EMPTY NEST: Book 3, The Euphemia Sage Chronicles.

Prologue.

Joe Kincaide wasn’t exactly avoiding Euphemia Sage. But he had left Oakhill Station as soon as she arrived. He was merely, he thought, delaying the inevitable. In the meantime, the opportunity to revisit the Pounui Wetland Reserve and observe this season’s spoonbill chicks as they prepared to leave their parents’ nests was too good to miss. He looked forward to spending a quiet night alone tucked up in his sleeping bag in his shack and going to sleep to the sound of the waves on nearby Ocean Beach.

He needed time to settle his nerves before he faced her. His responses to her inevitable questions had been prepared weeks before but he needed time to practice them. He needed to practice how to sound truthful when he said them. It was vital for everyone’s well-being that she believed him. Kenneth would accept what he said at face value. He was a man. But Euphemia would have no compunction calling him out if she thought he was being less than honest about the accounts. If only the events of the last year had not necessitated this deception he wouldn’t be in this position. There was too much at stake to be caught now.

I regret having to lie to her; he thought as he walked along the levee to the shack where he did his bird watching. Kenneth and Euphemia had been his friends since their university days. He liked and trusted them. They were clever, and they were fun. For the last twenty years in April, they had made the trip over the hill from Wellington to Oakhill Station to go through the end-of-year accounts of Oakhill Station the property which had been in the Kincaide family for over one hundred and fifty years. Once the business was over, they spent the rest of the weekend enjoying themselves.

Not this year.

Joe looked up. He had arrived. The shack was a small but sturdy one roomed building made from plywood. To call it a shack was disrespectful because it had every modern convenience, money could buy. Powered by discrete solar panels, and covered in webbing woven through with branches and grasses, it was so well camouflaged, a pair of bitterns had nested alongside it last spring - their deep booming calls reverberating around the marshes in the mornings.

It had no windows, just small openings in the walls with shutters which he could raise and lower depending on the weather and which birds were where, on the massive wetland surrounding him. The furniture and fittings comprised a large chest, which doubled as a table, one chair, one high stool, a bed, a small stove which ran on wood pellets, LED lanterns and sink fed with filtered rainwater from a tank on the roof. There was a shelf of books, thrillers each one read many times over, and a pair of high-powered binoculars. Well-stocked with the necessities of life, he kept tins of baked beans, coffee, whisky and chocolate in the chest. His usual trip involved him stopping first at the Martinborough Bakery to purchase two baguettes and then at the cheese shop in Featherston to pick up a round of South Island Brie. He locked the shack when he wasn’t there, to keep out the lost and feckless; the door bolted and padlocked.

Except today. The door was wide open. He put his backpack down and approached cautiously across the wooden causeway.

‘Who’s there?’

There was no answer. A gust of wind blew the door back on its hinges, slamming it against the wall with a loud bang. He listened, but heard nothing to indicate anyone was inside. Ready to confront an intruder, he stepped over the threshold and into the gloomy interior of his shack. There was no one there.

He heard footsteps behind him. He turned. It was too late. Joe didn’t see the man who put the wet rag over his nose and mouth and held it there until he passed out.