



the target

RILEY CHANCE



By the same author
Surveillance
The Democracy Game
Weeping Angels



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*In memory of Ernie Abbott, and for
everyone fighting for a fairer society*

CHAPTER 1

It was a brief flash of blue in a sea of green that made her skid to a stop.

Marla Simmons crouched low, staring.

She had been pushing hard as she neared the end of her run. Noiselessly, she breathed in hard through her nose, out through her mouth. Blood pulsed in the back of her neck. Her dog Indy, who had been running a few paces ahead, circled back. The small dog sat next to her, mouth open, tongue lolling as she panted heavily.

She couldn't see anything now except an endless kaleidoscope of greens, but she had seen something. Fifty metres ahead, someone or something was in the bushes off to the side of the track.

Bordered by dense native bush on either side, the track they had been running along continued on straight for maybe a hundred metres before it disappeared around a corner. At her current pace it was no more than five minutes back to the park entrance where she had parked. She continued to stare, but there was nothing to see and the only sound, apart from Indy's panting, was the gentle rustling of the bush.

Eyes fixed on the spot, she patted her dog and said quietly, 'Good girl, Indy.'

Weather permitting, Marla and Indy went for a run most afternoons. The Milnthorpe Park track, where they were currently, was one of ten locations that she selected at random by rolling a ten-sided dice. Rolling the dice was a straightforward way to avoid developing a pattern. To avoid becoming predictable. To avoid *this*.

She had come across people occasionally in the park before, but it was rare. Tourists with trekking poles or runners with dogs. The park was a five-minute drive from Parapara, a small, picturesque South Island town where Marla lived. People kept to themselves, it was the ideal location to live under the radar. It *was* the ideal location.

After taking in a deep breath, she wiped her hand across her T-shirt and slipped the Glock from its slimline holster that concealed the gun in the small of her back – the grip familiar in her hand. With Indy back on

her lead – she had been wearing it like a belt – Marla moved stealthily along the track.

She had already rejected the option of doubling back to avoid a confrontation. If they were this close, whoever *they* were, her entire setup was compromised. There was nowhere to go. If this was the end of the road, so be it. They would know all about her, they would know it would be the end of the road ... for someone.

Indy, oblivious to the danger, trotted ahead. What would become of Indy? A small black and white version of an American bulldog, she had adopted her from the Nelson SPCA the day after she settled in Parapara. They told her that Indy's first two years hadn't been great. Marla didn't know who previously owned her, it was probably a good thing. If she got out of this, she would make a plan to get Indy to her friend Grace Marks – if worse came to worse.

As she edged closer, she saw it again, clearer this time – a light-blue sweatshirt. She eased back into a crouch. With Indy on her right and her gun in her favoured left hand, she stared intently. About ten metres off the track in the dense bush, she saw glimpses of a person moving. But whoever it was, they weren't lying in wait – they were digging.

A small laugh escaped her as she rubbed Indy's head. 'It's not the end of the road, at least not today.'

Keeping Indy on her lead, she holstered her gun and walked down the track, stopping where she could watch the activity. After a minute, a man in red and black harlequin shorts, a light-blue hoodie and gumboots emerged from the bushes.

His eyes flew wide when he saw a woman in black three-quarter leggings and a plain grey T-shirt standing in the middle of the track with a small dog on a leash.

'Shit ... I mean, hello.'

'Kia ora,' said Marla.

He wore cheap glasses and was either growing a beard or hadn't found a reason to shave for a few days. In one hand he held a spade, in the other a large fern that he had obviously just dug up. After giving her a way too obvious once over, his eyes narrowed. 'It's Alice, isn't it?'

Marla smiled. ‘That’s right.’ Alice Green was the identity she had assumed since settling in the South Island.

‘You came into the shop a while ago.’ He bent awkwardly, putting the fern down to pat Marla’s dog. ‘And who’s this?’

‘Her name’s Indy. It’s, ah ... Geoff, isn’t it?’

Marla knew who he was. He worked at a local firm that specialised in boutique jewellery. She had visited their shop when she had been poking around the district, killing time. Mid-thirties with no sign that he had ever worn a wedding ring, she had been the only person in the shop and he had been overly attentive. The jewellery they made was stylish, but their target market was wealthy tourists. She hadn’t bought anything, she wasn’t a jewellery sort of person.

‘That’s right. I um ... well we ... my mother, actually. She wants a large fern in her front garden. I told her that the park is protected.’

‘This isn’t part of Kahurangi National Park – I think you’re fine.’ Marla was enjoying improving her *te reo* and found it satisfying to pronounce names correctly. It also helped mask her fading but still recognisable American accent.

‘Well, exactly,’ he said. ‘But you know what people say.’

‘What do people say?’

‘If everyone took one, there’d be none left.’

‘You’d need a constant stream of buses to bring enough visitors to the park to beat regrowth.’

‘You’re right. Stupid, really.’

Marla decided not to linger in case their conversation turned awkward. ‘Right, I’d better finish my run. Nice to see you again, Geoff.’

He opened his mouth but before he could reply, she had let Indy off her lead and set off along the track, Indy powering past her.

CHAPTER 2

Back home, Marla fed Indy, poured herself a glass of white wine and sank into her couch. With its panoramic view across the twinkling Parapara Estuary towards Kahurangi National Park, it was her favourite spot in the house.

A loud, involuntary sigh escaped her. She was used to feeling physically tired, but after her encounter on the track, she felt drained. Events like that served to remind her that the next minute could be her last. While she wasn't unique in that regard, anyone could drop dead without warning, most didn't have agents on their trail intent on hastening the process.

In order to survive, Marla kept a low profile in the small town that sat on the edge of Golden Bay. A former US Marine, she had become an agent who Uncle Sam sent in when they needed to get involved without looking like they were getting involved. When the operation she was sent to New Zealand for went pear-shaped, the agency that sent her decided to bury the evidence – including her. Now, the agency and the New Zealand Police, who wrongly believed she was involved in a murder, were keen to get their hands on Marla, and not in a loving way.

Although she lived a semi-retired lifestyle, she kept her fitness high and her skills sharp to ensure she remained a step ahead of her pursuers. She was confident they had no idea she was using the Alice Green identity or where she lived, because if they did ...

Three years ago, after she had successfully evaded the two agents sent after her, she arrived in Picton on foot with her possessions in a large backpack. She toured the South Island for eight months, never staying long in any one place. It had been a fun, cathartic holiday and it confirmed that no one was looking for Alice Green.

In the short- to medium-term, money wasn't an issue. She had been paid well in the past and kept her money in places that the nosiest government agencies couldn't penetrate. They were the same places dodgy governments and the wealthy hid their cash.

When Marla decided that the holiday was over, she returned to Golden Bay and rented a small, fully furnished three-bedroom house in Parapara with large windows that accentuated the stunning views. The furniture in the house was relatively new and relatively cheap. She thought the owners must have staged the house to sell, but when they didn't get an acceptable offer, they decided to rent it out.

As a bonus, the region was alive with local arts communities. From her early exploration there were a few too many conspiracy theorists for her liking, but she planned to eventually get involved through photography. Back home in Nebraska, she had created sculptures from recycled material scavenged from dumps. She had developed a growing reputation under the pseudonym *No Rules* and as much as she would have liked to take up where she had left off, it was too risky. She tried painting first but struggled with the medium and settled on photography.

The day after she moved in, she had sat on the couch marvelling at the scenery and realising with clarity that she would go stark raving mad living alone. The next day she went to Nelson and came home with Indy. There were many sweet dogs at the SPCA but Indy's confused, sad yet hopeful look was irresistible. Although Marla would've sworn it only happened in fairy stories, she fell in love at first sight.

Since then, her life ran at retirement pace in stark contrast to her past roles where bullets were usually flying. Now she captured aerial photographs with her FPV drone, read, watched movies and ran with Indy. A weekly highlight was a visit to either Tākaka or Collingwood to stock up on supplies. She also trained hard and kept her former skills sharp. She figured she would need them one day.

Apart from the gentle changing of seasons, one week was much like another. Although Marla was happy with her current situation – she was alive and safe – she missed her former life. Not the military or working as an operative, she missed Nebraska and her would-be partner, Lucas.

Sipping her wine and stroking Indy, who had joined her on the couch after demolishing her dinner in record time, Marla stepped through the day's events on the track. After thoughtful consideration she was content that her actions were proportionate to the perceived risk. Even though

the signs pointed to a benign situation – no operative would select visible clothing for an ambush – caution had kept her alive.

Patting Indy, she said, ‘It’s not paranoia. They *are* out to get me.’

Indy tilted her head, giving Marla her usual inquisitive look.

‘They’ll struggle,’ she said getting off the couch. ‘We’re well set up here, Indy.’

She nudged her laptop awake. The 24/7 AI surveillance system that monitored her home and surrounds displayed all green ticks. Garry had been the only visitor to venture down her driveway. A ginger cat who lived nearby, Garry liked to check out Indy’s bowls when they weren’t home.

Marla had installed four high-definition cameras – three covered the house’s perimeter and a fourth, concealed in a cabbage tree, monitored traffic entering the town on Parapara Beach Road. The system used facial recognition technology, vehicle plate identification and an artificial intelligence engine and soon became familiar with the comings and goings around her house. When it detected events that required clearance, it sent a text. Initially, she was bombarded with alerts but the system learnt quickly.

‘What shall we have for dinner, Indy?’ she said peering into the fridge.

Indy’s look changed from puzzled to hopeful.

‘I meant, what shall I have?’

Indy remained looking hopeful.

The fridge was well stocked with options for dinner but Marla found cooking for one was dispiriting. She had come to understand how people in her situation could spiral into alcohol and drugs. Take a temporary ticket on the helter-skelter that transported you away from reality. Over time you lost fitness, focus and attention to detail. She enjoyed a glass of wine but, by herself, always stopped at one – that was the discipline. She was well aware that one could be too many and that ten wasn’t near enough.

‘It looks like leftovers.’

Marla dragged out a square of lasagna and ingredients to make a salad. Indy watched on approvingly, knowing morsels would be coming her way. Marla ate watching the news then hid the dishes in the

dishwasher. She had an hour to kill before what had become a genuine highlight of her week – a chat with her journalist friend Grace Marks.

Their paths first crossed on the operation that went pear-shaped. It was the COVID tracking system in use at the time that threw the first spanner in the operation's works and it led to Marla, and then Grace, narrowly avoiding becoming fatal collateral damage. She hadn't expected to see Grace again, but months later she saw her interviewed on TV after someone had nailed the cards known as dead man's hand to her front door. Bored and looking for something meaningful to do, Marla paid her a surprise visit to see if she could help. The rest was history.

Their weekly call started a few months ago after Marla impulsively called Grace, curious about the outcome of a family violence story she had helped her with. On reflection, Marla realised that she needed to talk to someone who knew she wasn't Alice Green. All the training, all the running, she was trying to do the impossible – to run away from herself.

Grace must have recognised her predicament and suggested a weekly check-in, provided it didn't compromise Marla's security. It didn't. No one on Earth, not even Grace, knew where she lived. They mitigated the slight risk further by using the app Signal – which provided secure end-to-end encryption – and both used burner phones. Even with the GCSB's Waihopai Station nearby, it was science fiction to think the spy agency could intercept their communications and turn it into usable intelligence.

After she had showered, Marla wiped the steam off the mirror and studied her reflection as she flexed various muscle groups. She eventually nodded. She looked as fit as she did in her Marine days. And nearing forty, even if she did say so herself, she was attractive. Her current cropped black hair hairstyle wasn't to everyone's taste, but it was easy to keep and there was no significant other to worry about. A month ago, she discovered her first grey hair – she plucked it out immediately.

In loose fleece trackpants and a thin black hoodie, she flopped on the couch next to Indy and called Grace.

'Marla, how's it going?'

'Ace, it's great to hear your voice. Is now good?'

‘Yep. The children are nominally studying. Sean’s at home with his children, so it’s just me.’

Grace’s partner, Sean, was a family court lawyer who, from what Grace had said, often had to work evenings to keep on top of his workload. And her children weren’t exactly children – they were both around twenty. Grace often reflected that they would soon be leaving Palmerston North, something Grace said she encouraged. Reading between the lines, Marla got the feeling it was Grace who would have liked to drive off into the sunset.

‘No pressing editorial deadlines tonight?’ asked Marla.

‘Always, but they can wait. What’s happening in your world?’

Trying to sound upbeat, she said, ‘The same as the last time we talked.’

‘I’m sorry, Marla.’

‘Don’t be, Ace. I’ll start feeling sorry for myself. When I was out running today ... I thought they’d tracked me down.’

‘And?’ said Grace, her voice full of concern.

‘They hadn’t. It was a local guy in the bushes stealing a fern. The point is, no part of me said cut and run.’

‘I get that,’ said Grace, breaking the brief silence. She changed the subject. ‘What about your photography? You’re getting into that big time.’

Marla smiled. ‘There is that. Now the weather’s improving, I take my drone out most days. The detail they capture is amazing.’

‘I know,’ said Grace. ‘Because of fucking Russia, they’ve gone from toys to the battlefield weapon of choice in what, two years? Did you see the footage of the attack on the Russian airbase? Unbelievable.’

‘And they’ll only get scarier in that theatre. I fly mine at the local domain, it’s usually deserted. I buzz it over water, bush and even my house. Indy chases it but soon loses interest.’

‘How is Indy?’

‘Great.’ Marla thought of Indy on the track, returning and waiting without her saying a word. ‘She’s one clever girl. I take it you haven’t got Roxy tonight.’

‘No. Sean reckons I prefer Roxy to him.’