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Sunday 20 August

THE LIGHT CHANGES. Someone's walked past the kitchen window. Then Graeme appears in the doorway.

He has his rifle with him, and his jacket pockets are clumpy and angular, full of stuff as usual. 'Hey.' He grins in that wide open way of his, then leans the rifle against the wall and wraps his arms around Nick in a big bear hug – and there's that old faint smell of liniment, and sheep's wool and burnt toast – then he stands back and gazes at Nick's face. 'It's been a while, but you look all right. How about a bit of shooting?'

'What are you after?'

'See if we can knock off a few bunnies.'

'Nah. I think I'll just mooch around here.'

Graeme slaps his shoulder then laughs. 'Come on, you're hardly ever back here these days. Make the most of it. Get your father's .22.'

Nick goes out to the garage. The bonnet of the car's up – Rex, his father, said he was going to look at the starter motor but there's no sign of him. The problem is, even after all these years Rex's voice still clatters around inside Nick's head, *Don't you ever go near that gun without my permission.* But Graeme's behind him and he says, 'Don't worry about Rex, I told him I'd drop by, see if I could twist your arm.'

So Nick gets the key from his father's office, and unlocks the

cabinet in the garage that holds Rex's old shotgun and his .22 in its tidy canvas bag. He slides the rifle out and stows the bag, and Graeme shakes his head and says, 'What are you going to fire it with, your finger?'

Nick grins. Graeme always gives him a hard time when he's forgotten the routines. He goes back to the office, unlocks the desk drawer and gets the bolt and magazine. And the box of ammunition. He sits down on the back door step, slides the bolt in and closes it, then feeds a few bullets into the magazine clip. Graeme starts to say, 'Don't load ...' and Nick says, 'I know,' and puts the magazine in his pocket.

Rex has twenty-five acres that run across a small plateau, down a humpy slope into a gully, then up into a straggly pine plantation. It's warm for the time of year and they amble through the first paddock where a few sheep are fattening up. When they come to the stile across the fence, Graeme stops and leans against the post. He's the same age as Rex, sixtyish, has a farm further along the road, and Nick's known him since Rex bought the farm ten years ago.

Graeme rubs his hand over the stubble on his chin. 'Rex shouldn't be here by himself. Every farmer along here's got a story to tell – petrol siphoned, tools gone – and we all know who it is and no one's doing a bloody thing about it.'

'Rex thinks he's okay.'

Graeme grunts. Then he says, 'When did you last fire a .22?'
'While ago.'

'Like, a few years ago.' Graeme squints along the fence line to where a massive old macrocarpa is standing by itself, the last of an old shelter belt. 'See that gnarly bit down low in the middle? Looks whitish. See if you can hit that.'

Nick loads the rifle. 'What's behind it if I miss?'

'If you miss that whole tree you shouldn't be let loose with a water pistol.'

Nick looks through the scope and fires. His first shot is too

high, but the second is just off the target. 'How about that? Not bad, eh.'

'Not bad at all. For a city boy!' Graeme looks casually across the gully to the pines bunched up on the other slope, then he becomes still, all of his body rearranging itself into one new focus. 'Well, well. Looks like we've flushed out something bigger.' He rests his elbow on the post, shading his eyes against the sun, then says, 'Looks like we've got the real McCoy this time. Caught him red-handed.'

Nick looks but he can't see anyone.

'There he is again. In the pine trees. He's heard us. Act like you're walking away.' They follow the fence casually, then when they get to the corner where it right-angles down the slope, Graeme says, 'He can't see us here. Let's get a better look at him. Quick, before he takes off.'

They go over the fence and run, a clodhopping single file, following the line of it. There are macrocarpas sweeping across the wires, and the two of them half-crouch, keeping low under the branches. Then the ground rises and they can't see over it so they leave the cover of the trees and scramble across the open ground then fling themselves down flat on the crest of the rise.

Graeme says, 'There he is.' And there's a shadow shifting between the pines, the kind of movement you'd only see if you're used to watching for deer, or some other furtive and dappled animal – like a man not wanting to be seen. 'There's another one!'

'Where?'

'Use your eyes! We should give them a damned good lesson.'

'You don't know who they are.'

Graeme looks through the scope of his rifle. 'Too right I do. Don't know about that fellow – but that other one ...' he looks up and across the gully again '... I've seen him hanging around before.' He gives a grunt of a laugh. 'We've got them fair and square, Nick, and we're going to give them one hell of a wake-

up call! None of this farting around waiting for the police.’ He sights along the rifle again. ‘Now wouldn’t you know it – they’re going into the bush.’

The fence runs along the farm boundary, and the bush butting up against it on the neighbour’s side is tall enough for a man to disappear into. Nick hears the click of the bolt on Graeme’s .22. ‘What ...’

‘We’ll put a shot up their arse. Give them the message loud and clear.’ Rex’s rifle is on the grass and Nick pulls it towards him. He looks through the scope but has no idea where the men are.

Graeme says, ‘Leave it. I’ll do it.’

Nick says, ‘No, I will.’ He knows this side of Graeme – too quick, hand or mouth quicker than the head. He looks up from the scope, and a shadow flickers again on the opposite slope – Graeme’s right, they’re heading for the fence, they’re going to take off into the bush. Suddenly Nick’s mad at them – they’re on Rex’s farm, using his land, messing with everyone’s minds – and he grips the rifle to steady himself and moves it back to where the men first appeared. There’s no one there – they’re way across the slope by now. He shifts his body into a better alignment with the rifle, looks through the scope, sees a circle of tree trunk, cocks the gun, there’s a rush of green and dark and light, he pulls the trigger, and at the edge of his eye he sees a movement – one of the men must have come down the hill and along the stream bed, he’s running up onto the hump of the bank. But it’s too late for the image in the head to connect with the finger, because the finger has already pulled the trigger, and the air has already exploded beside him from Graeme’s rifle. He closes his eyes and lets his head fall onto the grass. There’s a roaring sound in his ears and he lies still, waiting for it to settle, but it doesn’t, it’s like a huge wind tearing across them.

He hears a movement beside him, and opens his eyes.

There’s no wind, just silence. Nothing has changed. The

grass shimmers in front of him, the sun sliding down each filament making the world bright and shiny, hurting his eyes, and through the glare he sees Graeme lift himself up from the ground: he looks shimmery and strange as well. He sees Graeme's boots with the woollen socks stretched and flopping over the tops, then his boots tip sideways, Graeme will break his ankle if he's not careful, maybe he's drunk, and he starts to run, he's running down this hillside drunk. But now Nick remembers. He pushes himself off the ground with his hands, his legs like concrete but somehow they lever him into an upright then standing position, then he runs down the hill after Graeme, feeling his body weaving and rocking.

The man is lying on the hump of the bank above the stream. Graeme crouches beside him, and his voice is faint and strange. 'He's alive. We've got to get an ambulance.'

'I'll go.' Nick runs and limps up the slope on the ridges of the sheep tracks, then across the paddock to the house. He barges into the kitchen then can hardly speak. 'Call an ambulance.'

'What happened?' Rex is already reaching for the phone.

'Man's hurt. He was in the pines, over the stream.'

'Not one of them again. Sounds like he got what he deserves this time. What happened to him?'

'He was ...' Nick stops. Maybe he can lengthen out this long silent moment, because once he's said it, everything will change. 'He was shot.'

Rex's eyes fix on to Nick's face. 'Who shot him?'

Nick doesn't answer. He can't get his thoughts into any kind of order. The question balloons out in all its complexity, it's filling the room, it's stifling them. Neither says anything.

His father picks up the phone, dials 111, asks for an ambulance and the police, gives directions.

Jacob comes into the kitchen. Rex's older brother. Like Nick, come up to the farm for an easy weekend. He looks at Rex then Nick. 'What's going on?'

Rex says, 'There's been an accident. You'd better go with Nick, and take the first aid kit and a blanket. I'll wait for the ambulance.'

Graeme is kneeling beside the man, who grunts as he breathes, his fingers grabbing air. Jacob opens the man's jacket and lifts his T-shirt to see the damage to his chest. There's blood all over his ribcage, and Nick turns away ... and now there's a shudder in the memory, as though a film is showing on an old projector and has missed a sprocket ... and when the film picks up again he's by himself some distance away. He hears Jacob say, 'We shouldn't move him. We'll have to do what we can here.' He tells Graeme to get a bandage from the first aid kit and fold it into a wad to try to stop the bleeding, then they lay the blanket over the man and tuck it under him. Jacob has taken Graeme's place, cradling the man's head, and Graeme walks away up the slope so Nick follows him. They sit on the ridge of a sheep track. The hillside is still, the sun is sliding down it turning the grass silver, and midges are swarming in the warm air. Nick bats them away with his hand, and they scatter then reassemble in a shivery cloud above his foot.

Jacob, below them, shifts his position and bends over with his head close to the man's face. The two on the slope don't look at each other. Finally Graeme says, 'Who was it? You or me?'

Nick shakes his head. He can't say anything.