



# CHAPTER 1

## *Garth: 34 days until Battle of the Book Clubs*

My earworm for today is ‘I Don’t Like Mondays’ by the Boomtown Rats. I hum the tune as I fumble through my keys and unlock the bookshop’s back door. If Eloise were here, she would no doubt quiz me on why I was making strange noises, deny that the melody bore any resemblance to said song and then give her own rendition which, to me, would sound exactly the same as what I was humming.

Today I am spared this indignity as Eloise has stayed at home for a scheduled call with Dame Fiona Kidman. Dame Fiona is supposed to be the authorly guest at our Battle of the Book Clubs fundraiser for the Mighty Oaks kids’ cancer charity but it seems she must pull out and wanted to explain why over the phone. The event is only four weeks away and we were somewhat relying on her as a drawcard.

Perhaps that’s why I’m humming ‘I Don’t Like Mondays’, or perhaps it’s because I’ve seen the pile of new magazines at the back door, waiting for me to process.

‘Morning, lovely,’ I cheerily greet the bookshop, which over the years Eloise and I have anthropomorphised because surely something that creates so much serenity and delight must have a soul.

I lug the magazines inside, the thin polypropylene straps that bind the bundles biting painfully into my hands like a Mafioso assassin’s cheese-wire garotte. Abandoning the piles on the rear counter, I promise myself I will get around to them shortly, while a secret, dark part of me knows I am hoping to get distracted by customers so I can leave my most hated task to Kitty.

I rub the blood back into my strangled fingers and boot up the computers, then turn my attention to the Eftpos machine, which we have also (less fondly) anthropomorphised. The display flashes ‘config update failed’, something it is doing more and more often these days. It has always been a temperamental little beast, hence our belief that it has reached the point of singularity and become self-aware. Amelia, a member of staff who, like me, is a prepper for the zombie apocalypse, is convinced that it is an evil abomination and is biding its time before instigating the rise of the machines and the extermination of the human race. I believe it’s just being a cock.

I tentatively press the power off button to instigate a reboot; one day I fully expect it to refuse to deactivate and, in the voice of HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, say, ‘I’m sorry, Garth, I can’t do that.’ Thankfully, today is not that day and it restarts with a friendly little beep as I flick on the lights, illuminating rows of pōhutukawa-red and gold shelves full of worlds of wonder.

My heart stutters, which I attribute to joy and not the high cholesterol my doctor insists I need to lower. I love our bookshop and truly hope that Amazon doesn’t lead to the extermination of our little haven of hope; it’s so much more than just a place to buy books.

Heaving open the shop’s massive front door, I am hit by the aroma of coffee. It must be a roasting day for Oddbeans, so the

whole of Havelock North is going to enjoy the bitter-sweet scent that permeates the Village. The café seems to be managing to stay open, even though, only a couple of weeks ago, Eloise and I unmasked the owner, Franklin White, as a murderer — or a suspected murderer at least. He's on remand with a trial date pending, and although we are certain he is guilty, nothing has yet been proven in court.

I inhale deeply, savouring the roasted coffee scent. Because of the morning's drama with Dame Fiona, I have missed out on my normal breakfast brew and my brain and body are complaining. Walking to the counter I slip back into 'I Don't Like Mondays', recomposing the lyrics — *the silicon chip inside my head is switched to caffeine low* . . .

I flick the kettle on, remembering to do both the switch on the kettle *and* the one on the wall because Kitty will have obsessively switched off the socket, being our bookshop eco-angel. Scattered on the counter next to the coffee caddy are a number of small black pellets. I'm about to sweep them into the sink, assuming they are stray spillings from Kitty's lunch, when something gives me pause. Even for vegan food they look a tad unpalatable. I slip my glasses onto my nose and my fears are confirmed. Not vegan food, but something even worse. Mouse droppings.

The shop is generally critter free, and in the ten years we have been open we have never been home to a rodent of any description — well, not if you discount the time a certain shock-jock visited to promote his new book.

I guess having a mouse isn't as bad as it would be if we were a food establishment but it's still not good news. They could chew or soil stock and do even more damage to our reputation. Perhaps along with Stevie, the shop dog, we should get a shop cat.

'Mōrena!' yells Kitty, bustling through the Tardis door, which leads from the back corridor into the shop proper and is painted like

the legendary police box. Today she is wearing bright baggy trousers decorated with New Zealand birds and a burgundy Sherlock Toms hoodie. She is yet to tie her hair back for the day and tawny strands fall across her flushed cheeks. In her hands she carries two reusable bags of Monday morning vegetables. I spy a cauliflower, a leek, kūmara, and . . . urrrggg . . . beetroot, the most offensive of the roots.

‘What’s wrong?’ asks Kitty, seeing the revulsion on my face, which I have made no effort to hide.

‘There’s a reason beetroot’s Latin name is *Beta vulgaris*, you know.’

Kitty dumps her bags in the stock room. ‘That new cookbook from the Celery Sisters has loads of great vegan recipes. I’m going to make a chocolate and beetroot cake.’

‘No. You’re going to make a perfectly good chocolate cake unpalatable by adding animal feed to it.’

‘I bet you’ll eat a slice when I bring it in.’ Kitty raises her eyebrows.

‘I’m allergic to beetroot.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, it makes me depressed.’

Kitty glances at the pile of magazines lurking on the side. ‘Does doing the magazines make you depressed too?’

I fold my arms. As joint owner of the shop I’m technically the boss, a distinction that generally seems to be ignored by the staff. I entirely blame Eloise, whom Kitty, Amelia and Phyllis all seem to regard as the actual boss, referring to her as Fearless Leader. ‘I haven’t started them because we have a more pressing problem, of the mouse variety.’

‘Oh! Have you seen it?’ Kitty’s face shows delight rather than horror and she clasps her hands together as if I have just announced the appearance of Despereaux, Kate DiCamillo’s swashbuckling mouse, complete with sewing-needle sword.

‘No, I haven’t seen it, but I do intend to put down some poison.’

‘You can’t!’ says Kitty, shocked.

‘Well, can you lend us Noggy, then?’

‘Noggy’s not much of a mouser. He’s more of a lie-on-a-cushion-and-demand-food type of cat.’ Kitty brushes hair from her face. ‘Helen from Forest and Bird has a humane mouse trap. I’ll borrow that.’

‘Do they actually work? I don’t want this problem to escalate.’

‘Of course they do. I’ll bait it with some chocolate and beetroot cake.’

My eyebrows rise. ‘I thought you said it was humane?’

Kitty pokes her tongue out at me and turns to the computer to check on the web orders that have come in overnight. Something else I am supposed to do but haven’t, although unlike the magazines my reticence with these is more because I am likely to stuff it up.

‘Oh, we’ve got two orders for that new romantasy,’ says Kitty.

‘Right. Another potentially great fantasy novel that has been ruined by smut.’ I shake my head. ‘What’s this one called, “Fifty Shades of Goblin”?’

‘No.’ Kitty looks slightly embarrassed. ‘*Dragon Heat*. It’s actually quite good.’

‘Dragons on heat. Well, that paints a host of unwanted pictures in the mind.’

‘Only in your mind. Can you grab a couple from the shelf?’

I venture into the sci-fi and fantasy section, which is my favourite part of the shop, and not only because it is decorated with faux treasure chests, potions and swords. Since opening the bookshop my reading tastes have definitely widened, but this is my true home, a place where I can escape into the worlds of wizards, warriors and, until recently, safely celibate dragons.

I’m taking a couple of copies from the pile when my phone buzzes with the sound of a text message:

Eloise: Running late. Be there in five.

I glance at the shop clock: 8.45. We're giving a talk at a Grey Folk meeting in fifteen minutes. Even with Eloise's driving we're not going to make it. I hate being late, I always have done, and this particular foible of mine was only reinforced by my brief stint as a Royal Marine commando, when being late for anything resulted in a sadistic punishment, or 'corrective training' as it was officially termed. Eloise will probably lay the blame on Stevie, and much as I love our timid, traumatised rescue dog, he is not an excuse for tardiness. My chest tightens, pain building behind my eyes; is it really so much to ask?

I'm about to close my phone's screen when I notice that the text was sent three minutes ago and has only just arrived. With the throaty rumble of a 3.9L V8 and a squeal of tyres, a battered silver Range Rover judders to a halt outside the shop's front door. It's not actually our vehicle — a friendly customer has lent it to us after Eloise wrecked our little red Ford Fiesta a couple of weeks ago in the process of unmasking the aforementioned Franklin White for a decades-old murder.

The Fiesta had the moniker 'the Tomato', and due to the Range Rover's borrowed status Eloise has named it the Loan Ranger, which I feel ambivalent about. When viewed through a modern lens the handling of the original Tonto character is dubious . . . but on the other hand the new name does facilitate an entertaining plethora of inappropriate comments.

'Got to go and enter the Loan Ranger. Try to get those magazines done before I return.' I dash from the shop, sensing the mid-digit raised at my back.

Pink hair tied in a ponytail, heavily tattooed arms stretched out as she grips the steering wheel, Eloise looks like a Formula One

driver waiting at the start gantry.

‘We’re late,’ I say tightly as I buckle up.

‘Not yet we’re not.’ Eloise floors the accelerator. ‘Hi-yo Silver, away!’ The Loan Ranger surges onto the road in a cloud of dust and burning rubber. New car, same terrible driving.