

PART II
**Never Let
Me Go**

*We are not measured by who we hold onto.
Our worth lies in those who bind themselves to us.*



By What Crooked Alchemy

IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE AN ADVENTURE. By the sixth river crossing we hadn't even got to the front gate of the farm.

When we finally arrived, the hills around us were hung with wisps of cloud, the tops hidden by thick mist. The kitchen came straight out of my childhood — tongue-and-groove boards, cast-iron stove, that lingering scent of wool carpet and pine from the wood bin. Outside the kitchen window a string of old antlers strung on the sheep fence, weathered and covered in lichen. A big woolshed, another full of horse tack. Old-school New Zealand, the sort of place you take one look at and know you're home.

After settling in it's off to explore and check the rifles. More river crossings over deep shingle, clear, cold water rushing past. Above us tower timbered mountains, jagged faces, all softened by fine mist. I check on Jamie in the back, silent with wonder. It's all a bit much for a boy from flat farmland, and I start to see it through his eyes. The slopes are sprinkled with matagouri, wilding pines and stands of solemn beech. High up I spot a red hind but say nothing. There will be enough of that later.

At the homespun range the 30-06 is printing a touch to the right, easily fixed. Jamie has served a two-year apprenticeship on my little Sako rimfire, and in his quiet way asks if he can try something bigger. There's a .223, which, on paper at least, is just perfect, but it's heavy and the long suppressor makes it clumsy. There's a farm rifle too, light and compact with a tidy over-barrel suppressor — the classic bush pig. It's perfect but in 7mm-08 a big step up from what he's used to. I ask if he's prepared to give it a try, and he almost bowls me over with an instant yes. Not bad for a ten-year-old, I say to myself, but let's not mess up a good start by going too fast.

I fuss and fret to set him up, including doing some dry-fires to get the feel of the light trigger. He puts two shots down in short order, no messing about,



and leaves the bolt open as he's been taught. As we walk a hundred metres over the riverbed to the target, I think to myself, well there's no saying where the shots went, but at least he handled the gun with confidence. I see two 30-calibre holes from my test and then whistle through my teeth.

Damn, boy. There are two 7-millimetre holes slightly below, just a centimetre apart. I've seen grown men shoot worse than that, including me. I've underestimated him.

We head out to the backblocks, now clogged out by fog and drizzle. That's fine by me, both have been my friend in the past, muffling sound and reducing the range of sharper eyes than my own. We climb slowly but surely, allowing plenty of time for his young legs and my old ones, then sidle from one fold to the next. The grass and matagouri are wet, and soon we're both

soaked. He's so excited that when a fallow doe breaks out front he shouts 'there!' and his arm goes up in a point. Of course she's gone, but with a youngster no more than a few months old in tow that's okay. We're looking for venison, but she was always safe from us.

Time drags until we get close to the magic hour. We move just below the ridgeline as the valley stretches out before us, and just like that a fallow spiker materialises out of the mist. He's head-on at 200 metres, no shot for a beginner. I check in with Jamie, putting him behind me, and it's all on. The crosshairs veer wildly before the sight picture settles and I make a lucky shot. The spiker flops without a step.

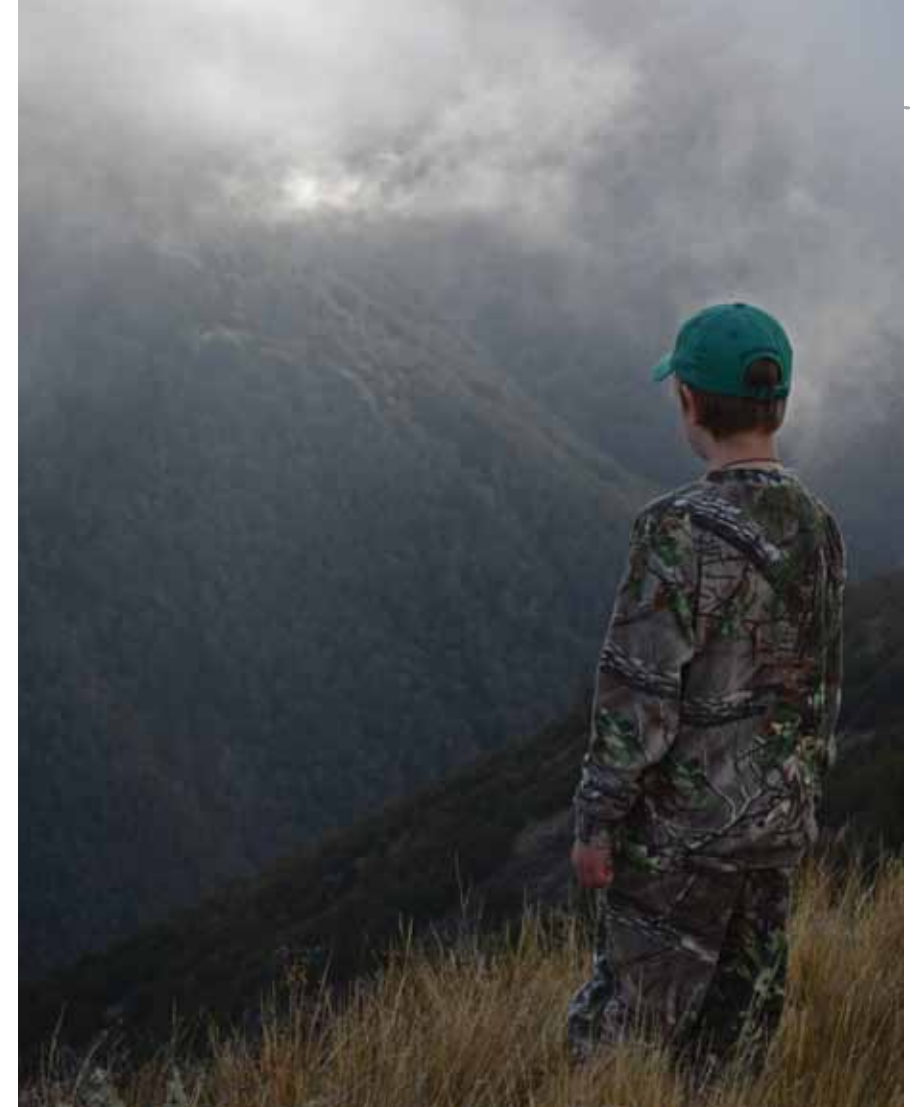
I clear the rifle and turn to Jamie, who peers around me and asks if the white speck of belly he can see is the deer. I say yes and watch his face turn to a picture of confusion. He's never seen a shot made beyond .22 range, but there's more to it than that. I can see now that it has cost him hard — he wanted so much to do something himself. He wanted to impress me, to tell his mates, to take something home. Instead all he could do was stand by and watch.

And then he swallows it all down, puts his hand out and shakes mine. Damn again, boy. I've met plenty of grown men who couldn't do that either.

It's the first time he's ever seen a deer dressed out. Those who think it might shock a boy would be disappointed. He wants to know what everything is, including where the bullet is. I find it for him and he gravely weighs its dense mass in his small hand. He wants to keep the skin, doesn't want to throw away the heart. I'm busy with the knife until the realisation hits that he's simply trying to hold onto as much of the experience as he can. We take a couple of quick snaps before the weather really goes to pieces, and then set off on the long trip back to the farmhouse. When we get there, we hang the deer to cool and set, then retire to light the fire and change out of our sodden clothes.

The next few days are spent exploring. Is there anything better in all the world than having a great swathe of new country in front of you and no deadlines to meet? We spend hours walking the valley floor; with the crossings too high for his boy gaiters, I swing him over the gurgling streams on one arm, much to his delight. We climb the sketchy farm tracks cut like a scar across vast hillsides. We walk to the tops, snaffling blackberries as we pass low down, slowly approaching ridgelines to glass below.

There are old musterers huts in the far backblocks, and a slippery track over a saddle that leads to high empty country, the sort of place you could shoot a moody western film. I miss a shot at a boar running through the



Thinking big thoughts.

tussock, much to everyone's disgust but nobody's surprise. Over the boundary lies the Molesworth, biggest farm in New Zealand at 185,000 hectares. I look at it, and then look at him and ask if he would ever want to go there one day. He glances at the vast, high plains and endless mountains rolling to the horizon, then looks me in the eye and says 'Can we go *now*?'

And it is then that I remember another boy who was just like him. I wonder where he went, and by what crooked alchemy the best of him is somehow standing beside me forty years later.

