



# Shadow of the Mountain

By Anna Mackenzie

## Chapter 1

Geneva pushed herself away from the desk and stretched, feeling her spine click and straighten. It was after two and her belly was producing a rumbling chorus of demands.

In the kitchen doorway she hesitated. Her mother stood at the sink, plate in one hand and dishcloth in the other, the perfect pose of domesticity – except that, despite the appearance of a task in hand, her mother was motionless, her eyes fixed on the mountain that rose in startling planes and angles beyond the smooth green waves of the paddocks.

Ignoring her, Geneva advanced on the pantry. From the corner of her eye she saw her mother flinch and plunge her hands into the water.

The bread she pulled from a crumpled bag was stiff and speckled with mould. Shoving it back on the shelf, Geneva turned to the fruit bowl. It was no more tempting. As she picked through it she glanced surreptitiously at her mother.

“Time we did a run to the supermarket,” she said.

There was no answer. Geneva tossed a few moulding oranges into the chook bucket.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked.

Her mother’s head turned, her eyes not quite meeting Geneva’s before they wandered on around the kitchen. “Risotto,” she said, finally. “There’s a packet in the pantry.”

Geneva compressed her lips. Her mother had once been an enthusiastic cook, both competent and creative. A year ago she’d have laughed if anyone had dared suggest she’d resort to a packet mix for anything.

“Do you remember that dinner with Julia and Dan, after the twins were born?” Geneva asked. “You made a risotto with prawns and scallops – celebration seafood you called it.”

Her mother turned away.

That was it, Geneva thought. Easier just to turn your back.

Grabbing the least jaded apple from the bowl she stomped back to her room. She’d assured the school counsellor she’d spend the holidays catching up on overdue assignments – and she had been. She was halfway through the pile, her desk a mound of scribbled notes and half-read reference books.

Ignoring the work she flopped onto the bed and crunched into the apple’s sadly soggy flesh. Dead apple. Her teeth rebelled against the texture but her stomach, less fussy, rumbled its gratitude. Her mother would once have told her off for eating lying down and the years of good messages were still there, implanted in her brain. She ignored them. Above her the angled ceiling held a 3D poster, a silver spiral that seemed to draw you inwards, luring you towards the mysterious promise of its depths. Abruptly she rolled over.

When she’d first moved into the room she’d put the desk beneath the bi-fold windows but it was easier to concentrate away from the view – their million dollar view, her father had called it when they’d begun remodelling the old farmhouse. The renovations had turned the place inside out, giving as many rooms as possible access to that view.

Geneva thought briefly about the shout her father had given when the work had finally come to an end. They’d sat outside and toasted the view, the architect, the builders. There’d been a bit much toasting, to be honest. She’d been fourteen and she’d never drunk champagne before. Or since. Her father had interrupted his spiel to eyeball one of the builders who’d

been coming on a bit strong. It had been more a compliment than a serious attempt to chat her up, and at the time it had flattered her.

She shrugged the memory away. That girl, still a child, was gone – along with the family they'd been back then. Her eyes drifted to the window, to where the mountain stood unmasked after days of lying hidden by cloud whose frayed remnants now streaked the slopes in shifting patterns of shadow and light.

Unwilling to be caught by its beauty, Geneva tugged her attention back to the room. The shelves beside her desk were filled with clutter, the residue of years. She should chuck it all out. Random daubs of colour – swimming certificates, ski posters, a local band gig – pocked the wall above her bed. With a sudden burst of anger she snatched them down, leaving torn corners under a stubble of drawing pins as she balled them into the rubbish bin.

As she tore the last poster free a photo fluttered from behind it to the floor. She stooped to pick it up. Three climbers gazed out at her, the rock behind them in sharp relief against a cloud-tattered sky. Holding the two year old image cupped in her hands, Geneva sank down on the bed and stared at the familiar faces, one of them her own.

## Chapter 2

The darkness inside the old warehouse took her by surprise. Geneva hesitated in the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

She'd been here before, with Stephen, but she didn't remember much. The roof was high, the cavernous space echoing with noise: squeaks and clanks and the occasional laugh or shriek. The space was broken up with freestanding walls that stretched to the ceiling, jutting at odd angles. A wooden counter stood to one side.

As she took it in, she noticed someone moving towards her.

"Hello there." Geneva watched for any flicker of recognition, but there was nothing. "First time here?"

About thirty-five, she thought; tall, confident, easy smile. She nodded.

"Want to give it a go?" He gestured towards the colour-flecked walls. "I'm Keith."

She shook her head. "Actually, I was hoping you could help me. I want to climb a mountain and I need a guide."

"Well, sure. We do commissions. Usually team stuff, but we're open to suggestion." He had a slight accent, either Scottish or Irish. "Have you a particular mountain in mind?"

"Kaitiaki," she said.

Keith sucked his lip, assessing her in an impersonal way. His gaze made her stand straighter. She was tall and slim without being willowy – she'd always thought that sounded too airy, as if you'd be in danger of blowing away. Her fair hair and skin were contrasted by dark eyes. There was nothing outstanding about her looks, but then, she didn't want there to be – and Keith looked more interested in her muscle tone. Geneva figured she'd do all right there.

"Have you had any experience?"

"Just bits and pieces."

There was a pause, and Geneva began to wish she hadn't come. It was too much, too soon.

"We've got a couple of groups that do weekend trips. We can team you up with one of them," Keith offered. "That'd get you started. After –"

"I don't want to take it up as a sport," she interrupted. "I just want to climb Kaitiaki."

Keith frowned. He was a handspan taller than her, broad shouldered, and stood poised on the balls of his feet as if he might at any moment spring into action. She noticed his shoes: old, well worn, good brand. She knew she was avoiding his eyes.

"Uh huh." He dragged the syllables out. "Well, Kaitiaki's not a mountain you just go out and climb. You'd need a good

grounding.”

His tone wasn't dismissive or patronising but Geneva could feel her temper flare. “I do know a bit. I might not be technically perfect or anything but I'm fit.” She thought about all the k's she'd done on the road this year. “It's just that I'd rather not do it alone.”

His eyebrows went up in a sceptical curve.

“Okay,” she added. “Forget it.”

“It's no big deal, lass. We don't support anyone taking risks they can't handle. How about you show me what you can do.” He nodded towards the nearest wall. “Then we'll see.”

Geneva's first preference was to get out of there fast but something flickered in her belly; some need to impress. She shrugged as he reached behind the counter for a harness. “I'll belay you,” he announced as he handed it over, watching while she put it on – checking to see she knew what she was doing. Geneva lifted her chin.

The wall Keith led her to was a grade above beginners and a smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. Clipping herself swiftly onto the belay rope she stepped forward and fitted her fingers into the first of the broad multi-coloured brackets. Much easier than the real thing, she thought, stepping onto the wall. She'd climbed here a couple of times before; more often at the sports centre in Waimana. It was years ago now but she assured herself it was like riding a bike – you don't forget.

Stephen had early on shifted his preference to real climbing, real rock. Real challenges. He'd introduced her to the sport, but she'd never really taken to it the way he had. He'd started getting technical while she was more of an all-rounder. A bit of everything, that suited her.

But she could handle this with her eyes closed.

When she landed lightly back on the floor, Keith slackened the belay rope and gave her a nod of acknowledgement. “How about something a bit more challenging?” he suggested. Geneva thought she could detect a hint of amusement in his tone.

Halfway up the second wall, Geneva could feel sweat slipping down the small of her back and she knew the muscles in her arms, less accustomed than her legs to sustained effort, would be screaming at her tomorrow. Smart-arse, she thought. The wall he'd chosen was a lot more challenging.

She came off two-thirds of the way up. Reluctance and defiance warred within her as Keith lowered her feet to the floor and she turned to meet his gaze.

“That was a good effort,” he acknowledged. “You were right about not being technical but you've obviously got a fair way without it.”

Geneva shrugged, her mind running through what Stephen would have said.

“Saturday,” Keith announced, breaking into her thoughts. “Come and do Pinion Bluff. We're meeting here at eight o'clock, gear supplied but bring your own lunch – plenty of it. It'll be a full day.”

“Okay.” She didn't know why she said that. She'd meant it when she said she didn't want to take up climbing as a sport.

Keith grinned.

He thinks he's got me hooked, Geneva thought. They're all so bloody obsessive, acting as if climbing's the only worthwhile pastime on the planet. Well, it wasn't for her, and it never would be. She knew that, beyond any doubt. But she wanted to climb Kaitiaki.

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