

Sweat trickled down Pete's forehead, momentarily caught in his dark eyebrows, then stung his brown eyes, forcing him to pull away from the telescopic sight and mop at them with the slightly grubby hanky that he kept tucked in his top pocket.

Dammit! He had sworn he would never get himself back in this situation, but here he was and it was so fucking hot – more like Ghana than Takatu.

He checked the scope again quickly, saw that all was well up at the roadblock, then leaned back against the manuka brush wall so he could have a drink and eat the rest of the sandwich that was in danger of being overrun by ants.

It tasted good, earthy. Home-made cheese and pickle, and his own bread. It all took so much more time and effort, but these were the good things about their new isolation.

The maimai was getting way too hot to be comfortable now. They would have to open it out to get some air flowing in the summer months. The so-called experts had been wrong about so many things but they definitely got their global warming predictions right.

Pete took another quick glance through the scope to check all was clear where they had blocked Takatu Road. Handy things those diggers when parked two abreast on a dirt road.

He looked longingly at the bay where the cool, clear ocean mocked his sweating body. High tide and it completely filled the old flats where the road used to go, before the sea level rose a metre-and-a-half . . . and counting.

He and Rosie had moved up here to enjoy that ocean, the waves, the fishing . . . the freedom . . . but everything had changed so quickly.

They had thought themselves so clever when the third, and final, financial crash hit and took all the services down with it. Their time spent fine-tuning the solar power

set-up, their water system, the gardens, all seemed vindicated as people fled the city, trying to find somewhere with food, water and safety.

His neighbour, Chris, had helped him build a big, fuck-off gate and fence, and they had taken turns to patrol their land. That had been enough to see off the first wave of refugees from Auckland.

The upside of that trouble was that it had forced the landowners at Takatu to get organized to defend themselves. Pete remembered the meeting where they had been asked by Chris to bring along any firearms they had. Rosie had gone without him because he had started to leak unwilling tears at the thought of having to pick up a rifle again. The others thought they had hit the jackpot, of course, when they found out he was an ex-army sniper. That was until Pete supplied some graphic detail about his kills in Ghana.

Things had been getting back to some semblance of order after the Third Financial Crash but then the flu had arrived. It was as if God had been biding his time, waiting for humans to get a bit run down, and then hitting them with a bug they couldn't fight. That was when things turned mean.

The gate, the fence and the patrols worked OK at first, but then, in one night, three of the owners closer to the Omaha turnoff got burnt out and killed. Several gangs began terrorizing the area and stealing anything they could lay hands on.

It was the day after those families were killed that Rosie told him she was pregnant. He had cried and cried, and had trouble stopping. He had cried because he was so happy that he was going to be a father and because he was overwhelmed with love for Rosie, and he had cried because of the shitty, shitty world his baby was going to be born into and his fear of not being able to protect his offspring.

That was when he picked up a rifle again. He was going to defend his wife and child, or die trying. He showed the others how to make IEDs and they placed them up on Takatu Road, around about where Pete calculated aggressors might park up to check out the situation ahead. Then they built several hideouts, like the maimai Pete was sitting in now, with a clear line of sight to the road. After fortifying the old pa site above Omaha, they were as covered as they could be for the small community they were protecting.

Glancing out across Christian Bay, the ripples and sparkles on the water showed Pete that the afternoon seabreeze was picking up. That was what he was meant to be doing – going windsurfing and fishing – not sweltering away in a fucking maimai, looking down the barrel of a damned rifle.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck!’ he shouted at the musty confines of the hut. Pete hung his head, breathed deeply and watched the droplets of his sweat make patterns on the floor.

The radio by his knee suddenly crackled and Sharon’s voice came through.

‘Incoming vehicle, blue sedan, four people by the look of it, no weapons that I can see.’

Pete wiped his hands and forearms carefully, and settled in behind the rifle’s scope. He saw the car come to a stop at the top of the hill, right alongside the IED. The occupants of the car got out and looked down the road at the diggers forming the roadblock. The driver was unarmed but the other three had rifles. There was a short discussion before they got back into the car and slowly drove down the road to stop about ten metres short of the roadblock.

Pete picked up the radio. ‘Stay cool Chris. We’ve rehearsed this. You know what to do.’

Through the scope, Pete watched the conversation take place between the visitors and Chris, who was out of sight to them, hidden behind the digger's bucket that had been lowered down to road level. Chris was a good man and Pete knew he could rely on him to deliver the warning clearly and calmly. He now tightened his finger on the trigger and chose the red-head as his first target, in case they decided not to retire. To Pete's great relief, the men got back into the car, turned around and drove back up the hill.

He picked up the radio again. 'Nice work Chris. Report please Sharon.'

'They appear to be leaving . . . no! They've turned around at the old milking shed and they're coming back slowly. Shit!'

'OK, stay calm everyone. Keep talking Sharon.'

'Slowly edging back up to the top of the hill. And stopped. They'll just be able to see the diggers from there.'

Pete replied, 'Yeah, I can see them from here so they're in range for me but possibly out of range of IED 1.'

'Bad news guys,' squawked Sharon's voice through the tinny speaker, 'there's a sort of van coming up the road with metal plates welded all over it. No idea how many occupants.'

Pete could hear the panic creeping into her voice.

'It's OK Sharon, they still have no idea that you and I are here or where the IEDs are so just keep talking us through it.'

'OK, sorry. Van getting closer. Pulling up behind the sedan now. Occupants of sedan getting out and talking to driver and passenger of the van. I think there's other people in the back of the van.'

Pete jumped in. ‘You’re doing great Sharon. Chris, stand by, and have the shotgun and pistol ready. Keep going Sharon.’

‘The occupants of the sedan are going back to their car. Sitting . . . sitting . . . edging forward to the crest! Right next to IED 1 now! Should be in sight for Chris.’

‘I can see them,’ Chris replied.

Pete sighed. So, what he hoped had been finished forever must start again. He quickly mopped his hands again and thought about his beautiful, pregnant wife. A slight waft of salty breeze circled the hut and made him smile. A seagull’s cry, the deep blue sky and a syrupy sun – it was a beautiful day. He felt his heart calm to professional pace as he lowered his eye to the rifle’s scope. One finger caressed the trigger and his other hand held the radio close.

‘OK guys, here’s how it’s going to happen.’