



THE HUNT FOR THE BALLAMANANA

AN ILLUSTRATED NOVEL

'The
most epic
adventure ever!'
- Charlie

'No it's not.'
- Georgia

Full
Colour
Edition

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THE HUNT FOR THE BALLAMANA

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No dolphins were harmed during the making of this book.

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** See author's note, page 221*



For Cliff Chillingworth
a good bloke
gone too soon

A WARNING

Listen carefully because this is important. You must not tell anyone you are reading this book. If anyone asks, say you are reading something else. Especially, do not tell anyone about the very strange creatures you find out about within these pages. They'll think you're mad and lock you away in a place for crazy people (who have probably also read this book and did not take my advice to keep quiet about it).

I should also warn you that if you ever encounter a mangorilla in the wild, keep absolutely calm. Do not make eye contact, back away slowly, and whatever you do, do not say the word 'rhinodendron'.

Oh and by the way, this story is not about a hunt for a mythical creature called a 'ballamanana'. Don't believe everything you read in a title.

(If you think this story seems a little strange, don't worry, it's about to get much stranger.)

In this story you will meet an evil scientist. Scientists are actually wonderful people who find out all sorts of interesting things about the world and then use those things to invent stuff, mostly good stuff. (But not always.)

The worst thing about scientists is that they always think they know it all. But one thing history has taught us is that every time scientists thought they knew everything, they were wrong.

They told us the Earth was flat, and they were wrong. They told us the sun revolved around the Earth, and they were wrong. They told us if you dropped food on the floor, it was okay to eat as long as you picked it up within five seconds... actually it probably wasn't scientists who said that.

There was one time when scientists invented a machine called the Large Hadron Collider. They conducted an experiment that destroyed the entire universe but fortunately, the same experiment invented time travel and one lucky scientist was able to travel back in time and stop the experiment ever taking place. Unfortunately, that also meant they never invented time travel which is a shame because time travel would be really cool.

But none of that has anything to do with this story, or with mangorillas or even rattlesnails.

Now before we dive into this bizarre tale, I want you to meet the main characters. They're not exactly heroes, but they'll have to do because they're all we've got.

THE HEROES

(not exactly)

CHARLIE



This is Charlie.
He is very intelligent, brave and rather handsome.
Everybody says so. And by everybody, I mean Charlie.

GEORGIA



This is Georgia, Charlie's sister.
She is super smart, stubborn, bossy, and a bit of a nerd. Everybody says so.
And by everybody, once again, I mean Charlie.

DOODLE



This is Doodle. His full name is Crackerdoodle but it's 'Doodle' for short.

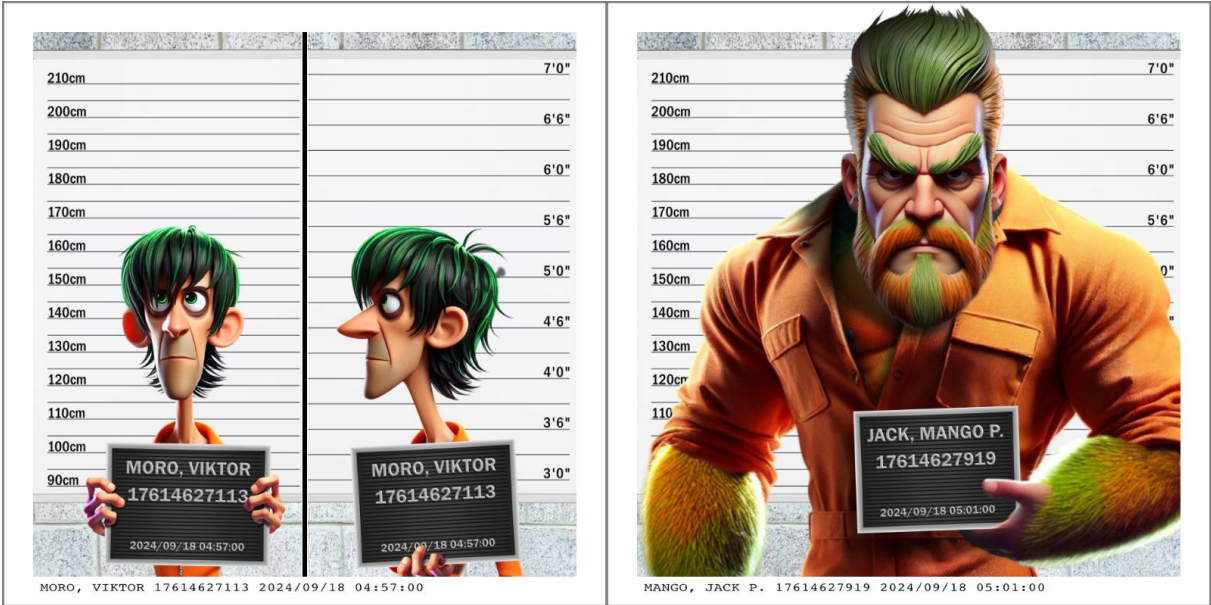
Doodle is half kangaroo, half rooster and a total goofball. Doodle thinks Doodle is cool and clever and charismatic. (He's a bit full of himself, is Doodle.)

GRAN



And this is Gran. She's nice, a little weird, true, but nice. I mean, not everybody's grandmother used to be a stunt pilot in a flying circus. And not everybody's grandmother says made-up words like poopdipoop and whoopsickle. (Gran says lots of stuff like that.)

SOME, UM, OTHER PEOPLE



Don't worry about these guys. You'll meet them soon enough.

THE STORY

“It’s not going to be the most epic adventure ever.”

- Georgia (*actual quote*)

BAD NEWS PART I

Charlie and Georgia got the bad news early one morning while they were exploring the backyard at Gran's house. They'd been staying at Gran's weird-looking house all week, while their parents were off on an expedition, and today they had got up early to practise for their own exciting expedition. More about that in a minute.

Charlie was wearing his brand-new hiking boots and his khaki safari suit, which was loose-fitting and cool. His safari helmet kept the rapidly rising sun off his head. He had a magnifying glass and was turning over blades of grass and fallen leaves with a pair of tweezers and saying things like, "Gadzooks, a whistling boomerator."

"Don't be stupid," Georgia said. "There's no such thing."

Of course there was no such thing, Charlie just made it up. But he was practising for when he made some exciting discovery on their real expedition.

"There might be," he said. "You don't know everything."

"I know more than you," was her reply.

That was undoubtedly true because Georgia knew a lot of things, especially science stuff, but she still didn't know everything. In fact, Charlie knew things that she didn't, like where he had hidden her favourite stuffed toy (a great white penguin) when she was seven, but that has nothing to do with this story.

Georgia was wearing her old muddy hiking boots, a camo top and a pair of old brown cargo shorts with a ripped pocket. She had a pair of binoculars and was examining things like Gran's blimp which was moored at the back of the house.

She didn't call out things like 'Gadzooks', because she thought that was a bit silly. When she found something interesting she said 'Eureka' instead (which you should really only say in the bath).



The backyard of Gran's house was enormous, as big as a football field. It was the perfect place for barefoot, grassy-kneed games and endless exploration. The rising sun was warm, but a cooling sea breeze was drifting in from the coast, rustling the leaves of the trees.

A small flock of toucanaries soared overhead, silhouetted against the rising sun as they sang in cheerful harmony. Doodle, their pet kangarooster, looked up and mimicked their cries. Like a parrot, he could perfectly imitate just about anything he heard which could sometimes be really annoying, although in this story it will prove to be extremely useful.

Today Charlie and Georgia were exploring the jungle. Well, the forest. Oh, all right, it was just one tree. A gnarled old oak in the back corner of the yard with a tyre swing hanging from one of its lowest branches.

They crept through the dark and dangerous jungle, followed closely by Doodle. Georgia went first but Charlie was okay with that because it meant she would be the first one to get bitten if they happened to encounter a rattlesnail, or a taipanda with its cute, furry, little black eyes and its deadly fangs. That's what older sisters were for.

Charlie knelt and examined a line of ants with his magnifying glass. "Why are they all walking in a straight line like that?" he asked. "How do they know where to go?"

"They're following a chemical trail," Georgia said, glancing down. "When one ant finds food, it leaves a trail of smells, called pheromones, for the others to follow."

"Like when Gran makes pizza and I can smell it from miles away," Charlie said.

"Sort of," Georgia said. "But if you mess up the trail, they'll get lost, like this." She raised a boot ready to stamp it down on the ants.

"Don't!" Charlie said quickly.

“They’re just ants,” Georgia said.

“And how would you like it if you were just going about your business and some giant came and squashed you, just to prove how smart they were?” Charlie said.

Georgia considered that then lowered her foot away from the ants.

“I can’t wait for our real expedition,” Charlie said. “It’s going to be the most epic adventure ever!”

“No,” Georgia sighed. “It’s not.”

“Yes, it is!” Charlie insisted.

“It’s an expedition, not an adventure,” Georgia said.

“Well... that’s kind of like an adventure,” Charlie said.

Georgia sighed. “We’re going to spend a week traipsing through the Himalayas feeling cold and miserable, searching in vain for some creature that probably doesn’t even exist.”

“Like I said,” Charlie said. “The most epic adventure ever!”

Georgia shook her head. Charlie knew she was just about as excited as he was about the expedition, she just didn’t want to admit it. She was nearly a teenager and it wasn’t cool for teenagers to get excited about things like going on an expedition with their parents.

After they had been around the tree about three times, Charlie was getting a little tired of exploring the same part of the same jungle and had an idea.

“I think we’re lost,” he said.

He didn’t really think they were lost as he could see the backdoor to Gran’s house and the garden shed and the blimp.

“I think you’re right,” Georgia said, playing along.

“Will we ever make it back to civilisation?” he asked.

“There might be a way,” Georgia replied thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Charlie asked.

“Doodle.”

“What about him?”

“He’s actually a highly trained tracking kangarooster,” she said. “He can follow our scent and lead us back to our camp.”

“Like an ant trail!” Charlie said.

“Sort of,” she said, then looked down her nose at him. “You need to know these things when we go on our real expedition.”

“But Doodle’s not really a highly trained tracking kangarooster,” Charlie said.

“He is if I say he is,” Georgia said, folding her arms. “I’m the expedition leader.”

“Who made you the leader?” Charlie asked.

“I did,” Georgia said.

“Why did you get to choose?” Charlie asked.

“Because I’m the leader,” she said.

That was a bit much to process when you were lost in a dark and dangerous jungle, so Charlie bit his tongue and said nothing.

With Doodle leading the way, they turned and started to go around the tree the other way. Fortunately for Charlie, Doodle quickly got bored and bounded off over the lawn. He jumped up onto the roof of the garden shed and bounced back a moment later, holding a frisbee, which he dropped at Charlie’s feet.

He threw back his head and crowed. “Crackerdoodle-doo!”

Playing frisbee with a kangarooster is a little more challenging than with, say, a labraduck, or a bumblebeagle. Labraducks waddle around so slowly they never catch anything, and bumblebeagles tend to grab the frisbee and fly off with it, so the game is over before it starts.

But a kangarooster loves to play. It can jump really high, and it can snatch a rapidly spinning frisbee out of mid-air almost before it has left your hand.



The secret to playing with a kangarooster is to pretend to throw the frisbee in one direction and then quickly throw it in another. Kangaroosters are fast and strong, but they're not very smart.

Charlie threw the frisbee and watched it soar past the branches of the old oak, too high even for Doodle, who hopped along after it, waiting for it to come back down. The bright red comb on the top of his head quivered with excitement.

The frisbee curved around the tree like a boomerang and started dropping as it headed back in their direction. There was a blur of movement and Doodle leapt high, snatching the frisbee out of the air like a lizard's tongue catching an insect. He must have thought it was a particularly good catch because he threw back his head and crowed. "Crackerdoodle-doo!"

Of course, as soon as he did that, he dropped the frisbee. (I did say that kangaroosters are not very smart.) It hit one of his big kangaroo knees and bounced up into the air. He jumped again, grabbing the frisbee a second time while turning a complete somersault in mid-air. He landed and looked at Charlie and Georgia as if expecting applause. He really was quite full of himself, was Doodle.

You may have been wondering why Charlie and Georgia's parents were off on an expedition. You see, they were world-famous zoologists and explorers, which meant they were really clever, a bit nerdy (like Georgia), and spent a lot of time on expeditions looking for strange animals, and sometimes creatures thought to be extinct, like the Jeremiah Bullfrog, an extremely large frog with horns like a bull.

Their mum and dad had never taken Charlie and Georgia on one of their expeditions. But Charlie's birthday was coming up, and when they asked him what he wanted to do, he said he wanted to go on an expedition. After lots of pleading and wheedling, they had finally agreed.

For a month now Charlie had been counting the days until he and Georgia would go off with their mum and dad to the Himalayas, searching for the elusive yetiger, a creature that was half yeti and half sabre-toothed tiger.

Charlie had even received an early birthday present: brand-new hiking boots. His mum and dad had given them to him a week early so he could break them in before the expedition. Nobody wanted to be hiking through the Himalayas with blisters because you had new boots you hadn't broken in. He'd worn them every day since. He wore them at breakfast, lunch and dinner. He wore them when he went to the bathroom. One night he even wore them in bed.

In truth, Charlie was a bit nervous about the expedition, although he would never have admitted that to Georgia. The Himalayas were full of dangers and if you got in trouble, there was nobody to come to your rescue. (There was also no TV or ice cream, and you couldn't even send out for a pizza if you got hungry.)

Doodle had just started bounding back towards Charlie when Gran came hurrying out of the back door of the house with a strange expression.

"Charlie," she called out. "Georgia."

Charlie knew straight away that something was very, very wrong. It was the look on Gran's face. It was the way she said their names. But more than that it was the way she must have got dressed in a hurry because her cowboy hat was on backwards, and one arm was stuck through the neck hole of her sweater.

Charlie started to run towards her, and so did Georgia, but at the same time, Doodle came bounding in with the frisbee, weaving under Georgia's feet. She tripped, went head over heels, and crashed into Charlie, knocking him over too. His hat went flying and they all ended up on their backs on the grass in a tragic tangle of arms, legs and kangarooster staring up at Gran's blimp.



THE COLONEL

Oh, right. The blimp. I forgot to tell you about the blimp.

Meet *The Colonel*. It's a little like a hot air balloon except there's no hot air and it's not a balloon. Okay, so it's not really like a hot air balloon at all. Rather it's a long envelope filled with helium gas to make it float. That's the same gas they put in party balloons – the kind your silly cousin sometimes breathes in to make himself sound like a chipmunk. Helium gas is much lighter than air, so it floats up through air the same way that a bubble of air floats up through water. If you don't believe me, just go fart in a bath.

The Colonel is a wonderful flying machine. It has a propeller to push it along, rudders to steer it, large fins to keep it steady, and an atomic-powered rocket underneath for emergencies.

The big, balloony thing is called the envelope. Below that hangs the gondola, which looks a little like a pirate ship without the sails. It has four levels. On the very top, at the front, is the wheelhouse. Below that are the cabins for sleeping. On the next level down is the saloon (like a living room) along with the galley (kitchen) and the head (bathroom). Below that, inside the hull, is the hold, where you store stuff.

The Colonel has a rope ladder for people to climb on board and a long mooring rope with a big metal clamp on the end.

When Grandad was alive, The Colonel was their holiday home. Gran and Grandad journeyed all over the world in it, having lots of exciting holidays in exotic places like Finland, Madagascar, and Easter Island. But Gran hadn't really gone on holidays much since Grandad died.

It really was a wonderful (if slightly strange) holiday home, and you'd be foolish to think that it wasn't going to come in handy, sooner or later.

BAD NEWS PART II

Charlie froze, barely able to comprehend what he had just heard.

“Wait! What?” Georgia blurted out.

Gran said it again, although clearly it took a lot of effort. “Your mom and dad’s seaplane is missing.”

“What do you mean, missing?” Georgia asked. “Has it...” she almost couldn’t bring herself to say the word, “...crashed?”

Doodle untangled himself from the pile and started hopping from one foot to the other, the frisbee held firmly in his beak. He wanted to play some more. He wasn’t smart enough to know that it wasn’t a time for playing.

“No, no, sweetheart,” Gran said quickly, sitting down heavily on the steps of the back porch. “Not crashed. Not so far as we know. It’s just... missing.”

Charlie and Georgia went to sit on the step next to her, one on each side.

“They must be somewhere, right?” Charlie said, his voice rising in panic. “Maybe they just... um... just...”

Gran held out a hand to each of them, and they took it. Her grip was gentle but somehow reassuring. “The authorities are searching, but they haven’t found anything yet,” she said. “That’s a good thing. We just gotta hope that they’ve crash-landed somewhere and are sitting in their plane trying to make the radio work or to start a signal fire, or something like that. They’re real resourceful, your mom and dad.”

“Don’t they have emergency beacons, or... something?” Georgia demanded.

“They do, but there’s been no signal,” Gran said, her own voice cracking slightly. “Not yet, anyways.”

“Isn’t that strange?” Charlie asked.

She took a deep breath. “The important thing is, we haven’t heard anything bad yet.”

Charlie’s mind was racing. He felt dizzy, like the ground was shifting beneath him. Gran knew more than she was letting on – he was sure of it. But all he could say was, “What if they don’t come back?”

“I’m not going to lie to you and tell you that everything is going to be okay,” Gran said. “I hope it will. I pray it will. But I know no more than you.”

Georgia sniffled, wiping her eyes with the back of her other hand. “What are we supposed to do now, Gran? We can’t just sit here and wait.”

“She’s right!” Charlie leapt to his feet. “We have to go and look for them!”

“Waiting’s the only thing we can do,” Gran said softly, stroking Georgia’s hair. “Right now we just have to stay strong and look after each other. That’s what your mom and dad would want us to do.”

Charlie could see Georgia’s bottom lip start to tremble. He knew she must be feeling terribly upset because girls always got emotional about things and he knew that she wasn’t as strong and brave as he was.

So when she stood up and came to give him a hug, he let her, even though he didn’t need one but he knew she needed one and when she started crying he held on tightly and started crying too just so that she wouldn’t be crying all by herself.

That’s what little brothers were for.



THE MAN IN BLACK

Everything seemed strange.
The air seemed strange.
The sun in the sky seemed strange.

The house seemed strange.

The man with green hair and eyes who knocked on the door seemed strange.

Really there was nothing strange about the air or the sun. It was just that Charlie felt strange, which made everything else feel strange too. Even worse, tomorrow was his birthday. His parents had never missed his birthday before.

As for the house, well, to be honest, that was a little strange. It was as though when they had finished building they still had lots of stuff left over so they kept adding on bits in strange places. There were rooms sticking out of the walls, rooms without walls, walls without roofs, wonky windows, demented doors, peculiar porches and a huge tree on one corner that seemed to be part of the house itself.

Inside, there were staircases that led nowhere, windows that faced brick walls, windows in the floor, and even windows in the ceiling. There were pieces of furniture stuck to the ceiling, pieces of ceiling stuck to the furniture and lots and lots of photographs.

There were photographs of Gran and Grandad before they got old and wrinkly. There were photos of Charlie and Georgia's dad when he was a baby called Simon.

There was Simon as a little boy, a big boy, a teenager, a grown-up, getting married to Susan (Charlie and Georgia's mum) and so on. Charlie's favourite photo was one of his grandfather wing-walking. Gran and Grandad used to be in a flying circus, performing aerial stunts in old planes. That's how they met.

Gran was a fearless, barnstorming pilot, and Grandad was a wing-walker, who would go out onto the wing of Gran's airplane and do tricks like standing on his head or walking from the wing of one plane to another flying alongside.

This particular photo had pride of place in the lounge. It showed Grandad sitting on the front edge of the wing of Gran's plane, both of them grinning madly.

Charlie always thought that photo was really lovely and also really clever and daring. But it also made him a little bit sad in a way he didn't quite understand. Maybe it was because it showed a different side of Gran. The Gran he knew played cards by herself and made people cups of tea and took naps after lunch and talked to her dead husband and sometimes wore her hat backwards. But the Gran in this picture was young, daring and full of life and energy. It was hard to imagine that old Gran was once young Gran but he knew it was true, (except of course she hadn't been called Gran back then, she'd been called Norma).

Georgia was sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. She looked very sad. Charlie wished there was something he could do to cheer her up, but it was hard because he was also feeling very sad.

Gran went upstairs to get changed. She was really upset about everything but not so upset that she didn't notice she had her arm through the wrong hole of her sweater

When she came down again, dressed properly, she told Grandad all about what had just happened. Grandad had died a few years earlier, but Gran talked to him all the time as if he was still alive. She'd talk to the photo of Grandad for a long time, and now and then, she'd stop and nod as if she were listening.

If anybody commented, she'd say, "He is still alive. In here." She'd tap her heart. "To be honest he never used to talk much when he was around so I scarcely notice the difference."



Charlie thought she was secretly really sad about Grandad but he understood this was her way of not being sad so he didn't say, 'But that's only a photo' or 'But people can't live inside you' or 'You're as crazy as a soup sandwich' or anything like that.

Gran told Grandad all about why Charlie and Georgia were staying on longer than had been planned and how Simon and Susan were missing and how worried everybody was. Somehow hearing her tell Grandad that stuff made Charlie feel a little better. It was like sharing a heavy load. Maybe that's why she did it.

After that Gran made Charlie and Georgia a cup of tea.

Charlie didn't like tea, and neither did Georgia, but they both knew that making someone a cup of tea made the person making the tea feel better. So they smiled and said yes. Just as the kettle was just starting to boil, a knock came from downstairs.

It sounded sharp and brittle, like jangling bones rattling against the front door. The wind started howling too, which was strange because it hadn't been very breezy until then. The wind around Gran's house always sounded really creepy because of all the strange angles and rooms and chimneys. The wind yowled around all the odd bits of the house and sounded like three cats fighting in a tin drum.

The kitchen was on the second floor of the house, where it jutted out over the coal shed and had a window so they could look down and see who was at the door.

All they saw at first was the black hat. It had a wide brim and his head was tilted slightly so that it hid his face. His bony hand was extended, the way people do when they have already knocked once and they are not sure if anyone heard, so they are getting ready to knock a second time.

His fingernails were long and dirty, Charlie noticed. That itself wasn't all that strange as lots of people had dirty fingernails, especially if they had been gardening, cooking, or making a voodoo doll of their sister out of modelling clay (don't ask).

Charlie wrinkled his nose in disgust as an unusual smell wafted up from below, drifting in through the half-open window. It was a bit like decaying leaves or compost, the scent of damp, rotting vegetation.

Doodle, as always, was first to the door, they could hear him downstairs, hopping up and down and crowing. “Crackerdoodle-doo!”

“Y’all stay here,” Gran said warily, turning off the kettle.

Charlie and Georgia exchanged glances. It was unlike Gran to say something like that.

“Who is it?” Georgia asked.

“You’ll know when I know, no sooner ‘n no later,” Gran said, and headed downstairs.

Charlie looked back at the man. Something about him made Charlie feel nervous, though he couldn’t quite explain why.

“You should go and help her,” he said to Georgia.

“Help her do what?” Georgia asked.

“You know,” Charlie said. “In case you need to karate him or something.”

“It’s judo, not karate,” Georgia said.

Charlie, of course, knew this but always pretended he didn’t.

“And Gran told us to stay here,” Georgia said.

“You’re just afraid of him,” Charlie said.

“I’m not afraid of him, you are,” Georgia shot back.

“No you are,” Charlie said.

Just then they heard the front door open downstairs.

“Good day sir, how may I help you?” Gran asked politely.

The sounds from Doodle stopped. A moment later he appeared back upstairs and went to hide under the kitchen table, shaking his wattles.

Charlie and Georgia looked at each other. That was Doodle’s signal for danger.



The man took off his hat and held it to his chest, bowing slightly. His hair was green and tangled, like creeping weeds. His eyes – also green – glowed like embers in the shadowy doorway.

“Hello, my name is Dr Viktor Moro,” he said in a strange voice that reminded Charlie of the hiss of an angry cat. “I’m looking for Simon and Susan D’Urville.”

“Well I’m afraid they ain’t here,” Gran said.

Charlie noticed she didn’t mention they were missing.

“When will they be back?” Dr Moro asked. “I have some important information for them.”

“Can’t say,” Gran said. “You want to give me that information?”

Dr Moro shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s confidential.”

“Simon’s my son and Susan’s my daughter-in-law,” Gran said. “Ain’t nothing so confidential you can’t tell me what you want to tell them.”

“I’m afraid I cannot,” Dr Moro said.

“Fine and dandy,” Gran said. “Was there anything else?”

Dr Moro smiled, a thin, unsettling smile that never reached his strange, glowing green eyes. “No, nothing else... for now,” he said. “But do let them know I stopped by. I’m sure we’ll meet again, very s–”

Gran rather rudely slammed the door in Dr Moro’s face before he could finish.

Charlie and Georgia watched him stand on the doorstep for a moment. He raised his hand as if to knock once more but changed his mind and picked his nose instead. He put his hat back on and then walked slowly back to his car, a large, old, red convertible parked in the gravel driveway.

Something about Dr Moro didn’t feel right – not his green hair and eyes, not his strange voice, and definitely not the way he’d smiled. And what had he meant about meeting again very soon?

CRACKING THE CODE

Saturday was Charlie's birthday. It wasn't much of a birthday really, although he did find out something amazing. Something quite mind-blowing. In fact, something so... never mind, we'll get to it.

He didn't have a party. He usually had one every year, but today there was no party planned because they were all supposed to have been going on the expedition. That was probably just as well. He didn't feel like partying. Gran and Georgia knew he was feeling really sad and tried to cheer him up, but it didn't really work, probably because they were both feeling so sad too.

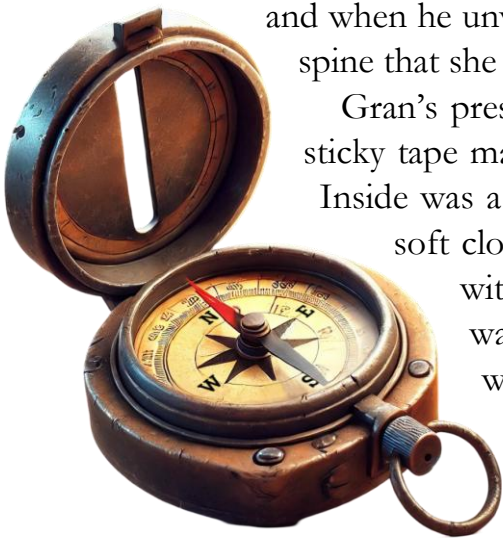
Gran made a nice birthday lunch of puffy tacos and baked a chocolate sponge cake. She didn't have any birthday candles, so she used matchsticks instead. Charlie had to blow them out quickly before they burned their way down to the icing.

Georgia gave him a book. It was one of his favourite authors, but it was hers too, and when he unwrapped it, he could tell by the tiny creases in the spine that she had read it first. He didn't mind, really.

Gran's present was wrapped in plain brown paper with old sticky tape marks that showed it had been reused many times.

Inside was a small cardboard box, and within it, nestled on a soft cloth, was a compass. It was an explorer's compass with a cover that flipped up to become a sight. It wasn't new either. In fact it looked very old and worn.

"It was your granddaddy's," Gran explained. "It was his lucky compass. I thought you might need it on your expedition, but now I guess..." she trailed off sadly.



Charlie put it down and gave her a big hug.

”Thanks, Gran,” he said. “I’m going to carry it everywhere. It’s the best birthday present ever!” He saw Georgia giving him a look and added, “But the book is really cool too.”

With their parents missing, Georgia and Charlie were staying with Gran for the time being, so after lunch, they went back to their own house to pick up more things, like extra t-shirts, socks, underwear and Charlie’s collection of origami dinosaurs. Important stuff like that.

“Y’all take your time,” Gran said as she went to make herself a cup of tea in the kitchen.

Doodle lay down in his kennel in the corner of the lounge.

Georgia was packed and ready in five minutes and sat in her bedroom reading a science book while Charlie looked for his favourite left sock, which was exactly the same as his favourite right sock except it had a big L on it.

His thoughts drifted back to his birthday. It was supposed to be a special day, but it had turned into one of the worst days of his life. He swallowed hard and blinked away a tear. What if his parents were never found? What if they never came back? Every birthday from now on would just be a painful reminder of the day everything went terribly wrong.

He gave up looking for the sock and then went to the kennel in the lounge to wake up Doodle so they could leave. But Doodle wasn’t there.

“Doodle,” he called.

There was no scurrying of feet or thumping of tail, which was a little strange.

“Doodle!” he called again. There was still no response, so he went looking.



He found the little kangarooster in his parent's study, a large, but somehow cosy room at the back of the house. It had a floor-to-ceiling bookcase on one wall with an old wooden desk on the wall opposite. On the wall at the end was a fireplace, stacked with newspaper, kindling, and firewood, ready to be lit, although it never was.

The walls were covered with photos of his mum and dad on their expeditions. There they were on Rottnest Island in Australia studying quokkadiles. Here they were in the frozen wilds of Antarctica investigating the eating habits of the Great White Penguin.

"Time to go, Doodle," he said.

Doodle was staring up at a picture pinned to the corkboard above the desk. The one of their mum and dad with the baby kangarautans. He looked at Charlie and then began pawing the ground with his foot, a sign that he wanted attention.

Charlie examined the photo. It was taken in the Australian outback, in front of a huge red rock called Uluru. The poor mother of the babies was very sick and unable to take care of them. So his parents had looked after them, feeding them milk and watermelon.

For the first few months, they had been like a mum and dad to the young kangarautans until their real mother got better. Charlie could understand why his parents treasured this picture.

Charlie found it sad and just a little bit scary being in this room when his parents were not there. There were so many things in there that reminded him of them. He put his hand on Doodle's shoulder and the little kangarooster rested his head on Charlie's arm.

"I know, little fella," Charlie said. "I miss them too."

"Hurry up!" Georgia shouted from her bedroom. "We don't have all day!"



“You hurry up yourself,” Charlie called back, which made no sense, but he hated getting bossed around by his sister.

“I’m already ready,” Georgia said, her voice annoyingly smug.

Charlie was just about to leave when Doodle reached up and rested his beak on the wooden desk, next to a white envelope.

Come on Doodle,” Charlie said, but Doodle didn’t move. He placed his paw on the envelope and looked up at Charlie with sad eyes.

Doodle had great instincts, and over the years, Charlie had learned to trust them, so he looked a little closer at the envelope. It was just a plain, white envelope, face down. He picked it up and turned it over.

In their mum’s neat handwriting, it read: ‘Georgia and Charlie.’ Below their names, in smaller letters, was written: ‘Open only in case of emergency’.

“Georgia,” Charlie called out.

“I’m busy,” Georgia yelled from her bedroom.

“I thought you were already ready.”

“I am. I’m busy reading.”

“You’re going to want to see this.”

Georgia arrived at the door a few seconds later. Charlie held up the envelope, and they stared at their mother’s writing.

“Is this an emergency?” Charlie asked.

“Of course it’s an emergency.” Georgia snatched it off him and tore it open. A letter fell out. She caught it and unfolded it quickly then showed it to Charlie.

“It looks like a poem,” he said.

“It’s a nursery rhyme,” Georgia said.

“It’s a puzzle!” Charlie gasped with sudden understanding. “Mum knows how much we love puzzles, so she’s written a secret message disguised as a nursery rhyme.”

“How much *you* love puzzles,” Georgia corrected him.

That was true. Georgia was great at knowing stuff, especially science stuff, but Charlie had a real knack for figuring out stuff.

“Whatever,” he said. “Let’s just try to solve it.”

Hickory dickory, buckle my shoe
The wives from St Ives travelled to Uluru
They saw Snow White and all of her gang
But the mice didn't see and away they all ran

As if they were on swivels, Charlie’s and Georgia’s heads turned to look at the photo of their parents with the kangarootan babies at Uluru.

“What does it all mean?” Georgia wondered.

“I don’t know,” Charlie said. “Snow White? Mice?” He walked over to the corkboard and stood in front of it, wondering if there was a safe behind it.

He tried sliding the corkboard to the left, then the right, then up, then down, but nothing happened. He tried pulling it away from the wall, but nothing happened. He tried twisting it around in a circle, and something happened. He only turned it a little bit, and it stopped with a soft click, then swung open. On the wall behind it was a series of six dials, like the wheels on a bike lock, each with numbers from zero to ten. Next to that was a handle.

Georgia pushed him out of the way. “That’s a combination lock,” she said, waving the envelope in the air. “It’s a code!”

If you are an exceptionally clever reader you might even have worked out the code by now. If you need a little more time, we can stop and admire this picture of a quokkadile that was sitting on the mantelpiece above the fireplace.

Cute little critter, huh?



Finished?

Given up?

Okay, here's the poem again.

Hickory dickory, buckle my shoe
The wives from St Ives travelled to Uluru
They saw Snow White and all of her gang
But the mice didn't see and away they all ran

"Hickory dickory," Charlie said. "Like the nursery rhyme. Hickory dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock. The clock struck *one*... The first number must be one!"

Georgia set the first dial to one, then said, "*One, two*, buckle my shoe." She set the next two dials to one and two. "Okay, the wives from St Ives."

"As I was going to St Ives, I met a man –" Charlie began.

"With *seven* wives," Georgia cut in. She set the next dial to seven. "Okay. 'Snow White and her friends' is easy. The *seven* dwarves. What about the mice?"

"Um," said Charlie.

"Um," said Georgia.

"What didn't they see?" Charlie asked. "Snow White?"

"The dwarves? The wives from St Ives?" Georgia suggested.

Charlie snapped his fingers. "*Why* didn't they see?"

"Because they were blind!" Georgia said. "*Three* blind mice."

"We got it!" Charlie cried.

"One, one, two, seven, seven, three," Georgia said, setting the last dial. She tried to turn the handle, but it didn't budge.

"We must have one of the numbers wrong," Charlie said.

“The first is definitely right,” Georgia said. “The clock struck *one*. And it’s *one, two*, buckle my shoe.”

“The man from St Ives definitely had *seven* wives,” Charlie said.

“And there were *seven* dwarves,” Georgia said.

“And *three* blind mice. Wait!” Charlie said. “Read the third line again.”

Georgia picked up the letter and read it out loud.

“Snow White and her friends.”

“Snow White and her friends,” Charlie repeated and slapped his own forehead.

“Oh, duh!”

“What?” Georgia asked.

“Seven dwarves *plus* Snow White!” Charlie grinned. “That’s *eight*!”

Georgia quickly set the fourth dial to eight. This time the handle turned. A clunk came from the end of the room, and they turned to see that the fireplace had come free from the wall and was standing open just a few centimetres.

Charlie beat Georgia to it and swung the fireplace open wide. Behind it was a dark passageway but just enough light spilled in from the study for Charlie to see a light switch on one wall. He flicked it on.

They both stared in amazement.

“Time to go,” Gran called from the kitchen. “Y’all are slower ‘n a snail on sticky tape.”

THE SECRET PASSAGE

Just to bring you up to speed real quick so we can get on with the most epic adventure ever, Susan and Simon D’Urville (Charlie and Georgia’s mum and dad) weren’t really explorers. They were zoologists – that part was true. But that was just a cover for their real jobs as secret agents for an organisation called PARADIGM.

That stood for ‘Protection Against Radical And Dangerous Illegal Genetic Manipulation’. They had been on many important cases, tracking down and stopping people like Magnus Kreel, who was trying to create a Hipposaurus Rex, or Dr Vladimir Grimspur, who was building an army of mutant scorpions. And then there was that nasty business at Buckingham Palace, but we don’t like to talk about that. It was all top secret, of course, which is why you have never heard of any of these people.

The folio lay open on the old wooden desk in the study, brightly lit by the harsh, overhead fluorescent light. Two leather ID wallets sat on one side.

Gran said softly, “I figured there was something goin’ on, but this is like finding a gator in the gumbo pot.”

“You didn’t know anything about this?” Georgia asked.

“I knew there was more to their jobs than met the eye, but this is all news to me.” She shook her head. “You think you know someone, just because you’ve known ‘em since the day they was born.”

Charlie and Georgia’s house was built on the side of a mountain. That wasn’t unusual in this part of town, where the surroundings were quite hilly. What was unusual was the secret passageway they had discovered hidden behind the fireplace that had led them through a dimly lit tunnel to a secret room inside the mountain.

The walls were lined with long, dusty shelves filled with lever-arch files, all labelled with letters and numbers. In the centre of the room, sitting on a table, was the folio, with big red labels saying ‘TOP SECRET’ and ‘FOR YOUR EYES ONLY’. They had brought it out to the study to show Gran.

“I can’t believe they didn’t tell us anything,” Charlie said. “It’s like our parents have whole lives that we know nothing about.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Gran said enigmatically.

Georgia picked up their mother’s ID wallet. She gently touched the photo of her mum, then put it down, picked up their dad’s wallet and did the same thing.

Charlie didn’t say anything to interrupt her. She was hurting, he knew, and she missed them terribly. He knew this because he did too.

“Why didn’t they take their ID badges with them?” Georgia wondered.

“I’d guess because they’re undercover,” Gran said. “They couldn’t risk them being found.”

Charlie flipped over a couple of pages in the folio. “Wait!” he said, scanning some notes. “That whole expedition to Kaho‘olawe was a fake-out! They weren’t really looking for Jeremiah’s Bullfrog at all, they were on their way to...” he checked the notes, “Kānaka ‘Ino Island, a deserted volcanic island near Midway Atoll, investigating reports of a strange creature they referred to as a ‘ballamanana’.”

“What in tarnation is that?” Gran asked.

Charlie blinked. “According to this, it’s a llama crossed with a banana.”

“Scientifically impossible,” Georgia said. “Plant and animal DNA don’t mix.”

“Dad thought so too,” Charlie said. “He says here that nobody has ever successfully crossed an animal with a fruit, or any kind of plant.”

He tapped a piece of paper, which had a sketch of what a ballamanana might look like. Across the top, their father had scrawled: ‘Most probably a local myth’.

“Ballamananas,” Gran scoffed. “Whatever next? All these strange crossbreeds we have nowadays didn’t exist when I was a girl.”

Charlie was confused. “There were no crossbreeds? No kangaroosters? No bumblebeagles?”

“Oh well of course there were some,” Gran said. “Like crossbred cats and crossbred dogs. I remember when it was very fashionable to cross certain kinds of dogs with poodles and make new breeds like Labradoodles, Moodles and Cavoodles.”

“We should cross Doodle with a Poodle,” Charlie said, “and make a Poodledoodle.”

Doodle looked up at his name being mentioned.

“Doodle’s just his name, noodlehead,” Georgia said. “He’d be a kangaroosterooodle.”

“Or a kangaroodlooster,” Charlie said.

“Anyways,” Gran said. “There was a few crossbreeds as we know ‘em today. There was Ligers...”

“That’s a cross between a lion and a tiger,” Georgia said smugly.

“And Zonkeys.”

“Zebra and Donkey,” Charlie said quickly to show he was just as smart as she was.

“And even Geeps,” Gran said.

“That’s a sheep and a...” Charlie tailed off, unsure.

“Goat,” Georgia said and gave him a look that left no doubt who was the smarter of the two.

“But nowadays I think this crazy genetic experimentation has gone too far,” Gran continued.

“Why do they do it?” Georgia asked.

“Because they can,” Gran said. “That’s all the reason folks need sometimes. But plants and animals? A ballamanana? That’s crazier than a sack full of squirrels.”

“Only if it exists,” Georgia said wisely. “And Dad thinks it’s most likely just a myth. There probably isn’t really any such thing.”

“Shame,” said Charlie, who would quite like to have met a walking banana the size of a llama (as long as it was friendly).

“But you know what this means, right?” Georgia said, suddenly all excited. “It means that all the searchers have been looking in completely the wrong place! Mum and Dad are not at Kaho‘olawe. They’re here! Kānaka ‘Ino Island!” She tapped a finger on one of the maps. “That’s well to the west of Hawaii!”

That was the sort of moment of realisation that would have made Charlie say ‘gadzooks’, or possibly ‘eureka’ (even though he wasn’t in the bath), but he didn’t get to say any of those things, because just at that moment there was a terrific crash from the front of the house and Doodle gave his danger signal, shaking his wattles wildly.

“What the hootenanny?” Gran said, looking up.

There was another, even louder crash as if the front door had just been smashed in, which it undoubtedly had. They could hear movement in the front room.

“In here, hurry,” Gran said, nodding at the open fireplace. “Bring the folio.”

Nervous little Doodle did not need a second invitation, he was in through the door in a flash. Charlie grabbed the folio and the IDs while Georgia quickly reset the dials, turned the handle, and put the corkboard back in place.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway as Charlie ran through the secret door. Gran pulled the door closed and locked it, but not before Charlie saw that he had dropped something. One of the ID wallets must have slipped out of his grasp. It was lying on the floor by the desk.

“I dropped one of the IDs,” he said urgently. “I have to go get it.”



“No time,” Gran said. She pulled her phone out of a pocket and dialled the emergency number. Charlie could hear it ringing faintly in her ear. “Police,” she whispered.

From outside, a series of clattering, tearing, and scraping sounds echoed through the wall, interspersed with thuds and bangs. The study was being thoroughly searched.

Staring at the secret fireplace door, Charlie spotted a small metal plate engraved with a symbol that resembled an eye. At its centre was a knob. He frowned, then grasped the knob and pulled. A slender rod slid smoothly from the wall, revealing a glassy brown eyeball at the end. A small hole remained where it had been. Charlie tiptoed closer and pressed his eye to the opening, then drew a sharp breath. It was a spyhole! He was looking out into the study through the quokkadile’s eye in the photo above the fireplace.



Dr Moro was standing by the desk, holding up the ID wallet Charlie had dropped.

“Ah hah!” Dr Moro hissed. “Mango Jack!”

Now there were more big, heavy footsteps. The footsteps of the kind of man who could smash a solid door off its hinges.

A moment later a huge man entered the study, ducking to get through the doorway. Mango Jack was, quite simply, the biggest person Charlie had ever seen – if in fact he was even human at all.

He stood well over two metres tall. He had shoulders like boulders and a back like a sack of potatoes. He wasn't wearing a shirt – probably because they didn't make shirts that big. His body was covered in thick, vibrant fur, a wild mix of green and orange that rippled with every movement. He wore a hat, a fedora, like an old-time gangster, pulled low. Peering out from under the brim of the hat were intense eyes, framed by thick green eyebrows. His orange and green beard was long and gave him a fearsome, primal look. There was something both human and animal about him.

“You. Found. Some-thing?” Mango Jack's voice was a deep velvet rumble, like distant thunder. He spoke each word as if it were a separate sentence and each syllable as if it was a separate word.

For an answer, Dr Moro held up the ID wallet. Mango Jack looked at it vacantly.

“I told you, didn't I tell you!” Dr Moro hissed.

“What you told me?” Mango Jack asked. He didn't sound too bright.

“PARADIGM!” Dr Moro spat out the word as if it had just flown into his mouth.

“Par-a-dime,” Mango Jack repeated dully.

“I've never been so angry in my life,” Dr Moro said. “Not even with Montgomery.”

“Mont-gom-er-y,” echoed Mango Jack.

Dr Moro's lips curled into a sneer. “Well, I guess that's what happens when PARADIGM agents stick their noses where they don't belong.”

“Serves. Them. Right,” Mango Jack said with a snigger. “What now?”

“We have meetings with our suppliers,” Dr Moro said in an oddly loud voice. “That will take a week. Get the plane ready and make sure we have enough fuel to get back to Kānaka 'Ino.”

Two police officers were standing in the lounge. One was a tall woman with ginger hair named Constable Copper, which was a rather funny name for a police officer. The other, a shorter, slightly chubby man with a friendly smile, was Sergeant Banks. That wasn't a particularly funny name – unless, of course, his first name happened to be Rob.

The house was the biggest mess Charlie had ever seen in his life. The furniture was all overturned. The cupboards and drawers were open, and all the contents were on the floor. The television was smashed, the terracotta warrior statues were broken, and all the photos and paintings had been pulled off the walls. Constable Copper was taking pictures of it all with her phone.

“Any idea who did this?” Constable Copper asked, taking a photo of the front door.

Charlie crossed his arms angrily and said, “Dr Moro.”

Constable Copper took a photo of the statues and the remains of Doodle's kennel.

“Who is this Dr Moro?” Sergeant Banks asked, writing the name in a notebook.

“We had a visitor at my place yesterday,” Gran said. “Gave his name as Dr Viktor Moro. Odd sort of bird. He came looking for Simon and Susan, the children's parents. I didn't like the shine of his shoes and when I wouldn't tell him anything, he scramoodled.”

“And you saw him do all this?” Sergeant Banks asked, waving a hand at the mess.

Charlie was silent. They all were. They had already decided how much they could say to the police. They couldn't tell them about the secret room so if they revealed that Charlie had seen them, that would raise awkward questions about how, which they didn't want to answer.

“We were upstairs when it happened, hiding in a closet,” Gran lied, her voice steady. “There were two of them. We heard them.”

“Uh-huh,” Copper said, raising an eyebrow sceptically. “And you knew it was this Dr Moro and some... accomplice, by the sounds they made?”

“By their smell,” Georgia said.

Copper raised her other eyebrow. “Can you often identify people by their smell?”

“Him, I could,” Georgia said with a sniff. “He smelled like compost.”

“Uh-huh,” Copper said again.

Doodle looked at her and mimicked the sound. “Uh-huh.”

Copper gave him a mildly annoyed look.

Sergeant Banks scribbled a note, but said, “I wouldn’t go around accusing people without proof. You could get in a lot of trouble.”

“You said Dr Moro was looking for the children’s parents?” Copper asked, flicking through the photos on her phone with a bored expression. “Where are they at the moment?”

Gran hesitated, then glanced at Georgia and Charlie. “We don’t know,” she said quietly. “Their plane went missing two days ago.”

Copper looked up, her expression quickly shifting. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said with a sympathetic frown. An uncomfortable silence followed.

“Can you tell us if anything has been stolen?” Banks asked.

Gran hesitated again. “No, I don’t think so. But... they left in a hurry when they heard the police siren.”

“Could’ve been teenagers,” Banks suggested, eyeing the damage to the door. “Happens all the time in these neighbourhoods. Kids these days have no respect.”

Gran narrowed her eyes at him. “This wasn’t the work of hooligans, officer.”

“I thought you said you didn’t see them,” Copper said, tapping her pen against her notebook impatiently.

“I said we heard them,” Gran said. “Their voices. They weren’t teenagers.”

Copper’s eyes flicked between Charlie and Georgia. “So what were they looking for? Do your parents keep valuables in the house?”

Charlie’s heart raced. He wanted to blurt out everything, about Dr Moro, Mango Jack, and their parents being secret agents, but he bit his tongue.

“Nothing special,” Georgia answered.

“Uh huh,” Copper said.

“Uh-huh,” Doodle echoed, tilting his head to one side.

Copper glared at him.

“Right...” Banks said, “Riiiiight.” He drew out the word. He looked around the room. “So, no harm done, then?”

“Harm?” Gran said, her voice rising. “The door’s all busted in, the house has been turned upside downside and we’re lucky none of us got hurt!”

Copper waved her hand dismissively. “If nothing’s missing there’s not much we can do. We’ll file a report, but without any real witnesses or CCTV...”

“So we’re not ‘real’ witnesses, then,” Georgia said, crossing her arms angrily.

Banks sighed, slid his pen into the spiral binding of his notebook then tucked both away in a pocket. “We’ll leave you with a case number. If anything valuable turns up missing, or if you remember anything more concrete, just call the local police station.”

Gran’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Of course,” she said stiffly.

The officers turned to leave, but not before Constable Copper threw one last look over her shoulder. “It’ll turn out to be teenagers,” she said with what she probably thought was a reassuring expression. “Nothing to get too worked up about.”

“Uh-huh,” said Doodle.



They had to wait for a while for a local carpenter to come and fix the front door, and they spent that time putting the house back into some sort of order.

“Just as well for them, they didn’t find us,” Charlie said as he picked up the fallen terracotta warriors and piled them in a corner. “I’d have given that doctor a black eye and a bloody red nose to go with his stupid green hair.”

“Don’t be dumb,” Georgia said, sweeping up broken crockery with a brush and shovel and putting it in a plastic dustbin. “You’d never have got past Mango Jack.”

“I didn’t like the look of that one at all,” Gran said grimly. She was putting drawers back into cabinets.

“I’d have left him to Georgia,” Charlie said. “She would have kung-fu’d him.”

“No. I wouldn’t,” Georgia said with a horrified expression. “And it’s judo, not kung fu.”

“Hai-yah!” Charlie cried, crouching and making fists.

“Hai-yah!” mimicked Doodle, and, not to be outdone, attempted a flying kung-fu style kick that would have been quite awesome if he hadn’t fallen over backwards and knocked over the dustbin that Georgia was using for the crockery, scattering it all over the room. Somehow he then got his head stuck in the dustbin and bounced all around, crowing, crashing into things and knocking them over, although, to be honest, he could hardly make matters worse.

Gran drove much faster than usual on the way home, speeding around corners and honking her horn at slower drivers who got in her way. That was quite unlike Gran. Charlie had to cling to the grab handle above the door to avoid being thrown around on the corners. Georgia was doing the same.

She shot Charlie a worried look, but he barely noticed. Dr Moro’s words kept circling in his head.

That’s what happens when PARADIGM agents stick their noses where they don’t belong.

Charlie swallowed. “What do you think he meant?” he finally asked. “About Mum and Dad?”

Gran shook her head. “Don’t read too much into it, sugar. We won’t know for sure till we get to the island.”

“Wait, what?” Georgia asked, her eyes wide.

“Well it’s pretty clear that those cops ain’t gonna do nothing,” Gran said, skidding the car around into her driveway, sending gravel flying and a cloud of dust billowing out behind them. “We’re gonna have to handle this our own selves.”

“But what can we do?” Georgia asked.

“You heard Moro say they got meetings with their suppliers,” Gran said, sliding the car to a stop outside the front door. The cloud of dust that had been chasing them caught up, swallowing the car in a swirling haze. “They ain’t heading back to the island for a week. That gives us time.”

“For a rescue mission!” Charlie breathed, jumping out of the car, his heart pounding.

Gran’s smile was tight. “Hopefully.”

Georgia was close behind them. “But Kānaka ‘Ino island is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean! How are we going to get all the way there?”

Gran simply looked up as she strode toward the front door.

Charlie followed her gaze.

I told you that blimp was going to come in handy, sooner or later.