

## Chapter 1. The Reunion.

*Greymouth Harbour, The West Coast, South Island. [Māwheranui, Poutini.]*

2016

*“Friendship is a single soul dwelling in two bodies” ~ Aristotle.*

The siren voice, ringing lucid in his mind, can no longer be silenced.

For decades marginalised, this deigned vocation demands to be heeded.

Its plea echoes in the slap of the mussel encrusted mooring rope; cast off with a shrug into treacle harbour water. Flashing glimmered light, in relief, the crustaceans attached to the old manila rope re-enter their natural element, to breathe again and feed.

On board Ron slides the chugging diesel engine into gear, without so much as a clunk, and the old kauri long-liner, the Mabel, slips her mooring. She feels her path forward gingerly out into the channel.

The diesel fumes blend easily with the salty morning air to brew the familiar, bitter chypre. The essence that always accompanies the journey seaward.

The entire fleet is in dock and Ron ignores the inquisitive stares from the unkempt trawler-men, while they unload their boats' holds; overflowing trevally and red cod onto the quayside.

Ron can almost hear them thinking, *“where does that old fool think he’s going with a southerly blow coming in?”*

The more concerned souls start running alongside the quay, despite the foul weather, calling and waving like the seagulls they startle into flight. Ron just looks the other way. He finds the familiar leeward-leaning pine, on the opposite riverbank, to hold his attention.

Between lightning strikes, Ron notices that Rongomai is stationed beneath this ancient sentry. He holds a surreal presence, dressed in the manner that is his custom; and he stands firm, despite the southerly gale. Ron holds no concern for the boy; he is aware that no one else can see him.

The VHF radio illuminates the Mabel’s console, drawing Ron’s attention. Mike, the skipper of the trawler the Marie Rosa, attempts to hail him. Through the crackle of the radio Mike’s voice exhibits an edge of desperation while he tries to warn his old friend. Reaching across Ron snaps the radio toggle off, unanswered, and enjoys the solitude while his vessel rounds the river’s outer channel markers and leaves the safety of the port in his wake.

The relief to be underway is a tangible force in Ron’s conscious, which at long last quietens. The terms and conditions of this unholy covenant are now mutually endorsed, and fully adopted.

The river-mouth sandbar is approaching and Ron hasn't seen the ocean crashing onto it, in this manner, for many years. These massive ocean swells push ahead of the Antarctic-born storm and collide onto the unyielding sandbar at mouth of the Grey River. Rows of water and foam stand up in military formation as the ocean rollers meet the outgoing tide of flood-swollen river water. This confluence is an uneasy one; a congress met, under the duress of storm-chopped skies.

Adrenalin courses through the old man's veins. Lifting up goose-flesh on wrinkles of brown and weathered skin. Up his arms and down his back. Fresh and reminiscent of the vigour of his distant adolescence. His youth had been spent long ago, and now, in his old age, this is a currency all but forgotten.

Ron picks out a likely spot in the channel and guns the engine to full revs.

The forty-five footer pushes its way out into the swells and foamy white water.

"I've been over in bigger weather," he mumbles to himself, although right now he could not exactly remember when.

The ragged swells had already broken and were on their way upriver when he hit them. The boat goes up and over, while Ron keeps her straight and pointing out to sea. The old vessel shudders and is driven backwards with the direction and force of each collision with the waves, until the propeller gamely bites into

the churned white-water. Gaining traction, it pushes the old boat forward again, exposed to the massive seas.

An ally, the outgoing tide, surges underneath the hull and assists the small craft to gain speed over the swells. Until a large wave, still full of power, from its collision with the submarine knoll of the transitory sandbar, stalls and turns the boat.

Ron struggles with the helm and throttle, a waltz he and the boat have repeated many times previously. Both partners know the steps and rhythms to this dance. With the skill and instincts born of thirty years practice, Ron brings her forward, at full power, to meet the last great ocean roller as it towers unbroken, above the bar.

The sea and horizon disappear from Ron's sight while the Mabel climbs the almost vertical wave, leaving only the dark grey storm clouds of his fate to fill his vision. The mountainous wall of water is higher than the boat's length. The wave's power and the unrelenting pull of earth's gravity combine, threatening to take the boat and casually toss her onto the sandbar.

She could be destined to lie among the hulks and wreckage of the forlorn, already claimed by the sea, on this notorious stretch of ocean. This littered route of the imprudent may yet have another occupant.

The Mable's bow crashes through the top third of the wave and her stern snaps up like a see-saw, throwing Ron from the wheel. He lands on the wooden deck, hard on his back. Racked with pain from the fall, and his illness, Ron peers back over the stern and sees the wave breaking in white foam, to both port and starboard of the old boat's rear safety rail.

They converge in a cutting crescent, while the boat's transom collides through the white-water force.

A vibrating crash resonates through the hull as the tower from the pot-hauler is torn away from the stern deck. It is taken overboard, caught squarely in the cutting scissor action of the breaking crests of the wave. Whipping its bolts and hydraulic hose linkages free from the deck, like octopus tentacles cracking and thrashing green, oily blood. The sea claims the pot-hauler as a toll, made for payment of an ocean passage.

Ignoring the debilitating shafts of pain firing through his abdomen Ron struggles back to his feet. Revving the engine to its full power he points the steering at a right angle to the oncoming waves, and then with the scuppers and pumps labouring to clear the foam, oil and water from stern deck, she is through.

The next sets of waves are not fully standing. They have yet to reach the underwater mound of the sandbar, so the boat crests them comfortably before

settling into her pattern, punching through the swells. Ron eases back the throttle and turns his craft to the south, heading down the coast.

After two hours of working against the ever growing ocean, wind and driving horizontal nails of sleet, Ron decides it's time to switch the VHF radio back on.

The last thing he wants is for someone to follow him out in this weather, looking for him. Immediately after he switches on the radio he hears Charlie, the Harbour Master at Greymouth Port, hailing him.

"This is Greymouth Harbour, Mabel come in, over."

"Mabel receiving, over."

"Ron where the hell are you! What are you doing out in this? I have been calling you for the last hour! Over."

"I have some cray-pots up the coast and thought I would get them in before the blow arrives," Ron claimed. "I don't want to lose them, over."

"It's too late for all that Ron; we have had to close the harbour. The waves are huge. They have grown even since you got out and with the tide against you, your old tub will never get back over the bar in one piece - how are the conditions out there? Over."

"It's getting pretty bad," Ron conceded, "but I am okay, over."

"How is your fuel situation? Over."

"I've got plenty," replied Ron. "Both tanks are full, over."

“Ron, Westport Harbour is now closed also. You will never make it over the bar there either. You are going to have to make a run north, around Farewell Spit, and try to shelter up past Separation Point, or go on to Nelson Harbour, to get clear of the storm,” said Charlie. “I want you to call in every two hours with your position. Where are you now? Over.”

Ron gave him the coordinates of a location a few hours to the north, just to make Charlie feel a bit better about things.

“Okay,” said Charlie. “The eye of the storm is still around eighty miles south of you, but it is travelling quite slowly, so with following seas you should make it around to Nelson alright. I want you to call in every two hours on this channel so I know you are okay. If you run into problems there is a large Japanese squid boat ninety miles out to sea, off Farewell Spit, riding this out. I will ask them to listen for you on single-side band 2182. They might be able to come and get you, if you run into trouble. I will phone your boys and let them know where you are and what is going on - I will tell you now Ron; we are going to have a chat about all this in my office, when you get home! - Stay safe and Greymouth out.”

“Mabel out,” replied Ron, smiling.

That was a conversation Ron was glad he would never have.

A chattering sound heralds the arrival of the latest weather fax, with paper tumbling from the out-dated machine and onto the chart table. This storm is huge, with the isobar contours folding on to each other in a nest, like clay on a drunken potter's wheel.

Ron's storm, born of a huge low in Antarctica, has gathered power on its journey across The Southern Ocean, merging with other low pressure systems. They have compounded together and created the largest storm-front to hit the West Coast of New Zealand in decades. This monster is centred thirty miles south/south-west of Ron's boat and is beginning to show its teeth.

"This one is mine," Ron breathed. Giving in to the 'siren-call' he has resisted for more than sixty years. He reaches a diminutive peace, attained through a final compliance; while he steers south-west, out to sea. Navigating across the swells, and in the direction of the storm's eye.

While he progresses pivotal moments of his long life flash across his memory, in the bizarre technicolour of an old film clip. His senses overload with a half remembered smile, the gentle taste of a kiss and the adrenaline-cold rage of a fight. The love of his children's and grandchildren's images moving and blending with those of his parents and ancestors, in his mind.

His whakapapa, genealogy, stacking layer upon layer, growing in influence.



His mana tupuna, an authority transferring across the generations, always with a fresh start. Gone from his learned experience, will be the taint of the butchery that Ron witnessed in the fox-holes of Europe. These shadows, cast across his soul, cleansed, and deemed to be 'non-transferable' by death.

Bouncing and rolling now the boat is fast becoming dwarfed by the heaving sea-swell giants, threatening to tumble the game old long-liner, end over end. She is a veteran of many sea tempests but this is to be her last. Her definitive contest. The Sea always claims what is hers in the end, and the Mable unarguably belongs to that ancient bitch.

The stone-like feeling of dread around Ron's heart cramps and burns in his chest. His whole body has ached over the last few months, because of the cancer, but this older, surreal pain is the worst. Directly linked to the siren's demands, it is still driving him.

He runs his work-worn stubs of fingers through his freshly cropped thicket of white hair and he briefly touches the war medals, pinned to the jacket of his best suit, that he normally only takes out of his wardrobe for weddings or funerals. It is on funeral duties today. The soft grey pinstripe of the thread-bare woollen suit contrasts wildly against the salt stained fluoro-yellow of the PVC wet-weather gear, he is wearing over top.

*"I need to be looking my best when I meet with old friends."*