

The background of the book cover is a dark, atmospheric scene. It features a large, bright, circular light source, possibly the sun or moon, partially obscured by dark, silhouetted trees. A small, dark, disc-shaped object, resembling a UFO, is visible in the sky. The overall tone is mysterious and sci-fi.

① Changels

INITIATION

Part One of Book One, Serendipity

By Peter King

The Changels Series



Changels:
Initiation

Part one of
The Changels Genesis trilogy

By Peter King



Peter King Publishing

The Changels Genesis Trilogy

Changels : Initiation

By Peter King

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The Changels Genesis trilogy is comprised of three books (Serendipity, Metamorphosis and Die Bruderschaft) and six parts Initiation, The Weaving, Renaissance, Into Darkness, Conjunction, The Crucible, all published separately

For more information about the trilogy visit <http://www.changels.info>

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Content warning

The Changels series is recommended for young adult readers 13 and older. Contains censored profanity, and references to sexuality and violence. This book is not recommended as suitable for children.

Series advisory

The Changels Genesis story is one story in three books (just like Lord of the Rings) It is sold as a trilogy and as a sextet. This part Initiation is followed by Changels *The Weaving* (ISBN 978-1-927264-04-1)

The books are also available as ePub and Kindle books as well.

Preface

- DEDICATION -

Changels Serendipity is dedicated to my friend Amarath Ou, who came to New Zealand with his mother and brother as a child refugee from Cambodia. Thanks for your patience, mate.

- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS -

Most of Changels Genesis was written on an HTC cellular telephone with a slide-out keyboard while using public transport.

The author would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement he has received from the following people.

My friend Louise Wickham, for reading the first draft and despite its many failings encouraging me. And to my friend Sylvia Zlami (and her calibrated nose) for reporting the smells from the car park of Pacific Fair mall on the Gold Coast of Queensland, Australia.

The drivers and my fellow passengers on the number 150 bus, who have followed this story's development from inception, and my friends and neighbours.

I would like to thank Najva Mirhashemi for her help with Farsi, and Katayoun Hassell for her advice on names within the Iranian Baha'i community.

I must acknowledge the huge resource provided by Google Corporation without which this book would not have been possible. The Israeli white pages guide to common names in Umm al Fahm was also very useful.

I would also like to acknowledge the advice and support of the Wellington chapter of the Romance Writers of New Zealand, and in particular Kris Pearson and Diane Fraser.

I must thank my father, John, for his assistance with proof-reading Changels Genesis. And my mother Dell for her typically robust challenges on structure. Once an editor, always an editor.

Finally thank you to my wife, Jenny, for putting up with my hobby.

Preface

- NOTES ON LANGUAGE -

The original language of this book is English, however multiple dialects (Yat and Mockney) and accents of English are included as are elements in Maori, Welsh, Gaelic, German, French and Farsi.

The story is told in the first person by Sam Kahu, a New Zealand Maori, nominally of the Nga Puhi Iwi (tribe). Sam does not use authentic Northland slang or Maori elements and occasionally substitutes North American terms for New Zealand ones in the interests of comprehension. That said he does use some slang terms such as “sus” for “suspicious” or “suspect”.

Maori (Mao-ree) names and songs are used throughout the text. Wherever possible Maori language words have been hyphenated for ease of pronunciation. However Maori has a few peculiarities those not acquainted with it may wish to note.

“i” is normally short, but at the end of a word is pronounced “ee” not “I”

“u” is pronounced “oo” so “Atua” (God) is said “Ah-too-ah”.

“e” at the end of a word is pronounced “ay” so “Tane” (god of the forest) is pronounced “Tah-nay” not Tain.

“wh” is pronounced closer to “ph”, so “when-u-a” (people) is said “phen-oo-a”

“ng” is pronounced as in “singer” so Nga Puhi is closer to “Nah Poo’ee”

Sam Kahu is nominally Nga Puhi (the largest Maori iwi/tribe) where Te Rauparaha was Ngati Toa.

Normally a Maori grandfather would be called “Koro” rather than “Grandpop” but as many readers will skip these notes and because of the scope for confusion over a non-English title in place of a name I have stuck with “Grandpop”.

The terms “Khanum” (feminine of Khan) and “Ba”, Sam pretends to think are names in Chapter one may be translated as “Lady” and “dad” from Farsi and Vietnamese respectively.

The Louisianan characters Ashley and Patricia Robinson come from the ninth ward of New Orleans which is the home of the “Yat” dialect. I have done my best to render a flavour of this dialect, but I am no native speaker and I apologise to speakers for any failings in advance.

Preface

· FACT OR FICTION ·

Because this contains potential plot spoilers the detailed notes on which elements are true and which are fiction are at the end of the book.

· AUTHOR'S FOREWORD ·

Serendipity is the first book of a six-part story, Changels Genesis. As with any long journey it pays to pace yourself. It is possible to read Genesis in a week. Personally I don't recommend it because in your relentless march you will miss some of the flowers along the way.

The whole series is not a movie, nor is it structured like a movie. Movies are watched in one sitting. Books are dipped into as time allows. Therefore the structure of movies and books should be different and that is reflected in the structure of Changels Genesis.

Part One Initiation is the opening of a mystery which keeps getting bigger for a few books to come. It is relatively fast-paced and initiates Sue (and the reader) into the world of the Changels.

You may find the Youtube music mixes accessible from www.changels.info a useful kind of emotional shorthand for the book.

Preface

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Chapter One: The Interview

“Sam, you aren't in trouble. We just need to ask you some questions about the fire.”

It's two days later: Wednesday, 10.11 a.m. on March 11th, 2009, or so the worn-out clock in interview room four at the central police station says.

Sixty-seven hours ago, Sunday about 3 p.m. the old mansion I was living in, on remote A-o-te-a Island, burned down and the twenty or so people living there vanished. It's been all over the news, here in New Zealand and even around the world. Lots of deaths always make the news.

Some TV channels said it was some kind of weird UFO suicide-murder cult, like one in Switzerland before I was born. They called the leader of our community, Dr Gennady Prosperov, a “billionaire, Russian UFO-nut” who had been investigated in America for crooked financial deals.

Then, thirty-seven hours ago, at 9.04 p.m. on Monday night, I turned up at the local cop's house, the unexpected survivor. Sergeant Gavin Seay, the local cop who never liked us much, zapped me a pizza and made up a bed in an unlocked cell at the station next door. He knew he shouldn't, but he only had a one bedroom house, and there wasn't anywhere else to put me. Just for once I didn't mind him being a jerk. *They* wouldn't be looking for me there – not yet anyway.

The next day I met the cops running the case and Welfare took me off the island and into emergency foster care. They didn't have anywhere else for newly orphaned teens to go either. Emergency care was Ruth and Dave Moore's home for teens in the eastern suburbs of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Ruth ran it like a prison, but I can't blame her – at least they fed and housed me. On the news this morning, while I ate my cornflakes, the cops

announced they had found a fourteen-year old survivor, who they wouldn't name until they could contact his surviving family. They said I was helping them with their inquiries.

Yeah, well so far that's just been so much dreaming. Here in cramped, neon-lit interview room four, the silence is dragging.

There's just two cops. Opposite me a cutie with short hair, blonde tips and a stud in her left ear, wearing a uniform. She's late twenties I'd guess. She introduced herself as Detective Constable Sue Williams. She's from Youth Aid. She's trying to look sweet and big sisterly, but she's just a tad too staunch to be straight.

The other one next to her is in charge. I met him yesterday. He's an old, white guy, about forty, in a cheap gray suit, with an ugly green tie. His name is Detective Sergeant Kevin Cooper. I think he's hoping this mystery will turn into something big that will help him make detective inspector.

Me? I'm Sam Kahu, Maori, and sitting here with my hood up. I'm saying nothing. I'm sweet coz I don't have to tell them anything anyway.

"Sam, they are only trying to help you."

That's Geraldine Jones next to me. She's my social worker. I only met her about an hour ago. Mid-fifties, small and fat, with gray hair. The caring face of the system. I don't trust her. She suggested I live with my Aunt and that is never going to happen.

"So Sam, where were you when you first realised the house was on fire?" Sue tries.

She's trying to be light but concerned.

The first mystery they want to solve is why I'm here, and the others have vanished. In fact I was in a slum in the Philippines. But if I told them that they'd think I was crazy or just jerking them around, so I say nothing. I can see their eyes flicking around each other, trying to work out how to get this hard, little Maori kid to talk.

And to be honest, I really don't know what to tell them eh? My story is simply too weird to tell.

"Sam?"

The woman cop still has her fake smile on still. I look at her, trying to focus. I know at once she's all front. And behind it? Behind all this professional bullshit? Man! Her life is really this total mess. Fights at home with her girlfriend; her mum thinks she's a sicko; her dad's a drunk; endless crude jokes about lesbians from the lads

The Interview

in the station; sucking up to this detective next to her in the suit and hating it; years of swallowing bitterness.

Readings are always like this. A jumble of impressions that flood over you.

I didn't say it loud. I just sorta said it like you might if you noticed someone had a small spider on their collar. It just slipped out.

"Rachel's moving out."

And her smile died on her face – like the sun going down back home up north. One minute it's sunny, then it's dark. In place of the fake smile was this angry woman who felt scared she was being betrayed and embarrassed like I could see right through her. I knew she was gutted. And she knew what I'd said was true – but she couldn't admit it. Not here. Not at work. Here I was – a perfect stranger – another random file, voicing her deepest, darkest fear in front of people she would never tell *anything* to. Saying *on tape*, that despite trying so hard for so long, Rachel, her girlfriend, her partner of three or so years, didn't love her and was off.

"Pardon?" she half gasped, trying to pretend she hadn't heard.

Kevin meanwhile had written down "Rachel" like it meant something to *me*.

Only the ghost of her old smile, with anger and fear lurking just below the surface of Sue's face. I knew I'd said too much. I'd crossed the line again. How often have I done that when I was younger? And still I keep doing it, like I can't control my dumb mouth. I silently cursed my own stupidity.

"Nothin'."

"Who's Rachel dear?" Geraldine asks loudly like a deaf old grandma putting her foot in it. She thinks she's helping the cops. I've put a spear through Sue's heart, she's like a fish. She's stunned, gasping and bleeding in the water, and here's this silly cow twisting it because she can't see what I've done. My eyes flick off Sue who can't look me in the eye anymore anyway.

"Dunno. It... It was just somethin' I saw on that show 'Friends'," I lie, lamely.

Kevin over there, in his cheap suit, he's wrestlin' with his face. He knows I'm lying, but he hasn't the brains to look at Sue next to him. He thinks I'm jerkin' them around. He thinks there was somebody at Renwick named Rachel who wanted to leave. It fits his story. He still doesn't know there was nobody named Rachel there. I say nothin'. The silence drags again.

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The reading on Kevin sharpens. He's from down South and he's a racist. Thinks all Maoris are trouble. Two daughters, wife, church; very superior. Believes in living by setting an example to others, assuming if he can do it so can everyone else. He's got no idea. Luckily he's going to do the big daddy thing to me coz he's read my file and he's heard of my dad – and anyone who'd heard of my dad would pity his kids.

“Sam, we're trying to find your sister and your family. *Anything* you can remember might help,” he says.

He says it gently, but he knows mentioning my sister is a red-hot poker to me. My sister Rewa is the one person I've looked after all my life. And he knows what he's doing too! It makes me angry. He doesn't wait for a reply, but goes straight on, looking at his notebook.

“On Monday night you told Constable Seay that you went out fishing around the next bay at about two PM on Sunday afternoon. So where were you for the rest of Sunday and Monday? Did you go alone or did someone go with you? Did anyone know you were gone?”

Kevin's fishing himself. Fishing for lies. It's a trick. He winds me up by mentioning Rewa then goes straight into lie-detector mode. It's what he's used to doing to crims. He thinks he's good at his job. Maybe he is. I don't really care. I let the silence drag on while I stare at him from under my hood, my arms crossed leaning on the desk. He's trying to stare me down like I'm a crim. I just stare back. I'm not scared of him. He thinks he sees a cheeky kid of fourteen, but he has no idea what I've been through over the past two years. He's just some pudgy loser who gets off on bullying. I start back at him. I keep it calm but firm.

“I went fishing and when I came back the house was burning so I went to find help for myself. But you...” I sit back almost shaking my head, “you have the whole Auckland police force looking for twenty missing people and after three days you haven't found any sign of them. They can't have *all* been in the fire. It was a big house! There were far too many ways to get out! If you had to, you could even jump from the second floor. But you haven't found any sign of *anyone*. How could you lose track of twenty people like that?”

I glare at him from under my hood. If I were any other kid who'd lost his family I'd probably be upset. Hey, who wouldn't be? Your family and all your friends suddenly gone, and you left behind. But

The Interview

I can't just think about me. Everyone's counting on me to cover them. Besides this isn't the first time I've lost my family. I am one survivor from a whole house full of survivors. The sole survivor. The last one standing and my job is to get back up and make things safe for when they return.

Kevin is surprised. He's used to asking the questions not answering them. But he looks me in the eye and answers me straight.

"I don't know, Sam. But I promise you, we *will* find them, and we will get to the bottom of this tragedy."

That's half hope, half threat. It's a hope because he doesn't know it *is* a tragedy but it might help him if it was, but it's a threat because survivors like me are always suspects to cops like him. I may be a scrawny little 14-year old, but he knows I've got secrets and to him secrets mean lies and lies mean guilt. He thinks something bad has gone down. He just doesn't know what. I do. And I also know he won't find any trace of them at all. As far as he's concerned they have disappeared into thin air. He continues.

"But I think you could tell us more about what happened to you than you've told us so far," he says, trying to stare me down.

Well, sure, he's right there. Of course I could. And there was a time when an adult staring at me like that would have made me drop my eyes and spill my guts. Not any more.

"Hang on? What *is* this?" I ask, as much for the camera videoing the interview as those in the room.

"All I know is that I went out fishing and when I came back the whole place was full of firefighters, cops and gawpers watching my home burn down with no sign of my friends or family anywhere. And you're sitting here asking *me* where *I* went like *I* did it? Do you think I killed my own family, and all my friends and then burned down the nicest house I've ever lived in? Get real!" I show some frustration.

I even take a deep breath as if controlling myself.

"So I'll ask again. Where is my sister? Where is my Aunt? Where is my Grandpop? And where is everybody else?"

They shift uncomfortably in their seats. Actually I'm half talking to Dr Prosperov in case they've tracked me and are listening in. It's been a long forty-eight hours and I'm wondering what the plan is. When you are all alone you can't help feeling stressed.

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But these guys can take the rap on themselves if they want. Suits me. They know how this looks as well as I do. Questioning a fourteen-year-old who's lost his family as if he's a suspect instead of a witness looks bad no matter how you dress it up. The adults are getting frustrated with me.

"Sam, we are trying to sort it out but it's complicated," Geraldine begins.

"We don't know anything about the people you lived with. And you refuse to talk to your father's family..." she began.

That touched a nerve.

"The Stephens's are not *my* damn family!" I shout and I don't care that they find it loud.

"I'm a Kahu! That bastard you call my father killed my mother! And you want me to live with that witch sister of his? When she isn't drunk, she's doing drugs! You know it's true! Her kids are in the gang. There's no way I'm going to live with them! I'd be safer living in the bush!"

Strictly speaking that isn't true. I'd tried that, and I'd seen the lights in the sky at night. In the bush *they* would find me and probably Emma too. But it sounds right to them.

There was another long silence.

"Sam, why won't you tell us where you went," Kevin asks quietly.

"Because it's private, and has nothing to do with finding my family, or anyone else, and finding out why Renwick House caught fire and burned to the ground. I wasn't there. I didn't see it. I had nothing to do with it. But why can't *you* with all your scientists and your dogs and shit find *anyone* on an island as small as Aotea?"

And now I stared *them* down. This interview is not going the way they had expected. They'd expected tears or teenage Maori mumble and they were getting videotaped bollocking. They were shocked because I wasn't acting like a vulnerable kid. And maybe I wasn't, but that's because after two years of missions I'm not your average fourteen-year-old. When you've been hunted by drugged-out Congolese soldiers with AK-47s a few police in a room just don't seem very scary anymore.

Kevin was rubbing his chin. Sue glanced uncertainly at him. Geraldine was biting her tongue in the corner.

"Sam, would you excuse me and Geraldine for a moment," Kevin said.

They got up.

The Interview

"Sure, don't mind me," I put in loudly.

Kevin glanced at Sue and raised his eyebrows toward the video machine.

Sue leant forward to the microphone.

"Interview suspended 10:32 a.m." and pushed the button, as the others left the room.

Sue and I were left facing each other. She still didn't want to look at me and read her papers. The silence dragged. I felt bad about mentioning Rachel.

"Sue?"

She didn't look up.

"Constable Williams," I growled in the commanding voice Grandpop taught us.

She glanced up at me pulling that awful false smile, eyebrows raised questioningly.

"I'm sorry about what I said," I muttered "I should have shut up."

"Sorry?" she shook her head, confused.

"About Rachel."

She looked at me very directly – very pissed off. It was like she morphed from an official policewoman into an angry lesbian.

"I don't know who told you anything about my private life but whoever it was is a piece of shit who should keep his nose out of other people's business," she hissed furiously and buried her face back in her paperwork.

I waited a moment.

"Nobody told me anything," I told her quietly.

She ignored me. She was really angry.

"I'm psychic."

She kept ignoring me. So I did the full reading for about two minutes. Then I began.

"Susan Ellen Williams, your dad's name is Evan Ross. Your mum's name is Karen Anne, previously Sharpe," I said gently.

She flinched a bit and although she was still pretending to read now I knew I had her attention.

"You have a sister Josephine Alice. Jo is married to Bruce Peterson. They have two kids, Joshua and Oliver. Your mum has never accepted the fact that you're a d...that you aren't into men."

That brought her face up again.

"Shut up," she ordered.

I shut up. She was mad-as.

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"I don't know where you get off with all this stuff and I don't care," she whispered angrily.

"I am here to do my job. This is about you, not me. Now if you were half as forthcoming with information about that group you were in as you have been about my private life we would be a helluva lot further along with this inquiry than we are now."

She was glaring. I understood her hurt and looked down.

"I was just trying to say 'sorry', that's all," I mumbled.

She went back to her papers. Nobody said anything for a while.

You might wonder why I bothered, but I had my reasons. The others had all gone, and I had no idea how long for. It could be days, weeks or even months. Impossible as it seemed we'd been betrayed by someone. It had to be someone we knew, so it was safest to trust someone who I didn't know at all. And when you are totally on your own, you need *somebody* to be your friend.

Yeah, and I liked her. She reminded me of a younger version of my Auntie Liz. She's a nurse and also "bats on the other team". Auntie Liz had looked after me for most of my life. Like her, Sue had obviously been through tough times but she was still there, still trying to be kind. I could relate to that. But more important I could feel her vulnerability. When you see another's vulnerability, most people want to be kind, not cruel. It's the kindness of strangers and it is true. I've seen it all over the world. So I wanted her to understand that I never wanted to hurt her. Finally I spoke up again.

"Look, the only way you'll understand what was happening on Aotea, is by believing me, when I say I'm psychic," I told her quietly, "If you can't believe that ..."

Kevin and Geraldine were coming back into the room,

"you won't understand anything," I finished.

She looked up into my eyes. Hers were blue. She was still pissed off, but she was thinking about it. Kevin and Geraldine sat down again.

"Anything for the record?" Kevin asked Sue.

"No, we were talking about me," Sue told him, with a firm look that told him to back off.

"OK?" Kevin agreed, thinking about it as a questioning technique. Then he leaned over and pressed the record button.

"Interview resumes 10:36. Look, Sam, you've made your feelings pretty clear here," he began, "and I hear where you're coming from."

The Interview

You're a bright kid and I won't patronise you. But no matter how you look at it until we find your family you're an orphan, in foster care. It's not the best place to be is it?"

"So Sam, to be honest we really need your help. The house has been completely destroyed and everyone has vanished. We have no idea how, why, or even when exactly. My job is to find out what happened and if, as it seems, there has been a crime committed, by whom. To do that we need information. Anything, no matter how small or unimportant could help. Will you try to do that Sam?"

"Then you don't need to know where I went because it has nothing to do with that," I told him crossing my arms.

"For the moment let's say it's not relevant to our inquiry," Kevin nodded.

"OK then, what do you want to know?"

"OK, well, let's start in the morning. What was the mood of everyone that day?"

"Sunday?"

"Yes."

It had been slack and happy. That's why I nipped off to visit Eduardo and see how he'd been doing selling his balloons. He's a sweet little guy and you can see why he'll be such a great secretary-general when he grows up. Ashley had gone to Washington to see Nathan – he'll be their president in forty years or so. That's where someone must have put the trace on her that set off the evacuation.

"It was good," I told them confidently.

"Good?"

"Yeah, it was a good day, people were feeling relaxed."

"Nobody a bit upset?"

"Nobody I talked to."

"What about Dr Prosperov?"

"Dr P was busy. He'd done some deal with someone in Russia."

Kevin was taking a note, so I added, "And I don't know anything about his deals. He tried to explain to us how they worked once but he lost me after five minutes. He was full of deals. It was very complicated."

"So as far as you were concerned it was just another Sunday before you left?"

"Yeah, pretty much," I shrugged.

"Did Dr Prosperov ever talk about having enemies, particularly back home in Russia?"

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That would make a good cover story. I pretended to think about it.
“Yeah, he had enemies. Not just in Russia either, otherwise he wouldn't have come to a backwater like New Zealand.”

“Any names?”

“He mentioned a few but *I* can't remember Russian names. They're way too long. Names like Corduroy-sky and Lemon-ov.”

“Any Western names?”

“Nah, I don't really remember any.”

Kevin was taking all this down in his notepad. The names I had given him were what he would expect me to mangle certain famous Russian oligarch's names into. I think he was starting to get the idea that the people Prosperov knew could not only be very, very rich, but could also be dangerous.

“Was there much security at Renwick House?”

I can't help smiling. We were secure against threats that were literally out of this world. We could have won a war against half the U.N Security Council, but that wasn't our mission. Our security was defensive and it had mostly worked. That was why *nobody* had been caught yet even if the House itself had been lost.

“Nah. It was pretty casual really – though the ground floor windows were pretty solid,” I say as if the idea of security was a bit odd.

“No cameras or security service?”

How cute.

“On Aotea? What could they do if we called them? It's an hour from Auckland by ferry when it runs. I mean twenty people in one big, old house on a small country island don't really need security.”

“OK Sam, could we talk about the people at Renwick House?”

“Hmm, yeah sure, what do you want to know about them?”

“We aren't sure exactly who was there. The electoral register, the Immigration Service and the Health Department have no records of anyone living at Renwick although Constable Seay also says there were about twenty people living there.”

Then he paused, and continued, eyes staring at me.

“And strangely enough someone stole the school's registers and erased all the records from their computers on Monday night.”

I shake my head as if tut-tutting kids today.

“Who would do a thing like that?” I ask.

“We're finding out. They left hair clues.”

The Interview

Bullshit. He knows those hairs could have been there for weeks. My eyes give me away. There's a flash of suspicious annoyance from Kevin. He knows it was me eh? But he has to play it straight. That's the rules.

"So would you mind telling us the names of everyone who lived at your former home?"

"Sure Kevin," I begin seriously. "Well, there was Deidre, Ken, Bernard, Zoe, Scotty, Patience, Soraya, Asal, Mitra, Tahira, Nguyen, Cam, Patricia, Ashley, Ali, Tarik, Elizabeth, Mike, Rewa, Gunter, Mariko, eKaterina, Irina and me," I tell him quickly.

Kevin isn't writing any of this down. He's pissed off.

"Their *full* names please, Sam," he says officially.

"Umm. Sorry Kevin but I'm not sure about them," I scratch my neck.

He looks at me, real irritated again, then picks up the look from Geraldine.

"As well as you can remember," he says putting pen to paper.

"Sure, well, umm eKaterina and Irina probably used Prosperov, though Dr P said it wasn't a real Russian name. Deirdre called herself 'Jones' but the name in her passport was Welsh with Cs, Ys and Ws everywhere and I couldn't say it. Ken is short for a longer Mongolian name but I'm not sure he even *had* a family name so I don't know. Zoe was born Apple-something but of course she married Scotty's father, and then Bernard so I don't know if she used her own name or a married name or if Scotty used his mother's, his father's or Bernard's last name. Patience probably had Bernard's name. Bernard's last name was African and long like Kilimanjaro or something. Soraya, Mitra, Asal, and Tahira are Iranian but Soraya was Mitra's mother, and I'm not sure if they took her name or kept Mitra's husband's. I think it was Khanum or something. Nguyen and Cam are Vietnamese. I think Nguyen's last name was Ba but Vietnamese is very hard to follow. That's what Cam called him anyway. Ali and Tarik's last name was Arabic, like Akbar or something. Mariko's name changed when she married Gunter and his last name was Grass – I think. But I could be getting confused with someone else. I'm sorry Kevin, but we never used our last names because we couldn't all say them properly. The teachers were worse. They couldn't even pronounce Maori right."

I sat back and smiled at everyone, trying to look like I was pleased with myself for helping so much and knowing it was crap.

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Kevin stared at me in silence. He wanted to throttle me.

"Is that really the best you can do Sam," he asked finally, knowing I'm messing with him, but also knowing Geraldine will jump down his throat if he said what he thought.

"Sorry Kev, but yeah. That's all I know," I grin, acting as dumb and happy as possible.

I felt a bit sorry for him, eh, but it's critical I make sure nobody gets named in the police files. *They* could hack the police easily and trace the relatives of anyone I identified. Any future we might have totally depended on nobody knowing who we were.

"Sam, if..." Kevin paused thinking of a new angle, and then started again.

"Well, if we *do* find some of these people and they have ...well...if they're deceased, we may need to ask *you* to identify the bodies."

Geraldine gasps, but Kevin keeps talking.

"It's a very difficult and serious task to ask anyone, but this is serious Sam, and without any records there's no other way it can be done."

He let that sink in for a moment. He was threatening me into co-operating. He went on quietly.

"When people die their families usually need the bodies. It's important for them. For a sense of closure. If we find bodies we will need to return them to their families and it's very important we don't get them mixed up. So any information that can identify anyone we might find would help everyone a lot Sam."

I stared at him, saying nothing for a long time. Everyone was wondering what I'd do. I replied just as serious-like.

"They aren't dead Kevin," I told him quietly. "They're just missing. If they were dead *I'd* know, but they aren't dead. *My* sister isn't dead." I let my voice shake a bit. I added that last bit to get Geraldine off the sidelines. She was sure I was about to fall apart.

"Detective, I'm sorry but I don't think this line of questioning is going to do anyone much good. Sam's in no condition to deal with this sort of speculation right now. He's traumatised. I don't think he can help you the way you want him to. He needs time and proper counselling. Now I must insist you move on to another line of questioning."

Kevin takes a breath and stares at the ceiling. I try not to smile. He's not used to dealing with kids and he wishes there were fewer rules and he was allowed to do more good old-fashioned shouting.

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I'm taking up a lot of his patience. But he knows he's lost that one, so he starts a new line.

"OK Sam. That list of names. I didn't recognise many of them. So it's fair to say that most of the people who lived at Renwick House weren't born in New Zealand were they?"

"Nah, me and my family were the only ones."

"Did you ever feel that the others were all connected in some way that you didn't know about. That they had some kind of secret you weren't part of?"

We were connected in a way most people never dream of. And some, like Tahira, did have secrets but not common ones.

"Nah. We were all very happy," I say, happily.

"How were you happy?" he asks, seriously.

"Like happy ... you know what that is, right?" I asked, like he might be some sad-arse who might not.

"No, I mean what sort of things told you everyone was happy?"

"Aww," I start, thinking, this is easy, "well, we had great parties, and we swam, and we had beach soccer, and barbecues and sang on the bus ..."

And suddenly I can't talk anymore. I can't speak. I can't breathe! I feel *so* embarrassed.

I turn away quickly because suddenly *my* eyes are streaming. Huge tears are rolling down my face which is screwed up with grief. As I reminded myself out loud how great it had been the reality I was left alone hit me like someone ripped my heart out!

It was the best time of my life and it's *over*. The others have all gone! I'm all alone, and *they're* out to extract my brain! I don't even know if or when the others'll be back! When or even if I'll ever be safe and happy again.

Geraldine puts an arm around my shoulders and tries to comfort me. She means well but she's an annoying old cow. She rubs my back – which eases the stress a bit – but says stupid things like "you're a brave boy" which is just so dumb.

She has no idea! She has just *no* idea what I'm dealing with. None of them have any idea how much I have to do now and how small and alone I feel. I'd way prefer Sue to hold me, but she's on the other side of the small desk, I can't see and I don't know what she's doing.

"Kevin, I think we should stop there," Geraldine says quietly over the desk to the detective, her arm over my shoulder.

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I hear him sigh a little and say, "Interview halted 11.07," in a quiet voice.

"Sam, what would you like us to do?" Kevin asks quietly.

He pisses me off so much with his big daddy thing. So I ask for what I want because I can't think of a cunning plan to get it.

"I'd like to talk to Sue for a while. Just me and her," I tell the wall. No-one says anything so I check around quickly.

Kevin seems a bit surprised by that. So does Sue, who doesn't look so keen. Geraldine takes back her arm and goes back to looking disapproving. Kevin sighs.

"Do you mind Sue?" he asks her.

"No sir, of course not. That's why I'm here. I am the Youth Aid Specialist after all," she reminds him.

"Should I stay too Sam?" Geraldine asks.

"No ... no ... it's OK. Thank you Geraldine," I say trying to be polite.

"OK, well Sue, if you could um ... see me when you're done here," says Kevin, "Geraldine I'll find a spot where you can wait for Sam."

And once again he showed Geraldine, who was thinking I was the saddest case she'd seen for a while, out of the interview room. It just made me angry with my own tears. Her pity I did not need.

The door closed with a click. I looked at Sue who was staring at me with both sympathy and some curiosity. Now, I found it hard to look *her* in the eye. I sat forward, elbows resting on my knees, head in my hands, hood still up. I was trying to stop my breath from shuddering.

"So what is it Sam?" she asked me. She seemed genuinely concerned now.

I looked up at her, my eyes still wet, sitting back again, confused.

"What's what?" I asked, breathing out hard and looking around.

"What did you want to tell me?" she says sitting forward.

I feel defensive. I hadn't expected to crack like that. I feel battered. It must be stress from being hunted and on the run. Knowing what will happen if *they* catch me. It hasn't been that easy to sleep.

"Nuthin...I didn't want to tell ya anything, I just...I just wanted to talk to you."

"What about?" she asks, suspicious I want to go back to the lesbian thing again.

I look around uncomfortably. I wanted to talk to her but now that I am, I feel kinda dumb. I dry my face on my sleeve.

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"Nuthin...anything...I dunno...the weather and shit," I say confused.

"Why?" she wants to know.

I decide to fess up.

"Coz I haven't got anyone else to talk to!" I blurt out.

"That, and the other two get up my nose. I feel like I can talk to you coz you know what it's like."

"What do I know?" she asks sitting back suspiciously and folding her arms.

"To feel ... you know ... sorta ... on the outside," I say looking around for inspiration.

"I am still a police officer Sam," she reminds me.

"Yeah, I know, but at least you're not like Kevin," I tell her leaning forward.

"You don't like him?"

Her tone is neutral but it sounds like a trap. But Hell, hung for a lion, as a lamb eh?

"Nah, he's way too straight for me eh?" I tell her playing with my fingers.

"You seem fairly straight yourself compared to most of the young people I talk to."

"Yeah but ... I'm not ..." I can't think of the words. I'm trying to say I'm used to people who don't fit into the usual boxes but it gets all jumbled in my mind.

"You don't want to be straight? You want to be more like your cuzzies?" she guesses referring to the Stephensens.

"Oh, F___ no!" I said, without thinking.

"Sam, keep it seemly," she warned with a soft growl – a bit like a mother dog.

I smile a sorta gormless apology and try some of Ashley's southern manners.

"Yes May'am."

Sue actually smiled at that.

"So why don't you want to be like your cuzzies?" she asks leaning forward.

I play with my fingers some more while I talk.

"Coz they're dumb," I sigh.

"They're like my dad was. They think they outsmart the system but they don't. They're more scared of letting their guard down with

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each other, hiding behind booze or drugs, or being assholes, than admit to each other that they're scared. I *know*. I can read them."

"You don't think they had anything to do with this?"

"What?" I ask, wondering what she's talking about.

"The fire and everything."

"Who?" I ask, not seeing a connection.

"Your cuzzies."

Finally I make the connection.

"My *cuzzies* burn down *Renwick*? No way! They're *way* too small time," I laugh.

"You think this is big time?" she asked trying to keep it casual.

Bigger than you could *ever* imagine, sister.

"It's gotta be eh?" I say quietly.

I think back to Kevin's Russian questions and decide to lead her down a garden path.

"Dr P ? He was dealing with some super heavy dudes back in Russia, eh? And they play rough over there, and I mean serious hard ball."

She nodded. She was actually paying attention.

"That guy Corduroyov I told Kevin about? I mean he's got billions. Dr P never had billions. That's just media crap! He's rich enough, but billions is *serious* big time. And Dr P says some oligarchs have soldiers in their pay because the government doesn't pay them. He told me one guy had 250 paratroopers in his personal bodyguard! Just imagine what that could mean!"

"You think a Russian oligarch is involved with this Sam?" she asked levelly. I got a hint that she thought I'd seen too many movies. But I didn't care how dumb it sounded. It was a credible cover story.

"Well, they did visit Dr P sometimes and I can't see who else would care about him enough to do anything about it. I mean making twenty people disappear if they don't *want* to go would be pretty hard. The teachers at our school couldn't get us to go anywhere we didn't want to go, and my Grandpop, he was in the SAS in Vietnam and I know how hard it is to sneak up on him."

"So what do you think oligarchs would want with Prosperov?"

"I dunno. Could be anything. He obviously wasn't expecting trouble. Maybe his business opposition figured it was easier to take *him* out here, than to get the others back in Russia. I dunno, I'm making this up, but it makes sense."

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"Hmm ...well it's a possibility, Sam. But our job is to collect evidence. So far we haven't found much," Sue admitted.

"Do you know how the fire started?" I asked, knowing the answer but wondering how far they'd got.

"Not yet, but the fire service investigators are pretty sure the gas supply by the kitchen exploded. We found steel bottles all torn open. They're very good those guys. They can often tell us where, when and how a fire started, how it spread and what was burned in it."

She was checking me for guilt, but there wasn't anything I needed to worry about.

"Did you check the beach?"

"What for?"

"Signs of boats."

"Yes, of course, there was nothing. No sign of boats or footprints anyway."

"Before the tide came in?" I check, knowing that was unlikely.

"Well no, it came in just as they were putting out the fire, but we did take dogs on Monday and there wasn't any sign of 20 people anywhere."

"None?" I ask sounding surprised.

"Not from the beach. It's possible they went on boats from the rocks, but it seems unlikely."

"What about the helicopter," I suggest.

Sue thinks I'm messing with her, but she wants to get my confidence.

"What helicopter?" she asks

"Dr P's helicopter. A Squirrel I think it was. Ken flew it."

"We didn't find any helicopter," she admits, "Do you remember the letters on its tail?"

"ZK something. I never paid much attention. It's not like we had to work out which helicopter was ours in the parking lot."

Sue actually smiled at that, but wrote it down.

"I'll check if anyone saw the helicopter going anywhere. Civil Aviation will have the registration and may have flight plans. Of course a Squirrel isn't that big. It couldn't carry more than five at a time so I imagine you would have noticed it," she said, and then added pointedly, "no matter where you were."

"No, I didn't see any," I admitted, which was true enough.

There was a bit of a pause while I thought about that.

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“Sam?” She said gently.

“Yeah?”

“I think you have to consider the possibility that they haven't left. That they *are* still there.”

She said it gently and quietly. She meant they might be dead in the fire. She was expecting more tears, I suppose. But that was one thing I knew she was wrong about.

“No, they *are* alive. I'd know if they weren't, Sue. Me, especially. Dead people are always finding *me*. I'm like a magnet to them. So they've gotta be somewhere.”

Sue wanted to say something but she thought better of it.

“So Sam, where do you come from anyway?” she said changing the subject, “and how did you end up on Aotea anyway?”

“Aw, that's a real long story, Sue.”

“Well, you can tell me some of it. I'm booked with you 'til lunchtime anyway.”

So I did. And this is what I told her.



Chapter Two: Origins

My families come from the Ho-ki-anga, the big bay north of Auckland that's always warm and which always seems to sound of cicadas. My tribes go back to the ancient canoes of Nga-toki-mata-whao-rua and Mata-atua who came here a thousand years ago.

I don't know if you know it, but the Ho-ki-anga is a strange kind of place because it's sorta rich and real poor at the same time. Everyone knows everyone else, so it's rich in history; it's hot, so it's rich in climate and it's always rich in hope, but in terms of actual money? It hasn't got much. The roads are bad and some of the people are too. People like my dad's family. People who live for drugs, hard-out drinking and crime. It seems strange that a place that the sun makes so bright can have so many dark shadows as well.

I wasn't so happy as a little kid. Luckily I don't remember too much about it. My mum, Joy Kahu, was nineteen when she had me. My dad's 'court name' was Alan Xavier Stephens but everyone just called him "Ax". He was twenty-four when I was born. I mostly remember a lot shouting and hitting, either of my mum or me. I remember lots of huge grown-ups being very loud and scary. I remember loud music, the smell of beer, weed and stale cigarettes – they still make me freeze inside. I hate those smells.

I was four when my dad killed my mum. Rewa was two. I remember it like a nightmare in black and white. My dad, huge and smelling of beer, dragging her down the corridor by the hair past our room, waking me up. Then throwing her on the bed and hitting her again and again. She screamed and screamed for him to stop. Her bloody face. I ran in and tried to stop him and he threw me against the wall. She jumped up to defend me and he smashed her down. And then he kicked her head again and again shouting at her, over and over, where she was down behind the bed and I couldn't

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see her. I was still stunned by the wall. And when she was still, he stormed out and slammed the door and it was quiet.

I crawled over to look at her bloody face and her eyes were looking into mine but she wasn't there any more. How many nights have I woken screaming with those eyes in my mind?

I slept with my sister in her cot that night with the body of my mother still in the bedroom. In the morning we watched TV and ate whatever we could find in the fridge. Me and Rewa? We've been never been apart for long ever since.

It was Grandpop that found us. I'll never forget his face. He's dark for a Maori, but then so pale. His face hard with horror and fury. He told me later he'd been worried about mum for weeks and when nobody had answered his phone calls he'd come over to find her dead, and me with her blood on me.

I remember lots of legs after that.

Police legs. Welfare legs. Doctor legs. Grandpop's legs. But the face I remember was Aunty Liz. Elizabeth is Grandpop's oldest daughter. Elizabeth wasn't married, nor did she seem to want to be. But she took me and Rewa in with that sad and serious look she has. And as far as we were concerned she became our mum even though we always called her Aunty and our Grandpop became our dad though we never called him that.

Ax was soon caught and sent to prison. He'd been there already. He said he was drunk and couldn't remember any of it, but admitted he was guilty of manslaughter. The judge sentenced him to fourteen years. But after time off for "good" behaviour he was only locked up for eight. It meant as we grew up our dad was more of a distant threat. An echo of that evil night that might come back one day and try to get us.

Grandpop already shared the old house over the road from the sea with Aunty Liz. He and Nana had retired there after Grandpop left the Army. Then Nana had got very sick for a long time, with cancers popping up, then being beaten down, and then popping up again. Aunty Liz had spent two years looking after Nana before she died. Then she took on looking after us. Nana had died the same year my mum was murdered. Aunty Liz always worried that bad luck came in threes.

I was very scared for a while that Welfare would take us away from Aunty Liz and Grandpop but the Judge was a kind old white man

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and could see at once that the Kahu family had a good record. Liz was a community nurse for the district and Grandpop's war medals all helped. And so my mum simply became a ghost who haunted us. Hanging around, with all the others who could not or would not go to wherever it is they are meant to go.

For as long as I can remember I have been able to feel dead people. It's not like in that movie, you know the one where the kid whispers "I can see dead people" cos you don't really see them. You sort of remember them there, even though you never saw them before. It's kinda hard to explain to anyone who can't sense them. A bit like explaining "blue" to someone who has never been able to see, or the wash of the sea to someone who is deaf. You think you can see or hear presences – sometimes very clearly – but if you took a picture there would be nothing there. I know, I tried when I was older and the best I ever got was blurs.

I s'pose in a way mum never left me, although for a long time I wouldn't talk to her. I was angry with her because she had left us. I was angry with her for not being there for us, the way other kids' mums were.

Aunty Liz never wanted us to call *her* "mum". She was very respectful of mum's memory and we kept a special picture of mum in the passage. She missed her sister.

Aunty Liz wasn't as pretty as our mum had been, nor was she smiley like her. I think it had a lot to do with her job. She was always visiting the sick, or the injured. There were some who got better but there were a lot who never did. It always seemed really depressing seeing all these sick, old people; guys who'd been maimed in fights or driving, or at work; and women who were always being beaten. She was always warm and calm, Aunty Liz. She rarely got angry with us and if she did, we were terrified.

But she looked after us, Aunty Liz did. She went part-time when she and Grandpop took us in. The Health Board wanted her to stay full-time but they couldn't find anyone else to do her job so they had to put up with it. It was good because they gave her a car and a big, old cellphone that didn't work because there wasn't coverage anyway but now she could fit her rounds in around looking after us.

Of course it wasn't too long after we came to live with them that I started school. Both Rewa and me were scared sick about being separated. We cried and screamed so they let Rewa play around with us in the morning for the first few months. After that Aunt Liz

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took Rewa everywhere with her and she became her “assistant nurse” which the old people found very cute.

But at the end of the school day the only person I wanted to see was my sister. To make sure she was OK. We would play together, usually with Joey and his sister Annie, from next door while Aunt Liz went back to work. Sometimes the Barrys would keep an eye on us and sometimes, if he was back from a fishing trip, Grandpop would. Aunt Liz would normally get home around six.

Aunty Liz got me off to school, made my lunches, looked after us when we were sick. She told us off when we were naughty and played with us sometimes when she could. We never had any money, so we had to make-do with whatever was passed down or around. “Improvise” was Grandpop's word. He said that was what they trained him to do in the Army and he could improvise a lot. He fixed mechanical things, electrical things, or furniture. It wasn't pretty but he made stuff work; working quickly and quietly with bits of wire, tape, plastic or old cans. I was fascinated by the way he did things and often tried to copy him with cardboard and Sellotape. I'd show him my creations and he'd look them over carefully, sometimes making suggestions on how to make them look better or hold together. He never mocked me the way I saw so many other fathers mock their kids.

Nobody mocked *him* either. Grandpop is a big man. A very, big man, and very strong and quick too. The men who thought they were tough never showed off when Grandpop was around. But he's so quiet just from habit people often forget he's there. There were a number of men around the village who were actually smaller than him but seemed bigger because they talked louder and had more parties. The Barry brothers Ed and Jack and their families were very large, very loud and everybody knew what they were doing because they talked so much about it. Same too with the Heki family which was really four families each with four or five kids. Old George Heki was the grandfather and the senior Elder or Koh-ma-tua on the ma-rae or Maori meeting house. He was also one of the few World War Two vets left and was one of the senior members of the Returned Services Association.

My Grandpop wasn't a big talker. He had a boat and he fished and dove for Pau-a, the big black abalone, that are everywhere. He'd often be away over night or for a few nights. Once he was away for a whole week. Sometimes in summer he chartered his boat out to

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tourists, which was better money than fishing. He drank a bit but he never got drunk, and he never completely relaxed either.

When I was young it seemed to me that he never slept. If I woke he'd be there. If Rewa cried, he'd be there. He'd doze in his rocking chair on the verandah but he'd never be asleep. If you tried to do something naughty, like tie his shoelaces, he'd tell you off from under his hat as if he'd been pretending to sleep the whole time.

My main playmates were Joey Barry, Tipene Baker, and my cousin Clive Stephens. Joey lived next door in the loud and busy Barry family home of Ed and Jacki. He liked coming to our place because it was quiet and I liked going to his place because it was noisy and there was always something happening. Tipene lived a bit further down the street. He was big on going into the bush. He loved eeling, hunting and playing with his labrador, Jess. His dad Manu took him hunting and I always wanted to go but Grandpop was against it. He said kids and firearms don't mix. He hated us playing war and would tell us off angrily if he heard us making shooting sounds.

Clive was a playmate, though to be honest I didn't like him much. He's a year older than me. His mum was my dad's sister and although she'd largely disowned my dad, family ties rarely break completely with us Maori. Clive loved playing tricks on us. He was pushy and in your face but he was also inventive so we often tagged along because no-one else was going anywhere. He was one of six children with: a sister, Moana who lived at home with her baby; two older brothers, Paul and Mark who were regularly accused of stealing things; a younger sister Amy who was scarily bossy and made Rewa's life hell whenever they met; and a baby brother, Matthew, who was the cutest little guy and seemed to be in for a life of disappointment.

Clive liked to wear shades at school and he was always in trouble with the teachers and chatting up the girls. He wore a gray leather jacket and if anyone tried to steal it he'd fight them. He always fought dirty. If he lost, his brothers, Paul and Mark, were big enough threats most kids would give it back claiming they were "just kiddin". I never had anything worth stealing, though everyone got smashed by a bigger kid some time. It didn't pay to stand out and become a target.

Clive liked to make jokes of me and Joey, and then say "jus kiddin cuz" and "turn that frown upside down Sam the man". Some people thought he was clever. I wasn't one of them.

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I hated schoolwork. I was no good at reading, and numbers just confused me. I kept a low profile, mumbling along with the others and trying not to get noticed. It wasn't that hard. My teachers didn't notice anyway. I was just another kid in a class of thirty or so. I played the games – although I was never that great at sports. I sang and did Kapa Haka – Maori cultural stuff like dances and songs – along with everyone else. But I didn't stand out – except at swimming.

For some reason I've always been a natural in the water. I'm small and skinny but I can hold my breath for half a minute quite easily – even in cold water. I've always been able to dive and though I've never been taught properly I'm easily the fastest in my class over any distance in the pool.

But my biggest problem was constantly being haunted. For some reason the spirits just wouldn't leave me alone. I didn't mind Nana or mum, they were just part of the house and I was used to them being around, like old furniture.

Some visitors were very clear, almost like real people who came to see me, but most were “fuzzy”. A lot of them were scared or ashamed.

There were the teens who had done something stupid and couldn't believe they were dead. Some wanted me to take a last message. Of course some were scary. Sometimes there were little kids or women who'd been killed by bastards like my dad, broken and covered in blood. I hated that. The worst was the mum who died giving birth.

But the really scary ones were the very, very old Maori spirits. Some might say they were A-tu-a – our old gods. They were terrifying. They were huge, proud and strong, but utterly ruthless like Tuma-tau-enga, god of war. Some, like Whiro, god of evil, was so dark and so deep it felt like he scraped your soul just when he noticed you. Tane was bright like sun through the leaves. Mahuika goddess of fire, was the smell of smoke, and I could feel the heat from her. Then there was the breath-stealing darkness of Hine-nui-te-po; the great lady of the night or death. I would wake up at night when a cloud was over the moon gasping for breath and know she was visiting because someone had died and I would meet a new spirit soon. I think the other A-t-u-a thought I was a complete wuss because I cried and hid.

Some kids at school thought I was scary because I talked to people who weren't there, or carried messages for them to grown-ups.

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Some liked to smack me over for it too. They stopped when I learned to pretend to be able to put the mak-a-tu or curse on them.

The old women said I had the gift that my mother's grandmother Tui Owen had had. She could see spirits and foretell the future. Sometimes when Grandpop was away I had sleep-overs on the Ma-rae with the old people. They would tell me stories about my old ancestor Papa-huri-hia who was an old To-hunga or wizard back when the whites first arrived in Ho-ki-anga. His father Te Wha-re-te was another with powers. He could travel long distances instantly and Papa-huri-hia could make his allies invisible. That sounded pretty cool to me but I never seemed to get any magic powers. I just got nights full of scary dreams about old gods. I never slept well and hated them but the old people were very pleased when I told them about the dreams in the morning.

Grandpop was not so pleased. He called it, "superstitious old crap". It didn't help that he and old George Heki didn't get on. The World War Two vets looked down on the Vietnam vets and Grandpop took it personally. He kept us away from a lot of Maori stuff on the ma-rae because he hated them so much. I was half-pleased. The Maori spooky stuff scared me, but even I had to admit there were *some* advantages.

The big one was over Ax's sister, Auntie Rebecca. She was terrified of the idea of my mum's ghost. That amused both me and mum's ghost. Auntie Liz is pretty religious because her mother, Nana was a Catholic. She had no problem with the idea of spirits but she said I mustn't encourage them, so that they would go on their way. I knew mum wouldn't go. Grandpop just said he didn't believe in ghosts and was angry with me if I talked to any or told him about it. He was especially angry about me talking to Nana. He hated it when she told me to remind him of things. At first I was sad that Grandpop wouldn't believe and tried to prove it by taking pictures until Auntie Liz explained to me that Grandpop had too many of his own ghosts from the war and he couldn't help me with mine as well. It had never occurred to me that Grandpop had problems, and while I now knew *why* he wouldn't listen, it didn't make me feel any better.

My friend Joey was the only one at school who showed any real interest in the spirit world. Joey's world was always busy and crowded and the idea that I had a world of "invisibles" as we called them didn't seem to bother him at all. I think he liked being

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spooked and it made him excited if I said there was an “invisible” around. He had far more interest in them than I did and pestered me about them whenever we were alone. It took a while to make him understand I didn't *want* him to talk about it to anyone else. I didn't like the way everyone would fall quiet when Joey mentioned that I could talk to my mum or other dead people. I didn't want to be pitied.

I don't think I deserved pity either. My life between the ages of five and ten was not too bad really. Not compared to a lot of places. We weren't rich in terms of money but we could play anywhere we liked outside. There was miles of bush to explore and do stuff in. There were trees to climb, eels to hunt, the sea was warm enough to dive in. It was mostly warm, the air was clean, the water was safe and we didn't go hungry. How many kids in the world don't have that? Millions. I've seen them. So, we didn't have computers or game consoles? But neither did anyone else and with all that real world to enjoy it never occurred to us to miss them.

But when I was eleven things something began to change. At first I only noticed it when some families suddenly had a lot more money to spend. Clive suddenly got a brand-new bike and his brothers got X-boxes each. They got a new car and new TVs. Clive started acting up, wearing more expensive sunnies and a red bandana like he had a chest full of treasure. At school he bought other kids ice-creams all the time. Then Tipene got in on the act, getting a brand new BB-rifle with a scope which he used to waste every bird he could get near.

There were more parties, and they went on for longer – sometimes all night. Clive sometimes fell asleep in class. Suddenly there were strangers wearing sunnies in new SUVs in the area. Not just during the day but at night as well. And trucks that would drive up our dead-end road into the neighbouring bay in the middle of the night.

And now Grandpop and Aunty Liz seemed less relaxed. Grandpop used to drink his coffee on the veranda just enjoying the sounds of the sea and bird-life. Now he was actually looking around, sometimes with binoculars, watching the boats and even the other houses. We started ignoring invitations from Aunty Rebecca. Clive would tease me about it at school but it didn't make any difference, the Kahu's were shunning the Stephen's. Grandpop wasn't that keen on the Bakers either. Fortunately Ed Barry next door

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remained in firm favour and Joey and me lived in one another's homes.

I started to pick up hints of what was going on at school. It started with the puaa. Apparently, for some reason, the Chinese think it has some sort of special powers and they buy the stuff for good prices. But in return they send the ingredients to make this drug called Ice or Meth, which we call "P" for Pure, and selling that makes huge money. So I started to realise that all of these toys everyone was getting came from the drugs and the puaa trade.

At first I had no idea what this was all about. But it seemed to me that as we never had any money, and as these other people were suddenly makin' heaps, that maybe we should too! So one night at dinner I suggested it to Aunty Liz and Grandpop. Boy, did they go off at me! They called the Stephens's all sorts of names they usually threatened to scrub my mouth out for using. They said the puaa poachers were taking all the babies so that all the puaa would die out, and they said the drug was driving people crazy. Making them dangerous and wild. Aunty Liz said that making "P" poisoned a persons house and that taking it poisoned a person's brain. Grandpop said that when he was a soldier they had been given something like it to cope with the long dangerous night patrols. He said he'd rather face the Vietcong in the jungle than be around some of his old friends who couldn't stop taking those drugs.

When everyone had calmed down and Aunty Liz was putting us to bed she explained that she and Grandpop had seen the damage these drugs could do. But she said a lot of people couldn't learn from others and had to find out the hard way every time. She said lots of people hope there is a short-cut in life but there never is. The short-cut becomes the long-cut, and while some people like to show off, eventually they come unstuck.

And she asked me if having all of those things was really about me having them, or about proving that I was as good as Clive. I thought about that for a while, because it was true that Clive certainly got up my nose, but at the same time, even if Clive left town, I could see myself riding a new bike and that seemed a pretty good thing as well. So I was mostly convinced but not entirely by Aunty Liz and Grandpop.

I'd sort of hoped that this lesson in life would be over in half an hour, like a TV show, but that didn't happen. Instead it got worse. Clive got pushier, more and more people got involved and the whole

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community got crazier. Nobody seemed to want to listen to Auntie Liz or Grandpop. They said we were the party-poopers, and to prove it they had all-night parties all through the week.

The gang had always been around in our village. Young men joined it when they went down south to Auckland. Now the gang was in our face. Big guys in big cars who went around monsterring people, putting the pressure on. People started to get angrier too. Angrier and more impatient. And while there had always been punch-ups now they were turning into severe beatings which Auntie Liz had to help with. It seemed the community I grew up in was unravelling like an old jersey.

Grandpop's worst fears about the paua started to come true too. The boats were finding fewer and fewer of the shellfish but the pressure from the gangs, and the need for the drugs, drove the fishers to work harder and harder and cut more and more corners. The Fisheries Protection officers came around to look like they were doing something but everyone knew they had been paid to look the other way, so they did.

But as the pressure increased so did the bad feeling. This was the only time I met what Grandpop referred to as "my friend".

I woke up late one night to go to the toilet and noticed a light on in the sitting room. Curiously I nosed through the door and saw my Grandpop drinking beer at the coffee table and cleaning a gun. It wasn't a hunting rifle either. I'd seen plenty of those. No, this was a soldier's gun with a long curved magazine like the ones I'd seen them shooting in wars on the news. I asked him about it but Grandpop quietly told me to go back to bed and mind my own beeswax. I never saw it again.

I don't know if he meant me to see it or not but I couldn't wait to tell Joey and by the end of the day the whole school knew – which meant that by that night everyone knew. I only realised later how crafty my Grandpop was. When Ed from next door asked him in his usual big, friendly way if he had a souvenir from the war hidden somewhere he told them I must have dreamt it. Nobody believed I'd dreamt anything. But they had no proof, so they were left with this feeling that Grandpop had a Vietcong assault rifle hidden somewhere without having seen it themselves. It certainly stopped the drive-bys of the house, or the big men wearing sunnies from sitting on Grandpop's boat. They decided that old Kahu was too

Origins

small and too dangerous to be bothered with – so they went for easier targets.

It was Ho-ne Pou-kawa who they made the example of. Hone was pretty dumb anyway and he tried to cheat the gang. They beat him so bad he was never the same. Auntie Liz had to visit him every day after they finally let him out of hospital. She said, he could barely cope on his own and wept a few tears for him – which was pretty unusual for Auntie Liz who didn't usually get upset about her patients. Grandpop told me a man's head can't take much kicking without his brain being damaged. And there is no doubt Hone's head had been kicked a lot. It was a different shape and his face had been completely mangled by gang boots. The police investigated but, of course, nobody had seen anything. Anyone who knew anything was either tied up with the gang themselves, or too scared to talk, and the rest either didn't have anything useful to say or didn't want to mark themselves out by being the only ones narking to the cops. So Hone Poukawa's beating just hung over the community, weighing down on everyone's minds like this big unspoken cloud.

You'd have thought that at least Clive would have been enjoying those days, riding around on his fancy bike, in his new threads and talking on his cell-phone. But even Clive seemed to have something wrong with him. He seemed all nervous and twitchy. He'd get real angry – I mean crazy angry – over nothing. And he kept scratching himself. He looked thin and his face had sunken. We never visited the Stephens's anymore and at school I kept away from him because he wasn't nice to be around. He smelt of glue.

But then something else happened that was even worse. My dad remembered me.

I was eleven when Ax wrote his first letter to me. There was one for Rewa as well but I never let her see it. I didn't want to read it either but Grandpop took me aside and told me you should always read the enemy's communications for clues about his intentions. What they say, and more importantly what don't say, give you useful clues about what they are thinking. So we read the letter together, stopping at the end of each sentence to talk about what Ax had written, and what he'd left out.

Mostly, the letter was asking for forgiveness. Grandpop said Ax had probably been told what to write, and he was doing it so he could get out of jail sooner. We read the letter to Rewa, which was

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full of lies and self-pity and made me angry, but Grandpop said this was probably what Ax really believed.

Grandpop said something which I've always remembered. He said *everyone*, even the worst of men, is a hero in their own minds. He said the lies Ax wanted to tell Rewa were probably the lies he told himself and to understand Ax, we had to study his lies. I really didn't want to. I said as far as I was concerned I had no father other than Grandpop and what Ax thought didn't matter to me. Grandpop didn't press it, but he put the letters into a shoe-box and wrote "Enemy Intell" on it, which made me laugh.

But the letters didn't stop coming just because I didn't reply. For some reason Ax seemed to *like* writing letters to me, and we started getting them every month. Grandpop thought that must be when Ax was visited by the prison counsellor. The letters stopped asking for forgiveness and turned into a combination of diary and story of his life when he was my age. He talked about how he had become a Christian and wanted to be a better person. He always signed off "love, Dad", which always made me angry.

The letters had come for about a year, without us responding once, when a new idea seemed to have taken over. Now Ax had decided he wanted to have his children around him. He kept talking about fathers and sons in the Bible uniting before the Lord. At first I thought it was just more raving from a nut-job but he kept going on about it. It started to make us nervous.

We got even more nervous as we began to realise that praying and writing letters weren't the only things Ax had been up to in prison. He'd been making friends. But his friends were not men of God. They were the high-up, city leaders of the gang that had taken over our village and Ax had apparently become quite senior among them. We began to realise he had a very good idea of what was going on in our neighbourhood and that his plans for his release were not those of a humble Christian seeking forgiveness but a very full-of-himself man who fully expected to inherit the whole place. What we didn't realise was the length's he'd go to, to get what he wanted.



Chapter Three: Backstab

Sue listened to my story closely without interrupting. I stopped when the time reached 12:17, mostly because it was a good place to stop, but partly because I was hungry.

"By the way, Sue, is there any chance of getting some lunch here?" I asked.

"Pardon? Oh lunch! Yeah, sure Sam, I'll get you something." She got up. Then stopped.

"So, if you're psychic, then you would know if your family was dead wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I answer simply.

"And they're not?"

"No."

"But you don't know where they are."

"Not exactly, no."

"But you have some idea."

"Yep."

"Are they in hiding?"

"Yeah ... you could say that."

"So why didn't you go to them? Why come to us?"

"Because I *can't* get there."

Sue stared at me for a moment and then it clicked.

"Oh, come on ... you don't believe..." she began.

"What?"

"That flying saucers came and took them all away?"

"Hell no!" I was shocked by such a scary idea.

Sue looked relieved.

"They were *escaping* the flying saucers to get out of their reach," I explained.

She looked at me like I'd grown an extra head. She was about to say something and then stopped herself.

"Let's get some lunch," she mumbled.

“Yeah!” I agreed, enthusiastically.

We left the interview room and walked along the corridors. There were lots of cops wandering about talking, joking and carrying stuff. It was like the hospital Auntie Liz used to work in.

We got to the canteen, which was pretty full, and a bit like the one in the hospital, and stood in a queue. I noticed nobody talked much to Sue although there were quite a few cops at the tables. Sue got herself a sandwich, some yoghurt, and a banana and got me two pies. Call me a guts but I love pies and I was damn hungry. We then went to Kevin's office (which had “Detective Sergeant Cooper” on the door) looking for Geraldine, but Kevin was on the phone talking to someone, and he waved us back out of his office, so we went to Sue's office to eat.

“So what are you going to do after you've ditched me?” I ask her to make conversation.

“I'm not going to *ditch* you,” she objected.

“Well, I mean after Geraldine's taken me back to the shelter or whatever you call it.”

“It's only temporary.”

“I know, I know, but what will *you* do?”

“I have a few more interviews, and a family group conference.”

“What did they do?”

“Who?”

“The bros?”

“I'm not meant to talk about it.”

“Oh,” I paused for a moment. Reading Sue was surprisingly easy. Some people, like Dr P, are real hard. Some are even dangerous.

“Green car. Real shiny. White doofus. Is one of them a racer?” I asked.

She smiled, then peeled her banana.

“Can't tell you Sam,” she says taking a bite. But she's looking at me keenly.

We sat for a while eating our food.

“So Sam, this psychic thing you do, how does it work?”

“I dunno,” I shrugged, “It's multi-dimensional. Dr P's maths is full of weird symbols. I don't pretend to understand it.”

“No, I mean how does it work for you?”

“Oh, you mean how do I read?”

“Yeah, if that's what you call it.”

"Oh well, it's a bit random. You get feelings, impressions, ideas."

"How do you know you aren't imagining them?"

"You just do. Everyone is different and has different strengths. My speciality is dead people. I'm good with them. By the way Detective Sergeant McLaren says 'hi'."

Sue froze.

"What?" she said faintly.

"Woody," I replied, "he says 'hi' and he's right proud of you too."

I can almost see her skin crawl. Mine did it lots. I'm used to it.

"How did *you* know?"

"Well, it's not hard, he's right over there," I said, pointing to him in the corner near the door.

She turned slowly. I didn't think she could see him. She turned back.

"He's right chuffed seeing you using his old office. Thinks you're doing a grand job," I tell her using McLaren's accent.

Sue got up slowly. I was freaking her out. McLaren was a very cheery sort though. It even took Joey a while to get used to his invisibles and it was only Sue's first time.

"I'd better see if DS Cooper is free," she said, and went off shivering.

Which was exactly what I was waiting for.

I jumped on to her PC and shook the mouse. Sue's username "SE dot Williams" and password, "s+r4eva", I read an hour ago. McLaren was annoyed but I had things to do. I opened the port on my watch and connected the USB to the sticky gel inside. It began to glow green indicating a link. My watch injected a tiny program into the bios. Then I ripped off my trainers and took the Omnicard out from my sock. It's a credit-card-sized, plastic card about 2mm thick, but completely white. I pressed my thumb onto the corner and it changed through various credit cards until my code came up. The clunky old-style message program window from my watch came up on the screen. I needed to send two messages. The first was to a Para.no.ID dead-letter drop with my eight-character personal code, and the emergency "need assistance" code. That would go to Dr Morozov's friends in the ultra-secret Para.no.ID hacker community. I didn't know them, but they were meant to be friendly. Then I exited the message program. I pressed a button on the watch and a small green hologram of Qi – the watch's user interface appeared.

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“Qi send a webmail to Sir Michael. Tell him the New Zealand police are looking after me but I still don't have a contact address. Dr Prosperov sends his apologies and asks him to take care of me.”

Qi paused, then said, “done.”

I pushed the button and he vanished. I unpeeled my watch and put it on. Then I stuck the card back on my foot, and pulled on my sock. I heard Sue and Kevin coming, got the screensaver to demo, then hopped around to my seat and pulled on my trainer. I was doing up my laces when Kevin and Sue came back. From training I didn't hurry but just tied the laces up slowly as if I'd just noticed they'd come undone.

“Hi Key, where's my ride got to?” I asked cheerfully.

“Geraldine had to go. I'll take you myself,” he said.

“Cool,” I agreed, noticing out of the corner of my eye the screensaver had popped off. It prompted me to keep their attention.

“So what happens now?”

“You go back to the Moore's until the Department finds a longer term arrangement. We continue our investigation, and if ... or when ... we find your family we notify you,” he said.

“So you won't have any more questions for me?”

“Well, Geraldine thinks you should see a counsellor so she will organise one for you. We may have more questions later on but for the moment we will follow up the physical clues.”

“But I'm not under arrest or anything?” I checked.

“No, of course not.”

“So they can't lock me up?”

“No, though you are temporarily under the guardianship of the department until a court gets to look at you, so until they find someone else to look after you, you are in their care.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Not legally Sam. Legally, you're still a minor. Look, let's talk about this in the car.”

“OK. Will I see you again Sue?” I asked her.

“Probably Sam, though I can't say when at this stage.”

“OK, well see ya later then,” I said and extended my hand.

She seemed surprised and shook it awkwardly. She also seemed relieved as I left her office with Kevin.

We followed the maze of narrow corridors to the lift. Something in Kevin's body language was closed up. He was thinking about what the Fire Service people had just told him about traces of Powergel,

the explosives on the gas cylinders, and seemed to be unwilling to chat. So we rode the lift down to the basement garage in silence. I tagged along after him to his car – a gray, late model Ford Mondeo. It still had that new car smell in the black vinyl. Kevin reversed it out of its park, nosed up the ramp. The garage door opened automatically and the bright light of an Auckland day blazed in through the windshield.

For some reason after the gloom of the station it made me feel quite hopeful again. What was really cheering me up, of course, was the messages. We had drilled for this sort of situation and it was good to get the ball rolling. The news about me and Renwick had gone global and, although I knew we had been betrayed, I had to start reaching out for help somewhere. It wasn't like receiving those messages would surprise anyone. It also meant more practical help would soon be on its way. In the meantime I had to sit tight. The world is a big place and New Zealand is out on its own when it comes to time zones. However if all went well I would soon have a lot of help.

The silence between me and Kevin started to drag. Traffic in central Auckland was as slow as ever. I sized him up while we crawled along. Now he was thinking about police politics. Ambition, status. Those were obviously his goals. For a moment I wondered what it must be like to be tied down to one place, one job, one future like that, but I couldn't face thinking about it. My mind drifted back to Sue, in her office.

"So who was Detective Sergeant McLaren anyway, Kevin?" I asked finally.

"Hmm?"

"Detective Sergeant McLaren, who was he?"

"He was a detective."

"Yes, I know, but how did he die?"

"He was fatally shot on a drugs bust three years ago. He was a big loss."

"Oh ... he seemed like a nice guy. British?"

"Yes, 20 years there, seven here."

"Was he close to Detective Constable Williams?"

"He was her supervisor."

We pulled out onto the motorway for a brief run down to the next exit. Kevin accelerated away seeming to want to leave the

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conversation behind. I said nothing, I had nothing to say. It was Kevin who started the conversation again.

"Did Prosperov have any religious convictions that he spoke of?"

I tried to think.

"Nah, I mean he grew up in the Soviet Union. All that was banned. His dad was a communist but his mother and grandfather were Jewish. I think he was still a bit of both but he talks about religion more as a bunch of theories."

"What about the flying saucers?"

"He investigated them for the Soviet airforce. I think you can find his report on the web."

"But he believed in them?"

"Sure. He still does."

"Do you believe in them?" Kevin asked.

"Sure," I said at once.

"Have you ever seen one?" he asked.

"Yep. A few."

"Where?" he challenged me.

Greenland? Papua New Guinea? Yemen? The moon? I couldn't answer that one truthfully.

"Around. Few around Aotea," I didn't add "lately" and "looking for me."

"What did they look like?"

"Lights in the sky. They just hang and then ... fiit ... they fly off so fast you can hardly follow it."

"And you don't think they were a helicopter or a plane?"

"Nah. They move too fast with no noise at all."

"I've seen one," he volunteered.

That was a surprise.

"Nah?" I josh him.

"Yeah. It was small though. Bright, very fast, low over the Gulf when I was on a mate's boat."

How embarrassing! It was probably us! I pretend to be interested.

"Did it spook you out?"

"No. That was the funny thing. It just zoomed by and I just thought it was a plane and then I realised it was far too low, far too fast and far too small. And of course, no noise. I was more surprised than anything else."

"So does that mean you don't think Dr Prosperov was a nutter?"

"It doesn't mean he *was* a nutter. It doesn't mean he *wasn't* a nutter."

"But you don't think seeing flying saucers makes you a nutter?"

"No Sam, and I've seen some spooky stuff like you did with Detective Sergeant McLaren before too. Sometimes *we* use psychics. But while there is spooky stuff in the world it's not reliable. You couldn't use it as evidence or policing would turn into witch-hunts. It's just stuff that happens. The important things are the things you can rely on."

"Like what?"

"Logic. Reason and technology built using it. Like cars for instance. Cars, phones, maybe even computers sometimes. They make our world work. Spooky stuff is just spooky stuff. It happens but it doesn't go anywhere. Get hooked up on it and you end up waiting for things that never happen and making excuses when they don't."

"Yeah, I used to think that too."

I've noticed that adults don't like it when you hint you know better than they do. They obviously think: "hey I'm older than you, kid, I've seen some stuff, listen and learn". And Grandpop always taught me to do that. He used to say, "shut up and listen. Not just hear, really listen. Listen hard to everything. Every sound, every voice has many messages."

"Those that listen, survive," he said. I'd got readings of him in Vietnam where listening saved his life. And I tried sometimes to do that. Really listen hard. But I came to see that you can't hear everything coming and sometimes it's better just to keep moving to stay out of reach. So I talked into the silence.

"That's what Dr Prosperov was trying to do, make spooky stuff reliable."

"Did he?"

"It's how he made all his millions."

We were getting near to Ruth and Dave Moore's. Kevin turned off the main road into the suburbs and we threaded our way past the parked cars of the mostly empty streets to the emergency foster home.

We pulled up outside and Kevin came with me to the door. I'd only been here one night and I didn't like it much. I didn't like the smell and it didn't feel safe. We knocked and after a bit of a wait Ruth answered.

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“Geraldine had to go,” Kevin explained.

“Sam’s been helping us find out what happened out there.”

Ruth was a white woman who had had four teenage sons and despite being small and gray was very strict and very bossy. She believed that boys should be treated like dogs: feed ‘em, pat ‘em, give ‘em lots of exercise, and shout at them when they are naughty. She was good at shouting especially. She’d obviously been doing this for a long time so she had everything worked out, and it was up to us to fit in.

“Thank you Kevin, will you be needing to talk to him again tomorrow?” she asked.

“Probably not – unless we find something, of course.”

“Good, well Sam, I need you to do some assessment worksheets for the department to find out what you’ve been learning at school all these years.”

“Oh, great!” I groaned.

“Well, we’ve all got things to do,” Kevin said leaving, “Thanks Ruth, bye Sam.”

“Later Kevin,” I said and got dragged inside by Ruth.

Ruth and Dave’s house was an ordinary home on the top level and a dormitory, recreation room and bathroom on the bottom level. Ruth took me downstairs to the Rec Room and put a booklet in front of me and gave me a pen.

“You’ve got half an hour, try to do what you can,” she said, not expecting much.

There were four bunks, so they could sleep eight but right now they only had three of us. They specialised in boys in trouble. The other two looked pretty big. Sailosi, was Samoan and also fourteen, but he was already six-foot-four. He’d run away from home after a fight with his dad. I’d only talked to him for about an hour or two at most, but I liked him already. He was a cheerful sort of guy, although he was a bit down at the moment because of the problems with his folks. The other kid I didn’t like so much. He’d been pretty quiet while Sailosi was around so I’d talked with Sailosi instead. Jaden was a white kid of sixteen who was in care. He was scrawny, mean, and stupid, with blonde hair, a fuzzy blonde beard and there was always a beanie on his head. I’d sensed bad things from him the minute I met him.

At the moment Sailosi was out, and Jaden was reading a comic on a bean-bag in front of the blank TV set. Ruth didn’t let us watch

daytime TV. Ruth went back upstairs telling me she'd be back from time to time to see how I was getting on. That was more of a warning to Jaden.

I had a look at the booklet. I hated it already. I really do have trouble reading stuff like this. It makes me nervous. Ask me the questions and I'll give you the answers in a flash, coz I'm not dumb. I just hate reading and writing. I sighed and knuckled down to it though frankly I'd rather clean a septic tank.

"Too hard for you eh, nigger?" Jaden said, almost to himself while reading.

I'd expected that.

"No need to project your intellectual inadequacy, bro. Nothin' harder'n me here, eh?" I smiled at him, and went to work.

He scowled trying to work out what I'd said. The first questions were actually easy. Simple arithmetic, fill in the blanks, complete the sequence. I had no problems with that.

"Cos he's too dumb, dumb, dumb, he's a dumb-ass little nigger," Jaden was singing quietly as he flipped the page. Actually he was helping. If he hadn't have been hazing me I might not have bothered. Ruth came down and Jaden shut up. She looked over my shoulder.

"Good work Sam," she smiled.

She went back upstairs.

Jaden started making huge sucking noises.

"No thanks, Jaden," I said, not looking up.

He was annoying me but I got stuck in again. Next they asked you to use words in a sentence. The first ones were easy enough but I'd never seen the other ones. I couldn't make sense of them - and I never was a quick writer anyway. My letters looked awful. I made a strategic decision and skipped that bit.

"Flip em all dumb c ____!" Jaden advised, not looking up from his comic.

"I was jus' looking for a page you could colour in, while I was workin', Jaden," I replied cheerily.

Before Renwick he would have upset me. I would have attacked, which was what he wanted. But I realised it wasn't personal. This guy would have done the same if I had been anyone. He just liked bringing people down to his level.

Now the test had a map of the world and we had to match cities to letters. That was too easy - I'd been to all of them. Then there was

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some science. I knew the molecules, but I couldn't spell the seashore things, or I didn't know the names. I was frustrated because some of the topics I knew the stuff but not the right words. I found it hard to get the answers down.

Ruth came down again. I realised she was coming down every ten minutes which meant I had ten minutes left.

I skimmed through the rest looking for easy ones. There was one question on Maori history which was easy so I had to answer that. Which left me with five minutes and only hard ones. I quickly decided to do the one on reading a story and answering questions. Jaden was making horrible snotty throat-clearing sounds which I thought were to just put me off.

Then a gob of spit hit me in the cheek followed by his bray of laughter.

Both of us were skinny and small, but I was still a lot smaller than he was. Still, I wasn't thinking very clearly. All I knew was he was going to get it. I got up, wiping my face.

"Oooooooooo," Jaden jeered as if this meant trouble. He was still sitting down, though he was tense now.

I walked around the table toward him.

"Sit down little c____!" he ordered.

Orders don't work on me now. I ran at him. He stood. My knee came up. His hands went out to ward me off. My knee struck home with my weight behind it, we went over, the chair behind him with us. I landed on top of him. My knee had really hurt him. His hands went to my throat. Mine inside his arms to his face. He began to choke me. I began to gouge him. He was yelling something, cursing me.

"SAM! JADEN!" I swear Ruth's voice sounded louder than a rifle shot.

Then she was on us pulling us apart, yelling at us while we were all yelling at one another. His face was bloody where I'd got him and he was limping from the knee shot.

"Jaden upstairs!" Ruth barked at him.

"You're dead meat, nigger!" Jaden snarled climbing the stairs.

"JADEN! SILENCE!" Ruth bellowed at him. For a small woman she could yell almost as loud as Grandpop doing his drill sergeant voice.

For a second I thought Jaden might get a knife from the kitchen. But I realised he was a coward so he would wait 'til he had me alone

before having another go. Still, I made a mental note to be careful about knives.

Ruth was shouting at me. She shouted for quite a while about “in this house”, rules and not taking a rise. I complained that he'd been hazing me and spat on me. Finally, when we'd shouted ourselves out, I gave her the booklet. I was sentenced to apologise to Jaden for losing my temper. He would have to apologise to me for being rude. But we were both to lose access to the game machines for three days. As I never played them that didn't bother me in the slightest, but I knew Jaden loved his racer games and he was going to be highly pissed at me for this.

The apologies were about as unsorry as we could get without Ruth making us repeat them. Then we got another stern lecture about “If I ever...” and, “in this house...” then we were separated. Jaden got to do some chores with Ruth. I was pretty sure that Ruth could see through Jaden and wanted him under her thumb. This left me the rec room all to myself. Not there was that much in it. A TV with half a dozen channels, a Playstation 2 with a bunch of games mostly rated PG, a heap of graphic novels and comics, magazines, and a ping-pong table. For someone like myself, more into doing things than reading or watching it was pretty dull. I picked up some comics and started reading them half-heartedly.

At 4 p.m. Sailosi came back from his family group conference. I could see he was pretty shaken up. So I asked him if he wanted a game of ping-pong and we played badly for about an hour. It helped him forget anyway. Then Ruth rounded us up to make dinner.

I hadn't done much cooking before so I found it more interesting than reading comics or playing ping-pong. Jaden didn't say anything, so conversation was mostly between me and Sailosi with Ruth giving instructions or encouragement in the background. I didn't see it happen but suddenly the whole pot of boiling potatoes was knocked off the stove top by Jaden on to Sailosi's arm. Sailosi screamed.

“F___! sorry man,” Jaden yelled.

Ruth shoved me and Jaden aside and grabbed Sailosi to put his arm under cold running water. Then Jaden winked evilly at me. She yelled at me to get the first aid box – which I didn't recognise because I was finally realising what Jaden was doing, so Jaden got it, pretending to be sorry and concerned for Sailosi.

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Sailosi's skin was coming up in an ugly red burn, turning pale as it died under the running water. Sailosi was weeping in pain in spite of himself. He was going into shock, shaking and looking pale, so I got him a blanket. Ruth got on the phone and called Dave, telling him what had happened and that they'd have to go to hospital. Dave told Ruth to call the ambulance because he was twenty minutes away. So Ruth called an ambulance.

The ambulance must have either been waiting down the road or could fly because it arrived in the middle of the rush-hour traffic after only ten minutes. This gave Ruth a problem. She couldn't go with Sailosi and mind us. Sailosi was already feeling bad before he was burned and now he was looking pleadingly at Ruth to go with him.

"Don't worry Mrs Moore," Jaden assured her, "I'll take care of Sam," he said.

I knew he meant it too – but not in a nice way. But I could see Sailosi needed her help more than I did so I didn't say a thing. Ruth called her husband who said he was still in heavy traffic about ten to fifteen minutes away. So recognising the ambulance couldn't wait forever and that technically she could leave us for the ten minutes it would take her husband to get home she delivered us a stern lecture about fighting and went with Sailosi.

I didn't go back inside the house as the ambulance drew away. I was far safer on the sidewalk. Jaden went inside and came back looking pleased with himself.

"One nigger down, one to go," he remarked to me as he came up to me on the street, smirking to himself.

"Come inside. We can start now, save waiting til lights out," he added grinning.

I told him what I thought about him, which wasn't polite. Then he suddenly punched me in the nose. I went down on the ground. It hurt like hell but he wasn't finished. I caught a glint of steel. I wasn't going to wait and see what he'd pulled from his pocket. I rolled, scrambled to my feet and ran, clutching my nose, which was bleeding everywhere, barely able to see where I was going. He chased me, and being bigger he was going to catch me too. I let him get close, then dropped so suddenly he tripped over the top of me. I had taken his knees in my back but he'd gone right over. He gasped.

I got up. He'd been holding the knife, handle-forward, blade along his forearm, to make it less obvious. As he'd gone over he'd dropped

it to break his fall but the knife landed handle down and he had landed on it. Now blood was pouring out of a gash in his side where the knife had stabbed him.

He was really scared and swore at me furiously and loudly, but now his attention was on his wound and he turned back to the house, holding back the blood.

I'd had enough.

Jaden was a poisonous snake and I wasn't going to sleep anywhere near him if I could avoid it. I turned into a park and set off for the other side over the grass. Dave would seek me out with his car but if I used routes which were away from the road he wouldn't be able to trace me.

As I walked I thought about where I was going.

I'd looked for police protection for good reason. I had tried camping on the island but I'd seen the lights at night and could see *they* were watching it very closely. By turning myself in and getting on the news I drew them away *with* me, away *from* Emma. With a case number and the cops watching me it was harder for *them* to get me, though I knew it wasn't impossible. Out of official gaze they might find me and "remove" me without any problems so I wanted to stay in the system. But that wasn't at any cost. I wasn't going to stay anywhere in a system that was unsafe.

I'd been in much more danger in other countries but then, I'd had way more back-up. Now I was completely on my own with just my Omnicard and Qi. It was getting dark and I hadn't eaten since lunchtime.

I took stock like Grandpop had taught us. Shoes? Good, nothing wrong there. Clothes? My clothes were a bit bloodstained, thin, but dry. There would be a dew with an overnight temperature in the range of five degrees. Sleeping in the open was out.

Situation? Jaden would probably tell Dave I'd attacked him. Dave would probably doubt that, given our relative sizes, but I wasn't there to defend myself. Jaden would need his wound looked at. They would take him to the emergency department too. So they'd probably notify the police I was missing. On the other hand there are loads of kids on the street in Auckland and the cops don't know where they are either so it would probably not get a very high priority.

So where could I go?

Sue Williams.

Part One Initiation



Chapter Four: Seeking Susan

Sue's name popped into my head – but I had a feeling it was not for a good reason. I stopped and sat down to read her and staunch my nosebleed with my T-shirt. Then I remembered I had her card in my pocket. That would help. I took it out and looked at it.

I felt sick. Sick as if my guts had been ripped out. Something was wrong. Something was not good. Rachel!

I'd been right, and it was all happening now, as she got home. She needed help. *I* needed help! So where would I find her? Something turned me West to where the sun was going to set behind the hills – but I would need a map to locate her exactly. A map, and some food. And for that I needed money.

My Omnicard was OK in an ATM but no good in a shop, where it would look suspicious. My big fear was having a money machine swallow it. Not that it had ever happened before but there is always a first time. I took off my shoes and socks and put it in my sleeve under my watch band. I had to keep it in contact with my skin or else it would self-destruct after ten minutes. So my next step was to find a money machine – which given I was in the Eastern suburbs could take a while. I set off to find a shopping centre in the gathering dark.

The roads were busy. Adults walking alone are rare; teens walking at this time seemed even rarer. I realised I would stick out and tried to look purposeful while sticking to suburban back streets. Even so, this is a white or asian area and Maori kids in hoodies walking alone here would stand out. Finally I made it to the shopping centre. It was a small cluster of grimy shops that looked like their owners were struggling against the big malls. But there was a money machine and it appeared to be working.

I stopped for a moment, and then decided that if I was going to lose the Omnicard, I would be better off losing it closer to the Moore's place than miles away. I selected a Visa gift card profile

that was still fresh and stuck it into the machine. For a second the machine seemed to hesitate, then the screen refreshed and I was challenged for my PIN. I entered the PIN for the card; once again it paused for a worrying moment and then presented me with my options. I asked for \$50 in cash. Then, to my relief I got both my card back and \$50.

I could have taken heaps of money of course but it would look sus for a Maori teen in a hoodie to be running around the eastern suburbs with hundreds in cash. It attracts attention and I didn't need that. I went into the nearest corner store. An unfriendly Pakistani man looked at me suspiciously as I entered. He obviously mistrusted Maori teenagers. I knew he would expect me to sidle along the back rows so I put my hood down and went straight up to him.

I asked for a couple of pies, and a map, then asked him where the buses went. He didn't know too much about the buses but he sold me a pair of lukewarm pies and an over-priced map. Naturally they didn't put anything as useful as bus routes on the map so I drifted over towards the bus stop, looking at the maps and eating a not-quite-cold pie.

Fortunately the bus stop had an electronic sign on it telling me the next bus was ten minutes away. I was keen to put as much distance between me and the money machine as I could. There was always a risk my Visa gift-card profile had been had been identified and *they* were tracing me. To avoid being spotted I put my hood up and stood looking at the map against the fence so my back was to on-coming traffic. I was trying to sense where Sue was from the map but aside from a definite feeling she lived in the Western suburbs I was too distracted by my surroundings to get any true feeling for it.

I decided to take the bus into the centre of town. There I would find somewhere quiet, get my bearings and then either get a taxi or a bus to Sue's place. The countdown until the bus finally showed up seemed to take forever. When it did the bus driver made a big deal of having to make change. I didn't mind. At least I was moving now. And it was extremely cheap. If I could work out where Sue was I might be able to avoid another money machine visit. There were only three other people on the bus: two girls a bit older than me, and an old man, so I found a seat and settled down to study the map.

I wasn't the best in our team at doing this. Scotty was a natural but I'm sure it's easier in the african bush than the lurching noisiness of a bus. Even so, by concentrating on Sue I was getting more and more certain of the area she was in, even if I wasn't exactly sure of the street.

The bus roared, shuddered and swung its way into the centre of town, along the still-busy main roads with the light slowly fading from the sky. Streetlights were coming on, shops were closing, and people had their heads down rushing home. It was kind of enjoyable to be going in the opposite direction to everyone else. Finally we began to navigate around the city centre. I wanted to get as close to the central bus stops as I could to find the bus that would take me to where I wanted to go.

I got off in a rather grubby part of town full of backpackers, Asian takeaways and sex bars. I felt relaxed here because we'd done our earliest urban training in these very streets. Admittedly I was better equipped then, but I knew the place well and that made me more comfortable than say Tondo, Manila. There were still a lot of people about and plenty of lights on. I walked to Queen Street, the street running up the centre of Auckland's main business district and headed down to the Britomart rail terminal around which all the buses run from. There was a tourist information terminal on the street to help find the right bus service. I had a play with that for a while and decided I needed a no.72f. I looked up the timetable and saw that there was one leaving in about ten minutes, but where from? Finally I had to go into the railway station and ask the guy who directed me to a bus stop by a sex-bar.

I had about twenty bucks left. The bus would cost four. Should I get more? What I needed was a bank card to copy. If it was pressed against a real mag-stripe or chip card it could match the design with undetectable precision. Only the name and account would be mine with my signature and or picture would be on it. I had a number of old profiles on it. I had an American Express standard, gold and platinum, a couple of Visa cards from America, France and Belgium, a heap of foreign access cards for all sorts of things but the one thing I didn't have was a card I could use in a shop in my own country! I'd never needed one. We usually used gift cards and my collection of those had burned to plastic ash. I decided to risk it and not get any more out. If I had to use the foreign cards I may as well

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get out a thousand and stay in a hotel or something but for the moment I'd try to keep a low profile.

The bus in the dark – it was now 7:05 p.m. – was even emptier than the one I'd ridden into town. There was just one older guy in it who was reading a book. It was strange to be doing this completely by senses. When we were operating we had Control with loads of extra information to help us. But this? This was operating almost naked. Once again I just cleared my head and let the feelings flow.

It surprised even me, when I got near enough to walk, how strong the feeling was. The stop was past where I wanted to get off so I had a five minute walk to get back to the corner that called me. I checked the map again. The street I was following would take me into the neighbourhood I had marked on the map. That was lucky because I hadn't checked the map on the bus.

Lucky. Hmm. Perhaps it was Lucky, perhaps it was just me. I decided I must be on my guard against hope and fantasy. All I would respond to was my inner sense of direction. I kept walking up a steep rise. A wicked part of my mind tried to convince me that my inner sense of direction could choose an easier path than this.

The more I walked the more I was starting to doubt myself. What if I went to someone's door and it wasn't her? Maybe I was alone in a strange part of town with no money and no clues. Well, that wasn't strictly true, I had \$16 and her cell phone number. It could be more hopeless than that. I decided I needed to clear my head again so I sat down on the footpath by a wall and relaxed.

It was still warm. There was a little traffic about but I could see the flickering light of TV sets in the houses about me. The stars were drowned out by the sodium streetlights. I had to climb this rise, then go down into the valley on the other side for about four hundred metres.

I got up and walked up the rise and there was the valley. I walked down the other side: one hundred metres, two hundred, three hundred. There was a side-street, one way in and out. The neighbourhood was new, but losing its shine. The houses were mostly smaller and cheaper. People here drove, they didn't walk. I knew I was close as I walked down the side-street. I was being pulled to the end, a house on the right side of the turning bay. I walked all the way down to the end of the street. It was a small townhouse, probably two bedrooms, a trellis with flowers growing

up it and a carport with a compact Nissan car in it. There were a few lights but not many. This was the place!

I hesitated. I knew I was right, but I didn't believe it. The rational part of my mind looked for evidence. There was no mail in the mailbox and nothing visible in the car suggesting it was Sue's. But I knew it was.

There was a movement at a window next-door. I realised I couldn't lurk in the shadows or someone would call the cops and I'd have to answer questions about Jaden, so I had to put my conviction to the test. I stepped up to the door and pressed the doorbell, noticing the "Neighbourhood Watch" sticker on the door.

Nothing happened. A thousand embarrassing scenarios flooded through my mind. Some old lady, or another complete stranger answering. I rang again. Then I knocked. I heard quick footsteps. And then a small voice from a heart in a million shattered splinters.

"Rachel?" It was almost too sad to bear.

"Sue, it's Sam. Are you OK?"

"Sam?" her mind was a million miles away.

"Sam Kahu."

"*Sam Kahu?*"

"The Maori psychic kid from this morning."

"You! What are you doing here."

"Open the door Sue."

Sue unlocked the door but barred the way. She looked terrible in an ugly pink tracksuit. Her face was wrinkled with crying, but she was droopy, almost asleep.

"Why are you here? You should be at that home," she drawled.

"One of the kids tried to knife me. Sue? Sue, what have you done?"

She didn't seem to understand the question. She was barely able to stand. And then she just gave up and fell forward. I caught her and lifted her inside, until I could lie her on the floor. She stank of alcohol. I tapped her collarbone, slapped her face and called her name. She moaned but wasn't really responding, I knew already why. I turned her on her left side, one knee bent: the recovery position. I knew she had taken pills and that getting them out before they were fully digested was essential.

"Sorry about this Sue."

I opened her mouth and shoved my finger down her throat. She promptly vomited all over me. There were pills mixed with noodles. And now *I* stank of booze. She started coughing. I kept her on her

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side, making sure her airway was clear and she was in no danger of drowning in her own vomit. I stayed with her while she relaxed but I knew the pills were already working and she needed more help than I could give her.

I ran down the passage and found myself in a small kitchen. The place was a mess. Obviously Rachel had left in a hurry and taken everything. On the table was note from Rachel – very short I thought. A photo album, a chemist's pill container popped open like bubblewrap and a bottle of vodka. I read the label "Imovane – for sleep". As I'd suspected, sleeping tablets. There was a cordless phone I grabbed it and punched in the emergency number.

"Police, ambulance or fire?"

"Ambulance."

"What address are you calling from?"

"I don't know. There's a woman here, she's taken a heap of sleeping pills. Trace me."

"Stay on the line please. Where is the lady?"

"In the house by the door."

"Is anyone with her?"

"No, there's just me I'm going back to her now."

"Stay on the line please."

"Roger."

That might sound dumb but it's what we said and I was used to it.

"We have your address as 21 Rosewood Avenue, Waitakere City."

"Great! I have no idea if that's right. But send someone asap."

"Stay on the line please."

I went back to Sue, licked the back of my hand and put it under her nose. I was real worried she would stop breathing. She was breathing. I took her pulse. It was hard to find, and slow.

"You still there?"

"Yes. She's breathing but it's shallow. Pulse is regular but weak."

"What's your name please?"

"Sam. What's yours."

"Annie," She sounded Maori to me.

"How old are you Sam?"

"Fourteen."

"You're doing fine Sam."

"How long will they be?"

"About ten minutes."

Sue was lying there asleep. If it weren't for the mess around her you'd think she had just decided to have a nap. I stroked her hair. I wondered if she'd dream of Rachel.

"How well do you know this lady?" Annie was asking to pass the time.

"Not very well. I only met her today."

We chatted quietly. Annie was a quiet, calm woman very like my Aunt Liz. We were even from the same tribe. Finally I could see the flashing lights by the door.

I went to get the pill container. I gave it to the ambulance officers who put Sue on a stretcher. They asked if I was coming with them. I wanted to, but I knew she'd be asleep until morning and then she'd need some clothes and stuff. I told them I needed to call her friends in the police to come and get me and meet her at the hospital. They looked doubtful but they had a patient to take care of. I was getting strange looks from all the neighbours who had come out to see what was going on but nobody said anything. I went back inside.

I decided to call Kevin. I pulled out his card. I felt a bit sad. Sue had tried so hard to be a good cop but this couldn't be great for her career. Still, there was no point putting it off. She could hardly pretend she'd got food poisoning. I dialled the number.

Kevin sounded very tired when he answered his cell at 8:30pm.

"Kevin, Sue's just been taken to hospital."

"Sue? Sue who? Who is this?"

"Sam Kahu. Constable Sue Williams, she's just been taken to hospital."

"Sam! Where are you? What's happened to Sue?"

"I'm at Sue's place."

"Sue's place!"

"Yeah."

"What's happened? Sam they're already looking for you for a stabbing you know."

"That's all crap Kevin. All you have to do is fingerprint the knife, I never touched it. That shit Jaden was trying to cut me."

"Yeah, well there's a complaint we have to process in the morning, But what's happened to Sue? She didn't try to stab you too did she?"

I could hear the door of a car slam. He was on his way over and wanted to keep me talking.

"No Kevin, her girlfriend *Rachel* left her today. She's taken too many pills."

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There was a silence on the other end of the line.

“What did you say Sam? I'm not sure if I understood.”

“Detective Constable Williams took too many sleeping tablets on top of about half a litre of Vodka. I got here just in time to make her spew them up and get an ambulance to her.”

There was another long silence.

“Are you there, Kevin?”

“Yes. Yes. Sam how did you get to Sue's house?”

“Bus and feet Kevin, how else do 14-year-olds get around a city?”

“Look OK, wait for me there will you Sam?”

“That was why I rang *you* Kevin. See you soon.” I hung up.

I was now in Sue's bedroom. You could see where bits of furniture had been taken by Rachel. It was hard to know what was Sue's and what wasn't, but I guessed the drum-kit and the posters of Sister Meg, Shiela E and Karen Carpenter drumming were Sue's. I felt a bit stink about being in Sue's room alone but I also knew there were resources I needed.

Her bag was on the floor. I picked it up and found her wallet. I took my Omnicard from my wrist and pressed both sides to the her bank card. It would copy the stripe and the PIN too but Qi could change the account later. Then I found her cell. I opened the back, took out the battery and found the Sim. I opened the top of my watch put the Sim interface in the plastic putty which moulded itself to make contact. A second later it glowed green to tell me it had copied the Simcard. I replaced everything except her keys which I put in my pocket.

I found a small suitcase in the wardrobe and put it on the bed. I packed underwear (which made me feel real creepy), loose clothes, and a jumper. Then I went into the bathroom. Rachel had ransacked that too. Sue didn't have a lot of beauty stuff. Tahira had way more and she's fourteen. I grabbed a few things which judging by where they were looked like she used them most, plus her toothbrush – which looked very lonely all by itself. I put her bag in the suitcase and closed it and then put it by the door.

I went back to the bathroom again for a towel to soak up the vomit. I wondered if the doctors would want a sample and decided they could get their own. I found the laundry and a carpet cleaner which looked useful so I set to work. I was making progress when Kevin drove up outside. I opened the door and went back to work.

"I've made up her bag. It's by the door," I told him while scrubbing as he came in.

He took the bag and turned for the car. Then he came back for me.

"Sam?"

"Hmmm?"

There was a pause. I was still busy rinsing stink out of the carpet. I was thinking Sue would not need this smell to remind her what happened. It certainly wasn't my favourite.

"Sam, you are amazing. I've never met a 14-year-old like you."

He meant it too.

"I have," I said looking up at him, "there's five more of us where I come from."

He had nothing to say to that and put the bag in his car.

I finished up and put everything away again. Kevin came back.

"Sam I..I.. don't know what to do with you," he admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can't take you back to the Moore's tonight."

"No, you can't," I agreed.

"But where else can I take you?"

"Well, I'm not under arrest am I?"

"You could be, but I'm not sure the cells in town are a great place for you either. I can't just turn you loose, you're a minor, you have to be in someone's care."

"Well, what about Sue's?"

"You can't stay here."

"No, I mean in Sue's care at the hospital."

"She can't care for you Sam."

"Kevin, I don't need care," I told him looking him in the eye. "She does. I'll be in her care and she can be in mine."

Kevin looked doubtful. It wasn't so much about me as about the rules.

"Just for tonight? We can sort something else tomorrow," I bargained.

"Oh, OK," he said turning to go. I followed him down the corridor.

"At least I'll know where you are and if I take you anywhere else you'd probably just sneak off to the hospital anyway."

"That's true," I replied.

We got in the car.

"You smell pretty bad Sam."

"Yeah, she chucked all over me. I'm pretty damp as well."

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"Have you eaten?"

"Not much."

"Tell you what, how about we go back to the station and I'll ask around to see if anyone's got some clothes your size then we'll get you fed and showered and then go to see Sue."

I was surprised by this new goodwill. Kevin might have picked this up because he added

"It's going to be a long wait at the hospital so you may as well be comfortable."

He was right so I agreed. He called up the station and there was a bit of a conversation about me in which he described me.

"150 centimetres."

"145," I corrected him.

"145 centimetres."

"52 kilos," he guessed.

"46."

"46 kilos."

"Waist is..." He asked questioningly

"56 centimetres."

"56 centimetres."

We always knew exactly what size we were. None of us were large – that was the whole point.

The station at night seemed different to during the day. More relaxed. More private too, in a way. They had raided lost property and found another hoodie, jeans and a T-shirt which had the phrase: "Been nowhere, done nothing, stole the T-shirt", on it. I found that funny because it was exactly the opposite of me. I had a quick shower because I didn't want to be around lots of beefy naked cops in case any came in. I got changed, put my old clothes in a plastic bag, and was fed again at the canteen. I had chicken and rice which was slightly better than boil-in-a-bag but reminded me of Cam, whose dad had been the chef at Renwick. I missed his cooking, it was so good.

True to his word Kevin got me to the hospital by 10 p.m. Kevin explained our deal to the nurse on the ward who said it was impossible. Only relatives could be allowed to stay. Children certainly not. We argued for about half an hour but it was plain they didn't want to know me. Finally Kevin said.

"Bugger this Sam, come back to my place, you can sleep on the couch."

I agreed. I was tired.

Kevin's house was about half an hour away. I dozed in the car. When we got there Mrs Cooper – Diane – had already made up a bed for me on a convertible couch in the living room. I thanked her and then we all went to bed.

For a moment I lay there in the dark in this strange new room trying to put together the day.

Compared to many of the hard-out days I'd had over the past two years it was pretty tame. No one had been shooting at me and I wasn't seeing anything horrible, but in other ways it was challenging. I'd never been quite so alone as I felt now. At Renwick the challenges were greater but we faced them together. We were a team. Here I had no back-up, no friendly advice in my ear. There was just me, alone in a strangers living room, with a motion detector on the ceiling with a tiny light that flashed every five seconds.

I thought about the messages and wondered how they would be received. One had gone to Britain so they probably only got it two hours ago. The other had gone to the network. They were spread around the globe so they never slept. They were Morozov's friends and called themselves Para.no.ID – and they were. I had no idea who they were. I wasn't meant to.

I must have drifted off to sleep. I had an odd dream that everyone at Renwick had shrunk so that they could fit on a small glowing point of dust. I was following this point of dust calling out to them to take me with them and they were laughing and calling out, "not yet Sam, not yet", and I was tripping and stumbling and they were calling out encouragements but drifting higher out of reach.

Suddenly it was daylight and two little blonde girls in white woollen cardigans, blue velvet skirts with flowery embroidery and blue ribbons in their hair were standing staring at me. It was bizarre.

"He's awake!" they screamed, dashing to their mum in the kitchen.

I didn't want to be. But the morning cartoons, the radio, the noisy routine of a family getting ready for work and school wasn't going to wait for a strange Maori boy asleep on a bed in the living room.

Kevin came over. He was in a suit looking fresh and ready for work.

"Don't you ever sleep?" I asked him crustily.

He smiled.

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“Toast ? Milo ? Tea ? Coffee?”

I sighed and started to rouse myself.

“Toast and coffee – just black – please.”

I found my jeans beside the bed and pulled them on under the covers while the girls watched me curiously. Then I pushed aside the duvet and sat up. Kevin gave me a cup of coffee.

“Thanks.”

I sat for a while on my bed sipping it, letting the coffee drift through my system. Tarik had taught me about coffee. He came from Turkey, though he was Kurdish.

I got up and started to fold up the duvet. We always made our beds at home. Grandpop had drilled that into me since I was five so it was almost automatic. Kevin's wife told me not too bother so I went into the kitchen to have some toast. Kevin drained his coffee, kissed his wife and kids, and we headed out in the car.

“Now we have one little matter we have to deal with this morning,” he said to me.

“What's that?”

“There's still you stabbing Jaden Smith to deal with.”

“I didn't stab him. He was chasing me, I dropped, he fell over me and accidentally stabbed himself. It was all his own fault.”

“Sure Sam, that's *your* story but we have to check out all sides. Now, tell me what happened again, and leave out nothing.”

So I did. He asked a lot of specific questions. I could see how he would catch anyone out who lied. There were no lies in mine. Finally he was satisfied. I was worried he was going to take me back to the Moore's but instead we drove up to the hospital. He bought a big bunch of flowers at the hospital shop and we then went back to the ward. This time we were allowed in.

Sue looked rather embarrassed to see us. She was in bed wearing hospital pyjamas. She looked strained and weak.

Kevin was surprisingly gentle with her. He didn't talk about her taking pills at all. He said a whole lot of stuff about stress which seemed to be aimed at reassuring Sue and then said he needed to go and run a few errands and as she was the youth aid officer she could continue interrogating me and still be on duty. Then he left us alone. I was liking Kevin a bit more. I sat opposite Sue in a big armchair.

For a long time she said nothing and looked out the window. Then the tears came to her eyes.

"You were right," she half gasped.

She sat there weeping. Then rubbed her eyes, and blinked, putting on that awful false smile.

"I was lucky you came along."

Her face folded and she looked down crying some more. I said nothing. What do I know about why one adult can't face life without another? It seems weird to me but she was suffering, that was clear to anyone. Finally my silence irritated her.

"Are you just going to sit there like a garden gnome? Say something," She said angrily blowing her nose.

I laughed. That made her laugh too.

"I don't know what to say Sue," I told her straight-up. "I've seen a lot of suffering. A real lot. But this is new to me."

It was the God's honest truth.

"It's love. A whole new form of suffering for you to look forward to when you're older," she said bitterly.

She looked at me again, thinking.

"You must be so tough," she said.

That surprised me. It made me think of my father.

"Me? I'm not tough."

"Your father kills your mother when you're a scrap, your childhood community ravaged by gangs and drugs and now you've lost everyone to a crazy cult and *I'm* the one in the psych ward and *you're* here to comfort me. If that isn't tough what is?"

"It wasn't a cult," I said impatiently.

"How do you do it?"

"What?"

"Keep going?"

I thought about that for a moment.

"Hope, I guess. Hope, and a bit of fear."

"Hope," Sue repeated. She was going to crumble again.

"You have to have hope to hope," and she burst into tears again.

Now I *did* know what to do and I went forward and put my arms around her. She held me. It was a strange feeling being held by a grown woman who was falling apart. Her breasts were pressed against me which felt nice but I also felt wrong about that. I wished I was older because I felt sure I'd know what I was meant to do. I didn't, but I slowly began to realise, as she held me, that I wasn't meant to *do* anything. I was just meant to stand there, and be hugged, and get my shoulder wet.

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Finally she let me go. She dried her eyes on the sheets and I went back to the chair.

"Thanks Sam, I really needed that."

"S'Ok."

She sighed deeply.

"So how did you end up at my house?"

I told her the whole story, except for the bits about the Omnicard and copying her SIM, I just pretended I had a bankcard all along. She was shaking her head.

"You bussed clear across Auckland and found me by psychic powers alone?"

"It's not that special. It's a homing instinct. Animals do it all the time. Cats and dogs can't *smell* their old families when they move hundreds of kilometres away, they just home. It's just knowing how to let it come to you. There are loads of powers we all have but we don't listen to them. I just know how to listen."

"You didn't have my address?"

"No. You never gave it to me."

"That's still pretty special," she said appreciatively.

She smiled at me in silence for a while and then a thought struck her.

"Why did you bother?"

"What?"

"Not what Sam, 'pardon'."

"Pardon?"

"Why did you bother?"

"What?" I was totally confused.

"Why did you bother coming all the way to save me?"

"I didn't ... I was escaping that nutter Jaden."

"No, you realised I'd taken pills and you set about saving me straight away. Why?"

"I dunno," I said honestly, "I mean you can't let someone die..."

I thought about that. "...not if you can help it. And ... well ... I like you. You remind me a bit of my Aunt Liz and ... and..."

"Yes?"

"A bit of my mum."

We both sat there thinking about what I'd said. It was true. She was tough and gay like my Aunt but pretty and fun like my mum. Like my mum she'd suffered in a bad relationship – though obviously not as much.

Sue smiled.

"And you *could* save me," she added quietly.

That stung! She meant when I was four I couldn't save my mum.

Now it was my turn to fight off the tears.

"Yes ... and I *could* save you."

There was a silence between us but a smile spread across her face like the sun coming out.

"That's the first thing anyone's said to me so far that's made me want to be saved. Thank you for saving me Sam."

I could tell my mum was proud of me too. I could feel a big smile on her face too.

"Man, what a wreck I am," Sue reflected.

I said nothing.

"I feel like I'm in a helicopter and I've just been saved from this yacht which was my life that's being destroyed by the ocean and I'm looking down at it and thinking what did I think I was doing?"

I smiled, remembering.

"Dead people tell me the same thing all the time."

For a second she looked shocked. And then thoughtful.

"Maybe death and losing love feel the same."

I left that alone. What do I know?

She started to tell me about Rachel. When and where they met. How she'd fallen in love with her. How they'd planned things that never happened. The little betrayals. The social circles they'd moved in. How she'd felt weird being a cop when so many friends were hostile to the police. The gradual loss of love. The fights.

To be honest she wasn't talking to me, she was talking to herself. I was just an excuse. I shut up and let her go for it. It seemed to help. She wasn't crying anymore, though sometimes she got quite emotional and either got angry with some memory or other. After an hour and a half she sort of talked herself out.

"Do you think I'll see her again?" she asked. She meant Rachel.

"Yip," I replied. I knew it. It would be short, sharp and unpleasant. Sue looked uncomfortable.

"You will," I predicted, "but you won't take any more of her shit."

Sue sighed.

"I don't feel strong enough," she confessed.

"You'll surprise yourself."

"Will it be soon?" she asked. There was a hint of a hope that being in hospital might bring Rachel back out of pity.

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“Nope. A few weeks.”

That made her bitter and angry. Then she worried what her parents would say. Once again she talked herself through it.

A ward psychologist popped in to say hello. The exchange didn't last long but the doctor seemed to realise that I was helping his patient more than he could and left us alone.

We had lunch together and the conversation swung around to me. I still had no idea where I'd be sleeping that night. Then Sue asked me to pick up my story from where I'd left off last time. So I did.



Chapter Five: Leaving Home

My dad's release was weighing on everyone's minds. It was the beginning of December. The weather was getting hot and shiny with the first signs of summer. School was drifting towards the long holidays in a series of sports days that involved athletics and swimming. Everyone seemed more annoyed by Christmas than excited by it. Even the spray-on snow writing in the shop windows seemed dumber than ever.

I was in the school swimming events for the two hundred metre freestyle and one hundred metre backstroke. By now I was at the end of junior school. Next year I'd have to go to Northland High. That seemed far off enough for me not to feel too worried. Right then I felt confident about my world. I knew the kids, the teachers and the way it all hung together. I was on road safety patrol before school and after. I knew my way around the area and all the shopkeepers. And I felt confident about my chances in the swimming – the one thing I knew I was good at.

But the parole board was meeting soon to decide whether my dad would be given parole before Christmas. They had met before and turned him down. He'd written letters dressing his rage in see-thru Christian clichés, “Judge not lest ye be judged,” etc etc. It was obvious his interpretation of the Bible was all about his own righteousness. Christianity to him was all about God's Will which he couldn't tell apart from his own. Forgiveness and love didn't really come into it.

But this time was going to be different, he said. Apparently he had this expensive lawyer the gang used representing him. Grandpop and Auntie Liz were worried that an expensive lawyer counted for more in the eyes of the parole board than the letters they had written asking the board to consider me and Rewa. It felt like a summer thunderstorm: hot, sticky, and heavy. If they let him out

over Grandpop and Auntie Liz's objections he would probably be back in town within a week. I wasn't sure what that would mean, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't like it.

Not even Ax's allies seemed happy about the idea of him coming out. Clive tried to make a joke about it at school but it fell flat

because nobody thought it funny. Some of the big men in, or near, the gang knew that Ax would mean less freedom from the gang's leaders in Auckland who Ax was tied up with. And although no-one would admit it, I think a lot of people were scared of him.

There was a lot to be scared about. Apparently he was even bigger now than he was when he went in – and that was big enough. With nothing to do but work-out, take smuggled drugs, grease gang leaders and read the Bible, he was a dangerous combination of crazed, frustrated and very, very powerful. And yet for the parole board he would, “lie down with the lamb,” in his own words. While at the same time he promised us he would “bring the sword” to the unrighteous in the community – by which he meant anyone who disagreed with him.

High on that list was almost certainly going to be Grandpop. Grandpop wasn't a big talker. I found him strangely hard to read. Most of the time you had no idea what he was thinking. He had never talked to us about our mother when she was alive before. Now she seemed to be on his mind. He also seemed to be thinking about his life a lot. That night at dinner he even apologised to Auntie Liz for being “a useless father”.

“Dad? What do you mean?” she asked, surprised at his talk.

Grandpop was bent over his food, his gray hair glinting in the light from the living room, deep shadows on his lined brown face.

“I was never there. Your mum did all the work.”

He paused to chew. Chew and reflect.

“I thought it was more important for me to be in the jungle fighting communists than looking after my little girls,” he paused again.

“And the communists were going to win anyway. I knew that. The yanks didn't have a clue.”

He rested his elbow on the table like he told us not to do, but he was distracted by talking to Auntie Liz.

“It was just vanity. I wanted see how good a soldier I could be. But who was I fighting for? It wasn't you, despite what I told myself at

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night in the jungle, it was me. I was as wrapped up in myself just like that piece of shit is (by which he meant Ax)."

Liz said something to calm his conscience but you could tell he didn't believe it.

When he wasn't fishing he started going out at night on "exercises".

I was only a kid really. I didn't realise that his midnight trips into the bush were a rehearsal for what Grandpop thought would be a final battle between himself and Ax. So one night when I saw him go out I slipped on my black tracksuit and followed him. I thought I was pretty cool at being a Ninja. I had no idea.

The bush at night is very, very dark. I walked in trying to be as sneaky as possible because I thought I might find out where Grandpop kept his gun. I'd seen him head along a path I knew pretty well during daylight, and even twilight. But now with no moon and the deep shadows of the trees it was hard to avoid stumbling. Foolishly, I wanted to surprise Grandpop. I should have known better.

Suddenly a shadow grabbed me in an iron grip, hand over my mouth and I was off my feet and face down in the dark being pinned by his weight. It all happened so fast I had no time to make a sound. Then Grandpop whispered something that terrified me. I didn't know what it was because it was in Vietnamese. And I got a reading, a flash, that he had done this to a kid in Vietnam before and that this memory was alive to him right now as if the past forty years had vanished.

And that really scared me because suddenly he wasn't Grandpop anymore but a foreign soldier, a soldier who might kill me in an instant in a dozen different ways and nobody would know til they found my body, if indeed they ever did. And then he rolled off me.

"What are you doing out here boy? You should be in bed," he hissed.

The fact that he was still whispering showed that while he knew it was me, his instincts were still locked in the war. I was still a bit shocked.

"I... I... wanted to see..." I began but trailed off, knowing he wouldn't like my wanting to know where he kept his gun.

To my surprise Grandpop laughed for quite a while.

I was confused. Finally he stopped.

"You can't see – that's the whole point," he smiled.

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He got up.

“Look, watch me.”

And he slid off into the dark. I watched for a while. His shadow moved and then wasn't there. I listened hard. There were a few sounds but within half a minute I had completely lost track of him. Finally I couldn't stand it.

“Grandpop!” I whispered loudly.

“Behind you,” he said, making me leap out of my skin.

I turned. He was smiling.

“You can't see Sam because there *is* no light in there. Even using a Starlite you'd never see anything. Now you try.”

I tried to sneak off but I tripped, crunched something and while I was distracted Grandpop vanished. I snuck back to try and find him but I couldn't see any sign of him.

“Grandpop?” I hissed.

There was no answer.

“Grandpop?”

Still no answer.

I went back to where he'd been. He was gone. I looked around for him for a while but after calling a few times I gave up and went home. I kept a watch from my window but I fell asleep.

The day of the parole board hearing Grandpop was due to go fishing. I woke early. It was just starting to get light and the birds in the bush behind the house were singing their heads off. I lay in bed listening to them, and the sounds of Rewa breathing softly in her sleep, and Grandpop moving around in the kitchen. The air was still a bit chilly and while I wanted to see Grandpop off, I wanted to put off the moment when I actually got out of bed.

Finally, I reached the point where I knew it was now or never. I jumped out of bed, chose some clothes from the big old dresser with sticky drawers, pulled off my pyjamas, and shuddered into the fresh cold cloth, pulling on my hoodie. Then I went down the hall into the kitchen-dining room barefoot. The clock on the wall showed the time to be a little after six. Grandpop was listening to the news on the radio and finishing the last of his coffee and cigarette.

I knew better than to interrupt the news, so I went to the cupboard and made myself a huge plate of wheat brix with hot water and milk. Then I sat down opposite Grandpop and started eating. I have no idea what was in the news – in those days I didn't pay any attention to it – but the weather forecast said there would

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be fine weather for a few days until the tail end of a tropical cyclone (Murray I think) would bring us a bit of a storm. Grandpop acknowledged this news with a bit of a grunt and a sigh.

"Have to make it quick I guess," he said putting out the ciggy.

"When do you think they'll let us know about Ax?" I asked.

"Dunno... committees like that take their time. I reckon the bush telegraph will tell us quicker," he said.

"If they let him out..." I began.

"If..." he said sternly.

"He won't ... well he won't be able to ..."

"What Sam?"

"Take us away?"

Grandpop looked at me seriously.

"Not while I'm alive, son," he said.

Then he smiled, a grim smile.

"And he may have paid his debt to society but as far as I'm concerned he hasn't paid his debts to me."

I didn't quite know what that meant, so I said nothing.

"Don't worry Sam, you'll see," he said, "His bark is worse than his bite. He may pretend to be a mongrel but strip away all the talk, and he's still the sad little puppy, he always was."

I felt encouraged by Grandpop's toughness. It was just a shame he was completely wrong.

He stood up.

"Coming out to the boat?"

I came out and slipped my feet into my boots on the verandah by the front door. I strolled down the front steps with Grandpop, who lit another ciggy, and then down the road to the jetty. The jetty was only twenty-five metres up the road - within view of the house. Grandpop's boat "Hua-Kai" (named after a legendary fishing hook) was an eight-metre aluminium cabin work-boat with two 500cc outboards and he wouldn't moor it anywhere he couldn't see it. Everyone knew better than to mess with it.

Today there was already other activity on the jetty. It was only about twelve metres long and could take four boats at most. Jack Barry had come back in and he and his brother, Ed, were unloading the catch into wheely-bins, and rolling them over the road to Ed's basement freezers next door.

The wheely-bins had been lifted from Whangarei early one morning before the rubbish contractor had made his rounds. The

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rubbish ended up on the mayor's lawn. Everyone thought that was very funny.

"Hey Mike," Ed called out cheerfully to Grandpop as he pushed his bin over the road.

Ed was one of those likeable guys who always seems to be smiling. Grandpop and Ed stopped to chat in the middle of the road – which was pretty normal around our place because there was no traffic – while I went on to join the other kids who were helping Jack on the boat. Among the kids was Joey so I joined him shifting gear onto the jetty. Then Grandpop came over and started talking to Jack about his catch and the weather while getting ready to cast off.

Suddenly this big new Land Cruiser came up the road heading towards town. This was strange because, as I say, there was never much traffic on the road. It slowed down and then crawled past the Jetty. Normally drivers would find an excuse to stop and chat, but not these two. They cruised past, eyes hidden behind their shades, their faces unreadable through the open window. Then they roared off down the road.

Ed appeared with his wheely bin on the other side of the road and shouted after them.

"Don't be scared! We won't eat you!" Then he pulled a face and stuck out his tongue in a traditional challenge.

Everyone found that funny. Then he crossed the road to join us. The men were talking about the gang and the way they were encouraging everyone to take too many shellfish.

"Ay, but they're clever too," Jack said, "They get their fancy pants lawyers to buy fishing quota and all that eh?"

Not many people in the bay worried too much about official fishing quota much. Most relied on traditional Maori fisheries rights. There were numbers and sizes people stuck to because that was how it worked. They knew there was a special right for Maori because we were here first. The main thing was that the fishery was kept in balance and that was something we had done for hundreds of years without a whole bunch of forms and papers from the Government.

Everyone agreed the gang was a pain. Then the talk turned to the parole hearing. Ed and Jack weren't keen on Ax on the loose either and they ended up all agreeing that if anyone saw him on the road it wouldn't be a bad thing if they got distracted and ran over him. There were a lot of jokes about the stories they'd tell in court.

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Eventually Grandpop cast off and the rest of us went back to Ed's place. I remember looking over my shoulder and seeing Grandpop powering away out into the bay, looking powerful and relaxed on his way back out to sea, and I knew I would never see him like that again.

I went back home and found Rewa having her breakfast with Aunt Liz. She was asking a lot of questions about Ax, who she couldn't remember, and was a bit scared of. Aunt Liz was trying to reassure her that everything would be OK and that he didn't want to hurt her.

Rewa looks a lot like Mum did at the same age. I've seen the old pictures. I knew that this reminder of her dead sister made Aunt Liz especially protective towards Rewa. At the same time I knew I looked a lot like Ax and it worried Grandpop in particular that this might attract my father's attention more than the little reminder of the woman he'd killed. So we set out for school with none of Rewa's questions answered. We were a thoughtful pair as we followed the familiar path to school.

"Why do they have to let him out of jail at all?" Rewa asked me.

I had no idea. It didn't seem fair to me that Mum was dead and the man who killed her would be back walking around like nothing had happened.

"You know what I think," I told Rewa quietly.

"What?"

"I think Grandpop's planning to shoot him," I whispered.

"But then *he'll* go to jail," Rewa pointed out.

"Yeah," I replied defensively, "but at least we won't have to worry about Ax."

"I don't want Grandpop to go to jail and I don't want Ax to come out," she said.

She had a point. The only hope was the parole board would see it that way too. They didn't. Aunt Liz picked us up after a good day where I'd come second in the 200 metres. It wasn't til dinner time that Rebecca called to say Ax had been granted parole and would be let out at the weekend. Then she dropped a bombshell.

"He says he wants visiting rights," she told Aunt Liz.

Aunt Liz couldn't believe her ears.

"What?"

"He says he's going to go the family court to get visiting rights, before going for joint custody."

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“He's dreaming.”

“That's what he says ... I thought you should know.”

Aunty Liz kept this to herself, and pretended she was just worried about Ax's getting parole. She tried to shush us into bed early but I stayed up and listened in to her talking to her friends about it. That was how I found out. I guess like my Aunt I was hoping Grandpop's return in the morning would stop the rising sense of dread that was knotting my stomach. It didn't work out that way.

The next morning was a nervous sort of day. I didn't let on to Rewa or Aunty Liz what I'd heard. Aunty Liz was bustly. Grandpop would come back sometime today or tomorrow but we didn't know when. It depended on the fishing. On the way to school I reassured Rewa that Ax would probably bring her lots of toys to butter her up. But she could tell the difference between money and love.

Then, when we came back from school that afternoon there was more bad news. Two big SUVs were drawn up outside the Barry's house, but this time it wasn't the gang. One was the Police, and the other had Ministry of Fisheries written on it. Two blue-uniformed men, one Maori, one white in peaked caps were walking around the place while the local cop Constable Rawhiri watched on. I saw Ed following along after them and he was not his usual smiley self at all. He looked very worried and barely glanced at me as he opened the basement to the men. Joey came over and we went up into the bush to play for a bit.

Joey looked confused and hurt and talked bitterly about the men.

It turned out he was right to worry. Ed was taken away in the police car. We had tea with the Barry family that night. Aunty Liz and “Aunty” Jacky talked and we kids played for hours waiting for Ed to come back. But at ten o'clock when there was still no sign of him we all gave up and went to bed.

The next day on the playground we began to realise that the whole community was splitting into gang families and non-gang families. The Barry kids learned that the gang was behind the arrest of their father because they had fixed it with the Fisheries Inspectors. Worse was to come.

When we came home we found Aunty Liz weeping. I could see Huia-Kai at its mooring so I asked the obvious question.

“Where's Grandpop?”

“They took him away,” Aunty Liz told us.

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There's an old Maori poem about death that goes that when a great tree falls another takes its place. But right now it felt like a great tree had gone and left us completely exposed. That night Ed came back but he was still not smiling and worse he couldn't look any of us in the eye. He cuddled his own kids and wife a lot and told them they would be OK. He was nothing like so reassuring to Auntie Liz though. He tried to nervously reassure her it was just a bunch of questions about catch figures.

The week was running out. Soon Ax would be released and Grandpop was locked up! We were a very quiet trio at tea that night.

Then in the middle of the night I awoke to wild cheering. There was a flickering light on my windowsill. I ran down the hall to the living room to find Auntie Liz in the dark, staring out the window, with tears running down her cheeks. Over by the jetty there were two SUVs silhouetted by the blazing fire on Huia-Kai.

"They're burning Grandpop's boat," I yelled and ran to the front door.

Auntie Liz chased me and caught me before I could open it. I always thought I was pretty strong but Auntie Liz was that much stronger. She stopped me.

"You are not going out there! You saw what they did to Hone Poukawa and don't think they wouldn't give it to you too!"

"But we can't just watch!" I shouted.

"We can, and we will," Auntie Liz said.

Woken by our shouting Rewa came out sleepily with her teddy-rabbit, Mr Nibbles, in her arms and we all hugged together and watched Grandpop's boat burn.

Of course we called the cops and Constable Rawhiri came out in the morning. But as Auntie Liz explained, old Wiremu Rawhiri wasn't going to come out and risk being killed for a boat. Ed didn't come over to show solidarity, but at least Jacki did. You could tell she was angry, even though she also knew her husband had ratted us out.

School that day was awful. Rewa was worried about Grandpop, Ax, and to make matters worse the gang-related kids picked on us. I was glad Clive was at High now. Rewa crying on the way home and I admit I was close to tears myself.

When we got there we found Grandpop was home. He gave Rewa a huge hug and me one too. He seemed strangely calm. He told us

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to go and tidy our room while Auntie Liz made dinner. He sat at the table with the Auckland Star open and his reading glasses on. Then at dinner, looking over his half-moon glasses, he made his announcement.

"Liz, I want you and the kids to move out tomorrow."

"What? Are you crazy dad? This is our home. I've got a job, I can't just walk off!"

"As of last night Elizabeth this isn't a place for children."

"But dad..."

"No, Elizabeth! I don't want you or the kids around. I want you to go to Auckland, find a place to stay and make a new life. This life is over! Now, I've got a few thousand put aside. It will be enough to live on while you get yourself sorted. There's a lot of demand for experienced nurses you won't have any problem finding work."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about me."

"No, I do worry about you. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to finish what they started," Grandpop said grimly.

"Dad, don't be a fool!" Auntie Liz cried

"I'm not a fool. I'm a soldier," He replied matter-of-factly.

"So you want to fight them," Auntie Liz asked, as mockingly as she dared.

"Elizabeth I'm not a silly old man with a fantasy of being young again. I know what I'm talking about. *I* know what's at stake. I don't want to fight them, but they've declared war on me and given me no choice. I don't fight because I want some fun, I fight to win. 'To put the enemy out of action and eliminate his ability for attack as quickly and efficiently as I can'. Like the book says. But to win I have to have full latitude of action. I can't win if I'm out-numbered and forced to defend you and the kids," he explained patiently.

There was a pause as we digested what he's said. To me it made sense.

"So," he continued, "the solution is simple. I must get you out of harms way. You have to be hidden and safe and I must have no idea where you are until it's safe for you to return."

Auntie Liz was still looking unhappy.

"But the kids' school is here," Auntie Liz objected.

"The year's nearly over. Kids shift schools all the time."

"But their friends..."

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"It doesn't feel like we have a lot of friends at school, mum...Aunty Liz," I said.

She looked at me struggling with emotion. We always were careful to acknowledge my mother, but Aunty Liz was the only mum I could really remember and now, as the pressure was going on it seemed natural to call her 'mum'.

"What about my job?"

"Take leave, you've got months, then give notice."

"What about the car? I can't take the car it's hospital property."

"Take mine, I've still got the bike and that'll be more useful to me anyway."

"Dad..." Aunty Liz began, but Grandpop interrupted.

"Kids go to your room and pack everything you need. Pack your favourite toys, your favourite clothes. If it's not your favourite leave it behind. OK off you go. Aunty Liz and I need to talk."

So Rewa and I went off to pack, feeling like something huge was about to happen and not having much idea what it would be like. Finally, Aunty Liz came in to see us.

"Well, I've talked to Grandpop and we've agreed that we'll go away for a few weeks. Work owes me months and months of holidays anyway. If we find something we like, we stay, but if we don't, we can come back. So it's a kind of holiday eh?"

Rewa is always quick to spot a chance. She came up and sat on Aunty Liz's lap.

"Aunty Liz, if we're going to have a holiday in Auckland can we go to Rainbows End?"

The idea of visiting the kid's amusement park made Aunty Liz smile for a short moment.

"Maybe we can Rewa," she said, "maybe we can."

"And that's how we came to leave my home village," I told Sue.



Chapter Six: Reprieve

By the time I'd finished telling my story it was starting to get dark. A nurse had interrupted to tell Sue she would be moved to the Psych Ward tomorrow for assessment and, all going well, she'd be back home by tomorrow afternoon.

I was getting edgy. The day was nearly up and I had no idea where I would be sleeping that night. On one level that was good. If *I* didn't know, *they* sure didn't know either! Then just as the 6 o'clock news was starting on the TV, Kevin came in. After asking after Sue, and being told I was providing a lot of useful background information, he turned to me.

"Sam, there's been a bit of a development in the case involving you."

I looked surprised. Sue looked interested too.

"You have a lawyer. Actually a Queens Counsel, which is the most senior kind there is."

"Michael!" I replied happily. The message *had* got through.

"You *know* him?" Kevin asked, surprised.

"He's Dr Prosperov's English immigration lawyer. He has others."

He had also helped our family, and very well too.

"Well, because your Aunt signed a document making him your legal representative in her absence, he is temporarily also your legal guardian."

"But he's in London," I pointed out.

"No, he's on his way here," Kevin told me.

That was not a total surprise. Michael loved to fly – he had a large historical aircraft collection as well as his Dassault Falcon business jet.

"Anyhow it means that your accommodation's organised.

Apparently he's hired someone to ... um ... well ... mind you ... until he gets there."

"Who?"

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"I don't know. So long as you are safe and in the custody of a legal adult it doesn't actually matter for the moment."

That set off a silent alarm. Someone *did* know where I was sleeping that night and I *didn't* know them. Maybe I had been too relaxed about my uncertainty. But I didn't want to make a fuss just yet.

"Oh. What about Jaden?"

"Hmm? Oh, he withdrew his complaint. His story was hopeless. Um ... now could I have a quick word with Sue in private Sam?"

I wandered off to the ward reception. I wondered where Michael, Sir Michael actually, had put me up. I also wondered who my minder would be. I imagined some sort of heavy movie dude in a suit, with a fast car. On the other hand it was a risk because we had been betrayed by someone we knew. If it was one of *them* I'd have to escape. I wondered if I could get some new clothes. I felt a bit cruddy in the lost property bin stuff I was wearing. Also a bit naked. I didn't have any of our normal weapons. I felt nervous.

Kevin joined me and we made our way to his car. He maneuvered through the hospital, which was busy because it was drive-time, and we got out into the heavily congested evening traffic.

"Sue says you are really helping her," he told me.

"I'm just listening."

"And talking," he added, "she says listening to your story makes her feel better."

"That's good."

"Would you mind talking to her tomorrow Sam?"

"No problem. Though she has to see the Psychologist tomorrow. Is that to make sure she won't do it again?"

"Yeah."

"Kevin?"

"Yeah?"

"Is Sue going to lose her job?"

Kevin didn't say anything for a moment.

"It's complicated Sam. I hope not."

The traffic crawled slowly on. I noticed we were driving back into town.

"How's the case coming along?" I asked eventually.

"Well your friend Sir Michael Hamilton-Smythe Q.C is going to hold it up a lot."

"Why's that?"

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"He's insisting that there is, as yet, no evidence of a crime, so we are outside our jurisdiction treating what's left of Renwick House as a crime scene. We can investigate the cause of the fire but he says we need evidence there have been victims to treat it as more than missing persons. He wants access to the site."

That was strange. Kevin was wondering if Sir Michael was already in contact with Dr Prosperov. I knew that was not very likely because he didn't know much about us, really. Nothing secret anyway.

"You mean never?" I checked, surprised.

"Well, that depends on what the Judge says."

"When will that happen?"

"After the weekend probably."

"Oh."

"So how do you know this guy?" Kevin wanted to know.

"He visited Renwick a few times."

"What's he like?"

"Umm, well, he's nuts about flying. He gave us a trip in his business jet once and he loves air shows. There's an old Russian plane at that air show they have down south that gets him excited. Wanted to buy it I think."

"So he's rich?"

"Not as rich as Dr Prosperov, but yeah, he's pretty rich. He helps very rich Arabs or Russians move to other countries or buy islands and stuff."

"And English?"

"Yeess, but he's not old and crusty."

I thought a bit more about him.

"... Speaks Russian and Arabic, and, oh yeah, he likes Rugby. He went to school there."

"Tall? Short? Dark? Blonde?"

"Tall and blonde. Good looking. Blue eyes, very blue eyes."

"How old? Wife? Kids?"

"Oh, he's pretty old, about same as you."

Kevin chuckled.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm only 44."

"Yeah."

Kevin sighed, "So family?" he asked.

Reprieve

"He has a daughter, but he's not married now. She died I think. The daughter's a bit older than us, about seventeen, eighteen. I think she goes to school in Switzerland or something. Anyway, I've never seen her around, or met her. He has a picture of her on his desk though."

"How do you know?" Kevin asked me suddenly.

Whoops! I am going to have to watch this guy. I was getting sucked in there! I'd only seen the picture when I was bugging him one night for Dr P.

"On his plane," I lied quickly.

"Why were you on his plane?"

Man this guy is seriously on my case!

"He flew us to Northland for the non-mol...you know, where the judge says my father can't visit us," I said.

"So Sir Michael knows *you*? You're not just one of the crowd to him?"

"Yes. He actually helped us Kahus out with some legal problems we had with my father."

"For free?"

"To us," I shrugged. "Dr P probably paid him heaps. We couldn't, we never had any money. I mean it probably cost more for him to fly us to court than my Grandpop ever made in his life."

"Hmmm ... interesting man," Kevin remarked.

I could have said that compared to most of the people at Renwick Sir Michael was a rich playboy who knew nothing. But looking at Kevin I realised he still had a simple awe of people so much richer than himself.

"*You* could say that," I agreed.

Town came gradually closer. We passed under the high rises, negotiated the busy motorways and drove down the narrow streets until we came to..

"The Highgate," said Kevin.

We got out and a young man in a dark green uniform with a dumb hat came up and drove Kevin's car off to park it. I'm not much into international hotels. They seem like embassies of the rich and the greedy to me. We went through the foyer to the lifts.

"Officially, of course, you aren't a guest of the hotel. You're the guest of your minder, who is the guest of the hotel. My instructions are to take you to room 527 and so long as I'm comfortable that he checks out, and you're OK, to leave you in his care."

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We got into the lift. I was getting really nervous now. There was something here that wasn't right. Something was wrong. Not close by, but somewhere. It was just an instinct, but I take those very seriously. They've saved me quite a few times. If this guy was an Infiltrator I had to act immediately. Their mind control powers are way more powerful than mine.

"Kevin?"

"Hmm?"

"It's really good of you to look after me."

"That's OK, Sam."

I couldn't think of anything much, but I didn't want to have to track Kevin's place down the same way I had Sue's if it all turned to crap.

"Kevin?" I asked again as we got out of the lift.

"Yeah?"

"Could I have your home address and phone number?"

He looked a bit questioning.

"Just in case."

"Sure Sam."

I took his rather crumpled card out of my pocket. He wrote his number and address on the back, against the wall and handed it to me. As Grandpop had always told us, *always* have a back-up.

We knocked on the door. To our surprise a woman's voice answered it.

"Come in, it's open."

Kevin opened the door. It was quite a spacious room with a lounge, and dining area with a huge flat-screen TV, all in brown, white and gray. The last light of the day was streaming in the window, standing next to which was a tallish woman about the same age as Kevin, wearing a crisp, white suit with a purple, silk blouse, drinking a cup of something, looking out the window. She had long, dark wavy hair and sparkling brown eyes.

"Hi, I'm Leonora," she said in a casually English accent, nose in the air.

I didn't like her already.

"Detective?" she said coming forward and shaking Kevin's hand.

"Sergeant Cooper," he replied "Kevin."

And then the big glow for the cameras as her face broke into a huge smile and she fell on me in a way which told me she'd never had anything to do with teens in her life.

Reprieve

"And you must be Samuel," she said pretending delight.

"Sam," I corrected her quietly.

"Sam. Well you and I are going to have a jolly nice time together until Michael arrives. He's told me I have to spoil you rotten. Sounds like fun doesn't it."

"Yes," I admitted smiling. It jolly well did.

Best of all she was human, and, as far as I could tell, exactly what she said she was.

"Good ... so Detective?"

"Ma'am?"

"Do I have to sign anything?"

"No, but if you have a card I'd appreciate one. Sam is technically still a witness in our inquiry."

She gave him one of those huge fake smiles she specialised in. She was way better at it than Sue. I wondered if she was an actress.

"But of course," she replied and went to her bag.

She was a private detective. Her reading was quite clear. She was safe. Nothing to do with *them*. Sir Michael had sent her ahead. Her accent was fake, she originally came from Liverpool and her name had been Debbie. She'd been in the Police, briefly, then moved to London and joined a private detective agency, and after a while started her own company. She liked deceptions and was naturally nosey. She gave Kevin her card.

"I'm afraid it's not much use to you Mr Cooper. As you can see I work from London but my 'phone works here just as well."

Kevin was wondering whether Leonora was her real name, and what sort of other things she hired herself out for, but he remained friendly.

"Well, thanks very much. I suppose you'll be here and contactable on your cell?"

"Of course."

"Sam, I know Leonora wants to spoil you rotten and after the past few days I'm sure you're up for that, but I'd just ask you to remember Sue tomorrow afternoon."

He was really interested in seeing if he could get me to tell Sue everything he hadn't got back in the interview room.

"I won't forget Sue, Kevin," I assured him.

"Thanks," he straightened up. "Well, I'll leave you to your spoiling. Have a good time."

He turned and left. I felt vaguely abandoned.

Part One Initiation

"Well Sam, I imagine you're hungry," Leonora said picking up her bag, "what would you like to eat?"

She ushered me back out the door.

I almost said McDonalds just to confirm her expectations, but I wanted to enjoy a good meal again after a week of grabbed pies and rubbish. So, what with Cam's dad being the chef at Renwick, and because I'd learned a lot about different foods from around the world over the past two years, I decided to tell her what I really wanted.

"Vietnamese, but Thai's good too," I added trying not to be too difficult.

"Oh!" Leonora exclaimed, "And here was me thinking you'd want McDonalds!"

"There's plenty of Thai places in Auckland. Probably Vietnamese too if you know where to look," I told her.

We walked to the lift.

"I just ask the concierge, they usually have a worthwhile suggestion," she said, letting me in first.

And Leonora was right. The concierge had a suggestion not five minutes walk away. He called for us, and reserved the table in the name of Cartwright.

"So why do you like Vietnamese food, Sam?" she asked as we walked along the pavement. It was still sunny and quite warm.

"Because of Cam, my friend at Renwick and her dad who was the cook there."

"Oh I see. I thought you might have been there."

"I have, several times."

"Several times?" she asked in a half mocking sort of voice suggesting I was making it up but that she liked me anyway.

"Yes, but only once just for the food. Do you like it Leonora?"

"Me? Ah, well I don't really know. Is it like Thai or Chinese? I like them."

"You'll like it then, trust me."

We found the restaurant without too much difficulty. The best sign was most of the people eating there were Vietnamese. We were shown to a table by a pleasant waitress named Aimee who spoke English with an Auckland accent. I knew she was a student studying medicine. It was her parent's place.

Aimee asked if we wanted to order drinks. I asked for a Sugar Cane juice, and Leonora asked for some kind of French wine. We

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also got a plate of rice-paper wraps, spring rolls and prawn crunchies with sauces while we explored the menu.

Leonora was feeling chatty.

“So, Sam have they been treating you alright?”

“Yeah, it's not been too bad. I mean I knew it would be tough but the way I see it I have to just sit tight and wait it out.”

“So, you're sure that Dr Prosperov's 'disappearance' is ... um how can I say this delicately ... not ... permanent?”

“Very.”

“I think Michael's just a bit put out. Nobody let *him* in on the plan.”

“How do you think *I* feel?” I said, with a bit more feeling than I'd meant.

“Yes ... well, you have a point,” she admitted.

I was not going to say this to *her* but I was beginning to suspect that the community would not return until it understood what had gone wrong. Somewhere, there had been a security breach. And that meant that I had to regard everything and everyone as potentially suspect.

“Well, I suppose in the meantime we can probably have some fun with all the money,” she said.

“What money?” I asked pretending not to know.

“The money Dr Prosperov left in case this happened.”

“Oh, I didn't know there was any,” I lied.

“Thousands,” she said eyes flashing for emphasis.

I smiled. She was lying again. There were millions, but it didn't matter to me, I didn't need millions. But just to wind her up I put something new under her greedy, artificial nose.

“Is that the gold from all the treasure we collected?”

“I don't know,” she admitted, “what treasure?”

“There was a lot of treasure. Spanish, mostly.”

“Really? Oh, I don't think Michael knows anything about that. I'm just talking about Dr Prosperov's British bank accounts.”

“Well, I guess he has even more money tucked away then,” I shrugged.

I knew this would drive her nuts. People who care a lot about money are easily distracted by it.

“So when you say you collected treasure. What do you mean by that?”

Part One Initiation

"We went to some very out of the way places, picked it up and took it home. It was fun."

"How?" she said doubtfully.

"If you don't know I can't tell you," I smiled.

"Why not," she asked. She enjoyed this game.

"It's a secret," I told her.

"If it's a secret why are you telling me about it," she asked.

"Because it's fun," I smiled.

"But you might be just making it all up," she accused good-naturedly.

"I might," I agreed in a way she knew I wasn't.

"Have you told the police this secret," she tried.

"Hell no!" I laughed.

"Why not?" she faked surprise.

"Because in the first place they wouldn't believe it. And secondly because it's not going to help them."

"But if they wouldn't believe it, why should I?" she asked sulkily.

"Different motives," I smiled.

"What do you mean?" she asked, ready to be offended.

"A cop's job, as Kevin said, is to find out if a law has been broken and bring those who broke it to court."

"And my job?" she prompted.

"Is to spoil me rotten," I smiled.

She held up her glass and we clinked them, she wrinkled her nose up at me.

"You're pretty clever really, aren't you Sam?"

Damn straight.

"So what should we order Sam? I don't know anything about this."

"Well do you want a soup or dry food? The soups are full of stuff like noodles or vermicelli and meat and veg plus broth while the dry food is rice based ones with salads."

"Hmmm those soups look a bit risky to me."

"Well, they can be pretty hot, but the dry ones can be too," I said trying to be helpful.

"No, I mean risky for a woman wearing a white suit. It would be very easy to end up walking through Auckland with a big stain on my jacket and everyone would wonder where you'd picked up that grubby woman."

I laughed. She seemed to enjoy the effect. She closed her menu.

"So what have you chosen?"

Reprieve

"No idea, I'll get her to choose a salad for me."

It seemed to be my turn to ask a question.

"How long have you worked with Sir Michael?"

"Oh, we go back a very long way. He was the one who encouraged me to set up on my own."

"What's it like being a private detective?" I asked, wondering if it was a job I might like.

"Well, you know the TV shows?" she said as if sharing a secret.

"Yeah."

"Well, it's sort of like that but in very, very, very slow motion. So sometimes it's exciting and you're following someone or staking a place out but most of the time it's rather dull really: going through computer files, accounts, all that sort of thing."

"Do you ever carry a gun?" I asked playing up to her image of me.

"No, of course not dear, for a start it's illegal in Britain to carry a handgun and second I'm a terrible shot. No, if you want people who carry guns I am definitely not your girl."

"Good!" I said.

"You approve?" she asked, surprised that I wasn't disappointed.

"Yes, I don't like guns. They hurt people," I said, remembering.

Aimee came up to our table with a nervous smile. I ordered a chicken Pho with pickles in my best imitation Saigon Vietnamese which made her laugh, and Leonora asked her to pick a salad that wasn't too spicy.

"So tell me more about Dr Prosperov," Leonora demanded playfully.

"Oh, he's a genius. He studied Electrical Engineering at Leningrad University. Then he worked for the KGB."

"So he was a spy!"

"Yes, he was a spy when my Grandpop was a soldier."

"Then what happened?"

"He found a way using his spying techniques to make truckloads of money during the 80s in London."

"There were a lot of people doing that then," Leonora agreed.

"But it got him in trouble with his Government so they put him in Siberia. It's incredibly cold in Siberia in winter you know."

"I've heard."

"Anyway then there was a change of Government and they let him out."

"Perestroika," she guessed.

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"Yeah, that's it."

"But Dr Prosperov went to America and made a number of new discoveries which astonished even him."

"What were they?"

"Secret. But they made him heaps more money. Then got in trouble with something called the S.E.C which polices money over there. He often complained about them. Then he went to Switzerland made even more money and traveled a lot in disguise in Africa, the Middle East, India and Asia. Finally he came here and decided he wanted to set up a community here."

"Why here of all places?"

"He wanted to disappear and, as he said, New Zealand is a place the rest of the world forgets about because it's small, reasonably well off, and tucked down at the bottom of the Pacific where most people can't be bothered going."

"Can't argue with that. But what sort of community was he trying to establish?"

"A ... a different community."

"How was it different? ... Oh, I know, it's secret!"

"Yeah, I'm afraid it is."

"So was it a bit strange, this community?"

"Yes, we were all a bit strange."

Now it was her turn to laugh.

"Well, I suppose its true," she said, "you are a bit unusual for a ... how old are you exactly Sam?"

"Fourteen."

"Really. You're small for your age. But much cleverer than I expected."

"Yeah, I know. We're all small ... *and* clever."

Our meals arrived. For a while we ate in silence. It was great to taste the South Vietnamese flavours again. It brought back a lot of happy memories of Cam and her dad. The only problem with memories though is that you can't live on them. And the reminder only made me think more about my situation.

It had been ninety-three hours since the evacuation. How long would this last? Were they OK? I knew they weren't at risk from any dangers I knew about, but what if there were dangers I didn't know about? All we knew was that when the alarm went we had twenty minutes to destroy Renwick and get into the emergency transporter, but where that went, we had no idea.

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Also, off and on, I had been thinking about Ashley. The fact that she was tagged was central to the whole situation. It meant that she, or someone else, had been expected in DC. It meant *they* had Nathan pegged. That was a major worry in itself. If they were expecting one of us, it might mean that someone had a clue as to our mission. It was impossible someone had ratted us out because the only people who knew anything had the most to lose.

The only other possibility was that *they* had predicted where we would go. That meant *they* had to have some idea that of all the thousands of kids in D.C we would be interested in Nathaniel Robinson. That suggested that either *they* had somehow heard about the way Ashley had got him to his Grandmother, after he was attacked by his drunkard mum's boyfriend late last year – which was next to impossible. Or *they* were watching him for the same reason that we were: because they knew he had a strong chance of making President in forty years time. But if *they* knew that, it meant either *they* were on to our Mission, or someone who could manipulate *them* was. The only ones who could manipulate *them* were the Infiltrators. The Infiltrators were certainly annoyed with us and perhaps this was their revenge.

Ever since the police had announced my existence, *they* would have been working on a plan to catch me. *They* have agents everywhere who look like ordinary people but luckily, to a psychic, they are completely obvious. The Infiltrators are different. They've been here for centuries, but to us they were the more dangerous possibility.

This was the unsaid part of my chat with Leonora. She wasn't either, but was she working for them indirectly? That's what I wanted to know before I ended up going to sleep in the same hotel suite as her. The only way I could find out was go along with her and give her enough to make her show her hand before anything that I couldn't undo happened. So far I'd flashed money under her nose and she'd definitely shown an interest in that as any ordinary person would. That was good. It confirmed her readings. She was as simple as she seemed.

"So Sam, what do you want to do tomorrow?" she asked conversationally

That was an easy one.

"Go shopping," I answered.

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"Excellent idea," she enthused taking a mouthful of salad. And then after she swallowed that.

"What do you want to shop for?"

"Clothes. These are from the police lost property bin."

"Yes, they do seem a little ... used. Anyway that definitely sounds like fun."

"And I want to get a phone."

"That's another idea I approve of."

"And in the afternoon I want to visit my friend Sue."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

I thought at once of Emma. I hadn't called her in days. As soon as I got a phone I'd be able to do that.

"No, Sue's a policewoman I'm helping. She's on the investigation with Kevin."

"And she's your *friend*?" she asked, surprised.

"Well, she is now."

"That doesn't sound nearly as much fun."

"Well no, it isn't really, and it's actually a bit ... well it's just between her and me really."

"So you're saying you don't want me hanging around?" Leonora pretended to pout.

"If that's OK?"

She looked at me thoughtfully.

"Is she your plan B if your family are never are found?"

I was surprised to find that had been at the back of my mind, and she'd just guessed.

"Well, no, I mean ..."

"Go on, you can tell me. I won't blab," she blabbed.

"They will show up ..."

"But if they don't you'll need some adult to take care of you and ..."

"Look, it's a long way from that ..."

"It's OK Sam, I'm not jealous! Really! Michael just sent me here to make some inquiries and when he heard from you he thought he'd better do what he promised for Dr Prosperov. In the long term he isn't planning to adopt you. We're just looking out for you as arranged."

"Did Dr Prosperov make any other arrangements if he didn't come back?"

"None that I am privy to, Sam."

I must have looked a bit down.

Reprieve

“Cheer up Sam, Just think of me as your fairy godmother, with a very large expense account, here in your time of need.”

She so surprised me I decided to use the challenge codes “blue” and “maroon”. That would tell me if she were an ally. It took me a little while to think up a sentence so I pretended to think about my feelings.

“I guess I just feel a bit blue about being marooned.”

“Well, there are worse places to be marooned.”

Nope! She definitely didn't know the response words.

“That's true.”

We ordered dessert which involved chocolate for her and Chua for me. Then we wandered back to the hotel. I was now sure Leonora was not an agent of *theirs* anyway. The more I thought about it, the real question was why was a man like Sir Michael so interested in a single survivor from Dr Prosperov's community? If I were just a case of welfare he could hire a legal dream team of locals to represent me. Instead he was taking time from his business – which was not small – to fly his own personal jet – at who knows what expense – just to see an orphan on the other side of the world – why? It was definitely sus.

It seemed Leonora's job was just to get me comfy and receptive to whatever he was coming for. I doubted if she knew anything at all. If they were fishing for me and I was the fish, Leonora was the bucket of chum to get the water all bloody and me snapping at things. The hook would be in something else later on.

When we got back to the hotel it was about eight. I felt like an early night, so I was in bed with lights out by nine. It was kind of strange to be so comfortable. If you get used to grabbing sleep in barns, cells, foster care homes and sofas having a King-size single bed in a hotel room is actually a bit odd. So when Leonora checked on me at nine-thirty I pretended to be asleep. Then she made an interesting phone call.

She was quite quiet so it was hard to catch what she said but he seemed to want to know if I had anything with me. She said I didn't even have a case. I could have read her but I was so sleepy. Eventually it all started to jumble in my head and I found myself in an underground tunnel with the others being chased by a huge silver skull. There was this strange singing in my ears. The skull wanted our blood. I took a turn and lost the others and found myself following all these copper pipes of different sizes. There were

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hundreds of them and I knew I was in the basement of an airport ... Then it began to get cold and I knew a ghost was coming but I took a side door out of a cleaning cupboard. A plane was landing which I had to meet but I didn't know which gate, or the flight number. Then I woke up.

It was nice to wake up somewhere comfortable for a change. From my bed I could see out the window over the harbour. Today it looked a bit gray and it was nice to know that at least I wasn't under a bridge in Lima or living in a cardboard box in London. I was one of the lucky ones who was warm, secure and likely to have a good breakfast.

The room was still and quiet with Auckland harbour still spread out before me out the window. There were bright points of violet light like dust catching in the sunlight. Maybe the others could see me! I was a bit grumpy they hadn't tried to contact me, and then I realised with a shock, *I was suspect*. Someone had betrayed us and everyone had to be checked out – even me. And here I was in a fancy hotel!

It made me feel restless so I decided to get up. I slipped out of bed and pulled my clothes on. I was just doing up my laces when the suite door opened. I went to my own door to investigate.

It was Leonora in a tracksuit with a towel around her shoulders.

“Hello sleepyhead. Ready for some breakfast?”

“Yeah ... Thanks,” I said a bit confused.

“Just been down at the gym. Give me a few minutes for a shower and we'll go down to the café. Check out the TV, they've got channels for nearly everything.”

I sat down on the couch and picked up the remote. The news didn't interest me (I'd long ago learned the most important things aren't usually on it), nor did the brain-numbing cartoons, but there was a show on Orcas which I found interesting so I settled down to see what National Geographic had to say about them. It must have been interesting because I didn't notice how long Leonora took to get ready – she just suddenly was.

I confess I pigged out a bit at breakfast but there was so much that I liked and Leonora encouraged me to go for it. There was fruit, yoghurt, cereals, bread, pastries, eggs just about every way, bacon hash browns, ham, pancakes, sausages. I guess I hadn't eaten much for the past few days and I felt like making up for lost time.

Reprieve

“Well, at least when we buy your clothes they'll have to fit you with your tummy full,” Leonora observed.

So then we went shopping.

Now I'm not big on shopping for clothes. But I guess that was because we never had any money and shopping on the cheap is depressing. This was different. For once there was no shortage of money and unlike Auntie Liz, Leonora didn't care what I bought so long as it looked good and was fun.

And it was. Although she wanted me to get flashy stuff – I got a whole gangsta outfit because she thought it suited me. But I'm not into being a gangsta. I just liked the black hoodie and the shades. She was surprised I wanted to keep my cheap-looking watch and dragged me into a jewelry store just to have a look. Realising I might not get another chance I was bigger on the outdoors stuff. And if you want to spend big money on clothes? Man, can you go mad on outdoors gear!

Leonora had no idea about outdoors clothes at least approved of my being fussy and spending heaps. I got myself a very cool rain jacket, a well designed and tough back-pack, and some amazingly tough and comfortable hiking boots. The next stop was to Vodafone to get a cell. I made sure it was a pre-pay (Leonora wanted an account but I made a fuss and she didn't want to upset me) with user removable dual Sim card, weather proof, with GPS, a decent size screen and internet by every protocol they have. By lunchtime we had about 50kg worth of shopping bags, and we'd spent about ten K – which was more money than I'd ever had spent on me in my life. At my suggestion we then got me a Gift Visa card with \$1,000 loaded on it (which I then copied with the Omnicard when Leonora went to the bathroom).

We took a cab back to the hotel and had a quick lunch in the café. I was still digesting breakfast so I wasn't all that hungry at lunchtime. Then Leonora demanded a fashion show so we did that for about half an hour. I ended up in my high tech rainjacket, styly jeans, ultra comfortable boots and a cool wool top I liked.

“So what do you want to do now?” She asked.

“Well, I should go visit Sue.”

“You don't have to.”

“I want to.”

“Well OK, but Michael wants to catch up with us at dinner so be back by six.”

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“OK.”

She walked me to the lobby where there were taxis waiting. It was strange to suddenly have some control back again. Strange too because I wasn't doing anything so out of the ordinary for many rich kids all over the world – and yet it was all completely new to me. It made me suddenly realise how easy it is to live on the same planet with people and have no idea how they live their lives.

The taxi driver was Persian so we chatted about places in Iran we both knew, which surprised him a lot, but he didn't ask how I knew Tehran. When we got to the hospital I arranged for him to pick me up at 5:30 for the return home.

It took a while to find Sue. The psych ward was painted the kind of pink Rewa liked but which I could take or leave. I found Sue sitting in the canteen eating her lunch off a plastic tray and reading the paper. She was dressed but looked a bit down, like a balloon left over from a kid's party. I instantly felt bad I'd forgotten to bring her anything. Still, she cheered up a bit at the sight of me.

“Sam! I barely recognised you. You look ... well ... you look so respectable! What's happened?”

It bothered me that being poor didn't look respectable but I let it slide. I told her all about Leonora and my shopping trip. I asked for her phone number – even though I had it already – and showed off my new phone.

“Wow rags to riches in five days!” Sue smiled, obviously happy for me.

“It's only money Sue,” I told her, “Prosperov has heaps. He's just looking after me until he gets back.”

“Might this lawyer know where he is?” she asked. That was a question for Kevin.

“I doubt it,” I said, doubting it a lot.

We looked at each other for a moment in silence. I felt a bit awkward standing there.

“What will happen with you now Sam?” she asked.

“I dunno, I guess they'll try and put me in some fancy boarding school or something.”

“Well, you do need to get back to school,” she told me.

“How are you?” I asked her to change the subject, and sitting down.

“I'm OK,” she said, remembering a little too late to give me that fake smile.

Reprieve

"What's the matter?" I asked at once.

She looked a little vulnerable for a moment and then did the smile again.

"They say I can go home."

"OK," I said doubtfully. You didn't have to be psychic to see she was dreading facing her empty house.

She said nothing.

"Has Kevin been in?" I asked, wondering how her work was with her being in a psych ward.

"Yeah, he came in."

"Is he OK with you going back to work?"

"Well, he's sort of got me on light duties," she looked at me. "I'm looking after your case. He's got to do something else this week."

"Great!" I said enthusiastically.

"Well, it is different to my normal job, I guess," she conceded unenthusiastically.

"Ooh yeah," I agreed.

She said nothing.

"When are you allowed to go?"

"Any time really ..."

She paused, and now she was close to tears, "... actually I've been discharged since ten o'clock."

I wasn't that sure what to do. I wondered what would cheer her up. My first thought was shopping but she had a houseful of stuff and more crap wouldn't help. So I said something which seemed like a great way to stop her thinking about her loss.

"Great! Why don't you come with me to Rainbow's End."

"Sam, I don't..." she said being all grown up.

"Come on Sue, we'll ride the terror tower and eat hotdogs and be idiots."

"I've got to ..."

"C'mon, you can be monitoring your witness or something."

She was hesitating.

"I'll pay."

"Sam you don't ..."

"Beats moping around the Psych ward," I teased.

She smiled.

"Oh all right," she got up, then stopped.

"How do we get there?"

"I'll call Hussein."

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“Who's Hussein.”

“The cab driver.”

Hussein turned out to be busy so the cab company sent a Sikh dude named Maresh62 instead. He thought Sue was a truancy officer and I was a naughty school kid so he had a lot to say about the education system which I thought Sue was very polite to put up with. Anyway we quickly dropped off her bag at her work and then went to Rainbow's End, much to Maresh62's annoyance. He was even more annoyed when I paid the cab fare but his opinions didn't stop him taking my money.

Rainbow's End wasn't exactly busy at 1pm on a damp Friday afternoon so we got most of the rides to ourselves. We had a great time bashing each other on the Dodgems; I made her get on the rollercoaster; but she refused the terror tower. Then we bought hotdogs and played mini-golf where she completely wasted me. But about three the clouds rolled in, the rain came down and Rainbow's End wasn't any fun anymore.

I called a cab.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked.

“I guess I'd better get it over with and go home,” she said.

But the mindless fun had worked and she looked happier than I'd seen her.

The cab driver was very into his new satnav and kept pushing buttons on it as we went. Finally we got to Sue's suburb, her street and her house. She looked nervous.

“Sam, could you come with me?” It was a request, not an order, or a plea. Of course I said “yes”.

The place smelt a bit when we opened the door. I obviously hadn't managed to scrub out the smell of sick as well as I had thought but Sue didn't seem to mind. She opened the windows and walked through the place inspecting it like a crime scene. Then she sighed and led me to the kitchen and looked in the fridge. She pulled out a carton of milk, gingerly sniffed it and then poured it out into the sink.

“Would you like a drink Sam? I've got coke or coffee or tea but no milk.”

“Coke would be good thanks.”

She poured me a flat coke and put the kettle on for herself. I sat at the table and watched her. She seemed to be thinking a lot to herself and I let her collect her thoughts.

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"You know Sam," she said, "I was really lucky to meet you."

I chuckled to myself.

"What?" she asked.

"Lucky," I replied smiling.

"Yeah lucky. I mean I would ... I'd be ... and you, you somehow just help me now. I mean you make me feel ... different," she paused knowing she sounded kinda weird, even though I knew what she meant.

"You make me feel like there's hope. That's what it is. It's not just what you do and stuff, it's ... well, it's who you are as well." she stopped.

Deep down I knew what she was saying. My situation was worse than hers but I kept going. That inspired her. But there was more. She did youth aid, not just because she liked kids, but because she wanted kids of her own. With a difficult partner like Rachel that had been forgotten. But with her gone and me around she was starting to get in touch with it again.

"Do I sound like a raving loon?" she asked.

"Straight out of the psych ward," I replied, smiling.

We laughed. She made some coffee and sat down opposite me. She said nothing for a while, and then I decided to confide in her.

"You know how I was telling you about how I came to be at Renwick?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well Lucky was involved in that too."

"Lot of luck Sam," she corrected.

"No, I mean Lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"Well we didn't understand it at the time either."

"Understand what?"

"The relationship between Dr Prosperov and Lucky."

"Sam, you aren't making a whole lot of sense."

"Maybe if I pick up where I left off."

"Sure."



Chapter Seven: Dr Prosperov's Island

It was Friday after school that we loaded up Grandpop's old Toyota station-wagon and left the only good home I'd ever known. All we had was a full tank of gas, an old AA accommodation guide, a couple of suitcases and a few of our most precious possessions. The whole thing had a kind of strange unreality about it. I kept thinking at any moment I'd wake up, or we'd get a call to tell us Ax wasn't really being released and Grandpop's boat hadn't really been burned to the waterline. But the kilometres between where I was and everything I knew just kept mounting up.

The highway south seemed to be full of busy people and us escaping our home was just one story of many on that road that day. At about five we stopped at Wellsford for some pies and chips for tea, but Auntie Liz didn't want to eat on the roadside because just about everyone in the entire region seemed to be driving past, and sitting on a park bench there, would be very obvious to anyone who might recognise us.

Auntie Liz was very nervous and she was clearly in two minds about going at all. Rewa and me played "I-spy" and "Horse" until it got too boring. It was about six when we began to come into the outskirts of Auckland and the biggest traffic jam I had ever seen. There were cars *everywhere*. For Auntie Liz who was used to quiet country roads the huge jams just made her even more stressed-out than she already was. After about half an hour she was freaking. I spotted a motel near an off-ramp. Auntie Liz got us out of that traffic and up to that motel in no time.

There was nothing nice about the "Hibiscus Motor Lodge" at all. The rooms were gathered in two stories around a car park and the view was of the motorway. The place was painted a pink even Rewa found ugly, and everything was worn and run-down. We got a two-room unit with a room for us and a living area and kitchenette with

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a bed Auntie Liz would sleep in. The bathroom was tiny with a pink washstand and ugly tiles in the shower.

“Are we going to live here Auntie Liz?” Rewa wanted to know.

At the price the owner wanted Auntie Liz was very clear – the answer was no. We hunkered down in our room and watched TV that night and went to bed early. Unfortunately we were woken up by this woman in the next unit screaming. I asked Auntie Liz if we should call the police but she said “no” and it wasn’t long afterwards that the woman was giggling, and then stomping out the door in her high heel shoes. There were a few presences about the place but even they seemed to be no more than passing through.

I woke up early on Saturday morning with this strange feeling about the day. It was cool, but sunny, with a sense of promise about it which seemed completely wrong given our horrible unit. Maybe it was a premonition, or maybe it was just that I thought things couldn’t get any worse, but for some reason I felt sure that our luck was about to change.

We checked out early, loaded up the station-wagon and headed into the city. Even on Saturday morning the motorway was busy. We drove without knowing where we were going. Auntie Liz just kept following the motorway. The motorway kept heading South and before we knew it, we were crossing the Auckland Harbour Bridge for the first time in our lives. It felt kind of strange to come to the city and Rewa and I were looking around at all the tall buildings and the gray concrete. I didn’t know then, that as cities go, Auckland is quite small, with only a million or so people. It seemed enormous to a twelve-year-old country kid from the sticks.

When we got to the middle of town Auntie Liz took an off-ramp and we ended up driving around, looking about like visitors from Mars, or something. Finally we found a car-park and then, more importantly, we found a McDonalds where we could have breakfast.

We had probably had McDonald’s about twice in our lives before, so this was a real treat. Rewa got some little toy pony or something and I got stuck into a quarter pounder. Auntie Liz had bought the newspaper which was very thick on Saturday. She started looking through the jobs section. Rewa did the puzzles in the kids section while I looked through the houses section for something to do.

It was completely weird the way the ad jumped out at me. It was quite large and it said, “Wanted: Nurses, Baker-Chef, Groundsman-Gardener, Receptionist (multi lingual), Electrical Engineer. Free

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Accommodation and meals provided. Families welcome. Immigration assistance available.” Then it gave a whole lot of detail about Renwick House on Aotea Island. I showed Aunt Liz who was not having as much luck with the jobs section. Then she noticed something.

“Please apply in person at Meeting Room 5, Sheraton Hotel, Auckland at 11 a.m. Children most welcome.”

She checked her watch. It was 10:30! Where was the Sheraton? She asked “Mandy” and “Steve” at the McDonald's counter but they had no idea. So we borrowed the telephone book and got the address. Then we ran up the road to the big book shop on the corner and bought ourselves a map of Auckland.

It turned out the address we were looking for was just up the road from where we had parked. So we dragged Aunt Liz up the hill again to the hotel and got there, gasping for breath, at five minutes to eleven. We felt pretty out of place in such a fancy hotel but the meeting board showed us where to go and we soon found ourselves in a room with a lot of seats facing a front desk.

To our disappointment there were quite a few people already there. Everyone was sitting down quietly, wondering what would happen. There was mix of people in the audience with Asians, black people and a few Middle Easterners. To our surprise we were not the only children. Obviously the promise to help with immigration had attracted many of them.

Then two men came into the room. One was old, small and slightly balding with messy fine gray-white hair, and a fine gray goatee. He was thin and wore a dark gray suit and tightly knotted blue silk tie and carried an odd walking stick that was full of carvings in its twisting dark wood. He had big, deep brown eyes, set in wrinkled lids that looked like everything seemed funny to him. I remember trying to read him and got nothing but complexities I couldn't understand.

The man next to him was bigger, and far stronger. He seemed to ripple like a tiger when he moved. Although he wore a suit too, the shirt had a button instead of a tie. He was Asian with very high cheekbones, very pronounced eyelids and black eyes. He seemed a bit scary because he didn't say anything. Unlike the old guy he was easy to read, but he didn't really know what his boss was doing.

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At eleven o'clock the old man checked an old-fashioned pocket watch and stood up lazily leaning with both arms on the tables. His voice was strong but had a heavy accent.

"Is too many people here. Simplest to say all those without children please stand up."

A number of people stood up uncertainly.

"Thanking you for coming but first priority is for greatest need."

One man wanted to argue

"I've got kids, I just didn't bring them," he called out as he stood.

"Then you have somewhere else they can be," the old man said lazily.

"This is totally unfair," he said as he filed out.

The old man made no comment but his eyes held no mercy. I thought "he is one hard dude".

There was a fair degree of grumpy muttering about this but the heavy asian dude opened the door and stood next to it with his hands clasped in front of him. The old man remained where he stood, eyeing people with a look that told you he was not the kind of person you mess with. It looked like a pretty firm hint and it emptied out the room quickly.

"Now raising hands please. Who has nowhere to live?"

We put our hands up, like everyone else.

"Others, thank you for coming but clearly need not so bad. Leaving now please."

Once again there were more complaints but the Russian just stared and the people left.

"Please to lower hands," he instructed. Now he walked out in front of the table. I had thought that he had propped himself up on the table out of weakness but no, he was light on his feet. He pointed to a woman in the audience.

"Where are children?"

"I ... I left them at my sisters ... we've got to move out ..."

But the same merciless stare was directed at her and she finally got up and left crying.

The heavy dude moved back behind the table. The old guy walked up the aisle in the middle.

I caught his eye for a moment and for a split second there was a slight smile, almost of recognition. And the feeling of good fortune just swelled in me. I knew then we would be chosen.

He came back to the front and lightly half sat on the table.

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“OK, so how many nurses?”

Aunty Liz and two others put their hands up.

“State last hospital, nursing type and city,” then he pointed at a black woman with a daughter next to her.

“Martin Luther King Jr, Urgent Care, Los Angeles and a’fore that Lindy Boggs Medical Center, New Orleans.”

We all remembered Hurricane Katrina had struck New Orleans just over a year ago.

Everyone turned to look at her. She seemed very different to everyone else but she sat calmly, her eyes on Prosperov, who turned now to a younger white woman with a small boy.

“Te Aroha Community Hospital, elder care department.”

And finally Aunty Liz

“Whangarei Base Hospital, Community care, Whangarei.”

He nodded.

“Is no requirement for geriatric nurse,” he said looking up.

The woman looking very disappointed started to get up.

“Is to advantage to please wait outside,” he told her with a slight smile. Uncertainly, she got up and left, closing the door quietly behind her.

“OK, you two are nurses,” Prosperov resumed.

We were in! Although, I wasn't yet sure if we wanted to be.

“Requirement is for Baker Chef. Applicants please raise hands.”

And he went through all of them. He took no arguments and picked quickly just as he had chosen us. But he told a number of people to wait outside. Others he did not. Finally we had been whittled us down to six families. We started to check each other out. We certainly were a different bunch. There was us three Maoris, two black Americans, two Asians, two Arabs, Four Iranians, and one black and one white Zimbabwean. Five women, two men, five girls and three boys.

“Excellent!” the old guy said. “Is time for self-introduction. My name is Dr Gennady Achillovich Prosperov, and you probably tell I am Russian. My offer to you is simple. You work for me and live free at my house on Aotea island. Meals will be prepared by chef except on day off. All staff work six days on, one day off. Job description is simple: everyone helps everyone, to Housekeepers direction. Pay is same for all, that is double average local income. Paid annual leave is three weeks. If you want to quit please to give one month's warning. Immediate start. Any questions?”

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The black Zimbabwean man had one.

"Yes?" Dr Prosperov asked.

"Am I to understand that you are employing us as servants?" his voice sounded warm and strong.

"Yes and no. Yes under law. No, because purpose of my clinic is not my comfort."

Now the black American lady had a question.

"Sir, what sort of clinic do you intend to establish?"

He studied her for a moment as if assessing what her reaction might be.

"Parapsychology clinic."

I had no idea what that meant but it seemed to surprise the American who looked at her daughter. It seemed I wasn't the only one who looked blank so Dr Prosperov filled us in.

"Parapsychology is study of psychic phenomena. Includes mind-reading, remote-seeing, fortune-telling, ghosts etc. I am already expert, hence fortune. Where other research centres in Germany, Scotland, California study by experimental research I am interested in therapeutic research. My plan is for free Parapsychology Therapy Clinic for advanced psychics. Fortunately Government here like most Governments does not regulate parapsychology because is not classed as medicine. Thus I am free because house is not hotel or hospital. It is just large house. Your job to provide assistance to myself and guests. So to question, 'are you to be servants'? Answer technically yes, functionally no."

There was a kind of pause where everyone wants to say something but nobody knows what to say. Prosperov smiled. I liked his smile. It mixed cunning, caring and fun in one expression.

"Now time is," he looked at his pocket-watch, "... twelve twenty three. Lunch is in meeting room four in seven minutes. Please to excuse for brief moment."

He went to join the Asian man who handed him a briefcase. Then they went outside.

Almost at once everyone started talking. The main themes were: Is this guy crazy? Who is this guy anyway? Will he really do what he says? Where is Aotea Island and what is it like? When do we start? What is his house like? Can we trust him? Auntie Liz is usually quiet at times like this but she found the outgoing Iranian lady who was to be the receptionist, and the Zimbabwean man in particular agreed with her concerns. Most of us kids let the adults speak for us

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except the Arab-looking kid who seemed a bit full of himself and who kept saying we needed everything in writing. His father who was the engineer was a more patient man and kept telling Tarik to quiet down and listen. The black American girl who was called Ashley summed it up for me when she said to her mother that they were not in a position to inspect a gift horse's dental work. The feeling was one of excitement from the kids, and caution from the parents.

The Asian man came back into the room and opened the door, waving for us to follow him. We started to come out as a group, with every one chatting excitedly. I noticed the nurse and the small boy who had been sent out of the room were parting from Dr Prosperov. The nurse had tears in her eyes but looked very happy and was clutching a large brown envelope. The little guy looked confused while Prosperov had that smile on his face again. I thought to myself immediately, "this guy is alright".

As we came in we wrote our names on peel-off name badges with "Introducing" already printed on them and stuck them on our chests. It seemed to change the crowd from a collection of unknown bodies into a group of people. The lunch for the adults was on plates along the back wall of the meeting room where they could mingle and chat. The lunch for us kids was at a table, on top of which was also placed a laptop computer and a projector that was showing a slide show of Renwick House and Aotea Island. The funny thing I noticed at once was that while there was a large stack of plates at the adults table there was exactly the right number of kid's places.

The food was pretty much the same as the adults were having. Everyone had an orange juice. Sausage rolls, filled rolls, Asian things I didn't know then were Vietnamese, pizzas, slices and cakes. We sort of filled our plates from whatever was nearest. Even though I'd just had a big feed of McDonalds I wasn't going to pass up a chance to eat this lot.

Now I could read the names of all the other kids. All the bigger kids were about twelve, the same age as me. Ashley Robinson was the black American girl. She was about the same size as me, which was small for my age, thin, round faced with glasses, a kindly expression, shoulder-length hair in braids and her clothes were girly. Cam Tran was Vietnamese, even smaller, with sharp eyes, snub nose and short straight black hair. She was dressed like a tom-boy in a black denim jacket but very pretty despite that. Tahira

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Khadem was the Iranian girl. She was drop-dead gorgeous with shiny brown eyes, light brown skin, curly brown hair and a pink polo neck. Her sister Asal who was about ten, and if anything even prettier, sat next to her. She was the same age as Rewa and they looked like sisters. Both were light brown, with shoulder length curly hair, pretty eyes and dressed in pink. Scotty Khumalo was from Zimbabwe. He was small, blond with brilliant blue eyes and slight freckles on his white skin. He seemed to fill a very small space and not say much but when he looked around he seemed to be both out of place, patient and very determined to be here. Much bigger and louder was Tarik Gursoy. He was taller than most of us, but very skinny. He had short curly black hair, brown lively eyes, and a long, thin nose. He wore a silver bling necklace and a T-shirt. He seemed to be permanently twitchy and could hardly sit still but he was also the most outgoing and seemed to delight in talking to people just to see what they'd do.

"Hey Sam! Wotcha know 'bout this island, mate?" he asked me. He had a strange accent. Half English like someone on TV and half something else.

I said I'd never been there.

"Whatcha think about this guy, Prosperov, Sam? 'E on the level?"

He had the annoying habit of asking a question and not looking as if he actually cared what you said in reply.

"I think he's cool."

"Ya fink he's cool dyah mate? Anyone else 'ere fink e's cool?"

He was trying to get Tahira's attention but she was talking to Ashley about their flight out to New Zealand from Paris. Cam was more interested in the girl's conversation too.

"Hey Sco'y, mate! You agree with Sam, yeah? This guy alright?" Tarik asked turning to him.

Scotty shot me a look of bright blue. I was surprised how penetrating his glance was but then he went back to looking at the table.

"He's OK," he said quietly.

"OK ? OK? What's thaat? OK, good ? OK, so-so? OK, doesn't mean much, init?"

"He's good," Scotty said even quieter than he did before.

Tarik looked around at Prosperov then drooped down and put his hands out.

"Yeah, but isn 'e talkin bollocks about psychic 'ospital?"

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Then he sniffed and cleared his throat.

Scotty checked me out and for an instant we realised we were both reading each other. We both stopped, shocked and surprised. Tarik had put his finger on it. Dr Prosperov was a very strange man and we were a strange group of people.

Renwick house came up on the screen again. It was a big place, made of brick and wood. The slides said it had started out as an invalid's hospital for soldiers coming back from the First World War. It was built set in bush overlooking a beach on secluded, beautiful Aotea Island, a one hour ferry ride from Auckland City because it was thought the quiet would help soldiers recover. After the War it had become a quarantine hospital, then a mental hospital which was closed in the 30s. Since then it had been used as a storehouse by various farmers and finally by the Department of Conservation, but they had leased it to Dr Prosperov who had promised to restore it. The restoration was still in progress but most of it had been done up. It looked very grand. More like a museum than a house and it was hard to imagine anyone really lived there.

I didn't know anything about how adults got their jobs but I could tell from the way they had reacted that Dr Prosperov's method was far from normal. And how come he had known exactly how many places to set at the kid's table but not how many adults?

I didn't know the answer to Tarik's question but it bothered me and I could tell it bothered Scotty too.

Aunty Liz came over and knelt down by us.

"Well kids. What do you think? Shall we give it a go?"

She looked stressed but we could tell she was sold.

I nodded. "Couldn't be worse than the Hibiscus Lodge could it?"

"I don't know, but so far he's answered all my questions. He seems straight-up and it's not like he owns the whole island. If we want to we can simply go again."

"Well, I'm up for it," I replied.

"Rewa?"

"I think it's cool," she said.

"Right, well, I'll go sign up then," Aunty Liz decided.

Everyone did. There was a queue of them: Patricia Robinson the black American lady, a little fat, but tall, well dressed with short hair; Neat and tidy Mitra Khadem and her stern-looking mother Soraya; Fit and intelligent looking Bernard Khumalo with very short black curly hair in a loose shirt and cargo pants; Timid, thin

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and graying Mr Nguyen Tran in his dark blue jeans; and thin Dr Ali Gursay, with gold wire-rim glasses, slightly balding with a brainiac look, in a gray suit. They seemed an odd collection of people.

There was a brief pause as everyone sorted out how we would get to the ferry. Aunt Liz offered to take Ashley and her mum Patricia in our car because she wanted to get to know the other nurse. Finally we all broke up into smaller groups, with Dr Prosperov being driven off in a Shark-like, shiny black Mercedes by the Asian dude.

As we went to the car the first thing we noticed was that Patricia and Ashley had no luggage. The second thing I noticed was a presence attached to Ashley that followed her like a shadow.

"So how long have you been in New Zealand Patricia?" Aunt Liz asked, as we walked to our car.

"Waall, to be honest wid you 'lizabeth, we only been here since six this morning!" she said. Man, she was loud.

"Oh! So you came to that meeting almost straight off the plane?"

"Yeah! Crazy ain't it?"

Aunt Liz was too polite to agree out loud. We came up to our old car. It looked like the biggest heap of crap in Auckland. I imagined their gleaming American car back home.

"Sorry about the car, it's a bit of a mess," Aunt Liz muttered.

"Don't sweat it 'lizabeth. We down't care jus so long as we don't hav-ta walk."

We got in. Patricia sat in the front with Aunt Liz. I sat behind Aunt Liz, Ashley sat behind her mum and Rewa sat in the middle.

"Da only thing I cayan't git used to is dis driving on da left, it jus feels *all* wrong," she laughed.

"I suppose it would," Aunt Liz agreed.

"So how long have you been thinking about settling in New Zealand Patricia."

"'bout four hours."

Aunt Liz said nothing. It was obvious she didn't want to pry but the answers she was getting, had us all fascinated.

"Daddy cayme here one time," Ashley volunteered.

"Oh ..." Aunt Liz was just about to say something when it became embarrassingly obvious that daddy wasn't there. I knew at once who the shadow was.

"When did he die?" I asked, wanting to know.

"Sam!" Aunt Liz started.

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"S'awl right Elizabeth. My husband died two years back on active duty in I-raq."

Ashley was looking at me with interest.

"When d'your momma pass away?" she asked.

"Ashley where are your manners child!? " Patricia laughed, embarrassed." She obviously ain't dead is she?"

"Actually I'm their Aunt, my sister died eight years ago," Aunt Liz told Patricia.

"My father killed her," I added in case they wondered where he was.

"Oh my god!" Patricia said. "How awful!"

"Yes ... yes, it was," Liz agreed and she began to tell Patricia our story, more or less as I've told it to you.

But that was background to me and Ashley staring at each other, because we both realised we could both do the same thing, and until I'd met Scotty and Ashley I had never met another one. I don't think she had either. It was something we knew we wanted to talk about, but away from adults who might tell us off or try to keep us quiet.

The ferry was already busy for the weekend and it was only two o'clock. We had to get out and go with Patricia while Aunt Liz parked the car on the deck. The others had made their way by minivan shuttle and had formed a small group at the worn-out waiting lounge. The Iranian family had the most luggage, while Tarik and his dad also had a couple of large suitcases. I could not but wonder at how little Ashley and Patricia had, nor Cam and her dad, or Scotty and the black man with him. Eventually they let us onto the ferry and we pushed through to claim a seat. It was too busy in the lounge so we went onto the deck on the roof.

The ferry to Aotea has an open car deck on the bottom, a lounge over that and an outdoor deck above that. It carries about fifty cars at a time and it was completely full as we put to sea. It wasn't warm, but it wasn't especially cold either, so we all gathered around to watch the land slip away behind us in a trail of pale, bubbly seawater. I was surprised how fast the ferry moves and we kids started a watch for dolphins, which often hitch a lift on the wake, according to the video in the lounge.

In fact it was great to have a bunch of kids my own age to play with. Tarik was tearing around like a mad thing pretending all the small boats around us were pirates we needed to escape from and Cam seemed to find that attractive for some reason. Scotty, Ashley

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and me were half playing along at repelling the pirates and half looking for dolphins. For a while Tahira tried to sit with the adults and look pretty, but she got sick of being the only one listening to their boring talking and joined us. Rewa and Asal were looking for mermaids and dolphins on the other side too.

When the ferry hit open water it started to get a bit rougher and colder and the adults went down inside. But that left us with the whole deck to play on. We were having a great time with the waves bucking us about and it never occurred to me that anyone wouldn't. But down below it was a different story and Auntie Liz ended up spewing in a bag and looking very unwell. Auntie Liz came upstairs to get some fresh air again with Patricia, who also looked uncomfortable, keeping her company.

The whole trip took something over an hour and although it seemed to pass in no time to me, Auntie Liz complained it took forever. As we began to approach the island our games were forgotten and we became interested in looking at the place we had agreed to call home.

The island was quite large with hills at each end and a ridge down the middle that dipped like a horses back. The highest parts were in bush but there was also grass paddocks as well. As we got closer to the harbour at Port Carlyle we could see more and more houses. The village seemed to be about the same size as the one I'd known back home.

The ferry approached the dock with the kind of casualness which showed the driver did this all the time – which he probably did. It seemed too fast but it turned out to be perfectly timed and the front ramp of the ferry was lowered on to the dock in no time.

Everything felt as if time seemed to be going too fast for me. I hadn't got used to the idea of leaving Grandpop yet and here we were arriving somewhere new to live. I guess I wasn't the only one feeling that way. Everyone was looking a bit uncomfortable and grumpy – and it wasn't just from feeling seasick. We trooped off the ferry, down a gangway and found ourselves in a pretty empty parking lot. Most other people were getting into their cars and driving off. Auntie Liz would meet us once she'd driven off the ferry but after that we had no idea what was going to happen.

Just as we were wondering what we would do a big yellow American style school bus drove up into the carpark at some speed and braked noisily just short of where we were all gathered. The

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doors opened and a very small Asian woman with bright pink strands in her hair, bead wristlets, a silver nose stud, wearing a Bob Marley T-shirt leant out the door and casually shouted:

“Awwrr aboard for Rlenwick House!” and disappeared back into the bus.

Everyone starting filing up the steep stairs past the driver who seemed far too small to be allowed to drive, but who seemed very pleased to see everyone. Aunty Liz finally drove up into the car park and recognising us drove over to where we were all boarding the bus. I stood with Rewa at the bottom of the stairs unsure what we should do.

“Hey kids, you coming to Rlenwick?” the driver asked.

“Ah yeah, but our Aunt's coming in the car.” I told her.

She made a noise of understanding and with surprising speed leapt down the stairs past us to where Aunty Liz was getting out of the car. I was amazed to notice that although she was an adult she wasn't bigger than I was. Still she moved with speed and determination as though the rest of the world was stuck in slow motion.

“You want to follow to Rlenwick?” she asked Aunty Liz.

Aunty Liz seemed a bit surprised by this lady's appearance but replied that she did.

“Cool. It's narrow gravel road and Betty,” she nodded at the bus “kick up rots of dust, so you hold back out of cloud and keep lights on. You OK on gravel?”

“Yeah,” said Aunty Liz who only drove on gravel back home.

“OK kids, who ya wanna go with, mum or me?”

“Aunty Liz, can we go on the bus?” Rewa pleaded. Like me she already thought this tiny lady was the coolest adult she'd ever met.

“OK,” she agreed

“Cool! Ret's go!” the woman yelled punching the air.

We ran up the stairs

The bus's engine roared to life and a split second later the bus was filled with this disco song about being excited. “Yeeehah!” yelled the driver who had a microphone plugged into the PA and took off at surprising speed.

The upbeat happiness of both the driver and the music was catching. People who had seemed a bit down a few minutes ago suddenly had smiles on their faces.

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"Hi new pepul. My name is Mariko and I'll be your driver and d.j for this trip to Rlenwick House."

She paused for the beat of the music.

"The shit tip we're driving through is Port Carlyle. Velly small brains!" she held her finger and thumb up about an inch apart above her head. Everyone laughed. She paused again.

"Journey take 20 minutes. Average speed 20."

She paused for the music again.

"That's kay not miles. Road ? Hah !"

The bus roared up the hill through Port Carlyle music blaring. We crossed the ridge and then down the other side through a series of bays filled with houses, shops and cafes.

"This tourist beaches for surfers."

The brief bit of speed did not last long. We started to climb a big hill, the bus roaring up the narrow road. At the top of the hill the seal turned to gravel and the bus swung along the twisty, potholed road. The ride was exciting, scary, fun and interesting. We were all looking out over the island taking in the scenery. There was a lot of grass but there were also hillsides covered in gorse and ferns. In some places there were forests. You could always see the sea which looked big blue and wild, and there was the odd hint of fantastic beaches. You couldn't see a thing out of the back of the bus. It was just a huge cloud of dust. I hoped Aunty Liz wouldn't have too much of a problem following us.

We took a fork in a road and began following *another* ridge which branched off the main ridge of the island. We were still in sheep country but as we got closer to the sea we came up to a small church that overlooked the sea and then down into a pine forest as we zigzagged down the side of the hill.

Suddenly we pulled out of the pine forest and drove into a sheltered bay and there right next to us was Renwick House, against the pine trees looking out over the shingle, and white sands of the beach out to sea. To me it was ginormous.

Mariko drove the bus right up to the front steps and killed the engine and the music. The sudden quiet caught up with us like the dust cloud that had been following us. It was almost alarming. Now all you heard was the breakers roaring up the sand. Everyone was looking around with butterflies in their tummies.

"Home sweet home!" Mariko yelled and threw herself down the stairs. Outside she yelled again.

Part One Initiation

“Gunter! Gunter ? Where are you baby?”

I felt disorientated getting out of the bus. I think we all did. I looked around at the bay. It was quite deep and so sheltered but we were still getting warm orange afternoon sun. In front of Renwick House, which was big and made of brick and looked all old and pointy with fake turrets and things, was a lawn. The lawn ran to the shingle which blocked the view of the beach. To the left facing the sea was a stream, which cut through the middle of the bay and further round was an old lighthouse. To the right were a lot of rocks and a small cliff but on top of the cliff was what looked like an old fort from a war.

Just as Auntie Liz drove up, out of the front door came a biggish man with thinning blonde hair, a goatee, round pebble glasses, wearing a purple polarfleece, a carpentry belt, olive green board shorts, and sandals. This was obviously Gunter, and he introduced himself to all the others, shaking their hands and smiling a lot.

Then an old woman appeared at the doorway and came out to join us. She said her name was Deirdre Jones. She had pale white skin that showed blue veins, with messy gray hair and dressed in a gray cardigan, and pleated gray skirt with a big pearl necklace. She had a black shawl and a plain face and looked very frumpy but she spoke with a musical accent. I liked hearing her and Bernard, who was Scotty's black guardian, talk together because they both had nice accents.

I was listening in to the adults talk, when Ashley tugged my arm and pointed quickly up at the house. I followed her gaze up to the gallery of windows that looked out over the beach. Looking out of the windows at us, I could see the face of a man sneering out at us. I looked along the gallery and then I saw something that chilled me. It was another face – or should I say, half a face. The mouth was twisted, the nose smashed and one eye had completely gone. It was all an awful red suggesting it had been burned. Then it noticed me and simply vanished. I looked for the other face but that had gone too.

Ashley slipped close to me. She looked worried.

“You see 'em too?”

I nodded.

So now we knew what was wrong with the deal. Renwick House was seriously haunted.



Chapter Eight: A Little Chat

“Sam, why didn't you tell us everyone's names and descriptions? Kevin was right. It's *important*,” Sue said with gentle disappointment.

“Because it could kill people,” I said seriously.

I must have said it right because she didn't try and tell me off.

“*How?*” she asked, thinking about it.

“Russian crackers. Would you bet *your* parents' lives that the New Zealand Police computer system could not be hacked by the best Russian crackers money can buy?”

“Umm...” her eyes flicked as she thought about it.

“Because if the fire had *anything* to do with the Russian underworld that's what you're asking me to do. Those guys don't just kill their *targets* you know, they kill *everyone*. Brothers, sisters, children, cousins. Now I *know* my family aren't dead and my guess is they're all safe somewhere. But if that information gets out I'm worried a lot of people somewhere else could die and it's not worth the risk to find out the hard way. So if you want me to keep telling you this stuff you have to promise me you won't write it down.”

Sue looked serious. Then she sighed.

“Oh, alright.”

She was thinking I didn't know that she had an excellent memory. There was a pause as she realised I must have one too.

“How do *you* remember all this stuff so clearly, anyway?”

“I have total recall.”

“*Total?*”

“Yes.”

“You can remember everything that happens to you?”

“Yes.”

“Everything you *ever* saw or heard?”

“Uh-huh.”

“How accurate is my wrist watch?” she tested me.

I'd seen it in the interview room. I could see it and the official clock.

"It's five minutes fast. Do you keep it that way?"

Sue was impressed.

"And you do that by memory?"

"Yeah, you had it on in the interview room."

She nodded.

"So you remember absolutely *everything*? Does it go with being psychic?"

"No. I didn't always have it. I ... well ... of course just because I *can* recall everything doesn't mean I do. If you didn't ask I wouldn't bother. It takes a lot of concentration."

"It explains why you can remember so much detail and keep speaking with accents."

She paused, then looked around her house and sighed.

"But I've spent so long listening to you I haven't even begun to tidy up," she said.

"Do you want me to help?" I offered.

"No, thanks Sam, it's OK."

I could tell she needed privacy for that.

"Well, I suppose I'd better go back," I said.

"Yeah."

"Sue, can I come back and tell you more?"

"I was hoping you would," she said. She sounded a bit official – even to herself.

"It also helps me take my mind off things," she added.

And then she hesitated a little before adding,

"I was thinking of going out to look at Renwick myself. Seeing as it's now my case and I haven't been out there yet. Would you come with me and show me around?"

"Sure. When do you want to go?"

"Monday, I need to pick up some things from the station."

"Cool."

I hesitated.

"Will you be OK for the weekend?" I asked.

I felt a little silly asking an adult police officer that, but she didn't mind.

"Thanks Sam, it's sweet of you care. I'll be OK, I've got to go see my parents, and I want to catch up with some of my friends."

A Little Chat

I got an impression.

"Don't chase after her," I warned, "It'll hurt you."

"I won't," she said, but I could tell she found that advice annoying.

I was fairly sure she was going to find out Rachel had left her for someone else and I knew she would take it hard.

"Call me if you want to," I suggested.

"Or you," she said.

So I called a cab. She got started on her tidying and I waited. When the cab arrived, to my surprise, she gave me a big hug.

"Sam, you're a great kid. It was really nice of you to take me to Rainbows End. It was just what I needed and it reminded me how much I like kids. But don't forget you aren't an adult. You're allowed to goof off and have fun. Take it easy and I'll see you on Monday."

In the back of Alan176's cab I thought about what Sue had said. It was true. When I first went to Renwick I'd played a lot more with the others but as the months had gone by we'd played less and less. Now I was on the run from aliens and was about to go out to dinner with an expensive lawyer and a P.I who I suspected of working for them. My closest ally was a woman police officer. Everyone around me just seemed a tad too dull. I wished I could call Emma but if I got her parents they'd hang up on me. Her dad thought I was "a bad influence".

When I got back to the hotel I called Leonora to ask where she was. It turned out she was upstairs in our suite. She opened the door and left it open with a casual

"How was your friend?"

"Much better thanks."

"Good! Michael called, we're on for dinner at seven."

She went back to her room and put her laptop back on her lap.

"Oh, OK," I commented and went into mine.

By now my breakfast had worn off and I was actually quite hungry. I wasn't sure how I could get a snack before seven. To pass the time I decided to try calling Emma. It was six o'clock on Friday, which was usually take-out night. I made the call but all I got was the answer-phone and I didn't think it would be a good idea to leave a message.

That left me alone with my empty stomach for an hour. What to do? I decided to tune in on Leonora and see if I could catch anything. I discovered she wasn't thinking about me at all. She was

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e-mailing her friends about a party back in London in a week's time. As far as she was concerned her job here would soon be over and she was going back home.

Her careless self-centredness depressed me because it made me feel more alone than I had done until now. If she'd been plotting something evil at least it meant I was important. But she'd had as much fun as she expected to get out of me and she wanted to move on. That I still didn't know where I was going to live, and I still didn't know where the others were, wasn't her problem.

The next half -hour was a kind of food-less torture. I lay on the bed thinking about how nobody really cared about me and for all the stuff I'd bought that morning I was still alone in the world. Then I heard a cupboard in the lounge open, a tearing sound and Leonora appeared at my door eating potato crisps.

"Better get ready for dinner. If you want to use the bathroom, better do it now because I want to have a shower."

"Could I have some please?" I asked pointing at the crisps.

"Look in the minibar, help yourself," she shrugged simply.

I opened the cupboard and there was a whole heap of junk food. I changed my mind and took a Mars bar instead. It felt fantastic to get some food back in me again.

Leonora disappeared into the bathroom and turned the shower on. I suddenly realised her laptop and phone were unprotected. I thought about this for a second and then realised this wasn't actually *my* thought. Leonora didn't interest me at all because she wasn't in on anything. But thoughts are catching and sometimes if someone thinks about something hard enough about you the thoughts echo outside their own mind. Sometimes you can find yourself saying or doing something which you wouldn't normally do, just because the thought is there. I'd fallen into that trap before. It was something Dr Prosperov had warned us about.

To test my theory out, I snuck out of the lounge and into my own room to get changed as quietly as I could. I decided that if Leonora suspected me, I may as well dress the part and be a gangsta. I changed my trousers first, then pulled on my new black hoodie, the black basketball shoes, took the shades out of the case and put them on. It was fun to wear this sort of outfit again, even though it couldn't *do* anything. There was no mirror in my room so I went back into the lounge to find Leonora, wrapped in a towel sneaking

up purposefully on her room's doorway, the sound of the shower in the distance.

"What d'ya think," I said.

My sudden appearance where she hadn't expected me, made her jump, with a little squeal – a picture of girly shock. It was funny, although I noticed her reactions were pretty quick, and she could obviously handle herself in a fight. I made out as if I was pleased with the outfit to cover my smile.

Leonora straightened up again.

"I thought you were a burglar!" she said clutching her chest.

"No," I said pretending disappointment, "I was trying to be a gangsta."

"You need to wear the bling then, dear," she said.

Then she went into her room grabbed a bottle of something and went back into the bathroom.

I really don't like bling so I wasn't going to wear any. Tariq liked it, but me and Scotty thought it looked *skeef* (bent). I did like the hoodie though.

As Leonara relaxed into her shower I decided I would slurp her laptop's hard-drive rather than her phone's Sim. Sim's give you warning but hard-drives give you history. There was something odd about the fact that she had got here before Sir Michael and there might be a clue in her emails.

The laptop was still switched-on lying on her bed. I picked up the remote. I could change the channel from the bedroom! I switched on the TV and slipped into the bedroom, took off my watch, opened it and jammed it over the firewire port. The gel stuck on and started to glow. After loading the trace program the disk began spinning fast. I changed channel, then again and again, and again and again. I slipped into the lounge still changing channels to comment.

"Man this is crap."

I flipped until I found the Deutsche Welle with a documentary on the Tuareg. That was different so I let it run. I guessed it would take five minutes to slurp the disk. I started counting from three hundred quietly. Grandpop taught us you had to say it aloud to yourself to make sure you kept the rhythm you kept it real. Then just as I got to two hundred seconds Leonora turned the shower off. My watch was still in there! I had to force myself to keep counting and listen. My heart rate was creeping up. I got up and went to my room to get some of the bling Leonora had bought me. I put that on

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the couch back as if I was trying it on and slipped back into her room. The watch was still running the disk hard but I had no choice. I unpeeled the gel from the port and closed it up, before putting it on. I got to the couch just in time to lift up an ugly silver necklace in front of me when Leonora opened the door.

“I dunno, what do you think,” I asked as she passed by.

“Looks fine to me,” she said passing through.

The laptop had stopped running hard but I noticed it had moved slightly. Luckily the watch stops anything upsetting the screensaver so that was still on. I hoped Leonora didn't notice anything but I knew better than to freak out about it. As Dr Prosperov said, just because you can pick up others' thoughts, don't imagine your own are always that secure either.

Finally Leonora had put on her jewelry, eyeliner, lipstick, foundation, powder, blah bah blah, and got herself ready. I realised she was making a special effort for Sir Michael and she did scrub up well. By contrast my black shades, hoodie, jeans and trainers looked a bit casual but I wasn't too fussed, and as far as Leonora was concerned I was a specimen of local teens which she thought of as another species.

We took a cab to the restaurant which was in the middle of a park, quite a while from anywhere. I was a bit nervous about meeting Sir Michael. He was a good man and had helped us with Ax, which was why I had messaged him. But I also knew the reason why everyone had evacuated was we had been betrayed.

I felt a cold nervousness as we nosed through the gates and along the long drive through darkened trees and lawns. Sir Michael hadn't known anything about our operations but it was always possible he too had been compromised and I wasn't entirely sure what I was getting myself into.

Despite the fact the restaurant was quite busy climbing up the stairs to a private room in a restaurant in the middle of a park felt a bit isolated. I wondered how far I could get if I needed to escape.

Sir Michael was gushy when he met us, calling Leonora “darling” and kissing her, then shaking my hand in the way adults do when they want to you to pretend you're like them. It was a large room for only three of us in an old wooden house that must have been important once. The wallpaper was yellow with small square patterns in dark green and the light-bulbs had a hard time not

making it feel dim. It felt like a place where people had made hard decisions.

Sir Michael was boringly dressed in a dark gray suit, white shirt and violet silk tie. We settled down to drinks – wine for the adults, coke for me – and bread with dipping oils.

“So Sam,” he began with fake cheeriness, “has Leonora been looking after you?”

You didn't have to be psychic to see something was eating him. He was just too intense. I began to start reading him, aware that he might be in trouble.

“Yes, thank you Sir Michael,” I said with my best manners. And then thinking something more was needed added, “At least I have some clothes now.”

“Well, that's better than the alternative isn't it?” he laughed.

I shrugged and grimaced. It might be a joke to him but it wasn't to me. Then he went on. He kept talking to keep me out. His mind was on practicalities but I knew this was a distraction. He'd been told to do it. There was a shadow of a mind over him. One that scared him.

“Anyway, it's a start. Now, I know Dr Prosperov had a lot of respect for you children, and especially you Sam, and while he, and your Aunt are ... well ... wherever they are ... my duty is to take care of you in a fashion he would approve of.”

He paused to bite some bread, then went on.

“So far the New Zealand authorities have been reasonably cooperative. I've met with your social worker who tells me you are seeing a bit of the youth aid police officer assigned to your case?”

“Sue, yeah,” I replied with my mouth full. I was still trying to get a reading. I figured the more talking he did the easier that would be.

“Well, as far as they are concerned as long as someone is acting *in loco parentes* and you are cooperating with authorities they don't really have any need to worry about you.”

That was like a little warning bell, but I kept listening. I had been *trying* to worry the authorities for five days. I hadn't slept in the same bed once. It was the best way to make sure *they* didn't grab me.

“So the next concern is obviously your long term care ...” reading my face he corrected himself “... or at least until your Aunt returns ... and your education.”

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I must have made another face which Michael responded to at once

"Yes, I'm sorry young man, but you are legally obliged to go to school."

What a bore that was.

But at least a school would want to know if I vanished, so from a safety point of view they could replace the welfare people. Still, to go from endless free time shopping and having fun, back to school had to be a downer. Sir Michael was still talking.

"Fortunately, of course, we get to choose the school. We are talking about a boarding school, of course, Sam. Much as I'm sure you could enjoy living in the Highgate we all have to come back to Earth some time. So, over the next few days we'll visit some schools in the city and decide which one you like the most."

"Yes sir," I answered miserably.

"Well, as I say we can't have you missing out on an education. And your welfare officer says that while you seem to have excellent maths and general knowledge for your age, your grammar and writing need work. So we'll have to find a place that can help you with that. I don't suppose you've given any thought to a career yet?"

I was lost. "Um ... you mean like a job?" I guessed.

"Yes."

"Uh ... well ... I ..." I had once thought of being a policeman but after they arrested Grandpop I'd kind of got over that, and never thought about it since.

"Never mind," he interrupted, "you're still young, plenty of time to think about that. I wanted to be a pilot when I was a young man. I didn't become a commercial pilot but I did learn to fly in the end. The main thing Sam, is to keep your options open. Learn everything you can. Never let anyone tell you, you can't do something. There is always a way."

"Yes sir."

What a jolly bore this was.

He studied me for a moment. He seemed to be gathering his thoughts after this onslaught of organising my life.

"You know Sam, I don't know if you realise this but Gennady was a very interesting man. Some people regard him as an electrical genius to rival Tesla. But his genius also extended to financial markets as well. He had ... has ... a fairly large fortune. He has taken

some rather unusual market positions which will double it if they come off.”

The oil plays. I knew about those.

“And yet he came here to this (and I hope you won't mind me saying this about your homeland, Sam) fairly insignificant little country to provide a hostel for an unusual assortment of people. What was it all about Sam? Do you have any idea what he was doing and where he's gone?”

I hadn't got far with the reading but I already knew Sir Michael was bugged and this question was for *them*. He was compromised and that meant I was in trouble! If he had all these legal rights over my life I could end up disappearing in a bright silver disc having my brain pulled apart. I needed to find a way to get out of here. I decided to try misleading him. I had been thinking about a better challenge sentence all afternoon.

“I don't know. For all I know he's gone off into the wild blue yonder with one of his mates on some megayacht leaving me marooned,” I said pretending to be depressed.

“Ah ...” Michael said recognising the challenge words. He sat back for a moment then he looked at Leonora as if something had occurred to him. “Leonora, would you be a diamond and find the waiter, they seem to be leaving us in the dark.”

Leonora realised something was up, but also recognised she'd been asked to leave us alone, so got up and slipped out while Sir Michael eye-balled me. He felt pleased with himself, both for himself and his sponsors.

Unfortunately for him he hadn't passed the test as well as he thought. “Dark” and “diamond” was the lowest security response to “blue” and “maroon”. Dr Prosperov had made diamond the lowest level because it seemed highest. That way anyone with the lowest response code would think they had the highest and wouldn't think to try fishing for others like “pearl” and “dawn”. A spy might have guessed that, but judging from his clumsy response Sir Michael was no spy.

As the door closed behind Leonora Sir Michael was all ears.

“Well, it's not that hard Michael, we were building a fortune using our psychic abilities to predict the future. The oil play you mentioned is an example.”

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Sir Michael looked at me shrewdly. I knew from that he already knew more and realised the password he'd used wasn't the key he'd hoped for.

"I surmised as much," he replied. "So he was building on his earlier work in London. But you were from all over the world, how did he find you all?"

This was a throwaway question. He wanted to keep me off guard. He knew my sensitivities made me dangerous.

"Takes one to know one, Sir Michael. Dr Prosperov is sensitive himself," I lied.

"But why children?"

And that was a genuine question everyone wanted to know the answer to. And now I had a strong impression that Sir Michael was a *double agent*. He worked not only for *them* but also for the *Infiltrators*. I answered his question according to the script.

"Dr Prosperov told us that most adult psychics had made their problems worse. A lot of them are drunks or performers or both. Dr P brought some to Renwick and they *were* pretty hopeless. They aren't reliable and he wanted to train us before we got bad habits. But, there were some adult psychics who visited us."

"Do you think any of *them* had anything to do with his disappearance?"

That was another unbalancing question to keep me talking. I could see he was an expert at talking. Way better than I was. I decided to close it down.

"No, not really."

"What about Professor Lana Vilenskaya?"

And the sharp way he asked that suddenly made me very nervous. I had to feign disinterest.

"No, she's just his old friend from Russia."

Then acting on a guess.

"Have you met her?"

"Of course I have, Sam," he said in a way that chilled me to the core, "It was I who helped her leave the Soviet Union twenty years ago. More recently she's been providing consulting services to some friends of my daughter."

Oh shit. I felt sick. I knew at once he was talking about the *Infiltrators*. There was something very bad lurking here. He was secretly trying to tell me something.

"Do you think Lana might know where Dr Prosperov is Sam?" he asked quietly.

That was a double question. If he knew her background it could mean he knew Dr Prosperov was with "our friends". If he didn't it would mean he meant Russia. I couldn't give anything away.

"I don't think she was involved in his business Sir Michael. He was working on oil and gas with Gazprom. I've tried to tell the police as carefully as I can that he had powerful enemies in Russia."

Sir Michael seemed to like that answer.

"So you suspect Russian Oligarchs?" he asked raising an eyebrow.

"Why stop with the Oligarchs?" I muttered.

Leonora reappeared with a handsome Maori waiter whose company she seemed to like.

"This could go all the way to the top," I continued raising my voice.

"Ahh there you are, Leonora. Now, I think we are ready to order," Sir Michael smiled.

I wasn't. The menu made no sense to me at all. It may as well have been written in Hungol. The other two ordered quickly enough but I was stumped. I asked for explanations of what things were and that didn't help much because they seemed to be making a lot of something as simple as steak and mash. Cam's dad didn't need fancy words to make delicious food, he just cooked it. In the end the waiter said he'd ask the cook to make something special for me. I was OK with that, although I was pretty sure I was going to get fries and a burger. At least it was food.

"So has this police officer told you about any progress on Dr Prosperov's case Sam?"

"No, all I know is they haven't found any bodies."

"Nor did they recover any documents as far as I can tell. I have impressed upon them my power of attorney should any show up," Sir Michael pressed on.

Then he stopped and looked at me carefully.

"Sam, I'm going to let you in on a little secret."

"What's that?"

"I have reason to believe that Dr Prosperov was involved in a little more than making money from psychic research."

This was interesting. He wanted to stop the dance and go up a level. He was being told to move things along by *them*.

"Oh? Who told you that?" I asked quickly.

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When anyone is asked a direct question everyone thinks first of the true answer. For a psychic this flash of insight is gold. It came to me at once. It *wasn't* one of them but someone I already knew. Someone close by who was hunting me using Sir Michael like a worm on a hook. The relationship was quickly suppressed. Sir Michael knew what I was doing and they don't make people Queen's Counsels for nothing. He ignored the question to put pressure back on me.

"I believe that he was experimenting with extra-terrestrial technology."

This was hard to resist. The whole place was built on extra-terrestrial technology.

"What does extra-ter-rest-ial mean?" I asked, playing the dumb Maori kid, and buying time.

But Sir Michael wasn't buying that. He leant forward, studying my face closely.

"Not - of - this - Earth," he said slowly and clearly.

"You mean like aliens or something?" I answered feeling rather uneasy, picking at the breadcrumbs on my plate. He was piling the pressure on.

"Yes."

The door opened and the waiter came back in to refill glasses. The brief distraction helped. I realised he would be able to tell if I was lying straight away but I might be able to put him off the scent with a distraction. I waited until the waiter had gone again.

"I could believe it," I admitted.

"Why's that?"

"Well, he was doing so many spooky things. And he did investigate UFOs for the Russian Airforce in the 1970s. He told us about that."

"Yes, I know about that. But what other 'spooky things' was he doing?"

"Mostly mind reading and remote hypnotism."

It was partly true but I said that to make him think again. He didn't take the bait.

"No, I'm talking about quite different technology."

"Oh," I answered dumbly.

"Motive technology."

"You mean like what makes people do things?"

"No. I mean technology that makes something move. An engine!"

"You mean like in a car?" I asked looking around restlessly, as if this was boring. I knew exactly what he meant.

He was studying my face like a hawk.

"A very small, very powerful engine," he continued, eyes boring into me.

"You mean like on a jet or a rocket or something?" I gabbled.

He knew I was struggling to avoid admitting anything and I knew he was thinking about Ka-rea-rea, my speeder, the craft that had brought me home when Renwick was self-destructing. He wanted it. That was what he had been asking Leonora about in the late-night phone call. It was his prize for cooperation with both *them* and whoever else was controlling him. But there was something else. Something in the background to do with war and his daughter. It didn't make sense.

The waiters appeared bringing in our food, And surprise, surprise: mine was a burger with fries. Teens equals burgers I guess. Still, it was pretty fancy with all sorts of extras including bacon, an egg, mushrooms and avocado as well as frilly lettuce in it so I wasn't going to complain. But Sir Michael was fired up and didn't take his eyes off me until the waiters left.

"No, not a rocket, a very different sort of engine. An engine that is so small it would fit in a briefcase but can power a craft up to Mach 7 in almost no time at all. An engine that can break the known laws of gravity and momentum. An engine powered not by fuel by the quantum fabric of space-time itself. That sort of engine."

It was interesting how close Sir Michael was. I took a bite of my burger. It was good. Being so nervous I'd forgotten how hungry I was.

It's always important to tell half-truths Mrs Jones used to tell us. She was a professional clairvoyant in Wales and was always telling lies. Not because she *didn't* know things, but because she *did* know things, and some things – like death-dates and times – are best not shared. But Mrs Jones warned us not to lie. She always told us most people can spot a lie almost at once but if you say something that is literally true, but deceptive, they find it much harder.

"I never saw Prosperov playing with any engines, Sir Michael, he did stuff in the lighthouse but I don't think he was turning that into a rocket or anything. If he was, it never went anywhere," I said when my mouth was empty again.

"What about the others?"

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"The only one into engines was Ken but he just did ordinary ones."

"Could Dr Prosperov have worked in secret?"

"Yeeah, easy. He had all sorts of strange stuff in the lighthouse and it was a big house with a room in the cellar we couldn't go into."

"Couldn't go or weren't allowed?"

"Both. It had a thumbprint and voice print lock. He took Russian friends down there but we never knew what they were doing," I lied utterly.

"Very interesting."

Sir Michael bent down to his briefcase and pulled out a pen and paper. The paper had a plan of the house on it.

"Whereabouts was the cellar?" he asked handing me the map.

"Let's see, there's the staircase, so it'd be about here I'd guess."

"Excellent. We will investigate that on Monday when I've clarified the extent of the forensic investigation."

The room I was describing was actually the treasure vault where we kept some of the gold but it was also the entryway to the tunnels. It was only about ten metres square, poorly lit and chilled. If they hadn't had time to evacuate it – which was likely because it was not important – I'd go in on Monday with Sue and try and empty it out.

"Did you ever try to go in?" Sir Michael asked taking back his plan and pen.

I felt now that his guard was down I could start making more up.

"We weren't even meant to know about it."

This was a total whopper.

"How *did* you find out about it?"

"It was hidden behind a wine rack. There were footprints in the dust."

"Why were you in the cellar?"

"Playing hide and seek. We often did on wet days."

"And the police haven't asked you about this door?"

"No."

"And you don't think Dr Prosperov and the others took shelter in there?"

I genuinely had never thought of that because I knew they wouldn't. Of course they *had* passed through it to the tunnels and evacuation.

"I don't know. You know that never occurred to me! I always assumed the room was too small because he only ever took a few

people down at a time. Maybe we should tell the police! Maybe they're still there!" I started.

"Hmmm Sam I don't think that would be a good idea," he said calmly.

"Why not?" I said trying to be dramatic.

"Well, police in general only ever move quickly if they think lives are at risk."

His eyes were full of experience.

"Maybe they are! "I exaggerated.

"I don't think so."

"Why not."

"Because if it were *my* sister who was missing I'd have been in there *already*."

Damn, he had me. It had been a trap and I'd fallen for it.

"*I'd* have suggested *anything* with the remotest chance of finding my sister again. I would be frantic with worry."

He searched my face with slight smile.

"Sam, you *do* know where your sister and family is. I'm willing to wager you *probably* know where Dr Prosperov is too. And I'm further willing to bet dollars to doughnuts that they aren't hiding in the cellar strong-room."

He paused to take a bite of his meal. Then returned to his theme.

"Prosperov is a genius Sam. That doesn't make you one. And it doesn't mean I'm a fool either."

My burger suddenly tasted rather plain. I hadn't managed to fool this guy at all and worse he was on to me. Michael sat back in his chair and studied me for a while. Then he leaned forward again.

"Let me explain why I'm interested in this technology Sam."

He paused to eat. Leonora had been listening in both fascinated and confused. He swallowed and went on.

"As you know at the moment the world runs on oil. Without oil there would be no trade and without trade there is no civilisation. Trade is how each nation contributes to our rise as a species. Without it the top scientists in America, Asia, and Europe would have to spend their days worrying about how much food they could find. Trade allows us to specialise, and specialisation allows us to develop and move forward."

"Now there's two big problems with oil. The first is that there is only so much of it. Oil mostly comes from the time when the dinosaurs were destroyed by a giant asteroid and there was only so

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much carbon about at that time. So we must eventually run out. Second, and more importantly we are burning it up and making carbon dioxide at a faster rate than the great volcanoes that were going to kill the dinosaurs if the asteroids hadn't got them first. That would be problem enough, if we weren't *at the same time* wiping out the rain forests that can suck up all that carbon and store it as trees and leaves, out of harms way. Put those two together and we can expect a climate catastrophe if we don't change our ways fairly soon. Weather patterns will change and the farms everyone relies on for food will fail. When food is scarce there is war and war could easily destroy civilisation completely Sam."

He stopped to see if he's made an impression. So far his argument squared with everything else I'd been told so I just nodded thoughtfully.

"Now the problem with people, Sam, is once they have something they don't want to give it up. Trade is good for us, it makes people richer, live longer and generally raises them out of the gutter of poverty. Not just in the developed world Sam, but everyone. Now you can't ask a Chinaman who's father broke his back working in the fields to give up his new well-paid job in a factory and go back to doing what his dad did, just because of the effect it might have on the climate. He'll just think this is a new form of robbery that the West has been practicing on his father, his father's father, and his father before him, all the way back to Marco Polo. In other words Sam, he doesn't want to give up all his hard won development up. And why should he? Why not someone else? The problem with that Sam is that everyone says the same thing. 'Why me? Why not the other chap?' So nothing happens."

"So the best answer to these problems is not to go backwards but to go forwards, and all over the world there a thousands of scientists working on new technologies that will make a small difference.

He took another bite because his meal was getting cold. Then he resumed.

"But Sam, it's not going to be enough! The rate of progress in technology is not as fast as the rate of degradation of the life-giving properties of the planet. The result will be shortages, competition and very probably wars."

"So what we need Sam is something totally new. A leap of centuries into the future. If we can do that we can prosper as a

species and avoid a lot of suffering. That is why I want to find this technology Sam. With power like that the energy problem would be solved. I am certain Dr Prosperov had access to it. I know you know more than you've told me. But I'm sure if he were here Dr Prosperov would want you to help on this project towards a better future for humanity."

I was pleased because all Sir Michael's talking had given me time to eat my burger. I also knew everything Sir Michael had said was largely to suck me in. I didn't trust him one single inch. For a start he wasn't thinking about putting that engine in power stations, but in military jets. Our speeders flew rings around fighters. Tahira had proved that once just for fun and if Sir Michael had fighters with speeder engines he could guarantee control of the air, and for the military control of the air means control of everything else. But I also knew that something else going on here. Why give me this line on helping the environment? Why did he even want my cooperation? I was right where he wanted me anyway. He was building up to something.

"Sir Michael?"

"Yes, Sam?"

"Don't you think that *if* there were such aliens they mightn't *want* us to have an engine like that?"

He was busy eating.

"I mean it's a bit like Mau-i stealing the fire from Ma-hui-ka isn't it?"

Sir Michael thought about that, chewing.

"How does Mau-i steal the fire?" he asked, chewing and humouring me.

"Well, he pushes his Auntie Ma-hui-ka's goodwill until she shows him how to make it himself, but she tries to burn him first."

"Well, perhaps there are ways to avoid getting burned," he said pleasantly. He seemed to think he had a deal that would help him. He had finished his meal now, as had Leonora, who had followed the conversation with some interest.

"Leonora, would you be a gem and fetch the waiter please," Sir Michael suggested.

Leonora slipped away and out the door.

I now guessed his plan. The only way *they* would deal with him was to trade something of greater value for something of lesser value. And as the engine on my speeder was probably worth more

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than the Bank of England, Sir Michael had to be trading something other than his relatively small fortune, and the only thing he had worth that much to *them* was *me*.

But there were obvious problems. Anyone could see that Sir Michael needed a guarantee that *they* would keep their side of the bargain. If he handed me over and got nothing back he was screwed. That meant he had an interest in keeping me out of *their* reach at least until he had the speeder. So I decided to challenge his plan on its weaknesses to see what sort of reaction I got.

"Sir Michael?" I asked quietly.

"Hmm?"

"What happens if I don't give you what you want?" I asked him quietly but directly. He too lowered his voice.

"Excellent question Sam. Perhaps we'll make a lawyer of you yet. Well ... for the moment you are under my protection ..."

"And if I don't. I won't be?"

Sir Michael put his elbows on the table, fingertips to his lips.

"Sam, as you probably know my protection doesn't mean much. The only reason they have for working with me is that I can get them what they want much easier than if they just send someone to grab you."

"That might be harder than they think," I warned, trying to sound tough.

"You have done well Sam, I'll give you that, but speaking from recent unpleasant personal experience I can tell you your days of freedom are numbered. Like me you can cooperate voluntarily or involuntarily but you will cooperate one way or the other. Eventually we have no power and no choice. I suggest it would be far better for you if it were voluntary."

"But all you've talked about is what you want. What do *they* want?"

"*They* want you to be reunited with your family, wherever they are."

"I'll bet they do," I said grimly.

They didn't give a toss about reuniting me with my family. What they wanted was to tag me like animal, and trace me to where "our friends" were.

The alien's technology for tagging people on Earth is quite simple and assisted, unwittingly, by the United States Department of Defense. What *they* do is fold a nanowire antenna plus an inter-

dimensional communicator into a food capsule smaller than a grain of pepper. A nanowire is a tiny, tiny filament of ultra-thin wire to pick up the signals from the Global Positioning System satellites.

An inter-dimensional communicator is actually nothing more than a device for reading and changing the 'spin' of a sub-atomic particle. It's called "entanglement" and works by splitting twinned streams of particles. If the spin on one particle is changed the spin on it's separated twin also changes immediately regardless of how far apart they are. Dr Prosperov had told us Einstein had a long German name for this which translated to "spooky action at a distance". It works because the informational dimension of existence is common to both particles even though they are physically separated. Alien technology allows entanglement to work on twinned masses, so all you need is to split a radioactive mass in two.

The two twins maintain super-dimensional information links. This link creates a channel for communication down which you can send codes by changing the spin directions. By changing spin directions you can send a digital signal of zeros and ones. In this way paired communicators can exchange signals over any distance without interception or interference. The beauty of it is that it is entirely passive. It emits no signal that anyone can detect because the only signal is to the super-dimensional channel which cannot be jammed or even easily detected.

The tag capsule breaks down in the stomach and the tag itself attaches to the large intestine. The antenna then unfurls following the intestine and is about two metres long – which is still way shorter than the intestine. Being fractions of a millimetre across the only human technology that can detect the antenna is a hospital Magnetic Resonance Imaging machine. But because the MRI's magnetic field induces a huge current in the antenna it usually disappears in a flash as the aerial filament burns up.

Of course this tag only works on Earth. If *our friends* showed up and whisked me off to their world it would be useless. The GPS satellite signal is detectable within our solar system but any further away it's too faint. But "The Service", *their* military arm, has miniaturised tags which can detect the gamma rays from Pulsars. The Pulsars – which are spinning neutron stars – act like giant GPS satellites for the whole Galaxy. NASA uses them to guide spacecraft but our detectors would never work on earth because of all the

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signals that would drown out the Pulsar's signal. But *their* technology is way better. Their tag could provide vectors for locating people anywhere to within a few thousand kilometres in a Galaxy 120,000 light years across.

The Service tag is a shiny metallic egg-sized object which requires an operation on the stomach cavity to be installed. I was not keen on being tagged with one. Partly because I don't like the idea of *them* operating on me. But more importantly it could mean I would never see my family again because if I was rescued by our friends the tag would give their home planet away and defeat thousands of years of careful hiding.

"So you get an engine, they get a tag. What do I get out of it?" I hissed.

"Have you enjoyed the past few days Sam?" Sir Michael asked.

"You mean the shopping and the restaurants and stuff?" I whispered.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Well, yeah I s'pose so. But you said yourself you can't live in the Highgate forever."

"Yes, well most people can't but someone who had an engine of the kind I've mentioned probably could. They could probably buy every hotel chain in the world if they wanted to. That engine is worth trillions, Sam. Even a one percent share of it's future revenues would probably make you richer than your own country. You've had only the smallest taste of the wealth that could easily be yours."

I pretended to be struck by this, even though it angered me, but then I asked the clincher.

"And if I don't cooperate?"

"I'm rather afraid *they* will get what *they* want one way or another. *They* know where you are and *they* can act at any time. I'm just trying to offer you an opportunity to help yourself and the whole human race at the same time."

So there it was. "*They know where you are and they can act at any time,*" he'd said. They *had* tagged me. Somewhere in the meal I had just eaten, was a tag. It was probably unfurling its antenna inside me right now. It was definitely time for plan B.

"I WON'T DO IT!" I yelled loudly at him defiantly, getting up.

"Sit down. One way or another, I rather think you will," he affirmed angrily. He reminded me of a Jaden in a suit.

“YOUR FRIENDS ARE NOT GOING TO STICK ANYTHING IN ME!” I yelled again. What I was yelling made sense in the context of our talk but I knew downstairs it would sound rather different.

“Sam, sit down,” he snapped, I could tell he was under pressure from his handler now. “You cannot win against them. Your only chance is to negotiate.”

“YOU CAN'T MAKE ME,” I bellowed, making for the door.

Leonora suddenly appeared at the door behind me. She looked annoyed.

“Keep your voice down. The whole restaurant can hear you,” she hissed.

“NO, I WON'T BE QUIET. THAT'S HOW YOU PEOPLE OPERATE!” I yelled even louder, knowing exactly how that would sound downstairs.

This infuriated Leonora who grabbed me and shoved me towards my chair.

“KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF ME!” I yelled again, adding fuel to the fire.

This just made her shove me harder.

“You are insulting the one man who is in a position to take care of you. Now shut up and show some respect,” she snarled.

Leonora is a full-grown woman, and I am a pretty small 14-year-old, so she was not only bigger than me but more forceful.

Fortunately we had been trained not to fall for adult ordering, which can otherwise freeze a kid in his or her tracks and stop you performing your mission. That left her with her strength. We were never trained in amazing Kung-Fu skills of the kind you see in movies. That was partly because to do it really takes decades of training and in movies most of the stunts are done with a whole bunch of guys pulling the actors around on wires in front of blue or green screens. Also, real fighting is far faster and more brutal than those pretty dances and our parents and guardians would never have allowed us to fight. That was never the deal. But what Mariko, the Okinawan, *did* teach us was just enough Judo and Aikido to get out of situations where we were being grabbed or manhandled. In pushing me down Leonora was already off balance and it took barely a sudden shrug and a side-step to send her flying past me to hit her head on the table.

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” I roared heading for the door.

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Now Michael was getting up, and Leonora, already sore at losing her balance was getting up and turning around.

“SIT DOWN! YOU MANNERLESS BRAT!” She yelled.

I got to the door, turned the handle, and opened it, when suddenly I felt hands grab my hair and pull me back.

“HELP!” I yelled.

I heard movement down below.

Plan B works in some places and not others. In some places a brown child being abused by rich white people in a private room is just business and nobody will lift a finger to do anything.

Fortunately Plan B works in most civilised places including my home country so, as I was being dragged back to my chair, I was not surprised to see the door fly open and two of the waiters standing there.

“What's going on in here?” the head waiter asked looking pretty angry, from me to Leonora to Michael.

“Leave us alone,” Leonora spat acidly

“No!” the waiter replied, “Not til...”

“Let him go, Leonora,” Sir Michael told her quietly.

Leonora let go. I straightened up and went over to the Maori waiter

“You OK, little bro?” he asked, with an angry glance at the other two.

“Yeah.”

But Sir Michael wasn't finished.

“Sam, I'll wait a week but then it will be out of my hands and they *know* where to find you. Without my help I don't think you will come out of this very well at all. You have my number.”



Chapter Nine: A Tragic pair

I left with the waiters. We went downstairs to the restaurant and they led me out the back to the kitchen. It was hot and busy but much more my style of place.

"What was that all about then?" the head waiter asked me.

"They had a proposition for me which I didn't like," I said using Scotty's famous Plan-B words.

"Public school nonce," spat a young red-haired chef with a strong Scottish accent. "Yew sit here a bit, son. You'll be alrigh'."

I was told Sir Michael and Leonora decided against "pudding" and left, Sir Michael being tripped "accidentally" by someone who didn't apologise. The staff gave the guy who did it a "discount" when he paid up. They were very friendly toward me and gave me a free cake and coke.

"Do you need a lift home, little bro?" the Maori waiter asked me.

That was awkward. Now I didn't have anywhere to sleep. I didn't want to call Kevin.

"Ahm ... well I don't ... lemmee see."

I pulled out my phone. Ring Sue, or not ring Sue? Sometimes you know in advance whether it's a good idea to call someone or not. And sometimes you don't. I wasn't sure, so I rang anyway.

The phone rang for one, two, three, four rings when Sue came on the line.

"Sue Williams?" She sounded small and sorry. Not at all the cop I'd left.

"Hi Sue, it's Sam," I said quietly.

"Sam? Hi Sam, how are you?" her voice changed from rejected girlfriend to policewoman.

"Um ... not so good."

"What's the matter?"

"You know that rich lawyer?"

"Yeah."

“Um ... I ... I ... I don't feel safe with him.”
There was a pause.
“Why not Sam?” she asked, suddenly sounding even more like a cop.

“Um ... well I'm in the middle of a restaurant kitchen right now. Everyone's being very nice.”

“Where are you,” she asked decisively.

“I'm at 'Raleighs',” I said picking up a card.

“Wait there, I'll come and get you.”

“Thanks Sue.”

She rang off.

I wondered how mad she'd be when she learned the truth.

“Old lady coming to get you little bro?” the head waiter asked.

“No ... no, it's my case officer. She's a cop.”

“Oh!” he said loudly. “Little bro's cop is coming to get him,” he called out loudly.

“Aw what?” someone complained.

I realised they were planning to have a smoke of weed and a cop would spoil their fun.

“I'll wait out the front,” I offered.

“Nah, stay here. It's OK.”

The wait for Sue was quite fun. And when one of the waitresses announced that Sue had come for me I was a bit sad to leave. Everyone patted me or shook my hand, especially David the Maori waiter.

Sue had her cop look on – but turned down a notch because she was dressed in jeans and a jacket. We didn't say much until we were driving down the driveway.

“OK Sam, what happened?”

I tried to tell her without getting too specific but she kept interrogating me. Finally she'd had enough.

“Sam, I'm sorry but I simply don't believe in flying saucers! It's crap! And frankly you're starting to make me think you're in need of professional help.”

There was a bit of a silence after that. She was mad at me for playing childish games and I was mad at her for not believing me. I toyed with the idea of showing her Qi, my watch, but she might not get that the technology simply wasn't available on Earth. She might think I bought it with my new clothes. Finally I had an idea.

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"Would you believe in flying saucers if you saw one?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if one flew around you, in daylight, right in front of you, would you believe in flying saucers then?"

"I suppose I would," she said doubtfully.

"OK then, if we go back to Aotea tomorrow I'll show you a flying saucer."

"Sam I ..."

"If you wanna see a flying saucer I'll show you mine."

"Yours!"

"Well, mine to use. It's what Sir Michael is after. It's hidden on the island. That's what I was doing when Renwick House burned down. It's totally secret OK ? but I'll show it to you if that's what it takes to make you believe me."

"And it will *fly*?"

"I'll fly in it. You can watch."

"Why can't I fly in it?"

"Because it barely takes me. It's very small."

"You'll fly it in the sky?"

"Yes. Where else do you fly things?"

"How high?"

"Well low, so you can see it."

"But higher than a few feet?" she checked. Light and shadow of streetlights slid off her face.

I got her picture.

"Sue, it's not a cardboard box decorated with silver paper that I play in and make noises with my mouth like a six-year old. It's a craft more sophisticated than any other on the planet. Sir Michael thinks it's worth trillions."

She still didn't believe me, but she was willing to humour me.

"OK Sam, show me your saucer. I wanted to take you out to Renwick House to go over the scene anyway. Doing it tomorrow might be better legally anyway."

I suddenly remembered I hadn't got through to Emma yet. It was ten at night, and she was probably in bed. I set an alarm to call her in the morning.

"So how are you?" I asked.

"Fine," she answered, distractedly.

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I knew something was bothering her but I also knew that she didn't want to talk about it. So I talked about the waiters at the restaurant instead. I don't think she was listening.

Before we got to her place it started raining. We dashed into her house, which was beginning to feel fairly familiar now and got inside.

"I've made you a bed in the spare room."

"Thanks Sue."

"I'll have to report all this to Geraldine. I don't know strictly what your legal status is now because Sir Michael is still your guardian. Legally he could drag you to wherever he calls home whether you like it or not."

"I know."

"I'll have to tell him where you are, you know?"

His pals knew anyway thanks to the tag. They knew exactly where I was to the centimetre.

"I know, do you want his number?" I offered.

"I'll do it tomorrow. I can't be fagged now. Let him think you're suffering a bit. It'll help him calm down."

"I think he can find out where I am anyway."

"How?"

"I'm not sure. He may have tagged me. What do you have to do to get your stomach MRIed?"

"Probably have cancer or something. Why do you want your stomach MRIed?"

"Don't worry about it."

I wondered where I might find a powerful electro-magnet. With a big enough induced electrical current I could fry any tags Leonora had slipped into my dinner. I had to do it before I showed Sue my Speeder or *they* would get me.

I thought of power stations, high voltage lines, lift motors, but they were all difficult to get to and extremely dangerous. Electromagnetic fields fall away very quickly from their source and I had no interest in climbing a high voltage line tower to see how close I could get to 220,000 volts. I'd be fried. Then I remembered. The lighthouse! Nobody would have bothered to disassemble that. I could do it tomorrow at Renwick! Seemed rather fitting really.

We sorted out a bathroom routine and I got Rachel's old toothbrush. I hoped Rachel didn't have any germs or anything. Sue loaned me an old pair of shorts and a T-shirt to wear as pyjamas. I

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got into bed, she said good-night, turned the light out and closed the door.

The vibe of the house soaked through me. It had always been a busy place with people coming and going. Rachel wasn't the first break-up it had seen. There had been young couples and babies, people between marriages. It was a place that expected change and lots of it. Perhaps in some ways it even created change by expecting it.

I didn't feel sleepy so I slipped out of bed and grabbed my phone. I was nervous. I was tagged and they had heard Sir Michael's approach fail. It wouldn't be hard for them to get me here. I could imagine a team quietly gathering in the rain outside. Gathering and then there would be a knock. Sue would answer, be hypnotised and if I wasn't gone it was all over. They'd have me in a saucer with things up my nose in half an hour.

I felt like slipping off into the dark but of course it wouldn't make any difference. I couldn't hide with a tag in my stomach. *They* knew where I was no matter where I went. I had to hope Sue offered some protection. But ironically my safety now really depended on Sir Michael convincing *them* I would eventually come around. I pushed a few buttons on my watch face and unlocked the dial.

"Qi?"

Qi appeared instantly on my wrist.

"I want to call today's data object of about 6pm 'Leonora's Computer'."

"OK."

"When does Lenora's computer first record coming here?"

"March 7 at 9:14 p.m. in an e-mail from Antonio Rossi, Sir Michael Hamilton-Smythe's personal secretary to Leonora Cartwright. He asks her to fly to New Zealand immediately, e-tickets attached."

"March 7th?"

"Yes."

"Hoo-boy."

Leonora was sent two days *before* Ashley was tagged. This was worse than I thought. It meant the Infiltrators were on to us before *they* were. The Infiltrators already knew we were based in New Zealand before Renwick was traced. But how?

"No instructions?"

"No, just fly to New Zealand and wait."

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“And she does?”

“Her next message is March 9 at 12.42 p.m. saying she's at the Highgate and will be going to bed at 6 p.m. to beat the jetlag.”

“Any reply?”

“None.”

“Then what happens?”

“March 10, 7 a.m. she gets instructions to investigate the Renwick House fire.”

“Who from?”

“Antonio Rossi.”

“OK, does he have any suggestions?”

“Quite a few. He wants to know if there were any survivors or any signs of escape. He suggests she get to know the local cops and the nearest neighbours. His last instruction is to establish who is running the case and report in with what she's found.”

“Does she?”

“Yes, it includes video clips if you'd like to see them?”

“Yes, thanks.”

Qi waved his arms and a small screen appeared over his head which ran the video.

It showed Renwick looking sadly like a gutted shell filled with ash and burned wood. The shot was taken from a car and it zooms in from quite a distance to glimpse people in white suits slowly working through the debris. Then there is a conversation with a fire service investigator taken from a secret camera looking up at him. He tells her very little but gives her his card. Then there's some local TV clip and a few newspaper stories.

“When did she send this?”

“March 10, 10pm.”

“She's a fast worker. Are there any emails about me?”

“Yes, she alerts Rossi that news reports say the police have announced a survivor.”

“When's that?”

“March 11 at 10 a.m.”

“And the response?”

“Find out who it is. More instructions in the morning.”

That would be morning UK time. Her report was sent 10 a.m. New Zealand time but would have been received about 10 p.m. UK time if they picked it up instantly. Obviously Sir Michael wasn't going to wait up all night to find out who it was.

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"And when does she send in her report?"

"At 3.17pm. She identifies you."

"So that's early morning UK time. When does he respond?"

"Sir Michael himself replies at 6 a.m. He tells her to use the attached files to gain custody, to take you to the hotel and spoil you rotten. He says he'll fly out himself immediately."

Wow! He dropped everything to get to me. That might explain why he made a mess of it. He's probably still jet-lagged.

"Are there any files about her dealings with Sir Michael?"

"There is a lot of accounting information."

"How much does she charge him?"

"Her regular fee is five hundred British pounds a day plus travel penalties and expenses. She doubled it for having to drop something else at short notice."

I was impressed. I didn't think private detectives made *that* much.

"Does she have some kind of relationship with Sir Michael?" I asked, suspicious.

"The only relationship apparent from 'Leonora's Computer' is based on her business."

"Did this secretary dude ..."

"Antonio Rossi?"

"Yeah him. Does he have anything to say about Dr Prosperov or Renwick House?"

"He includes a plan of the house obtained from Auckland District Council."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing other than general background."

That was strange. Why hadn't this Antonio dude been at the restaurant? A personal secretary generally stays close to the person they are secretary for. Was he busy somewhere else? What was he doing?"

"OK, thanks Qi. Look, I need you to do some online work for me."

"OK."

"I need you to contact para.no.ID. Challenge is Blue Maroon. Message header 'Big Blue joins Central Bank'. Body 'Tiny Falcon amber on local TV, popup plus 48.' And see what you can find out about this Antonio, what was his name?"

"Rossi."

"Yeah him. OK?"

"OK."

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“Bye Qi.”

Qi vanished. I then opened the watch and stuck the USB port of the phone into the gel. Instantly the phone lit up and the gel began to glow. I put them carefully under the bed and lay back with my head in my hands looking at the ceiling.

People think humans are the only intelligence on the 'net. But it's even more useful for *them*. For *them* the net is an awesome research tool because *they* have far more powerful computers to analyse the things people do and say, than even Google. I mean if my watch can process more than the average bank, just think what one of their Cyberminds can do. It's just another way they watch human civilisation. But if their security service gets involved it also means they have a very powerful tool for making us do stuff if they want to. I was running a risk using Qi on the net. He was good but not perfect and my phone could be traced and counter-hacked. Then they could find out even more about us.

But I had to work this out! Sir Michael was working for the Infiltrators. That was clear. He was also working with *them*. That was weird. The reward he was being offered was technology he had been told we had, because he'd never seen it. He obviously didn't think Prosperov would be coming back so it looked like he was just trying to get what he could out of the disaster.

And what if para.no.ID was compromised? It was possible. They hadn't acknowledged my first message. The whole point of the network was it was secret – even from itself. That was why I challenged them in my message. If they came back with “dark” and “diamond” I'd know it wasn't para.no.ID but “Central Bank” – our codeword for the Administration.

Sir Michael was probably hoping I'd be fretting and regretting my escape. He would know where I was and Leonora would probably tell him about Sue. He'd given me a week. It was probably the same deadline he was under. But whether I did a deal with Sir Michael or not, both paths led to me being on board a UFO with them operating on me – something I wasn't so keen on.

I lay there for about half an hour trying to go to sleep but no matter which way I lay I couldn't get comfortable. The imaginary men in black were outside in the rain, watching and waiting to get me. My mind raced this way and that. It wouldn't shut up. Finally I decided to raid the kitchen for some milk. I got up and crept down

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the hallway trying not to disturb Sue, but to my surprise I found her up watching TV.

"Is it OK to get some milk?" I asked at the doorway.

"Sure Sam."

Then she got up, "actually hot milk and honey is a good idea."

I stood back and she went into the kitchen. I followed her and sat at the table as she automatically got out a pot, put it on the stove, opened the fridge and tipped milk from a full two-litre bottle into it. Then she looked at me.

"Can't sleep?" she asked.

"No."

"Me, neither. I had those pills for a reason. Now it's worse, and they won't let me have any more."

I felt like it was my fault.

"Sorry," I said.

She smiled at me. It was a warmer smile than she'd given me all evening.

"Don't be sorry Sam. I'm not."

She went back to stirring the milk with a wooden spoon. Then she spoke again.

"I still feel as if she's stolen half my life away though. It's like a house where half the doors lead to a sudden drop because that half of the house isn't there," she sighed.

"I keep wishing she'd just come back and yet I know she won't ... she was always a selfish bitch really," she sighed again.

Then she laughed and looked at me.

"You must find this strange. Listening to the ravings of a lovelorn old dyke."

"You're not old. And my Aunt is one too."

"A lovelorn old dyke?"

"Well not lovelorn – I don't think."

"Oh. Well, I suppose you *are* used to the ravings of lovelorn old dykes then."

"Well no, she never talked about it. She ... well ... Grandpop was a bit ..." I admitted

"Yeah ... my parents are a bit ... too," she said.

She sighed again.

"Fat lot of help they were today too."

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The milk was ready and she poured it into two mugs and stirred in a good amount of honey. Then she came and sat opposite me at the table.

"What a pair," she laughed. "A lonesome lesbian cop and a deranged street kid."

"I'm not deranged," I said hotly.

"Well, you sure sounded it tonight."

"Sue. I really will show you something tomorrow," I promised.

"But it is big and I do need to be careful," I added earnestly.

"OK, OK, OK. Chill, Sam. If it is what you say it is, it will all happen. Be cool."

I knew she didn't believe me but she was right. There was no point getting uptight about it. Seeing was the only way she would believe.

"Why don't you tell me more about when you came to Renwick. I think we'd got as far as you and that girl Ashley seeing ghosts in the windows just before you moved in."

"You don't believe in ghosts either do you?"

"No, but they made the story more interesting."

I sighed.

"What's the point of telling you my story if you won't believe any of it?" I asked sulkily.

"Well, at least I listen to it, which is more than most would. And I admit I find it interesting to know what you *think* happened."

I made a face.

"And," she went on, "it's eleven thirty on Friday night, TV's crap, and neither of us can sleep. So hot milk and a bedtime story sounds like a good idea," she smiled.

It was a warm smile when she did it like she meant it.

"Oh alright," I said, and this is what I told her.



Chapter Ten: Welcome to Renwick House

We were welcomed into Renwick House by Mariko, the punk Japanese bus-driver; Gunter, the German craftsman; and Mrs Jones, who looked like a very frumpy old housewife. No matter how I looked at us all, I could see nothing in common. There was us three Maoris; two southern black Americans; two Vietnamese; four originally from Iran but more recently France; two originally from Turkey but had been a long time in Britain; and Scotty (who was white) and Bernard (who was black) who were from Zimbabwe.

As everyone was introduced to everyone else Mariko explained that Gunter had almost single-handedly restored the old building for the past year in his “boring way”. She was obviously very proud of him, and despite the fact they were chalk and cheese, they seemed to really like each other.

“OK risten up,” Mariko yelled clapping her hands. “Anyone who doesn't like Sushi ...” and she paused as if daring someone to admit they didn't like Sushi. “Will be veeeeeery hungry,” she laughed.

I had no idea what Sushi was and I don't think Scott did either.

Mrs Jones led us in through the grand front doors. There was a large hall with black and white tiles with stairs from both sides. The whole house shone with gleaming polished timber, the wallpaper was olive green, the drapes cream and the floors tiled. We passed beneath the landing into “the ballroom” as it was labeled on the old tiles above the door. The ballroom was almost as big as our old school's hall. The wooden floor was a deep, rich red while the roof was like full of arches made of curving wood. Through the windows in the roof light streamed in spotlights on to the floor.

Despite the name on the door it felt like this had once been a chapel, rather than a ballroom. The effect was a strange blend of friendly and holy all at once. There were folding tables and chairs put out for us and at the back the church bits were gone but in its place were tables which were full of plates of little round dark green

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and rice things. There was also clay pots of steaming liquid. Apparently this was called saki which the adults seemed to enjoy. We got our first taste of iced tea which was surprisingly good.

We kids were given first go at the food while the adults stood around talking and drinking the Saki and discussing the allocation of rooms which was being marked out on a big whiteboard plan of Renwick House. I knew nothing about Sushi and was a bit suspicious of it at first. But Mariko's Sushi was delicious as well as pretty and I was soon coming back for more. The big discovery was Wasabi. It was Scotty who discovered that the hard way. He thought it was avocado. His eyes streamed bulging in his head and then he grabbed his nose. Of course we all had to try it after that and Tarik wanted to have Wasabi eating contests – but nobody else was up for that.

When we'd eaten a lot Mariko clapped her hands loudly again. "OK, no servants here. We the servants! Bring the plates into kitchen. Follow me!"

So we stacked up the plates and carried them through some doors at the back of the ballroom. This was where we found my favourite room. It was a sort of like a café. It had bench seats and tables but the wall had huge windows in it that looked out over the shingle dunes and down to the beach. You could look all the way out to the horizon at a bit of an angle. From here we turned right into the kitchen. And wow! What a kitchen! It had more things for cooking than I had ever seen before. The pots shone with copper, the machines were large and made little beeping noises. It looked like a chef's dream come true. Mr Tran looked like he was in heaven. The dishwasher we loaded was a huge industrial sized machine that took every dish we had and still had room for more, and there were two of them!

From the kitchen we went out the back-door past the market-sized food store, past the waste processing station and instead of going through the rear doors out to the loading bay we hung a right through an enormous laundry full of big industrial washers and dryers and into a corridor which ran down the west side which was where the sun was at the moment. The west wing was boarded up. Apparently that was stage three. The east wing was being built still. It had Mrs Jones and Gunter and Mariko's apartments and a big studio for Mariko but it was still only half finished. There were a

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few store rooms which Mrs Jones, who was leading the way wanted to show the adults that were pretty dull. Then we headed up a staircase around a lift in the Southern side, in the shade of the pine trees behind the house up to the next level.

This was the apartment level where we were going to live. The ballroom or chapel was in the middle of the whole house – a separate building – around which the much larger house had been built. From the windows in the corridor which ran around the inside of the apartment level you could see the ballroom's tall roof angle away to the sky. This meant the inside corridor remained reasonably well lit. Mrs Jones led us up to the front of the building.

I admit I was a bit worried about this because we were heading precisely where Ashley and me had seen the presences before. I noticed Ashley was hanging back, just as I was. But when we got there we found nothing at all. There was an open lounge at the end of the corridor complete with a large pool table, fire-place and lots of sofas and armchairs. Through the double doors in the lounge you could go out into the landing which took you up to the guest level or to go to the gallery. The gallery was a windowed room as wide as the house which looked out over the sea. Across the beach the view just seemed to stretch forever with the lighthouse on the left across the Pacific horizon to the cliffs on the right. There were cane sofas, chairs and tables, radiator heaters and the whole room was painted white.

The guest level was the next one up. It was under the tiles of the steep roof. This level was a bit darker as it lacked the big windows of the lower levels. Mrs Jones said originally this had been the staff quarters and the level below had been the patient's ward but Dr Prosperov wanted this reversed.

The apartment level had impressed me as open, light and much nicer than anywhere I'd ever even heard of anyone living. I had never been into a hotel then but I suppose now I'd have to say it felt like a comfortable sort of hotel. But the guest level was something far more intriguing and it was where Gunter's best work was to be found.

The apartments in the guest level had different themes. There was a Chinese apartment which was full of gold, lacquer and silk; a French apartment which was full of silver and dark blue; a Japanese apartment with hard looking mattresses and a huge bath; an American apartment which was like an old movie set; a Persian

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apartment with carpets and brass jugs; a small Mongol apartment apparently for Dr Prosperov's aide – although I noticed it had two bedrooms; and a huge Russian apartment for Dr Prosperov which we didn't go into. This level also had a library about the same size as the one we had at school but with large armchairs and a bank of screens and computers on one wall that looked like a TV station. Dr Prosperov's office was in the wing above Mariko's studio. For a kid like me, used to living in a little, busted, old house by the sea it was amazing.

Now Mrs Jones led us to our own apartments. With three of us we got the second largest apartment on the floor. The Iranians got the biggest because there was four of them. Most of the other apartments had two bedrooms. There were still a couple spare even after we had all chosen ours. For the first time ever Rewa and I would have our own rooms. The apartments were decorated in gray, brown and white with a lounge, a small kitchen area and a table. Every bedroom in the whole house had a small desk with a computer screen which was also a TV. Ours was on the east and looked out toward the lighthouse. Ashley and her mum were next door, Cam and her dad next to that. The Iranians were on the west side, along with Scotty and Bernard and Tarik and his dad.

All of us kids were excited. There was no sign of the ghosts so we started running around exploring the house in groups. Rewa, me, Ashley and Scotty went downstairs again and discovered there were two lounges on the north-east and north-western sides of the house. They looked very dull with a bar full of alcohol with more big TV screens as if they were a pub and of interest only to adults. Then we went outside around the back under the pines and discovered a huge workshop where Gunter had all his tools and materials. We also found a big shed which had the big yellow school bus in it as well as a big black Range Rover (which had to be Dr Prosperov's), a small pink BMW Mini, which we guessed belonged to Mariko, an old roundish looking wagon which seemed to be half made of wood which had Morris Oxford on the side (which we imagined belonged to Mrs Jones), a real rugged looking van which had to be Ken's and a beautiful Mercedes old-timer we guessed was Gunter's.

We went out the front and joined Tarik, Tahira, Asa, and Cam who were walking along the shingle bank throwing stones into the sea which must have been at high tide because it had covered most of the beach. There was driftwood everywhere and seaweed had

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been thrown on the beach as well. Gulls drifted overhead and small birds with long beaks kept a wary distance from us as they walked the beach probing for things.

We walked about two hundred meters along the beach and then turned to look at Renwick House.

"Ya know what? Dis whole place seems real familiar to me, real familiar," Ashley said.

"Is like I always live here," Cam added.

We all agreed, it did feel strangely familiar. And the other thing which was strange, but which we didn't say, was that we felt strangely familiar to each other too.

"Let's go to lighthouse!" Tarik said.

The lighthouse was about a kilometer from Renwick House on a headland that jutted slightly out to sea. We had to cross a shallow stream, walk along a long shingle bank, past a marsh and back on to the dirt road that went back to Renwick.

The headland was bare except for grass and a straggly old wire fence which wouldn't stop even the dumbest sheep. We walked for longer than we expected, but finally came to the bottom of the lighthouse.

It was about four stories high and was fairly run-down. The door was nailed shut with rusty "danger, do not enter," signs on it. We could see the glass at the top was broken, probably by kids like Tarik who threw stones at it.

The headland it was on was the most easterly point on the whole island which meant you could look back along the long, long coast to the North. The sea filled the air with haze as it dashed against the lonely beaches. The land was mixed between farmland, bush and scrub. It was so lonely. You couldn't see another house or any sign we weren't the only ones left in the world.

Suddenly we heard a distant clatter and a dot appeared over the ridge in the distance and grew rapidly.

"Helicopter!" Tarik yelled.

The helicopter flew along the coast and up and around the lighthouse. We jumped up and down and waved and the pilot circled the lighthouse once before heading up the beach toward Renwick House. We all ran back along the road toward the house to see who it was. The helicopter landed on the west side of the house by the road and one figure got out and walked quickly into the house.

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The run back to the helicopter had turned into a race. Tarik, was the tallest and not surprisingly one of the leaders, but Ashley was right behind him and Cam, despite being the smallest, was determined to keep up. I ran with Scotty, who was not really trying, while Tahira was shushing along Rewa and Asa. She looked like a mother hen with her chicks.

The blades on the helicopter had stopped turning when we got up to it and the Mongol guy who had apparently flown it was standing next to it and smiling as we ran up.

"You guys wanna sit inside?" he asked. We were all surprised by his gentle deep voice and American accent.

"What's your name?" Rewa wanted to know.

"Well, my Mongolian name is Khenbish but everyone calls me 'Ken'."

"How long were y'all in da States?" Ashley asked.

"Long enough to make a fortune and lose it again," he said good naturedly.

"How d'you fly this then mate?" Tarik said from the pilot's seat.

Ken took the headphones off his head.

"I'll show you when you're eighteen," he answered, looking at Tarik with amused suspicion.

"Is this how Dr Prosperov gets to Auckland?" I asked.

"Yeah, most times, but he doesn't go there much."

Then he seemed to get distracted and cocked his head.

"Dr Prosperov wants to see everyone in the ballroom," he announced.

We got out of the helicopter and followed Ken inside, asking him questions about a million things.

In the ballroom Dr Prosperov was still wearing a suit and was again leaning on a table with his usual half-amused look, his stick next to him. It seemed odd that he had one as he didn't seem feeble. The parents were already gathered and had tea and coffee. There were a couple of packets of biscuits open and we quietly sidled up to grab a few.

"First welcome. Am trusting everyone finding house comfortable. Is years work by architect craftsman Mr Zimmermann. Very good work in my opinion."

Gunter seemed to already be aware of Dr Prosperov's opinion and didn't look the slightest embarrassed.

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“Second facility is to open on first February next year and is still much to do. Between now and New Year objective is to establish operating routines. For this we will host a few special guests. These to arrive soon. Is no panic as guests helping but remembering is workplace not vacation home.”

“Third organisation here is simple. Mrs Jones is boss. Do what she says. If you have problem talk to her. If you still have problem talk to each other and her. If you still have problem go elsewhere. Mrs Jones very reasonable woman. I have no time for stupid arguments.”

“Fourth, most not legal to work here. To get around legal problem I get you all Visa card. All pay go to credit card paid in Euros. Working on longer term solution with Immigration Department. For moment you are willing workers on this small organic farm.”

The adults laughed at that.

“Fifth, tomorrow is party to celebrate arrival of my wife Katya from America. Party at six, on beach. Mariko in charge of arrangements. And that is all. Mrs Jones you go.”

Mrs Jones strode forward almost as if she were about to sing. Her Welsh accent was nice to listen to too.

“Well, everyone seems to be settling in very well. Now I won't keep you long because I realise some of you have come quite a long way today and must be starting to get tired, so I'll just mention a few things. First of all, while everyone has their own job, we will all need to help one another. If your job isn't busy that doesn't mean you can sit around reading magazines. It's a big house and a big house means plenty of housework. This brings me to the children. This house may seem like an adventure but it isn't. You also have jobs here, helping with the cleaning.”

All us kids suddenly looked shocked.

“Yes, that's right. Your parents aren't going to be cleaning up after you, you will be cleaning after them.”

Our “parents” were looking very pleased.

“I'll be making up cleaning rosters for you all and I will assign you in teams of two. And note if your cleaning is not up to scratch I will dock your pay.”

Mrs Jones was a very no-nonsense woman but the news that we would be paid was still not enough to make anyone ask the obvious question. It was Bernard who asked for us.

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“Excuse me Mrs Jones, but I don't believe the children know how much they can expect to earn and for what.”

“Thank you Mr Khumalo for reminding me of that. Children will be expected to work an hour a day during the school term, and four hours for the whole weekend. The rate is twelve local dollars an hour which means they can expect \$108 in cash a week.”

“Woo-hooo!” I yelled. That was more money than I'd ever had in my life. And I don't think I was alone. All the kids looked pleased except Tarik and Ashley who didn't think so much of it.

“And during the holidays they will be expected to work two hours a day and four hours for the weekend. Which will earn them \$168 in cash a week.”

“But no work, no pay. And I'm certain anyone messing up anyone else's cleaning will not be very popular.”

“Now I'd like to pass on to Mr Zimmermann to tell you a bit about the water, waste and systems we have installed in this house.”

Gunter had a strong German accent which sometimes made him hard to understand but he told us about how the house drew its water from an underground stream that flowed through the caves that were to be found all over the island. He said the island was made of limestone and full of shafts and holes, some of them very deep indeed. The waste was processed in special digesters which also emitted gas for cooking and heating. The house had a stand-by diesel generator because the power supply was not reliable. It also had an internal computer network and every screen was wired to be a video intercom. You could also get the internet and TV via the two-metre satellite dish on the roof.

There was so much to explore and it was still hard to believe we were going to live in this place at all. Only that morning we'd woken up in a cheap motel with nowhere to live and no job for Aunt Liz. Tonight we would sleep in a free apartment of Aunt Liz's – and our – new employer. It had all happened so fast we couldn't believe it. So fast, in fact, we had forgotten that somewhere out there Ax had moved back to our old village and found his mad dreams of being reunited with his kids ruined.

That night we had brilliant home-made Pizzas in the café. Our new chef Mr Tran whizzed them out almost as fast as we could eat them. He made it look so easy it was obvious he could cook for this small number in his sleep. When everyone pitched in, cleaning up took less than five minutes.

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It was an early night. Everyone was tired. Ashley, Cam and the little girls nearly fell asleep at the tables. I got into my new bed. Which was more comfortable than any I'd ever had, and before I knew it, I was in this big old empty house. I knew Ax was somewhere in it too, and he had a butchers knife. I could hear him walking the corridors his footsteps echoing around me so I wasn't sure where he was. Rewa was with me and we ran through the corridors to a staircase only to find he was coming up. But he didn't run he just walked after us. We ran through more corridors. Rewa wanted to hide in a box and I was about to stop her when I realised I had to lead him away from Rewa. So I dashed away from where she was hiding.

Ax was like this bear creature and he sniffed as if he could smell Rewa so I walked out and taunted him until he started following me. I led him deeper into the maze of corridors. The way started to get tighter and tighter when suddenly it opened out into a big dome like room. In the middle was a thin bright light coming up from the floor. I ran to the light, my footsteps echoing around in the big dome. The light was coming from a hole in the floor no bigger than my finger. I peeked through and found myself looking down at green grass where Rewa was standing looking up at me. She was shouting at me to get out. Then I heard more footsteps. I got up and I could see Ax standing by the entrance looking at me. I taunted him to chase me but he silently shook his head, and then pointed up. I looked up and realised the top of the dome was covered by a huge gray spider about the size of a house looking down at me. Then I woke up my heart galloping.

It was still dark. The only light in the room was a small red LED on the screen. I began to realise the curtains were pulled and finding the dark too intense I got up and opened them. The sky was incredible. Back home the night sky was good but there were still street lights right outside our house which dimmed the stars. Out here there was nothing, it was black, but the sky was packed full of stars while the sea seemed to give off a sheen of its own as it rhythmically washed up the beach and back.

Before I had been tired, suddenly I was excited. Being awake at night just seemed too great an opportunity. I quietly put my clothes and shoes on and slipped out into the living room. There was no lock on the door – why would there be I wondered to myself – so I slipped out into the passage.

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The corridor was lit – but only just – by a few bulbs at either end. I crept along as quiet as a mouse; checked the lounge was clear, ducked through that and down the stairs; past the gallery as fast as I could because I was sure the ghosts were there now. At the ground floor I found myself confronted by the big main door. For some reason I felt opening it might set something off, so I scampered down the side corridor feeling like a naughty mouse that's got all the cheese.

The back door opened easily and I slipped outside. It was very dark in the shadow of the pines, and the sheds around the back of the house looked spooky, so I scampered back along the drive round to the front of the house. And there I had something of a surprise. Over on the beach a fire was burning. I wondered what it might mean, and as quietly as I could snuck up the gravel road.

The people by the fire seemed to be doing something with a large object, but I couldn't tell what it was against the light of the flames, which smelt a little of kerosene. I crept slowly forward keeping my eye on the shadows of the people. I was about twenty metres away poking my head over the top of a bush when...

“Glad you could make it Sam.”

My heart nearly leapt out of my body. Ken was standing behind me with a guitar under his arm, smiling. He must have followed me the whole way.

“Come over and join the fun,” he said.

He led me around the bush and over the shingle down to the fire.

I recognised the figures instantly. Gunter's glasses shone in the firelight and Mariko's snub nose was silhouetted looking at him. Gunter had a big telescope on a tripod and was carefully adjusting it.

“Sam's come to join us.”

Mariko looked around and grinned, “Hi Sam.”

“What are you doing,” I asked.

Two voices answered at the same time.

“Astronomy,” Mariko said.

“Drinking Bourbon,” Ken said.

“Both,” Mariko corrected.

Then they both laughed.

“Ve are ... in fact ... observing the rings of Saturn,” Gunter said “... und zere sey are!”

Mariko bent over the telescope.

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"Cooooool," she said.

She looked up at me.

"You lrook, Sam."

I crunched over and put my eye to the viewer.

I was blown away. There they were! For real!

"Wow!" was all I said.

"Pretty cool, huh Sam," said Ken.

Gunter looked at his watch.

"I'll start recording in three ... two ... Vun. Vun twenty four exactly," said Gunter.

"What's he doing?"

"He's just taping the sky for five minutes," said Ken who was now standing next to me holding his metal cup.

"Sorry I can't give you one of these kid, but that's the law," he added.

I told him I didn't mind. Gunter wanted a refill from Ken's flask though, and Mariko snuggled up to him as he watched the sky and the equipment.

"So do you guys do this every night?"

Ken laughed, "Every night? No."

"Tonight was epecially good for Saturn and zere'z no cloud cover," Gunter added.

"This is sky is huge," I gushed, "back home it's good, but not this good."

"In most parts of the world is now almost impossible to zee the stars, because of all the light pollution," Gunter said seriously looking up.

Ken laughed.

"You mean in most parts of Europe, Gunter. The world is a lot bigger than that. Out on the Steppe in Mongolia you see skies a lot like this. And in the desert in the States too."

"We lroost our stars in Japan," Mariko said sadly.

We were all struck by her words. I thought to myself, what does it mean, "to lose your stars?"

"Didn't your May-Orie ancestors navigate by the stars, Sam?" Ken asked.

I smiled at his mispronunciation of Maori. It's Mao-ree (with a rolled 'r' and short ee). It was funny coming from a Mongolian with an American accent. But I answered his question.

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"Yep, they were navigating across the Pacific by the stars a thousand years ago."

"Do you know Maori stars Sam?" Mariko asked.

"No, not many," I had to answer. I remembered something from those sleepovers on the Marae but I couldn't recall it clearly enough. And it suddenly seemed sad that nobody had ever taught me about them. I had lost my stars too. Not that I'd ever been given the opportunity to learn. The old people only passed what they knew on to very few.

"I think I'd like to find out about them now," I added almost to myself.

"So what do you think of Renwick? Do you think you'll stay?" Ken asked.

"I don't know. I think so. We haven't got anywhere else to go. But it's all so strange and sudden. Just when we needed a place to stay here it was. I haven't got used to it yet."

"Why d'you need new prace to stay?" Mariko asked.

I told them my story as quickly as I could. They were surprised, and not so surprised.

"I'll bet every family that he picked up tonight has a similar story," Ken said.

I was too surprised by that to react. I thought my story was pretty unusual.

"We were all in trouble when Dr Prosperov took us under his wing," he smiled nodding at the others. He sat down and picked up his guitar, beginning to pick a classical tune.

"I'd made some pretty atrocious banking decisions on behalf of the Government of Mongolia. I fled to the States and went into banking there, but I met him through my father back in Mongolia, strangely enough," he admitted.

"I piss off Yakuza. Never know when to shut mouth," Mariko smiled.

"What's yakuza," I asked.

"Bunch of nasty rittle men with ...," Mariko began,

"The Japanese mob," Ken interrupted her.

"I vuz involved wit development in Poland. I vuz unaware my partners were fraudsters. Zey left me to take za rap," Gunter smiled.

"Dr Prosperov is very mysterious," Gunter said. "Even vee don't know much about him and vee haf verked wit him for three years."

"Four," said Mariko.

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"Seven," said Ken, "and all I really know about him is that ten years ago he started the project to find a place and now it's nearly ready."

"Why here?" I asked.

"Well, he was kicked out of the States," Ken said.

"Kicked out?" I repeated, wondering what you had to do to be kicked out of a country.

"Well not kicked out, but the SEC made his life so tough he had to leave."

"SEC? What's the SEC?" I asked feeling very ignorant.

"Security and Exchange Commission. It's the police of banks and finance in the States. Very powerful."

"So is he very rich?" I asked feeling like a little kid.

"Well, he's no Warren Buffett, but he's rich enough to pay us more than we deserve and not notice it."

"But why did he want to come here," I asked a bit timidly.

"I was with him when he toured the world looking for places," said Ken,

"There were a bunch of countries he liked. Switzerland and Brunei were high on his list. So was Australia, Chile, Singapore and Norway. But he speaks no Spanish, doesn't like the heat and wanted to get away from Europe because it's too close to Russia for his comfort. Besides New Zealand is a friendly place where newcomers can fit in without too many questions. More importantly it's easily forgotten about by the rest of the world – which is something that suited him just fine. So four years ago he picks up this place for relatively little money from the Government with the help of a special May-ori lady who was interested in his project. The government didn't want to pay for it but don't want it knocked down either. Then he goes looking for an architect and a designer and finds these two," Ken smiled at the couple.

The telescope issued a couple of beeps.

"Za pictures are finished now," Gunter remarked to the woman in his arms.

"So's the bourbon," Ken commented shaking his flask.

"Bedtime," said Mariko looking at Gunter.

"Ken would you help again vis de telescope?" Gunter asked.

"Sure, no problem."

"Can I do anything?"

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"No thanks Sam, but you better get back to bed in case your Aunt misses you and freaks out," Ken said.

"OK. Night everyone."

They all said goodnight and I walked back down the road to the backdoor. I felt relaxed. It had been nice to talk to these adults. They hadn't treated me like a little kid and tried to tell me off for being up. They'd just accepted me as being awake early in the morning and talked to me normally. I liked that.

The inside of Renwick seemed incredibly dark and I had no idea where the light switches were. I padded along the corridor not quite looking where I was going – just as Grandpop had taught me to use sideways vision in the dark. I got around to the front staircase OK, but I began to feel a bit nervous. There were presences in the house. I could feel them aware of me. It was if they were whispering all around me. They weren't friendly, but they weren't angry either. I just wanted to go bed. I put my head down and climbed the stairs.

When I got to the top of the stairs the sense of the presences was stronger. I realised this had been the wards where they'd lived, and more importantly died, and we were sleeping there. It was cold, my skin pricked. I knew they were there and I turned around. A wave of electric terror ran through me. I hadn't expected to see it as clearly. It wasn't transparent, or glowing or any cartoon story ghost, but looked real, as real as if he was still alive. The half-faced man I'd seen in the window was staring at me from the gallery entrance. His mouth a twisted hole, noseless with a single eye, the rest a mess of raw flesh dressed in a hospital gown that did not hide the metal leg and hooked hand. He started to walk toward me.

I think I barked a sort of terrified, "No!" and ran down the dark corridor. He kept walking. He seemed to be making this weird rasping noise which sounded insane. It was incredibly dark. I tripped over my own feet and leapt up again. I couldn't tell which number room I was up to. The ghost was still coming. I felt each door for numbers as I ran past them. Finally I found our door. I looked up and the ghost was gone. I was covered in cold sweat and my heart was pounding.

It was still very dark inside our apartment. I could still feel the presences around me, whispering. I felt cold with fear and wanted to wake up Aunt Liz but I knew she got impatient when I talked about ghosts. I just ran into my room, kicked off my shoes and

Welcome to Renwick House

jumped into bed, lying there shivering and hoping that it wouldn't come through the walls.

Gradually the whispering seemed to reduce and I noticed a slight graying of the sky toward the East. I must have fallen asleep then because the next thing I knew my Aunt was waking me the next morning.

I stopped talking.

Sue's head had just slumped on to her chest.

"Sue?"

"Hmmm?"

"Sue!"

"Yeah, yeah ... what?"

"You're falling asleep."

"Yeah ... what time is it?"

"It's ... um ... well it's two oh five."

"Hmmm ... I think Sam it's bedtime."

"OK."

She got up drowsily and started turning things off.

In the passage as I turned to my door she put a hand on my shoulder.

"Great story Sam ... really liked the ghost bit at the end."

Then she guided me to my room and shuffled off to hers.

I threw myself onto the bed, highly pissed off. She obviously didn't believe me. She thought I was just telling her stupid stories for some reason. I really was determined to show *her* in the morning. I looked under my bed. The watch had stopped glowing and the phone was dark too.

I lifted them up and unstuck the phone, lowered the watch face and dialed up Qi. He appeared on the face.

"How did it go with para.no.ID?"

"They responded."

"Which code?"

"Gray elephant."

That meant that they suspected I was compromised and wanted a new code challenge. More time lost but it was a high level challenge and it meant I could probably rely on them now. At least they were in the clear.

"Did you find anything out about Antonio Rossi?"

Part One Initiation

“He has an unverifiable cyber-shadow. I have his social networking site addresses if that would help?”

“Don't bother.”

People get very jumpy about the idea of net shadows or cyber shadows. You know, telling the world about themselves on Facebook or Twitter or whatever. But most of it can't be checked. It's just a bunch of crap people write. So the fact that Antonio Rossi had a shadow meant nothing. Antonio Rossi could be a real person or a cyber-phantom – an artificial personality. It proved nothing.

“Qi I want you to use strict protocol with para.no.ID. If they break it – and I think they will – break off. Then try again in 48 minutes time. That has to be exact. Forty eight minutes exactly. The code word is 'Alice says 'hi'. Their response to the challenge is 'Cheshire' and a smiley. After that tell them that Michael is dealing with *them* and some of the Infiltrators. Not sure who. Ask about Antonio Rossi and see if they can find anything going to him from here which might suggest who it was.”

“OK Sam.”

I wondered why they *weren't* coming to get me. I was tagged. They had tracked me all the way here. But then the more I thought about it, the more I realised I had made it quite hard for them. I was in a Policewoman's house. People knew I was here. Really they should have struck when Leonora had me, but loyal as she had shown herself to be to Sir Michael, she wasn't part of this. She knew nothing and Michael had got himself between *them* and me.

But now as I thought about it, I realised in a way Sir Michael was trying to *protect* me by convincing them to do everything legally. I had seen an Infiltrator murder a man as casually as putting out a cigarette because he wanted a dead body. Maybe I had more help than I thought. If only I knew what had started the whole thing.

I lay there half-asleep recalling the last moments I talked to anyone from Renwick almost a week ago. I was flying 25km over the Pacific, east of the Solomon Islands. The evacuation order had been given ten minutes ago and I had to get back but I knew I wasn't going to make it. I looked up and about 90km above me and 90km ahead in the dark boundaries of space a colossal triangular craft a kilometre in length surrounded by five smaller triangles descending directly overhead doing about ten clicks a second. I could beat them home but only by minutes – and then they'd get me.

Welcome to Renwick House

I call it in.

“Better move it guys, Service carrier and five escorts on its way. ETA ten minus.”

“Sam! Hide! We can't wait for you! We're going now!” Mariko called desperately.

“Catch you later guys,” was all I could think to say.

There was no acknowledgement. They'd started the self-destruction process. Renwick was burning.

The carrier didn't spot me because they were on a mission and I was so tiny, so I dived for the sea, through the cloud layer, slowing rapidly as only inertialess flight allows. I decided to swim home. The sea is so blue and pretty. I slip into it gently and begin the slow journey home underwater. And everything turns into a lovely dream about mermaids, dolphins and tropical islands with Emma on them.



Chapter Eleven: Beneath the Ashes

We slept-in the next morning. It wasn't until ten o'clock on Saturday morning that I finally got out of bed, and only because Sue insisted.

"C'mon Sam, it's a gorgeous day," she enthused. Obviously she'd slept well too.

And it was a great day for autumn. Blue sky, no wind and a warm eighteen degrees Celsius. It was one of those autumn days when you think winter might not come at all.

Sue rang the ferry and booked us in for the twelve o'clock and six o'clock return. That meant about five hours on the island.

"So what's the plan?" I asked her over breakfast.

"Well, the forensic guys still have the house roped off but they've finished gathering their evidence and we haven't yet turned it over to the owner's lawyer – the one you ran away from. So if there's anything you want to show me, now would be a good time," she explained.

"OK. I doubt if there's anything left of Renwick House. Did they find radiation?"

"They weren't looking for radiation," Sue said doubtfully.

"Well they'll be OK in those suits they wear. They had to crash the fusion reactors so there might be residual."

"Radiation from the *fusion* reactors," Sue said, nodding.

"Yeah. Could be," I said tucking into cornflakes.

"But you think it's safe?" she checked over the lip of her coffee cup.

"Oh yeah, for short periods, under four or five hours no problem."

She smiled at me knowingly, putting down her cup.

"What?" I asked, pausing, spoon in hand.

"Sam, you're not getting cold feet about showing me your flying saucer are you?"

Welcome to Renwick House

"No, just a bit nervous," I said playing with my food. I couldn't help remembering that I carried a tag. They knew *exactly* where I was. They could show up at any moment and I couldn't fight them. My only hope was to hide, but right now that was impossible.

"Oh yes. Why's that?" she asked directly.

"Well, I want to make sure you only see *one* flying saucer. Two flying saucers would not be so good."

"Two for the price of one, what's wrong with that?" Sue laughed.

"Because it means they've bounced me, so you won't see me again – not that you'd remember it."

"*They* being ..." she said crunching into her toast.

"The other guy's flying saucers, yeah," I resumed eating.

She was still smiling. I was nervous.

"So how radioactive did you say Renwick House is?"

"I didn't. I don't know, but it's a possibility."

"And you aren't trying to put me off going there?" she smiled.

"No," I said honestly.

"Not a teensy bit?" she grinned, inclining her head slightly.

Her smiling was making me smile. She was cute.

"No! it's okay ... really."

"And there's no monsters in the lagoon?" she asked.

"No, although I guess the ghosts will be pissed off," I said collecting my last cornflakes.

She laughed.

"Oh yeah! I'd forgotten about *them*. So apart from the radiation *and* the other flying saucers *and* the ghosts, I'll be fine then?" she asked almost laughing.

I thought of adding Infiltrator hit-men on her doorstep to her list but I decided not too.

"Uh-huh."

"Sam you're a crazy nut job but at least you make me feel better," she sighed, getting up and going into the kitchen,

I smiled at her. I was glad she liked me. If she knew the crap she was really in, she might not.

"Can I ask one favour?"

"Hmm what?" she asked with amused suspicion.

"Can I bring my flying saucer home?" I asked.

"Home?" She asked her smile dropping.

"Sorry, to your place," I admitted.

She looked at me a little sorrowfully.

Part One Initiation

"Sam I like you and everything but ... well ... you can't live here. Not permanently. You will have to find a foster family, at least until you're old enough to look after yourself."

I was hurt by that. Stunned in fact. Leonora had been right. Sue really was my plan B. The idea that she was willing to ditch me to some foster family hit me hard. Where the hell would I go? Not the Moore's again. That was for sure!

I looked at my empty bowl. It was mostly the rejection but there was also extra pain in realising that she still didn't believe a damn thing I'd told her. As far as she was concerned it was just so much raving from a funny little Maori orphan kid. I took a deep breath and got up to go back for my watch. She knew she'd hit me hard.

"Sam? Sam? Don't be silly now," she followed me down the passage to my room. Then she grabbed my shoulders and turned me around.

"Sam, I am not your Aunt or your mother. I'm not a substitute for them," she said firmly looking into my eyes while I avoided hers.

"I can barely keep my own life together. I couldn't ... and they wouldn't let me ... It's just not real Sam," she said gently.

The word "real" set me off. Her idea of what was real was just so simple.

"That's the problem!" I blurted out bitterly. "Your stupid reality! You don't even realise how small and f_____d it is!" I swore.

That did it. Now she was angry! Her eyes flashed and jaw hardened.

"Don't you swear at me, young man, not as a guest in my house!" she roared.

She was actually quite frightening. She was up there with Auntie Liz, and Grandpop. I was impressed. We were staring each other down. She was winning. I looked away. I had to swallow a lot of bitterness. Not all of it was towards her either – some of it was about being left alone like this – but it was rising up and if I let it out now at her everything I had achieved so far would be lost. With as much control as I had left I faced her again.

"Look, I'm sorry for swearing at you. OK? I'm sorry. But Sue, I'm not a nut-job. I'm not a sad-puppy orphan who's wiggled out because I've lost my family. They *will* come back for me."

"Sam ..." she began sympathetically.

I had to fight down the frustration as she started feeling sorry for me again.

Beneath The Ashes

"Look," I interrupted trying not to yell at her again. "Can we go to the island now? At least we can agree on that. OK?"

"OK," she said slowly, "but we are going to have to sort this out before Monday, OK? Because *I* have to front up to your lawyer and explain why you were such a little shit ..."

I began to object but she continued.

"Uh, uh, uh. Why you were such an ungrateful little *shit* to someone who was just trying to help you."

"OK," I agreed wanting this lecture over with.

"Can we just go to the island now?"

It seemed to take an age to get in the car with too much shagging around and forgetting things. We were both ratty with each other and the traffic which was very heavy didn't help. We had to drive west to east across Auckland and get to the ferry on time on a day when it seemed everyone in the city had suddenly decided to go out driving.

I decided to risk ringing Emma to pass the time. To my delight her brother Andrew answered. Andrew had been in the same class as Rewa. Like most kids that age he wasn't great on the phone but at least he handed it on to Emma rather than her dad or mum.

"Emma?" I began

"Oh hi ... ah ... *Charli* ... hang on," she replied.

I heard her walking through the house and close the door.

"Sam! What's happening? Why haven't you called?"

"I tried a few times but it's been real complicated. First they put me in a foster home with this knife boy ..."

"What!? Are you OK?" she sounded worried.

"Yeah I got out of that. Then I stayed the night on the couch of a detective. Then I got rescued by this rich lawyer dude and his private investigator but it turned out they were ... uhh sus..."

"*Shit!* Are you OK? Where are you now?"

"Yeah, I'm OK for now. Tell you more later. Look, I've got a mobile so take this number down ..."

"Hang on ... hang on ... oh, why is there never a pen? ... I'll use eyebrow pencil, OK?"

"0251 6929211."

"0251 692...?"

"...9211"

"0251 6929211?"

"That's it. But I'm on my way out to the island right now!"

Part One Initiation

"Now!"

"Yeah! ... I've got this cop with me. She's in charge of the case ... but I think she's OK. Anyway she's driving me back over there."

"Great! So you want to meet up?"

"Course. We're arriving at one and we'll be at Renwick at one thirty. Meet me in the usual place at two."

"OK, I'll try. I might have to bring Charli."

"Poor old Charli," I said.

She giggled.

"See ya at two."

"OK."

Sue was curious.

"Who was that?"

"Emma Reeves."

"Who's she?"

"A friend."

"Your girlfriend?"

"Well, she's my best friend not from Renwick, and she's a girl, so I guess *you* would say that."

"Is that who you were with on Sunday night?" she asked sounding like Kevin.

I decided to make her squirm.

"You mean like having sex?" I asked looking at her directly as she drove.

"Well ... ah if you say so," she admitted uncomfortably, look at the road.

"No," I said firmly and rather grumpily, looking forward, in a way that suggested she was out of line.

And to my surprise she didn't keep questioning me about it. I wondered if she'd ask Emma. I hoped she wouldn't pretend I'd said we had been to bed just to see what Emma said. That was a trick I'd expect of Kevin but I'd hoped Sue would be a bit more responsible.

In fact I *had* spent that night at Emma's place. In the barn. We liked each other but we were too busy hiding my speeder, erasing the school records and avoiding *their* increasingly scary efforts to find me to worry about snogging. She'd been the first person I'd turned to because she had had been brought into our secret a year before. That, and because she was borrowing my wetsuit at the time and I needed it. The wetsuit allowed me to get into the hiding place for the speeder which only we knew about.

Beneath The Ashes

We drove across town on a sunny Saturday morning. There was a lot of traffic. You could see kids out playing sports or with their parents enjoying themselves. I wondered what it would be like to have a normal life. One where you didn't have to wheedle cops into driving you around or wonder whether aliens were tracking you via stomach tags so they could abduct you later. It seemed so relaxing.

Everything on this trip depended on the lighthouse. If I could get some power out of the supercapacitors and get its powerful electro-magnets cranked up I'd soon know whether Leonora had tagged me or not.

To pick up the signals from the GPS satellites the tag had to have an aerial finer than the finest old, wire, light-bulb filament. The electro-magnetic field in the lighthouse lab would start a current running through any aerial anywhere near it. If I got close enough to the field the induced current would overload the aerial, like blowing an old light-bulb, and blast the tag to bits – probably burning me internally at the same time. I really hoped that it wouldn't hurt too much.

As we drove I got the feeling that Sue had started to think that if she cracked my case the embarrassing incident with the pills would be quietly forgotten by her bosses. It explained why she looked every bit the cop at the moment. She seemed to think she'd let her guard down too far by letting me get involved in her personal life. She had a phrase “professional detachment” going through her head. I thought it was bullshit but I could see it was attached to a bunch of memories which were not much fun so I guessed that was how cops cope. Not being a cop I couldn't say whether it worked or not.

We got to the ferry terminal without talking very much. We were both lost in our own worlds. The terminal wasn't very busy. It might have been a nice day but autumn was not the tourist season for Aotea. Not like summer anyway. We drove on to the ferry and got ourselves up on deck relatively quickly. This process seemed to change Sue's mood and she was quite interested in everything around her. It turned out she'd never been to the island before and it was nice to have work pay for something she found interesting anyway.

On board we bought lunch. I pigged out a bit on juice, pies and cakes trying to line my stomach, but I knew the crossing and didn't see any risk of getting seasick. Sue was more careful. She didn't

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trust her stomach. Still, after we'd eaten, it was nice to sit up top and watch Auckland fall away behind us. For some reason today some dolphins were playing around the boat and their presence and the sea breeze put a smile on Sue's face again.

"So ... so far you've told me about how you came to be at Renwick, and a little about the people there but there's still a lot of unanswered questions. Why did Dr Prosperov lease the place? Why did he hire foreigners? What was all this stuff about a clinic and did you ever get over being haunted?" She asked conversationally.

"I can't tell you that until you've seen me fly. There's no point. You wouldn't believe me and I'd get mad with you again," I said looking out to sea.

"Well, what about the other kids? How did you get on?"

"We got on fine," I said.

She looked at me sharply.

"OK, Sam what are you in a snoot about?"

"I'm not in a snoot. It's just pointless telling you stuff if you won't believe what I say. I told you that three days ago when I met you and nothing has changed. So now you'll just have to see it for yourself."

Sue chewed on that for a while.

"OK, have it your way," she snapped. But I could tell she wasn't happy.

The trip over to the island brought back a lot of memories for me. Memories that seemed almost so large that I could only feel them. As the harbour came into view I felt as if I was coming home and I couldn't wait to be off the ferry again. It seemed to take forever to berth the ferry, and for us to get in the car and get off on to the road. As we drove through town I caught glimpses of school friends and people who I knew. It just seemed so unfair that I was being jerked around by all these adults.

Along the ridge Sue drove the gravel road with determination and some skill. I couldn't help sneaking a peak at her now and again wondering how she would cope with what I was going to show her. Would she simply ignore what was right in front of her? Over the past two years I had learned that ignoring things that didn't suit them was something adults were frighteningly good at.

Finally we took the turn off towards Renwick. It was coming up to one o'clock. The sun was high in the sky and warm, but the breeze was fresh now, hinting at the winter to come. I found the familiar

Beneath The Ashes

landmarks made me excited. Even if it all turned to custard at least I would be in my element doing what I liked.

At last we were driving through the pine road that zig-zagged down the hill. I caught glimpses of the ruin but it wasn't until we were out on the flat that the full extent of the fire was obvious.

The whole area was marked with orange cones and police tape. Sue drove around to the area in front of the old front doors. It was the only part of the structure still standing although the once strong looking doors now hung off their hinges, burned to crispy slabs. The fire had obviously been its most intense at the back by the kitchen and waste processing station where the gas from the waste and the gas cylinders were.

We got out of the car. The smell of ash was really strong. I noticed that the walls and old door were labeled with "hazard" tape and guessed they were probably unstable. I walked around the side with Sue following me. The whole place was just a tip of burnt stuff. It was surprising how small it looked, now that it was flattened.

"Did they find the gold?" I asked Sue.

"What gold?" she frowned.

"There's about a tonne of gold down there. Do you have a torch?"

"In the car."

We went back to the car and got a lantern-sized waterproof torch. Then I led her around to the side and picked my way through the rubbish, Sue balancing her way through the unstable heaps after me. Finally we got to the place where the cellar had been. I started moving the burned wreckage. It was heavy and in some places sharp. There was also the danger that I might fall through a burned floor. Sue caught up with me.

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you the escape route everyone took," I answered

"How do you know what route they took?" she asked, surprised.

"Because we practiced it like a fire drill every month. Now help me make a hole to the cellar and be careful. It was deep."

Sue began to help and the work went a bit faster, although what we really needed was a small digger.

"So you knew where they went," she asked as we worked.

"Of course."

"But why did you tell Kevin all that bullshit?" she puzzled.

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“Because we need a cover story to come back with and if I told him the truth he'd think the same way you do,” I said not giving her anything.

What bothered me was there wasn't a hole here already. I had told Sir Michael about this place but *they* hadn't tried to open it up. That suggested they didn't believe I would tell them the true location of the speeder – which was true enough – but also that they would be watching us *now*, ready to pounce. I had to get rid of the tag. If I flew with it still in place they'd have me in seconds. Then I'd have to give in or kill myself and I wasn't sure I could blow myself up. I didn't want to die right now.

After about fifteen minutes, during which we had got completely covered in ash, we uncovered a hole. It was just big enough for an adult to squeeze through. I got out the flashlight and shone it down into it. As I had expected the cellar had escaped a lot of the blaze although some of the wine had been destroyed. You could smell it and there was broken glass where some bottles closer to the ceiling had shattered in the heat. Still it was only about four metres to the floor and the broken glass was clearer directly under me. There was a risk of a twisted ankle and a cut but not huge.

“Have you got a rope?” I asked looking up at her.

“I've got my tow rope ...” she suggested, bent over looking into the hole over my shoulder.

“That'll do.”

She started back to the car to get it. Then I lowered myself into the hole and ended hanging down by my fingertips. Stretched out I could reach down almost two metres but I still had another two metres to fall. It looked a long way in the near blackness down there. Sue must've looked back.

“Sam!” she shouted urgently “Where are you?”

“Here!” I called.

“What are you doing! Stop it! It's dangerous! You can't go down there!” she shouted.

I think I was still pissed off with her for not believing me. I wanted to teach her a lesson.

“Follow me,” I called and I dropped two and a bit metres to the wreckage strewn floor.

The landing was heavier than I'd expected and when I stood up I noticed I'd missed a big heap of broken glass by centimetres. I shoved it away with my foot.

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"Sam?" Sue called down the hole.

"Are you OK?" she sounded worried.

The air was thick with fine dust, which given that it probably was radioactive, was not a good thing. I'd had forgotten about this and it made me cough and brought tears to my eyes.

"Yeah but ... it's really dusty down here," I gasped.

I explored around with the torch. I decided to slip my hoody off and tie it around my face like a mask. That way I could breathe through it and it would filter at least some of the dust.

"What can you see?" Sue asked down the hole.

"A lot of burnt stuff."

Some of the piles looked like they might not hold the debris above up for long. I kept looking.

"Sue?" I asked, shielding my eyes, looking up into the light.

"Yeah."

"This is the escape route, but in case it's blocked would you mind getting that rope?"

"You're a bloody idiot for jumping in there," she told me off, grumpily.

I looked up at her and smiled.

"I know. You're right," I agreed, because she was, "But now that I've done it could you see if you can find the rope?"

"OK. Don't move!"

She disappeared. I was annoyed at myself for being such a dork in front of Sue. I'd let my desire to make her follow me, make me do something dumb. Grandpop would have given me a real hard time. But I couldn't wait, I had to see if I was wasting my time. I slipped through the wreckage and twisted under a bit of the floor to find the way to the vault and the route to the tunnels under the house that went back into the hill behind it.

This path was clear of dangerous wreckage but the air was thick making the beam from the torch shine. It was a perfect place to meet *them* – which I really didn't need – but there was no sign. Just the dust dancing in the light from my torch. I had to creep carefully through, checking the way above, below and on the sides. I got to the vault door. It was a big door built to be fire resistant and I was pretty sure that if it still opened I could open it.

There was a small steel combination lock dial on the front panel. I dialed up Qi on my wrist and he gave me the combination. This was the big moment. If I was right the panel would open to reveal the

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actual door lock panel glowing with big red LEDs. If I was wrong I was down in a dark hole breathing radioactive dust for nothing.

"Sam? Sam? Are you there? Where the hell are you? I told you not to move!" Sue called angrily from the hole. She was worried again.

I opened the panel and a lovely red glow lit up the dark.

"First enter numeric key," the panel said with an American woman's voice.

"Sue!" I yelled.

"Sam, what are you doing?" she called distant and frustrated.

I worked my way back to the hole. Sue had the rope and was tying it to some of the heftier bits of wreckage.

"Sue!" I looked up shielding my eyes from the bright day outside. Her face appeared above.

"Sam, I'm just tying the rope on. Do you think you can climb up?"

I smiled up at her, trying to look like I always spent Saturday in the cellars of burnt out buildings.

"Sue, come down. You're going to want to see this."

"What?" she asked shortly.

"Come and see," I said and walked back into the darkness.

"Sam! Sam! get back here!" she roared.

Training had made me such a shit when I wanted to do my own thing. Even scary policewomen couldn't shake me. I went back to the door panel. There was no need to ask Qi this time. Normally this panel had been left open and I knew my number better than any phone number. I punched it in.

"Please say your password at the tone," The vault demanded.

"Hua Kai."

A small panel slid open revealing a glass panel.

There was a noise behind me. I guessed it was Sue coming down.

"Oh, it's horrible down here. Sam! Sam! You've got the torch! Where the f___ are you?" Sue called.

"Hang on," I yelled lazily.

I placed my hand on the scanner. A light slid across my hand brightly.

"What's that?" Sue called nervously from the hole.

"Entry authorised."

And the door servos whirred briefly and stopped. I pushed the door and it swung open. Then I went back for Sue.

She was standing in the column of light from the outside world with dust flurrying around her. Occasionally it seemed to glow in

points of lilac and blue. She looked pretty amazing actually coming from the darkness. Then she started coughing and the whole effect was spoiled.

“What the hell do you think you're playing at!” she asked angrily, not really wanting an answer.

“I told you not to come down here and you did it anyway. I told you to wait and you wander off. I'm not going to put up with this!”

I sat down on a broken beam and looked her in the eye.

“Sue would you stop acting like a nervous mother. Even the foster home was more dangerous than this!”

She was shocked. There was no doubt about it. She wasn't sure whether I'd caught her maternal instincts out or not. So I went on before she regained her balance.

“I'm leading you into something way bigger than you realise. It's not a funny little story I make up to entertain you, it's my life. Now you can either follow me into this tunnel and discover a bigger reality, or you can go back home to the reality you think you know and forget all about me, because whether you come or not I *am* going.”

And with that I stood up and headed to the vault leaving her. I think she realised then that I was quite prepared to vanish down there and there wasn't much she could do about it.

“I just don't want you to wander off where I can't find you,” she called assertively.

“If I wanted to do that I'd be gone already,” I said from the darkness.

“Now come with me and keep low or you'll hurt your head,” I told her.

She came into the dusty darkness, through the broken glass and the smell of ash, around the fallen supports of the floor which in places threatened her skull and brought her to the door. The panels red LED's continued to shine in the dark.

“Welcome to my sad orphan world of make-believe,” I said coldly and pushed open the door, shining the torch inside.

If you've never seen a lot of gold glistening in the dark you probably don't know how beautiful it is. There are reasons why people have murdered for it, enslaved whole populations for it. It is bewitching. I led Sue into the entrance of the vault and I went in and shone the torch around. The gold was arranged on shelves. The smallest ingots – just small fingers really – were by the door.

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Further back there were the coins in bags, and even further in were the bricks of gold and silver. There were also trophies: daggers, cups, lamps, all sorts of items made of solid gold or silver and encrusted precious stones. Sue was just staring at it all with her mouth open.

"Wait there a minute. I'll be back in a second," I said.

"Where are you going?" she demanded as I left her in the dark.

"Just making sure the escape tunnel is still open," I told her.

I went to the back of the vault and found the hatch. It was a simple round hatchway in the floor. I turned the seal and lifted the heavy hatch open. I took a quick glance inside to make sure nothing had changed and went back for Sue.

"Come in," I said and handed her the torch.

She entered and walked around inspecting the treasure.

"What do you think?" challenging her again.

"Who does this belong to Sam?" she asked in a small voice. She was still grumpy but she was a bit shocked by the scale of the treasure.

"Until the others come back. Me, I do," I admitted.

She turned the torch on me suddenly. I covered my face.

"Hey!" I complained.

"No, really Sam? Is it Prosperov's," she asked.

"Half of it. But a twelfth of it really is mine. We gathered it," I told her.

"How?"

"Not til you've seen my speeder," I said shaking my head.

"Speeder?"

"My flying saucer."

"Well, this lot will have to be looked after," Sue sighed looking around. It was cold in the vault. I put my black hoodie back on.

"I know," I agreed.

Sue went towards the back swinging her torch around the treasure.

I walked to the door and pulled it closed. There was a loud clunk.

"What have you *done*!" Sue screamed. There was a note of real panic in her voice. It was a very loud scream inside that enclosed space and the torch was in my face again.

"Stop panicking," I said wincing, "come and look."

Beneath The Ashes

She came back around and shone the torch at the back of the door. The big manual wheel which opened the door I'd just locked was obvious.

"It's a manual exit. The system was designed for panic rooms. You know like the movie? The power system is a large battery. It's in that column behind you. But even if there's no power at all you can always get out."

"Sorry I just ..." she began.

"I know and it was dumb of me to jump down here but you've got to remember I know this place like the back of my hand. It just didn't seem like a big deal compared to what else is down here. Now turn that torch off I want to show you something else."

She hesitated.

"Go on!" I insisted.

She switched the light off.

"I can't see a thing," she complained immediately.

"Wait," I said.

"You aren't going to do something stupid are you?" she asked a little nervously.

It took a while for our eyes to adjust to the dark.

"Look behind you. It's not scary."

I saw her silhouette turn.

"Where's that glow coming from?" she asked curiously.

For a pretty rippling radiant green glow was reflecting off the ceiling above the hatchway.

"Go and look. I'll follow you."

She went over to the hatchway. A ladder went down the narrow tube cut into the rock, but it was the lining that was so remarkable because it shimmered and glowed fluro green in the dark.

"What is that?" she breathed.

"It's the way down to the entrance tunnel."

"I meant ... entrance tunnel?" she asked suddenly realising what I'd said.

"Yeah."

"Entrance to what?"

"Our fairy grotto," I laughed.

"Well, not much anymore," I added, "but you should come and have a look anyway."

Part One Initiation

And I pushed past and swung over the trap and taking hold of the ladders on the outside with hands and feet slid down to the bottom, as we always did.

Sue stepped down, reluctantly, after me.

It was strange entering that tunnel again. It seemed so entirely lifeless. The tunnel was round and made of bricks coated with the green shimmering glowmoss. But the floor was hard and shiny, almost slippery, made of black glass material which seemed to soak up the green light like night. It was only about two metres tall. I waited for Sue to step uncertainly down the ladder.

"What is this place?" she asked and the tunnel ate her voice in its darkness.

"It was originally built in World War Two as an access way to the coastal battery command post in the hill. The ghosts led us to it."

"The ghosts," Sue repeatedly uncertainly in the eerie green light.

"Yeah."

"So you did get over being spooked by the ghosts," she tried to kid me half-heartedly.

"No. They weren't keen on strangers," I said, setting off.

She shuddered slightly. But I had more important things to do than freak out Sue.

"Come on, it's up here."

I set off up the tunnel which led back toward the hill. I knew the path in my sleep. Sue followed unhappily along behind me, muttering about how the fire might have made the tunnel unstable. Knowing how it was made, I rather doubted that.

"Sam?" her voice echoed in the low tunnel. I turned.

She had paused to inspect the moss, touching it with her fingers and rubbing them together.

"What is this stuff making all the light?" she asked.

"Glowmoss. 'Our friends' made it. It's genetically engineered of course. It makes light and oxygen from chemical reactions. It's perfectly safe, but don't eat it. Come on."

We clattered and echoed along the tunnel into the darkness. After a while the silence got to her.

"Where are we going Sam?"

"We're following the route to the base. Eventually it will lead us out," I replied.

"Oh ... that's good," she said.

She didn't like being underground.

Beneath The Ashes

We walked about hundred metres up the shiny black path, climbing all the way. A hundred metres feels a very long way underground, and came to the junction. To the left the tunnel went on into the green-lit dark. To the right it did the same. But ahead of us was a gateway that had collapsed into a dark heap of dirt and rubble. I waited for Sue to catch me up. When she did, she shone the torch on it.

"What's that?" she asked, realising I was looking at it for her benefit.

"*That* is where everyone went," I told her.

"Were they killed by a rockfall," she said stupidly.

I looked at her like she was dumber than dumb.

"Noooo. They collapsed the tunnel behind themselves so *they* couldn't pursue. Even *they* can't get in there."

"So are they still in there?" Sue asked, confused.

"Of course not, they had another way out."

"Where does it come out?" she asked simply.

I smiled and shook my head. Her world view was so small.

"On another planet," I told her.

"Oh really," she said. By which she meant, "I don't think so."

"Uh-huh."

"But you're left behind," she pointed out.

"Yeah," I admitted. It *did* make me sad.

I felt her stand close behind me and then she put a hand on my shoulder. I confess I liked it so I didn't stop her. I didn't like fighting with her either. Then she took a deep breath.

"I'm glad you showed me all this Sam."

"It's OK."

"You remind me of the children left behind by the Pied Piper of Hamelin. You know they could still hear their playmates even though they were left behind," she said sadly.

"Hang on," I tensed.

"What?" she asked, suddenly worried.

"What's the time?"

"It's one thirtyish," she said.

"When's the next ferry from Auckland?"

"I don't know, why?"

I dialed Qi who appeared on my wrist.

"Qi what time does the next ferry arrive from the mainland?"

"In twenty nine minutes if it's on time," he said pleasantly.

Part One Initiation

"Sam! What *is* that!" Sue demanded.

"It's my watch Qi, Qi meet Sue, Sue meet Qi."

"Glad to meet you Sue," Qi said chattily.

"Er ... hi!" she said looking astonished.

"How long did it take us to get to Renwick, about ten ... fifteen minutes?" I asked Sue.

"Yeah, about that."

"We've got to get out of here!" I concluded.

"What? Why?" she demanded.

I didn't have time to explain.

"Come on! This way!" I said my words echoing off the walls, and started running into the right tunnel.

"Where does *this* go?" she called following after me.

"Out, come on."

As I ran I dialed Qi out.

The smoothness of the path and the fresh air from the glowmoss made running easier than it might have been. Still it was easy to feel a little disorientated in the green glowing darkness on the shiny dark floor.

"Why do we have to run?" Sue called her voice echoing after me.

"Because *they're* coming. And if I'm not quick, they'll get me."

"Who's coming?"

"*Them* and Sir Michael."

"Sam, this is crazy."

"Better crazy than dead," I said and kept running.

Now we were heading on a long right-hand curve following the bay downhill along the luminous green path through darkness. I was getting the stitch but I ran on. Finally we came to the end of the passage. At the end was a big door. I turned the wheel lock while Sue gasped for breath behind me. The big door swung open.

Light flooded in. We passed through the door and I closed it behind us.

"Where are we?" Sue wondered panting.

The room was large and round with the same shiny black floor as the tunnels. Around the edges were some very high voltage looking devices with big ceramic couplings and heavy cables that spiraled upwards.

"We're under the lighthouse!" Sue realised.

It was true. The light was coming in from the top of the lighthouse from the sides, pouring down the internal walls to light us the white

walls of the room. Above us a spiral staircase twisted down around the walls from the floor to the very top of the tower. But most interesting was the huge tube suspended above from the top of the lighthouse all the way to the bottom made of countless coils of gleaming copper wire. And the whole thing was aimed at a huge copper bowl set inside a single piece of granite with enormous power cables coming out of it at regular intervals.

"What is this all this stuff?" Sue asked.

"A high energy physics lab. Now, quick, up these stairs," I said as I led Sue up the stairs.

The stairs were set in a cage and we went up to a control room that looked over the floor and the big copper bowl from behind thick glass windows. The control panel was still intact, as I'd expected. The only thing missing was the control computers and the power source but if I was right the superconducting capacitors would still be holding a whopping charge. I didn't know anything much about the set up but I knew an "on" switch when I saw one. Sue was following me trying to make sense of it all. I turned to her.

"Sue, you don't have any implants or anything do you?" I asked urgently.

My intensity caught her by surprise. She looked down at her modest chest.

"What does it look like to you?" she asked ironically.

"No, I mean metal. Plates in your head or pins in your bones?"

"Um no," she responded a bit defensively.

"Where's your wallet?"

"In the car."

"Phone?"

"In my pocket."

"Right, well if you want to save your phone get up to the exit level, get about twenty five, thirty metres clear of the lighthouse. Oh ... and take my phone too," I said tossing it to her.

"What are you going to do?"

"Just turn this thing on and off again."

"Why?"

"Can you just trust me?" I demanded. She shrugged. "I'll give you two minutes," I told her.

She started up the stairs and the paused looking through the bars.

"What about your watch?"

"It's optronic."

Part One Initiation

She shrugged and clambered up the stairs and opened the door. I counted off one hundred and twenty seconds and turned on the machine. The needles on the dials of the control panel were very low but I knew it was enough. I went out of the control room and up the stairs. When I got to halfway up the lighthouse I got out of the stairwell onto the grated floor and approached the huge copper coils. The hum and buzz of electricity was intense.

I knew immediately I *had* been tagged. I started to feel a long hot line in my gut. I forced myself closer as the searing pain inside my stomach worsened. Then the tiny wire that acted like an aerial for the GPS signal was overloaded by the induced current and frizzled like a popped light-bulb filament. It hurt like hell. I hoped I hadn't ruptured anything. My idea that eating a lot for lunch might cushion me from an internal burn had proved wrong.

I staggered back to the stairs, clambered down them, clutching my stomach and staggered outside, letting the cleverly hidden door swing shut behind me. It was a beautiful day. The sun was bright, the air still warm and the sky blue. The green of the grass and the white of the lighthouse and the blue of the sea looked amazing together. I ran down the road to Sue who was sitting with a grass stalk in her mouth staring out to sea, clutching my side.

"What's up with you," she asked concerned.

"Something I ate. We need to get moving," I said through gritted teeth.

I stood up. It hurt a lot. I tried to ignore it.

"You know this must have been a great place to be a kid in," she said looking out over the sea.

We were just walking. I wanted to run, but I wasn't sure I could.

"It was. Can we get back to the car," I grimaced.

"Why?"

"I want you to see my flying saucer but I don't want Sir Michael to find it."

"Why not," she asked.

"Because he's a maniac," I grunted.

"Why is he a maniac?" she asked skeptically.

"Because he wants to take over the world," I gasped.

"How do you know?"

We were heading down the hill toward the ruin of Renwick.

"Because that's why I ran out on him last night. He wants my speeder so he can build an unstoppable air force."

Beneath The Ashes

"Why does he want an unstoppable airforce?" Sue asked, as if that was the stupidest thing anyone could want.

"Because he thinks there's going to be a humungous war."

"A war?"

"Yes. He wants to make sure his side wins."

"Why would there be a war?"

"Any number of reasons. But he thinks it will be over natural resources."

"OK, but why do you think he's coming here?"

"Because he put a tag on me. By the way could you turn your mobile off too please?"

"No, why should I?" she objected.

"Because there's no signal here anyway and you're broadcasting where we are."

"Please?" I grunted. The pain was surprisingly bad. I hoped nothing had burned the stomach lining. I didn't want an ulcer. Sue checked her phone.

"You're right. No signal. Oh, OK then may as well save some battery," she said and switched off.

"Now what is the story about that watch of yours?"

"It's a watch."

"No watch I ever saw had talking holograms come out of it."

"It's a watch from elsewhere."

"Where elsewhere?"

"I don't know. It's a cheap data watch from a place that makes cheap data watches like that."

"It doesn't look very cheap to me."

"Well, it didn't cost me anything."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Our friends."

"Sam, you keep talking about 'your friends' but who are they?" she asked, annoyed.

"Uh-uh. Not till you've see me fly."

I turned Qi on again.

"Qi how long 'til the ferry docks?"

"Nine minutes," he responded.

"And the time is?" I asked.

"Nine minutes to two New Zealand Standard Time."

"Bugger. We're late," I gasped.

I started jogging.

Part One Initiation

"What are we late for now?" Sue wanted to know easily keeping pace.

"Emma."

"Oh, *right*," Sue said.

We got back to Sue's car at four minutes to two.

"OK, let's go," I said settling down.

"Let me just get my towrope," she said getting out.

"Sue, we don't have time. Please? ... I'll buy you a new one, promise," I said half climbing out after her.

She looked at me skeptically.

"*Really!*" I said really worried. She seemed to pick up my mood.

"Oh, OK, where are we going?" she said getting back in, starting the car.

"Up."

"Up?"

"Back up the road we came down, back to the ridge. As quick as you can."

"OK."

Sue tore back up the hill in a cloud of dust. She seemed to like driving fast on gravel. We got back to the ridge at 2:04 and then I directed her on back up the road. We retraced our path along the ridge as the clock ticked on. Then at 2.07 we came to the turn off which formed a Y intersection with the ridge road. We turned right and north and headed up the road. I kept an eye out looking at the dust cloud, hoping that it would settle in the next ten minutes so that when Michael arrived there were no clues we'd left.



Chapter Twelve: Down the Rabbit Hole

We went from steep hillside farmland surrounded by scrub to flatter land where the roadsides were lined with the big clumps of flax and the three metre-tall pampas grasses we call toi-toi. Behind these were open stands of Australian blue gum trees which crowded out the view of the sea.

“Take that drive on the right there,” I directed Sue.

Sue slowed down and we pulled off onto the narrow drive that threaded through the tall toi-toi with their big grassy heads like flags in the breeze.

“Who owns this place?” she asked looking around.

“It's conservation land, a public park. This is an access drive.”

The pampas fell away and it was clear now that we were on a bluff covered with rocks and occasional Australian blue gums. It overlooked a bay to the left and bay to the right. The lighthouse was on the opposite side of the bay to the right, jutting further out to sea. The drive curved around to the left and a side-road appeared on the right.

“The road's a circle, there's a picnic spot up ahead.”

And there, sitting on the picnic table looking at her watch, was Emma.

We drew up by her and I got out, taking Sue's torch with me. I felt a bit shy in front of Sue, but Emma didn't apparently. We hadn't seen each other for almost a week.

“Sam!” she shouted happily and ran over to me, her long black hair flying, and gave me a big hug. It hurt and felt great at the same time. I held her tight for a moment which felt so good. Then she let me go again. Emma's a bit bigger than me. Her dad, Tama, is Maori, working for the Conservation Department, and her Mum's white so Emma's coffee-coloured with brown eyes. She was wearing a rough, bush-jacket and jeans.

“I brought your suit,” she said.

Part One Initiation

And she had. It was my wetsuit. My most treasured possession and my first Christmas present at Renwick House.

"Thanks. Emma this is Sue. She's a cop on the Renwick case."

"Hi," Emma said shyly.

"Hi Emma," Sue smiled a friendly greeting.

"Sue's OK. I want to give her a little demo of the speeder." I told her.

"What!?" Emma goggled at me, not believing what she'd heard.

"I need her to help me, when they come back Emma. And for that I need her to believe me, otherwise she'll think I'm a nut-job when I get to the important stuff."

Emma gave Sue a grumpy look but said nothing. Sue wasn't quite sure what to make of that.

"She's OK, Emma. Well ... more OK than the other one. Anyway let's get going, time is getting away on us," I said.

I picked up the suit and we started through the reserve.

"Where are we going?" Sue asked.

"Well, assuming nobody interrupts us, you're going to wait up here while I get my speeder, I'll fly it around and then land and you can have a look at it. Then seeing you don't want it at your place I guess I'll hide it again," I said.

Sue didn't rise to that.

The reserve was full of bushes, big rocks, flax and the gum trees. We cut through the brush. Emma and me, we knew the way well. We were almost at the top when she grabbed my arm.

"You know how you've told me about Administration Scouts," she asked anxiously.

"Yeah," I responded quickly. I had feared this might happen when me and Sue had gone underground and my tag signal vanished.

"Is that one?" Emma asked.

I followed her pointing hand. About eight kilometres off the coast a metallic gray disc was sitting in mid-air gleaming in the sun. It was small but quite plain against the sky. Just what we didn't need!

"Yes! Run!" I shouted.

I ran on with Emma close behind me. Sue jogged behind, torn between wanting to watch the disc and follow us. We ran up to the top cave entrance. It was a little crevice under a rock behind a bush. We stopped to look at the disk from behind the rock, under the cover of the trees.

Down The Rabbit Hole

"Sue, quick," I called urgently to Sue who was walking along squinting at the disc out over the sea.

"What *is* that?" she was saying to herself.

"It's a f_____ flying saucer and I'm not flying it. C'mon," I said nervously.

Emma was bent down at my feet, already scurrying down into the crevice with her torch out.

"It could be a chopper," Sue suggested, refusing to be drawn up by our panic.

"It's not a goddam chopper, hurry up," I yelled bending to follow Emma into the hole.

"It *could* be a chopper," Sue insisted.

Just as I was about to follow Emma the disc accelerated left and then forward in a zigzag motion so that in less than two seconds it was in the bay on our right, right over Renwick, no more than a kilometre away, hovering silently again. It now looked as big as a small truck and was quite plain to view. Dull metallic gray, round with a few bumps around the outside and a central dome in the middle. By my guess it was right over Sir Michael about now.

"Now do you believe me?" I asked with mock patience and dived into the hole.

"Ah yeah I ..." Sue said her face turning gray.

"They are looking for us and with their sensors, they'll spot us in about two seconds. Move!" I shouted from inside.

Emma had gone. I couldn't afford to wait for Sue anymore. I dove down the hole, and scrambled down the twisting turning crevice. I could hear Sue following.

"Wait for me," she said with pleasing panic rising in her voice.

"Hurry," I shouted back.

The entrance was narrow. Even I had to crouch down and it twisted downwards.

"Ow," yelled Sue as she banged her head on a rock we'd forgotten to warn her about. "I can't see a ..."

Then a brilliant white light filled the narrow cave. It lit up the hole like God was looking in it. It was too bright to look at as we scurried for the bottom like rats in a searchlight. I got to the overhang we called the U-bend. It went down and then came up again but you had to wriggle through it. Emma's feet were already disappearing from view.

Part One Initiation

"Headfirst," I yelled to Sue, "follow Emma. There's a puddle at the bottom but it's not deep."

"What if I get stuck," Sue asked fear etched on her face.

"Mooooove! Go! Go! Go!" I screamed at her.

She squeezed into the crevice.

The ground began to shiver and I could feel an awful churning in my stomach. That was the infrasound. Sound waves with a long frequency which start things vibrating but which are so low only an elephant could hear them. It's a search technique they use. Dirt and dust started raining down from the brilliant light but everything was still eerily silent. Behind us the air began to distort like a window flexing in the wind. *They* were coming.

I wasn't hanging around for this bit and jammed my head into the crevice following so close behind Sue that I shoved her in front of me. We scrambled down like desperate animals burrowing into the dark, with the brilliant white light behind us. Then we hit the muddy wet bottom and began to climb, the rock still vibrating under our quivering hands, dust pouring down on us getting in our faces and eyes.

I was the last one up. We were in a cavern. It was lit by Emma's pocket torch, Sue's big lantern torch and the brilliant light that was beginning to creep under the corner of the U-bend.

"Slide hole," Emma shouted.

"Go!" I shouted back.

Sue just looked worried. But Emma took off, and Sue was quickly on her heels. The cavern had a number of trails in it that we knew very well. Emma headed down one cave branch that was three metres wide and about the same height. We ran, stumbling as the light behind us grew like a brilliant dawn in the dark. We turned a series of bends and then came to a slope which Emma ran up like a monkey. She stood, balanced at the top holding her torch. Sue managed to get up next to her.

"It's a long slide about yay steep," she showed Sue with a steep slope with her hand, "Then it eases out and opens up. You slide on the mud. Follow me."

Then she jumped – but without her normal "woohoooo!". Sue followed. I ran up the ramp to the hole. For a moment I was tempted to see if we *were* being followed but I knew that if I found out, it would be too late, so I jumped.

Down The Rabbit Hole

The slide wasn't exactly comfortable. You went down at huge speed, there were rocks that ripped your bum without a tyre to ride in, and you got totally soaked on the way. It was a surprisingly long fall – about five seconds before it eased out and slid into cold, muddy, water up to your waist when sitting. It was cold, wet and felt awful. The slide fed into a stream but the cave around it was much larger.

We had gathered on a big flat rock near the slide.

“God damn,” Sue was swearing quietly, “I hate caves.”

By Emma's torch you could see she was completely covered in mud as was Emma and me too for that matter.

“The good news is, so do *they*,” I told her. “They won't follow us here.”

“How do you know?” Sue asked, angry at having been frightened.

“Our friends rely on it. *They* don't usually hang around for long. We've just got to wait them out.” I told her.

“Well great! So how long do we wait in the freezing cold and dark?” Sue wanted to know.

They'll be gone in half an hour,” I said “It's daylight. They only came when my tag died. They will be annoyed with Sir Michael that they can't track me anymore.”

“Why not?”

“That was what I was doing in the Lighthouse. I burned out their tag.”

“Tag?”

“Tracking device.”

“What tracking device?”

“The one in my stomach.”

“What?”

“The night you came to collect me Lenora slipped a tiny tracking device in my food. I burned it out by overloading it with induced current when I switched on the lab equipment in the lighthouse. That's when they lost track of us. Up until then they knew exactly where I was.”

“But that means they know where I live,” Sue pointed out.

“Leonora could have found that out by now anyway. She's an investigator.”

Sue was looking very pissed off.

“God, I'm freezing, and I've got no change of clothes,” she was clutching herself.

Part One Initiation

"At least you aren't in that saucer having them inspect your brain," I pointed out.

Sue's eyes were wide. She looked completely freaked.

"I...I can't *cope* with this," she shivered, shaking her head.

"She's freaking out," Emma, my iron-willed friend, commented.

"You're in shock Sue," I said. "Not surprising really. But we're safe here underground so long as we keep moving. We know these caves, they don't. They may send in a 'snake' but it'll be more likely to get lost than find us."

"What's a snake?" Sue asked, a slight pleading look in her eyes.

"It's a snake. It's a biobot made from a real snake but adapted. Real pain in the arse because they can swim too. But they aren't too bright in this cold and become a bit stupid. So anyway my suggestion is we split up. You two head for the beach exit, I'll take the water exit and get the speeder. Don't worry Sue, *they* won't hang around in daylight for long."

"OK. Let's go," Emma said to Sue turning downstream.

"I feel completely useless," she commented to Emma, as she picked her way after her.

I came forward and put my hand on her shoulder.

"You aren't. Here take this."

I gave her my phone.

"I can't take it where I'm going."

"Where ..." Sue began.

"Swimming," I answered waving the suit, "don't worry, just follow Emma."

"You're still bigger than we are, and you're an adult so people will listen to you," Emma was saying reassuringly as they set off.

"You're a cop Sue," I called after her, "My Aunt wouldn't have made it through the U-bend. You're doing fine."

Emma led Sue away into the dark. I could still hear them as they left.

"C'mon Sue, Sam's got to change and he's funny about girls seeing his willy," Emma said, smirking back at me.

I was glad it was dark. My face flamed with embarrassment.

"Take care Sam," Sue called.

"See ya," Emma added leading on.

"See you two," I replied as calmly as I could.

Quickly I peeled off my sodden clothes and wriggled into the wet suit. As I zipped up I heard something slip down the slide. It

Down The Rabbit Hole

probably *was* a snake. With two trails to follow it was probably confused as to which way to go. So I set off upstream as quickly as I could before it made up its mind. Sue's torch was definitely not as bright but I was very pleased it was waterproof. The snake would be slower than me on the rock because I could jump from rock to rock and it would have to slither through the water.

Biobots are brighter than machinery but a snake is no match for a human. The snake has full spectrum eyesight including thermal imaging, just like a real snake, so it can see the heat from an animal's body. It also has a delicate sense of smell, also like a real snake and good hearing and touch. The Bot's payload varies from mind altering drugs to tags to bacteria or venom. It's a pretty neat system. But it's not big on brains.

I made extra noise so it would follow me rather than the other two. I set off as quickly as I could letting the raw pain of my internal wound burn me and keep me going. Knowing the snake was following certainly made me keep my pace up. There was no time to take it easy or look over my shoulder. Finally I found what I was looking for. It was a point where the stream was wider because it split in two and went down a second tunnel. Crossing over in a short leap I got to the other branch and started following that one down a new course until it reached a long pool where the roof eased down to the water. It looked like a dead end because the exit was under water.

We called this "The three ducks" because there were three underground pools in a row. We had discovered the route with "our friends" technology, otherwise we'd never have gone in. As Grandpop said diving in caves is the most dangerous thing you can do. But because we'd scouted the route I knew it well and we'd had to hide the speeder somewhere where *they* couldn't get to it, so of course it had to be hard to reach.

To get in you had to "duck" through the first cave, come up, breathe, swim a bit, "duck" through the next, and then the next. Of course the water was like ice. That would also help slow the snake down. I did a bit of hyperventilating to get my blood aerated for the swim. I left my clothes on the bank to further confuse the snake. The torch meant I wouldn't have to swim blind because there was no light at all inside "the Ducks".

I stepped into the water, wading silently up to my thighs before lowering myself in to swim. It was totally freezing. So cold it hurt

Part One Initiation

and tensed every muscle in your body. I swam forward gasping and then dove. The “Ducks” were linked by two wide channels and a third narrow one which was much faster. The cold was biting and of course made me tense and less buoyant but the water was clean and clear and the hole obvious. The burning pain in my gut drove me on. I kicked out strongly, found the passage which was a metre long and was soon pushing for the surface.

The distance between the surface and the ceiling in the next cave was only half a metre which made you feel horribly enclosed. I swam along the surface gasping out the old air and re-inflating my lungs. It was so cold it was hard to do more than pant. The worry here was the snake was smaller and faster than me in the water. I swam for the second passage as fast as I could, then dove. It was longer than the first. The cold was eking into my muscles but the effort was generating heat and the wetsuit was helping.

The entrance was relatively wide. Once again I shot up for the surface. This second cave was much bigger and the cave ceiling was higher. I swam along the surface preparing for the next dive. I was getting used to the cold now, as I knew the snake was losing energy through its long, thin body. But then as I approached the last wall I swung my torch around and looked back to see a black thin shape behind me. It was the snake and I knew my torch, as the brightest thing in the pitch blackness, had dazzled it.

I swam faster than I'd ever swum in my life. I had a twenty metre headstart but it was faster in the water than me. Fortunately the third passage is a waterfall and the snake was still ten metres away when I entered the suction of the narrow drain. I kicked as hard as I could but as I hurtled down the two metre drop into the final deep pool, I hit my arm and dropped the torch, which fell away beneath me.

The final duck was the largest by far. It was forty metres long and twenty wide. The pool only occupied twenty metres of its length and ten metres of its width set into a bowl like surround. The rest of it was a large flat stone ledge about half a metre above the bowl. This last pool was salt water and connected via a five metre drop and ten metre tunnel to a sea cave entrance so you could swim out to sea relatively easily. That was how Emma and I had found this place.

Right now Sue's torch was sinking slowly to the bottom of the salt pool. With the snake behind me I was under pressure and in a few short strokes I was at the pool edge, and out of the water. I got out

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just in time to see a dark line shoot down the waterfall into the pool. I froze in the dark as the glow from the torch got dimmer.

By shining the torch at the snake I had dazzled it and accidentally associated the torch with its prey. With the cold slowing down its little brain, it didn't pause to check the cave but followed the light to the bottom. I had gained valuable time.

As the torch slowly fell, the light in this dark cave reduced and the glow-worms on the roof of the cave became visible. Like millions of tiny stars in the night sky these little creatures lit the ceiling and walls of the cavern with their soft greeny-blue light. This time I didn't have time to admire them. Quickly, I sprinted up the slope away from the pool to the far end of the cavern to the place me and Emma called the 'altar' because it had a church-like feel to it. And there lying right where I left it, was the last remaining thing "our friends" had made for us. The speeder.

What it looked like, was exactly what it wasn't. It looked exactly like a large, gray roof-rack capsule from a car. It even had a common brand name on the side. We had asked "our friends" for a flying craft for some missions where we needed some form of aerial observation. Normally we worked on the ground but they had made six copies of these things and they had come in extremely handy because they could not only fly but swim deep as well.

"Ka-rea-rea," I said to it quietly.

Instantly it began to grow, its base sliding longer and its top growing higher. In storage mode it compacted down by squeezing into the already very small passenger compartment. I put my hand on the newly exposed panel.

"Sam," it said in its pleasantly toned male voice, and the top popped open. There was almost no room at all inside the speeder. It's smooth, shaped, passenger compartment had no windows, no controls and no nothing but a human shaped outline one and a half metres tall with two handgrips. The lid was similarly featureless except for a metallic cap in the lid where the passenger's head went. I stepped in and lay down, noticing as I put pressure on my stomach that despite being freezing cold, with aching muscles, my stomach still stung where the tag had burned me. The lid closed tight over me, pressing me down in the darkness. I closed my eyes and held the handgrips. There was a flash as the interface in the speeder linked with the interface in my skull.

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Suddenly I was in the cavern. My body was still sore and wet, and my breathing heavy, but my sight, and hearing was now that of the speeder, along with its numerous other sensors.

The anti-graviton generator engaged with a slight hum beneath the craft's hardened shell. Anti-gravity doesn't interact with ordinary gravity. It pushes matter apart with surprising force even as ordinary gravity pulls it down. I floated the speeder up to the ceiling to look down on the pool. The snake was now clearly visible to me crawling out of the pool. But it couldn't see me. It couldn't see me because the speeder was effectively as clear as glass.

It could be transparent in two ways. Using adaptive camouflage the outer shell replicated the light that fell on it almost perfectly so it blended in with any background. This took almost no energy at all and could be hard to detect as close as two metres away. The other way is an electromagnetic warp distortion field which acted like a lens to bend light and any other radiation around the hull. This used way more energy and only worked if the viewer or radar station was over two hundred metres away. Otherwise the edges showed up as increasingly bright outline around the transparent speeder. A halo around "nothing" is still obvious. Right now I was just blending using adaptive camouflage.

Slowly the snake sniffed around in the dark. It was cold and clearly unlikely to survive. It seemed to take forever but I knew I had to be patient. Had I been down there I would not have been defenseless either. I've seen kids smaller than me kill bigger snakes with nothing but quick hands and daring. But killing the snake wasn't my aim. I could do that now, silently and invisibly by drilling it with the speeders beam. My plan was watch it follow my trail and sneak out through the pool behind it. That way the crew in the saucer watching through the snake's eyes, looking for me, would still focus on the snake, while I went elsewhere.

As the snake made its painfully slow way to where the speeder had been, I turned over and nimbly dropped the speeder capsule, feet-first until I was *just* touching the pool. Then, slowly, I lowered the speeder in, and slid down into the pool being careful not to leave so much as a ripple behind as I slid under the water. In the pool I dropped down feet first, then quickly turned end-over-end and slid out into the sea, accelerating away under the sea. I zoomed out from the shallows toward the deep Pacific ocean. I turned on the

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distortion invisibility for total transparency then I turned north-east and headed for the big beach.

The speeder can go very fast underwater but I couldn't see anything. The problem with being underwater with distortion transparency engaged is your speed is limited because so are your sensors. Light distorts past you making it hard to see, so you can only use sound which flows past the distortion field in contact with the hull. The distortion field still messes with the sound energy. So while the saucer operating the snake couldn't see me, I couldn't see *them* either. If I burst out of the sea I would make a pretty obvious eruption of water, but luckily waves on a beach provide cover. So I turned and zoomed up the bay to catch the surf and broke out into the air through the crashing waves.

As soon as I broke into the air I pulled a quick turn to the right, north up the beach and hurtled out towards the north of the island.

One of the most enjoyable things about the speeder is ... well ... its speed. You see somewhere you want to go and it goes there. Fast. You don't so much fly it as guide it. If you see something you don't want to hit, it avoids it. I've tried to play flight simulators on a PC but I found the controls too demanding and the restrictions of wings, engines and gravity too boring. The speeder operates in Earth's gravity but repels mass as well which gives it lift and direction. It just goes like *stink*.

And like an Administration craft if you want to go really, really fast it can go inertialess as well. That allows it to do impossible accelerations like stopped to 10,000km/h instantly without turning you to paste. It also means you can go from 10,000km/h to stopped instantly and or even reverse without slowing or stopping.

Inertialess works through dimensional displacement. It's real complicated. The trick is that the matter-antimatter dimensional boundary or vortex of the power system is expanded and you effectively become a bubble in space-time, with no actual mass. This allows you to go as fast as you can handle – which isn't that fast actually. It's how the Center moves its craft. The only problem with inertialess is that it isn't compatible with distortion transparency and it creates big dimensional field distortions that are easily detected a long way away. Anti-gravity creates anomalies as well but these are less obvious and can be hidden from above. Administration craft don't have distortion transparency because they don't believe in sacrificing speed for stealth anyway. Our needs

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were different and we had distortion transparency and prefer to fly slow to keep field distortions low that might otherwise be picked up by *their* orbiting microsatellites.

I circled about in a wide arc ten kilometres away from the island and began looking for the disk. It was still over Aotea but now it was flying around Mt Marsden about five or six kilometres from the beach. It looked bored. Then as I watched I was rewarded with the sight I had hoped for. The disk streaked up into the sky on full inertialess. They were gone in sixty seconds. They had had enough. It was three o'clock. Home for afternoon tea.

I whizzed over the sea at about one hundred metres and was back to the island in seconds. I slowed down to drift over the park where we'd entered the caves. Sue's car was still there. That was cool. Now the question was, where was Sir Michael? I looked around the bluff and spotted Sue and Emma coming out on to Lookout Rock and they were the only ones there. They must have seen the disk leave. I zipped back to Renwick.

I found a large black rental car parked where Sue had parked two hours earlier. I circled around probing the hole in the rubble Sue and I had made but found no sign of Sir Michael. Then I whizzed over to the lighthouse – where he wasn't either; and then to the old gun emplacement. No sign there. For a moment I wondered if the Administration had taken him in, but realised that was ridiculous. So I went back to Renwick. This time I found him. He was climbing out of the hole I'd made with a large shopping bag in his teeth. I immediately thought he must have got a pass-code for the vault from the manufacturers and be stealing the gold.

As he crawled and staggered out I could see Sir Michael's outdoors jacket was somewhat grubby. Still, I could talk. All I had to wear was a wet suit. It annoyed me that he'd have clothes, and the gold that we had done all the work to collect. And it wasn't that it was gold. It could have been marbles for all I cared. But the point was we'd done the work collecting it, and he was nicking off with it!

The speeder has a range of tools. They are not serious weapons and are no match for the ones on an Administration Scout. The beam is a like an advanced laser. Because of movies people think of lasers as little lines of coloured light that shoot out with funny high-pitched noises. In fact lasers are silent, complete rays from weapon to target, and, except in heavy rain or dense fog, they are completely invisible. The speeder's beam could drill a three millimetre hole in

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steel, while flying past at a kilometre a second, to an accuracy of about two millimetres, from about five kilometres away. Down the path of ionised air it could pump an electric charge strong enough to knock a man out, or more delicately act like a long-range acupuncture needle.

Then at close range there were focused sound weapons which could give you a tummy ache, smash specific glass windows, creep people out or even just make them crabby. Finally there were the electro-magnets which could zap computers, disrupt communications or lift five tonnes. In other words it wasn't a case of what I could do to this thieving bugger, it was what *couldn't* I do.

I started by heating the handle of the plastic bag he was carrying so the whole thing tore and dropped. Then I drilled the valve in the driver's side front tyre so it began to go flat. But just to be truly annoying I blasted the car's engine management system with an electro-magnetic pulse so it wouldn't start. With luck he'd spend half an hour changing the tyre *before* discovering the car wouldn't go. With no phone coverage it was going to be a *very* long walk home. Feeling happily evil I headed back to find Emma and Sue.

They were trudging back up the hill to the car. I flew up ahead of them, disengaged the distortion transparency and reverted to the gray colour of a roof-rack capsule and dropped down to about one metre. I then slid back along and above the path. I was now a big gray, roof-rack capsule hovering a metre above the ground in mid-air on a walking track.

Emma was in the front when she came around the bend from behind the bush and saw the speeder just hovering there silently. She stopped still. Sue stood, eyes wide, mouth open, and looked at me like her brain had completely given up. She simply didn't seem to know what to do. I flashed a smiley pattern on the front. Emma realised who I was, and smiled.

"It's Sam," she said happily.

Sue let out a huge sigh of relief. I backed up, turned around, and backed down the track toward them, hovering a few centimetres above the track.

"He wants to give us a ride," Emma smiled.

Emma happily got on top and sat on the side in the middle of the speeder. Sue took a little coaxing but finally sat behind her. Then slowly I moved forward remaining low and not going any faster than a fast jog. In about five minutes we were at the top of the track.

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I ferried them over to the car and stopped meaningfully by the picnic table. They got off then stood back looking at the small gray capsule.

Just for fun I zoomed up vertically about one hundred metres, flew a knot, zipped out to sea about a kilometre and zipped back again to stop instantly and land on Sue's car. I extended the landing gear which gripped the car just like a roof-rack. Then I popped the top and stuck my head out.

“So whaddya think of my flying saucer Sue?” I called.

Sue just stared at me with her mouth open.



Chapter Thirteen: Wilder Skies

"I think she's still a bit shocked," Emma smiled at me. I liked her smile.

"I... I ... I ..." Sue kept saying but not really knowing what to say, shaking her head.

She went over and sat down by the picnic table, looking at me. Emma went and sat down next to her looking at her sympathetically.

"I don't believe this," she said finally more to herself than anyone.

"*What?*" I asked unbelieving, "You want me to do it *again?*"

"*No!*" she yelled, "no ... just leave it alone."

I got up and slid off the car on to the ground. Ka-rea-rea closed his hatch and contracted into a smaller roof rack capsule.

"How are you feeling," Emma asked her.

"Like ... like I seriously want a cigarette," she said.

"Pity we don't smoke," I commented.

"No, and neither should I," Sue said.

She sat there looking at me and occasionally eyeing Ka-rea-rea.

"So there really were ghosts at Renwick?" she asked.

"Of course," I said.

"And ... your friends ... are ..." she began questioningly.

"Not from around here, no," I confirmed.

She sighed.

"And that guy ... Sir whatsit ... wants to get his hands on that thing?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"How on Earth did you get mixed up in this Sam?"

"It's a long story. But this isn't the best place to tell it."

"And I'd better get back home," Emma said.

Sue blinked and looked at her.

"You're amazing," she told Emma. "You just kept cool even when there was ... when they were chasing you!"

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"Me!" Emma laughed." Sam's the amazing one! And the others! They are totally incredible. They dealt with situations like that all the time. I just didn't want him to think I couldn't."

Sue looked at me. Emma was too.

"What?" I asked Sue.

And then I looked at Emma.

"No ... I agree with Sue, Emma, you are amazing," I said

"You just think I'm cute," Emma jeered.

"No not 'cute'," I said searching for the right word. "More ... 'hot'! Yeah, hot and amazing."

Emma gave me a telling-off-but-pleased frown.

"Well, I'd better give you a lift home," Sue interrupted getting up.

"You better see if you can start the car first," I remarked.

Sue looked puzzled, "Why?"

"The electromagnetic pulse from the Scout. In the old days it just stopped cars temporarily, these days it tends to fry their electronics."

Sue got up, went to her door searching in her pocket for her keys. She pulled them out, sat in the drivers seat. Nothing happened. Sue swore. Then she reached down and popped the hood. She came around and propped it up and stared at the machinery. I came to join her.

"I'm acting like I have the first clue what I am looking at," she said. "And even if I did I would have no idea what I'm looking for," she said bitterly.

"It's the engine management system," I said pointing to it, "but you'd need a replacement chip to fix it. The Scout's electromagnetic field fried it," I told her.

"Damn!" Sue swore putting the hood down.

"How far is it to your place?" she asked Emma.

"About two k's, don't worry I can walk it," Emma said.

"Hey guys," I said to get their attention. "I can drive you."

"How?" Sue asked.

"Well, the speeder can. It can drive. It flies itself, all I have to do is give it directions. It can easily drive a car. I did it before with my Aunt."

I didn't mention that Aunt Liz hadn't agreed.

"So what do I do?" Sue asked.

"Pretend to drive."

Sue thought about this.

“OK, we'll do that to get Emma home, but I'm not so sure about driving like that through Auckland.”

“Me either. But I have another plan for that,” I said happily, noticing that “home” seemed to include me now.

I was about to jump back up into Ka-rea-rea when Emma cleared her throat.

“Ahem! THAT, is not how we say goodbye Sam Kahu!” she told me.

I felt a bit embarrassed.

“Yeah ... OK, sorry,” I said.

“Come here,” she commanded.

I went over to her. She put her arms around me, and I her. She pulled me close and looked me in the eyes. It felt very nice, and I got a bit turned on. Then she gave me a kiss, just like in the movies. My face flamed bright red. I think she was showing off to Sue – not that I didn't like it. But then she released me with a smile.

“That's better. Now say goodbye nicely,” she smiled.

“Goodbye nicely,” I recited.

She punched me in the guts with sudden strength. It was hard enough to make me bend over.

“Aw,” I coughed. The burn in my gut didn't like that at all.

“Nicely,” she said.

“First you kiss me, then you sock me one!” I complained.

“Be nice!” she said

“Oh alright. See you later ...”

“*Soon*. See you *soon*.”

“See you *soon*,” I agreed.

“and ...”

“And ... I ... I um,” I wondered if she wanted me to tell her I loved her, but that seemed wrong.

“... will *call* you,” she coached.

“... will call you,” I agreed.

“See it's quite easy to be a human being. More boys should try it,” she smiled.

“Most boys don't get such good training,” Sue observed.

“So ...” I interrupted looking at the speeder.

“Yes, off you go,” Emma nodded.

Feeling a bit like I was being treated like a little kid I clambered onto the roof. The other two got in the car. It was a bit awkward getting into Ka-rea-rea from this position. Sue called out if I was OK

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but then once I was in the speeder and ready to go there wasn't any way to talk to them so I just slowly started forward.

We drove carefully down the road, found the Reeve's drive which was down the hill on the right and I stopped to let Emma out. As she looked back I had Ka-rea-rea flash a little smiley on its right side, which made her smile. Then feeling happy I drove down the road to a secluded spot and turned around, then I drove us back to the picnic spot to discuss what to do next. I popped the speeder's top and Sue got out.

"Why didn't you pull in to Emma's parents place?"

"Less explaining to do. She can easily say she fell in a puddle but if she shows up with you it all starts to get a bit curious."

"Yeah, well I was hoping to ask her parents if I could borrow some clothes."

"Because you're a police officer who got muddy with their daughter hiding underground from a flying saucer?"

Sue even managed a smile. She looked at her watch.

"I wouldn't have said that but it doesn't matter now. It's four now and the ferry goes at six," Sue said. "Is there anywhere we can get some clothes? I'm cold, wet, filthy and I really just want to get home."

"Yeah, and I have nothing to wear but a wetsuit. But my problem is where am I going to hide this now?"

"Keep it on my car."

"But your car needs repairs and I'm not letting this out of my sight."

We stared at each other.

"Open the nearest clothes recycling bin?" I suggested.

"What about the local cop?" she asked. "He might have some clothes. I might get some overalls anyway. How big is he?"

"About twice as tall as you."

"Is he married?"

"Gavin? No, that's probably why he's such a ..."

"*Sam*," Sue warned.

"Anyway he doesn't sound all that promising," she admitted.

"Well, I have a better suggestion."

"What's that?"

"We fly home."

"How can I fit in that?"

"You can't. But it can easily carry the car, "

Sue was looking very uncertain.

"I carried Auntie Liz and Rewa," I added, again hiding the fact that it wasn't their idea.

Sue still wasn't convinced.

"OK, I'll level with you. I don't want to have to stay inside this box for three hours being the engine of your car. This thing has no toilet, no food and is no fun for long stays. I know because I've suffered in it before. If I can just fly you home it'll only take twenty minutes."

"Yeah twenty minutes flying and twenty days talking on TV about my flying car."

"We can do it at night."

"It'd have to be pretty late at night, by which time I'll have got hypothermia."

"OK, how about this. How about you visit the Reeves carrying out your inquiries and see if Fiona lends you some clothes. She probably will. She's very nice. I'll wait in the speeder. That way you can pretend I'm not there and you haven't met Emma before."

"Who's Fiona?"

"Emma's mum. And she is about your height."

"OK, that works for me," Sue shrugged.

So that's what we did. Once again I parked up on the street and Sue, covered in mud, walked down doing her best to look official. I could hear her go inside and the door closed. I could have used the microphone to eavesdrop but frankly I didn't really care what they said.

Half an hour passed, then an hour. It was getting pretty boring sitting in a box with nothing much to do. There was nothing on TV but car racing which I find very dull. Meanwhile the big mountains were casting their long shadows over the whole area while the sky was beginning to get a bit pink. And I was hungry. I directed the beam microphone to the windows of Emma's house. They were chatting away, laughing about the people who lived at Renwick House. And they had arranged to feed Sue dinner! I was going to have to lie here listening to them feeding their faces and laughing about my friends while I starved! Man, that pissed me off!

Well to hell with them! I disengaged from Sue's car and adopted blend transparency and took off. I powered up to five thousand metres in about thirty seconds. It felt fantastic to leave Mt Marsden

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far below in the pink gray light. Auckland's lights were sparking in the distance and the sea looked calm and peaceful below.

My problem still remained. Where could I get some clothes now that the shops were shut? Where could I get a shower, and some food too while wearing a wetsuit? It wasn't something I knew, so I asked Qi.

His answer made me feel pretty dumb. The Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia! Shops all along one big beach. It was two hours earlier, two thousand three hundred kilometres away. I could be there in ten minutes. I climbed quickly up into the dark, starry sky at 20,000 metres, dropped invisibility and went inertialess. I kicked myself for not having thought of this an hour ago.

The Tasman Sea had a good base of cloud over it. But at twenty clicks I was miles above any normal aircraft. There was nothing much to do but enjoy catching up with the sun again.

It wasn't long before I was over the Gold Coast and I dropped out of inertialess so I could go warp-invisible and descend to 5,000 metres. My initial plan had been to hide the speeder in the sea but as I whizzed around overhead I spotted a huge shopping centre no distance at all from the beach in a little island with highways all around. It looked like a giant shopping castle with its own moat. Zooming in with the speeders sensors I could see plenty of places to park the speeder on the roof, leaving me a brief climb to get down. This was always tricky. The most important thing was to find a spot that wasn't overlooked by anyone else, that was as easy to get down from, as back up to. Luckily the roof of this place wasn't within 200 metres of anyone which meant the distortion invisibility would work all the way to the rooftop, if no-one came out.

But it turned out to be easier than even that. The open-air, rooftop "Earlybird" carpark on the north-east was almost empty. There were two cameras which I fried with the beam before they saw me. The trick to cameras is just to overload their CCDs. When two go together you don't even get maintenance guys working on them because they assume the cable has died. There was no-one around. I put Ka-rea-rea down on a corner next to a cooling tower on the rooftop carpark. Then I got out and told him to adopt a roofbox shape.

I was immediately struck by how much warmer it was and by the smells. Warm, with fried chicken fat, ice cream in rubbish bins, a distant nail parlour and asphalt. I watched Ka-rea-rea fold up into a

gray box enjoying the warmth on my feet. I guessed that it was easily 22 degrees C. It made it far more believable that I might be a lazy surfer kid who couldn't be bothered getting out of a wetsuit.

I strolled over to the lift well and entered the mall which was apparently called Pacific Fair. The place was huge, and, strangely clad as I was, the crowd just swallowed me up. Shopkeepers suspect kids our age to be shoplifting so it really is important not to loiter in shops but just go in, buy stuff and leave like you are way busy.

But if you look focused one of the beauties of being a teen is that other shoppers ignore you. You have to be doing something seriously annoying before anyone makes a fuss. Even then you get far more patience than you would if you were an adult doing the same thing. People did notice me. Let's face it most teens don't go into a mall in a wetsuit. But nobody cared and there were plenty of other people to look at too including families of Arabs obviously down from Dubai who stuck out more than I did.

I decided the first thing I'd do is get some money. This was no problem because just past the salad bar were a couple of teller machines. Here I wasn't worried about using my Omnicard as a Mastercard. The place had no end of bank machines so I got \$500 in bright Aussie bills out from three of them so I didn't get any attention from the cameras. I could tuck the money into the right sleeve opposite the watch and Omnicard.

I found a sports store common to both New Zealand and Australia where I quickly bought a cheap pair of baggies and a T-shirt. The people in that shop were so sales focused I don't think they even noticed me. All I had to do was queue up and pay. Cash has a way of making people relax about you. Unless of course you try to buy a new car with it.

My third destination was a toilet. Partly to get changed out of the wetsuit and partly because I needed to go. Once again people notice a teen in a wetsuit going to the toilet but nobody says anything. It was *so* good to get out of it too! I'd already got pretty clean in the three "ducks" but I took a chance to wash a bit more too.

When I came out I was just a relaxed teen in a mall with a wetsuit in a plastic bag and some spending money. Life was looking much better. The next stop was to find some food. That wasn't hard either. There was a food court just by the bank machines. Once again there was more choice than I knew what to do with. There was Japanese, pies, burgers, healthy salads, seafood, grilled

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chicken, Kebabs, Indian, Mediterranean and Mexican. I was sick of pies so I ended up munching Kebabs and drinking coke in the food hall, where once again, nobody notices you.

My mood was improving so I decided to buy some slightly better clothes instead. I found an outdoor chain which does the expensive casual look and bought myself some gear to replace the stuff I'd left in the cave: a rather nice top and trou'. Then I went back to Nike's for some decent trainers and picked up some shades at the sunglass bar. That left me with about \$20 left over, so I headed back to the lift.

I had been away about an hour including flight-time. I was worried Sue would be waiting outside by her car looking like a dork. The local time was nearing five and the mall closed at 5:30. That meant it was seven back in New Zealand. I re-activated Ka-rea-rea, then had to wait a few minutes while a family with two howling kids packed up in the last car in the lot and finally drove off. I dove into the speeder, activated the transparency and took to the sky. At 10km off the coast and 10km up I went inertialess and plunged through into darkness about 200km off New Zealand ten minutes later.

The dark side of Aotea island is pretty dark. The lights are in the South and North-East but the North-West is completely black at night. I didn't even need warp transparency now because blend was enough and Ka-rea-rea is almost invisible to air traffic radar because of the materials and shape. I went back to the Reeves' place worrying that Sue would be standing by the car looking pissed off.

She was nowhere to be seen. I applied the mikes to the Reeves' window and they were still yakking away to Sue! And here I was worrying! I parked Ka-rea-rea on the car and lay back to wait. There was no network access here but at least I could get TV. So I watched that via the brain interface (which is odd because your entire visual field is taken up by TV image) until Ka-rea-rea interrupted to say someone was coming.

Tama was walking Sue to her car making friendly invitations should she return while Sue was smiling and trying to get rid of him. I think she was nervous about him watching her start the car so she stood chatting for a moment before shaking his hand and finally getting in. I watched Tama go into the house before finally moving off.

It was dark now but the moon was coming up big and round. I wanted to get away from the Reeves place completely before taking off. I also wanted to make sure Sue was ready before I flew over the water. So at the next corner I pulled over and popped Ka-rea-rea's top. Sue got out.

"Hey look I'm sorry ..." she began and then stopped. I was wearing my new shades.

"Hey! You're changed!"

She on the other hand was wearing an outfit that looked like a sack. Fiona was the same height as Sue but she was a lot rounder.

"Yeah, and I look a helluva lot cooler than you do too," I grinned.

"Howdya do that?" she wondered.

"Spot of shopping in Surfers. Had dinner there too," I raised my shades.

"You went to *Queensland*!"

"It was the best place to go shopping while wearing a wetsuit at this time of day."

"What did you use for money?"

"Oh, I can get money. Always could. That's how I got to your place the night ..." I trailed off.

"Are you *sure* you went to Queensland?" Sue asked gobsmacked.

I took an aussie note from my pocket and handed it down to her.

"Pretty sure, yeah."

"How fast does that thing go?" Sue asked wonderingly.

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk about. You see with a car on it, not so fast. I mean still fast enough to be scary so I just wanted you to know how I was going to do this."

"OK," she said nervously.

"OK so a car is not a huge radar target but it's still big enough to be pretty obvious. That means that we can be seen by ships or aircraft or air traffic control if we don't do this right."

"OK."

"So what we'll do is fly low to look like a boat. I'll fly at about 100 kays which for this thing is almost standing still but is about as much as I'd expect a fast boat to be doing. When we get closer to the city I'll climb to about 1500 metres to look like a chopper and get out of the light and then I'll wait for a chance to drop right in to your home. Now that will be the scary bit because it will be very fast so feel free to close your eyes. Obviously you should have your seatbelt firmly fastened ...'

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"And my tray table folded away," Sue added.

"Sorry?" I was stumped.

"It's what they say on airplanes."

"Oh? I didn't know. I've only ever flown in a plane once, and that was Sir Michael's private jet."

"Really?" Sue asked, amazed.

"I'm a poor Maori kid from the sticks. When would I ever get to fly on a plane? Anyway what I was going to say is ... I've forgotten."

"Sorry," Sue said.

"It's OK."

"It's just I'm a bit nervous about this. I don't like the idea of dangling underneath a flying roof-rack piloted by a fourteen-year-old. It seems a bit risky," she admitted nervously.

"Remember it's not me that's flying. I'm as much a passenger as you are. It'll be fine. Shall we have a practice spin?"

"OK."

"I'll take you out to sea, round and then we'll do a practice drop on to the beach."

"OK," she gulped.

"Now get in, strap in. Bang once for go, twice for emergencies."

"OK."

We got into position. She gave a bang and I took off vertically and headed around for a low circuit about ten kilometres in total at 100km/h. The moon was up now casting a pale light over the sea. It looked quite lovely. We came back over the beach south of the Reeves. It's a huge beach and sometimes people fish on it – especially on the full moon – but there was no-one there tonight. I soared up to about 200 metres and then dropped to one metre, before settling gently on the sand. Then I popped the top.

Sue was still in the car. I hopped down and found her clutching her seatbelt and steering wheel, staring and breathing hard in the moonlight. The sea roared as breakers rolled along the beach behind us and the air was chilled and sandy.

"You OK?"

"I'll be fine," she said staring ahead with a glassy stare.

"Sure?"

"Yes."

Her voice was rather high-pitched. I waited for a while, then she continued.

"I didn't mind the flying part. Actually that was OK. But I screamed all the way down."

"So not so keen on the drops," I summarised.

"No, not much," she admitted.

"Well, I'll see what I can do. Actually I've just remembered what I wanted you to do."

"Yeah?"

"Make sure our phones are still off. The signal will look very odd if anyone is tracing them."

"Why would anyone be tracing them? They aren't allowed to without a warrant," she said, suddenly all official.

I pointed up, "*They* can do what they like and we *really* don't want to meet them in the air."

Her eyes widened. Quickly she rummaged in the glovebox and found the phones. To my relief they were still off.

"It's a pity. It would be nice if we could talk."

"Yeah. But we need to be careful. OK?"

"Yeah," she said taking a deep breath.

I climbed back on to the car, closed the lid and lifted off, this time picking up to 100km/h which felt to me like granny stepping the 400 metres but was probably as fast as Sue could cope with. It was a lovely night to fly. The moon was up and the sea was relatively calm. I decided that given the bright moon the best option was to stay low so we skimmed the sea. Ka-rea-rea translated radar into audible sounds so I could hear the radar from a few boats out fishing but I stayed as far away from them as I could.

As we rounded the island and began approaching Auckland I realised that flying directly over the city was asking for trouble. It was early Saturday evening, the moon was up and there was lots of traffic moving. There was even air traffic. So I changed course and headed north running parallel with the coast about 20km out to sea. It would make the flight longer but reduce the chance of being detected. My plan was to circle Auckland by the north and come into the western suburbs from the west which meant flying over the Waitakeres - the low range to Auckland's west.

It was a long, nerve-wracking flight. Apart from being seen by Aucklanders the thing that had been worrying me was how vulnerable we were if we were bounced by a UFO. They could pick us up in seconds and we would be doomed.

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We flew an oblong around northern Auckland. As we approached land near Orewa I climbed into cloud which I could feel made Sue very anxious but got us clear of the lights. We were also far enough out from Auckland now not to be in air traffic radar. Then once we'd passed the densely settled area I dropped back down to 200 metres to whizz silently over the countryside. The Waitakere hills were tricky because they are higher and have houses in them. People often look above them at night but there was no light falling on us so we were pretty hard to see. I stayed high.

Finally an hour after setting off we were in position 1500 metres over Sue's house. I knew she was hating this bit, but I had to be careful and there was a lot to watch out for. Cars were moving around in the suburb below and the lights of the Henderson industrial district glowed brightly. It was late, but not that late. Tucked away in the dark were people out walking dogs.

Then way, way to the North I noticed a light. It could have been an air force P-3 coming in from patrol, but it could be *them*. I wasn't taking any chances. We had to get down. Fast. Ka-rea-rea dropped for ten seconds.

I think Sue screamed all the way down. Certainly when we touched down there were people coming to the windows. But of course it just looked like a car quietly pulling in to a carport. So they soon went back to their TV sets.

Sue sat for a moment and then got out of the car looking pale and shaky. She looked at Ka-rea-rea and then realised I wasn't going to get out outside, so she went to the door. She was shaking so much she dropped her keys, but she finally unlocked it and staggered in.

There was no way I was leaving the speeder outside. They knew all about this place and could even be here already. Instead I quietly released the car and floated over to the door and nudged it open. Then I flew into the house and down the passage to my room and settled on the floor. Only then did I get out and tell Ka-rea-rea to lock down. I turned on the light and went to find Sue.

She was sitting at the kitchen table wearing her old bathrobe with a bottle of "Jack Daniels bourbon whiskey" and a packet of cigarettes. Her hands shook as she lit a cigarette.

Normally she didn't smoke inside but she was obviously too upset to care. I said nothing. I just sat down while she poured herself a drink and drew on the cigarette. She almost seemed to be

challenging me to say something. I just sat there studying the floor. Finally she started.

“You're a total pain in the arse you know that!”

She inhaled deeply and blew a stream of smoke out like a grumpy dragon. It took her a few puffs to calm down and continue.

“I had this whole thing all sorted! You were just a screwed up kid with mental problems. Nice enough, but no bloody wonder considering your background. You were involved with a whacky cult that had filled your head with all kinds of crap. Then, they take off into their secret cavern and leave you behind. That's when you flipped out. At the lighthouse I had the whole thing pegged.”

She paused again recollecting her thoughts, letting the adrenaline from the fall subside.

“I even humoured you when you said you were late to meet up with your girlfriend! I had to meet *her* of course. I wondered what kind of lunatic she was!”

Then she sighed. She was still pale.

“And then ... then ... it all just fell apart. I sat there all through dinner with that family joking about you guys while I *knew*, and Emma *knew*, that you guys aren't the crazy ones. You knew that thing was coming. You hurried me along! Then there was all that light and you guys just kept going.”

She paused reliving it and took a drag on her fag.

“Even during dinner Emma gave nothing away. She'd been chased by aliens down a hole and there she was laughing with her parents like nothing had happened.”

She stubbed out her cigarette and lit another. She was smoking very fast. I'm not a big fan of smoking but it was calming her.

“And then you! You really do have a flying saucer! I mean *f*_____ me! I thought exactly what you said! I thought it was some sad toy or something you used to keep your poor little head together. But no. It's real! You flew *my f*_____ car with it! You went all the way to Queensland and had dinner and came back in an hour! All the way home I kept thinking I was going to wake up, and then that *f*_____ awful drop!”

It had all been a huge shock to her. The adrenaline from the drop had just got her all panicky again. Adults often find it hard to adjust to the idea that they can be powerless in the face of the unknown. Kids, of course, are used to not understanding adults so they adjust better. How else could I have survived Ax? But as a cop,

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as someone who represented protection and security, to find the rules and the whole world she understood was wrong, was a shock to her whole world view.

"I've never thought ... I mean ... you see movies but you know it's all ... well ... it's bullshit ... just actors in suits. I ... I ..."

She didn't know what she wanted to say.

"It's OK, Sue. It was the same for all of us," I reassured her quietly.

"Was it?"

"Well, it was a little different but it rocked our worlds too."

"What do *they* want?" she said pointing up.

"*Them*. Um ... well most of the time they just want to study us."

"They don't want to invade or anything?" she asked.

"No, of course not. Look, imagine that we're like a tribe in the Amazon who live in a little valley called Earth. We never go anywhere and know nothing of the outside world except for the strange craft – helicopters and planes I mean – that we see sometimes in the sky. OK?"

"Yeah," she said seeing the connection.

"Now *they* are like scientists or David Attenborough or something. *They* watch us, but *they* don't interfere. What do *they* want from us? Well, they don't need our little stone-age valley, or our crummy food, or *anything* we think is important. It's like scientists in a helicopter over the valley. Everything the scientists want comes from within their *own* world, not the tribesmen's. The scary thing for us tribesmen though, is we don't understand *them* at all. We don't know what they want, or why they do what they do, and we can't do *anything* about it. So the solution that most of us find easiest to cope with, is to pretend they don't exist, even when they are staring us in the face. People are very good at ignoring things they can't control or don't want to see. That's why seeing them is such a huge shock. You have to face the fear of something powerful and unknown that you can't do anything about."

"But if they just want to study Earth why did they chase *us*?" she asked.

"Generally they study us. *Me*, they want to catch."

Sue looked at me with a combination of fear and respect.

"They want to catch *you*?"

"Yeah. That's why the others burned down Renwick and blew the tunnels to stop them catching us."

"But what about you?"

"I was caught out. I was flying home over the Solomon's when they attacked Renwick. I saw them coming."

"And the others went without you?"

"They had to. It was that or be captured."

"But if you could fly anywhere and get money why did you come back?"

"I ... well, I didn't have too many friends anywhere else, except Emma."

"So that's where you went between the fire and when you turned yourself in."

"Sorta. I stayed in a barn they have. But they were watching and if I stayed they'd have caught Emma. So I decided to hide in the system. But that wasn't so safe either," I sighed.

"And now your legal guardian ... ?"

"Yes, Sir Michael is working for *them* too, by the look of it."

"And this is because they want... that craft of yours?"

"Only partially. Look Sue I can only expect you to believe so much at a time. I mean you believe in flying saucers now don't you?"

"Well, I guess I have to say 'yes'. Nothing else would make me get filthy hiding in a cave. I hate caves."

"OK, well, so there's a whole bunch of stuff which if I had told you about before that, you would have simply thought I was crazy. So like I said we on Earth are a little tribe in a forgotten valley, right? The local Administration keeps a low profile. Intervening is against an old treaty which has become a kind of standard. The other civilisations don't intervene until we've proved we can be trusted. They don't want us focused on them, they just want us to carry on doing what we do so they can watch our development."

"So they're like ... the Discovery Channel Aliens?" Sue suggested.

I laughed.

"Yeah, you could call them that. Like game wardens, but like Bernard, they don't call the shots. They have to do what they're told by their Government – The Center. The Center is huge and it's mostly run by synthetic intelligences: Cyberminds and biological robots like the Greys. But there are also some of the original species there as well. The Center doesn't care about our valley at all. But they have a military we call the Service. The Service doesn't care about non-intervention. If they want to do something here they will do it. A bit like the army in the rainforest. They aren't going to hide from a bunch of tribesmen. Most of the more blatant UFO cases

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reported in the media are because of them. They don't care if they scramble Belgian fighters or if the whole of Phoenix, Arizona sees them. The Administration only cooperate with the Service when they are absolutely forced to."

"OK, I get that. But this Service isn't after you, is it?"

"Oh, yes it is."

"Oh F____!" she said, looking terrified. She was gulping air in big breaths.

"But that's not as bad as it sounds because the Service has no local intelligence. They have power but they have no local knowledge. That's why that was an *Administration* Scout, not a Service one. If it had been a *Service* one they would have taken the hill out."

"Sam, I don't want to be caught in that light again if I can avoid it."

"No, you won't be because we are dealing with the Administration, so if they do something it will be quiet, not a flying saucer parked over your house at three o'clock in the morning. In cities that's just not how they operate."

"So they'll send the 'Men in Black'," Sue smiled.

"Yeah."

"That was meant to be a *joke*," Sue said, appalled, and starting to pant again.

"No, it's what they *will* do, They look like ordinary people."

"But they're not?"

"No, they're android biobots. Look like us, but they simply aren't. We psychics can spot them a mile off."

"What about *non*-psychics?" Sue asked, worried.

"It's tricky because they are built to be attractive. They look pretty and radiate pheromones."

"Oh, I thought they were spooky."

"No, the spooky ones are the Infiltrators."

"Infiltrators?"

"They're aliens who live here among us."

"Jesus! They live *among* us?"

"Yeah. They're kind of against the Center. So rather than live by Center rules they live here. Some of them are OK. Others are very dangerous. They have serious psychic powers. Way more than us. This is probably all because we got the Administration to arrest some of the Infiltrators last year."

"Arrest them?"

"For intervening. When they live here they aren't meant to intervene."

"How were they intervening?"

"Killing people mostly. They kill lots of us."

"*Killing* people? *Who*?"

"I'll tell you later. Look, the main thing was we tipped off the Administration and the Administration arrested them. But now it seems that both the Infiltrators and the Administration are working *together* to catch us."

"*Us*?"

"Me."

"Sam, I don't know if I want to be part of this," she said looking worried.

"I'm afraid you already are."

"Why?"

"Because last night Sir Michael had a tracking device put in my food. They tracked me from the restaurant to your place. Remember how I asked what it would take to get a MRI done?"

"Yeah?"

"Well that was to burn out the tracker. That's what I did at the lighthouse after you went out. That's partly why I couldn't sleep last night. I was half expecting them to show up."

"*Here!*" she said shocked.

"Yeah."

"So, we *aren't* safe are we?" she said looking around.

"No, not at all."

"F__k! What do we do now?" Sue asked.

"Get a cab, go to town and stay somewhere else. I just think it's safer," I admitted.

"So do *I*," Sue said decisively, "Hang on I'll just make a call."

"We can stay at a hotel. I've got plenty of money," I called after her.

"No, I know a better place."

"Where?"

"It's a private secret refuge run by some people I know. Mostly for women."

"Won't it be a little late. It's almost ten?" I wondered.

"No, they take people at risk at any time."

"Sue?"

"Yeah?"

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“Is your cell a work one?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Use it. Your landline will be bugged by now. Your cell was turned off on the island so they won't connect it to you. They watch a private phone by looking up the billing address but work ones are confusing for them. But make it fast. They are *very* smart and they aren't confused for long.”

“OK,” she said nervously.

She called the friend, who was apparently named Julia. Sue spun her a story about a young witness she needed to hide out with. It was sort of true. Julia didn't seem to mind. Then Sue called a cab and went to pack. I fretted about Ka-rea-rea. Without the antigravity he was damn heavy. Finally the cab appeared. The driver was a big cheerful Samoan dude named Siva. We told him the speeder was full of books and he swung it up on his head as if it were made of cardboard, then stowed it in the huge boot of his Ford.

Julia's place was only twenty minutes away in Ponsonby, but we paid Siva to drive into the city to hotels, and bars, and more hotels, where anyone overhead couldn't see who was getting out or in, just to make it hard to track us. If they were watching the cab they would end up losing us like we were a pea under a shell.

We finally arrived about eleven. I was tired. The refuge was a grand old Villa set back off the road in a street full of settler houses and villas and oak trees. It was pretty obvious that Julia and her partner Caz were also lesbians like Sue, which didn't surprise me at all. They were so sweet, very friendly and welcoming, although they made a point of saying I was the only male over ten they'd allowed to stay in the place in five years. They kept a few rooms aside for women in trouble with violent partners – male *or* female. My mum liked them for that.

The house was decorated in old style wallpaper with lots of polished wood everywhere. The ceilings were miles high. Siva insisted on carrying Ka-rea-rea inside and up the stairs to the small room they had set aside for me. Sue had her own room down the hall and there were two other rooms but they weren't in use.

We were totally exhausted. It had been a real long day and we went through the bathroom and off to bed in no time at all. By 11:30 I was lying in my room which seemed to be taller than it was long or wide looking out the old sash windows at what little of the night sky

Trial

you could see above the orange glow of the city's light and through the big tree in the garden.

It was six nights since the evacuation and I'd slept every one of them in a different place. That was good. For the moment I was one step ahead. As I lay on my back I stared up at the stars thinking how close, yet how far away they were. Just like my family.

Somehow the age of the house, which had always been a foundation in the lives of the families that had lived in it, affected me. I felt a sense of permanence which was quite odd given the reality of my situation. A ghost named Sarah who had been a domestic servant there all her life just made me feel that, whatever my current difficulties, everything would be alright in the morning. And thinking a blessing for her, and with the stars twinkling in my eyes over the sounds of distant cars racing through the night, I let my mind sink softly into darkness.

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The story continues in

Part 2, Changels The Weaving

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· FACT OR FICTION? ·

Changels is a work of fiction but includes many true elements. Obviously all the non-historical characters are fictional and any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental.

The island named “Aotea” in the story does not strictly exist. It is modeled topographically on Great Barrier Island from which the name “Aotea” has also been taken. However the ferry to Great Barrier only runs in summer and takes two and a half hours demonstrating that the imaginary “Aotea” is closer in location to Waiheke Island. It also shares Waiheke’s wartime defensive structures. Given that the island is imaginary it can also be safely inferred that its inhabitant characters are also imaginary.

As the island it is on is imaginary so too is Renwick House. It is loosely modeled architecturally on Seacliff Lunatic Asylum which was finally demolished in 1992. A Renwick House does exist in New Zealand but is much smaller than the building depicted and actually part of Nelson Central School in the South Island.

Sam’s putative ancestors Papahurihia and Te Wharete are genuine Nga Puhi ancestors and their legendary powers of teleportation and invisibility are in accordance with tradition.

The symptoms of meth addiction described are accurate.

The author has no personal experience with paranormal activity so all descriptions are based on reports. Note that the cosmology adopted for this story flows from the need for psychic powers as a plot device.

Spukhafte Fernwirkung or “Spooky action at a distance” was the phrase used by Erwin Shrodinger when he wrote to Albert Einstein about quantum entanglement. It is a genuine phenomena under active investigation as a communications system by present day scientists and engineers.

Proximity to high voltage lines induces current in all adjacent conductors (including the human body) via the electromagnetic field. The filament in Sam’s stomach is meant to pick up 25 watt signal at 1575mhz 20,500km away. I have no idea whether this could be achieved with any material nor whether the temperature of the filament would reach a dangerous temperature before it overloaded, But as a guide a light bulb filament operates at over 2000 degrees Celsius – certainly not something you want

inside you.

The description of UFO behaviour is an amalgam of numerous reports. The author does not discount the possibility that alien craft visit this planet. This is not “unscientific” because the scientific method is not hypothetically equipped to deal with the politics of superior and deliberately evasive intelligences. The notion of inertialess drive was pioneered in fiction by E. E ‘Doc’ Smith in his classic “Lensmen” series. Many eye-witness observations of UFO flight suggest they are inertialess, which in turn suggests they are optical illusions.

Sam’s speeder, Ka-rea-rea, is named after the New Zealand falcon (*Falco Novaeseelandiae*). It uses a number of technologies of varying degrees of possibility. Meta-material cloaking (invisibility) and active camouflage are active fields of scientific research. Anti-gravity (a repulsive force on mass) is not allowed for under the Standard Model of particle physics.

A mansion on remote Aotea Island off Auckland New Zealand has burned down. Twenty people are missing but only one, 14-year-old Sam Kahu, has been found. Detective Sue Williams soon discovers Sam is unusual. He tells her he's psychic. Then, by saving her life, he proves it. But he also tells her he has his own UFO...



FICTION