

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

4

# House of Shadows

JENNY PAUSACKER

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For Carolyn Polizzotto, with thanks for a long-term friendship and a very useful newspaper cutting.

## CHAPTER ONE

Green hills, smooth and round, like a little kid's drawing. A three-lane highway, cutting between the hills. A motorbike speeding along the highway - a Honda Rebel, grey and silver, with a long-tailed silver star on its tank.

And on the bike a small, sturdy kid in jeans and a leather jacket. Hair the colour of sunshine on sand, spiking out from her crash helmet. Eyes the colour of stormy water, hidden behind her goggles. Gloved hands gripping the handlebars, steady and determined.

Blake looked around. Waved at a bunch of cows, watching her from across a barbed wire fence, and laughed out loud. *Feeling good. Money in my wallet and more money stashed inside the lining of my backpack. I won't need to use my bankcard for a while. Won't need to run the risk of being traced by those two detectives.*

*I'm free again. Free to keep searching for my mother.*

As she wheeled round a bend, Blake glanced sideways and found herself looking down a long green valley. For a moment she thought she saw a strange box-shaped shadow, like a dark stain on the grass. Then she blinked and the shadow turned into a huge old house. Grey stone, high roof, towers at both ends and -

But before she could check it out any further, she was veering around the curve and

heading on down the highway. Blake forgot about the old house straight away. She leaned into the wind and gazed at the horizon.

*Two hundred and fifty kays to Mudgeebung, where Mum's aunt lives. Mum's parents sent her off there when she was fifteen. So, if I can find this aunt, maybe she'll tell me what Mum did next.*

*Maybe she'll give me some clues that'll help me work out where Mum is now.*

She frowned. Two hundred and fifty kays. At eighty kilometres an hour, she should get to Mudgeebung in about three hours, just before dark. Okay, it was never as simple as that – for instance, she'd need to stop for petrol and food somewhere along the way.

*But I'll be in Mudgeebung tonight, for sure.*

Then Blake spotted the sign. Couldn't have missed it. The sign was enormous, nearly as big as a billboard. It said 'Gladesdale' in round white letters, with three little pictures underneath - a petrol pump, to show that there was a garage in Gladesdale; a bed, to show there was a motel; a teacup and a knife and fork, to show that you could get food and drink. And a squiggly line, to show where the Gladesdale road turned off the highway.

*Hey, too bad. I couldn't be less interested. They can keep their garages and motels and cafes. I'm not going to Gladesdale. I'm headed for Mudgeebung.*

But, as the sign got closer, alarm bells started to ring inside Blake's head. Gladesdale. She'd heard that name before. Not long ago, either. Yesterday, in fact, when she was talking to Spider.

Blake groaned. *Yeah, that was it.* Spider, that skinny little kid who turned out to be a genius with computers. Spider, who surfed the Net for her and proved that her mother's aunt was still in Mudgeebung. She owed Spider big time - and Spider had asked her to go to Gladesdale.

She could remember the conversation. Spider saying, 'If you're heading up country, you could watch out for that hacker who disappeared. Some of the street kids reckoned they spotted Huntsman on a highway near Gladesdale. You could ask around, if you're in the area.'

Blake saying, 'Hey, not a problem. I like asking questions.'

*That was yesterday, though. Today I just want to get to Mudgeebung as fast as possible. I don't want to waste any more time on other people's hassles. I've got enough hassles of my own.*

The sign was almost on top of her now. She could see the lines on the highway, marking the turn-off. Blake gritted her teeth and powered ahead. 'Mudgeebung,' she muttered. 'I'm headed for Mudgeebung.'

But at the last minute she swung the Honda to the left and went hurtling down the road to Gladesdale.

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Gladesdale was a small sleepy town, brown and gold in the late afternoon sun. A few shops lined up along the dusty street - a bakery, a hardware store, a shop window crammed with striped shirts and flowery dresses and babies' toys. A cluster of weatherboard houses with long verandahs and neat hedges. A petrol station at one end of the street and a motel at the other.

And that was all.

Blake parked the Honda under a gum tree and sat there, swinging her foot. Trying to remember everything Spider had told her about Huntsman. 'If you think I'm smart, you ought to meet the Huntsman,' he'd said once. 'I'm just an ordinary little spider but Huntsman's pure poison. The best hacker in the country.'

A while later she'd asked him to describe Huntsman. He'd blinked half a dozen times and stared off into the distance. 'Big nose, pale skin, thick eyebrows,' he said, making a list. 'Long skinny arms and legs. A spider tattoo on the left wrist. Hair - who knows? It could be scarlet by now - or blue - or bright yellow. Fact is, Huntsman's hair changes colour as often as I change my socks.'

And Huntsman was a street kid too. Blake had met a few street kids while she was on the road, so she knew the look. Old jeans. Old runners. Eyes that shifted around all the time, watching for trouble. Always wary. Always tired. Always hungry.

*Hungry, yeah, of course. If Huntsman was in Gladesdale, he'd need to find somewhere to eat. The bakery, maybe, or the cafe at the motel.*

She thought about it for a moment and decided to try the cafe first. Huntsman was a street kid and a hacker. He wouldn't want to stay in a town like Gladesdale for long - and the cafe was the obvious place to go, if you were planning to hitch a lift out of town.

*Mind you, I can't work out why the heck Huntsman came to Gladesdale. He couldn't live on the streets here, because there's only one street. Plus it looks like Gladesdale hasn't even heard of computers yet.*

*So maybe he was just passing through. In which case, I might get to Mudgeebung tonight, after all.*

Blake revved the Honda and rode down to the cafe. The motel was brand new - a long, low yellow-brick building - but the cafe looked like a gingerbread cottage from a fairy tale. White shutters on the windows. Roses climbing up the wall. A heart-shaped knocker on the front door.

Inside, the cafe was just as cosy. Red and white checked curtains, red and white checked table cloths, a red and white cover on the sugar bowl. And a plump, grey-haired woman behind the counter, wearing a big red and white checked apron. She came bustling over straight away.

'Well, hello, dear,' she said. 'I haven't seen you around before. From the city, are

you? Yes, I thought so. Up here for a holiday with your parents? No, you're older than you look at first sight and besides, you're on that great big motorbike. A working holiday, I suppose. Fruit picking - or maybe you've got a relative on a farm somewhere? At any rate, you must be hungry after such a long ride. How about a bowl of my special pea soup?'

She beamed and bustled off again. Blake collapsed into the nearest chair and took a deep breath. *Oh wow. I haven't said a word but she knows heaps about me already. If she checks out all her customers like this, I'm in luck.*

She leaned back and looked around. The cafe was empty, except for a small boy in a Chicago Bulls t-shirt who was dusting the pictures on the wall. They were all photos of kittens. Kittens playing with balls of wool, kittens peeping out of flowerpots, kittens sleeping together in a heap.

Blake counted the pictures. *Fifty-eight of them. Unreal.* She was starting to count the kittens in the photos when the woman came bustling back with a bowl of soup and a plate of crusty bread.

'Would you believe, I forgot to introduce myself,' she exclaimed. 'I'm Mrs Corcoran and that's my youngest son Jerry over there. And you're ...?'

'I'm Blake.' Before Mrs Corcoran could start talking again, she added quickly, 'I think you might've met a mate of mine as well. A guy called Huntsman. He was in Gladesdale a couple of months ago.'

Mrs Corcoran frowned. 'Huntsman? No, I'm afraid not. I'd remember a name like that.' Then she brightened up and said, 'Wait a minute, though. A young lad came into the café - hmm, about twelve-and-a-half weeks back. A skinny-looking creature with green hair and a tattoo of a spider on his wrist. Would that be your friend, by any chance?'

'Sounds like him, all right. Did you notice where he went after that?'

'Well, he hung round outside for a while. Kept muttering to himself and peering down the road, as if he couldn't decide what to do. Then, next time I looked, he'd disappeared. I asked around but nobody seemed to know where he'd gone.'

She sighed and went bustling away. Blake grinned. *Mrs Corcoran likes to know everything that goes on in Gladesdale. She's still cross because she lost track of Huntsman but personally, I'm rapt. I told Spider I'd try to find his friend - and I tried. Now I can head on to Mudgeebung, as soon as I finish my soup.*

The pea soup was excellent. Thick and sludgy, with cubes of potato and shreds of bacon and tiny flecks of sharp-tasting rosemary. Blake was scraping the bottom of the bowl when she felt someone watching her. She looked up to find the small boy standing beside her.

'I know where that kid went,' he announced.

'Yeah?' said Blake. She waited for a few seconds and then added, 'So, are you

going to tell me?' He tugged at his Chicago Bulls t-shirt.

'I might,' he said finally. 'If you give me five dollars.'

'Why do you want five dollars?' she asked and the boy opened his eyes wide.

'I want to buy five packets of Crispy Tomato Salsa Surprises, of course - an' I'll get five basketball cards - an' maybe one of them'll be a lucky card - an' then I'll win a poster of Michael Jordan.'

Blake started to laugh. *Fair enough. If I had to live with all those kitten photos, I'd want a Michael Jordan poster too.* 'Okay,' she agreed. 'Here's your five dollars, Jerry. Now, tell.'

Jerry Corcoran's hand shot out to grab the money. He glanced over his shoulder, saw his mother coming and edged closer to Blake. 'That kid went off along the back road,' he whispered. 'I reckon he was heading for the old Hartley house. It's where all the weird kids go, right?'

Then Mrs Corcoran swooped down on them. She whisked Blake's bowl away and gave her son a friendly shove.

'Jerry, you haven't finished dusting the kittens. Blake, do you want some more soup? No? Oh well, I suppose you need to get a move on. Unless you're planning to stay in Gladesdale for the night.'

Blake hesitated. *Rats. I wasn't planning to stay ... but I'll have to go and look at the old house now. That'll take an hour or so, which means I wouldn't get to Mudgeebung before ten o'clock. Much too late to find a place to sleep.*

*Looks as though I'm stuck here in Gladesdale, after all.*

## CHAPTER TWO

Mrs Corcoran was very proud of the new motel. As she led Blake down the side path, she told her all about it, from the day when she and Mr Corcoran first thought up the idea to the day when they finished painting the last room.

Blake wanted to ask about the Hartley house but she couldn't get a word in. Mrs Corcoran was still talking at top speed as she unlocked the fourth door in the row. Blake followed her inside and glanced around. White walls, a comfortable bed and a big window that looked out onto the trees behind the motel.

*And half a dozen kitten photos, of course.*

'There you are,' Mrs Corcoran said, beaming at her. 'I'll give you a key and you'll find some towels in the bathroom. Now, is there anything else you need to know?'

'Yes,' Blake said quickly, while she had the chance. Then, half a second too late, she changed her mind.

*Fact is, it might be smarter to keep my mouth shut. If Mrs Corcoran knows I'm interested in the old house, she'll tell the whole of Gladesdale. And I'm not sure what's going on with Huntsman, so I'm not sure whether I want the whole of Gladesdale checking me out.*

Mrs Corcoran was still waiting for her to say something. Blake's eyes flicked round the room and settled on the photos. 'Um, do you have a lot of cats?' she asked.

To her surprise, Mrs Corcoran shook her head. 'Can't stand them,' she said. 'Nasty, sneaky creatures, always killing the poor little birds or leaving cat hair on my nice clean

cushions. If only they'd stay kittens forever ... But they don't, so I collect kitten photos instead.'

Blake stared down at her feet, trying not to laugh. *Hey, everyone's different. Some people have pets. Some people have photos of pets.*

'Thanks a lot,' she mumbled. 'The room's great. I might go for a bit of a ride in the hills now. See you later.' And she shut the door before Mrs Corcoran could start talking again.

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The sun was sliding down towards the horizon. The cafe windows glittered and the main street of Gladesdale looked as though it was covered with gold dust. Blake swung her leg over the Honda and kicked away the stand. She revved the engine and roared off.

She coasted along for a while, past a patchwork of trees and paddocks. Then the road wriggled and twisted and went zigzagging up a steep slope. Blake paused at the top and looked out across the green hills. Gripped the handle bars and steered the Honda down into the valley.

It was a roller coaster ride. Up one hill and down to the next. Past dams and farm houses and bunches of sleepy cows, nuzzling each other's shoulders. Blake was having fun. She'd almost forgotten about Huntsman when she spotted a box-shaped shadow on a hill nearby.

*Oh-oh. That's the spooky old house I saw on my way into Gladesdale. I bet it's the Hartley house - the one Jerry Corcoran was talking about.*

She cruised round the next bend and stopped the bike. Checked out the hillside, shook her head and sighed. She couldn't see the house from this angle, because it was hidden behind a ridge. But there was a wide track, lined with plane trees, leading up the hill.

*Okay. Here goes.*

As the Honda chugged up the track, Blake kept glancing from side to side. The sun had set by now. The sky was still full of bright orange clouds but shadows were gathering under the trees. Their silvery bark gleamed in the darkness and their leaves rustled and whispered overhead.

*It's way too quiet, so the Honda sounds way too loud. I better do something about that.*

She switched off the engine and wheeled the bike behind a bush. Then she dodged between two plane trees and started to climb the ridge. One minute she was scrambling up a stony slope, tripping over rocks and swearing under her breath. Next minute she was staring down at the old house.

It was enormous. Nothing like the wooden farm houses she'd seen on her way. The

walls were made of bluestone - huge chunks of grey rock, chipped out of a quarry somewhere. Slate tiles on the roof, two bluestone towers and half a dozen chimneys.

Blake counted the windows and decided that the house was three storeys high. She studied the arched front door, studded with iron knobs. She ran her eyes along the balcony around the second floor and checked out the verandah at the front of the house. Then she sat back on her heels and frowned.

*This isn't an ordinary house - it's practically a castle. I bet it must've cost a fortune. So Jerry Corcoran must've got it wrong. I can't see a street kid like Huntsman fitting in here.*

*Good. In that case, I can go back to the motel.*

Blake thought about the comfortable-looking bed in her room. Dinner cooked by Mrs Corcoran, a movie on TV and then a nice long sleep. It sounded like a great idea - but for some reason she couldn't make a move. She just went on sitting there, scowling down at the old house.

As she watched, the moon rose up from behind the hills. Big and round, like a giant silver basketball. *No, not quite round. A bit flat on one side. I reckon there's at least two days to go before full moon.*

The moonlight was so bright that it chased the shadows away. Except for the shadows around the old house. Somehow the house seemed darker than ever. Darker and more frightening.

Blake tried to look away but she couldn't turn her head. So she shut her eyes instead - and saw a picture of the old house, floating on the darkness in front of her. Shadows oozed out of its doors and windows and gathered into a black pool. Then a dark stream started to flow up the ridge, reaching out towards her.

Blake's eyes flicked open. She glanced around and sighed with relief. There was no pool of shadows. No mysterious dark stream. Just an almost-full moon, hanging in the sky above a funny old house.

*What's the matter with me? That was so weird. I felt - go on, Blake, admit it. I felt like the house was trying to get me.*

Blake shivered. All of a sudden she wanted to race back to the motel and phone Daffy Clarke. Daffy, the strange old artist she'd met while she was searching for her mother. Daffy, who was convinced that Blake had special psychic powers.

*Daffy would love this - and that's exactly why I'm never going to tell her about it. I don't want to see things that other people can't see. I don't want to have special powers.*

*Except for the icy finger, of course. I have to admit that's been kind of useful.*

The icy finger. Whenever she was headed for trouble, Blake could feel its cold touch, poking her in the ribs or grabbing the back of her neck. It was a warning, a sign to tell her that there was danger around. She'd got used to it by now and besides, it helped her when she needed to be helped. Blake could handle that - but she couldn't handle

this new feeling.

*A house that's sending shadows out to get me? No way. Not possible.*

She took a deep breath and focused on the door of the house. Waited to see whether the shadows would come oozing out again. Her heart was beating so loud that she could actually hear it. Then she heard something else as well.

A high shrill scream that went on and on and on.

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Lights started to flash in the windows of the old house. Upstairs and downstairs, as though people were running from room to room. Finally the front door swung open, letting out a long beam of light. And two smaller beams as well. Two torches, swinging this way and that across the grass.

The shrill scream kept on going but by this time Blake had worked out what it was. *An alarm, of course. Someone must've tried to break into the house.* All the same her heart was still banging like a drum. It was almost a relief when she felt the icy finger prodding her.

*Danger alert. I need to get moving.*

She skidded down the ridge and sped towards the avenue of trees. Stopped under the first tree and thought for a moment. She had two choices. She could make a dash for the Honda - but when the people in the house heard the bike, they might think *she* was the thief.

Or else she could hide. Blake glanced at the plane tree. Spotted a lumpy knot half-way up its trunk. She wedged one foot against it, stretched high and reached out. Her fingers clutched at the air, a few centimetres below the nearest branch. She lost her balance and tumbled to the ground.

*Never mind. Try again.*

This time she backed away and ran at the tree. As her foot hit the knot, she pushed down hard and leapt. Her fingers closed around the branch and clung tightly. For a wild moment she swung to and fro and then she hauled herself up onto the branch, leaning back against the trunk.

Just in time. As she peered through the leaves, Blake saw something moving up on the ridge. For a moment a small skinny figure was outlined against the moon-bright sky. Then it ducked and dodged and disappeared, heading down the ridge and away from the house.

Seconds later the torches flashed again. Two larger people appeared on the ridge, standing where the skinny shadow had been. They paused there for half a minute, while their torch beams swept across the slope.

'Can't see the little creep anywhere,' one of them growled and the other one said

with a smile in his voice, 'Well, those kids aren't stupid, you know. Come on, we've got to hurry.'

They slithered down the slope, torches swinging wildly. A shaft of light brushed the leaves of the plane tree. Blake gulped and pulled her feet up, hugging her knees to her chest. *I'm not sure what's going on here. Those guys could be trouble - or they could just be trying to catch a thief. Either way, I better not let them catch me.*

She steadied herself against the tree trunk and leaned sideways. Squinted into the darkness, searching for the small shadow and the two men. But she couldn't see a thing, not even the light from the torches.

*Smart move. The guys must've switched their torches off. They're out there, listening. Waiting for the shadow to make a move.*

Blake listened too. She could hear a bird twittering drowsily in the branches above her. A little animal scurrying through the grass. A cow mooing in the hills. Cars swishing along the distant highway.

And a twig cracking, somewhere nearby.

'There!' said the growly voice. 'Gotcha!'

He switched on his torch and aimed it at the avenue of trees. Blake held her breath and hugged her knees tighter. Then a stone came rattling down from the top of the ridge and the smiling voice said, 'Think again. The kid must've circled around behind us. Back we go, mate.'

They whirled round and charged up the slope, waving their torches like Jedi laser swords. Blake let her breath out slowly and started to relax. She was wondering whether to make a dash for the Honda when she heard another twig crack. Right underneath her tree.

She hung onto the branch and eased herself forward. Looked down and saw the skinny shadow, huddled against the trunk. A long thin arm shot out and collected a stone from the edge of the track.

*Oh, right. So that's what happened. The shadow must've chucked a stone at the ridge, to send the guys off in the wrong direction. It's a clever shadow, all right - and a good shot too.*

As the shadow tossed the stone and caught it, Blake noticed something strange about its hand. A black blob, just above the wrist. Like a spider. Or like a spider tattoo.

'Huntsman!' she said out loud and the shadow jumped. Took a step backwards, glanced from side to side and whispered, 'How do you know my name? Who are you? Come to think of it, *where* are you?'

But before Blake could answer, she heard stones clattering and footsteps pounding down the hill. No time to think. She swung her leg across the branch, gripped it with her knees and let her arm drop.

'I'm in the tree,' she hissed. 'Quick. Grab my hand.'

Huntsman scrambled onto the knot in the trunk and reached up. Cold fingers locked around Blake's wrists. She heaved hard. Huntsman kicked out. They clutched each other and wobbled to and fro. Then, just as Blake was sure they were going to fall, Huntsman slumped back against her and she slumped back against the tree, using the trunk as an anchor.

*Oh wow, I don't believe this. We did it. We actually did it. Mind you, it's lucky that Huntsman has such long arms. Otherwise he'd still be standing under the tree.*

*And that'd be a real problem, because right now those two guys are standing there too.*

'I don't get it,' Growler complained. 'How did that little thief manage to escape? I mean, it's hard to move fast *and* silent. Especially for a city kid who doesn't know much about the bush.'

'City kids aren't stupid,' Smiler told him. 'Maybe we had the wrong idea. Maybe we should've been looking around here, where the twig cracked.'

Blake grinned. *I think I know how this team works. Growler's the muscle and Smiler's the brains. I just hope he doesn't have too many brains.*

'So what?' Growler was growling. 'Even if you're right, the kid's not here any more. We'll have to get the car and drive back along the road. There's nowhere else for the kid to go.'

Smiler hesitated for a few seconds. Above him, perched on the branch, Blake crossed her fingers and touched wood for luck. *Don't say it, Smiler. Please, please don't say it.*

But Smiler frowned and rubbed his forehead and said, 'Nowhere - except up.'

## CHAPTER THREE

Smiler and Growler switched on their torches. Two lines of light ran up the tree trunk and swept out along the branch. Blake grabbed Huntsman's elbow and swung him around.

'Now!' she yelled and jumped.

Her runners thudded against Growler's shoulders. Growler staggered and flung his arms out and fell flat on his face. Blake crashed down on top of him, letting her body go limp. Two seconds later she was on her feet again. She spun around to look for Huntsman.

Smiler was on the ground too - but so was Huntsman, clutching his ribs and gasping for breath. 'Dumb idea,' he groaned. 'That hurt.'

'Too bad,' Blake told him. 'We have to run for it now. Unless you'd rather stay here with your mates.'

'No, thanks,' he muttered and she hauled him to his feet. They went pelting down the avenue at top speed. Blake glanced sideways at the bushes as she ran, checking for the Honda. *I'm sure it was behind this bush - but it's not. And it's not behind the next bush either.*

*Oh no, don't tell me we've gone too far.*

It was a worry. Behind her, she could hear the two men lurching and stumbling as they tried to help each other up. Growler was cursing loudly - and Smiler wasn't saying anything, which bothered her even more.

*They're pretty mad. I hope we don't have to turn back and face them.*

Then moonlight glinted on a strip of metal - the long-tailed silver star on the Honda's

petrol tank. Blake sighed with relief. She dodged around the bush and shunted the bike out. Vaulted onto the seat, shouted 'Move it, Huntsman,' and felt the skinny kid thump into place behind her.

At the last minute she glanced over her shoulder and saw Growler hurling himself at the back wheel, fast and low, like a football tackle. His big hands struck the mudguard, knocking the bike sideways. But Blake leaned to the right, pulling Huntsman with her, and steadied the Honda. The engine roared and they sped off down the track.

Out onto the road, up through the hills and back to Gladesdale.

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Blake stopped the bike just outside the town. She jerked her shoulder and Huntsman scrambled off. For the first time she managed to get a proper look at him. Short body but long skinny arms and legs. A long narrow face, with a small tight mouth and tan-coloured eyes, set close together. Heavy metal t-shirt, crowded with skulls and gravestones. And purple hair this time, whipped into an afro by the wind.

'Hey, hey,' he protested. 'You can't leave me here, in the middle of nowhere.'

She scowled at him. 'What are you whingeing about? I rescued you, remember. You could at least say thanks.'

'Why?' he snarled. 'Those guys aren't my biggest problem. They're robots - like, they're just obeying orders. I would've handled them somehow, if you hadn't come along. I never asked you to rescue me, did I?'

Blake's hands clenched inside her gloves. 'Frankly, I couldn't care less about you. I'm a friend of your friend Spider, that's all. I only rescued you because he asked me to look out for you.'

Huntsman tipped his head back and began to laugh. 'Spider? That wacky little runt? So he's sending out search parties now? I'll never need a mother while Spider's around.' Then he narrowed his red-brown eyes and added, 'Mind you, Spider won't be too pleased, if you dump me at the side of the road. You better let me get back on the bike.'

'I'm *not* dumping you,' Blake sighed. 'If you just listen for a moment, I'll explain. I'm staying at that motel over there, behind the trees. So I want you to head for the trees, climb through the window of the fourth room and wait for me there. I'll hang around the cafe for half an hour, to see whether the guys come looking for you. Then we'll know what we're up against, right?'

'Makes sense,' Huntsman admitted. 'That way, no-one'll spot me - but you can keep an eye on the enemy. Okay, I'm out of here.'

But as he turned to go, Blake grabbed the back of his jacket. 'One more question,' she said. 'What were you doing, back at the house? Were you trying to break in or

what?'

He glanced over his shoulder and gave her a twisted grin. 'Not now. I'll tell you when we meet up again. See you,' and he pulled away from her, ducked through the fence and scampered across the paddock towards the trees.

Blake started the Honda. *Oh wow, that guy's a real turkey. Dunno why Spider likes him. I just hope I'm doing the right thing.*

She sped along the road to the cafe and parked the bike. Walked in and ordered dinner. Picked up a local paper from the counter and sat down at a table by the window.

Before long she saw the headlights of a car, swooping round the curves of the hill road. A few minutes later the cafe door opened and two men walked in. Blake leaned back and studied them from behind the paper.

The first man wore a well-cut Italian suit but apart from that he looked totally ordinary. Smooth cheeks, mouse-coloured hair, no-colour eyes. His face was so ordinary that when she looked away, Blake couldn't remember it. But it was a nice friendly face, all the same.

*Bet that's Smiler.*

The second man was short and stocky, with arms that hung down to his knees, like a gorilla. His big jaw jutted out beneath a tiny snub nose and his little eyes were almost hidden by bushy eyebrows.

*Growler, for sure.*

Mrs Corcoran bustled over to meet them. 'Mister Tony!' she said. 'This *is* nice. And Albert as well. What can I do for you? A lovely roast dinner? No, you've got a good cook up at the house. I suppose you're here for some information.'

'You're a mind-reader, Mrs C,' Tony said. 'I don't know how you do it but you're right, as always. We need a new maid, so I came to see whether you'd heard of anyone who might be interested. Oh, and by the way, one of the kids may've run off with some of our files. Just a joke, I'm sure, but the files are important. We need to get them back.'

Mrs Corcoran straightened her red and white checked apron. 'You're out of luck. No girls looking for a job - and no strangers in Gladesdale today.' Then her eyes brightened and she added, 'Except for Blake, of course. She's just been for a ride on her bike, so she might've noticed something.'

'Bike?' growled the second man. 'The little thief got away on a motorbike. Like somebody was waiting there, ready to go.' He lurched forward, brushed the paper aside and stared down at Blake. 'Was it you, kid?'

Blake put the newspaper down on the table. She smoothed its crumpled pages and folded it carefully. Then she glanced up and said in her coldest voice, 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Tony came strolling over and edged the other man aside. 'Calm down, Al,' he ordered. 'Blake'll think we don't have any manners.' He turned to her, smiled and said,

'I'm sorry. Al didn't mean to be rude. We'd really like to know whether you saw anything while you were out.'

The smile changed his whole face. For a moment he was as handsome as a prince in a fairy tale. Then the smile faded and his face looked ordinary again.

But Blake was already smiling back at him. 'Not a problem,' she said. 'I haven't got much to tell you, though. I was riding through the hills when this other bike shot out in front of me. A much bigger bike than mine - a Harley, I think. The driver was wearing a helmet, so I don't know what he looked like. But the passenger definitely had purple hair.'

While Tony nodded, Al marched over and peered out into the darkness. 'She's right,' he reported. 'That bike was real big and her bike's pretty small. I reckon she's telling the truth.'

Blake bit her lip, to make sure she didn't start grinning. *Clever me. I was pretty sure Al didn't see the Honda till he tried to tackle it - and everything seems a lot bigger when you're flat on the ground, looking up. Plus I've also planted the idea that the bike rider was a guy.*

*Clever, clever me.*

She glanced across and saw Tony frowning at Al. 'Of course Blake's telling the truth,' he said. 'With a bit of luck she might even be able to tell us where the bike went next.'

'It raced down the hill ahead of me and zoomed straight through Gladesdale,' Blake said, making it up as she went along. 'I guess it was heading for the highway.'

'Blast,' Al muttered. 'How long ago?'

'About five or ten minutes.'

'Then we still got a chance,' he decided. 'Come on, boss.' And the two men hurried out of the cafe.

As soon as they'd left, Mrs Corcoran bustled over, carrying a plate. 'Roast lamb with mint sauce, new potatoes and beans from my own garden,' she told Blake. 'Eat up - and I hope Albert Croggan didn't bother you. He's the night watchman out at the old house, as well as the gardener, and he takes himself a bit too seriously sometimes. His bark's worse than his bite, though.'

'So who was the other guy?' Blake asked.

Mrs Corcoran pulled up a chair and sat down. 'That was Tony Hartley. A lovely man. isn't he? He's working for his aunt Helen, out at the Hartley house.' She sniffed and added, 'Well, she calls herself Helena now. But she was just plain Helly Hartley when we were at school together.'

'I saw the house while I was out on my bike. It looks really old. The Hartley family must've been living there for, like, a hundred years, right?'

'Oh no,' said Mrs Corcoran. 'Helly Hartley lived in Gladesdale, along with the rest of

us - although she was always boasting about how rich her family used to be. The Hartleys had to sell off the big house a long time ago.' She lowered her voice and whispered, 'Because of the ghost, you see.'

Blake's mouth was full of potato. She choked and swallowed fast. *Rats, I want to ask two questions at once. A question about Helena Hartley - and a question about the ghost. I think I'll ask about the Hartleys first. After all, I don't really believe in ghosts. Even though I have sort of ... kind of ... seen a few ghosts lately.*

'So how come Helena Hartley's living in the old house now?' she said and Mrs Corcoran hitched her chair closer.

'Helly was very beautiful,' she admitted. 'She went off to the city to become a model and later on she married a man who was very, very rich and very, very old. He died a few years back and left all his money to Helly - and next thing we knew, she'd changed her name back to Hartley, bought the old house and started doing it up. A silly idea, if you ask me. She should've just let the place fall to pieces. But Helly was always stubborn. I suppose she thinks she can outwit the ghost.'

Blake speared a couple of beans with her fork. *Good. The perfect opening. Now I can ask about the ghost.* She opened her mouth but Mrs Corcoran cut across her.

'You want to know about the ghost, don't you?' she said. 'I'll tell you the whole story while you finish your dinner. Young people always love ghost stories - and this one's a beautie.'

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Mrs Corcoran turned and stared out at the shadowy hills. When she started talking again, her voice sounded different. Slower and quieter, as if she was reciting poetry. *I bet she's told this story before, heaps of times. It's probably the most interesting thing that ever happened in Gladesdale.*

'The Hartley house was built in 1880, more than a hundred years ago,' she began. 'Josiah Hartley was one of the first farmers around here. He bought up lots of land and made lots of money and then he decided that he wanted the biggest house in the area, to show everyone how rich he was.'

'Josiah lived to be ninety-seven years old. For the last twenty years of his life, his second son Matthew looked after the property, even though he knew that the Hartley house could never belong to him. The estate was entailed, you see - that's a lawyers' word, meaning that Josiah's house and land absolutely, definitely had to go to his oldest son. And his oldest son, Frederick, ran away to go looking for gold and never came back.'

She paused to gaze at the hills again, while Blake sliced a piece of roast lamb in half. *I thought this was supposed to be a good story - but it seems pretty boring to me.*

*Where's the ghost?*

'When Josiah died, Matthew had to hire some detectives to look for his brother,' Mrs Corcoran went on. 'In the end he discovered that Frederick was dead as well. As a matter of fact he'd died just before the detectives found him. Matthew was sorry, of course - but he was pleased too, because it meant that the Hartley estate went to him now.'

'Matthew asked all his friends to a big party. Then, in the middle of the party, a young woman came knocking at the door. She was Frederick's wife and she had a little baby boy. So the house didn't belong to Matthew, after all. It belonged to the baby.'

Blake started to laugh. 'It's funny to think of a baby owning a house,' she explained, as Mrs Corcoran frowned at her.

'This isn't a funny story,' she snapped. 'As a matter of fact, it's very sad. You see, the young woman asked Matthew to stay on and look after the place, just like he'd looked after it for his father. But a few months later the little boy went missing. They searched and searched and at last, just as the full moon was rising, they found him - or, at least, they found his body. It looked as though he'd fallen into the well and drowned.'

Blake shivered. 'So there's a baby ghost haunting the house?' she guessed.

Mrs Corcoran shook her head. 'Not so fast. I said it *looked* as though the baby fell into the well - but around the same time next year, with another full moon in the sky, Matthew jumped into the well and drowned too.'

'Why?' Blake asked and Mrs Corcoran raised her eyebrows.

'It's obvious, isn't it? Matthew must've pushed the baby into the well, because he wanted the Hartley estate. Then afterwards he was sorry, so he drowned himself in the same way.'

Blake swung around and looked out the window. *Okay, now I know why I thought the old house was full of shadows. That's a terrible story. No wonder the house still seems pretty scary.*

'This ghost - it's Matthew, right?' she said. 'Have you seen it? What does it look like?'

Mrs Corcoran smiled. Not a happy smile, though. A worried kind of smile. 'No-one's ever seen Matthew's ghost,' she said. 'It's not that sort of ghost. It doesn't hover beside the well - or walk down the corridors - or wail in the night.'

'It doesn't? Then how do you know it's there?'

'Because of what happens to the people who live in the house. Every now and then the ghost gets into someone and takes them over. They seem all right at first ... but after a while they start to change. They become jealous and greedy. They want money or power or the house itself and they'll do anything to get it.'

'Oh,' said Blake. 'I see. Just like Matthew.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

Outside, the night was dark and full of shadows. Blake hurried down the path beside the motel, jumping every time the trees tossed in the wind. *There ought to be a law against telling ghost stories to people just before they go to bed. I bet I won't be able to sleep tonight.*

Then she remembered that Huntsman was waiting in her room. That was a relief. She didn't like Huntsman much but no ghosts would dare to turn up while that tough purple-haired street kid was around.

*Unless Matthew's ghost has got into Huntsman already. After all. I've never met him before, so I wouldn't know whether he's suddenly started to change.*

She pushed that thought aside and fished for her key. Opened the door and walked in. The room was empty. At first Blake felt almost relieved and then she started to frown. *Blast. Where's Huntsman? I hope those guys didn't come back and grab him.*

She looked around. Her backpack was still sitting in the middle of the room, where she'd left it. The bed cover was still smooth. The kitten photos were still lined up neatly on the walls.

*No sign of a struggle - and Huntsman definitely wouldn't let himself be dragged away without a fight. He's probably just hiding somewhere, in case Tony and Al tried to peer through the window.*

The bathroom was the most logical hiding place. Blake hurried over and swung the door open. 'Okay, Huntsman, it's safe now,' she called. 'You can come out.'

But the bathroom was empty too. She pulled back the shower curtain, just to make

sure. Then she looked under the bed and behind the curtains. Checked the cupboards, tipped the armchair sideways, peered out through the open window and sighed.

No doubt about it. Huntsman wasn't there any more. He must've got tired of waiting and headed off into the night.

*Oh well, that settles it. I'll never solve this mystery - but I don't really care. I've kept my promise to Spider and there's nothing more for me to do.*

*Now I can set off for Mudgeebung in the morning.*

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Blake hoisted, her backpack onto the bed and undid the flap. Reached for the battered black notebook tucked inside. Her special notebook, where she'd written down every word her mother had ever said and all the facts about her that she'd found out so far. She read through the notebook every night, before she went to sleep.

*Just in case it gives me a new idea.*

It should've been easy to find the notebook, because she always packed pretty carefully. Clothes and torch and camping gear, in exactly the same place each time. Except that, as she groped around, she realised that all her things were jumbled together.

*Oh no. Someone's gone through my backpack. Huntsman, for sure.*

Up-ending the pack, she tipped everything out and sorted through it. The notebook was still there but her space blanket was missing. The thermal one that she used when she was camping out.

Huntsman must've pinched it, which meant he was a thief. Plus it also meant he must be planning to sleep out in the open. *I bet he's going to head back to the Hartley house and try again.*

Blake stared down at the mess on the bed. Grabbed the pack and wriggled one finger into the lining. Sighed with relief as she touched the stash of money that she'd hidden there. Then she sat down on the end of the bed, clutching her forehead. Trying to stop the thoughts that were speeding through her brain.

*I shouldn't have helped Huntsman like that, without asking any questions. What if he really did steal Tony Hartley's files? Tony seemed like a nice guy and Mrs Corcoran said Al's okay too, when he isn't growling. Maybe I got it all wrong. Maybe I should've been helping them, instead of Huntsman.*

She'd made a mistake before, back in the city. She'd tried to play detective - and then she'd found out that she was helping the bad guys, not the good guys. *I decided to be more careful next time but I wasn't careful with Huntsman. I just rushed straight in, as usual, and made a fool of myself again.*

Blake rolled onto her back and gazed up at the ceiling, trying to think things through.

On one hand, Spider had asked her to watch out for Huntsman and she owed Spider. What's more, she hated to see kids in trouble - and that purple-haired street kid was in deep trouble, for sure.

But on the other hand, she didn't trust Huntsman. He was bossy and rude. He'd nicked off, instead of sticking around to explain. He'd searched her pack and stolen her space blanket. And it was starting to sound as though he'd stolen something from the Hartleys too.

*Rats. Looks like I can't run away from Gladesdale, not yet.*

*I have to stay here till I find out whether Huntsman's still trying to break into the Hartley house.*

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Blake tossed and turned. A long night, filled with familiar dreams. She was running from someone through a huge empty house. Searching for someone down long empty streets. Running. Searching. Running and searching.

She woke early, made a cup of coffee and went to sit by the window, watching the sun rise and planning her next move. *I better set this up properly. Otherwise I'll only make things worse.*

After a while she strolled down to the cafe, paid for the room and asked, 'How far is it to the next town?'

'Fifty kilometres to Heatherton,' said Mrs Corcoran. 'It's a nice place, bigger than Gladesdale. A lot of the backpackers stop over there. Too close, though. You'll want to get as far as Mudgeebung before you have lunch.'

Blake grinned. *She's trying to read my mind again - but she couldn't possibly guess what I'm going to do next.* 'Thanks for everything, Mrs C,' she said. She waved to Jerry, who was sorting his baseball cards in a corner, and strode out to the bike.

It was a sunny morning. No shadows anywhere. Blake jolted along the main street and sped off down the highway, lifting her face to the wind. Around her the green hills gradually got smaller and changed into fields of yellow wheat. She turned off at the first sign and rode into Heatherton.

Blake parked the Honda and looked around. *Good. Dozens of shops. I'll be able to find everything I need.* She went into a chemist and a clothes shop and a souvenir shop. Then she wandered down the street till she came to a backpackers' hotel.

There was a coffee shop next door, where the backpackers went for breakfast. About fifty kids, talking in ten different languages. They had sun-bleached hair and sun-tanned skin and they wore army shorts or sarongs from Bali or t-shirts with kangaroos and maps of Australia on the front.

Blake spotted a small blonde girl at a table by herself. Her pack was covered with

badges from different countries, sewn onto the flap. *Yep, definitely a tourist. Just what I'm looking for.*

She sat down at the table and started chatting to the girl. Her name was Inge, she came from Germany and she'd been travelling around Australia for three months, working in pubs and cafes. After a while Blake leaned over and tapped a red, yellow and black striped badge that was peeling off Inge's pack.

'That's the German flag, isn't it?' she asked. 'I've always wanted one of them. Can I buy it from you?'

'*Ach, nein,*' Inge said. 'No, Blake, I give it to you.'

She ripped the flag loose and handed it over. Blake smiled at her. 'Okay then, I'll buy you breakfast,' she said. '*Vielen Danke, Inge. Das ist ganz gut.*'

Inge's eyes widened. 'You speak German good. You live one time in Germany, yes?'

'Nah, I just learned German at school. But I'm glad it sounds okay to you.' *Because that'll help with my plan as well.*

She said goodbye to Inge, left some money for the waiter and hurried off. There was a caravan park at the far end of the street. Blake found the shower block and lugged her shopping bags into one of the cubicles. Stripped off her clothes and turned on the shower.

Fifteen minutes later she walked out and posed in front of the long mirror. A typical backpacker stared out at her. Red hair. (*A henna rinse.*) Brown arms and legs. (*Tanning cream.*) Army shorts and a t-shirt with a koala in a cork-trimmed hat, waving a bunch of gum leaves and saying, 'Bewdy, mate'. (*The final touch. No Australian would ever wear a t-shirt like that.*)

She added some mascara, to darken her blonde eyelashes, and a dash of lipstick, to make her look older. After that she sat outside in the sun while her hair dried, sewing the German flag onto her pack, along with some Australian badges from the souvenir shop. Then she walked back down the main street of Heatherton.

Inge was still sitting in the coffee shop. Blake glanced across as she strolled past but Inge looked straight through her. *Great. It worked. She didn't even recognise me. Time to hitch a lift to Gladesdale now.*

*If Inge didn't recognise me, I bet Tony and Al won't recognise me either, when I apply for that job at the Hartley house.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

Blake left her bike at the garage in Heatherton. Got a ride with a friendly truckie. Walked into the Gladesdale bakery, bought two apple muffins and told the owner that she was looking for a job.

*Inge would probably go to the cafe but I can't risk talking to Mrs Corcoran. She's way too curious and she's seen way too much of me, so my disguise mightn't work on her.*

Her disguise worked on the bakery owner, though. He ran to the door and called out, 'Hey, Al, I got a German tourist here who wants a job. Do you still need another maid out at the old house?' Then he came back, beaming, and said, 'There, that's fixed - and I won't even charge you for it.'

Minutes later Blake was bouncing along the hill road in the front seat of a four-wheel drive, next to Albert Croggan. *Ouch. Things are moving too fast. I wasn't expecting to meet someone I knew, not quite this soon. I thought I'd have a bit more time to practise being German.*

Luckily Al was as grumpy as ever. After he'd said, 'Hop in', he didn't speak again until they arrived at the house. Then he said, 'Hop out'. Jerked his thumb at the door and added, 'The housekeeper's room is thattaway.'

The Hartley house looked completely different in the daytime. Long french windows opening onto the verandah, masses of rose bushes, pigeons strutting along the edge of the roof. The slate tiles were frilled with green and white lichen. The bluestone walls were laced with *ivy* and *wistaria*.

*So calm and peaceful. Not like last night at all.*

Blake walked into the hall and looked around. Rainbow splashes of light patterned the white walls, reflected from the stained glass windows beside the front door. Two high-backed chairs under a row of stags' heads with enormous antlers. A polished wooden staircase, curving down to the black and white marble floor. Five huge oak doors, leading off in five different directions.

And a woman, standing in one of the doorways and frowning at Blake.

'What on earth are you doing here?' she snapped. 'Quick, come to my office before the children see you.'

She hustled Blake down the hall and pushed her into a small room at the back of the house. Blake collapsed into a leather chair and blinked up at her. The woman was wearing a grey suit with chunky shoulder pads, gold-rimmed glasses and sensible shoes. *She looks as though she's spent most of her life sitting behind a desk. But there's a row of sporting trophies along the mantelpiece and solid muscles under those shoulder pads.*

She studied Blake for a moment and then nodded briskly. 'A tourist,' she decided. 'Looking for work, I suppose - which means I should've sent you round to the back door. All right, you're hired.'

Blake blinked again. 'Don't you want to ask me any questions?' she said and the woman laughed.

'Listen, I have dreadful trouble finding maids, because this place is such a long way out of town. If you're happy to work here, that's fine by me. Those clothes are hopeless but I'll give you a uniform, plus a room upstairs, all your meals and the usual salary. In return, you'll have to clean the house and help in the kitchen at dinner time. There are two other maids working here, as well as a cook and a gardener. Oh, and me, of course. I'm Jenna Foster. Pleased to meet you.'

She seized Blake's hand and shook it hard. *Solid muscles on those fingers as well.*

'*Guten Tag,*' Blake said, practising her German accent. 'My name is Inge Braun. I come from Germany and I -'

'Yes, yes,' Jenna said impatiently. 'I don't need your whole life history. Can you start work straightaway? Good. Anything else you need to know?'

Blake had a hundred questions lined up in her mind. She started with the easiest one. '*Ja, Fraulein Foster,*' she said. 'Why are so many people working in this house? What do you do here?'

Jenna Foster stared at her. 'Good heavens, didn't they tell you that in Gladesdale? This is a school, Inge. A very special school.'

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*So that's why Tony Hartley kept saying stuff like 'Those kids aren't stupid.' That's why*

Jenna said, 'Come into my office, before the children see you.' That's why Jerry Corcoran thought Huntsman would've gone to the Hartley house, because 'it's where all the weird kids go.'

*I should've guessed - except that it's the last thing I would've expected. A school? Huntsman was trying to break into a school? Helena Hartley inherited a fortune and came back to start a school?*

*It must be a pretty special sort of special school, to explain all of that.*

Blake wanted to ask more questions but Jenna Foster was already standing up. 'I'll take you round the house now and show you what to do,' she said briskly. 'Come along, Inge.'

*Inge? Oh yeah, that's me.*

She jumped to her feet and followed Jenna out of the office. The housekeeper led her down a dark narrow corridor to a dark narrow flight of stairs. 'Don't ever use the big staircase in the main hall,' she warned. 'You have to stay right out of the children's way. Ms Hartley doesn't want them to even see you.'

'Why not?' Blake asked, but Jenna turned her back and went striding up the stairs, three at a time. Blake puffed along behind her. *Oh wow, I thought I was fit but this woman's super-fit. Olympic hurdler material - or close, at any rate. Why on earth is she working as a housekeeper in a little country town?*

*Another mystery, to add to the rest of the bunch.*

At the top of the dark narrow stairs there was another dark narrow corridor, only half a metre wide. Blake peered down it and frowned. *The house looks so big from the outside. How come the corridors are so small?* They edged down the passage until they came to a little door. Jenna opened it, glanced out and nodded.

'Good, the coast's clear,' she said. 'Hurry up, Inge.'

When Blake ducked through the door, she found she was standing on a small, square balcony. Plump stone pillars supporting a bluestone ledge. A view of lawns and trees and green hills, rolling off into the distance. And behind her, two long glass doors like the french windows downstairs.

Jenna pushed the glass doors open. 'These are the children's rooms,' she announced. 'There's six of them down this side of the house, three children to a room. You'll have to make their beds every morning, tidy the rooms, sweep the floors and polish the furniture.'

Blake raised one eyebrow. 'These special kids, they are too special to clean up their own mess, *ja?*'

'Yes,' Jenna said flatly. 'Much too special.'

She marched over to the nearest bed and started to tug at the sheet. Blake hesitated and then went to help her. There were three beds, lined up against the walls. Three polished wooden desks in three of the corners. And a huge old wardrobe in the corner,

crammed with shirts and skirts and dresses.

They made the first bed and the second and then turned towards the third. *'Ach, gut,'* said Blake. 'Good. One kid has make her bed.'

'Made her bed,' Jenna snapped. 'Made, not *make*. And you're wrong, anyway. That's Rosalee's bed and Rosalee ... isn't here any more.' She straightened the doona and added, 'Now, Inge, don't forget to make sure the rooms are empty before you come in.'

'And if a kid is in the room, what then?'

'Then you have to wait in the corridor, of course, until the room is empty. I told you before, the children aren't supposed to see you.'

Blake scowled. *This is crazy. Does she think the kids couldn't cope with seeing an ordinary person or something?* 'These children are like *Prinzinen und Prinzessinen*,' she said crossly. 'Like little princes and princesses.'

To her surprise, the housekeeper actually laughed. 'It's funny you should say that, Inge. This house was built in 1880, when rich people had lots of servants but they wanted the servants to keep out of their way. "Invisible hands" they called it, as though the housework was being done by magic. That's why they built those servants' corridors inside the walls. Ms Hartley liked the idea, because she wants to protect the children from outside influences - so, yes, in a way the children are being treated like royalty. Or like rich people's children, at any rate, although in fact some of them come from very poor families.'

*Oh yeah? Like Huntsman, for example. Hey, what if he's one of Ms Hartley's special children?*

'Can you tell me more about the children, please?' Blake asked.

The housekeeper stared at her for a moment. 'No,' she said and walked out of the room.

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Jenna clattered down the stairs at top speed. 'I've cleaned the rest of the children's rooms already but tomorrow morning it'll be your job,' she called back over her shoulder. 'After lunch you can do some cleaning downstairs. There's a library, a lesson room, a gym and a dining room - oh, and Ms Hartley's rooms, of course. You'll clean the library and the dining room. The other maids will take care of the rest.'

'Where's my room?' Blake said breathlessly. 'And what about the rooms opposite the kids' rooms?'

'The breakfast room, my bedroom and the teachers' bedrooms are on the other side of the second floor,' Jenna told her. 'You're up in the attics with the other maids, Tony Hartley's in the tower and Al, the gardener, sleeps in a cottage outside. And that's all I'm going to tell you, Inge. You ask too many questions. Far too many questions.'

She strode down the corridor and swung round the corner to her office. Stopped suddenly and mumbled, 'Oh, Ms Hartley, I'm sorry. I almost ran into you.'

'That's all right,' said a soft lilting voice. 'You're busy, I understand that. And who's this child standing behind you?'

'It's just the new maid, Inge Braun,' Jenna shrugged. 'She-' but Ms Hartley waved her away.

'I'm sure you've got a lot of things to do, Jenna,' she said. 'Off you go. I want to talk to Inge.'

The housekeeper stormed into her office, scowling at Blake as she went past. *Like she's warning me to keep my mouth shut.* Blake gulped and took a step forward. Found herself in an enormous room, twice the size of the rooms upstairs.

It was bright and airy, full of sunshine and flowers and paintings and old-fashioned furniture. But Blake hardly noticed any of that, because she was too busy staring at Helena Hartley. She was tall, even taller than Jenna. Silver-grey hair that framed a smooth young-looking face, with high cheekbones and a wide mouth and deep-set blue eyes that glinted like sapphires.

*I thought she'd be one of those model types - heaps of make-up and expensive teeth and fancy clothes. But she'd look just as fantastic if she was dressed in rags, like Cinderella. She's beautiful.*

*Really beautiful.*

Helena Hartley laughed. A musical sound, like a run of notes on a piano. 'I thought you were special and now I'm sure of it,' she said. 'Come here, child, and let me check your aura.'

*My aura? No way. I'm not into that kind of hippy stuff.*

Blake was planning to back to the door but before she could stop herself, she realised she was walking across the room. She stopped in front of Helena Hartley and waited. Helena lifted her long slender hands and ran them around Blake's body- not touching, about thirty centimetres away from her. *As if I was a candle and she was tracing the shape of the light coming off me.*

'Yes, there's a lot of light inside you,' Helena murmured and Blake jumped. 'Mind you, there's a lot of shadow too. It's a pity you're too old. If you were five years younger, you could've become one of my children. I would've taught you how to make your light shine brighter and drive the shadow away.'

Blake shivered and turned her head aside. For a moment the room seemed darker than before. The sunlight gone. Shadow oozing through the window and clustering around them.

Then she blinked and the shadow vanished. *Oh wow, that was weird. I felt like Ms Hartley was looking into my mind. Like she could see the picture of a candle inside my head - and like she knew about that other picture, the picture of the Hartley house*

*oozing shadow.*

*But she doesn't know what I'm thinking. Not possible. She can't.*

Helena patted her cheek and Blake flinched. 'Run along, child,' the tall woman said with a smile. 'Have some lunch and take a look around the gardens before you start work. I'm sorry I can't let you mix with my children - but I have to shield them from the dark side of the world. Still, I'm glad you're here, Inge. In your own way, you're going to bring more light into the Hartley house.'

## CHAPTER SIX

Blake drifted out into the corridor, feeling dazed. *Lunch. Good idea, except that no-one's told me where the kitchen is. Never mind, I'm not totally helpless. I can find it for myself.*

*She* went back to the narrow corridor and found a second flight of stairs that took her down to the basement. Blake peered into a cellar lined with bottles of wine and big wooden barrels and then into a huge laundry, with an old-fashioned copper in one corner and modern washing machines and driers along the walls. She sniffed the air and swivelled around.

*Excellent smell. I bet the kitchen's behind that door.*

It was. She walked into another enormous room with a polished stone floor, benches everywhere and a huge oven, turned black by decades of cooking. People were speeding to and fro, juggling plates and glasses and trays. Blake dodged out of their way and leaned against a shelf set deep in the wall, loaded with casserole dishes.

Then the shelf jerked and started to slide upwards. Blake only just managed to get her elbow out in time, before it was squashed between the shelf and the wall. The shelf jerked one last time and disappeared. She stuck her head into the gap and peered up a long dark chute.

A fat man, carrying three trays at once, stopped to laugh at her. 'That's the dumb waiter,' he said. 'Yeah, stupid name but that's what they call it. Think of it as a very small lift. We load it with food and send it up to the dining room, then they load it with dirty plates and send them back for us to wash. Generally we shut its door when we're not using it - but this time someone must've pressed the button upstairs and given you a

shock.'

Blake nodded. She looked at the fat man's white apron, covered with interesting food stains. The wooden spoon sticking out of the apron pocket. 'You're the cook, *ja?*' she guessed. 'I'm Inge Braun, the new maid.'

'Good,' said the cook. 'We need another pair of hands around here - but not just yet. Sit down and have a bite to eat. I'll see you at dinner time.'

He dumped the trays beside the dumb waiter and hurried off. Blake went over to the oven and collected two hot pasties. She didn't sit down, though. Instead, she climbed the stairs, found a back door and walked out into the sunshine.

She strolled round the garden, munching her pasties and admiring the roses. After a while she heard the sound of voices in one of the front rooms. The lesson room. *Hey, those special kids must be in there.*

She edged closer, crouching behind the rose bushes. When she peered through the leaves, the children near the window looked pretty ordinary. A blond boy in a footy jumper was poking a blonde girl with a ruler and passing her a note. A kid with curly black hair was throwing a ball of paper at a small Vietnamese girl.

Then the teacher said something that Blake couldn't hear and the kids all sat up straight. 'We are the Chosen Children,' they chanted. 'We are the children who will change the world. We are special. We are important. And we will work hard every day, until the sunshine drives the shadow away.'

After that the teacher started mumbling again. Blake shrugged and drifted off. More *of that sunshine and shadow stuff. Ms Hartley must have a thing about it.* She looked around, noticed two more buildings, half-hidden by the trees, and wandered over to investigate.

The first building was a neat little bluestone cottage, with a herb garden and a rainwater tank behind it. *Where Al lives, I guess.* But the second building couldn't have been more different. Tiles missing from its roof. The door lurching on its hinges. Tall weeds sprouting up through the cracked pavement of the yard. A rusty tap that looked as though it hadn't been turned on for years.

*Looks like no-one lives here. I wonder why they're letting it fall to pieces.*

Blake shoved the door open. Winced as the hinges squealed like chalk on a blackboard. She peered into the darkness and saw a row of tiny rooms, with doors that stopped halfway up.

*That's odd - but I've seen something like it before. On TV, I think, with horses' heads poking over the door. Oh yeah, of course. This must be the stable, which explains why it's so run down. Ms Hartley's crazy about old-fashioned stuff but at least she uses cars, not horses.*

She grinned and turned to check behind her. Found a trough full of mouldy hay and a rickety ladder, leading up to a loft with a whole wall of mouldy hay. *Uh-huh. I suppose*

*the horses ate from the trough and then, when it was empty, they pushed some more hay down from the loft. I bet that hay's at least twenty years old.*

She poked the hay and a spider scuttled out. Fat mottled body and long hairy legs, hooked at the ends. Blake jerked her hand back and gasped. It was a huntsman spider, which reminded her that she'd hardly thought about Huntsman all morning.

*I've been so busy figuring out the geography of this place that I'd almost forgotten why I'm here.*

She leaned against the ladder, trying to sum up what she'd learnt so far. The Hartley house was a school for special kids. But why were the kids so special? Because they were in trouble? Because they were smarter than other kids? Or was Ms Hartley gathering kids together so she could start a cult - some strange new religion, all about sunshine and shadow?

*Haven't quite worked that out yet. I'll need to snoop around a bit more.*

Still, she knew enough to make a few guesses about Huntsman. He was smart - and he was in trouble - so he could easily be one of Helena Hartley's special kids. But if that was true, he must've been breaking out of the house, not breaking in. And that didn't make sense. After all, he wouldn't need to break out.

*Unless those kids are prisoners - and Al's their guard.*

Blake shivered. All of a sudden she was desperate to get out of the dark musty stable. She spun around and saw a shadow blocking the door. Clenched her fists, took a step backwards and recognised Al.

'What are you doing here?' he growled and Blake made herself smile at him.

'I explore,' she said in her best German accent. 'This is where the horses live, *ja*? And the spiders.' That gave her an idea. She smiled even harder and added, 'Someone tells me that a boy called Huntsman lives in this house too.'

'Huntsman?' Al snarled. 'Nah, we never had no-one by that name around the place. Go on, get out of here and don't come prowling around again—especially at night. We got alarms on all the downstairs doors. If you open them, you'll wake the whole house.'

'No worries, Mr Al,' Blake said. 'I stay in my bed all night.'

She dodged past him and sped across the lawn, feeling pleased with herself. *At last, a nice solid fact. Huntsman isn't one of Helena Hartley's children, therefore he must be a thief. But I still don't see why he'd want to break into a school. To steal Ms Hartley's lesson plans?*

*I don't think so.*

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Blake swept and cleaned. Dusted and polished. Stirred huge pots of vegetable stew, loaded trays into the dumb waiter, ate dinner and finally trudged upstairs to the attics,

where she collapsed on her bed to rest for a minute and woke up four hours later.

It was twelve o'clock. The house was dark and silent. Blake sat up and rubbed her eyes and went to unpack her things. Clothes into the cupboard. The black notebook on the table beside her bed. Then back into her pack again, tucked into the lining next to her stash of money.

*Just in case someone gets suspicious about Inge Braun and decides to check my stuff, you can't be too careful.*

She found the t-shirt and track pants that she slept in. Headed for the bed but stopped in the middle of the room. *Rats. I don't feel tired any more. Should be tired, after four hours sleep, but I'm not.*

Blake stared around the room. No TV and nothing to read, so she shrugged and went to open the window. She propped her elbows on the sill and gazed out at the midnight hills. The billowy mass of the tree tops, dark as storm clouds. The moon, like a brand new ten cent piece tossed up into the sky.

*Oh, right. Full moon tomorrow. That always makes me restless. Wish I could go for a walk - but I'd set all the alarms off, so I wouldn't get far.*

She leaned her cheek against the window frame and drifted into a half-awake dream. Her room was at the front of the house. When she looked down, she could see the avenue of trees and the gravel drive leading to the front steps, sweeping out in a circle around a fountain ringed by more rose bushes. She could imagine carriages bowling along the avenue, horses crunching across the pale gravel, men and women in evening dress jostling up the steps for Matthew Hartley's party.

And a young woman with a baby in her arms, sidling out of the shadows. The baby that would turn Matthew's party from a celebration into a disaster.

All of a sudden Blake gasped and clutched the window ledge. Blinked and got her eyes into focus and peered at the shadows under the trees.

*Oh wow. It's true. I really can see someone.*

*But who?*

She hung out of the window, fixing her eyes on the shadowy figure. It scooted across the lawn, pushed through the rose bushes and climbed onto the verandah. A knife blade flashed in the moonlight. A long skinny arm reached out.

*Yep, I guessed right. That's not the ghost of Frederick Hartley's wife. That's Huntsman.*

The skinny kid glanced around and took a step forward. After that Blake couldn't see him any more, because the verandah roof got in the way. But when she listened hard, she could hear a sound like a knife tapping on a table.

*I bet I know what Huntsman's doing. He's chipping away the putty around the glass in the library windows. That way, he can lift one of the panes out and wriggle in, without setting off the alarm.*

Blake grabbed the thin silver torch from the side pocket of her pack. She raced downstairs to the second floor and groped along the wall until she found a door. Seconds later she was tiptoeing past the housekeeper's bedroom, then past the breakfast room and onto the big staircase.

*Jenna told me not to use the main stairs but this is an emergency. And besides, there's nobody around to see me.*

She scrambled onto the bannister and pushed off. Went sliding down the polished wood, faster than a water chute ride. Jolted past the landing and hurtled on towards the front hall, dropping light as a cat onto the black and white marble floor.

She padded across to the library, and eased the door open. Moonlight shone silver on the panes of glass in the french windows. Except for the third pane on the left, which was an empty gap.

*Full marks, Blake. Huntsman lifted the glass out, all right. He was pretty quick about it too. I reckon he's done this before.*

She edged into the room, ducking into the shadows by the nearest bookcase. The library was full of shadows but that was okay. After all, she'd spent half the afternoon cleaning the room, so she knew the layout by heart. Bookcases all round the walls, stretching up almost as far as the high ceiling. Long tables where Ms Hartley's children sat and worked. And another table with a row of state-of-the-art computers.

*The computers are over there, behind the other tables. Easy to spot, because I can see a dim grey glow. So that's why Huntsman came back. He wants to hack into Ms Hartley's computer files.*

*Mind you, I still can't see why he's so keen.*

Blake crouched beside the bookcase, trying to decide what to do next. Somewhere in the darkness she heard a door open and shut. Followed by a high shrill scream, cutting through the darkness like a chainsaw gone mad. *I've heard that noise before. Someone's set off the alarm.*

*Not Huntsman. Someone else.*

A switch clicked. The dim grey glow vanished. Huntsman left the computer and came hurtling towards the door. As Blake shrank back into the shadows, she heard footsteps pelting down the main stairs.

She glanced round, panicking. Checked the curtains. *No, too obvious.* Checked the tables. *No, they'd soon spot me under there.* Noticed a ladder propped against the bookcase and nodded with relief. *That's it. The library steps that the children use when they need to fetch a book from the highest shelf.*

Blake climbed the ladder, quick as a monkey. Wedging her foot against the second-last shelf, she swung out and up. Next minute she was sprawling face down, gripping the edge with frantic fingers. Squeezing herself into the narrow gap between the top of the bookcase and the ceiling.

*It's lucky I'm small. Otherwise this wouldn't have worked.*

Then torch beams flashed around the walls and the footsteps came pounding into the library. Tony Hartley's voice said, 'For heaven's sake, Al! You're supposed to be guarding the house, not frightening everyone out of their wits. What's the big drama?'

'Sorry, boss,' Al growled. 'I was out in the garden, doing my rounds, and I thought I saw this light inside the library. So I made a dash for the door - and forgot about the alarms.'

'Oh, terrific,' Tony sighed. 'If anyone was here, you've probably scared them off by now. Still, we'd better take a look around.'

Their torches probed the darkness under the tables. Tony strode over to the windows and pulled the curtains aside, while Al swung his torch aimlessly across the bookshelves. Blake held her breath and watched his torch beam lift higher and higher.

Just before it reached the top shelf, a musical voice said, 'What's going on here?'

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Blake almost groaned out loud with relief. She bit her lip and pressed back against the narrow strip of wall, feeling faint and giddy. Below her, Al was saying, 'There was an intruder, Ms Hartley. At least, I think there was. I'm pretty sure I saw one of the computer screens glowing.'

'A computer?' Jenna Foster's voice cut in. 'That doesn't prove a thing, Al. One of the kids could've had a brainwave in the middle of the night and come down to make some notes. Why are you so convinced it was an intruder?'

*Interesting. Apparently, Al and Tony haven't told Jenna everything. In the cafe last night, they said Huntsman was after some files - computer files, I guess. That explains how Al guessed that Huntsman was breaking into the library.*

*But I wonder why he's keeping secrets from Jenna.*

She waited and listened but no-one said a word. Al and Jenna were probably glaring at each other, with Tony and Helena Hartley watching from the sidelines and Huntsman hiding in the darkness, somewhere nearby. Blake could picture all of them as clearly as if she could see them.

Suddenly the hairs down the nape of her neck began to bristle, as though she'd been clutched by an icy hand. *Oops. It's my own personal danger signal - but what's it warning me about? I thought I was safe here.*

She shut her eyes and concentrated hard. Once again, a picture took shape in her mind. Tony and Ms Hartley, Al and Jenna and Huntsman. And a shadow oozing from the little group. Stretching out like an octopus's tentacle. Searching for her.

Blake's heart was pounding. She wanted to slam her mind shut, so the shadow couldn't find her, but she didn't know how to do it. *Should've asked Daffy Clarke, while I had the chance. I bet she could've taught me a few useful tricks.*

The shadow cast around, hungry and hunting. Blake started shaking, so hard that she was scared she might shake herself right off the bookcase. Then, as she clutched desperately at the shelf, she heard a clatter from upstairs.

'There!' Al growled. 'I was right. Someone was breaking in.'

The housekeeper sniffed. 'Maybe. We'll see about that. I'll check the second floor and calm the kids down. Tony, you can search this floor, while Al checks out the basement. And -'

Ms Hartley laughed. 'Leave me out of this, Jenna. I'm going back to bed. You can report to me in the morning - if there's anything worth reporting.'

More footsteps, pattering off down the hall as the group scattered. Blake counted to a hundred. Listened to make sure Tony wasn't coming back and then swung her feet out. Found the ladder, climbed down and slumped against the bookcase, still trembling.

*Did that really happen? Did I really feel a shadow searching for me? It sounds crazy but somehow I can't help believing it. Worse still, I think I know what the shadow is. I think it's Matthew Hartley's ghost, come back again to take over somebody in this house. Jenna - or Al - or Tony - or Ms Hartley.*

*Or Huntsman.*

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Blake was tired and frightened. She wanted to crawl back into bed and pull the blankets over her head. But the housekeeper would be roaming around the second floor, cutting her off from the attic. *And besides, I might as well look for Huntsman. That's why I came down here, after all.*

She rubbed her aching muscles and tried to work out where Huntsman had gone. Al thought he was upstairs but Blake wasn't so sure. When Huntsman darted out of the library, she'd heard footsteps on the stairs a few seconds later. So the street kid wouldn't have had a chance to run up to the second floor. He'd barely have had enough time to make it into the next room.

Blake sidled to the door and peeped out cautiously. Heard clangs and thumps from the room at the end of the hall. *Uh-huh. Tony must be searching the gym.* She whipped out into the hall, skidded across the marble floor and ducked into the dining room. Shut the door, leaned back against it and looked around.

To her surprise, the room was empty. Nothing but four dining tables, surrounded by chairs. *Damn. I was positive Huntsman would be here.* She checked again, sighed, turned to go. And froze as she heard a loud creak from the far side of the room.

Blake spun around and studied the wall. After a few seconds she spotted a square wooden frame, set deep into the plaster. *Oh yeah, of course. The dumb waiter. I forgot about that.*

She marched over and grabbed the handle of the dumb waiter's door, hauling it up. At the same moment the door to the dining room burst open. Blake whirled back. Saw Tony Hartley in the doorway. Gasp and staggered as someone shoved her from behind.

Huntsman leapt out of the dumb waiter and ran for the door. He charged straight at Tony and sent him flying. Blake hesitated for half a second and then made up her mind. *There's no point in chasing Huntsman, not with all those people after him. I better settle for getting away.*

She scrambled into the dumb waiter, bending double and clutching her knees to her chest. Reached out and pressed the button. The dumb waiter creaked and groaned. Its motor whirred, its pulleys clanked and it started to sink down the lift shaft.

Down into pitch black darkness. Blake couldn't see a thing. She shut her eyes and tried not to think about what would happen if the dumb waiter got stuck. *Think about what you'll do when you arrive in the kitchen, instead. And remember that AI could still be down there, looking around.*

As the dumb waiter thudded to a halt, Blake slid the door up and jumped out. Her feet landed with a squeaky, crunching sound and she looked down, puzzled.

*Huh? I don't get it. The floor's covered with sand, just to make things harder. If AI didn't hear the dumb waiter, he'll definitely hear me crunching.*

Blake thought fast. She went skating across the floor, sliding her runners in long arcs that pushed the sand out ahead of them. When she got to the other side of the kitchen, she dodged into the pantry and pulled the door shut. Then she waited and listened.

*Again. I'm tired of waiting and listening.*

After a while she realised she could hear a noise somewhere in the distance. A noise like a rushing wind. She shut her eyes, to help her concentrate, and finally recognised the sound. It was a clothes dryer, which meant that AI was in the laundry. He must've turned the dryer on, to check whether anyone was hiding inside.

*He's a real friendly sort of guy - not. Still, if the dryer's roaring at him, he won't have heard me thudding and crunching.*

She waited a bit longer, till AI's footsteps went clumping up the stairs. Relaxed and peered out into the kitchen. As she took a step forward, there was a loud clang from nearby. The door of the big oven swung slowly open and a kid came tumbling out.

*Huntsman? How the hell did he manage to get down here? Or - oh no, don't tell me someone else is playing hide and seek as well.*

While she watched, a second kid crawled out of the oven. Blake scowled and decided she was sick of playing hide and seek. She reached for the torch in her pocket

and switched it on. Flashed its narrow beam towards the two kids beside the stove.

They were standing close together, arms around each other. A boy and a girl, like Hansel and Gretel escaping from the witch. *Except that Hansel and Gretel were brother and sister and I don't think those two are related. Something tells me they're in love.*

As the torch beam reached their faces, Blake realised she'd seen them before, through the classroom window. The blond boy, who'd been passing a note to a blonde girl. *Asking her to meet him here tonight, I bet.*

'So,' she growled, trying to sound as tough as Al. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Pheona,' the girl said obediently. 'That's P-h-e-o-n-a, not F-i-o-n-a.'

'Right,' Blake said, biting back a grin. 'I'll remember that. And you?'

'I'm Peter,' the boy told her. 'Well, I'd rather be called Pete but Ms Hartley won't let us use nicknames.'

Blake nodded. 'She's pretty strict, isn't she?'

'You bet,' Pheona burst out. 'Us girls aren't even allowed to go walking in the garden with the guys, let alone out on a date. Ms Hartley reckons love rots your brains or something. That's why Pete and I have to meet at night, in secret.'

'We're in love, see,' Pete said, pulling Pheona closer. 'And we're not going to let Ms Hartley break us up. Her and her stupid school.'

'What sort of school is it, anyway?' Blake asked and for the first time the two kids hesitated. Pete frowned and glanced at Pheona, who nodded and narrowed her eyes at Blake.

'Hey, what's with all the questions?' she said. 'We told you who we are - but who are you?'

'I'm Inge Braun,' Blake said quickly. 'I'm travelling around Australia but I just got a job here, as a maid.'

Pete frowned even harder. 'Oh yeah? Then how come you don't have a German accent?'

Blake looked startled. She checked back over the conversation and realised Pete was right. 'Rats,' she said. 'I forgot. Okay, I'm not Inge Braun. My name's Blake and I came to the Hartley house to look for a friend of mine. Do you want the whole story?'

Pete and Pheona swapped glances again. Their fingers twisted together and they kept on gazing into each other's eyes, as though they'd forgotten Blake was there. She cleared her throat loudly and watched them jump.

'No, thank you, Blake' Pheona said politely. 'We're not really interested. We're in enough trouble already, without taking on your problems as well.'

Blake stared. *Wow, what a pair. How can they resist hearing about an interesting mystery? Ms Hartley's right. Love does rot your brain.*

'Oh well, fair enough,' she said. 'But could you at least tell me a bit about the school? That won't get you into any more trouble, I promise.'

'Hey, why not?' Pete shrugged. 'I don't care if you use it against Ms Hartley, anyway. Fact is, she deserves all she gets.'

'Yeah?' Blake said, surprised. 'I met her this afternoon and she seemed kind of nice. Definitely weird - but nice, all the same.'

Pete and Pheona looked at each other. 'Oh sure, she's nice,' Pheona agreed. 'While she's talking, you want to believe everything she says. Then you go away and start wondering what it was all about. Well, Pete and I started wondering, at any rate. The other kids just soak it all up, because they love being told how special they are.'

'I loved it at first,' Pete admitted. 'I come from this school out in the western suburbs, so I'd never seen computers and books and teachers like they have here. But then me and Phee got talking and I started to see things from a different angle. I mean, Ms Hartley pays my folks a lot of money for sending me to her school, right? Like she's bought me or something.'

'Plus she rang my parents five times in three days, to talk them into enrolling me,' Pheona chimed in. 'Mind you, they didn't need a whole lot of persuading. They're halfway through a divorce right now, so they were glad to get rid of me.' She hesitated and added, 'Most of the other kids've got stories like that. Ms Hartley keeps calling us the Chosen Children but I reckon we're more like the Lost Children.'

Blake drummed her fingers on the edge of the stove. 'Okay, so why does everyone keep saying you're special?'

Pheona grinned. 'Hey, we're geniuses. Hadn't you noticed? Ms Hartley puts ads in the papers and runs these free intelligence tests. If you score incredibly well, she offers you a place at the school. It's kind of cool, being told all the time how brilliant we are - but I hate the way she tries to cut us off from the rest of the world. Like, she'd freak if she knew we were talking to you, right?'

Blake looked them up and down. *Geniuses, huh? I never would've guessed. Hope I haven't wrecked their brilliant minds by having a chat with them.*

As she scowled at them, Pete said, 'Hey, we better go now. Otherwise we'll be totally wiped in the morning.'

Blake swung her hand out to stop him. 'Wait a minute, mate. I ought to warn you that Jenna's patrolling the second floor.'

'Yeah, we know that,' Pete told her. 'We were out on the balcony when the alarm went off. We couldn't get back to our rooms because Jenna came charging out. Then Phee dropped one of her shoes and made a real racket - so we slid down the laundry chute, to hide in the basement till it was all over.'

'The laundry chute?' Blake repeated and Pheona chuckled.

'Didn't Jenna show you? It's at the end of the hall on the second floor, near her room. The maids drop the sheets and towels into it and they go whizzing down to the laundry - but it works for kids too. Sandro Petrucelli discovered it. He's always hungry,

so he slides down to the kitchen every night for a snack.'

'It's a pity we can't slide *up* it,' Blake sighed. 'Although, come to think of it, Jenna's probably figured out that you two are missing.'

Pete shook his head. 'Not a problem. We stuff some clothes under our doonas before we go out. And no-one'll be surprised that the alarm didn't wake us. We're famous for being heavy sleepers - on account of spending half the night on the balcony.'

'Sounds pretty safe,' she agreed. 'Listen, can I ask one more question before you go?'

The two kids looked at each other again and then Pheona said, 'Oh, all right.' Blake sorted through all the questions in her mind, trying to choose.

'Have you come across a guy called Huntsman?' she said finally. 'And have you noticed anything strange over the last few days?'

'That's two questions,' Pete told her. *Yeah, this kid's definitely a genius.* He grinned and added, 'But I'll tell you, anyway, because it won't take long. The answer's "no" and "no".'

'Wait a minute,' Pheona cut in. 'I can think of one strange thing, at least. What about Rosalee, that girl in my room? She disappeared yesterday ... but hey, I reckon she probably just ran away. She hated this place even more than we do.'

Blake groaned. *Oh no, I don't believe it. All I wanted was some information about Huntsman but what do I get? Another mystery. Another missing kid. That's all I need right now.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

They crunched over to the dumb waiter. 'Why's the floor covered with sand?' Blake asked and Pete said, 'Hey, that's your third question.'

Pheona squeezed his arm and said, 'Don't be such a dork. It's an old-fashioned way of cleaning floors, Blake. When you walk on the sand, it kind of polishes the stone. Makes a terrible noise, but. We would've got caught, if we hadn't thought of hiding in the oven.'

She kissed Pete, scrambled into the dumb waiter and pressed the button. Pete went next and Blake after that. When she climbed out, Pete and Pheona were kissing again in a corner of the breakfast room. Blake mumbled 'G'night' and headed for the attic stairs.

*Love. They can keep it. I can't see the point. Can't see myself ever falling for anybody.*

*Not until I've sorted out this business with my mother and father.*

She tugged the black notebook out of her pack and settled down on her bed to read through it. Closed her eyes for a moment. And woke up with her cheek pressed against the first page and sunshine pouring through the window.

*Oops, I didn't even set my alarm clock. Luckily it's only twenty to seven. Twenty minutes before I'm supposed to start work.*

She hid the notebook again and struggled into her uniform. Black dress, black stockings, frilly white apron. More *of that old-fashioned stuff*. Then she ran downstairs to the kitchen and served herself a bowl of muesli. Collected a broom, a duster and some

polish from the laundry cupboard and headed back upstairs.

When she reached the door that led into the main hall, Blake paused for a second. *Wonder what the kids are doing now. I'd love to get a look at one of their lessons. It sounds really quiet out there. Maybe I can risk it.*

She listened at the door and then sidled out. Down the corridor, past the housekeeper's room and across the black and white marble floor. Someone was talking in the room at the end of the hall.

*The gym? Strange way to start the day - but then, this is a strange school.*

Blake flattened herself against the wall and peered in. Saw kids lined up in rows - sixteen of them, so Pete and Pheona must still be fast asleep. She studied the front row carefully. Two dead-set computer nerds. A tiny, beautiful Vietnamese girl. A bug-eyed boy with see-through skin who couldn't have been more than nine years old. And a plump cheerful kid with curly dark hair - Sandro Petrucelli, for sure.

*A pretty varied bunch. I guess geniuses come in all shapes and sizes.*

As she watched, the kids began to chant. 'We are the Chosen Children', the same as the day before. When they'd finished, the teacher said, 'Okay, today's a free day, which means you'll be working on your own projects. So we're going to start with some yoga, to let the light in and drive the shadow away.'

He started showing the class how to stretch and bend. *Yoga? Big deal. I've seen people doing yoga before.* Blake sighed, feeling disappointed. Turned around.

And looked up at Jenna Foster.

The housekeeper smiled ferociously. 'Well, well,' she whispered. 'I was wondering when you'd notice me. Come along, Inge. Something tells me we need to have another little chat with Ms Hartley.'

She grabbed the collar of Blake's dress and marched her down the corridor. Knocked on the door and pushed Blake in. 'I caught this brat snooping around the gym, Ms Hartley,' she announced. 'If you ask me, I reckon you ought to fire her straight away.'

Helena Hartley was sitting at her desk beside the window, with a breakfast tray in front of her. She settled a gold-rimmed tea cup into its saucer and glanced up. 'Good morning, Inge,' she said in her musical voice. 'I hope you slept well. Are you enjoying your new job?'

Beside her, Blake could hear Jenna grinding her teeth. 'You're wasting your time,' she snapped. 'There's no point being polite to the little sneak. Just sack her, Ms Hartley.'

The arch of Ms Hartley's eyebrows lifted a millimetre higher. 'I think you've forgotten something, Jenna,' she murmured. 'I give the orders around here. Inge's not a bad child, you know, just curious. We'll have a talk and after that I'm sure she won't give you any more trouble.'

The housekeeper looked as though she was getting ready to argue. But Helena

Hartley just turned away and picked up a silver coffee pot.

'Ask one of the maids to bring me another cup for Inge,' she said. 'Goodbye, Jenna.'

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Blake perched on the tapestry seat of a low chair, drinking espresso coffee from the thinnest china cup she'd ever held in her hand. *Like something out of a museum. Come to think of it, this whole room could easily be in a museum. And Ms Hartley too.*

Helena Hartley was wearing a long grey gown with tight-fitting sleeves and a ruffle at the neck. Its full skirt swished across the carpet as she paced up and down.

'We live in strange times, Inge,' she said. 'The shadows are gathering fast. We invented all kinds of machines, so people would have time to think and dream and be with their friends and families - and let more light shine into their lives. But the big companies sacked most of their workers and put machines in their place. Now half the world's working ten hours a day, because they're scared they might be sacked too. And the other half of the world doesn't have any work at all.'

'Um, right,' Blake mumbled but Ms Hartley took no notice.

'The politicians are no use,' she went on, her voice rising. 'They just take money away from our schools and hospitals and theatres and community centres and use it to help the big companies. We'll be swallowed up by the shadow soon, unless we stop thinking about money and start thinking about ways to make everyone happier.'

A maid tiptoed in with a fresh pot of coffee and tiptoed out again. Ms Hartley didn't even seem to see her.

'That's why I started this school and went looking for my children,' she said, pacing faster. 'They're the Chosen Children, Inge. They're dreaming up new ideas that are going to change the world. They're special. They're important. And they'll work hard, every day, till their dream comes true and their light drives the shadow away.'

Her voice was shaking with excitement. It didn't sound like a run of piano notes now - more like the screech of a violin that was slightly off-key. Her hands plucked at the ruffle of her gown and her blue eyes had rolled up so far that Blake could only see their whites.

'Well, Inge?' she demanded. 'What do you think of my plan?'

Blake wasn't sure what to say. Luckily, she didn't have to say a thing, because the door flew open and Tony Hartley came hurrying in.

'Hello, Aunt Helena,' he said, taking her arm and steering her back to the desk. 'Oh dear, are you getting upset again?'

Helena Hartley crumpled into her chair. 'I was just talking to this child,' she said faintly. 'Trying to explain my dream. She's a good girl, Tony. A little bit of shadow in her - but a lot of light too.'

*Huh? What's she on about? Pheona was right. While she's talking to you, it sounds great. But afterwards you realise it doesn't make any sense.*

Tony glanced over his shoulder and winked at Blake. 'Sure, Aunt Helena,' he said. 'The kid's full of sunshine, I can see that. She's also one of our maids, so you'd better let her get back to work. And you'd better have a nice long rest too.'

He glanced at Blake again and jerked his head towards the door. As she scrambled to her feet, Helena said weakly, 'Thank you for listening, Inge. I'm sorry Tony had to come and rescue you. I'm a dreamer, you see, but he keeps me in touch with the real world.'

Tony was turning to go but he swung back to face his aunt. 'Hey, I believe in your dream too, you know,' he said, before he followed Blake out into the hall.

She sighed. *Oh, great. I thought Tony was the sensible one - but it looks like he's just as wacky as she is.*

## CHAPTER NINE

Blake hesitated outside the door, wondering what she was supposed to do next. Behind her Tony said, *'Wie geht's? Alles in Ordnung, ja?'*

*What? Oh, got it. He said, 'How's it going? Are you all right?' in German.*

*'Ach, es ist hier ganz gemütlich,'* she said, turning round. *'Sprechen Sie Deutsch, Herr Hartley?'*

'Do I speak German?' Tony translated. 'A little bit, Inge. But I'm afraid I don't know what *gemütlich* means.'

Blake frowned. 'It means comfortable,' she tried. 'Or nice. I say that it is very nice here.'

*I'm lying, though. Actually, it's very weird here. One minute the boss is telling me how she wants to change the whole world. Next minute her nephew is testing me out, by talking German when I'm not expecting it. It's like he suspects I'm not really a German tourist.*

*What did I do wrong?*

Tony ran his hand through his mouse-coloured hair and narrowed his no-colour eyes. Then he smiled and once again his face changed from ordinary to drop-dead handsome.

'I'm glad you like the place,' he said. 'And I'm sorry about my aunt. She doesn't usually lecture people like that.'

Blake shrugged. *'Es macht nichts.* I mean, it doesn't matter.'

Another dazzling smile from Tony. 'Thanks, Inge ... but I want to explain, just the same. You see, when Aunt Helena's husband died, he left everything to her. At first she tried to go on running his companies - with my help, of course. We wanted to prove we could make a profit and pay our workers properly. But the big companies didn't like it, because they were worried that their workers would ask for more money as well. So they forced Aunt Helena to sell out.'

'They force her?' Blake repeated. 'That is wrong, *ja?* Your aunt, she should go to the police and -'

Tony sighed. 'No, Inge, it was all quite legal. The big companies just got together and told us we couldn't use their trucks or sell our products in their supermarkets or store things in their warehouses, not unless Aunt Helena agreed to pay her workers less. But she wouldn't agree, of course. She wouldn't play by their rules, so they shut her out of the game. That's why she had to sell her companies to Interco in the end. And that's why she set up this school.'

Blake's eyes opened wide. *Oh no, not Interco. The huge multinational company that my father runs. Don't tell me it's turned up again. It's everywhere. I can't get away from it.*

*Which means I can never really get away from my father, no matter how far I run.*

'Your aunt, she starts this school for revenge?' she guessed and Tony laughed.

'Not exactly, Inge. She still believes in her dream, you know. She wants people to learn how to make their lives better, not just to make money.' Then he grinned like a cheeky five-year-old and added, 'But hey, if her Chosen Children are as good as she thinks they are, the big companies are going to be in big trouble. So, yeah, I suppose we might get the chance to pay Interco back as well.'

Blake shivered. *Oh wow, this is confusing. All of a sudden I feel like Tony and Ms Hartley and I are on the same side. I'm mad at my father and his company too. I've seen what happens to workers who lose their jobs. It's a pretty depressing business.*

*On the other hand, I still don't see how this bunch of Chosen Children can change the whole world. So maybe I'm not on Ms Hartley's side, after all.*

She was getting ready to ask another question when Tony said, 'Well, Inge, I've told you a bit about what we're doing here. Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself in return? Al Croggan reckons you've been asking about a kid called Huntsman. What makes you so interested?'

*Oops. Now I know why Tony got suspicious. He's probably wondering whether I came here to help Huntsman. Time to think up a really good lie.*

'Huntsman?' she said. '*Ach, ja.* I remember. Yesterday I am in a cafe in Heatherton. A girl tells me that there are jobs at a house in Gladesdale and then she says, "If you are working there, will you please ask about my friend Huntsman?" So I ask - but Al tells

me he doesn't know this Huntsman.' She crossed her fingers behind her back. *I think that sounds convincing. Let's see if it works.*

'Fair enough,' Tony said, frowning. 'Who was this girl, Inge? And how were you supposed to contact her, if you tracked Huntsman down?'

Blake thought fast. 'Urn, she tells me to write to the main post office in the city.'

'Good. In that case, you know her name.'

'*Nein*,' she said. 'No, Mr Tony. The girl asks me to write Black Widow on the postcard. But Black Widow is not a real name, *nicht wahr?*'

'Black Widow?' Tony repeated, raising his eyebrows. 'More spiders? That's a tag, Inge - a nickname, like Huntsman. I'm afraid it's not much help but, oh well, thanks for trying.'

Blake's muscles relaxed and she slumped against the wall. *Phew. He believed me - but I'm exhausted. Telling lies is way more tiring than cleaning rooms and polishing furniture.*

She looked up to find Tony watching her. 'It's funny, I keep thinking I've seen you in Gladesdale recently,' he said, rubbing his forehead. 'Still, that can't be true. There was a girl staying at the Corcorans' motel but she looked quite different - and besides, she moved on yesterday. And the only other stranger in town is the young guy who's at the motel now.'

He shrugged and added, 'Never mind. I shouldn't keep you here any longer. A word of warning, though, before you go back to work. Watch out for Jenna Foster, Inge. She's an excellent housekeeper but she doesn't really believe in the Chosen Children or our dream.'

His no-coloured eyes fixed on her, as though he was trying to drill the warning into her brain. When he turned and walked away, Blake relaxed and started to grin. *Actually, that's the best thing I've heard about Jenna Foster so far. I don't really believe in the Chosen Children myself.*

*Or Ms Hartley's precious dream either.*

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She stood there for a moment, watching the patterns of light from the stained glass windows. Counting the antlers on the stags' heads along the wall. Listening to the murmur of voices from the library, where the children were studying.

*That was an interesting talk with Tony. He's obviously been working with his aunt for ages and he seems to like her a lot. I understand Ms Hartley much better now.*

*Still, I wish I'd managed to find out more about this young guy at the motel. I wonder whether it's Huntsman. Nah, surely not. Tony would've recognised him - unless Huntsman's disguised himself too. My disguise fooled Tony all right, even though he*

*had a vague feeling that he'd seen me before. So Huntsman could've fooled him as well.*

She decided to see whether she could hitch back into Gladesdale later on and check out the young guy. Then she turned and headed back down the corridor. The door of the housekeeper's office was half-open. As she hurried past. Jenna Foster called out, 'Inge, come here.'

Blake sidled into the room. Jenna shuffled a stack of papers and hitched at her shoulder pads. 'You've been talking to Tony Hartley, haven't you?' she said. 'Be careful of him, Inge. I don't trust him.'

*Hey, what a coincidence. He doesn't trust you either.*

'Tony is a bad man?' she asked and Jenna ran her hands through her short brown hair.

'I'm not sure whether he's a bad man but I think he's very dangerous. Look at the way he talked Ms Hartley into trying to run her husband's companies. He doesn't know much about business, so she lost a lot of money. And now he's hanging around her school as well.'

'Why not?' Blake asked. 'Tony is Ms Hartley's nephew, *ja*? Maybe he is here because he likes her.'

Jenna scowled. 'Maybe - and maybe he's after her money. Tony used to work for Ms Hartley's husband as well, you know. They didn't have any children, so I suspect Tony hoped his uncle would leave him some money - and I suspect he's still trying to get money out of his aunt. That's why I'm warning you, Inge. Don't tell Tony too much about what goes on in this house. He might use the information to hurt Ms Hartley.'

She frowned down at the stack of papers. Then she glanced up, flapped her hands at Blake and said, 'Go on. Shoo. Out of here.'

Blake backed away and scurried down to the servants' corridor. Climbed the narrow stairs and edged onto the first balcony. Peeped through the long glass doors, to make sure no-one was around, and started cleaning the room.

*While she swept and polished, she thought about everything, she'd found out. They're a crazy bunch. Ms Hartley living in a dream world. Tony Hartley warning me about Jenna foster and Jenna warning me about Tony. Jenna reckons Tony's just in it for the money. Tony's worried because Jenna doesn't believe in his aunt's dream - like, she might've come to the Hartley house for some reason of her own.*

*And meanwhile they both seem to be totally loyal to Helena Hartley. It's very confusing. What's more, it isn't helping me to sort out this business with Huntsman either.*

She hung the rugs over the balcony and beat them with a broom to shake the dust out. Brushed a cobweb from the ceiling. Carted a pile of dirty clothes to the laundry chute at the end of the hall and watched them go sliding down to the basement. Like

Pete and Pheona last night.

As she trudged back to the room, Blake started puzzling about Huntsman again. *Hmm, I think I've changed my mind. Maybe I am finding out more about Huntsman, after all. Ms Hartley's obviously still rich, even though she had to sell her companies. What if Huntsman's hacking into her files in order to steal some of her money?*

It made sense. More sense than anything else she'd thought about so far. And if she was right, then Huntsman would definitely try again. *So I'll be waiting for him, same as last night. No, I've got an even better idea. I'll take that loose pane of glass out of the library window, like he did, and hide on the verandah, so I can catch him there.*

She patted the last doona into place and nodded, pleased to have made a decision. As she headed for the balcony, the door swung open.

'Good,' said Pheona. 'I was hoping you'd be here. I wanted to make sure you hadn't told anyone about Pete and me.'

Blake grinned at her. 'No way. I'll keep your secret, if you'll keep mine.'

Pheona flopped onto her bed, bouncing on the springy mattress. 'Yeah, I knew that, really. I just needed to double-check. Besides, I was dying to get away from my computer for a while. This project I'm working on is *soo* stupid. I mean, one minute Ms Hartley's raving on about how she hates the big companies - and next minute she wants us to hack into the big companies' data bases. To practise our computer skills, Tony says, but there's more interesting ways to do that. This is *bo-oring*.'

'Dangerous too, if the companies catch you,' Blake commented but Pheona just laughed.

'Hey, they won't catch us. We're way too smart for that. Like, Rosalee hacked into Gameworld Inc last week and got the plans for their next game - and that's supposed to be totally impossible.'

'Yeah, and now Rosalee's disappeared,' Blake pointed out.

'Coincidence,' Pheona said but she sat up and frowned at the empty bed, all the same. Then she shook her head and added, 'Like I told you, Rosalee got sick of the place and ran away. Forget it, Blake. You're making a big mystery out of nothing.'

She swung her feet off the mattress and went storming out. Blake shut the glass doors and leaned on the balcony for a moment, looking out across the green hills. *Making it all up, am I? I don't think so. There's a lot of mysteries around this house, for sure.*

*Still, right now I'm supposed to be cleaning its rooms, not solving its mysteries.*

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Blake worked fast. Even though she'd started late, she managed to finish cleaning all the children's rooms by lunchtime. When she raced down to the kitchen, she noticed

Al talking to one of the teachers. 'We had a spot of bother with the alarms the other night,' he was saying. 'So me and that kid Pete spent the morning fixing up a new system. We've wired the windows this time, as well as the doors. And we're turning the system on early, at six o'clock - so you better warn all the kids not to open any doors or windows on the ground floor after that.'

*Rats. I won't be able to sneak out and ambush Huntsman, after all. I'll have to think of a new plan.*

While she was frowning to herself, the guard turned away and sat down at the bench, with a mountain of chips and a steak that was almost as big as his plate. Blake cheered up.

*Oh, good. Al told me not to go exploring again but it'll take him ages to get through that lot. I think I'll take another look around, while he's eating.*

She let herself out through the back door. The children were still at lunch in the dining room, so Blake wandered over to Al's cottage. She paused and looked around. Heard a soft, regular noise, like someone picking at the strings of a guitar.

*Plink. Plink. Plink. What is it? Oh right, the tap beside the stable seems to be dripping. It wasn't dripping yesterday, though, so someone must've turned it on since then. I suppose Al could've been watering the garden - except that I can't see a hose or a watering can.*

*Or Huntsman could've been looking for something to drink.*

That was an interesting idea. What if Huntsman wasn't staying at the Corcorans' motel at all? What if he was hiding somewhere near the house? It'd make sense, for sure. That way, he wouldn't need to walk all the way from Gladesdale to the house before he tried to break in. But where could he hide?

Blake laughed and thought of an answer. *In the stable, with the other huntsman spiders.*

It was supposed to be a joke. But then she remembered the ladder and the loft and the wall of hay and the joke began to make sense. There were plenty of places to hide in the stable, for sure. Might as well check them out.

As she took a step forward, Blake felt a tickle between her shoulder blades. She wriggled inside her uniform and kept going. The itch was still there but she didn't intend to stop and scratch it.

*Not now. I've got a thief to catch.*

She cut across the yard between the cottage and the stable. Plunged knee-deep into the weeds and waded on, eyes fixed on the stable door. Then her foot snagged against something rough and solid. She yelped and stumbled, hands thrust out in front of her to break her fall.

But her hands never hit the ground. Instead, they slammed into a wooden lid. Her palms went skidding across its surface and struck a metal handle. So hard that the lid

jolted and shifted.

A cold tingle shivered down Blake's spine. *Oh-oh. The icy finger's trying to warn me again.* Too late, though. The lid was already tipping sideways and thudding onto the pavement.

And Blake was falling forward, into a deep dark hole.

## CHAPTER TEN

Blake threw her arms out wide and grabbed the stones at the edge of the hole. Hooked her feet over the stones behind her and dug her toes in. For a moment she hung there, suspended over a black pit. Then she tensed her muscles and flung her right arm into the air. Pushed with all her strength. Arched and lifted and rolled.

And collapsed into the weeds at the side of the pit, gasping for breath.

After a while she sat up and peered into the hole. A long shaft lined with bluestone, about twenty metres deep, with a gleam of dark water at the bottom. *Oh, right. The well. I nearly fell into it.*

*Just like Matthew Hartley and his baby nephew.*

She rubbed the bruise on her elbow, where it had banged against the low stone wall around the well. Started to scratch the tickle between her shoulder blades and then realised that it wasn't there any more.

*Rats. That wasn't an itch. It was the icy hand, trying to warn me. I've got so used to it that I don't even notice it now. Sorry, icy hand. I promise I'll pay more attention next time.*

Blake scrambled to her feet and edged round the well. She gripped the metal handle and heaved the lid out of the weeds. Dropped it onto the low wall of the well and knelt down to shove it into place. Then, at the last minute, she decided to try an experiment.

Clutching the stone wall, she leaned out over the well. She shut her eyes and thought about shadows. The shadow that had come oozing towards her, the first time she saw the Hartley house. The shadow that had come oozing towards her in the

library, with Tony and Ms Hartley, Jenna and Al and Huntsman somewhere near by.

The shadow that was Matthew Hartley's ghost.

Gradually a picture took shape in her mind. The shaft of the well, dropping down into the earth. Green moss furring the stones. Sunlight reflected on a circle of water, like a full moon trapped underground. No shadows oozing towards her this time ... but a few fragments of shadow clung to the wall of the well.

*Yep, that's what I thought. The ghost came from the well but it's not here any more. It's taken somebody over - somebody in the Hartley house. So I'm not just trying to catch a thief. I'm playing hide and seek with a ghost as well.*

Blake pushed the lid into place and sat back on her heels, feeling a bit embarrassed. On one level of her brain she didn't believe in ghosts or psychic powers. But somehow, on another level, she trusted the picture she'd seen in her mind.

*Ah, who cares? Ghost or no ghost, I still need to check out the stable.*

She dusted her hands and stood up. Trudged across to the stable, pushed the door open and winced as its hinges squealed. *Rats. I wasn't thinking. I'd forgotten that the door squeaks. Better be more careful from now on.*

Blake dodged round the door and crept into the stable. She checked the ladder - and the trough of hay - and the horses' stalls. Heard a rustle from the loft and dropped to the ground, somersaulting backwards past the stalls. A bale of hay hit the floor, just where she'd been standing, and exploded in a swirling yellow cloud.

Blake spluttered and sneezed and rubbed hay dust from her eyes. When she squinted up at the loft, she saw a long pale face staring through a gap in the wall of hay.

*Huntsman.*

She sprang up and raced for the ladder. But Huntsman got there first. He steadied himself and jumped, feet aiming for Blake's shoulders. *Not fair. I taught him that trick, when we jumped out of the plane tree onto Tony and Al - and now he's got the nerve to use it against me.*

As he hurtled through the air, Blake twisted sideways and grabbed his ankles. She wrenched hard, slamming him onto the floor. The skinny kid landed heavily and lay there, groaning. Blake collapsed on top of him, flinging her arm across his chest.

*His chest? Wait a minute, Blake. Think again.*

She rolled off, sat up and scowled at Huntsman. 'Hey,' she said, 'you're a girl.'

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Huntsman propped herself on one elbow. 'So?' she said, scowling back. 'That's not news to me. I've always been a girl. You got a problem with that?'

Blake studied Huntsman's long skinny arms and her long narrow face. Her spider tattoo and her purple hair and her heavy metal t-shirt. 'I thought you were a guy,' she

said. 'You tricked me.'

Huntsman sniggered. 'Hey, I thought *you* were a guy when I saw you in your motorcycle jacket - but I didn't chuck a wobbly after I realised you were a girl. What difference does it make, anyway?'

Blake frowned. *Yeah, why am I so mad at Huntsman? People often think I'm a boy, if I'm wearing my leather jacket or jeans and a t-shirt. But it's fun when I fool the rest of the world. It's annoying when Huntsman fools me.*

'Someone told me that hackers are always guys,' she said, glaring at the skinny girl. 'Besides, you call yourself Huntsman - *Huntsman*, right? That proves you're trying to trick people.'

'No, it doesn't,' Huntsman said, sounding bored. 'It's a cool tag, that's all. Huntsman spiders live in the cracks and they hurt when they bite - just like me. Huntsman suits me way better than *Rosalee*.'

She spat out the name, as though she'd found a lump of meat in a salad sandwich. Blake stared at her. Rosalee. The girl in Pheona's room. The girl who disappeared, on the day she'd seen Huntsman running from the Hartley house.

*Oh, of course. That's why Pete and Pheona hadn't heard of Huntsman. She was always called Rosalee here, because Ms Hartley won't let the kids use nicknames.*

'You used to be one of the Chosen Children, didn't you?' she said slowly. 'But you ran away. Why, Huntsman?'

The skinny girl clenched her fists. 'I'll get Spider for this,' she muttered. 'He shouldn't have set you onto me. You know too much already. Way too much. We better have a talk - but not here, in case Al comes nosing around.'

She kicked the loose hay under the trough. Adjusted the stable door, so that it would creak if someone touched it. Dragged Blake over to the ladder and gave her a shove. Blake climbed up to the loft and waited, then followed Huntsman through an opening in the wall of hay.

It was like walking into a secret cubby house. The stable walls on three sides, a wall of hay on the fourth side. A bed of loose hay, with Blake's space blanket spread out on top of it. A bale of hay for a table, stacked with ten cans of baked beans, a bottle of water and a big torch.

Huntsman switched on the torch and shunted two bales of hay into the opening, like a door that shut the little room off from the rest of the loft. She found another bale and filled up the gap in the wall. Then she sat down on the floor and took a swig of water.

'Okay,' she said. 'I may as well tell you the whole story.'

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The loft room was dark and musty. Huntsman's red-brown eyes glittered in the dim light

from the torch. 'I liked living on the streets,' she began. 'Anyone would, if they'd had a family like mine. But it's not exactly an easy life. Nine out of ten street kids use drugs to help them cope - and I won't do drugs, because I don't want to zap my brain cells. I'm smart and I want to stay that way. And I'm a hacker, even if your mate says girls can't be hackers. That's how I got into this mess.'

'What do you mean?' Blake asked and Huntsman glared at her.

'Shut up,' she ordered. 'I'll tell this my own way, okay? The thing is, for a while Spider let me use his computer. Then his folks cracked down on him and I decided it was time to move on. I saw an ad in the paper about this crazy lady who was looking for genius kids, so I hitched to Gladesdale and walked out to the Hartley house. Did Ms Hartley's tests and signed up as one of her Chosen Children.'

She stared off into the distance for a while, cracking her knuckles. 'I had the best time for the first few months,' she said finally. 'Books everywhere, teachers you could argue with and a computer all to myself. My idea of heaven! And then I had to spoil everything by starting to think about it.'

She drifted off again. In the end Blake stretched her legs out and, accidentally on purpose, nudged Huntsman's foot. 'So?' she prompted as the skinny girl blinked at her. 'What then?'

'I dunno how much they told you about the school,' Huntsman said. 'Not much, I bet. They're all pretty cagey. Mind you, on the surface it's pretty much like a normal school. They teach us a lot of history, so we know how the world works. Economics, so we know how money works. Maths and English and all the usual stuff, including a major amount of information about computers, plus gym work to keep us fit and yoga to help us concentrate. Oh, and Ms Hartley lays these raves on us sometimes, about light and shadow and auras and psychic powers - but I never took any notice of all that garbage.'

Blake nodded. *Yeah, Huntsman, I reckon it's garbage too. Only problem is, I seem to have a few psychic powers of my own.*

'Like I said, the school seemed fine at first,' Huntsman went on. 'Except that then I found out why we were learning all that stuff. Ms Hartley wants us to swallow her ideas whole and then go out and get all the key jobs in business - or politics - or the public service. She wants us to work together, like this secret network, and change the world around till it fits with her ideas.'

She sat up suddenly and swung a punch at the air. 'I hate that sort of thing,' she burst out. 'Ms Hartley reckons that, once we've been trained properly, us geniuses can make the big decisions for everybody else. But that's wrong, Blake. Really wrong. I mean, the kids on the street may not be geniuses but they deserve a chance to make their own decisions, right?'

She thumped her fist into her palm. Blake turned her head away, so that Huntsman wouldn't catch her smiling. *Huntsman gets pretty worked up about things, same as Ms*

*Hartley. They seem really alike to me, even though Huntsman says she hates Ms Hartley's ideas.*

'So that's why you ran away?' she asked. 'Because you don't agree with Ms Hartley's plans?'

To her surprise, Huntsman shook her head. 'I wish,' she muttered. 'But it's not that simple. I found out a few more things as well. For starters, most of the Chosen Children aren't here of their own free will. Ms Hartley bought some of them. She conned some of their parents. And some of them are total rejects, like me.'

'Yeah, I heard about that from Pete and Pheona,' Blake said. 'They -'

'Hey, I thought I told you not to interrupt. I haven't got to the worst part yet. Ms Hartley's been asking us to hack into all the big companies and raid their files. We've got the plans for the new Gameworld Inc game, the next developments in software, new ideas for microcomputers - stuff that'd be worth a fortune. Tony keeps saying "It's just an exercise" but Tony's dead innocent. Fact is, Ms Hartley's using us. She pretends she's so keen on justice and freedom and that— - but really, we're just industrial spies. We're stealing business secrets for her, so she can sell them to other companies and make back the money she lost.'

'Can you prove that?' Blake asked and then stopped as Huntsman glared at her. 'Okay, okay. I won't interrupt again. Keep talking.'

'Well, I went along with it for a while,' Huntsman said bitterly. 'I pretended it didn't mean anything. I pretended that Ms Hartley wasn't ever going to use the information. All because I couldn't bear to walk away and leave my computer behind. Then last week Tony took me aside and told me that Ms Hartley had this special challenge for me. She wanted me to invent a foolproof way to take out the Internet - to block all the e-mails and shut down all the web sites and put the whole thing out of action.'

Huntsman buried her head in her hands for a moment. When she looked up again, her face was pale and bleak.

'That did it. Oh, it's a smart idea, in a twisted sort of way. The Internet's getting to be really important. If Ms Hartley threatened the servers - the people who run the Net - they'd pay her heaps to leave them alone. But I love the Net. It's my real home. So I had to do something.'

Blake realised she'd been holding her breath for three minutes. She let it out in a long sigh. 'Wow,' she gasped. 'What did you do?'

'I crept downstairs that night and checked the computer in the library that has all Ms Hartley's files. It didn't take me long to find her secret accounts system. She's been selling the information we collect for her, all right, and she's getting ready to blackmail the Internet servers too. I could give you as much proof as you like, Blake - except that, when I started to print out the files, Al and Tony came busting in and I had to run.'

Blake slumped back against the wall. *Rats. I thought Helena Hartley was a nutter but*

*I kind of liked her. Now it turns out that she's just a con artist, after all. She criticises the politicians and the big companies, because they only think about money - and yet that's all she thinks about too.*

'Someone ought to stop Ms Hartley,' she told Huntsman. 'Can't you hack into her accounts system from outside?'

'I'm not a bloody magician, y'know,' Huntsman snapped. 'Ms Hartley's computer isn't on-line, like the others are. I have to be there.'

Blake sighed. 'Rats and more rats. I wish you'd managed to get hold of those files. We could've taken them to the Computer Crime Squad. They'd know what to do.'

Huntsman grinned unexpectedly. 'Hey, don't give up yet. We can still get the files. I can break into the house again, real easy. If you'll help.'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Luckily no-one seemed to have noticed that Blake was missing. She crept back into the house and raced straight to the dining room. Whirled about like a tornado, cleaning and polishing, while thoughts went looping through her brain. The same thoughts, over and over again.

*I told Huntsman I'd help her. But I'm not sure whether I did the right thing. It sounds like Ms Hartley needs to be stopped. It sounds like Matthew Hartley's ghost has taken her over and turned her jealous and greedy, like him.*

*Then again, Huntsman's been living in the stable next to the well for the last few days. What if the ghost went into her, not Ms Hartley? In that case, I ought to let Ms Hartley know what's happening.*

*But I told Huntsman I'd help her.*

After an hour of this, the dining room tables were shining like brown ice but Blake was still confused. She sighed and hurried on to the library. It was the time when the kids usually had their afternoon rest, so the room should've been empty. But when she peeped in, Pete was sitting at one of the computers.

*Hey, the exact person I'm supposed to be looking for. Except that I haven't decided whether to go ahead with Huntsman's plan.*

While she hesitated, Pete glanced up. 'Yo, Blake,' he called. 'Come on in.'

She took a deep breath and marched over to him. 'Here,' she said. 'I've got a note for you. From - from Rosalee.'

Pete's eyebrows shot up. He opened the note that Huntsman had written and skimmed through it. 'Uh-huh,' he muttered. 'So Rosalee's figured out a way to get back at Ms Hartley and she wants me to help, right?'

Blake nodded. 'Can you do it?'

'Dead easy. So easy that I can't see why I'd bother. Unless - wait a minute, are you planning to help Rosalee too?'

Well, *Blake? Yes or no?*

'Yes,' she said in a rush and Pete looked pleased.

'Okay then. I'll swap you. I'll set all this stuff up, if Pheona and I can meet in your room, instead of on that freezing cold balcony.'

'Done,' Blake said. 'It's a big job, though. You better go and get started, while I clean the library.'

Pete's eyes went cloudy, as though he was already making plans. He wandered out and Blake got to work. She belted round the bookshelves at the speed of light, duster in her hand. Skipped the top shelves. *No-one can see them, anyway.* Swept a pile of dirt under the rug. Wiped the computers and headed out into the main hall, just before the kids came back.

As she skated across the marble floor, Pete bounced out of the lesson room. He whispered to her for a moment and then she hurried on. Down to the kitchen, where she peeled fifty-two potatoes. Heaved towers of plates out of the pantry. Served meat and vegetables onto the plates and carted them over to the dumb waiter.

Half an hour later the first pile of dirty dishes came clanking back. Blake had been listening for the sound of the dumb waiter's engine. She sped across, opened the door and grabbed a lumpy parcel, hidden behind the plates. Stuffed it down the front of her black dress and slipped out of the kitchen.

She darted up the main stairs to the front balcony. When she leaned out, she saw Huntsman skulking in the rose bushes below.

'I can't come down,' Blake hissed. The alarms are on already. But here's your stuff.'

She dropped the parcel into Huntsman's hands and checked to make sure that no-one had spotted them. 'Thanks,' Huntsman mouthed and Blake whispered, 'Gotta go now. I'll see you later tonight - as long as your plan works.'

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It was dark outside. The moon wasn't up yet, so the garden was crowded with shadows, lurking between the rose bushes and scuffling under the trees. Al looked around and clutched his two-way radio. Normally he liked being on guard duty but tonight, for the first time, he felt jumpy and nervous.

As he turned to march back down the drive, something flickered at the corner of his

eye. Al swung back. Saw the flash of a torch, there for half a second and then gone. He hesitated for a moment, frowning at the darkness. Made up his mind and strode off towards the avenue of trees.

But before he got there, the torch flashed again. Halfway between the avenue and the house, which meant that the intruder was moving pretty fast. Al pushed the radio into his pocket and went jogging across the lawn. Straight into one of the garden beds.

His foot sank into the soft soil. He stumbled and grabbed the nearest bush. A rose bush, as it turned out, which meant that he spent the next few minutes pulling thorns out of his fingers and cursing. Quietly, though, so that the intruder wouldn't hear him.

Then he scanned the garden, to see where the intruder was now. No torch beams. No movement in the shadows. No dark figure creeping onto the verandah. Al was just about to give up when the light flashed again. On the opposite side of the garden. Over by his own cottage.

He lowered his head and charged like a bull, pounding the grass and crunching over the gravel of the drive. This time he didn't care how much noise he was making. He just wanted to stop that little thief before she broke in and trashed the place. There was only one problem. As he hurtled towards his cottage, another beam of light streaked across the garden. Coming from the rose bushes behind him.

Al groaned and whirled round - but while he was turning, light flashed across the windows of the cottage again. He stood there for a moment, head swivelling from side to side. And then froze as he heard a sound from the yard beside the stable.

The sound of a baby wailing.

Al clenched his fists and reminded himself that he was too old to believe in ghosts. But all the same he couldn't help remembering the stories his gran used to tell him, when he was a little kid in Gladesdale. Stories about the Hartley house. About wicked Matthew Hartley. About the little baby who drowned in the well.

His hands were shaking as he tugged the radio out of his pocket. He flicked the switch and waited till he heard Tony's voice.

'Boss,' he gasped. 'It's me, Al. You gotta come quick. There's two people out here and - and something else. I'm in real trouble.'

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Tony Hartley ran down the main stairs. He paused in the hall and found the fuse box. Punched in the code that turned off the alarm. Opened the door and hurried out. Blake sidled from one shadow to the next and watched him go.

*Okay, Huntsman's plan seems to be working. So far.*

She peered into the night. The moon was rising, balanced on top of the hills like a silver balloon that a giant had left behind. It was full now, bright and enormous. *Funny*

*how it always looks twice its usual size when it's close to the horizon.*

Voices murmured somewhere in the garden. The air was so still that Blake could hear Tony saying, 'A baby crying in the well? Ah, come off it, Al. You're imagining things.'

When she squinted across at the cottage, Al was hanging his head and shuffling his feet. Then his arm shot up and he pointed to a flash of light under the trees. And another flash of light from behind the stable.

'So young Rosalee's got a friend, after all,' Tony said. 'Not that German girl but someone else. Two of them - and two of us. I'll head for the avenue, Al, and you can take the stable.'

He sprinted off straight away but Al paused for a second, glancing nervously at the well. While he hesitated, one of the shadows by the rose bushes came creeping out onto the drive. Heading towards Blake, just like the shadow she'd seen in her mind. *I'm not scared of this shadow, though. I know who it is.*

*Huntsman.*

Blake leaned forward to get a better look. Then several things happened at once. Moonlight flooded the garden, turning the pale gravel of the drive to silver. Huntsman made a dash for the circle of rose bushes around the fountain in the middle of the drive. And Al turned his head to look for Tony but spotted Huntsman instead, just before she ducked for cover.

He let out a yell and went sprinting towards her. Huntsman ran. For the next few minutes they chased each other round the fountain, while Blake watched helplessly from the doorway. *It's like they're playing tag or some other kids' game. I'd be laughing my head off if I wasn't so worried.*

One lap. Two laps. Three laps. By now it was hard to tell whether Al was chasing Huntsman or whether Huntsman was chasing Al. But then Al surged forward, closing the gap between them. His hand stretched out. Huntsman dodged frantically.

And the moon rolled behind a thick blanket of cloud.

Blake couldn't see a thing. She could hear something, though. A scuffle. A yelp. A gigantic splash, echoing back from the walls of the house. Then more splashing, as though someone was trying to wade out of the fountain.

*Huntsman? Or Al?*

Next minute footsteps came pattering up the steps. Huntsman burst in, closed the door and collapsed against it.

Thanks, Blake,' she panted. 'I owe you for that. Al would've caught me, for sure, if you hadn't shoved him into the fountain.'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

'But I *didn't* push Al into the fountain,' Blake told her. 'I was waiting here the whole time.'

Huntsman blinked. 'You didn't? Then who did?'

They stared at each other for a moment and then the skinny girl shrugged and turned away. 'No time to think about that now,' she said. 'Tony's not stupid. He'll figure out what's happening and they'll come racing back.'

'They can't get in, though,' Blake pointed out. 'The door's shut.'

'So? The alarm's off, which means they can break a window without waking the entire house. They'll do it in the end, once they realise there's no other way. Come on. We gotta get to work.'

Huntsman darted into the study and switched on the last computer in the row. While it hummed and pinged, she fished out a remote control unit and tossed it to Blake.

'Here, take this,' she said. 'It's the gizmo that Pete rigged up for us. The first button works the light under the trees - the second's for the light in the rose bushes -the third's for the light near the stable - and the fourth button makes the baby cry.' She chuckled and added, 'Great baby, right? Sandro Petrucelli recorded that for Pete. His mother had triplets after him, so he knows exactly what babies sound like.'

She settled down at the computer. Her long skinny hands danced over the keyboard, calling up one display after another. Blake watched for a few seconds and then went to stand by the window with the remote control.

*If I can keep Tony and Al chasing imaginary torches round the garden for a while*

*longer, it'll buy us a bit more time.*

She tested the first button, holding it down with her thumb while she counted to three. A long beam of light drilled out through the trees for three seconds. Blake *nodded. Just like I hoped. Here goes.*

She pushed the first button again, nine times in a row. Three short beams, followed by three long beams, followed by three short beams. The most famous Morse code signal of all. Dot-dot-dot, dash-dash-dash, dot-dot-dot. SOS, the worldwide sign for danger.

After she'd finished, Blake repeated the same pattern with the third button. She watched the light flashing behind the stable and smiled. It looked like there were two people out in the garden, hiding and signalling to warn each other. *Pretty convincing, I think.*

Tony and Al thought so too. They huddled together on the drive for a minute, whispering and pointing. Then Tony sneaked off down the avenue, while Al dodged round behind the back of the cottage.

*Yep, they've fallen for it. They're trying to circle round and creep up behind the intruders. That ought to keep them busy for a while.*

As Blake turned away, Huntsman glanced up from the keyboard. Her purple hair stood up in a cockatoo's crest and there was a faraway look in her red-brown eyes. 'Okay, I've been exploring Ms Hartley's data base,' she said. 'The good news is that the accounts file is still there, so I can start printing it out in a second.'

'And the bad news?'

'The bad news is that Ms Hartley's gone ahead with her plans to hold the Internet to ransom. She must've got one of the other kids to set it up after I nicked off. Eamonn, probably. He's almost as good as me - but he's only nine, so he wouldn't realise what he was doing. It'd just be like one of Gameworld's games to him.'

'So what's the deal?' Blake asked. 'How can we stop her?'

Huntsman flourished a sheet of paper. 'We can't,' she said grimly. 'This fax came through while I was sitting here. The Internet servers just paid a million dollars into Ms Hartley's Swiss bank account.'

'And Swiss banks are famous for keeping secrets,' Blake said with a sigh. 'Still, we've got the fax, so we can add that to the rest of the proof. You better start the print out now.'

Huntsman thumped one of the command keys. The printer whirred and clicked and began to spit out sheets of paper. Blake went back to the window and frowned at the night.

*Oops, can't see Al and Tony anywhere. Wonder what they're up to. Time to flash a few more lights, to keep them busy.*

She thumbed the first button but nothing happened. Tried the second button and the

third. Still no lights. Blake hit the fourth button and heard a baby wail, off in the distance.

'Blast,' she groaned. 'They must've found Pete's spotlights - but not the tape recorder in the well. I bet they're heading this way right now, under cover, so we don't spot them. Can't you make that thing print faster?'

'No,' Huntsman said flatly. 'I may be a computer whiz but that's not possible. Shut the curtains, Blake, so they can't see the light from the computer screen. Then you better go back into the hall. Watch out for any signs that Tony and Al are trying to break in - and watch out for Ms Hartley too. I bet she'll be coming in to collect her fax soon.'

Blake nodded. She fixed the curtains and hurried out to the big hall. *That Huntsman's so bossy. I'm not used to taking orders from anyone. I'd tell her to lay off - except that she tends to be right most of the time.*

She pressed her cheek against the stained glass panel beside the door and peered out. Through the coloured glass, the moon looked like a huge red ball. A ball of blood. Blake shivered. Her hand closed round the remote control, brushing against one of the buttons, and outside the baby started to wail again.

*Full moon and a baby crying. Just like the night when Matthew Hartley got so jealous that he shoved his nephew into the well.*

Even with her eyes wide open, she could feel the shadow reaching for her again. Matthew Hartley's ghost. The ghost that had taken over one of the people in the Hartley house. But who?

Ms Hartley, jealous of the big companies that were more successful than she'd been? Tony Hartley, jealous because his uncle had left all his money to Tony's aunt? Or Huntsman? After all, the skinny street kid could be jealous of everyone else in the house, including Blake. They'd all had way better luck than Huntsman.

*She could be running this whole scam herself and blaming it on Ms Hartley. How the hell would I know? I gotta admit, she's smart enough to trick me.*

Blake scowled at the blood-red moon. And felt a chilly tickle, somewhere near the top of her spine. The icy finger, tapping her on the shoulder. She tensed her muscles and started to turn.

Too late. The air swirled and brushed against her skin as a hand came sweeping down, chopping at the back of her neck.

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Blake moved fast. She swivelled round in a tight circle, only just managing to stop herself from banging into the wall. At the same time her foot swung up and out, aiming at the groin. *The most vulnerable spot for a man - and luckily it works if you're fighting a woman too. Because that's not Al or Tony.*

*It's Jenna Foster.*

The housekeeper thrust her arm down and blocked the kick. Then she pulled that arm back and slammed her other arm forward, throwing a punch at Blake's head. Blake braced herself and brought her arm up, bent at the elbow, protecting her face. Bunched her left fist and jabbed at Jenna's midriff.

*Okay, now I know why Jenna looks like an athlete disguised as a business woman. She's not an Olympic hurdler, like I thought. She's a karate expert. The same level as me - or better.*

As Blake punched, the housekeeper took two quick steps backwards, moving smoothly across the marble floor. Which left Blake leaning forward, over-extended. While she flailed for balance, Jenna's foot shot out in a side-kick. Blake collapsed onto one knee. Clutched at Jenna's ankle.

Pulled hard.

Jenna wobbled for a second and then fell. Her runners went skidding across the floor and she landed flat on her back. Blake sprang to her feet and dropped onto her, planting her knees on Jenna's shoulders. Then she leaned sideways, swung her leg up and settled her heel against Jenna's throat.

'Don't try to yell for help,' she hissed. 'Don't even move. Or else ...'

She pushed her foot down slightly, as a warning. Jenna gasped for breath. 'Please, Inge,' she croaked. 'Let me up. I have to get to that fax machine. This is what I've been waiting for, ever since -'

'In your dreams,' Blake cut in. 'Why would I want to help *you*?' She raised her voice slightly and called, 'Huntsman, are you ready?'

The skinny girl appeared in the doorway, shoving a thick envelope down the front of her windcheater. Her eyes widened when she saw Jenna.

'Hey, you've been busy,' she said with a grin. 'Me too. I got the print-out and - oh-oh!'

Somewhere close by, glass smashed and went tinkling to the floor. 'Sounds like someone threw a brick through the classroom window,' Blake commented. 'I reckon Al and Tony are on their way.'

She bent and clipped Jenna under the jaw. Not so hard that she knocked her out, just enough to stun her for a few minutes. Then she grabbed Huntsman's hand and dragged her off down the hall. Heading for the dining room and the dumb waiter.

She bundled Huntsman into the narrow space and thumped the button. Waited, jiggling up and down, till the dumb waiter came back again. Scrambled inside, curled into a ball and shut her eyes as it chugged up the dark shaft.

*Where next? Jenna knows all the hiding places in this house as well as I do. But I reckon I've got a foolproof plan, all the same.*

She rolled out of the dumb waiter and ran to the long glass doors. Pushed Huntsman onto the balcony outside the breakfast room. Opened the small door set in the wall and led her into the servants' corridor. Then she found her torch and flashed its thin beam

around the walls.

'Take a good look,' she told Huntsman. 'We'll have to navigate in the dark from now on.'

'Oh hell,' Huntsman muttered. 'I hate being shut in like this. But - yeah, okay. I know it makes sense.'

Blake turned the torch off and the darkness folded around them, like a thick blanket dropped over their heads. Huntsman gasped and stumbled.

'Hey, Blake,' she said in a shaky voice, 'what was going on down there? Did you have a fight with Jenna or what?'

Blake frowned. *We shouldn't really be talking. Still, I don't think anyone's after us yet - and Huntsman needs something to take her mind off things and stop her panicking.*

'Yeah, Jenna tried to karate-chop me in the hall,' she said. 'I'm not sure what her game is. She found out about the fax somehow and she actually wanted me to hand it over. As if.'

'Uh-huh,' Huntsman muttered. 'Maybe she's a con artist who heard about this rich lady with a weirdo school and decided it'd be a good place for a scam. Maybe she set up this whole scheme to take out the Internet ... and Ms Hartley's innocent, after all.'

Blake grinned in the darkness. *There, I knew Huntsman liked Ms Hartley more than she was admitting. It's a pity she's wrong. But she's getting her brain back into gear, at any rate. She'll be able to handle the corridors, without freaking out.*

'Okay, we better be quiet now,' she whispered. 'Come on.'

They groped through the darkness, feeling their way along the wall. Lifting their feet carefully and setting them down without a sound. Getting quicker and more confident as they went on. Blake opened the door to the next balcony and heard Huntsman suck in a long deep breath of fresh air. Then she crossed to the opposite door and they plunged back into darkness.

After a while Blake heard a muffled thud in the passage behind them. *One of the doors, slipping out of Jenna's hand when she tried to shut it quietly.* She speeded up, widening the gap between them and the housekeeper. But, as they stepped out onto the front balcony, she noticed that Huntsman was looking even paler than before.

*She's scared, fair enough. I ought to explain my brilliant strategy.*

'Hey, it's cool,' she breathed. 'Jenna can't catch us. This corridor runs all around the house, inside the walls. So we can keep going round and round, as long as we stay the right distance ahead of her. In the end she'll give up - and we can escape.'

She reached for the next door handle. Turned it carefully and eased the door open. Then groaned softly as she heard more footsteps thumping along the corridor.

Heading towards them.

'Great plan,' Huntsman whispered. 'But I think you left something out. Jenna must've joined forces with Tony and Al, down there in the hall. Now they've split up and set off in

opposite directions, so they can corner us.'

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Blake started to panic and then decided it was a waste of time. *I got us into this mess, so I better get us out of it.*

She checked the door into the hall on the second floor. Realised that Al or Tony or Jenna could be waiting there and shook her head. Leaned over the balcony, trying to guess how far they'd fall before they hit the verandah roof.

*Too far - and besides, it's a tin roof. We'd make too much noise.*

*But there's nowhere else to go.*

Then Huntsman grabbed her arm and spun her around. 'Come on, Blake,' she hissed. 'I'll teach you how to climb walls.'

Blake stared at her, weak with relief. 'No need,' she whispered. 'Spider's mate Marty taught me already.'

'Cool. He taught me too. Let's go.'

They grinned at each other and rubbed their hands on their jeans. Reached up and found a gap between two chunks of bluestone. Hoisted themselves higher, until their feet were off the ground. Bent their knees and wedged their feet into another gap.

By the time Al burst out onto the balcony, they were flattening themselves against the wall, four metres above his head. Huntsman mouthed, 'Don't look down.' *Marty's first rule of wall-climbing.* They clung to the stones and waited till they heard Jenna's voice.

'Damn. They're not here. I was sure they'd try to hide in the servants' corridor. Where's Tony, Al?'

'At the top of the stairs, so he can keep an eye on this hall and the main hall, both at once,' Al growled. 'You seem to be giving the orders tonight. What do you want us to do next?'

Jenna hesitated. 'You better go back and turn the alarms on, so they can't get out. Then we'll start in the basement and go through the house, room by room, till we find them.'

Doors slammed. Blake counted to fifty and then turned to look at Huntsman. 'Which way now?' she asked and Huntsman thought for a moment.

'Up, I reckon. Down's too risky at present. Up to the tower. They won't get there for ages, so we can rest for a bit and then climb down the back of the house.'

'Smart thinking,' Blake agreed. 'I could use a rest.'

The minute she thought about settling into a nice soft chair, her hands started to loosen their grip. Blake turned her fingers into hooks and clawed at the bluestone. Stiffened her legs, nodded to Huntsman and kept climbing.

They swarmed up the wall like two giant lizards, pressed flat against the stone. Holding on with their left hands while their right feet felt for a crack. Holding on with their right hands while their left feet felt for the next crack. And then starting all over again.

Ten moves later Blake's hand hit the gutter. She swung herself out and over. Walked up the slate roof on all fours until she reached the tower. Stood on tiptoe, found a gap between the stones and climbed higher, with Huntsman half a metre ahead of her.

When she tumbled over the ledge onto a padded window seat, Huntsman was sitting up and sucking her fingers. 'Bluestone's great,' she told Blake. 'Heaps easier than climbing those brick walls in the city. Marty'd be bored stiff.'

She stood up, wincing slightly, and strolled over to a chair. A very modern leather armchair that swivelled to and fro on a big chrome foot. *Pretty different from the furniture downstairs - but come to think of it, this must be Tony's room. He's a modern guy, not like his aunt Helena.*

Huntsman clicked the switch on the desk lamp. She pulled out the envelope of papers, sat down and swung the chair towards the light. Blake frowned at the high back of the chair and went to close the curtains.

*Just in case they can see the window from downstairs. No point in getting caught now, when we've done this well so far.*

The window seat was set deep in the wall. When Blake pulled the curtains, she shut herself into a narrow space, like a small cupboard. She knelt on the hard cushion of the seat and leaned out the window, checking on the moon. It was high in the sky by now, sailing past the Southern Cross. A bright silver disc, above a bright silver garden.

*Looks real peaceful. If only.*

She sighed and rested her chin on her hands. Heard a rattle at the door, swung round and banged her elbow on the window frame. As she swallowed a yelp of pain,

Blake felt the icy hand close on her shoulder, gripping tight. Holding her there.

*No way. Someone's coming. I have to warn Huntsman.*

*Except I promised I'd pay attention to the icy hand next time. If it wants me to keep on hiding, maybe it's got a reason.*

By the time she'd thought this through, the door was opening and two sets of feet were tramping across the stone floor. 'We're in trouble,' Tony said. 'The fax hasn't arrived - and I can't stand around waiting for it, because that snoop Jenna Foster would notice. I set this whole business up so well but if we're not careful, it's going to backfire on us.'

'How, boss?' Al growled and Tony tapped his foot impatiently.

'I thought the Computer Crime Squad might be after us, remember,' he snapped. 'So I got the Internet servers to pay the money into Aunt Helena's account, which means she'll be blamed if anyone manages to trace it. Unfortunately, it also means that, if the timing goes wrong, we won't be able to get our hands on the cash. Damn it, where's that fax?'

Blake tried to send thought waves across the room. *Don't move, Huntsman. Keep the hack of your chair turned towards the door.* But Huntsman must've sat up in shock. The leather chair creaked once - and then creaked again as Tony grabbed it and swung it round.

When Blake peeped through the curtains, Huntsman was sprawled in the chair, staring up at Tony. She stuck out her jaw, waved a sheet of paper and said, 'Here's your stupid fax.'

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Blake reached back, heaved up the hard cushion and threw it at Al. He doubled over with a grunt and she took two steps forward. Shouted, 'Run, Huntsman' and aimed a side-kick at Tony. As her foot smashed against his knee cap, he staggered and fell into the chair. But Huntsman was on her feet already, dodging Al and darting out the door.

Blake turned to follow - but Al straightened up and hurled the cushion. While she ducked, he flung himself into the doorway and crouched down, knees bent and arms wide, like a goalie. Behind her, Tony hoisted himself out of the chair and limped forward.

*Decision time. I could fight them both - or I could go out the window. Not much of a choice, really. My karate teacher always said, 'Run if you can. Fight if you can't run.'*

*Good advice, Sensei.*

'See you later, guys,' she said and slipped through the curtains. She swung out of the window and let herself drop, hanging onto the frame with one hand. Found a foothold and then a hand hold and began to work her way down the wall of the tower.

It was the scariest climb she'd tried so far. For one thing, Blake was exhausted. *Not*

*enough sleep. Scared all the time. Plus that fight with Jenna as well. And besides, like Marty had said, climbing down walls was harder than climbing up. She could feel the ground below her, pulling like a magnet. Tugging at her till she just wanted to give up and let go.*

*Remember the first rule of climbing, Blake. Don't look down.*

She must've muttered 'Don't look down' at least twenty times before she landed on one of the second floor balconies. She collapsed against the railing, using the bluestone ledge as a pillow.

*Decisions, decisions. Should I keep on climbing? Head down to ground level, walk into Gladesdale and phone the cops? That'd be the most sensible thing to do - except that the alarm system's on again, so Huntsman won't be able to get out. I can't leave her there, with Tony and Al and Jenna after her.*

*I have to go back into the house.*

When she peered through the glass, Blake saw Jenna's grey coat hanging on the back of the chair. *Oh well, if this is Jenna's room, at least it should be empty.* She tiptoed over to the door and peered out. Sighed as she spotted Al, standing guard in front of the laundry chute. Waited till he turned to look down the chute and then scampered across the hall to the main staircase.

She swung her leg over the bannister and pushed off. Went gliding down the polished wooden rail towards the main hall. Faster and faster, speeding around the bend of the landing and plunging on. Flying off the end of the bannister onto the black and white marble floor.

Landing in a heap at Tony Hartley's feet.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'Nice to see you again, Inge,' Tony said politely. 'You've saved me the bother of searching for you.'

He lifted his hand and pointed it at her. When she squinted through the shadows, Blake realised he was holding a gun. More decisions. She could swing from one of the stags' heads and kick the gun out of his hand. *If I was in a super-hero movie.* She could make a dash for the back door. *Straight into Jenna's arms, if Tony doesn't shoot me first.*

Or she could stand very still and hope that Tony didn't do anything stupid. *Like firing that gun, for example.*

'Good girl,' Tony said. 'That's the right idea. Put your hands on your head. Turn around and start walking. We're going down to the basement to look for your little friend Rosalee. She disappeared much too quickly, which means she must've hopped into the laundry chute.'

Blake glanced sideways as she turned. Saw Tony standing in a patch of moonshine, dappled with red spots from the stained glass window. In the dim light his no-colour eyes were like deep dark pits, full of shadow. She gulped.

*Oh wow. No wonder I didn't suspect him before. He's changed so much. That's not Tony any more.*

*That's Matthew Hartley's ghost.*

He prodded her in the back with his gun and she went stumbling forward. Across the black and white marble. Into the servants' corridor. Down the narrow stairs. With her

hands clasped on her head, Blake found it hard to keep her balance. Much too hard to risk lashing out at the gun.

At the bottom of the stairs Tony frowned at the laundry door and muttered, 'Too easy.' He waved the gun at Blake and she scuttled into the kitchen. *There's gotta be something I can do - but I can't think properly. Guns tend to have that effect. Besides, there's so much shadow swirling round Tony that I can't see properly either.*

*I'll just have to hope that Huntsman's come up with a plan.*

Tony circled round the kitchen, opening doors. Dumb waiter door, pantry door, oven door, cupboard doors. When he'd finished, he pointed with the gun and said, 'Cellar next.'

'Cellar?' Blake repeated, as loudly as she could. *Can you hear me, Huntsman?* 'Sure, Tony. Anything you say.'

The cellar smelt of grapes and damp. Racks of wine bottles along one wall. Ten huge wooden barrels along the opposite wall. Tony studied the barrels for a moment and then shrugged.

'Too difficult to search them all. I'll try a short cut.'

He swung the gun up and pushed it into the hollow at the back of Blake's neck. Said, 'Okay, Rosalee, I'll give you twenty seconds to get out here. After that, your friend's going to have a nice neat hole in her head.'

As he started to count, one of the barrels jolted and swayed. Huntsman scrambled out and came walking towards them. Tears were streaking down her face but she didn't seem to notice. She lifted her hand and held out the envelope of papers.

*Rats. Why did she do that - and why is she crying?*

*Oh. I guess she likes me. Never realised that.*

Tony took the envelope and pushed it into his belt. 'Thanks for co-operating, Rosalee,' he said. 'That's very convenient. Now I can shoot you both.'

He jerked the gun down, aiming for Blake's heart. There was a loud clang, like metal slamming onto stone. The sound of running footsteps. And a voice from the doorway, saying, 'Actually, that's not such a good idea.'

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Tony spun round and levelled the gun at the door. A young guy was standing there, dressed in jeans and a black jumper. He looked relaxed and casual and as handsome as a model. Tall and slim, with pale blond hair and dark brown eyes and an amused smile. Blake's jaw dropped.

*Oh no. I know who that is.*

'Pleased to meet you,' he said. 'My name's Dion. I'm a cop from the Computer Crime Squad - and coincidentally I've been hiding inside the old copper in the laundry, so I've

heard everything that's been happening. Would you mind passing me that gun, sir?'

"Why should I?' Tony snarled. 'You can't make me. You don't even have a gun of your own.'

'That's true,' Dion agreed. 'But your gun isn't much use any more. There's one of you and three of us, which means you can't possibly shoot all of us before we jump you. So why start shooting?'

The gun wavered in Tony's hand. Blake shifted a fraction closer and watched his eyes change. From black shadow to the colourless sheen of clear water and back again. While he hesitated, they heard footsteps thumping down the stairs. Tony called, 'Al! Over here!' and relaxed his grip on the gun.

So Blake kicked it out of his hand.

The gun hit the ground, exploded and went spinning across the floor. Dion jumped out of its way and it skidded to a halt in front of Jenna Foster. The housekeeper sniffed and bent to pick it up.

'That was very silly, Inge,' she snapped. 'Someone could've been hurt.'

Blake stared at her. *Jenna, not Al. And now she's got the gun. I'm glad it's out of Tony's hands - but I don't exactly trust Jenna either.*

'I'm not sure what's going on here,' the housekeeper said. 'But I don't intend to stand round in a freezing cold cellar while I find out. Up to the hall you go, the whole lot of you. And remember, I'm holding the gun.'

She stood back to let them pass. Dion led the way, with Tony following and Blake and Huntsman close behind. As Blake's runner hit the first step, her knees went weak and she had to hang onto Huntsman for support. *Oh wow. I just tackled a guy with a gun. It didn't really sink in till now.*

'What's the story on that guy Dion?' Huntsman whispered in her ear. 'You know him, don't you?'

'No talking,' Jenna called and Blake nodded.

*That's a relief. I don't want to lie to Huntsman - but I don't want to tell her the truth either.*

She dragged her foot onto the next step. Then flattened herself against the wall as Dion came tumbling down towards them. Blake grabbed him and steadied him. When she peered through the darkness, she saw Tony bounding up the stairs, making a dash for the door.

'Keep moving, Inge,' Jenna ordered. 'It's okay, he won't get far.'

A few seconds later Blake realised why Jenna hadn't seemed to be worried. The main hall was crowded with people. Helena Hartley at the centre, surrounded by the rest of the staff and the children. Al on one side, watched by three kids with baseball bats. And Tony Hartley, struggling in the grip of the yoga teacher.

As they came towards him, he relaxed and smiled. *Drop-dead handsome, as*

*always.* 'Okay, Jenna, you win,' he said. 'Just tell me one thing. Who are you, anyway?'

'I'm an undercover cop from the Computer Crime Squad,' she snapped.

Huntsman glanced across at her, looking startled. 'Huh? You mean there's two of you here?'

'Hardly,' Jenna snorted. 'The CCS couldn't afford to plant two cops in the same place - although my back up team'll be arriving any minute now.' Then she frowned and added, 'Two cops? What on earth are you talking about, Rosalee?'

'Him,' Huntsman said, pointing behind her. But when they looked around, Dion had vanished.

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Huntsman was still trying to explain about Dion when a car horn tooted outside. Jenna switched off the alarm and opened the door to a pair of brawny cops who marched in and handcuffed Al and Tony.

'Thanks for your help,' she said to Ms Hartley. 'I'm sorry it turned out this way. I'll be back tomorrow to get statements from everyone. Especially you, Inge - if that's your real name.'

She strode off, followed by the two cops. 'My apologies, Aunt Helena,' Tony said as he went past, lifting his cuffed hands in a salute. 'I hope you'll be able to keep the school going. I still think it's important, you know.'

Helena Hartley stared straight through him, her face like a smooth mask beneath her silver hair. But Blake drifted over to the door and watched him go, a grey blur of shadow under the rolling moon.

*So was Jenna right all along? Was Tony just after his aunt's money? Or was he telling the truth when he said he believed in Ms Hartley's dream?*

*Hey, maybe they were both right. Maybe Tony was a bit jealous of his aunt's money, to start with - but then the shadow took him over and turned that little bit of jealousy into something way bigger.*

She sighed and closed the door. When she turned back, Huntsman and Ms Hartley were scowling from opposite sides of the hall, as though they were trying to stare each other out.

'Well, Rosalee,' Ms Hartley said finally, 'why did you run away from me?'

Huntsman stuck her thumbs into her belt. 'I thought you were trying to hold the Internet to ransom and I'm sorry about that. But I'm not sorry for doubting you in the first place. I don't like the way you buy kids from their families. I don't think geniuses should have all the power, any more than the big companies should. Fact is, if you want to change things, you don't just need people with giant brains - you need people with giant hearts as well.' She scowled and added, 'Oh, and by the way, I don't like being called

Rosalee either. I'm Huntsman. It's not just a nickname. It's *my* name.'

Ms Hartley sank into one of the high-backed chairs. She knotted her hands together in her lap and gazed down at them for a while. When she looked up again, she said, 'All right, Huntsman, you've given me a lot to think about. Tell me, please, how many of you Chosen Children would leave, if you had the chance?'

A brief pause and then Pete and Pheona walked over to the door, with two other kids close behind. But the rest of the children were edging closer to Ms Hartley and clustering around her.

Including Huntsman.

'So you'll stay?' Ms Hartley asked, with a crack in her musical voice. 'You'll talk to me? You'll tell me where I've gone wrong? You'll help me to drive the shadow away?'

While Blake stared in surprise, Huntsman gave a small tight nod. Her hand reached out and Ms Hartley grabbed it and held it hard. *As though she just found the daughter she's been looking for, all this time.*

*As though Huntsman's found the mother she was looking for, too.*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Blake swung away. *They don't need me any more. It's time to go.*

She ran up to the attic and collected her pack. Went back downstairs and ducked into Ms Hartley's room. Picked up the phone, dialled and waited. It was two in the morning but the person who answered didn't seem to be surprised. Blake asked a question, listened to the answer and said, 'Huh? You want me to ring you again some time? Why? ... Oh, all right. Maybe I will.'

She put the phone down and headed across the room. As she eased the window open, Huntsman came racing in.

'You're leaving?' she gasped. 'Thought you would. I just wanted to say goodbye.'

She held out her hand and Blake shook it. For a moment it seemed as though they might even hug each other but they decided against it.

'Are you sure you want to stay?' Blake asked. 'I could lend you some money if -'

'Nah, I'll be fine,' Huntsman told her. 'Ms Hartley's on the right track. Hey, I've been a street kid. I know things have to change. She just needs a bit of help, that's all.'

'Good luck, then,' Blake said. 'See you round.' She scrambled over the sill. Huntsman shut the window behind her and they stared at each other through the glass for a second longer, before they waved and turned away.

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Blake jogged across the lawn towards Al's cottage. Reached through his

kitchen window and lifted a bowl from the sink. Filled it with rainwater from the tank, picked two twigs of rosemary from the herb garden and walked over to the stable.

She heaved the lid off the well. Looking up past the moon, she found the stars of the Southern Cross directly overhead, with Alpha and Beta Centauri pointing towards it. She tilted the bowl this way and that, till she caught the light of the twin stars on the rainwater. Dipped the twigs into the water and drew an unbroken circle around the well.

Then she knelt down, took a deep breath and whispered, 'You cannot escape. You cannot escape. You cannot escape.' When she closed her eyes, she saw shadow boiling and heaving in the well. Blake gulped. She gritted her teeth and whispered down the shaft again.

'I break your power. I break your power. I break your power.'

Her voice caught in her throat. It took a huge amount of effort to get the last sentence out. But once she'd finished, she felt as though the shadow was sinking back into the well. Lurking on the dark surface of the water. Waiting.

Blake scrambled to her feet and pointed at the stars. 'You can leave now,' she said. 'If you go straight up.' She stood there, holding her breath, until a breeze swirled past her, rushing through the moonlight. And when she looked again, she knew the well was empty.

She dropped the sprigs of rosemary onto the water. *Signed and sealed. If Daffy Clarke's right, the ghost can't come back again. Not ever.* She hesitated for a second and then hoisted up her pack.

As she strode towards the drive, a voice said, 'Well, Blake, can I give you a lift somewhere?'

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Dion had parked his car on the road outside. While they strolled down the avenue of plane trees, he said, 'So what was that about?'

Blake shrugged. 'You probably won't believe me - but there was a ghost in that house. I couldn't let it hang around any longer, so I rang this crazy old artist friend of mine and she told me how to send it away. And that's what I was doing.'

'By saying spells and that? Freaky, Blake.'

He looked sideways at her and she laughed. 'Hey, the water and the herbs and the words aren't important. They're just props, to help you concentrate. Basically, I got rid of the ghost by will power, right?'

They walked on in silence for a while. As they reached the car, Dion said, 'Okay, I'll take your word for it, even though I don't really understand. Fact is, there's a lot of things I don't understand about you these days.'

Blake paused with her hand halfway to the door. 'Like why I ran away from

home, for example? Is that why you keep following me around? So you can *understand?*'

He glared at her over the roof of the car. 'Typical,' he said. 'You haven't seen me for months, apart from five minutes in that old factory, which doesn't count. Most people'd want to hear all the family news. But you just want to pick a fight.'

She sighed. 'Okay, little brother, tell me the news. How are Dad and ...?'  
'Mum. That's what you used to call her.'

'But she's *not* my real mother,' Blake told him, clenching her fists. 'She's -'

'Wait a minute,' Dion cut in. 'Okay, Mum didn't give birth to you - but she's the one who brought you up ever since you were two weeks old, when they adopted you. Doesn't that count for anything?'

*Oh, great. Now I remember why I had to run for it. To get away from conversations like this.*

She climbed into the car. Slammed the door. Sat there and stared through the windscreen, without seeing anything.

'Yeah, it counts,' she said after a while. 'But I still need to look for my ... my other mother, as well. You don't know what it's like, having two mothers, Dion. It's simple for you. You were the baby Mum and Dad thought they could never have. I was the baby that - ah, let's not go into all that complicated stuff again.'

Her knee bumped against her pack and she felt the shape of the black notebook, hidden in the lining. Beside her, Dion said, 'I don't know why you're so keen on finding that woman. She dumped you, remember.'

Blake fixed her eyes on the moon and dug her fingernails into her palms. *So she did. Thanks for reminding me, brother.* She cleared her throat and said, 'But she came back to find me, even though she dumped me again in the end ... Listen, come to think of it, how did *you* manage to find me?'

Dion grinned. 'Those detectives, Greg and Thumper, send Dad a report once a fortnight. I fiddle the lock on his safe and read the reports, so I knew you were hanging round the market in the city. I was in the car with Greg and Thumper when they were following you and your mates. Then I gave a kid a hundred dollars to borrow his bike - switched to a taxi - hired this car - booked into the Gladesdale motel and tracked you here. Not bad, hey?'

'Pretty impressive,' Blake agreed. 'You'd make a good detective yourself. I liked your cop act tonight - and I suppose you were the one who tipped Al into the fountain too. Just one question, Dion. Was it worth it?'

He turned and stared at her. 'Yeah, of course. You're my big sister, Blake. Half-sister, if you insist. But either way, you're important.'

*Good. I'm glad you said that, because it gives me an opening.*

She looked up at him. The pale blond hair that was just like hers. The dark brown eyes that were just like his mother's. 'If I mean that much, you could try

trusting me a bit more,' she told him. 'Like, you could lay off for a while, till I've done what I have to do.'

Dion opened his mouth and shut it again. Scowled at her, thumped the steering wheel with his fist and said, 'Yeah, yeah. I get the point. I'll leave you alone from now on - but Dad won't, you know. I promise not to tell him I've seen you, though. Is there anything else I can do to help?'

'Sure,' Blake said. 'You can drive me into Heatherton to pick up my bike, before I head off to the city again.'

Her half-brother gave her a half-smile. When he turned the key in the ignition, Blake settled back in her seat. *So, okay, I'm actually going to Mudgeebung, not the city. So I don't trust Dion to keep a secret, not quite. Then again, I don't really trust anyone, even myself.*

*Maybe that'll change, after I've tracked my mother down.*

The car wound through the hills and down into Gladesdale. As they swung onto the highway, Blake turned to look back at the Hartley house, nestling among the trees. The light from the full moon outlined its high roof and its two tall towers. She waved to Huntsman and Helena Hartley one last time and then turned to face the road ahead of her.

Leading to Mudgeebung - and another chance to find her mother.

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Ebook produced in Australia.