

# The Physician's Gun - Sample Chapter

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## Chapter 20

### Terror in the forest

HENRY SPINTEK AWAY from Chadwick's house... *Run!* ... down the street, not daring to look over his shoulder... *Run!* ... across the open ground... and into the alley.

Duke was waiting where he left him. *Thank goodness.* There was no grass there, so the horse was snoozing.

"Duke!"

The animal awoke with a start as Henry charged out of the dark and leapt on his back. "Home, Duke!"

They galloped across the darkening landscape. The last of the sun bathed the clouds in an eerie light.

Henry looked behind him. There was no sign of a large man on a horse in hot pursuit. *I'm safe.* He allowed his horse to slow.

They reached the cemetery, where headstones cast long shadows across the rough dirt. As he always did, Henry glanced over at his father's grave.

What would Father say about all this? What advice would he give? *At least Father had a rifle.*

Henry slowed as they entered the forest to allow Duke to navigate the gnarled tree roots. The exposed roots of the kahikatea, buttressing the tree, looked like the paws of a giant dog.

A forest could be a terrifying place, especially at nightfall. Your worst nightmares took form, hiding behind every tree, rustling the dead leaves...

The dying sun threw long shadows across the forest floor. The forest became a dark cathedral, with pillars of timber and a ceiling of interlaced branches and leaves.

Henry heard the multitude of birds chattering in the trees as they settled in for the night, and there was rustling in the undergrowth as ground-dwelling birds ventured from their burrows.

The further in Henry travelled, the darker it became. An uneasy thought crept into his head. *Is someone following me?* To calm himself, Henry began to hum a vague tune. *The Lord is my shepherd...*

He couldn't help looking around, anxious. Every shadow threatened to devour him. He decided to pray, which was usually a good way to calm oneself.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." he began.

Duke snorted. His hooves scattered the dry leaves and he stumbled over the tree roots.

"Steady, Duke," said Henry, trying his best to sound masterful. *Stay calm.* He shut his eyes and continued the Psalm. "I will fear no evil..."

WHACK! A branch whipped into his face. Henry yelped in pain and let go of the reins to clutch his stinging cheeks. He grabbed for the reins again, but too late. He lost his balance and tumbled off Duke, crashing to the ground. As he lay there, stunned, Duke eyed him from further along the track.

Henry clambered to his feet, moaning, and rubbing his backside. He hadn't been this sore since Alberta kicked him during milking. He signalled to his horse. "Wait, Duke." *Stay calm. Don't spook the horse.*

There was a rustling movement in the trees.

Henry stared into the dark bushes but could see nothing. *Is someone there? Is it Sullivan?* He stumbled towards his horse, reaching for the reins. *I need to get away!*

“Here, Duke.”

*He’s heard noises too. I mustn’t alarm him.*

He gestured at his horse. *Come here, Duke!* Duke snorted and trotted a bit further up the track, away from the noises and away from Henry.

“Duke, come back!” Henry yelled. *You stupid animal!* He broke into a sprint to catch his horse.

That was enough to panic the normally placid Duke. He tucked his ears back, kicked up his hooves and scampered up the track, to be swallowed by the dark.

“Duuuuuke!” Henry cried out.

Now he was alone in the dark forest. Abandoned. His imagination ran riot. The shadows under trees took human form.

*Is that Sullivan? Burgess?*



Despite his pain, Henry broke into a sprint, scrambling and stumbling over the tree roots.

Under the trees to his left, he was certain he caught sight of a dark figure. Muscular, catlike, and matching him stride for stride.

*Burgess!*

“What’s the hurry, laddie?” Burgess called to him.

Henry, scared witless, looked to his right and saw those familiar boots, taking huge strides, crushing the ferns. And that chiselled face, twisted and cruel.

*Sullivan!*

“I don’t trust him, Burgess,” growled Sullivan.

Henry’s feet were flying. *Run, run!*

Sullivan was brandishing a large knife.

*He’s going to kill me!* Henry hurtled down the path. *I don’t want to die!*

“I say kill ’im,” said Sullivan. “Throttle ’im.”

The two men were closing in, their voices terrifying. “Kill ’im!” they barked. “Snuff ’im! Burke ’im!”

*Ruuuuuunnnnn!*

Henry reached the edge of the dark forest and rocketed out into the open, leaving his pursuers behind in the darkness, and kept running.

*Don’t stop!* He sprinted twenty yards before doubling over, gasping for breath. He dared to look back. The forest was well behind him. *I’m safe.*

A breath of wind ruffled the bushes, and branches creaked and groaned. Henry hoped he had been imagining the voices, but they had seemed so real.

Perhaps they were still there, taunting him? *I'm not going back to check.* When his panting stopped, Henry stumbled on, rubbing his sore bones. *Where is that wretched horse?*

He found Duke near the Maungatapu Rock, nonchalant, feasting on fresh grass.

*You good-for-nothing animal!* Henry wanted to yell at him, to give him a good telling-off. But he knew that would only alarm Duke and send him galloping off again. As he limped towards the horse he spoke in a soothing voice.

"Good boy," he called through gritted teeth.

Duke stamped his hooves and snorted.

*Don't you dare run off, Duke!* Henry grabbed the reins. "Don't ever do that again," he said. "Ever." He climbed on his horse, wincing in pain, and they set off, glowing in the pale moonlight.

Now they were in open country.

Henry was still on edge, and glanced behind him to make sure he was not being followed. Maybe by someone on horseback, or maybe someone running. He knew Burgess could do it.

He sighed with relief as Bluebell Cottage came into view. *Home!* The place he had always felt safe and happy, even in the dark days after his father died. *Wait till I tell Mother everything.*

He saw the comforting glow of a lantern in the window. A wisp of smoke from the chimney. Soon he would be inside, telling his mother how he had saved the rotten bank manager Chadwick, and laughing with her at his scary imaginings in the forest.

In the front yard, he unsaddled Duke. Stretched his sore limbs.

He smiled as he heard a haunting *Für Elise*. Henry knew his mother would be sitting straight-backed at her shiny piano, which they had shipped all the way from England. Her eyes would be closed, her work-calloused hands dancing over the keys.

The piano was one of the few treasures his mother had refused to sell in order to put food on the table. And *Für Elise* was her favourite: a sweet melody that reassured Henry all was well.

But even as Henry reached for the door handle, his mother's playing faltered, and she struck a wrong note. This was strange, because she had played the tune so often she could play it in her sleep.

*Something's wrong.*

Then he heard a sound that worried him far more. It was the grunting of animals, and it came from their back garden.

*Pigs!*

*The fence!* Henry dashed around the side of the cottage to the garden. In horror he saw a section of fence had been knocked down, and a large sow was wallowing in a muddy confusion of uprooted vegetables.

"Get out! Get out!" Henry charged at the animal. The sow struggled to her feet and lumbered back through the fence into Chadwick's field. Two piglets emerged from the mud, squealing, and trotted after her.

Henry did not notice that the piano had fallen silent. He surveyed the ruined garden and slumped to his knees.

*What can I say to Mother? No vegetables to eat, and none to sell.*

As he knelt in the mud, head in hands, he heard the creak of the back door opening. A shaft of lantern light fell

across the garden, and a man called out. "Well, well, 'Enry! Watcha done now?"

Henry froze. He recognized that Cockney voice. *No, no, it cannot be!*

Standing in the doorway, framed by the light, was a squat and menacing figure.

Richard Burgess.



*Standing in the doorway, framed by the light, was a squat and menacing figure.*

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