

## CHAPTER 1

Stepping on the bathroom scales confirmed she had lost more weight. Three months of deprivation had resulted in a transformation of her body from bordering on obesity to just pleasantly chubby. Chubby she could deal with. She never liked skinny bodies. *Skinny bodies looked like death on bones.*

The weather was perfect. Sunny, warm and calm. There was still plenty of time before the guests were due to arrive. She had chosen her outfit the night before; white linen trousers, navy striped blouse and linen jacket. Her new short blonde bob was colored to perfection. She knew she looked good. Everything she had worked so hard for was coming to fruition. It had been a year since she had decided to convert her family's remote seaside property into a business. The addition of four new cabins to the site would increase her income considerably. The work had been all encompassing which was a blessing. She needed a project to take the darkness from her mind. She knew it would return. It always did.

Taking her hot tea outside she sat at the picnic table overlooking the ocean. The morning stillness reflected in the water creating a familiar millpond effect. Not a sound could be heard, just an occasional birdcall from high on the pines. Audrey's reclusive nature bonded with the remoteness of the land. The decision to sacrifice her privacy for monetary gain was a necessity not a choice. Her financial situation had gone from bad to worse. Being an accommodation provider was what she knew best. Well, that wasn't completely true. Getting away with murder was her most accomplished skill, but one that provided no recognition unlike her reputation in the tourist field.

Her new website reflected her welcoming persona: bright, cheery images of rustic cabins with warm colorful interiors, fire pits, BBQs, hot tubs, native bush walks, fishing spots, rocky beaches and vast ocean views adorned the pages. Every cabin was fully booked from now until March with the exception of a few nights here and there. She knew this might be her last morning to enjoy complete solitude. The first guests were arriving about midday. An American couple who were touring the far north and were planning on staying two nights. She had put them in the Bush Cabin - furthest from her cottage and surrounded by native bush with a wonderful view overlooking the Hihi estuary and township.

Anticipation and intrigue were her welcoming companions. Audrey knew there was a fine line between friendliness and intrusiveness. Every cabin was completely self-contained with kitchen, laundry, linens and supplies. Guests just had to provide their own food and beverages. The office adjoined her cottage where she assisted guests with travel, local activities and general enquiries. Apart from that she kept to herself. Just welcoming guests on arrival and checking them out at departure.

When she had first moved onto the property there was only one cabin. Now there were five. She knew she would have her work cut out for her. The laundry and cleaning she would do herself. She didn't want anyone else nosing around. A quick look at her reservations confirmed the arrival times of the other guests. It was going to be a busy day.

## CHAPTER 2

It was almost noon and Ben Williams still had a two-hour drive before reaching Hihi. His cell phone hadn't stopped beeping since he left Auckland. He knew it was his bloody wife. Marrying was his first mistake. Marrying his best friend's wife was his second. Now he wished he had never met her. He had managed perfectly well on his own for over fifty years. The last seven years had been hell. He had seen his dark side reflected in her eyes. A dark side he did not want to recognize but was now fully exposed in its viciousness. Her parting words were ringing in his ears "I never want to see you again." *Well, fuck her!* The feeling was mutual. He knew it was over. He wondered why she was calling him. He wouldn't answer.

Working as a prison corrections officer had taken its toll. At first Ben could recognize the line between prisoner and staff. As time went on the line became blurred. Violence was an everyday occurrence. By the time he retired he could hardly recognize himself. He was a bully. Survival had been his excuse but he had enjoyed the power his job gave him. The power to control, to violate the rights of his prisoners and maliciously enforce his position became his daily routine.

Ben had simply transferred his hostility to his wife. At first he just wanted to know he could trust her. There was nothing wrong in that. She said that she needed her space, whatever that meant. She would spend more and more time over at her girlfriends' houses. He didn't ask for much. Just dinner on the table by six thirty, a clean house and his laundry done. She didn't have to go to work. After all, he used to do this for himself as well as working full time. What the hell did she do all day? What was worse, he had lost his best friend. He would have nothing to do with him since he had learned of the affair between them. It was all Joan's fault. She had come on to him. Now he only had his fishing buddies.

The trip had been planned for weeks. They were staying in the small seaside village of Hihi. His buddies were bringing the boat. They would fish mainly in Doubtless Bay and head out into the ocean, weather permitting. His truck was loaded with fishing gear and beer. He was looking forward to a nag-free week. He checked his phone for directions.

