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**FRANZ  
JOSEF**



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## PRELUDE

*It is said that dogs howl just before their owners feel that mysterious jolt, the compression wave, signalling an impending seismic disaster. New Zealand has had its fair share of disasters in recent years. The centre of Christchurch still looks shell-shocked more than a decade after the earthquake that brought down tower blocks, made the earth bubble, and cancelled scores of lives. Further north, the mountains around Kaikōura have been put back in their place after they tumbled towards the sea and gave a foretaste of what Mother Nature is capable of when she turns her mind to it. Not long after, a lethal pandemic virus came and went, changing everything and sweeping all before it. Of course, some devastating shock waves can be triggered by just one man with a semiautomatic and a heart full of hate.*

*He is sick of running and hiding. If the end of the world isn't far enough, then where is? There's no such thing as sanctuary these days. Was there ever? Churches, temples, and mosques are as likely to become massacre sites as a last refuge. Priests, predators. Saviours, savages. Nowhere is safe; no-one can be trusted. In the end you are alone and not even love can save you.*

*The night is still. A full moon bathing the fields in its pale glow. Trees whispering softly. Bird sound, a morepork perhaps, not so far away. The creak of the gate at the end of the track. Throb of an engine approaching. The dog growls sleepily outside on the porch. Waking too late to offer up any warning howl. Up the steps onto the verandah. Torchlight. A shadow-play dancing on the walls and ceiling.*

*He once was lost but now is found.*

**WEDNESDAY.** The tiny town of Franz Josef, about halfway down the west coast of South Island, has a permanent population of approximately three hundred residents, but upwards of half a million souls can pass through during the tourist months. It's about five kilometres from the glacier of the same name and has a petrol station, a small but busy heliport, sundry tourist accommodation options (up to two thousand people might stay overnight during the main season) and a handful of restaurants, bars and shops. It was named in 1865 by the German explorer Julius von Haast in honour of the emperor of Austria. Local Māori have always called the place Waiau, or 'swirling waters'. Nobody realised until about the mid-1960s, a century later, that the town was built smack bang on the Alpine Fault – the line where the Australian and Pacific tectonic plates rub irritably against each other. Well, maybe a few locals have had their suspicions over the centuries and decades. The fault is about ten years overdue for a massive eruption, an eight on the Richter, which is forecast to open South Island up like a zip. The place is a case study, a laboratory for doomsday scenarios, and the powers that be have decided the risk is too great. The plan, dubbed Operation Exodus by the news media, is to close Franz Josef down and have the good citizens relocated somewhere safer further up the road. A noble and valiant cause, trying to instil some predictability in an increasingly unpredictable world. A world of seismic jolts. Who could have predicted the Christchurch mosque massacres, the pandemic, and now Russia invading Ukraine? The experts in their fields maybe, but who listens to experts these days?

'Are we there yet?' Latifa Rapata has just woken up, grumpy, eyes gummed from sleep. I'm still getting used to the recent *moko kauae* on her chin, a symbol of her self-confidence and of her growing status in the community. I don't know why she insisted on coming on this trip – married

just over eighteen months, five months pregnant, in the process of moving house to accommodate her expanding family plans. There are a thousand better things to be doing and places to be, but Latifa's always known her own mind.

'Another hour and a bit, maybe?'

'I need coffee and food.'

It's still light and will be for another few hours yet. Daylight-savings, late-summer South Island evenings. Once we left behind the logged hills of the Top of the South and the flat cleared farmlands with their billboards whingeing about the proposed new water quality regs, the drive down SH6 has been glorious, winding through lush rainforest, hugging the coast with its wild driftwood beaches and the Tasman shimmering off to our right. Lose the sandflies, and it could be paradise. We've been on the road since early morning and should get there by midafternoon. 'The thermos is on the back seat along with a box of sandwiches, some fruit.'

'What kind?'

'Bananas and apples.'

'I meant the sandwiches, Nick.'

'Ham salad.'

Latifa points her fingers at her gob and makes a gagging sound, but the twinkle in her eye lets me know it's a wind-up. Her hunger overrides her professed dislike of ham salad and she tucks in with gusto. Then after peeling a banana and pouring us both a coffee, she remains uncharacteristically silent until we reach our destination.

There's a chill about Franz Josef and not just because the sun has gone behind some clouds. Maybe it's the proximity to the glacier, which acts like a bag of frozen peas on a bruise. Maybe it's the strengthening wind off the ocean. Or maybe it's because it's already a semi-ghost town. This is the last tourist season before the old Franz Josef is closed for good. A few shops have already given up; shuttered and shut forever. Some with posters in the window – *SAY NO TO EXODUS!* The handful of tourists strolling the main street seem somehow let down. Wait until they see Franz Josef II – a soulless assembly of concrete and glass boxes unceremoniously dumped in a paddock a few kilometres north on the safe side of the Tatore Stream. Imagine the crusty old emperor shorn of his whiskers, medals and martial glint, and dressed up instead like your local Jehovah's Witness nursing a crisis of faith.

‘Operation Exodus, huh? What they gonna do with this place once everyone’s moved out?’

‘Bulldoze it? Use it for movies, or police or army training?’

‘House the homeless maybe? At least until Judgement Day, the final shake.’ She drains the dregs from her coffee cup. ‘There’s the cop shop.’

I pull up outside and in we go.

‘You guys made good time, then.’ The sergeant is a bloke called Bryce, in his forties and kept himself in okay shape. I spot a mountain bike leaning against a wall in an office otherwise empty, save for some boxes stacked in a corner. We do the introductions.

‘Nick Chester, and my colleague here ...’

‘Latifa Rapata.’

‘Enchanté,’ says Bryce. Handshakes all round.

‘Getting ready for the big move?’ I gesture towards the boxes.

‘A month and a bit off yet, April Fools’ Day. Says it all, really.’

‘Not convinced of the need?’

‘Nanny state. That big earthquake could happen in the next five minutes, next twenty years, maybe not even in our lifetime. If it does, it could be anywhere. That’s what makes NZ great: if you’re not livin’ on the edge, you’re taking up too much space.’

‘Cue dead body,’ says Latifa. ‘Where is it?’

‘You’re keen,’ says Bryce. He nods at her baby bump. ‘This can wait until morning if you need a rest.’

‘I’m fine, thanks. It’s a baby, not a tumour.’ She looks up at me, aghast.

No need. My tumour turned out to be benign, was cut out, and I haven’t looked back since. ‘It’s still in situ, the body?’

‘Absolutely. Wonderfully preserved too.’

A glacier will do that.

—

‘Two detectives?’ says the young cop guarding the locus, not that there’s much danger of curious passers-by high up on a glacier. ‘Is that all we’re worth?’ His name is Dale and he’s been here a while. He’s shivering, teeth chattering.

‘One and a half actually,’ says Latifa, sweetly. ‘I’m just a trainee.’

Yes, I finally accepted District Commander Marianne Keegan’s offer of a job with the D’s in Nelson. Vanessa, Paulie, and I now live near the beach at Tāhunanui. It’s not as grand as it sounds – a solid, bland brick place

from mid-last-century, not one of those flash forts on the hill overlooking Rocks Road. Latifa, meanwhile, has finished her law degree but doesn't want to be a lawyer – not yet anyway – or continue as a uniform cop pulling over dickheads on SH6. She's got her sights set on being among the first Māori wahine *grands fromages* in Tasman district. She's in it for the long haul and hubby Daniel has committed to staying at home to look after impending bub while Latifa reaches for the stars.

We've been helicoptered up onto the glacier. Long gone are the days when we could have walked up here; apparently the ice has receded by nearly a kilometre in the last fifteen years or so. I reckon that by the time I'm retired, it'll be gone. The snow-capped Southern Alps loom in the background and the milky, freezing river rushes below. The sun will disappear soon and the air is sharp. It's my first time on a glacier and it would be nice to enjoy the moment, but a blue canvas tarp has been tacked with pitons to a rupture of ice, awaiting the big reveal.

'Ready when you are,' Latifa says to Dale.

The tarp is pulled aside and there – suspended like a wasp in amber – is our man.

'He's ...' Latifa is momentarily lost for words.

'African?' says Dale.

'Naked,' says Latifa.

She's right. I hope the poor bugger was already dead when he went in there. 'Who found him?'

'A glacier guide,' says Bryce. 'First thing this morning, a recce before leading some punters through a tour of the ice caves.'

'Nobody else knows about this?'

'Nah.'

Latifa has stepped up close, staring at the ghostly face, the eyes peacefully closed. 'How do we get him out of there?'

'Very carefully,' I say, checking my phone in vain for a mobile signal.

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Late February. With the season winding down, the kids back at school, and it being midweek, there are limited options for dining in Franz Josef. No expense spared from the Tasman district police budget – we've checked into a two-bedroom cabin at the Top 10 Holiday Park just north of downtown and strolled the kilometre or so back in for a feed.

'Pub or pizza?' says Latifa, surveying the choices within our field of vision.

'I think I spotted a Thai place earlier.'

'I vote pizza,' says Latifa.

We settle in, scan the menu, and order. I'll have a beer as I'm on expenses and no longer have cancer. Latifa's on mineral water, no bubbles. The establishment is bland in décor but the food smells good. Of the twelve tables, four are taken up by us plus some boisterous backpackers who've pushed two together, and finally a couple of grey nomads who, right now, seem to love their phones more than each other. Otherwise, it's empty.

'Obviously foul play, isn't it?' says Latifa. 'The victim wasn't accidentally naked.'

'Could have been a stag party prank gone wrong. Or suicide.'

'What did you tell the boss?'

'To send forensic techs as a matter of urgency. We'll make the call on what next, once they've taken a closer look.' The drinks arrive. The server is a young woman with blonde pigtails and a sing-song northern European accent. 'Is it always this quiet?' I ask.

'Ever since I started here, yes. Maybe it's my fault. Do you want any garlic bread while you're waiting?'

'Why not?'

She disappears to get it.

'Do you really intend to keep our friend on ice until the techs get here?'

'Best place for him for the time being. I'm not game to have him hauled out of there by amateurs in case we stuff things up. The team's getting choppered in tomorrow morning.'

'Fair enough.' She shivers.

'Cold?'

'I wouldn't like to live here all year round. Would you?'

'Why are you here, Latifa?'

A frown. 'I've got a lot to prove. Keegan doesn't rate me; she's let me in as a favour to you. The rest of the team? Who knows what they think?'

'And coming all the way down here is meant to make a difference?'

Latifa sniffs. 'It's a day out in the country.'

A sudden smash as a beer bottle is knocked from the backpackers' table. The kids say sorry and one of them asks for a dustpan and brush. The male half of the grey nomads turns to me, rolls his eyes, shakes his head. His better half pats his forearm to calm him.



Back to Latifa. 'Everything okay with Daniel?'

'I don't know, I'm such a bitch sometimes.' Her eyes fill. 'Maybe I don't deserve him, he's really nice, too nice.'

'I thought that's what you liked about him?'

Latifa shakes her head. 'Ever since I've been pregnant, he's been too needy, clingy, overattentive. Always tiptoeing around me, like I'm some bloody goddess. Hanging on my every word. Watching me. Cooing at my baby bump.' She blows out a breath, takes a sip of water. 'I'm not a fucking invalid.' Leans back as her pizza is put before her.

'Are you sure you want that many anchovies?' says the server.

'That's what I asked for.'

'Okay.' The server retreats.

I take a slug of beer. 'Chow down and early night, eh?'

Latifa pulls her jacket tighter, cradles her belly. 'This place gives me the creeps.'

'The restaurant?'

'The town. It's like a tomb waiting for business.'