

The Secret of Sinbad's Cave

by Brydie Walker Bain

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Smashwords Edition

For the Phoenix, the Lion and the Polar Bear

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What others are saying about The Secret of Sinbad's Cave

'A New Zealand Indiana Jones style treasure seeking adventure. Walker Bain succeeds in making a thoroughly believable story, one that left me with a whole new perspective on New Zealand and the magic and history that could lie hidden in the land.'

- Mieke Heyns, Wairarapa, New Zealand.

'I love your story and I so want to get the next one. Miss Hansen has been reading it to us. The whole class listens so hard that no one utters a sound for probably the first time in the day!'

- Tamsyn, aged 9, Rangitoto School, Te Kuiti, New Zealand

Contents

Glossary of Maori Words

- [Chapter 1 - The Attic](#)
- [Chapter 2 - Natalia's Letter](#)
- [Chapter 3 - Abraham Te Kaitiaki](#)
- [Chapter 4 - Pockets of Magic](#)
- [Chapter 5 - Break Through](#)
- [Chapter 6 - Stuck](#)
- [Chapter 7 - Front Page News](#)
- [Chapter 8 - Drake's Plotting](#)
- [Chapter 9 - Sinbad's Story](#)
- [Chapter 10 - Tautoru](#)
- [Chapter 11 - A Patupaiarehe Gift](#)
- [Chapter 12 - Mike's Confession](#)
- [Chapter 13 - The Legend of Abraham](#)
- [Chapter 14 - Harpagornis](#)
- [Chapter 15 - Unwelcome Visitors](#)
- [Chapter 16 - Change of Plan](#)
- [Chapter 17 - Search and Rescue](#)
- [Chapter 18 - Pukatea Mountain](#)
- [Chapter 19 - Grounded](#)
- [Chapter 20 - Saving the Day](#)
- [Chapter 21 - Man to Man Chat](#)
- [Chapter 22 - Answers](#)
- [Chapter 23 - The Set Up](#)
- [Chapter 24 - Reconnaissance](#)
- [Chapter 25 - Treasure Stew](#)
- [Chapter 26 - Hell or High Water](#)
- [Chapter 27 - Beware the Curse](#)
- [Chapter 28 - Into Position](#)
- [Chapter 29 - Kēhua](#)
- [Chapter 30 - Beyond the Lowest Passage](#)
- [Chapter 31 - The Eagle's Nest](#)
- [Chapter 32 - Emerald Eye of Babylon](#)
- [Chapter 33 - Get A Good Lawyer](#)
- [Chapter 34 - The Pirate's Cache](#)
- [Chapter 35 - Drake's Revenge](#)
- [About Brydie Walker Bain](#)
- [Book Two - The Ship of Sight and the Hand of Shadow](#)
- [Chapter 1 - The Ship of Sight](#)
- [Chapter 2 - The Wake Up Call](#)

Glossary of Māori words

<i>Aotearoa</i>	.....	<i>New Zealand</i>
<i>haka</i>	.....	<i>fierce dance</i>
<i>hīnaki</i>	.....	<i>eel-trap</i>
<i>hongi</i>	.....	<i>press noses in greeting</i>
<i>kai</i>	.....	<i>food</i>
<i>karakia</i>	.....	<i>prayer</i>
<i>kēhua</i>	.....	<i>ghost</i>
<i>kōura</i>	.....	<i>crayfish</i>
<i>mōrena</i>	.....	<i>good morning</i>
<i>patupaiarehe</i>	.....	<i>fairy</i>
<i>Pouākai</i>	.....	<i>Haast eagle</i>
<i>pounamu</i>	.....	<i>greenstone</i>
<i>taonga</i>	.....	<i>treasure</i>
<i>tapu</i>	.....	<i>sacred</i>
<i>Tautoru</i>	.....	<i>Orion's Belt</i>
<i>tohunga</i>	.....	<i>teacher, healer, priest</i>
<i>tomo</i>	.....	<i>hole, cave</i>
<i>ūenuku</i>	.....	<i>rainbow</i>
<i>urukehu</i>	.....	<i>fairy</i>
<i>wāhi tapu</i>	.....	<i>sacred place</i>

Chapter 1 The Attic

When Kathleen fell through the roof, all the air in the world disappeared with her. Iron bands wrapped around Nat's chest and started to squeeze. And the kicker was, it was the second time today she'd felt like that.

'Kathleen?' she gasped.

Suddenly the air came rushing back.

Nat and Jack sprinted inside, up the stairs and flung open the doors to the attic. Tatty books sat in the gloom with mattresses and beat up suitcases.

'Kathleen,' called Jack. 'Are you okay?'

No reply. Nat pushed into the darkness.

'Kathleen!' she yelled. 'Where are you?'

They'd come back to the farm that morning after the term in town. Kathleen had fallen asleep against Nat's shoulder, her red curls spilling onto Nat's unruly brown ones. Her brother Jack sat in front. At 14, he was a year older than Nat and a total beanpole like their Dad, Mike.

Nat caught Mike's gaze in the rearview mirror. They all had their Dad's green eyes.

'You okay?' he asked.

'Yep. You?'

Mike nodded. 'When we get back we need to have a chat.' His voice was steady, giving nothing away. Mike was like that. He wrestled the wild land and unruly sheep by himself. It took a lot to get him riled up.

'About what?' asked Jack.

'You'll see,' said Mike.

Jack shrugged, and put his earphones in under his straggly hair.

They pulled up in front of the ramshackle farmhouse and traipsed up the steps. Inside, Mike took a deep breath and cut to the chase.

'The farm goes on the market next week.' He lifted his hands for a moment, then dropped them on his knees. 'It hasn't made any money for a long time.'

Thump.

Nat jumped.

Thump.

'Kathleen?'

'In here,' came the faint reply.

Nat gulped. 'Are you all right?'

'I think so,' called Kathleen. 'How do I get out?'

Nat ran her hands over the wall at the end of the attic and rapped her knuckles against it. A solid sound echoed back. It didn't make any sense. Nat pushed a crooked dresser out of the way. The floorboards moaned. She glanced up. Was anything else going to collapse? The attic was still. In a flurry she shoved boxes and musty coats onto the dresser. She couldn't see anything but the wall. Suddenly she knew why.

Nat turned to Jack. 'Can you pace out the length of the house from the kitchen to the back porch, and then compare it to up here?'

'What do I get?' he asked.

Nat screwed up her face. 'My eternal love and gratitude?'

'Sister love?' said Jack. 'Gross.' He loped downstairs, his long legs taking the steps three at a time.

Nat rested her head against the wall. What was it her Dad had said?

'The bank's had enough,' said Mike. 'There's nothing more we can do.'

'What if we sold some stock?' asked Nat, her voice a squeak.

Mike shook his head. 'The price is rock bottom. It won't even make a dent.'

'Could we sell a bit of land?'

'No-one wants it Nat. It's almost worthless.'

Nat stared at her Dad as the last air escaped from her body.

'But it's our home,' said Kathleen, reaching for Nat's hand.

'Not for much longer,' said Mike. He rubbed his temples. 'You'll live with your mother full time in town. I'll stay up here in the shearer's cottage and help out.'

Jack reappeared. 'Twenty. And upstairs it's – hold on.'

'Hurry up!' yelled Kathleen.

Jack reversed to the edge of the landing and then paced again, scrambling up into the attic and continuing to the wall where Nat waited. 'Eighteen.'

'You're sure?'

'Yeah.'

'Then we have to find a way in.'

'Dad's going to love that.'

Nat examined the wall again. There was no sign of an entrance. Jack banged on the plaster in a couple of places.

'This stuff is really solid,' he said. 'Maybe I should get a hammer.'

'Find something up here,' said Nat. 'Kathleen – can you see a door?'

'No!' called Kathleen. They could hear the tremor in her voice.

Nat looked at Jack. 'We have to figure this out.'

'I've found some tools,' said Jack. He brandished a hammer and a splitter axe.

'You tap the wall over here, top to bottom, left to right. There has to be a way in somehow,' said Nat. She grabbed the hammer. 'What's the axe for?'

He shrugged. 'To scare her.'

Nat glared at him. 'Not funny!'

Jack smirked. 'Is so.'

Methodically, Nat tapped the plaster, but the returning sound was dense, not hollow. She worked her way down to ground level – nothing. Jack finished his section with the same result. They moved along.

'I could barge it,' said Jack. He crashed against the wall and bounced back so hard he flew against a hat rack and landed in a tangle on the dusty floor. 'Or not,' he muttered.

'What was that?' yelled Kathleen.

'Nothing,' said Nat. 'Hold on.'

She tapped the wall while she flicked through different solutions in her head. If Jack couldn't force it, they were in trouble. Tap-tap-tap. The hammer flaked off pieces of plaster. Tap-tap-tap.

'Nat?' said Kathleen, her voice muffled. 'I'm sorry I climbed onto the roof.'

'Onto the most unstable section,' muttered Jack.

'I just wanted to see the view,' said Kathleen. 'Like Dad said.' She fell silent for a moment. 'Is it true? Do we really have to leave?'

Nat put down her hammer. The worst part of the chat with their Dad came flooding back.

'Dad?' said Kathleen. 'Can we still have some adventures?'

Mike sighed. 'Of course. These are your last two weeks up here – ever. Go see all your

favourite places, take in the views.’

Nat stood up. ‘Let's start with a ride.’

‘That’s the other thing,’ said her father. ‘We have to sell the horses.’

Kathleen whimpered. Nat sat down with a thump.

‘The land in town is too expensive to keep them,’ said Mike.

‘Even for a pony like Sundance?’ asked Kathleen.

‘Even for a pony,’ said Mike.

Nat's eyes welled up with tears. And to her horror, so did her Dad's.

‘I'm sorry,’ said Mike, wiping his eyes roughly with the back of his hand. ‘Believe me, I've done everything I can.’ He stood up. ‘I’m off to the back barn to start clearing it out. I’ll be back later to finish the roof repairs – I don’t want anyone on the ladder while I’m gone.’ He whistled to the dogs and disappeared out the door.

Nat tested the last stretch of wall, just above the floor. Tap-tap-donk. The hammer fell through something new – a thin board.

‘Jack – I’ve found it.’

With the splitter and the hammer they cleared out all the board until the space was big enough for Nat to slither in.

Kathleen leapt up from the nest of rafters and torn hessian. She threw her arms around Nat.

‘That was so awesome!’

Nat hugged her little sister tight. Kathleen was only nine and a half, but she was gutsy. And almost unrecognisable. Both sisters shared the same spattering of freckles across their cheeks but Kathleen's had disappeared under the coating of dust. Nat wiped each cheek clean with a thumb and Kathleen giggled.

Jack wormed into the room. ‘What is this place?’

Every wall in the secret room had been reinforced with planks of solid wood.

‘This is rimu,’ said Nat. ‘No wonder you bounced off.’

Jack rubbed his shoulder. ‘Whoever built this didn’t want anyone to find it.’

‘They obviously had something worth protecting,’ said Nat.

‘Then what are we missing?’ asked Jack. ‘If they went to this much trouble to keep people out... Hold on.’ He and Kathleen pushed the debris against the far wall. They scanned the floor. Nothing.

‘What about up?’ said Kathleen.

‘Up?’ repeated Nat. Her gaze flashed over the walls.

‘Holy,’ whispered Jack.

At the peak of the roof, in front of the gaping hole, sat a single shelf. On it rested a small wooden box. Jack lowered it to the floor. It was covered with cobwebs and fastened with a padlock.

‘The key could be anywhere,’ said Nat.

Jack grinned. ‘Don’t worry about that.’ He lifted the hammer and brought it down on the padlock. It smashed instantly. Jack offered the box to Nat. ‘Would you care to do the honours?’

Nat opened the lid. Inside was a yellowed envelope with a name on it:

‘Natalia.’

Chapter 2

Natalia's Letter

Nat's heart was pounding. She picked up the envelope, hardly able to believe what she was seeing.

'Open it,' said Jack.

'How is this possible?' asked Nat.

'Who cares, open it!'

Kathleen's eyes were shining. 'Do it,' she said.

Nat took a deep breath. She peeled open the top flap of the envelope. There was one piece of paper inside. It felt so brittle she worried it might fall apart in her hands.

'It's a letter,' she said.

'Read it!' said Kathleen.

'Dear Natalia,

After all we have been through, I apologise for having to hide these final endeavours from you. Last week's events changed both our worlds, and I fear the wider consequences. You and I know that neither of us is to blame; but unfortunately many do not share that view. Who knows what dark forces are waiting in the shadows?

Opening the second cave to the public has changed the situation drastically. For the moment, the treasure remains safe within. If you succeed in recovering it, it may be some consolation for your great loss. Please find enclosed the relevant maps. You alone know the access points; if another stumbles upon them, all is lost.

Tomorrow I take my leave to cross the seas. To your family I wish wealth and happiness.

Rewi Te Kaitiaki.

January 2nd, 1888.'

Nat looked at the others. They were holding their breaths. She realised she was too.

'Did you understand all of that?' she asked her sister.

Kathleen nodded. 'Where's the treasure? Can we find it and save the farm?'

Nat grinned. 'We can try.'

'It's hidden in a cave,' said Jack. 'He was telling her how to find it.' He pulled two small packages from the box, each tied with string, and opened them. 'Cave maps,' he said. 'One says 'Sinbad's Cave,' and the other 'Cave of the Emeralds.' But which one has the treasure?'

Nat examined the maps. They weren't very detailed. The first one had a stream flowing into it. The main feature was a large room. She peered at the tiny writing on the map. It said 'The Ballroom.'

'Got it,' said Nat. 'This is the Waitomo Glowworm Cave. The ballroom has to be the Cathedral. It was discovered in 1887, the year before this was written. But Rewi must have found it before that. Maybe having people going through the cave meant that he couldn't get back in.'

'Nice work,' said Jack. 'So the Glowworm Cave is Sinbad's Cave. But where's this Emerald Cave?'

'It could be anywhere,' said Nat. 'And what about this bit in the letter about dark forces?'

'It's totally ancient,' said Jack. 'Don't worry about it.'

'Is the letter really for you Nat?' asked Kathleen.

'More likely, our great great grandmother,' said Jack. 'Nat was named after her.'

Nat thought for a moment. 'So,' she said, 'Rewi thought Natalia was clever enough to

find this room.’

‘But she didn’t find it,’ said Kathleen.

‘No – the maps were still sealed,’ said Jack.

Nat frowned. ‘I wonder why not? And who’s this Rewi?’

‘There are lots of Te Kaitiakis down the hill,’ said Jack. ‘They’ll be able to tell us if any of their relations was named Rewi.’

‘Hey!’ said Kathleen. ‘There’s one more thing in the box.’ She lifted out another package, tied in brown paper and fastened with string.

‘I think it’s your turn to open something,’ said Nat.

Kathleen ripped apart the paper. ‘It’s a book,’ she said. ‘Sinbad the Sailor.’

‘Is there anything else?’ asked Nat.

‘Yeah,’ said Jack. ‘A feather.’ He held it up. It was black with golden streaks at the tip. ‘I wonder what bird that comes from.’

‘Let’s make a plan,’ said Nat. ‘First, we’d better go explain to Dad why there’s a massive hole in the roof.’

‘And we can ask him about Natalia,’ said Jack.

Nat nodded. ‘Then, let’s go see the Te Kaitiakis, and we’ll find out about Rewi.’

‘It’s a real live mystery,’ said Kathleen. ‘In our house! And I found it!’

Chapter 3

Abraham Te Kaitiaki

Nat sat reading *Sinbad the Sailor* for the tenth time that day. The book was full of notes from the previous owners. She wished she could conjure them to ask about everything that had happened. Instead, she had to squint to decipher their scribbles. Some of the words she knew – Taupo, jewels, dhow. She'd had to look that one up to be sure, but she'd been right; a dhow was an Arabian ship. Then there were other words she'd never heard of. In bold letters up the side of one page someone had written 'Al-Idrisi.' What – or who – was that? Nat soaked it all in. She was determined to get to the bottom of each mystery.

Two chapters had a blue ribbon between the pages, marking Sinbad's second and sixth journeys. In the second voyage, Sinbad was abandoned on an island occupied by giant birds known as roc. He became stranded in a valley full of diamonds and serpents. Merchants harvested the diamonds by throwing hunks of meat into the valley. The roc picked up the meat, covered in diamonds, and dropped it in their nests. The merchants would drive the birds away to collect the gems. Sinbad managed to get picked up by a roc and then escaped the nest, eventually returning home to Baghdad with his fortune secured.

What interested Nat most was the word 'Moa' written in the margins of the page about the serpents. She thought about that for a moment. To a frightened traveller who saw the strange bird, the head might have looked like a snake.

Sinbad had a history of getting shipwrecked, and on his sixth voyage it happened again, leaving him stranded on an island. He travelled on a raft through a cave laden with jewels, and emerged on the other side into a different land with people who helped him return home.

'Hey! Splatters!' Jack's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. 'Are you ready?'

Nat frowned. She hated when Jack called her that. Muttering insults under her breath, she put away the book and ran downstairs.

'Dad's taking Kathleen to grab stuff for the roof,' he said. 'Now's our chance.'

'Did you tell him where we're going?' asked Nat.

Jack grinned. 'Yeah – he said old man Te Kaitiaki was a witch and not to make him mad or we'd come back with a tail.'

Nat gasped. 'He really said that?'

'Yeah.'

The secret room had fascinated Mike. He hadn't been able to fit his shoulders through but he'd examined everything from the edge of the hole. Then when they'd shown him the letter and the feather, he'd clammed up.

'He knows something,' said Jack as they biked up the driveway. 'Did you see his face change?'

'Yep,' said Nat, pedalling hard to keep up with her brother's longer legs. 'Give him some time. We'll get the story.'

Jack led the way along the gravel. The road wound between steep green paddocks where limestone pillars rose like ruined castles. To the east the mountains of Maungatautari and Kakepuku rose from the blue horizon. Nat grinned. Only this morning she'd longed to see her favourite spots as they'd rolled by. Now she whizzed past them without a second glance.

Out on the seal, they flew down the hill so fast Nat's ears were burning with wind chill by the time they sped over the one-lane bridge. The Te Kaitiakis lived on the edge of a massive bush block that rolled over the hills behind their house. Their driveway was dark and narrow, flanked by native trees. Nat had never been inside. At the letterbox she paused.

'Scared huh?' said Jack, screeching to a halt beside her.

'Catching my breath,' said Nat.

‘How old were you when Erica Te Kaitiaki’s hair turned white overnight?’

‘Maybe seven,’ said Nat, keeping her voice as even as she could.

‘What about when Sammy brought that magic rock to school?’

‘That wasn’t a magic rock.’

‘Was too – it made him levitate!’

‘Stop winding me up.’

‘Or you’ll do what?’ taunted Jack.

‘I’ll tell everyone you’re scared of heights!’

Jack’s jaw set in an angry line. ‘Hurry up,’ he said. ‘I’ll wait here.’

Nat was suddenly genuinely scared. If Jack was spooked, maybe she should be too. She gripped her handlebars. Turning back now wasn’t an option – there were too many things left unresolved.

She took off down the driveway flat-tack, leaving Jack in her dust trail. As she rode, two fat kereru swooped out of a miro tree and flew beside her, one either side. They cried out when the trees opened up, revealing a small wooden house, then they both executed a loop-de-loop and flew off.

A wizened man sitting on the porch smiled at her. ‘It is an auspicious day when a young lady arrives with a royal escort,’ he said.

Nat clambered off her bike.

‘Come here child,’ he called. ‘It is customary for the chief to hongi the princess.’

‘Um –’ said Nat, ‘I’m not a princess, sorry.’

He smiled. ‘No? Well, that doesn’t really change anything.’

Nat frowned. So far, Mr. Te Kaitiaki wasn’t at all what she expected. She rested her bike on the ground and walked towards the house. The old man on the porch looked as though he’d seen three hundred summers and had collected a wrinkle for each one. His skin was the colour of the totara stumps her Dad pulled out of the swamp – golden and shiny. Dark, lively eyes examined her as she approached. She grasped his hand and bent down to press his nose and forehead to her own. As their skin touched, there was a sudden spark, and a series of images flashed before Nat’s eyes, like a film, sped up, but out of order. She jumped back, and saw the old man was watching her carefully.

‘Natalia,’ he said, in a voice like whispery wind. ‘My uncle told me about you.’

‘I’m usually just called Nat,’ said Nat. ‘Unless I’m in trouble.’

‘And I,’ said the old man, ‘am Abraham Arapeta Hokianga Kahu Te Kaitiaki. But you can call me Abraham.’

Nat decided to get straight to the point. She fished the letter out of her pocket and handed it over. Abraham read it and placed it on the table between them. He produced four small stones from his pocket and anchored each corner of the letter.

‘Let them be seen by the sunlight, these words that have been hidden away,’ he said. Then he looked her directly in the eye. Nat jumped involuntarily, as if his full gaze somehow electrified her.

‘You have a plan, I imagine?’ he said.

‘Find you,’ said Nat. ‘Find out more about Natalia. Have a look in the Glowworm Cave.’ She shrugged. ‘That’s all we’ve got so far.’

Abraham chuckled. ‘You’re doing well. You only found the room this morning.’

‘How’d you know that?’

‘I know a few things,’ he said, and Nat watched his ears wiggle.

‘Who was Rewi?’ she asked.

‘The greatest protector that ever was,’ said Abraham.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Nat.

‘His job was to look after this valley and make sure its secrets remained hidden until the

right time,' said Abraham.

'And what happened to him?'

'He was exiled before the century rolled over last time.'

'Who by?' asked Nat.

'That's a story for another time,' said Abraham. 'It's a winter story. Will you be here in winter?' There was hope in the old man's voice and Nat began to warm to him.

'I don't know,' said Nat. 'Up until now, we've lived with Mum during school and in the holidays we stay with Dad. But the farm goes on the market next week.'

Abraham raised his eyebrows. 'Really?' he said. 'Something must be done about that.'

'That's what I think!' said Nat. 'So – if Rewi was a protector, does that mean there's treasure?'

'Absolutely,' said Abraham. 'The question was never whether it existed – but where it had been placed. Was there anything else with the letter?'

'Two cave maps,' said Nat, 'a copy of Sinbad the Sailor – and this.' She held out the feather, and the air around it seemed to shimmer.

Abraham smiled. 'Caves I know, Sinbad I have read – but this – this is a real treasure.'

'What is it?' asked Nat.

'This is the feather of a great eagle. Today they call her after an explorer, Haast. To us, she was the Pouākai. After reading Sinbad, however, you may know her as a roc.'

Chapter 4

Pockets of Magic

Nat stared at Abraham. ‘A roc?’ she repeated. ‘But I thought the last one died hundreds of years ago.’

‘You must remember,’ said Abraham, ‘there are pockets of magic in this country where things that have vanished from the everyday world live on. When I was a boy, there were two eagles left. The female of the pair was chased from her cliff top home when the settlers started dividing up the land. They herded her towards the sea.’

‘They herded her?’ Nat didn’t understand. ‘How could they even chase her? She could just fly away.’

‘She was tame,’ said Abraham. ‘When the people came to capture her, she trusted them. Before long, she was bound up in ropes. She was the colour of sunsets. The settlers knew she was too beautiful to kill, but she was too dangerous to let live. So they delivered her here, to our people, and told us they never wanted to see her again.’

Nat couldn’t understand why, but she had tears in her eyes. ‘What happened to her?’

‘The tohunga untied the ropes and rubbed salve into her wounds,’ said Abraham. ‘The bird asked for Rewi, and the tohunga explained he’d been forced to leave forever. The bird flew straight up, let out a melancholy cry, and disappeared to the west, never to be seen again.’

‘What about the other eagle – the male?’

Abraham’s eyes darkened. ‘The last eagle was given a grand task, and gave his life for it.’

Nat was about to ask another question, but a wind rustled the trees and a man emerged from the bush. He was wearing traditional Māori dress and was fully tattooed in a way she’d only seen in books. Nat blinked: she could see straight through him. He stepped onto the porch and bent down to whisper in Abraham’s ear. Abraham leant forward and Nat caught a glimpse of a large greenstone hanging around the old man’s neck. It was dark green, almost black. Nat blinked again, furiously, as the tattooed man stood up, stepped back into the bush and disappeared into a tree.

‘Unfortunately my dear, I must leave.’ Abraham stood up with a strength that surprised Nat. ‘I am needed across the valley. There is someone you should meet however; she will be most helpful in your quest. My great-niece Ariki.’

A Māori girl stepped from the house. She had two black plaits that flowed over her shoulders and the same piercing dark eyes as Abraham. Nat remembered her from the primary school bus; she was the year ahead of Nat, which meant she was about fourteen.

‘I’ll see you again,’ said Abraham. ‘There is much more to tell.’ He rested his hand on her shoulder. ‘Be careful Natalia – you have stumbled across a mystery that has claimed lives.’

With a final nod, he was gone. Nat realised she’d been holding her breath, and let it go with a shudder.

‘I didn’t know your name was Natalia,’ said the girl.

Nat screwed up her face. ‘I like Nat better.’

‘I get it. Everyone calls me Riki – except for Abraham.’

Nat glanced back to the bush where the tattooed man had appeared.

Riki chuckled. ‘That was nothing.’

‘But he walked right into the tree!’

‘Wait till you see some of Abraham’s other tricks.’ She grinned. ‘Hey, I know how to get you into the Glowworm Cave.’

‘I’ve been before,’ said Nat. ‘Heaps of times.’

‘Course,’ said Riki. ‘But I know where we can hide – and other ways to get out.’ Riki leapt down the steps and wheeled a bike from the garage. ‘Your friends are waiting for you at the end of the drive.’

‘Friends?’ asked Nat. ‘Only my stupid brother came along.’

‘He’s gathered reinforcements,’ said Riki. ‘Elijah and Barnaby Lima are here too.’

Nat pedalled up the driveway. Her brain was bursting with the mystery – Sinbad’s story, the cave maps, a giant eagle feather, the exiled Rewi. She didn’t even know how her great great grandmother fitted in yet – and now the Lima brothers were here! Elijah and Barnaby were Samoan and lived further up their road. Nat pulled to a perfect stop in front of them.

‘Hi,’ she said. Her heart was beating wildly.

‘Old Splattercat,’ said Elijah. His dark hair was short and spiked, and his olive skin still wore a summer tan. ‘Good to see you again.’

‘You too,’ said Nat. ‘How’s boarding school?’

‘Good,’ said Elijah. ‘I’m in the First Eleven. Not bad for a fifteen year old aye!’

‘Nice,’ said Nat. She couldn’t believe how much he’d grown; especially across his shoulders.

Elijah was calm and in control, but Barnaby was always up to mischief. He had the same olive skin as his older brother, but Barnaby was skinnier. His long scruffy hair made him look like a surfer.

‘Hi Splat,’ said Barnaby. ‘Been climbing recently?’

Nat groaned. Not again.

‘You’ve got natural Splatter ability,’ continued Barnaby. ‘Remember when we were out bouldering, and you boasted that you’d perfected that really hard climb?’

‘Was that the one she demanded we watch?’ asked Elijah. A massive grin spread across his face.

‘Yep,’ said Barnaby. ‘What happened next? That’s right, you fell and winded yourself so bad we almost called the ambulance.’

‘I was quite worried,’ said Elijah.

‘I was too,’ said Jack.

‘Yeah right,’ said Barnaby. They all laughed.

‘Moving on,’ said Nat. ‘What are you guys doing here?’

‘We were biking home when we found Jack crying ‘cos he’d lost his sister,’ said Elijah. Jack scoffed. ‘Whatever.’

‘Do you all know Riki?’ asked Nat.

‘Long time, no see,’ said Elijah. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Good,’ replied Riki. ‘Are you guys up for a mission?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Barnaby. ‘Does it involve finding the cave Jack’s been going on about?’

‘Not yet,’ said Nat. ‘We’re going to the Glowworm Cave.’

The boys groaned. They’d all visited the cave repeatedly on school trips.

‘Let’s go to a real cave,’ said Barnaby.

‘You just want to play in the mud,’ said Jack.

Barnaby smiled. ‘Yep!’

‘The thing is,’ said Riki, ‘we’re going into the cave with a tour – but not coming out with one.’

‘We’re staying the night?’ asked Elijah.

‘Probably not.’ Riki lowered her voice. ‘We’ll bust out once we find what we’re looking for.’

Barnaby leaned forward. ‘Which is?’

‘Sinbad’s lost treasure.’

‘I’m in,’ said Barnaby. He glanced around the group. ‘I think we all are.’

‘Excellent,’ said Riki. ‘Listen up – here’s the plan.’

Chapter 5

Break Through

Outside the Waitomo Glowworm Cave, the buses were lined up as usual; Nat counted them as they biked past.

‘Four here at the moment,’ she said.

‘End of the day,’ called Elijah. ‘They’ve probably put through thirty since this morning.’

The impressive beams of the Glowworm Cave building stretched out over the bustle below. Nat wondered for a moment if anyone was watching them. There’s nothing to worry about, she told herself. We just want to sit in the boat and see the glowworms, like everyone else.

‘Isn’t the building supposed to look like a hīnaki?’ Jack asked Riki.

‘An eel-catcher?’ She shrugged. ‘A really fancy one maybe.’

‘What do you think Nat?’ Jack was doing his best to wind her up again. ‘A big old eel-catcher for big bad-daddy eels?’

‘Watch out!’ cried Nat. A group of people had wandered onto the road, oblivious of any traffic.

‘No fear, sister!’ called Jack as he swerved around the tourists. He swung into the car park and everyone followed him. They stashed their bikes in the bush and raced up to the building.

‘Give me a second to talk to my Aunty,’ said Riki. ‘She’ll sort everything.’

They waited on a bench and watched the crowds. Some were posing for photos, others wandering about taking it all in.

‘It’s the best hiding place,’ said Nat. ‘Right in front of millions of people.’

Jack glanced up from checking their head-torches. ‘The scent on our mystery is stone cold,’ he said. ‘I doubt we’ll actually find anything.’

Elijah patted Nat on the back. ‘Love your enthusiasm,’ he said. ‘But Jack’s right. There’s almost no chance.’

There was a shrill whistle, and Riki waved out from the ticket office. They leapt up. The lady behind the counter smiled.

‘You kids have a good time,’ she said. ‘You’re on the last tour with two busloads, and the final few tourists of the day. Sorry it couldn’t be a smaller group.’

‘Not a problem,’ said Riki. Nat could tell exactly what she was thinking – it’s perfect.

Their guide welcomed them and the group trooped inside, past the round door that reminded Nat of a hobbit hole. In the cave, there was a murmur of voices and the shuffle of feet; it was like entering a shrine.

‘How long do we wait?’ whispered Jack.

‘Easy daisy,’ said Elijah. ‘We can’t disappear right away. Act touristy for a bit.’

Immediately Jack and Barnaby adopted terrible American accents.

‘What’s this formation here?’ said Barnaby.

‘That’s a stalagmite,’ said Riki, playing along.

‘Shoot,’ said Barnaby. ‘The stalagmites we’ve got at home are twice the size of these ones.’

Nat rolled her eyes. Trust the boys to act up.

‘And our caves,’ twanged Jack, ‘they’re way darker than this one!’

‘Shut up, you idiots,’ said Elijah. ‘Nat, tell me more about what we’re looking for.’

‘If something has been hidden all this time, it has to be well concealed,’ said Nat. ‘We should split up and examine the edges of the cave, especially the floor and walls. If you find anything suspicious, report back.’

Elijah nodded. ‘Good plan.’

The group moved towards a set of narrow steps and began to funnel into the Cathedral. Nat could hear the guide pointing out different features to the people at the front. She nudged Elijah. ‘Now’s good.’

Elijah beckoned to Jack. ‘We’ll double back and look at the entrance.’

‘Check all the side passages too,’ said Riki.

‘Got it,’ said Elijah. ‘See you at the boat.’

They pulled out their torches and scurried away into the darkness.

Nat tried to relax and enjoy the beauty of the cave, but her eyes couldn’t rest for a second. Every rock she saw made her wonder if a secret passageway sat beneath it. Behind each formation, she imagined something was hidden. Barnaby put his arm around her to calm her down.

‘Deep breath in, deep breath out,’ he said, although now her heart was thumping for a totally different reason. ‘They’ll be back in no time.’

Nat gripped the handrail and shuffled down the steps. She listened absentmindedly to the conversation of the couple in front of her. A thin man was whispering to a woman holding a briefcase. She had smooth dark skin and was wearing a hat and expensive black coat. Nat heard the man say something about Sinbad. It must be my imagination, she thought. Straining to hear more, she leant forward.

Suddenly her foot slipped. Barnaby reached out to pull her back, but she had too much momentum. She fell straight onto the couple, tumbling them down the last steps. The briefcase flew through the air, hit a wall, and cracked open. Something golden soared through the cave, clanged on the floor, and spun to a stop. The woman fell in an undignified heap, and the thin man sprawled on top of her. There was a dull thud as his head hit the floor. Nat landed on both of them. A shower of fine formation loosened by the flying briefcase sprinkled over all of them.

Before Nat knew what was happening, Barnaby had pulled her to her feet and Riki was apologising.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Barnaby.

Nat nodded. She watched as the woman heaved the man off her. Riki offered to help her up, but the woman snarled at her outstretched hand.

The rest of the group had melted out of the way, but now they began to creep closer. The woman shoved them aside and scooped the gleaming object into her arms. She ignored the thin man, who was nursing his head and rubbing his hip.

He turned to the woman. ‘Is it safe?’ he whispered.

‘Yes,’ she hissed, and disappeared into the shadows.

The man hobbled to his feet and with one quick movement caught Nat’s chin with his hand. He wrenched her head towards him, and leant in so close Nat could see his nostrils quiver.

‘You should be more careful,’ he sneered, holding her tight.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Nat. ‘I didn’t mean to.’

‘Where are your parents?’ he demanded. ‘Who is here with you?’

‘We’re here by ourselves,’ said Riki. The man shifted his glare to her.

‘Despicable,’ he spat, as he turned to go.

‘Excuse me,’ said Nat. ‘Did you say something before about Sinbad?’

The man spun about so quickly he winced and grabbed his hip. ‘What?’ he demanded.

Nat gulped. ‘I just thought I heard –’

‘Stupid girl. Get out of my sight.’

Barnaby and Riki steered Nat away from the man. She looked over her shoulder and watched as he picked up the broken case and hobbled away. The woman was waiting for him

on the far side of the Cathedral. When the man limped towards her, she began scolding him, stabbing him in the chest with her finger.

Nat brushed herself off. 'Did anyone else see that?'

'I saw something bright, but that's it,' said Barnaby.

'I did,' said Riki.

'What was it?' asked Barnaby.

Riki looked around before speaking. 'It was a golden mask. It looked like a tiger.'

Nat frowned. 'Why would someone carry around a mask?'

'Because it's too valuable to leave anywhere,' said Barnaby.

'Abraham will know what it was,' said Riki.

The guide started telling the group about the famous people who'd performed in the Cathedral, and asked if anyone would like to sing. A group of Koreans launched into a lullaby. As everyone listened, a movement in the upper levels of the cave caught Nat's attention. The thin man and the woman were now talking to a chubby man in a suit. Pretending to point out a formation to Barnaby, she showed him the meeting. Then they spotted Jack and Elijah, flattened against a wall. They'd snuck up on the trio and were listening closely.

'Good,' muttered Nat. 'We'll figure out what they're up to.'

'It might be nothing,' said Barnaby.

'Yeah right,' said Nat. 'That woman was strange. The man too. They're up to something.'

The guide announced they'd now begin loading the glowworm boats.

'This is our moment,' said Riki. 'I'll tell the guide we're leaving because our friend isn't feeling well.' She winked at Nat. 'Then we'll find a place to hide.' She trotted away. Nat watched as the guide pointed Riki to the exit.

'Right,' said Barnaby. 'Let's go.' He and Riki put an arm around Nat, who lolled her head to act the patient. Nat almost giggled at the mock-drama of it all, but Riki shushed her with a serious glance.

At the foot of the stairs, they found Elijah and Jack, who beckoned them into the darkness.

'This way,' said Elijah. 'We can watch from the alcoves under here.'

Barnaby checked over his shoulder, but the group was intent on filing into the boats. He half lifted, half slid Nat up onto a rock ledge and squeezed in beside her. The others filed into the next alcove, pulled up their feet and burrowed themselves into the rock.

'You got strong,' whispered Nat to Barnaby. 'How are you going to fit through the cave squeezes?'

'That's what I've got you for,' he replied.

Nat shook her head. 'I don't like squeezes. They make me feel trapped.'

'Is this okay?' Barnaby smiled. They were jammed tight into the niche.

'Now?' said Nat. 'Yeah, this is okay.' She blushed, and said a silent thank you for the darkness.

They listened as the awestruck whispers and exclamations from the tourists drifted back to their hiding spot. The first group exited the cave, and the boat returned to load the final people. When they left, the cave settled into a happy silence. Nat felt sorry for the place, full of chattering and noises all day.

Staccato footsteps cut through her musings, and two men appeared. One was limping; Nat recognised him as the thin man she'd scuttled on the stairs. The other man was wearing a suit two sizes too small.

'Okay Henderson,' said the thin man, 'This better be good.'

The plump man bent over double to catch his breath. 'This place is iconic, Wylie. Have a

look around.’

‘You’re supposed to be calling me Cortez.’

‘I’ll use your code name when Drake’s around. What sent her packing?’

‘Those annoying kids. She hates children.’

‘She hates everyone.’

‘Yeah, but kids are at the top of the list. Especially unsupervised gangs of them.’

‘Right. So, this is the Cathedral. Pretty spectacular, isn’t it?’

‘Seen one, seen ‘em all,’ said Wylie, sounding bored. ‘I don’t care about caves. I just want the things hidden in them.’

Nat’s eyes bulged as he grabbed onto a stalactite and casually leaned on it. Everyone knew the damage that could cause!

Henderson started to stutter. ‘Ah – I – ah – I don’t think you’re allowed to touch that.’

‘I’m the world’s pre-eminent cave expert,’ said Wylie. ‘I’ll touch what I’ll like.’

Barnaby shifted beside her. Every hair on his body was standing on end, like a dog with his hackles up. She held her arm out in front of his chest, silently warning him to stay put.

Henderson chuckled. ‘You’ve started to believe your own propaganda. I know where you bought your degrees.’

‘I didn’t hire you to believe my tall tales,’ spat Wylie. ‘I hired you to see through walls. What’s taking so long?’

‘I told you this wasn’t going to deliver a quick return.’

‘What was so important you couldn’t tell me in Auckland?’

‘Come and see for yourself.’

‘We don’t want word to get out that we’re chasing fairy stories.’

‘You won’t be disappointed.’

The voices floated off. Elijah leapt out of the darkness, landing on his feet like a cat. Nat watched him jealously. He signalled that he was going to follow the men, and before anyone could stop him, he was gone. The cave was still again. Ten minutes passed, twenty, and everything remained silent. Nat’s legs started fizzing with pins and needles. Barnaby’s stomach grumbled and they both had to swallow their laughter. Thirty minutes passed and then an almighty clang echoed through the cave.

‘That’s the door closing,’ said Nat, almost to herself. ‘We’re locked in.’

A moment later Elijah scampered back. ‘We’re in the clear,’ he called.

Stretching and groaning like they’d been cooped up for years, they piled out into the Cathedral. As all the lights had been turned off, they switched on their head-torches. Elijah waited for them with gleaming eyes.

‘What’s going on?’ demanded Jack. ‘You were gone for ages.’

‘They talked for ages,’ said Elijah. ‘That man, Cain Wylie, is telling everyone he’s a cave expert.’

‘He’s no expert,’ muttered Barnaby.

‘So Wylie was the grumpy one?’ asked Riki.

‘Yeah, and the fat one, Henderson, he’s in charge of a special project. It’s been going on for a couple of months now, and lots of cash has been poured into it –’

‘But they haven’t got anything back yet,’ finished Barnaby.

‘Exactly,’ said Elijah. ‘Wylie is mad, wants results, and is willing to do anything to get them.’

‘What’s the project?’ asked Nat.

‘You’re not going to believe this,’ said Elijah. ‘They’ve been scanning the cave walls with some kind of sonar imagery, looking for hollow spaces.’

Nat looked at Elijah blankly. ‘Why is that exciting?’

‘They’ve heard rumours that treasure was hidden here before the cave opened to the

public. To find out once and for all whether the story is true, they've been going through the cave, segment by segment, scanning to see if there's anything there.'

'And they've found something,' said Jack, 'or you wouldn't be grinning like an idiot.'

Elijah nodded. 'I followed them to a wall, and Henderson told Wylie that behind this particular wall there was a small space, about elevator size.'

Riki frowned. 'What are they going to do next?'

'On Monday a team will come down from Auckland, close off that part of the cave under the guise of a safety inspection, and probe the wall.'

'They can't do that,' said Riki. 'The cave is tapu. It's a taonga.'

Nat turned to her new friend. 'They don't care if it's sacred or not,' she said. 'They don't care about anything but the money.'

Riki's frown deepened. 'They'll come to a bad end,' she said. 'It doesn't matter whether they believe in it or not.'

'Can you show us the wall?' asked Jack.

'Follow me,' said Elijah.

He led them to the upper parts of the cave. The beams of their head-torches flashed about as they climbed the stairs. Nat hung back for a moment and switched off her light. Apart from footsteps, the only sound was an eerie dripping somewhere in the blackness. She shivered with excitement. Flicking her light back on, she raced to catch up with the others. They had stopped in a nondescript passage. There was nothing to suggest that anything was hidden there.

'Are you sure?' asked Nat.

'Yep,' said Elijah. 'I know it doesn't look like anything, but that's the genius, isn't it – imagine how many people have walked where we are now, and never knew what was on the other side!'

Barnaby interrupted. 'Hey, we don't know either.'

'Yeah, but we will soon,' said Elijah. 'What do you reckon? We could get in there and get it out before the guy in the suit returns.'

'Hold on,' said Riki. 'What did you say?'

'We can break through,' said Elijah.

'With what?' scoffed Barnaby.

'No way,' said Riki.

Elijah looked at them. 'On Monday any treasure is gone to a bank vault in Auckland. They've been searching for ages for what we've been looking for today. It's a golden opportunity – we have to seize it.'

As he spoke, Nat saw Jack backing away from the group. Then without warning he hurtled down the passage and threw himself at the wall. He bounced back and fell to the floor. Nat couldn't help herself. She burst out laughing. So did the others.

'Nice work,' said Nat.

'Shut up Splat,' said Jack. 'At least I gave it a go.'

Barnaby was running his hands over the wall, tapping and listening as he went. 'It's all rock,' he said. 'Good old bone crunching thirty million year old rock. There's no way we can smash through it.'

Jack groaned. 'I'd agree with the bone crunching part.'

Watching Barnaby, something clicked in Nat's brain. She dropped to her knees and examined the bottom section of the wall. Running her hands over the limestone, she tapped and patted it as Barnaby had done. Then, in the bottom right corner of the wall, she took a deep breath and scratched her fingernails into the rock. A little dust flaked off. She tried again, and more powder trickled onto the cave floor. Furiously, she scraped her hands against the rock, and it started to crumble before her. The others were still arguing. She looked up at

them.

‘Hey!’ she said. ‘I’ve got something.’

They gathered around her.

‘That’s not limestone,’ said Barnaby. He picked up the dust and sniffed it. ‘It’s plaster.’

Nat stepped back to let the others have a turn.

‘You’re bleeding,’ said Riki.

Nat looked down at her hands. She’d attacked the rock so vigorously she’d skinned her knuckles. ‘It’s for a good cause,’ she said.

The boys dug out the plaster until they’d created what looked like a massive mouse hole. Elijah lay on his stomach, stretched his arm deep into the hole, and gasped. ‘We’ve done it,’ he said. ‘I’m through to the other side!’

Chapter 6

Stuck

Everyone gathered around the hole, pushy and excited. Riki wriggled close on her stomach and shone her light down the passage. 'I can see something on the floor,' she said.

Barnaby grinned. 'There's actually something in there!'

Elijah whacked him over the head. 'Of course there's something in there, you moron. That's why we've got businessmen scanning walls with machines that cost millions.'

'But what could possibly be worth it?' asked Riki as she slid back to let the next person have a look.

'Sinbad's treasure,' said Nat. 'They said it themselves – they're chasing fairy stories.'

Jack was using a rock to scrape out the plaster, widening the hole. 'It's still too narrow,' he said.

'We're making a mess,' said Barnaby, looking at the debris collecting on the floor. 'How are we going to hide everything?'

Riki shook her head. 'There's no way to hide this. Tomorrow morning, the first guide in here is going to freak out – it'll be all over the news.'

Nat considered this. Riki was right. 'Guys,' she said, 'start thinking about an escape plan and a hiding place.'

Elijah laughed. 'You're a crack-up Nat. First day of the holidays and we're already involved in a treasure hunt, a mystery over a hundred years old, and now we've broken into the biggest tourist attraction in the country. What happens next?'

'Whatever does happen,' interrupted Barnaby, 'Count me in.'

'I think we're all in it together now,' said Nat, glowing at Barnaby's comment. 'And we might be in a whole heap of trouble.'

'Youch,' said Jack. He pulled his hand back from the hole, and a stream of blood dripped onto the floor. 'This is nasty work.'

'Is real life harder than PlayStation?' joked Barnaby.

'Must be your turn, cave geek,' muttered Jack. He handed the rock to Barnaby, who got to work. Nat showed her own bloody hands to her brother.

'The cave is taking a bit from us,' said Riki, 'because we're trying to take something from her. We didn't even say a karakia, did we? No wonder there's resistance.'

Riki sat down, closed her eyes, and started talking to the cave in Māori. Nat watched for a moment, then sat down beside her and listened. It seemed appropriate. Suddenly it was like the very spirit of the cave was there with them, watching their endeavours. It felt like something was being considered, and each of them was examined curiously. Then a feeling of happiness surrounded Nat.

'The cave likes us,' said Riki. 'It likes us being here. We're different from the usual people it sees. We're going to be all right.'

'I hope the cave is okay with us taking the treasure,' said Nat. 'We have to save our farm.' She looked at Riki. 'This sounds crazy but it's like the land is part of me. Without those hills, I'm nothing.'

Barnaby wiggled back and put down the rock. 'I think I can get through.'

'Feet first?' asked Elijah.

'Head first,' said Barnaby. He tightened his head-torch around his forehead.

'Go for it,' said Elijah. 'Think skinny.'

Nat crouched down beside Barnaby as he scrunched his shoulders together and manoeuvred himself into the hole. Pushing off with his feet, he wiggled in, a couple of centimetres at a time. Soon just his legs were sticking out of the hole, and then he stopped.

‘Are you okay?’ called Jack.

‘Hold on,’ said Barnaby, but his voice was muffled and strained. His feet scraped around to get some purchase, but there was no more forward movement.

‘What can you see?’ asked Riki.

‘Feathers,’ called Barnaby. ‘They’re big and pretty – I don’t know what bird they’re from.’

‘I do,’ said Nat. ‘It means we’re in the right place.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ said Jack.

Barnaby’s feet pushed again, but to no avail.

Elijah leant closer. ‘Is there anything else in there bro?’

‘Not sure,’ said Barnaby. There was a renewed effort of shuffling and grunting as he tried to push forward. ‘I’ll come back.’

Everyone watched as the feet scuffled back on the cave floor. Barnaby reversed until they could see his lower back, and then stopped again.

‘What’s going on?’ called Nat.

There was a pause. They leant down to see if Barnaby was okay.

‘I’m stuck.’

‘What do you mean, stuck?’ said Elijah. ‘You can get through anything.’

There was a furious wiggling and kicking. Then a pause. Then – nothing.

Jack giggled. Elijah looked at him. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Barnaby’s stuck,’ said Jack. ‘In a cave. But not even a real cavers’ cave, a tourist cave. He must be pretty shamed.’

‘Shut up Jack!’ The voice from the hole was mad. ‘Better than what you could do!’

But the giggles were infectious. Nat caught them next. All she could see was the bottom half of Barnaby. No adults knew where they were. No help was coming. She imagined them all sitting in the chamber the next morning when the tourists arrived. It’d be hilarious. She couldn’t help herself. She burst into raucous laughter. Suddenly Riki was chuckling too. Then Elijah. Then all four of them were rolling around the floor with belly-aching guffaws at the absurdity of their situation. When they finally stopped, Nat was crying, Jack was doubled over trying to catch his breath – and Barnaby was still stuck.

‘We need some kai,’ said Riki. ‘What supplies have we got?’

Jack didn’t need a second invitation to eat. He went for his backpack and produced muesli bars, a bottle of juice and some crackers.

‘Want something to eat?’ called Elijah to his brother.

‘As if food will help at a time like this!’ yelled Barnaby.

‘It’s not our fault you ate too many pies,’ said Jack, and he started giggling again.

‘He’s right,’ said Elijah. ‘Your squeezing days are over. A year ago, you could have made it through there no sweat. Jack’s skinnier than you – we should have sent him.’

‘Too late now,’ said Jack, cracker crumbs falling from his mouth.

‘We could pull you out,’ called Nat. ‘What part of you is stuck?’

‘Shoulders,’ came the reply. ‘If you pull it’s going to hurt.’

‘Better than being caught here tomorrow morning,’ muttered Elijah.

As they munched their treats, an amiable silence fell over the group. Everyone was in good spirits.

Riki was beaming. ‘This is fun,’ she said. ‘We’ll get him out – the cave just doesn’t want to give up its treasures too easily.’

‘It doesn’t belong to the cave though,’ said Nat.

Riki looked at her. ‘It doesn’t belong to us either. But if you’d looked after something for over a hundred years, you’d be pretty attached to it too.’

‘You’re right,’ said Nat. ‘Hey Barnaby,’ she called, ‘have a chat with the cave. Ask it to

let you go.'

'What are you guys drinking out there?' said Barnaby. 'I'm not talking to a cave!'

'Could be worth a go,' called Elijah. Nat shot him a grateful look.

There was another silence, this time loaded with anticipation. Everyone watched Barnaby's feet wriggle, then wriggle again. After a moment, he slid back smoothly, and pulled his dusty head out of the hole. He blinked at everyone, and then let out a massive sigh of relief. Nat threw her arms around him. Everyone cheered. Barnaby glared at them.

'Get off,' he said, pushing Nat aside. 'I heard you laughing with the rest of them. You're supposed to be my friends!'

'But you did really well,' said Riki. 'And you're okay. Here, have something to drink.'

Barnaby snatched the juice from her and guzzled it. Then the rest of the crackers and two muesli bars disappeared down his throat.

'If you didn't fit before, you certainly won't after that,' said Jack.

'Shut-it, beanpole,' said Barnaby. 'One day you'll grow muscles too.'

Nat took a deep breath. 'I can probably make it.'

'Splatters?' said Jack. 'Doubt it.'

Nat ignored him. 'I'm the smallest one here. It's worth a shot.'

'You don't like squeezes,' said Barnaby.

'If I don't give it a go,' said Nat, 'I don't know how else we're going to get in.'

Nat didn't wait for permission; she just wriggled straight into the hole. Please let me through, she said to herself. Please let me through to get the treasure so the bad guys don't find it. She quickly found herself at the end. The floor was sprinkled with feathers – the same as the roc feather in their attic.

'Are you okay?' called Jack.

'Yep,' she yelled. 'I can see the feathers.'

'Keep going Nat, you're doing great,' said Elijah.

Pulling her shoulders together as tightly as she could, she slid out of the hole.

'Guys! I made it!' she called. She could hear them whooping and cheering.

Nat was in a small room with a low roof. She could stand, but she doubted if Barnaby or the boys could have. Rewi must have been a little man. Either that or he had a very small helper. She examined the wall she'd crawled through. It looked like it was originally accessible by a narrow slit. Rocks and other debris had been slid into the gap and then been mortared over – all from the inside. They must have plastered up the crawl space when they'd left. They'd done a masterful job.

She carefully checked the room. Apart from the feathers, it was empty.

'What can you see?' called Riki.

'Nothing,' said Nat. 'But the floor is scratched, like something was dragged across it.'

'So the treasure's been moved,' said Barnaby.

'Are there any other clues?' asked Elijah.

Nat scanned the room again. Suddenly she saw something in the far corner.

'Nat!' called Elijah. 'What have you got?'

'Not sure,' said Nat. 'Something's carved into the cave wall.'

'Is it a message?' asked Barnaby.

'It's a picture,' said Nat. 'A bird with huge wings. Does anyone have paper and pencil?'

'I do,' said Riki.

Nat reached down the crawl hole and Riki passed them through. Holding the paper to the rock, she ran the pencil over the wall, creating a rubbing. The drawing came alive before her.

Nat looked around the room one last time. She wondered about collecting up the feathers, but decided to leave them with the cave. It would be rude to take all its treasures. Saying a silent thank you, she scooted back through the hole, without any trouble at all.

Chapter 7

Front Page News

‘What is it?’ asked Jack, staring at the paper.

‘It’s our next clue,’ said Elijah.

Jack screwed up his face. ‘A giant bird? How is that going to help us?’

‘We’re obviously on the right trail,’ said Riki. ‘Something used to be kept in that room. Figuring out what this is will help us find the treasure.’ She rolled up the rubbing and put it in her bag.

‘What’s the plan from here?’ asked Barnaby.

‘We need a smooth exit,’ said Elijah. ‘Into a boat.’

‘He’s right,’ said Riki. ‘We could sail out and down the stream.’

There were three boats resting at the edge of the glowworm grotto. Each could seat about twenty people.

‘Jump in,’ said Elijah. ‘I’ll steer.’ He stepped aboard and grabbed the wires above the boat. Barnaby and Riki followed.

‘Do you know what you’re doing?’ asked Jack.

‘Of course,’ said Elijah. ‘I pull us along on these.’

Jack shook his head. ‘I don’t trust your driving.’

‘Hurry up,’ said Barnaby.

Jack placed one foot on the boat. It drifted out from the dock.

‘Hold the side!’ called Elijah.

‘Got it!’ said Nat. She crouched down and pulled it in. But as Jack moved, the boat lurched, and Nat was yanked forward. Before anyone could stop her, she pitched straight into the freezing black water.

The cold knocked the breath out of her lungs. She gasped, and swallowed a huge mouthful of water. As she sank into the darkness, her muscles screamed in protest. Desperately, she forced herself up into the air.

‘Grab this!’ Jack held out an oar. She reached for it but missed.

‘Nat!’ yelled Barnaby. ‘Hold on!’

Nothing in Nat’s head made sense. The icy water slapped her face. She could feel something slimy around her feet. She watched the oar rise up again and swam clumsily towards it. Then, almost in slow motion, the oar came down. She didn’t have the strength to do anything. It crashed onto her head and everything went black.

The first time Nat opened her eyes she was lying on her back at the bottom of a boat, drifting under the glowworms. She thought they were diamonds and reached out to pluck them from the ceiling.

The next time she came around she was slung over a bony shoulder climbing through the bush. People were yelling and car lights flashed by.

The third time she woke she was much more comfortable; there was a sofa and a warm blanket, but there were strange herby smells and her head hurt desperately. A low voice she recognised wove an incantation over her and she sank back into a deep sleep.

Nat blinked at the light. Sunlight. The warmth on her face made her smile.

‘Dad! She’s awake!’ Jack’s voice. Footsteps bounded up the stairs – quick light steps following heavy, urgent ones.

‘Nat – how are you feeling?’

She blinked to focus on her father’s eyes, searching, concerned. ‘I’m okay,’ she

mumbled. ‘You okay?’

Mike chuckled. ‘We haven’t slept for worrying about you.’

‘I’ve been your nurse,’ said Kathleen.

‘Thank you,’ said Nat. She sat up, but the striking pain in her head made her slide back onto the pillows.

‘Yeah – no movement. The doctor said you’d taken a nasty hit from a blunt object,’ said Mike. ‘Barnaby Lima swore that you were out caving, and I believe him, but you’re not stupid enough to go caving without a helmet.’ He looked at her. ‘The doctor also said you were dangerously close to hypothermia. Forget to take your wetsuit too, Nat?’ She smiled weakly. He frowned. ‘Stay put. For at least a couple of days.’ He strode down the stairs with Kathleen, and Nat listened as he drove away on the quad bike with a chorus of barking dogs close behind.

Jack was waiting beside the bed. ‘Sorry about hitting you,’ he said. ‘I honestly didn’t mean to.’

She started to roll her eyes, but even that hurt. The best she could do was point an evil finger at Jack. ‘You did so,’ she said. ‘I’m going to get you.’

He nodded. ‘Fair enough.’

‘What happened after I got knocked out?’ Nat whispered.

Jack sat down. ‘Hauling you out of the water was such a mission. You were a dead weight!’

‘Thanks,’ muttered Nat.

‘Everyone was so freaked out. Barnaby was yelling about the eels, he almost punched me for hitting you.’

‘I could feel the eels – they were swimming around my legs!’

Jack was the one to roll his eyes this time. ‘Whatever. We got you in, and almost lost all of us overboard in the process – the boat was rocking all over the place. Then Elijah and Riki paddled us out of the cave to the outside dock. Barnaby carried you up to the side of the road, and who should be waiting for us there but old man Te Kaitiaki!’

Nat’s eyes widened. ‘How did he know?’

‘No idea. He was perched on the back of his truck, puffing his pipe when we came stumbling up with a body. He looked you over, drove us up to his place and then went back and got our bikes. Riki made us cups of hot milo and Abraham gave you some crazy drink. Then he delivered us back to our homes and told us to lie low.’

‘Lie low? How come?’

Jack grinned. ‘You should see the paper. We’re front page news.’ He passed the local weekly to Nat. ‘Glowworm Cave Break-In,’ announced the headline. ‘And if you’re not happy with small-town stardom, check out the Herald.’ Jack picked up the fat national paper. It had an even more dramatic lead-in. ‘National Tourism Icon Vandalised.’

Nat gulped. ‘Are we in massive trouble?’

‘Not really,’ said Jack. ‘They can’t quite put it together – and they haven’t been told the truth anyway. The reporters have got this idea that a professional team snuck into the cave, blew up a wall with high-tech equipment and stole a boat before they disappeared.’

‘No way.’ Nat couldn’t believe it. ‘High tech professionals? That’s crazy!’

‘It’s brilliant,’ said Jack.

Suddenly the date of the paper drifted into focus. ‘It’s Monday?’ she asked.

‘No,’ said Jack. ‘That’s yesterday’s paper. You’ve slept the last two days – the doctor’s been up a few times, and Dad’s been beside himself.’

‘I feel kinda strange,’ admitted Nat.

‘That could be the tea.’

‘What tea?’

‘Abraham Te Kaitiaki came up on Sunday morning with a funny brew. Dad said it tasted like pig guts, but he fed it to you anyway. It’s the only thing that seemed to make a difference. He magicked you better.’

‘Cool,’ said Nat. ‘Do you mind if we pick this up later on? I’m kinda sleepy.’

Jack nodded. ‘Sweet as,’ he said, standing up. He half turned round at the door. ‘And sis,’ he said, ‘I really am sorry about hitting you.’

‘Sure you are,’ murmured Nat as she sank into a deep, healing sleep.

Chapter 8

Drake's Plotting

Cortez burst through the door. 'You were wrong!' he yelled. 'You said there'd be no opposition!'

Drake, dressed in black as usual, shot Cortez a look so foul he stopped in his tracks. 'I beg your pardon?' she hissed.

Cortez took a deep breath. 'They have the Scarlet Eye of Ceylon.'

'What?' growled Drake.

'Our informant told us it was in the Glowworm Cave, but the room was cleared out.'

'Where is it now?'

'At the farm,' said the man. 'It must be.'

'Find out!' commanded Drake. 'We need it back. Both gems must be placed in the mask.'

'This means the Protectors of the Valley are active,' said Cortez. 'The family chain is intact.'

Drake shook her head. 'They are uninitiated.'

'It lingers in the blood,' said Cortez.

'They are children – and there is no teacher.'

'There's Abraham.'

'He is too old,' spat Drake.

'You forget what he has done.'

'I forget nothing.'

'Show me again,' said Cortez. His small eyes flicked around the room, taking in the maps pinned to the walls, each adorned with arrows and coloured string. He stopped before a desk stacked with papers.

Drake flicked a map off the desk, revealing the black briefcase. Cortez felt his mouth begin to water. Drake unfastened the case, and drew aside a black velvet cover. Cortez gasped. The mask glowered up at him with such intensity that he stepped back. It was fiercely beautiful. He felt giddy, as if a spell hovered over it. He traced the empty eye sockets and marveled at their size. The gems they were looking for were huge.

'I will find the jewels,' he vowed. 'The mask will be activated, and the secrets of the Ancients will be ours.'

'Code names only,' said Drake. 'If the media gets hold of this we lose everything.'

Cortez leaned so close over the mask his breath fogged up its golden surface. 'I still can't believe we found the Last Valley.'

Drake raised an eyebrow. 'Remember, I found it.' She allowed herself a smile. 'This is the opportunity of a lifetime –'

'I know,' he interrupted. 'You have to trust me.'

'I don't trust anyone,' she replied. 'Not even my own family.'

'You have family?' he joked. The narrowing of her eyes warned him not to say another word.

'You know what to do,' said Drake.

Cortez bowed before the sightless tiger. He nodded to Drake and strode out of the room.

Alone again, Drake carefully wiped the tiger's face clean and wrapped the mask in its velvet cloak. Still smiling, she surveyed her headquarters with pride. These obstacles would be overcome. Cortez would do his part and be dealt with. Then the knowledge of the Ancients would be hers alone.

Chapter 9

Sinbad's Story

Nat's head was soon clear enough to read all the articles about the Glowworm Cave break in. Her first clue was a story at the bottom of the local report. She almost missed it as she scanned the page, but when her eyes latched onto the article, a jolt shot up her spine.

'Long-time readers may remember a series of futile 'treasure hunts' last century. Servicemen returned from the war overseas with tales of hidden bullion, and many a caving trip had the discovery of great riches as its objective. The old stories always featured the same elements – cave maps, a golden tiger mask with different coloured eyes, and references to the great Arabian chronicles of Al-Idrisi. Perhaps this burglary is connected to those quests.'

Nat could hear her heart thumping. There was that name again; Al-Idrisi. All the elements in the stories matched. They thought they'd found their own mystery, but they'd stumbled onto an age-old treasure hunt. She had to know more. Jack hooked the computer up in her room and she did some research.

She learned that hundreds of years ago a man named Caliph Haroun al-Rashid was ruler of the greatest empire in the world at that time, the Abbasid Empire in Arabia. He sent ships out on three voyages around the world. When the sailors returned, they had many stories, including tales of a mountainous land to the south filled with giant eagles and serpents with small heads.

The stories were compiled in a book by a famous geographer and historian named Al-Idrisi, who wrote them up in the twelfth century. Explorations had taken place around 800AD, but there was evidence that the Arab explorers had walked in New Zealand. Nat read with wonder about a rock in the Taupo area that seemed to have a dhow carved into it.

The tiger mask was the next thing Nat looked up. Known as the most beautiful and powerful talisman in the Abbasid Empire, it was made entirely of gold, with fierce black stripes across the face. It was gifted to Sinbad by the Caliph, and brought great luck to whoever owned it. The gleaming eyes of the mask were famous gems; one a huge emerald named the Emerald Eye of Babylon, and the other a massive ruby known as the Scarlet Eye of Ceylon. When Sinbad returned from his travels without the tiger talisman, it was said that he had left the gems and the mask in different locations at the end of the earth to guarantee his safe return to Arabia. From there, a legend was born; that whoever found the gems and placed them in the lost mask would uncover the very secrets of the ancients. But a curse had been cast on the Emerald Eye of Babylon. Whoever first found the gem would not live another day.

Nat blinked. What an impressive story. She lined up the journey on a map. Although sailors steering their ships to New Zealand hundreds of years before Abel Tasman or Captain Cook was a stretch, the journey looked possible.

Reading further, Nat came to more extraordinary tales. In the ancient world the library of Alexandria in Egypt was famed for its collection of knowledge. When the Muslim armies invaded it was burnt to the ground. However, Muslim scribes copied many of the most important documents in the library, preserving much of the knowledge gathered by Greek and Roman scholars. Age-old charts and scrolls were saved, detailing now-forgotten voyages around the world. Now-forgotten. That was the key, thought Nat. These journeys had taken place so long ago that they'd slipped into the murk of time.

A tree tapped on the window, breaking Nat from her thoughts. Its leaves were barely

hanging onto their branches. Stretching her arms wide, Nat smiled. She felt lucky. Safely tucked in bed, reading about the voyagers of centuries ago, she was inspired to get to the bottom of her own mystery. If scholars had rushed into the library of Alexandria to copy its golden knowledge, Nat absolutely had to figure out the puzzle that had landed in her lap. She turned all the different elements over in her head.

Supposing the Arabs had made their way over the seas and landed in the North Island of New Zealand, they could have trekked inland from Kawhia, an accessible harbour, and carved a picture of one of their boats in rock at Taupo. People left graffiti wherever they went; Nat knew this was an ancient habit. The Valley of Serpents, in Sinbad's second voyage, could be the Waikato basin, she thought – a valley surrounded by mountains. Maybe Sinbad did float through the cave and think the glowworms were twinkling diamonds. It was a fantastic idea. But it didn't lead to a treasure chest and a mystery cave map. Nat grinned at the riddle. There was much to uncover. On the floor beside her bed lay untouched assignments for English and social studies. There was no way she was giving up her search to do homework.

The next morning Kathleen insisted on checking Nat's temperature every half hour. By eleven o'clock, Nat was ready to throw the thermometer out the window.

'How about I give you an important job?' she said.

Her sister refused the bait. 'Couldn't be as important as looking after you.'

'It might lead to saving your pony,' said Nat slyly.

'Kathleen's face lit up. 'What do I have to do?'

'Go to the bookshelf downstairs,' instructed Nat. 'Find the book of cave maps and bring it here.'

Kathleen ran down the stairs so fast it sounded as if the house was falling down. She tore back up and landed the fat cave atlas on the bed with a thump.

'Now,' said Nat, 'You're the best in your class at shapes, aren't you?'

'We call it geometry,' said Kathleen.

'Of course,' said Nat, without missing a beat. 'Geometry is all about matching, right?'

'Right,' said Kathleen.

'Then I have a challenge for you.' She looked at her sister. 'Slide the box out from under the bed.' Nat stifled a giggle as her sister dived to the floor. With utmost care, Kathleen opened the box they'd found in the attic.

Nat unfolded the unknown cave map. 'Here's the problem: we don't know where this cave is. This book,' she said, tapping the cave atlas, 'has maps of all the caves in the North Island. Could you match this map with one from here?'

Kathleen puffed out her chest. 'Of course I can.' She picked up the atlas and map and left the room in silence. Nat was left twirling her roc feather in peace.

Later in the afternoon, Mike knocked on the door. 'If you're up to it we'll have nachos tomorrow night. Old man Te Kaitiaki is going to bring Riki, and the Lima brothers will be helping me down in the shed, so they're coming too. Sound okay?'

'That's so cool – thanks Dad!'

Mike smiled. 'You've had plenty of rest, so I thought for a treat we could all head out to Raglan the next day. We'll have fish and chips on the beach eh?'

'Sounds awesome.'

'By the way, what'd you do to Kathleen?'

Nat sat up in alarm. 'What's happened?'

'She's anchored to the sofa, examining maps in the cave atlas. She said they were too small so I gave her that old magnifying glass. She's having the time of her life.'

Nat grinned. 'I gave her a job.'

‘Good work. Now back to sleep – you’ll need it.’

Nat wriggled her toes with glee. She fluffed up the pillows and disappeared into her duvet, but there was no way she could go back to sleep. She couldn’t wait to get back on the case.

Chapter 10

Tatoru

The next night Elijah was sporting a nasty bruise on his temple where a ewe had kicked him. Barnaby acted out the incident with Jack playing the part of the sheep, leading to fits of laughter from everyone. By the time Abraham dropped off Riki a noisy party was underway.

Riki walked in with a huge tub of ice-cream and everyone cheered. It was a celebration of being alive, Nat realised. It might have been a different result if things hadn't been on their side on Saturday night. The next time they went out they'd have to be more careful.

'Why so serious?' said Barnaby, elbowing her.

She smiled at him. 'Just thinking about everything.'

'You're the smartest girl I've met Nat,' said Barnaby. He didn't look like he was kidding around. 'You'll figure it out.' He locked eyes on her plate. 'Are you gonna eat those chips?'

She shovelled the last of her nachos onto Barnaby's plate and he wolfed them down. Nat watched him flick his long hair behind his ears and realised she was staring. She excused herself and started clearing the plates.

'Attention everyone!' said Mike, banging his fork on the table. 'I've got a flyer here for a talk by a cave expert.' He waved it in the air. 'Professor Wylie. Next Sunday.'

'I'm busy that day,' said Jack.

'No you're not,' retorted Mike. 'We're all going and we're going to learn something.' He waited for the groaning to subside. 'Anyway,' said Mike, 'he might be able to tell us something about these treasure stories. They're the talk of the town.'

Nat felt the change in the room.

'What have you heard Dad?' asked Jack.

'A few different versions,' said Mike. 'First thing is, the hole these robbers got in was tiny – so they reckon you're dealing with a gymnastics troupe, a midget, or someone operating a mechanical arm.'

'That's an interesting theory,' said Barnaby, and for a moment all Nat could picture was Barnaby's legs and bum stuck in the squeeze. She scraped the plates loudly to clear the image away.

'Professionals, they reckon,' said Mike. 'They got in without being seen and disappeared into the night.' He nudged Kathleen. 'Is it ice-cream time yet?'

'Yes!' yelled Kathleen. She fetched the plates and started scooping out uneven amounts.

'We've had some funny characters hanging around the village this week,' said Mike as he distributed the spoons. 'A couple of guys in suits.'

'What do they do?' asked Elijah.

'One's a whiz on machines. He told me they can map unknown spaces with sonar imaging to see what's in them! Bit of new fashioned magic really.' Mike paused to savour his dessert. 'This is good stuff Riki, thank you.' He smiled at Kathleen, who was mashing her ice-cream to a pulp.

'It's his mate that worries me,' said Mike, shaking his head. 'A thin, shifty guy with little eyes. He's a dark horse. Do anything for money. The lads fed him a couple of rums the other night, and you wouldn't believe the stories he was spouting – he reckons there's treasure around here that'd make him rich beyond belief.'

'Like what?' asked Riki.

Mike leaned in. 'He kept talking about gems – rubies and emeralds. Then he started up about twin treasure chests, one of them with a curse on it! These stories rang a few bells, so this morning I pulled out your great great grandmother's prized possession; her photo album. This is the lady Nat was named for.' Mike stopped for a moment, realising he had a captive

audience. He surveyed them. ‘Nat’s shown you the letter she found up in the attic.’

‘She sure did,’ said Elijah.

Barnaby and Riki nodded.

Mike paused again. ‘There’s nothing you guys want to tell me is there?’ he asked. The question hung in the air, demanding a response.

‘Nope,’ said Jack.

‘All right,’ said Mike. ‘Pass me that cloth. We’ll give this table a wipe first.’

Everyone gathered around as Mike opened the album. It was small, with hand-stitching around the binding and white tissue trying to escape from between the black pages.

‘This is our house,’ said Mike. He pointed out a willowy figure with an elegant hat. ‘This is Natalia. Before anything went wrong.’

‘What went wrong?’ asked Jack.

‘Nothing,’ said Mike, but his reply was too quick. He turned the page. Natalia was wearing a floor length dress and carrying a lamp.

‘Is she going caving?’ asked Barnaby.

‘Look closer,’ said Mike. ‘You can see where she is.’

‘The Glowworm Cave,’ said Riki. ‘She explored it with my Uncle Rewi, didn’t she?’

‘Don’t you mean great-great-uncle?’ asked Barnaby.

Riki giggled. ‘Yeah, but uncle is easier.’

Mike nodded. ‘They used to say they were cave mad, those two.’

‘Who’s this?’ asked Nat. She’d found a photo of Natalia standing with a bulky man. Her namesake wasn’t looking comfortable.

‘That’s her husband,’ said Mike. ‘Your great-great-grandfather, Griffith.’

‘How come we have these photos?’ asked Jack. ‘Cameras must have been pretty new back then.’

‘That they were,’ said Mike. ‘Griffith was a surveyor, so the camera would have been for work – one of those ‘everyone hold still’ ones. He was away a lot, up and down the country, telling them where to put roads and bridges through.’

‘She doesn’t look very happy,’ said Nat.

‘It’s hard to see happy when you look back that far,’ said Mike. He stood, and Nat scooted into his seat. There weren’t many other photos of Natalia in the book. Perhaps Griffith had work to do, and had taken his camera with him. The next page had a small programme pasted into it, announcing the opening of the ‘Best new attraction in the Empire; the Waitomo Glowworm Cave.’

So she’d been there at the very beginning, thought Nat. The next photos were of babies and toddlers. The rest of the album was scenic shots of New Zealand. Nat closed the back cover. There was more to this lady than was being let on.

‘We’ve got a couple of movies we could watch,’ said Mike. ‘Anyone keen?’

‘Do we get popcorn?’ asked Kathleen.

‘You just ate an enormous dinner,’ said Nat.

Kathleen smiled. ‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘You’ll go pop,’ said Mike. ‘Come on.’

Father and daughter scuttled down the hallway, leaving the five of them alone. They looked at each other for a moment. Nat took a deep breath – then her Dad stuck his head back in the room.

‘You guys coming?’ he asked.

Riki was looking out the window. ‘The stars are incredible,’ she said. ‘Even better than down in the valley.’

‘Course,’ said Mike. ‘Up here, ain’t nothing between us and the sky. You two go check out the stars. The rest of you – movie’s starting.’

Nat handed a coat to Riki and pulled one on too. She tucked her hands in her pockets as they stepped out the door.

‘Your Dad’s right,’ said Riki, grinning up at the perfect sky. ‘What’s your favourite constellation?’

‘Orion,’ said Nat. ‘Or, as I used to call it, the pot.’

Riki giggled. ‘Mine is the Southern Cross.’

‘I love the three stars of Orion’s belt,’ said Nat. ‘They’re like an anchor. When Mum and Dad divorced and we only lived up here part-time, it was like living in a fog.’ She frowned. ‘I don’t want to think about what it would be like to lose this place altogether.’

‘Tauroru,’ said Riki. ‘Orion’s belt. Looking from one magic place to another, I reckon.’ She smiled at Nat. ‘I’ll help you,’ she promised. ‘As much as I can. This place is alive. You belong here. To leave would be – terrible.’ Riki checked over her shoulder before speaking again. ‘Tomorrow, on the beach, a meeting has been arranged with someone who wants to help us.’

Nat stared at her. ‘Who?’

Riki shook her head. ‘I can’t say anything more.’

Nat grinned. ‘Then bring on tomorrow!’

Chaos erupted on Saturday morning. In the middle of the night Barnaby had hidden everyone’s shoes and toothbrushes. He danced around the house, laughing at everyone’s frustration, until Jack and Elijah held him down and rubbed toothpaste through his hair. A mad toothpaste fight erupted. Only when Mike yelled did the whole sprinting, dodging household come to a halt.

‘We’re leaving for the beach in five minutes. If you’re not in the truck at ten o’clock I’m going without you!’

The madness intensified; three dogs escaped and raced around the yard. The boys ran for their togs and towels, and at the very last moment Nat leapt out of the truck and ran up the stairs two at a time to grab the box they’d found in the attic. She felt better about it being with her. As they exited the driveway, Riki cheered that they’d got that far.

When everyone had settled into the hum of the journey, Mike cleared his throat.

‘There’s a bit more to the story from last night,’ he said.

‘Like what?’ asked Jack.

‘You deserve to know the truth,’ said Mike, never taking his eyes from the road. He paused, as if was calculating where to start.

‘About Natalia?’ asked Nat.

‘Yeah,’ said Mike. ‘Her marriage was arranged. She came from an English society family that had run out of money, so they sent her to New Zealand. As you could see from the photos, it wasn’t a perfect match. But she couldn’t do anything about it.’

‘How many children did they have?’ asked Nat.

‘I think six were born,’ said Mike. ‘They were a long way from any medical attention, and a few passed away when they were young. It was all very sad. Natalia poured her heart into her hobby – caving. She loved the way nature had created secret worlds.’

‘She was a cave-geek,’ said Barnaby. ‘Just like me.’

Mike laughed. ‘She didn’t have the gear that you have – there were no ascenders or fancy ropes back then. They did it the hard way.’

‘Purists,’ said Barnaby, to himself. ‘Nice.’

‘Anyway,’ said Mike, ‘there was speculation that Natalia and Rewi Te Kaitiaki knew of a cave that housed an incredible treasure. But they weren’t interested in its value, only the cave.’

‘There were also some questions being asked about what a nice English lady was doing

hanging out with a Māori man – that sort of behaviour used to be frowned upon. Rewi got a lot of pressure to back off.’

‘According to our family he was exiled,’ said Riki.

Mike nodded. ‘But the treasure rumours never died. Snippets of information trickled down; no-one ever knew which were true, and which were made up. There was a story about a cave map with directions hidden in the watermark, and another about a drowned cave entrance. People searched everywhere. And no-one ever found it.’

They were on the last stretch of road now, and Nat caught a glimpse of the sea, shining out ahead.

‘Hell of a tale, Mr. Sheppard,’ said Elijah.

‘Well, as long as no-one takes it too seriously,’ said Mike. ‘Stories round here have been known to get out of control.’

Chapter 11

A Patupaiarehe Gift

By the time the truck scooted through Raglan town, everyone was hanging their heads out the windows, savouring the salt taste in the air. Mike parked at the surf club. He'd scarcely stopped the vehicle before the kids hurtled down the hill and along the black sands.

'Be careful Nat!' called Mike.

'Okay Dad,' she yelled, racing towards the ocean.

Once Nat and Riki had their feet in the water, they stopped to look around. The boys were organising sprinting races, and Mike and Kathleen were collecting shells.

'I know a cool walk not far away,' said Riki. 'Wanna check it out?'

Nat nodded, and they set off across the sands.

'I couldn't wait for you to get better,' said Riki. 'Abraham was really worried about you.'

Nat was puzzled. 'He only came to check on me once.'

Riki looked at Nat. 'He doesn't need to be there to see how someone's doing.'

'He's pretty special huh?'

Riki shook her head. 'He's more than special. He's something else. I've watched him raise huge stone slabs into the air and move them around – all by lifting one hand.'

'That's crazy,' said Nat.

'No,' said Riki. 'He's a powerful tohunga. There aren't many of them left.'

'And you?' asked Nat. 'Can you do some of the same things?'

'Maybe,' said Riki. 'That's why I was sent to Abraham.'

'Where are your parents?' asked Nat.

Riki shrugged. 'Gone.'

Nat stared at the sand, wondering how another world could exist and no-one know about it.

'That's the way we like it,' said Riki, and it took Nat a moment to realise Riki had plucked her thoughts from mid-air. 'If people don't know what we do, they won't be scared.' She pointed towards a mamaku fern hanging from a cliff. 'That's the start of the track.'

They headed towards the windswept bush. Under the canopy it was warm and sheltered.

'Abraham asked me to bring you here,' said Riki. 'Friends of ours live around the corner.'

'Cool place to live,' said Nat.

Riki grinned. 'You got that right.'

The light trickled through the bush like arrows from the sun. As the wind rustled the trees, a kaleidoscope of colour spun before them, making it hard to focus. Nat thought she saw a movement, but when she looked again there was nothing there.

'They're watching us,' said Riki. 'Sometimes people stumble in, not knowing.'

'Knowing what?'

Riki laughed, and tinkling laughter echoed from the trees around them. Nat's eyes opened wide, but still she could see nothing.

'Are you ready?' asked Riki.

Nat nodded.

Riki started to sing. The bush seemed to hum along with the song. Reaching for Nat's hand, she continued up the path. They came to a small clearing, where three logs rested on the ground.

'Sit here,' said Riki, and Nat did as she was told. She watched as her friend laid out fern fronds in a circle. 'They won't be long.'

The wind suddenly stopped. Nat was startled by the complete silence of the bush. She couldn't even hear the breakers crashing on the beach.

'That means it all worked,' said Riki. 'The summoning of silence,' she added, seeing Nat's question. 'We have to make it safe for them to show themselves.' She frowned. 'It wasn't always like this, but Abraham says we use the old ways to live in the new world as best we can.'

Small figures began emerging from the rays of sunlight. Nat couldn't believe what she was seeing. They were like pixies, light and quick. They're even smaller than I am, she thought. They were thin and pale, with blonde and coppery hair.

'Patupaiarehe,' said Riki. 'That's what we call them.'

The patupaiarehe waited on the edge of the circle Riki had created. Some sat in trees, others crouched in ferns. Nat stared at them, astonished.

'Where do they come from?' she whispered.

'They've always been here,' said Riki.

'But how do we not know?' asked Nat.

'You don't look,' said Riki. 'Or you see, but your brain tells you it's impossible, so it's cancelled before you look again.'

A small man stepped forward. He was dressed in clothes woven from leaves. His flax shorts were fastened by a belt wound from supple jack vine. He had light blue eyes.

'Abraham sends you his greetings,' said Riki. From her pocket, she produced a parcel fastened in a leaf Nat recognised; a rangiora.

The man accepted the parcel and unwrapped it, revealing a smooth, gray rock, almost perfectly round. He bowed once, then stepped away and melted into the bush. Even though she'd been watching him, Nat couldn't say at which point he'd faded from view.

Two more patupaiarehe stepped forward. They were Kathleen's size, thought Nat, but they were grown women.

'Beware,' said one. She had long blonde hair, and dark eyes. Her words landed in Nat's head without a spoken sound. 'This will keep you safe.' She held out a small package. 'There are rules about these creatures, but they do not apply to this one. He will bring you good luck, inside and out. You can rely on him.' The parcel was set in Nat's hands. The touch of the patupaiarehe was like brushing against a length of silk.

'Beware of what?' asked Riki. The spoken words rattled in the air.

'You have stumbled onto a trail that has driven men mad,' said the second woman. She was cradling something. Nat realised it was a tiny child, and watched as a miniature hand reached for the mother's auburn curls.

'You have enough heart to be close,' said the blonde woman. 'Keep your sister nearby. She is watching more than you know.'

The red-headed woman gazed at them. 'Your question, Nat,' she said. Nat blinked; she'd asked so many questions as their adventures had unfolded – which one was appropriate now?

'The answer is yes,' said the woman. 'They sailed across the sea, and landed on this beach. They were afraid; they were superstitious men, so we watched and followed in silence. Carrying a golden mask high to ward off the evil spirits of their minds, they trekked across the land.

'We sent our birds to fly beside them so they could eat. We sent sunlight to show them the cave entrance, so they could experience the wonder of our sacred world. We watched as they climbed the mountains in the centre of this island, and carved their ways into our rocks. But the terror of their minds made them unable to see – that the moa would not harm them, the Pouākai would not chase them, unless they were chased first.

'We led them across the island and safely over the seas. This was an age ago, so far back only the barest outline exists.' She looked into Nat's eyes. 'They will say it didn't happen. Do

not believe them. Believe your heart.’

‘We appreciate your gift,’ said the blonde woman.

‘Thank you for your wisdom,’ replied Riki.

The women smiled a final time and then turned away. They walked towards the trees, and somewhere in the dappled light, they simply disappeared.

‘I’ve never seen them give anyone a present before,’ said Riki.

Nat opened her hands. The package seemed to quiver. She unhooked the fastening and peeled it open. Inside was a jet-black fantail. As the sunlight fell upon its body, the bird opened its eyes and uttered a small cheep.

‘We’ll tell the others it fell out of its nest,’ said Riki. Nat nodded. She didn’t understand how this little bird was going to keep her safe, but it was an amazing gift.

Riki nudged her. ‘What are you going to call him?’

Nat started walking as she turned a few names round in her head. ‘What about the Māori word for fantail – Piwakawaka?’

‘It’s a bit long,’ said Riki. ‘Maybe call him Pi for short.’

‘I like it,’ said Nat. ‘Thanks so much for bringing me here. It must be incredible knowing all the things you do.’

Riki made a face as she turned back towards the beach. ‘Sort of,’ she said. ‘It’s like being in two different worlds; sometimes I don’t know which one is more real, or more important.’

‘It looks like you’re doing a pretty good job,’ said Nat.

They hadn’t ventured far onto the black sands when there were shouts and the boys ran towards them.

‘Where have you been?’ yelled Elijah.

‘We’ve been looking everywhere,’ said Barnaby.

Jack didn’t say anything. He just glared at them.

‘We’ve been in the bush,’ said Riki. ‘That’s where we found the fantail.’

Nat held up the bird for the boys to see.

Elijah glanced at the bird, then frowned at them. ‘What bush?’

Nat turned around to point it out. Her hand fell by her side. There was only a sheer cliff. She looked at Riki. ‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Riki, ‘it’s better that way.’ She started walking back towards the surf club. With a shrug, Jack fell in beside her. But Elijah and Barnaby weren’t satisfied with the explanation.

‘Honestly Nat, we tore up the beach looking for you guys,’ said Elijah. ‘Your Dad was getting worried – he’s on edge anyway, he doesn’t need this.’

Nat had no idea how much she was allowed to say, so she walked back to the car in silence, flanked by Barnaby and Elijah. The whole way Pi cheeped and sang, as if to say, ‘I’m here now; I’ll make it all better.’

Chapter 12

Mike's Confession

Nat woke with a start when the car pulled up in front of their house.

'What the hell?' Mike burst out of the driver's seat so quickly Elijah had to put the handbrake on for him.

'What's going on?' asked Nat, rubbing her eyes.

'Someone's broken into our house!' yelled Mike.

Nat leapt up the steps, clutching the box they'd found in the secret room. The front doors were wide open and the place was a mess. Drawers had been pulled out and their contents emptied on the floor. The sofas were turned on their end and slashed. Every single cupboard had been opened. Mike stormed up the hall, and his bellowing told them the burglars had been in every room. Kathleen started to cry.

'This is because of us,' whispered Jack.

Nat nodded. Mike didn't have any enemies; he was always helping people. And it was too thorough to be a random burglary.

'Attic,' said Jack.

As they sidled up the hallway, Mike came storming back down. 'Bloody bastards,' he yelled.

'Did they take anything?' asked Barnaby.

'The TV's still there, the stereo, computer. But they've trashed the place – it's like they were looking for a needle in a haystack.' Mike picked up the phone and dialled the police.

Upstairs, Nat and Jack could hear him yelling down the phone. They ducked past the hat rack and sidled around the old mattresses. Footsteps in the dust warned them they weren't the first people up there that day, but the secret room looked intact from the outside. Jack motioned that he'd crawl in first. Nat stood in the gloom alone and fretted.

'It's clear,' said Jack. 'But check this out.'

Nat ducked through the squeeze. Written in the grime on the floor was a chilling message; 'We will find it. Then we'll finish you.'

Nat looked at Jack in horror. This was not a game any more.

By nine o'clock, they were snuggled in the kitchen with mugs of milo brimming with marshmallows. Mike piled them on, explaining that in times of shock you needed more treats. Kathleen was curled up on the couch; she'd refused to sleep by herself in her room. The house had been put back together; Elijah and Barnaby had righted the couches and stacked crockery back into cupboards, while Riki had re-folded every towel and facecloth that had been thrown from the linen cupboard onto the floor. Laundry powders had been tipped out; wardrobes had been stripped. And still, no-one could find a single thing that was missing.

Now Nat watched her Dad force two more pink marshmallows into his mug.

'All right,' he said. 'There's something I have to get off my chest.'

Nat dunked a biscuit into her chocolatey drink and held it out for Pi to peck at, but her ears were straining at attention.

'There's another side to the stories of Natalia,' said Mike. 'But it was only ever whispered. Partly because in hard times you don't repeat silly stories; it's difficult enough getting by.' He shook his head. 'People in the village were very cruel about my Grandpa's tales. And partly because it had to do with witchcraft, and excuse me Riki, but some people know how to deal with that more than others.'

Jack had forgotten his drink; he was staring at Mike in amazement. He looked at Nat and she knew what he was thinking; their father had never talked about anything like this before.

Mike cleared his throat. ‘When my grandfather was young, his mother used to take him for walks across the farm. The story of Sinbad’s treasure was old even then; a magical chest hidden in a remote valley. There are treasure stories up and down this country, but they say that the Sinbad tale has always been local.

‘One day, they walked out to the cliffs at the end of the valley. My grandfather was shown a locked chest. A huge eagle landed, and his mother reached up and removed a key from the eagle’s neck. She unlocked the chest and opened it enough for him to see that it was full of precious gems. The key went back round the bird’s neck. Natalia spoke; it flapped its wings and disappeared.’ Mike leaned forward. ‘He remembered that the bird blocked out the sun. There’s only ever been one bird that big.’

‘The Haast Eagle,’ said Barnaby.

‘It wasn’t supposed to have lived in the North Island,’ said Elijah.

‘Or been alive a hundred years ago,’ added Mike. ‘My grandfather remembered everything about that day. But people told him he was a fool.’

‘It’s pretty far out,’ said Jack. ‘But from what you’ve told us, he wasn’t the lying type.’

Mike slurped at his marshmallows. ‘Nope, he wasn’t.’

‘I believe his story,’ said Riki. Mike stared at her. ‘It’s well known in our family that Rewi looked after a pair of eagles.’

Mike sat so still Nat wondered if he was still breathing.

‘So if the part about the bird is true – what about the rest?’ asked Elijah.

‘There’s nothing on the cliffs out there,’ said Mike. He glanced around before adding, in a much softer voice, ‘I’ve looked.’ Jack sniggered. ‘I have!’ he said. ‘When I’ve been rounding up sheep, I’ve checked a few places out. I know every inch of this farm – there are no treasure chests.’

Everyone swung their heads back to Riki. She grinned. ‘How much do you want to bet?’

‘Ten bucks,’ said Mike. ‘And it’s a wasted bet!’

‘Twenty,’ said Jack and Barnaby together.

‘You haven’t got twenty bucks,’ said Mike.

‘If Riki reckons it’s worth having a look, I’m in,’ said Elijah.

‘There’s nothing there,’ said Mike.

‘But the rumours!’ said Barnaby.

‘All rumours need is boredom and a bit of oxygen,’ said Mike. ‘When soldiers came back from the Great War with Sinbad stories, people figured Rewi must have been telling tales in the Middle East. They spread from there.’

‘And kept spreading,’ said Barnaby. ‘Right down to today, when a couple of guys ransack a house looking for clues to ancient treasure.’

‘The thing is,’ said Mike, ‘I might be the one to blame for that.’

‘How?’ asked Jack.

‘I told you about those shifty characters in the pub the other day. They were spouting all sorts of stories. So, thinking it was all fun, I spouted some back.’

‘Dad, no!’ Nat couldn’t believe it.

‘I was just being friendly – I told them about the secret room and some of the old tales.’

‘Which led them straight here.’ Jack shook his head. ‘Stranger danger, Dad.’

‘This time tomorrow they won’t be welcome anywhere in town,’ said Mike. ‘I apologise if this scared anyone. I’ll take full responsibility.’

‘Mr. Sheppard,’ interrupted Riki, ‘Do you know where your grandfather used to go walking on the farm?’

‘Vaguely,’ he replied. ‘He used to say; walk east down the valley, following the river until it drops along the boundary line and out of sight.’

Riki thought for a moment, and without anyone saying another word, hope seemed to

creep back into the room. ‘I can make sense of that,’ said Riki. ‘I’d say that your grandfather was telling the truth all along.’

Chapter 13

The Legend of Abraham

'Where is the jewel?' demanded Drake.

Cortez hung his head. 'We don't know.'

'What?'

'We looked everywhere in the house – even the attic room. There was nothing.'

'Unacceptable,' spat Drake.

'There has been another development,' said Cortez.

'Yes?'

'The Patupaiarehe are involved.' Instinctively Cortez ducked. He looked up in horror as a series of darts flew into the wall behind him.

'I chose you because of your reputation as a pirate of the highest order,' said Drake.

'And you are undone by a pack of children. You disgust me.'

Cortez rose to his feet. 'Abraham must have –'

'Don't mention that name again!' hissed Drake. 'You're like the rest of them, stunned by the myth.'

'He's the reason the Last Valley remained hidden for so long,' said Cortez. 'I need more men. And more time.'

'I will call reinforcements,' said Drake. 'But there is no more time. Others will sniff out the news. This place will be swarming with treasure hunters; the desperate, dirty hordes.'

'We will search the old man's house,' said Cortez.

'Watch out,' said Drake, her face twisting into a nasty sneer. 'You may find fire-breathing dragons guarding the gates. Isn't that what the stories tell you?'

'Something like that,' admitted Cortez.

'Only fools believe those stories.'

Cortez shrugged off the insult. 'What of the curse?'

'Another exaggeration,' said Drake.

'I'm not so sure,' said Cortez. 'The Ancients protected their fortunes every way they could. Stories of the curse are well known.'

Drake laughed out loud. 'So are stories of men convinced they would die a horrid death when there was nothing wrong with them. Sound familiar?'

'I will succeed,' replied Cortez. 'I promised I would deliver and I shall.'

'Excellent,' she said. 'What does Henderson have to report?'

'He's scanning in the second location. He promises results within the week.'

Drake nodded. 'Good,' she said. 'Now bring me those jewels, or I will be forced to replace you – which means you won't get a thing.'

'We had a deal,' said Cortez, clenching his fists.

'The deal was; you bring me the gems, I fill the Tiger's mask; you get half of the rest. As I have nothing, you get nothing. Got it?'

Cortez nodded.

'Good,' barked Drake. 'Now get out!'

Chapter 14

Harpagornis

On Sunday morning, Nat was up at dawn. It wasn't her idea. Pi woke her with his singing. Nat jumped out of bed, threw warm clothes on and slipped out the door. There were too many things racing round her head to get any more sleep. Pi buzzed about, singing all the while.

'You're noisy,' muttered Nat.

She introduced her new friend to her horse Plato, and by the time she'd saddled up and was heading into the valley, Pi had begun an interesting routine of flitting from the horse's ear to the ground and back again, giving the impression that the bird was conveying secret messages from the worms.

It was a misty morning, and as Nat led Plato to the river to drink, she watched steam rising from the bush. Each plume indicated a tomo or a cave. How many were mapped, how many were a mystery? Nat had no idea. She looked east, scanning each dip and hollow in the landscape. That mission could wait. Today, they had a different task; a council down at Abraham's to discuss the next step. Nat could scarcely believe everything they'd been through in a week. She couldn't wait to tell her mother about it – although she'd already decided to leave out a lot of the details.

Back at the house, Nat cooked a pot of porridge for everyone. Kathleen was still sitting at the breakfast table when the boys stepped out to pull on their gumboots, arguing about who smelt the worst.

'You okay mate?' asked Nat.

'Yeah,' said Kathleen. 'I want to help but I'm scared of the bad guys.'

Nat scooped her up in a hug. 'They're gone,' she said, 'and they're never coming back.'

'You sure?' asked Kathleen.

'Yep,' said Nat.

'Ready Splatters?' called Jack. 'Hurry up or we're leaving without you.'

Nat grinned. Everyone was desperately excited to get down to Abraham's. She smiled at Kathleen. 'See you soon, okay?'

'Okay,' said Kathleen.

Nat ran outside and leapt on her bike.

'Bout time!' said Elijah. 'We've been waiting forever.'

'Shut it!' cried Nat, as she pedalled up the driveway. There was a furious chirping behind her. Nat braked so fast she left a trail in the dirt. She'd forgotten her feathered friend in the rush. As the others took off, she made sure Pi was comfortable in her jacket.

'All good?' called a voice ahead. Nat looked up. It was Barnaby.

'You didn't need to wait,' said Nat. 'I can catch up.'

'I wanted to,' said Barnaby. Nat watched him twisting one foot into the mud. 'These holidays have been super sweet because of – because of you.' He sighed at the end of the sentence, as if the words had been an effort to pronounce.

'Thanks,' said Nat. 'I don't know if I'm different from anyone else though.'

'You are different,' said Barnaby, staring at the mud. 'You can see deeper into things.'

Nat gathered her courage. 'I think you're awesome too, Barnaby.' For a terrible moment, she thought it might have been the wrong thing to say, but then she watched an ear-to-ear smile spread across his face.

'Cool,' he said. They kicked off and followed the others without saying much at all.

They coasted down the hill, pedalled once or twice on the straights, then wove through the corners to the valley floor. Nat watched as Barnaby took his hands off, sat up straight, and

sailed past her. She gripped the handlebars firmly – she didn't want to splat in front of him. They could see the others ahead a few times, but they didn't catch them until they arrived at Abraham's house.

As Nat cruised down the driveway, she noticed that the paint on Abraham's wooden house was peeling, and a vine that wound along the edge of the verandah was pulling the guttering away from the roof. But it didn't matter. She loved everything about the place. Every plant around the house was magnificent, from the spiky cabbage trees by the chicken coop to the dense kowhai hedge. There was a feeling of calm that seemed to envelop Nat from the moment she saw the house. It was like the outside world didn't exist, or certainly didn't matter.

Abraham was seated on the verandah. He called out a welcome as they gathered together.

'Mōrena, mōrena,' he said. 'Good to see you all again.'

Nat released Pi from her jacket. He shot into the air and was quickly surrounded by an abundance of birds. They swirled together in an aerial dance. Everyone watched as they sang to each other, darting and twisting. When each bird had greeted every other, the swirl evaporated and Pi flew to Abraham and sat on his knee. He burst into song. The old man listened and nodded.

'The patupaiarehe,' said Nat, when the song paused. 'They gave him to –'

'No need to explain it all again,' said Abraham. 'I have heard everything from him.'

Nat's mouth dropped open.

'So,' said Abraham. 'I believe you have another clue.'

'Do you know what it is?' asked Barnaby.

'Let's we have a look together,' said Abraham. 'Follow me.'

He led them along a hallway where the floorboards tilted downwards. As they walked, open doors offered glimpses into Abraham's world. Nat saw shelves in one room stacked with plants and dried herbs and something with fur. The ceilings in the old house were high, and the shelves stretched right up to the roof. Another room was lined with maps. There was a sliding ladder if any map needed closer examination. Abraham stopped in front of the last door. As he turned the handle he muttered to himself and something seemed to scurry away.

Riki's room had zany old-fashioned flowery wallpaper, but you couldn't see much of it because there were so many pictures plastered over the top. There was an entire wall dedicated to American Indians, including a poster of an old Chief, and a glossy black and white print of Indians on horseback in a majestic desert landscape. Nat leaned in closer to read the name; Canyon de Chelly.

Jack took a seat on Riki's bed and threw his feet up on the quilt. Nat and Barnaby perched beside him. Abraham settled into an armchair in the corner. The rubbing from the cave sat on Riki's desk.

'So this was etched on the cave wall?' asked Abraham. Nat nodded.

'Oh!' said Barnaby. 'I know what it is!' Everyone looked at him.

'Yes?' asked Abraham.

Barnaby grinned. 'It's a Haast Eagle, isn't it?'

Abraham nodded. 'The Latin name is *Harpagornis moorei*.'

'The largest eagle to have ever lived,' said Barnaby. 'Look at the talons.'

'The feathers in the room must have been from the eagle,' said Riki.

'So where's the treasure?' asked Elijah.

'And who moved it?' asked Jack.

'Good questions,' said Abraham.

'And who was that lady with the mask?' asked Barnaby.

'They called her Drake,' said Elijah.

A strange look crossed Abraham's face. 'Well,' he said. 'I imagine we'll see her again. Perhaps I could fill in more details then.' He cleared his throat. 'A more important thing to think about is – who does the treasure belong to?'

'Does it belong to the government?' asked Nat.

'Actually,' said Abraham, 'it belongs first and foremost to you. I'll fish out the paperwork, then we can pass the legal ownership along directly.'

Nat stared at Riki, who stared back. Then they threw their arms around each other and started whooping and dancing. Abraham chuckled, and shuffled back to his armchair to watch the delight leap around the room.

Chapter 15

Unwelcome Visitors

Nat grabbed some biscuits and followed Riki and the others outside. They'd yelled and jumped so much they needed a rest. Nat paused to watch the kereru floating around the trees, but as she stepped forward, she didn't look where she was going.

'Nat – watch out!' called Riki. But it was too late. Nat stumbled on an uneven piece of concrete and crashed onto her knee.

Jack cracked up laughing. 'Morning, Splatters!'

Barnaby rushed to her side. 'You okay?'

Nat winced. The blood was trickling down her shin. She smiled at Barnaby despite her embarrassment. 'I'll survive,' she said, sliding into a chair.

They settled in the sun. Nat watched her fantail duck and dive with the birds in the tree-tops. She could tell Pi apart from the others because he'd scoot back towards the group once in a while and circle overhead, as if checking she was all right. It was a great sweeping loop, and watching it in the warm sun made her sleepy. All of a sudden Pi shot high into the air, far higher than the trees, then circled about and zoomed straight for Abraham.

He was gathering such speed that Nat turned in alarm, but the old man was already alert. Pi landed on his shoulder and chirped twice before taking off again. In the background, Nat could hear the rumble of an approaching quad bike. Abraham sat forward.

'Children, listen at once.' The tone in his voice silenced everyone, even Jack. 'Three men are coming down the driveway. You must stay absolutely still – don't move a muscle, no coughing, no laughter.' He started to mutter under his breath, and waved his hand in a wide arc around them.

Nat looked at her friends, and saw her frightened expression reflected in their eyes. She sat back in her chair to focus on being totally motionless.

The birds' chirping was drowned out by the noise of the bike. Nat's heart began to thump as it roared into view and pulled to a stop in front of the house. Two men hanging onto the back leapt off. The driver stayed where he was.

'This is it?' said one man. 'What a dump.'

Nat recognised him from the Glowworm Cave. It was Cain Wylie. He was thin and shifty looking. Thin enough to squeeze into their secret room.

Wylie spat at the driveway. 'I thought this guy was supposed to be respected.'

'If you believe in that stuff,' said the driver.

'You said the kids and the old man were here,' said the other man. It was Henderson, the man who'd created the machine to see through walls.

The driver shrugged. 'They were,' he said. 'Must have popped out.'

Wylie was incensed. 'With the money we're paying I expect a better answer than that!'

The driver pulled out a tobacco pouch and started rolling a cigarette. 'You paid the others more to go through the house up the hill.'

'That's none of your business,' snapped Wylie, flicking mud from his city shoes.

The chubby engineer walked towards the house. He climbed the steps, passing a few metres in front of Nat.

'Got anything, Henderson?' called Wylie.

Henderson shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'Let's get out of here.' Wylie turned back to the bike. 'They've been through the house already, there's nothing inside but junk.'

'What's the next stop?' asked the driver.

'Straight to the Rēhua Reserve,' said Wylie.

‘We should close the cave down first,’ said Henderson, still snooping across the deck. ‘Save the trouble we had last time.’

‘We just need an excuse,’ said Wylie. ‘Something to tell the suckers at the museum. The idiots have even pre-sold tickets to my talk!’

‘When’s that happening?’

‘Who cares,’ said Wylie. ‘We’ll be long gone.’

‘You’ll never be able to return,’ warned Henderson.

‘I’ve heard the stories about what’s hidden in this valley,’ said Wylie, ‘but there’s enough money in the Sinbad haul to last a lifetime. I’m going to take the big prize and bolt.’

Nat could feel her eyes bulge. She concentrated on being still, but her mind was racing. What else was hidden in her valley?

Henderson scratched his head. ‘Tell the public the carbon dioxide levels are too high.’

‘Or that the coming storms make it unsafe,’ said the driver.

‘Anything will do,’ said Wylie. ‘Then we’re going straight through the wall. Thanks to your fancy machine, we know exactly where the treasure is.’

‘It’ll cause massive destruction,’ said Henderson. ‘You’ll have a lot of explaining to do.’

Wylie shrugged. ‘Earthquakes happen all the time,’ he said. ‘You said the push should be ready by Friday?’

Henderson nodded. He stepped away from the porch, paused and looked back. Nat held her breath. He’d looked straight at her, or more precisely, her feet. Her heart started to thump as he climbed the steps again and knelt in front of her.

‘Wylie,’ he called. ‘Check this out.’

Nat was almost trembling in her attempts to remain still.

‘What is it?’ snapped Wylie.

‘There’s fresh blood on the concrete,’ said Henderson.

‘The old man probably caught a possum,’ said Wylie. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Really fresh,’ said Henderson. ‘It’s dripping from something right in front of me.’ He stared straight at Nat.

Wylie climbed the steps, and Nat saw he was still favouring his hip. He’d been hurt badly in the Glowworm Cave. The two men stood before her. Wylie bent over and started sniffing. She watched the way his nostrils quivered as he breathed in, and felt sick in the pit of her stomach.

‘Reach out,’ ordered Wylie. ‘See if anything’s there.’

‘You’re the boss,’ protested Henderson, his chins rolling together. ‘You deal with it.’

‘On three,’ said Wylie. ‘On three, we’ll grab the chair together.’

The driver of the quad coughed on his cigarette as he laughed at them. ‘It’s an empty chair,’ he said. ‘You guys get spooked too easily.’

Every hair on Nat’s arms was standing on end.

‘One,’ said Wylie. He lifted his hand, ready to grab. Henderson did the same. ‘Two. Three!’

Everything happened at once. Wylie and Henderson reached forward and grabbed Nat’s shoulders at the same moment as Abraham stood up. He threw his arms out, and suddenly Wylie and Henderson were lifted off the ground and flung back into the trees. They slid down the trunks and lay motionless on the ground. The driver’s cigarette dropped clean out of his mouth. He took off, leaving Wylie and Henderson to their fate. Abraham waved one hand and pointed at the stunned men.

There was a strange cry from the air. At the treetops, fantails, kereru, tui, even mynahs and magpies began to gather. Then there was a rush of wind. The birds moved as one, a squawking mass of terror. They swooped on the men, pecking and clawing, and when Wylie and Henderson came to, they were defenceless. Every attempt they made to bat the birds

away was useless. Soon the birds changed tactics. Pi flittered into view, circled the men, and landed a poo on Wylie's head.

'What the hell?' The man was outraged. 'Cheeky bird!'

Pi circled again and landed another one. But this time, he wasn't quick enough to get away. Wylie's hand shot up and swatted the bird. Pi landed on the ground, and in a flash, the man leapt up and booted the fantail. Pi spun through the air. Wylie and Henderson ran up the driveway, stumbling and yelling. But the birds didn't stop; they dive bombed the men, over and over, all the way up to the gate. Nat could hear their cries long after they'd disappeared.

Nat ran from her seat to the spot where Pi had fallen. Heartbroken, she picked up his crumpled body from the ferns. He was still warm. The poor thing hadn't done anything but try and protect. As she cradled him tears began to roll down her cheeks.

'Nat,' whispered Riki. 'Nat – look.'

Pi chirped weakly.

'He's okay,' said Riki. 'They just winded him.'

Nat started crying again in relief, and for the fright she'd had at almost getting caught. Then she realised everyone was standing around her and she was embarrassed all over again. But Abraham crouched down and gave her a hug.

'You did well,' he said with a smile.

'You were amazing!' she said.

He chuckled. 'That'll teach those clowns not to come snooping around my place again.'

Nat clambered to her feet, and Pi flapped his wings a few times before snuggling into Nat's hand. They settled in the sun again, and Pi nibbled at the biscuits that Barnaby and Nat softened up for him.

Elijah was the one who broke the peace. 'Right,' he said. 'No way we're going to let those scumbags get away with that. Time for revenge.'

Chapter 16

Change of Plan

Twenty minutes later Jack and Nat were headed up the hill. Their mission was simple; grab warm clothes and get back down to Abraham's place, where they'd join Riki and go straight to the Rēhua Reserve. They'd made plans to meet Barnaby and Elijah under the mahoe tree on their road at three o'clock. There was no time for mucking about.

When they raced up the front steps and into the kitchen, Mike was waiting for them. And he was angry. His big hands were clenched into fists.

'Where's Kathleen?' he bellowed.

Nat stopped in her tracks. 'She was here with you.'

'She's gone,' said Mike. 'Sundance too. They've been gone for hours. I've got no idea where.'

Jack shrugged. 'She's probably making a tree hut Dad. Chill out.'

'Chill out?' Mike stepped towards Jack until they were eyeball to eyeball. 'The weather is closing in, my youngest daughter has gone missing and you want me to chill out? Change of plan, you two. Whatever you were about to do, it's cancelled. We're forming a search party and leaving in five minutes.'

'But Dad,' began Nat, 'we've got to get –'

'No buts!' Mike glared at them both. 'I don't care what's going on – you're coming with me. You're going to need raincoats, warm hats and gumboots. The clouds are coming down. Visibility is going to be close to zero.'

Nat looked at Jack in a panic, and then at their father. He was breathing so hard his face was going red. She knew Kathleen had disappeared trying to save the farm. She had to get her sister back. The treasure would have to wait.

Mike began to throw rope, jackets and blankets into his truck while muttering angrily to himself. Jack ducked into his room, and Nat was left alone in the kitchen. The cave atlas was sitting on the table. On a hunch, she picked it up. Kathleen had marked the pages – some maps were eliminated with a firm pencil 'No.' Others said 'Maybe' or had a question mark.

As Nat flicked through the book, the atlas fell open, revealing an edge of jagged paper. A page had been ripped out. Nat noted the cave maps before and after the torn page, and flipped to the index. There were two options; Requiem Cavern and Restriction Rock Cave.

Mike strode back into the house. He took one look at Nat and started yelling.

'Put that down,' he barked. 'Can't you tell this is serious? We're heading into the back blocks, and then we're going up the river.'

'She's not there,' said Nat.

'And how do you know that?'

Nat took a deep breath. 'I asked Kathleen to match the cave map from the attic to one in here. She's gone off to one of these two places.' Nat held open the atlas. Mike glanced at it and looked at her in horror.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Restriction Rock is on the other side of the district; I've heard cavers talk about it. But Requiem Cavern is on this farm. There's another name for it.' An anguished expression crossed his face. 'Kathleen asked me this morning about the caves around here, and I pointed out the directions they were in. I never imagined it'd lead to this!'

Nat scanned the index. 'Also called The Eagle's Roost. First surveyed 1920.'

'Probably no-one's been back since – it's right at the end of the bluffs; nearly an impossible trail to get to it, and if you manage to get out there, you're surrounded by sheer cliffs.'

Nat gulped. This wasn't good.

Mike glared at her. 'You set her on this mission Nat, and she wanted to help you so much she's gone off all alone.' He glanced out the window. The fog was closing in around the house.

'This is serious. Kathleen's nine years old. Men have been badly hurt out there.' He spun around. 'Jack! We're leaving – now!'

Chapter 17

Search and Rescue

The truck hurtled up the hills and out towards the bluffs with the huntaway dogs, Snow and Boss, on the back. The cloud had sunk so low the track had disappeared. They stayed on course only because Mike knew every bump like the back of his hand.

The further towards the cliffs they got, the thicker the cloud became. The winds were picking up too, and started to rattle the occupants of the cabin. Mike gripped the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. Jack sat beside him, giving nothing away. Nat was left to her own thoughts.

Right now, those awful men were in the Rēhua Reserve. They might be smashing through the cave wall already. She bit her lip, hard. They had to find Kathleen and get back down the hill as soon as they could, otherwise all their efforts in the last week would be in vain.

‘The thing is,’ said Mike, ‘where we’re going – there are funny stories about the place. My father avoided it too.’

‘What sort of stories?’ asked Jack.

Boss howled and leapt into the fog. A group of sheep were huddled in the middle of the track. The sheep scattered; Boss jumped back onto the truck.

‘Good dog,’ called Mike. ‘White sheep, white cloud – this is ridiculous.’ He concentrated on steering the truck down a deep ravine and then up the other side.

The bush to the right was deep and dark, tangled with vines. In other places on the farm it was light and airy, but here it looked as if it was about to charge the fence and take over.

‘Dad,’ said Jack. ‘What kind of –’

‘Lights,’ snapped Mike. ‘Late at night, people have seen lights out here. The cattle won’t go near these paddocks – if you herd them up here, they’ll turn around and come back.’

‘What are you saying?’ asked Nat.

‘I’m saying – I don’t know what the deal is. So be careful. Really careful.’

Mike’s phone buzzed. He perched the truck at the top of the hill and pulled the handbrake on hard.

‘Hello?’ he called. ‘Tony – where are you?’ Nat leaned closer, but all she could hear was static. ‘Stupid things,’ said Mike. He climbed out of the truck and scrambled up the nearest rise. His coat was attacked by the buffeting winds. The further he climbed the more of his body disappeared into the fog. Nat watched his boots pace back and forth as he yelled into the phone.

She leant her head against the window. When people were lost in the bush it sometimes took all night to find them. She knew there was no way her father would let her leave until Kathleen was safe, and even then, he’d be keeping a close eye on them. There had to be a way to save her sister and get back down to the reserve.

Pi stirred in her jacket pocket, and there was a bright cheep. She opened her lapel enough for him to wiggle out. He fluttered up onto the dash and started singing. Boss and Snow howled at the bird. Nat wound down the window.

‘He’s all right,’ she said. Pi jumped to Nat’s shoulder, and flew out the window.

‘Pi!’ she called. The bird flew back, then flew out again.

‘Looks like he’s got a plan,’ said Jack.

‘I hope he knows what he’s doing,’ said Nat

‘Probably not,’ said Jack. ‘He is a bird brain.’ He grinned to himself, as if that was the funniest joke of the year, and was still grinning when Mike clambered back into the truck.

‘My phone’s running red hot,’ said Mike. ‘Tony’s boys have been worried about where

you two were – apparently there was a rendezvous set up and you didn't arrive. They're on their way up here to help. Then Abraham Te Kaitiaki rang. He and Riki wanted to see you too. I started to tell him what was going on but he said he already knew, and to give him a call when we're all safe.'

Nat grinned. The cavalry was on its way.

Mike slammed down the accelerator and took off over the final track to the bluffs. As the gusts stirred up the cloud, windows to the valley floor opened. Even in pockets, the view was spectacular. They could see the ring of mountains surrounding the pastureland below. Nat thought of Sinbad and the shipwrecked sailors, walking through the land of the roc. In order to get their bearings perhaps they had climbed high. This could be the view they had witnessed.

'This is as far as we can go,' said Mike. 'Make sure you rug up.'

The truck was perched on the last shelf of land before the rocks and dirt gave up and plummeted to the valley floor. It was a spooky place; snags of mist caught in the ferns, and misshapen trees formed gnarled sculptures. Nat put on another jersey and her raincoat. She shoved her jeans into her socks so they didn't come loose in her gumboots, and pulled on a woollen hat. She was ready.

Mike grabbed the rope from the truck and charged ahead. Nat could hear him bellowing into the wind, calling Kathleen. Nat and Jack followed and started yelling too. Soon they were following long slivers of rock towards the cliff edge. Jack paused. Nat knew why.

'The fog is good for something huh?'

Jack nodded. 'Or no way you'd catch me out here.'

Some of the limestone platforms wobbled. Nat was almost pitched off when she sidled along one outcrop.

'Easy tiger,' said Jack. 'We don't need any splattercat appearances today.'

They crept down, clutching the tussock to keep their balance. Before long the Limas arrived. Barnaby shouted as he emerged from the fog and Nat waved. While Mike and Tony put their heads together, the boys scrambled down to Jack and Nat.

'They've found Sundance,' said Elijah. 'They untied him and sent him home.'

'So we know we're in the right place,' said Barnaby.

'If we're in the right place, why isn't she answering?' demanded Jack.

'What would you do?' asked Barnaby. 'You'd find a warm, dry place, and crawl in – likely she can't hear us.'

Mike and Tony called from the hill, and indicated they should split into three teams. The men would work their way down the most exposed part of the cliff, Jack and Elijah would take the middle, and Barnaby and Nat the far side.

'Have you been to this cave before?' asked Nat as they swept back and forth, making sure they didn't miss any trail Kathleen might have left.

'No,' said Barnaby, his eyes focused on the ground. 'Dad was telling us some good stories though – it's a pretty sacred place. The Elders don't give permission for people to come out here very often.'

Nat stopped suddenly and listened.

'You all right?' asked Barnaby.

She nodded. 'I thought I heard Pi.'

Nat listened again, but the wind whipped around the rocks and started to howl. The noise was immense. The bedraggled fantail burst through the cloud, chirping for all he was worth. He circled and dived out of sight.

Nat inched forward into the fog. She stopped when she could feel her toes hanging off an edge. For all she knew, it could be a hundred metre bluff; there were more than a few of those out here. She shuffled her feet back, but Pi emerged again, chirping loudly, and then dived

down into the mist.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Barnaby.

‘Pi wants me to go down there but I can’t see a thing.’

Barnaby thought for a moment. ‘If I brace myself against these rocks, and we hold on tight, I could lower you down until you get a foothold.’

Nat looked at him. ‘If there is a foothold.’

She grabbed Barnaby’s wrist, and he grabbed hers. Nat lay on her stomach and wriggled back to the edge. Barnaby braced his legs and gave her a nod.

‘Geronimo,’ she muttered, and pushed off. Her feet searched beneath her. Nothing. Barnaby lowered her further. Her feet scratched against the rocks but they were too smooth.

‘Lower,’ she called. Barnaby slid forward, and her feet flailed around again, desperate for a foothold, even a tiny ledge to rest on. Still, there was nothing.

From below her, within the mist, Pi sang again. He was insistent, chirping louder and louder. A great gust came howling through the cliffs and Nat was slammed against the rock face. The winds were following each other in a game of cat and mouse in the impossible white out. Barnaby gripped tighter.

‘I’m not letting go,’ he yelled.

Again, Pi sang, more demanding now. Nat felt around with her feet. She swung them in all directions. There was nothing there. Pi hovered next to her, singing all the time.

‘I think you have to let go,’ called Nat. ‘Pi keeps telling me I’ll be okay.’

The winds collided. Nat felt Barnaby’s grip slip. A hollow boom sounded across the cliffs, then Nat lurched wildly and fell backwards into the whiteout.

Chapter 18

Pukatea Mountain

Nat landed flat on her back with a thud. She lay in an eerie cocoon of white. She wiggled her toes; they all moved. She lifted her fingers – no pain, no pins and needles. Gingerly she flexed her arms and legs. Nothing was broken. She sat up.

‘Barnaby!’ she yelled. ‘I’m okay!’ She listened hard, turning her head in the wind to catch any echo of a voice, but there was nothing. He’d probably doubled back to get help.

There was also no sign of Pi. Or Kathleen. Nat thought for a moment. There was no point in going further into the fog; she’d fall to the bottom of the cliff. The best plan was to inch back the way she’d come and find a place to shelter. She rose to her feet, holding out her arms for balance. As she straightened her knees the wind did her two sudden favours. The first was to bat her to the ground with a single gust. Then it gathered all its might and shoed the fog away so Nat could see where she was.

The ledge she sat on was about three or four metres below where Barnaby had gripped her hand. She shivered, and it wasn’t from the cold; she’d been lucky not to break her back in the fall. Beyond the ledge was a sheer vertical drop of at least eighty metres.

The fog shifted again and suddenly Nat saw two immense rock figures guarding the cliff. She only made them out for a moment, then the fog rushed back and she was left alone, struggling to understand what she’d seen.

The statues were carved from the rock and made to scare all intruders away. Their giant feet extended towards her, and they were so tall that her gumboots must have almost been scraping their ears when she’d hung onto Barnaby. The figure on the left had the body of a human, wore some kind of tunic and was holding a spear. But his head was an eagle, and Nat had seen great wings rising from his back. The other figure had cloven feet, like a goat, and his tail was wrapped around his legs. From his neck sprouted a mane, and his head grew ferns instead of hair.

Suddenly lightening cracked, and Nat saw the figures again. They glared at her,

demanding to know what business she had being there. From within the cliff, Pi chirped. Nat's heart flipped. Pi had to be kidding. There was no way she was walking between those statues. They were there to keep people out. She folded her arms over the layers of clothes. She wasn't moving until rescue arrived.

One low rumble of thunder was all it took to change her mind. It rolled through the valley with vibrations so intense Nat scuttled right between the carved figures. Pi chirped in approval. Nat had to grin at herself. At least now she was out of the cold.

The fantail fluttered along a passage leading into the hill. Nat stepped after him, then stopped. It'd be silly to wander too far – the others would be trying to find her, and she was supposed to be rescuing Kathleen, not exploring. Outside, the brutal winds howled. She looked from one option to the other. Neither looked good.

'Pi?' she called out. 'What am I supposed to do now?'

The bird flew back to her, chirping non-stop. Nat gasped. Behind Pi was a man. He was very small, and looked just like the people they'd met at Raglan. Patupaiarehe, in our valley!

The man held a bow with an arrow ready to fly. He had blonde hair and wore in a fur-lined coat.

'I'm sorry,' said Nat. 'Am I allowed to be here?'

'Actually,' said the man, 'we hoped you'd be arriving soon. We've been looking after Kathleen.'

Nat closed her eyes in relief. Her sister was safe. When she opened them the man stepped closer and Nat caught a glimpse of the pointed tips of his ears.

'You must promise, on the life of your sister, that you will never tell anyone the location of our grotto,' he said. 'This is the most important oath you will ever take. We will be watching to make sure you keep it.'

'I promise,' said Nat.

'Good,' said the tiny man. 'You may follow me.'

Pi leapt from Nat's shoulder and flew ahead with the patupaiarehe man. The bird started chirping, probably updating him on all that had happened. Nat glanced over her shoulder at the miserable cliff, then turned and followed them.

'The others with me,' said Nat. 'Will they be able to follow us?'

The man shook his head. 'Your father will find the ledge you landed upon. He will not see the guardian statues, just a steep passage to the eagle's nest. That is what they have on their maps.'

'But what about all of this?' asked Nat.

'It does not exist to most grown-ups,' said the man.

Nat ran her hands along the walls, wondering what kind of place she'd found herself in.

'This is a sanctuary,' said the man, answering Nat's unspoken question. 'Since ancient times the pukatea tree has offered water, shelter and hope to anyone who has needed it. This is Pukatea Mountain. No-one will find us here.'

They arrived at a set of massive wooden doors. The man looked intently at Nat.

'Remember your promise,' he said, as he pushed the doors open.

Beyond them was a massive grotto of light. The cave was huge, spanning far up and across. Nat could see balconies and terraces, and deep below a subterranean river meandering through the rock. But the cavern was dominated by great trees. Nat blinked, trying to understand what she was seeing. Grand trunks and root systems stretched from the world above down into crystal clear pools in the floor. She recognised the buttress roots – these were the pukatea trees. Each gigantic trunk shone, casting light from the pools all the way up to the ceiling. At the roof of the cave, little tomos also allowed light to stream in, but the rain of the surface trickled down the root system. Around the clear pools fern gardens grew, and in the centre of these children played on a green mossy area. The whole place was tingling.

‘This is incredible,’ Nat whispered.

The man nodded. ‘We have not had a human visitor for a very long time. Not since the eagles moved on.’

‘So the perch outside was an eagle’s nest,’ said Nat. ‘We’ve been following the trail.’

‘Rewi would approve,’ said the man. ‘We will do what we can to help.’

Nat listened to the rumble of the river and watched the children play among the ferns. She realised that one of them was her sister. She stepped forward, and the patupaiarehe man rested his hand on her arm.

‘Kathleen fell when she was looking for the cave. She broke her arm. We have set everything, but it was a bad break.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nat.

He smiled. ‘Your sister has been happy here – maybe we will see her again.’

Nat ran down a grand stairway and around a series of terraces, then onto the moss. Pi swooped from above and followed her. Tiny children laughed and jumped when they saw her coming. Kathleen looked up to see what the fuss was about, and when she saw Nat tears welled up in her eyes. She stood up, and Nat saw the ingenious sling the patupaiarehe had created.

‘You came,’ said Kathleen. ‘You found me!’

‘Of course I came,’ said Nat, carefully wrapping her arms around her sister. ‘The others are up above still looking; we’ve been calling and searching.’

‘I wanted to help find the treasure,’ said Kathleen, her big eyes full of the stories she had to tell. ‘So we could keep my pony. You all went off without me but I was the one that found the secret room to start with.’

‘We never forgot about you,’ said Nat. ‘We were trying to keep you safe!’

Kathleen looked at her arm and then back to Nat. ‘Tell me about it.’

Nat grinned. A couple of the patupaiarehe children were gaining confidence and getting closer and closer to Nat. One of them dashed forward, touched her, then darted back again and collapsed with his friends into fits of giggles. They were pranksters all right. She waved to them, which prompted every child to leap behind a fern and hide.

‘We have to go,’ said Nat. ‘Dad’ll be beside himself by now.’

Kathleen gripped Nat’s arm. ‘It’s not goodbye forever though, right?’

Nat looked at the happy faces watching from all over the cavern. ‘Maybe not,’ she replied. ‘But I think we have to be careful who we tell about this place. It’s best if only you and I talk about it.’

Kathleen nodded. ‘I understand. They gave me a special juice to seal my lips.’

Concerned, Nat examined her sister, but Kathleen smiled. ‘It’s okay Nat, it’s just for when keeping a secret might be tricky. But they said I could always talk to my sister.’

Nat sat back, impressed at the wisdom of the Patupaiarehe. ‘Okay. Time to say goodbye.’

The children crept out from behind the ferns and hugged Kathleen – her feet, her knees, whatever they could reach. The sounds they made were like chiming bells.

They made their way through the terraces and up the staircase, back to the solid wooden doors where the man was waiting. Nat could feel all the eyes were following them. Pi landed on her shoulder. She looked around one more time, soaking in the view.

‘There is one last thing,’ said the patupaiarehe man. ‘To find the treasure you seek, look for the pouākai. When you stand before the final wall, and there is no clue how to pass, trace the outline of Tautoru on the rock. Take the lowest passage and remember; you are on sacred ground.’

Nat repeated everything he said. ‘Thank you so much. Can we do anything in return?’

‘There will be,’ he said. ‘We will find you when the time is right.’ He bowed once, and

disappeared behind the wooden doors. Nat and Kathleen listened as they were fastened tight again. Kathleen lifted one hand and rested it against the door. Nat watched as a tear ran down her sister's nose and fell to the floor.

'Bye-bye,' whispered Kathleen.

There was no reply.

Chapter 19

Grounded

At the end of the corridor, Nat and Kathleen stood between the statues and looked out into the fog.

‘How’s your arm?’ asked Nat.

Kathleen managed a lop-sided shrug. ‘Hurts.’

‘Ready for the real world again?’

‘Not really.’

Nat wasn’t sure if she was ready for the real world either. ‘Stick close to me. Real close. They’ll be looking for us, so it won’t be too long in the cold this time.’

Two steps forward landed them deep in the pea-soup fog. They started yelling for help.

‘Dad!’ bellowed Kathleen. ‘We’re down here.’

‘Barnaby! Dad! Jack!’ called Nat.

They listened to the echo of their voices float away on the cloud. Nat looked back to the statues. They had disappeared.

‘Try again,’ urged Nat.

‘Jack!’ screamed Kathleen. ‘Come save us! Dad! We’re here!’

‘That ought to do it.’ Nat grinned. Kathleen could out-yell the best of them.

Snatches of conversation drifted back to them.

‘I heard something – they’re down that way.’

Nat rustled around in her jacket to keep warm. ‘You did it kiddo,’ she said. ‘We’re about to get rescued.’

Kathleen nodded, and looked over her shoulder toward the cave. Nat understood how she was feeling. ‘Chin up,’ she said. ‘We’ll see them again, remember?’

‘I know,’ said Kathleen. ‘But I didn’t get the treasure to save my pony.’

‘Right now, let’s get home and get warm,’ said Nat.

‘Kathleen?’ This time it was Mike’s voice. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m okay Dad! I hurt my arm, that’s all.’

‘Rope coming down!’ called Mr. Lima.

Kathleen and Nat stood back and the coil landed neatly at their feet.

‘You first,’ said Nat. She looped the rope under her sister’s arms and tied a quick bowline, making sure to back it up. ‘Kathleen’s ready,’ she called. ‘Mind her arm – it’s in a sling.’

With all the muscle on the end of the rope, Kathleen disappeared skyward in seconds. Nat could hear the cheers at the top of the cliff. The rope slithered back into view. Nat tied it around herself slowly. She couldn’t see anything of where they’d been, but just knowing the grotto of light existed made her reluctant to leave. Strange, she thought, that a place can settle in your heart after one visit.

‘Ready,’ she called. She flew up in the fog, like a great white elevator with Pi fluttering beside her. Although the cloud was still dense, she could have sworn the statue with a mane flicked its tail once in farewell.

When Nat appeared there was another cheer. Elijah and Barnaby, their feet braced in bushes of tussock, grinned at her. Behind them was Mr. Lima. Jack was wrapping Kathleen in a blanket. Mike hugged her tight without even bothering to untie the rope. Then he lifted her over to Kathleen and held them both close. Nat suddenly understood how anxious he’d been.

‘Sorry Dad,’ she said.

‘It’s okay mate,’ he muttered, without lifting his head. ‘We’re all right now.’

‘In the nick of time,’ said Mr. Lima. ‘Not much light left.’

‘Yep,’ said Mike. ‘And thank goodness for that. This is no place to be at night.’ He scooped Kathleen up in his arms. ‘Nice work on the sling Nat.’ He carried Kathleen back to the truck. Mr. Lima followed, carrying the coiled ropes and extra blankets. He threw a final order over his shoulder.

‘Jack, Elijah, grab the rest of the gear would you?’

The boys obeyed, leaving Nat and Barnaby alone in the fog.

‘Where did you go?’ asked Barnaby. ‘I fetched the others, we abseiled down – and you’d disappeared.’

‘We weren’t gone that long,’ protested Nat.

‘It’s been hours,’ said Barnaby. ‘We’d almost given up – your Dad was ready to call the cops, search and rescue, everyone he could think of.’

‘Hours?’ asked Nat. ‘Really?’

Barnaby nodded, biting his lip. He only did that when he was really worried. ‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘I went down first, and found these incredible statues – like nothing I’d seen before. One had an eagle’s head.’

‘And another had a tail?’ asked Nat.

Barnaby’s eyes widened. ‘You saw them too – what were they guarding?’

Nat tipped her head to the side. ‘What do you mean?’

‘As soon as Mike and Dad landed beside me, the statues faded away – there was only a sheer rock face. We found an entrance and followed a passageway to a terrifying drop. Your Dad was right; no-one’s been there in years. When you were nowhere to be seen, we climbed back up and kept searching.’

‘We should get going,’ said Nat, taking a few steps up the hill.

‘Hold on,’ said Barnaby. ‘What about Kathleen’s sling? You may have fooled your Dad, but I’ve seen your first aid. It’s not that good.’

She screwed up her face. ‘Thanks a lot.’

‘Aren’t you going to tell me anything?’ said Barnaby.

Nat shrugged. ‘Not today.’

Barnaby put his hands on his hips and glared at her. ‘You’re a piece of work Splattercat. We’ve been scrambling over these hills for hours, getting frozen and terrified over whether you’re even alive! Clearly something amazing happened down there – and you won’t even share?’

Nat kept walking.

Barnaby sighed. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘At least you’re okay.’

He strode past, reached out one hand and shoved her over. Taken off guard, Nat rolled a few times before stopping, arms in one tussock, legs in another. She didn’t know whether to laugh, or race to catch up and tackle him too.

She lifted her head. ‘I’ll get you Barnaby Lima!’ she yelled.

Barnaby laughed. ‘Come on,’ he yelled back. ‘You deserved it!’

Nat climbed out of the tussock. She was beat. Pi reappeared and settled back into her pocket. The two families separated into their own vehicles, and Kathleen snuggled up to her sister as Mike picked the smoothest track home. They’d been driving for a few minutes when they passed a grove of trees Nat hadn’t taken much notice of before.

‘Dad,’ she said. ‘How old are those trees?’

‘The Pukateas?’ he asked. ‘Really old. Lots of bush around here regenerated after fires, or the land being cleared. But Pukateas don’t burn, and the settlers had no use for them. They let them be. I quite like them – don’t you?’

‘Very much,’ said Nat. She looked down at Kathleen to see what she thought, but her sister was already asleep.

‘Now listen up,’ said Mike, his eyes on the track ahead. ‘There’s been enough monkey business. This just tops it off. You’re all grounded. Tony’s kids too. Till the end of the holidays. No questions.’

Nat folded her arms. She loved her Dad and knew he was trying to look after them, but there had to be a way around this. And if there wasn’t, she was going to make one.

Chapter 20

Saving the Day

Nat got up early on Monday and made everyone pancakes.

‘I’m taking Kathleen to the hospital,’ said Mike. ‘I want that bathroom spotless and all the wood split. That’s after your rooms are done – Nat, Kathleen’s too please, make her bed and tidy everything up. If you get the vacuuming done too, we’ll have dessert tonight.’

Jack and Nat waved from the porch as the car pulled out. But the second it had rumbled up the driveway, they sat down in a huff.

‘This is stupid,’ said Jack. ‘We’re not slaves.’

‘He’s trying to keep us busy so we don’t get any other ideas.’

‘Too late,’ he grumbled. ‘I’m going to play on the computer.’

‘What about your jobs?’ asked Nat.

He shrugged. ‘Plenty of time for that. They’ll be gone for ages.’

Nat watched her brother shuffle back into the house. Best to get started, she decided. If it made her Dad happier to have the chores done, that was a good thing. She began in Kathleen’s bedroom and worked down the hall, tidying and vacuuming as she went. When she raised her head and realised it was four in the afternoon, she smiled. By keeping her hands busy she’d made the hours fly. She made Kathleen’s favourite dessert, feijoa and apple crumble, and was finishing the dishes when the car pulled in.

Kathleen bounced up the steps to show off her new purple cast. Mike followed in a daze, asked what was for dinner and then wandered out again. Soon, Nat could hear him chopping wood. The solid axe blows echoed around the paddocks.

‘What’s wrong with Dad?’ asked Nat.

Kathleen was hunting for a marker pen so everyone could sign her cast. ‘There’s a bone medicine the doctors gave me so my arm heals right.’

‘And what’s the problem?’

‘It’s expensive,’ said Kathleen.

Nothing more was said that evening about adventuring, or money, or hospitals. Later, Nat found her Dad sighing at his bald patch in the bathroom mirror. He passed a half-hearted comment about how clean the house was, but didn’t notice that Jack hadn’t done a thing. Kathleen was in bed early. Mike joined Jack in front of the TV, but Nat excused herself. Her mind was spinning. She had to figure out how she could make everything better. The answer was obvious. She just had to figure out a way to say it.

Nat woke to the sound of her Dad making coffee. She scuttled down the stairs and pulled up a seat at the kitchen table.

‘Hi Dad,’ she began. ‘How was the hospital?’

Mike rubbed his bleary eyes. ‘We got the same nurse that helped us when you sliced open your elbow last summer. She can’t decide whether I’m a bad parent or you’re all accident prone.’

Nat watched as her Dad poured the black brew into his mug, and fetched a wad of lottery tickets from the bench. Opening up the newspaper, he leant over to check each ticket carefully. He screwed up the first one with a scowl and threw it on the floor. The second, third and fourth ticket landed beside the first. Nat decided to launch.

‘Remember I told you about our caving trip the other day, when we followed the map from the attic? There was one part I left out.’ Mike raised an eyebrow. Nat knew she was safe to continue. ‘We found a clue to the treasure; it’s supposed to be full of rubies.’

Mike stared at her as he sipped his coffee. ‘Huh?’

‘Dad, we’re on the trail of a treasure chest.’

‘Really?’

Nat nodded. Maybe it was too early for big news like this. ‘Really. That’s what the burglars were looking for.’

‘You’re serious?’

‘Yes!’

Mike stared at the table. ‘Kathleen told you about the medicine.’ He sighed. ‘I know you’re just trying to help Nat, and it sounds amazing. But you might never find it. And even if you do, it probably doesn’t belong to you. There’ll be all sorts of claimants.’

‘Mr Te Kaitiaki said that it was mine. Because of Natalia.’

Mike looked up. ‘Did he now?’

Nat took a deep breath, and laid out the rest of her plan.

‘I know we’re grounded and we probably all deserve it but do you think it’d be okay if Riki and Abraham came up here? Abraham could explain everything to you.’ She smiled hopefully.

The phone rang. Mike took two steps and answered it. ‘Hello? Yeah, sorry mate, I’ve been meaning to ring you about that. I know it’s overdue. I was hoping to pay when the farm sells. I’ll do what I can – but no promises.’

Nat could hear the man on the other end. He wasn’t happy. Judging by the way her father was shifting back and forth from one foot to the other, neither was he. Mike set the phone down after another few minutes’ tirade, and pulled on his hat.

‘Well Nat, you call up Riki. A treasure chest might be exactly what I need to save the day.’ He bolted out the door, and soon Nat could hear the beat of the swinging axe again. Saving the day was exactly what she planned to do.

Chapter 21

Man to Man Chat

The following morning Nat took Plato for a long ride over the hills. She found herself steering the horse towards the grove of Pukatea trees on the cliffs. Plato neighed, interrupting her thoughts of returning to the sanctuary. He pranced on the spot as Nat scanned the bush line, certain someone was watching them.

There were so many unanswered questions from the last ten days and so few leads. Mike still hadn't let them in on Natalia's story; there must be more. There was that odd comment he'd passed last week about the settlers' gossip. How had Rewi met her great great grandmother? Why did he build secret rooms and leave notes for her? And why did she never uncover them herself?

Returning home, she brushed down the stallion and checked in on Kathleen. She was huddled over her desk, practicing writing with her left hand. Beside her sat the box from the attic.

Nat picked up the cave atlas. 'How many more cave maps do I need to look at?'

'None,' she replied. 'I checked them all.'

'Sure,' said Nat.

Kathleen's face clouded over. 'I was careful,' she protested. 'I knew it was important!'

'Sorry,' said Nat. 'I know you did. But the cave that best matched our map wasn't the treasure cave, right?'

Kathleen smiled and cradled her injured arm. 'Right.'

'And all the caves in the North Island, every type – limestone and marble – are in that atlas.'

'Lava tubes too,' said Kathleen.

'So it doesn't make sense if we have a map that doesn't match any of them.'

'No it doesn't,' agreed Kathleen. 'Cavers are pretty observant. Think of Barnaby – he's always on the lookout.'

Nat flushed at the mention of Barnaby. She'd been doing a good job of thinking about the treasure instead of him, but even hearing his name made her want to giggle. She shook the thought of his smile out of her head and focused.

'We've had generations of cavers criss-crossing this area, and we've got a map for a cave they've never found.' Nat frowned. 'I don't buy it.'

'Neither do I,' said Kathleen.

'Who even surveyed the cave?' demanded Nat.

'Does the map have any clues?' asked Kathleen. She opened the box and produced the original. They flattened it out and examined it.

'Cave of the Emeralds,' mused Nat. 'It has a nice wide entrance – which makes it even stranger that it's never been found.' She paused. 'Well, of course it's been found – we've got a map for it. But somehow it was lost again.'

'Maybe someone wanted it lost?' suggested Kathleen. 'They could have been protecting the treasure.'

'It's odd though,' said Nat, sitting down in a heap. 'The people who lost the cave weren't after the treasure.'

'Why not?' asked Kathleen.

'Because they'd have taken it – then there'd be no point keeping the cave hidden.'

Kathleen gasped. 'Unless there's something else in there.'

Nat stared at her sister. 'Maybe,' she murmured. She turned back to the map. 'There are three passages that turn off the main stream.'

‘What did the patupaiarehe say?’ asked Kathleen.

‘Trace the outline of Tauroru on the rock,’ recited Nat. ‘Why does that sound so familiar?’

‘Toru is three,’ said Kathleen.

‘Yes!’ said Nat, remembering. ‘Riki told me the other night – Tauroru is Orion’s belt!’ The rumble of a car could be heard in the driveway.

‘Finally,’ said Nat. ‘Riki’s here!’

Nat raced out the door and down the steps, ready to let fire with a string of questions. But she didn’t get a chance. After she’d hugged Riki, she threw her arms wide to Abraham, and he handed her a box of vegetables.

‘This is for dinner,’ he instructed.

She looked at him.

‘Well, go on.’

Nat placed the box on the kitchen table, and returned to Abraham’s truck, ready to demand answers. But even as she opened her mouth, Abraham interrupted.

‘This is for your father when you lot bugger off,’ he said, putting an old cake tin in her hands. ‘You can peek inside, but it won’t do you no good.’ He laughed. ‘Not for you!’

Inside, Nat prised the lid from the tin. ‘It’s just cake.’

‘Whisky cake,’ said Riki. ‘His recipe is pretty famous.’

‘Stop gas-bagging,’ called Abraham. ‘Let’s get the jobs done first. There’s still more out here!’

Returning to the truck, Nat was given two jars of bright yellow chutney. Abraham nodded. ‘That’ll make his day.’

‘Dad’ll be back soon,’ said Kathleen.

‘Not a problem, child,’ said Abraham. ‘In times of excitement, every moment should be savoured. The skies are clear, the mysteries are unraveling at last.’

At the mention of mysteries, Nat glanced back to watch Abraham. Hearing some soaring music they could not, he put together a couple of old fashioned dance steps. But he wasn’t ready to say anything. Instead he hooked his hands behind his back and walked among the trees, humming to himself.

‘He’s acting funny,’ Nat said to Riki.

Riki laughed. ‘You haven’t seen the half of it! On the way up here he was singing old songs to himself. He’s in a great mood.’

‘How come?’

She shrugged. ‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

Nat deposited the chutney on the bench. ‘I’ve been waiting for ages to tell you about the afternoon we were supposed to meet back at your place.’

Riki nodded. ‘The day Kathleen went adventuring by herself.’

‘We found the cave map she’d been looking at,’ said Nat. ‘Which led to a place called Pukatea Mountain.’

The story was disrupted by the crunch of gravel under tyres. Mike was back from mustering. Nat glanced at Riki. ‘I’ll pick this up later.’

The truck roared back into view. The farm dogs leapt from the back to inspect each individual, assessing them for good and bad smells, or the ultimate prize – a bit of food. Mike climbed out, shook Abraham’s hand, and to Nat’s absolute amazement they fell silent, looking up at the blue sky.

‘Pearler day,’ said Mike eventually.

‘Too right,’ agreed Abraham, and from his pocket he produced his pipe and a pouch of tobacco. He offered it first to Mike.

‘Don’t mind if I do.’

Riki, Kathleen and Nat sat in the sun by the porch, watching Abraham stuff his pipe and Mike roll a cigarette.

‘Why don’t they hurry up?’ whispered Nat.

‘The things they’re going to talk about are big things,’ said Riki, keeping her voice low. ‘You can’t dive straight into them.’

‘But the waiting is so painful!’ said Nat.

‘I think watching them is funny,’ said Kathleen.

Nat sighed. She hated being held back. Over the last few days she’d felt as though her wings had been clipped. She took a deep breath and let it out, counting to ten. Then she stretched her legs in the sun and counted the freckles from her toes to her knees while Mike and Abraham eased their way into the strangest conversation they’d had in a long time.

It started out normally; with the weather.

‘Tomorrow they reckon the rain’s coming,’ said Mike.

Abraham blew out a puff of smoke, and they watched it linger in the air. ‘We’re in for a helluva downpour aren’t we?’

Mike nodded. ‘That’s right.’

‘Should we be worried, down the hill?’

‘You’ll be right unless you go underground.’

‘Right,’ said Abraham. ‘Right, right.’

‘Something to drink mate?’ asked Mike, scuffing his boots in the dust of the yard.

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ replied Abraham.

‘Tea?’ suggested Mike.

Abraham shook his head, but sideways, as if he was shaking water from his ear.

Mike pulled his hands out of his pockets. ‘I’m sure we’ve got coffee.’

‘Marvellous!’ said the old man.

They wandered towards the front door, where Mike paused to drop his cigarette butt in a tin can. They kicked off their boots and stepped inside, smiling at the girls as they walked past. Inside, the conversation turned when Mike spied the jars of chutney and produce on the bench.

‘This is very generous,’ he said. ‘I’m quite partial to courgettes.’

‘Those are my prize crop,’ boasted Abraham.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Mike.

‘So,’ said Abraham. ‘There are some things we need to talk about, and the truth is going to sound...’ He paused, looking for the right word. ‘Fantastical.’

‘I’m ready,’ said Mike. ‘I might even surprise you with a few stories of my own.’

‘Shall we invite the girls in?’ said Abraham. ‘They’re listening anyway.’

The front door swung open, and Nat, Kathleen and Riki trooped inside. Mike yelled to Jack, who trotted down the stairs and curled himself into an armchair.

‘This story,’ began Abraham, ‘has never been told. Thus, it has spawned rumours and treasure hunts. It has caused broken hearts and broken families. And no-one has got near the truth until now.’

A yell in the yard and whoops of laughter stopped Abraham. There was a crash as bikes hit the dirt, and two unruly heads emerged through the door. Nat’s heart leapt. It was Barnaby and Elijah.

‘Are we late?’ asked Elijah.

‘No,’ said Abraham. ‘Perfect timing.’

‘How come you’re here?’ asked Nat.

‘Abraham rang Dad and asked us to come down. Move over.’ Barnaby pushed his way onto the sofa next to Nat.

‘We were just talking about the treasure,’ said Abraham.

‘Excuse me?’ said Kathleen, in her politest voice.

‘Yes?’ asked Abraham, who seemed amused at all the interruptions.

‘What treasure?’

‘Oh,’ said Abraham, still beaming. ‘Sinbad’s treasure.’

Chapter 22

Answers

Kathleen gasped. ‘Sinbad the Sailor?’

Abraham nodded. ‘Yes, that’s how we’ve come to know him.’

Nat curled her toes and grabbed onto a pillow. She was so excited she thought she might burst.

‘And how did it get here?’ asked Kathleen.

‘It was left as an offering,’ replied Abraham. ‘Long ago, people who journeyed here from lands of sand left two treasure chests. They were to guarantee safe passage home. One was bestowed to the fairy people, the patupaiarehe, also known as the urukehu. They have managed to drift from people’s memories as if they were a dream. But,’ he said, ‘real they are, as some of you in this room know intimately.’ His eyes met Nat’s for a moment.

‘They protected their chest for centuries. But then people began to settle in this remote area. The patupaiarehe decided to move the treasure, and enlisted a young man to help them. His name was Rewi Te Kaitiaki.’

Nat watched as the name rippled around the room. Riki’s chin rose higher. At the table, Mike was leaning forward, taking in every word.

‘Rewi was special for a number of reasons,’ continued Abraham. ‘He was the eagle keeper. The last pouākai lived in this valley. Eventually there was one left. His home was a sacred place known as ‘The Cave of the Emeralds.’’

Nat gasped. Everyone looked at her. ‘That’s the cave we’ve been looking for.’

Abraham nodded. ‘I know.’

‘But it’s not in the cave atlas,’ she said. ‘Kathleen fell off a cliff to make sure.’

A broader grin spread across Abraham’s face. ‘I know.’

‘You sure know heaps,’ said Kathleen.

Barnaby interrupted. ‘What do you mean a cave that’s not in the atlas? Are you saying this is a new cave?’

Nat rolled her eyes. ‘We knew it didn’t make sense,’ she told Barnaby. ‘But someone must have surveyed it for a map to exist. Which means it was lost – on purpose.’

‘Caves can be very expensive things to make disappear,’ said Abraham. ‘Our friend Rewi found that out. The other treasure chest, gifted to the local Maori, had been entrusted to the eagle. When the patupaiarehe approached Rewi, he moved their treasure to the same location. The treasure chests were a talisman for both cultures, ensuring their progress. Safely in the cave they lay, until yet more settlers arrived and there was again concern that the treasure would be found.

‘Rewi’s tribe concluded that their treasure must be moved, and this time more cunning would be required. They decided to hide the chest in plain sight. Before the Glowworm Cave opened, Rewi and his men created a secret room – but the story leaked out. Rumours began that have never rested. And finally someone with enough tenacity and cash followed those rumours to their source.’

‘Wylie,’ muttered Jack. ‘I knew he was fishy.’

‘You should have seen how he treated the cave!’ said Barnaby.

‘He’s as crooked as they come,’ said Abraham. ‘As the truth was passed down it rose to the surface now and again. But this time, it was bought.’ The old man’s head dropped. ‘Pride is not what it was,’ he said. ‘Now even our most sacred treasures are for sale.’

Elijah spoke up for the first time. ‘So Wylie sucked up to the community, to make all the contacts he needed?’

Abraham nodded.

Mike screwed his face up. ‘That’s why he was so damn friendly.’

‘But he was too late at the Glowworm Cave,’ said Riki.

‘Why’s that?’ said Mike.

‘Because someone got there first,’ said Barnaby.

‘Actually,’ said Abraham, ‘Rewi suspected that the secret was out. So at the very last moment, he returned the treasure to the care of the eagle, and sealed up the room – without telling a soul.’

‘But why were the treasure maps hidden in our attic?’ asked Kathleen.

‘Ah,’ said Abraham. ‘That’s the sad part. Rewi worked on this farm, for Griffith and his wife Natalia. Griffith was assigned to collect maps of the caves in the North Island. One day he heard a story about a sacred cave deep in the valley. Rewi pleaded that the location remain unpublished. But Griffith wanted money for the secret and demanded to know why it was so special.

‘Rewi was a man of the land. He had no need of jewels – he was merely their guardian. But Griffith pushed, and finally Rewi had no choice. He went to the cave and retrieved one gem to buy the safety of the treasure. It was enough; Griffith ceased demanding answers and seemed content to hear stories about this amazing cave.

‘Rewi warned him against trying to find it alone, but when Griffith considered himself experienced enough, he set off – and was never seen again. An extensive search began. Because his caving gear was missing, the focus fell on the caves published in his collection. As the map of the sacred cave was never included, his body was never found.’

‘After his disappearance, stories circulated about Rewi and Natalia. Rewi decided it would be best if he faded away. Some say he was banished, or sailed off to war, others that he went to live with the patupaiarehe. Before he left, he did two things. The first was to leave a sealed envelope with his family, containing his will and a few select papers.’

‘What was the second?’ asked Nat.

‘To build the room in your attic,’ said Abraham. ‘A secret place where all the clues could be left, waiting for someone to assemble them again.’

‘But then he moved the treasure,’ said Elijah. ‘So she wouldn’t have found it anyway.’

‘One cave leads to the other,’ said Abraham. ‘You followed the clues. I’d like to think Natalia could have uncovered them too.’

‘So why didn’t she?’ asked Jack. ‘The letter was still sealed – she never found the room.’

‘Because,’ interrupted Mike, ‘a few months after Griffith disappeared, disaster struck again. Natalia was out caving. There was a rock fall and she was killed. My grandfather and his brothers were orphaned.’

Nat felt a pang across her chest as she absorbed the last elusive part of Natalia’s story. Now she understood why her father had been so worried when they were out adventuring.

Silence lingered in the room. Abraham produced an envelope. All eyes were on him as he pulled out a fragile piece of paper. ‘This is the last will and testament of Rewi Te Kaitiaki,’ he said. ‘He didn’t specify much, which is why this last sentence has puzzled us for years – and made us all believe.’ He looked at Nat. ‘It reads; ‘To Natalia Sheppard; two chests of ancient jewels, as gifted by the Arabian party in the time of Chief Pukunui. Location; Undisclosed.’

The room was suddenly alive with exclamation. Everyone looked at Nat and then back to Abraham. Barnaby bounced on the sofa. Mike stood up and shook his head, as if he couldn’t accept any of it, then sat back down again.

‘It’s really Nat’s?’ he said.

‘It is,’ said Abraham. ‘Technically, it’s yours, as you are the next immediate descendant of Natalia. In short, it belongs to all of you.’

‘And that’s okay?’ asked Mike.

‘Yes,’ said Abraham. ‘Rewi was part of a long line of guardians who watched over the treasure. They were known as the Protectors of the Last Valley. Natalia was also a protector. You must live here to continue the line. If the farm is sold, the line is broken, and anyone can access the valley’s riches.’

‘What kind of riches are we talking about?’ asked Mike.

‘It has been rumoured that hidden in this valley is a collection of clues and maps that will unlock the very secrets of the ancients,’ said Abraham. ‘I’m talking about vast wealth, and incredible wisdom.’

Barnaby’s eyes were shining. ‘Imagine if we could find that collection.’

‘Indeed,’ said Abraham. ‘I believe that Rewi would approve of you using the treasure to secure the farm. I can speak for both the local Māori and the Patupaiarehe; they have passed on their blessing. If we can find those chests, then all of us can continue Rewi’s task of looking after the valley.’

‘Sounds dangerous,’ said Mike. ‘And it’s a long shot.’

Nat was puzzling over everything she’d heard. ‘There’s still one part of the story left, isn’t there Abraham?’

‘What’s that?’ he asked.

‘How did the Cave of the Emeralds and the eagle stay hidden?’

‘Ah.’ A shadow crossed Abraham’s face. ‘Since that first cave atlas was published, the land has changed almost beyond recognition. Trees have been cut down and roads carved through the bush. No longer held in place by the deep roots, the rich soil washed down the hills, and filtered over the sacred places. Finally it was the elements that helped us keep our secret. A long time ago, a flood swept through the valley. High on hilltops, people huddled together, waiting for the wrath of nature to diminish. They could hear boulders being tossed about below as if they were grains of sand. When the waters subsided, everything in the upper end of the valley had changed. The mighty river had poured into the Cave of the Emeralds and made it her home. The eagle was trapped inside and was never seen again.’

Barnaby’s caving brain had been working overtime during the story. ‘I know where it is,’ he said. ‘There’s a lagoon under an alcove, not far into the Rēhua Reserve. When the sun is high enough, the waters are an intense blue-green. It looks like there might be a big cavern back there.’

Abraham chuckled. ‘All these years,’ he said. ‘And a fourteen year old boy unravels this great secret.’ He smiled. ‘You’re right. That’s the entrance, leading to the eagle and the chests.’

‘Hold on,’ said Nat. ‘Do you mean we have to swim under to find the treasure?’

‘Yes,’ said Abraham.

‘Sump diving is risky,’ said Elijah.

Abraham nodded. ‘So there is a choice. We sit here safely and let Wylie go about his work. Elijah is right. There are dangers involved, and we do not want to be reckless.’

The room fell silent. Nat watched the looks pass back and forth. Jack glanced at Elijah, as if to say, danger or not, we can handle it, but Elijah’s somber expression showed he wasn’t convinced. Barnaby and Nat looked at Riki, who nodded, letting them know she’d be there in a heartbeat. Kathleen was anxious, scanning each face, and it was her voice that broke the silence.

‘If we don’t do anything,’ she said, ‘they get all the treasure. And that’s not fair.’

‘Fair or not,’ boomed Mike, ‘someone has to keep an eye on you lot. What would your mother think of me if I let you chase a bunch of bad eggs into the bush and dive deep into a cave to search for a treasure that hasn’t been seen for a century? She’d have a fit. In the last week we’ve had one concussion, one broken arm, and Lord knows how many scrapes and near misses.’ He sat down and glared at each of them in turn. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘But this

whole thing is unsafe. Wylie and his cronies are ruthless. Searching for treasure already broke up one generation in our family. No more adventures. Are you all listening? You're staying right here until the end of the holidays, and that is that.'

Chapter 23

The Set Up

When Mike laid down the law, everyone knew there was no arguing with him. But Abraham didn't seem disturbed by the turn of events. He suggested to Mike that they take a walk, explaining that as a child, he'd been brought up to this farm to see where his Uncle Rewi had lived, and he'd never had a chance to look around since.

The men pulled on their boots and ambled out the door. The boys followed them to the porch and Kathleen tagged along. Nat watched from the window as Mike and Abraham walked up the driveway together.

'What do we do now?' she asked.

'He's up to something,' said Riki. 'Give it some time.'

Nat sat down. 'How do you know?'

'I can see when he's plotting,' said Riki.

'I want to be more like you,' said Nat. 'When things go bad, you're already onto the next plan.'

Riki grinned. 'That's funny, I want to be more like you. You always do something at the right moment that turns everything around.'

Nat shook her head. 'Nah, I'm a klutz.'

'Actually, you're awesome,' said Riki.

'Thanks heaps,' said Nat. 'It's super cool having you around. Before you there was my horse, and he's neat, but –'

'He doesn't talk back?' said Riki, laughing.

'Exactly. And then there's Jack and Kathleen.'

'But they sort of don't count?'

'Yeah!' said Nat.

'Imagine how it's been for me,' said Riki. 'I've only got Abraham to talk to.'

'He's pretty cool,' said Nat. 'But you probably couldn't tell him about some things.'

'You got it,' said Riki. 'I've always wanted a best friend.'

Nat grinned. 'Me too.'

'How cool that I found you!' said Riki.

'Nah, I found you!' protested Nat.

'I think it was meant to be,' said Riki. They high fived each other so hard they gasped with the pain of the impact. When they'd finished shaking the sting out of their hands they dissolved into giggles on the couch.

The boys and Kathleen walked back inside.

'Right,' said Elijah. 'Let's get a plan together.'

Nat admired the way everyone obeyed Elijah. He was a natural leader.

'Okay,' said Barnaby. 'What do we know?'

'We know where the cave is,' started Nat. 'We know the entrance is underwater.'

'There are three passages,' said Kathleen. 'We were told to take the lowest.'

'By who?' demanded Barnaby.

'Can't say,' said Kathleen. She smiled as Barnaby gritted his teeth.

Elijah leaned forward. 'What exactly were you told?'

'Trace the outline of Orion's belt on the rock,' recited Nat.

Jack looked blank. 'What?'

'It's part of a constellation,' said Riki. 'There are three stars, one lower than the others.'

'You know,' said Nat. 'The stars that look like a pot.'

'Oh yeah,' said Jack. 'I'm with you now.'

‘We also know that it’s dangerous,’ said Nat.

‘And we know that on Saturday, the bad guys are going to do whatever they can to get in there,’ said Barnaby. He frowned. ‘We’ve got a lot of broad information, but not a lot of specifics. Like – how long do we dive for? How big are the tunnels? What do we have to look out for?’

‘You have to look out for eels, not losing your way and not drowning, you idiot,’ said Elijah. ‘If there’s any sump diving involved, I should do it. I’m the oldest and strongest. I’ll feed rope out behind me so I can find my way back.’

Riki nodded. ‘That’s a good idea.’

‘We know that lots of things are on our side,’ said Kathleen. ‘The cave, the valley, the people – none of them want Wylie to get that treasure.’

Nat beamed. Her sister had a greater grasp of what was going on than any of them.

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘And I think that might be the decider.’

Barnaby put his hand out. ‘Pass that map again.’ Nat handed it to him and the three boys examined it closely.

‘Nat,’ whispered Kathleen.

‘Yes?’ she whispered back.

‘If we get those treasure chests, I bet we can keep Sundance and Plato.’ Kathleen’s eyes were wide with excitement.

‘Even better than that,’ said Nat. ‘If we had those gems, no-one could ever take the horses away from us.’

‘Then that’s what we have to do!’ said Kathleen.

Mike stepped back inside. ‘I might have been a bit tough before,’ he said. ‘It’s pretty hard hearing all these stories of treasure and not being allowed to see where it might be. Whadaya say we head down into the reserve, go for a walk and see that lagoon Barnaby was talking about? Abraham reckons by the time we get there the sun will be just right.’

Nat wanted to do a back-flip out of her chair. She wiggled around, unable to keep still.

Jack raised one eyebrow at her. ‘Sounds good,’ he said. ‘I think we’d all like that.’

Ten minutes later they were heading down the hill. Riki, Pi and Nat had the back seat of Abraham’s truck, while Kathleen sat in the front.

‘I still haven’t told you what happened the day we went looking for Kathleen,’ said Nat.

Abraham chuckled, and the hearty sound cheered Nat.

‘What’s so funny?’ she asked.

‘Don’t you know yet?’ said Abraham. ‘We knew where you were before you did. The trees passed the messages down the valley, with every detail – the broken arm, the promise never to tell, the way you both loved the place.’

Nat couldn’t believe it. She looked at Riki. ‘All this time, you knew what I was going to say and you let me try and tell you anyway?’ Riki nodded. Nat slid along the seat and gave her friend a sideways hug. ‘You’re the best.’

‘I want to see the trees,’ said Kathleen.

‘What, dear?’ asked Abraham.

‘The trees, when they’re passing messages.’

‘You already have,’ he said. ‘Look, here comes one now.’ As the truck rumbled down the road, the trees on either side reached across to each other, touching tips before swinging back into place.

‘But that’s just the wind!’ protested Kathleen.

‘It looks like the wind,’ corrected Abraham. ‘But in reality, it is something quite different.’

‘Then what did they say?’ she asked.

‘It wasn’t a message for me,’ he said. ‘So I can’t tell you.’

‘But –’ said Kathleen. She took a deep breath. ‘Do you mean that –’

‘What I mean,’ said Abraham, ‘is that we live in an enchanted part of the world. So keep your eyes open. Amazing things happen every day.’

‘Like miracles?’ asked Kathleen.

‘Exactly,’ said Abraham.

Nat could see the boys moving around in Mike’s truck. She wondered how Abraham had convinced her Dad to change his mind. If she asked, she doubted she’d get a straight answer. She was just grateful that they were on the move.

When they pulled into the Rēhua Reserve Nat and Riki went ahead with Kathleen and Abraham. Pi fluttered beside them as they followed the path, passing signs advertising where to wait for the tourist caves. A crowd of Indian children romped together on the grass, their mothers and grandmothers hovering nearby. As Nat and Abraham entered the canopy, a tall blonde couple focused their camera on a twisted tree. They chatted to each other in a language Nat didn’t recognise.

‘You see?’ said Abraham. ‘People from all over the world are drawn here. There are no great attractions, just a quiet valley. But still they come.’

Nat understood. The Rēhua Reserve was world-famous due to its concentration of caves. The hills surrounding them were riddled with tunnels and passageways of all shapes and sizes. Beneath the trees, everything was beautiful. The sunlight trickled down, bouncing from leaf to leaf before landing in splotches on the ground. In the lazy river flowing alongside the path, she could see two brown kōura being chased by an eel. The air was soft and humid, heavy with the smell of growth and new life.

‘There is a balance,’ explained Abraham. ‘The magic swells up from the earth, entwines with the air we breathe and fills us up. All these people are looking to capture a fragment of that magic – in a photo or a memory – something to accompany them through life. But we get to see these things every day.’

‘So we should be grateful,’ said Nat.

‘Always,’ said Abraham. ‘It is a gift we have. But it is also a job. We must look after what is here.’

‘Like Rewi,’ said Nat.

Abraham nodded. ‘And now there’s also the boys, Ariki, you and I.’

‘We’re the only ones?’ asked Nat.

‘There are others,’ said Abraham. ‘Some turn down the job. Others ignore it. Some haven’t realised what they’re here to do yet.’

The boys interrupted them, arguing loudly as they entered the bush. Barnaby had a length of rope around his shoulders, and Elijah and Jack were chasing him.

‘You’re being an idiot,’ yelled Elijah, as they marched past Abraham and Nat. ‘I said we’d go caving later, not now.’

‘Who wants to go caving?’ yelled Barnaby. ‘I’m taking my pet rope for a walk.’

Mike shook his head when he met them on the path. ‘The poor tourists out there think those three are crazy,’ he said. ‘By the time we’d got half-way down the hill, Barnaby had given the rope a name and was trying to teach it to sit.’

‘They’re just letting off steam,’ said Abraham.

‘Found it!’ yelled Barnaby.

Nat turned to see the boys in a mad sprint along the path. All around them were sheer cliffs, twenty or thirty metres high. The boys scrambled over the rocky outcrop that guarded the deep pool of water on the other side. They skidded to a halt, but the arguing and shoving continued. Barnaby reached out and pushed Elijah. Nat started running. Elijah teetered off balance for a moment – then he hit the water with a splash.

Chapter 24

Reconnaissance

Nat ran as fast as she could. She leapt up onto the rocks to see Elijah flailing in the deep water. Without thinking twice, she whipped off her jacket and started pulling off her shoes to jump in after him, but Barnaby grabbed her.

‘He deserved it,’ said Barnaby. ‘Don’t help him.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ she said, trying to shake off his grip. ‘It’s cold down there!’

Elijah looked like the breath had been knocked out of him.

‘It’s just cold shock,’ said Barnaby. ‘He’ll be all right in a moment.’

‘Don’t be so mean!’ yelled Nat.

Barnaby let her go. Nat turned to see Abraham marching him down the path by his collar.

‘What kind of stupid behaviour is that, young man?’ demanded Abraham. ‘That’s how people get hurt. You need to get your head on straight. Go for a walk and cool down. I don’t want to see you for at least twenty minutes.’ Barnaby started to protest, but Abraham was adamant. ‘Get!’

Barnaby sheepishly disappeared down the path, his pet rope still slung over his shoulder.

Elijah stood shivering in the water, looking like a hosed down monkey.

‘It’s cold,’ he said, to nobody in particular. He patted down his pockets and groaned.

‘I’ve lost my wallet. Damn it Barnaby!’

‘I’ve sent him off,’ said Abraham.

Mike looked at Jack. ‘You were in the thick of it – you can give him a hand.’

Jack’s eyes bulged. ‘I’m not getting in there!’ he said. ‘You heard the man. It’s freezing!’

Mike only had to advance one step before Jack slipped off his sneakers and crept down the rock to stand next to Elijah.

As the sun peeked through the leaves, lines of light hit the water and illuminated the entire cavern. The blue green pool seemed to glow. Jack took a deep breath and dived to the bottom of the lagoon. He was a good swimmer and before long he returned, clutching something. Everyone watched as he surfaced, and waved a card.

‘What’s that?’ asked Elijah.

‘Your school ID,’ said Jack. ‘Everything’s spilled on the bottom. How old was that wallet?’

Elijah grimaced. ‘It was a present for my tenth birthday. It was pretty shot.’

‘Looks like it disintegrated when it hit the water,’ said Jack. He laid the ID on a rock.

‘There’s my house key!’ said Elijah, and dived down.

It caught the light, even from the bottom of the pool. They watched as he retrieved the key, and then one at a time, they started diving for the rest of the wallet’s contents. It wasn’t long before Kathleen became restless.

‘You go on with the girls,’ said Abraham to Mike. ‘I’ll stay here.’

Mike nodded his thanks. ‘Make sure they get every last thing out of there.’

‘That’s the idea,’ chuckled Abraham.

As they left the lagoon, Mike was still shaking his head at the boys’ hi-jinks. They passed more waiting tourists, then the path approached the last cave in the reserve. The Flower Grotto was known for its delicate formations and famous entrance. To reach the cave you had to cross a bridge, and climb a steep set of steps that clung to the hillside. The bridge was mossy and quaint, but when they neared it Nat saw that the gate was locked. There was an official looking sign outside declaring the cave temporarily closed.

‘That’s odd,’ said Mike. ‘I’ve never seen this cave closed except on Christmas Day. I wonder what’s happening in there.’

Riki and Nat looked around for more information, but found nothing. They stood in front of the gate, gazing at the ferns sprouting from the cliff. It was Riki who saw it first.

‘Everything’s shaking,’ she said. ‘Look, you can see it in the fronds.’

Nat watched the big mamaku closest to her. At first she thought a breeze was blowing, but she leaned closer. Each fern was shuddering. She gripped on to the gate, and felt it through her hands; slight tremors, like there were trucks rumbling past.

‘Dad,’ said Nat. ‘There are no roads round here, right?’

‘Only on the other side of the reserve,’ he said. Nat showed him where to grip on to the gate and he concentrated for a moment. ‘That’s heavy machinery all right,’ he said. ‘But not a truck. More like an industrial drill.’

Suddenly a rock was dislodged from further up the cliff. It ploughed through the mamaku and landed before them with a gigantic crash. Chips of stone scattered furiously. Mike threw his arms around all three girls and escorted them back to the main path.

‘I’ve got no idea what they’re doing in there,’ he said, ‘but they should be more careful.’

Mike set off to tell a guide what had happened, leaving the girls in the sunshine of the car park. Nat and Riki basked on a picnic table with Kathleen. Pi reappeared to scavenge for bugs. It wasn’t long before the boys returned. Barnaby was still bouncing round like an idiot, although he no longer had his rope. But when she asked him about it, he wasn’t concerned.

‘I must have lost it,’ he said flippantly.

Nat was perplexed. Barnaby was nuts about his gear; ropes, harnesses and karabiners were his prized possessions. There was no way he could lose a rope and be that happy. It didn’t make sense. She gave him a funny look, but he ignored her. She lay back in the sun. Elijah and Jack started wringing out their clothes beside her.

‘Get everything back?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ grunted Elijah.

Nat stared at him. ‘Shouldn’t you be happy about that?’

He didn’t reply.

Abraham took Kathleen’s hand and they walked together on the grass. Soon they were deep in conversation. Nat sat up and watched her sister nodding her head. It looked like Abraham and Kathleen were discussing something important.

Nat turned to Riki. ‘There’s something odd going on.’

Her friend rolled over. ‘Jack told me about your over-active imagination.’

‘It’s just that –’ Nat looked at Elijah and Jack, silently drying in the sun, and at Barnaby, swinging from a tree branch, then to Abraham and Kathleen, heads still together, deliberating.

‘What are you on about?’ asked Riki.

Nat scrutinised her friend. Riki’s blank expression gave nothing away. Nat thought quickly. If they were keeping something from her, it had to be for a good reason. But what?

‘I’m not sure,’ said Nat. ‘But someone is definitely up to something!’

Chapter 25

Treasure Stew

Outside later that night, Mike and Nat watched the moonrise together. A huge corona projected across the sky onto the high cloud.

Jack stuck his head out the door. 'What's for dinner?'

Mike shrugged. 'Dunno. You think of something.'

'Jack, cooking?' screeched Kathleen from inside. 'Are you trying to kill us Dad?'

'Nat, you help him,' said Mike. 'Then we'll survive.'

Nat sighed. This was how the last few days of freedom would drift by. Cooped up, they'd argue and snip at each other, and play the board games they'd played a thousand times before.

'Natalia Dawn Sheppard, look at me.'

Surprised, Nat turned to her father. He pointed at her, his eyes narrowed.

'Do you have any plan to get into that lagoon and find that treasure?'

Nat blinked, her eyes wide. 'No,' she said. 'There's no plan.'

Mike examined her for a long moment. Nat felt her heart racing. 'All right,' he said. 'I believe you. Sorry, but I had to check.' He stepped inside.

She sighed again. They'd farewelled the others in the reserve. Barnaby and Elijah were picked up by their Mum, and Riki and Abraham had climbed into their truck and disappeared with the toot of a horn. Nat had hoped for a more dramatic finish to their adventures.

Jack stuck his head out the door. 'Splatters,' he whispered. 'Did you pass?'

'What?'

Jack watched her. 'What did Dad want?'

'To know if we had a plan.'

'What'd you say?'

'There is no plan Jack. I told him so.'

'Excellent,' he muttered, and withdrew into the kitchen.

Nat followed him. 'Hey, what shall we cook?'

'How about a batch of treasure stew?' he replied with a grin.

Nat ignored him. 'Do you want pasta?' she said. 'We've got bacon.'

'I want to make an emerald and ruby pasta bake.'

'Jack, quit it!' she yelled.

He stared at her.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It's just that –'

'It's just that you're really thick,' said Jack. 'Haven't you figured out what's going on?'

It was Nat's turn to stare. 'What do you mean?'

'Keep your voice down.' He turned to see if anyone was in earshot. 'If Dad cottons on to what's happening, it's all over.'

Nat was totally lost. 'What is happening?'

Jack rolled his eyes. 'I must be adopted,' he muttered. 'I'm pretty sure it's impossible to be as smart as me and have a sister as dopey as you.'

'Get to the point,' said Nat.

'We're breaking out,' he hissed, in a conspiratorial whisper. 'We're meeting the others in the reserve and we're getting that treasure.'

Nat smiled and shook her head. 'There's no way. Dad's watching me like a hawk.'

'Yeah,' said Jack. 'But he knows you're a terrible liar. I'd say you passed that last test with flying colours. His guard is down – he's never going to see this coming.'

'Got an invisibility cloak, have you?' asked Nat.

‘Better,’ he said, still speaking in his funny spy whisper. ‘We’ve got a plan.’

‘What is it?’

Footsteps in the hall stopped their conversation.

Jack smirked. ‘For goodness’ sake Nat,’ he said, speaking normally. ‘Can’t we concentrate on making dinner? Do you want bacon in the pasta or not?’

‘I vote bacon and peas,’ said Mike, as he marched through the kitchen.

‘Sold,’ said Jack. ‘Do we have peas?’

‘Freezer,’ said Mike as he stepped out the door. He whistled for his dogs and disappeared into the darkness. Nat pushed her nose up against the window to check the corona of the moon. It had shrunk dramatically, a sure sign the weather was closing in fast.

Nat waited as Jack fished around in the freezer and produced peas. She watched as he pulled a pot from the cupboard and filled it with water.

‘Are you going to help?’ he asked.

‘Are you going to tell me any more?’ she demanded.

‘Nah,’ he replied. ‘It’s better if you know nothing. Barnaby was right. You’re like an open book.’

Nat spluttered her protest. ‘That’s not true!’ she said. ‘I’m a great secret keeper.’ She ground salt into the water, imagining she was grinding up her insulting brother.

‘It’s not about secrets,’ retorted Jack. ‘It’s about the fact Dad can read you in a second. If I tell you the details of our plan, it’ll pretty much be written across your forehead. He’ll take one look and we’ll be locked in our rooms for eternity.’

‘You are the meanest brother in the world!’ yelled Nat. ‘You can’t tell me there’s a plan and then leave it at that! What am I supposed to do now?’

Jack laughed. ‘Stand on your head,’ he said. ‘Go count the stars.’ He pulled the bacon out of the fridge and slapped it on the board.

Nat reached for the pasta. ‘There’s really nothing I can do?’

‘Well,’ said Jack, ‘Think about the clues we’ve got, because we’ll need all the help we can get.’ He sliced the bacon, then paused. ‘Oh, and practise holding your breath.’

Nat looked up, alarmed. ‘Why?’

‘The reason Elijah was grumpy in the reserve is – ’

‘Because Barnaby pushed him in the water, it was obvious.’

Jack set down the knife. ‘You’re so dense.’

Nat was tired of the abuse ‘Stop it,’ she said. ‘I do have a brain.’

‘Then use it!’ hissed Jack. ‘Barnaby pushed Elijah in so we could conduct some reconnaissance.’

‘What?’

Jack slammed a frying pan on the stove. ‘To scout out the cave and the tunnels – get it?’

Suddenly, the light-bulb went on. ‘Oh,’ she murmured. ‘That’s genius.’

‘Took a while,’ muttered Jack.

‘And Dad missed all of it,’ Nat realised. ‘Abraham’s behind it, isn’t he?’

Jack nodded as he flicked butter into the frying pan.

‘Then why was Elijah in a grump?’

‘Finally,’ said Jack. ‘Welcome back to the programme. Elijah was worried. I could fit through the tunnel but he couldn’t. No way Barnaby can either. We talked Riki through it, but she doesn’t feel confident. I can’t do it alone – which means it’s up to you and me.’

Nat flopped down at the kitchen table. She watched in a daze as Jack dumped the pasta in the pot and the boiling water cascaded over the sides and flooded the stove. The water ran in rivulets towards her feet, and suddenly she was very, very cold.

Chapter 26

Hell or High Water

Drake smiled under her black umbrella. The dank smell of the bush reminded her of a long-ago childhood. She surveyed the busy men before her. Soon they would deliver what was rightfully hers. This time she'd arranged everything herself. The children would be dealt with and she would possess both gems.

Cortez approached, his wet hair giving him a drowned appearance.

'We're ready,' he said.

'Good,' she replied. 'The men are posted around the perimeter. They'll tighten the noose from daybreak.'

'The entrances and exits?'

'All covered.' She smirked. 'No-one will get in our way.'

'What about the tourists?'

'It won't be hard to clear them out.' Drake sneered. 'At the bottom of every man is a coward waiting to flee. Once the earth starts moving they'll be gone.'

'Have you considered the Patupaiarehe?' asked Cortez.

'Have I considered a race of fairy people who haven't shown their face in public for hundreds of years?' She raised one perfect eyebrow at him.

'We know the children have met with them. Perhaps they have given them some clue?'

'I suppose there is a chance...' said Drake. She shot out a gloved hand and snatched Cortez's collar. Pulling him towards her, she whispered into his ear. 'You have a lot of concerns. It's surprising. Makes me think you're backing away from the task.'

The man shook his head. 'No. I'm just wondering –'

'Yes?' snapped Drake.

'Do you really need me in there?' he asked. 'Wouldn't someone else be better at the helm?'

'I need you,' she cooed. 'I need a dedicated man I can trust.'

She released him and straightened her coat. 'The Patupaiarehe are obsolete. They may have told the children all the secrets in the world. It will do them no good. We have a drill, an objective, and a team of experts. This time tomorrow we'll be wealthy beyond our wildest dreams. The parched treasure market will be reinvigorated. Can you imagine, Cain? For decades, we've had everything catalogued and registered. Every major gem, its weight, history, origin, has been known. Until now. Can you imagine when the trickle begins? A few fresh and rare Arabian rubies? The fuss they will create? The prices they will fetch? And that will just be the beginning.'

'You used my real name,' said Wylie.

Drake turned her head. 'Did I?'

'There's a legend,' said Cortez. 'The black widow only uses your real name the last time she sees you.'

Drake shook her head. 'You believe some tall tales.' She held out her hand. 'Good luck.'

Wylie stared at the woman, stunned. He didn't know what to believe. He looked up at the entrance of the cave. It felt like the right place. His instincts told him they were close. But at what price?

'Goodbye then,' said Drake.

Cortez lifted his chin. 'Goodbye Majella.'

The woman's eyes flared, but she didn't say a word. Instead, she lowered her hat and stepped back into the night. Cortez knew he would never see her again.

Looking back to the cave, he realised his choice; get the rubies and emeralds and catch

the first plane out of the country or die here in the attempt. He lit a cigarette and took a desperate drag. This was the ultimate treasure-hunter's dream. He was too close to give up. He stomped the cigarette into the mud and flicked up his jacket collar. He'd show Drake. Come hell or high water, those jewels would be in his hands tonight.

Chapter 27

Beware the Curse

It was late when the first drops tiptoed across the roof. Nat glanced up. The rain scattered over the iron. Silence. Then suddenly the downpour began. She gave up on her book and clambered into bed.

Dreams of diving into cold, dark water haunted her sleep. She woke up shivering. Strange warnings ran through her head. Beware the curse, said a voice.

The words were so clear she sat up and turned on the lamp. There was no-one else in the room. A light outside caught her eye; she peered out the window. It was a long way off, on the ridgeline near Pukatea Mountain. It was warm and comforting in the dark night.

The voice landed in her head again. Beware the curse. Do not be the first to open the treasure. A bang at the window made her heart jump. She leapt to her feet. The familiar outline of Pi reassured her. She slid open the window and he burst in, dripping wet. He flew three circles round her head and perched on the window latch. Then the strangest thing happened.

Pi started chirping, but his tone was unlike anything Nat had heard before. She could have sworn the bird was lecturing her, telling her to listen to the voice, be careful, and get back to bed. Befuddled, Nat nodded at Pi, and snuggled under her duvet. The fantail roosted on the bedside lamp and this time Nat slept deeply, without any dreams.

Nat didn't know what time the screams began. They were early. Too early. But she knew exactly who they were coming from. There was only one person with a voice like that. She scrambled free from her duvet and raced down the stairs.

'It hurts!' wailed Kathleen. 'Here and here and here!'

Nat could hear her Dad soothing Kathleen as best he could, but it wasn't working.

'It really, really hurts!' she cried as Nat arrived in the bedroom.

'Let me see,' said Mike. Kathleen cried out as she rolled onto her stomach, and wailed again as her Dad inspected her back. Nat gasped. Even from the doorway she could see nasty red spots all over her sister. She rushed closer but Mike stuck his hand out to stop her.

'Out!' he commanded. 'This looks contagious!'

Nat backtracked. 'What is it?' she asked.

'Maybe measles,' he said, sliding Kathleen's slippers onto her feet. 'I don't know. If it's come on this quick I'd better take her straight to the hospital.'

Mike wrapped Kathleen in a blanket and scooped her up in his arms. The screaming hadn't stopped.

'I don't know how long we'll be gone,' he yelled. 'I'll bring home something from the bakery.'

Nat trailed them down the hallway to wave goodbye. But as Mike stopped to pick up his keys, Nat almost fell over her own feet when Kathleen winked at her and mouthed 'Good luck.'

As the front door slammed Nat heard a noise behind her. Jack was standing in the hall, fully dressed and prepared to go adventuring. He wore a backpack, a helmet with a light and there was a wetsuit woven through the straps of his pack. And he was holding a red marker pen in his hand.

He grinned. 'It was much better you didn't know that was coming,' he said. He spun the red pen between his fingers. 'A million times more convincing.' Nat's jaw dropped open in astonishment. His grin widened. 'Let the games begin.'

Under the old mahoe tree, Nat could see Barnaby and Elijah waiting. The rain had

stopped, but the gnarled branches were still dripping. Pi flew ahead and danced around the tree, waiting for Nat and her heavy backpack to catch up.

‘Glad you could make it this time,’ yelled Barnaby as they approached. ‘Is Splatters up to date with everything?’

‘Not really,’ said Jack.

‘I’ll fill you in’ said Elijah. He leapt on his bike and they were off. They bumped over the gravel in silence, but as soon as they hit the sealed road, the story of what the Lima boys had been up to flooded out.

‘It started when Barnaby and I were looking at the map,’ said Elijah. ‘You can get into the Rēhua Reserve from Abraham’s place pretty easily – it’s a straight line through the bush.’

Barnaby sped past on his bike, hands resting behind his head. ‘Actually I realised it – not him.’

Elijah ignored his brother. ‘We’ve checked it out and left markers on the track. The only problem is the drop-off.’

‘Huh?’

‘The path through the bush comes out on top of the cliffs above the lagoon.’

An image of the sheer rock face flashed through Nat’s mind. ‘We can’t climb down that.’

‘But we can abseil,’ said Elijah. ‘That’s what Barnaby set up yesterday. It’s all rigged and ready to go.’

‘Nice,’ said Nat. ‘That’ll work out better anyway. There are too many people in the reserve for us to walk in with all this gear. It’d be totally suspect.’

‘That’s what we decided,’ said Elijah. ‘But we have to teach Riki how to abseil.’

‘I’ll do it,’ called Barnaby.

Elijah looked at Nat and shook his head. ‘Maybe that’d be best left to you.’

‘No probs,’ she said.

‘The Tauroru thing stumped me at first,’ said Elijah as he swerved around the next corner. ‘I kept looking at star maps of Orion’s belt and wondering which of the two passages was the right one.’

‘But he was looking at it the wrong way,’ said Barnaby, pulling up alongside them. ‘Well – from a Northern Hemisphere perspective.’

‘We see it upside down,’ said Nat.

‘Exactly,’ said Barnaby. ‘So that’s the way we should trace it on the rock.’

‘And that’s what we found,’ said Elijah. ‘When you get there, it’s obvious.’

‘It’s the final key,’ interrupted Barnaby. ‘How’d you know about it again?’

Nat smiled without saying a word. She couldn’t believe everything was working out – all they needed to do was ride to Abraham’s, find their way through the bush, abseil down the cliff and grab the treasure. It was going to be an incredible mission. She looked up at the heavy skies and remembered the warning from her father. They’d definitely have to keep an eye on the weather. With Pi flying beside her, Nat pedalled hard and momentarily threw both arms out. Then she swung them back onto the handlebars – just in case.

They raced down Abraham’s driveway and skidded to a halt. Riki met them all at the door with a wave for the boys and a massive hug for Nat.

‘I’m sorry I had to throw you off the scent yesterday,’ she said. ‘You were too quick!’

‘No worries,’ said Nat. ‘Everything you’ve done more than makes up for it.’

Abraham appeared behind her with a beaming smile. ‘Is the rain holding off?’ He looked skywards. ‘For the moment. Good. Come inside.’

In the lounge, everyone’s gear was pooled.

‘The water is cold,’ said Elijah. ‘Like, bone-chillingly cold. We all need wetsuits.’

‘I’ve got two,’ said Barnaby. ‘One for Riki, one for me.’

Riki nodded her thanks. 'I've organised lots of food. We've got chicken sandwiches, chocolate brownie and thermoses of –

'Milo!' chorused everyone.

Abraham chuckled. 'It does seem to be the magic ingredient in your adventures.'

Elijah scanned the equipment. 'We've all got helmets, right?'

'Mine is a bit old,' admitted Riki. 'We found it in the back shed.'

'Doesn't matter,' said Barnaby. 'They're built to last. Here's a light to fasten onto it.'

'Waterproof?' asked Riki.

Barnaby grinned. 'Yep. I nicked Dad's best one – and all the spare batteries I could find.'

'What do we put the treasure in?' asked Jack.

'Oh,' said Nat.

Everyone turned and looked at her.

'You okay?' asked Riki.

'I just remembered a dream I had last night,' said Nat.

Abraham leaned forward, and something about his stance silenced everyone.

'What happened in the dream?' he asked.

'A voice kept running through my head,' said Nat. 'I saw a light down the valley. I got up to check – then Pi banged on the window.' She looked at the old man. 'When I let him in, it was like he was telling me off.'

With a low whistle from Abraham, the bird flew into the room. He perched the back of a chair and launched into a monologue using his wings to gesture.

'The message came from your friends in Pukatea Mountain,' said Abraham. 'Pi wanted you to listen. What did the voice say?'

Nat took a deep breath. 'Beware the curse. Do not be the first to open the treasure.'

'No way!' said Barnaby. 'That's crazy!'

Riki cleared her throat. 'If a message has been passed on we have to take it seriously.'

'A dream and a talking bird?' said Jack, looking sceptical. 'We've been discussing this stuff for nearly two weeks now. No-one's said anything about a curse before.'

'Yes they have,' said Abraham. 'You have not been listening. The Emerald Eye of Babylon carries a curse of horrid proportions. Ariki is right; to ignore the message would be foolish.' He looked around the room. 'Do not be the first ones to open that chest, children. Whoever does so will never leave the cave. Do you understand?'

Heads nodded in agreement.

'I know your fathers and I will have much to discuss at the end of this exercise, but I will not take any responsibility for sheer recklessness. I will summon everything I know to protect you but there are two things you must remember.' Abraham looked each one of them in the eyes before he spoke. 'You must help each other. And you must all be very careful.'

Chapter 28

Into Position

After that note of warning, Nat couldn't believe how much time slowed down. It seemed like all their words had dried up. Even Jack's store of wisecracks and bad jokes was empty.

They changed into their wetsuits, donned gumboots and climbed into their harnesses. Elijah and Barnaby went around obsessively checking that they were tight enough, that the double-backs were done, and that each piece of gear was fastened properly. Nat gave Riki a quick abseil lesson and she passed with flying colours. Everyone was ready, and grimly silent.

'Calm before the storm,' joked Barnaby. No-one laughed.

Abraham started his truck. He was to be their look-out on the ground. Nat followed him around the house.

'Abraham?' she said.

The old man turned. He looked at her for a long moment and rested a hand on her shoulder. 'You don't need to worry,' he said. 'All you have to remember is to stop, look, and take everything in. If you give yourself that moment, you will know what to do.'

Nat shook her head. 'I don't mean to be disrespectful – but how can you know that?'

'Because I have known you for two whole weeks,' said Abraham. 'In that time I have seen a brilliant girl leaping about, trying to get people to notice her – when no-one could miss you. You're a shooting star Nat.' He lifted the pounamu from around his neck and held it up. It glinted green in the sunlight. 'This taonga brings good luck and good judgement. Wear it next to your skin, and it will protect you.'

Abraham put the greenstone over her head. Nat slipped it under her wetsuit. Her skin pulsed when the pounamu touched it.

'Thank you,' she murmured.

Abraham climbed into his truck and Pi followed. The old man honked the horn as he pulled out of the driveway. Nat thought she heard him call 'Good luck.'

'Thanks,' she said to herself. 'We're going to need it.'

She returned to the others. Standing in their small circle, wearing all the kit they could and carrying even more in their bags, they looked like strange super-heroes.

'Are we ready?' asked Elijah.

'How are we supposed to move in this outfit?' asked Riki. 'I feel like a stuffed penguin.' Nat giggled, and the giggle was infectious. Soon everyone was cracking up.

'Stop!' called Riki. 'Otherwise I'll have to pee!' That was definitely a bad thing to say, because everyone laughed even more. Nat grinned at Riki. At least she'd managed to defuse the tension.

Riki led the way around the back of the house to the reserve. 'The first part is easy. There's a bit of a path. After we get past our possum traps it's pretty thick, so we'll keep an eye out for the markers.'

They'd been walking for a while when the path began to fade away. They pushed deeper and deeper into the dark bush. Soon the weather broke again. The raindrops were fat and heavy and they started to fall faster.

'It's funny being rained on in a wetsuit,' said Riki.

'Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar?' asked Barnaby.

There wasn't a chance to answer the question because all of a sudden, the ground shook in a series of sharp blasts.

'What was that?' asked Jack

'Earthquake?' said Elijah.

They looked at each other in confusion.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Riki. ‘It sounded strange.’

Jack poked at a tree, as if this was the cause of the disturbance. ‘What do we do if there’s another one?’ he said.

‘Stop, drop and roll!’ said Barnaby.

Jack chuckled. ‘Is that what they teach for bush earthquakes?’

‘It was the first thing that came into my head,’ said Barnaby.

‘Let’s keep going,’ said Elijah.

‘What about aftershocks?’ asked Nat. ‘There’s never just one.’

Elijah glared at her. ‘We can’t wait here, being scared about what might happen. We’ll deal with anything else when we come to it.’

They started to climb through supple-jack. The black snaky vines created a convoluted maze. Each time a creeper moved, it clanked against its companions and they twisted tighter. Jack and Elijah led the way through, following the markers.

After an eternity of scrambling, Barnaby whistled.

‘Almost there,’ he called.

‘Good,’ muttered Nat. She stayed close behind Barnaby, holding down the vines he handed to her, trying to make sure none flicked back onto Riki.

The light ahead was stronger. Nat pushed through the last of the tangle and stepped out into the rain. They’d arrived at the edge of the cliff. It was a long way down.

‘Duck!’ called Barnaby.

They all hit the ground.

Riki crawled up next to Nat. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Tourists,’ said Nat.

A scattering of people were gathered around the lagoon, cameras held high.

‘Can you see Abraham?’ asked Riki.

‘Not yet,’ said Nat. ‘Why are those people standing there? They should have cleared out after the earthquake.’

Beside them, Barnaby had coiled the abseil rope. He lowered it down. No-one noticed.

‘I’m going,’ he said.

‘Wait!’ hissed Riki. ‘Abraham said he’d signal us. Give him a couple more minutes.’

Barnaby flicked his hair out of his eyes. ‘I’m saturated!’

‘It’ll be the same down there,’ said Elijah. ‘Deal with it – and wait.’

Barnaby grunted, and turned to Jack. ‘Is this messing with your head?’ he asked.

Jack shoved him. ‘Shut it.’

Riki raised an eyebrow.

‘Jack hates heights,’ Nat whispered. ‘But he won’t let on how frightened he is.’

Nat hadn’t found anything Barnaby was frightened of yet, but when she did, she’d be rubbing it in his face. Jack was pale, and although she had faith he’d execute his abseil perfectly, she felt sorry for him.

Far below, a single figure emerged from the trees. He tipped his cap back and whistled, long and low.

‘That’s Abraham,’ said Riki. ‘It’s clear.’

‘Can you see any tourists?’ said Elijah. ‘Double check.’

Nat scanned the path. ‘They’re gone.’

Barnaby flicked the rope through his abseil gear in a split second. Thorough hands checked his helmet, harness, tied on his safety device, and he was off. He sailed over the edge and down the rope in a flash, and soon Nat heard his call from the bottom.

‘Rope free.’

Nat heard Jack swearing under his breath as he stood up to follow. He didn’t look at

anyone. His hands were shaking, and they fumbled while he loaded the rope. Nat knew better than to offer help. She saw Elijah watching too, making sure he had a backup safety attached. Then Jack took off, and although his descent wasn't as graceful as Barnaby's, it was just as fast.

The two figures joined Abraham, stripped off their harnesses and loaded them into Barnaby's backpack. They'd just get in the way for the next section.

'Who's next?' asked Elijah. 'I'll go last. Nat?'

'Yep,' she answered. 'Then I can belay Riki.'

Nat loaded up the rope. She leant back, shifted her feet onto the wall, then kicked off and sailed down. In four bounces her feet were on the ground.

'Rope free,' she called up to Riki.

Barnaby was there as her bottom belay. 'Nice work Nat,' he said. She slid off her harness and handed it to him.

'You too,' she replied. 'How's Jack doing?'

'He'll be okay. You should have seen how much his hands were shaking when he landed.'

'Where is he?' she asked.

'Went for a walk with Abraham. The old man reckons there's something fishy about that quake.'

'Fishy how?'

Barnaby shrugged.

'On belay?' called Elijah from above them.

Nat's focus snapped back to Riki. 'On belay!' she confirmed. She held the rope in her hands, ready to pull tight to save Riki from falling if anything went wrong. Her friend wriggled over the edge and descended slowly, bobbing around on the wall. When she landed on the path she gasped.

'Thank goodness!' she said, wiping the rain from her face. 'It really digs into your back!'

'That's why it's best to go fast,' said Barnaby, with his trademark grin.

They retreated under the bush canopy to wait for Elijah. He leapt out with confidence, but suddenly the ground started shaking again. Elijah was in mid-air! He slammed back into the crag, hard. Rocks started raining down from the cliff. Nat, Riki and Barnaby crouched under the trees as the tremors continued. Elijah pushed off the unstable rock face. He flew down the rope at a frightening speed, landed on the shaky ground and sprinted towards them.

The four of them huddled together, arms and faces tucked in tight so if anything fell, their helmets and packs would take the impact. Abruptly, there was silence and everything was still.

Nat spoke first. 'Everyone okay?' she asked. They all nodded.

'That wasn't part of the plan,' said Riki.

Elijah shook his head. 'Way too close.'

'We have to find Jack and Abraham,' said Barnaby.

'You guys go,' said Nat. 'We'll stay here and stash the gear.'

Elijah undid his harness and followed Barnaby down the path. Nat stuffed Elijah's kit into the pack with the rest of the equipment and hid it under some king ferns.

They didn't have to wait long before the boys returned. Barnaby emerged at a sprint from the end of the path and started gesturing to them.

'Hide!' Barnaby called. 'Now!'

Nat slid under the ferns next to the pack, and Riki followed. Barnaby leapt in behind them and held one finger across his lips. His eyes were wild and urgent.

'Where's Elijah?' whispered Nat.

Barnaby slammed his hand across her mouth, shaking his head frantically. Nat pulled

herself into the tiniest ball she could and lay still. The king ferns they were tucked beneath offered tiny peepholes out to the path. Soon Nat could see black boots stride past, the kind that army men wore. The soldier found the rope, yelled out, and a second man came running. When the first man turned, she saw something that made her heart begin to thump. Over his shoulder, he carried a machine gun.

Chapter 29

Kēhua

Nat lay silent under the ferns. The rain trickled behind her ears and down her neck, but she didn't dare move. She was frozen with terror. That gun was the scariest thing she'd ever seen. She'd been around her Dad's hunting rifle, but it was treated with utmost caution. The only place she'd seen an automatic firearm was in movies or on TV, and she was horrified to be faced with a real one.

As she lay there, she tried to rationalise it to herself. Maybe it was a prop. Perhaps it wasn't loaded. But then she thought of those black lace-up boots. Those boots meant business. You didn't get footwear like that for a walk in the bush. You got them to get something done. Deep down, she knew that the gun was real, and it was looking for them.

A fern moved and her heart nearly exploded, but Elijah appeared. Relief that it wasn't the bad guys, and that Elijah was okay flooded through Nat's body. He held his thumbs up and she nodded. Riki tapped her on the shoulder and beckoned.

'Keep low,' she whispered. 'Follow me.'

They crept through the bush, stopping whenever there was a noise, and continuing when they gained enough confidence. Riki led them back towards the cliffs. When they reached a soaring nikau palm, she gathered them close together.

'We have to karakia,' she said. 'We're heading into a wāhi tapu.'

'A what?' asked Barnaby.

'You heard me,' said Riki. 'A sacred area. And a burial ground. We'll be safe there.'

Holding hands in the falling rain, they listened to Riki's whispered chanting. A twig snapped in the distance. Riki froze. Nat shivered. It was spooky enough being off the path in the dense bush and chased by men with guns, let alone heading into a graveyard. They picked their way past rewarewa seedlings and over fledgling pongas. The limestone face got closer and closer, and suddenly they were right against it.

Riki resumed her chant. She ducked down and disappeared into a hole. Nat followed. Inside, the karakia grew stronger and inexplicably, a second voice joined Riki's. Nat spun around. In the dim light, she could make out two figures already inside! She stepped back, eager to escape, but Elijah and Barnaby blocked the way.

'You're safe,' said a calm voice. 'They will not find us here.' Abraham stepped forward, followed by Jack. Relief flowed through Nat again. She crumpled to the floor. Barnaby sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

'Sit,' said Abraham. He hugged Riki tight. 'I knew you would know where to come.'

'It's the only safe place,' said Riki. 'We said our karakia outside too.'

'The spirits are satisfied,' he said. 'The treasure those men are trying to steal belongs to our ancestors too. The many kēhua of this place are on your side.'

'If there's another earthquake, will we be all right in here?' asked Nat.

'They weren't earthquakes,' said Jack. 'We think it's dynamite. Someone's blasting underground.'

'This is Department of Conservation land,' said Elijah, 'They can't do that!'

'No they can't,' said Abraham. 'That's why they've shut the reserve down.'

It was Riki's turn to look astonished. 'I beg your pardon?'

'After the tremor,' said Abraham, 'a man wearing army fatigues told everyone that the area was unsafe; they were advised to leave. Outside the lagoon, rocks were falling. It looked like the cliff might collapse.'

'That's why those tourists were standing around taking photos,' said Nat.

'Oh yes,' said Abraham. 'There was quite a show.'

‘So they got rid of anyone who could have been a witness,’ said Barnaby.

Abraham nodded. ‘The whole place is cut off. They have someone at the top of the hill barring the way.’

‘How’d you get through?’ asked Nat.

Even in the dim light, she could make out his smile. ‘I know a few other ways in.’

‘So who are we dealing with?’ asked Elijah.

‘I’d put my money on Cain Wylie,’ said Abraham.

‘The cave geek?’ asked Nat. ‘He wouldn’t go blowing up caves.’

‘That’s just his cover,’ said Jack. ‘He’s a treasure hunter above all else.’

‘Which means he’d do anything if it got him what he wanted,’ said Barnaby.

‘And he wants this treasure chest badly,’ said Riki. ‘Bad enough to kill and bad enough to break a lot of rules.’

Barnaby groaned. ‘I know what’s going on. They’re supposedly renovating in the Flower Grotto, right?’ Everyone nodded. ‘There’s a funny chamber up in the top section. When you stand there, you can feel a breeze. Elijah and I tried to find where it was coming from one year. We didn’t get very far. But – hold on.’ Barnaby turned on his torch and grabbed a stick from the ground. He smoothed the dirt and sketched the Grotto. Then he drew what they knew of the lagoon and the tunnels beneath it. ‘They’re right next to each other,’ he said. ‘They would have scanned the Flower Grotto like they did the Glowworm Cave, and realised they could tunnel through. All they needed was unlimited access.’

Without warning, another series of blasts detonated. Nat could see Barnaby tense in the shadows. He was getting angry. In his book, anyone who deliberately destroyed the environment was a criminal.

‘Uncle?’ said Riki. ‘Do you think you and I could create a diversion?’ Her sentence trailed off.

‘Perhaps something as simple as a meeting of our ancestors,’ said Abraham. There was a pause in the gloom; he and Riki still seemed to be talking, but without saying a word.

Abraham cleared his throat. ‘What you will see children, will be frightening. The key is to remember that what comes from one time cannot hurt those in another.’

Jack looked confused. ‘But doesn’t that mean the guys out there won’t be hurt either?’

‘Not physically,’ said Abraham. ‘But they don’t know that. And fear in the mind is a much greater threat. Now, everyone please gather at the entrance.’

Nat, Barnaby, Jack and Elijah crept towards the green light. The rain was bucketing down now. Nat hugged herself to gain more warmth. Behind them, Riki and Abraham stood back to back and began to chant in Māori. Summoned by their words, swirls of mist rose from the cave floor. The air resonated with a high-pitched hum. Outside, the same mist flowed from the ferns and churned together. The chanting grew louder, and the mist became hundreds of human forms. Soon Abraham and Riki were shouting as they recited the incantation.

They wailed together, a fierce battle cry. The summons sliced the ribbon separating past and present. The mist solidified into tattooed Māori warriors. They buried their toes into the earth and bellowed their fury. Four kēhua launched into a haka and every hair on Nat’s body stood on end. It didn’t matter when the men came from, they knew there were intruders in their midst. They began to hunt them. The trees dropped spears into their outstretched hands. Crouching low, the warriors stalked through the undergrowth.

Riki joined Nat at the entrance. ‘Long ago,’ she whispered, ‘long even before Rewi’s time, there was a mighty battle here. The whole valley is heavy with spirits. At the right phase of the moon, you can talk to them. When you’re surrounded, they can be called to help.’

Out in the bush, there was a human cry. One of the soldiers ran into view. He spun

around and fired into the air. The warriors kept advancing. Terrified, the man ran, ducking between trees, and the spirits followed.

‘Now’s our chance,’ said Riki. ‘Straight to the lagoon. Follow me!’

She leapt out of the cave and cut through the bush. Jack, Barnaby and Elijah followed. Nat looked back at Abraham. He was sitting on the cave floor, calmly loading his pipe.

‘Go,’ he said. ‘They need you. I have some old friends to catch up with.’

Reassured, Nat climbed towards the light and sprinted through the bush. Licks and wisps of mist turned and examined her as she ran. The lagoon entrance was littered with fallen debris from the blasting. There was no time to think about the risk. She hurtled over the barrier rocks, straight into the water.

Chapter 30

Beyond the Lowest Passage

The shock was brutally cold. Nat threw her arms forward in a frantic freestyle stroke. Her lungs buckled but she had to keep going. If anyone saw her ripples their escape route would be a dead giveaway. She reached a stalactite stretching from the cave ceiling and pulled herself behind it. She waited a moment then peered out, her chin just above the water. No-one was chasing them. So far, so good. She switched on her light and swam into the gloom.

Soon she could make out the lights of the others. They were climbing onto a rock outcrop. When she reached them, Jack and Elijah hauled her out of the water.

‘Thanks,’ she whispered.

‘Did you check if anyone followed?’ asked Barnaby.

She nodded. ‘We’re clear.’

‘Good,’ said Riki. ‘The spirits did their job.’

‘That was a cool trick,’ said Elijah. ‘What else have you got up your sleeve?’

Riki grinned. ‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’

The inside of the cave was narrow and high. Their headlights cast demented shadows on the twisted rock walls.

‘Anyone figure out how deep the water is?’ asked Riki.

‘Real deep,’ said Jack. ‘If we lose anything in here, it’s gone.’

‘How do we know this is it?’ asked Nat.

Elijah stepped aside and everything was clear. Five metres away, the rocks plunged back into the stream. Across the water, Nat could see an eagle carved into the rock. The symbol was identical to the one carved on the wall in the Glowworm Cave.

‘Harpagornis,’ she whispered.

‘This is where we got to when we were scouting it out,’ said Elijah. ‘The tunnels are directly underneath the sign.’

‘There’s not as much room as the other day,’ said Jack.

‘Yeah, the water is rising.’ Barnaby’s face betrayed no emotion. Nat had seen him like this before. It was his way of dealing with tricky situations. When the going got tough, Barnaby got factual.

Elijah continued his instructions. ‘If you swim to the sign then straight down, you find the second tunnel. The first is to the right. The one you want is left and down further.’

‘Okay,’ said Nat. ‘We’d better get moving. Where’s the rope?’

Elijah pulled a length of rope from his bag, and Nat tied a releasable knot around her waist. ‘One tug for help. Two for safe. Three to be pulled back through. Right?’

Elijah nodded, and Jack set up an identical system with the second rope. While she waited for her brother, Nat focused on what the patupaiarehe had told her.

To find the treasure you seek, look for the Pouākai. When you stand before the final wall, and there is no clue how to pass, trace the outline of Tautoru on the rock. Take the lowest passage and remember; you are on sacred ground.’

Jack was ready. Nat looked at Barnaby, Elijah and Riki. She gave them the thumbs up and slipped into the water.

Nat swam to the Harpagornis sign, took a deep breath and dived straight down. Her heart was thumping faster than it ever had before, but she pushed all her fear aside. She had to do this. There was no going back, and there was no time to lose. Even with her light on full

beam, the water was murky. Nat kept her hand on the wall, pulling herself deeper. The rocks were sharp. She kept tracing her fingers down, down – and then her hand thrust into nothing. This must be the second tunnel.

She wondered for a moment what might be waiting for the unsuspecting caver who took that option. Would it connect through to the other side? Would it be walled off? She'd never know. Grasping the rocks, she pulled herself to the left and found the third tunnel with her feet. She didn't have enough air to hesitate. She pushed herself downwards and swam in.

The tunnel was narrow and smooth. Nat searched for something to grip onto. For a panicked moment she couldn't find anything. Her hands hunted furiously for a finger hold. Suddenly she found a narrow crack. She dug her hand in and pulled as hard as she could. She shot out the other side, fought her way to the surface and gasped a deep, thankful breath.

Nat was at the edge of a huge moat. An island rose from the water before her with a path leading to the upper levels of the cave. Everything was silent. She tugged on the rope twice. Safe. As she did so, a deep rumble rolled around the cave. Nat looked about frantically. The noise stopped. She trod water, waiting for Jack. In a spluttering burst he arrived beside her. He looked around with wild eyes, then sent the signal back to the others. They both floated in the water a moment, taking it all in.

Before them was a beautiful cavern. Unlike the bare rocks on the other side, every surface here was decorated with delicate formations. Nat pointed out the path to Jack. They swam across and pulled themselves onto the rocks. As they undid the knots and coiled the ropes, Nat looked back the way they'd come. There was nothing to betray any kind of exit; just a sheer wall rising from the water. It was a perfect hiding place.

'Ready?' asked Jack. His voice was little in the huge space. Nat nodded. Jack turned and started climbing. He hadn't gone three steps when the rumble began again. 'That's what I could hear in the tunnel,' he said. 'Talk about scary.'

'Is it the drilling?' asked Nat.

'Must be.'

'Where's it coming from?'

They listened as the vibrations increased, and both looked up.

Jack allowed himself a wry smile. 'The way we're going.'

They climbed higher. Loose rock shifted beneath their feet. Nat slipped, and a series of pebbles skidded down into the water. She gulped. Any misstep and it was a long tumble down.

Looking up, they could see more formations. There were fine white shawls and copper-coloured straws. Nat knew Barnaby would be furious to miss them. She wondered how the others were doing on the far side of the wall. The sitting and waiting would be painful for them.

'Nat?'

'Yeah?'

'Check this out.' Jack pointed to a massive column. The back of it had been slashed, as if someone had repeatedly dragged a blade across it. 'What's that from?'

Nat shrugged. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

Puzzled, they continued upwards, picking their way through the loose rocks. But soon Jack stopped again.

'Nat –'

She followed Jack's gaze and found herself looking at a bone. Not a small bone either. She hung back as her brother took a closer look.

'That's from a sheep,' muttered Jack. 'There's another one!'

'How did a sheep get in here?' asked Nat. They scanned the chamber, their lights flicking across the great darkness. 'That doesn't make any sense.'

Without warning, the drilling began again. The noise hammered through the room. Rocks started jumping. A wall of the cave suddenly slipped towards the moat. Nat watched as the water exploded with debris. When the drill stopped, the ringing in her ears was intense.

‘If the spirits got the guys outside, whoever’s in here is going strong,’ said Jack.

Rubbing her ears, Nat nodded.

‘Let’s keep going,’ said Jack. ‘Watch your feet. Stand on the wrong rock around here and you’re a gonner.’

The climb became more vertical. The boulders were huge, with precarious handholds. They’d almost reached the roof of the cave. Jack had to crawl to miss the formations. Nat scrambled past, looking for an easier path. She found herself at the bottom of an enormous slab of limestone. Bridging carefully, she shimmied up the rock and lifted her head to see what lay beyond. The sight was extraordinary. She slid back down the rock and landed next to Jack.

‘We’ve found it!’

His eyes widened. ‘The treasure?’

Nat grinned at him. ‘The eagle’s nest.’

Chapter 31

The Eagle's Nest

They clambered up the slab and peered into the inner sanctuary of the cave. Broken formations, bones and sea shells littered the floor. In the centre of this den sat an enormous black bird.

The eagle was dead and had been so for some time, but it was beautifully preserved. It looked like an exhibit from a museum. Its powerful wings were wrapped around its body. Nat could see red feathers that burst from the top of its head and trimmed the edges of its wings. It was the single most beautiful and majestic thing she had ever seen.

Jack broke the mood by nudging her. 'What's it sitting on?'

She squinted into the dark. The eagle's powerful talons were holding onto something. 'Can you see?' she asked.

'I think it's the treasure,' he whispered. 'We have to get up there.'

Jack climbed over the head of the slab and dropped into the nest. Nat followed. The shells began to clink and rustle. She winced at the commotion. Jack didn't care. He waded through, kicking the shells out of the way. Nat wouldn't have been surprised if the eagle had woken at the disturbance and eaten them both for a snack. She was still in the shell swamp when Jack climbed up next to the bird. The eagle towered over him. He knelt at its feet.

'It's the treasure all right,' he called. 'One claw on each chest.' He stared up at the eagle. 'That's what was eating the sheep.'

'And the shellfish,' said Nat. 'But how on earth did they get him in here?'

Jack looked around. 'There's a massive rock fall on this side. Maybe that's how they bought in all his food. After that closed, he was stuck.'

Jack's words echoed round the cave, then the drill swallowed them. This time, it was closer. The vibrating shells stabbed against her legs. The noise built up to a crescendo of hammering. Nat fought to escape, and pulled herself up onto the rocks.

Suddenly a giant drill exploded through the cave wall. Fragments of rock flew everywhere. Jack ducked under a boulder and beckoned to her furiously. Nat sprinted towards him. She saw the churning metal head and vicious teeth of the drill as she threw herself under the rock. Around them, stalactites dropped like swords. Rockslides began to tumble.

'The whole cave is on the move,' shouted Jack.

There was an almighty crack. Nat watched in horror as a section of the ceiling split off and smashed down, showering everything with rubble. She threw her arms over her head and burrowed further beneath the boulder. Rocks clanged and roared around them.

Finally, everything was still. Nat waited, praying that nothing else would fall. For a moment she panicked about their exit being blocked, but the idea was so dreadful she shut it out. Jack wiped the dust from his ears and eyes. He looked like a grey ghost.

'Ready?' he whispered.

She nodded.

They climbed out of their hiding place and surveyed the new landscape of the cave. The dust was still settling, but rivers of rock had run down the slopes, leaving them surrounded by unstable terrain.

An enormous stalactite had smashed into the heart of the drill, silencing it forever. The figures of two men lay beside it. Without thinking, Nat ran towards them. The first man was slumped on a rock. She hooked her arms under his shoulders and tried to move him.

'Help, Jack,' she called. Together they dragged the man away. As Nat checked for a pulse, Jack returned to the drill.

‘He’s alive,’ said Nat. ‘What about the other one?’

Jack turned back. ‘Don’t look,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing we can do for him.’

Nat saw a stain of red seeping over the cave dust.

‘I can smell petrol back there,’ Jack added. ‘Fresh air might be all this guy needs.’

‘Do we know him?’ asked Nat. With the caving helmet on and the dust covering his face, it was difficult to see.

‘Look!’ cried Jack. He started to run.

Nat spun around. Before them lay the treasure chests, unopened, but intact. They looked bare without their guardian. The majestic eagle had been thrown aside by the rock fall and had disintegrated. A trail of feathers and a beautiful sad head were all that remained of the great protector. Nat crouched down to say goodbye to the only Harpagornis she would ever see.

‘We’ve got to move,’ called Jack. ‘We don’t know how stable this place is.’

‘What about the guy back there?’

‘Nat!’ said Jack. ‘He’s after this treasure! We have to get it out of here before he wakes up.’

He knelt beside the chests and Nat leapt to her feet.

‘Don’t dare open them!’

‘Relax sis, the locks are still on.’

The chests were wooden, each about the size of four shoeboxes, and looked like they had belonged to a genuine pirate. There were cracks in the lids, and the edge of one was seriously chipped, perhaps from someone trying to smash it open long ago. The other chest was encrusted with grime, as if it had been buried. They both had tough metal handles and sturdy black padlocks fastening the latches.

Jack nudged her. ‘You grab this one.’

Nat grabbed the handles and lifted the chest. ‘Whoa,’ she said. ‘That’s heavy.’

They began to pick their way around the swamp of shells and bones.

‘Watch your step,’ warned Jack. ‘If you fall in there, it’ll be trickier to get you out than at the Glowworm Cave.’

Sidling their way through the maze, they managed to haul the chests past the shells and with an almighty effort, up onto the limestone slab. Nat passed her chest to Jack, and he lowered it to the ground.

‘Next one,’ he said, searching for a better grip on the rocks.

Nat pushed the second chest towards him. Sharp pains shot through her shoulders. She heaved with all her might.

‘Hold on,’ called Jack. He grunted as he jammed his body against the slab, using his knees to secure the chest. Together they held it steady. Then all at once, Jack’s foot slid, Nat’s arms gave out, and the treasure fell. It hit the other chest and they both plummeted downwards. They bounced at the bottom of the slab and slammed into the unsteady scree. One thump was all the rocks needed. They hurtled downwards.

‘No!’ yelled Jack. He leapt after the chests, landing in the scree. His weight triggered another rockslide. He was swept past the chests and thrown into the water with an avalanche of stone.

Nat raced down the slope. Jack was splashing about. The treasure chests had stopped metres away from him, on the brink of the moat.

‘Are you all right?’ called Nat.

‘My foot’s stuck!’ He was straining to get it out.

Nat made her way to the edge. ‘Are you serious?’

The pain contorted his face. ‘Deadly.’

‘Hold it right there!’ yelled a voice above them.

Nat blinked. She knew that voice. She'd taken an instant dislike to it when she'd first heard it. It was Cain Wylie.

'We saved him?' she groaned. 'I'm an idiot!'

Wylie staggered down the slope, rubbing his head. In his hand was a gun. Nat gulped. She had no doubt he was prepared to use it. She glanced at Jack, still straining to free himself from the rocks.

'Don't even think about moving,' yelled Wylie. His voice was slurred and uneven.

'Carbon monoxide poisoning,' whispered Jack. 'He's all over the place. Those fools were operating that petrol drill in a pretty small space.'

'So he might recover?'

'Yeah, but his brain might also be mush. Oh, and Splat,' whispered Jack. 'I don't want to freak you out – but the water's rising.'

Nat spun around. The water was lapping around Jack's shoulders. A moment ago it'd been at his chest.

'I told you not to move!' yelled Wylie. He fired at the ceiling.

Nat dropped to the floor as pieces of stone showered around them.

'That's better,' he drawled. He lurched downwards, sending rocks flying into the moat with every step. Wylie fired at the locks of the treasure chests. They flew off with a shrill ringing noise. He pointed the gun back at Nat, knelt down and flicked away the warped remainder of the padlocks.

The dust covered man smiled as he ran his hand along the chests.

'And Carter said it didn't exist,' Wylie muttered to himself. 'Silly old man. Never did have enough imagination.' He cracked open the lids and held them still. He waited for a long moment and then sniggered. 'Just another rumour.' Wylie swung both lids wide open. The light of his headlamp hit the jewels, revealing the green gleam of perfect emeralds and the warm glow of rubies. While one hand gripped the gun, he plunged the other into the emeralds. His hand emerged clutching a gigantic green gem. Nat knew instantly it was the Emerald Eye of Babylon. Wylie stared at it, mesmerised.

Nat's heart was pounding. Jack was going to drown if she didn't do something soon. But any movement and she would be shot. She started to panic. This was not how it was supposed to go. Wylie reached into his jacket and produced two canvas bags. He started loading the gems into the bags; first the Emerald Eye of Babylon, then one at a time, then by handfuls. As he sealed the first bag he chuckled to himself. Then he threw his head back and laughed out loud. Wylie's triumph echoed around the cave. The sound reverberated off every surface until the whole space was filled with the cackle of the crazed man.

There was a moment of silence as the laughter faded away. Then the cave replied. It started softly; Nat had to concentrate to understand where the sound was coming from. Then it grew into a rumble. Nat scanned the ceiling.

'Jack!' she screamed, pointing up.

A crack appeared in the roof. It ripped through the rock, heading straight for Wylie. A line of huge formations lay in its path. It crept around the first one, loosening every connection. The stalactite teetered on its moorings. But the crack wriggled further, and the formation let go, dropping silently through the air. The stalactite landed right beside Wylie. He leapt away in horror. The formation was over three metres high.

Nat watched the crack get back to work. A moment later, a second stalactite landed on the other side of Wylie. His face lost all colour. Between the two massive pillars, he looked like a toy. He stared at the roof, frozen to the spot. The crack was widening above his head.

Another gigantic stalactite on the ceiling began to waver. It plummeted down, piercing the heart of the second treasure chest. Rubies were cast into the air in a surreal lolly scramble. A few plopped into the water, but the rest scattered over the rock. The cave roared. Wylie

stumbled. Another stalactite fell. Wylie yelled; he'd been pinned; the formation had pierced the edge of his jacket.

'Nat!' yelled Jack. 'Now!'

Nat launched. She grabbed the rope they'd coiled on the rocks and tied a foolproof knot around Wylie's full treasure bag. She tugged the line three times and the bag was pulled into the water.

Wylie was still struggling to escape his jacket.

'The other jewels!' yelled Jack. 'Grab them!'

She glanced at Jack. Only his face was above the water. She fell to her knees and began throwing the last emeralds and rubies into the other bag. Her hands flew faster and faster. She fastened the bag and dragged it towards Jack. But when she looked up, he'd disappeared under the water. She abandoned the treasure and dived into the moat.

She pulled at the rocks around his feet; they weren't big or heavy, but there were so many of them her hands churned in desperation. She rose for more air, dived again and frantically revealed more and more of Jack's leg. Finally a spurt of his blood tinted the water. Jack's gumboot was left embedded, but his smashed foot floated free.

Nat slipped an arm around her brother and lifted his head above the water. Nothing. She slapped him across the face as hard as she could. Once... twice... Jack gulped in a desperate breath.

'I'm getting you out of here,' said Nat. She tied the second rope around his waist.

'What are you doing?' he gasped.

'Getting that damn treasure,' she said. 'We've come too far to give up now.'

'Nat – no!' said Jack.

'This is my chance to save the farm and keep Sundance,' she said. 'I owe it to Kathleen. And Dad. Go!' She tugged on the rope three times and immediately felt the reply from the other side. Jack heaved in an urgent breath and was pulled away.

The cave was still. Nat glanced up. She couldn't see any movement. She slipped out of the water and ran for the bag of gems. She reached for them – and then froze as she heard a metallic click behind her.

'Turn around,' ordered Wylie.

Nat did as she was told. The man was covered in dust and blood. He'd ripped his shirt and jacket apart to escape from the stalactites. He stepped forward, the gun wobbling in his hand.

'The great hunters of the world are always alone,' he said. 'The spoils must never be shared.'

Nat stared at the demented man, rueing her decision to come back. Her heart kicked into a higher gear, beating so fast it rattled her body. Then something on her chest pulsed. She raised her hand and rested it on the taonga. What had Abraham said? Stop, look, take everything in. She took a breath and closed her eyes.

'You can do it,' she said to herself. Wylie was still muttering under his breath. Nat glanced up to the roof. The crack had started to move again. She watched it for a moment; it was heading straight for the eagle's roost, where a group of enormous boulders were piled against the ceiling. Suddenly she saw exactly what was going to happen next.

'You're an idiot,' she yelled. Wylie jabbed his gun in her direction. 'You knew about the curse, and you still opened that chest.'

'There's no curse!' said Wylie.

'Oh yeah?' said Nat. The cave started to rumble again. 'Then why is this whole place out to get you?'

'You don't know what you're talking about!' yelled Wylie.

Nat pointed towards the roof. 'Those boulders are going to slam straight into you!'

Wylie spun about. Nat didn't waste a second. She scooped the bag of jewels into her arms and leapt out over the water. Wylie turned and fired. The first two bullets whistled past Nat, but the third brushed against her shoulder. She hit the water, clutching the gems, and plummeted straight down.

There was a guttural roar. The cave had finally had enough. Rocks fired into the water then a landslide of mud and boulders swept into the moat. Nat was slammed against a wall by the relentless current. She sank deeper and deeper into the blackness.

Chapter 32

The Emerald Eye of Babylon

Nat hugged the jewels as she was tumbled over and over. She could see nothing. Strange thoughts floated through her head. Kathleen rode past on Sundance, her arms in casts. Her father called out to her, but she kept drifting. Riki and Abraham rowed around her as Pi flitted above. Elijah and Jack waved, and Barnaby reached out his hand as she bounced along the bottom of the cave. Her shoulder throbbed. A light scanned back and forth above her, transforming the inky water into an eerie green. Still clutching the bag, she pushed upwards.

Her head pounded with the desperate need for oxygen. She paddled up and up, then shot through the surface. She gasped in lungful after lungful of air.

‘Thank God,’ said a voice. It was Jack. He reached out and grabbed her. ‘You were gone. I’d almost given up.’

Nat hugged him. ‘You came back,’ she gasped.

‘Of course I did,’ said Jack. ‘Wylie’s dead. When you went under, another rock fall came down, then a giant boulder tore down the slope and flattened him.’

Nat nodded. The curse of the Emerald Eye had claimed its rightful victim.

‘Time to go,’ said Jack. He tied the rope around her, and sent the signal through. Nat looked around a final time. So much of the beautiful cavern had been destroyed.

‘Sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I wish we could have done better.’

Slithering through the tunnel, she burst free on the other side. She opened her eyes to see Riki, Barnaby and Elijah pulling her towards them. They heaved her out of the water. Jack appeared a second later, and they lugged him onto the rocks. His foot was a mashed up mess. Beside Nat sat the first canvas bag. She grinned and set down the second bag. Barnaby, Riki and Elijah began screaming and cheering. For a moment there was chaos as everyone demanded to know exactly what had happened and how, and they all told their story at once.

‘The canvas bag was so heavy!’ said Elijah. ‘We really had to heave it through.’

‘Have you opened it?’ asked Jack.

Barnaby shook his head. ‘We were waiting for you two.’

Nat unfastened the first bag. Reaching in, she grabbed the biggest gem she could find. She pulled it out and handed it to Barnaby.

‘Oh man!’ said Elijah.

‘That’s got to be the Emerald Eye of Babylon,’ said Riki.

Barnaby was awestruck. His voice cracked as he spoke. ‘That’s the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen.’

‘That fits into the golden tiger mask left here by Sinbad,’ said Nat, her voice wavering with excitement. ‘That’s what we saw in the Glowworm Cave!’

Barnaby dug around in the other bag. ‘So what’s this?’ He produced an enormous ruby, deep purple in colour. There was a star inside the ruby, and as Barnaby turned it, the centre of the star moved.

‘The Scarlet Eye of Ceylon,’ said Riki. ‘We have both gems.’

Nat looked up. Everyone’s headlights were still on – the group was intensely bright. It was such a total change from the deep blackness she’d been immersed in that suddenly she gasped for air, as if she was still in the water.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Riki, leaning close. ‘You did amazing. I knew you would.’

Nat looked up at her. ‘Thank you’ she whispered. The sight of everyone’s glowing, smiling faces was more than she could cope with. All of a sudden she burst into tears.

Chapter 33

Get a Good Lawyer

‘Sit,’ ordered Riki.

‘Hold on,’ said Nat. ‘First I have to –’

‘No,’ said Riki. ‘You’ve done enough. Sit.’ She put her hands on her hips. ‘Now.’

Nat obeyed. Riki wiped Nat’s tears away and placed a steaming mug of milo into her shivering hands. Then she settled beside her.

‘We got so worried,’ said Riki. ‘We could see the water rising. You should have heard the crazy schemes we came up with to save you!’

Riki’s fussing soon made Nat feel much better. Riki examined the bruise where Wylie’s bullet had grazed her, and pronounced Nat extremely lucky.

‘If he’d been a better shot, you’d be in trouble,’ she said.

Beside them, Elijah and Barnaby were in extreme survival mode. They’d slit Jack’s wetsuit up to his shin, revealing his mangled foot in full. Despite the fact Jack was in serious pain, Barnaby was lecturing him.

‘That’s why you wear steel caps. Safety first mate. Now we’re going to have to bind this. It’s going to hurt.’

Elijah wound the bandage around Jack’s foot. Nat watched her brother grimace, but he didn’t complain. When Elijah had tucked in the bandage end, he sat back.

‘So,’ he said. ‘Let’s take stock. We got the treasure. Wylie and his cronies are gone. You guys got to see a Harpagornis, and for all that we got dealt one serious injury.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Nice work you two.’

‘If I could have fitted in the tunnel I would have got the treasure right away,’ joked Barnaby.

‘No you wouldn’t,’ said Jack. He wasn’t being argumentative; his voice was calm and quiet. ‘Nat was the perfect person to do it. She outwitted Wylie, and saved me. Then she went back and grabbed the last gems. I saw the whole thing.’

Nat was gob smacked. Jack had never said anything like this to her – ever.

Elijah nodded. ‘Does everyone have a milo? I’d like to propose a toast.’ Riki distributed more cups and filled them to the brim. ‘A toast,’ said Elijah. ‘To Natnat Splattercat and her gang.’

‘To Natnat and her gang!’ everyone chorused.

The echo drifted around the cave. As all the gear was packed away, Nat hung close to Jack. When the other three were occupied and the moment was right, she elbowed him.

‘Thanks heaps for what you said.’

‘Thanks for saving my life,’ he replied. ‘I owe you big time.’

‘Dad never would have forgiven me if I had come home with treasure and no brother.’

Jack chuckled. ‘We’re going to be in so much trouble.’

When it was time to go, Nat and Riki led the way with the bags of gems. Barnaby and Elijah stuck with Jack. When Nat saw the light of the lagoon, her heart leapt. She clambered out into the pouring rain, letting it fall on her uplifted face. A noise startled her. She dropped to a crouch, but a familiar voice set her at ease.

‘You’re safe Nat,’ called Abraham. He smiled down from the rocks around the lagoon. ‘Well done.’ Sitting on his shoulder was Pi. He leapt and sang as he watched everyone climb out of the water.

Nat lifted the greenstone out from under her wetsuit and passed it to Abraham. ‘It worked,’ she said. ‘It was amazing.’

‘You did it,’ said Abraham. ‘I knew you could.’ He re-fastened the pounamu around his

neck.

Suddenly two more people clambered over the rocks – one in a single stride, the other in a unique nine-and-a-half year old manner. Mike didn't say a word, but scooped Nat into a massive bear hug. He lifted her off the ground and held her tight for a long moment. Then he set her down and stepped towards Jack. Elijah and Barnaby shuffled aside as Mike lifted his son into his arms. Jack didn't utter a word of protest.

As Mike stepped back onto the path with him, Nat saw two more men. One was a police officer taking notes, and the other man Nat recognised as a friend of her father. He had a great bristly beard with white streaks in it and eyebrows that looked like they might be alive.

'So this is the trouble-making, illness-inventing gang who refuses to stay grounded,' he said, looking amused.

'This is Steve Forrest, from the Department of Conservation,' said Abraham. 'We've had a nice afternoon together.'

Steve chuckled. 'With you two? That'll be the day.' Nat watched as his frame shook with merriment. 'It's the story of the year,' he said. 'We've got men swarming through the Flower Grotto, and their reports are hard to believe. Someone's smuggled an incredible amount of drilling equipment in there and made a right mess.'

Nat nodded, unsure of how much to say. All of a sudden she was hugged tight around the waist. 'Was it amazing?' whispered Kathleen. 'Did you get the treasure?'

Nat smiled. 'Yes,' she replied. 'Definitely yes.'

'That means I get to keep Sundance, right?' asked Kathleen.

'Without a doubt,' said Nat.

Kathleen grinned up at her sister. 'We did it,' she said, skipping about on the rock. 'We did it!'

'Dad,' said Nat. 'We get to keep the farm.' She reached into her bag and passed him a ruby. Mike's eyes looked as though they might fall out of his head. Kathleen grabbed the gem.

'How much is this worth?' she asked.

'More than you,' replied Jack. Everyone laughed.

Jack turned to Mike. 'What are you going to do now, Dad?'

Mike shook his head. 'Beats me,' he said. 'What do you suggest?'

'Get a good lawyer,' said Jack. 'Negotiate the sale of the gems one at a time, pay off the debt, and relax a bit.'

Mike's head fell to his chest and Nat saw tears in his eyes.

'Relax?' he said. 'I don't know if I know how to do that.'

'I'll teach you,' said Jack.

'Either way,' said Abraham, 'a lot of the pressure you were feeling is gone now.'

Mike looked at Abraham, and held his hand out. They shook. 'Thank you mate,' said Mike. 'Thank you for all you've done.'

Abraham smiled and shook his head. 'Don't mention it.'

'All right,' said Mike. 'Time to go home. We've got to get you all cleaned up, bandaged and packed. Tomorrow is the cave talk, then you're all going back to your Mum's place. I'm going to take the whole next term to recover from everything you've put me through these holidays.'

'But at least –' started Kathleen.

'But nothing,' said Mike. 'We're going home.'

Chapter 34

The Pirate's Cache

On Sunday morning, Nat slept in. She didn't want her holiday to end. But then the shower was cold and she didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to Plato before she was swept into the car with Jack and Kathleen. She almost forgot Pi, but Mike held the door open for the fantail.

'This guy's going with you,' he said. 'He drives me nuts with his chirping. Have you got everything? The talk starts at ten.' He went to tie up the dogs. Nat shook her head.

'Doesn't he get that Wylie's not going to turn up?' she asked.

'He'll figure it out,' said Jack. He was back to his usual grumpy self, and was already packed into the front seat with his crutches.

Down in the village, people were milling around the museum, chatting in small groups. Nat waved to a few people, looking for Riki and the Limas, but they hadn't arrived yet. She perched on a bench with Kathleen and waited. It wasn't long before her sister became restless.

'I'm going to go play in the park,' she said, pointing towards the stream bend.

She disappeared across the road. Nat watched as she stomped through the shallows in her colourful gumboots, with the fantail flying alongside.

Nat didn't see Riki until she sat on the bench beside her.

'Giddy mate,' said Riki, and grinned as Nat jumped. 'How's it going?'

'Pretty good – apart from the going home part.'

'How was your Dad about everything?'

'Really cool,' said Nat. 'He hasn't said that much actually. I think he's grateful we're all okay. The doctor said Jack's foot will recover.'

'Wicked,' said Riki.

They were interrupted by an outburst in the gathering crowd.

'I'm just saying!' said a man with red hair, 'all the ghosts in the village got woken up yesterday afternoon and I'd bet Abraham Te Kaitiaki's behind it!'

'He's right,' said a distinguished woman. 'In the hotel they made an awful din.'

A tall man leant forward. 'I thought it was just the old fellow at my place. You're saying it was all of them?'

Nat watched as Abraham talked to the upset people and calmed the situation. The crowd returned to their chatting, although more people were checking their watches. It was now ten past ten, and there was still no sign of any speaker.

'Give him a few more minutes,' called an authoritative voice. Nat recognised it as Mr. Lima. That meant that Elijah and Barnaby were here. Seconds later the boys and Jack all squashed onto the bench.

'No Mr. Wylie huh?' said Barnaby.

'Strange to think he wouldn't turn up for his own lecture,' added Elijah. 'Something tragic must have happened.'

'He got what he deserved,' said Jack. 'Serious scumbag material.'

Nat spotted Steve Forrest, from the Department of Conservation, in the crowd and could hear him talking to an old farmer. 'You wouldn't believe what my men found last night,' he confided. 'A hidden cavern and the remains of an enormous Harpagornis moorei.'

'The Haast eagle?' said the man. 'That's impossible!'

'Amazing, isn't it?' said the DOC man. 'They're going to have to rewrite the books after this one.'

Nat grinned. She caught Mr. Forrest's eye and he winked at her.

The crowd laughed and joked amongst themselves, and as they realised that no lecturer was turning up, they dispersed. Mr. Lima and Mike stood by their trucks with Jack and Elijah. Barnaby looked to his Dad, and then back to Nat. They could hear Mr. Lima calling.

‘I have to go,’ said Barnaby. ‘But I can’t wait till next holidays.’

‘Me too,’ said Nat. They looked at each other. ‘See you then,’ she added.

‘Yep,’ said Barnaby, taking a few steps back. He stopped, ran forward and threw his arms around her, almost knocking her over. ‘You’re the best,’ he whispered, and then took off, sprinting all the way.

‘Well,’ said Nat, blushing.

‘He really likes you,’ said Riki.

Nat leapt to her feet. Kathleen was jumping up and down as Pi flew circuits around her. Abraham followed their gaze.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ he suggested.

They crossed the road. Kathleen was waving something in the air. Nat broke into a run.

‘Look what I found!’ called Kathleen. ‘It was caught on the corner of the stream.’

Nat took the small bundle and set it down in the grass. It was an old canvas dry bag. The seams were fraying and the surface was wearing thin.

‘Where did this come from?’ she asked.

‘This stream flows directly from the reserve,’ said Abraham. ‘I’d say it was in the cave with our eagle, and all the disturbance set it free.’

Nat unfastened the bag and slid out a rectangular tin container. It was tightly sealed, and took some jiggling to pry open. Inside the lid were a series of names, but each had been crossed off, apart from the last.

Nat read them aloud. ‘McGuire. Ching. Belzoni. Carter.’

‘What’s inside?’ asked Kathleen.

The contents of the container were protected by a series of plastic bags. One by one, Nat opened them, until finally she held a small leather satchel. She pulled the ties and it fell open in her hands. Inside was a collection of old papers. She pulled one out; it was a map. Another had a series of directions. A couple of the parchments were in languages Nat didn’t even recognise. She looked at Abraham in astonishment.

‘Here is your real treasure,’ he said. ‘A cache of clues and maps that has been sought after and prized for a very long time.’

‘This is what you told us about,’ said Nat, breathless with the discovery. ‘Should I keep it?’

‘Absolutely,’ said Abraham. ‘It is known as McGuire Cache. McGuire was a dread pirate, so some simply call it the Pirate’s Cache. Legend has it she travelled the world and ransacked ancient libraries to gather these clues together.’

‘And what happened to her?’ asked Riki.

Abraham shook his head. ‘Nobody knows.’ He rested his hand on Riki’s shoulder. ‘Nat and I are going to take a walk under the kaiwaka trees. Tell Mike we won’t be long.’

Riki nodded and grinned at Nat. ‘Thanks for all your help.’

Nat threw her arms around her friend. ‘No probs.’

‘Till next holidays, right?’

Nat smiled. ‘For sure.’

As Riki and Kathleen skipped across the park, Abraham and Nat turned and wandered along the riverbank.

‘So where’s the Tiger’s Mask?’ asked Nat. ‘After that split second in the Glowworm Cave, we never saw it again.’

‘Don’t you fret,’ said Abraham. ‘We’ll find it.’

‘And what about the rest of the treasure?’ asked Nat.

Abraham smiled. 'What about it?'

'I wanted to save my horse' said Nat. 'but it turns out I could save all the horses in the whole country. What should we do with it?'

'Keep it,' said Abraham. 'You will need it.' He stopped and looked at her. 'There is a path opening up for you Nat. If you become one of the Protectors of the Last Valley, there will be much excitement and opportunity.'

'I'm in,' said Nat, without hesitating.

Abraham chuckled. 'Well,' he said, 'do not be so quick to agree. There is also danger.'

'Can I bring my friends?' asked Nat.

'Of course,' said the old man. 'You're all tangled up in this together.'

'Then I'm definitely in,' said Nat. 'Can you tell me more next holidays?'

'Of course. There is much to tell,' said Abraham. 'But it might be time for you to go.'

Nat looked across the park. Her mother was waiting by the museum. Mike seemed to be doing a lot of talking. Jack was already loaded into the front seat, and Kathleen was waving to her.

'Go,' said Abraham. 'I'll see you in winter.'

Nat hugged the old man. 'Thank you so much for everything.'

'You're welcome,' said Abraham. 'I look forward to your return.'

Nat hugged the cache of clues and maps to her chest and ran across the park. She couldn't wait until the next holidays.

Chapter 35

Drake's Revenge

Drake pressed her face against the cold rock. She couldn't believe what she'd seen. The cache had finally been uncovered, and now – her body shuddered at the thought – it had been delivered to the child. How could Abraham do this to her? He knew she was out there, watching; she was sure of it. She'd even felt a strange pang in her chest, seeing him under the kaiwaka trees, where they used to walk together. The message was unmistakable. Abraham had resurrected the Protectors of the Valley, and soon they would be stronger than ever before. With the cache in their possession, they could access any of the places she had dreamed about.

She spun around. It was imperative she get it. The planning had to begin immediately. The surveillance would not stop until she had retrieved it. She allowed herself a wry smile and clutched the briefcase to her chest. She still had the mask, and knew where both gems were.

She watched as Abraham settled on a park bench and gazed up the valley. How much had he told them? He must have whispered the truth; Sinbad and his sailors were not the only ones to visit New Zealand in times gone past. Although many agreed to the official lie in public, only a fool would believe it; it was obvious these shores had been visited by many. She smiled as she watched the old man. Perhaps she should be grateful to him for teaching her that.

She wondered if he would be proud of her; she had visited each of the Treasure Valleys, as he had once done. It was impossible to choose a favourite; the grandeur of Egypt had impressed, but their valley had been the first to fall. Mexico too, had been ransacked. Tibet had a different type of majesty, as did Patagonia. Nothing like this quiet place.

Abraham stood, and looked across to where she was hidden. He lifted his hand and tipped his hat towards her.

Drake froze.

Abraham smiled to himself and wandered along the path, eventually disappearing from view.

Huddled under the trees, Drake's eyes flashed. Enough, she decided. The old man had done his time; now he was a nuisance. She would get rid of him, destroy the young Protectors of the Valley and take all of its treasures. And no-one would ever again forget the name Majella Te Kaitiaki.

The End –

About Brydie Walker Bain

Brydie Walker Bain is a poet, playwright and children's author. Brydie lives with her husband and two young sons in Waitomo Caves, New Zealand.

Discover other titles by Brydie Walker Bain

Book II in The Natnat Adventures:

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Thank you so much for taking the time to read my book! I know there are lots of other amazing options available and I'm thrilled you chose mine. I hope you enjoyed it.

I would really appreciate it if you could tell your friends about the book, and leave a review. It doesn't have to be long, just a couple of lines would help.

Make sure you follow Nat, Riki, Jack, Barnaby and Elijah in their next adventure, *The Ship of Sight and The Hand of Shadow*.

Thank you,

Brydie Walker Bain

The Ship of Sight and The Hand of Shadow
Book II in The History Mysteries

Chapter 1
The Ship of Sight

Drake scanned the screens before her, absorbing every graph and map. Jupiter was high in the night sky and perfectly aligned with Mars and Mercury. The moon had pulled up the oceans. All indicators pointed to a brutal king tide around the country.

'Access all cameras and satellites,' she ordered. 'When the light emerges, watch every beach and harbour. Look for disturbances or anything new.'

Fingers scurried over keyboards. Drake surveyed her empire. The control room of headquarters had been expanded for this operation. They could not afford to let their chance slip away.

'There's a wreck in Northland exposed by the waves.' A young man with a ponytail sat aside so she could see his screen. 'But it doesn't have the slender neck you described.'

Drake dismissed the image. 'That's an old cream boat.'

'The Ship of Sight,' mused the young man. 'If it was last seen in 1916, there's a chance the sea could have completely eroded it.'

'It's there,' said Drake. 'Keep looking.'

She laced her hands behind her back and began pacing the room. Everything in the sky and on earth indicated the return of the ship. The signs were unmistakable.

'First reports from the East Coast are in,' said a woman across the room. 'There's nothing.'

'Nothing in Cook Strait either,' said a bearded man beside her.

Drake frowned. 'All this gadgetry, and you can't see what's right before you.'

'Because we're looking for a legend,' said the young man.

Drake cocked her head to the side. 'The old knowledge is powerful,' she cooed. 'More powerful than you imagine.'

'But surely there's no hurry,' said the woman. 'No one else could know this.'

Drake's eyes flashed. 'Do not assume we are the only ones hunting tonight. What about the whale – anything?'

'Nothing,' said the bearded man. 'Only three great white sharks off the Otago coast.'

'Focus,' said the man with the ponytail. 'Sharks are irrelevant. We're looking for the Southern Right whale.'

'Tohorā,' said Drake. 'Also last seen in 1916.'

Fingers around the room paused over their keyboards.

'Life span for the Southern Right is estimated to be ...' the woman paused, 'between fifty and sixty years. Do we know if this whale is still alive?'

'We do,' said Drake. 'He is the grandfather of all tohorā. Once a century he makes a journey to Cape Reinga. We must intercept him.'

Drake returned to her pacing. She had faith they would find what they were looking for. The only question was whether they could find it in time. The Ship of Sight always emerged with The Hand of Shadow; the two were inextricably linked. She could bear the Shadow to gain right of entry to the Sight. But she had to be there first. Once The Hand of Shadow was

imprinted, it could not be transferred.

'I've found something!' said the woman. An image filled the screen. Drake's heart thumped. This was it. She recognised the detail in the dragon's head instantly.

'Where is it?' she demanded.

'West Coast, Ruapuke Beach, south of Raglan.'

Drake smirked. Her home territory. Excellent.

'Ready the chopper!' she ordered. 'We leave immediately.'

Chapter 2

The Wake-Up Call

At 4 am on the first morning of the winter holidays, the phone rang. Nat listened to her father stumble down the stairs.

'Abraham?' he said. 'Bit early isn't it mate?'

Nat didn't wait another second. She leapt up, and pulled on her jeans and two jerseys while her Dad argued with Abraham on the phone. It was pretty clear he wasn't winning. She was ferreting about in the dark for her camera when Mike arrived at the bedroom door. He took in her appearance.

'You knew this was coming?'

Nat shook her head. 'I had no idea. But if he's calling in the middle of the night, you know it's got to be good.'

'He wants me to take you guys out to Ruapuke Beach,' said Mike, shaking his head. 'I told him you'd freeze to death, but he wouldn't take no for an answer.'

'Cool,' said Nat.

Mike rolled his eyes. 'I'll wake up Jack.'

'Good luck,' said Nat. 'What about Kathleen?'

'It's tempting to let her sleep,' he said, 'but safer to bring her along.'

Nat nodded. Her younger sister hated being left out of anything.

Nat swept her unruly curls into a ponytail, collected coats and hats for everyone and grabbed bananas for breakfast. Mike swept Kathleen from her bed without waking her and placed her in the back seat of the car wrapped in her duvet. Nat's older brother Jack trudged down the stairs. His curly hair was growing longer. He looked like some kind of rock star her father used to listen to.

'This sucks,' he said.

It was bitterly cold outside. Nat watched her brother climb into the car. His foot had healed after being trapped in a rock fall last holidays, but his limp was still noticeable.

Nat's pet fantail, Pi, flitted towards them. The little black bird landed on her shoulder and she transferred him to her pocket.

The car took a moment to start. Nat banged her gloved hands together to keep them warm while the heater whirred into life. When they rounded the first corner on the gravel road, they saw lights waiting across the ravine.

'Looks like the Limas got an early morning wake up call too,' muttered Mike.

'Sweet,' said Jack.

Elijah and Barnaby Lima lived on a farm further up the road. Elijah and Jack had been best mates since primary school. Elijah was tall and broad shouldered and his dark hair was short and styled. He was only fifteen years old, but he took things seriously. Mike said his head was on straight.

Barnaby, on the other hand, overflowed with jokes and mischief. He was a year younger than his brother. They had the same olive skin and dark brown hair but Barnaby was lanky, and his scruffy hair almost touched his shoulders. Having the Lima brothers around last holidays had been crucial to their success in finding two ancient treasure chests filled with rubies and emeralds. Elijah and Barnaby were an integral part of the gang.

Mike pulled alongside Tony Lima's truck and lowered the window. Elijah was half asleep in the front seat, snuggled in his down jacket. In contrast, Barnaby was straining against his seatbelt, eyes gleaming.

'Morning!' he said, before anyone else could speak.

'Good morning Barnaby,' sighed Mike.

'Got room for two more?' asked Tony. 'I'm supposed to be scanning the ewes at eight, but Abraham was insistent.'

'That he was,' said Mike. 'Nat, give Eli the front seat. Barnaby – simmer down.'

Barnaby looked indignant. 'I haven't done anything!'

'Be good, Barnaby,' commanded Tony. 'Or else.'

Barnaby glowered at his father. Nat suppressed a giggle. She clambered into the back and Barnaby squashed in beside her. Elijah closed the front door, and they were off again.

The road climbed through the valley and soon almost everyone was lulled back to sleep. There hadn't been a peep out of Kathleen. Elijah started to snore in the front seat, and Jack's head lolled about. Mike gripped the steering wheel and clicked on the radio. Only Nat and Barnaby were wide awake.

'Do you know where we're going?' whispered Barnaby.

'Ruapuke Beach,' said Nat.

Barnaby nodded. 'That's where Abraham's bach is.'

Mike glanced at them in the rear view mirror, and turned up the radio. The low talkback voices filled the truck.

Barnaby leant close to Nat. 'I know why we're going there.'

'How?'

'Dad's been talking about the tides – you know all these storms we've been having?' Nat nodded. The rain and wind had been incredible this winter. Massive trees had fallen down and the sea had battered beachside communities.

'He said that the tide will be the highest it's been in a hundred years,' said Barnaby.

'They call it a king tide,' said Mike. 'This one's breaking all the records. It'll be on the news.'

As the clock ticked over to five o'clock, Nat and Barnaby leaned forward to listen. The bulletin told stories of coastal mayhem. The storm surge had swamped estuaries and battered sea walls. Roads were flooded. In Kapiti debris had been swept onto people's back yards. Further north on the Hokianga people had been evacuated from their homes in the middle of the night.

'Imagine being woken up and told you had to leave immediately,' said Barnaby. 'That'd be crazy.'

'It'd be awful,' said Mike.

'I wonder what the tide has dragged up that Abraham wants us to see?' asked Nat.

'Maybe a giant squid,' suggested Barnaby.

'Or a message in a bottle,' said Mike.

Nat didn't think it was a squid, giant or otherwise. And a message in a bottle wasn't important enough to haul two families out of bed at four in the morning. It had to be something bigger than that.

'Maybe an octopus!' said Barnaby, a little too loudly.

Jack woke with wide eyes. He punched Barnaby on the arm and settled straight back to sleep.

'Enough speculation,' said Mike. 'You two try and doze.'

Nat closed her eyes, but knew there was no chance of sleep. She'd been craving another adventure. The school term had crawled by. She'd grabbed every spare moment to pore over the maps and instructions in her cache of clues, but she needed Abraham to help her to decipher them. A smile spread across her face. Now, on the first day of the holidays, even before dawn, it had begun.

'Funny sort of sleep, Nat,' said Mike.

'It's a smile sleep Dad,' said Nat. 'When you're this excited you have to let a bit out'

somehow.'

As Mike turned his eyes back to the road, Barnaby squeezed her hand in the darkness. Nat's grin widened. This was going to be incredible.