

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

10

Fly  
Away  
Home

JENNY PAUSACKER

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For Kerry again - I really couldn't have done it without you - and for Barbara, who keeps an eye on things.

## CHAPTER ONE

A long stretch of coast road. Two buses honking as they pass. One heading north up the highway, towards beaches and rainforests and the tropical warmth of the Top End. The other heading south, down to the biggest, busiest city in Australia.

Blake looked up and waved to a little kid on the bus going north. She read the name painted along the bus doors and sighed. Ladybird Bus Lines, like the old nursery rhyme.

*Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home.*

*Your house is on fire and your family has gone.*

The story of her life. Blake had grown up thinking that she had a mother called Theia Williams and a father called Frank Williams and a brother called Dion. But that was a lie. Her real mother - *well, the one who gave birth to me* - was called Maureen and she had a whole new family as well.

Although she still had to go home and sort out her old family.

She sighed again, wishing she could switch buses and go speeding back to Maureen in the Top End. Too late. She was stuck here now. At least she had a book to read. She'd jumped onto the bus in a hurry, leaving her pack in Baybeach. But luckily the young guy in the next row had a bag full of science fiction novels, so he'd lent her *The Time of the Wisewoman*, the new book in the *Time of the Phoenix* series.

Blake pushed both her families out of her mind and went on reading about D'ar il Ai'ia, elf swordswoman and master thief. As she turned the page, the back of her neck

started to itch. A strange prickly feeling, hot and shivery at the same time. She frowned down at the book and one of the words caught her eye, as if it had been underlined with red biro.

Empath. D'ar il Ai'ia had just discovered that she was so good at fighting and stealing because she was an empath. A person who could feel other people's feelings.

*Oh wow. The story of my life, all over again. I know what it's like, D'ar il Ai'ia. I just discovered that I'm an empath too.*

She leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. Thought about all the things that had happened while she was travelling round and searching for her mother. To start with, a crazy old artist called Daffy Clarke had told her that she had special psychic powers. Blake didn't like the sound of that - but she couldn't help noticing the icy hand that poked her and prodded her, whenever there was danger around.

Then, months later in the Top End, Blake finally met up with her mother and found out that Maureen was Aboriginal. She remembered saying to one of her new family, Auntie Vi, 'This icy hand, it's not some sort of Aboriginal business, is it?' and Auntie Vi telling her, 'I can't say. That's not our word. You want to understand, you have to know our culture way. You have to go and put your foot back there in mother's land. The land must know you, girl. Then it give you what you need to know.'

Although it wasn't that simple, of course. Before she could ask where mother's land was, Blake was on the run again. Partly because her father's private detectives, Greg and Thumper, were after her, and partly because she'd decided that she needed to confront her father. But she'd kept dreaming that she was walking across warm red earth, and in her last dream, she came to a red rock shaped like a hand.

And after that, the icy hand had changed to a warm hand.

The warm hand was patting her shoulder now, to show her that she was on the right track. Blake took a deep breath and forced herself to face one more memory. That morning, only eight hours ago. Her best friend in Baybeach standing on a high bridge, ready to jump. Blake remembering her dream and letting the warm hand help her to reach into her friend's mind. Letting mother's land give her what she needed to know, in order to save her friend.

*So, okay, now I know I'm an empath, same as D'ar il Ai'ia. But I don't really understand how it works. Like, can I read people's minds or what?*

She opened her eyes and sat up straight. Made a picture of the hand-shaped red rock inside her head and then glanced at the woman in the seat beside her. Nothing happened. She couldn't tell whether the woman was angry or happy, bored or sad.

*Hmm. Can't read her mind, at any rate. What now?*

Blake wriggled around and looked further down the bus. The young guy in the next row was shutting his second s.f. novel and pulling a third from his bag. All of a sudden Blake laughed out loud. She knew exactly what he was thinking. He was pretending to

be a tall muscly warlord, like the hero in his book, even though he was actually a small skinny kid who worked in a video store.

*Interesting. I like that guy, because he lent me one of his books. Maybe that makes it easier to pick up on his feelings. I wonder if - oh! What's that?*

Another feeling was sweeping over her. A terrible sadness this time, coming from somewhere behind her. Blake muttered, 'Excuse me' and pushed past the woman in the next seat as she hurried down the aisle, heading for the toilet at the back. Her eyes blurred with tears. She stumbled, lurching sideways, and an old man grabbed hold of her elbow.

'Sorry, girlie,' he murmured. 'My foot was sticking out into the aisle. I didn't mean to trip you - but I'm in a bit of a state, because I'm going to an old mate's funeral. Would you believe, I'd known him for fifty years. We met in the army, during the Second World War.'

'Hey, it's great that you were friends for so long,' she said and the old man smiled faintly. Blake smiled back and went to shut herself in the toilet. She collapsed onto the seat, holding her head in her hands.

*All right, that settles it. I can tune into other people if (a) I like the person or (b) their feelings are really strong. I never even noticed that old bloke but his feelings came wafting towards me, like someone's cigarette smoke. Just the sadness, though. I wouldn't have known where it was coming from, if I hadn't tripped over the old guy's foot.*

She scowled and rubbed her forehead and remembered something else. Something that Daffy Clarke had told her, months and months ago. 'Your sixth sense can't send you a fax or an email, all neatly printed out,' Daffy had said. 'You just get a feeling. It's up to you to make sense of it.'

Blake sighed. 'Yeah, Daffy, I believe you,' she said out loud. 'That's the story of my life too. It's always up to me. Why should this empath stuff be any different?'

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It was dark by the time the bus hit the big city. Well, the sky was dark, at any rate, but there were lights everywhere - street lights, car headlights, traffic lights, shop window lights and flashing neon signs. There were people everywhere too. People coming home late from work, racing down to the corner shop before it closed, going out to parties and dances.

Too many people. After hanging out in the Top End and at Baybeach, Blake had forgotten how crowded the city was. She crouched down in her seat, as if she was hiding from the crowds. Almost as if she was scared.

*Actually, I am scared. I ran away to look for Maureen, because I didn't know how to*

*talk to my dad. Now I'm back in the same city and I'm still not sure what I want to say to him.*

She peered out the bus window, chewing on her thumbnail. It had felt good, escaping from her dad for a while. Although she'd never really got away from him. Interco, the big multinational company her father ran, seemed to turn up all around the place.

Interco had taken over the Baybeach Sugar Company, so a guy who worked for BSC had tried to stop her friend Reece from talking about the lead poisoning in the Baybeach river, because cleaning up the river might cost Interco money. Interco had pushed the men on the HiCorp building site into working dangerously fast - planned to build a casino in Mudgeebung - put pressure on Helena Hartley when she wanted to pay her workers a fair wage - and backed a computer consultancy that ripped off unemployed kids.

And Blake had tried to help the other side every time. The truth was, she'd been fighting Interco for the last nine months. *So basically I never stopped fighting my father. Wonder whether we'll be able to stop fighting this time?*

As the bus cruised into the terminus, Blake leaned over and returned *The Time of the Wisewoman* to the guy in the next row. The minute the door opened, she went speeding along the aisle and jumped down the step. Sniffed the city air, grinned and headed for the street, hands in her pockets, whistling the tune of 'There's no place like home'.

*It's great to be back. This place even smells like home.*

She was strolling to the exit when a warm hand landed on her shoulder, slowing her down and spinning her round. Blake ran her eyes across the people waiting to meet the bus. Gulped and stood still, staring at a short, stocky man with grey-blond hair and grey-blue eyes and an expensive grey suit.

'Oh,' she said in a small voice. 'Hi, Dad.'

'Athena!' her dad said, hurrying over. 'How wonderful to see you again. Don't worry, I'm not going to start any of those old arguments. I just wondered whether you needed somewhere to stay. Your old room's waiting for you at home. I hope you know you're always welcome'

Blake backed away before he could hug her. 'How did you find out I was on the bus?' she said. 'I thought you'd called off your private detectives.'

'Of course I did,' Mr Williams said, looking hurt. 'But I forgot to tell my computer people to stop searching for your name. When the bus line registered your ticket, I -'

'You decided to come and hassle me again,' she snapped. 'Lay off, Dad. I mean it. I can look after myself, okay?'

'Can you?' her father asked, raising an eyebrow. 'I hear you've been living like a street kid since you left home.' When Blake glared at him, he threw his hands up,

saying, 'All right, all right. It's your decision. If you don't want to come home, that's fine by me - but please, go and see your mother tomorrow, while I'm at work. Theia worries about you a lot, you know.'

Blake bit her lip. *That's fair enough. I guess. I'm only fighting with Dad, not with Theia.* She was getting ready to say, 'Yeah, sure', when Mr Williams added, 'By the way, your motorbike's in the garage at home. If you come and visit, you'll be able to pick it up.'

'Typical!' Blake yelled, losing her temper. 'You're using my Honda Rebel as a hostage. How the hell did you get hold of it, anyway? I left it with Mum's - with Maureen's friend Kenny Malone.'

'Mr Malone lives in a flat,' her father said patiently. 'He had nowhere to put the bike, so he passed it on to your rock star friend Dancer, the one who's going out with your brother. When Dancer went to America on tour, Dion offered to store your Honda for her.'

Blake frowned at her feet. *Rats. Here we go again. It's hopeless, trying to argue with Dad. He always sounds totally sensible and reasonable. But he always ends up getting exactly what he wants.*

*Always.*

When she looked up, Mr Williams was saying, 'Your brother's gone running off to America too. I told him it wasn't a good time to take leave from his job - and he just said he wanted to be with his girlfriend. I love Dion, of course, but he's not really committed to Interco. He's not as smart as you, either. I still want you to come and work with me, Athena. Doesn't that prove I care about you?'

'No,' Blake said. 'It proves you don't know me. I'm not interested in money. Dad.'

Mr Williams looked surprised. 'Neither am I. Well, I'm good at making money - it's my job, after all - but I'm not particularly interested in buying fancy clothes and big cars and so on. The point is, if you've got money, you've got power. You can tell other people what to do. You can make things go the way you want them to go.'

'Yeah, that's what I hate most,' Blake muttered. 'I mean, why should a bunch of rich guys tell everyone else what to do, just because they're good at making money? Other people are important too. Artists.' *Like Paddy Bell.* 'People who've lived a long time and learnt a lot.' *Like Auntie Vi and Daffy Clarke.* 'People who care about the towns they live in.' *Like Reece in Baybeach or Jan Shepherd in Mudgeebung.* 'People who care about the truth.' *Like Cory Mason who asked questions about HiCorp - and got killed for it.* 'People who keep trying, even when things look hopeless.' *Like my street kid friends, Elissa and Marco and Tran and Big Suze.*

Her father smiled and ruffled her hair. 'Oh, Athena, you're such a dreamer,' he said. 'It'd be nice if everyone listened to old people and people who tell the truth - but that's not the way it works. You can't change the whole world, you know.'

'I can try,' she snarled. 'And, by the way, my name's not Athena. I'm called Blake now - but you needn't bother to remember that, because I won't be talking to you again.'

Then she turned and stormed out of the bus station, while her father stood and watched her go.

## CHAPTER TWO

A line of taxis was waiting outside the terminus. Blake flung herself into the first car and told the driver to take her to the nearest hotel. It turned out to be a four-star hotel, with huge bowls of flowers all around the foyer and violin music playing softly. The woman on the desk looked pretty startled to see a small, scruffy kid come storming in. But when Blake slammed her credit card down on the desk, the woman shrugged and gave her a room.

*Rats, I just proved that Dad's right. Money does make things easier. I've been living rough for most of the last nine months - but I don't need to worry about using my credit card now, because I'm not trying to hide from Dad any more.*

She stepped into a lift with a thick carpet and glass walls and sailed up to the tenth floor. Her room was packed with all the things she needed. Blake dialled room service and ordered dinner. Cleaned her furry teeth with the free toothbrush. Had a shower, put on the fluffy white dressing gown hanging behind the door and sent her clothes downstairs to be laundered.

*I'll go somewhere else tomorrow. But right now I can use a bit of luxury.*

She sat by the big window, looking out at the lights of the city, while she ate her dinner and flicked through a pile of glossy magazines. Switched on the TV and sprawled across the king-sized bed. Fell asleep within five minutes and slept for the next eight hours.

No dreams this time. Not the dreams she used to have, where she was running from someone through a huge empty house, searching for someone down long empty

streets. Not her new dream about walking across warm red earth. No dreams tonight.  
None at all.

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Next morning Blake found her clean clothes hanging on the doorknob. She got dressed, went downstairs and ate an enormous buffet breakfast - fruit and waffles, bacon and eggs and tiny sausages, three cups of coffee. Then she paid the hotel bill and stepped out into the street, blinking at the winter sunshine.

*Where now? Ah, don't play dumb, Blake. You know what you're going to do.*

Before she could change her mind, she waved at a passing taxi. Next minute she was speeding across the city, staring out at her favourite bookshop - the karate dojo where Sensei had taught her how to fight - her old school, Cabrena Ladies' College, empty now, because of the school holidays.

As the taxi travelled on, the houses around her got bigger and grander, with velvety green lawns and views of the harbour. Blake shivered and dug her fingernails into her palms.

'This'll do,' she said suddenly. 'You can stop here.'

She scrambled out of the taxi and hesitated on the corner. Took a long deep breath and went striding up the street. A kid on a cross-terrain bike sang out, 'Hi, Athena.' A woman pruning her rose bushes called, 'Athena Williams! I haven't seen you for ages.' Blake nodded and kept walking.

Then jumped, as a voice rumbled, 'G'day, Blake.'

She swung round, startled, and looked up at a giant in a blue singlet and track pants with a red speed stripe. Another man half-hidden behind him, little and wiry as a jockey, with a lined face and sandy hair. Thumper and Greg, her dad's private detectives. Blake scowled and clenched her fists and lost her temper again.

'What are you two doing here?' she spat. 'I thought Dad told you to stop following me around.'

'We're not following you,' Thumper protested. 'Me and Greg, we're on another job now.'

'Yeah, someone's been kidnapping rich kids and hitting their folks for ransom money,' Greg told her. 'We're working for this Japanese-American family that lives down the street from your mum and dad, keeping a watch on their two kids, to make sure they don't get snatched.'

'Oh, right,' she mumbled. 'Urn, sorry about that.'

'Not a problem,' Thumper said. 'Always nice to catch up with you, Blake. I guess we'll see you around, if you're moving back home.'

'I'm *not* moving home,' she growled. 'Why does everyone think I - ah, forget it. Sorry,

Thumper, it's not your fault. See you later, okay.'

Blake hurried off, feeling stupid. Five minutes in the suburb where she used to live and she was acting like a little kid having a temper tantrum. Maybe she wasn't ready for this. Maybe she ought to go and work out at the dojo with Sensei first. Except that she couldn't turn around and walk away, not with Greg and Thumper watching her.

So she pulled her shoulders back and went marching up a long winding drive, through a garden that looked like a square of bushland plonked down in the middle of the city. Her front door key still worked. She tiptoed into the hall of the big white house and looked around at the gold-framed pictures on the wall and the huge bowls of flowers, like the flowers in the hotel.

'Mum?' she called. 'Mum, it's me, Athen - I mean, Blake.'

No-one answered. Blake prowled down the hall, peering into the lounge room - the dining room - her father's study - the sunlit kitchen. All empty. She shivered and rubbed her arms.

*Just like that old dream of mine, about running from someone through a huge empty house. Funny, I never realised I was dreaming about the house I grew up in.*

As she wandered over to the kitchen window, Blake heard the sound of voices. She nodded and opened the back door. A stone terrace outside, with three women sitting at a wrought iron table. A small round Japanese woman in a beige suit, with pearl rings and a pearl necklace and pearls in her ears. A tall girl with long straight black hair, wearing jeans and a purple shirt. And a plump pretty woman with olive skin, curls like bunches of black grapes and big dark eyes.

*The neighbours Greg was talking about, I suppose - and my mother. Well, one of my mothers, anyway. Not Maureen, the mother who gave birth to me. That's Theia, the mother who adopted me when I was one week old.*

Blake cleared her throat. 'H-hello, Mum,' she stammered, and Theia Williams leapt to her feet and came running over. Blake hugged her hard and then took a step backwards.

'No need to make a fuss,' she mumbled. 'Just go on talking to your friends, okay?'

Theia's hands lifted, as though she wanted to hug Blake again. But instead she pushed back her curls and said, 'Let me introduce you first. This is my daughter, Blake, and these are our new neighbours, Shina Carter and Yumiko Petersen.'

'We're mother and daughter too,' the small round woman explained. 'My first husband died and I married again a few years ago - but Miko and her brother, Hiroshi, decided to keep their father's surname.'

Miko's glossy black eyes flicked across to Blake. 'Hi,' she said. 'We were just talking about this kidnapping business.'

'Unbelievable!' Shina Carter exclaimed. 'Two children, a ten-year-old girl and a little boy who was only five, taken from their homes and shut up in some dump, until their

parents paid the ransom. Trust me, it wouldn't happen in the States.'

'It hasn't happened here, until now,' Theia said quickly, while Blake sat down between her mother and Miko. Her fingers were feeling really hot all of a sudden. She blew on them, to cool them.

*Weird. It feels like the warm hand's tugging at me. But why?*

She looked sideways at her mother, then across the table at Shina Carter. When she turned to look at Miko, the other girl winked at her and the warm hand squeezed harder. Blake remembered how Miko had started talking about the kidnappings straight away, which meant that Theia and Shina went on talking about the kidnappings too.

*It's like Miko knew I couldn't handle a lot of questions from Theia right now. Almost like she could read my mind.*

Blake shifted her chair, edging away from Miko. It was bad enough to find out that she picked up on other people's thoughts and feelings. Even worse to think of someone else poking around in *her* mind.

When she tuned into the conversation again, Shina Carter was saying, 'Oh sure, Miko and Roshi will probably be okay. Still, I feel a whole lot happier, knowing those two private eyes are watching the house. Mrs Williams, please thank Mr Williams for telling us about Mr Fender and Mr Rabbitt. Your husband's been marvellous to us, even though we're not going to do business with him.'

The door bell rang and Theia leapt up, murmuring, 'That'll be the gardeners - or the flower-arranging service.' While she was away, Mrs Carter went on chatting, explaining that her father, Akira, was a scientist and how Blake's father was interested in some of his ideas - but Akira kept insisting that he'd come to Australia for a holiday, not for work.

Blake smiled and nodded, watching Shina Carter's Japanese face and listening to her American drawl. *She must've been born in the States but she looks totally Japanese. Wonder what that feels like.*

But she didn't get a chance to ask any questions. The minute Theia came back, they started raving on about the kidnappings again.

Mrs Carter saying, 'I feel so sorry for those poor kids.'

Blake's mother saying, 'Yes, the Wainwrights took little Christopher straight off to visit his grandparents in England. Maybe he can forget the kidnapping, if he's in a new place with no bad memories. I hope so. Being snatched from a playground, when his mother looked away for half a second - that's the worst thing that could possibly happen to a child.'

Blake was beginning to get annoyed. She pushed her chair back, scraping it across the stones, and said, 'No, it's not.'

'Blake!' said her mother, sounding shocked. 'What do you mean? You're sorry for poor little Christopher, aren't you?'

She shrugged. 'Listen, while I was travelling around, I met kids who get their dinner

out of pizza shop rubbish bins and sleep in empty factories. They have to live like that forever. They can't go back home to a nice house with flower arrangements and gardeners and overseas trips, all laid on. So don't ask me to feel sorry for a pair of rich kids, just because they happened to get kidnapped for a few days.'

Silence. No sound at all, except the echo of Blake's voice bouncing off the wall of the house. *Ouch. I reckon I went a bit too far - but I'm not going to apologise.*

She muttered, 'I'd better go now.' Dodged round Miko and charged across the terrace, without looking back. Ran down some steps and into the garage, where she checked the petrol gauge on her Honda Rebel, turned the key in the ignition and went roaring off down the drive.

*Oh, terrific. I lasted twenty minutes this time, before I lost my temper. Hope the warm hand wasn't telling me to make friends with that girl Miko, because I think I just blew it.*

## CHAPTER THREE

'I've seen my dad and he's as bad as ever,' Blake snarled into the phone. 'Can I come back to the Top End now?'

Maureen Nagalarramba chuckled. 'You can do anything you like,' she said. 'It's your life, eh? It just seems like a waste, travelling halfway across the country for one quick chat with your dad. Why not give him a second chance?'

Blake thumped the pile of phone books with her fist. 'How come you're sticking up for him?' she demanded. 'You ought to be glad I hate him. Look at the way he stuffed you around.'

'Frank Williams isn't exactly my favourite person,' Maureen admitted. 'But he's your dad, Blake. You can't get away from that - just like you couldn't get away from the fact that I'm your mum.'

She sighed. Maureen had a point there. Blake had been mad at her mum for years, because she'd thought that Maureen had walked out on her. Still, she was over that now, after talking to Maureen. Maybe she ought to talk to her father as well.

*Or maybe not.*

'Nah, it's different,' she said grumpily. 'Okay, you let Dad con you into handing me over to him - but you came back later on. You proved that you cared, right? What's Dad ever done, apart from throwing money at me and trying to talk me into working for Interco?'

'Your dad loves Interco and money,' Maureen reminded her. 'So maybe that's his way of showing he loves you. Listen, Blake, if you really want to come home, we'll all be rapt to see you. But I still reckon you need to finish what you've started.'

Blake opened her mouth to say, 'No way' - and the phone clanked and whirred and cut her off. *Damn. My money ran out. That means Maureen got the last word - as usual.*

She stormed across to the nearest shop, bought a paper and marched back to the pay phone with a handful of change. Thought about ringing her mother again and decided that Maureen would only ask some more hard questions. Besides, it was her life, just like Maureen said.

Blake riffled through the phone book, dialled the Ladybird Bus Line and booked a ticket to the Northern Territory - in three days time, because everyone was rushing off to the Top End for their winter holidays.

*There, that's settled. I'll need to find somewhere to stay for three days - but first I need to calm down. Next stop, Sensei's dojo and a karate lesson.*

Half an hour later she was climbing a flight of stairs and hurrying into a big, long room. A class was lined up, practising their moves, but Blake didn't have time to check them out. As soon as he saw her, Sensei grinned and came powering towards her. His feet swinging out in a series of kicks, his arms whirling out in a series of punches.

Blake gulped and backed down the room. She managed to block the kicks and punches but she didn't get a chance to land any hits of her own, because Sensei was moving way too fast. Any minute now, he was going to back her right into a corner. There was only one way out. She spun round and bolted for the door, slamming it behind her.

*Well done, Blake. You 're supposed to be Sensei's top student - but you just made a complete fool of yourself.*

She sighed, wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and forced herself to open the door. As she walked in, the class started clapping. Sensei beamed at her and said, 'See? Athena knows the first law of karate - run if you can, fight if you can't run, *Bonjour, ma cherie.* I lend you some proper karate pants and you join the class, yes?'

*Hey, I did the right thing, after all.*

Blake beamed back at her karate teacher. Sensei was small and solid, not much taller than her but almost twice as wide. A Japanese face and a French accent, because he'd grown up in the south of France. Still wearing the same faded, fraying track suit that he'd been wearing when Blake started karate seven years ago.

'I pair you with my best student,' he said. 'Very good fighter, almost as good as you.'

He waved his hand at the class. Blake turned and stared, rubbed her eyes and stared harder. *I know that face - but I think I'm seeing double.* Two kids were standing side by side, looking very Japanese in white karate suits with gold belts. The same shiny black hair, the same glossy black eyes, the same wicked grins.

Blake felt the warm hand pulling at her left arm. 'Miko?' she said to the kid on the

left.

The kid on the right frowned. 'Hey, you cheated, Miko. You must've winked at her or something. Nobody ever guesses which of us is which, especially not first off.'

'No, I didn't help her,' Miko said, looking puzzled. 'She worked it out herself. Blake, say hi to my twin brother, Roshi, and then I'll show you where to find a spare pair of cotton pants.'

Blake changed her jeans for karate pants and came back to find Miko waiting for her. As she bowed to the other girl, she closed her eyes and thought about the mother country she'd seen in her dreams. Warm red earth and a rock shaped like a hand.

*Come on, warm hand. Do your stuff. Let me know what Miko's thinking, so I can beat her, okay?*

Miko was quicker at first but before long Blake began to remember all the moves Sensei had taught her. The warm hand was helping her too - pushing her arm out, warning her when Miko was going to try a scissor kick. There was only one problem. Miko kept blocking and dodging, just as smoothly as Blake did.

*Rats. This is like fighting my reflection in a mirror. Like Miko always knows exactly what I'm going to do.*

They could've gone on fighting forever, except that Miko stepped back, tripped over a pile of mats and fell flat on the floor. 'Watch it,' Blake said, holding her hand out. 'Are you okay?'

Before she could pull Miko to her feet, Sensei came racing over. '*Non, non, non!* First you kill her,' he said, jabbing at Miko's throat. 'Then, after you kill her, you ask if she's all right. It's not smart to be polite, when you're doing karate.'

'Sorry about that,' Blake said with a grin, as she hauled Miko up.

Miko grinned back. 'That was great,' she said. 'Best fight I've had in ages. Want to have coffee to celebrate?'

Blake hesitated. 'I have to find somewhere to stay,' she began and straight away Sensei said, 'Stay here, in the room at the back of the dojo. I give you the keys - you and talk to your new friend. *Pas de probeme.*'

'Thanks, Sensei,' Miko said, as Blake caught the keys one-handed. 'Hey, Roshi, are you coming with us?'

'No, I'm going home to work on my project,' Miko's twin called back, so they headed down the stairs, swapping stories about Sensei and Miko's karate master in America. Miko steered Blake across to a bookshop on the other side of the street, which turned out to have an espresso machine in the back room.

The minute they sat down, she leaned forward and said, 'So, okay, your mother calls you Blake but Sensei calls you Athena. What should I call you?'

'Blake,' she said firmly. 'I hate the name Athena.'

'Why? It's a really special name. I've seen it in a book somewhere. Hang on a

minute.'

Miko jumped up and darted into the bookshop. Came back two seconds later, saying, 'See? *Myths of Ancient Greece*. Athena was the Greek goddess of wisdom. She wasn't born in the usual sort of way - she kind of popped out of her father's head. Maybe that's why she was so wise, because she was born from his brain.'

Blake started to laugh. 'No kidding? Wonder if my dad knows that story. He probably called me Athena on purpose. I was born out of his head, for sure.'

'Seriously weird,' Miko commented. 'More, please.'

Blake didn't usually tell total strangers about her two families but for some reason she found herself giving Miko the full story. Explaining how, years ago, Maureen used to clean people's houses, to earn money while she was studying at university. One of the houses belonged to Frank and Theia Williams and after Maureen had been working there for a while, Frank told her that Theia couldn't have children - and then said he'd pay Maureen a lot of money, if she'd have a baby and give it to them.

Maureen thought it sounded like a good idea. She went off to Mr William's doctor, who arranged for her to get pregnant. But after the baby was born, she changed her mind and decided she wanted to keep Blake.

'Except that my dad brought in all these big-time lawyers, who scared Maureen stupid,' Blake said, scowling. 'She disappeared for thirteen years - but she came back in the end and we took off together. Three years on the run, living in caravan parks, working for peanuts. And then, all of a sudden, Maureen disappeared again.'

'How come?' Miko breathed and Blake frowned down into her coffee cup.

'Well, Dad has loads of money and Maureen was totally broke. She felt like he could give me all sorts of stuff I'd never get from her. So she phoned Dad and told him where I was - but she left a letter for me, saying she'd wait in the next town, in case I wanted to stay with her. Only I never got the letter.'

This time Miko didn't bother to ask 'Why?' She just raised her eyebrows and looked at Blake.

'Dunno,' she muttered. 'But I bet Dad had something to do with it. He probably stole the letter and ripped it up or whatever.'

'Oh, boy,' Miko sighed. 'That's an amazing story. I see what you mean about being born out of your father's head. It's like he had an idea and he made it happen. He made *you* happen. What about Maureen, though? Did you ever see her again?'

Blake nodded and told Miko about running away nine months ago, to search for Maureen. 'I found her in the end - but, just to make things more complicated, she'd discovered she was Aboriginal. Now I have to work out whether that makes me Aboriginal too. I mean, sometimes I feel as though I'm the same as Maureen and Auntie Vi - but other times, I feel more like Dad's daughter.'

'Sure you do,' Miko said, sounding surprised. 'Me, I had an American dad and a

Japanese mum, so I figure I can be American on Monday, Japanese on Tuesday and a totally unique human being called Miko on Wednesday. Still, I guess it's easier for me. I look Japanese but you don't exactly look Aboriginal, do you?'

Blake slammed her coffee cup into its saucer. 'That's not my fault! Me and Maureen and Maureen's mum all had white fathers, which means I ended up with blonde hair and pale skin and blue eyes. It doesn't mean I have to *feel* white, though.'

'Chill, Blake,' Miko said. 'I've only been in this country for two months, remember. I don't understand everything about Australia yet.'

'Oh, yeah,' she mumbled. 'Fair enough.'

*I thought I was losing my temper... but it looks like I found it again. Fact is, it's not fair to shout at Miko, when she just solved one of my main problems. Maybe I could be like her - maybe I could feel white on Monday and Aboriginal on Tuesday and Blake on Wednesday.*

*It's worth a try, at any rate.*

She looked up at Miko and found herself saying, 'Listen, I have to do some shopping. Want to come along?' Grinning from ear to ear when Miko said, 'Sure.'

They started by buying a backpack, to replace the one that Blake had left behind in Baybeach. After that they filled the pack with two changes of clothes, a big cup for Blake's breakfast coffee and *The Time of the Wisewoman*, so she could finish reading it.

'And I'd better get something for my dinner too,' she said but Miko said, 'Don't bother. You can have dinner at my place.'

Before Blake could argue back, Miko whisked her onto a bus, pushed her into a window seat and sat down beside her, saying, 'There, you can't escape now.' Then she took a closer look at Blake and added, 'Hey, you look angry. As angry as when you walked out of your mother's house. What's the matter?'

'I don't want to go back there, in case Mum sees me,' she mumbled. 'She'll try to make me apologise - and I meant everything I said.'

'Relax,' Miko sighed. 'We'll get off at the stop near the park, which means we won't have to walk past your place. Although it wouldn't hurt to apologise to your mum. After all, you were wrong.'

'You reckon?' Blake said crossly, and Miko nodded.

'Think about it, Blake. You said rich kids always have it easy - but you're a rich kid and you've had a pretty tough life. If I can feel sorry for you, then you can feel sorry for Christopher Wainwright and Jess Martin.'

Blake turned her head away and frowned out the window. *Miko's just as bad as Maureen. One minute I'm sure I know what I think and next minute they start changing all my ideas around.*

Then a warm finger poked her in the ribs, warning her to pay attention. She

remembered what Miko had just told her. Swung around and gasped, 'Wait a second. Did you say *Jess Martin* got kidnapped? Little Jessie? But I used to babysit her.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

It was easy to get mad at her mother for fussing over a pair of poor little rich kids. But it was harder to stay mad when she thought about smart, serious Jess Martin being dragged off by a bunch of kidnapers. For the rest of the bus ride Blake fired questions at Miko. She found out that a woman had come to collect Jess after a doctor's appointment, saying Jess's mother had sent her. She'd been shut in a dark room for five days, with a blindfold over her eyes, until her parents paid the ransom money.

*Poor Jess. I hate it when had things happen to kids. Adults can look after themselves but kids - that's different. Makes me want to do something about it.*

*Except that I can't, because I'm going back to the Top End in three days.*

She was still thinking about Jess as she walked into Miko's house but two seconds later she'd forgotten about the kidnappings. The front room was packed with people. Shina Carter, talking into a mobile phone. A tall guy with direct blue eyes and a dimple in his chin, standing by the glass doors and yelling, 'Okay, guys, I'll be with you in a minute.' *Miko's stepfather, I suppose.* An old man with a brown wrinkled face, sitting back and watching everyone else. *That'd be Miko's grandfather.* And Roshi, Miko's twin, playing table tennis with -

'Huh? What's that?' she gasped.

Miko giggled. 'Blake, meet Chip - short for Microchip. He's Grandpa's favourite robot and Roshi's best friend.'

Blake stared. Chip didn't look like a human being, the way C3PO in *Star Wars* did.

He was just a black box on a stand, with jointed metal arms and a face made out of wires and metal panels, with two glowing red sensors for eyes. But he seemed to be pretty good at table tennis - and his eyes were swivelling round to focus on Blake.

As she backed behind Miko, a tinny voice said, 'Roshi, you are tired.'

'Wrong, Chip,' Roshi said. 'I turned round to see who'd come in, that's all. Still, we might as well stop playing, anyway.'

When he put his bat down on the table, Chip let his metal arm fall. Blake stared even harder. 'It - it talks?' she whispered. 'And it understands what you say? I didn't know robots could do that. Real robots, I mean, not robots in movies.'

Miko's grandfather chuckled. 'Chip's a very special robot,' he told her. 'Most scientists are trying to make robots smarter by programming in more and more information. But I believe robots can learn things the way we do, by looking at the world around them and responding to what they see.'

'Chip's, like, part of our family,' Roshi said proudly. 'He's learnt heaps of stuff already. He can use his eyes to follow people's movements and then reach out with his arms - that's how I taught him to play table tennis. He can recognise faces, plus he can tell how you're feeling, by the way your face looks.'

'And he shows how he's feeling too,' Miko joined in. 'He can smile - and make his eyes go dark when he's scared or really red when he's angry - and if he doesn't like what's happening, he just closes his eyes and shuts off. Look!'

Blake turned and saw two silver shields sliding down in front of Chip's eyes. *No, not eyes - they're sensors. And Chip isn't a person, he's a robot.*

'Freaky,' she breathed.

Miko's grandfather smiled at her. 'Don't be scared of Chip,' he said. 'He's not dangerous. Think of him as a little child, who's still trying to understand the way adults talk and think. Right now Chip's confused, because he thought Roshi was tired but Roshi said he was wrong. So he's closed down and gone to sleep.'

Blake was confused too but instead of going to sleep, she nodded and took two steps sideways and ducked out through the glass doors. Miko's stepfather was outside as well, talking to a pair of guys in overalls, with mobile phones tucked in their top pockets. She circled round them and went to lean on the stone railing of the terrace, gazing at the still water of the harbour and enjoying the quietness.

Except that a few seconds later, somebody screamed. Blake jumped and whirled around - but Miko's stepfather just kept talking to the overall guys. She frowned and listened to the voices drifting over the high back fence.

A little kid bellowing, 'You promised! You *said* I could go to Nicky's sleepover.' A woman yelling, 'You've got a cold, Julian. You have to stay in bed. And don't try sneaking next door to Nicky's place like last time, all right?'

Blake groaned. *More people. My head feels crowded. Hey, maybe that's because*

*of this empath business. Maybe I'm picking up on too many thoughts and feelings at once*

Behind her, Miko's stepfather was saying, 'I didn't make it to the bank, Jadney. Would you mind calling round tomorrow morning? I'll pay you then and we can have another chat about America.'

'Not a problem, Steve,' said one of the overall guys. 'It's great, getting a chance to talk to a cool guy like you. I don't intend to be a gardener forever - and you've taught me more about big business than I ever learnt at school.'

The warm hand gripped Blake's shoulder and shook it. She turned round to get a look at Jadney. A lean, tanned guy in his twenties, with wavy brown hair and a film star smile, gazing at Miko's stepfather as if he was the best thing since sliced bread.

*Sorry, warm hand. I don't get it. What's so interesting about him?*

The warm hand gave her another shake, more impatient this time. Blake looked again and noticed the other gardener, standing next to Jadney. A big solid guy wearing a t-shirt that showed off his muscles and a baseball cap that said 'Mower Man'.

'Hey!' she said. 'Donnie Harding.'

Donnie twitched and came sidling over to her. 'G'day, Blake,' he said out of the corner of his mouth. 'You gave me a fright, yelling at me like that. What the heck are you doing here? Don't tell me you're poking your nose into another mystery.'

She laughed. 'No way. I'm just visiting Miko, Mr Carter's stepdaughter. And you're mowing his lawns, right? Your lawn-mower business must be doing pretty well.'

'Actually, it folded,' Donnie told her. 'Tracy used to do the paperwork and that but after the baby was born, she couldn't keep up. I'm working for this firm called Elite Gardening Services now, going into all these North Shore houses full of expensive stuff. Not that I ever think about nicking any of it, of course. I been straight for a year now, ever since Trace got pregnant.'

He beamed at Blake and she smiled back. Donnie used to be a full-time thief, doing four or five burglaries a week. She'd met him when she was trying to track down his brother Lenny, who wanted to do burls like Donnie - except that Lenny was probably the worst thief in the world.

'How's Lenny going these days?' she asked and Donnie said, 'Great. Trace found him a job delivering pizzas and he's happy as a pig in mud.' Then he edged closer and added, 'Listen, would you keep your mouth shut about the burls, okay? My boss at Elite knows I've got a record but I don't want the customers to find out.'

'Hey, I don't go round telling tales about my friends,' she said indignantly and Donnie looked relieved.

'Thanks, Blake,' he said. 'You're a mate. See you round,' and he went hurrying after Jadney, who was strolling down the drive and chatting with Mr Carter.

Blake headed back into the front room. Shina and Roshi had disappeared but Miko

was still there, talking to her grandfather. She looked up and said, 'Blake, you must think I'm an idiot. I introduced you to Chip but I forgot to introduce you to my grandfather. His name's Akira Taganaki - oh, and that guy speeding past at a hundred and fifty kilometres an hour is my stepfather, Steve Carter.'

Steve nodded to Blake, said, 'Roshi, go and set the table for dinner' and went speeding on. Miko giggled.

'Poor old Steve,' she said. 'He can't tell the difference between me and Roshi, even after two years. I guess we tease him a bit - like, I prefer really short hair but I let it grow, when Roshi decided he wanted to look like Captain Cool in his favourite comic books. We swap clothes all the time too, because we get a buzz out of fooling people.'

'The twins look the same but they're not the same inside,' Akira Taganaki told Blake. 'Miko likes people. Roshi likes robots. He helps me a lot with my work. In fact, I sometimes think he knows more about the robots than I do, because he's got total recall - you know, a perfect memory.'

'Not all that perfect,' Miko said with a grin. 'He never remembers to practise for his violin lessons. Come on, Blake, you can help me set the table.'

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Roshi wanted Chip to sit next to him at dinner. His mother said a definite 'No', but she let them take their fruit and ice cream into the front room. Blake watched Chip's metal mouth jerk into a smile as Roshi came through the door.

'Tell me more about your robots,' she said to Miko's grandfather. 'Do you really think they can feel happy or sad, like people do?'

'Well, people learn how to have feelings,' Akira told her. 'For example, Japanese people show their feelings in a different way than Australians or Americans do. So I don't see why I can't teach machines to have thoughts and feelings as well.'

'Why bother, when humans can do it already?' Blake asked.

Steve Carter leaned forward, clasping his hands round one knee. 'For one thing, machines are more reliable than people,' he pointed out. 'They never get sick and they can work twenty-four hours a day. If robots could learn how to tell when someone's lying - and how to make decisions - and how to talk customers into buying things, then machines could handle all the jobs that people do now.'

'And us people could sit around on our backsides and watch the machines working,' Miko cut in. 'I don't think that sounds like much fun.'

'Neither do I,' her grandfather agreed. He turned to Blake and said, 'As a matter of fact, that's why I came to Australia. I went to a lecture in the States, given by a woman called Helena Hartley who's very angry about the way we're letting machines take people's jobs. She was pretty convincing, so I decided to take a vacation and think

about what I was doing, before I sold the plans for Chip to one of the big companies.'

'Don't spend too much time thinking, Akira,' Steve said. 'If you don't sell those plans soon, some other scientists might beat you to it. Then they'll be famous, instead of you.'

Miko's grandfather shrugged. 'I don't want to be famous for making a mess of the world, like the scientists who worked on the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. I'd rather be -'

But Blake didn't get to hear the end of the sentence, because the warm hand clamped around her wrist. Pulling gently, to start with, and then tugging so hard that it hauled her out of her chair. Then it shunted her through the glass doors and out into the garden. Shoved her in the back and sent her staggering across the lawn.

*Oh, great. Now Miko'll think I'm completely crazy. First I walk out on my mum and now I'm walking out on Miko's family. Come on, hand. Give me a clue. Why did you bring me out here?*

It was dark in the garden. Blake slammed into the back fence before she'd realised it was there. As she rubbed her elbow, the warm hand pushed her again.

'Okay, okay,' she grumbled. 'Quit that. I get the message.'

She climbed the fence and looked around. Trees and lawn and shadows. The white wall of the next house with a paved driveway cut into the hillside. And that was all. No kidnappers. No ghosts. No robots trying to take over the world.

*Nothing. The hand dragged me out here for nothing.*

But just as she was about to give up and go back to the house, there was a rustle in the bushes nearby. Blake braced herself against the fence, knee bent, ready to kick. Sighed with relief when Miko ducked under a branch and came hurrying over.

'Sorry, it took me a while to find you,' she whispered. 'What's going on?'

Blake blushed in the darkness. 'Don't laugh but - well, I had this feeling that something was wrong.'

'Hey, I wouldn't laugh,' Miko told her. 'I know how - oh! What's that?'

A light flashed in the back room of the house behind them. A small shadow appeared at the window, heaved it open and crawled through the gap. And three larger shadows went prowling over to meet it.

'The little boy!' Blake gasped. 'That's Julian, the kid I heard earlier on. He's sneaking out to go to a sleepover - and the kidnappers are waiting for him.'

## CHAPTER FIVE

Blake swung her legs over the fence and dropped down into the garden. A second later Miko landed beside her. As they pelted across the house, one of the shadows threw a blanket over Julian's head. The second shadow picked him up and the third shadow followed them down the hill, guarding their backs.

'Driveway,' Blake panted. 'We have to cut them off, before they can get to their car.'

She veered sideways and Miko turned with her. Their feet pounded across the grass and then hit the stones of the driveway. *Good. We got here first. They can't push past us, because there's a steep hill on one side and a fence on the other side. But can we fight three guys at once?*

While Blake hesitated, Miko grabbed her arm and spun her round. They stood there, back to back, blocking the path. Blake grinned fiercely, remembering her practice sessions at Sensei's dojo. It had been hard, learning to fight in a pair - but exciting too.

The three guys thundered down the drive and stopped when they saw Blake and Miko. 'Relax,' the first guy called back. 'They're only kids.'

'Shut up,' snarled the guy who was holding Julian. 'Don't let 'em hear your voice. Just get 'em.'

The other two guys rushed them. One heading for Blake, the other circling round to get at Miko. Blake kicked out and the first guy grunted and went staggering back. Then she turned slightly, to let Miko aim a kick at the second guy, before he was ready for it.

*Ha. That showed them. This isn't going to be as easy as they thought.*

The guys looked at each other, nodded and closed in again. Moving more

cautiously this time, watching the girls and waiting for a chance to attack. Blake and Miko swivelled in a circle, their backs pressed together, protecting each other. When the first guy pounced on Blake, Miko swung to the left, to cover her while she kicked. And when the second guy threw himself at Miko, Blake swung to the right, as Miko landed a kick under his knee cap.

*Excellent team work. Miko knows we have to kick, not punch, because hitting would take us in too close to the guys. I reckon we can hold them off forever, as long as we aren't separated.*

The third kidnapper was in trouble as well. Julian was yelling and biting and struggling under the blanket. 'Get a move on,' he growled. 'Any minute now, the whole neighbourhood'll come running over to see what's happening.'

His mates edged forward, limping as if their knees hurt. They looked the two girls up and down and then, all of a sudden, they both charged at Blake. *Because I'm smaller than Miko - but I'm faster too.* She kicked one guy in the stomach. Turned sideways and watched Miko kick the other guy under the chin. Laughed out loud as the two guys collapsed in a heap on the driveway, groaning and swearing.

*We've done it! We won. We saved Julian.*

Next minute Blake heard the sound of footsteps, trampling along the street and up the drive. Someone pushed between her and Miko, shoving them apart. Blake stumbled and almost fell. She wobbled, clutched at the air and flung her arms out for balance.

*Oh. That hurts. Back-to-back karate makes you twice as strong - but if somebody splits you up, you feel twice as helpless.*

Her hand brushed against Miko's hand. They hung on, trying to steady themselves and work out what was happening. The footsteps belonged to two new shadows, a huge one and a smaller one. The huge shadow flung itself at the third kidnapper, who dropped Julian and ran.

But at the same time the other two kidnappers dodged past Blake and Miko and headed for the street, with the smaller shadow chasing after them. A car engine roared and tyres squealed on the road. Blake groaned and looked up at the huge shadow.

'Oh, Thumper, you idiot,' she said sadly, 'You let the kidnappers get away.'

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Fifteen minutes later Blake and Miko were sitting side by side in a big bright lounge room, full of pictures in gold frames and flower bowls on tiny tables. Thumper was slumped in an armchair, looking miserable. Greg kept explaining to everyone that they'd only been trying to help. And Julian's mother, Mrs Tregorow, was clutching her son, as if she was never going to let him go.

The door bell rang and Blake jumped up in relief. 'That'll be the cops,' she said. 'I'll let them in.'

When she opened the door, a fat policeman with twinkly blue eyes held out his hand and said, 'Inspector Potter, here about the kidnappings.' Then he took a second look and added, 'Well, well, it's my young friend Blake. Going to catch some kidnappers for us this time, are you?'

Blake gave him a fake smile. *Terrific. This is like a school reunion or something. First Donnie Harding and now the fat cop. I hope he's not still mad at me, because I promised to catch a thief for him ... and then I sort of let Peter Piper escape.*

Luckily, Inspector Potter didn't seem to be mad at her. He turned to the man behind him and said, 'You want to watch this one. She's a regular junior detective, always solving mysteries.'

The man looked down his long nose at Blake and stroked his thick dark moustache. 'Roger Bigglesworth,' he said, introducing himself. 'You might as well call me Biggles. Everyone does. I'm a kidnapping expert from a firm in England - and I don't like amateurs, so I hope you'll keep out of my way.'

He pushed past Blake and strode into the lounge room. Knelt down in front of Julian and began asking questions, while the fat cop scribbled the answers in his notebook. Blake had been sure that Biggles would try to bully Julian, the way he'd tried to bully her, but she had to admit he knew how to talk to little kids. By the end of the questions, Julian was bouncing around in his mother's lap and boasting about his adventure.

After that Biggles started on Julian's mother, asking her how many people knew that Julian was grumpy about missing the sleepover. 'Well, a woman from Flower Power was here, arranging the flowers, when Julian had his tantrum,' Mrs Tregorow said. 'And of course, I told Nick's parents, the family next door. But that's all.'

'Not quite,' Blake butted in. 'I knew, because Julian was yelling so loudly. Mr Carter and the gardeners were out on the terrace with me - and I bet half the neighbourhood heard him as well.'

Biggles nodded briskly and turned to Greg and Thumper. 'So where do you two fit in?' he asked, and they explained that they'd been watching Miko's house, as usual, when they heard a noise out the back and went to investigate.

'I headed straight for the little kiddie. Didn't realise I was bowling Blake over,' Thumper said miserably, and Greg added, 'We were only trying to help.'

Biggles studied them thoughtfully, fiddling with his moustache. Then he whirled round suddenly and snapped, 'And what were *you* doing there, Blake?'

She stared back. *No way can I tell this guy I've got a sixth sense for danger. It was hard enough, telling Miko.*

'Um, Miko was showing me the garden,' she mumbled. 'The kid must've shouted or something, so we climbed over the fence to take a look around.'

The kidnapping expert pulled his heavy eyebrows down in a frown. 'An interesting story,' he commented. 'Looking at the garden in the dark. Hearing Julian shout, when he says the kidnappers dropped a blanket over him straight away. I think you're lying to me, Blake. I'm not sure why - but believe me, I'll find out in the end.'

He swung away and began to question Miko. Blake held her breath but Miko backed up her story brilliantly.

'All right, you can go home now,' Biggles said, looking disappointed. 'Just give your addresses and phone numbers to Inspector Potter before you leave.'

As they walked down the drive, with Greg and Thumper marching ahead to guard them, Blake edged closer to Miko and whispered, 'Thanks.'

'That's cool,' Miko said. 'I didn't like that guy Biggles. I reckon you'd make a way better detective than him. Is it true, that stuff Inspector Potter said about you getting involved with some other mysteries?'

'Yeah, it's true,' she admitted. 'I hate mysteries, so I can't help trying to solve them - maybe because my entire life was a mystery, up until a few weeks ago. I won't be trying to solve this mystery, though, because I'm going back to the Northern Territory in three days time.'

There was silence for a while and then Miko sighed quietly. Blake took a deep breath and added, 'Although we could drop in on Jess Martin tomorrow and ask a few questions about her kidnapping, if you're interested.'

A smile spread across Miko's face. 'Good,' she murmured. 'I was hoping you'd say that.'

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Blake lay on the hard mattress in the back room at Sensei's dojo, arms folded behind her head, mind skidding all over the place. She remembered the kidnapper dropping a blanket over Julian's head. Biggles asking difficult questions. Theia, looking as though she didn't dare to hug her. Maureen's voice on the phone. Greg and Thumper, stuffing up as usual. Chip the robot. Miko's family. Miko.

*Too many people. Wish I could shut them out by closing my eyes, like Chip. Or maybe I need a magic shield, like D'ar il Ai'ia in The Time of the Wisewoman.*

She smiled in the darkness and began to invent her own magic shield. Invisible, of course. As tall as her. An electric current running through it, so it threw off sparks when anyone touched it. If she had a shield, she wouldn't need to pick up on everybody's thoughts and feelings, because the shield would bounce them back.

*A weird idea - but then, this empath business is pretty weird too. An invisible shield might help. I'll give it a go.*

She fell asleep, still smiling, and dreamed she was leaning against a hand-shaped

red rock, feeling safe and protected. Woke to find Miko kneeling beside the mattress, holding out the mug she'd bought yesterday. Blake sat up, rubbed her eyes and took a swig of coffee.

'Oh, right,' she remembered. 'We're going to visit Jess Martin, aren't we?'

Straight away Miko pulled out a notebook. 'I've written down everything we already know about the kidnappings,' she said. 'For one thing, all the kids live pretty close to each other - Christopher Wainwright's house is across the road from your place, Julian Tregorrow's in the next street from me and Jess Martin's only a few blocks away. So we're looking for someone who knows the area, maybe because they live there or maybe because they work there.'

'Like Flower Power or the Elite Gardening Service?' Blake suggested and Miko said, 'Yeah, they're at the top of my list. The gardeners and the flower people definitely knew about Julian's sleepover, so we need to find out whether they knew about Christopher's trip to the playground and Jess's doctor's appointment as well.'

She blinked. *Wow, Miko sounds really organised. She must've spent last night making lists, while I was lying around and inventing invisible shields.*

'What else do we need to find out?' she asked.

Miko's eyes widened. 'You're the boss. I've never done this sort of thing before. How do you usually handle it?'

Blake could feel her cheeks turning red. *Actually, I usually wait for the warm hand to point out the clues. But I can't tell Miko that.*

'We better get moving,' she said, gulping down her coffee. 'How do you feel about riding on a motorbike?'

She lent Miko her spare helmet and showed her how to balance on the back of the bike. They zoomed through the city streets, passed Miko's place and stopped in front of a two-storey wooden house, surrounded by flowering gums and grevillea bushes. The house was the same colour as the gum tree trunks, with balconies and stairs sticking out everywhere, like a giant tree house.

When they knocked on the door, a worried-looking man in a burgundy tracksuit peered out and said, 'Athena Williams. What are you doing here?'

'I just heard about what happened to Jess,' Blake told him. 'So I called round to see whether she's okay.'

Mr Martin rubbed his bald head, as if he was polishing it. 'Jess *seems* okay,' he mumbled. 'But who knows? I can't stop thinking about it, Athena. It's all my fault. If only I hadn't left her by herself at the doctor's. But I needed to talk to a client down the road, just for half an hour - and Jess had been to that doctor dozens of times, because of her asthma - and nothing ever went wrong before. I'll never leave her alone again, though. Never.'

'Can I come in and say hello to her?' Blake asked and Mr Martin snapped, 'No!

Jess had a bad asthma attack after the kidnapping. She needs rest, not visitors. Goodbye.'

As he slammed the door, they heard a voice calling, 'Daddy, was that Athena?' Blake looked at Miko and pulled a face.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I stuffed that one up.'

Miko shrugged. 'You couldn't help it. The guy's feeling really protective right now. You can't blame him.'

'True,' Blake agreed. 'Actually, Mr Martin's pretty cool. He was this hot-shot advertising guy but when his wife went back to America, he changed his life around and started working at home, so he could pick Jess up from school or whatever. He's been a great dad to her - and now those kidnappers have made him feel like a failure. It's not fair.'

As she kicked at a stone on the gravel path, a breathless voice called, 'Athena! Athena Williams.' When she swung round, she saw a kid climbing over one of the balconies and racing down the steps. A pale skinny kid with huge dark eyes and two tufts of black hair sticking out from her head like horns.

'Oh,' Blake said. 'Hi, Jess.'

## CHAPTER SIX

'Daddy's still fussing over me non-stop,' Jess complained. 'He won't let any of my friends come around, not yet anyhow. But you were my favourite babysitter, Athena, and I haven't seen you forever. I *had* to talk to you, so I could find out why you disappeared like that.'

Blake laughed. 'I didn't exactly disappear,' she told the girl. 'I just went looking for my mother.'

After that she had to explain about her two mothers - and the places she'd been - and the mysteries she'd solved.

'I've got a mystery too,' Jess said shyly, when Blake stopped for breath. 'Can I tell you about it, please?'

'Sure,' she said, surprised. 'As long as it won't make you feel scared again.'

'No, I *want* to tell you,' Jess insisted and Blake nodded.

'Then go for it, kid. We're listening.'

Jess told them that she'd been sitting in the doctor's waiting room when a woman dashed in and said Jess's father needed her urgently. As she hustled Jess across to a car, she shoved a sweet-smelling hanky over her mouth and Jess passed out. When she woke, her hands were tied behind her back and there was a tight bandage wrapped around her eyes. Someone came and fed her three times - breakfast, lunch and dinner - and then they drugged her again and shifted her to a different place.

'How did you know it was different?' Miko asked and Jess looked at her scornfully.

'Hey, I had nothing else to do. I spent lots of time thinking about all the smells and sounds. The first place smelt sort of cold and empty, as though no-one had ever lived

there, and every time the kidnappers turned up with more food, their footsteps echoed loudly. But the second place smelt like a real house and there were all kinds of noises. A noise like a squeaky wheel - a noise that was a bit like a car horn and a bit like a sick cow mooing - and a dreamy *shush-shush* noise that made me fall asleep.'

'You're a smart kid,' Blake told her. 'You noticed a whole lot. Just one more thing. Do you remember how many people knew you'd be waiting at the doctor's place on your own?'

'Well, the gardeners were here when Dad and I left the house,' Jess said. 'And we have a housekeeping service that does our cooking and cleaning. Dad always tells them where I'm going to be.'

'This housekeeping service, do they bring flowers for your house as well?' said Miko.

Jess thought for a moment, fiddling with the rubber bands round her tufts of hair. 'There's always heaps of flowers in the house, because Dad likes to have nice things to look at while he's working,' she said finally. 'But I think the housekeeping service gets someone else to bring the flowers. A place with a funny name. Flower Pow -'

She stopped in the middle of the word. Gulped and stared up at the man looming over them.

'Hmm,' said Roger Bigglesworth, stroking his moustache. 'So this is where you got to. Better run back to the house, Jess. Your father's looking for you.'

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The kidnapping expert paced up and down the path, while Blake and Miko watched him nervously. Then he turned and said, 'I warned you once before. Stay out of this, Blake. I was hired by the Wainwright family to solve this case - I mostly work in Europe but I happened to be here on holiday when the Wainwrights contacted my firm in England, so I said I'd stick around and help the police. That means I'm working outside my usual territory, which is hard enough. I don't need to have you making my job even harder.'

'We just asked Jess a few questions,' Blake protested. 'I can't see how that's going to mess things up for you.'

'This isn't a game,' Biggles snarled. 'I don't have time to deal with a pair of kids pretending they're the Famous Five. Jess Martin hasn't said much about the kidnapping yet, because she's still frightened. If you've scared her even more -'

'Hang on,' Blake cut in. 'Jess was desperate to talk to us. She told us heaps.'

Miko nodded hard. 'I don't think Jess is scared, Biggles. I think she's worried about her father same as he's worried about her. She doesn't want to talk about the kidnapping in front of him, in case it makes him more upset.'

Biggles stroked his moustache again, the way he always did when he was thinking. 'All right, I suppose I ought to say thank you,' he grumbled. 'Now, tell me everything

Jess Martin said.'

So Blake and Miko gave him all the details. The kidnapping expert knew a lot of it already but his dark eyes brightened when they told him about the smells and noises Jess had noticed.

'Cold and empty and echoing,' he repeated. 'That sounds like a new house with no furniture or carpets, just bare concrete floors. Maybe a house that isn't quite finished. I'd better find out whether any of my suspects have connections in the building trade.'

'Who *are* your suspects?' Blake demanded. Biggles scowled, as though he thought she was really pushing it this time, but she glared back and said, 'Listen, we just gave you some important information. You owe us, right?'

As he hesitated, Miko said encouragingly, 'Go on, Mr Bigglesworth, stroke your moustache. That'll help you to decide.'

The kidnapping expert hastily tucked his hands behind his back. 'Very well then, I'll tell you a bit about how kidnapers work. But it won't do you much good. Kidnapers are professionals - in other words, it's their job. They organise a kidnapping as carefully as the boss of the Elite Gardening Service organises his gardeners. If you want to catch a kidnapper, you need contacts in the criminal world. And nice young girls like you two obviously don't have any criminal friends.'

Blake tried not to laugh. *Biggles thinks he's so smart - but he doesn't realise I know Donnie Harding.*

'Tell us, anyway,' she said. 'We're interested, Biggles.'

'Yes, we've never met a kidnapping specialist before,' Miko chimed in, smiling sweetly. 'It's way cool.'

Biggles puffed out his chest and twiddled the ends of his moustache. Whisked a photo folder from the inside pocket of his suit coat, flicked it open and said, 'Here, I'll show you a pair of master kidnapers.'

Blake and Miko stared down at two faces. A middle-aged guy with a neat, short beard and a white streak in his hair, looking as though he'd like to spit at the camera. And a younger guy with long wavy hair, eyebrows that slanted up like wings and laughing eyes.

'Franco Pasquale and Aldo Tucci,' Biggles said, frowning at the photo. 'My two main suspects.'

'Both Italian,' Blake commented. 'How come?'

'I've worked in Italy a lot, over the years,' Biggles explained. 'It's my special area. I've studied the way their kidnapers work, so I could see straight away that the Wainwright and Martin jobs fitted the Italian pattern. For example, the arrangements for collecting the ransom were the same as in lots of Italian kidnappings - although I can't tell you the details, because the police need to keep it secret. But believe me, either these kidnapers spent time in Italy or else one of the Italian kidnapers has come over here.'

'So basically you think one of those guys is in Australia right now?' Miko said, tapping the photos.

'Yes, I do. For one thing, they both disappeared a few months ago. Franco Pasquale was a pretty cruel sort of chap, which means his gang might've turned against him. He could be dead ... but he could be living just around the corner. With Aldo Tucci, it's a different story. His balaclava slipped, while his gang were dragging a business man into a car, and the man saw Aldo's face. Most kidnappers would've killed the man on the spot but Aldo let him live - and then, of course, he had to go on the run. So he could easily be here as well.'

Blake stared at the two faces and waited for the warm hand to give her a nudge. Nothing happened. She sighed. *Oh well, I didn't really expect it to be that easy.*

'Thanks, Biggles,' she said. 'Don't worry, we'll stay out of your way from now on.'

He beamed. 'Good girl. You're learning. Just remember, leave it to the experts.'

'We're not really going to stop investigating, are we?' Miko asked, as they headed off down the street.

'Of course not,' Blake told her. 'I never said we would. I just said we'd stay out of Biggles' way. I reckon we ought to check on Flower Power and the Elite Gardening Service next. We won't run into Biggles there, because he's obviously talked to them already.'

'Smart thinking,' Miko said with a grin. 'But there's something you'd better do first, before we go chasing off across the city.' When Blake gave her a puzzled look, she shrugged and said, 'Your mum, fuzzbrain. You told me you were planning to apologise to her - and right at this minute she's only a few blocks away.'

Blake didn't remember promising to apologise but, once she'd thought about it, she decided it wasn't a bad idea. After all, she was going back to the Territory soon. This might be her last chance to see Theia before she left.

While Miko ducked into her house to pack some food for lunch, Blake hurried down the street to her old home. Turned her key in the lock, padded quietly down the hall and found Theia in Mr Williams' study, addressing invitations to a fund-raising dinner in her beautiful flowing handwriting.

Blake walked straight up and said, 'Mum, I'm sorry about yesterday. Actually, I'm sorry about the last nine months. You were right, that day at the Top End, when you said I should've phoned you from time to time. I didn't realise what it'd be like for you.'

*Not until I saw how wrecked Mr Martin was - and his daughter only vanished for a few days, not most of a year.*

Theia dropped her pen and spun the chair around. 'Do you really mean that, Blake?' she asked.

'Sure. Why not?'

'Well, you ran away to find your real mother,' Theia said in a whisper. 'I thought - I

was afraid you didn't want me as a mother any more.'

'That's stupid,' Blake said. 'I mean, you were the one who changed my nappies - and picked me up when I fell off the swing - and told me how to handle the bullies at school. Fact is. I'm luckier than most kids, because I've got two mothers, instead of one.'

A warm finger touched her on the chest, just above her heart. *Oh. That's interesting. I was only saying that stuff to make Theia happy - but I think I believe it, after all. Having two mothers always felt like a problem, up until now, but suddenly it feels like a bonus.*

Theia seemed to believe her too. She jumped to her feet and pulled Blake into a hug. They held onto each other for a while and then Blake said in a muffled voice, 'Listen, I'm going off to spend some more time with my - with Maureen but I'll be back, I promise. I won't disappear on you again, Mum.'

'It's all right,' Theia said, half-laughing and half-crying. 'I don't mind, now I know -'

'That I love you?' Blake mumbled. 'Yeah, I do. Always will. See you later, okay?' and she scuttled out of the room, blinking fast.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Blake never cried. Never. All the same, as she hurtled down the front path, her eyes were so blurred that she almost bumped into Donnie Harding.

'You again?' she said, when she managed to focus properly. 'Are you working for my folks as well?'

'Me and Jadney, we're the best workers at Elite Gardening Service,' Donnie boasted. 'We do most of the big houses on the North Shore. My boss is real posh, so he knows all the nobs. He's not up himself, but. He just laughed when I warned him I'd been in gaol a few times.' He frowned and added, 'That Jadney, though, he kept acting like I was Ned Kelly at first. Mind you, he calmed down after I explained that burgs were hard work, way harder than gardening.'

'You know, it's lucky your boss is so cool,' Blake said. 'I bet the cops've been hassling you about this kidnapping business.'

'Tell me about it!' he groaned. 'First I had to prove where I was when those kids were pinched. And then, soon as the jacks clear off, some of me old crim mates come sloping around, dropping hints about how they'd like to get in on the action - as if I'm the sort who goes round stealing little kiddies.'

'So you haven't heard anything about the kidnappings?' she asked regretfully.

'Only what me mates told me,' Donnie said. 'They reckon there's a new game in town. Big money. Really huge. But I wouldn't let them drop any names or nothing. I'm going straight now. I don't want to get involved.'

Blake scuffed her runner along the path. *So much for my contacts in the criminal*

*world. Face it, kid. You don't stand a chance of solving the kidnappings.*

'Fair enough, Donnie,' she said. Then she swung away - and came face to face with Miko and Inspector Potter.

'G'day, Blake,' the fat cop said cheerily. 'You're a hard one to track down but your mate told me you'd be here. I just want you to check the statement you made last night, about the blokes who tried to kidnap young Julian.'

He handed her a page of typing. Blake read it through and signed her name at the bottom. 'Seen Biggles this morning?' she asked.

The inspector shook his head, so she told him all about their conversation with Jess Martin. Inspector Potter seemed particularly interested in the idea that Jess had been kept prisoner in a place that the builders hadn't quite finished.

'Sounds like a house at lock-up stage, all its walls and doors and windows right and tight, but still waiting for the painters and plumbers to come in,' he observed. 'That's a nice little clue, Blake. I'll go through my files again and see whether any of the local crim families have relatives in the building trade.'

'Why families?' Miko said and the fat cop chuckled.

'Use your brain, girlie. You need a lot of people to pull off a kidnapping. Someone to grab the kid, someone to drive the car, someone to guard the kid and so on. If the boss of the show hired crims from here, there and everywhere, they'd probably go running off to spend up big, get drunk and boast about how they were in on the Wainwright job. But families keep an eye on each other, 'cause they know that if one of them goes down, they all go down. So I reckon Biggles' Italian connection must've somehow hooked up with one of the big Aussie crim families.'

'Do you think Biggles is right about the main kidnapper coming from Italy?' Blake asked.

Inspector Potter flipped his hands out. 'Who knows? He's the expert. That's his job, finding the big guy. It's my job to go round talking to the little guys. The crims on the street, they all know who did it, only they'll never tell the cops. I'll have to keep squeezing a bit of info out of someone and a bit more out of someone else, till I've got enough facts to nail the bastards. I'll get them in the end - but it could take a while.'

Blake sighed. *I hate to admit it but it's starting to look as though Biggles was right. Solving mysteries is just a hobby for me. I better leave this one to the professionals, the people who know about Italian kidnappers and criminal families and all that.*

She was about to turn away when Miko said, 'Okay, Inspector, we gave you Jess Martin's story. What are you going to give us in return?'

The fat cop's eyes twinkled. 'You're a pushy kid, aren't you? Luckily, I've got a soft spot for pushy kids, so I'll answer one question. Just one, mind.'

Miko glanced at Blake. She thought fast and said, 'All right, can you tell us whether Elite Gardening Service and Flower Power were on the scene for each of the three

kidnappings?'

'Bingo!' said the inspector, sounding surprised. 'You hit the jackpot there. As far as we can tell, they were the only people who knew where all three kids would be. You've heard the story on Julian Tregorow and Jess Martin already, and the same goes for little Christopher Wainwright - the Flower Power team came to his house that morning and the gardeners were working outside. Not that it means anything, of course. The kidnappers could've been spying on the families' houses or tapping their phones or whatever. Still, it's interesting, just the same.'

'But you haven't arrested any of them yet,' Blake commented.

Inspector Potter nodded. 'Exactly right. Problem is. I can't prove a thing. The Flower Power team are squeaky clean, not even any unpaid parking fines, let alone a criminal record. I wondered about your burglar pal, Donnie Harding, but he's got alibis coming out of his ears - proper alibis, not the ones you can buy down at the pub.'

'So Donnie's in the clear?' she said with relief.

'Afraid so. And his mate Jadney was away, looking after his sick mum, on the day Jess Martin was nabbed. That seems to cross him off the list as well, unless Donnie happened to tell Jadney that Jess was at the doctor's. Donnie swears he didn't say a word to anyone - but he could be lying, I suppose, because he's so desperate to keep out of trouble.'

'And that's it?' Miko asked, looking disappointed.

'Well, there's Patrick MacAvoy, the boss of Elite Gardening Service,' Inspector Potter told her. 'But he's rolling in money - rich family and all that. I can't see why he'd want to start a kidnapping business on the side. Although they say you can never be too rich or too thin.'

He laughed and patted his round stomach. Blake laughed back and said, 'Still, Mr MacAvoy doesn't sound as if he's the sort of guy who'd meet a lot of criminals. Not like Mr Bigglesworth, for example.'

The fat cop narrowed his eyes. 'Are you suggesting that Biggles is involved with the kidnappings?'

'No way,' she said quickly. 'It's just that - well, he knows all about how those Italian guys organise things. He'd have ways of getting in touch with criminals all over the world. Plus he was here in Australia on holiday before the kidnappings started.'

Inspector Potter looked thoughtful. 'That was kind of convenient, him being right here on the spot. I'm not saying I believe you, Blake, but still, you've been right before.' He grinned and added, 'That reminds me. I saw an interesting interview on TV the other night - a father and son, talking about how the son disappeared for years and then suddenly turned up as a flute player in the symphony orchestra where his father's the conductor. Would you believe, the son looked exactly like this small-time thief from my last beat. Funny sort of coincidence, wasn't it?'

He winked at Blake and turned to go. She watched him walk away, her mouth still hanging open in surprise. *Amazing. That must be Peter Piper, the thief I helped to escape. Maybe I do have some more criminal contacts, after all.*

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Blake and Miko made a few phone calls and found out the addresses for Flower Power and Jadney and Patrick MacAvoy. Blake phoned the office of the symphony orchestra and made a time to see Peter Piper the next day. Then she revved her Honda and they set off across the city.

Jadney's house was the closest. A small cottage in a side street, with cracks in the walls and paint peeling off the door frame - although the garden looked terrific, of course. Blake and Miko stood together on the footpath, checking out the neighbourhood.

'A lot of the houses are pretty run-down,' Miko commented, 'But I get the feeling that things are changing. A few places are being done up - and look, there's two empty blocks where people are building new houses.'

'You can hear the traffic from the main road,' Blake added. 'A few car horns, although I wouldn't say they sounded like sick cows mooing. And the cars rumble along - they don't go *shush-shush*.'

They looked at each other and said in unison, 'Which proves that -'. Blake laughed and told Miko to go on.

'It proves this *could* be the place Jess Martin described to us,' Miko said. 'It's got a lot of the right sounds and smells. Except that if Jadney's one of the kidnappers, it'd be a bit dangerous, bringing Jess to the actual street where he lives.'

'Yeah, that's what I thought too,' Blake agreed. 'Now let's go and find out whether Jadney really does have a sick mother - or whether that was just an excuse for nicking off.'

She marched over to the house and banged on the door. No answer. 'That's strange,' Miko said. 'I was sure I heard voices. Let's take a look around.'

Blake nodded and followed her down the side of the house. The back garden was even more beautiful than the front garden. An archway of ivy, pebble paths lined with gillyflowers or snowdrops and a Japanese cedar tree, pruned so that its leaves made a little green tent.

Two women were sitting together under the tree. A small dumpy grey-haired woman with sad eyes and a lined face. A woman in a green linen suit, tall and elegant as a model, with a slash of red lipstick and thick eyebrows that angled up towards her temples. As Miko strode across the grass, the tall woman blinked and whisked a lace-edged hanky across her eyes.

And the small woman leapt up and ran at them, screaming, 'Get out! Go away, you

horrible children. Get out of my garden.'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Blake and Miko tore down the path and hurdled the front gate. Glanced back and sighed with relief, when they realised that the woman had stopped chasing them.

'Phew!' Miko said. 'That was kind of scary. She's got a really short fuse, hasn't she?'

Before Blake had time to answer, someone called out, 'G'day, Miko. What are you doing here?'

Blake turned and saw Jadney strolling down the street towards them. She crossed her fingers behind her back and said, 'Hi, I'm a friend of Donnie Harding. He told me the cops were hassling him about this kidnapping business, so I thought I'd drop in and ask if you knew anything that could help him. But I think we might've upset your mum and her friend.'

Jadney's handsome face clouded. 'Mum's, y'know, the nervous type,' he said. 'Sometimes she gets so depressed that I have to stay home and look after her. She went through a pretty nasty divorce - like, my dad made loads of money, building houses in the outer suburbs, but he hired these fancy lawyers and managed to leave my mother flat broke. Right now her sister's here on a visit, because her marriage broke up too. I guess that's stirred up some bad memories for Mum.'

Blake and Miko looked guiltily at each other. *Oops. We shouldn't have gone barging in like that. Jadney's mum and her sister were probably having a heart-to-heart.*

'Sorry about that,' Blake said. 'And could you please apologise to Mrs - um, what's your surname, Jadney?'

'Jadney,' he said with a grin. 'My full name's John Jadney but I reckon John's the most boring name in the entire world. Okay now, what can I tell you about Donnie

Harding?'

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Twenty minutes later, Blake and Miko were sitting in a small green park that sloped down to the harbour, eating the sushi rolls Miko had brought. 'Blake, you're a genius,' she said. 'My mind went totally blank when Jadney asked what we wanted to know about Donnie - but you managed to think up half-a-dozen questions.'

Blake shrugged. 'Listen, I already felt terrible about upsetting Mrs Jadney. I would've felt way worse if Jadney'd guessed why we were really there.'

Miko looked her up and down, 'You're a funny mixture, Blake. Tough on the outside. Pure marshmallow on the inside. You worry about everybody, don't you?'

'Can't help it,' she muttered, scowling at her sushi. 'Want to know why I changed my name to Blake? William Blake was this dead poet who wrote this poem that goes

*Can I see another's woe  
And not be in sorrow too?*

That's what it's like for me, Miko. I pick up on other people's thoughts and feelings. So, if they're unhappy, I'm unhappy as well.'

Silence. When she glanced up, Miko was staring at her strangely. *I knew it. I shouldn't have told her. Now she thinks I'm a freak.*

'Is that for real?' the other girl whispered. 'Me too, Blake. I've been tuning into other people's heads ever since I was a kid. I even have this little voice that warns me when I need to be careful or listen properly or whatever.'

Blake gulped. 'I've got an icy hand,' she said in a rush. 'Well, it used to be cold but after I had this special dream, it changed into a warm hand.'

She flicked her last bit of sushi to a passing seagull and gazed down at the waves splashing against a tumble of rocks. Remembered how Miko had seemed to know what she was thinking, right from the very beginning. How they'd matched each other perfectly while they were sparring in the dojo and fighting off the kidnappers. How she'd trusted Miko almost immediately, even though she didn't trust many people at all.

*This is incredible. I've finally met someone like me. Another empathy - only Miko's real, not a character in a sci-fi novel, like D'ar il Ai'ia. It's too much. I'm not sure whether I can handle it.*

'Come on,' she said, scrambling to her feet. 'It's time we went looking for Patrick MacAvoy.'

'Sure,' Miko said, looking relieved. 'Let's go, Blake.'

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As they strolled along, the strip of land jutting into the harbour got narrower. Soon they could see water on both sides. Patrick MacAvoy's house was right at the end of the point. A red brick castle with a tall tower at the back, facing out across the bay.

'If he dug a moat along his front fence, he'd have his own private island,' Miko said. 'Inspector Potter was right. This guy must be loaded with money.'

They paused for a moment, listening to the waves lapping and the seagulls squawking and the ferries hooting as they chugged across the harbour. Then they went to ring Patrick's front doorbell. Patrick turned out to be a chunky blond guy in his forties, with gym muscles and a deep tan, even in the middle of winter.

'Miko Carter?' he said, when they introduced themselves. 'You must be Steve Carter's stepdaughter. And Athena Williams - you've been away for a while, right? Come in and tell me what you're doing here.'

He led them up the stairs to his office in the tower. Blake settled in the window seat, looking out at a sheer drop down to the rocks and the water. The walls of the tower were obviously pretty thick, because she could hardly hear the sea sounds. The waves were just a distant rustle. The seagulls seemed to be squeaking, instead of squawking. Even the ferry's horn was softer than before.

Then Patrick MacAvoy raised an eyebrow at her and she remembered that she was supposed to be asking questions, not chilling out.

'I've just returned from a trip around Australia,' she said in her best Cabrena Ladies' College voice. 'My mother's dreadfully worried about these kidnappings, Mr MacAvoy. Could you please help me to convince her that your gardeners couldn't possibly have been involved?'

'I'm not really the best person to ask,' Patrick said, flashing perfect white teeth. 'See, I go skiing every second week. The boys phone me on their mobiles if they have any problems, but basically, I trust them to do the job on their own, without me looking over their shoulders. So I'm afraid I can't tell your mother where Jadney and Donnie were while those children were being kidnapped. As a matter of fact, I don't even know exactly when the kidnappings took place.'

Straight away Miko unzipped her bumbag and produced her notebook. While she read out the dates, Patrick MacAvoy flicked through the diary on his desk.

'That's funny,' he commented. 'I was up in the mountains every time. Sharing a ski lodge with Carl Svenssen, the famous architect - and John Wheeler, the famous racing car driver - and my younger brother, who lives off his share of the family money. That gives me a cast-iron alibi, I guess, but if you want to know about Jadney and Donnie, you'll have to ask them.'

Blake couldn't think of any more questions and besides, she was tired of pretending

to be a nice Cabrena Ladies' College girl. She let Patrick lead them downstairs. As he showed them to the front gate, she spotted a four-wheel drive parked at the side of the house, with snow tyres and a pair of skis strapped to the roof.

*Just in time. Looks as though Patrick's off again this week.*

'You've got a beautiful garden,' Miko said politely, as they passed a shiny mass of rhododendron bushes. 'Is that why you started the business, because you like gardening?'

Patrick's expensive teeth flashed again. 'Not really. As a matter of fact, young Jadney comes and does the garden while I'm away. It's a good advertisement for the business, of course, but I'm glad you like it. *Ciao, bella.* See you round.'

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'What a poser,' Miko sniffed, pulling on her helmet. 'Wish we could prove he was the kidnapper - but he wasn't even in the city.'

'He might've masterminded the whole thing, then nicked off to give himself an alibi,' Blake suggested. When Miko looked hopeful, she shook her head and added, 'Sorry, just joking. Patrick's obviously rich as. He doesn't need any more cash, unless he's blown all his family money on skiing and fancy dentist work.'

They climbed onto the bike and sped off to their last stop. Flower Power. A narrow window with the business name in small gold letters and a single bowl of Australian flowers on a stand. It looked like a quiet, peaceful sort of place but when they opened the door, it sounded like the central train station at peak hour.

A line of phones, with a line of people shouting into them. A long table and more people arranging flowers in bowls. People in overalls heaving cases of flowers through the back door. People in peach and cream uniforms carrying bowls of flowers out the front door to the peach and cream delivery vans.

Blake stumbled and grabbed the table. *Ouch. Too many people. My head feels crowded again.* She hung onto the edge of the table, feeling dizzy. Shut her eyes and pretended she was holding an invisible shield, sparking with electricity, covering her from head to foot. Protecting her from everyone's thoughts and feelings.

*Okay, let's see how that works.*

When she opened her eyes, she noticed an old man sitting by himself in a corner. Thick white hair, thick dark eyebrows and quick black eyes - the same eyes and eyebrows as most of the other workers. Every now and then somebody would hurry over, ask him a question and hurry off again.

The warm hand tugged at Blake's sleeve, to tell her she'd picked the right person. 'Come on,' she said to Miko. 'I think I just found the boss - and I have a feeling he's the father or grandfather of just about everyone in this room.'

She marched over to the old man and said, 'Hi, I'm Blake and this is my friend Miko. We live over on the North Shore, near those kids who were kidnapped, and we want to ask you if -'

The old man thumped his palm with his fist. '*Prego!*' he said. 'This I like. You two girls playing detective, like 'Crime Time' on the telly. Don't worry, Roberto Venuti tell you everything you want to know.'

Blake had needed to work hard at thinking of questions for Jadney and Patrick MacAvoy. But Mr Venuti talked for the next fifteen minutes without stopping for breath. He told them the shop was too noisy, 'but no problem, we build new shop, almost finished now, ready in one week'. He told them how he hated kidnapers, 'especially when they steal little *bambini!*'. He told them that his sons and daughters and grandchildren and nieces and nephews all hated kidnapers too.

Then he clapped his hands and called, 'Lucia, bring the delivery book, *per favore!*' A plump woman, with her father's dark eyes and eyebrows came bustling over with a huge diary. Mr Venuti opened the book and spread it across his knees.

'Lucia, she draw up the delivery roster every night,' he explained. 'Very busy, always different people going to different houses.' He stabbed his finger at the page, saying, 'See? When little Christopher kidnapped, my grandson Jason delivers the flowers to his house - but he's never been there before, so he can't tell the police nothing. Same with the other kidnappings too. We want the police to catch the bad men but no good, can't help.'

As he sighed gustily, Lucia murmured, 'Why don't you talk to Giovanni? He's the son of my husband's cousin. We haven't seen Vittoria since the divorce, because she's been hiding herself away. So sad,' she added, getting sidetracked. 'You need your family at times like that and poor Vittoria's an orphan *and* an only child. But I'm sure her boy's still working as a gardener for those families whose children were kidnapped.'

'Giovanni?' Blake repeated. 'No, neither of the gardeners are called - hey, wait a minute, do you mean John Jadney? We went to see him this morning.'

'Then we can't help you at all,' Lucia said, looking disappointed.

'But here,' Mr Venuti said, 'take some flowers with you for luck.'

As they walked back to the Honda, Miko said, 'That was a big family, for sure, about as big as they get. Italian too. They match up with some of the things Biggles and Inspector Potter were saying ... but I don't want them to be the kidnapers, because I like them.'

'Me too,' Blake agreed. 'Trouble is, nice people can do terrible things. I found that out the first time I started poking my nose into other people's secrets.'

Miko frowned and tugged at her long black hair. 'Oh well, I still want to keep trying,' she decided. 'I have to go home now. But maybe we could meet up again tomorrow.'

'Yeah, that'd be great,' Blake said, pleased. 'I'll give you a call first thing in the

morning, okay?'

She took Miko back to her house and then pointed the Honda towards Sensei's dojo. Parked the bike near the corner and strolled down the street, whistling. As she jiggled the key in the lock, the warm hand jerked at her sleeve. Two seconds later, a real hand landed on her shoulder.

'Hello, Athena,' said Mr Williams. 'I was hoping you'd come back here.'

## CHAPTER NINE

Blake whirled round and glared at her father. 'Have Greg and Thumper been spying on me again?' she demanded.

Mr Williams spread his hands wide. 'They're watching the Carters' house, remember. They couldn't help noticing that bike of yours.'

'Maybe not. But they *could* help phoning you to say I'd dropped Miko off.'

'You can't blame them for that,' he told her. 'Greg and Thumper work for me on a regular basis. I pay their wages, so naturally they tell me what I need to know.'

'It always comes back to money, doesn't it?' Blake growled. 'Don't you ever think about anything else?'

Her father shrugged. 'Money's important. Everyone needs it, even those dole-bludging street kids and ferals you've been hanging around with lately.'

'You reckon street kids are bludgers? What about all the big companies that get tax cuts and government money for their research, plus laws that let them run things exactly the way they want? I reckon they're the real bludgers, asking for extra help when they're making heaps of money already.'

She waited for her father to get mad but instead he laughed and said, 'You know, your brother Dion wouldn't be able to tick me off like that. He just does as he's told - but you use your brain, because you want to understand how the world works. Now can you see why I'm so keen to have you with me at Interco?'

'Forget it,' Blake said. 'I'll never come and work for you, not after what you did to Mum.'

'*You* upset Theia, not me. She was out of her mind with worry after you

disappeared.'

She groaned. 'Oh wow. You don't even know what I'm on about. The letter, Dad. The letter Mum left for me. Does that ring any bells?'

'Ah, of course,' her father said, nodding. 'You're talking about your *other* mother. Let me think for a moment, Athena ... Yes, that's right. Maureen more or less kidnapped you when you were thirteen but a few months later she phoned from interstate, asking me to take you back. I flew over straight away with Greg and Thumper and told them to break into the house where you were staying, just to make sure that everything was all right. Thumper brought me a letter that was lying on the table, because he thought I'd want to see it - but he'd spilt tomato sauce all over it, which made it impossible to read. I would've told you about it, though, if I'd known you'd be so upset.'

Blake gritted her teeth. *Hell. This is why I took off in the first place. Whenever I talk to Dad, he makes everything sound ordinary and reasonable. It's hard to stay mad at him, unless I stay right out of his way.*

She glanced sideways at her father, who was saying, 'Good, I'm glad we've got that sorted out. Now you know I didn't mean to hurt you, maybe we can have a calm, sensible discussion about the idea of you working for Interco.'

Blake blew a fuse. 'No,' she shouted. 'No, no, no and no! This is so typical. You just can't help trying to push people around. You pushed Maureen into having a kid, then you pushed her out of my life and now you want to push me into this stupid job. That's why I ran away - and while I was on the road, I met heaps of people who'd been pushed around by Interco. I don't like it, Dad. I don't want to be part of it. And plus, I wish you'd remember to call me Blake, not Athena.'

'All right, all right,' Mr Williams said, holding up his hands. 'Cool down, Ath - Blake. You're getting carried away. It's true that I head up the Australian branch of Interco, but I'm not as powerful as you seem to think. The people at head office can order me around - the people who own shares in Interco can order me around - and I have to do things the same way as other big companies, or they'd get together and squeeze me out.'

Blake clenched her fists, so tight that the door key dug into her fingers. 'So you reckon you get pushed around too, same as everyone else?' she asked. 'How powerful do you have to be, before you can call the shots?'

Her father thought about it. 'Well, if you get hold of an important new idea, you can end up pretty powerful. The first bloke who started marketing computer software really aggressively, for example, looked as though he controlled half the world ... for a while. But things change fast. These days you'd need to find something different. Artificial intelligence maybe - in other words, robots that can think.'

'You mean robots that can take more jobs away from human beings?' Blake said, remembering what Akira Taganaki had told her. 'Would you really rush into a deal like

that, without working out whether it was going to help people or hurt them?’

‘Of course,’ he said, sounding surprised. ‘After all, if I didn’t do it, someone else would. It’s not my job to decide whether something’s good or bad. I just sell things, Blake. If people buy them, I go on selling them. If people don’t buy them, I stop selling them.’

She sighed. *There he goes again. He makes everything sound so simple. But it's not. I don't agree with him, only I'm not sure why.*

‘I’m tired, Dad,’ she said. ‘I gotta go now. See you later.’

*Much later. Like, in ten years time, when I've thought up some better arguments.*

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Blake sat in the back room, eating cold rice and Japanese pickles from Sensei’s fridge. After a while she reached for the phone and dialled Maureen’s number.

‘I talked to Dad, like you told me,’ she said straight away. ‘It’s no use, though. I can’t get through to him and I’m sick of trying. Most kids only have two parents. Why can’t I just say I’ve got two mothers and no father?’

‘Because it’s not true,’ Maureen told her. ‘Whether you like it or not, your dad’s part of you as well.’

‘So?’ Blake said sulkily. ‘My wisdom teeth were part of me - but when they grew the wrong way, the dentist pulled them out.’

Maureen chuckled. ‘Sorry, the dentist can’t fix your dad.’ Then she turned serious and added, ‘Look, kid, I know you want me to say it’s okay to give your dad the flick -but I can’t do it. Your dad did his best to get rid of me and I hated that. I can’t turn round and tell you to get rid of him, can I?’

Her voice sounded faint and far away. Blake closed her eyes and tried to remember her dream about mother country but her brain was too tired to work properly. She chatted to her mother for a while longer, telling her about the kidnappings and Miko, listening to the news about her stepfather and aunties and cousins. Then she said goodnight and staggered off to bed.

She dreamed about gold dollar coins raining down from the sky and almost burying her, until she lifted her invisible shield and backed away. Woke early, finished reading *The Time of the Wisewoman* and went to Sensei's morning karate class.

After that she phoned Miko and said, ‘Listen, there’s someone I need to go and see. But I can meet you later on, okay?’

‘Damn,’ Miko said. ‘I want to get out of the house - like, *now*. Roshi and Grandpa stayed up half the night, working on Chip, so Roshi’s trying to talk me into going to his violin lesson, because his teacher wants him to come earlier than usual. But he’s a way better violin player, which means the teacher's bound to guess that it's me, not him.’

'Tell Roshi you have to wait around till I call you,' Blake suggested. 'And I'll give you a ring after I've finished talking to Peter Piper. See you soon.'

She hung up and stood there for a few seconds, smiling at the phone. *Last night I was sorry I'd come back to the city but today I'm glad. Even though I haven't got anywhere with my father, I've made a new friend.*

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The orchestra's rehearsal rooms were in an old warehouse. Blake sat in the front office and listened to the music, starting and stopping and starting again. After a while the doors swung open and twenty or thirty people came surging out. One of them walked straight towards her.

'Blake,' he said, holding his hands out. 'So you've come to the end of your shaman's journey. Congratulations.'

The last time Blake had seen Peter Piper, he'd been disappearing into a maze of underground tunnels, to escape from Inspector Potter. That was only a few months ago - but now she had to look twice, before she recognised him. His yellow hair was neatly cut, not long and ragged. He was wearing jeans and a jacket, not a long derro overcoat. But his eyes were still amazingly blue and his red and yellow Doctor Who scarf was still trailing down to his feet.

He steered her across the road to a children's playground. Sat cross-legged on the grass and pulled a thermos from his pocket. 'How did you find me?' he asked, pouring peppermint tea into a pair of plastic cups.

'Inspector Potter saw you on telly,' Blake told him. 'Don't worry, though. He's not planning to turn up and arrest you.'

Peter Piper pulled a face. 'That reporter was dead keen to talk to me, because she thought I was like the boy in that film. You know, the one who ran away because his father pushed him too hard, then came back to become a famous pianist. But my story isn't like that at all.'

'What *is* your story?' she asked curiously and Peter stared down at his hands for a while.

'You'll think this sounds stupid,' he began. Then he looked up and added, 'No, it probably won't sound stupid, not to you. The thing is, I have ESP or whatever you like to call it. I've always known what the people around me were thinking and feeling - and I couldn't handle it. That's why I dropped out and ended up teaching street kids to steal things. I get on better with kids, because their thoughts and feelings are simpler than adults.'

Blake stared. *Oh wow. No wonder I couldn't help liking Peter. He's an empath too, same as me and Miko.*

'But you're working with a huge bunch of adults now,' she pointed out. 'How do you cope?'

'The music helps,' he said. 'And I use a trick my gran taught me. Grandma had the power as well, like her mother and her mother's mother. She showed me how to build a wall of light around me, to shut out most of the noise from other people's minds.'

'Hey, I do that too,' Blake said, startled. 'Only I use an invisible shield.'

'Who taught you?' Peter asked and she shrugged.

'No-one. I worked it out for myself.'

Peter Piper whistled softly. 'Good one, Blake. That was smart - but then, you're obviously a pretty strong kid. After all, you've got to the end of your shaman's journey without much help from anyone.'

The shaman's journey. Blake had heard about it from The Dog, the young rock star who'd been one of Peter Piper's thieves. Dog reckoned that back in the past, a lot of tribes used to send their kids out into the desert - or the mountains - or the forest, because kids had to learn how to survive on their own. In the end, some of them had these strange dreams that changed them into a shaman, a magic man or a magic woman.

*Or a wisewoman, like in that book about D'ar il Ai'ia.*

'Um, why do you think I've finished my shaman's journey?' she asked. 'I don't feel any wiser than before.'

Peter grinned. 'That just means you're wise enough to know what you *don't* know. Your shaman's journey's over, because you've figured out how your powers work. But now you need to figure out how you want to use your powers. For me, it's music, playing my flute in a way that helps other people to understand their feelings better.'

'And D'ar il Ai'ia in the book I've been reading, she used her powers to save the phoenix from the Grey Lands,' Blake joined in.

Peter Piper pulled his flute out of his other pocket and played a few bars. *Children's songs, because we're in a children's playground. First 'Tom, Tom the piper's son' and - oh, that one's 'Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home'.*

'You're getting the idea,' he said. 'But you don't play the flute and there aren't any phoenixes in this city. So what are you going to use your powers for, Blake?'



## CHAPTER TEN

Half an hour later Blake was on the opposite side of the city, thinking about the things Peter Piper had said. *This empath stuff still scares me a bit. But I'm glad Peter decided to go back to the orchestra and start playing music again. So maybe I should try working out the best way to use my own powers.*

She leaned back against the Honda, eyes half-closed, listening to the sounds of the street. A whine of brakes, as a big semi-trailer slowed down at the corner. The scream of a siren, as a fire engine zoomed back to the fire station nearby. A voice chanting, 'Allahu akbar' from the tower of a mosque across the road. Blake smiled.

*I liked being in the Top End - but I have to admit I like the city as well.*

Then her smile froze, as the warm hand clamped round the back of her neck. Blake felt a flash of fear run through her whole body. Her eyes flicked open and she glanced round quickly, checking for danger. Nothing. No thugs creeping up on her. No cars veering off the road towards her. Nothing at all.

*Strange. Oh well, maybe someone got a fright and I picked up on it. No time to sit and think about it, anyhow. I've got work to do.*

As she crossed the road, heading towards a pub on the corner, Blake ran through the information Peter Piper had given her before she left. 'I'm sending you off to meet a guy called Ron Parker,' he'd said. 'The Parkers are the biggest crim family in this city - and Ron owes me, so I've told him he has to talk to you. He mightn't know much about the kidnappings, though. He's not very bright, which means the Parkers wouldn't let him in on anything important.'

She walked into the pub and looked around. It was an old-style pub, no peach-coloured walls or fancy tablecloths or ads for the latest cocktails. Just two bars in an L-

shape with brass foot rails and high stools. Pictures of footballers on the walls, a big-screen Sky television blasting out a footy replay and a smaller TV behind the bar, tuned to the races. And three doors - a front door, a side door and a back door, all wide open.

*In case someone needs to make a dash for the exit, I suppose.*

While she was studying the room, a man propped by the door called out, 'Rugrat alert.'

*That'll be the look-out. The cocky, Peter called him.*

She turned to him and said, 'Hi, I'm trying to get hold of Ron Parker. Peter Piper told me I'd find him here.'

The cocky swung away and sang out, 'Rugrat for Ron Parker.' Blake frowned. *Looks as though he's giving Ron a chance to nick off.* She waited by the door, tapping her foot. After a while, a weedy guy with a long skinny neck and no chin stood up and sidled over to her.

'Blake?' he said, without looking at her or moving his lips. 'I got Peter's message. He reckons you want some info, right?'

As Blake nodded, the barman lifted a glass high in the air and dropped it. Ron jumped. 'Oh-oh!' he muttered. 'Cop alert. We better beat it.'

All round the pub, men were edging towards the ladies' lounge or ducking into the backyard or stuffing bundles of notes under the cushions of the corner seat. While Ron dragged her away, Blake glanced over her shoulder and saw two men striding through the side door. A tall, lean man with a natty moustache and a tall, broad-shouldered man in a green singlet.

*Biggles and Thumper. The kidnapping expert must've asked Thumper to show him around. It makes sense. After working as a private detective for years, Thumper probably knows all the crim bars in the city.*

She turned away and raced after Ron. 'We should be safe here,' he panted, dodging into an alley. 'But I'm not hanging round if the jacks are about, so talk fast.'

'I'm interested in those North Shore kidnappings,' Blake said straight away. 'Peter reckons your mob might know something useful.'

Ron stuck his bottom lip out, like a sulky kid. 'Yeah, they do,' he grumbled. 'Me brothers and the cousins keep dropping hints all the time, about how they're onto something real big. It's gotta be the Wainwright job and the Martin job - they're the biggest games in town right now - only they won't cut me a piece of it, the scumbags. Even me old mate Donnie Harding won't tell me what's going down.'

She stiffened. 'Donnie Harding?' she repeated. 'Is he in on this?'

'He says not,' Ron shrugged. 'Says he's gone straight, on account of the baby and all. Still, I seen him talking to the cousins a few weeks back. Sure, he was going, "Get lost, leave me alone" but it could be a cover up, couldn't it?'

Blake let her breath out in a sigh. *Phew. That fits with what Donnie told me. He said*

*some of his old crim mates were hassling him about the kidnappings - and he obviously used to be mates with the Parker family. I believed him back then, because I was sure the warm hand would warn me if he was lying.*

*Hopefully, I can still go on believing him.*

'Okay, let me try some other names on you, to see whether you've heard of them,' she said to Ron. 'Roberto Venuti. Patrick MacAvoy. John Jad-'

Ron Parker froze. 'Omigod,' he yelped. 'That wasn't the jacks. It was *him*. If he catches me blabbing, he'll murder me. Good luck, kid - and goodbye.'

He threw himself at the nearest fence, scrambled over it and dropped down into the mosque. Blake heard an angry shout, followed by the sound of running feet. Ron mightn't be too bright but he definitely had good reflexes. Maybe she should've followed him over the fence - except that she wanted to know who'd scared him so much.

When she spun round, she saw two men peering down the alley. Biggles again, with Thumper behind him. Her heart skipped a beat and then started pounding twice as fast. Yesterday, when she'd told Inspector Potter that Biggles could be the boss of the kidnapers, she was just trying to get back at the guy, because he'd suspected her. But now, all of a sudden, it looked as though she could've been right.

Ron Parker had taken off, the second he spotted Biggles. Why would he do that, unless he'd seen the kidnapping expert hanging round with some of the Parker family?

*Good question. I think it's time to check Biggles out a bit more carefully.*

Blake went marching up the alley towards the two men. But before she had a chance to say anything, Biggles grabbed her arm and shunted her into a nearby bus shelter.

'We saw you, Blake,' he snarled. 'What were you doing in that pub? Meeting up with some of your crim mates, maybe? Why don't you tell us all about it?'

Blake jerked her arm free. *Oh, sure. Like I'm going to tell you about Ron Parker, when you could be the ringleader of the gang.*

She turned her head away from Biggles and pretended to be incredibly interested in a poster on the shelter wall. An ad for the latest blockbuster movie, with a girl in an old-fashioned ball gown gazing out across a stormy sea. Not the usual sort of Hollywood film star, though. This girl wasn't stick-thin and she had thick dark eyebrows, slanting upwards like wings.

Then a hand closed round her arm again, squeezing tight. When Blake pulled back, the hand moved with her. *Oh. That's not Biggles' hand this time. It's the warm hand, trying to tell me something.*

She studied the poster closely, focusing on the girl's eyebrows. Remembered Aldo Tucci's winged eyebrows in the photo Biggles had shown her. The elegant woman in Mrs Jadney's garden had eyebrows like that as well. Mrs Jadney's sister - or at least, Jadney said it was his mum's sister. But Lucia Venuti had told them that Vittoria Jadney was an only child ...

Blake spun round and said urgently, 'Biggles, did you check to see whether Aldo Tucci has any relatives in Australia?'

'Of course I did,' he said impatiently. 'We're keeping an eye on all of them. Tucci's got an old uncle up in the country and two cousins here in the city. One of them's married to Lucia Venuti who works at Flower Power and the other -'

"The other one's the mother of John Jadney from Elite Gardening Service,' Blake cut in.

Biggles looked startled. 'That's right,' he said. 'How did you know? We crossed Lucia's husband off our list, because he was out at the Venutis' flower farm when both Christopher and Jess were snatched. But there's been a cop car parked near the Jadneys' house for the past few weeks. No luck, though. Mrs Jadney doesn't go out much. The cop on duty has only spotted her once, in the garden with a woman friend.'

'A friend?' she repeated. 'Interesting. Jadney told me that was his aunt. Guess what, Biggles? I think I've found Aldo Tucci for you.'

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Blake perched on the padded seat of her Honda and watched a young cop marching Aldo Tucci to the van. The cops had let Aldo change into jeans and a jumper but there was still a smudge of red lipstick across his wide mouth.

'Signor Biggles,' he called out. 'You know me. You know I don't do this. I kidnap rich businessmen, *si* - but little childrens, never!'

Biggles frowned and stroked his moustache. 'You've haven't dealt with kids before,' he admitted. 'But you were desperate this time. On the run - in a strange country - your money frozen in an Italian bank. Just look at the facts, Tucci. You were hiding out, disguised as your cousin Vittoria's sister. Her son works at all the houses where children have been kidnapped, so he could've told you when to strike. And he works with Donnie Harding, a known criminal and an associate of the Parker family, which means Donnie could've helped you to link up with the Parkers. Can you really ask me to believe you're innocent, after all that?'

Aldo laughed, as cheerfully as he'd laughed at the camera in his photo. 'I don't ask nothing, Biggles,' he said with a shrug. 'But it's true, all the same.'

While the two men stared at each other, Inspector Potter came out of the house with his hand on Jadney's shoulder, followed by Mrs Jadney wailing, 'No, not Giovanni. Please, don't take my son as well.'

'It's all right,' the fat cop said kindly. 'We just want your boy to answer a few questions about your cousin - and about Donnie Harding. If John's telling the truth, he's definitely in the clear. He says he didn't realise why Aldo was so interested in the families he was working for. And he doesn't have a criminal record, unlike Donnie.'

Blake scowled. *Rats. This sounds bad. Donnie's in serious trouble. Maybe I can't trust the warm hand, after all.*

*No, scrap that. I trust the warm hand more than I trust Biggles or Inspector Potter. Which means I better do something, fast.*

She slid off the bike and strolled over to Thumper, who was sitting on the bonnet of Biggles' car, mumbling, 'Yes, Greg ... No, Greg ... Sure, Greg' into a mobile phone. When he noticed Blake, he added, 'Sorry, mate. Gotta go now.' Then he beamed and said, 'Nice work, kid. You wrapped that kidnapper up and tied a bow around him.'

'Did I?' Blake sighed. 'All of a sudden, I'm not so sure about that. Thumper, could you do me a favour? You and Greg know how to hack into people's mobile phone records, right?'

'Maybe we do and maybe we don't,' Thumper said cautiously. 'If we *could* do it, what would you want me to find out?'

'Whether Jadney phoned Donnie Harding at the Martins' house on the day Jess was kidnapped. Or whether Donnie phoned Jadney at his home.'

He pulled out an envelope and wrote down the questions in large round letters. Looked up and said, 'Anything else you want to know?'

'Just one thing,' Blake said with a grin. 'Don't you ever get cold, wearing nothing but a singlet in the middle of winter?'

'I got a good metabolism,' Thumper explained seriously. 'Nosy - that's my wife - she reckons I'm better than an electric blanket for keeping her warm.'

'Your wife's called *Nosy*?' Blake said and Thumper chuckled.

'Well, she's Rosie, really. But her name was Parker before we got hitched, so I call her Nosy sometimes - y'know, nosy parker.'

As he tucked the mobile back into his pocket, Blake remembered Miko and said, 'Hey, can I borrow that for a minute?'

She tapped out the Carters' number and Mrs Carter answered straight away, gasping, 'Yes? Do you have Roshi there?'

'Roshi?' she said, puzzled. 'I'm Miko's friend Blake, Mrs Carter. Who did you think I was?'

And the warm hand ran a sharp fingernail all the way down her spine, just before Shina Carter sobbed, 'The kidnappers. I thought you were the kidnappers. They've taken my Roshi.'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

'Could you tell us the story again, please?' asked Inspector Potter. 'Slowly, this time.'

Mrs Carter pulled another tissue from the box and wiped her eyes. 'I drove Roshi to his violin lesson at eleven, a few hours earlier than usual,' she sniffed. 'He didn't want to go but I - I made him. Then I did some shopping and came back and waited for fifteen minutes. When I finally knocked on the door, Roshi's teacher told me that - that he'd left early, because his grandfather had rung to say he was having problems with Chip.'

'I didn't ring Roshi,' Akira Taganaki cut in. 'But everyone in the family knows my mobile phone picks up a lot of static, so he wouldn't have been surprised if the voice sounded blurred and crackly. I've been meaning to get the mobile fixed but I kept putting it off. If only ...'

The fat cop thumped Akira on the back and passed Shina Carter another tissue. 'You mustn't blame yourselves,' he said. 'These kidnappers are a clever lot. If they hadn't nabbed Roshi this way, they would've tried some other way.'

'The important thing is to get Roshi back again,' Biggles chipped in. 'Have the kidnappers contacted you yet? Please, don't try to hide anything from us. We need to find out as much as we can, in order to help your son.'

'I don't see how you can help us,' Shina wailed. 'You thought you'd found the kidnappers already - and you were wrong.'

She collapsed against her husband, sobbing uncontrollably. Steve Carter scowled at Biggles and Inspector Potter, saying, 'Shina needs to rest. Don't worry, I'll answer your questions after I've taken her to her bedroom. I admit we probably wouldn't have told you about the kidnapping, if Shina hadn't blurted it out when Blake phoned - we

would've just paid the kidnapppers anything they asked for. Still, you know now, so I'm prepared to cooperate.'

He tucked his arm around his wife and led her away. 'Mrs Carter's got a point, y'know,' Blake said. 'You arrested Aldo Tucci half an hour after Roshi was kidnapped. Maybe Aldo isn't the kidnapper, after all.'

'We never thought Aldo did any of the hands-on stuff,' the inspector told her. 'We were watching the Jadneys' house, remember. The cop on duty would've noticed if someone'd gone sneaking out just before Christopher Wainwright and Jess Martin were snatched.'

'Aldo was the mastermind,' Biggles said firmly. 'He got someone else to do the dirty work. Mind you, that could be a problem. Aldo's a pro, so we could trust him to return the boy safely. But it's hard to guess what his sidekicks'll do, now Aldo's not around to give the orders.'

'Slow down, Biggles,' said the fat cop. 'We haven't answered Blake's question yet. What if Aldo *isn't* the kidnapper? Or what if he organised the first two kidnappings and then some Aussie crims decided to get in on the act? This could be a copycat job. After all, it doesn't quite fit the pattern. When Christopher and Jess disappeared, the kidnapppers phoned their families straight away ... but Roshi's been gone for two hours and the Carters reckon the kidnapppers haven't rung them yet.'

Biggles tugged at his moustache. 'Actually, a copycat job could be even more dangerous for Roshi. As I keep saying, amateurs are trouble. They don't know the rules. If they think we're getting too close, they could panic and do something stupid.'

Blake bit her lip. *Like killing Roshi, for example. I'm glad Biggles didn't say that in front of Shina. Although, come to think of it, Miko and her grandfather are still here.*

She glanced across at Miko, who was huddled beside her grandfather in the corner. But the other girl avoided her eyes. Blake winced. Her new friend had hardly looked at her since she arrived. It was like Miko was blaming her for Roshi's kidnapping or something.

*I don't understand. Why would she do that?*

She reached for her invisible shield and held it in front of her, shutting out everyone else in the room. Focused on Miko and studied her closely. Miko's eyes were dark and dazed and her long hair was tangled, as if she'd been too worried to brush it properly. Although she'd remembered to put on some bright red lipstick.

*Funny, I've never seen Miko wearing lipstick before.*

*Even funnier, that doesn't feel like Miko.*

Memories went speeding through Blake's mind. Miko on the phone, talking about Roshi's violin lesson. Aldo Tucci, disguising himself as Vittoria's sister by putting on a dress and a wig and a slash of lipstick. She stood up and edged over to the corner of the room.

Bent down and whispered, 'Okay, Roshi, what's going on?'

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Roshi sat on the end of his bed and leaned against Chip. 'Hello, Roshi,' the robot whirred. 'You are unhappy today.'

'That was smart, moving Chip into your room,' Blake said. 'He isn't fooled by your disguise, not like your mother and your stepdad.'

'Mum's been crying too hard to see straight,' Roshi explained. 'And Steve can't tell the difference between me and Miko, which makes him easy to trick.'

'Why do you want to trick him?' she demanded. 'You ought to tell the cops straightaway, so they know they're looking for Miko, instead of you.'

Akira Taganaki shook his head. 'Not so fast, Blake,' he murmured. 'It's a tad more complicated. You heard what Inspector Potter said. This kidnapping's different from the others - for one thing, the kidnappers haven't asked for money straight away. I think there's a reason for that. These kidnappers don't want money. They want the information about my robots that's stored in Roshi's photographic memory.'

Blake felt sick. She swallowed hard and said, 'So while they think they've got Roshi, Miko's probably safe. But if they find out she's *not* Roshi ...'

'They might kill her,' Roshi said flatly. 'All because I conned her into going to my violin lesson. Do you see why we can't tell anyone, Blake? We're not sure who we can trust. Even the cops could be in on the act.'

'True,' she agreed, thinking of Biggles. 'We have to do *something*, though.'

'I'd better stay here,' Akira said. 'If the worst comes to the worst, I can offer to trade places with Miko and give my robot plans to the kidnappers.'

'Still, we could go and talk to my violin teacher or whatever,' Roshi added. 'I don't know whether it'll help - but it beats doing nothing.'

As they jumped up, the robot lifted his metal hand and said, 'Goodbye, Roshi. Take care.' Blake and Roshi sidled down the corridor, past the front room where Steve was saying, 'No, inspector, the guys from the Elite Gardening Service definitely weren't here this morning. I'm not sure about the Flower Power lot, though.'

Blake trod on a brown leaf that had fallen off the flower arrangement by the front door. She picked it up and rubbed it thoughtfully between her fingers. *Nah, Flower Power weren't here. No way would Mr Venuti let his team deliver a bowl of half-dead flowers.*

*This kidnapping's different, for sure. Looks like Akira's theory could be right.*

They were hurrying down the path when the warm hand tapped Blake on the shoulder. 'Um, maybe it's a waste, the two of us going to the same place,' she mumbled. 'Why don't you cycle over to your teacher's place, while I cruise around on the

Honda?’

Roshi nodded, and said, 'Fair enough.' Fetched his bike and set off down the street. Blake watched him pedal away, long black hair streaming out behind him. *Like Miko's hair.*

Her stomach churned and her heart hammered. She felt incredibly scared. Although, come to think of it, she'd been feeling scared for hours, ever since she'd had that weird flash of fear outside the pub.

*Oh wow. That was around eleven o'clock, the time when Miko was kidnapped. Maybe I've been feeling her fear.*

In a crazy kind of way, it made sense. The first time she'd met Miko, she'd been convinced that Miko could read her mind. They'd fought off the kidnappers like a team, even though they hardly knew each other. And then Miko had told Blake that she was an empath too.

*What if we're linked together somehow? Maybe - just maybe - the warm hand can help me track Miko down.*

Blake swung onto the Honda and went roaring down the road. To begin with, she decided to go back to all the places where she and Miko had been. Flower Power was closest. She parked the bike on the other side of the road. Lifted her invisible shield and sat there, eyes shut, whispering, 'Miko, Miko, Miko,' like someone calling a lost kitten.

No answer. No Miko-feelings in the air. Just a rumble of engines as the Flower Power delivery vans pulled up and drove off. Ten minutes later Blake sighed and started the bike and rode on to Jadney's house, where she went through the same routine again. No luck this time, either. She couldn't sense Miko at all, although after a while she started to feel a wave of sadness rolling out from the house.

*Mrs Jadney, I suppose, feeling sad about her cousin Aldo - and her entire life. I can't help picking up on her feelings because they're so strong.*

For a moment she wondered whether Mrs Jadney's feelings could be drowning Miko out. Then she realised the kidnappers weren't likely to stash Miko in the Jadneys' house, not when the cops could turn up again at any minute. So she revved the Honda and headed on towards Patrick MacAvoy's red brick castle at the edge of the harbour.

She was zooming up to a junction when the warm hand pressed down on her leather glove. Her right glove. Blake frowned, changed lanes and veered off to the right. A few kilometres later she stopped the bike outside the crim pub, the place where she'd felt that really strong Miko-feeling.

*Huh? I think the warm hand's getting confused. Why did it bring me back here?*

She sat sideways on the bike, swinging her feet and feeling small and hopeless. Wondering whether some of the Parker family were watching her from the pub. Just as she was about to give up, the warm hand shoved her in the back. Blake tumbled off the Honda, dodged a cyclist who was speeding towards her, and let the warm hand lead her

across the road.

The alley beside the mosque looked kind of interesting. She strolled down it, examining the backs of the houses. As she ducked under a branch of a tree that needed pruning, she felt a tingle between her shoulder blades. But before she could turn and check to see whether someone was watching her, she got the Miko-feeling loud and clear. Wafting towards her like music from a radio or a drift of scent from a jasmine creeper.

She reached for her shield and blocked out everything else. Swung her head around, sniffing the air like a tracker dog and whispering, 'Miko, Miko, Miko.' The Miko-feeling came eddying towards her again, even stronger now. This time Blake could actually get a fix on it.

*It's coming from that house opposite me. I would've thought it was empty, because all the blinds are shut. But Miko's in there, I'm positive.*

There was a door in the back fence. When Blake pushed hard, it swung open. She grinned and stepped into the yard. Heard footsteps pounding behind her and a voice that she knew, shouting, 'Blake! No!'

Then something solid crashed down onto her head. She blinked and staggered and fell into a whirlpool of darkness.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

After a while the darkness stopped whirling and settled down. Blake stretched and realised there were floorboards underneath her. Once she focused properly, she could see streaks of neon light across the darkness, seeping round the edge of the blind that covered the window. She lifted her head and spotted another body on the floor nearby. It groaned and twisted towards her, its arms tucked awkwardly behind it.

'Greg!' Blake gasped. 'What are you doing here?'

'Lying on the floor and feeling lousy, same as you,' he snapped. 'I must be turning stupid in my old age. That wasn't one of my smartest ideas, charging in to rescue you. Should've just gone off to fetch Thumper or the cops.'

Blake sighed. *Oh, terrific. Looks like I've gone and got myself kidnapped too. Then again, this could be the best way to catch the kidnappers, if we plan it right.*

But when she tried to sit up, she realised that her legs were roped together and her hands were tied behind her back. She strained at the ropes and couldn't shift them. Panicked and tugged harder. Rolled this way and that, starting to whimper out loud.

'What's the matter?' Greg asked and Blake panted, 'The ropes. Feels freaky. Can't handle it.'

He nodded. 'Yeah, a lot of crims feel that way about handcuffs. One bloke told me it was like claustrophobia, without the walls.'

Blake shuddered. *Yuck. I've never been scared of locked rooms or lifts or whatever. But I understand claustrophobia now.*

She hauled at the ropes again, feeling trapped and terrified. Couldn't breathe

properly. Couldn't stop herself from struggling. Wrenching at the rough cord. Jerking her wrists back and forth, until she felt the rope getting looser. Only a little bit looser - but that was enough. Blake flattened her left palm against her right palm and heaved.

And her hand scraped past the rope and swung free.

'Holy toenails!' Greg said, startled. 'What are you - Harry Houdini, the great escape artist?' He frowned at the dark drops of blood dotted across the floor and added, 'Nah, you're a complete maniac. You better do something about those scratches, before they get infected.'

'Don't boss me around,' Blake snarled. 'You're not my dad.'

Silence for a few seconds and then Greg said, 'You're right there. I'm not anyone's dad. Used to be, only I stuffed up and I haven't seen my kids for years. Still think about them, but. You can make a mess of things with your family, real easy, but you can't ever forget them.'

Blake found a hanky and started wrapping it round her wrist. "That's what you think," she said through gritted teeth. 'As soon as I get out of here, I'll go straight back to the Top End and forget that my father ever existed.'

'So you're going to run away again? If you ask me, Blake - but nah, why would you listen to a bloke who's been a total failure as a dad?'

She leaned forward, picking at the rope round her ankles. 'Ah, go ahead,' she said with a sideways glance. 'I don't mind listening. I've got nothing better to do.'

'Well, you can run now,' Greg said slowly. 'You can take off and see the world, get mixed up with a whole bunch of new people. But years later you could find you're stuck in a little room somewhere, feeling sorry for yourself. Feeling like you made a big mistake, way back when.'

More silence. Blake pulled on the knot and broke a fingernail. Pulled again and felt the knot start to come undone. *Interesting. I think Greg just told me the story of his life, in four sentences. He's sorry he walked out on his kids - but I bet I won't be sorry when I walk out on my dad.*

'Okay, that's enough advice,' Greg said. 'I just remembered I got a message for you from Thumper. He reckons Donnie Harding rang Jadney's house from Jess Martin's place on the day you were asking about and then, straight after, Donnie rang the Carters as well.'

Blake pulled a face. *Bummer. Looks like Donnie really is involved with the kidnappings. He hasn't cleaned up his act, after all. He's just super-good at lying.*

But she couldn't concentrate properly on the Donnie problem, because right then the knot came apart in her hands. She jumped up, yelping as her foot hit the floor. Muttered, 'Pins and needles' and limped over to the door. Rattled the handle, discovered that the door was locked and went limping across to the window.

When she pulled back the blind, she saw a set of solid iron bars. It was dark outside,

except for the beam of light from a street lamp, too dark to recognise any landmarks. *So we still don't know whether we're in the house near the pub or whether the kidnappers have shifted us somewhere else.*

'I could smash the window and yell,' she suggested. 'I bet someone'd think it was burglars and phone the cops.'

'Don't waste your breath,' Greg said. 'If the kidnappers were worried about us calling for help, they would've gagged us. This place is probably sandwiched between a couple of factories. Or else the houses on both sides of us belong to the Parker family.'

'Yeah, that'd be right.' Blake said regretfully. 'Do you want me to untie your ropes next?'

He shook his head. 'Not yet. Not till we've worked out a plan. Once the kidnappers realise we've cut loose, they'll just tie us up again. You better loop that rope round your ankles again, Blake, and sit on your hands if the kidnappers come in.'

'All right,' she agreed, reaching for the rope. 'Now, about this plan. Got any smart ideas?'

'A few,' Greg told her. 'First, we wait till the kidnappers come and bring us our dinner, so we can check them out. After that, we decide on the best way to jump them. Shouldn't be too hard, what with your karate and my black belt in street fighting. Any questions, kid?'

For some reason, Blake found herself remembering the last argument she'd had with her father. 'This doesn't have anything to do with the kidnappers,' she began. 'But - um, what would you think if someone told you they just sold stuff, they didn't make people buy it?'

Greg laughed. 'Sounds like a drug dealer. They go, "I only sell drugs. I don't force kids to take them." It's true, in a way, but I still reckon the pushers need to ask themselves some hard questions.' He frowned and added, 'That's a funny sort of thing to be thinking about. What brought it up?'

'Dunno,' she mumbled.

*Well, actually I've been puzzling about it for the last couple of days, ever since I lost that argument with my father. Not sure why I decided to ask Greg, of all people - but it's a good answer. I'll try it on Dad sometime.*

As she leaned back, Greg yawned and said, 'Okay, I'm going to have a nap, to keep my strength up. You look as if you could use some shut-eye as well.'

He rolled onto his side and started snoring within seconds. Blake glared across at him. *Oh, great. I'll never fall asleep, with my wrist throbbing and Greg making a noise like a steam train. Still, I'm glad I got those ropes off. It really spooked me, being tied up.*

She stretched out on the floor and listened to the night sounds. A rumble of traffic and a booming whine, like power brakes slowing down for a corner. Just like the semis at the corner near the pub - although, of course, there were probably a hundred corners

like that in the city.

Then a few minutes later she heard a fire engine's siren, going *wee-oo, wee-oo*. Winding down and switching off suddenly, as if the engine had just pulled into the fire station round the corner from the pub.

*Hmm. Maybe the kidnappers did stash us in the house that I was trying to check out. In which case, my Honda's waiting nearby, if we can escape.*

*If.*

Blake sighed and wriggled round on the hard boards, trying to get comfortable. Her head felt crowded again, the way it had felt in Flower Power's shop. But this house wasn't packed with people, she was sure of that. It was like she was picking up on bits of thoughts and feelings from people all over the city.

*Probably because I was so scared. When you panic, you always go hyper-alert. Time to put on my invisible shield again.*

As she raised the shield, the pressure inside her brain vanished. She curled into a ball, feeling small and empty and lonely. 'I want my mum,' she whispered like a little kid and felt a gentle touch brush across her hair. The warm hand, patting her on the head.

Straight away a rush of feelings blasted into her. Warm and loving, a bit impatient but very protective, although there was a layer of shyness underneath. 'Maureen!' Blake breathed, recognising her mother as easily as if she was standing there in front of her. 'She's thinking about me right now - and I'm tuning into her thoughts.'

After that, she didn't feel quite so lonely. She propped herself against the wall and concentrated hard, trying to see whether she could pick up on anyone else. Nothing for a while and then another rush of feelings, sadness and happiness all mixed up together. There were pictures this time too - pictures of Blake as a baby, a toddler, a teenager. And finally a picture of Blake the way she looked now, saying, 'I'm luckier than most kids, because I've got two mothers, instead of just one.'

*Oh. It's Theia, remembering the stuff I said to her yesterday. So both my mothers are thinking about me. That's kind of nice.*

By now Blake was starting to get drowsy. She snuggled down on the floor and started to drift off to sleep. But as her eyes closed, she felt her mind tune into someone else's thoughts. More love, just as strong as Maureen's and Theia's, but a lot of worry as well. Worry and a surge of pure terror. She squeaked and sat bolt upright.

*Omigod, that's Dad! He knows I'm missing - but he hasn't even told Theia. He must be scared of what the kidnappers might do to me, same as Akira and Roshi were scared for Miko.*

Blake sat there, hugging her knees and letting her father's feelings wash over her. Even though she was still mad at him, it was comforting to realise that he knew what was going on. Her father was pretty smart. If anyone could find her, he could.

*Just wish I could send him a message - but this empath stuff only seems to work*

*one way.*

She leaned back and tried to make sense of this new power she'd just discovered. Apparently, when she needed it badly enough, she could connect with the people who were closest to her. Maureen and Theia - that figured, although her father was a bit of a surprise.

*Maybe Greg's right and I can't shut Dad out as easily as I thought. Wonder if I can connect with anyone else?*

She searched around, as if she was spinning the knobs on a radio, trying to find another station. Heard a crackle of static, followed by a voice saying, '*Blake! Blake, is that you?*' A voice so clear and close that it seemed to be coming from the other side of the room. Blake's heart pounded.

*Miko. I've found Miko. She's here, somewhere in this house.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For the next half-hour Blake and Miko practised sending messages to each other. It wasn't easy. They could only use simple words. *'Miko.'* *'Blake. Are you okay?'* *'Yes. Are you?'* But when Blake tried to ask Miko where she was, she couldn't hear the answer properly. She thumped the wall with her fist, pulled herself together and tried sending a picture instead.

*The room. Greg asleep on the floor. Me sitting beside him.*

In return Miko sent a picture of herself, gagged and bound, in a room upstairs. After that they swapped pictures, faster and faster as they got better at it, until finally they'd worked out the basic plan of the house.

Miko had been drugged, like Jess Martin, when the kidnappers dragged her into their car but she'd woken up on the way to the house. Although she'd pretended that she was still out of it, so she could get a look at the place, without the kidnappers noticing.

She showed Blake pictures of the stairs and the door to the back room where she was locked up. Plus a picture of two men, their faces covered by black wool balaclavas. Then she added a sound that she'd heard, round about sunset. A voice chanting something like, *'Allahu akbar.'*

Blake grinned. *The muezzin, calling from the mosque. That's great. Now I know where we are, for sure.* She sent back a picture of herself and Greg, charging into Miko's room. Followed by a picture of Miko and her taking off on the Honda, while Greg ran for his car.

*'Rescue,'* she explained. *'Soon. Get ready, Miko.'*

She crawled across to Greg and shook him till he woke up. 'Wassamatta?' he asked

sleepily. 'House on fire or something?'

'No, it's Miko,' Blake said. 'She was kidnapped by mistake, instead of Roshi, and she's upstairs in this house. We have to get her out, before the kidnappers realise who she is.' She took a deep breath, 'You gotta believe me, Greg. I know this sounds kind of weird but I can, like, read people's minds.'

'Is that so?' he said, sitting up. 'I thought it must be something along those lines. Me and Thumper, we've been chasing you round Australia for the last nine months and you kept getting away, like you'd got the devil's own luck. I figured you had to be one of those people who can see a bit more than the rest of us can.'

He held out his hands and Blake started working on the knots, surprised that he wasn't surprised. Before long, she'd untied both ropes. Greg stood up, flexing his wrists and ankles, and tugged a thin strip of metal out of the heel on his boot. Strolled over to the door and examined the lock.

'A cinch,' he boasted. 'Just watch me. I'll fix this in seconds.'

He jiggled the metal in the lock and eased the door open. When Blake peered out, she saw a shadowy figure coming down the hall. A man in a balaclava, carrying a tray of food. She took a long step forward, kicked the tray and sent soup splashing into the man's eyes.

'Run,' Greg rasped from behind her. 'Go and fetch the girl. I'll deal with this one.'

Blake pounded up the stairs and raced towards Miko's door. Studied it for half a second and aimed a karate kick at the lock. The door flew open. She burst in, looked round and darted across to smash the window. Glass tinkled to the floor. She snatched up the biggest piece and knelt beside Miko, slicing carefully through the rope with the sharp edge of the glass.

As the cords parted, Miko leapt to her feet and ran to the window. 'There's a guy on guard in the yard,' she said. 'But that's cool. We can get out this way.'

She pointed up at the ceiling. Blake blinked, feeling puzzled, and then spotted a manhole, leading into the roof. Miko took a step sideways and stood underneath the manhole, legs braced, hands clasped in front of her.

'I'm taller,' she said. 'You go first.'

Blake tucked her right foot into the cup of Miko's hands. While Miko heaved hard, she swung her left foot out and hitched her right foot up, until she was balancing on Miko's shoulders. She poked at the door of the manhole and pushed it open. Tensed her muscles and jumped, grabbing for the sides. Did a chin-up in midair and went tumbling forward, into the dark space beneath the roof.

As she reached down towards Miko, footsteps thundered on the stairs. Two sets of footsteps. *A kidnapper chasing Greg - or two kidnappers, if we're really out of luck.*

'Too late,' Miko panted. 'Leave me, Blake. Go and tell the cops where -'

And two men closed in on her, seizing her arms and twisting them behind her back.

Blake hesitated. *Miko's right, of course. I ought to escape, while I can.* But before she could make a move, one of the kidnappers snarled, 'Get down here or I'll break your mate's arm.'

He meant it too. Blake's mind was still linked to Miko's mind, so she could feel the stab of pain ripping through Miko's tendons. And a grinding, wrenching pressure, as though the bone was about to snap.

*Sorry, Miko. Can't bear it. Hurts too much.*

She groaned and dropped back down into the room. 'Good,' the first kidnapper said. 'Nice to meet a kid who can obey orders.'

Then the second kidnapper slapped a sweet-smelling hanky across her face and she collapsed onto the floor.

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Later - much later - Blake opened her eyes. Nothing but darkness. She sat up, planning to go and explore, but her hands and feet were tied again. Instant panic. She rolled across the floor, struggling with the ropes. Scraped her cheek against the carpet, realised that there was a tight bandage around her eyes and wondered why she'd been blindfolded this time.

*I've seen the house near the pub already. They must've moved me, while I was out cold.*

Thinking felt better than panicking. Blake lay back and listened for clues. This place was quieter than the last one. No traffic noises, just a distant *shush-shush*. Something squeaked every now and then - not a regular squeak, like a door blowing in the wind, but half a dozen squeaks at once and then silence for a while. In the middle of one of the silences, Blake heard a muffled, bellowing sound.

*Like a sick cow mooing. That reminds me of something. Squeaks and a sick cow and a shush-shush sound. That's exactly what Jess Martin heard, in the place where the kidnappers hid her.*

Now that her brain was working again, she remembered to reach out for Miko. She picked up a signal straight away.

*'Miko!' 'Blake! You're here too.'* 'Yeah, feels like they took both of us to the same place.'

Miko sent her a series of sounds - squeaks, sick cow, *shush-shush* - followed by a picture of Jess Martin. Blake nodded and sent back a picture of a broken window and a picture of the balaclava boys loading two bundles into a car. *To tell Miko that the kidnappers must've moved us, in case the cops managed to spot the upstairs window from the street.*

After that they concentrated on helping each other to be brave. Trading pictures of

the Australian guy who'd been trapped underground for hours, when a snow slope collapsed on him. Pictures of the Burmese woman who'd been locked in her house for years, because she was fighting to help her people. *'They're survivors.'* *'We can survive too.'* *'Hang in there, Blake.'* *'Hang in there, Miko.'*

Then Blake felt her friend yawn and sent a picture of Miko asleep. Miko sent back a smile and faded out. As soon as Miko had gone, she started to panic again.

'No way,' she said out loud. 'Thinking's better than panicking. So think, Blake. This'd be a good time to solve the kidnappings. After all, you've got nothing better to do.'

Settling herself on the carpet, she started to sort through all the things she and Miko had found out so far. Flower Power first. The Venutis were a big family - but not a criminal family. They were Italian - but that didn't mean they knew anything about how to plan a kidnapping. Lucia's husband was Aldo Tucci's cousin - but he'd been out at the Venutis' flower farm when Christopher and Jess were snatched.

*Okay, Flower Power delivers flowers to the Wainwrights and the Martins and the Tregorrows and the Carters. Plus, they're building a new shop and Jess Martin was kept prisoner in a new building. Still, that's not enough to prove that the Venutis are kidnappers.*

*Forget about Flower Power, for the moment.*

Patrick MacAvoy next. He was rich but he spent a lot, so he might've taken up kidnapping to make more money. He went skiing with an architect, so he might've heard about a house at lock-up stage where he could hide Jess Martin. On the other hand, he didn't seem to know any criminals, unless you counted Donnie Harding. And he definitely didn't know any Italian kidnappers, unless he'd met Aldo Tucci through Jadney.

*Nah, too complicated. Easier to leave Patrick out of it and concentrate on the two guys who work for the North Shore branch of Elite Gardening Services.*

Blake groaned. She'd been trying to avoid thinking about Donnie Harding, ever since Greg had told her about the mobile phone calls. Donnie reckoned he'd gone straight, after his kid was born, and she still wanted to believe him. But it looked as though Donnie had rung Aldo Tucci from the Martins' house, to tell him that Jess would be on her own at the doctor's. Which meant that Donnie had to be part of the kidnapping gang.

It was depressing. Blake liked Donnie and she hated the idea of him ending up back in gaol. So she let her mind wander off and started puzzling about the sounds again. Squeaks, a sick cow and *shush-shush*. Jess Martin had told her about them ... but hadn't she heard them somewhere, as well?

Like in Patrick MacAvoy's red-brick castle, where the walls were so thick that the seagulls' squawks turned into squeaks - and the waves became a distant whisper - and the ferry's horn sounded as muffled as a sick cow.

Blake's mind started to race, so fast that she could hardly keep up with it. She

breathed in deeply and told herself to slow down and take things one at a time.

- 1. Miko and Greg and I are prisoners in Patrick MacAvoy's house.*
  - 2. Patrick's off at the ski slopes right now.*
  - 3. Jadney does Patrick's garden while he's away, so he probably has a key to the house.*
  - 4. Jadney knew where Christopher and Jess and Julian Tregorow would be, at the time when the kidnappers pounced.*
  - 5. Jadney's father is a builder, which means Jadney could find out about empty houses.*
  - 6. Jadney's uncle is an Italian kidnapper, who admits he's kidnapped businessmen but swears he'd never kidnap children.*
  - 7. Jadney knows Donnie Harding and Donnie knows the Parker family.*
  - 8. Jadney doesn't want to be a gardener forever. He wants to be seriously rich, like Steve Carter.*
- In other words, it looks like it was Jadney, not Aldo Tucci, who organised the kidnappings.*

She nodded, pleased with her theory. It was all pretty neat. There were only three facts that didn't fit in. But she didn't get a chance to think about them, because at that precise moment someone came tiptoeing into the room.

'There you go,' Thumper's voice rumbled. 'It's Blake, just like we guessed.'

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Hands tugged at the rope on her ankles, cutting it with a pocket knife. Hands stroked her hair and untied the bandage around her eyes.

'Blake!' Mr Williams breathed in a strange choked-up voice. 'Thank God we've found you. I was afraid ...'

As Thumper sliced through the ropes at her wrists, her father pulled her into a fierce hug. Blake flung her arms around him and hugged back. 'How did you - no, there's no time for that now,' she whispered. 'We have to collect Greg and Miko and get out of here.'

'Too dangerous,' Mr Williams hissed. 'Greg can look after himself and they'll return the Carter boy once his family pays the ransom.' Then he frowned and added, 'Did you call him Miko? I thought his name was Roshi.'

'It is,' Blake said. 'Miko's his twin. She got taken by mistake - and I'm not leaving without her.'

'Oh, all right,' her father sighed. 'Come on. Let's go and be heroes.'

They sidled out of the room - *the front room in Patrick MacAvoy's house, just like I figured* - and walked straight into one of the balaclava boys. Blake kicked him under the knee cap and as he slumped forward, her father landed a rabbit punch on the back of his neck.

'A nice bit of teamwork,' he said, looking rather proud of himself. 'Lock him in the front room, Thumper, and after that we'd better split up. You can look for Greg, while Blake and I go after the girl.'

Blake lifted her invisible shield and picked up Greg's thoughts straight away. *Funny, I didn't expect to connect with him that quickly. I suppose we got a lot closer, when we were locked up together.*

She tugged at Thumper's sleeve and said rapidly, 'Greg's in one of the back rooms downstairs and Miko's up in the tower. Don't ask me how I know. Just trust me, okay?'

'Oh, that psychic stuff Greg was raving about,' Thumper said. 'Sure, Blake. I'm out of here. See you in a minute, okay?'

He padded down the hall, moving incredibly quietly for such a huge guy. Blake headed for the stairs, with Mr Williams a few steps behind. She climbed fast, stopped in front of the office door and slammed her heel against the lock.

But Patrick's doors were more solid than the doors in the house near the pub. She had to back off and kick again, before the door burst open. They jostled into the room, looking around for Miko. Then Mr Williams caught hold of Blake's arm and pulled her back.

The other balaclava boy was there in the tower room. When he heard the door rattle, he must've ditched his tray of food and hauled Miko over to the window. Now she was balanced on the windowsill, roped and blindfolded, hanging over a steep drop down to the rocks at the edge of the harbour.

'Nice try,' the balaclava boy growled. 'But you're out of luck. Turn around and walk away, quick smart. Otherwise your mate'll be fish food.'

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Blake couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Couldn't even think properly. Miko was helpless and terrified, and her fear was fogging Blake's brain. While she hesitated, her father stepped in front of her.

'You're making a mistake,' he said in a calm, friendly voice. 'I'm a very rich man. I'll pay you anything you like, if you'll let the kid go.'

The balaclava boy laughed. 'Mate, all the money in the world won't help me now. If you've found this place, the cops can find it too. I gotta scram - and I'm prepared to dump the kid in order to save my own skin.'

'Listen, your boss has been caught,' Mr Williams told him. 'He'll give your name to the police anyway, so -'

'Shut your face,' the kidnapper cut in. 'You talk too much. My arm's getting tired. I might accidentally drop the kid, if you don't get moving.'

He rocked Miko to and fro on the windowsill. She panicked and tried to kick out. Blake gasped and clenched her fists. Took a long deep breath and sent calming thoughts into Miko's mind.

As Miko's body went still, Blake noticed the balaclava boy's eyes widening. She glanced back and saw Thumper looming in the doorway.

'Hey, it's Terry Parker,' he rumbled. 'What do you think you're doing, mate? You don't want to go topping a little girl. That's the worst kind of bad luck.'

'A girl?' yelped the kidnapper. 'Bloody hell. They told me it was a boy.'

'Well, she isn't,' Blake snapped. 'Let her go.'

To her relief, Terry Parker hoisted Miko off the windowsill and lowered her to the

floor, patting her shoulder and saying, 'Sorry, miss. I don't hurt chicks, I promise.'

Thumper strode over, pulling out his Swiss Army knife, and got to work on Miko's ropes.

'Beat it, Terry,' he said over his shoulder. 'Send me and the missus a postcard from Surfers, okay?'

'Thanks, Thumper,' the balaclava boy said meekly. He pushed past Blake, hissing, 'You should've said she was a girl', and clattered away down the stairs. Blake's knees suddenly went weak. She had to hang onto the door frame, to stop herself from sliding down to the floor.

*Oh wow, that was close. Too close. It's lucky Thumper knew how to press Terry's buttons.*

She was stumbling forward to make sure Miko really was okay, when Greg dodged around her. 'Move it,' he snapped, helping Thumper haul Miko to her feet. 'There's a couple of cockies on the front gate. When they see Terry hightailing it out of the house, they'll go for their mobiles - and we don't want to be here when the rest of the Parker mob arrive.'

'Lookouts at the gate?' Blake repeated. 'So how are we going to escape?'

Her father beamed at her. 'Don't worry, Blake,' he said. 'I've got that under control.'

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Fifteen minutes later, after a scary climb down the cliff in the dark, they were jolting across the harbour in the Williams' motor boat. Greg was steering. Thumper was looking after Miko, saying, 'Jeez, those Parkers knocked you around. Never mind, I'm good with bandages and that. I should be - I got four kiddies of me own.'

And Blake and Mr Williams were sitting side by side, gazing across the choppy black water at the lights of the city. *So much to say. It's hard to know where to start.*

Finally she turned to her father and said, 'Thanks for rescuing me, Dad.'

'That's my job,' he yelled back, above the roar of the engine. 'You're my daughter, Ath - Blake. That'll never change, no matter how much we argue.'

Blake chewed at her bottom lip. 'You can call me Athena, if you like,' she offered, but he shook his head.

'No, I've got used to Blake. It suits you somehow.'

'I know,' she agreed. 'But I'm glad you like it too.'

The boat bounced, almost throwing Mr Williams off the seat. As he landed heavily, he gasped, 'Listen, how do you think that Maureen - that your mother would feel about meeting up with Theia and me? I'd like to tell her I'm sorry, if it's not too late.'

'Dunno how she'd feel,' Blake said. 'You'd have to ask her.'

But the idea made her feel warm inside, even though the waves were blowing cold spray against her face. *Dad's been thinking about the stuff I said. Thinking about what*

*he did to Maureen. Maybe he can change, after all. Maybe I won't have to spend the rest of my life feeling like I'm split in two.*

A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. She was starting to turn towards her father, when a flash of fear shivered through her brain.

*What's that? Surely I'm not scared of Dad. No, wait a minute. That's Miko. I'm picking up on her feelings again.*

At the same moment Miko swung round to face them, pushing Thumper's hand away. 'Please, Mr Williams, can we go to my house first?' she said in a tight, tense voice. 'I think my brother's in trouble.'

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The minute Greg moored the boat, Miko scrambled onto the jetty and began to run. Blake sped after her but her friend had longer legs and a head start. By the time she reached the Carters' house, Miko was already disappearing through the front door.

*Damn. We should've made a plan first. But Miko couldn't stop to think, because Roshi's frightened. Can't blame her. I couldn't think straight either, when that thug was dangling her out of the window.*

When she looked back, Greg was loping towards her, with Thumper close behind and her father jogging along in the rear. 'I need to go back to the gym,' he puffed. 'I've had more exercise today than in the past three weeks. What's happening now, Blake?'

Blake closed her eyes and tuned into Miko's mind. More fear, blurring her eyes and making her heart race. 'I'm not sure,' she said. 'But it's something dangerous. I'm going in there.'

She expected her father to argue but he just said, 'Then I'm going with you. Greg, stay outside with Thumper, in case we need some backup.'

They crept through the dark garden, aiming for the glass doors at the side of the house. While Greg and Thumper waited on the terrace, Blake pushed the doors open, marched in and looked around.

Miko's grandfather was hovering beside his robot, clutching a racquet. It looked as though he'd been teaching Chip to play tennis, to stop himself from worrying - but it wasn't working, because his face was tense and grey. Shina Carter was sitting on the couch, crying softly. One of the twins was holding Shina's hand and the other twin was standing in the doorway.

Steve Carter was in the doorway too, with a gun pointed at the twin's head.

*Poor Miko. Someone's threatening to kill her, for the second time in two hours.*

'Mr Williams, how nice of you to drop in,' Miko's stepfather said, smiling. 'And your daughter as well. Come in and make yourselves comfortable. I'm just about to tell my family a bedtime story.'

Blake thumped down on the couch, glaring at Steve. *Rats. I had a feeling that Jadney couldn't have organised the kidnappings on his own. But I never got time to think about those three facts that didn't fit in.*

She thought about them now. First, the fact that Jadney didn't know Roshi's violin lesson had been changed to an earlier time. Second, the fact that the kidnapper knew about Akira's crackly mobile phone and used it to con Miko. Third, the fact that Donnie rang the Carters from Jess Martin's house, straight after he rang Jadney. Three facts which proved that Steve Carter was the only person who knew everything the kidnappers needed to know.

'But why?' she burst out, before she could stop herself.

Steve Carter turned his friendly smile on her. 'It's Akira's fault,' he explained. 'The old guy's sitting on the hottest idea since personal computers - and all of a sudden, he turned wussy about it. I'm a business man, Blake. I couldn't let a chance like that slip through my fingers. I know Roshi's got a photographic memory, so I figured I could lock him up somewhere and pump him for information. But I decided to practise on a couple of other kids first, partly because I'll need money to market the robots - and partly so no-one would guess that Roshi was kidnapped for the robot plans, not the ransom.'

'Oh, Steve,' Shina Carter sobbed. 'I don't believe it. How could you do this to us?'

He frowned. 'Shina baby, I didn't want to break up the family. If things had gone the way I planned, nobody would've ever connected me to the kidnappings. I could've set up my robot company under a different name, made a fortune and then sold out to the highest bidder. But when I walked into the bathroom and saw Roshi under the shower - well, it was obvious that I'd got the wrong twin. So I had to change my plans in a hurry, with a little help from my friends.'

He raised his voice and called, 'Jadney.' The glass doors opened wider and Greg and Thumper walked in, with their hands above their heads and Jadney behind them, waving another gun.

'G'day, Blake,' he said with a grin. 'Thanks for convincing the cops that Aldo did the kidnappings. That'll give me and Steve a chance to get clear, while the jacks are grilling Aldo and Donnie Harding. Poor old Donnie, he's such a loser. I conned him into introducing me to the Parker mob down at the pub - and then I said the Parkers'd swear he was one of the kidnappers, unless he told us what Jess Martin was doing on the day when I had to stay home and look after my mum.' He laughed and added, 'No-one'll ever believe Donnie's gone straight, not now.'

'Quit that, Jadney,' snapped Steve. 'You don't need to score off Donnie. You're bigger than he ever was and you'll be mega, once we hit the States and start our company. So move your arse, kid. Make Thumper tie up the others - he's pretty street-smart, so he won't try anything dumb. Me, I'll deal with the kid. Come to poppa, Roshi.'

'No,' Miko and Shina and Akira yelled in unison.

But Roshi stood up, straightened his shoulders and walked towards his stepfather. He looked brave and determined, even though he was scared and shaking inside. Blake could tell, because she was still linked to Miko, who was picking up her twin's feelings.

As Roshi crossed the room, Chip's head turned to follow him. 'Roshi,' the robot said in his whirring mechanical voice, 'you are frightened? Yes. You are frightened of that man.'

His eyes went dark and then started to glow bright red. His metal hands lifted, one holding the tennis racquet, one holding the ball. Chip dropped the ball on the table and hit it as it bounced. The ball went whizzing through the air, aiming straight for Steve.

Knocking the gun out of his hand.

Instantly, Miko grabbed her stepfather's wrist, jerked hard and flipped him over her shoulder. Thumper's big fist closed round Jadney's hand and squeezed, until he let go of his gun. Blake took a flying leap across the couch and landed on Steve's chest, pinning him to the floor.

And Inspector Potter strolled through the glass doors with Biggles behind him. "Well, Blake,' he said, 'you haven't left much for us to do. Looks like you've caught another kidnapper.'

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Half an hour after the cops had taken Steve and Jadney away, Roshi and his grandfather were still arguing about artificial intelligence. 'Chip got angry because I was in danger,' Roshi kept saying. 'His eyes went red and then he decided to save me. Your programs are working, Grandpa. Chip can feel and think and take action, all on his own.'

'Slow down,' Akira kept saying. 'You're rushing ahead too fast, just like the big companies. Chip hit the ball, sure, but it could've been a coincidence. We need to do more tests.' Although he couldn't help adding, 'Still, it *is* a breakthrough.'

'Sure is,' Roshi said, thumping the robot's metal shoulder. 'You're the best, Chip.'

Blake grinned. *Roshi's going to be okay. He's back at work already. No happy ending for his mum, though. Her kids are safe but she just found out that her husband's a louse.*

She glanced across at Miko, who was sitting on the couch with her arm around her mother. Miko lifted her head straight away and sent back a series of pictures. Blake and Miko fighting the kidnappers back to back, doing a balancing act under the manhole, flooring Steve Carter. Then she added two words: '*Great team.*'

Blake's grin got wider. She was heading over to Miko when Biggles reached out and stopped her. 'Ah, Blake,' he said, fiddling with his moustache, 'I'm sorry I suspected you of being involved with the kidnappings.'

'Hey, that was my fault,' she said with a shrug. 'I should've explained how I knew

that the kidnappers were after Julian Tregorow. But I didn't want to admit that I've got, um, psychic powers.'

Biggles smiled at her. 'Don't be embarrassed, Blake. Most good detectives have a bit of ESP - and you're certainly a good detective.'

Blake started to blush, muttered 'Thanks, Biggles' and hurried off.

*Oh wow, he wasn't surprised by my powers, any more than Greg or Thumper were. Maybe this empath stuff isn't magic, like in the D'ar il Ai'ia books. Maybe somewhere in the future some scientist's going to sort it all out. Roshi, perhaps, after he's worked out how to teach robots to think.*

*Or Chip. That robot seems to know a lot about human beings.*

She waved to Chip and the robot waved back. Then she circled round towards Miko and found Miko circling towards her. They dodged out into the hall and stood there, staring at each other.

*We've been talking mind to mind for the last twenty-four hours. It's hard to remember how to talk in words.*

'You missed your bus to the Northern Territory,' Miko said finally. 'I guess you'll be taking off again soon ... but it'd be kind of nice if you could hang around here for a while.'

As Blake started to nod, an arm dropped round her shoulders. 'I'd like that too,' said Mr Williams. 'Why don't you come and stay in your old room, just for tonight?'

Blake nodded again. She hugged Miko goodbye and set off down the front path with her father. 'Well, that was an adventure,' he commented. 'And we managed to sort out a few of our problems as well. We might even be able to talk about that job with Interco again, now things have changed.'

'Maybe,' Blake said. 'Although I still don't agree with a lot of the things you do.' She paused for a second and then blurted out, 'For example, I don't like the way you were planning to kidnap Roshi from the kidnappers.'

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'How did you know about that?' her father asked, startled.

'I didn't,' Blake said. 'I was just guessing. But you've told me now.'

Mr Williams chuckled. 'All right then, how did you guess? I knew you were smart, Blake, but I didn't realise you were as smart as that.'

She frowned, thinking it through. 'Well, I couldn't help wondering how you found me so easily. Then I remembered the way Ron Parker took off, when I was talking to him by the pub. I thought he was running away from Biggles but he was actually running away from Thumper. Plus Greg wasn't too keen to escape, until I told him the kidnappers'd snatched Miko, not Roshi. It all added up. I reckon Greg and Thumper were watching the kidnappers, getting ready to nab Roshi and hand him over to you.'

'Clever girl,' Mr Williams sighed. 'You're right, of course. Thumper's wife is one of the Parker family, so he heard the inside story about the kidnappings and passed it on to me. Artificial intelligence, Blake, the biggest breakthrough of the twenty-first century! I couldn't resist it - but I suppose I've wrecked my chances with you now. You'll never join me at Interco after this.'

Blake opened her mouth to say 'No way'. But the warm hand tapped the side of her head and she found herself saying, 'Oh, I dunno. I mean, someone has to keep an eye on you. I *might* think about coming and working with you, under certain conditions.'

'What sort of conditions?' her father asked.

The warm hand tapped the other side of Blake's head and she said, 'For starters, I'd want to spend two months of every year at the Top End with Maureen. Plus Interco would have to put some money into a special unit,

employing people to tackle some of the problems kids are having right now. What do you reckon, Dad? Would you be prepared to do that?’

Mr Williams threw back his head and laughed. ‘You’re my daughter, all right. You drive a tough bargain. But it could work, Blake. Interco needs some Aboriginal contacts. And times are changing - people want to see the big companies giving something back, as well as using their work time and their country’s resources. Who knows, you might even be able to convince Roshi and Akira that we’d give them the sort of deal they want.’

Blake sighed. *Typical. I'm trying to work out what's best for everyone and Dad's trying to work out what's best for Interco. We're still on opposite sides. Or are we?*

They walked on in silence. After a while she felt a hand tugging at her sleeve. ‘Blake?’ her father said, almost shyly. ‘Did you mean that or were you just testing me?’

‘I’m not sure,’ she said honestly. ‘I need more time, Dad. Go in and tell Theia we’re okay. I’d like to sit here and think for a bit.’

Mr Williams shuffled his feet. He started to say something, clamped his mouth shut and went striding up to the house. *He's worried I'm going to run away again - and he could be right. I can't believe I said that stuff about working for Interco. Why did I let the warm hand push me into it?*

She perched on the stone slab of the gatepost, feeling very small under the stars. Gazed at the lights of the city and remembered all the places she’d been and all the people she’d met. She’d lived with rich people and poor people. Sometimes she felt Aboriginal and sometimes she felt white. *Not many kids know both sides. But I do. If I went to work at Interco, I'd take that with me.*

*Plus I'd take my empath powers as well.*

Peter Piper had asked her how she wanted to use her powers. Blake knew the answer now. She wanted to use them to make things better for other people. If she had a high-level job with Interco, she could try to stop them from plonking casinos down in little country towns - and building skyscrapers that wouldn’t last - and paying their workers as little as possible. She could teach them to take things more slowly, like Akira taking time over his robots.

But ... what if Interco changed her, instead of her changing Interco? What if she started to think about money all the time, just like her dad?

*Nah, not possible. The warm hand wouldn't let me get away with that. It'd pinch me black and blue, if I started putting money ahead of people.*

*Besides, I wouldn't have to do it all on my own.*

The special unit to help kids. Blake liked that idea. She could call it Blake’s 7, like the old TV show that her friend Dog was so keen on. Seven kids, checking things out and coming up with new ideas. Miko, of course - Reece and Jahlion from Baybeach - her cousin Debbie - Spider, the junior hacker

and computer whiz - that street-smart street kid Elissa - and Blake herself.

*What a team. We could stir Interco up, no worries. They wouldn't know what'd hit them.*

*And if that didn't work, we could take what we'd learnt and try somewhere else.*

After that, there was only one problem left. Her father. She'd run away from him nine months ago. Did she really want to turn round and work with him now? *Let's face it, I'm not going to change Dad overnight. But I'll never change him at all if I don't stick around. And he can change. He's sorry about Maureen and he came barging in to rescue me, even though it stuffed up his plans.*

*Besides, I guess I love him, even though I argue with him all the time. He's part of me, the way Greg said. I'm tough like Maureen - but I'm tricky like Dad as well.*

Blake turned her head and looked at the big house behind her. Turned back and looked at the city streets, marked out in glittering lights. She remembered the dream she'd had while she was travelling around - running from someone through a huge empty house, searching for someone down long empty streets.

But she'd found her mother now and she didn't need to run from her father any more. She knew who she was at last. Miko had said it: 'A unique human being called Blake.'

She took a deep breath and slid down from the gatepost. As her feet touched the ground, Blake laughed and swung round to face the house.

*Okay, that's enough thinking for the moment. I've got work to do.*

*Time to go.*

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Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

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