?’

‘The police will deal with that, at the moment I’m concerned about your times...’

‘But I was threatened in the middle of Tekapo. Half the town’s full of police...’

Spark was irritated.

‘This is a murder inquiry Mr Micklethwaite. A very nasty murder inquiry. We are working to a system. You are a suspect’.

Now he had not intended to say that, in fact he thought it was a bad practice. But he felt rattled, and somewhat out of balance by Micklethwaite’s insistence. Besides, he was not a morning person, as he slurped at his cold coffee. Whose bloody idea was it to have an interview at 8 am?

Micklethwaite was silent. Of course he had known he was a suspect but when Spark said it the full impact sank in. Sergeant Reilly slipped in the door and Constable Thornton smiled and eased out.

‘Your times allow the possibility that you were in Tekapo at three to four that afternoon. No one saw you. We do not know when you got to Haka Station. You knew Emerald Bilton, in fact you are one of the few men in town that did know her. We talked to Mungo Davis. He said there’s no stone hut near Hakataramea Pass, and does not know why you would look there. He said there was a ruin near Mackenzie Pass.’

Spark was enjoying himself and felt in control.

‘The inference is that you told us about this other stone hut on Hakataramea Pass to explain away a lost hour or so. We checked the map. It does not take that long to get to Haka Station, at least not the three hours you claimed. One hour, perhaps an hour and a half at the most. Where were you really Mr Micklethwaite?’

Reilly coughed.

‘Sir...’

Micklethwaite reiterated. Angrily, he could not believe that Spark was so stupid.

‘I was at Haka Station. I left here, Tekapo, at 1 o’clock, or thereabouts and went

over Hakataramea Pass that afternoon’.

‘Your words. Prove it’.

‘Sir...’

‘Yes Reilly?’

This was Spark’s way of saying shut up Reilly. He felt good now. The second cup of coffee was doing the trick and Micklethwaite looked red and uncomfortable.

‘I talked to a station hand out at Hakataramea Pass sir. George Hudd. He works from Ben Duig station, reckoned he was mustering that day. Reckoned he saw a Hillman Hunter on the road...’

This was bad news for Spark. He did not say ‘what’ or ‘bugger off’ or most of what he was inclined to say, but stared viciously at Reilly. Sergeant Reilly looked as blandly composed as ever.

‘He was mustering sheep along the road to meet a stock truck at the yards there. Said he remembered it ‘cos it was the only car he saw all day’.

Spark tried to recover, but Micklethwaite beat him to it.

‘I remember now. There was a man mustering, about mid-afternoon I suppose..’

‘Oh you remember now, Mr Micklethwaite. How come you did not remember before? You forgot I suppose. That great brain was rather full?’

Actually Micklethwaite had forgotten, and sometimes he did think his brain was over full. He stayed silent. Spark was getting very annoyed, and started to click his finger-joints. It reminded Reilly of someone else.

‘What time though? Reilly, did you get any accurate time?’

Translated this meant, are you sure you know what you’re bloody well talking about Reilly? The Sergeant dug the knife into Spark just a little bit deeper. It was a delicious moment.

‘Well George Hudd said he was meeting the truck at the yards at one thirty, but he was running late. Reckons it was closer to two, because the truckie told him off.’

Two o’clock. It was too late thought Spark bitterly, unless, a hope suddenly spurted up ...

‘What time did they leave?’

Reilly had judged it beautifully, and sliced apart Spark’s last faint hope.

‘They took at least two hours to load, apparently they were a skittish lot. The stock truck left about four. They didn’t see anyone else, apart from the sheep of course’.

Reilly kept a helpful look on his face, but he could not help the inner chuckles that were welling up. That should make Spark look a right prat, wait ‘til he told the boys

this.

He knew nothing much moved on Hakataramea Pass road that George would miss, and Ben Duig station ran along both sides of the road. He spent two hours yesterday tracking down George Hudd just for this moment. He'd got a verse out of it too, something the shepherd had said, and he ran it through his mind again as the silence in the interview room deepened.

*The wind was tossing through the wethers,
Stirring up the flighty lot of beggars.
The shepherd swore and cursed his luck,
It took two hours to load the truck'.*

Spark controlled himself.

'Thank you Sergeant Reilly?'

This really meant 'sod off' Reilly. So Reilly sodded off, and Spark waved his hand at Micklethwaite in a plain dismissive gesture. After the door closed Spark smashed his fist down hard on the table, and the pens jumped onto the floor.

He knew full well that Sergeant Reilly had set him up, set him up to fail, and he was bloody well not going to fail. At every turn he was being baulked. He still could not get access to Rosie Hilton, the doctors refused him. There were no witnesses to anything. No forensic clues. Usually there was something to work on, for most murders are committed in haste, and leave a lot of messy substances behind. But here, the hard dry autumn ground was as blank as a new born baby. Tabula rasa. And the absence of people in the district was a profound handicap. Spark had never encountered this problem before. Usually there was too much people data, conflicting statements, cross-overs, time errors, someone heard this, someone saw that — but when you do not even have a someone?

Spark often theoretically imagined himself committing a murder, and found it helped to see the thinking and logic behind the act. How would he do it? How would he cover his tracks? Provide an alibi? What reasons justified it and what reasons prevented it. His experience on several murder teams had shown categorically that if you wish to commit murder do it in the outside, on a farm, or a lonely road. Do it well away from people and habitations. Hitch-hiker murders, or the killing of a recluse in the back-blocks were invariably the hardest to solve. In fact in New Zealand there was a steady list of such unsolved back-country crimes. The implication of this was that many of the murders were random, spur of the moment affairs, which brought him back into completing a depressing mental circle. As he had said so glibly the other day, people wanted results. The superintendent was nagging him for results and he had two journalists waiting to interview him, and what was he going to say? We are making solid progress, there is an immense amount of data to correlate, there will be no quick solutions...

It was as if every door was closing on him, although, here he paused in his mental rant. He knew one door that might open, and it might open again tonight, and he

stared at the concrete wall. He slowly picked up the pens from the floor. They had talked intimately last night, she had a fresh open laugh, and lovely hair. If his marriage was to fail he might as well do it properly. He clicked his fingers and stared at the wall.

Down at the lakeside it was a relief for Micklethwaite to get away. He walked a few minutes to calm himself down, then got petrol for Hilly, and the garage man seemed friendly again. Perhaps Jim Jago had already got the word out? He was not quite sure what that interview had been about, or why he had lied. There was no actual stone hut near Hakataramea Pass, he knew that, but how can you explain to someone that you just sat in the car for two hours, drinking in the view and thinking? No one believed him when he said he enjoyed thinking, so he had to make up feeble excuses. Micklethwaite was also vexed about even the fact he had been considered a suspect. His life so far had been an untrammelled progress of decency and respectability, and where had it got him? If you were in the wrong place at the wrong time — tough. You got beaten up. You got questioned. A life of innocence was no protection against the suspicion of small communities and small minds.

At three o'clock that afternoon the internal and external strain of life in Tekapo was getting to Micklethwaite and he went out for a drive, which he told himself was unplanned and random, yet he found himself steering along the road to Goonhilly Downs station, turning into the discreet side-road and following it up to the door of the little church. He knew some of the answers lay here, and he had temporarily abandoned his work on the stone huts, and had mentally switched from being a historian to a detective. Actually, he realised, there was very little difference.

Long shafts of light had broken through the cloud canopy and it seemed as if they were pathways to some skylit heaven. The wind of the lake was cold and edgy, and the church looked smaller than when he had last seen it. Two swallows were darting about. He quickly located the sheel-na-gig again, and it looked smaller and less offensive. Today it looked like a joke and he started to draw it.

Abruptly the church door opened from within and Micklethwaite retreated a few steps as Dorothy Jago bustled out with a bunch of dead flowers in one hand, and clippers in the other.

‘Why Gordon? A surprise... that poor, poor girl’.

Dorothy’s thoughts had obviously jumped quickly to the foremost pre-occupation on everyone’s mind.

‘You knew her didn’t you?’ she asked gently.

‘Yes’.

Micklethwaite still could not easily look at that mask.

The late sun had touched the front porch like angel dust and high-lighted their figures, throwing the shadows blackly against the white weatherboard walls. If a stage hand had suddenly turned the light on the main characters on stage, the effect could not have been more theatrical. It lasted only a minute and Micklethwaite was pleased

when the light switched off. It glinted weirdly off Dorothy's plastic face.

'I do the flowers every week, or twice a week. But they last longer in winter, which is fortunate because I have less flowers to pick'.

Micklethwaite wondered who the congregation was who would appreciate this kind act, or perhaps it was just her way of filling out the long days. She started pulling at some weeds that were escaping out of the concrete and Micklethwaite sensed she was off-balance, not quite in control.

'We get station people from up-valley at our little church. It's non-denominational, although in practice it is Anglican. This Sunday it is the turn of the Friends, do you remember? Society of Friends, 10 o'clock. You can come? Of course it's not entirely proper to meet in a church but I've moved the pews around in a circle'.

She looked hopefully at Micklethwaite, who of course, had forgotten, and felt himself trapped into an acquiescing nod. Dorothy moved the conversation into high gear.

'Do you believe in God?'

He shook his head.

'Well that's the easier way I think. I wonder if murderers should believe in God?'

Micklethwaite pointed out the Celtic swirl of animals around the portal.

'You are rather non-denominational'.

She giggled.

'Yes, there was a visiting Anglican priest from Timaru and he was horrified. He had no sense of humour of course, I think the theological college beats it out of them. The catholic priest from Fairlie on the other hand, Father Reilly, he laughed'.

'Is that any relation with Sergeant Reilly?'

'A cousin I think'.

'Did he laugh at the sheel-na-gig?' asked Micklethwaite pushing his luck.

She followed his eyes and in the acute silence that followed she suddenly sprung out the reason why it was there.

'Oh, so that's what you're drawing. It's good, you have a talent Gordon. It's a fertility symbol of sorts, an old Celtic one, creating and destroying, isn't that what we humans do best...' her voice dimmed, then brightened briskly 'you find them on English churches still, for Christianity is not very useful at providing such things. I mean the Virgin Mary as a sex symbol? I'm surprised you know the Celtic name. Some people just call it a goblin, or an imp, but I have become rather fond of it. Poor wee thing tucked away in the corner there...'

Her voice was lost in a small trough and then the wave crest came through.

‘My husband is quite superstitious you see, he thought it might help’.

‘You’re not superstitious Dorothy?’

It was an abrupt question that received no answer.

The strong light had gone and had been replaced by a general darkness. He should go soon, the car battery was almost flat and would not run to lights. Across from the church a horse whinnied, and they both looked at it. Her thoughts seemed to be flicking back and forth like the swallows that darted under the eaves of the church, not settling anywhere.

‘I’ve always liked horses, yes, even now. I like horses more than God I think. Are you an atheist?’

It was as if she was speaking to herself, and expected no answer. There seemed to be a confused relationship in Dorothy Jago’s mind between horses, children and God.

‘Just one horse-ride, you must have wanted to know surely? About my face? You asked me before and I did not say.’

Micklethwaite was hardly breathing. Words so often prevented speech, silence seemed to excite it.

‘It was midsummer’s eve, warm, magical. Charles and I went riding out on the river bed. I had an old musterers hack, and the stirrup was just a piece of broken rope. Charles tied on a makeshift stirrup but the horse bolted and the stirrup slipped up my leg, and twisted as I fell. I was dragged a hundred yards on my face before the stocking broke. Simple really. My face was torn off.’

In the gloom Dorothy spoke, as if propelled by Micklethwaite’s silence into explaining herself.

‘I was barren after the accident. We tried very hard to have children, but doesn’t that sound peculiar. I mean we enjoyed the trying, it was the failing we did not enjoy’.

Micklethwaite felt mesmerised by the poor women’s confession. He could not pull away.

‘That poor child. I wanted children so badly, and children love you for what you are inside. I’ve lived a life without choice Gordon. All my choices were made for me on that day. My sexual functions, my fertility, my social needs — all destroyed’.

Her voice was matter of fact, and she said ‘goodbye’ with a softness that belied the bleak subject matter, and he watched her walk away. An animated dot under the shadows of dark macrocarpa.

He managed to drive home without lights, although he turned them on in town. There were at least five police cars lined up outside the inquiry headquarters, and he glimpsed several uniforms in the Chinese restaurant. The pub carpark was full, and

Micklethwaite vaguely recalled the All Blacks were up against the 'boks, and live on big screen satellite television. He was not tempted, and knew he would be out of place. Probably the local lads were there, and the cops. Back at the bach he stoked up the wood-burner and boiled the jug.

He wanted to think.

If Rosie is Chad's daughter, who was Emerald's father? The incest theme kept playing in his head, but was Rosie really Chad's daughter? In fact, when Chad said to him last week, that 'she's my daughter' was he referring to Rosie or Emerald? Micklethwaite could not see any obvious resemblance between Chad and Rosie, but there was thick layer of life on top of Rosie that rather hid her original soul.

Was it strange that Chad was in a motel? Why not shift into the stone hut? Did Chad really believe in a Token that inhabited the hut?

After two pots of tea Micklethwaite was still struggling with various threads that were tangling in his mind, and his thoughts jumped about. If Spark could play detective in real life there was no good reason why he could not do the same. Micklethwaite momentarily felt sympathy for him: Spark was rapidly losing his options, as well as his wife so he'd heard. Two constables had been gossiping in the police ante-room whilst Micklethwaite had waited and listened. Well it was none of his business, but it amazed him how people can handle chaos in one part of their life, whilst the other side was well-organised. Spark had good discipline, but not enough imagination. Probably in 99% of police cases imagination was not needed, it was just leg-work and hard slog, but Micklethwaite knew in his bones that this murder was different — though he could see the case from Spark's point of view. He would make a good suspect, and detected the rage under Spark's thin moustache as Reilly methodically closed one door after another on him. That surely was not a coincidence.

Why didn't Chad stay in the Jago household anyway? They had plenty of rooms, and he would be safer. And why did Jim get so mad momentarily, when he thought Micklethwaite had said 'wish' instead of 'wisht'. 'Stop meddling' he said, but what was he meddling in? His questions brought him back to the Jago's again, as they always did. Micklethwaite wrote down some suppositions.

Dorothy's life ended in 1946.

Charles or Chad had caused it.

Jim was superstitious.

So was Chad.

Dorothy attended to several different kinds of God.

There was the Wish House.

Wisht was a Cornish word that meant melancholy.

Emerald was dead.

Dorothy was dragged by a horse.

Chad and Jim did not get on.

Oh God.

At eleven he gave up. His brain ached, and yet it continued chugging on. It reminded him of how his Hillman Hunter kept running even after the ignition was turned off. As Roger had explained, it was all the carbon deposits on top of the cylinders that were still igniting. His brain must be full of carbon deposits. He was struck by a thought: it was not that the events in themselves that did not appear to make any sense, but that he could not make sense out of them. He liked that idea, and wrote it down in his notebook. He then thought of Vicki, he'd seen her light on twice as late as this — and suddenly Micklethwaite felt lonely.

He struggled on his parka and walked down the street. It would be good to have a milo and a chat. It would not be anything more than that, well not with a Christian. The cottage was round the back, and Micklethwaite slipped down the side of the old schoolhouse and then lost confidence as he approached the cottage door. Perhaps this was not such a good idea, it was late. He would be seeing her next week anyway. There was a light on in the window and no curtain drawn.

He stared. The top half of Vicki Smith was visible and back-lighted. She was naked. In the light her breasts looked plump and gorgeous, and her back arched slightly, lifting her nipples up and forwards. She seemed to be doing some sort of rhythmic exercise, and although the decent thing would be to walk away, Micklethwaite did not choose to do so. He was fascinated, they looked a good ripe handful. Then two hands reached out and picked the fruit for him, and Vicki disappeared eagerly from sight.

Micklethwaite turned away, and in embarrassment and jealousy he realised that he knew perfectly well who those hands belong to. Detective Inspector Vincent Spark had found some consolation away from his empty marriage.

Chapter 16

Two and Two

14 May, Saturday

He'd broken several rules, some of them official, some of them private, and he shouldn't have taken that girl.

She was ripe for it, any man could see that, and he had never had another woman except his wife, and he and Mary had not slept together for years, things were that bad. It was sweet, damn sweet. He was risking his reputation if anyone found out, although she was hardly a girl, and a woman who he could naturally expect to be attracted to — but you don't shag people involved in a case, it was that simple. An old cop had told him that. Said how easy it could be to get started, and bloody difficult to finish. Fortunately she was not a witness, and did not seem to have much involvement in the case, but it was a small town, everyone was involved with each other somehow. He was running a risk, a bloody stupid risk. He was newly promoted and shouldn't be taking these kinds of professional chances. Spark pencilled a note on the memo in front of him which said 'stop it now', which he quickly crumpled up and threw in the bin. He wanted her again.

He hated this room, with no windows to look out of. His motel room was not much better and he had already decided that if he was in for the long haul he should look at renting a bach.

She had given herself so easily. One night of chat and another of bliss. He'd been wasting his good looks in a rotten marriage when there were dozens of women out there for the taking. A single friend of his had stated emphatically that any single woman over thirty was desperate for a mate. They are terrified, he explained, of being left on the shelf. They'll take the risks, so don't worry about the 'young 'uns, concentrate your forces on the oldies'.

The phone rang and Spark grabbed the opportunity to put his mind on other matters — except it was bad news. They needed two of his detectives immediately in Christchurch for a rape inquiry. It was as if they were stripping away his resources, expecting his failure before he had even failed. He chucked the phone down in an even worse temper, and went out for a run. Tekapo was too small a town to do a decent lap, so Spark was well along the Lilybank road before he turned around. With two half marathons under his belt he was keen to try a full race, and the exercise gave him a longer buzz than sex — which was something to think about. Back at the boring motel he showered, changed and walked down to the inquiry centre,

feeling a tad better, but then he noticed that journalist's car had gone, chasing better news, and that depressed him. Sergeant Reilly's supposition that the murderer was a casual passer-by was beginning to gain momentum, much as he hated that idea. There seemed no other choice.

He looked through the autopsy sheet again. Nothing there. He had read it over and over, looking for some clue, a scrap of hope. As a murder weapon the stocking was perhaps a little unusual. The report stated that it had very little wear, yet it was of a rather old-fashioned style. Spark had quizzed the forensic boys about this. Did it show signs of having lain around the picnic area for long? They were not prepared to comment, so it was going up to Wellington for more detailed examination. Perhaps there was blood, or microscopic hairs caught in the weave that were not revealed by the ordinary tests. It was bloody frustrating. At least he had forced some progress on the doctor at Tekapo country hospital.

'Was Rosie Hilton ready for more questioning?' he asked the doctor.

There was a sort of pompous harrumphing sound down the other end of the phone.

'She is still very weak, she lost a lot of blood, and frankly...'

'Doctor, I do not care how much blood she lost. The life blood was squeezed from that little girl, and we need to talk to her mother.'

It was a Sharpian analogy, pithy and pointless.

'I really must say no...'

'You are not in a position to say no any more. This is a police inquiry. We work to a system. I will be interviewing her again this afternoon at 2 pm in the hospital, and your presence will not be welcome'.

'I will protest to the medical council about your attitude Detective Inspector'.

'Obstructing the course of justice is an offence, doctor. So is interfering in a policeman's duty. Good day'.

Phone down, and feeling pleased for the first time, Spark sent Constable Thornton to confirm the time with the doctor and Rosie Hilton.

'Make sure he doesn't get any drugs or sedatives from that quack, Jessica. I want her as compus mentas as possible'.

He watched Constable Thornton legs as she walked out daintily and his eyes were still around ground level when rather fatter legs walked in.

'You wanted me sir' asked Sergeant Reilly.

'Yes Reilly. I'm sick of my motel room, can you get me a bach to live in? Something with a bit more space, a view. More like a home'.

Reilly pondered.

'Might be hard getting hold of some of the owners in winter sir, they mostly live out of town' but sensing Spark's impatience, added 'I've got a farmer mate, he

rents out one or two places. I'll try him today sir. Here's the original file on Chad Jago sir. The 1955 case. Plus his Sunnyside record'.

'You're getting a bit plump Reilly' observed Spark 'do you pass the fitness tests?'

It was hard to answer that question.

'I get by sir'.

'A policeman should be fit I think. Perhaps you would enjoy a run with me?'

'Well sir...'

'Good. Tomorrow morning. I'll enjoy that'.

Bloody hell, thought Reilly as he went out into the main room, the bastard's getting back at me. The only exercise Reilly got was operating the lever on his Lazy Boy chair. His wife often nagged him on the lines of 'you watch all those fit people running around on tv etc'. He sat down in his desk and pulled out a sheet of paper. He was trying to find a rhyme to go with 'love'. It was really difficult.

Spark read the notes on Charles Jago carefully, particularly the defence offered. He had never come across the word 'changeling' before and decided that Charles was already as mad as a meat axe then. What a bizarre defence. He was trying to beat away the fairy child in order to get back the real one. Was he trying to do the same with Emerald? There was also a psychiatrist's report from Sunnyside on Jago. He had been sent there for examination after the trial, and had spent quite a bit of time there since.

'This case has some unusual elements, for Charles Bude Jago seems quite certain of the reality of his claims. He appears to inhabit a world of spirits and beings quite foreign to our notion, although they do not appear to constitute a religious belief in that sense. He believes in a Christian God and a medieval spirit world quite coherently, and sees no contradiction between these different belief systems'.

At this point the psychiatrist began to get technical and Spark flicked through with less interest. At the back was a list of Jago's admissions, a long one, but he never seemed to spend any great period of time at Sunnyside, but he had been there as recently as 1986. The admissions appeared to be for some sort of mental paralysis. The diagnosis made little sense to Spark but he understood that Jago got mentally seized up and unable to do basic functions for a while. He had been treated with drugs, and ECG (was that electric shock treatment?) with mixed success. His periods of paralysis rarely lasted long, but always seemed to re-appear. He had not been in prison and was not considered dangerous.

Spark threw the report down and scoffed. The number of times he had read psychiatrist reports on murderers, rapists, arsonists who were 'not considered dangerous'. These people were bloody clever. He would have to get Charles Jago in again. Vicki seemed to know something about the changeling business, oh that was silly thinking of her. He looked through the concrete as if it were an imaginary window and positioned Vicki in the frame. He wanted her.

At two o'clock he, Constable Thornton and Sergeant Reilly entered Rosie Hilton's room. She looked terrible.

She was propped up with pillows and looked shrunken amongst the blankets. The sun poured in from the French doors, that lead onto the garden, but there was little warmth from it. The room was fuggy with the radiators, and stank of disinfectant. All the orange dye in Rosie's hair had washed out and there was a lot of grey visible. Her skin was thick with lines, and her eyes sagged under the weight of sorrow.

Spark did have some sympathy. It must be horrible to lose your child, and he had enough imagination to realise how destructive of hope that must be. But he still had a job to do.

The doctor had followed them in with some flapping of the arms but Spark quite quickly dealt to him. Constable Thornton closed the door behind the doctor and Spark seated himself beside Rosie. There was a lot of stuff to get through, and on his lap was the thick folder that traced the generous career of Rosie Hilton.

'Rosie. I have interviewed you once, before you attempted suicide. How are you feeling?'

She looked blankly at him. Ok, not a great start.

'Your real name is Gaylene Bilton. Why didn't you tell us that?'

Rosie looked away. Spark repeated the question.

'Dunno'.

'Your record is considerable. Smuggling five grams of heroin in 1975. You got three years for that. Resisting arrest before that. There's two charges of prostitution, and one of theft from an employer. Driving drunk twice, unregistered driver three times, two assaults at a nightclub, you were a bouncer I think. You were a drug addict for a while. Been in a detox unit, twice. Why didn't you tell us your real name?'

'I thought you were trying to get Emmies killer, not me'.

'We are, but we need to be assured that you are speaking the truth. Why did you come to Tekapo?'

'I told yer' Rosie sounded tired, 'Chad offered me a house'.

'So? There's houses in Christchurch, why come here? It's hardly a happening place.'

How could she explain to this cop. It was her last real chance in life. She had mucked up everything and this was as good a way as any to get away from her druggie friends and marginal relatives. She did it for Emerald. Now Emerald was shattered. She started to cry. Spark looked uncomfortable and motioned to Constable Thornton to sit by Rosie as she broke into loud sobs. The young constable took Rosie's hand, and surprisingly Rosie gripped it strongly.

'You bastards don't understand. Stop talking to me and get the killer'.

‘We need your help Gaylene’.

‘My name’s Rosie now, I never liked Gaylene’.

Rosie mopped her face with the hospital blanket and straightened herself up.

‘If we don’t get this child killer he might kill again. When did you meet Charles Jago?’

She looked suspicious.

‘Chad you mean? In town’.

‘Christchurch?’

‘Yeah’.

‘When, last year?’

‘Yeah’.

‘Whereabouts?’

‘He’s done nothing. He’s had a hard life, leave him alone’.

Spark decided it was time to get mean.

‘Rosie, Charles Jago was prosecuted for abusing his child in 1955. Did you know that?’

She looked scared.

‘He beat his child, there was bruising on her body. Did Charles Jago beat Emerald?’

‘No’.

It was quite defiant, but her eyes seemed to have lost contact with the room and were floating around in some inner mental space.

‘Rosie, Chad Jago was seen on the lake in his rowboat in the early afternoon, but you claimed that he was with you all that afternoon. Can you explain that?’

She obviously did not want to. That sighting had been one the rare bits of luck in this case, but she was not responding, unless hatred from her eyes was a response. Hell, she could have killed Emerald herself, she had a bad enough temper.

‘What was your relationship with Charles Jago? Were you lovers?’

‘Don’t be bloody silly cop boy. He was over sixty’.

Spark did not like being called ‘cop boy’ but at least he was getting a response, getting under her skin.

‘Were you his daughter?’

‘Don’t be stupid’.

‘You sure? Chad often referred to you as his daughter, several Tekapo people have

confirmed that, he said ‘she’s my daughter’, ‘my daughter’s coming to town’. What did he mean?’

She shook her head again.

‘Ask ‘im’.

‘Who is Emerald’s father?’

‘None of your bloody business. What does it matter anyway’.

Rosie began to get angry, and the words came jerking out.

‘You leave Chad alone. He’s a good man, a good mate. Best I’ve had. Em loved him too. Real gentle. Why can’t you bastards get Emmie’s killer. She’s bloody dead yer know. Bloody dead’.

She was almost screaming now and Constable Thornton looked alarmed. The nurse came rushing in and effectively ended the interview, such as it was. Yet Spark emerged feeling triumphant. Her defensiveness, her manner, her lies, all pointed to the simple truth that she was hiding something. He chatted to Reilly as they went outside.

‘I think she’s protecting Charles Jago. She did not know about the court case’.

Sergeant Reilly felt like landing a good square punch on Spark’s nose. Perhaps the bastard might be right after all. Spark got into the car, Constable Thornton was in the driver’s seat, and it pulled her skirt up revealing more of her nice black stockings, but for once Spark was not looking. He turned to Reilly again.

‘Bring Charles Jago in Reilly. Only Rosie confirms Jago’s location, and she’s lying, we know that. Why should she protect him, except...’

A wayward thought came into Spark’s head.

‘Unless Emerald is his daughter? Is that possible?’

He asked the question to the thin afternoon air. Reilly demurred.

‘She didn’t say anything definite sir’.

‘No, but she did not deny much either. Think about it Sergeant Reilly. I took your advice too readily, why couldn’t Charles Jago have murdered Emerald Bilton? He knew the kid. You know what the autopsy said? There was no real violence shown, hardly any strength used. He is not a strong man. He would know her movements...’

‘But why, sir?’

Constable Thornton had been thinking too.

‘He’s mad. Sick. Sick sexually’ replied Spark bluntly.

‘Do you think Emerald is his daughter sir?’

Spark smiled his most winning smile at the earnest Constable Thornton.

‘I’ll consider that. It’s possible, but I do not think that Gaylene Bilton is Charles Jago’s daughter. We need to see Emerald’s birth certificate Reilly, get onto it. Gaylene Bilton has a father, I’ve already met him. He’s done time, of course, like his daughter. It took me a while to make the connection, and she changed her name to sound like an upmarket hotel. I suppose that’s logical, I mean you would not choose a down-market one would you? Crime is one of the arguments for eugenics Jessica’.

‘Pardon sir?’ she looked puzzled.

‘Eugenics, the science of controlling populations by manipulating who breeds and who does not. Criminals invariably have criminal families. Stop a criminal from breeding and you might stop a good deal of crime’.

She looked uncertain about this idea. He could not resist teasing, she blushed so beautifully.

‘You of course Jessica come from a perfectly respectable background, and so would be encouraged to breed remorselessly. No time for police-work. Under the eugenic system you’d be flat on your back all day long’.

She blushed beautifully.

‘Sir...’

Reilly wore an expression that looked benign, but was not. He knew what was coming.

‘Catholics of course have long practised eugenics, isn’t that so Sergeant Reilly?’

‘If you say so sir’.

Much as he enjoyed this type of chatter Spark moved on.

‘It is just possible that Charles Jago is Emerald’s father, though I am prepared to bet that the birth certificate says ‘father unknown’. You know it is what I said before, children have most to fear from their parents and guardians. What do you think Sergeant Reilly?’

Spark leaned back comfortably. Reilly clearly remembered Spark’s monologue, and although he thought the principle was sound, he was not yet prepared to admit it to this prick.

‘But as Constable Thornton said sir, why should Rosie protect Chad?’

‘She does not want to believe the impossible. She trusted that man, and once you have given trust it hard to renege on it. It would be an admission that your judgement is truly awful, and that, in a real sense she is as much to blame for Emerald’s murder as Charles Jago. She cannot yet admit that. Doesn’t the suicide attempt suggest as much? This is a psychological murder as much as a real murder’.

Spark was not exactly sure what he meant by that, but he liked the sound of it in his head. It sounded authentic, so he elaborated for himself.

‘We have been overlooking the obvious psychological tangle of relationship between Charles Jago and Gaylene Bilton. There is a co-dependency there. They need each other, yet Charles Jago cannot overcome his world view. You read his psychiatric history Reilly. He sees the world utterly different from you or me. Who is to say that he did not see Emerald as a changeling, and was trying to strangle a nasty fairy child out of her. Look, get hold of that ignoramus doctor. Warn him that Rosie might attempt suicide again. I want a round the clock guard put on her door, stuff the hospital’.

He felt good at last, a long way from the negativity of the morning. He may not have got all the story straight, but he was really beginning to believe that the answer to Emerald’s death lay very close to home indeed. He patted Constable Thornton’s knee affectionately and she smiled nicely at him. Good lord, he was going to get lucky twice in a week.

Chapter 17

Within a Circle of Friends

15 May, Sunday morning

The name Quaker was originally a perjorative nickname, given sneeringly by a judge about George Fox and his followers, who ‘quaked’ with emotion when giving testimony or speaking witness to the spirit inside them. Their name for themselves was ‘Society of Friends’, and the absence of ceremony and rituals is what makes the quaker meetings so unusual. No music, no mutual prayers, no sermon, no formal bible readings; very little of anything that would be called a normal church ceremony. Indeed, George Fox was establishing what he thought was a new and better form of Christian church, stripped down to essentials, a gathering of like-minded men and women. Their radicalism alarmed the eighteenth century authorities, who made efforts to imprison Mr Fox and break up meetings, but that did not do much good. Over time, the passionate elements of the movement dissipated, and left behind an earnest educated middle-class sect of Christianity famous for its pacifism and prison reform. Quakers often had an influence on public policy far beyond their congregational numbers.

Micklethwaite’s father was a Quaker, and he still missed him. Sitting here in this constrained, concentrating circle of five people he immediately saw images of his father, pouring out of the sepia tones of his memory. There he was concreting the driveway, and there fishing off the jetty from their bach in the Sounds. Walking to work to the Council engineers office in Blenheim. Holding his young sons hand as they went to Meeting and sat quietly for the words to come. Gordon could not remember his father ever standing to give witness, he was in any case a quiet man, with long pauses between words. But Gordon listened carefully to the tea-talk after Meeting and gradually realised that his father was a great man amongst the other Friends. Been imprisoned for his convictions and written several articles on his experiences. The other fidgety children quickly gave up going to the Friends house on Sundays, but Gordon persisted. It was a time of intimacy before the fall. His father got cancer of the liver, and that is a very fast cancer. From hale and hearty in two weeks to a pale face on a hospital bed, and after visiting him one evening the family went home and got a call from the matron. In those 15 minutes his dad had died, he was twelve.

Micklethwaites belief in God was becoming meagre, and the number of times he had attended this year could be counted on one hand. But every time he went he remembered his father, and he supposed that in some way he was paying a homage to his father, who would have been pleased to see his atheistic-leaning youngest son coming home.

No one spoke for 40 minutes. That was often the way. Gordon did not know the three other people who had arrived, an elderly couple whose names he had already forgotten and a middle-aged single man called Smith. Dorothy sat opposite him with her head bowed. The comfort of God must be a consolation for her, and his eyes roamed around the details of the church, noting how the colour-stained sun highlighted the ornamental features. It was quiet and Gordon believed he could hear the lapping of the lake, but that was surely not possible. A skylark was rarking up outside and his mind, if it was thinking of anything at all, wondered idly if this was to be a completely silent meeting.

Then the man stood up.

‘A child has been lost to us, a child who had barely arrived in our community..’

The man paused, looking for the words

‘...the Lord giveth and the Lord giveth away, and yet, well I struggle with this action of the Lord’s. Did He have to take away so promptly and meaninglessly?’

Another long pause.

‘We are small people in the scheme of things but, this terrible thing, makes us smaller. Do we have a monster in our midst? I find that hard to believe, so did some passing stranger see the girl and take a life to satisfy his own aggression? Can we forgive him? That I find hard to do, as anyone would find hard to do. Yet that is the essence of the Christian message. To forgive.’

Another long pause as he coughed, and collected himself.

‘I do not want this child’s death to be meaningless, yet it seems so to be now. What can we say to the mother? What can we say to God?’

Then he abruptly sat down, and buried his head into his hands, exhausted with the effort of speech.

Micklethwaite had sat up. He should have been thinking of Emerald instead of day-dreaming about his dad. Immediately thoughts of the happy girl came sharply into focus, and he remembered her drawings hanging up in Chad’s caravan. He glanced at his watch furtively, ten to eleven. But someone else would speak, he felt sure of it, and he knew already who it would be.

After some minutes Dorothy stood up. She spoke clearly and articulately at first, and then seemed to drift into a strange memory land.

‘A shadow has been cast on this land, our land. Something of our innocence lost, with a little girl lost to us. ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed is the name of the Lord’. I have often pondered that saying, so direct and yet so

cruel. Why does the Lord have to take them away? And where does the Lord take them? A child's death cuts to the heart, it cuts to mine. I still remember it to this day, the little figure lying so forlorn and absolutely still, as only the dead are still. A proper little child, with delicate limbs, and soft face, my sweet child, not even given the chance of life before the Lord has taketh her away from me. Blessed is the name of the Lord, but it is hard to bless the Lord when that child is dead in your arms, oh and how so much love is lost...'

Micklethwaite was listening carefully and was confused. Was she talking of Emerald, or some other child? But she never had any children had she? Dorothy was almost in tears, but recovered quickly and firmly and held her head up even as she talked with her eyes closed, at least, as Micklethwaite glimpsed briefly, assuming you could tell whether her eyes were closed or not under the mask.

'There is a monster in our midst, a monster we must forgive even as we condemn. For otherwise we are no better than that monster, and the whole Christian teaching is based upon Christ's forgiveness of people who wronged him. Sometimes we have monstrous thoughts and imaginings, but we manage them somehow with God's love to guide us. We must learn to forgive ourselves. Perhaps this foul person who has killed a child had wrongs done to them, hurts poured on their soul, and so passed on this burning passage of hate. However hard it is we must forgive, forgive each other. For without forgiveness there is no love, no genuine love.'

She sat down, and after some minutes of intense silence the elderly man shook hands with Dorothy, and they all exchanged handshakes. Just to stand up was a relief and Micklethwaite was unable to look into Dorothy's eyes and pleased to sidle out of the church and into the sun. God, did she see herself as a monster? A monster disfigured, but that was an accident after all. Yet there was a tone of self-loathing wrapped around her words, as if she could not forgive God for the calamity He had delivered to one of His most loyal subjects 'we must learn to forgive ourselves...'

She caught up with him.

'Tea at the house Gordon? I'm so glad you came. No? You're riding with Vicki, how nice. Look I must bustle, for the scones need to be put in the oven, See you again'.

Dorothy walked quickly down the path to her house followed by the middle-aged man called Smith who was talking to the elderly woman. The woman's husband, the one with no name, had closed the church door and nodded towards the house.'

'Dot puts on a good tea. You coming?'

'No thanks, I wondered...'

He wanted to ask something and got suddenly tongue tied. The man waited.

'I didn't think Dorothy had children'.

The man with no name looked at him closely.

'She did not, but she had a stillborn baby. Good day to you then, glad you could come'.

He strode off down the path and Micklethwaite now remembered the strange headstone that only had one date on it. Of course he should have twigged, for a baby that is born already dead does not need more than one date.

Chapter 18

Out Riding

15 May, Sunday afternoon

A promise is a promise, no matter now half-heartedly given. In fact, Micklethwaite had already forgotten the enthusiasm with which he said he would love to come riding, an enthusiasm not untempered by the fact that he agreeing to going out with an attractive girl with warm eyes and large mammary glands. However, the full reality of his decision did not hit him until he was unhappily astride the horse ('he's very gentle and calm') and realised there was a reasonable chance he was going to make a complete prat of himself.

But the change of air from the stuffy, closed church did him good, and the sun cleared his brain of gloomy thoughts.

They rode cross-country from Tekapo, aiming approximately towards the dip of Mackenzie Pass. The day was blue and gold, and the frosted landscape looked as crisp as a hospital sheet. Vicki periodically would break into a trot, which Micklethwaite hated, and sometimes a canter, which terrified him, but at least his bum ached less. It took some time for him to adjust to his height above ground, and that he was in charge of a vehicle which had no brakes and little intention of applying them. Regular fences and gates slowed progress down to a walk, which enabled some intermittent exchanges to take place.

'Pull on the reins Gord. Slow him down. You're in control you know. If Harry senses otherwise he'll make a meal of you. Great day isn't it? A cracker'.

She bounced along beside him chatting all the time. Obviously the shag had done her good thought Micklethwaite unkindly.

'It's easy for you'

He muttered, as Hooper (what a bloody silly name for a horse) side-stepped a rut and Micklethwaite tugged futilely on the brute's reins. This was not one of his better ideas.

'I heard that' she yelled back 'and I take it as a compliment. We go through this gate here, we can walk for a bit if you want'.

Did he ever, but how would he get down? He had not worked that out yet. Vicki shouted.

'I forgot to show you, no don't do that...Gordon!'

Too late, Micklethwaite had tried to take one foot out of a stirrup and sort of crossed a leg over, but got the other foot caught whilst Hooper started to plod through the open gate dragging a hopping Micklethwaite behind him. With two nasty expletives, Micklethwaite disentangled his leg. Vicki could not stop laughing, and weakly endeavoured to look sympathetic.

‘Could have been worse you know. Hooper doesn’t bolt, but they are trained to go through open gates and then stop. Should have warned you, but’ she giggled ‘it really looked funny’.

For Vicki horse-riding was as close to being as natural as breathing, and her father said once she should have been born a centaur. She had to look that word up. The world from a horse’s back was smaller and more reasonable, and the motion of riding was for her a form of meditation. She had written a long tract in her diary about her feelings for horses, the pleasure in an animal’s company, the simple sensation of togetherness that she had found far harder to obtain in human relationships. She was not sure whether to tell Gordon about Spark. It was none of his business, but on the other hand she felt good about it and wanted to boast. But what if Gordon actually fancied her? Would she hurt his feelings?

They walked for a bit, and despite the recent humiliation Micklethwaite did begin to enjoy the day. Then he immediately spoiled it.

‘I see Spark has brought in Chad Jago for another interview’.

‘Oh really’ Vicki looked upset ‘why does he hound Chad?’

‘Must think Chad did it’.

‘Oh that’s so stupid, I mean really... I told him Chad couldn’t do that’.

Micklethwaite was struck by how many Tekapo people thought Chad was strange, but not strange enough. When it came to the pinch they defended Chad, perhaps because of his brother.

‘Did Chad do it?’

‘No of course not!’

‘You seem pretty sure?’

‘He’s not the type, you’ve seen him. He’s gentle, wouldn’t harm a fly’.

‘We all harm flies’.

‘Is that supposed to be clever? Of course we do Gordon, but Chad wouldn’t kill someone’.

Vicki was urging the horse along, and soon more popped out.

‘He asked me about the court case, you know. 1955, and the changeling. Seemed interested, I told him you were interested as well. He didn’t like that. Vince is pretty territorial, maybe all cops are’.

‘Vince?’

Micklethwaite could not resist, and watched Vicki closely, while carefully pretending not to. She blushed and swore at him silently. Gordon had a knack of digging in exactly right places. He would have made a good policeman she thought, except that Vince made a very good policeman.

‘Well, I met him in the pub. We got talking, he seems a nice guy. Good looking too, not like you Gordon’.

She did not know why she said that. The surplus of men that had suddenly taken an interest in her made her feel bold, and brutal. They came to another gate, and another truckload of rabbits skittered away.

‘I have my charms’.

‘I know you have. Get off you’.

Vicki waved threateningly at the rabbits with her riding stick.

‘They are destroying this country. See this stuff’

She pointed out a grey-green plant that hug the landscape like an unsightly painted undercoat.

‘Hieracium, hawkweed. The farmers can’t get rid of it. The rabbits eat all the good grass and the only thing that grows is this stuff, which chokes out the grass, so there’s nothing left for the sheep’.

It was true. After riding five kilometres they had not seen a single sheep and the place looked desolate. They rode across the plain until they got to a lovely stream, that slithered through the tussock with the silvery elegance of an eel. Vicki instructed him.

‘Let the horse do everything Gordy, you just sit there and look pretty’.

‘How can I do that? You said I wasn’t very pretty?’

Micklethwaite made his complaint, and she looked embarrassed at his joke.

‘I’m sorry. You’re actually interesting to look at. Ok, watch out’.

Micklethwaite did not have time to digest the compliment (such as it was) and as Vicki foretold the horse did everything, and shortly they arrived at the road to the pass. The horses plodded along and they could ride side by side. A ute rushed by in a cloud of dust and an arm waved at them. Micklethwaite coughed.

‘You think he could slow down?’

‘That’s Charlie Jeffs. He wouldn’t slow down for a nude with a whisky bottle, well maybe the bottle. These high country fellas can knock it back. That’s what I liked about Vince, he doesn’t drink much. Runs a lot. Fit as.’

Micklethwaite felt that in the comparison war with Detective Inspector Vincent Spark he was bound to lose out. He veered back to what he wanted to ask.

‘But seriously Vicki, if Chad abused his daughter why wouldn’t he abuse Em-

erald? He was prepared to injure his daughter? Maybe Emerald is a changeling...'

'No! No! No! Chad's not like that'.

She was vehement, and she turned to Micklethwaite quite hot with denial. In her close-fitting riding outfit Micklethwaite could see why Spark had found her so attractive. He found her bloody attractive too.

'Emerald was not a bad tempered girl anyway. I only met her once but she seemed a nice kid. She wasn't a changeling, and didn't need to be beaten'.

Why had this happened to her? There was a life here she could lead but now it was being taken away. Her diary had started to be full of new sensations, new thoughts, the smell and the powerful completeness of a lover. The old language was pages behind, and already seemed maudlin, but just as these men brought delightful change they also brought questions, and the same old hideous evasions. Vince was probing. Gordon was digging. She was fed up with it.

Micklethwaite wasn't the sort to let go.

'Is Chad sane?' he persisted.

'Yes'.

'A lot of people in this town don't think so?'

'Maybe, but they still don't think he did it'.

'Perhaps they do not want to believe...'

Vicki had speeded up her horse and for a while got ahead of Micklethwaite, probably to end the unpleasant conversation.

The road wound up an easy valley and got to a small memorial by the side of the road, where she dismounted elegantly. He attempted to do the same, but Hooper would start moving, so Vicki giggled and grabbed Hooper's reins whilst Micklethwaite got down. The horses ate the verge grass as they studied the monument to James Mackenzie. It was a stone upright, with three sides, each written in a separate language — English, Maori and Gaelic.

'In this spot James Mackenzie the freebooter was captured by John Sidebottom and the Maoris Taiko and 'Seventeen' and escaped from them the same night 4th March 1855'.

'Gaelic?'

'It's amazing isn't it? They reckoned that in the early days half of the Mackenzie spoke only Gaelic, all Scots most of them. Driven off in the highland clearances'.

Micklethwaite thought of the portrait on Dorothy Jago's hall. He mentioned it.

'Great staring eyes, oh yes, he was a hero I reckon'.

‘He was a thief’ protested Micklethwaite.

‘So? Aussie has got Ned Kelly. There’s Bonnie and Clyde in America. Ronald Biggs in England, you know the Great Train Robber. People love that kind of thing. I tell you in the information centre we got about fifty per cent of our questions on the stone church and the rest ask’ and she imitated a very good American accent ‘who is this James Mackenzie?’. They all think the dog statue was Mackenzie’s dog, the one that rounded up sheep with a word of Gaelic from his master. You got to admit it’s a great story’.

‘But it’s not the truth’.

‘Who cares?’

‘Well I do’.

She looked at him thoughtfully. He was just like Spark, actually.

‘I can see that’.

‘I saw the Jago church, and the sheel-na-gig’.

‘The what?’

Micklethwaite explained.

‘Well I thought it was weird, I mean for a Christian church. It’s like having demons and devils cavorting around. A fertility symbol?’

They were both thinking the same thing, but it was Vicki that said it.

‘Poor old Dorothy, it didn’t work did it? Shall we go on to this hut? It’s round the corner there, along the line of the foothills. There’s a good track’.

The ‘good’ track turned out to be a sheep trail that ducked and dived through matagouri, gullies and over several swamps. Vicki had a great time, and often galloped ahead, but Micklethwaite was relieved when the terrible bouncing on his behind could finally stop. He managed to get down on his own.

‘Well done Gordon, you’re learning. We’ll make a rider of you yet’.

‘Have I got a good seat?’

You? Ha! As Hooper goes up, you go down. That’s why your bum is sore and you’re scratching yourself in that disgusting way’.

‘It hurts, besides men like to scratch. Vincent Spark said you had a good seat’.

She seemed surprised by that, and unloaded the saddle bags, and heaved off each saddle with a practised swing. The horses were relieved, particularly Hooper thought Micklethwaite ruefully. There could never be a love there, horses and he were incompatible, but Vicki on the other hand.

The day was passably warm, and the ruined hut sat in a small tussock basin, protected from the wind by old willows. There was a gurgling sound from the stream. The horses tore at the grass and were hemmed in by the old wire fences. It was pleasant

scene. Vicki had taken off her jacket, and her blonde hair bobbed up and down as she busily sorted out the picnic goodies and poured the thermos. Very practised.

‘There’s some advantage in going with a trekking guide’ Micklethwaite observed.

She grinned.

‘No problemmo. Good to have your company Gord’.

‘Even if I have less charms than Vincent Spark?’

She put her head on one side. She found that rather flattering.

‘Are you jealous?’

‘Well he gave me a good grilling. Said I was a suspect. I hardly feel warm towards the man’.

‘You? Yep, I can see that. I mean every outsider is a suspect these days’.

‘You’re not an outsider?’

He was lying down on the grass. Vicki shrugged, and changed the subject.

‘You havn’t looked at the hut yet?’

He had, and dismissed it immediately. It was not that old, probably a rabbitter’s hut from the thirties or so, and there was not much left to get excited about. A concrete floor, and a concrete chimney. He explained.

‘It’s the concrete you see. That dates it up here. I’m interested in the original boundary huts, going back to the 1860’s, even earlier. They are just stone and clay, and thatched with tussock. Concrete came much later.’

Micklethwaite stretched out in the warm tussock, leaned his head against the saddle and watched Vicki. Her arms looked sunburnt and muscled, and as she bent forward to pour the thermos her breasts swung heavily.

‘Tea? Bread roll here’ said Vicki.

He struggled to a sitting position, grabbed the roll and noticed that Vicki’s saddle blanket had hitched up, and revealed faded initials branded in the old brown leather of the saddle. He mumbled through the roll.

‘You must have been horse-riding a while to have all your own equipment’.

‘Sure have, I love it. I like horses more than men really, though men have their uses’.

Micklethwaite decided he was always attracted to women who gave him a lot of cheek. Carolyn was a bit like that. He sipped cautiously at the tea.

‘Such as...’

‘Killing rats. Oooh I hate them, and you always get them in the stables. All the hay I suppose.’

Micklethwaite rejected four obvious euphemistic comments he could have made at this point, regarding the usefulness of men in the light of Vicki's little fling, but realised with clarity that she would hardly welcome the knowledge that he knew, and certainly not welcome being teased over it. Once again he kept silent.

Vicki leaned back on the blanket and turned her face to the sun, closing her eyes. She knew Gordon was looking at her and enjoyed the attention. It would be quite easy to stretch out her hand, touch his. His reaction could be guaranteed. never in her life had she received the desire of two men simultaneously and she was woman enough to enjoy the attention. The sun warmed her body, and through half-closed lids she could study Gordon chewing on a tussock leaf. If only he would stop thinking sometimes!

They had ridden two sides of a triangle, and without noticing it had gained quite a bit of height above the plain. The mountains at the back looked close and edible, like ice-cream cones, and she smiled because the simile came into her mind every time.

Micklethwaite nodded towards a ute sprinting back down the pass road, leaving a cloud of dust behind like a top-dresser.

'Charlie?'

She agreed and looked relaxed, propped up on one arm. He drank the hot tea and wondered how to discreetly put the question.

'Are you a Christian Vicki?'

'Yes, well, most of the time. What about you? I bet you are on the other side.'

'Probably. I believe in truth too much to be a Christian.'

But she was not in the mood to be baited.

'No, I like a good story. There's a lot of truth in a good story.'

'Like the good book.'

She nodded firmly. It set him thinking. The Jago's liked good stories too, though certainly not Biblical.

'Have you heard of a Token?'

'A what?'

'It's a sort of ghost that inhabits a house.'

Vicki was quick to score a point.

'No. You don't believe in ghosts do you Gordon? I thought you only believed in the truth.'

That was true, but what if you did believe? That was the question he could not easily answer, and yet he needed to answer if he was going to make any progress. He never thought about it as a competition before, but as he lay back in the dry warm tussock, and watched a harrier hawk turning angularly against the deep blue sky,

Micklethwaite began to see the outline of a race shaping up. Vincent Spark had beaten him to the girl, but what about the killer?

As they rode back, high cirrus was creeping across the blue arch, and the rabbits seemed to have slipped into their cool burrows. It was still, almost lifeless, and for some time the silence was broken by the creak of leather harness and the harsh snorts of the horses. They crossed the stream that looked like deep glass. It was May but it was an absurd idea to go for a swim. Vicki had exactly the same thought, but whereas he dithered she just stripped off ‘you don’t mind do you Gordon?’.

Did he mind? Was the pope a catholic? He gazed wide-eyed at this plump pink vision, and she jumped in with a shriek that could be heard both ends of the Mackenzie plain.

‘It’s so freezing! Come on Gord!’

He stripped off his clothes, jumped in and sprang out with equal velocity. Vicki was dancing around joyously naked like a nature sprite, her shiny crucifix bouncing between her breasts. She looked both pagan and virtuous at the same time, and as they dressed Vicki made the first comment.

‘You look better naked than with your clothes on Gord. Have you got a girlfriend?’

Now here was an opening, but, yet, wasn’t she already taken? He shook his head.

‘Oh well, there’s plenty of fish on the sea’ she consoled him.

‘Plenty of sharks too...’ he replied

‘Really? I’d make a great mermaid, don’t you think?’

‘Bit too fishy’.

This silly exchange livened them up, and the trek became a series of light hearted quips. They were flirting of course, Vicki outrageously, Micklethwaite with more caution, at first.

‘Would you ride naked?’ he asked.

She considered the question, and lied. She had once, and felt quite illicit and sensuous. God knows what the horse thought about it. God knows what God thought about it, surely it was not a sin?

‘No, it would be horrible. All that horse sweat all over your legs, and other bits. Ugh’.

‘Shorts would be ok though’ he persisted.

‘They can get pretty rough’.

‘What about stockings?’

‘You must be mad! It would be horrible. They would rub and catch, and what a waste. You like this Lady Godiva idea eh? You men. One thing on your mind, that

was what Vince suggested too! Go riding naked in the moonlit’.

‘You’ve never gone riding naked in the moonlight?’.

Vicki giggled.

‘Do you measure-up stone huts naked in the moonlight?’ she inquired.

Micklethwaite waved off Vicki as she galloped across the paddocks leading Hooper and he walked down his road. Vicki seemed protective of Chad and (remembering Anzac Day) jealous of Rosie, but would she kill? It sounded daft, and it returned him to the same vexed problem, that killing a child was such an unthinkable act that it was almost impossible to make anyone a convincing suspect, except perhaps a pervert.

After the scare he got last week, and poor Chad’s caravan burnt up, every time he returned to the bach he expected to find it trashed. But the key turned normally, and the light switched on revealed the same carefully undisturbed kiwi kitsch. Nothing was touched, not even the dust, so maybe Jim Jago had got the word out. He dumped his gear on the table, brushed his face and felt it crusted with salt, and suddenly felt old and empty.

He made himself a cup of tea and gave a large vocal sigh, partly for his sore bottom, and partly for her joyous jiggling body. It was actually a barrier between them, for she would hardly show herself naked if she seriously fancied him. He was in the ‘mostly harmless’ category again, a category he had occupied just about all his sexual life. Such information he had obtained was hardly enough compensation for the simple fact that he had not got the girl. He sensed that Vicki would want to settle down and have kids, and probably like every man on the planet, Micklethwaite wavered between the attractiveness of proving your fertility, and the claustrophobia of domestic bliss.

He downed a second cup of tea and a minute later there was a knock on the door, and Micklethwaite opened it to reveal his landlord.

‘Giddy, errr, Mr Mickleton, look you..’

He hesitated and spugged out his words

‘I’ve been thinking, Mr Mickleton. About your rent. I mean we had only had a gentlemen’s agreement eh, about your stay here. You remember that? If someone comes along who wants it I said you’d have to move out, is that ok? I mean your rent is cheap, half the rate, I know it’s the winter season. But well, there’s quite a few guys in town now, and they want a better place. Sick of the motels, and he’s made me an offer. I mean they will pay the full rate eh. Err, is that ok.’

Micklethwaite stared at the man.

‘What?’

‘I think that’s fair, eh, alrighty?’

‘Oh’.

‘Tried to get hold of yer today, but heard you were out with that sheila. Vicki, nice girl. Well is that alrighty? I can give you a week till Sunday eh?’

Micklethwaite stared back. Sunday? He had just chopped all that wood. The man shuffled away.

‘No hard feelings but that’s business eh Mr Mickling? Alrighty? A week Sunday, great. Good cars these’.

He patted the Hillman Hunter affectionately.

‘My dad had one just like it. Went for years. Great cars, great cars...’

His voice faded on that note as he beat a hasty retreat up to his new Holden Torana and drove off with a breezy wave, as if counting his good luck to get away alive.

Micklethwaite stood on the step and felt a sense of grief. The bastard couldn’t even get his name right.

Chapter 19

Ends Meeting

20 May, Friday

In real life the negative motives of human action are usually quite shallow: jealousy, desire, envy, revenge, greed, anger, were typical. Was anger even a motive, since it was often not necessarily pre-planned but happened on the hot-blooded moment? For example, getting rid of a wife and a husband you were sick of. Except in these sort of domestic murders the murder was usually carefully pre-planned. Now failure was a powerful motive, or more exactly, the desire to disguise a failure, such as a failing marriage.

But motive itself was such a vague business, and often people did seem to need clear-cut reasons for their actions. The gut force. The straw finally snapping. A proper story needs a simple ending, a moment of clarity when the purported purpose is explained and explicable. A proper story has to end, a television show must have a conclusion, even the Bible ends with a conclusion — the resurrection. In fact, what was the difference between a fairy story, a soap opera and a religious tale? All ended with good triumphing over evil, all resolved, all offered hope. The early Christians must have had good story-tellers to seduce the pagan peoples away from their colourful tales. Perhaps Jesus was simply the greatest story-teller? It was an intriguing idea. Faith needed hope, even existence needs hope. The medieval peasants need to feel that their lot will improve. The Celtic peasants needed to believe that certain wishes would be granted.

Half speculation, half rumours, some gossip, a few words dropped loosely, half a dozen suppositions and some strange fairy tales. It was not a proper story, and it did not seem enough. He needed to think, yet all that ever came into his brain was images of Vicki's prancing body. He even dreamt of Carolyn last night, though her body looked suspiciously liked Vicki's.

Several days had gone by since they had gone riding, and he had wandered about in a mental swamp of speculation. It had been raining in Tekapo, under a grey swathe that turned the lake to iron and made the wet tussocks look like sword blades. He was half hoping that a metaphor of sunshine would brilliantly burn away the cloud, and reveal some insights, but by Friday, the sun had arrived and his brain felt clogged and as sordid as the inside of a rubbish bin.

He at least knew that Rosie Hilton was not Chad's daughter. That was helpful. He scrawled 'why?' on a sheet. Well it removed incest didn't it?

Did he still believe that Emerald was Chad's daughter? No, and put an emphatic exclamation mark beside it. Why not? Don't know, unlikely. He knew why the sheel-na-gig was there and who put it there, but was that relevant anyway to anything. He wrote down helpfully 'not really'.

From the bookshelf he pulled out the university copy of Old Tales from Cornwall and read the Wish House story again, and reminded himself that the wish could only be broken by someone moving into the empty house, and thereby driving the Token away. How did Chad get mad? Micklethwaite underlined this. It was an obvious line of thought that he had not followed before, so he followed it, and followed it down to where he drew a fat question mark with a face and a pulled down smile. So much for that. Was he putting too much emphasis on off-hand remarks. It was like a jigsaw, where he was becoming fairly certain that some of the pieces would never be found. Clues he saw everywhere, but vision, Gordonille, bloody vision, that was lacking.

The Wish House was a powerful idea. Chad Jago believed in it. Jim Jago knew about it, why else had he got so angry when he mistakenly said the words 'Wish Hut'? What would it be like to marry someone whose face had been torn off? A pretty girl, who was suddenly a liability. In shock, consequently infertile, then butchered by lousy surgeons, wouldn't you be just a teeny weeny frustrated that your wife looked like a plastic tiki without the colour? No matter how big her heart, it could never overcome the criminal liability of her disfigurement. It was a constant (excuse the pun Dorothy) in-your-face reminder at every mirror. Micklethwaite remembered how well Dorothy maintained herself, well groomed hair, and elegant clothing. She had not let herself go, but there was an element of farce in this continual pretence. You had to go on living, that was the rub. She was trapped, so was Jim, but they still made a good fist of it, and had a good life.

As Micklethwaite thought he doodled, and a vast spiral was made into a snail, with feelers and a fat tail squidging over the page. A hat appeared on the snail's head. A pipe stuck in the mouth. Somehow the snail gained a bra, then cleavage afterwards. The snail trail was blackened out and a forest sprang up around it. He wrote the word 'Nevil', and liked it, trying two ee's then double ll's. The ee's multiplied into a border, and he drew a family circle of the Jago's. Lines crossed over lines, shapes were lost, new patterns formed. The page became blacker with scribbles, words erased and arrows pointing out hopefully to nowhere. The question mark was getting overused. The exclamation mark fell into decline. He said, she said. They melded. 1946. Together, they were apart. A diamond appeared, rough indeed. Then splintered.

Micklethwaite threw down the pen and went out to the Chinese restaurant. It was a Friday night, and noisy.

There was a largish tour party from Japan in one corner and a group of loud kiwi lads and lasses in another. Three policemen in uniforms occupied one corner, in-

cluding the lovely Constable Thornton. She noted Micklethwaite's entrance and smiled at him winningly. He smiled thinly back, but thought that there was something definitely odd about that woman. No one who smiled that much could be sane. Micklethwaite groused to himself, as the Chinese waiter grimly offered him a four-person table in the middle of the restaurant. He was too intimidated to refuse, and felt like a fly stuck on fly paper, an image reinforced by the tasteful yellow tablecloths with matching red serviettes. He gazed through the menu, the waiter stood by, waiting.

'Water?'

The waiter hurried off, which barely gave Micklethwaite enough time to order tomato soup and spicy chop suey. Then Detective Inspector Spark came in. Micklethwaite was sure he was heading over to the delicious Constable Thornton, but suddenly he swerved and to Micklethwaite's surprise sat down opposite him.

'I can join you Mr Micklethwaite?'

'Yes'.

What else could he say?

Spark was a little drunk. Dragging Charles Jago through a long interview series had been weird and unproductive. Words seemed to creep out of Chad with little logic, and once he had grasped that Jago was talking Cornish the last hope he had of a sensible conclusion to this murder faded. He had no doubt of Jago's guilt, but how to prove it?

'Water and won tons. What did you order Gordon? Chop Suey. That's a myth. An American invention from the Second World War, but such was the demand that Chinese restaurants around the world started to put it on their menus. I'm surprised at you Gordon, an historian. I'll take the Chow Mein. And a gin and tonic, make that two'.

The waiter managed a ghastly smile for the Detective Inspector and hastened away.

'End of the week, my shout. Should one say 'a historian' or 'an historian'?

Spark felt in an expansive mood, although if he had to describe his feelings this evening, it would be 'expansively depressed'.

He was depressed because of the case drawing to a miserable close, and possibly the alcohol had affected him, but expansive because there was no shame in failing to prove the case. His superiors had agreed with his reasoning so far, and that in a sense was an ego booster. Of course he was going to see a lovely lady tonight. Constable Thornton could wait, and if the other detectives wanted to muscle in and try their luck on sweet Jessica's charms — so be it. Besides, he could always pull rank on the bastards. He swigged his gin and tonic. He also felt good because his early morning run with Sergeant Reilly had indeed demonstrated Reilly's unfitness and his superiority, and he also managed to score a rather good pun at Reilly's expense, calling him a 'running joke'. He laughed. Spark felt confidential and a trifle outrageous. He leant forward and whispered loudly.

‘You would have been the perfect suspect for Emerald’s murder, Mr Micklethwaite. A loner, outsider, queer, but Charlie Jeffs reckons he saw your car there on the weekend. Not forgetting Mr George Hudd of course’.

Micklethwaite was about to protest that he was not a homosexual, but Spark carried on remorselessly.

‘But in a sense that is in your favour, for in my experience homosexuals do not carry out this sort of sex attack’.

The waiter brought the soup and the won tons, which Spark dipped extravagantly in sauce. A second gin appeared and the Japanese tour party all marched out together, and the volume in the restaurant suddenly declined, so that Micklethwaite’s next statement rang out louder than he’d intended.

‘I’m not homosexual’.

‘Really? Well, perhaps I should put you back on the suspect list’.

Spark laughed at his own witticism. He drank the gin and tonic, and ordered another.

‘You’re an observer and an outsider, like me’.

This sort of flattery was gratifying, if it was flattery.

‘Been married Micklethwaite? My wife left me two months ago. Well, she hasn’t actually left. We have what is called a ‘trial separation’. Means the same bloody thing of course. Won ton?’

The young kiwi group also left and Micklethwaite was sure one of them was a youth who had accosted him. Spark followed his eyes.

‘Yes, you’re right. That’s one of them. We never found who burnt Chad’s caravan, but we hauled in your trio easily enough. I mean there is only one car with mag wheels in Tekapo. Gave them a warning. That’s enough. Unless you wish to prosecute?’

Micklethwaite shook his head.

‘No, you’re right, it’s rarely worth it. They are good boys really, sound stuff. Now their fathers were mortified, you should have seen their faces when their boys were brought into the police station, but they all stood by them. That’s the high country for you I guess. They’re loyal here’.

The restaurant was now much more quiet, and Spark’s voice sounded louder. The two police officers nodded to the Detective Inspector as they walked out, Constable Thornton smiled beguilingly, and met Sergeant Reilly coming in. Spark waved him over. Micklethwaite was beginning to wonder if this was a set up, but when he studied Spark’s red face he decided that it was merely bad luck on his part. Reilly seated himself heavily and studied the menu. He looked drunk too.

‘Do you have an office party on Fridays?’ asked Micklethwaite.

Spark winked at him.

‘How did you guess? It’s a bit of a running joke, like Reilly here’.

Spark found this funny and Reilly guffawed politely. He’d scored one and Spark had got one back, so they were even. He still did not much like the Detective Inspector, but who does like their bosses? He stared cautiously at the menu and ordered fried rice to be safe, I mean what harm could they do to it?

Meanwhile Micklethwaite got to the point, deciding he might as well take advantage of this situation.

‘So you think Chad Jago killed Emerald?’

‘You don’t beat around the bush do you Mr Micklethwaite? Well I would not tell you even if I could. We have to maintain our discretion’.

‘How is Rosie?’

‘Not so good, and that is not her real name by the way, which is Gaylene Bilton. I’ve met her father, a small-time crim. For that matter so is Emerald’s father, a druggie by all accounts. She sure picks ‘em’

Spark had already forgotten his famous discretion.

‘She has a record you know, a mile long (sorry kilometre), smuggling heroin, assaults, prostitution, I can tell you this because it is all public record. You can look it up in the newspapers. She’s been on and off drugs for years, and had numerous detoxification’s (if there’s such a word). A curious couple. Marginal’.

‘Like Mackenzie’.

‘Pardon?’

Reilly nodded sympathetically.

‘The sheep stealer, James Mackenzie. This country was named after him’ explained Micklethwaite.

‘Oh yes, well you can hardly expect me to approve. Was he caught?’

Micklethwaite nodded, surprised at Spark’s lack of knowledge. Reilly chipped in.

‘Yes sir. He had the same mannerism as you sir, he clicked his finger joints very loudly, that’s how they caught him. He was tried but not hung. He got five years hard labour but escaped several times, so they gave him a pardon’ said Reilly.

He had written several poems on Mackenzie, four lines in particular he admired and he quoted them now.

*He was not quartered and was not hung,
And only stories now are sung,
And tales are told and pictures drawn,
Of the white man who saw the first Mackenzie morn’.*

Spark nodded approvingly. Alcohol made him generous.

‘What a profound idea for penal reform. Escape frequently and they will give you a free pass. They would have hung him in England. That’s Reilly’s poem’.

Micklethwaite looked surprised.

‘You’re a poet?’

The Sergeant looked suitably modest.

‘He is. Talented too. Timaru Herald isn’t it Reilly? What’s your pseudonym?’

‘Nor’wester’.

People were full of corners and angles. Just because you looked at one side did not mean you saw the other.

‘Is that true about the finger joints?’ asked Spark.

The meals arrived and Chop Suey turned out to be an enormous plate of noodles, swirling around with vegetables and lumps of meat. It looked rather like the exhumed guts of some extinct animal, and suddenly Micklethwaite did not feel hungry.

‘We went to see his monument, on Mackenzie Pass. That was where he was supposed to have taken the stolen sheep.’

‘Oh you and Vicki, yes she promised me a ride to’.

You bloody well got it you sod, as Micklethwaite thought irritably, rotating his noodles desperately in the hope they might get smaller. Spark ate hungrily. Reilly poked suspiciously at the fried rice and thought of his wife’s steak and onions.

‘It’s a good story, and parts of it are true’

Said Micklethwaite, talking about Mackenzie but feeling drunk and stupid.

‘The trouble with you historians is that you are always trying to play detectives’ affirmed Spark with a loud sneer.

‘And the trouble with you detectives is that you are always trying to play detectives’ retorted Micklethwaite.

Reilly guffawed, and Micklethwaite could see that remark hurt. It was meant to, but he regretted it. So often he had to be grateful for his father’s good advice on dealing with people: ‘never slam a door after you, you may want to go back’. In other words, try and get along with everyone, and everyone will just about get along with you. It was an inoffensive philosophy for inoffensive people, but it worked.

Micklethwaite recalled seeing a great piece of graffiti advice years ago on a backstreet wall: ‘You give crap, you get crap back’. But tonight Spark was getting under his skin, presuming too much, drinking too much, and a cliché he had heard once kept whining in his head ‘you don’t like people that are like yourself’. True, damn it, maybe the gin had made him bolshie.

There was a momentary mutual glare, then Spark laughed.

‘You see, we are similar Gordon. You like stories to have strong endings and so do I. That’s the problem with this case, the ending is weak. But let’s not sour our Friday night. Reilly, tell me a story, you’re good at them’.

It must be something in the air reflected Micklethwaite, that everyone wanted to tell stories in this town. Reilly stuffed a fork of rice in his mouth and started talking, spluttering globules of meat and rice everywhere.

‘It’s funny eh. You see, there’s this pickpocket, he works in a small provincial town of England. He’s good, one of the best in town. He thinks he’s the best, bit of a know all, but he is cramped in this small town and decides to go to London to try out his skill there. The pockets are fatter, and riskier’.

Spark finished off his second gin, or third, and Micklethwaite was getting befuddled.

‘At first everything goes swimmingly. His skills are more than adequate for the big city wallets and he’s quickly able to prove to himself that he has what it takes. Then, one day, his pocket is picked. Bloody hell! He is a pickpocket by profession and his own pocket is picked. He feels very ashamed and is real determined to catch the villain. So he goes back to the same spot again, where his pocket was picked, and sure enough it happens again. But this time he’s onto it, and realises it was a beautiful gipsy-looking girl (I dunno why it was a gipsy, I ‘spose the Brits all think they’re all thieves, anyway) he chases her and catches her. Then what happens next?’

The waiter took away the plates and Spark ordered fruit salad and ice-cream.

‘Why are the desserts in Chinese restaurants always so lamentable. He beats her up?’

‘Nah. He falls in love.’

Reilly grinned, and leaned forward, sucking his listeners into his words.

‘He decides to marry her and start a dynasty of pickpockets. With his skills and her beauty, they could be the best in the world, and he’s delighted when she gets pregnant. But when their first child is born — tragedy’.

Perhaps he would make a good poet thought Micklethwaite. Reilly understood pace, and timing. He could almost imagine the plump Sergeant sitting around a Celtic fireside, regaling the audience with a great saga of heroes and villains. Why did so many people miss their vocation? The restaurant was empty now. Spark’s fruit salad arrived as did Micklethwaite’s pot of tea. Reilly slurped at a beer and continued, dropping his voice a tone as the story unfolded.

‘The child, a boy, is born a cripple, with an arm twisted across it’s chest like this’ and Reilly demonstrated ‘and it’s little hand all bent and closed into a fist like it was paralysed. It was a sad sight all right. The pickpocket and his wife wept. Their child would not be one of them, why maybe they would have to get decent jobs after all’.

‘But next week they went to see a specialist a famous doctor in Harvey Street. The pickpocket knew him well, he’d stolen enough from him in the past, heh. Anyway the specialist examined the boy, and tried to straighten the little arm out. But the boy howled. Then the specialist tried to open the little fingers, but the boy howled more, but as the doctor leaned over the baby his gold fob watch dangled and glittered close to the baby, and you could see the baby’s eyes following it closely. They glittered, and a miracle happened’.

Reilly whispered conspiratorially, and both Spark and Micklethwaite were waiting for the punch line.

‘The mites little arm reached out and tried to grasp the doctors big gold watch, and as the little fingers opened up...’ he paused for effect ‘the midwife’s gold wedding ring fell out’.

Reilly roared and Micklethwaite leaned back and smiled. He had to admit it was a better punch line than he expected. Spark banged the table. The Chinese waiter who was watching them did not move an eyebrow.

‘You’re in the wrong trade Reilly. Can you make any money from poetry?’

‘Nah sir. It’s just a pastime. Look sir, I better go, the wife...’

‘Ah yes, the wife. Go on then. Count your blessings’ Spark shouted after the departing Sergeant.

There was a short silence.

‘Any desire to marry Gordon? I wouldn’t. Play the field, the women are thick on the ground out there’.

Spark’s new found sexual success had given him aspirations to philosophy. Micklethwaite made movements to leave, but Spark kept restraining him with conversation, as if reluctant to be left alone.

‘I will divorce my wife, Mary. Eleven years, we married too young’.

‘But you cannot divorce your children’.

Spark seemed surprised by the comment, as if he had not looked at it that way. Like any drunk, he switched abruptly from grandiloquent affirmations to sorrowing self-pity.

‘Yes, great kids too...’

The temptation to hurt Spark was enormous, but Micklethwaite allowed his reasonable instinct to overcome his nastier side. You give crap, you get it back. He stood up and put on his coat. Spark was mumbling into his empty dessert bowl.

‘I could have done things differently, perhaps. One does have regrets. I suppose if I had had a wish list...’

It was the start of a commonplace sentiment but Micklethwaite was not listening.

The idea that he had been searching for all day, the spark from a Spark, and it trig-

gered the explosion. It was as if he needed to stop thinking to actually make progress, and that his unconscious mind had kept nagging away. Wasn't it some Chinese philosopher who said it was not the things in themselves that were important, it was the space around them that gave significance.

Micklethwaite had only started for half a second, and made a good pretence to listen to Spark's background prattle, but Spark had noticed something. Say what you like about Spark, that he was a pretentious git, a bore, a pompous bastard, but he was also on to it, and immediately noticed that there was something in Micklethwaite's manner that alerted him to the possibility that Micklethwaite had had an idea.

'Did I say something. If you know something Mr Micklethwaite...?'

Of course it was easy to shake his head, 'nothing, I must be tired' and make his excuses to leave, pay the bill, reach into the safety of a dark night, than admit that Spark had inadvertently triggered a remarkable sequence of ideas, that although not yet connected in a clear sequential way, had disturbing implications.

His mind raced whilst his stomach was burdened by two ton of nasty noodles. It made for an uncomfortable experience.

Chapter 20

Man on a Mission

21 May, Saturday

After the confusing mush of last night Micklethwaite awoke to a clear sense of mission. He jotted down a likely sequence of events, and gave himself a double dose of Nescafe instant. He could be horribly wrong, but then he considered, as he walked down the chilly road, he could also be horribly right.

His first visit was to the museum, it was 7 am and he let himself in with the key under the stone. Inside was pitch dark, and he switched on his torch and he went over to the cupboard and fished around the leg, scooping up the key. The wardrobe was full of cardboard filing boxes, with names carefully and childishly scrawled on the outside. Vicki's handwriting he supposed. He did not find Chad's box at first because the name was not on the side. The box was green metal, heavy and not locked. Inside were grey and brown piles of papers, and the thought of wading through them at first depressed Micklethwaite, but then he noticed that they seemed to be some sort of order. Indeed, there was the unmistakable fresh feel about the papers, that someone else had looked at them before, and quite recently. He tried to keep the torch light close to the papers, and sat on the floor with Chad's glory box. He suspected Vicki of being a night-bird and he was not unduly worried about her, but Mrs Nosey Parker might see flashes of torchlight.

At the top of Chad's paper pile he saw a thick red-leaf photo album, full of small old-fashioned black and white images with neat white borders. Micklethwaite leafed through. Most of the photos were dated, which was a god-send. The early photos were of two children, boys, in rather formal poses. In one they were sitting beside a large old woman who looked like Irmelina Calvadnack. He flicked through quickly, not exactly sure what he was searching for. Vicki had unwittingly let him know she had Chad's papers, and then made an attempt to distract him. There was something here he felt sure. There were more pictures of the boys growing up, station buildings, unidentified uncles and aunts, but the first photo that made him pause was taken in 1945. Jim Jago and his brother Chad.

Jim looked manly with his pipe clad between his teeth, but Chad stole the show with a nicely debonair pose. On the next page was Dorothy, 1946. She was attractive, with sparkling eyes. The oil portrait she had painted of herself was not a false image after all. Here she was with a pair of skis. This was Jim and Dorothy's engagement photos, October 1947. Dorothy's engagement ring was carefully displayed. When did she have the accident then? Must be fairly close to this date. Here was Chad again, this was the engagement party, and there was a pretty girl laughing on his arm.

It was hard to believe but Chad Jago might have been quite a ladies man once. There was one striking picture of Dorothy and Chad together, they made, as it would have been put fifty years ago, a handsome couple. Only they were the wrong couple.

On the next page there was a series of photographs taken on a horse trek 'To Upper Godley Valley, November 1946'. It was a large party and Micklethwaite did not recognise many of the young people. There was Chad, and a close-up of Dorothy with her horse. There was Jim and Dorothy riding together, sharing a horse and Dorothy holding on with a posture that expressed grim death. But she was laughing her head off. She was a good catch alrighty. Chad again with Dorothy, they were a close-knit group.

In December 1947 there was another series of party pictures. The caption said mid-summer's eve, and people were dressed in all sorts of odd costumes. It dawned on Micklethwaite that they were supposed to be Shakespearian characters from the mid-summer's night play. There was Jim as God-knows-what, and a snapshot of Chad looking distinctly-like Oberon. Other unknowns, then a beautifully robed Dorothy. Was she Titania? It sent a shiver down his soul. There was something uncanny about their roles. This was the very eve of the accident, indeed these pictures were the last photos taken of Dorothy Mackay before her face was ripped off, and perhaps in these frozen clowns and laughing fairies there was a clue as to what happened next.

He turned the page. Nothing. The rest of the photo album was blank.

The day was getting light now. He started on the papers. There seemed to be everything here from receipts to sketches of mountains, Chad showed a fair hand actually. Yet Micklethwaite suspected that if Vicki had already been through the papers then the interesting ones would be close to the top. He was right. This was a letter, a legal one, and looked like a copy.

'I Charles Bude Jago' being of sound mind, etc etc. It was a Power of Attorney, vested in Jim Jago, signed in 1958.

None of this was a surprise, except that one had to be in sound mind to give a power of attorney in the first place. It was an unusual thing to do, unless you were going overseas, or taking part in some risky life-threatening adventure — neither of which seemed plausible for Chad Jago. 1958, three years after the court case and his marriage split up. It at least proved one thing, that Chad Jago was still sane at that point, for he could not have signed this document otherwise, but what could possess someone in full sanity to vest his economic soul with someone else? It fitted perfectly with Micklethwaite's developing theory, indeed it was not even unexpected. He worked quickly through the remaining papers and found nothing of significance, and returned to the photo album again. He shook it and an envelope fell out. Inside was a picture of a young girl, perhaps ten years of age. It was Chad's daughter. Well that was a help anyway — but was there something else?

Grazing through the pictures he could not see any blindingly obvious pattern. Presumably this album was Chad's, put together by his hand, reflecting his tastes, his choices. The torch light swung from face to face, picking out the forty year old smiles, the breath of fresh young air that came off the stale pages. In the mid-sum-

mer's eve photographs most of the people were in fancy dress, Dorothy was shown in a dramatic posture, articulating with her hands. She looked beautiful, and was perhaps a good actress.

He leafed back and forth. There was something teasing him in these photographs, something obvious that his sub-conscious had already taken note of, but his brain would not see it. Perhaps he was detecting non-existent nuances, but, Micklethwaite stared hard, then flicked back furiously to the engagement photos. Yes. There. It was obvious when you looked at it. There was trouble in Jago land.

A blackbird chortled loudly outside, announcing to the world that he was awake and this was his patch. Micklethwaite slid away the box, locked the cupboard and replaced the key careful in the dust. He did not particularly care if Nosey Parker saw him, and she did. He waved generously and the curtain sniffed back into place.

It was silent in town, and his breath froze in the air. The new sun was just filtering through the pine trees and the mountains looked remote.

The next part of his day was probably illegal. By skirting around the back-road, and crawling through a wire fence, Micklethwaite came out in the pretty gardens of the hospital. He could just see around the corner, and at the front door there was a police car parked, and a young constable chatting to a nurse. It was 8.30 in the morning, and Micklethwaite slipped around the side wing and looked through the windows into Rosie's room. He tapped on the window but Rosie looked stupid, or drugged, or possibly both, because she shook her head and looked away. The French doors were open, so with a daring that Micklethwaite thought quite sensational he quietly walked in, and melodramatically signalled to Rosie with his finger to his lips that she shouldn't yell out. Which she didn't, fortunately, though she hardly looked welcoming.

Micklethwaite realised he had to get to the point

'Look Rosie. Don't yell out, I've come to tell you something important. Chad didn't do it. Kill Emerald, it wasn't Chad'.

She looked alarmed now, but he was sure he had hit the target.

'Yes I know you lied about being with Chad. He wasn't with you was he? He was out on the lake getting driftwood, but he didn't bring back any, is that right?'

She struggled into a sitting position, and pulled away her grey hair. She looked like death warmed up, which was not that far from the truth.

'How d'jer know?'

He smiled knowingly, and sat on her bed, whispering.

'There's one thing I need to know. Did you meet Chad at Sunnyside? Is that where you met?'

'Yeah. I was there for a spell, at the detox centre and we sort of hit it off. He was gentle with me, no one else had been gentle with me for years yer know. Yeah we got on well, I mean I know he's odd, and not quite there, but he's sharper than

that. He took a real fancy to me yer know? Said I reminded him of his daughter and other stuff...'

One tear started to roll down her heavily lined face, but she kept speaking coherently.

'I wasn't gonna just take him for a ride, but somehow he got locked into this idea and wouldn't leave it alone. I thought he was a bit nuts, but hell, I needed any friend I could get. He was sweet to Em... I didn't know what to think. When he gets questioned he sort of shuts down, or out comes all this Cornish stuff. Then when bloody bright Spark told me what he had done to his real daughter... That wasn't true was it?'

Micklethwaite could well imagine the situation. A woman at the end of her tether, with a young child and a history of mistakes and wrong turns.

'I mean he offered me this house, by the lake. I thought, Jeez for Emmies sake maybe I should take it. What have I got to lose? You won't believe this but I really liked the guy, and most men I've met have been jerks. He gave me something, offered me..' and she stumbled around to give meaning to what she was saying.

'Hope'.

Micklethwaite was half-listening out for footsteps, half-listening. He would get done for a goose if the nurse found him here.

'Did he hurt his daughter?' she asked again.

'No, it's not true. Not exactly true. It happened, but not in the way it has been portrayed. It was not really Chad's fault, he was lead to it. Inspired to it. Terrible things often happen to him. He's very superstitious'.

'Jeez, don't I know it, but he didn't kill Em...?' she seized on this hope.

'Rosie, of course he didn't do it. He would not harm a fly. But, why did you protect him, if you were not that certain?'

Rosie looked out of the French windows.

'It's nice here. I could live here, though I don't s'pose I shall live here now. He was like a father, I never had one. Well I did, but he was never there. Useless he was. Chad's always there. He's always kind. I know he's been through terrible times, but its true what you said. Terrible things happen to him, but he doesn't do them himself. It's like he's cursed. He often said that. I told him it was all nonsense, but he said he was cursed, and that the curse was lifting...

'Did he say that?' Micklethwaite seized on this, 'did he call it a curse, or a wish?'

'I dunno, a curse I think, why?'

He paused, she looked shattered but he really had to ask this question. It was crucial.

‘Did he talk about a Token?’

She struggled to a sitting position and nodded seriously.

‘He was bloody funny about that, we couldn’t sleep in the stone hut. He forbade it. He said it like that. Hell, he used bloody funny words. He forbade it, and Emmy was really keen. All in good time he said. Very soon, when the work was done. I think it was some sort of taniwha you know? Jeez I think he was mad as a meat axe, but, but... in a funny way I loved him’.

And that was the truth

‘What about that copper? He thinks Chad did it. Reckon, he thinks I did it too. Bastard’.

‘Rosie, Spark is clueless’.

That was intended as an insult for the absent Detective Inspector, but Micklethwaite realised it was literally true. Rosie looked hopeful.

‘You absolutely sure Chad didn’t do it, did he?’

The need for reassurance in humans is profound and continuing.

‘I’m sure’ he lied.

‘Who did?’

‘Trust me. Gotta go’.

She slumped back exhausted with the effort. Micklethwaite could hear footsteps and he did not want Spark finding out he had been here. The door opened and a nurse came in, and she admonished Rosie for the draught as the French doors swung wide open.

‘Honestly Rosie, you’ll catch your death’ and she briskly clammed them shut.

For some reason this made Rosie chuckle.

The sun was melting the frost-tipped edges, and several houses were belching out smoke as the occupants cranked-up the wood-burners. The great blessing with Tekapo was that everything was two skips away from everything else. Micklethwaite slipped through the hospital fence again, and went around to the front where the constable was pacing up and down to keep warm. He nodded genially to Micklethwaite who hurried by and up the street to the Alpine Tops View Motel. It was 9.30 and it was easy to find Chad Jago. He was sitting in front of his unit, basking in the early morning sun stroking the back of Seldom. He looked benevolent as ever, a quiet vacant smile staring nowhere. Micklethwaite talked to Chad briskly for a few minutes, made the necessary arrangements, then headed back to his own bach for another coffee. The morning so far had gone excellently, but he needed some more coffee inside him to face Vicki.

He got the Hillman started, and at the back-packers they said she was down at the shop. At the shop they said she was definitely up at the stables. He found her groom-

ing the horse and looked fit and bouncy as ever, perhaps even brighter he thought cynically, with a few good nights bonking behind her.

‘Hi what’s the goss, Goss?’

‘Lots really’.

She looked at him carefully. The horse looked shiny and black and Micklethwaite sensed he was losing momentum because he was now reluctant to begin this conversation. Vicki seldom let a conversation gap occur anyway, and she chattered away as he sat down on a bale of hale.

‘We’ve got a big trek today. Ten American clients and we only have six horses. We’re getting some more over. Good tippers the Americans, and they pay good tips as well’.

She laughed at her own joke, but Micklethwaite did not smile. She looked over her shoulder at him nervously.

‘You look serious Gord?’

He asked quietly.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you’re Chad Jago’s daughter?’

She was vigourously chewing gum, and shifted it to the other side of her face. It crossed her mind to immediately deny it, but something about Micklethwaite’s manner made Vicki realise that that line of defence had probably already been overrun. It was hard not to deny it, in fact it was almost a relief.

‘So? Does it make any difference?’

‘Of course it bloody does. You knew perfectly well that Rosie was a sham, and not even a very good sham at that’.

He was warming up now.

‘On your saddlebag there were initials stamped. I could see you had tried to black them out, but somehow the sun high-lighted them that day we went riding — I V J. Irmelina Victoria Jago. When I asked you it was your own gear, you said yes. This morning I went to the museum and looked through Chad’s papers in the box. There’s a picture of you in his photo album. You’re about ten I suppose.’

She stopped grooming and sat down on a bale of hay.

‘Twelve’.

‘Why keep it a secret?’

It took a while for her to answer. She took out her chewing gum and pasted it to the post where there were already several others.

‘You wouldn’t understand Gordon, it’s a funny town’.

He waited.

‘I mean I was going to tell everyone when I came, but, well the first guy I met when I asked after Charles Jago said, well you know what he said? Jelly Jago. They think he’s mad’.

‘But he’s your father?’

‘It’s not that easy, there’s stuff, you know, between us’.

‘The child abuse’.

‘Yep. I mean I couldn’t just bowl up and say ‘hi dad, it’s me Vicki, good to meet you’. My mum set me dead against my dad, for years, told me all kinds of stories, and so I just wanted to come and have a look at him first. You can understand that?’

It was her life this ‘stuff’. The parents divorced when she was three, and she was brought up with the belief that her father was dead for many years. Her mother remarried, and split up again. She was busy with another boyfriend now and within the compass of city life she had tried to bring up Vicki to the best of her ability — and had failed dismally.

Vicki often heard those words in her head ‘I did my best’ her mother would say, as her booked taxi whisked her out to another city party. She was an urban sophisticate, so Vicki turned herself into a land girl. Her mother liked fast cars, Vicki went for horses. The deep-seated rebellion against her neglect had finally reached the heavens themselves, for Vicki started going to a hallelujah and hellfire church. This appalled her mother who had cultivated a creed that Vicki described as ‘cocktail liberalism’.

Mothers and daughters. No relationship is closer or more fraught. The pulling together, the pushing apart. The opposition of attractants, the fierce magnetic fields of love. Vicki’s diaries were historic descriptions of what it was like to live with an unknown father and a disappointed mother, an epic compass of work that was researched by her soul and footnoted by her feelings. In truth, she felt sinned against. Even her God was not reliable, and all this intense personal history had to be summarised by that single word — ‘stuff’.

Micklethwaite nodded sympathetically, yet it was not quite the final explanation he felt. He let some silence roam between them for a while, then repeated his question.

‘Why didn’t you tell Chad you were his daughter?’

Long silence. The wind fretted about the stable.

‘I did’.

Micklethwaite frowned.

‘You mean he didn’t understand?’.

More silence as Micklethwaite had a curious notion.

‘He thinks you’re still a changeling, a fairy child’.

She nodded and started crying. Maybe the Jago's were cursed after all. Then she burst out.

'It was his grandmother that did it. Irmelina Calvadrack. She was a witch'.

The sobs grew even louder and Micklethwaite found himself holding onto her as she pressed hard against his chest. He rather liked this.

'He must have liked his grandmother, you have her name'.

'But I never use it'.

It was a relief this crying, for both of them. Perhaps the worst was over now.

'You weren't worried about Rosie moving in?'

Vicki detached herself from his chest, and smeared the wetness around her face. She started patting the horse vaguely.

'No. If he was happy'.

'How did you feel when he rejected you for a stranger?'

'I hated her'.

It came out just like that, but it was not like that in her diaries. Her feelings were more complex, or confused. A riven of suspicion that was softened by a profound pleasure in seeing Emerald so happy.

'Would you have killed Emerald?'

She stared incredulously. Her thought processes were so far away from Micklethwaite's questions that it felt unreal.

'That's what Spark is going to ask you when he finds out. He doesn't know yet does he?'

Vicki looked uncomfortable, and took a deep breath.

'I didn't hate her. My dad, he is my dad. I...'

How could she explain the rejection and the sudden dislocation from her kin by a total stranger.

'It looked like hate'.

'What?'

'On Anzac Day, I saw you looking at Rosie and Chad'.

Vicki shook her head.

'That was a bad day, seeing Chad there with his... brand new daughter. What was wrong with the old one? What had I done? It made me bitter, but I wouldn't have killed Emerald. Of course not! You have to understand, I was never close to my mum. She was city slicker, urbanite, with smart friends and smart cars. It's not me. So I thought, when I came to Tekapo I might find, oh I don't know'.

The word 'hope' crossed Micklethwaite's mind. This was a desperate coincidence, that both women were looking for much the same thing from the same man. The fact that the rest of the town thought he was loopy scarcely seemed to matter to them. Neither thought he was mad, and neither cared anyway. This odd creature with strange words and a buttoned-up smile that looked nowhere, had earned the love of two women. Many men could not earn one. This thought made him feel uncomfortable, and he stopped thinking it.

Vicki was crying again, quietly, hopelessly. Micklethwaite sat beside her again, but she shrugged off his arm.

'How could you think I'd kill Emerald. She's a darling'.

'I don't think that. Spark might. He's desperate. If he can't pin it on your father he'll pin it on you'.

'No. He's a decent man. I know that'.

'He really thinks Chad Jago killed Emerald. Even Rosie wondered'.

Vicki had brought forth a big man's handkerchief and was mopping the worst wet areas. Micklethwaite stared hard at the handkerchief.

'Why did you start a relationship with Spark?'

She did not seem surprised at the question.

'I was lonely. I would have started a relationship with you if you'd asked'.

She looked at him with red straight eyes. Micklethwaite felt embarrassed, and she added more.

'People in town thought you were queer, but I knew you were straight'.

'I would have been keen...'

'Bit late now. You've got to get more onto it Gordon. Women send out all sorts of signals but you don't see them'.

Vicki stood up and picked up the horse brushes. Micklethwaite thought the last remark was unfair.

'But you're a Christian' he argued.

She looked amazed.

'So. I'm a woman too. I don't like being on the shelf, I want to have children.'

'With Spark? He's got two already?'

Micklethwaite was incredulous, but Vicki defended herself, rather like a person who defends a new consumer purchase.

'He's a good man. Reliable. Dependable. His wife doesn't understand him, she's a cop too, and ambitious. There's a lot worse out there. I'm thirty-five, he's sporty like me...'

Micklethwaite interrupted this eulogy for Spark harshly

‘When are you going to tell him who you are?’

She looked hurt again. So Micklethwaite felt sorry for her, and he changed the subject.

‘At the museum when I looked through Chad’s papers in the box...’

‘Thanks for asking’ she interrupted.

‘You gave me permission remember?’

‘Well, you’re pretty nosey for someone who doesn’t live here. It’s bad enough with the police’.

‘I don’t think they are doing a very good job. Anyway, your father gave power of attorney to his brother in 1958. Why did he do that?’

She tossed her blonde hair, which was her way of shrugging. She was recovering some of her composure.

‘You must have wondered. You’ve been through those papers, recently I think’.

‘I was just curious’.

‘You don’t like Jim Jago much do you?’

‘He’s ok. I think he hasn’t treated my dad very nicely’.

‘In what way?’

‘You’ve seen it yourself. The power of attorney. Dad and Jim had joint ownership of Goonhilly Downs once, now it’s all Jim’s. He’s had all the benefits’.

‘Do you think the Jago’s are cursed?’.

‘Jim’s had all the luck, but all the Jagos are superstitious’.

–‘You too?’

‘I’ve too much city in me.’

‘Did your father talk about a Token’.

‘You’ve asked me that once already.’

‘Oh sorry’ he had too ‘a wish house then, did Chad talk about that?’

She shook her head. The conversation seemed to be over. He could not think of any more questions to ask, and she was remorselessly grooming her horse again with her back firmly to him.

‘Well, I guess I’ll see you around then Vicki’.

It was a lame exit, but he honestly could not think of anything better to say.

‘Sure’.

‘Hope the trekking goes ok’.

'Yep' said the back.

Then he thought of something to say.

'You know, I think I would have been better for you really'.

That made her turn round and stare after him. But she didn't say a word.

Chapter 21

Home Truths

21 May, Saturday

The road twisted meanly through the arid land, as if economising on shingle by going perversely against the run of hills, and jarring into small gullies with narrow concrete fords and then up short steep corrugations. The car suffered for it, but it would be hard to say if Micklethwaite noticed. He felt altogether in a different reality, with his mind still building a logic of events carefully. Goonhilly Downs Station came quickly, too quickly, and he found himself watching the patient fountain dribbling into the thick green pool as he waited for Dorothy's footsteps down the hall. There was nothing he could say. He was tired. His resolves were running out of steam, and although he was perfectly well up with his schedule, every meeting was getting harder. The next one was going to be tough. The last one impossible.

'Why Mr Micklethwaite? Do come in'.

She seemed pleased to see him, at least her voice smiled, even if the mask did not. He felt rotten.

'Well, I was actually after your husband Dorothy. It's about the stone hut, I wanted to check some more history with him'.

It did not sound an unconvincing story, but he was sure Dorothy did not believe him.

'Why certainly Gordon. But he's out, up at Wisht Wood. Shooting rabbits again I think. It's his main pastime.'

He nearly said something completely idiotic, like 'it's a lovely day for it', but stopped himself in time.

'Okay'.

He nodded gravely, and she sympathetically nodded, so they resembled those little ticky-tacky dogs that people put in the back-seats of cars. So articulate on most occasions, today she caught his hesitancy, even apprehension.

'Men's business I suppose?'

Micklethwaite was at a loss to reply.

'Errm... just history stuff, Mrs Jago'.

‘It always is. Tea?’

He dithered, and she regained some composure with a swing of her head.

‘I can sense you are not in the mood for an old lady right now. So when you come back?’

‘Thanks’.

He had no intention of keeping his word, and as he walked away it occurred to him that she had not wanted him to accept her invitation. The tone of her voice had not been set at an inviting temperature, or maybe at a deeper level she had sensed his purpose, and conveyed the invitation flatly in the hope he would refuse. It’s funny how two people can convey so much meaning by saying the wrong things, and how so many layers of complexity lay under a simple verbal exchange. He turned the ignition. What he was about to do was going to destroy her life, what little remained of it. Yet he did hesitate, a sense of wanting to explain to her, to make her understand the terrible grip of the wish house.

He drove up the road and saw Jim Jago’s horse tethered by the gate. He had stuck to the old ways. Micklethwaite looked around and took a deep breath. It gave him pleasure to breathe the high country air, which was so untainted with love or hate or anger, or any of the emotions that riddled human houses. It seemed only yesterday he had been here, and he followed the pack-track as it wound up to the old stone hut.

The cloud was high, and the air cool. A skylark was persisting in the grasses somewhere, singing its heart out. No sign of Jim Jago so Micklethwaite decided to head back to the horse again, but he could not resist going via Wisht Wood. He clambered down the stream gully and entered the cool totara forest. It was a pleasure to broach the timelessness of this air. A thousand years of living was hard to comprehend and Micklethwaite was struggling to do so when he smelt something distinctive. Something not made of forest.

A pipe. He looked around and saw Jim Jago watching him.

It was a shuddery moment, and it did not occur to Micklethwaite that he was risking his life for an idea that might be wrong. No, he was getting muddled. If he was wrong, then there would be no difficulty, he would be just making himself look a fool. If he was right, now that might be a problem. The .22 rifle was leaning against a totara tree, and Jim Jago looked very settled beside the trunk. With his red face and broad girth, he was something of a totara himself. What did he represent to the community? Practically everything. Cut him down, and what was left?

Micklethwaite walked forward a few steps and Jim spoke.

‘I come up here to think. It’s a handy spot’.

‘No luck with the rabbits then?’

‘Oh there’s a few with their brains out. I take pride in head shots you see’.

Micklethwaite felt numb.

'I came up to see you'.

Jim nodded. Micklethwaite seated himself, and for some reason felt safer. After a period of silence, Jim Jago broke it.

'So what's up lad?'

The 'lad' annoyed Micklethwaite, and got him started. He did not beat around this totara tree, but he spoke slowly, quietly, almost whispering. He did not look at Jim Jago. He found those eyes too deep, too hard.

What he said took five minutes and when he paused for interruption, none came. Jim Jago did not say 'nonsense', or take aim with the 22. Micklethwaite's body was tense like a spring, and if Jim Jago had made one move towards the gun then he would have run for it. Whether he could escape a man who could at sixty could shoot the brains out of a rabbit was perhaps doubtful, but there were trees to hide behind.

He ran out of things to say and stopped talking. He'd said his piece, and it had fallen flat. He could not bring himself to say the line 'I think you killed Emerald to stop the Token from fleeing', because even to Micklethwaite that sounded mildly unreal, although that's what he thought happened. Jim Jago was staring at the ground, and the air under the forest seemed thick and unyielding, as if the light was somehow coloured by the trees in a peculiar way. He had noticed this before, that different forests have differing light. He had been prepared for 'nonsense', or denials, and he had all his mental arguments lined up to attack Jim Jago, but it was all educated guesswork, and none of his arguments were going to be tested if Jim stayed suffocatingly silent.

'I wrote everything down, what I've told you...'

He had written on the envelope that it should go to Detective Inspector Vincent Spark, but that was a precaution that now seemed melodramatic. Micklethwaite was so stressed by the lack of response, that he found Jim Jago's silence to be a form of intimidation. The voice growled.

'So you think I killed the girl?'

At last.

'Yes'.

He nodded, and when he looked up Micklethwaite was shocked. There were tears, and you do not expect a man like Jim Jago to cry. Then his head dropped again, and Micklethwaite stood up, wondering why this triumph tasted more like failure. He opened his mouth to say something more, then looked one more time at Jim Jago who had not moved. His large grey head was still down, and the pipe dead.

Micklethwaite quitted the wood and kept nervously looking back as he went down to the road, but there was no sign of Jim. The horse looked at him patiently and Micklethwaite stood beside the Hillman frozen in doubt. What if he had got it all wrong. All his suppositions were just thin air, but what other explanation was there?

There was no sane reason why Emerald had been killed, so he had to accept an insane one.

A sharp sound cut through the air, like the pinging of a snapped fence wire, and Micklethwaite took a minute or two to realise what the sound was. One short sound, nothing else. He got in the car and drove off, and he did not want to think about anything. As he passed Goonhilly Downs station he was momentarily tempted to see Dorothy Jago, but what good would it do?

Chapter 22

The Token

22 May, Sunday

It was the Sunday after a hard Saturday, and although he had not drunk a drop of alcohol, Micklethwaite experienced a nauseous flavour in his mouth, as if he had a tolerably bad hangover. As he started to pack-up his belongings he evaded responsibility for that shot. Of course he hadn't pulled the trigger, and for all he knew Jim was just shooting more rabbits. Perfectly plausible, so why didn't he believe this? Restlessness drove him out of bed to study the lake.

It was choppy, and a wind blew uneven lines of cloud from right to left. Breakfast was weetbix and a pot of tea, and he was just putting the last of his stuff in the car when a police car pulled over. Out of it stepped Constable Thornton, smiling, sweet, her auburn hair tucked politely under her cap. The seams of her stockings were dead straight. This woman was unreal, a metaphor for his last few days.

'Hello Mr Micklethwaite. I hope we are not kicking you out?'

'Well, actually...'

She looked genuinely crestfallen.

'Oh. You see, the case is taking longer than originally expected, so the Detective Inspector decided to rent a bach'.

'Spark, in here?'

Micklethwaite was incredulous. He was being given the boot by Spark.

'I think so'.

'Isn't it a bit crummy for Spark's tastes?'

He swung his pack in the back of the Hillman.

'Well, I think..' she looked confused 'the Detective Inspector wanted somewhere more homely, the motel was quite noisy too. We all found it so'.

'Are you moving too?'

'Oh yes, it has two bedrooms doesn't it?'

That floored Micklethwaite, the man was brazen. Poor Vicki, a back number already.

‘It’s a nice car, you know...’

‘Your father had one just like it’.

She seemed surprised.

‘How did you know?’

‘Intuition’.

She stood there with a bag in her hand looking genuinely confused and upset, which puzzled Micklethwaite. It wasn’t her fault. Her hair glowed in the morning sun.

‘I am sorry we are kicking you out’ she looked sorry to, ‘your project sounded interesting. My grandfather used to be a shepherd, and I remember his stories. I was hoping to catch up with you. Perhaps in Christchurch? I could give you a ring?’

This was a turn up for the book. This lovely creature fancied him. Extraordinary. You spent all your time chasing one woman whilst another woman chased you.

‘I’d, I’d like that’ he mumbled.

She smiled shyly. They exchanged telephone numbers, but Micklethwaite could not quite believe it would come to anything, yet he also could not believe her interest was purely historical. He was reminded of a famous line from Sherlock Holmes ‘if you have eliminated all the possible theories then whatever is left, no matter how incredible, must be the correct one’.

Again he was on the road to Shep’s Creek, and turned down along the peninsula to the old stone hut. Chad was there on the dot, ten a.m., and just pulling in was another police car. Spark was getting out, looking urgent.

‘Gordon, you were next on my list. I couldn’t find Mr Jago at the motel, they said he was here. I’ve come to express my regrets on your brother’s death Mr Jago.’

So that was that. Micklethwaite swallowed, a dry painful swallow, as if he was gulping down his responsibility. A historian, just like a policeman, has to balance the probabilities, make judgements, question the evidence, but not destroy it. He’d pushed Jim Jago too far, and left a profound uncertainty. Wouldn’t the community have wanted a proper confession? Something they could trust and then file away in the gathering archives of loss and grief. A suicide raised as many questions as it solved, if it in fact solved any questions at all. What have you done Gordon, what have you done.

Chad simply smiled, and fished from his pocket a large key. Spark watched this proceeding suspiciously and he muttered to Micklethwaite as he took him aside.

‘Why’s he smiling? His brother’s dead. Didn’t he like his brother?’

Micklethwaite paused.

‘Let’s say his luck has begun to change’.

‘You were the last one to see Jim Jago alive. You seem to have an uncanny knack

of being in the right places at the wrong time. Could you care to tell me what you met him for?’

‘How did he die?’

Spark hesitated, as if wonderingly whether there was some advantage in not saying. He rejected it.

‘Rifle bullet, to the brain, .22.’

‘Did his wife find him?’

‘Yes. What happened to that woman? She’s grotesque’.

‘You must know? Haven’t you met her before?’

Spark was touchy about his abilities these days.

‘Yes, I have not met her. She seems fairly reclusive, and yes, I do approximately know the story, but I suspect I do not know the full story. Back to you Gordon, you have not answered my question’.

Spark was busy distracting himself. Jim Jago’s suicide was unhelpful and confusing. Was it relevant to his case? People were talking already, and then meeting Dorothy Jago yesterday was a horrible shock. Reilly did not warn him of course. He was annoyed with Micklethwaite playing amateur detective, and yet could not seriously entertain the idea that Micklethwaite had murdered Jago. At the same time he wanted to get under Micklethwaite’s skin, prick him, annoy the bastard.

‘You moving in?’ he asked.

‘I got kicked out of my bach’.

Spark grinned nastily.

‘Well that’s one to me. Why did you see Jim Jago? You were the last person to see him alive Mr Micklethwaite. What did you talk about? You were spotted in the hospital yesterday talking to Rosie Bilton. I don’t much like amateur detectives’.

Micklethwaite was feeling unmoved by Spark’s sensitivities, and, if he was honest with himself, he was feeling a certain triumph. He had a power over Spark now, and knew what Spark could never know. He was tempted to boast, but kept it short and sweet.

‘I was just checking the Jago hut again. I saw him, briefly, Jim Jago. He seemed fine. You sure it was not an accident?’

‘I’m not that stupid’.

Micklethwaite smiled thinly and Spark got angry.

‘You did not kill him?’ Spark inquired of Micklethwaite pleasantly.

Micklethwaite held up his fingers.

‘Take prints if you want, you will not find them on the rifle. I never touched it. I would not know how to fire one’.

‘You could learn, it’s not that difficult, and thank you I will take up your offer’.

Micklethwaite was irritated.

‘You don’t seriously bel...’

‘What were you saying to Rosie Bilton?’

Micklethwaite started to unload the car.

‘Sorry’.

‘For what?’

‘Emerald’s death’.

‘If she commits suicide then we will be arresting you Mr Micklethwaite’.

It was always ‘Mr Micklethwaite’ when Spark started to get unpleasant.

Chad was gazing out over the lake, the light wind ruffling his hair. Micklethwaite whispered to Spark.

‘You haven’t arrested Chad Jago yet?’

Spark was not going to be lead into that area, and followed Micklethwaite into the hut. It was the first time he had been inside, and he studied the construction with interest. Thick stone walls, a new sink on one side. Pots and pans were lined neatly on a shelf, and there was a box full of cutlery. A small gas oven had been installed, and a tilly lamp swung on the rafters. He hit his head on it and swore.

‘Cosy. How old is it?’ He rubbed his head.

‘140 years, maybe’.

‘Not bad. Is it the best surviving hut in the district?’ Micklethwaite nodded ‘still, not my cup of tea. Pretty basic’.

Micklethwaite suspected that what Sharp meant was that it did not have a double bed. They went outside, and whilst Sharp tried to take some notes off Chad Jago, Micklethwaite ferried in gear. Sharp called to him after ten minutes.

‘I’m leaving now. Wouldn’t mind seeing you tomorrow Gordon’.

He was affable again, back to Christian names again.

‘I can do today’.

Sharp was driving into Christchurch today to face his superiors. Of course he was not looking forward to it, but Jago’s suicide was so out of kilter to the context of Emerald’s murder that it might be just the lead he needed. He had already checked on Jim Jago’s movements, and sure enough he was out and about on that Wednesday afternoon. No definite sightings. He put Reilly straight onto it, and Reilly was horrified. Jim Jago? You must be joking sir? He’s not the type. Spark had been withering.

‘Sergeant Reilly, I want an efficient right-hander who obeys orders and does not wander about saying so and so is not the type. You don’t know that, neither do I. I have not forgotten Chad Jago but I have got to eliminate everyone, I would be happy to eliminate you from the inquiry if you cannot be more helpful to it’.

Reilly would probably be happy to go. His compulsory jogs with Spark were wearing him down, but he was too close to that pension, and too much of a good cop to say so. He had heard that Jim Jago had got Parkinsons disease, and that might be hard to take for a man like him.

‘Is that when the hands shake? Not drink?’ asked Spark.

Reilly shrugged, and Spark was left with another uncertainty. Spark returned to Micklethwaite.

‘Tomorrow is more suitable. I have to go to Christchurch now. I’m late as it is’.

Micklethwaite felt like teasing Spark, as they walked back to the police car.

‘Your bosses want answers I suppose. Any new clues?’

It was intended as a parting insult, but Spark took it seriously. He had no need to prove anything to Gordon Micklethwaite, but in a strange way he felt more closer to this silly history git than he did to anyone in his own team.

‘Yes, funny enough. The murder weapon was sent away for examination and brought up some interesting results’.

Murder weapon? Micklethwaite had not heard of such a thing, he thought Emerald had been strangled.

‘I thought Emerald had been strangled?’

‘Yes of course, with a stocking’.

A sick strange feeling hit Micklethwaite. His faced dropped and he screwed it up in an effort to concentrate.

‘A stocking. I never knew that. I thought it was someone’s hands or a piece of rope or...’

‘No a stocking, it’s always been a stocking. But what’s interesting...’

It was fine, it did not matter. In fact it made perfect sense, yet he felt that a splinter had got into his heart and was working it’s way in deeper. Spark was enjoying the privilege of imparting information.

‘...the lab boys found it was a rather unusual manufacture’.

Spark got ready to make a satisfying revelation, but Micklethwaite beat him to it.

‘It was Italian. Made in the 1940’s’.

This made the Detective Inspector extremely unhappy.

‘How the hell did you know that? I was only speaking to the lab boys on the phone in Wellington this morning. If you’re hiding evidence...’

How could he explain? He could not.

‘It’s just a hunch, a guess. Look, Jim Jago fought in the Italian campaign in the 1940’s didn’t he?’

That shifted the scent.

‘You really think...’

Micklethwaite was reminded of that famous line again.

‘If you have eliminated all the possible theories then whatever is left, no matter how incredible, must be the correct one’.

‘I don’t need Sherlock Holmes quoted at me Mr Micklethwaite. What do you know?’

He glanced at his watch. He was late already, which probably saved Micklethwaite from being dragged in then and there. What did he know, and why was he feeling so queasy?

‘Look, I have nothing definite. No proof. Just ideas. Suppositions and superstitions.’

Spark looked grim. Micklethwaite continued.

‘You said yourself you don’t like amateur detectives, well if you want to hear a load of crazy ideas from an amateur detective, let’s meet tomorrow. Early, since you are such an early bird.’

Spark issued one more threat but left it at that. He did not believe that Micklethwaite had anything meaningful. He got in the car and screwed down the window.

‘Was it something Jim Jago said?’

‘No’. That was the truth.

Spark drove off, and Micklethwaite returned to the hut. Chad hung around for some time, helping and mostly hindering Micklethwaite as he unloaded the car. He wanted to be left alone, but Chad seemed unable to take the hint. He was excited of course, even volunteering a reason for his excitement.

‘I’ve been in a deep fogou of course, and I can see the light. I’m in a stroathing to do things now’.

Nothing made any sense to Micklethwaite.

Finally Chad wandered off and Micklethwaite lay on the bunk and thought hard. It took him all day, thinking, unpacking, getting the fire going, and starting to make determined inroads on Chad’s huge firewood piles. The night seemed nervous with wind, and he did not sleep particularly well. One gust rattled some of the iron that Rosie had not nailed down quite so well. Also, in one small corner of a cupboard, by

the light of the candle, he unexpectedly found a small neat drawing of a house, with a chimney smoking and flowers outside along the path.

He could have cried for grief. Emerald had found her dream house, oh that poor girl.

There was no point in rehashing over whether he could have saved her, so Micklethwaite made himself miserable by briefly believing that he could have saved her. No, that was stupid, he wasn't that clever, that was the problem all along. If he'd been a bit more stupid and he said aloud 'I would like to make a wish, to take on Rosie's pain', but of course it was foolishness, it wouldn't work now.

The wind dissipated sometime overnight, and by the morning a mist hung over the lake, lit by the early sun with pearls of light through the trees. Blue sky appeared above the mist, and the air was polished, cleaned up after the mess of yesterday and Micklethwaite felt ready to face the rest of his life. He had made mistakes, and admitted them overnight. He was not as clever as he thought he was, no better than Spark really. The boasts he contributed to his soul now sank in his bowels. All the evidence was there, and through a long sleepless night he had reconfigured his theories so he could finally see the obvious.

He opened the front door, and let the wispy morning filter in. Of course he could not be sure, but when he opened the door there was quite a stir of air in the hut. There was no wind outside, yet when he pushed open the front door and gazed up at the sheer blue of experience, he was sure something slipped by him. The Token had fled.

Chapter 23

Some Words Softly Spoken

23 May, Monday

‘So who killed Emerald Bilton?’

Spark had got straight to the point, although the irony was ill-conceived in his voice. In fact Micklethwaite was surprised he had turned up at all. He had laid down clear conditions, conditions that he did not think the police would enjoy working under. He wanted to talk outside, not in the police office. He did not want to be taped. Reilly could come of course, but there should be no note taking. He had no proof. No hard evidence. He was not going to make a formal statement. What he said was strictly between them, and how they used his ideas were up to them. He wanted no further part in it.

Needless to say Spark would not have a bar of it.

‘Then I have nothing to say’.

‘We could lock you up for that Mr Micklethwaite’.

‘Go ahead’.

Micklethwaite stared without flinching. In failure he was feeling strong, and they knew it. He asked petulantly of Spark.

‘Do you want my ideas or not?’

They were like gladiators, sparring with words. Reilly soothed the waters.

‘What have we got to lose sir?’

Spark fumed.

‘Okay Mr Micklethwaite, have it your way. I hope this is the last conversation we ever have’.

‘So do I’.

Micklethwaite meant it, whereas Spark didn’t. Curiosity always gets the better of human beings, and after being interrogated by his superiors he was ready for something resembling hard information. His mood was not improved by a sexual defeat last night. He glimpsed the svelte Constable Thornton standing in her bedroom in her underwear and when he made something approaching an advance, she rejected him. She was interested in someone else she said firmly. It was a galling rebuff, but

what was the advice given him? A bloke looking for talent is like a man walking down a hotel corridor trying doors. He doesn't give up just because he finds a locked door, eventually he will find one unlocked.

The three men met by the picnic table near the stone church. The wind did not move and in the sharp winter's day the outlook down the lake was glorious, although it was wasted on the three of them. Micklethwaite had bought a takeaway coffee and as he drunk it it made his breath turn into clouds.

'I cannot answer that question straight away, I have to tell you a story. Which is going to be hard to believe, but I think it's the truth. You don't have to suspend your rational beliefs, but you do have to be aware that some people may believe in something quite other to your experience.'

Spark growled. He was getting a lecture.

'Think of it this way. You might not believe in the ideas of Hinduism, and the concept of reincarnation, but you are prepared to believe that many millions of people do think that, and live their lives by a logic that is utterly foreign from yours'.

Sergeant Reilly was enjoying this, but Spark was less happy.

'Are you getting to the point?'

'No'.

Micklethwaite took a deep gulp of coffee.

'There are two brothers Jim Jago and Charles Jago. They are being raised on Goonhilly Downs Station when their parents both tragically die in the influenza epidemic of 1928. They are aged about two and four respectively, very young. Out from Cornwall comes their grandmother to look after them, Irmelina Calvadvack. She is almost seventy herself, and lives another fifteen years. I think she died in 1945. She was born in the 1850's from a deeply religious and Celtic background, and she brings up the boys on a diet of fierce Christianity and peasant nature beliefs. She tells all manner of strange stories, and one of the stories she tells them is called the Wish House. It's in a book, Old Tales from Cornwall. There's a well-worn copy at Goonhilly Downs Station, I'm sure she read these stories to her grandchildren all the time. A Wish House is an empty house inhabited by a Token. I still don't really know what a Token is, perhaps a kind of house spirit. Anyway, this Token can grant you a wish if you whisper it through the locked door. But it's not any kind of wish, not like hoping for a strike on a Golden Kiwi, it is a wish to take on another person's troubles.'

It was still serenely beautiful out on the lake and Micklethwaite pointed across it.

'Over there is Shep's Hut, a stone shepherd's hut, and where Chad had his caravan. I don't think it's a coincidence that that is the place Chad chose to live. Charles Jago went out riding with Dorothy Mackay in 1947, that's over forty years ago. Dorothy was engaged to Jim Jago. It was a mid-summer eve's party, I suspect everyone was a bit drunk. Dorothy's stirrup was broken and Chad used a

stocking to tie Dorothy's foot to the broken stirrup, so that she would have some control'.

At the mention of the 's' word Spark had stopped gazing at the Japanese tour bus that had arrived by the stone church and looked warily at Micklethwaite.

'It all went horribly wrong. The horse bolted, Dorothy's foot got tangled up in the stocking and she was thrown off and dragged some distance. Her face was practically torn off. Plastic surgery was still in it's infancy in those days. They did what they could but they faced a difficult job. There were no techniques to repair such damage. You have seen the result Detective Inspector, Dorothy Jago is horribly disfigured'.

He had their attention now.

'This is where it gets peculiar. Charles Jago felt terribly responsible for what he had done, and because of what he believed, he thought, or possibly his grandmother had told him, that Shep's Hut was a Wish House. He went down to the old boundary hut. They are sort of strange when empty, you can almost taste the air. Melancholic, wisht the Cornish say, well, anyway, Chad went to the door, and when he heard the rustle of the Token waiting behind the door, he whispered to the Token that he wanted the troubles of the Jago's put upon himself. He took on their bad luck as his punishment for Dorothy's accident.'

He paused.

'So far so good, you're with me?'

Spark's face seemed set on his fingers which he was clicking in an audible way. It was a symptom of stress as Reilly recognised, but he was too enthralled by the story to care.

'Jim Jago feels obliged to marry Dorothy, she is his fiancée after all, but she is unable to bear children. The shock perhaps, or the years of botched surgery, well that's what she told me, but it's not exactly true. She did have a child, but it was stillborn. There's a headstone in the cemetery that puzzled me for it only has a single date on it, 1951, Roseanne Jago'.

Reilly nodded quietly in agreement. As the local policeman for thirty years he knew everyone buried or buried alive in the district. Micklethwaite continued.

'Perhaps having a stillborn baby is worse than not conceiving at all. At any rate when Jim Jago sees Chad Jago marry, and have children, he is jealous and vengeful. He knows of Chad's wish and he decides to make it happen. He convinces Chad that his own colicky child is a changeling, a fairy baby, an incredible notion to us, but commonplace among people of Irmelina Calvadrack's generation. The consequence is that Chad is arrested for abusing his own child. His defence is embarrassing. His wife leaves him and he never sees his child again, but he accepts that this is part of the wish that the Token granted him. He has to bear the Jago's pain'.

Three people linked together in some strange Celtic charm, which had somehow

degenerated into evil. Micklethwaite was quite certain that the old grandmother, Irmelina Calvadrack was the well-spring of the sorcery. Her powerful influence on two young boys, stuffing their heads with magic stories, witchery, hands that glowed, scabbards of skin. Wish Houses. Tokens. Changelings. She coloured their minds with characters that were harshly medieval, depicting the haphazardness of a peasant's life, and the charms to which they must be reduced to if they shall succeed, or even to survive. Perhaps on one level the brothers did not believe this Celtic nonsense, but in their guts, they did. Perhaps Chad was more fully impressed with this fairy world, but Jim was just as affected. At least as much to know that the Wish House was a powerful tool he could use against his better looking and more successful brother, and bring him down.

‘Chad often says he’s cursed. That’s what he means, it’s his reference to the wish he made...’

‘I read that case, I reckoned there was more to it then’ interrupted Reilly ‘what happened to the wife and child?’

Micklethwaite sucked down the last dregs of cold coffee.

‘The wife I don’t know, but the child lives here in Tekapo’.

Spark dropped in quickly.

‘What, Chad Jago’s child? The one he abused? I should talk to her.’

‘You already have. You were shagging her last week’.

Probably if Sergeant Reilly had not been present Spark would have gone for Micklethwaite’s throat.

‘Vicki Smith. Irmelina Victoria Jago’.

Okay, he enjoyed that. It was a sweet moment of triumph, but it was only a moment. Spark looked as if he had been hit by a concrete block. He half stood up.

‘If you’re having me on...’ he whispered menacingly.

‘Ask her. She’ll tell you’.

Reilly did a poor job of smothering a chortle. This was good. The boys were going to love this. Spark sat down, numbed, scarcely believing that Vicki had not told him.

‘Let’s move on’ continued Micklethwaite ‘amongst Chad’s papers in the museum is a Power of Attorney, vesting all of Chad’s finances with Jim Jago in 1958. The Goonhilly Downs Station passes into Jim Jago’s complete control, even though both brothers inherited a half. The original title is amongst Chad’s papers as well’.

Spark was not quite controlling himself, anger was ill-disguising the humiliation he was feeling. If Micklethwaite was right he was in big trouble.

‘This is pretty thin stuff Mr Micklethwaite. What’s the guts? That Jim Jago

killed Emerald Bilton? Get to the point’.

Micklethwaite leant forward and seemed to borrow some of Spark’s anger.

‘There is only one way to break a wish made at a wish house; someone has to live in it. Chad could not, but if someone else moved in the Token would have to leave. The wish, the spell, would be broken. Imagine what Jim Jago felt when he saw Rosie and Emerald getting ready to move in. What anger he felt. He did not want to see the spell broken, he wanted to keep his brother Chad under his control, under his power. He would do anything not to see that happen, anything...’

Micklethwaite’s face was concentrated on Spark’s.

‘So he killed Emerald Bilton?’ Spark said.

The tension was broken at this point, eased by the sheer fact of speaking aloud what no one had previously been able to do. The murderer was named, it was as if the air itself was listening, and the wind suddenly started up.

They stared at each other, none quite prepared to commit themselves to speech. Reilly spoke out first.

‘I can’t believe it sir, not Jim Jago. He isn’t the type’.

‘You and your bloody types. Why did he commit suicide then?’ Spark demanded. Reilly could only grimace.

‘I confronted him...’

‘What!’

‘I told him the story I have just told you. Outlined it for him, then I left him. When I got back to the road I heard a shot’.

Spark was simply beside himself and jumped up angrily. A long series of filthy expletives rang through the clear air. The Japanese no doubt were pleased they could not understand English, but the driver could and looked curiously over. Spark lowered his voice and his face pointed towards Micklethwaite.

‘You will be going to jail for this Micklethwaite. Perverting the course of justice. Wasting police time. If you had come to us a few days with this story we could have hauled in Jim Jago’.

‘On what evidence?’

‘We don’t need any bloody evidence. Put the squeeze on him. Why should a cold bloodied murderer get away scot free? You’re a fool. A bloody amateur detective’.

Spark spat onto the gravel. It was a dramatic gesture, and forced. He was by nature a tidy man, and would have arrested anyone else for spitting — but he needed a good exit line.

‘Let’s go’.

‘But I haven’t finished...’ protested Micklethwaite.

‘Well we have Mr Micklethwaite, we bloody well have’.

Micklethwaite looked sad.

‘You asked me who killed Emerald Bilton? I never answered the question, and I never said it was Jim Jago. I don’t think he did’.

By now the bounds of incredulity were just about to snap for Detective Inspector Vincent Spark.

He had been dollied along for half-hour with some crackpot theory that some half-wit amateur historian was now saying was not true. His nerves had gone. The strain of keeping together a case that had few clues, few motives, and too many loonies, and the fact that he might have entered a sexual relationship with a possible witness was propelling his humiliation into sheer rage. He grabbed Micklethwaite by the collar, and Sergeant Reilly actually thought the Detective Inspector was going to strike the man.

‘I’m going to arrest you...’

‘No listen...’ shouted Micklethwaite.

‘No you listen you piece of clever...’

‘Hold on sir’.

Reilly tried to calm things down. In another second they would all be rolling around in the dirt. Two Japanese tourists had been watching them curiously, as if they were part of the scenic attractions of Tekapo. Spark realised the stupidity of his actions. He screwed up Micklethwaite’s parka collar one more time, gave Micklethwaite the filthiest of looks, and let him go.

Micklethwaite spoke quietly in the space that followed.

‘If you believe that Emerald was killed by a man then the case is impossible: no violence, no semen, no obvious sexual bruising, but what if it was a woman? Think the unthinkable. It was Dorothy Jago’.

A long stunned silence. Spark certainly was thinking. So was Reilly.

‘The stocking is crucial, I didn’t know that. Don’t you see?’

All night Micklethwaite had wrestled with the horrible fear that someone had died unnecessarily, that Jim Jago need not have committed suicide. He had always wondered about the expression ‘to have blood on your hands’, and now he could taste it in his mouth.

‘I thought it was Jim Jago, I was sure of it. I went to the man yesterday and practically accused him of murder. He didn’t say a word, and now he won’t’.

‘He was protecting his wife by committing suicide?’ Reilly asked.

‘Yes. He has been protecting his wife for a long, long time. I’ve been stupid. I know

it. I had all the right ideas, put two and two together...'

Spark interrupted. His fury had been headed off by Micklethwaite's revelation, but the blood was still running hot.

'Cut the crap Micklethwaite. Why Dorothy?'

'It's the stocking. She went riding in stockings, why would she do that?'

Spark looked mystified.

'They were at a party, a mid-summer's eve party. December 1947. It was warm, sultry, late. She was pretty, he was too. Chad Jago is a good looking man, a handsome man. There was a masquerade, they were all in fancy-dress costumes. Shakespearian I think, from the *Midsummers Nights Dream*. Dorothy was having doubts about her engagement. There are good photos taken at the party, they show her hands and she is not wearing the engagement ring that Jim gave her only two months before. It's late evening, people have been drinking. Dorothy suggests an evening horse-ride to Chad and they go down to the stables. Her stirrup is broken, and she takes off one stocking and offers it to him...'

The sergeant was stroking his chin, getting the gist.

'She was making him an offer' suggested Reilly.

'I think so. She would have taken off her stockings right in front of him. The stockings were black, they went right up to her thighs. I suppose they used suspenders in those days. She lifted up her skirt, lifted it a long way to unclasp the suspenders.'

'They had sex?'

Spark thought this was too clever, yet the bit about a woman killer was worrying. He should have thought of that, but you never did with a sex crime.

'Probably not, it doesn't matter. Don't you see? It's a seduction scene. She makes him an offer, and he refuses. He uses the stocking to tie on her foot, and the rest we know.'

'No we bloody don't' Spark interrupted 'a woman scorned, is that it? For forty years she is a woman scorned?'

'Yes. She was engaged to Jim Jago, but I think she was having second thoughts. She fancied Chad, may have loved him, but he turned her down, and two minutes later it was too late.'

Sergeant Reilly was thinking hard enough to make his brain hurt.

'It could have been the two of them? Husband and wife. They both could have been pretty bitter eh? Both had good reasons to hate Chad?'

Micklethwaite acknowledged this.

'Yes, and I just don't think we will know exactly. The Wish House may have been started by Jim but taken up by his wife. Maybe she put him up to it entirely.'

Maybe it was all his idea. A partnership, for a while, but I'll tell you one thing, Jim Jago did not kill Emerald. It's like you said, Jim Jago is not the type. He would not have done such a murder. His hands are huge, he would have bruised Emerald, roughed her up too much.

You know, when you showed me those photos, the thing I noticed was how tidy the body was. The skirt rolled up. Her underwear looked almost placed in her mouth, didn't it strike you as odd?'

Spark was not in any mood to admit anything. Perhaps they had thought it odd, fussy he called it, but they had gone in one direction only — they were looking for a man. Maybe a queer.

'That's why you made that comment eh? About it only looking like a sex murder. I remember that now'.

Reilly was admiring Micklethwaite now, and Spark was not having any of that.

'Pity you didn't tell us these ideas at the time. There's no case here, we cannot arrest anyone on this stuff'.

'I never promised you that. I promised you suppositions and superstitions.'

Almost unconsciously the three men had hunched together around the picnic table, as if preserving their secrets from any passers-by. Micklethwaite felt the pressure to convince. Reilly looked convinced, but Spark was still scornful. To admit Micklethwaite might be right was to admit failure. Micklethwaite scratched his unshaven chin.

'If I was a betting man I'd say Jim Jago did not have much to do with any of this. I don't think he's a schemer, but Dorothy is. Of course I'm not a betting man'.

This whimsy was lost on Spark, who gave Micklethwaite another filthy look. Micklethwaite tried again, almost thinking aloud.

'Okay, how about this then. Emerald was killed on a Wednesday, that is a pointer. Dorothy Jago only comes into town once a week. She teaches art in the school on Wednesday afternoons. Emerald loved to draw and paint, she was very talented. Dorothy left the class, drove around to the picnic area. Met Emerald walking back home from school. Emerald was completely unafraid of this strange creature for Mrs Jago was a lovely teacher, inspiring. Mrs Jago was teaching her how to blur...'

Gordon bit his lip. He remembered exactly the moment when Emerald had told him that.

'It took a few seconds perhaps to murder Emerald, then Dorothy arranged the body superficially as a sex crime'.

There was silence around the table at this, everyman thinking that there was something painfully obvious about the scenario. Even Micklethwaite was ashamed. Spark had also been thinking hard.

‘There is this stocking, Italian, 1940’s. Is that the same pair...’

Micklethwaite nodded.

‘She’s sick’ Spark said disgustedly.

‘She may be mad, you can’t really tell behind that mask. She may have been unhinged for years. Perhaps from when she had her stillborn baby, maybe that was the child of her dreams, the child she never would keep. She may have been trying to implicate Chad, certainly the stocking was a symbol to Chad. Perhaps she hoped that Chad would find the body. He would know what it meant. He was still damned, still cursed. The wish remained’.

‘Would she have kept the other stocking, the broken one, the one Chad used to tie her foot?’

Spark asked Micklethwaite, and Reilly butted in.

‘If we found that sir, there’s our evidence’ but added ‘I still cannot believe that a woman would do such a thing over a lost love’.

‘Not the type Reilly?’ asked Spark sarcastically.

Reilly thought hard and looked up and down the lake as a way to avoid the question. In his heart he already knew. Whereas he could dismiss Chad Jago, and Jim for that matter, he could not dismiss Dorothy. She was the type, he knew that immediately Micklethwaite identified her.

Spark’s anger had almost dissipated under the impact of the tragedy. Micklethwaite tried to explain, as much as to himself as to anyone else.

‘I’ve spoken to her, I’ve seen the passion. She lost everything in that accident. Love, the ability to have children, even the ability to live. She hated Chad, yet may still be loving him, and I would think had the motive to keep tormenting Chad, to make him suffer as she had suffered, was still suffering. But suddenly, Chad had a family. Not only was this family threatening to break the spell of the Wish House, but it was a family. It was as if he was resurging again, getting love again. He who had destroyed her life, was starting to live again. She was not allowed children, her child died in her womb, but the Lord granted him a child. That was so unfair. I think that was too much to bear’.

Micklethwaite badly needed another coffee. His throat was dry. The Japanese tour party had long gone and the lake reflected the sky in a wide-angle of light, exposing every corner of the landscape.

‘Is it enough evidence’ Spark ruminated ‘we have timing maybe, opportunity. There’s the possibility of that stocking, but we would have to turn the house upside down’.

Micklethwaite had an inkling.

‘Try the locked glass case, and a book called *Old Tales of Cornwall*. The bookmark’ he suggested.

It was perverse of Dorothy to do that, yet somehow in keeping. He had long suspected that Dorothy was at least as superstitious as Jim, perhaps more so. Half of those Celtic books had her name written on the inside. Reilly still voiced his doubts.

‘Would a woman kill a child? It’s such an unnatural thing to do’.

‘Is it? Infanticide happens a lot more in our society than society is prepared to admit Reilly, and it is usually women’.

Here was Spark arguing on Micklethwaite’s side, which would have pleased Micklethwaite if he had been listening. But he now felt tired now.

‘But it’s not her child sir. She befriended Emerald, and then to kill her?’

Reilly was trying to argue himself away from Dorothy’s crime. As experienced police officers Spark and Reilly knew that people will do most horrible things when they lose control.

‘We have motive, if we believe Mr Micklethwaite’s theory of a wish house, you know that would not last two seconds in a court of law’.

Micklethwaite had thought of this possibility too, and suddenly felt weary of the whole business.

‘I think she’ll tell you anyway’.

‘Really?’

Spark was incredulous.

‘Yes, she likes nice young men. I think you still qualify Detective Inspector, certainly on the ‘young’ aspect anyway.’

That joke went flat.

‘Try her, you might be surprised. With Jim dead, she may be ready to talk now. She’s at the end of her life, her hope. In fact, I would be surprised if she was not waiting for you. Her scones are excellent’.

‘Where are you going?’ Spark asked as Micklethwaite made ready to walk away.

‘Back to Sheps’ Hut’.

‘Is that why you moved in, to banish the Token?’ asked Reilly suddenly inspired.

He had been taken by the idea of wish houses and tokens, and already felt some poetic sensibilities looming up.

The house was shuttered, calm and still

Yet there was a movement of another’s will

A knock, a pause, and a wish was asked

To rectify an error of the past

But what would rhyme with changeling?

‘Yes’.

‘But there’s no such bloody thing’ said Spark irritably, ‘as ghosts and changelings...’

Micklethwaite was suddenly tired of the whole business

‘I know that, you know that, but Chad Jago doesn’t, he still thinks his daughter is a changeling’.

‘Vicki?’

‘He rejected her’.

Spark digested this statement.

‘Poor kid’.

But Micklethwaite doubted if Spark meant it.

‘What about a statement?’

Micklethwaite shook his head definitely. They could get the glory, if that’s what it was, and he could see in Spark’s face that that was precisely what he was thinking.

He walked away from the two policeman, and they did not stay him, or say thank you. They were talking for a while but when he looked back, they were gone. For some reason he had walked the wrong way and was following the shoreline away from his car. The lake looked stunning, such a bizarre colour that could not be invented even by God.

In one sense he had solved a mystery, yet he remained mystified. Motive, revenge, rage, these were not simple mechanical linkages driven from a calculating engine to the shaft of action. There was no rationale to explain the inexplicable. He could not imagine the amount of cold rage needed to kill an innocent child, and everything that seemed to make sense, was hardly reasonable.

There was something quite matter-of-fact about Emerald’s murder, rather as if an automatic mechanism had been brought into play. Micklethwaite remembered on Anzac Day that he did not once see Dorothy look towards Emerald, which in hindsight, he should have realised was significant, but then all events seemed significant in hindsight. It was as if Dorothy was preparing herself mentally for the strength to kill and no emotion could enter between herself and the girl, and yet, and yet she painted with Emerald, drew pictures, saw laughter in the child’s face...

He felt in his bones that the Sheela-na-gig was put there under Dorothy’s insistence, hell, Jim Jago wouldn’t know what it was, or what it was supposed to mean. But it meant something to Dorothy. The little imp under the church roof was busy creating and destroying something in her head. If you could not create life, would you then destroy it? Were Charles Jago and Dorothy Mackay lovers once, if even briefly? Was it sexual, or were they just attracted to one another. He was certain that Dorothy Mackay in fact married the wrong brother, and did a long life of loneliness nurture a

life of revenge? He would have liked to have asked her, but in a way he felt relieved that he did not need to. How did the Greeks put it? He said out loud.

‘For whom the Gods wish to destroy they first make mad’.

He stood and gazed over the ruffle-free lake. A storm was building up in the mountains again.

People run deep, and childhood notions can embed themselves with a tenacity that live with us for the rest of our lives, and we cannot shake their bogies and sensibilities. Perhaps they just surface in certain ways, unexpectedly, making strange contradictions in our characters that in turn create some of the rotten contrariness of adult life. Put us under stress, and we react in ways that defy logic. Stories that start in a picture book on a grandmothers lap, end up as a motive for murder.

He picked up a stone and bent down and tried skimming it across the water. It hopped twice then sank miserably out of sight. He always had been lousy at skipping stones, and he just knew in his bones that the Detective Inspector would be good at it. He was sporty after all.

End Notes

This is entirely a work of fiction, and the names of the high country stations and characters used are all imaginary, and are not intended to resemble anyone living or dead. Any accidental representation that might have occurred is entirely by chance, and is regretted.

However the landscape utilised in this story is not fictional, though I have re-arranged some features to better suit my story.

The Mackenzie country exists in the middle of the South Island, in New Zealand, and has dramatic light and weather. It is bleak to some, pure theatre to others. The Southern Alps form a huge backdrop, and the mountain rivers do actually sparkle like champagne. The town of Tekapo does exist, though it is actually called Lake Tekapo. I have changed the name in the story to avoid endless confusion between the lake and the town. Lake Tekapo does not have a country hospital, or curiously a cemetery, which is at Burkes Pass.

Several old stone boundary huts do exist, but most of them are not in the Mackenzie district. They date from the 1860's and they now seem rather remote relics of a high country style of farming that has long gone. Helicopters and quad bikes are used to muster sheep these days, not shepherds, or pack-horses.

The tales of Mackenzie the Reiver, sheep-stealer, moss-man, or thief, are true, as is the story of Edmund Norman the boundary keeper. However, both stories are slightly fictionalised. For the sake of consistency I have spelt Mackenzie's name in one way only, despite the different variants.

Lastly, the Celtic story at the heart of The Wish House is an old one. It was one of Rudyard Kipling's collection of stories, written in a remarkably complex English dialect that is both authentic, and maddeningly hard to read. One writer thought it was Kipling's best short story, which is probably true, however the story is older than Kipling, though how much older is uncertain.

The word Token, in the sense of how Kipling used it, and as I have used it in this story, does not appear in the greater Oxford English Dictionary. However it does appear several times in early collections of English folklore, but the actual story itself is harder to trace, and seems lost in the disappearing folk-memory of ancient beliefs. In these stories a Token is not really a ghost or a ghoul, but something rather like a presence, perhaps a portent, or a conscience, that haunts a fallible mind.

Cornish Words

- ashes cat — person always found by fire
- cakey — feeble-minded
- crib — mid-morning snack
- figgy-hobbin — dough with sultanas
- fogo or fogou — cave
- fuggan — a type of Cornish flat-cake, made from suet, and usually criss-crossed with a pattern to resemble a fishing net
- goodbye chin — receding chin
- handsome is as handsome does — an old fashioned expression, not particularly Cornish, to express the notion that a persons acts are more important than their words
- knockers — fairies, in particular in underground mines, where the presence of knockers might lead miners to the gold
- mazed — mad, angry
- mazzards — hedgerow cherries
- mousey-pasty — pasty filled with mice, the penalty for bed-wetting
- my lover — a formerly common Cornish expression said after hello, but not usually literal
- niceys — sweets
- pisky ridden — beset by accidents
- saffron cake — a popular Cornish recipe
- skerrick — not much
- spriggans — fairies
- stroathing — hurry
- teddies and points — ‘teddies’ are potatoes, and ‘points’ are ‘point to the meat if you see it’, in other words a mean meal
- wisht — melancholy, miserable

High Country Words

- boundary keeper — before there were fences, these men had to patrol the stations boundaries to keep the sheep from straying.
- scab — an infectious sheep disease, prevalent in the nineteenth century.
- Johnny Fortnight — usually a packman bringing supplies to the boundary keepers, sometimes a swagger on his regular ‘rounds’.
- high country — specifically the area of tussock mountain lands used for sheep grazing, land often higher than 5,000 ft in altitude, and even up to 7,000 ft.
- crib — in southern New Zealand slang a ‘crib’ is a bach, or holiday home.
- bach — shortened from ‘bachelor’, a holiday home, or escape hut.

