

**New Zealand,
January 1983**

1

Emilia

New Zealand was greener than Emilia could ever have imagined. The trees, the paddocks, the seemingly endless miles of rolling hills . . . different hues, but all undeniably green. The change in pitch as the train clattered across a wooden bridge had nudged her from her sleep. They were now in what was called the King Country. Emilia found that gently amusing. King of what, exactly? Sheep? They were everywhere, thousands of them dotting the paddocks. Little mobile floor rugs and pullovers, ring-barking the hills with their hooves. No wonder Sanna had so easily found work here as a wool handler in a shearing gang. The supply and demand were untapped. It was like making and selling vodka to the Russians.

The town slowly revealed itself; a scattering of houses at first, then gradually, denser clusters. Emilia, wearing her trademark jeans and black boots, flicked at her neat, shoulder-length black hair and stepped nervously onto the asphalt platform. Placing her pack against the sign, *Nashville, King Country, NZ*, she noticed she was the only person alighting.

‘Can I help you, miss?’

The man had appeared from nowhere. He was old, older than her grandfather, a Māori, wearing a dark blue uniform.

‘Here, I’ll take your pack,’ he said.

They shuffled off the platform. 'Postie Plus' said the large red sign atop the shop directly opposite. Emilia's eyes were drawn to the racks of clothing spilling from the doorway, across the footpath. They did things differently here. At home, post offices were for buying stamps and sending parcels and letters.

'Can you direct me to the police station, please?'

'Police? You haven't been here long enough to get into trouble.'

Emilia chose not to respond.

'Down this way, one block, then at the corner, turn right.' He pointed as he spoke, his forefinger gnarled and bent. Arthritic, she assumed. 'It's along there.'

Emilia nodded. 'Thank you.'

He tipped his cap. 'You're welcome, miss. And best not to talk to any strangers, eh?'

Emilia found the counter of the police station unattended. She pressed the buzzer.

A constable presented himself, younger than her. Lance Peterson, his badge read.

'Can I help you?' he asked. He was as green as the landscape outside, but the tone of his voice was warm.

'My name is Emilia Sovernen.'

'I'm sorry,' the constable interrupted. 'Did you say Sovernen?'

'Yes. Emilia Sovernen.'

Peterson raised a finger. 'One minute,' he said, before excusing himself.

Another man appeared, this one with a large barrel chest, deeper voice and a presence that spilled over the counter. 'Ms Sovernen, I'm Detective Inspector Tom Harten.'

They each took a moment to eye the other.

'Ms Sovernen, you've travelled a long way. May I ask how long you're planning to stay in Nashville?'

WHEN THE DEEP, DARK BUSH SWALLOWS YOU WHOLE

Emilia tolerated the question. Wasn't it obvious? 'For as long as it takes to find out what happened to my sister.'

DI Tom Harten pushed a mug of tea across the table. White enamel, its blue rim looked as chipped and worn as he did. 'I'm sorry I don't have a proper cup and saucer,' he said. 'Sugar?'

'No, thank you.'

'Sweet enough, eh?'

She hadn't come here for small talk.

'Right, then . . . where would you like me to start?' he said.

'It's more about where we finish.'

'Listen,' he fidgeted uncomfortably. 'I'm sure you understand how allowing you this meeting is highly irregular. The investigation was very thorough. The interdepartmental investigator said so in his report. As honest as we sit here today, I promise you we did everything we could. I'm very sorry for Sanna, and for your family. But the fact is, there are times, not very often, but rare occasions, when we don't get a result.'

Emilia sipped her tea. 'A result? Like a football game?'

He sighed. 'You have a copy of that report, you already know the evidence. Out of respect for you travelling halfway around the world, I'm happy to give you some of my time. But I need to be honest with you. I'm not going to assist you to run another investigation.'

'So, this is like, how you say . . . a cold case?'

'That's not a term I'd use, no. But -'

'But you stopped looking for her. Right?'

'As you know, it's been almost a year. If more evidence came to light, and it stood up, then of course we'd intensify the investigation.'

Emilia pondered his comment. 'So, what do you need from me? For you to reopen the case.'

'Are you sure you want to go down this path?'

'Why else did I travel all this way? To be patronised?'

Tom drew breath. 'A body. If we had a body, the case would be escalated.'

Emilia barely flinched. She could see she'd impressed him. She was made of sturdy stock. 'Or the person responsible?'

'Of course. But trust me, we're not getting to him without a body first.'

'Him? Or them?'

'Well yes, either. We have an open mind on that.'

'I have an open mind too. Don't you think that is helpful? An outsider's perspective?'

'Potentially, yes. But don't forget that we brought in detectives from outside. No assumptions were made about potential local suspects. We stripped everything right back.'

'From outside? Different town or city maybe, but still people thinking the same as you. Not Finnish thinking.'

'No, not Finnish thinking,' he said, clearly fishing around for a way to move things along. 'Ms Sovernen, dress this up however you like, dance around the edges about different cultures and so on, but the bottom line is that your sister Sanna, she disappeared without a trace. Until we find some hard evidence, something that links her to a person of interest or a location, then I'm sorry to say, she is still a missing person, and —'

She caught his eye and stopped him in his tracks. She knew his words were intended as a conclusion. A full stop. But her determination told him she was interpreting them as a challenge.

All of a sudden, his cold case didn't seem so cold anymore.