

THE GLASS TABLE

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To my nephews, Jack and Jordan

And dedicated also to Daniel Morcombe, who disappeared while waiting for a bus, age thirteen

Chapter One

No one noticed fourteen-year-old Jack Irwin-Hunter as he hiked his way up the steep slope towards Lake Como. No one noticed Jack, even though the road was busy with traffic as residents evacuated the town of Rumpole below in search of a mountain breeze. That summer was extreme with heat and the hottest recorded in Rumpole's history.

It was the worst way possible to spend the school holidays: trapped indoors like caterpillars in a bug-catcher, with armpits flowing like waterfalls and hair damp and matted, hanging in dreads like worms. With one smelly pop out of a lethargic Labrador, the putrid air would linger on the heated oxygen molecules, leaving everyone gasping for just one gulp of clean, cooler air. It was all highly unpleasant and utterly boring.

The solution to ease frayed tempers was to pack the car and head to Lake Como, where altitude chilled the air and the rusty, jagged edges of Hanging Rock imprisoned

the troposphere. The blue, crisp waters of the lake were frosty enough for polar bears. It was like sitting in a refrigerator and not at all like backyard pools, where children boiled like spaghetti in a huge outdoor pot. Pine trees scented the air, making every day feel like Christmas, and fallen cones and needles demanded collection for painting or hiding inside someone else's sleeping bag.

A convoy of vehicles headed toward the lake, with air conditioners spluttering warm air into steamy cars. Windows left open drew in a blistering blast, as if the winds had come straight off the Sahara desert out of Africa.

In the heat, rattletraps and rust-buckets were forced to a standstill by the roadside, perched at a dangerous angle on the slope, almost upright on their back wheels. Hissing steam rose from bonnets, broiling the atmosphere a further ten degrees or more. Those families had to wait for night to fall before cranking flailing engines for the final ascent, and everyone was cranky, especially kids and grandmothers, who were stuck beside saliva-dripping jaws. Some car windows were so covered in drool that you could no longer see the steam rising from the bitumen outside.

The atmosphere was still hot, even under a night sky, but at least the black air that filtered through open windows tamed grouches and brought excitement, once the traveling was back underway.

A trail of white headlights zigzagged up the mountain to announce the arrival of more campers, even though the cabins and campgrounds were already full and overflowing.

In the morning, before the first light broke over Hanging Rock, those who had slept the short night in cars, owners of the rattletraps and rust-buckets, set to making a new camp in a wooded area right beside the slapping waters of the lake. Families worked together digging trenches for toilets, hanging hoses in trees for showers with cool lake water pumped by generator, and clearing ground for a village of tents. Shrubs and foliage were trimmed to make way for a community kitchen, complete with portable barbecues, grillers and a rock-ringed pit for roasting potatoes and marshmallows. Gas lanterns were hung from trees like a winter wonderland without the snow. When the camp was finished, the new residents celebrated. Across the lake, other campers, who had watched the hive of morning activity, were green with envy. The new camp was even better than the official one, and they were no longer laughing at the latecomers in their rusting old cars.

That's when it all began.

Chapter Two

"Where am I?" asked Jack Irwin-Hunter.

"Dude, I dunno ... there are fish and, and ... we must be under water!" replied Lucy Bintapple.

"We must be in the lake," said Jordan Carrefour. "Something grabbed my feet and pulled me along the bottom."

"We could be in the river Kai," said Jack.

"Yeah, it pulled me down the river," replied Jordan.

"Must have been a shark," said Lucy.

"There aren't any sharks in the lake or the river," Jordan answered.

"Must have been the Lock Ness monster then!" said Lucy.

"Has anyone noticed that we're talking under water?" asked Ming Zhi Chen.

"And breathing," added Jack. "Look, bubbles," he said.

They looked up as a swirl of water brought two more children to the gathering.

"Who are you?" asked Lucy.

"Isaac Witherspoon, and this is my little brother Toby. Where are we? What happened? What's going on?"

"We don't know," said Jordan. "I was on my boogie board, and the next thing I know, I'm being dragged along the bottom of the lake, and then I'm here with you lot."

"What about everyone else?" asked Jack. "Was everyone else in the lake too?"

Heads nodded.

"Are we fish?" asked Isaac.

"Dude, there's a booger hanging out of your nose!"

Isaac wiped at his face with the back of his hand. "Shut up, carrot top."

"Did anyone happen to notice that glass table over there?" Ming interrupted.

"Wow!" said Lucy, and they all stopped to stare at the strange rectangle rising up from the riverbed, glistening in the waters of the river Kai.

"There are six seats and six of us. I wonder if we're supposed to sit down," said Jack.

"And there's a book in the middle of the table. I wonder if we're supposed to read it. Maybe it will explain everything," offered Ming.

"Might be a trap," said Lucy.

"I don't think we have a choice," said Jack, flicking away to take a seat at the head of the table.

"Dude, you just swam like a dolphin!"

"Huh?" said Jack, glancing down at his feet. "I guess I did."

"We can all swim like dolphins," said Lucy. "See!" She glided around the table to demonstrate, with her two feet gripped together like a flipper.

"Awesome," said Isaac.

Jordan dashed upstream to attempt an acrobatic spin and returned a short while later, rubbing at his arm.

"What happened?" Lucy laughed.

"A giant fish bit me!"

"Okay, everyone, shouldn't we sit down at the glass table and find out what this is all about?" Jack called out and waited. "You can swim afterwards ... everyone ... not just Ming? Hey! Come here, people!"

"I'm not sure I want to know," said Isaac with a huff as he slid onto a glass chair. Lucy and Jordan filled the vacant seats, and they all stared at the glass book that shone like the moon. Their eyes were the size of dinner plates, and their mouths were wide open, like the clowns at the carnival waiting for a ping-pong ball. Jack rubbed his fingers over the words etched into the cover.

"It's a manual," Isaac explained to Toby seated to his right.

"What's a 'man-oo-al'?" Toby asked.

"It's a book with instructions and information," Ming replied.

"Is someone going to open it?" asked Jordan.

"I guess so," said Jack, and with a deep breath, he reached forward to turn the glass cover to the front page. "Welcome, spirits of the river Kai," he read to a round of gasps.

"Hey!" yelled Lucy. They all screamed and jumped in their chairs. Jordan fell off his satiny seat and onto the stony bed of the river. Toby started to cry.

"What is it?" Jack called out, dropping the glass cover on his fingers.

"We're all wearing watches," Lucy replied.

Long sighs and growls from around the table gurgled in the gentle streaming water.

"You crazy girl," scolded Jordan, dragging himself upwards. "You scared us half to death, and now I have a bruised butt to go with my chewed arm."

"Lucy, please don't do that again," Jack pleaded. "We're all on edge here."

"But look—they're all the same." She held up her wrist to show the orange band. The watch had a round black face with white numbers and three hands for hours, minutes and seconds. "What time do you have, dudes?"

"Seven o'clock, twenty-two minutes and forty-six seconds," said Jack.

"Same here," the others chimed.

"But it doesn't show the date," said Ming, "just the time, so we'll never know how long we've been here and how many hours have passed."

"Or weeks, or years," Isaac moaned.

They sat in silence staring at their wrists. "This must be a dream," said Jordan.

"Yeah, dude, it's just a dream. Whew!"

"Well, while we're dreaming, we might as well read this manual," said Jack. He began. "Welcome, spirits of the river Kai." He looked up at his fellow spirits with a serious glance, and then turned the heavy page. His fellow spirits leaned inward, with wide eyes and faces brightened white by the glow of the imposing glass book.

"It's a list," said Jack, "with six names: Jack Irwin-Hunter, age fourteen. That's me. Ming Zhi Chen, age twelve; Lucy Bintapple, age twelve; Isaac Witherspoon, age eleven; Jordan Carrefour, age ten; and Toby Witherspoon, age seven." Jack lifted the etched page to the next piece of glass.

"Welcome to the glass table, spirits of the river Kai. You are here because a spell cast you into a spirit world, and so you must now live by the six rules in this manual. You will live forevermore as spirits unless you can escape or find a way to break this spell. If you break the spell, you can return home once more as children. If you escape, you can also return home once more as children, but there will be consequences.

"You must first elect your leader. The person you choose must ensure that the rules are obeyed. Your leader will need strength and courage and may have to sacrifice his or her life so that the rest of you may be freed, so choose wisely."

Jack looked up. His face was pale, and not just from the brightness that radiated from the manual. He swallowed hard and read on.

"Next page, 'Rule number one: freedom. You are sitting at the glass table, at the bottom of the river Kai, which flows down to meet the ocean. Swim down the river to the river mouth and pass through it, and you will become a child again and you will be able to go home.

"But this is not as easy as it sounds. The mouth of the river is guarded by the wood spirits, six more children like you who were swimming in the lake when the spell was cast. The wood spirits have an oak table that sits on the bank of the river Kai, downstream from the glass table. The wood spirits can also live under water, and they will try to stop you from escaping through the river mouth and for good reason.

"Each time a river spirit passes through the mouth of the river, one wood spirit will die. Should four or more wood spirits die, then the woods surrounding the lake and all the creatures that live in the woods, will burn to the ground in a great fire. The lake will evaporate from the heat. Then I will cast another spell to punish all of you for the destruction, and that spell, I promise, will be far worse than this one.

"Rule number two: visitations. All of the spirits, the river spirits and the wood spirits, can move about freely. You can go home, visit your family, see your friends, but because you are spirits, no one will see you or hear you. If you touch someone in the living world, they will not feel anything, although some people may sense your presence and may even be able to contact you, but only if they truly believe in the spirit world. However, you are not free to go wherever you want, whenever you want. Two river spirits must be seated at the glass table at all times, and there should always be enough wood spirits at the river mouth to defend against any possible escapes by the river spirits.

"If a river spirit leaves for a home visit and does not return to the glass table within four hours, then one river spirit and one wood spirit will die. You must, therefore, be punctual."

"Ah, the watches," said Ming. "See, it has a stop clock in the top right-hand corner, set at four hours. We must have to press that button when we leave to start the countdown."

"Go on, Jack!" said Lucy. "This is some dream!"

"I get the feeling this is not a dream," said Jordan.

"Rule number three: who lives and who dies. The river spirits cannot kill or be killed. The wood spirits, however, will live forever as spirits unless the spell is broken. They cannot escape the spell by passing through the river mouth, and worse, one of them will die every time a river spirit escapes. For them, there is no way to return home as children unless this spell is broken.

"Rule number four: breaking the spell. This spell can be broken only when the Rumpole City Council orders the lifelong protection of the woods, the lake, and the river. There must be an end to the pollution caused by noisy children and their littering, and an end to the destruction caused by developers.

"Rule number five: destruction of the woods, the lake, or river by human hand. In the event that humans should cause further destruction to the woods, the lake, or the river Kai which flows from it, then all spirits—the river spirits and the wood spirits—will die."

"We're doomed," Isaac moaned.

"Rule number six:" Jack continued, "maintaining the balance of the two spirit worlds. In the event that four or more river spirits escape through the river mouth and wood spirits have died as a result, then the caster of this spell may restore the balance, and more children will join the remaining spirits in the spell."

Jack turned to the last page. "What is your destiny?" he read and closed the book.

"Wow," said Jordan. "Yep, I'm pretty sure, this is not a dream. My dreams aren't usually this complicated."

"Dude, that was heavy, and I don't mean the glass book!"

"What's a 'destiny?'" asked Toby.

"Destiny, Tobes, is what's going to happen to us. We're all doomed!" said Isaac.

"It's written as a question," offered Ming, "so I think we're being asked which choice will we make—to escape, like it says in rule number one, and not care that the wood spirits die or that the woods and the lake will burn. Or, it's another destiny if we decide instead to break the spell, as in rule number four, and save the woods, the lake, all of us, and the wood spirits."

"It's too much to take in," said Isaac dropping his head onto the table. "My head hurts."

"I think we should go swimming," suggested Lucy. "Can't we have some fun and worry about all this serious stuff later?"

"I wonder what's going on back at the lake," said Jordan. "I wonder if anyone has noticed that we're gone."

"If they search for us, will they find us?" asked Toby.

"They can't hear us or see us," Jack answered, "So ..."

"Did anyone leave a clue?" asked Ming.

"My boogie board is probably still in the lake where I left it," Jordan said. "I wonder what they'll be thinking about it."

"My dad will be blowing his top," said Lucy. "I'm going to be in heaps of trouble."

"Lucy, he has to find you first," Isaac groaned. "It's all over for us. We're all doomed."

Chapter Three

Mr. Carrefour paced by the edge of Lake Como in search of Jordan. It was eight o'clock and time for breakfast. He had last seen his son an hour earlier in a sneaky sprint to the lake with his boogie board. Mr. Carrefour stared at it now as the boogie board floated listlessly on the lake's surface. "Would you have seen my son Jordan, Mr. Bintapple?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Carrefour, I'm afraid not. And my daughter, Lucy, would you have seen her? It's not like her to be late for pancakes."

"Isaac? Toby? Come here this instant!"

"Good morning, Mrs. Witherspoon," said Mr. Bintapple. "Looking for your boys?"

"Good morning, Mr. Bintapple. Yes, they've gone off on their own again. How many times must I tell them?"

"I know, Mrs. Witherspoon, I know. If that Lucy is not back here in ten minutes, she'll be grounded for a year, and with no pocket money."

"Where could they be? Rascals," said Mr. Carrefour. "Why don't we split up? I'll search the campgrounds. Mr. Bintapple, if you could search the woods, and Mrs. Witherspoon, perhaps if you could continue to search around the lake?"

"Right you are, Mr. Carrefour," said Mr. Bintapple. "Let's meet back here in, say ... fifteen minutes? All watches synchronized?"

Mrs. Witherspoon nodded while Mr. Carrefour raced towards the campgrounds, having noted a crowd had gathered around a little Chinese woman.

"What's the problem?" Mr. Carrefour asked.

"Her daughter's missing. Have you seen her by any chance?" a woman asked.

"No, I haven't, but ... this is quite disturbing ... My son is missing also, and Lucy Bintapple and the Witherspoon boys."

"They're not the only ones," said Mr. Singh, striding towards the gathering. "There are others, including my son, Arjun."

"This is sounding very serious," said Mr. Carrefour rubbing at his furrowed forehead. "I no longer think they might have gone off somewhere by themselves."

"I think you might be over-reacting, Mr. Carrefour," said Mr. Watson, who towered above the crowd with his six-foot-two frame. "You seem to forget, this is Rumpole, the safest place on Earth for children. They'll be back as soon as they get

hungry. Probably just exploring the woods and perhaps a little lost, but they'll be back, I'm sure."

"Is your son or daughter missing?" asked Mr. Carrefour.

"I'm not sure where Kiera is at the minute, but I don't consider her missing. She's always going off with her friends. It's nothing unusual. That's what kids her age do."

"And her friends? Where are they?"

"I don't know for sure, but as I said, kids are always going off discovering places. There's no cause for concern and certainly no reason for you to be causing panic, Mr. Carrefour. They'll turn up."

"How long has it been since everyone last saw their children?" Mr. Carrefour asked, ignoring Mr. Watson.

"At least an hour since I saw Arjun swimming in the lake," said Mr. Singh.

"That's about the same for Jordan. He was also swimming in the lake. I don't like the sound of this." Mr. Carrefour rubbed his reddened forehead some more then turned back toward Mr. Watson. "Mr. Watson, I appreciate your comments, but I think we must do something about these missing children before it's too late, and as far as I'm concerned, one hour has passed and it may already be too late."

A scream rose from the other side of the lake, ending the campground chatter. "Another child missing, I would guess," said Mr. Carrefour. "It's time for an emergency meeting. Pass the word around for everyone to be back here in twenty minutes. I'm calling the police."

Mr. Bintapple was no longer threatening to ground Lucy. He returned from a search of the woods, scratched and bleeding, his shirt ripped like the Incredible Hulk and his troubled face just as green. He had heard the rumors which had spread faster than chicken pox. The children had run away, the rumors said, or they were lost in the woods, abducted, possibly by aliens, or eaten alive by whatever lurked in the depths of Lake Como. He shook his head at Mr. Carrefour to let him know the disastrous outcome of a frantic hunt through a wild thicket, with no clue even that any child had been through that way: no fallen baseball cap, freed shoe, or ripped clothing hanging from a shrub.

Mr. Carrefour stepped atop a barbeque table waving the red BMX flag from Jordan's bike. "Attention, everyone. May I have your attention, please!"

A shoosh echoed around the campground until silence fell.

"Thank you. Now, as you would all know by now, there are eleven children missing, last seen in or heading toward the lake sometime around seven this morning. We have compiled a list with the names and ages of the missing children, what they were wearing, and in some cases, we have photos. The police are on their way from Rumpole, but in the meantime, we're going to undertake a more thorough search of the area, and I would appreciate as many volunteers as possible.

"Mr. Carrefour?"

"Yes, Mr. Prattle?"

"What about the old woman in the shack? Has anyone spoken to her yet? Maybe she saw something."

A loud hum vibrated amongst the assembled crowd.

"Good question, Mr. Prattle. Has anyone been up to the shack? Anyone?"

The drone turned into a secretive whisper. No one answered.

"It would seem not, Mr. Prattle, so thank you for mentioning it. I'll go and see the old woman myself."

"Mr. Carrefour?"

"Yes, Mr. Prattle?"

"The old woman in the shack ... you're planning to go up there by yourself?"

"Yes, Mr. Prattle. Is that a problem?"

"It could be—you know, she doesn't take too kindly to visitors. Might be that she won't be too happy to have you knocking on her front door. That would be my guess."

"Mr. Prattle, our children are missing, including your daughter Faith, so from my standpoint, I don't particularly care whether the old woman is friendly or not. I'm not looking for a cup of tea and chat about the weather. If there is a chance she might have seen something that might help us find our children, we need to ask the question."

"But what if ... what if she had something to do with the disappearance of the children? Shouldn't you wait for the police?"

"Mr. Prattle, are you suggesting the children might be in her shack?"

"I would not think so, Mr. Carrefour. She most certainly does not like children, so I doubt very much that she would allow them into her shack, but maybe ... What if she did something to entice them away, like in Hansel and Gretel or the Pied Piper? Remember what she did to poor Mr. Arnett? God rest his soul."

"I don't know anything about Mr. Arnett, Mr. Prattle, and in any event, I doubt it would have anything to do with our worries here today."

"Perhaps it was before your time, Mr. Carrefour, but Mr. Arnett was last seen twenty years ago entering the old woman's house, back in the days when she lived in Rumpole. He went to talk to her, to complain about the state of her backyard, which was quite a mess, overgrown with weeds and vermin everywhere. He has not been seen since. He vanished, Mr. Carrefour, much like our children have vanished today, without a trace."

The crowd's whispers grew louder, forcing Mr. Carrefour to clap his hands for attention. "Mr. Prattle, I think we should finish with that kind of talk right now. It is not at all helpful, and besides, my son would not go off with a stranger, not even with an old woman dangling a candy stick or a man playing a musical pipe—and I'm sure the other children are similarly wise about the dangers of strangers."

"Many of us believe ... she's a witch," Mr. Prattle continued.

"That's all very interesting, Mr. Prattle. However, perhaps that curious discussion could be postponed for another, more appropriate time. Mr. Bintapple? Perhaps you'd like to join me on a visit to the old woman's shack?"

Mr. Bintapple gulped and started to jitter, his hands writhing like he was washing them in preparation for brain surgery. "Me, Mr. Carrefour? I thought I might lead the search back into the woods, since I've already been in there this morning. Perhaps someone else might like to go with you to the shack?"

"Anyone? Anyone?" Mr. Carrefour asked.

The crowd murmured without a single volunteer. Mr. Bintapple gulped some more.

"Looks like it's you and me, Mr. Bintapple. Let's go. There's no time to waste."

The crowd parted a clear passage in the direction of the shack, offering pats for Mr. Bintapple's stooped shoulders, which only caused them to fall closer to the ground. Mr. Carrefour galloped ahead towards the shack, ascending the tumbled brick pathway until he reached the first splintered step to wait for Mr. Bintapple.

Weathered boards inside the shack creaked, announcing their arrival before Mr. Carrefour had even had a chance to tap on the rickety contraption that vaguely resembled a door. He knocked gently, careful not to whirl the door from its rusted hinges. They waited. A shuffling inside prompted Mr. Carrefour to knock once more,

but with no success. He peered through the porch window that, like the rest of the shack, had never seen the colored end of a paintbrush. The shack was so small he could see light coming through a back window but nothing else.

Mr. Carrefour knocked again when he heard more shuffling inside. Frustrated, he called out, "Excuse me, madam?" No answer came. He continued anyway. "Madam," he shouted, "I'm terribly sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if I might have a minute of your valuable time."

Mr. Bintapple stepped up onto the porch and tugged at Mr. Carrefour's arm, nodding in the direction of the lake. "We should go," he said.

"One more time, Mr. Bintapple, please." Then the door opened, and before them stood the old woman who had petrified so many, including Mr. Bintapple, and who had set so many tongues to wag about witches and the disappearing Mr. Arnett. She was as tall as Jordan and looked like she might break into a million little pieces if anyone touched her withered, grey skin, even with a gentle fingertip. Mr. Carrefour looked down into her thinning hair. Her hair was jet black while everything else about her was grey and suggested she might be a hundred years old or more. A grey dress hung loosely from her bony shoulders, drooping to the floor, to end just above grey crocheted shoes. She rested on the doorknob with spotted, crinkly hands, also grey. She was all grey or black—even her eyes were grey.

"I'm sorry to bother you, madam, but we were wondering if you might have seen any children wandering off from the camp. Some of our children are missing, my son included."

"No, kind sir, I have not seen any children at all today. I did however hear some children. It was very early this morning, too early in fact. They were swimming in the lake and making a raucous noise," she said in a high-pitched, squeaky voice. "I'm surprised you did not hear them."

"Oh, I guess we are all used to the noise that children tend to make, so we didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. I do apologize if it disturbed you."

"I much prefer the winters," she said with a sigh. "It's too cold then for the holiday people and children. It's peaceful up here in the winter." She smiled at Mr. Bintapple who shifted in his shoes and furrowed his head into his chest.

"What is the name of your son, sir, the one who is missing?"

"Jordan, my son's name is Jordan, and Mr. Bintapple here, he is missing his daughter Lucy. Unfortunately, there are others—eleven that we know of."

The old woman nodded a slow, drowsy understanding and smiled meekly.

"Sorry again to have disturbed you, madam," said Mr. Carrefour. He turned back towards the path. Mr. Bintapple followed, clipping Mr. Carrefour's heels with each step that would return him to the safety of the lake.

"I am not embarrassed to admit, Mr. Carrefour, that I am scared out of my wits," said Mr. Bintapple. "There's something about that woman," he said with a full-body shiver. "What about you, Mr. Carrefour? Do you feel it?"

"Come on, Mr. Bintapple, she's just a little old lady living a quiet, humble existence amidst nature. What could be so scary about that?"

Chapter Four

"I want to go home," Toby wailed. "I'm hungry."

"Now that's interesting," said Jordan. "What are we supposed to eat? There's no Burger King down here."

"Well," said Ming. "We swim like dolphins and we breathe underwater like fish, so maybe we eat what they do—other fish."

"I'd say you're right, Ming," said Jack. "It probably means we eat whatever we can catch."

"Yuck!" Lucy squealed. "I'm not eating raw fish with their beady little eyes and slippery gizzards."

"You might not have a choice," said Jack. "You have to eat."

"Not me, dude, not Lucy Bintapple. I'm not eating raw fish."

"I'm going to catch that fish that bit me," said Jordan. "And eat him while he's looking up at me. Then he'll know what it feels like to be chewed."

"I think that fish is a carp, Jordan," said Ming. "Carp are the reason that the water is a little murky—they stir up the bottom of the river when they're grubbing about looking for food. I'm not sure he's going to taste very good to you, although the carp is an esteemed food in China and considered to be a sign of good fortune."

"I don't care what he tastes like. I'm going to eat him anyway. No one gets away with biting Jordan Carrefour like that."

"I suppose we should work out how we'll catch them," said Jack, "or we won't have to worry about the rules. We'll all die from starvation."

"Jack, don't you think we should get back to the manual first?" Ming suggested. "We need to elect a leader and work out what we're going to do, which destiny to choose."

"I want to go home," Toby cried.

"Hey, dude, we all want to go home! It's not going to help any if you'll be blubbering all the time."

"Leave him alone, Lucy. He's just a little kid," yelled Isaac, as he tried to quell Toby's quivering shoulders with a protective arm.

"Well, tell him to shut up then!" Lucy caught Jack's frown and crawled on to the table to reach across to pat Toby's head. "There, there, little kid. Just be quiet for a bit while we sort everything out. Then you can go home." She rolled her eyes.

"Jordan! What are you doing?" Jack shouted up the river. "We're going to read through the manual again. You can fish later."

Jordan returned to the table to collapse onto his chair gasping for breath. "Did you see the way he looked at me?"

"Who? What?" asked Jack.

"That carp. He was getting ready to bite me again."

"Jordan, the manual? Please?" Jack implored.

"Fine," Jordan grumbled, "to the manual, Batman."

"Okay, first things first. We need to elect a leader. The manual says the leader's role is to ensure the rules are followed, and that he or she may have to sacrifice his or her life so that the rest of the spirits may be freed."

"Whoa, that's heavy," said Lucy. "Who would want to volunteer for that gig? Count me out."

"Volunteers?" Jack asked.

No hands rose into the water.

"Anyone want to be leader?" he asked and waited in silence. "Anyone at all?" More silence followed for an awkwardly long time.

"Okay," he said, staring into his hands. "I guess my parents won't even notice that I'm gone anyway. I'll do it, if everyone wants me as their leader."

Five heads bobbed and wobbled faster than a Slinky Dog.

"It's yours, dude," said Lucy. "You're the leader."

"Are you sure, Jack?" Ming asked. "It means you might never leave the river. Don't you want to see your parents again?"

"He said he'd do it, Ming. No point trying to change his mind," said Isaac. "Unless you're planning to volunteer instead."

Ming locked her eyes on the glass table.

"Okay, that settles it then," said Jack. "Now, let's go through the rules again, one rule at a time, and hopefully, we can work out what we have to do. Rule number one: freedom. We can go home again, as children, if we pass through the river mouth."

"Which will be guarded by the wood spirits," Ming added.

"For every river spirit who escapes through the river mouth, a wood spirit dies. If all of us get through, then all the woods spirits will die, and the woods around the lake will be burned to the ground, and another spell will be cast as punishment, one that is worse than this one," said Jack, reading from the manual.

"What could be worse than being stuck at the bottom of the river with stinking fish and slimy ... everything and a stupid glass table," said Isaac. "I don't care if the wood spirits die. I don't even know them. We just want to go home."

"They're kids, just like us, you," said Jack. "I'm fourteen. I'm not really a kid. I can drive a car."

"If we escape and the wood spirits die, will that make us murderers when we go back as children again?" Jordan asked. "Will everyone blame us for killing them and put us in jail?"

"Who cares," said Isaac. "We don't even know who they are. None of my friends were swimming in the lake with me. It was just me and Tobes."

"Zeb was in the lake," whispered Toby.

"All the more reason not to care then," said Isaac. "No one likes him. He's a bully."

"There were some other girls from my school," said Ming. "I don't know them, but I wouldn't want to be responsible if something bad happened to them."

Lucy laughed. "Bad? What's badder than being in a spell?"

"I just want to go home," Toby whimpered. "I don't care about the other ones."

"Kids!" Lucy chuckled. "But the little fella's right. Why should we care about the other spirits if we don't even know them and we all just want to go home?"

"But there are other consequences, like the destruction of the woods and all the animals that live in them. Surely you must care about that?" Ming asked.

"Not really," said Isaac. "The trees will grow back."

"In another two hundred years," Ming replied.

"My dad will just make new ones," said Toby.

"How?" Jordan asked, shaking his head. "Your dad can magically grow trees?"

"He's an arkitek," Toby replied.

"Could I make a suggestion?" Ming asked, and continued anyway. "Maybe it would be easier if we formed a committee to review the rules—just two or three of us, then we can report back to everyone with a recommendation."

"Good idea, Ming," said Jack. "I think ... Ming, Lucy and me—we're the oldest—unless someone else wants to be involved?"

"Don't care," said Isaac. "We just want to go home. So long as the committee decides how and when that's going to happen, that's fine with me."

"I've got better things to do," said Jordan, with one eye on the carp lurking in the shadows of the riverbank.

"Then I suggest you three, Jordan, Isaac, and Toby, go down to the river mouth and see what you can find out about the wood spirits? Don't talk to them, just spy, and be careful," Jack warned.

"What's the worst thing that could happen to us?" Jordan asked. "It's not like we can die or go missing again! Come on, Isaac. We can work on our dolphin kick."

Toby followed Jordan and Isaac as they swam on the current toward the gaping mouth where the river Kai coursed its way to merge with the great ocean, where spirits might become children once more.

Chapter Five

The police chief arrived at the lake with two members of his force: Detective Ryder and rookie, Officer Qwerk. They had to trot to keep up with their marching chief, whose face was as red as an apple at the sight of a gathering of journalists with cameras and microphones.

"Get these people out of here!" the police chief yelled back at Officer Qwerk as his rotund frame waddled towards the crime scene.

"Who, sir?"

"The media, Officer Qwerk! They're trampling all over my crime scene," he said as he continued towards the lake muttering unintelligible abuses at everyone he passed on the way.

Officer Qwerk spotted the media in the distance, all swarming now in the direction of the police chief. Cameras, microphones, and notepads were flailing about in the dash. Officer Qwerk raced to cut them off before they regretted posing a first question. The chief was in a huffy mood, as usual, which worsened when he learned from Mr. Carrefour that a search had already been conducted in the woods and all areas around the lake and campgrounds. "Fools!" the chief had yelled.

Most tents had been dismantled in the rush to leave Lake Como before more children disappeared, however no one made it past the exit, which the police chief had closed with barricades. As each car approached the exit, Detective Ryder interviewed all occupants, from irritated parent to frightened child, and the unhappy holidaymakers were only released when every possible detail had filled Detective Ryder's notepad.

The police chief turned his attention to the remaining families, the ones who would not leave without their missing child, or children, in the case of the Witherspoons. Following his interrogations, the police chief was grouchier, if that was at all possible. No one had seen anything and could only say—and some with less certainty than others—that the eleven absent youngsters were last seen heading towards the lake or swimming in the lake. The only concrete evidence anyone had to offer was a boogie board belonging to Jordan Carrefour, found floating on the lake's surface.

The police chief put in a call to Bronte, the nearest city to Rumpole with its own team of police divers. The children, he feared, may be at the bottom of the lake, drowned by some bizarre, unexplainable occurrence. At the very least, this appeared to be the fate of young Jordan Carrefour.

The old woman in the shack also had nothing to add to the police chief's scant clue list: boogie board, in or around lake and seven o'clock in the morning, was all he had, no signs of a stranger lurking or spaceship landing.

Mr. Prattle would not let the matter of the old woman rest. He followed the police chief like a shadow, jabbering away about an unrelated mystery regarding Mr. Arnett filed away, "unsolved," twenty years earlier. The disappearance of Mr. Pratt's eleven-year-old daughter, Faith, had clearly disturbed the man, so the police chief did not have him handcuffed to a barbecue, as he would have liked.

Mr. Carrefour was also driving the police chief mad with endless requests for updates on police activity and lines of inquiry, which the chief had to admit with embarrassment was zilch, at least until the divers had finished with the lake.

In the end, it was the relentless nagging from Mr. Carrefour and Mr. Prattle that forced the police chief to close the campgrounds officially, and order the remaining families back to Rumpole and out of his sight. He needed peace and quiet to think. Then he would find something, that one evasive, tiny clue that would direct him to the source of the mystery, to the culprits or to the children.

The police chief glanced up at the shack. Smoke fluttered from the chimney. He wondered about a cup of tea, if the old woman might oblige, and waved to her as she stood on her front porch observing the goings-on around the lake. She did not wave back with a kind gesture or invite him up to the shack for tea. Instead, she hurried inside to secure the door as quickly as the rotting timber would allow.

The sedan belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Carrefour was the last car out of the lakeside retreat. Mr. Carrefour was still complaining at being forced to leave. He looked up at the floral arch as they passed under it and grimaced further at the sign that bade them farewell and hoped they would return soon to Lake Como.

Searchers moved in, police personnel and official volunteers who knew what to look for: footprints, pieces of cloth not visible to an untrained eye, trampled grasses or broken branches, footprints, and strands of hair. Helicopters hovered overhead, and boats and scuba divers caused ripples across the lake. Tracker dogs foraged in the undergrowth that filled the backyard of the old woman's shack. She returned to her front porch and glared down at the police chief, placing hands over her ears to suggest there was too much noise. The police chief replied, patting at his chest with an empathetic smile to say he was sorry and it would all be over as soon as possible, he hoped.

Chapter Six

"Let's start back at the beginning," said Jack, turning the glass manual once more to the first rule.

"I think we should skip past rule number one," Ming suggested. "It would be great if we could all escape, but that has the worst consequences, and I think we should only consider escape as a last resort."

"You talk funny," said Lucy. "We don't have to worry about conse—conse—what you said. That's what parents do."

"But we have to think like adults, Lucy. Otherwise, we'll never get out of here," said Jack. "Besides, I'm fourteen, and I've practically been taking care of myself for a whole year."

"Okay, okay, dudes, I was just being the devil's avocado."

"I think you mean devil's advocate," Ming corrected.

"Whatever, dude—advocado, if you like."

"Let's look at the other rules then," said Jack. "Maybe we should read through them by ourselves first and see if we come up with any ideas to talk about."

Jack, Ming, and Lucy gathered closely around the manual to study it. Lucy drummed rhythmically on the glass, opening her mouth on occasion as if to speak but blew bubbles instead. She picked up a smooth, shiny river stone to tap louder on the table.

"Hear that, dudes?" she asked.

"Yes, Lucy, you're a great tapper," said Jack.

"No, Jack, we can hear, just like normal. Name this tune," she said.

"Lucy? The rules? We're supposed to be working, to find a solution," Jack chided.

"It's lucky we're river spirits and not wood spirits, dude. At least we can escape and go home for visits. They're stuck in the river unless someone breaks the spell."

"You're right, Lucy, and that's the key." Ming pointed at rule number four. "If we can break the spell then everyone can go home. It's what they call a win-win."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Lucy asked.

"I don't know," said Ming. "That's the part we need to work out."

"It's the hardest option," Jack added, "but we should start there and see how we go."

"Isaac won't like it," said Lucy.

"But even if we were prepared to sacrifice the wood spirits," said Ming, "we're not going to be able to get through the mouth of the river easily. It says so at rule number one, so there's no point getting them angry with us when, if we work together, everyone can go home."

"Rule number four says the spell can only be broken when the Rumpole City Council orders the lifelong protection of the woods, the lake, and the river, and there has to be a clause about pollution," said Jack.

"So that means we have to get a law passed," said Ming.

"Dudes, we can't do this. We're just kids, spirit kids. No one can even see us! Am I the only intellect one here? Hya!"

"I think you mean 'intellectual'," Ming suggested, "but you're right, this is not going to be easy. We don't have a choice though. We should meet with the wood spirits, at least, and let them know we're not going to escape."

"Twelve minds are better than six," said Jack. "If we work together, we'll have a better chance of breaking the spell."

"Yeah, and maybe they'll have someone who knows how to get a law passed by a spirit," Lucy laughed.

Jordan, Isaac, and Toby sat down at the table, mission completed.

"How far did you go?" Jack asked. "Did you see the wood spirits?"

"The river mouth is wide enough," said Isaac. "We could escape through there without a problem, if we're fast."

"What about the wood spirits?" Ming asked. "Did you talk to them?"

"Nope. We were told just to spy," Isaac replied.

"There were five wood spirits guarding the river mouth—three girls and a little boy," said Jordan. "It'll be easy to get past them. They're just kids like us. It's not like they have any special powers."

"And they just want to go home, same as us," Isaac added.

"No special powers that you could see," Jack replied. "Anyway, I thought you said you didn't speak to them?"

"Oops," Isaac answered. "I guess we did."

"They've got a manual too," said Jordan. "So they know that if we escape, they will die."

"Too bad for them," said Isaac.

"They have to break the spell or live in the river as spirits forever, or die if we escape," Jordan added. "So, they're going to try and break the spell."

"Good. That's our decision as well," Jack reported.

"What do you mean?" Isaac asked. "We're not going to try and escape? That's stupid!"

"For now, that's our plan," said Jack. "We'll need to meet with the wood spirits to let them know that we want to cooperate and break the spell."

"I want to go home," Toby cried.

"The plan is fine by me," said Jordan. "At least while I'm here I don't have to clean up my room, do my homework, take the rubbish out, or feed the cat. Think of it as a holiday, Toby. We'll all be home soon enough."

"And you can swim like a dolphin, dude. You won't be able to do that when you get home."

Toby sniffed his acceptance while Isaac glared at Jack and Ming.

Chapter Seven

Lucy and Ming were on a mission, the first, to test what river spirits could do in and out of the water. They swam and somersaulted their way up the river Kai to its beginning at Lake Como. "We're amphibious," said Ming, as they sat on the pebbly shore.

"Dude, what are you talking about? I don't tell lies."

"Amphibious, Lucy, it means we can live in and out of the water."

"Oh, like frogs. I love frogs."

"There's a lot of search activity still going on here," said Ming. "But all the families have gone. The cabins and the camps are empty."

"Do you think my dad has forgotten me already?" Lucy asked. "Why wouldn't he stay to find me?"

"He probably had no choice. My mum has gone too. All our parents have gone. Let's follow the police chief for a while. Maybe we can find out what they've discovered since we disappeared."

The police chief headed towards the water's edge, where divers were removing wetsuits and goggles after an intensive scouring of Lake Como. Lucy sat down among the divers while Ming stood beside the police chief.

"Hey dude, this invisible thing is cool!" said Lucy, trying on a pair of goggles.

"What have you got for me?" the police chief asked the divers. "Tell me you found something."

"I'm afraid not, sir," said one of the divers.

"No sign of the Carrefour boy?"

"No, sir, nothing whatsoever, but there was something a little odd down there ... it probably has nothing to do with the missing children though."

"Well spit it out, lad. I haven't got all day," said the police chief.

"It looks like something, or someone, has been dragged along the bottom of the lake toward the river Kai. The tracks start at various locations around the lake, and we

did find twelve sets of tracks—the same number of tracks as the missing children, almost. It's probably nothing."

"There are eleven missing children, lad, not twelve."

"Nope, there's twelve of us," Lucy interrupted.

"Is that it?" the police chief asked. "That's all you've got? Some tracks on the bottom of the lake with no apparent connection to the missing children?" The police chief's hand phone chimed a bland tune, allowing the diver to escape a pending tirade of abuse.

"He's one cranky dude. Who's he talking to?"

Ming leaned into the police chief's hand phone while Lucy played with a diving tank, releasing some oxygen. She laughed as the divers stared at the tank while she released the oxygen in spurts. Ming shook her head, and Lucy moved towards a flipper, filling it with smooth stones. She looked up at Ming with a cheeky grin.

"Boo," Lucy said with a puff, so close to the diver's ear that her pale pinkish lips immersed into his ear canal. There was no reaction. "They really can't hear us," she said. "Just like the rule says."

"Come on, Lucy, let's follow the police chief. He's rushing over there for some reason. Looks like they found something ... a knapsack."

The chief snapped on a pair of tight, white gloves to rummage through the knapsack. He laid the contents out onto a barbeque table, covered with a plastic sheet: mould-ridden sandwiches, rotting fruit, an almost-empty bottle of water, and a change of clothes, size fourteen. The sleeping bag, rolled and tied to the outside, was still clean, not slept in, and there was nothing at all to say who owned the pack or where he or she might be. It was yet another mystery the police chief did not welcome, and he could not rule out a connection to the missing eleven. How the abandoned knapsack might be connected was not yet known.

Ming and Lucy returned to the glass table to report their findings.

"Your dad is driving the police chief completely mad!" Lucy informed Jordan.

"The police chief threatened to lock him up if he kept calling every hour."

"That sounds like my dad. He's a lawyer—that's what he does."

"He's annoying like that all the time, dude?"

"Most of the time, and he's very tricky. He's always doing tricky stuff to get me to do what he wants, and chores, but I know what he's up to."

"Doesn't he just yell at you if you don't do what you're told?" Isaac asked.

"Nah, he doesn't yell, but he likes to 'discuss' everything. He says to me, 'Jordan, convince me you're right and I'm wrong.'"

"Seems odd for a parent," said Isaac.

"Do you ever win, dude?"

"Nope. It's just a game he plays to get me to see everything from his point of view without actually telling me straight up. He seems to enjoy it, so I play along."

"Maybe he just enjoys spending time with you," Ming offered.

"That would be so annoying, dude. I don't want to have to think for myself when I have a perfectly good father to do that for me. That's what they're there for!"

"Okay, everyone. Let's get back to the mission," said Jack, tapping on the glass table for attention. "Ming, any developments?"

"Not really. They've finished searching the lake and the woods, but all they found was a knapsack. And they keep saying there are eleven missing children, but the manual says there are twelve of us: six river spirits and six wood spirits."

"The knapsack is mine," said Jack. "I was swimming in the lake when the spell was cast, but I wasn't at the lake with my parents, so there was no one to report me missing."

"How'd you get to the lake by yourself, dude?"

"Hiked."

"You hiked? By yourself? Your parents let you do that?" asked Jordan.

"They don't know."

"You ran away from home?" said Isaac. "Awesome."

"Seems like my parents still haven't noticed I'm gone," Jack whispered.

"Shouldn't surprise me, I guess. Since my little brother died, I've been invisible to them. My mother cries all the time. She doesn't even get out of bed most days. I went to the lake because ... that's where my brother is."

"Dude, I thought you said he was dead."

"Lucy," Ming chided, shaking her head in disbelief.

"He is dead, Lucy. We scattered his ashes in the woods. He loved the woods, and chasing squirrels. We used to camp at the lake every year for the summer holidays. Everyone was happy then."

"I'm sure your parents would have reported you missing, Jack," Ming offered. "The police just haven't worked out that your disappearance is connected to us because your parents probably think you're missing from Rumpole, but now that they've found your knapsack at the lake, it's only a matter of time."

"It doesn't matter," said Jack, his head still slouched. "I won't be going home."

Jordan laughed. "Why would you want to go home and miss out on all of this excitement?" he said, waving a wobbly catfish above his head then biting into its tail. "Hmm, yum, better than pizza—not!"

"Er, gross, dude!" said Lucy wrapping her white, wrinkly hands over her eyes.

"Here, Lucy, try a bulging catfish eye. It's a delicacy here in the river, and probably nowhere else."

"And those bloody gizzards are just like soggy french fries with tomato sauce, if you use your imagination," added Isaac with a laugh as Lucy squirmed.

"Don't swear, Isaac," said Lucy.

"I didn't. The gizzards really are bloody," he teased. "Look, Lucy."

"Okay, dudes—" Jack stopped suddenly. "I can't believe I just said 'dude,'" he mumbled to a chorus of laughter, especially from Lucy who had turned her hand shades into blinkers, keeping Jordan and his fish out of view.

"Okay, er, everyone, river spirits—not dudes, we have two missions: we need to meet with the wood spirits, and we need to find out what everyone in Rumpole is saying about our disappearance."

"Lucy, I've finished eating the catfish. You can look now," said Jordan.

Lucy removed her hand blinkers just in time to see Jordan bite into the head of the catfish.

"Hmm, fish head, delicious," he said.

"Err!" Lucy screamed.

Chapter Eight

The six wood spirits gathered at the mouth of the river Kai. They had been called to a meeting by the river spirits who had come down from the glass table, which rested further up the river.

The wood spirits had a manual too, made from bark and inscribed with ochre paint chipped from the red iron crags of Hanging Rock. But this manual had just four rules: first, do not let the river spirits through the river mouth—or die; second, do not allow the destruction of the woods, the lake, or the river—or die; third, visit home as spirits, but return within four hours—or die; and lastly, break the spell to return home as children by having a law passed to protect the woods, the lake, and the river.

Zeb Fabergast had elected himself leader of the wood spirits, and no one dared argue. They all knew Zeb, or knew of him from his days tormenting other children on the playground. He was a tall, thick, thirteen-year-old with a buzz cut that made him look as menacing as a prison escapee.

Seven-year-old Jasper Gifford shivered each time Zeb barked directions. He was still scarred from a Zeb encounter the day before they were transformed into spirits.

There were three girls in the wood spirits: Kiera Watson, Georgia Downs, and Faith Prattle, who were friends at school—an expensive private girls' school, where Ming Zhi Chen was also a student by way of a scholarship. Kiera still wore the bathing cap she was wearing when they were enjoying an early morning swim in the lake. She kept the cap pulled tightly down over her ears to tame her wild, black hair.

Arjun Singh was thirteen and the last member of the wood spirits. Like everyone, he was wary of Zeb Fabergast, having once seen him pull the yellow down from a pre-schooler's pet duckling. Zeb had a maniacal laugh that chilled children and teachers alike.

Zeb's first initiative as leader was to ban all home visits, and anyone who disobeyed would be "snapped in two like a dry twig." He ordered the other five wood spirits to guard the river mouth on a permanent watch, with no breaks at the oak table or anywhere else. The river spirits were the enemy and could not be trusted, and even though some of the wood spirits did not agree with this, they dared not say.

In the meantime, Zeb would not be guarding the river mouth with the others. He would stay at the oak table instead to work on a plan to break the spell. He did not want to hear talk of an alliance with the river spirits, for he was too clever to be duped by six fools who would, by nature, try to escape at the first possible opportunity. He certainly would, if the roles were reversed. In fact, he'd already be gone.

Arjun found some inner strength to question Zeb about treating the river spirits as enemies. The wood spirits could use their help, he argued, especially Ming Zhi Chen, who everyone knew was the smartest kid in all of Rumpole and perhaps the entire world. They should at least discuss the matter with the river spirits, Arjun suggested, as only four of the river spirits could escape anyway because two of them had to remain at the glass table at all times, according to Jordan Carrefour.

Zeb reached out and grabbed Arjun's turban, unraveling the cotton strip to reveal a mass of long, black hair. "Stupid Indian," he said. "And you look like a girl with your pretty, long hair. Do what I say and we'll all get along."

Arjun bit down hard on his lip, making it bleed.

"You going to cry, stoopid?" Zeb added. "Cry like a little baby? Little baby girl."

"Let it go," Kiera said to her fellow wood spirits. "We'll be at the river mouth from now on, as you suggest, leader," she sneered as Zeb hurried on his way back to

the oak table, then gulped, fearful that he might turn around and bop her over the head.

Ming, Jordan, and Isaac approached the river mouth, which was being guarded by five of the six wood spirits. There was no sign of Zeb, so Ming wasted no time before sharing her draft plan for cooperation, to break the spell, save the woods, the lake, the river, and themselves. She did not know yet how it might all work, least of all, how the law might get passed in the real world. They needed more information, for example, who in the real world might sense their presence? Could they write and leave messages? What did the townsfolk in Rumpole say about their disappearance? Would anyone believe that twelve children were now spirits? And if so, who? The missions, to gather the information, would need to be shared so that everyone had time to spend with family during the home visits.

"We can't help," said Arjun. "We can't leave the river mouth."

"How so?" Jordan asked.

"Zeb's orders," said Kiera. "Our great leader has cancelled home visits. We have to protect the river mouth all the time, in case any of you try to escape."

"We're not going to escape," said Ming. "The river spirits are committed to breaking the spell. I promise you that."

"Zeb doesn't trust you, and there seems to be nothing we can do about it. He is the leader," said Kiera with a sigh.

"And a thug," Arjun added.

"Why did you elect him leader?" Isaac asked. "Everyone knows Zeb Fabergast."

"We didn't. He elected himself, and no one was brave enough to challenge him," Georgia added.

"He's mean," said Jasper, rubbing at his forehead. "He pushed me off the tree swing, and I landed on my head."

"Yeah, I saw that," said Isaac. "Then when your mother came over, he pretended that he was helping you get up, when he had really been pushing your face into the sand."

"That's going to make it difficult," said Ming, "if you can't help us with the missions. Two of us have to stay at the glass table at all times, and we wouldn't ask Toby to do any assignments. He's too young."

"What are you lot doing here?" Zeb asked, arriving back at the river mouth with a fish bone languishing from the corner of his down-turned mouth.

They all jumped, with fright, guilt, and fear, in case he had heard anything they were saying.

"Hey, don't sneak up on people like that!" Isaac yelled, even though he was still shaking.

"What's going on here?" Zeb asked, with a suspicious eyebrow raised, ready to pounce.

"We're discussing a plan for cooperation," said Ming, with no visible sign of the fear that gripped her insides. "If we work together, there's a good chance we'll be able to break the spell, and you will all be able to go home as well."

"You must think I'm stupid if you think we're going to fall for that little scheme. We'll break the spell, and we don't need your help. And don't bother trying to escape. There'll always be five of us guarding the river mouth, and only four of you can try to get through. You'll always be out-numbered."

"We're not trying to trick you," said Ming. "We really do want to break the spell to save the lake and the woods, and we don't want to see any of you die."

"Well maybe just one of them," Isaac mumbled.

"What did you say, stupid?" Zeb yelled.

"You're the stupid one!" Isaac screamed back. "You won't be able to do it on your own. You're not smart enough."

"Get back to your glass table, and don't come back here again, you schmuck-head with water for brains."

"Fine!" yelled Isaac. "Fat, ugly, woodpecker head!"

"Fine yourself!"

"What a fruitloop," Jordan mumbled, as they swam against the current back to the peaceful sanctuary of the glass table.

"That didn't go so well," Ming added.

Chapter Nine

Toby's constant tears made the decision easy. The Witherspoon boys would be the first to visit home in accordance with rule two, home visitations, and the first of the spirits to test how they would move through the air and on land.

Isaac and Toby swam to the water's surface, following a stream of light that glinted down from the sun, causing the glass table to sparkle like a star. Jordan and Lucy followed to observe and learn.

"What now?" Isaac asked.

"Maybe just think about it," Jordan offered. "Push yourself out of the water with your feet kicking."

"I don't know about this," said Isaac. "It doesn't make any sense that we can swim like dolphins and also fly like birds. It might be a trap."

"Dude, look, watch me." Lucy submerged herself into a torpedo below the water's surface, and with a kick, she catapulted out of the river to soar into the clear blue sky.

"Whoohoo!" she shrieked. "I love being a spirit!" She circled upwards before swooping down to tug Isaac's hair, then flew up again like a swallow. "Come on, Isaac. Get on with it, dude, you big girl."

Without another thought, Isaac was fast in pursuit of Lucy to tug her red hair just as hard.

"You're flying, Isaac!" Toby called out.

"Hey! Come on, Tobes, you can do it. Just kick yourself out of the water. It's easy."

"But I might fall out of the sky," Toby whimpered.

"You won't fall. Little boys fall. You're a spirit now, Toby and spirits can fly, like Casper," said Isaac.

Toby stayed in the water shivering with anxiety, until Lucy plunged in to grab his hand and pull him into the air.

"Fly, Toby!" she said, letting go of a shaky hand, and a faint smile crept across his timid face.

"We can go home now, Tobes. You can see mum again."

"See you, dudes. Have fun."

"Isaac! Don't forget to set the alarm on your watch," Jordan yelled as Isaac waved back.

The thrill of sailing through the air ebbed as soon as the Witherspoon house came into view. It was Saturday night—pizza night—but the atmosphere was much too subdued for a Witherspoon meal: there were no fights over the last slice of pizza or spilling of coke, and no splattering of a cheesy topping over a clean tablecloth. The two vacant seats not only reduced the dinner noise but reminded everyone that Isaac and Toby were still missing.

Toby sat down in his chair and reached for a limp, cold triangle of BBQ Meat Lovers' pizza, his mouth watering in anticipation. He had barely eaten any raw seafood, except when forced to by Isaac.

No one noticed as pizza moved through the air and dropped suddenly onto the tablecloth in front of Toby. He bit into it with gusto. "Pizza!" he squealed. "I love—yuck! It tastes like catfish," he cried out at Isaac, spitting pizza onto the table and picking pieces from under his tongue and from between his teeth. "I want my pizza," he whimpered.

Riley stared at the mushed-up pizza then reached over to squish it with his hands, rubbing the pizza into the tablecloth.

"Riley!" Mr. Witherspoon called out. "Stop that."

Riley pointed at the air then played longer with the pizza mush while everyone else continued to stare down at their plates, picking at their pizza, unaware of the flying food.

Isaac sat down beside his mother. He told her about the witch, how they would break the spell and be home in time for Toby's birthday. He did not have to yell above the usual dinner noise. He told her of swimming like dolphins, flying like birds, and eating whatever they could catch in the river. He told her how they were never tired although they never slept, but that life in the river was boring. He told her that he would not complain again about going to bed at nine.

Brandon scraped his chair backwards and left the table without speaking. There was no chastisement, which was unusual, for scraping the polished floorboards or for a lack of courtesy. Much had changed in a short time, Isaac realized. He followed his twin brother, Brandon, up the staircase to the bedroom they shared.

Brandon lay on his black, skull-head quilt cover that hid the tartan bedspread that his mother preferred, and which matched the tartan curtains over the window. He sat up suddenly and stared at the doorway where Isaac stood.

"You know I'm here, don't you?" said Isaac smiling at his brother.

Brandon stood up and moved to the door, stopping just a nose away from Isaac.

Isaac moved to the study desk, located a notepad and pen, and wrote, "It's me, Brandon. I'm here!" but the ink faded, visible for a mere microsecond. "Double blast!" he yelled, then turned to pace down the hallway to the room Toby shared with Riley, the youngest of the four Witherspoon boys at three years old. Isaac rifled through Riley's toy box and found the magic slate board he was looking for. "I'm here. It's me—Isaac," he wrote, then waited. The words did not vanish like they had from the notepad. Isaac lifted the plastic sheet to clear the words. He wrote the same words and again, the words stayed on the magic slate board. "Awesome, dude," he said to himself, then cringed. He rushed back to Brandon who had returned to lying on his bed. Isaac placed the slate board on the bed beside his twin brother, pushing it into Brandon's side for attention.

Brandon glanced down at the board. "Riley, get out of here," he said.

Isaac lifted the board and placed it on Brandon's stomach.

Brandon bolted upright, read the board, then searched under his bed for Riley, knowing that Riley could not write.

"Isaac!" he yelled. He grabbed the board and raced down the stairs, three at a time, falling half the way. Breathless, he handed the slate board to his father, and waited. "It's Isaac!" he yelled at his father, when there was no response. "He's here. He wrote that!"

Mr. Witherspoon glanced at his wife, who cried softly at the mention of the name. Mr. Witherspoon lifted the plastic sheet to clear the words.

"What are you doing, dad! Isaac wrote that! He's here!"

"Brandon, we all miss Isaac and Toby. Don't be pulling stunts like this again. It's not fair on your mother. Now, go to your room."

Brandon grabbed the slate board and raced back up the stairs, slamming his bedroom door hard so that photos rattled on the wall below. Isaac wanted to follow, to write more on the magic slate board. He checked his watch. Time had run out. They had spent too much time practicing their flying and staring at cold pizza that they could not enjoy.

"Come on, Toby, we have to go," he said, tapping at Toby's ankle as he curled next to his mother on the sofa, resting his head on her thigh.

"I don't want to," he cried. "I want to stay here."

"You can't. You know the rule. If we're not back in four hours, two spirits will die, and you might never get home. But don't worry, Tobes, you'll be home for your birthday. I promise."

Toby kissed his matted white rabbit that his mother still clutched to dry her tears. "Can I take Pipkin with me?"

"The river is no place for a rabbit, Tobes, especially one made of cotton. Besides, mum needs Pipkin. He'll keep her company until you come home."

"Will I really be home for my birthday?"

"I promised, didn't I? I have a plan. You'll see. Come on now, we have to go."

Chapter Ten

Lucy breezed through the open kitchen window. Her father turned suddenly toward the sudden puff that left the curtain fluttering. He dropped the plate he wiped.

"Just me, dad," Lucy called out. "Just me dropping in for a little visit."

"Momma? Is that you?" Mr. Bintapple asked of the now limp curtain.

"No, dad, it's not Momma. It's Lucy—Lucy, your perfect daughter, remember me?"

"Momma? Have you come to help me find our little girl? We have to find her. That witch has taken her. I know she's out there somewhere, but no one is listening to me."

"Good grief, dad! It's me, Lucy!" she slapped at her forehead and headed down the hallway to her bedroom, mumbling. "This is going to be harder than I thought. I don't know where I get my big brains from. Not from you, dad, that's for sure."

The door to her bedroom was open, despite a sign that warned of death by monitor lizards should anyone enter without permission. Caitlyn sat cross-legged on the carpet, sorting through Lucy's bottle top collection, arranging them into piles of color. For a brief moment, Lucy was impressed.

"Didn't take you long to take over, did it? I'm coming back, Caitlyn, so don't get too comfortable ... and I know how many tops there are—five hundred and forty two—so don't be tempted to keep any for yourself thinking I won't notice. I'll notice."

Lucy ferreted through her room, in search of what, she did not know. There was no point writing a message. Isaac had told everyone about the ink that faded then disappeared before his eyes, and since she did not own a magic slate board, she had to find another way to communicate with her dad. Her eyes scoured the room and settled on her precious rock collection, a fish tank filled with rocks from volcanoes, gardens, the beach, and most importantly, from the lake. She found a smooth, shiny black stone from the shores of Lake Como, discovered during the summer holiday the previous year. Her father had inspected the find at length, commenting on its extraordinariness, a black sheep amidst the mass of grey. Unique, he had said, like an albino panther.

"Stay away from my rocks, Caitlyn, or there will be trouble," Lucy said before rushing back to the kitchen. She placed the stone on the kitchen bench then waited, resting her face in her hands and leaning on the kitchen bench next to the stone. Mr. Bintapple sipped slowly on his tea while gazing through the window as if waiting for another sign from his wife. He sighed, rinsed his cup under the tap, turned, and strolled toward their living room, and past the stone.

"Duh!" said Lucy, slapping at her forehead so hard that her freckles merged in a red mass, then Mr. Bintapple stopped mid-stride and reversed. He raised the stone and examined it through glasses that hung at the very tip of his nose.

"Yes!" Lucy screamed. "Good, dad, at last."

She waited with a buoyed smile that sunk as her father placed the stone into his trouser pocket then continued on his way to the living room.

"I must be adopted," Lucy said, arms folded in a huff. "I thought you were smarter than that, dad," she yelled after him. "See you next time, and make sure Caitlyn doesn't lose any of my bottle tops or my rocks."

While Lucy and Ming were visiting home, Isaac had swum down to the mouth of the river Kai, with Toby in tow, to talk to the wood spirits about his plan.

Toby had not stopped crying since their visit home, whimpering for his mother and Pipkin. Isaac was weary with the pressure of responsibility for his little brother, and he was tired of the constant sniveling. With just two weeks to Toby's eighth birthday, and since neither Ming nor Zeb had come up with a plan to break the spell, Isaac looked much like someone about to break a promise. Toby's forlorn upward gaze reminded him of this all too often, and it was a burden to carry, made worse because he could not get Toby to eat raw fish.

"I have a favor to ask," Isaac began. "Toby here, he's just a little kid, and he needs to go home. It's his birthday soon, so I was hoping you might let him pass through the river mouth."

"We'd like to help," Arjun replied, "but you know the rules, Isaac. If we let Toby through, one of us will die."

"But maybe it will be Zeb. He is the oldest, and I'm sure he would be the first to die. That would be good for all of you, all of us," Isaac suggested.

"But what if it isn't Zeb?" Georgia fired back. "Maybe it will be one of us. It might be Jasper because he's the youngest. He's only seven, too."

"And at least you can visit home," added Kiera.

"But what if the spell is never broken, and you're stuck here guarding the river mouth forever. Wouldn't it be better to die?"

"Zeb's working on a plan to break the spell," said Arjun.

"It's strange, don't you think?" said Isaac. "That there's nothing in the rules to say which wood spirit will die first if there's an escape?"

"It's probably done that way on purpose," said Kiera. "If we knew what order the wood spirits would die, we could all agree to let a spirit escape, like if we wanted to get rid of someone ... like Zeb."

"Sorry, Isaac, Toby. We just can't do it," said Arjun.

"Okay," Isaac mumbled. "No harm in asking, straight up. Didn't want to be sneaky about it or anything, since we promised not to escape."

Toby sobbed all the way back to the glass table and did not even laugh when Jordan's carp bit Isaac on the bottom.

Ming and Lucy were already back at the glass table when Isaac and Toby returned from the river mouth. Ming had not gone home as everyone had thought, but had set out instead to find the police chief for an update. She found him at the town hall, at a meeting organized to talk with the parents of the missing children, in the hopes that they would stop calling him, one at a time, several times every day. Busybodies and Nosey Parkers also came to the meeting, although they were not invited, filling the rest of the plastic seats Officer Qwerk had arranged in the hall.

"Lucy's dad is the only one who believes we're trapped in a spell," said Ming, reporting on her trip to the town hall. "He says it was the old woman who lives in the shack up at the lake. According to Mr. Bintapple," she paused for effect, "the old woman is a witch."

Lucy puffed out her chest at the news, amidst a chorus of "oooooh."

"But everyone else thinks he has gone completely mad," Ming continued.

Lucy's chest's ch deflated.

"The most popular view is that we've been kidnapped by a cult. A few people think we've been abducted by aliens, but they're considered crazy as well."

"Ooooh, aliens," said Jordan. "Now that's more interesting than being a fish-eating river spirit."

"What about the police chief?" Jack asked. "What does he think?"

"He seems to believe in the abduction theory but has no idea how it happened, given the number of people at the lake at the time and how many of us went missing all at once. He said someone would have heard or seen something."

"What were you doing there anyway?" Jack asked. "Didn't you go home?"

"No," she answered, hanging her head. "I couldn't ... it's best not to know how my mum—"

"Do you have brothers and sisters?" Jordan asked, sharpening a stick between two rocks to make a spear.

"No. It's just my mum and me. All her family, our family, is in China. She escaped with me when I was a baby. Her family and my father wanted to sell me to the baby traders because I was a girl—am a girl."

"What's a baby trader?" Lucy asked.

"People who buy and sell babies," said Ming.

"You can actually buy a baby?" Lucy asked. "Like a packet of chips? That's weird, dude."

"You're only allowed one baby in China, so everyone wants a boy."

"Smart," said Isaac. "Boys are better than girls."

"They are not!" Lucy yelled. "You're definitely not."

"So your mum saved your life," said Jack.

Ming nodded. "It would be too hard to see her all alone—" Ming started to cry. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, Ming. We'll break the spell," said Jack.

"So the woman in the shack is a witch," said Jordan. "That makes sense when you think about it. She was always complaining all the time, yelling at kids for nothing. She's mean to put us all into a spell though. She could have just chased us away." Jordan admired his spear. "Now, enough of this. I'm off to kill that carp."

"It bit me on the bum," said Isaac, glaring at Lucy for laughing so heartily.

"He's pure evil," Jordan replied. "He's also dead."

Lucy laughed. "Only if you catch him, dude!"

"Oh, I'll catch him alright," said Jordan. "Watch, and be awed by my genius."

Chapter Eleven

At the oak table, Zeb was busy with his escape plan. He would find a spiritual medium, a clairvoyant, someone who could talk with the spirit world and who could release him from the spell. First stop was a quick visit home.

A basketball match was in progress when he arrived. He sat down on the lawn in front of the grand white Fabergast house to watch his two younger brothers throw his red ball between themselves and occasionally through the hoop.

"Idiots," he muttered. "You're hopeless." He stepped into the game, snatching the ball as it bounced to hold it aloft and out of their reach, just as he would have done if he had been there in person. They stared at the ball suspended in the air.

"It's stuck in the air," said Nathan.

"You put it there," said Daniel.

"You did!" Nathan replied.

"Shut up, idiots," said Zeb, dropping the ball.

He watched for a while as the game continued, as if nothing peculiar had just happened. They had never beaten him at anything, not one-on-one or two-against-one. The two of them together were no match for his height and strength, and rule breaking. No one was. Zeb lost interest and went inside.

On the porch, he passed by his little sister Ally, as she played with an array of dolls in various stages of dress. Zeb snickered and kicked a Barbie doll into the garden then stepped over the shrieking girl with a smile.

His parents were out back, relaxing under the pergola, as was usual for a Sunday afternoon. They sipped from crystal glasses, with no sign of concern for a missing son.

"Great," said Zeb, "nice to know you care."

He proceeded towards the rumpus room in the basement, his master bedroom now since he had outgrown a mere bedroom, apart from the fact that he wanted to be well away from his brothers and sisters. His room was out of bounds to everyone, parents included, and he guaranteed his privacy with a castle-size lock across the only door.

Zeb stood in front of the door to his room, shocked to discover a mangled lock hanging loosely. He kicked at the door but made no imprint on the wood.

His first priority, once inside, was to check for what might be missing. He pulled out drawers and opened cupboards, spewing everything onto the floor in the middle of the room. He laughed. The blame would fall on Nathan and Daniel, for sure, when the chaos was eventually discovered. He pictured them tidying the mess under supervision, declaring their innocence, only to suffer further punishment for not

confessing to the crime. After one final reminiscent glance around his room, Zeb strode upstairs, two at a time, towards the telephone table in their living room.

He lifted the Yellow Pages from the shelf beneath the telephone and searched under Psychics, Mystics, and Clairvoyants. As the golden pages flicked, Zeb noticed Ally standing deathly still, with a doll in a cowboy hat shaking in her clenched hands. Her eyes were fixed on the turning pages.

"What do you want?" he asked, continuing to rustle through the book. "Little freak."

"What?" she replied.

Zeb stopped suddenly. "Can you see me?"

"Who's me?" she asked.

"You can hear me?" he asked.

"Who's me?" she asked.

"It's Zeb, stupid!"

"Are you a ghost?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am, and if you tell anyone I was here, I'm going to haunt you!"

Ally ran screaming from the room as Zeb ripped a page from the directory and headed off to find Madam Aurora, whose advertisement claimed she could speak to the dead. "Nutcass," Zeb muttered.

He arrived at a poky parlor with a sickly smell rising from burning sticks stuck in a glass of sand. All around him, bright colors of scarlet and hot pink filled every crevice and covered everything from padded chairs to lampshades and the single window. Angelica, bay, and hyssop herbs hung on the walls and doorway, and a mummified cat guarded the front door.

Two women sat at a small round table with a purple tablecloth, and a glass ball pride of place in the centre. Madam Aurora was obvious. She was covered head to toe in a blue and green flowing dress, with a sequined scarf wrapped loosely around her neck. Her hands hovered above a number of large picture cards. The other woman leaned forward from the edge of her seat, peering into the cards. She gasped when Madam Aurora turned one card to reveal a picture of a prostrate man with ten swords protruding from his back.

"Bogus, crazy woman," said Zeb. Madam Aurora looked up, her bracelets rattling as she moved her hands suddenly from their hovering over the cards. She gave Zeb her sternest frown.

"What is it?" screamed her client.

"A minor interference and nothing for you to worry about," Madam Aurora replied, resuming her calm and soothing control over proceedings, which matched her clothing.

Zeb strutted to search the back of the parlor. He hoped to find bizarre potions, creatures, and body parts floating in syrupy jars.

"What!" he yelled, at finding a room absurd only due to its normalcy, complete with a fridge, a table, one plastic chair, and a magazine on how to create a Japanese garden. An ordinary brown coat hung on the wall. "Fake," he said, "Bogus woman." He returned to the colorful blitz at the parlor's front.

The anxious woman left the parlor, happier than she had been moments before.

"Sit down," Madam Aurora ordered Zeb.

"You talking to me?" said Zeb, looking around the empty parlor. "You can see me?"

"No. I can't see you," replied Madam Aurora. "You're standing behind my chair."

He moved to sit down in the vacated chair, dwarfing it with his large frame.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she asked, shuffling her cards.

"Who says I want something?" he answered.

"Spirits come and go all the time, but they always have a reason for coming."

"You tell me, Madam, since you're supposed to be a psychic."

"Well, even though you are a rude, young man, I know you are not an evil spirit." She waved her arms at the herbs covering the walls and windows. "You see these herbs? They're not just for decoration. They keep the evil spirits out," she said.

"Who says it works?" Zeb replied with a smirk.

"This," she answered, lifting an amulet from around her neck. "Rattlesnake skull. Even if an evil spirit could get into the parlor, they can't get to me."

"Whatever, crazy woman," he said. "My name is Zeb Fabergast. Do you know who I am?"

"You're one of the missing children from the lake."

"Very good, Madam, but you didn't need psychic powers to know that. Read it in the paper, did you?"

"What happened? Are you all together, you and the other children?"

"We've been cast into a spell and turned into spirits."

"Well, that's good news, compared to the alternative. At least you're all still alive."

"Alive! We're not alive. Can you see me, crazy woman? There's no good news about it. Didn't you hear me? We're spirits!"

"What kind of spirits?" she asked.

"There are six river spirits at the glass table and six wood spirits at the oak table. The river spirits can escape the spell through the river mouth, but the wood spirits have to break the spell, or we're stuck there forever."

Zeb followed Madam Aurora around the parlor as she lit more incense.

"That stinks!" he said.

"Tell me more about the spell."

"The wood spirits have to guard the river mouth to stop the river spirits from passing through. If a river spirit escapes, a wood spirit dies."

"And how do you know this?"

"We have manuals. See this watch? We all have one because we can only be away from the tables for four hours."

"It sounds like a very complex spell. It will be difficult to break."

"I don't care about breaking the spell, crazy woman! I want you to cast another spell to release me from the spell. That's all."

"Hmm, that's interesting, and a little selfish, wouldn't you say?"

"Selfish? Who cares about selfish? My father says that being selfish is completely natural, that every man, woman, and child is naturally selfish, and that's perfectly okay. The others would do the same if they were smart enough to figure it out like I have."

"I see," she said, peering distractedly out the small window into the alleyway.

"Are you going to help me?" Zeb yelled.

"I'm not sure I can, young man. I'll see what I can do, but in the meantime, I have some advice for you, and I suggest you listen very carefully."

"Get on with it then."

"As I mentioned, you are all still 'alive.' You have not crossed over into the real spirit world, which is filled with the spirits of the dead and demons. That is a

dangerous, dangerous place, and every time you make contact with me or any other medium, they—the real spirits—can see you. They'll come after you, but if you stay in the spirit world created by the spell, you will be safe. Are you listening to me, Zeb?"

He nodded.

"I'll do what I can to help you and the others, but I have to be careful also. You cannot come here whenever you want or stay too long. In fact, you had better go now. They can see you."

"That's not good enough, woman! I need you to get me out of this spell! Now!"

"Zeb, you must go. Hurry! And don't come back. If I find a way to help, I will communicate with you, but go now."

"Stupid woman," he muttered as he began the journey back to the woods, near the lake. He would revisit the parlor at another time. He was not afraid of real spirits, who were probably just like him, only dead.

He yelled at the woods as he sat down at the oak table, "Stupid woman! Stupid woman!" There was no echo.

Chapter Twelve

Jordan was at home on a visit, rummaging through the refrigerator for anything non-fishy. His eyes widened at the sight of a bucket of leftover fried chicken. He plunged in with both hands, gobbling like a troll before spitting the chewed bird onto the kitchen floor. "Fish!" he yelled then whimpered, "everything tastes like fish."

Sadie, their cat, arrived to clean the floor. Jordan patted her white coat, grateful to be saved the task. The cat purred and wrapped her tail around Jordan's leg while she ate. He checked the fridge door for an update on life in the Carrefour residence. Maizie's school recital explained the quietness and absence of his parents and little sister. The notice was stuck in position on the silver door with colored alphabet letters. "Great, Jordan," he said to himself. "You come to visit and no one's home." He replaced the letters used to hold the notice in place, removing M-A-I-Z-I-E and substituting J-O-R-D-A-N.

He moved towards his father's office down the hall. The room was dark, except for the green banker's lamp. His dad was home, at his desk, but unusually, there were no files sprawled across the dark cherry surface. Instead, there was a large scrapbook. Jordan smiled, "How did you do it, dad? How did you get out of Maizie's recital?"

Jordan placed an arm around his father's shoulder and leaned in to view the scrapbook. It was a collection of drawings, essays, and crafty things made with paddle pop sticks—every creation from Jordan's ten years. Jordan had thought it had all passed directly from fridge door to the garbage. It had never occurred to him that his father would want to collect his artwork. It almost brought a tear.

They both jumped when the phone rang. Mr. Carrefour wrestled the receiver with his shaking hands. Jordan leaned in to listen to a breathless voice on the other end, who spoke before Mr. Carrefour had a chance to say hello and state his name. Mr. Carrefour grunted at the rambling and managed to add a word to the conversation after several minutes.

"Mr. Bintapple, I would really like to believe in all this ... spirit world, but I don't think the sudden appearance of a black stone on your kitchen bench means

anything. And with all due respect, all this talk of witches and spells is distracting us from the job of finding our children."

Jordan moved away from the phone to sit down on the navy pinstriped sofa and waited to hear more, knowing Mr. Bintapple was wasting oxygen. His dad believed in what he could see, what he could prove—no aliens or ghosts, just science and logic, and nothing else.

"What evidence do you have that she's a witch, Mr. Bintapple?"

Mr. Carrefour listened some more while shifting restlessly in his chair.

"I agree we need to consider every possibility ..."

"Okay, Mr. Bintapple," he sighed. "I'll organize a meeting of parents, as you suggest, so you can tell them about your theory, but I have to warn you—I don't think anyone will take much notice of it. It's not very helpful, in my opinion."

"Thank you. Good-bye, Mr. Bintapple. I'll be in touch."

Mr. Carrefour released another sigh, a deeper one this time, then turned on his computer and connected to the Internet. Jordan approached, curious, and watched as his father typed 'witchcraft' in the Google search box. When the search results page appeared, his dad stared at it for a while before pressing the red cross in the top right-hand corner to cancel the page. "What am I doing?" he mumbled to himself.

"Witches. Not likely."

"You're not going to be much help to us, dad, if you don't change your mind on black cats and mumbo-jumbo."

Maizie interrupted the father-son reunion with an announcement of a Chinese dinner ready for eating. Jordan grumbled at the thought of sweet and sour chicken with fried rice. He moved to the warm chair his father had just vacated to type C-A-R-P in the search box.

No one had seen Zeb in a while. He had not visited the river mouth to see how his fellow woods spirits were coping, nor to report on progress of the plan to break the spell. Arjun decided an investigation was in order. He and Georgia would swim up to the oak table and talk with Zeb, and argue, once more, for the reinstatement of home visits.

Kiera, Jasper, and Faith guarded the river mouth, playing riverpults to occupy the long hours in the river. The wood spirits each had a collection of river stones with initials scratched into the surface. Jasper placed his stone on the catapult made from a tree branch and an old drum found on the banks of the river. He jumped on the end of the branch and watched his stone float away on the current. On a good day, the force of water could drag a stone past the river mouth, resulting in a fifty-point bonus. Anyone could win with a little understanding of the currents and how they twisted and lurched towards the river mouth.

Faith celebrated as she retrieved her winning shot. A fish with oversized lips had snatched it from the current and carried her stone a distance before spitting it out way past the stones belonging to Jasper and Kiera. In the excitement, no one saw Isaac and Toby.

"Swim! Faster!" Isaac yelled from behind the river grass. Kiera, Faith, and Jasper turned in the direction of the talking grass while Toby swam past them, toward and through the river mouth. Once on the other side, he could no longer breathe under water and struggled toward the surface. Toby's two feet flailed and disconnected as he thrashed about, no longer as graceful as a dolphin and more like a fledgling turtle frantic to escape a predator. The surface drew closer, to everyone's relief. If Toby could just make it to the safe sands of the beach, someone would find him, so long as

he did not drown in the effort, unaccustomed as he was to swimming in the ocean, and especially without his fish-like skills.

As Toby disappeared from view, so did Faith, transformed from a spirit girl into a mass of tiny bubbles. The pockets of air that were Faith, grew larger and larger, until slowly, one by one, they broke free from the mass to merge with the river Kai and float away on the current. Faith was gone.

"Faith!" screamed Kiera as she swam around trying to capture the bubbles to join them back into one piece, that of her friend. Jasper cried and shuddered uncontrollably while Kiera continued her futile gathering of water molecules before collapsing on the riverbed in tears.

Arjun and Georgia returned from their unsuccessful Zeb-search just in time to witness the aftermath of Toby's escape. Arjun chased after Isaac, screaming in Hindi so the girls could not hear what he was saying. He stopped abruptly, turned in a somersault and swam quickly back to the river mouth. "Where are the others?" he yelled. "Quick everyone! Back to the river mouth! Where's Jasper?"

"I'm here," Jasper whimpered from inside the clumps of river grass. "The bubble monster's after me."

Georgia helped Kiera from where she had collapsed onto the riverbed. "Faith bubbles," she blubbered.

"Jasper, come over here where I can see you," said Arjun in a panic. "Kiera and Georgia, stay close to me. They'll probably be back for another attempt."

"Faith is gone," cried Kiera. "They killed her!"

"Who was it, Kiera?" asked Arjun. "Who escaped?"

"Toby," she wailed. "They killed Faith. They killed Faith."

Isaac sat down at the glass table, his face red from swimming away from Arjun, who was much faster than he looked. He would have been sweaty as well, if not for the river. Ming and Jack were working on the plan to break the spell with Lucy in a lifeless splay over the table. Jordan was toiling over his carp trap, the design for which, he had learned from the Internet.

"Where's Toby?" Ming asked.

Isaac did not answer.

"Where's Toby?" Jack asked squinting down the river, having never previously seen Isaac without Toby attached to his side.

"Has he gone on a home visit?" Ming asked.

Isaac shook his head.

"Playing with the wood spirits?" Lucy offered.

"No," said Isaac.

"Isaac? What's going on? Where's Toby?" Jack asked. "Tell us!"

"He's gone."

"Gone where, dude?"

"Home, he's gone home," Isaac replied.

"You let him go by himself? Did he set the alarm on his watch? He can't be late back," said Ming.

"He's not very good at telling the time," Lucy added, "even with a watch."

"He's not coming back."

Lucy laughed. "Very funny, dude. Where is the little bug—er, boy?"

"Isaac! This is not very smart of you. If he's not back in four hours, one of us will die—Rule number two, in case you've forgotten!" yelled Jack.

"No one is going to die ... Well, no one here at least. Toby went home ... through the river mouth."

"He's gone gone?" Jack asked.

"Oh, my," said Ming. "What about the wood spirits? Did you see what happened?"

"What happened, Isaac?" Jack asked when Isaac failed to answer.

"Faith ... turned into bubbles and ... dissolved into the river."

"Faith is gone?" Jordan asked, abandoning his trap making. "Dead?"

Isaac shrugged.

"I can't believe you did this, Isaac," said Jack. "Apart from killing Faith, which is ... unbelievable, there is no way the wood spirits will trust us now, and we need all the help we can get if we're going to break the spell."

"Zeb will be gloating," Ming added. "You just proved him right."

"Look, this whole thing about breaking the spell is stupid. We don't have to! We can just escape. Can't you see that?" yelled Isaac.

"Even if we didn't care about the wood spirits, only four of us could escape. Two of us have to stay at the glass table. Do you want to stay?" Ming asked.

"Jack has already volunteered."

"That's one. Who else? Are you volunteering, Isaac?" Jack asked.

"Besides, it's not right for Jack to stay behind anyway. We have to break the spell," said Ming.

"We agreed that's what we would do," added Jordan.

"You're overreacting," said Isaac. "Let's face it, we're just kids. We're not going to be able to break a spell made by a witch! We're not getting out of here unless we escape ... all of us. The rule doesn't say anything about what will happen if two spirits don't stay at the glass table. We should just go! Now!"

"And what if we all die in the escape attempt because that's the punishment for not having two spirits at the table?" Ming asked. "There has to be consequences. Just look at the rules. There's a consequence for everything."

"Doesn't anyone agree with me?" Isaac asked. "Lucy?"

Lucy shrugged and shook her head.

"Look, I'm sorry about Faith. I honestly thought Zeb would die first because he is the oldest of the wood spirits and because he is the only one sitting at the oak table. But I'm not sorry that Toby escaped."

"But are you sure he made it?" Ming asked.

"I think so," said Isaac. "The last time I saw him, he had just made the surface on the other side of the river mouth. I hope he made it."

"Are you planning to escape next, Isaac? We need to know," said Jack.

"I give you my word," Isaac answered, hand across his heart.

"I doubt anyone will be able to escape now," said Jordan. "They'll be guarding it like gladiators."

"Well, we'd better get to work on the plan," said Jack.

"Not me," said Jordan. "I have to finish my trap. That carp is dinner."

"He's too smart for you, dude," said Lucy.

"I've done my research, Lucy. He's not getting away this time. You'll see."

Chapter Thirteen

Someone had to break the escape news to Zeb. Georgia volunteered. He wouldn't hit a girl, she reasoned, even though she did not believe it. It had been four hours since she was last at the oak table with Arjun, so Zeb had to be back, or someone else would have died, a wood spirit and a river spirit, but everyone was accounted for.

She returned to the river mouth a short while later with no injuries and with an update on Zeb's recent absence. He had not been on a home visit as the wood spirits had suspected but had been conducting research on the plan to break the spell. He was insulted and furious that his fellow spirits should think he was having fun visiting home and that they should dare to check up on him while he was doing "all this hard work for them."

Faith's disappearance did not cause him any bother. He responded, as the wood spirits thought he might, by saying, "I told you so," and so he had.

Arjun thought it strange though. If the river spirits had planned Toby's escape, then where were the other river spirits? Only Isaac was hiding in the river grass. Four of the river spirits could have made it through in all the confusion, and why at the very least, didn't Isaac go through with Toby? Arjun concluded, and the others had to agree, that there was no conspiracy or escape plan. It was just Isaac sending Toby home for his birthday, as he had proposed the day before. However, they could not ignore the possibility of being wrong. No one wanted to end up like Faith, and so they would guard the river mouth, diligently this time, just in case, and wait for Zeb's plan for breaking the spell.

Jasper cried, as Toby had, wanting to go home, and Arjun, Georgia, and Kiera were sorry they could not help him as Isaac had done for Toby. Life as a wood spirit was not fair, and a lot of pondering happened during the endless hours on guard at the river mouth, trying to understand why they were chosen as wood spirits and not river spirits, but no answers came.

"Can we still be friends with them?" Kiera asked. "I like Lucy. She's fun."

"I guess so," said Arjun. "We just need to be careful."

"I like Jordan," said Jasper, chewing on a prawn Georgia had caught for him. "He's funny with that carp chasing him," he laughed.

"Just to be on the safe side," said Arjun, "we should build a barricade to keep them away from the river mouth. At least then, if they make a dash for it, we'll have enough warning." Arjun marked out where he thought the barricade should be erected. "Let's get to it, and no more riverpults. I'm sorry, but we'll be needing that drum for the barricade."

"I wonder what he does up there all the time," Georgia mused.

"Who?" Jasper asked.

"Zeb, our great leader."

"The plan must be almost finished," said Kiera. "We'll be out of here soon. Hear that, Jasper? No more prawns!"

Zeb returned to the parlor, ignoring Madam Aurora's previous warning about demons and real spirits—the dead ones he could not see and did not believe in, but he could not wait forever, tired as he was of fish heads and eels.

"I told you not to come back here," she said, sensing his presence.

"I don't believe in all that baloney. What have you done to get me out of the spell?" he barked.

"I told you I would try to help, not just you, but the other children as well. I also told you it would not be easy."

"So what have you done?" he repeated.

"I had a talk with the police chief. I told him about your visit and what you said. He didn't believe me, of course. I also spoke with a Mr. Bintapple. Do you know his daughter, Lucy?"

"Not really. She's a river spirit. I've only seen her once."

"Her father, Mr. Bintapple, is the only one who believes you're in a spell. I also spoke to your father at a meeting I attended. He called me a nutcase, so clearly, he doesn't believe in the spell either."

"That sounds like my father. Anyway, why are you wasting all this time talking to people? All you have to do is make a spell to get me out of there!"

Madam Aurora shuffled cards and laid them out on the table. "It's not that simple. If I don't understand the rules of the spell, I could make things worse for you. If the rules specify how the spell is to be broken, then that will be the only way to break it."

"I know what the rule is ... to break the spell."

"You do? Why didn't you say so?"

"I said we had manuals, stupid woman!"

"You didn't mention a rule for breaking the spell."

Zeb huffed. "The Rumpole City Council has to order the lifelong protection of the woods, the lake, and the river and ... no more children at the lake or in the woods, and no more litter and pollution. I think that was the second part."

"Interesting."

"Why is that so interesting?"

"It seems that whoever cast this spell wants it to be broken. That's unusual. It does not usually work that way."

"So it will be easy then, to break the spell, like I said."

"I need to know the other rule—" said Madam Aurora. "Zeb, you had better go. They're coming for you. Quickly now."

"Who's coming?" Zeb asked, sitting down opposite Madam Aurora mesmerized by her bright blue eyeshadow and over-stated rosy lips surrounded by a thick black line.

"Spirits from the spirit world. Zeb, you must go." The cards in Madam Aurora's hands flew from their pack, covering the table.

"I'm not afraid of anyone or anything. People are afraid of me."

"If you want a happy life now, as a spirit and again as a boy, you need to keep well away from the spirits, the real spirits. They can and will destroy you, Zeb. Go now!" She jumped, causing a fragile chair to fall to the floor and break in two places.

"What rubbish are you talking? I don't see any spirits, crazy woman, and I'm not afraid."

"Zeb!" she called out.

"Let go of me," Zeb yelled as three ghouls grabbed him by the arm, dragging him toward a hole that separated the two spirit worlds. "Help! Help!" he cried out while trying to wrestle free from their clasp. He kicked at his captors, but his legs pierced their bodies with no effect. They continued to laugh as he struggled.

"Let him go," Madam Aurora ordered, but the ghouls flew through the hole, pulling Zeb behind them.

He was gone. Madam Aurora could not help him now, but she could still try to help the others, and she would.

Jack, Jordan, and Lucy went down to the river mouth to where the barricade rose up from the stony riverbed.

"Greetings, earthlings," Lucy called out.

"Don't come any closer, Lucy," said Arjun. "You have to stay behind the barricade."

"Might I compliment you on your most excellent handiwork, dudes? Most impressive."

"Just stay behind it, all of you, and everything will be just fine," Arjun ordered.

"And there are four of us and only three of you," added Georgia, "so you won't get through the river mouth."

"We just want to talk," said Jack.

"Talk away," said Georgia.

"First of all, we want to say we're sorry for what happened to Faith. There was no plan for anyone to escape. Isaac did that without any of us knowing about it."

"Okay," said Arjun.

"I know it will take a while before you can trust us again, but we are working on a plan to break the spell. You'll see. Anyway, we just wanted to apologize."

"Where's Zeb?" Lucy asked, glancing around.

"At the oak table, where he usually is," replied Georgia.

"We haven't seen him for a while," Jordan added, "so we were just wondering what he's up to."

"No need for you to be wondering about how many people we have on guard," said Georgia.

"That's not why I asked, Georgia. It's just that, well, he hasn't been seen since Toby escaped and Faith ... dissolved."

"Like Kiera said," Arjun responded, "there's no need for you to worry about Zeb. He's busy working on our plan to break the spell."

"It would make more sense for all of us to work together," replied Jack.

"Well, you should have thought of that before Toby escaped," Georgia shot back.

"This is not going so well," Jack whispered to Lucy and Jordan. "Maybe we should leave them alone for now and try again later, when Georgia is in a better mood."

"Righte-o, then. We'll be off, dudes," Lucy called out.

"Tell Zeb I'd like to talk to him," said Jack, "to try and smooth things over so that we can start working together on the plan."

"I'll tell him," said Arjun. "It won't be long now though, before Zeb has finished our plan. I don't think we're going to need your help. Thanks all the same."

"Toorah," said Lucy.

Chapter Fourteen

As soon as the river spirits were out of sight, Arjun turned to Kiera and Georgia. Jordan was right. No one had seen Zeb for a while, not since Georgia met with him at the oak table. They knew nothing of the plan, how it had progressed, or even if it had been started, other than that some "research" had been done.

Their minds were in sync. Someone had to go back to the oak table for an update. Georgia volunteered since she was in a bad mood and ready to give Zeb a

piece of her mind, plus she could swim super fast, in case she had to get away from a flying fist.

Georgia sat down at the oak table ready to wait up to four hours for the missing Zeb to return from wherever he was. She carved her initials into the oak surface and played tic-tac-toe as the hours passed. When four hours had passed, she panicked, believing another river spirit had passed through the river mouth during her absence and Zeb had disintegrated as a result—not that she cared so much about Zeb, but she did care that the river spirits had lied about not trying to escape, and someone else had gone home.

Her chest thumped as she approached the river mouth, expecting to find her fellow wood spirits in disarray after yet another escape, but that was not the case. Jasper, Arjun, and Kiera were alert on guard but having fun with some seaweed wigs.

"What's he up to?" Arjun called out as Georgia came closer.

"He's not there," she replied. "Did anyone escape?"

"Nope," said Georgia. "What makes you think that?"

"It makes no sense. There's no sign of Zeb up at the oak table, no plan, no fresh fish bones, prawn shells, nothing at all. Where could he be?"

They formed a huddle to discuss Zeb's likely fate and concluded that Zeb had perished for not observing the four-hour home visitation rule. It was the only way to explain it, but that meant a river spirit must have perished as well. They hoped it was not Lucy, or Ming, or Jordan, or Jack.

Arjun was elected the new leader of the wood spirits and immediately came up with a plan.

"We need to make a couple of fake guards so it looks like every one of us is guarding the river mouth, even when we're not. Then we can sneak home for a visit without the river spirits knowing. Any suggestions?"

"Scarecrows," suggested Kiera. "We can make them using river grass instead of straw."

"Has anyone made a scarecrow before?" Arjun asked.

"Me," said Kiera. "I lived on a farm with my grandparents after my parents divorced, while they were busy fighting over who was going keep me."

"Excellent," said Arjun. "I mean about the farm—not the divorce," he added.

"Come on, Jasper," said Kiera, taking his hand. "Let's go hunting for scarecrow parts."

They searched the riverbed and banks of the river Kai for anything lost overboard from fishing boats and family cruisers, finding caps and shirts, sunglasses, and even a pair of vinyl pants with suspenders, like you would expect to find on a clown at the circus.

As soon as the river blackened that night, the wood spirits moved their two new guards into position, one with the vinyl pants and one with a pair of shorts made out of a t-shirt. With five guards now in place, three wood spirits and two scarecrows, Arjun and Georgia ventured back to the oak table to double-check for Zeb and evidence of the plan he had been working on.

Arjun wondered if Zeb had found a way out of the spell. Initially, he was angry at the thought, but then it consoled him because if Zeb had found a way out, it meant there was a way home for all of them. They just had to find it.

Zeb definitely was no longer there, nor was the plan, and there was no doubting that Zeb had vanished, dissolved, or escaped. Arjun and Georgia sat down at the oak table to re-read the bark manual, specifically, the rules on home visits and how to

break the spell. With Zeb gone, they would need to start with a new plan or think about an alliance with the river spirits.

When they returned to the river mouth, Lucy was standing at the barricade talking with Kiera. Arjun and Georgia hid in the river grass, unable to return in Lucy's presence, since one scarecrow wore a turban and the other one had a mass of green seaweed that only resembled Georgia's flowing blonde locks because the moonlight at night as it pierced the water cast a green glow over everything, even blonde hair.

Arjun caught Jasper's attention and beckoned him into the river grass to send him back with instructions for Lucy.

"Arjun wants to see all of the river spirits," said Jasper. "And you have come down two together—no wait—three together," Jasper said, glancing over at Arjun, who waved three fingers in the water.

"What's this all about, little dude?"

"I don't know. Arjun just says so."

"Well, why doesn't Arjun speak for himself then?" Lucy asked of the turban-wearing scarecrow.

"He's meditating," said Kiera. "So he can't talk at the moment. So is Georgia."

"Hmm," said Lucy. "They're mediating eh? What's that mean? They're not allowed to argue?"

"Meditating," Kiera corrected. "It's kind of like being asleep when you're awake, or awake when you're asleep ... I think. You'll have to ask Arjun when he's done."

"Whatever," said Lucy, racing off. "Sounds daft. I'll be back."

Jack, Jordan, and Ming swam down to the river mouth as instructed by Lucy, as directed by Arjun, via Jasper.

"What's this all about, Arjun?" Jack asked.

"We're just doing an audit, Jack. Just want to be sure all the river spirits are still here, there, at the glass table ... except for Toby of course."

"Why wouldn't we all be here—there?" Jordan asked.

"Where's Isaac?" Arjun asked.

"He's at the table," Jack sighed. "You know two spirits have to stay at the glass table at all times, and besides, you said come three at a time, didn't you?" Jack rolled his eyes.

"Well, go and get him then," said Georgia.

"I'll go get him," said Jordan, shaking his head.

"This is ridiculous," said Jack. "Do you think Isaac has escaped? You're all here, so obviously no one has escaped!"

"Zeb's missing," said Arjun. "We don't know where he is, whether he went on a home visit and died, or if he stayed at home and nothing happened to him, or if he somehow found a way to escape the spell."

"If he has broken any rules, then one of us would have died also, so it can't be that," replied Ming.

"I think he probably went on a home visit and didn't come back on time," Kiera suggested.

"But what if he did break the spell? He has been working on a plan all this time," said Georgia.

Isaac arrived, with his arms folded and lips pursed. "You wanted to see me, Arjun, oh great ruler of the river? You think I escaped?"

"Not that you wouldn't try, Isaac, but we wanted to find out if any river spirits had turned into bubbles and disintegrated. Now that we know you are all here, there can only be one explanation for Zeb's disappearance. He has escaped the spell."

"It's possible," said Ming, "but I find it a little hard to believe."

"Zeb's not the smartest kid on the block," Jack added.

"The dumbest, I'd say," said Isaac, still pouting.

"There's one way to find out," said Jack. "A mission to Zeb's place to see if he's there."

"And also to the police chief," Ming added. "Then we can be sure if he's home or still missing."

"Good idea," said Arjun. "It will have to be one of you because all of us are on guard all the time."

"Not now, we have the scare—" Jasper began, until Georgia wrapped her hand over his mouth.

"The what?" asked Isaac. "What was he saying?"

"Nothing," Jasper whispered after Georgia freed his lips.

"I'll go," said Ming.

"And I give you my word, again," said Jack, "No one is going to try an escape, especially not now you have the scare—" he laughed.

Ming set off in search of Zeb's place, stopping at a phone booth on the way to check the directory for the only Fabergast in Rumpole. As much as she disliked the boy, she hoped to find Zeb asleep in his own bed. That would be good for all of them.

It was late, and only one light shone in the massive white house. Inside the dimly lit room, Mrs. Fabergast slept and snored, her eyes covered by a pink mask. Mr. Fabergast was propped up in bed by three massive pillows, reading the daily newspaper.

Ming could see the headlines with no mention of missing children or that another one had returned home alive. If Zeb had broken the spell and returned home, it would surely have made front-page news. It was disturbing also that their disappearance was no longer of utmost importance in Rumpole—there was no mention of any of them on the front page.

Ming checked the other bedrooms in the Fabergast mansion in search of Zeb. All rooms and beds were occupied, but none of the sleeping bodies belonged to Zeb. She searched the rest of the house, eventually stepping down to the basement, which was wall-to-wall with quad bikes, motor bikes, go-karts, and anything else that raced. There was one door tucked away in the corner with a "Keep Out or Die" sign. Ming ventured inside, noting the damaged lock and mass of boot prints ingrained on the door. She immediately thought of Zeb. He would definitely be a door-kicker.

The vastness of Zeb's room did not surprise Ming. Everything about Zeb was big: his voice, his sneer, his body, and his attitude. His bed was also king size, but it was neat and showed no sign that Zeb had slept there for quite some time. Ming was sure he had not returned to the real world, but the police chief could answer the question definitively.

Ming flew part of the way to the police chief's office then walked through the Rumpole town mall, for old time's sake. The police station was at the end of the mall in a gothic building that was out of place amid the other bright, modern buildings in the mall.

The police chief was gone for the night, but his locked office was not an obstacle for a spirit. Ming found a storage box marked "Lakeside Abductions." She shuffled through the files and found one in Zeb's name. He was still missing. The last sighting was at Lake Como the day the spell was cast.

"Where could he be?" Ming asked herself, sitting down in the police chief's chair. It was a mystery, even more of a mystery than the disappearance of twelve children from Lake Como last summer. She glanced at her watch. There was time to spare for a home visit if she dared. She did not.

"He's not there," Ming reported to her fellow spirits back at the glass table.

"He's missing from being missing," Jordan added.

"It's very odd," Ming continued. "If he had found a way out of the spell, he would be at home, and he isn't. Yet if he had broken the home visitation rule, then one of us would be ... gone."

"Maybe the witch caught him trying to get out of the spell without breaking it," Lucy suggested.

"You might be right, Lucy," said Jack. "We know from the wood spirits that he was working on a plan to break the spell. This tells us that we need to be careful and be sure we follow the rules exactly. Maybe Zeb was being tricky, or trying to be tricky, but it didn't work."

They all nodded their agreement.

"I'll let the wood spirits know," said Ming. "Maybe now they'll realize we need to be working on this together."

"I wonder where he could be?" said Jordan gazing off into the river, with an old piece of fishing line clasped in one hand. "The witch must have him," he added.

"She might have eaten him," suggested Lucy.

"Hmmm, Zeb soup," said Jordan.

"I'd rather eat raw prawns," said Isaac.

Lucy screeched as Jordan was suddenly dragged along the riverbed by the carp, the other end of the fishing line clasped between two great rubbery lips, which appeared to be smiling.

Chapter Fifteen

Ming and Jack had been working on the plan without the assistance of the wood spirits, who were still afraid to do anything without knowing what had happened to Zeb. The wood spirits needed to be sure that Zeb's disappearance meant that the spell could be broken, and nothing else, and until they had evidence, they could not trust the river spirits.

With all river spirits present at the glass table, with Isaac's return from a home visit, Ming began with an update on the plan.

"Okay. So our main purpose is to protect the lake, the woods, and the river, right? Because if we don't, we're all dead and there's no point being able to break the spell."

"Pretty simple," said Lucy.

"Simple?" said Isaac. "And how are we supposed to do that, from the bottom of the river, trapped in a spell?"

"That's the next part of the plan: actions," said Jack. "Just be patient, Isaac, and we'll get through this."

"We have three actions," Ming continued. "First, we need to make contact with people in the real world who believe in the spell."

"That would be my dad," said Lucy.

"That's right, Lucy. At this stage, we only have Mr. Bintapple and Isaac's twin brother Brandon who believe in the spell."

"And Toby," added Jack. "Even though he's only seven."

"Actually, he's eight," Isaac interrupted. "It's his birthday today."

"What's going on at your place, Isaac, since Toby turned up?" Ming asked.

"Nothing much. No one believes him, and he has to spend hours every day with a child psychologist. They think he made up the story about the witch and the spell so that he doesn't have to remember what they think really happened to him."

"What's that?" Jordan asked.

"Most people in Rumpole still think we were abducted by a cult or aliens and that Toby somehow managed to escape or was dropped back down to Earth."

"Poor Toby," said Ming. "How frustrating to be telling the truth and no one believes you."

"And worse, they might eventually convince him something else happened. That's what adults do," Isaac added with authority.

"We can add Toby to the list of people we need to work with in the real world, but if it starts to get too much for him, we'll have to leave him out of it," said Jack to an array of nods.

"What's next?" asked Jordan.

"The second action is to work with the Greenies," said Ming.

"What's a Greenie, dude?"

"People who go around protecting the planet and animals and trees and stuff," Jordan answered.

"So the plan is to leave clues for the Greenies to help them with what they're trying to do up at the lake, like shutting down the campgrounds and cleaning things up," said Ming. "And next, we need to find ourselves a politician."

"A politician?" asked Isaac. "Are you serious?"

"We need someone who can propose the law we need to get passed by the Council," said Ming.

"And how do we do that?" Isaac asked, shaking his head.

"We're not sure yet," said Jack. "We're working on it, but we need to do more research."

"Well, that's it for actions," Ming concluded. "Anyone have anything to add?"

"I've got an idea," said Lucy,

"Oh, oh," murmured Isaac, "this'll be good."

"Well, dudes, we're spirits, aren't we?" Lucy waited and continued when no one answered. "Why don't we just scare everyone away from the lake and the woods?"

"Interesting suggestion, Lucy," said Jack. "The problem though, is that rule four states that 'the Rumpole City Council' must order the lifelong protection of the woods, the lake, and the river. And that's another problem—the rule does say 'lifelong protection.' We would have to remain as spirits forever to scare everyone away, which defeats the purpose of breaking the spell, and people would have to be afraid of us. Let's face it—some of us are not that scary."

"Zeb is pretty scary," said Jordan, throwing prawn shells onto the table.

"Yeah, he would have made an awesome ghost," Lucy agreed.

"But I think we should include it in the plan anyway, as a fourth action," Jack suggested. "As crazy as it might sound, you just never know."

"Okay," said Ming, "now, on to the next part of the plan."

"There's more?" Jordan asked, sighting the carp close by his trap.

"You can leave if you want, Jordan," said Jack, "but if you're not here, you'll get volunteered to do the things no one else wants to do."

"Just hurry it up, will you," Jordan replied. "I have other important business."

"The river spirits are getting restless, dude," added Lucy with an eye also on the carp.

"So next we need volunteers for the missions."

"What missions, dude?"

"The ones we've just been talking about, Lucy. Are you deaf?" Isaac asked, through gritted teeth.

"Keep your knickers on your top, dude."

"Lucy, I think you meant to say, 'don't get your knickers in a knot' or 'don't blow your top,'" suggested Ming.

"No, Ming. I meant what I said," Lucy replied haughtily.

"Could everyone please stay focused on the plan for just a while longer?" Jack begged. "This is more important than that carp."

"Shouldn't you put a fish on the end of the hook?" said Isaac.

"He doesn't eat fish. He's a bottom-dwelling, life-sucking, vacuum cleaner, but this time when he does his vacuuming, he's going to get hooked!" Jordan smiled.

Jack sighed. "Jordan, what's more important, catching that fish or getting out of this river?"

"Ahhh, ummm," Jordan replied.

"If you're no longer living in the river, the carp won't bother you," Ming added.

"I think he might," said Jordan.

"He's got it!" yelled Lucy. Jordan rushed off after the fishing line that flailed behind the disappearing carp. Isaac and Lucy followed in hot pursuit.

"I think we'll adjourn this meeting for now," Jack said to Ming. "When the others come back, we should head down to the river mouth and spend some time with the wood spirits. Maybe we can convince them to help us with the plan and the missions."

They glanced up the river. "That fish sure is fast," said Jack.

"And smart too," added Ming.

Chapter Sixteen

Jack was reluctant and only agreed to visit home to stop the relentless nagging of his fellow river spirits. He expected to find everything much the same as it had been when he left with his knapsack all those months ago. His mother would be in bed crying into Colby's photo, and his father would be wandering the garden, in search of caterpillars that seemed to move faster than he did.

The bees buzzing in his stomach seemed real as he approached his house. He went directly towards his parents' bedroom. The door was open, which was unusual, but there was no need anymore for his mother to hide away with her box of tissues since her only living son was gone. Jack could always hear the crying, even through the closed door, and had often sat outside her door on the floor and listened, hoping to

be remembered. He did not want to see her that way again, and that was the reason he left that day to hike to the lake.

After a deep breath, Jack stepped inside the bedroom. His mother would not see him now because he was a spirit, but then, she had not seen him since the day Colby died under the wheels of a speeding car at a school crossing.

His mother was not there in bed in her nightgown, and suddenly, Jack feared that she might have died too while he was gone.

Jack rushed through the house toward the living room sofa, front porch swing, garden hammock, places she was likely to be with the photo clutched to her chest and crying. He did not expect to find her in the kitchen with an apron tied around her waist, making lunch for two. This, he had not seen in a very long time.

His father was there with her, not rambling amidst the hydrangeas but waiting for a steak sandwich with barbeque chips on the side. It was shocking and confirmed what Jack already knew—because he had disappeared, life at the Irwin-Hunter residence had returned to normal. A tear fell down his cheek. He wiped it away quickly, then another followed and another, until he was slapping at his face willing them to stop. When Colby died, his mother had cried and cried and would not stop, not even after a year, but when Jack ran away, she was happy again—no soggy eyes or photos of him clutched to her chest. She was happy making lunch in the kitchen. He could conclude now, beyond a doubt, that his parents did not care for him at all. They had only ever cared for Colby.

Jack backed slowly out of the kitchen, out of the tragically happy scene, ready to return forever to his new home at the bottom of the river, a place he would not leave again, but then his dad spoke.

"So what do you think of Mr. Bintapple's theory about the witch and the spell?" he asked.

"I can believe in anything if it means finding my son. He's out there somewhere, Pop. We have to find Jackie-boy and bring him home. It's all my fault." She started to cry. "If I had been more attentive, he would never have run off like that." Just as quickly as she began, the tears stopped. "No, no. I'm not going to cry. That's what started this in the first place. I won't cry. I will find my son."

"You can't blame yourself, dear. We'll find him."

"We must. I won't lose another of my precious boys. We should meet with the psychic woman, the one who spoke with Mr. Bintapple. What was her name?"

"Madam Aurora."

"I'll call Mr. Bintapple now and let him know we will attend the meeting. And whatever the psychic woman thinks we should do, we'll do it."

Jack cried some more as he stole a hug from his dad, his mum, then stole a gingerbread cookie from the tray cooling on the windowsill. He spat it out. "Fishbread cookie!"

The river beckoned once more, but his home visit helped him fly higher and swim faster than before. He felt better than he remembered ever before, in all of his fourteen years. Seeing his parents filled him with enthusiasm for breaking the spell, he wanted to come home, and soon. It would be just the three of them, and they would be happy.

Jack joined Ming at the glass table to work on the action plan. Isaac was up and gone the second Jack sat down, to follow Lucy and Jordan up the river in search of the carp.

The wood spirits had not changed their minds on an alliance, disturbed as they were by Zeb's disappearance and believing it was somehow connected with his plan for breaking the spell. The river spirits would have to undertake the missions on their own, in teams of two or three, since two spirits had to remain at the table.

They were ready to get started, as soon as Jordan, Lucy, and Isaac returned from their most important mission—to catch the carp that taunted Jordan.

"So, you go to the Grammar School?" Jack asked Ming.

"I won a scholarship," she replied. "I wouldn't be there otherwise. My mother could never afford to pay for the uniforms, let alone the fees."

"You must be pretty smart, Ming, to win a scholarship to that school."

Ming shrugged and looked up as Lucy sat down at the glass table, followed by Jordan and Isaac.

"Any luck with the carp?" Jack asked.

Jordan glared while Lucy and Isaac smirked, answering the question.

"Okay, let's get to work. Ming and I have drafted our action plan with three teams. Team one to work with the believers, will be me, Lucy, and Isaac. Team two, to work with the Greenies will be me and Ming. Team three for the toughest mission, the politicians, will be Ming and Jordan." Jack waited a minute. "Any questions? Complaints?"

"Notta," said Lucy.

"Notta?" asked Jack.

"Not a single thing to say about that, dude."

"Next, we need to let the wood spirits know what we're planning to do. Isaac and Jordan, do you think you could stay at the glass table while Ming, Lucy, and I go down to the river mouth?"

"Sure," said Jordan. "Don't be long though, just in case."

Jack, Ming, and Lucy approached the barrier with slow and steady movements, not wanting to hear accusations of an escape attempt.

"We come in peace, brothers and sisters," Lucy called out as they swam closer. "We come with plans to save you all," she added with dramatic arm movements.

"And how are you going to do that, Lucy?" Arjun asked with a smile.

"Over to you, great leader-dude," she said, swirling her left arm in a circle and pointing at Jack.

"We've gone through the rules again and come up with the priority goal, which is to protect the woods, the lake, and the river."

"That's what we need to do to break the spell, and to be sure we don't all end up like ... Faith," Ming added.

"We have four actions for achieving the goal," Jack continued. "The first is to work with the people who believe in the witch theory and the spell. Me, Isaac, and Lucy are on that mission."

"Cause my dad is a believer," Lucy interrupted.

"The second action," said Jack, "is to work with the Greenies."

"They've been lobbying the council for years," said Ming, "to shut down the campgrounds because of pollution to the lake, so that will help us accomplish rule number five."

"The Greenie dudes protect the planet," Lucy advised. "That's their job."

"Ming and I are on that mission," added Jack.

"And the third action is to find a sympathetic politician to help us with the law we need to have passed by the Rumpole City Council. I'm on that mission with Jordan," said Ming.

"We have a lot to do," said Jack. "We could do with some help. Ming and I have two missions, which will be a lot of work."

"You forgot the fourth action, dude."

"Oh, yeah, thanks, Lucy. The fourth action, which is a last resort, is to—"

"We scare everyone," Lucy blurted. "We're spirits, dudes—that's what we do."

"Um, yes, that action has a few problems," said Jack. "It is a last resort."

"It's my idea," said Lucy.

"What do you think?" Jack asked after a lengthy pause.

"Impressive," Arjun replied. "You've thought of everything, but ..."

"But what?"

"We appreciate what you're trying to do, but ..."

"We don't want to turn into bubbles like Faith," Georgia added, tugging at the stick that kept her hair in a knot.

"Dudes, we said we're not going to escaaaape. Hyah." Lucy rolled her head, not just her eyes.

"We believe you—well, some of you—but we just don't know what will come of all these spell-breaking attempts," said Kiera. "You know what happened to Zeb. And maybe that was because he was trying to break the spell and the witch didn't like what he was doing."

"Well, actually, we don't know what happened to Zeb," said Jack. "You're only guessing. His disappearance might have nothing to do with trying to break the spell. Why would the witch include a rule to break the spell and then punish us for trying to do it? It makes no sense."

"It's a no," Arjun said. "That's all we've got to say on it. Sorry."

"Okay," Jack replied hiding a frustrated sigh under a wistful one. "We'll keep working away then—to save all of you, even though we don't have to."

"We'll want to see some gratitude in the end," said Lucy. "When we break the spell, you'll be, like, our slaves forever."

Chapter Seventeen

Jack and Lucy were on the inaugural mission to attend the first meeting of the believers meeting, held at the Bintapple residence. A crowd was not expected since few people in Rumpole believed in the spell, and only some of those thought the old woman in the shack at the lake was responsible. Most people still believed in the abduction theories, whether by aliens or a cult.

"Only five people," Jack said to Lucy. "That's not so good, but at least my parents are here." He surveyed the room. "And that couple over there," he pointed. "They must be Arjun's parents."

"That man looks just like Arjun," said Lucy, "except Arjun doesn't have a beard."

"It might help persuade Arjun to form an alliance," said Jack, "knowing his parents are believers."

"Food!" screeched Lucy, sighting a buffet of cakes, scones, tartlets, and jam rolls.

"Forget it, Lucy. It all tastes like fish."

Ignoring the warning, Lucy ploughed her way to the table, drool spilling down her chin into a marshmallow topped caramel tart.

"Oops!" she laughed as a hand selected the saliva-covered treat.

The room fell into silence when a knock came through the front door.

Mr. Bintapple stood aside the opened entryway with a bow and a wave, as if he was welcoming a queen. "May I introduce Madam Aurora," he said as everyone assembled in the living room.

Madam Aurora did not walk into the room, she swooshed, with layer after layer of different-colored sheer fabric floating around her every movement.

"Madam Aurora," Mr. Bintapple began, having extricated himself from the billowing chiffon, "saw our notice in the Rumpole Tribune and contacted me to discuss our plight. We have spoken several times now, and she has a very interesting story to tell, so if you could please take a seat, we'll get started."

Mr. Bintapple moved quickly toward the seat beside the coffee table, which supported a mammoth bowl of potato chips. He nodded at Madam Aurora when all six seats were filled, encouraging her to begin her story. She leaned forward in her chair as if she were about to whisper a top secret.

She had received a visit, she said, from a boy called Zeb Fabergast. Jack and Lucy gasped, as did everyone else in the room. "He came to me as a spirit, 'a wood spirit,' he called himself." Another gasp passed around the room and Jack's mother started to cry. "Is my boy dead, too? Are they all dead?"

"No, no, they're not dead, as such. They are, technically at least, still alive. They did not die and pass into the real spirit world, even though they are 'spirits.' The missing children are now spirits living in a place that has been created by a spell. If the spell is broken, then the place they are trapped in will disintegrate, and they will return home to you very much alive. I know this must be difficult for you to understand. The spell is very complex. It has been cast by someone with a great deal of expertise."

"The old woman who lives in the shack up at the lake," Mr. Bintapple added. "She's a witch. Mr. Arnett would tell you that if he was still with us, God rest his poor soul."

"Do you know anything of this woman?" Mr. Singh asked Madam Aurora.

"I do. I know of her and I know the stories that follow her, and while I cannot say with absolute certainty that she is a witch, she does have a certain aura about her."

"You know she is a witch, Madam Aurora," said Mr. Bintapple. "You said so yourself."

"Your children," Madam Aurora continued, "are living in the river Kai. There is a glass table at the bottom of the river and an oak table in the woods. From what I learned from Zeb, the wood spirits must stop the river spirits from escaping through the river mouth. I'm not sure which child belongs to which table, except for Zeb and Lucy. Zeb told me he was from the oak table, a wood spirit, and it seems that the wood spirits spend most of their time at the river mouth, guarding it. Lucy is a river spirit."

"Can't we just go and get them out of the river?" asked Mrs. Singh.

"Surely we could find these tables, the glass one and the oak one, and then we'll find our children," added Mr. Irwin-Hunter.

"You are free to search the river and the woods, of course, but I doubt you will find anything. Your children are living in another dimension. I expect they can hear us and see us, but I'm afraid the reverse is not the case."

"But you could hear and see Zeb," Mr. Bintapple reminded her.

"I couldn't see Zeb. I only felt his presence, and it was dangerous of him to come to see me like he did. I warned him not to come back, but he did, and now ... they have him."

"Who has him?" asked Mrs. Irwin-Hunter.

"The other side, the dark side, the real spirit world. They took him away."

Jack looked at Lucy, her eyes like a dinner plate, a reflection of his, and she was unusually speechless, for a moment.

"Aha!" she said. "Now we know what happened to the dude."

"Lucy has been home, as a spirit," said Mr. Bintapple. "I know this for sure because she left this for me to find." He removed the black river stone from his pocket and held it high above his head, as if presenting a great jewel.

"That's my dad," Lucy whispered to Jack. "Not as silly as we look, eh?"

"They have manuals with rules," Madam Aurora continued, "but unfortunately, I only know of one rule. The rule for breaking the spell."

"What is it?" Mr. Singh asked, moving to the edge of his seat. "What's this rule? Tell us!"

"According to Zeb, and let us hope he was correct with what he told me, the spell can be broken if and when the Rumpole City Council orders the lifelong protection of the woods, the lake, and the river, and something also about children at the lake, which I am not so clear about."

"That's it, then! That's all we have to do. We can do that!" exclaimed Mr. Bintapple.

"It might not be that easy, Mr. Bintapple," replied Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "We would have to convince certain people that the children are trapped in a spell, and as you can see from this meeting, there are not too many believers. Everyone else thinks we've gone mad."

"We also need more information," said Madam Aurora, "about the other rules."

"We should speak to the young Witherspoon boy, the one who escaped," suggested Mr. Singh.

"That will be tricky," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "He's under psychiatric care because—"

"Because," Mrs. Singh interrupted, "he said he was turned into a river spirit and was living in the river Kai!"

"And he mentioned a glass table!" said Mr. Bintapple.

"We must stay calm," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "We're going to need something more substantial to go on, and more believers."

"Should we start with a search of the woods and the river, to see if we can find the two tables and our children?" asked Mrs. Singh.

"What about talking to the police chief and Mr. Carrefour, see if we can sway them around to our way of thinking?" suggested Mrs. Irwin-Hunter.

"Is there anything you can do, Madam Aurora, in the spirit world?" asked Mr. Bintapple.

"Not really. The children are safe where they are. If we try to bring them out of the dimensions of the spell to communicate with them, we risk losing them, like Zeb."

"Should we tell his parents?" asked Mr. Singh.

"I doubt they would believe us," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "They're not very friendly people at the best of times, let alone if we tried to tell them their son was taken by evil spirits and that we don't know where he is but that our children are still safe in some river spell."

"We seem to have a lot of suggestions but not much we can do," said Mr. Singh.

"Let's do all of it anyway and see where it gets us. We have to do something," said Mrs. Irwin-Hunter.

"Let's organize a search of the river and the woods, just between us though," said Mr. Bintapple.

"And I'll talk to the police chief and Mr. Carrefour," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter.

"Especially since the police haven't come up with anything else—no clues, no sightings, nothing," added Mr. Singh. "I'll organize a boat and a sonic depth finder."

"I don't think we've got much chance of convincing the other parents at this point in time," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "Mr. and Mrs. Singh, could you keep an eye on the Witherspoon boy, since you live across the street? See if you can find a way to talk to him. He would know the rules."

"It would be extremely helpful to have the rules," said Madam Aurora.

"We'll talk to Mr. and Mrs. Witherspoon," said Mr. Singh. "But I'm not hopeful. They're keeping the boy well guarded from the rest of the world."

"Understandably," added Mrs. Irwin-Hunter. "That poor child."

The meeting concluded with a supper. Jack and Lucy shadowed their parents about the room as they mingled with the other parents. Neither was happy to hear their parents tell of childhood stories, which were not at all amusing, even though people laughed.

"Parents!" said Lucy. "Why they have to tell everyone this private stuff? It's not even funny."

Jack nodded in agreement. "It sure is embarrassing. Don't tell the others what you heard about me, Lucy."

"Deal, Jack. My lips are sealed, although it is kinda funny that you wet your pants on Santa Claus."

"I did not! It's a lie. It was Colby," said Jack, his face red, reliving one of his worst memories.

Chapter Eighteen

Isaac flew solo for his first mission with just four hours to follow Mr. Irwin-Hunter to his meetings with the police chief and with Mr. Carrefour. If time permitted, Isaac would call in to check on Toby.

When asked, Mr. Irwin-Hunter was at a loss to find the right words to explain the reason for his visit with the police chief. It had all made sense the previous night at the believers' meeting, but in the light of day and with the police chief staring through him with a raised brow, Mr. Irwin-Hunter was less certain about what he was wanting to say. In a roundabout way, which caused the police chief to tap rapidly at his desk to speed the discussion, Mr. Irwin-Hunter spat it out, all of it: Madam Aurora, Zeb, the witch, the spell, tables of glass and oak, and the spirits of the river and the woods. Exhausted, he leaned back in the visitor's chair. Isaac clenched Mr. Irwin-Hunter's shoulders for support and waited for a blast of hot air from across the table.

The police chief was speechless for a while, then laughed to himself as he stewed over the story from Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "That's all very interesting, Mr. Irwin-Hunter. What do you expect me to do with that . . . information? What could I possibly investigate from all that you've said? For example, you say there is a glass table at the bottom of the river Kai and an oak table in the woods, but we can't see them? And there's a manual with rules about the spell, but you don't know what these rules are?"

And then you suggest I speak to young Toby Witherspoon, even though the poor boy has been traumatized by what happened to him? Do you hear what I'm trying to say to you, Mr. Irwin-Hunter?"

"With all due respect, Chief, that is the point. The child is traumatized because no one is listening to him, no one believes him, but he's clearly telling the truth. At least help us to talk to him. He knows about our children, and we can help him."

"That would be up to his parents, not me, but if he were my son, I would not let you anywhere near him with this nonsense."

Mr. Irwin-Hunter stood to leave. "Thank you for your time, Chief," he sighed.

The police chief moved towards his office door to usher Mr. Irwin-Hunter through the opening so that he could shut the door as quickly as possible. When he turned, after sending away his visitor, the chief noticed a hole in the flimsy wall behind the door. He shook his head, bewildered that he had not seen it previously, given his keen eye. Stress, he decided, had affected his senses. He sat down at his desk and stared at the puncture. How did it get there? Who was responsible? When did it happen? And why?

Isaac relaxed in the backseat of Mr. Irwin-Hunter's blue sedan, rubbing his bruised, red knuckles. He had put a fist through pillows and little brothers, but never into a wall before, and he would not do so again. He was even more surprised to see the blood ooze, believing spirits to be beyond pain or injury. It made him wonder if a spirit could die while in the real world. The manual said that they, as spirits, could not kill or be killed, but what if this only applied while they were in the river and at the hands of other spirits?

Isaac followed Mr. Irwin-Hunter into the reception area at Mr. Carrefour's law firm. Isaac had never seen a more dejected man, with his shoulders stooped so low that he resembled a cave man. It seemed Mr. Irwin-Hunter was not expecting any better of a response from Mr. Carrefour than what he had received from the police chief.

A secretary guided Mr. Irwin-Hunter into a conference room to wait for Mr. Carrefour. Isaac followed.

Mr. Irwin-Hunter sat, stood, sat, and stood several times, like a jack-in-the-box, then wandered around the room to exhaust his nervous energy. The conference room was another world compared to his hardware store. Antique-looking pictures covered the timber-paneled walls with ornate gold frames hinting at their value. A crystal decanter with matching glasses decorated the fancy oval table at the core of the room. Mr. Irwin-Hunter tinged a glass with his fingernail to test for authenticity and was greeted by an unfamiliar ring, which could not be heard from the fake crystal glasses he sold at the store, a family business without the family—unless Jack returned.

Isaac settled onto a long sideboard that stretched the entire distance of an expansive window. He would not get away with sitting atop furniture at home or anywhere else, so he planned to make the most of every minute. He turned onto his side to observe Mr. Irwin-Hunter, who had finally eased back into a black leather chair to begin a rapid clicking of his plastic pen, until it broke into pieces.

Mr. Carrefour closed the door behind him as he entered the conference room. He was resplendent in a pinstriped suit and silky gold and blue tie. Mr. Irwin-Hunter swiveled in the chair to greet him. He stood awkwardly to shake Mr. Carrefour's outstretched hand.

The two men sat opposite each other at the widest part of the shiny, parqueted, oval table. Mr. Carrefour was busy heading up his blank notepad with details of the

meeting at hand: the date, time, and participants. Isaac wanted to prod him in the back to move matters along, as Mr. Irwin-Hunter was getting more nervous by the second, but Isaac could not be bothered getting up from the sideboard. Mr. Irwin-Hunter had resorted to handwringing after his plastic pen broke. The wringing was so furious that Isaac was certain Mr. Irwin-Hunter might start a fire in his palms.

"Seems like we have something in common," Mr. Carrefour said finally, glancing at Mr. Irwin-Hunter's twisting fingers.

"Seems so," replied Mr. Irwin-Hunter, shifting in his seat.

"Is there any particular reason why you wanted to meet with me, Mr. Irwin-Hunter?"

"Speak, will you?" yelled Isaac. "I haven't got all day." Then, just as he had done with the police chief, Mr. Irwin-Hunter showered Mr. Carrefour with every detail without taking a breath.

"Good job, Mr. Irwin-Hunter. You did it," Isaac encouraged reclining back onto the sideboard. "Breathe now."

Mr. Carrefour reclined into his executive chair and twirled around to face the window, and Isaac.

"Oh, oh, he's looking pensive," said Isaac. "Not sure if he's buying any of it, Mr. Irwin-Hunter. You might have to try again, but relax this time, and you might not sound so much like a crazy dude. Oh, no, I said 'dude!' Lucy!"

Mr. Carrefour swiveled back to the table and looked like he was about to deliver some bad news. "In my profession, Mr. Irwin-Hunter, we deal with facts, what we can prove, so I must say, it is a little hard for me to stretch my mind to believe in—"

"I'm sorry to have wasted your time," Mr. Irwin-Hunter interjected and stood to leave.

"Please, wait," Mr. Carrefour urged. "Have some water." He poured iced water and lemon slices from the decanter. "I want to believe you, Mr. Irwin-Hunter, I really do, because what you say gives me hope that my boy is still alive, even if he is a spirit. That is better than nothing, and nothing is all we have right now. So, tell me again—start from the beginning, and slowly this time, so I can get my mind around it."

Mr. Carrefour poised a pen at the top of his notepad, ready to document each word as it repeated.

Several scrawled pages later, Mr. Carrefour looked up at the pause.

"What's next, Mr. Irwin-Hunter? And more importantly, what can I do to help?"

Mr. Irwin-Hunter smiled for the first time that day.

"Way to go, dude," Isaac said, jumping from the sideboard to take a seat at the table. "Damn, I said it again! Damn, I just said 'damn'" Then he smiled, remembering his parents could do nothing about it.

"We're going to hire a boat with a sonic depth sounder to search the lake. Hopefully, it will pick up the glass table, but even if it doesn't, it won't mean the table doesn't exist. It just means we're not meant to find it. And we're also going to search the woods for the oak table."

"I'd like to be involved in both searches, if that's okay. Let me know when, and I'll have my secretary clear my diary. And it would be best if you don't mention the searches to anyone, or we might find ourselves locked up at the police station, and I especially wouldn't want my fellow partners to know any of this."

"Good job, Mr. Irwin-Hunter," Isaac said, moving from the sideboard to pat Mr. Irwin-Hunter on the shoulders. He did likewise on the other side of the table with Mr.

Carrefour. Breathing a sigh of accomplishment, Isaac checked his watch. He had an hour remaining, time enough for a home visit to catch up with Toby and Brandon.

Riley was sprawled across the carpeted floor with the magic slate board while Toby laid lifeless on his bed, with arms folded above his head and eyes transfixed by nothing on the ceiling.

Isaac waited for Riley to tire of the board, which ordinarily would not take long but seemed forever while Isaac waited. He snatched it away from his little brother, leaving Riley shocked into silence and scurrying away as pale as his grey t-shirt. Isaac placed the magic slate board on the bed beside Toby. "It's Isaac," he wrote. "Are you okay?"

Toby sat up, alert and smiling for the first time since the lake last summer. "No one believes me," he said aloud. "I wish I was back in the river. Everyone treats me funny."

"I know," Isaac wrote, then lifted the plastic sheet to clear the words. "Contact Jack's dad. Tell him about the rules."

"How?" Toby asked as Brandon entered the room.

"Who you talking to?" Brandon asked.

"Isaac's here," Toby replied.

"He's here? Isaac's here?"

"Hi Brandon," Isaac wrote on the board. "Get Toby to tell you the rules," he added.

"Okay, then what?" Brandon asked.

Isaac lifted the plastic sheet to clear the words. "Contact Jack's dad. Tell him the rules," he wrote.

Brandon wrote everything down on a notepad before Isaac cleared the board once more to write the address of the Irwin-Hunter hardware store in Main Street.

"Got it," said Brandon checking the scrawl only he could read.

"Have to go now. Toby will explain the home visit rule," Isaac wrote.

"Let's keep this between the two of us," Brandon said to Toby. "How long have you been there?" Brandon asked Riley who was standing in the doorway.

Riley shrugged.

"It's a secret, Riley," said Brandon. "Don't tell anybody, and don't tell anybody you've got a secret. That's the same as telling the secret. Got it?"

"It's a secret-secret," said Riley. "What's the secret?"

"Did Jordan catch the carp?" Toby asked.

"No," wrote Isaac, followed by a smiley face.

"I wish I could swim like a dolphin again."

"I have to go," Isaac wrote. "Talk soon."

"Bye, Isaac," Toby sniffled.

"We're counting on you, little buddy," Isaac said, tousling Toby's unkempt curly mop.

Isaac made his way back to the river, the mission successful, except for the police chief. When he returned home for good, after the spell is broken, he would spend more time with his brothers. They were not so annoying as he had once thought.

Chapter Nineteen

Isaac finished his mission report to rapturous applause. Hopes were high that they were on their way to freedom, albeit with only a few tiny steps taken.

"Are you sure about my dad?" asked Jordan. "He doesn't believe in anything out of the ordinary, and he definitely doesn't believe in ghosts or spirits."

"Well, I'm not sure he actually believes any of it, but he is trying to believe."

"That's amazing," Jordan sighed. "There's a lesson in that for all of us."

"A lesson, dude? What lesson?"

"Never give up on your parents. They'll come good eventually."

Ming did not join in the spirit mirth but stared instead into the glass table.

"Something wrong, Ming?" Jack asked.

"Just worried about my mum, that's all."

"Maybe it's time you went on a home visit," Jack suggested. "I'll go with you if you want. It's better to see her than not know how she's doing."

"I'm not so sure. I think it would be worse to see her upset. I thought she might have attended that first meeting at Mr. Bintapple's. Chinese believe in the spirit world."

"Maybe she didn't see the notice in the newspaper?" Lucy offered. "Can she read English?"

"Yes, she can read English, Lucy. I wonder if ..." Ming paused. "I wonder if she has gone back to China without me. Maybe her family came and took her away."

"Ming, will you stop wondering and go and find out!" Isaac yelled.

"Don't worry, Ming, I'll check on her after my next mission, if I have time," said Jack. "Now, we need to let the wood spirits know all about our last two missions."

Jack, Isaac, and Lucy arrived at the river mouth, kept at a distance by the barricade that was still in position.

"Just wanted to give you an update on our two missions," Jack called out, trying to raise his voice above the current as it hit the barricade to divert right or left.

"Go ahead," Arjun replied, tossing three stones in an attempted watery juggle.

"There was a meeting at Lucy's place of parents who believe in the spell," Jack began. "Can you come over here so I don't have to yell? The current's very fast and noisy today."

"Nope," Arjun answered. "Sorry."

Jack huffed. "Your parents were there, Arjun."

"You saw my parents? They were there?" he asked, dropping the stones and moving closer to the barricade.

"Your mum is very pretty," Lucy added. "She was wearing a beautiful yellow safari."

"Sari, Lucy, it's a sari," Jack whispered in her ear.

"How are they? How's my mum?"

"They're good, Arjun, and more importantly, they believe we have been cast into a spell, so that's two more people on our side."

"What about my parents?" Georgia asked.

"And mine?" asked Jasper.

"They weren't at the meeting," said Jack. "Maybe they'll be at the next one."

"Or maybe they just don't believe in the spell, dudes."

Jack rolled his eyes at Lucy before continuing. "And we learned something else, something really, really interesting," he said, pausing for suspense.

"What?" asked Georgia.

"We know what happened to Zeb, well, we sort of know."

"What?" yelled Georgia. "Tell us!"

"Settle, dude," said Lucy. "We don't respond to angry people." She glared pointedly at Isaac who snarled back at her.

"Apparently," Jack continued, "he went to see a psychic woman, Madam Aurora, and asked her to cast a new spell to release him from this spell." Jack waited for the awe, shock, and dismay to pass, proceeding anyway when the wood spirits would not stop cursing Zeb's name. "When he was up at the oak table all that time, he wasn't working on a plan to break the spell. He was planning to leave all of you behind and save himself."

"So, where is he now?" Arjun asked. "Is he back home with his family?"

"Warm and snug in his stinking bed, eating pizza?" Georgia asked. "Don't say 'yes' because then you'll see some serious anger."

"No, he's not at home," said Jack. "He's still in the spell, but it seems some real spirits took him away somewhere. We don't know where."

"That's what Madam Aurora said at the meeting," Lucy added. "He went to see her again, even after she told him not to. The real spirits, you know—from dead people—came and took him."

"Wherever he is, it can't be good for him," Isaac said. "And worse than being in this spell, I reckon."

"He deserves it," said Georgia. "We can't feel sorry for him after everything he's done."

"And it proves we were right," said Arjun. "It's too dangerous to be working out how to break the spell."

"Only if you don't follow the rules," said Jack.

"We don't know that for sure," Georgia added.

A piercing sound interrupted the debate, and all eyes snapped upwards at the surface.

"What's that?" asked Kiera. "It's not a normal boat."

A hull moved across the surface at slow speed then stopped directly above the barricade. The familiar buzz of a boat motor spluttered to a quiet halt. "Watch out," Lucy yelled, as an anchor crackled downwards, just missing Isaac and the barricade. The piercing sound resumed, forcing Jasper to cover his ears until it stopped once more.

"What's going on?" Arjun asked.

"They're looking for the glass table," said Jack. "Your dad is up there, Arjun."

"Really? He's up there? My dad's up there?"

"He was the one who had to hire a boat with a sonic depth finder. They're also searching the woods for the oak table."

"Will they find anything?" Kiera asked. "If they do, then we're almost out of the spell, aren't we?"

"Not likely, according to Madam Aurora," Jack replied. "Sorry, Kiera, it's not going to be that easy."

"I'll bet they think the barricade is the glass table," Lucy laughed.

"If so, they'll probably be back to investigate," said Jack. "Shame they're going to be disappointed."

"I'll bet they're all excited up there," said Lucy, "thinking they've made a great discovery."

Jack watched Arjun staring upwards at the boat's bottom. "You can go up there if you want, Arjun, to see your parents. No one's going to escape. We promise."

"No, Arjun," said Georgia. "We agreed, remember? And besides, it's not fair if our parents aren't up there."

"Dudes, let him go see his parents!"

"It's okay, Lucy, we agreed," Arjun mumbled. "What's next, Jack?"

"We'll continue with our missions. Isaac got a message through to Toby and Brandon."

"Brandon is my twin brother," Isaac added.

"Hopefully," said Jack, "Toby will be able to remember the rules and pass them on to my dad, and he'll pass them on to the rest of the believers."

"Then they'll know what has to be done to break the spell," said Isaac.

"And they'll also find out about the visitation rule, so they'll know that there are times when we are at home, even though they can't see us," said Lucy, pounding on the barricade like a drum.

"Home visits," Arjun sighed.

"Enough mention of the home visits," Jack whispered to Lucy. "It's like we're torturing them."

"You could go on home visits too, dudes, if you want to make the alliance again," she yelled and turned in response to a nasty pinch on her arm. "That's it," she whispered to Jack. "I won't mention home visits again."

Chapter Twenty

Jack and Jordan attended the next scheduled meeting of the believers, hosted again by Mr. Bintapple.

Mr. Irwin-Hunter had started his brief report on the search of the woods. They had found nothing but a pile of fish bones and prawn heads, which may be near the oak table or may not, and may be scraps left by the wood spirits or may not.

Mr. Carrefour followed with a more in-depth report on the river search, explaining that they had discovered a mass on the riverbed that did not move, so it was not a school of fish and may possibly be the glass table or something just as interesting. Mr. Singh was making inquiries, he reported, to hire some divers to search the relevant area near the mouth of the river Kai.

"We still don't understand why the wood spirits have to guard the river mouth," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "All we know from Zeb speaking with Madam Aurora is that the river spirits can escape the spell by passing through the river mouth, and the wood spirits must break the spell if they are to return home. We don't know how this is all connected."

"We need to speak with Toby Witherspoon," said Mr. Singh. "But unfortunately, I have had no luck trying to contact him. His parents are being rather unhelpful."

"He holds the key," said Mr. Carrefour. "We need to find out why the others didn't follow him through the river mouth, assuming that's how he came to return home."

"That's right, Mr. Carrefour," said Madam Aurora. "Zeb said the river spirits can return home if they escape through the river mouth. I think it is safe to conclude that Toby Witherspoon was a river spirit."

"We must learn more about the rules and the spell," added Mr. Bintapple.

"Madam Aurora? What about asking the woman in the shack at the lake, the one who supposedly cast the children into this spell?" said Mr. Singh.

"I don't think we should be talking to her," said Mr. Bintapple. "She could make matters worse for our children, and for us, if she knew we were onto her. Remember, Mr. Arnett?"

"Well, how do we get to the Witherspoon boy then?" asked Mr. Singh. "That's the dilemma. He has information, and we need it."

"Let's mull it over some fruit punch and patty cakes, and I've also made a fresh batch of chocolate-chip cookies," said Mr. Bintapple, leading his guests to the dining room and proudly presenting his afternoon baking spree.

"Is your wife not going to join our meetings, Mr. Carrefour?" asked Mrs. Irwin-Hunter as they strolled towards the dining room.

"I don't think that is likely," Mr. Carrefour replied. "She finds it difficult to cope with Jordan missing and prefers to keep busy and focus her attention on our daughter, Maizie. That way, she doesn't have to think about Jordan trapped in a spell and living in the river."

"I can understand that. Sometimes, it's best to pretend your child is still with you and is away at a camp or at school," said Mrs. Singh.

Jordan held back his tears by biting into a patty cake. Cream oozed from the butterfly clipping at the top. "Oh, no, not again," he said dropping the morsel to the floor in disgust. "More fish!"

"What were you expecting?" Jack asked. "Nothing's changed. We're still in the spell."

Jordan followed his father back to the living room.

"Does mum know you're eating all that sugary stuff?" Jordan asked his father, referring to the plate of food he had piled high to wash down with a tropical fruit punch. Mr. Carrefour sat down beside Madam Aurora, and Jordan was curious to learn more of his father's sudden interest in the supernatural world.

"Maybe now you might believe in the bears?" Jordan asked him.

"What bears?" Jack asked, on his way past Jordan to see his parents.

"The ones that used to live under my bed. Dad said he couldn't see them, but they were there all right."

"Where are they now? The bears?"

"They moved away when I was about six. Don't know where they went. Into the woods I guess, or under someone else's bed."

"What's mum think of all this spell stuff?" Jordan asked his father. "She think you've gone nuts, dad?"

Mr. Carrefour paused during his conversation with Madam Aurora as a way to move from the weather to more important subjects. Jordan listened intently while Jack ate a cookie, despite the taste.

"I—we—my wife and I, we need to know he is okay," said Mr. Carrefour.

"Is that a tear, dad?" Jordan asked, peering into his father's watery eyes. "You must really miss me."

"That little boy ... is my life, our life."

"What about Maizie, dad? I thought she was your favorite, and I'm not so little anymore."

Jordan put an arm around his father's shoulder and blinked rapidly to clear the moisture from his own eyes. Across the room, he saw Jack with less bravery, with tears streaming down his face.

Alarms would soon ring on their watches. The four hours had passed faster than time had ever moved before in their lives. The river beckoned with little to report on their mission.

"What were you doing eating a fish-tasting cookie?" Jordan asked.

"Saved me having to catch fish back in the river," Jack replied.

"Hmm, can't believe I didn't think of that," said Jordan.

"Let's go," said Jack, "we don't want to be the first to break the rules."

"Second," Jordan said. "Remember Zeb."

"Rotten scoundrel," said Jack.

Brandon had been patient with Toby waiting for him to remember the rules, but he was frustrated and keen to keep progressing for Isaac's sake. He decided to apply some pressure, for Toby seemed to be taking it all too easy. "Think, Toby, think," he said, tapping at Toby's head.

"I am thinking, Brandon!" Toby replied "It's really hard because that lady told me to forget about the river and the spirits and think about the other people instead—the ones who abducted me."

"Toby, you weren't abducted, remember? Don't let them tell you what to think, or we might never see Isaac again. Now, tell me, Tobes," Brandon sighed, "what can you remember about the rules?"

"Well," he said, resting his cheeks in his hands. "I remember one rule. I remember it because I came home once with Isaac, as a spirit."

"What is it, Tobes? What's the rule?"

"The spirits are allowed to go home, so long as they're back in the river by four hours' time. And the wood spirits don't go on home visits because they're guarding the river mouth to make sure no one escapes."

"But you escaped, Toby, didn't you?"

"Isaac helped me when the wood spirits weren't paying attention."

"Why do the wood spirits have to guard the river mouth?"

"To stop the river spirits from going through."

"Yes, but why, Toby? Why should they care if a river spirits get through the river mouth?"

"Because a wood spirit dies."

Brandon was silent. There was not much to say upon learning that one of the twelve missing children had died because Toby sat with him now. Brandon wrote everything down in his yellow-paged notepad, allowing Toby some time before his next question. "Which spirit died, Tobes, when you escaped?"

"I don't know. I was on the other side of the river mouth then, and I couldn't breathe under the water."

"Well, you're here, and that's more important. Just ask mum and Pipkin. What else?"

"I don't know anything else. I wasn't listening when Jack read out the rules. I just wanted to go home," he sniffled.

"Jack? Jack Irwin-Hunter?" Brandon asked, searching through his satchel filled with every clipping of news on the missing children. In the earlier articles, Jack was absent, but he made front page news some days later when the police chief found a

knapsack at the lake. Brandon showed Toby the photo from the newspaper. "Is this Jack?" he asked.

Toby nodded.

"Do you remember who was a river spirit and who was a wood spirit?"

Toby nodded again. "I remember that."

"Okay, let's make a list. Who are the river spirits?"

"Jack, he's the leader, Ming, Lucy, Jordan, Isaac, and me."

Brandon scribbled with a dedicated effort towards neatness. "Wood spirits?" he asked.

"Zeb, Faith, Georgia, Jasper, and ... Kiera and Arjun."

"Good work, Toby. That'll do for today, but keep trying to remember stuff. If you think of anything, even if it seems unimportant, you come and tell me, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good boy," said Brandon, tousling Toby's hair. "I'm going down to the hardware store to see Mr. Irwin-Hunter."

Brandon grabbed his notepad and a favored denim jacket and slid down the banister towards the front door.

Close to the exit and freedom, his father called out to him. "Where are you going, boy?"

Brandon contemplated the truth, considered other options, and settled on the believable. "School detention," he answered. "I have to clean up the playground for two whole hours!" Brandon rolled his eyes for a more convincing charade then dropped his shoulders for emphasis.

"And what have you been in trouble for this time, Brandon?"

"I just played a prank on Abby Kristofferson. That's all. You know what she's like, dad. She's a dumb girl who can't take a joke."

Mr. Witherspoon shook his head. "Off you go then, but stay out of trouble, boy."

Brandon smiled, pleased with his ingenuity. The library version would never have worked. His father was an architect, and no fool. He would never believe Brandon would spend any time in a library, where they keep books.

Mr. Irwin-Hunter was with a customer when Brandon stepped through the colored plastic strips that flapped down at the front door of the hardware store. While waiting, Brandon waded between the narrow aisles. Shelves were crammed full of everything, including many items not ordinarily found in a hardware store, like water pistols and necklaces made from old coins. There was not a spot vacant on any shelf, or wall, or on the floor, no room even for a single mini pot of paint.

Mr. Irwin-Hunter found Brandon in the maze, recognizing him immediately as the eldest Witherspoon boy, the twin. He called out to Mrs. Irwin-Hunter and pointed to the back office to let her know where he would be. He ushered Brandon through to a room that, not surprisingly, overflowed from floor to ceiling.

Somewhere under a pile of unruly paper was a desk, and two chairs offered the only opportunity for sitting.

Brandon pulled the notepad from his satchel, re-stuffing the loose media clippings inside after they spilled out onto the floor. He handed the pad to Mr. Irwin-Hunter and waited. His writing was good enough, he thought, for Mr. Irwin-Hunter's eyes that didn't even need glasses. Mr. Irwin-Hunter glanced up after a short while and nodded.

"That's all he can remember so far," said Brandon.

"It's good, Brandon, very good. Thanks for doing this, and Toby also. He's a brave little boy."

"Isaac asked me to give it to you. He came to see me."

"You can communicate with your brother? The one who is still in the spell?"

"I couldn't see him or hear him, but we're twins, so I guess that helps. Isaac has been leaving me messages on a magic slate board."

"This is excellent, Brandon. Do you think your parents would let you attend the meetings of the believers?"

"I really doubt that, Mr. Irwin-Hunter. They don't believe in any of this, especially my dad."

"Do you think Isaac will visit you again soon?"

"I suppose so. They, the spirits, can visit home, so long as they're not away from the river for more than four hours. I can't see why he wouldn't come back to see me."

"Would it be okay if we, the believers, give you a list of questions to ask him? We all want to know about our sons and daughters, and of course, we want to help break the spell."

"Sure. So long as my parents don't find out. I don't want to end up in therapy with Toby."

Mr. Irwin-Hunter stretched out his hand for Brandon. "Thanks, Brandon. I can't begin to tell you how wonderful it has been to talk to you. And thank Toby for me, too."

He followed Brandon through the store, stopping him down one aisle. "Here, son, take these," he said, handing over two large bags of mixed lollies from a candy counter, stuck in between rows of hammers and other tools.

"Thanks, Mr. Irwin-Hunter," said Brandon, wasting no time drowning his hand in one bag before storing Toby's bag safely inside his satchel. He strolled home, relaxed, and buoyed by the time spent with someone who appreciated his efforts and treated him like an adult. That Jack was the lucky one, Brandon thought.

Chapter Twenty-one

A boat stalled on the surface of the river Kai, directly above the barricade, then dropped its anchor. A short time later, three divers in black wetsuits splashed from the side of the boat to descend to the riverbed. The wood spirits watched with amusement as an inspection began of their handmade obstruction. It was nice to have visitors other than the river spirits.

Jasper grabbed an oxygen tank for a free ride around the barricade as a yellow underwater camera captured every angle. Kiera lounged on top of it in a fancy pose.

"Do you think I'll show up in the pictures?" she asked.

"I don't know. How cool would that be if you did?" said Arjun.

"What would everyone think?" asked Georgia.

"That I'm a ghost from the river," Kiera offered.

"Or that the photos are a scam," said Georgia.

One diver swam towards the river mouth to inspect the two fake guards, and beckoned the others with rapid hand movements. More photos were taken as the divers shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders in disbelief.

"Wonder what they think of our scarecrows," said Kiera.

"That's going to be hard to explain," said Arjun.

"Probably say it's a scam too," said Georgia. "No one's going to believe any of this, so what's the point?"

"My parents will believe it," said Arjun. "They already believe in the spell, and Jack's parents and Lucy's dad."

"I ask again, what's the point? Just having a few people believe in the spell doesn't break it. Let's face it, Arjun, we're stuck here."

Arjun shrugged. "Just keep your opinions to yourself, Georgia, or you'll upset Jasper again."

The divers returned to the barricade with Jasper attached to one, like a sucker fish to a bull shark. One diver noticed the knee-high pile of seafood leftovers: oyster shells, prawn tails, and fish bones, and swam around it twice before shooting a stream of photos. Following a final inspection of the area, the divers flipped back to the stationary boat above. Jasper followed for a short distance then scurried back before he was out of sight.

At the glass table, Jack, Ming, and Lucy were busy planning for their mission to work with the Greenies to help protect the woods, the lake, and the river, in accordance with rule number five. Lucy covered her ears and clenched her eyes. "Can you shut up," she yelled at Jordan and Isaac. "I can't concentrate on my work!"

"Lucy, we have to finish this trap. This is work of great importance," said Jordan.

"It's not important as what we're doing, dudes," she yelled back. Jordan and Isaac continued tapping, using rocks for hammers.

"Wait a second," said Ming. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked Jack.

"Stop tapping a second, Jordan, and everyone listen," Ming instructed.

"What is it?" Jordan asked.

"It's you, stupid," said Lucy.

"It's not me," said Jordan. "Look, I'm not doing anything." He held his rock tools in the air, as did Isaac.

"It's coming from the riverbank," said Jack.

"What the—" said Isaac.

"Wonder what's going on," Jack interrupted. "Jordan, Isaac, go and check it out."

Lucy followed them to the surface, the trio treading water, dumbstruck by what they saw on the banks of the river Kai.

"Hya," said Lucy. "This can't be good."

Jordan stared at the riverbank, at Isaac and Lucy, then back to the riverbank, and around the circle once more. "Lucy, I think for once, you might be right. Let's go let the others know."

They returned to the glass table, sliding solemnly onto cold, shiny seats. Isaac was silent.

"There are people up there chained to trees!" Lucy exclaimed. "With signs everywhere about greedy developers."

"What's going on?" Jack asked.

"It's a protest," said Jordan. "It seems there are plans to develop that area of the riverbank, and the protestors are trying to stop it."

"And the policemen are cutting them off the trees and taking them away in vans," Lucy squealed. "And there are some men in suits standing around watching."

"Isaac?" Jack asked. "Are you okay?"

"You're as white as a Casper, dude."

"I just saw my father," he replied with a gulp.

"Was he tied to a tree, dude? Awesome!"

"No," said Isaac with a long, deep sigh. "He's one of the suits."

"What's he doing at a Greenie protest?" Jordan asked.

"I think he might be the architect ... for the developers."

"Yikes!" Lucy yelled. "Dude, he's going to kill us!"

Jack opened the manual and read rule five. "In the event that humans should cause any destruction to the woods, the lake, or the river Kai which flows from it, then all spirits—river spirits and wood spirits—will die."

He closed the manual with a thud that would have shattered any other book made of glass.

"This is a disaster," said Isaac, dropping his forehead onto the table.

"What do we do now?" Jordan asked. "If this development goes ahead, we won't need to worry about breaking the spell."

"We need to focus all our attention on rule number five," said Ming. "We have to stop this development."

"The Woodies will have to help us now," said Lucy.

"The Woodies?" asked Jordan. "You mean the Greenies?"

"No, dude, the Woodies! The wood spirits. Hya."

"You're right, Lucy. We're going to need their help. This is about survival, for all of us," said Jack.

"Let's go see what they have to say," said Jordan.

"And I'll start work on a new plan," said Ming, shaking her head.

"Have you seen what's going on?" Arjun asked as Jack and Jordan approached the barricade.

"Yep," said Jordan. "Looks like they're getting ready for a new development on the riverbank."

"Do you know what that means for us?" Jack asked.

"Yes, we know," said Georgia. "We have a rule that says we must protect the lake, the woods, and the river, or we all die—all of us."

"Jasper's mother is up there," said Arjun. "She's tied to a tree."

"Oh," said Jack. "Does that mean she's a believer?"

"I think it just means she is against the development, as far as we know. She hasn't been to any of those meetings, has she?" Arjun asked.

"No, not yet. Isaac's father is up there too," Jordan added.

"Really? He's a protestor?" Kiera asked.

"No," Jordan replied. "He's not protesting."

"So long as he's not a developer," Arjun said.

"We have to stop it," Jack answered with a sideways glance at Jordan.

"And we're going to need your help," Jordan added. "There are only five of us, and two spirits have to stay at the glass table at all times."

"So, Arjun, do we have an alliance," Jack asked.

"It seems like a good opportunity for you to escape," he answered. "If this development goes ahead, why wouldn't you plan to get out now while you can?"

"Because two of us would have to stay behind, and no one wants to. Either we all escape the spell together, or none of us do," said Jack.

The wood spirits formed a huddle, exposing their two fake guards. Jack smiled at Jordan, who was also amused by the unintentional revelation.

"We're still worried," said Arjun. "That three of you might escape."

"We need more time to think it over," said Georgia. "We don't trust Isaac."

"I understand," Jack replied. "We'll be back in the morning for your answer, but we don't have much time. The Greenies can't stay chained to the trees forever, and once they've been taken away, the development will begin, and it's all over for us. We might have a couple of days, a day, or maybe we'll just have a few hours."

"Come back tomorrow," Georgia said.

"Okay," said Jordan. "Aren't you going to introduce us to your friends?"

"What friends?"

"Those two, standing behind you," he laughed and swam with Jack back to the glass table.

Chapter Twenty-two

Jordan was on a mission to learn more about the proposed development on the riverbank. His first stop was the architectural firm of Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon. Next was a visit to the offices of the Greenies to find out how they planned to continue disrupting the development, since most of them had been cut from trees and locked up at the police station, guests of the police chief.

At the offices of Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon, architects and developers, a crisis meeting was in progress, with all six of the firm's partners present, including Isaac's father.

Mr. Dundee paced around the room as he spoke, his stomach protruding a long way into the space in front of him, pulling at his shirt buttons and threatening to expose a white singlet underneath. The firm was determined, he said, to proceed with their multimillion-dollar development of luxury houses on the banks of the river Kai. The council had approved their plans, and they had invested a considerable sum of money, which they were not about to lose because of a bunch of "scallywags" and "troublemakers".

He finished pacing and was greeted with applause and shouts of "Here, here, Mr. Dundee," and "Too right!"

"The bulldozers will be sent in, no matter what the Greenies do or say, or anyone else for that matter. And anyone still chained to those trees will be pulled from the ground along with the trees," he said.

More applause followed while Jordan boomed and hissed to no avail.

Jordan joined in with all the backslapping that followed the cheering, but for different reasons. He hoped to inflict some injury to the buffoons who seemed intent on destroying the riverbank, his home, and his life.

He left the meeting a short time later, with nothing but two aching hands. As a departing gift, he knocked over a pitcher of water on the table that flowed like the Amazon River into Mr. Dundee's open file turning black ink into an oil slick.

"How do you like that?" said Jordan, pleased with himself. "I'll be back, don't you worry about that."

The Greenies' office was a stark contrast to the glitz and glamour at Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon, and at his dad's law firm. It may have been a drab place to work, but at least they were well organized, which saved Jordan a lot of time he did not have to spare.

The Greenies' plans were not secret. Everything was written in large print across super-sized sheets of paper stuck to the walls, in their only meeting room, which

served also as their tearoom. Their list of volunteers, those willing to help with further protests, surprised Jordan. Rumpolians tended to avoid making a scene, but it seemed they wanted to ensure that Rumpole remained a sleepy hollow with no more development and no more "outsiders" joining the community.

Jordan studied the sheets closely, memorizing what he could. He left disappointed. More protests and lobbying of politicians seemed a waste of time compared to the might and determination of Mr. Dundee, his firm, and the bulldozers. The spirits of the river Kai would have to take the lead if there was to be a permanent halt to the development on the riverbank.

Isaac was home again to check on Toby and to find out how well he had done remembering the rules. The Witherspoon residence was lifeless with no one about, but Isaac found Brandon's notepad, which he had left on the study desk in their bedroom, alongside the magic slate board. There was no mention of rule five, which was now more important than all the other rules combined. Isaac wrote on the magic slate board, "Stop development on riverbank, or we all die. URGENT!" He moved the notepad and magic slate board onto Brandon's bed to be sure he would see it when he came home from wherever he was.

Isaac waited for the family to return. Family outings were rare, so he did not expect to wait long. An hour passed, then another, and Isaac left somewhat miffed, not recalling a family outing of such duration anytime recently while he was living under the Witherspoon roof.

Jordan waited for Isaac to take a seat before he started with his mission report, which did little to lift flagging spirits. Greenie plans to use human shields against the heavy machinery of Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon did not inspire any confidence, and no one doubted that a bulldozer would win any battle against their Greenie friends, even though reinforcements had signed up for the war. The Greenies were out of time and out of ideas to organize anything else.

"They're going to end up in jail, in the hospital, or at the cemetery," Jordan explained.

"What would they be doing at the cemetery?" Lucy asked.

"Dead, Lucy, not visiting. Killed by bulldozers," Jordan replied.

Isaac reported glumly on his home visit and the message he had left for Brandon. He finished his brief report with a sigh.

"Good job, Isaac," said Jack, without enthusiasm.

"Brandon will pass the message onto Mr. Irwin-Hunter and the believers," said Isaac.

"Maybe if the believers join forces with the Greenies they'll be able to stop the development, and we can get back to trying to break the spell," said Ming.

Brandon, Toby, and Riley were left behind at a cousin's birthday party so that Mrs. Witherspoon could return home child-free to finish the laundry. She roamed through the house delivering clean, folded clothing to each of the bedrooms, while Mr. Witherspoon enjoyed the peace and quiet for reading the newspaper.

In Brandon's room that he shared with Isaac, she found the notepad and magic slate board on Brandon's bed. She could not resist a peek, reading once, twice, and then a third time to be sure she had it right.

"Oh, my goodness!" she cried, tripping over the laundry basket she had left in the middle of the room. She stumbled upwards and rushed to the living room to present the pad and magic slate board to her husband.

"What's this?" he asked, a frown furrowing deep lines into his forehead.

"I found it on Brandon's bed," she gasped and sat down on the sofa near her husband. "It's Isaac's writing."

Mr. Witherspoon read the words again, one at a time, "Stop development on riverbank, or we all die. URGENT! This is very disturbing," he said. "I don't know what to make of it."

"It's Isaac's writing," Mrs. Witherspoon repeated.

"Is everyone in this house going crazy? How could it be Isaac's writing? He's missing, remember?"

"I don't know exactly, but I know it's not Riley's writing, or Toby's, and it definitely is not Brandon's. No one can read his writing."

"This is insane. Call my brother and tell him I'm on my way to pick up the boys. Someone has some explaining to do."

As soon as Brandon heard his father was on the way, he knew there was trouble brewing. He reminded Riley that everything was top secret.

"If you tell anyone anything, even a single word, Isaac will die. Do you understand, Riley?"

"Isaac's a river spirit."

"Don't say anything about river spirits to dad, or you'll be in serious trouble, and Isaac won't be too happy with you."

"Isaac's dead. Dad says so."

"He's not dead. Isaac is coming home. We have to help him, and it won't help if you go saying something to dad about river spirits."

"I won't," Riley blubbered.

"Toby, when we get home, you just say you know nothing and go up to your room and stay there. Okay?"

"Okay," said Toby. "I don't want to be asked more questions about the river."

"You won't, Tobes. I'll handle all the questions."

Toby and Riley raced for the stairs as soon as the station wagon pulled into the driveway at the Witherspoon residence.

"Where do you think you two are going?" their father called after them.

"They don't know anything," said Brandon, coming through the front door.

"And how do you know what this is all about, Brandon? I haven't said anything yet."

"You found my notepad I take it. That's an invasion of my privacy."

"An invasion of your privacy? You don't have any privacy, boy," yelled Mr. Witherspoon. "And there's more to this than just your notepad. Wait for me in the living room, Brandon. You have some explaining to do, and it had better be good. I'm in no mood for tales of spirits and spells. I'll have you know that right from the start."

Brandon had a few minutes alone to prepare an explanation while his parents plotted their attack in the kitchen. They arrived in tandem, as they tended to do, sitting side by side on the sofa for solidarity, two adults versus one boy. It was supposed to make him panic under pressure and blurt out the truth, like Riley and Toby tended to do, but the maneuver didn't work on Brandon or Isaac. He and Isaac together were an

even match for their parents—their twin minds were in sync and more than able to defeat their opponents, but Isaac was not beside him now—or was he?

Brandon thought about the rule, the one Toby had mentioned about home visits, and drew strength in believing his twin was there, ready for the battle ahead.

"Let's start with your notepad, Isaac. What is all this nonsense about the river spirits, glass tables, and rules? Have you been corrupting Toby's mind with all this rubbish?"

"It has nothing to do with Toby," Brandon replied. "It's all for an English assignment. I was stuck for ideas, and then I thought to myself, 'Why not write about the lake incident?' I was thinking of interviewing some people, like Mr. Irwin-Hunter to get his ideas on the whole spooky spell stuff. I just wrote down some of the crazy things people have been saying. You know, like they think Toby was a river spirit!" Brandon laughed, convincingly. "I need a good mark for this assignment, as you know, or I'm going to be spending another year of English with Ms. Warfield, and she won't like that. I know I won't."

"Hmm," said Mr. Witherspoon. "That's quite a tale, Brandon."

Mr. Witherspoon paused a while looking for a fault in the story, before continuing. "And how do you explain this bit here on the magic slate board about stopping my firm's development on the riverbank?"

"That's what Ms. Warfield calls the climax of the story. Then I was going to finish the story with the development all completed and everyone happy with how good it looks and ... that's the end. Everyone lives happily ever after."

"And this handwriting here on the magic slate board, your mother says it's Isaac's."

"It's my writing."

"It doesn't look anything like the scribble on the notepad."

Isaac shrugged. "It's my writing. I was just trying to be neat."

Mr. Witherspoon paused again then sighed while Mrs. Witherspoon, typically, sat in silence.

"I think it's in very poor taste, Brandon. Your brother is missing, along with ten other children. You shouldn't be making up stories about the sorry saga just for an English assignment. You'll offend someone, probably Ms. Warfield, for starters. Find some other idea for your assignment."

"If you say so, dad, but I may not get as good a mark with another story."

"I say so, and you'd better at least pass, my boy, or there'll be more trouble to follow. You're dismissed."

Brandon waited until he was halfway up the stairs before taking a deep breath.

"And stay away from Mr. Irwin-Hunter and the rest of the spell-crazed storytellers!" yelled Mr. Witherspoon.

"Yes, sir," Brandon replied rolling his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-three

The wood spirits agreed to the alliance. They had no choice, they said.

"What do you want us to do?" Georgia asked.

"We have a number of missions to undertake, and we certainly would appreciate your help," said Jack, "Firstly, we need to monitor what is going on at the

development site. Some Greenies are still chained to the trees, but we know bulldozers will be coming in soon."

"Sounds like it might get a bit dangerous up there," said Georgia.

"Anything is possible with Mr. Dundee. He doesn't seem to care that people could get hurt, so long as his development goes ahead," said Ming.

"Second," Jack continued, "we need to keep an eye on Mr. Dundee and his firm so that we know in advance what they're planning for the protestors. Then, we have to monitor the Greenies' plans, and we also need to keep up to date with what the believers are doing, if anything."

"They have regular meetings, and more and more people are turning up," said Jordan, "but so far, they haven't done anything but search the river and woods for the tables they can't find."

"And finally, we need to stay in touch with Toby and Brandon. That's Isaac's mission, obviously."

"So, how do you want to help?" Jack asked.

"We're prepared to volunteer two spirits for your missions: Kiera and Georgia. That will leave us with two guards—me and Jasper."

"Plus the two scarecrows," added Jordan with a smirk.

"So we have five people for five missions," said Jack. "Kiera? Do you want to work on the mission to the development site, and perhaps Georgia can join Jordan on the Greenies mission? Ming is in charge of the mission to Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon, and Jordan is on the believers' mission. His dad is one of them, so that makes sense. Lucy and I will join any mission as required."

"We'll meet here every afternoon at four o'clock for an update," Ming added.

"Well, let's get it started," said Arjun. "I wish I could be involved but we can't risk it, just in case."

"Arjun, we're not going to escape," Jack sighed.

"We know what you said, but none of us want to turn into bubbles so we can't risk it."

"What about Zeb?" Kiera asked.

"What about him?" Arjun replied. "Why are you asking about him? He left us, remember, left us in the spell while he tried to escape."

"I was just wondering," said Kiera, "if we should be trying to find him."

"No," said Arjun, "there's no time to be looking for Zeb."

"We wouldn't know where to start, Kiera," Jack added. "And it's really important that we stop this development. That's our number one priority."

Jordan attended the next meeting of the believers, called by Mr. Irwin-Hunter to brief everyone on what he had learned from Brandon Witherspoon directly, and from Isaac Witherspoon via his twin brother. The latest message from Isaac was cause for concern. "Must stop development on riverbank, or we all die. Urgent!" Mr. Irwin-Hunter repeated.

"Why?" asked Mr. Singh. "Why does the development need to be stopped?"

"Maybe it will affect their life in the river," offered Mr. Carrefour.

"Or maybe it's a rule," said Mr. Bintapple. "Maybe the rules say no development on the river."

"How are we supposed to stop it?" asked Mrs. Singh.

"Tie ourselves to trees like the Greenies?" said Mr. Bintapple shrugging.

"That's only a temporary solution," said Mr. Carrefour. "Sooner or later, one way or another, those trees are coming down, and the Greenies will be removed with them."

The Council approved the development some time ago, so I expect the deadline for appealing the decision has already passed."

"So there's nothing we can do, legally?" asked Mr. Singh.

"Only if we can find something in the original documents submitted to the council which is false or misleading."

"Like what, Mr. Carrefour?" asked Mrs. Singh.

"Well for example, Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon would have submitted an environmental impact study."

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Singh.

"An EIS is a detailed study of the potential effects of a development on the environment. It must show that the development will not cause any long-term damage to the area, especially when the development is on the shores of a waterway, as this one is. The purpose of an EIS is to protect ecosystems and the habitat of species. If there was an endangered species in the area, for example, or if the development would pollute the river, then the council would not have approved it."

"Mr. Carrefour, is there any point to all of this?" asked Mr. Singh. "I do recall that there was a lot of heated debate about the development when it was going through the council, and it was approved anyway."

"That's right, Mr. Singh. The Greenies and other concerned citizens of Rumpole lodged a number of objections against the development at the time. I'm not sure if it's of any help to us, but I thought it would be useful for everyone to know what attempts have already been made to stop the development, and to no avail. We need to look more closely into the EIS or find some other reason for a new objection."

"But what?" asked Mr. Bintapple. "I don't think anyone will listen if we say our spirit children will die if it goes ahead."

"I really don't know," Mr. Carrefour replied. "I wish I had an answer, but I don't."

"What about the witch?" asked Mrs. Singh. "Maybe she could cast a spell to stop the development?"

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," said Mr. Bintapple, twisting his wedding ring frantically.

"Wouldn't she have to admit that she is a witch and responsible for the disappearance of our children?" added Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "I'm not sure she's likely to do that."

"We should ask Madam Aurora," suggested Mrs. Singh.

"I will," said Mr. Irwin-Hunter. "This is a matter of life and death. The lives of our children hang in the balance. We have to do something, everything."

"Let's all go away and give the matter some thought," said Mr. Carrefour. "We'll come up with something, I'm sure."

Jordan headed back to the glass table to think about ways to stop the development, as his father had suggested, but already, he had what he considered to be a gem of an idea.

Chapter Twenty-four

Kiera was enjoying her time away from the river mouth, grateful almost, to Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon for creating the drama that released her from the tiresome chore of guarding the river mouth.

There was a steady stream of tree huggers at the development site, with one chaining up as soon as another found freedom courtesy of a bolt-cutting crony of Mr. Dundee. Some Greenies had taken up residence in tree forks, settling in for a long and uncomfortable battle, and ready to crash to the ground with their new homes, if necessary.

"Aren't you supposed to be on a mission to see your brothers?" she asked Isaac as he joined her on the river's surface to watch the activity on the banks of their river.

"I am."

"What are you doing here then?"

"My brothers are over there," he said, pointing towards a makeshift tree house with two boys camped high up in the branches.

"Hey, it's Toby!" Kiera screamed.

"And the other one, with his hair covering his eyes, that's my twin brother, Brandon."

"Your parents must be pretty cool to let them live in a tree for a protest."

"Er, I'm pretty sure that when my father finds out about this, Brandon and Toby will be living in that tree, permanently. They'll be homeless."

"Your dad won't be pleased?"

"Oh, no, he will not be pleased."

Ming was also on a mission to spend a few hours with Mr. Dundee listening in to phone calls and any meetings regarding the riverbank development. She was present when Mr. Witherspoon was called in to answer a few questions.

"Take a seat, Mr. Witherspoon," Mr. Dundee grumbled. "I've received a rather disturbing call from Christoff, who as you know, is monitoring the protest down at the development site. It appears that our control over the situation is falling from our grip."

"What's happened, Mr. Dundee?"

"According to Christoff, two young boys have taken an interest in one of the trees."

"What's this got to do with me?" Mr. Witherspoon asked.

"Christoff says the two boys bear a startling resemblance to two people who are quite familiar to you, Mr. Witherspoon." Mr. Dundee raised his eyebrows and peered over his dark rims.

"My boys? You're not ... that can't be, Mr. Dundee. There's obviously been a mistake. They would not be involved in anything like this. I can assure you."

"You can assure me, Mr. Witherspoon?"

"It's not them. It can't be. I'll go down there immediately to sort this out, and then Christoff is going to have his butt kicked, courtesy of my size nine!"

"Just deal with it, Mr. Witherspoon. I'm not interested in how."

Ming had a little time to spare before she was due back at the glass table, so she stopped by the river mouth and hid behind the river grass to watch Arjun and Jasper playing riverpults. Georgia was busy catching prawns, and no one was guarding the river mouth other than the scarecrows. Ming could slip through easily if she wanted to. They would not even realize she had been and gone until it was too late, but her mum would know because she would be home again, wherever that might be.

The river spirits waited at the glass table for Ming to return, checking their watches every ten seconds. Lucy tapped at hers to be sure it was working as nervous glances crisscrossed the table. No one wanted to say what everyone was thinking. If

Ming did not return within four minutes, one of them would die, according to rule number two, and another wood spirit would also perish.

"Where have you been?" Isaac yelled.

Ming ignored the question, took her seat at the table, and proceeded to report on the mission to Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon.

"What took so long?" Isaac asked. Ming did not answer.

"So, Isaac, what did you find out?" Jack asked, diverting attention away from Ming while she settled back into her seat.

"Toby and Brandon were at the riverbank protest camping in a tree." Isaac laughed. "I was watching the riverbank with Kiera, and my dad turned up. We could see the smoke coming out of his ears from the river. He was yelling at Toby and Brandon, waving his arms about like an octopus. Toby looked pretty scared but Brandon just kept saying, 'What's that, dad? I can't hear you from up here. We're fine, don't worry about us,' and that made him madder than ever."

They all laughed with Isaac, imaging the scene at the riverbank.

"Then dad yelled out that he was going to cut the tree down himself, and 'God help you both when I get my hands on you!' It was really funny."

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Ming asked. "Will he really chop the tree down?"

"Hmm ... he might."

"Jordan, what's happening with the believers?" Jack asked.

"If we're relying on them to save us, we're all doomed, to borrow Isaac's favorite expression. Useless, the lot of them. But my dad gave me an idea. He mentioned at the meeting that the development would not have been approved by the council if there had been an endangered species which would have been threatened by the development." Jordan paused.

"So?" said Lucy.

"So it means there weren't any!" said Isaac.

"Exactly!" said Jordan. "There weren't any when it was approved."

"Dude, I'm not following a word of this."

"There weren't any then, Lucy, but there are some now!"

"There are?" asked Ming.

"Well, there will be when we catch them from somewhere else and release them around the development."

"Release what, dude?"

"I'm thinking birds."

"Birds?" asked Lucy.

"Endangered birds or rare birds."

"Ohhh, I see," said Lucy. "Like birds that will peck you to death!"

"Noooo, you stu—" Jordan inhaled a deep watery breath. "Rare birds that are protected, not dangerous birds, endangered birds!"

"And where will we find these birds?" Jack asked.

"We'll need to do some research on that. Maybe start at the library. Once we've worked out which birds and where we can find them, we'll just need to make sure the right people are at the river bank when we release them."

"What about frogs, dude?"

"Frogs?" Jordan asked, shaking his head.

"Yeah, some frogs, dangerous frogs. They can hop about with the birds."

"Endangered frogs, Lucy," Ming corrected.

"That's what I said, dude."

"Sure, why not?" said Jordan, throwing his hands in the air. "Anyone else want to add some other critter? We can have a menagerie."

"What's a mana—thingy?" Lucy asked. No one responded.

"Jordan, what if you take Georgia with you on a mission to identify and locate the birds we need," Jack suggested.

"And frogs." Lucy added.

"And frogs," said Jack. "Isaac can keep an eye on the river bank protest, now that Toby and Brandon have moved in there. That will kill two birds with the one stone," he laughed, with everyone else except Lucy. "That was a pun, Lucy. We're not actually going to kill any birds."

"What's a pu—?" Lucy asked.

"Okay, that's it for today," Jack interrupted. "Ming and I will go down to the river mouth to update the wood spirits."

"What's a pun, Isaac?" Lucy asked.

Jack and Ming smiled as they swam away, hearing Isaac grumble after them.

Along the way, Ming confessed to Jack that she had already been to the river mouth that day, after her mission to Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon. She almost swam through, she admitted. She could easily have passed through, she said, and it was very tempting, but two spirits would be gone forever because of her, and she could not live with that.

"You have to go on a home visit, Ming, to check up on your mother. I'll go with you if you want, as soon as we organize the birds and the frogs."

"Thanks, Jack," she smiled. "You're right. I have to know. I have to go home and see for myself. I hope she's okay, or ... I don't know what I'll do."

Chapter Twenty-five

Jordan and Georgia set out on their first mission together, starting at the Rumpole Municipal Library. They scoured through books and encyclopedias on rare birds and amphibians and learned everything there was to know, but nothing they learned told them where exactly, within four hours of the river, to locate what they needed.

"I've got an idea," said Jordan. "It will save us a lot of time, and we've only got three hours left."

"What? Where are we going?" Georgia asked.

"Just follow me," Jordan called back.

At the zoo and bird park, Jordan found the stand with free guides of the park. He handed one guide to Georgia and opened the other up for himself.

"You do the frogs, Georgia, and I'll do the birds. They're in the same part of the zoo," he said, tapping at the map. "Lucky for us."

"I'm not doing frogs. I hate frogs. Slimy, creepy little things."

"Okay, Georgia," Jordan wheezed. "I'll do the frogs and you do birds, but you're probably missing a chance to find your future husband."

"What did you say, Carrefour?"

"Nothing," he called back as he set off for the amphibian centre.

Georgia followed close behind until they arrived at a vast caged area that was home to an assortment of birds, frogs, and other creatures able to live together in harmony without eating each other.

"Wow, this is amazing," said Georgia as they stepped through several wire-enclosed gateways into a tropical oasis. "There's even a waterfall!"

"I've never been here before," said Jordan. "Been to the zoo plenty of times, but never came to the bird park. You're right. It is amazing. Maizie would love this."

"Who's Maizie?"

"My little sister. She's always drawing waterfalls and trees ... and snakes."

"Snake!" Georgia screeched, pushing Jordan from the timber path as she hurried for the gate.

"Thanks, Georgia," he said, wringing pond water from his shorts which had barely dried since leaving the river. "There are no snakes in here. At least, I don't think there are."

"Ahhh! I'm getting out of here."

"No, no, Georgia," Jordan laughed. "I'm only kidding ... sort of."

Georgia turned again towards the gate. "I hate you, Carrefour. I'm getting outta here."

"No, seriously, there are no snakes in here, Georgia. I'm just playing with your mind."

"Well, stop it. You're not funny, and we've got work to do."

A crack of thunder and flash of lightning echoed around the cage.

"Ahhhh!" Georgia screamed. "I don't want to be on this stupid mission," she cried. "Especially not with you!"

Jordan laughed. "Didn't you read the guide? Every day at four o'clock, there's a simulated thunderstorm. Nothing to be afraid of, Georgia."

Fake rain fell, causing Georgia to whimper. "I'm sick of being wet all the time. I just want to be dry again," she sniffed. "And warm in my bed."

"That's probably why we're the only ones in here," said Jordan, gazing up at the falling water. "Everywhere we go, we end up wet," he sighed.

"Let's just find the birds and get out of here," Georgia mumbled.

"Remember, we're just looking for the endangered ones," said Jordan, tugging at his pocket for the ripped sheets from the library reference books. "Then we wait for the gates to close at five and we catch them. Hope your flying skills have improved," he added, "if you're going to catch those birds."

Georgia glared back. "I hope these stupid traps you made work, Jordan Carrefour. Lucy says you can't even catch a dumb old fish."

"He's not dumb," Jordan replied.

Jack found the offices of the Rumpole Tribune and went directly for the archives. They were after a particular journalist, someone who had been opposed to the riverbank development when the proposal went through the council, someone who showed support for stopping the development, and someone who would jump quickly onto a story about the sudden appearance of endangered frogs and birds at the site.

Jordan had passed on the information he had gathered during his recent visit to the Greenies' office, including dates and details of all protests that had preceded the council's approval of the development. Jack started with the newspaper for the earliest date Jordan had given him. The riverbank development was front-page news. Jack read the article. It was exactly what they were looking for. The journalist who had written the story, Sarah Gibson, had not been impressed with the council's decision, nor with the firm of Dundee, Castle, and Witherspoon. The riverbank should remain pristine, she had reported, and left in its natural state for the future enjoyment of generations to come.

Jack moved through the rest of the newspapers, with similar headlines, all written by Sarah Gibson, up until the day before the meeting of the Rumpole City Council that announced the decision. The riverbank development continued as front-page news but with a new journalist reporting on the approval of the development, a Mr. Jody Kowalczyk, whose article favored the development and everyone involved with it. His articles applauded the council for taking no notice of the Greenies and their objections.

Finding Sarah Gibson's desk was more difficult than Jack expected. After two turns around the office, he stopped in the middle of the newsroom scratching his head, then spotted another desk he had missed, tucked away in the back corner and hidden by towers of filing cabinets. The name plaque confirmed that the narrow, graffitied former school desk belonged to Sarah Gibson.

Jack sat down in an old timber chair, like the ones his grandmother used to have, to begin a message for Sarah Gibson. He could not help himself and flicked through the works in progress that covered Sarah Gibson's desk: a story about the grand prize-winning cat from the Rumpole Cat Show, a shortage of Halloween pumpkins, and a peculiar little man touring with the carnival whose nose hair dangled past his chin, and which he sometimes braided. Jack shuddered and stroked his nostrils.

With a pair of scissors and oodles of newspapers to choose from, Jack cut words to paste a message for Sarah onto a blank page then hid the collage-message under the picture of the nose-hair man. Mission completed. It was back to the shimmering table of unbreakable glass.

"You're kidding me," said Jordan.

"Nope, not kidding. The hair in his nose was this long!" Jack demonstrated.

"Cool!" said Lucy.

"That can't be real," said Jordan. "Nose hair doesn't keep growing like that."

"How would you know, dude?"

"Maybe he puts hair growth stuff on it, like bald people, to make it grow," Isaac offered.

"If it is real hair, then he must be pretty bored," said Jordan "Can't he think of anything else to do but grow his nose hair?"

"Anyway, the message is in place for Sarah Gibson. Around four o'clock tomorrow, we release the birds and frogs at the development site, as soon as we see Sarah there with her camera. Everyone clear on what we're about to do?"

"Clear," they repeated in unison.

Chapter Twenty-six

Jordan released the frogs and birds with Isaac's assistance, since Georgia wanted nothing more to do with Jordan or the frogs.

Being the fine investigative journalist she was, Sarah Gibson arrived on schedule with a posse of impressive looking people to witness the event, including the deputy mayor, three people from the Rumpole Birdwatchers Association, Mr. Carrefour, and a representative from the Environmental Protection Agency. Jordan and Isaac watched proceedings with Toby and Brandon in the tree house.

The birds flew from tree to tree, enticed by a supply of caterpillars they had pinned to the tree trunks. Lucy prodded the frogs encouraging them to hop onto the

shiny shoes of the deputy mayor, directing the performance with a stick. Cameras snapped into action, capturing all the riverbank action. It all proceeded according to plan, until Mr. Dundee appeared on the scene with Mr. Witherspoon.

"This is an outrage!" Mr. Dundee yelled. "These birds have been planted here by the Greenies. They're trying to sabotage my development any way they can!"

"We had nothing to do with any of this," yelled Mr. Garver, the leader of the Greenies, who was chained to a tree. "You've stooped too low this time, Mr. Dundee, falsifying your proposal to the council, but you underestimated nature, didn't you? You didn't realize the birds and frogs would return to their natural habitat."

"I did no such thing, you, you ... imbecile!" Mr. Dundee bellowed through a red face swollen to the size of a beach ball. He stormed off, cursing as he went. "This is not the end of this matter! Mr. Witherspoon! Are you coming? Now, Mr. Witherspoon!"

Mr. Witherspoon peered up into the tree house at Brandon and Toby. It was quiet at home without his three oldest sons, and just Riley, who barely made a sound now that he didn't have to squeal for attention. He sighed, never expecting to miss the noise. "Witherspoon!" rang through the air once more. Mr. Witherspoon turned, hesitated, glanced again at his sons' new home in the foliage, then strolled casually past the chaos towards Mr. Dundee's growling.

"What do we do now?" Mr. Garver asked Mr. Carrefour.

"We'll go to court in the morning and ask the judge to order an injunction. That will stop any further progress on the development site until we can prove that this is the natural habitat of these endangered species. It will buy us some time, and hopefully, it will be enough evidence for the council to revoke its approval of the development."

"I'll write an article for the Tribune," said Sarah Gibson. "Fingers crossed, my boss will actually print this one."

"And I'll contact the radio station and television reporters," said Mr. Garver.

"A job well done, fellow spirits," said Jordan, as they returned to the glass table feeling pleased with their efforts, plus they had had a ton of fun in the process.

"A job well done," Jack agreed. "Now perhaps we can leave the development crisis with Sarah Gibson, Mr. Carrefour, and the Greenies."

"And get back to our main priority—breaking the spell," Ming added.

"Shame we've got nothing to celebrate with ... like pizza," said Isaac.

"Or a huge tub of Ben & Jerry's," added Lucy. "I love chunky monkey."

"Anything that doesn't taste like fish would be fine with me," said Jordan. "Even a vegetable, and I can't believe I would ever say that."

"And I want some fries and a hamburger with beetroot," said Lucy.

"Beetroot! No one puts beetroot on a burger, Lucy. You're crazy," said Isaac.

"I hate to break up the party," said Jack, "but we'd better let the wood spirits know the mission was a success."

After filling the wood spirits in on the good news at the development site, Jack, Ming, and Lucy stayed a while at the river mouth, playing riverpults with the wood spirits. It was dark and late when the commotion filtered through the river Kai.

They followed the noise to the surface. In the darkness, at the development site, bright lights pierced the night, and the gruff of engines rattled the silence.

"Bulldozers," said Jack.

"Looks like they're about to tear down the trees and ..." Ming stopped.

"And the Greenies," Lucy finished. "They look like helpless little animals in the spotlights."

"This is bad, very, very bad," said Jack.

Ming and Lucy tried to keep up as Jack tore through the water back to the glass table. "I hope that's not what I think it is up there," said Isaac as Jack came into view, followed by a breathless Ming and Lucy.

"It's time for action number four," said Jack. "There's no time to waste."

"That's my action, dudes," Lucy squealed, bouncing up and down in her seat.

"I suggest Jordan, Isaac, and me for the mission," said Jack. "Everyone agreed?"

"Lucy's the scariest. I think she should do it," said Jordan.

"You're scary!" said Lucy

"You're scarier!" Isaac yelled back.

"Okay, okay," said Jack. "Jordan and Isaac, let's go!"

Jack and Jordan aimed for the two bulldozers already on the path towards the trees. They turned the ignition to OFF spluttering the engines to a halt, then took off with the keys. Isaac dragged grass from the riverbed, slinging it over Mr. Dundee's head as he supervised the invasion. Jack and Jordan took up arms with tree branches, swishing the legs of the bulldozer drivers, Mr. Dundee, and his colleagues. It was enough for the drivers to send them scampering from the scene, with Jordan in the chase, thrashing disappearing backs with eucalypt branches. Mr. Dundee was not so easy to scare. His shoes were stuck in the sandy loam with sheer determination. His colleagues backed away from the bizarre goings-on, their eyes wide as spaceships as dancing branches moved closer.

"Come back here, you lot!" Mr. Dundee yelled as his colleagues took off into the night, but with no effect.

Isaac joined in for a complete attack on Mr. Dundee, forcing him back to his car with an onslaught of violent leaves until he eventually drove away. A cheer ricocheted from trunk to trunk as the Greenies and their supporters breathed a sigh of relief, not knowing who or what was responsible for the victory.

"I've got a feeling Mr. Dundee will be back," said Jack. "We need to keep two spirits here to keep an eye on things. We can switch places every four hours."

Mr. Dundee returned to the development site at the break of daylight with two new burly bulldozer drivers, and with Mr. Witherspoon and Mr. Castle in tow.

"You think I'll be scared off by a few tree branches?" he yelled at the Greenies still chained to the trees. "You think I could be fooled by your shenanigans? Well, you're sadly mistaken. Start 'em up, boys." He nodded at the drivers, who turned replacement keys in the dozer ignitions and revved the motors.

Jack, Jordan, and Isaac had spent the past few hours in what had been christened the Witherspoon Tree. "Here we go again," said Jack. "Same as last night."

But in daylight, the drivers were not as easy to spook, although the sight of keys floating through the air did cause them to abandon their dozers and hurry, in a burly-kind-of-way, to a safe place away from the dangling keys. Mr. Dundee stood his ground, peering down at thrashing branches in search of cotton or chords that would lead him straight to the puppetry hands of a Greenie or two. He removed his glasses and polished them with an embossed handkerchief, replaced them, and peered more closely, unable to find the source of the thrashing.

"This place is haunted!" Mr. Castle cried out, as he broke a world speed record running back to his car.

Mr. Witherspoon wanted to run also. Everyone wanted to, but he could not leave his sons alone in a tree while unidentified forces terrorized the riverbank. He searched for his boys in the tree, but sunlight glinted from behind, turning them into faceless silhouettes. "Don't worry, dad," Toby called out. "It's just the river spirits. They're here to help us."

"Weeks of counseling wasted," Mr. Witherspoon muttered to himself. "Unless ..." He squinted at Toby. "Where's Isaac?" he asked, his voice quivering with hesitation.

Isaac answered the question by tapping Mr. Witherspoon on the shoulder with the keys from one of the bulldozers.

"Isaac? Is that really you? Are you really there, now?"

Isaac tapped his father's shoulder a second time, and Mr. Witherspoon fell to the ground in a pile of unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The wood spirits gathered around the barricade to hear Jack relay the events of the previous night and morning, leaving the river mouth completely exposed to escape.

"He fainted?" Kiera asked. "Mr. Witherspoon fainted? What did Isaac do?"

"He laughed, actually," said Jack. "He really was having a good time, and the happiest we've seen him in ... well, since we've known him. Even Toby was laughing, and I think I've only ever heard him cry."

"What about Mr. Dundee?" asked Arjun.

"When he saw Mr. Witherspoon faint, he huffed off on his own. Everyone had deserted him, in one way or another," said Jack with a smile.

"He wasn't scared at all then?" asked Georgia.

"He was more confused than scared. He seemed to think it was some kind of trickery, but he couldn't work out how it was done."

"And the birds and frogs?" asked Kiera. "They didn't get hurt, did they?"

"Yeah," added Georgia. "You don't know what I had to go through to catch those birds, and I'm not the best flyer in the river."

Oh, yes I do, thought Jack, recalling Jordan's story of his afternoon at the bird park with Georgia Downs. The river spirits had laughed and laughed as Jordan described and demonstrated Georgia's flying prowess, or lack of it.

"No birds or frogs were harmed during the mission," Jack reported.

"What about the Greenies?" asked Kiera. "Are they still chained to the trees?"

"The Greenies are still there but not chained to the trees anymore. The area has been sealed off to protect the birds and the frogs, and the Greenies are working with the environment people to keep an eye on things."

"Why don't the birds just fly away?" asked Georgia.

"They're being fed with the special grubs and things that they like to eat, so I guess there's no reason for them to go anywhere."

"What about Mr. Dundee? Won't he be back with more keys and new drivers for the bulldozers?" asked Kiera. "He might run over the frogs in the bulldozers."

"I wouldn't put it past him, but he will be in a lot of trouble if he tries that now that the area has been sealed off and is under protection."

Jasper returned from another attempt at catching his own fish. "Look what I found," he said holding up a fishing rod he had found wedged into the rocks at the bottom of the river. "Someone must have dropped it from their boat."

"Or maybe Jordan's carp was on the end of the line and it pulled the fishing rod into the river," said Jack.

"Yeah!" laughed Jasper. "Jordan's carp must have stolen it."

"That's going to come in handy," said Arjun. "Good job, Jasper."

"I'll bet Jordan Carrefour would love to get his hands on it," said Georgia. "Don't give it to him now, will you, Jasper?"

"Nope, it's mine," said Jasper, swimming away to test out his new rod.

"What about Jasper's mother, Mrs. Gifford?" asked Kiera. "She was at the protest for a while and was tied to a tree."

"She was, but she's not an official Greenie, just one of the people from town who want to stop any development on the riverbank."

"Do you think she realizes Jasper is a spirit?" Georgia asked.

"She might. I expect a lot more people might believe in the spell now. Toby let everyone know it was the river spirits doing all the scaring at the development site, so who knows how many believers there are."

"I wonder about Zeb and if he will ever come back from wherever he is," said Kiera.

"Who knows," said Jack.

"Who cares," added Arjun.

"And we've got enough to worry about getting ourselves out of this," said Jack.

"So what now?" asked Arjun.

"It's back to the main mission—breaking the spell. Can we count on your help again? Do we still have an alliance?"

"I don't think that's possible," Arjun answered.

"What! Why not? We promised you we wouldn't escape and we didn't. No one has even thought of escaping," he said, stopping a moment to think of Ming. "Why won't you help us break the spell?"

"It's different with the spell and that last mission," said Arjun. "You had to stop the development or else all the river spirits would have died, but now everything is back to 'normal,' and we're the only ones under threat of dying. You are all free to escape the spell by getting through the river mouth, so why wouldn't you try?"

"Because we said we wouldn't!" Jack replied exasperated.

"We can't risk it, Jack. I'm sorry. That's my final decision—our final decision."

"So we do all the work just so that you can go home again, and you don't even appreciate what we're trying to do? Maybe you're right, Arjun. Maybe we should just escape, if that's your attitude."

"It's easy for you to say, Jack. You're a river spirit. You don't understand what it's like for us."

Jack swam back to the glass table, kicking river grass and throwing river stones at anything that moved. He could hear laughter as he approached the glass table as tales of what had been dubbed the Battle of the Bank continued.

Jordan was demonstrating his swishing technique, which became more flamboyant with each showing, such that it was no longer recognizable with reality.

"And it was all my idea," said Lucy. "Action four was all my idea. Now, maybe you'll treat me with more respectance."

Jordan and Isaac laughed.

"You mean 'respect' or 'acceptance,' Lucy?" Ming asked.

"I mean 'respectance.' I want to be treated with more respectance in the future."

"Okay, Lucy," Jordan laughed. "Respectance you want, respectance we'll give you, whatever that is."

"Hey, Jordan! There goes your fish!" Isaac yelled.

"Come back here, you rotten carp!" Jordan yelled in pursuit.

"He'll never catch him," said Isaac. "That fish is way too smart for Jordan Carrefour."

Lucy laughed. "Jordan Carrefour will never, ever catch that carp."