

Excerpt from Something to Aim For

Chapter 18

Gravelguts, the Ghost and Hell's Ugly Maw

...The bush looked far worse in the predawn – the beam of our headlamps only travelled a short distance before being stalled by the shiny faces of a million damp leaves. We cut the track and focused on the ground ahead of our feet for a bit. Within minutes of entering the main forest we were soaked to the skin, partly from the exertion but mainly because the rainforest is called that for a very good reason. Our strategy for the day was straightforward. The plan was that we had no plan, until we heard a roar – and then we'd make a plan. The moan came from the same direction as the day before, but there was no response from across the river. We waited until he gave voice again.

It wasn't a full-blooded roar – more of the surly, bearish growl of a liverish animal, so Tony nicknamed him Old Gravelguts and we set off to put a face to the name. The forest did its level best to hinder us at every step and I never once felt confident we'd get close to the sod, but we did – tantalisingly close. Each sodden step promised to reveal at least a glimpse of him, but he must have been measuring his pace to ours, because we never got any closer to the sound. He kept us at arms length until he tired of the game and fell silent. This was to be his pattern for three days.

We sidled high, hoping for better passage, but every few metres were hindered by windfall, rotting logs or scrubby guts. It was tedious, exhausting travel and progress was tortuous, so we angled back to the valley floor. A twig snapped just in front of us, but my impatience cost us a sight of the big hind as she took flight from less than five metres away. Two steps more and another mocked me with the thunder of hooves.

Further up the valley a stag roared and we were just about to head off at a fast clip, when an ear-splitting challenge rang out about fifty metres ahead. We had just stalked an acre of beech trees which formed an island on the river flats and were funnelling in to where it confronted a steep ridge. The moment the second stag roared, I turned to watch Tony drop into a crouch on the fringe of an old dry creek bed. I quietly edged closer and stepped to where I could view the vague alleyway without putting Tony in jeopardy. The sun was high overhead and lit the forested lane so that it stood out in crisp relief.

The stag roared again – it sounded close. Any minute now we expected the stag to come strutting down the opening and present me with a gift of a shot. The tension, excitement and anticipation were palpable.

Nothing happened. It went quiet. Tony signed me to stalk the stag. So I stepped into the dry watercourse and felt the sunlight make the nape of my neck go cold. Proximity. Each step was measured and deliberate, each footfall was as faint as a mouse on carpet, each breath was controlled and silent, and every damn nerve in my body was squealing like a singed pig. The air wasn't moving, but it wasn't still. Suddenly I was swamped by the most god-awful

stench I'd ever been offended by – rutting stag. I could literally taste him. That meant the breeze was in my face. I looked to the right to a hedge of pepperwood on the forest edge. The smell was coming from there. I closed the bolt, sucked in a deep breath and took three steps and was through.