

Watch Over Me

A
Rose Rountree
Mystery

Judy Lawn

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WATCH OVER ME

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PROLOGUE

The little princess was out for her afternoon walk, her footsteps soft on the pine-needle path. He followed her—as he had done before—staying well back, using the tree trunks as a shield, careful where he put his feet. He didn't want to snap a twig or make any noise at all.

She came to a small bank and sat. The rust-coloured pine needles made a soft cushion for her; he was pleased she was comfortable. In the late autumn sunshine, the perfume of the bush was sweet; it was a good time for her walk.

Then he heard her crying. Tears welled to his eyes.

“Don't cry,” he wanted to say, half-lifting a hand toward her before drawing it quickly back out of sight. No...no... she must never know of his existence. His hand curled tightly against his chest, as if he would take back the gesture, make his hand smaller.

Why was his little princess crying? She was so pretty...she must not be unhappy. He crept closer, her tears drawing him in from the protection of the bush.

He forgot to look where he was putting his feet...and stepped on a twig. The snap of it was loud and awful, and his nerve endings jolted. In terror, he pressed against the tree trunk, eyes screwed shut, his heart racing...

CHAPTER 1

To hell with the lot of them! From her hunched position beneath the pine trees, Penelope Palmer gathered up a fistful of pine needles and threw them out into the forest of grey trunks. They didn't fall very far, and as she watched them unfurl and plop down limply in front of her, she thought sullenly, *That's exactly how my life is!*

Like she'd really needed Matt to show. And the olds! Why couldn't they leave her alone? And now Granny E was having a bloody heart attack! Penelope scooped up another handful of pine needles, crumbling them. Dry powdery bits filtered through her fingers, and a strong smell of pine wafted upwards, but she barely noticed.

It was bad enough being pregnant. She was only twenty. Her whole life was ahead of her. She didn't want crying babies and wet nappies. The thought was, even after all these months, still foreign. She simply couldn't accept it.

Tears welled in her eyes. If only Matt had been more careful. Bloody condoms! Like they really worked!

Angry, she plucked up another fistful of pine needles and hurled them into the trees.

Although it wasn't entirely Matt's fault, Penelope had to admit somewhat gracelessly. He'd been just as shocked as she was. At first. Then, when she'd cried and screamed and blamed him and said she was going to have an abortion and that it was over, he'd cried. Even now the memory

brought more tears. She'd never seen Matt cry before, and it had been a shock.

"Please don't, Pen," he'd pleaded.

Like she'd really needed *that!*

She wiped her eyes with pine gum-smearred fingers, not caring that the gesture made her eyes water like mad. Why couldn't life be fun, like it was supposed to be? Babies weren't fun. Babies were hard work. Oh, yes—Penelope knew all about babies. A friend of hers had one. Babies tied you down. Babies were the end of life!

She sniffed loudly and wiped her nose on the cuff of her sweater. Well, she wasn't giving in. She wasn't going back, and that was that. No matter what they said. She'd made up her mind, and she wasn't going to be bullied, not by Matt, the olds or Granny E. Mum had been unbelievable! Going on and on at her and—

What was that?

Penelope twisted round as a twig cracked somewhere behind her. She peered hard into the forest of grey trunks, rows and rows of them all the way up the hill behind her. The eerie sound of the wind through the trees gave her the creeps. She shivered, suddenly aware of her isolation.

She had charged out of the house some time ago and marched through the bush, following a short track, taking little, if any, notice of her surroundings, escape being the uppermost thought in her mind. She couldn't, for example, at that moment have said exactly where Granny E's house was.

She groped about in front of her for a fallen branch and struggled to her feet. She held the branch tightly and searched the trees once again, feeling the back of her neck prickle. Perverts were everywhere these days. Even on islands.

Brandishing the stick, she backed over to the nearest tree and leant against it, her gaze still fixed on the spot where she'd heard the noise. Perhaps it was just a wallaby or a bird or some other creature?

After another lengthy search of the trees—she heard nothing more—Penelope dropped the branch. It made a

satisfactory crunch as it hit the ground and broke into pieces. It was probably just a wallaby.

She tried not to think of Jack's ghost stories, which she didn't believe for a minute anyway. Jack was just trying to get rid of her. Like that was going to work!

She pushed away from the tree and hurried back along the track, resisting, with an effort, the impulse to look behind her. She wouldn't come here again. In future, she'd stick to the house. Despite the rows.



“Letter for you, dear.”

Rose looked up from her computer as Julian appeared in the office doorway with the morning's mail. She had come to her office earlier determined to begin her new mystery, but all she'd managed so far were three sentences, none of which pleased her. It was all the fault of the gorgeous autumn morning she could see through the window. She really should have been out in the garden with Julian.

“Oh? Who from?”

She had discovered very early in their relationship that Julian never handed letters over immediately. First, the address had to be thoroughly perused, followed by an equally prolonged study of the return address, if there was one. Then the letter had to be held up to the light, tapped, and its contents speculated upon for several minutes.

Julian always performed this operation in such a serious “chief inspector” manner, complete with a running commentary on the appearance of the letter and speculation as to why the sender was writing, Rose never knew whether to be amused or irritated. Sometimes she had to physically stop herself from drumming her fingers impatiently on her desk, and saying, “For goodness sake, Julian. Just give me the letter!” She knew if she did either of those things, he would be terribly wounded.

Julian had always fancied himself something of a super-sleuth, and now that he and Rose were living together, he

had set himself up as “chief research investigator” for her mystery novels. How he relished the role.

She had to smile as she watched him scan the letter. In the baggy brown cords and battered old beige jumper he had put on for gardening, and with all that wild white hair of his standing out around his head, he looked more like a ferocious unkempt hound than the calmly controlled detective inspector he was attempting to portray.

“Well?” she asked now, suppressing a grin as he furrowed both bushy brows.

Julian, not to be rushed when he was on to something, cleared his throat.

“It’s from a Lady E. Carr of Kawau Island.”

“Ah, Esmeralda.”

Rose was pleased—she hadn’t heard from Esmeralda Carr for some months. She lived not far away on tiny Kawau Island in the Hauraki Gulf, off the east coast of New Zealand’s North Island. When Julian gave her a look of enquiry, she knew the letter would not be given to her until she had told him every aspect of her friendship with Esmeralda and Esmeralda’s entire history.

Careful not to sigh, she began.

“I’ve known Esmeralda Carr for about nine years—we met at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. I’d gone to do some research, and Esmeralda came into the room where I was working.”

She paused, recalling the interruption to her quiet study as if it had been yesterday.

“I heard a rustle of silk then a tap-tapping,” she told Julian. “I looked up, and there was Esmeralda, tall and thin and resplendent in a rich red wool suit with a red-and-gold silk scarf trailing out behind her as she moved, regal as a queen. I fully expected to see an entourage behind her, just as spectacular, but she was on her own.

“Her hair was immaculately styled, with blond highlights, if I remember correctly, although she has let it go white now. She carried a gold-topped walking stick, and even

though she was in her seventies, she was wearing a pair of very stylish high-heeled black court shoes.”

Julian by this time had pulled out a chair and settled his solid six-foot-three frame comfortably into it. His hazel eyes, alive with curiosity, were fixed on Rose, the letter tucked at his cheek.

“Go on.”

Rose chuckled.

“Esmeralda saw me at the table and made straight for me, as though we’d prearranged to meet at that exact time and place. I was somewhat astonished but also intrigued, as you can imagine.” She gave him a mock self-depreciating grin.

“I’ll bet.” Julian’s eyes twinkled. Rose’s natural curiosity and penchant for meeting eccentric characters just about everywhere they went had long been a standing joke between them.

“Esmeralda Carr is certainly an intriguing character,” Rose continued. “She sat at the table beside me and launched into a conversation as if I’d known her all her life. And the strangest thing was that, after a very short while, I did feel as though I’d known her all her life.

“We talked for hours—I couldn’t believe how the time just flew by. One of the museum staff brought us tea, and Esmeralda presided over the tea table as if she were the queen. That was when I learned she was a lifetime patron of the museum. Her frequent visits were greatly valued, and all the staff knew her well. She spent her visits wandering about the rooms finding someone she could converse with. ‘No one talks these days,’ she said. ‘Television has ruined the art of conversation.’

“She told me all about her family and her children and her marriage to Sir Michael. He stayed in the army for quite a while after the war—he was a decorated war hero—and later he moved into government in an ‘advisory capacity.’ Not that she ever elaborated on what that ‘advisory capacity’ was.” Rose smiled. “Esmeralda is never one to break a confidence.”

“So, she would be over eighty now?”

“Yes. She’ll be eighty-five in September. Goodness.” Rose lifted a hand to her throat. “I hope it’s not bad news.”

“You’d better read this, then.” Julian handed her the letter. “I’ll make our tea.”

She slit open the envelope with fingers that were not quite steady. It was ridiculous to feel a sudden stab of fear. Esmeralda was an old lady. She had well and truly lived beyond her three-score-and-ten years.

Rose unfolded the single sheet of pale-yellow paper, and even though she was apprehensive of the letter’s contents, she couldn’t help a familiar lifting of spirits at Esmeralda’s elaborate sloping writing.

Dearest Rose,

I write today with the news that my eighty-fifth birthday party is about to be ruined by yet another family scandal. My granddaughter Penelope has arrived “pregnant and penniless!”

Of course, she refuses to marry the father of her unborn child. She’s fallen out with her mother and is barely on speaking terms with her father. I despair! The girl is out of control! If her parents hadn’t been so lenient with her when she was growing up, this situation would never have arisen. But then, I don’t want to go over all that again.

The baby is likely to be born on or near my birthday, if you please! And the chit thought I would naturally be delighted by this piece of information. As if I would be. Well, of course I would have been delighted if things had followed the normal course and there had first been a wedding. I am absolutely furious with the girl! She lolls

about all day sulking and watching ridiculous television shows!

What on earth am I to do with her? She says there's nothing to do here on the island, which is absolute nonsense! I can always find something to do, even at my age. But I suppose from a young person's point of view life here on the island would seem dull.

I wonder why she came here, then? I'm sure she means to get round me, but I've news for that young lady. I'm not senile yet! She means to have the baby here, if you don't mind! Call a midwife when her time comes. I'm absolutely horrified by the idea!

Dear Rose, you're not at a loose end, are you? You couldn't come across to the island and keep me company for a few days? Help me persuade this silly girl to go back to Auckland and get on with her life? I would so appreciate your help.

Yours
Esmeralda

Rose let the letter fall to her lap. Amusement at Esmeralda's deliberately melodramatic turn of phrase warred with genuine concern for her situation. Esmeralda was after all, nearly eighty-five. And she did live on an island, even if said island was but a short boat ride to the mainland, and from there a mere one hour's drive to New Zealand's largest city, Auckland.

She did a quick calculation in her head. Esmeralda's birthday was the third of September, if she recalled rightly. It was now the end of May, so that meant the granddaughter must be about six months pregnant.

She glanced down at the letter again. Esmeralda had several close neighbours in the little bay where she lived, and one of them, a woman named Jackie Butler who always insisted you call her Jack, came in every day to cook Esmeralda's meals and generally see to things. However, Esmeralda was still fairly isolated.

Rose could see why she would be concerned at her granddaughter's wish to have her baby on the island, attended only by a midwife. Things could go wrong at any stage, as Rose well knew. She recalled the births of her own three babies and the frantic rush in the middle of the night to the hospital with the first two, how anxious she had been when her daughter Maggie had given birth to Jody, and how relieved she had been when it was all over. It had been just as bad with her daughter-in-law Diane's three births. She had hovered by the phone waiting for Alistair to ring.

And now she was about to go through it all again. Maggie, who had recently returned to her husband after more than a year apart, was now pregnant with her second child.

Yes, things *could* go wrong, and it would be best if Penelope could be persuaded to have her baby on the mainland.

Rose read through the letter again. She couldn't help but think the situation might well resolve itself, as these things often did. Penelope might already have decided island life was not for her and, even now, be preparing to return home. Perhaps even to her boyfriend.

She decided the best thing to do would be to wait a few days then give Esmeralda a call. If Penelope was still there and showing no signs of leaving, then she would, indeed, go across to the island and spend a few days with Esmeralda. In fact, it might be the very thing to do, considering the situation with her writing.

Often when she had writer's block Rose would take off for a day's adventure. It always cleared away the cobwebs, and she could return to her work refreshed. Perhaps she

could think about Kawau Island as a setting for her new book? The place was steeped in history, and she could poke about the old copper mine ruins or look through the famous ‘Mansion House’ that Governor Grey, New Zealand’s first governor general, had had built.

“Not bad news, I hope?” Julian came into the office with their tea and a plate of ginger-nut biscuits.

“No, not really.” Rose smiled up at him as he set a steaming mug and the plate of biscuits beside her. “Esmeralda’s pregnant granddaughter has arrived and insists on staying and having her baby at her grandmother’s place. Needless to say, Esmeralda is in a bit of a panic.”

“Yes, she would be.” Julian took up two biscuits, hitched his trousers and sat down in the chair next to her. “How old is the granddaughter?”

“About twenty, I think.”

“Well, she’ll more than likely get bored in a few days time and take herself off home.”

“That’s what I thought.” Rose dunked her ginger nut in her tea and sucked the warm chewy bit into her mouth. “Mm.” She chewed then swallowed. “I’ll give it a couple of days and then phone Esmeralda. Although...I should take a few days off. I haven’t seen her for quite a while now. She sounded frazzled and is probably in need of a friend.”

Julian plunged his biscuit into his mug.

“Good idea. You haven’t been off on one of your adventures for a while.”

“The weather’s still mild, too. I thought I might get a chance to have a look around the island while I’m there. You know, poke about and unearth some interesting facts or mystery.”

Julian swallowed a mouthful of biscuit.

“Kawau Island would be just the place for that. Wasn’t there once a thriving manganese and copper mining industry in the eighteen-hundreds? Aren’t the old ruins still there?”

“Yes. And there’s Mansion House, too, and all its history, and the wonderful gardens Governor Grey had built.

Not to mention the exotic species he introduced. I should be able to glean something from all that.”

“Are the wallabies still there?”

“They are. Although there’s talk of having them removed.”

“I guess they’re pests, eating the native grasses and such.”

“I suspect possums probably do just as much harm.”

“They probably do. I heard one the other night in the pohutukawa tree, making its godawful chattering.”

“Aren’t they ghastly?” Rose laughed. “I nearly died of fright the first time I heard one.”



After Julian had gone back to his gardening, Rose got up, crossed to the open ranch slider and looked out at the scene before her. The sky was a clear, deep blue. All around the garden, the deciduous trees were either still losing their leaves or had lost them entirely; drifts of yellow and gold lay at their feet. The giant pohutukawa trees had long since finished flowering, and the spent flower pods clung to the ends of branches in rusty, drying clumps and littered the concrete driveway beneath.

The musty smell of decaying vegetation and the sweet scent of fermenting guava berries drifted up from the garden. There was plenty of new growth about, too. Bright buds peeped from lush green camellia trees; some were flowering in splashes of pink and red.

Rose let her gaze drift to the river. A light breeze dimpled the surface of waters the same blue as the sky. Along the river’s edge, mangrove trees grew in tangled disorder. Beyond the river was the mountain, a contented sentinel over the rolling farmlands. She never tired of that garden-river- mountain scene. It stirred something inside her. Brought back memories of a childhood spent in the country, and then her long and happy years on the large property on the outskirts of Wellsford farther north with her husband Spence and the children.

She had been secretary at the local primary school while the children were small and then after, until her writing had begun to take precedence. How lucky she'd been, she thought. How lucky she *was*!

And now to find this new happiness with Julian after they had both lost their partners. Spence had died three years ago, and the following year, Julian's wife Margaret had died. Rose thought back over the years they had known each other, and what great friends they had all been. The men had both run law practices in neighbouring small towns and had met through their mutual businesses, while a friendship had developed between the two women from the first, with their shared love of gardening. Margaret had been a great cook, running a bakery in the town where Julian practiced law. The dinners they had so often shared had always been full of laughter and fun.

Thinking of those times, she allowed a smile to light her face. Her memories were touched by sadness, but it was a sadness that no longer held the first pain of grief for lost loved ones. She had the firm belief that if it had been she and Julian who had gone first then Margaret and Spence would surely have gotten together, just as she and Julian had done.

Julian was of the same conviction.

With another smile, Rose allowed her memories to recede, and her thoughts to return to the present. She admired the view a while longer then turned back to her computer, but she knew it was a lost cause. Her mind was now busy with Esmeralda's letter and thoughts of Kawau Island, and when she should go. It would be impossible to settle to any serious writing now.

She was neither dismayed nor annoyed by this. It was simply part of what it was to be a writer, and she accepted it as such. She read through the sentences she had written, calmly deleted the lot and went to join Julian in the garden.

CHAPTER 2

They had been out in the garden for nearly an hour when Rose heard the telephone ringing; she downed her trowel and rushed up the steps into the house. Puffing, bemoaning her unfit sixty-one years, thinking she should have phoned her daughter, she plucked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Rose! Thank goodness you’re home!” Esmeralda’s crisp, clipped tones, overlaid with urgency, made Rose grip the receiver more tightly.

“Esmeralda! I got your letter this morning.”

“Good, good. Further developments, though, Rose. Further, frightful developments!”

“Whatever’s happened?” Rose was struck by guilt. She should have phoned at once.

“The boyfriend’s arrived. And then yesterday Amelia and Samuel arrived. What rows! I simply can’t abide it! I’ve taken to my bed, and I’m staying here until they’ve all gone.”

A fit of croaking coughing overtook her. Rose, thoroughly alarmed, made soothing noises.

“At this rate, I won’t make my eighty-fifth birthday. I’ve told them all, but what do they care? They just carry on rowing!”

Sensing the tirade hadn’t quite finished, Rose made more suitable soothing noises.

“I might have known family dramas wouldn’t suddenly abate just because I’m old. I let myself be lulled by the peace of a few months’ respite.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And if that’s not more than enough, now Jack’s seeing ghosts! Running about the place, brandishing a broom, and threatening to leave. I’ll be finished if Jack leaves me. I simply couldn’t do without her. I know she’s a bit strange, but I’m used to her ways.”

Rose digested this extra information about Jack with some amusement. Yes, Jack was “a bit strange.” At nearly sixty-five, she was one of those women who had probably never so much as applied lipstick, much less put any makeup or cream on her face. After a lifetime spent outdoors fishing, working hatless in her garden and beachcombing, her skin was tanned to a deep brown. Her hands were rough and barked, and she had lost the little finger of her right hand to infection when a fishhook had once caught and stabbed deeply. That Jack was “seeing ghosts” didn’t surprise Rose in the least.

“I’ll come over on the ferry tomorrow,” she said.

There was an audible sigh of relief from Esmeralda.

“Oh, Rose, thank you!” Esmeralda coughed again then cleared her throat. “But are you sure you can spare the time? Here’s me rambling on and on and not a thought for you. What about your writing? Your dear man?”

“My writing’s at the ‘take a break’ stage.” Rose managed a small laugh, knowing Esmeralda would understand. “And Julian is well able to fend for himself for a few days.”

“Well, if you’re sure, dear. It would be most appreciated. There’s plenty of room, as you know, and don’t worry about food. Amelia has brought tons, almost as if she is settling in for the winter. A thought that makes me shudder!”

Rose gave another murmur. Esmeralda and her daughter Amelia enjoyed a love/hate relationship. Over the years, they had feuded over just about everything. This was probably because they were very alike, something Esmeralda vehemently denied if ever it was mentioned. Amelia’s birth-

day was a few weeks after Esmeralda's, and most of their fiercer arguments always occurred around this time.

"Is there anything you want me to bring? Books or anything?" she asked, more to draw Esmeralda away from the frustration of her immediate situation than because the question really needed answering.

"No. Not really, thank you, Rose. Well, perhaps a good book, then. If I'm to be here in my bed for any length of time, I might as well be reading about other people's dramas as living through my own."

This was said more or less tongue-in-cheek, and Rose was relieved to hear a return of Esmeralda's usual good humor.

"I've just the thing for you," she said, allowing a smile into her voice.

This elicited a short bark of laughter from Esmeralda. Then she said, "Ah, here's Jack. Yes, Jack, I will have some of your pumpkin soup after all. Goodbye, Rose, and thank you. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon."

"Bye, Esmeralda."

Smiling, she replaced the receiver. Esmeralda was not above a little drama herself—she was more than capable of giving as good as she got. Rose could just see her conducting proceedings from her bedroom. Nothing would escape her attention. She would have the "frail little old lady" role down pat.

Still smiling, Rose went out to the garden to tell Julian the latest developments.



"Ghosts, eh?" Julian sat on the bed as Rose packed.

"More likely the imaginings of a woman who spends far too much time alone." She folded a navy polo-necked sweater and tucked it neatly into her case.

"Possibly." He didn't add anything more at that moment. He knew full well that, underneath Rose's assumed nonchalance, her natural curiosity was aroused. She had that look about her—grey eyes alert, and those bubbly dark-

grey curls of hers bouncing purposefully as she moved about the room.

She tucked one of those curls economically behind one beautifully shaped ear now, crossed to her dressing table and began packing her cosmetics into a floral toilet bag, her movements precise and systematic.

“So you won’t be ‘pursuing a line of inquiry,’ then?” he asked with mock gravity. Ghosts were Rose’s specialty. If Jack had seen a ghost then Rose would be sure to investigate.

“I’m sure I’ll hear all about it the moment I arrive.” She zipped up the floral toilet bag with a flourish.



She was not going to rise to Julian’s teasing. To put him off asking any more questions, she picked up her lipstick and proceeded to outline her generous mouth with her usual painstaking care. Julian followed this procedure with absorbed concentration. Watching him in the mirror with some amusement, she wondered what it was men found so fascinating in women’s ritualistic painting of their faces.

“So, this will be our first separation,” he observed softly. “Oh, Julian!”

She put away her lipstick and went quickly into the arms he held open, searching his dear face. She knew every crinkle and wrinkle and freckle by heart now, but she still delighted in this retracing of his features. Lifting one hand, she let her fingers rest lightly against the soft sun-browned skin at the sides of his hazel eyes. The warmth of his body against hers made her tremble.

She thought back over the last months, still amazed and delighted at their relationship, at how right it felt. Julian still went into the office once or twice a week, but more and more of late, he was helping her with her work.

“Why not come with me, then?” she said now, knowing her voice had gone husky.

His arms tightened around her.

“If you’re away any longer than a week, I will,” he declared, bending to kiss, very thoroughly, her newly red mouth.

“Now you’ve smudged my lipstick,” Rose said when she could speak again.

“Put some more on,” Julian urged, his gaze unashamedly hungry.



The following day was just as glorious. Julian dropped her at Sandspit wharf, saw her onto the ferry and waved her off. The ocean was calm; sea gulls flew alongside the boat in companionable escort, screeching for titbits. Rose learned from the captain that this was a daily ritual, and that one seagull—“George”—would actually take handheld pieces of fish.

Sure enough, George soon appeared, demanding to be fed. Rose and the other passengers watched in amusement as the bird returned again and again to the open window beside the captain to snatch pieces of fish from his fingers.

Although the day was lovely, the boat trip smooth, and the seagull’s antics entertaining, Rose still couldn’t help a small niggle of apprehension at her forthcoming role. How would Esmeralda’s daughter and granddaughter react? Would they be friendly, or would she be seen as interfering in something that was none of her business?

Knowing it would more likely be the latter of the two, Rose moved uncomfortably about on her seat and tried to put these worrying thoughts from her mind as the ferry chugged up to the wharf in what was known by locals as Esmeralda’s Bay. She was here now, and she would just have to do the best she could.

As the ferry bumped gently against the wind-and sea-battered wooden structure then stilled, Rose took a deep breath and got to her feet. The boatsman held on to a post to keep the boat steady while she disembarked then handed her suitcase up to her. Squaring her shoulders, she set off along the jetty.



From his place beneath the pines, he had a clear view of the bay. He saw the ferry arrive, a woman get off, pick up her case, wave and start along the jetty. Something about this woman—her bright jaunty step, the tilt of her chin—sent a frisson of fear along his nerves. He did not like her. She was not like the others, who were mostly nuisance and noise. This woman was trouble...

His heartbeat picking up at the thought, he sank down behind the trunk of the pine tree, not feeling the roughness of the bark against his shins through his jeans, feeling instead the swell of fear in his mind. What was she doing here?

He stayed crouched beneath the trees, not noticing the quiet warmth of the midday bush all around him, the soft sounds, the tangy scent of pine in the air. Instead, he sensed shadows—stretching out, touching his skin like a physical caress, cold and calculating...destructive.

It could not be. This was his sanctuary, his world, the place where he felt safe, where he could live without fear. He saw confrontation before him like a tall, hard wall, blank as yet but with a hundred fingers drumming, drumming, waiting to write the words of his discovery, to reveal him.

He quivered, shrinking away from the vision, his hands going to his eyes as if he would physically block out what he saw in his mind.

It must not be...

Perhaps she was not coming to *the* house after all but rather going on to one of the other houses? It was a forlorn wish, and he knew it the instant it came into his mind; but he waited, his heart beating hard. He strained to catch unusual sounds—footsteps on the soft pine path, the breath of a stranger. Yes, he could hear her. She was coming up the path to the house. Perhaps she would not stay long...

Curiosity and hope that he was wrong brought him to his feet. He edged forward, stepping from one tree to the next like a child playing hide-and-seek. Only this was no game.

He could see her clearly now. She was an older woman, perhaps sixty, quite attractive, with bouncy grey curls. Her eyes were grey—bright and lively, as if she looked out at the world with interest and enthusiasm. As if she would not rest until she had discovered what she was looking for.

She stopped, set her case down and came over to the edge of the path to peer up into the bush, one hand in the pocket of her blue jacket. His instinct was to turn and flee, but he knew he must not do that. Fear held him to the trunk of the tree, his face pressed against the rough bark. He squeezed his eyes tight shut and prayed she would not see him, that the capricious breeze would not capture his coat tail and hold it out. She must not see him.

He sensed she was listening.

Behind him, a wallaby scampered away through the bush. Then there was silence, blessed, blessed silence.

When he dared to look again, the woman was going back to her case, picking it up, moving on up the path away from him. He could breathe again.



Rose hadn't been on Kawau for a while and looked about now, appreciating the natural beauty of hills covered in pine and native trees. Esmeralda's house was at the back of the bay behind the other houses and cabins, a short uphill walk along a track through the bush. She had half-expected someone to meet her, but the fact there was no one didn't faze her.

Once, not that long ago, Esmeralda herself would have been there to greet her with Goldie, her old Labrador dog, at her side. But Goldie had died last winter, and Esmeralda had not thought it necessary to replace her.

"I'm too old for dogs now," she had said.

When Rose suggested a cat instead, Esmeralda had waved a dismissive hand, declaring there were far too many pests on the island now without her adding to them.

Rose walked briskly along, listening to the birds' songs and enjoying the quiet noises of the bush and the smell of the pines.

As she rounded the last curve of the track, a movement to her left among the pine trunks caught her attention. She lowered her suitcase to the ground, walked over to the edge of the bush and peered through the uniform mass of grey trunks. Her left hand slid into the pocket of her navy jacket, her fingers tightening in anticipation of what she would see. She knew from past experience that, if she was quiet and still, the shy wallabies would come out from their hiding places.

But all that stirred in the soft afternoon sea breeze were the feathery branches of manuka trees. Farther off in the bush somewhere was the sound of breaking sticks as either a branch fell to the ground or a wallaby scampered away.

Rose held her stance a while longer, then, with a philosophical shrug, went back to her suitcase. There would be plenty of time for wallaby watching while she was on the island.

A peculiar feeling that it had not been a wallaby, that someone was in the bush, went through her; but she shook away the feeling. She was not about to let Jack's ghost stories get to her so soon. Determined, she continued on her way, deliberately ignoring the sensation that someone was watching her progress.

Moments later, the house came into view, and she drew in a breath of relief. There didn't appear to be anyone about, so she went on up the steps, across the front verandah to the front door and knocked.

Jack answered the door—an older Jack than Rose remembered. She seemed shorter, and a shade wider of frame. Her once-dark hair was now thoroughly streaked with grey, the dark-grey of an angry sea. Telling herself not to be so fanciful, Rose wished her a good afternoon, deliberately keeping her voice bright and cheerful.

"Rose." Jack nodded in reply. "Come in. Madam will be glad to see you." She always called Esmeralda "Madam."

All efforts to get her to change this to “Lady Carr,” or even “Esmeralda,” had been met with mulish refusal.

She held the door wide to allow Rose entry but didn’t immediately close it. Instead, she glared out into the pine forest and muttered something that sounded to Rose suspiciously like “Keep back, you!” She then shut the door with a bang.



He watched her reach the house, climb the steps and knock on the front door. So, that meant she was a visitor. A midwife, perhaps? No, the case she carried was not one a midwife would carry.

Jack opened the door. Of late, Jack had been acting very strangely. Now, he heard her give a gruff welcome to the woman—Rose, he thought Jack said. Then, she glared out into the bush, almost as if she were looking right at him, and he felt his nerve endings jump in fright.

“Keep back, you!” she said, and shut the door with a bang.

His mouth fell open, and he took an automatic step backwards. What on earth was Jack doing? He looked behind him, expecting to see someone there, but the bush was empty.

He crept away until he reached his usual hiding place then sank down among the trees. From here, he could see most of the house—the front verandah and door and, through windows, the hallway and part of the staircase and the kitchen at the end. The back verandah was also partly in his view. He settled down to watch.



Rose purposely decided not to comment on Jack’s rather bizarre behaviour, opting instead for the usual benign pleasantries.

“How are you Jack? Lovely day, isn’t it?”

Jack gave a grunt and muttered cryptically, “Plenty going on here, despite the weather. Leave your case there, and I’ll

take it up,” she ordered, before leading the way along a short passage to the roomy lounge at the front of the house.

Raised voices came from the room. Without knocking, Jack thrust open the door and announced, in a gravelly monotone that wouldn’t have been out of place in one of those dark 30s murder mysteries, “Rose Rountree.”

Rose barely had time to step into the room before the door was closed sharply behind her. She thought she heard a strange cackle before her attention was taken up with the four people in the room.

Esmeralda’s daughter Amelia Edwards and her husband Samuel sat in two large chairs over by the bay window, while Penelope and a young man occupied the settee. Amelia and her husband were, thought Rose, a couple who would have slotted very easily into an earlier era, sitting as they were in Esmeralda’s old-fashioned floral chintz chairs.

Amelia was dressed in a long denim skirt and a crisp white cotton shirt. A red angora jersey was knotted carelessly across her shoulders. Silver chains glinted at her neck and wrists; on her feet were black leather high-heeled boots. Sunlight slanting in through the window struck her carefully styled dark shoulder-length hair, giving it the sheen of polished ebony.

Samuel wore fawn trousers, an expensive brand name sweatshirt of a deeper hue and leather boat shoes. There was very little left of his faded beige hair.

Rose let her gaze move on to the two younger people. Penelope was sprawled across the settee, wearing tight-fitting jeans and skimpy floral top in total disregard for her pregnant state. She wound her long, tangled blond hair around one finger; her expression was mulish. The boyfriend, with closely shaven brown hair, was dressed in the uniform of youth—blue jeans and an oversized sweatshirt with words Rose couldn’t decipher scrawled across the front.

That she had interrupted an argument was obvious. Into the sudden silence that fell came the imperious ringing of a bell from somewhere above. Feeling she’d mistakenly stumbled into one of those awful who-dun-its, Rose smiled in

her most professional and friendly manner and said, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon." Samuel Edwards jumped to his feet and came swiftly across the room to greet her. Belatedly, Amelia, followed suit. Her cheeks were bright, and her blue eyes still held the passion of her last heated outburst. Penelope didn't so much as glance Rose's way, drawing a hissed "Penelope!" from her mother. The young man pushed up from the settee, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Hello, I'm Samuel Edwards." He held out his hand. "I do apologise for...er..." He trailed off with a wave of his hand that encompassing the room in general.

Amelia stepped forward.

"Good afternoon, Rose. I'm Amelia, and this is Penelope." A rather lame wave was cast in Rose's direction. "And this is Matt Phillips."

Matt had now joined them; shyly, he shook Rose's hand. Above, the bell could be heard ringing more imperiously than ever. From another part of the house, came Jack's distinct "All right! All right! I haven't got ten pairs of hands!"

Amelia raised a perfectly shaped brow at Rose.

"Perhaps I'd better go straight up," Rose offered calmly.

At this, Amelia visibly relaxed.

"Thank you, Rose."

"We'll meet later, then."

She went from the room, along the hall and on up the stairs to Esmeralda's room.

Esmeralda was propped up in bed, cushions at her back. A knitted lilac bed jacket hugged her narrow shoulders. Her face was fully made up; her white hair, fluffy like down, had been freshly curled and set.

"Rose, at last!" She held out both hands.

Rose went forward quickly and caught the thin, veined hands in hers, dismayed at their coldness and frail grasp.

"Esmeralda." She bent to kiss a cheek that was as soft and dry as tissue paper.

"It's so good to see you, Rose." Esmeralda's smile was over-bright. "Sit down and tell me all your news." She relinquished

Rose's hand, and her own dropped down to rest on the pink and lilac flower-strewn duvet cover.

Rose sat in the chair beside the bed and let her gaze rest on Esmeralda. It was at least seven or eight months since they'd last met; she was shocked by how much Esmeralda had aged in those few months. Her once beautifully defined features had drooped and spread and were made harsh by penciled brows in the wrong place. Old-age wrinkles ran cruel paths deep into the skin of her face and neck. At each temple, blue veins were clearly visible through layers of foundation and powder. Peach lipstick did nothing to enhance her pale sunken features.

With difficulty, Rose tried to keep her shock at Esmeralda's changed appearance at bay, but she should have known better. Esmeralda's blue eyes, although faded, were as sharp as ever.

"I'm getting old, Rose. You don't have to pretend. I look in the mirror each day, and I know what I see."

"Esmeralda." Rose took a frail hand in hers again. She was far too fond of her to offer denials or platitudes, neither of which, she knew, would be appreciated. So, she said nothing, just gently squeezed Esmeralda's hand. She felt a return pressure before Esmeralda withdrew her hand and settled back on to her pillows.

Rose waited, finding she had to swallow hard as she watched her dear friend's battle.

After another moment, Esmeralda looked over at her with something approaching her old spirit.

"And how's that man of yours? Still happy and in love?"

Rose all but blushed at the unexpected question. Knowing Esmeralda would not be satisfied with anything other than the truth, she said, "Julian's very well, thank you, Esmeralda. And yes, we are as in love as ever."

"Good, good. Love is the only thing in life worth having, you know. Without it, life has little or no meaning." She paused a moment to gather breath then added with more verve, "A thing Penelope will learn soon enough. Choosing to bring up a child on your own is no easy step, but young

women today take it up as if it's nothing. You need the love and support of your partner—" She started as a loud screech echoed throughout the house. "Whatever is *that!*"

Rose, who had also started at the sound, stood up quickly.

"I'll go and see." She sent Esmeralda a reassuring smile and made for the door.

At the foot of the stairs, she paused and looked along the hallway. Jack stood with the front door wide open. As Rose started forward, Jack emitted another screech that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up.

The door to the lounge burst open, and Amelia and Samuel dashed out with Matt and even Penelope close behind.

"What?"

Rose couldn't have said exactly who asked the question. Perhaps it had come from all five of them.

"Get back!" Jack yelled to someone outside. "Get back, or it'll be the worst for you!" She snatched up a broom and wielded it high.

"Who's there?" Samuel nearly knocked Rose down in his rush to the front door. Amelia hung back, but Matt gave a good show, even if he was somewhat behind Samuel all the way. Penelope, looking bored, lounged against the doorway.

"Probably Jack's ghost." She yawned.

Rose took all this in as she made her own way to the front door. She looked around, but there was no one there.

Jack was still glaring.

"Who is it?" Samuel demanded, striding out onto the verandah, Matt at his heels. He looked about, saw no one and demanded of Jack, "Who do you see, Jack? Who is it?"

Without relinquishing either threatening stance or hostile glare, Jack announced, "It's him, that's who it is."

"And who is 'him?'" Samuel asked.

Slowly, Jack lowered her broom. She stared at him as if he were stupid.

"Him. Don't you know? Jeremy Wiseman, who lost his wife and babe in a wreck on Fitzgerald Reef. And I know



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