

AFTERMATH

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A SEQUEL TO **RETURN TO LUCIFER CREEK**

Published 2026
by Glenavon Publishing

ISBN 978-0-473-79202-2

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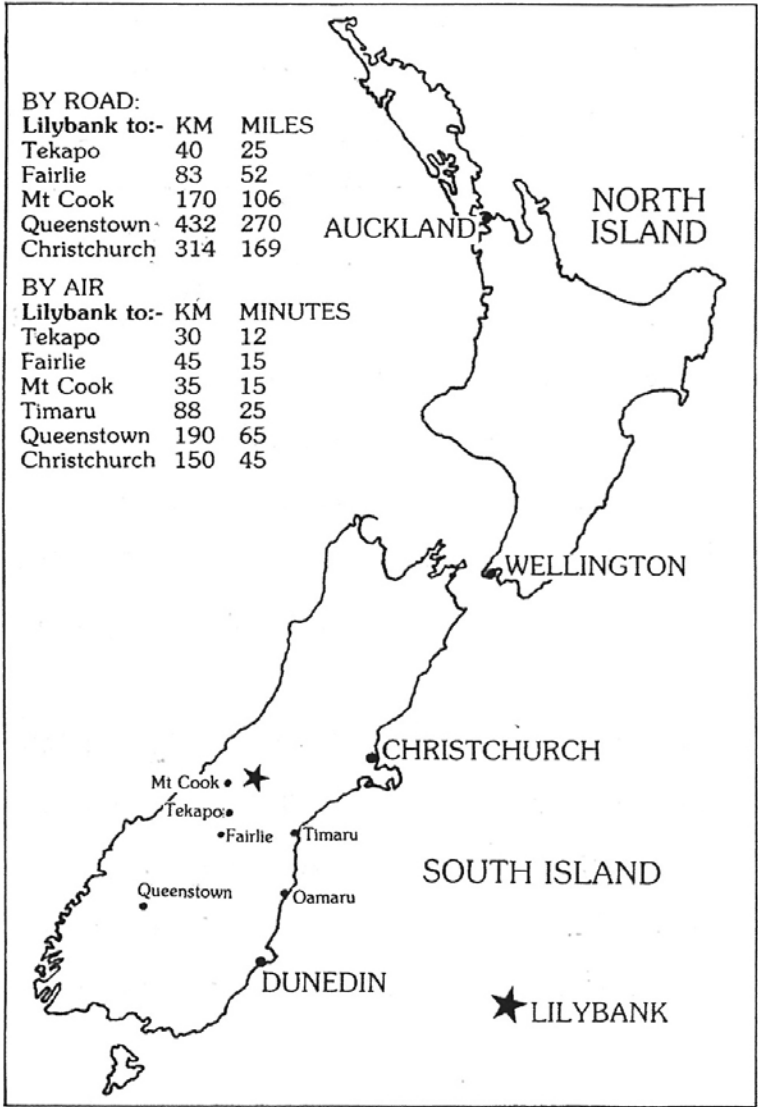
COPYPRESS

Printed by CopyPress, Nelson, New Zealand.

{REALNZBOOKS}

Distributed by Real NZ Books, Nelson, New Zealand.

www.copypress.co.nz



Chapter One

The rising sun of the new day was warming the backs of our legs as we paused at the apex of the gravel fan; thousands of years of rocks and gravel dumped from Lucifer Creek during past extreme rainfall events. This was ankle twister terrain; we linking-up in time-tested mutual-support, cautiously descending.

Ahead was the vast grey expanse of the Godley Valley. Out of sight, to our right, the burned out remains of the Red Stag Hut; the remains of four women entombed within. I glanced at Helen, her face a picture of agony, a tiny tear sliding, unhindered, down her cheek, she no doubt weeping for her dead younger sister plus murdered tramping companions. Still a slight hint of smoke hanging in the early morning air.

Without speaking we veered left, seeking the well-defined four-wheel-drive track formed after many years of use by hunting parties accessing the Red Stag Hut. Ahead was the five-hour monotonous grind to the lodge at Lilybank. Our packs weren't heavy, the 'borrowed' rifle over my right shoulder. The day was gloriously fine, the sky that deep blue that only the South Island high country can produce. Once the two-wheel tracks were under our feet we walked side-by-side, me making every effort to shorten my stride to match Helen's shorter legs.

Our moods should have been as bright as the day, but this was the very first time we had dared to move freely in the Godley, our previous efforts, even in the safety of the night, almost fatal. As we settled into an easy pace I glanced across at Helen, her face pensively sad. I knew she would be thinking about the fact that later in the day she would be

telling her parents about the death of her sister, their youngest daughter, telling three sets of parents about the deaths of their daughters. I am sure that she was attempting to construct, in her mind, the words she would use to ease the pain of parents receiving shattering news.

Me? I was running the chain of events of the past ten days through my mind, doing my best to sequence them into a chronological order, rehearsing the confrontations/interrogation that would certainly occur once we reached the police station at Tekapo. Yet, in the back of my mind, shadowed by my recalling our numerous encounters with the Grey Ghosts, was the pervading fear that this could be the very last time I would freely walk one of my beloved South Island major rivers, hunting tahr, chamois, red deer.

So much depended on the *debts* and *credits* of our situation? Would the fact that the pair of us had saved the life of the Prime Minister of Israel, a highly important visitor to our country, build us enough *brownie points* against the *debit* of killing fifteen or twenty men, apparent terrorists?

“Barry.”

I stopped and turned, for she’d spoken from far behind me.

“Have you forgotten that my legs are so much shorter than yours?”

“Sorry, I was contemplating my future.”

She walked up to me, took my hand and said ...

“I also have been negatively contemplating, fearing that the pair of us will end up in jail for a very long time, that we’ll never again enjoy the freedom of the wild places of our mountains and their valleys.”

I wondered if my face reflected her Glum Bunny face. I am sure it did, for obviously in the mutual silence, while following the four-wheel-track, we had each of us been total engrossed in our individual thoughts, thoughts of a similar nature.

There were no words I could bring to mind to ease her concerns, so I just pulled her to me and wrapped my arms around her. Once again,

I was reminded of just how small in stature she was. I waited for Helen to break our embrace, taking her right hand as she did so. Side-by-side, hand-in-hand, we continued, in silence, to finally reach the south margin of Lucifer Flat, the gut-busting grey void of the featureless gravel riverbed confronting us. Many a time I had tramped this section of the Godley riverbed, I knew we had a full forty-five minutes of nothingness ahead of us before we reached the confluence of the Weka Stream, more tussock flats, the four-wheel-drive track.

We were opposite the North Branch stream, about halfway to the Weka, when Helen spoke.

“Barry, look ...” She was pointing downstream.

Two vehicles; one following the other.

My binoculars, brought to sharp focus, despite the slight heat shimmer rising from the grey gravel, a police four-wheel-drive followed by an ambulance, both easily identified by their distinctive individual livery. They seemed to be on the track we were following. Removing the rifle from my shoulder I eased out of my pack, while nodding to Helen to do the same.

We watched as both vehicles stopped about fifty metres from where we stood. The driver of the police vehicle was the first to appear, a policeman in full police uniform. Next, from the two doors on the left side of the Toyota, stepped two men dressed in dark suits. I had expected more police officers. No one alighted from the ambulance.

I brought my binoculars up and I couldn't believe my eyes! Both men wore smart dark suits, possibly custom tailored, striped shirts, mute coloured ties. As they began to gingerly walk towards us, as if they were walking barefoot on broken glass, I noticed both were wearing polished black street shoes, highly inappropriate for the rock-strewn gravel underfoot. The leader of the pair was about my height, six foot one, with a short crew cut and a face emanating distrust and barely disguised aggression. My binoculars showed me he'd not shaved, that

his smart 'city' suit was seriously crumpled, suggesting he'd slept in it? There was no doubt the second man was subordinate to 'Crewcut', his face indicating he was younger, this impression reinforced by the fact his hair was pulled back into a lengthy ponytail. As they finally reached us Ponytail held back a pace, the police officer a couple of paces behind him, his face open, convivial, non-judgemental.

I stood there waiting for one of them to speak; thinking this pair was as much out of place as a couple of nuns in the front seats of live show of 'The Full Monty'.

Crewcut's opening comment was,

"Who the fuck are you two?" He was staring at Helen, giving me just a passing glance.

There was no proffering of ID, no courteous greeting with his name offered, a total lack of courtesy, the basics of P.R. ignored.

I really can't say what instantly lit my wick. Firstly, there was no need to use the 'F' word in front of a young woman upon first meeting, no need to be so openly aggressive to us without cause or reason.

I glanced across at the police officer to fleetly notice his face register disgust. Ponytail did his best to appear indifferent and neutral.

Taking a step towards Crewcut, I gently eased Helen behind me and spoke ...

"I am guessing you failed all the PR classes during your training."

He made as if to speak, but I cut him off with a quick hand gesture and continued.

"First up, where in your training were you taught to address a young woman, upon first meeting, with the 'F' word; neglecting to introduce yourself and offer ID? Here you are standing in the middle of a pristine wilderness river displaying traits that for decades have given elements of the bureaucracy a truly bad name. I don't know who put bidibids in your Y-fronts this morning, but if you want our help with your current problems, and mark my words you will, I suggest you take a small

walk, take a dozen deep breaths, and start again with usual universally acceptable courtesies.”

Interestingly he turned with a glance at both Ponytail and the policeman; each gave him the slightest of nods.

He took a short walk, paused for a while looking down valley, came back to stand immediately in front of Helen.

“I am sorry. I do apologise to you, Miss. Yesterday I had the shitiest day in my entire professional career.”

“How so?” from me. Still no ID or introduction!!

“I spent most of yesterday with the C.O. of the Tekapo Army Camp, and no matter what questions I asked him, no matter how I pleaded, he denied any knowledge of the dozen or more dead foreign soldiers scattered about the Godley Peaks Road. He lied to me all day until I gave up. I know he is covering up some international conflict within his establishment.”

“He didn’t lie to you, he told the truth,” from Helen, speaking for the first time.

Crewcut looked her up and down, his arrogance and aggression surfacing again.

“How could you possibly know that?”

“We killed all of them, they were terrorists set upon killing the Prime Minister of Israel.”

It is common for us to state that someone *took a double take* when surprised by an event or happening. Upon hearing Helen’s words Crewcut took a triple double take. For a second or two he was struck speechless.

“Are you telling me that the pair of you took on a whole raft of trained military types and nailed the lot?”

“That is what happened. Helen and I are on our way to Tekapo Police Station to report the murder of six civilians, four women and two men; by the group we’ve named the Grey Ghosts. To also inform

the police that yesterday morning we killed the dozen or more of them along Godley Peaks Road, and shot down a large helicopter operated by the same group. We are responsible for Glenmore Station's Toyota four-wheel-drive being shot to pieces and burned to a crisp. And we borrowed a rifle and groceries from Lilybank Safari Lodge."

It was all too much for Crewcut to take in. Helen and I watched his face as the complexities of my admissions of guilt registered. It was many long seconds before he reacted, turning to Ponytail and saying ...

"Watch this pair closely and don't let them get away."

He then turned to the policeman, giving a nod of his head indicating the police vehicle and that he should join him as he walked towards the Toyota. The policeman silently complied.

As they distanced themselves from us, I did hear Crewcut say something about a radio in the police Toyota.

Watch this pair and don't let them get away! We were standing in the middle of many hundreds of hectares of riverbed gravel with not a single place to hide! I had a distinct feeling that Crewcut was totally out of his depth with the situation we'd dropped him into.

After about ten minutes, during which I could see both Crewcut and the police officer using the radio, Crewcut returned to face us, the policeman, as always, standing back.

"Now, this is what is going to happen. This policeman will take you two to Tekapo in the ambulance, for there would seem to be, according to you, only deceased persons to be dealt with. I will take over the police vehicle and proceed up valley to ascertain and verify your information."

With that he nodded to the policeman, who, with his right arm, indicated that we should head for the ambulance.

As we turned to once again shoulder our packs, Crewcut spoke in an accusatorial tone.

“I hope that rifle isn’t loaded?”

“Have you not noticed the bolt is missing? Without a bolt a rifle is safe and inoperable.”

Jeez, I thought, the sooner that SOB returns to his familiar haunts in Wellington the better.

Chapter Two

Upon arriving at the back door of the ambulance, the policeman turned and, with a smile on his face, extended his hand.

“I am Senior Sergeant Phil Wake, and you are?”

Extending my hand, to reciprocate, I told him I was Barry Morton and turned to introduce Helen, who extended her hand; he took it while making a slight courteous bow.

“Now, there’s the thing. I have been instructed by a personage in Wellington; away higher up the pay grades than me, that I am to escort you two to Tekapo Police Station, that you are to speak to no-one, I am not to stop for any reason until reaching Tekapo. I am then to await further instructions, from Wellington. Oh, and by the way, we country folks are somewhat less formal than those who inhabit the big cities, so I will be quite comfortable if we converse in first names, Phil, Barry and Helen. OK?”

He then opened the back door of the ambulance and with old fashion courtesy assisted Helen to climb the steps. The interior of the vehicle was somewhat cramped with seating for two persons only, so while Helen and I would occupy the two seats, Phil perched himself on the bed.

We were not introduced to the two ambulance officers, a male the driver, his companion female, we never saw their faces, just the backs of their heads. Clearly, they’d received instructions from our escorting police officer.

The diesel engine coughed with the familiar sound, the ambulance made a 180-degree turn; we were on our way to Tekapo and civilisation.