



THE  
JANUARY  
STARS

KATE CONSTABLE

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The title 'THE JANUARY STARS' is rendered in a large, bold, sans-serif font. The word 'THE' is smaller and positioned above 'JANUARY'. The word 'STARS' is positioned below 'JANUARY'. The author's name 'KATE CONSTABLE' is at the bottom in a similar bold font. Silhouettes of a runner and a person in a wheelchair are placed on top of the letters 'A' and 'R' in 'JANUARY' respectively. Small white stars are placed inside the letters 'A', 'U', 'A', and 'S' in 'JANUARY'.

  
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**E**ven if Clancy had heard the phone ring, she wouldn't have answered it. Clancy didn't like talking to strangers, especially not on the phone.

So the message sat blinking on the machine for a whole day before Harriet, Clancy's mother, discovered it. And then all hell broke loose.

'But you must have heard the phone!' said Harriet.

'I didn't!' insisted Clancy.

'No one rings land lines anymore. She probably thought it was a scammer,' said her younger brother, Bruno, helpfully.

'She's in another world.' Her older sister, Tash, was scornful. 'She wouldn't notice if the whole building blew up.'

'Were you reading, Clance?' asked her father, Tim, hopefully. He was a teacher, and he still dreamed that at least one of his children would develop a love of books.

Harriet hadn't heard the phone because she was out at work. Tim hadn't heard it because he was at school,

preparing for the new term that was about to start, and then at a rehearsal with his jazz band.

Bruno hadn't heard it because he had been on the computer all day, wearing headphones. He was in trouble for that now, because he was only supposed to have two hours of computer time a day, even during the summer holidays.

'You can't blame me,' said Tash. 'I was at the oval playing footy with Az and Miranda. I wasn't even here.'

'You should have been.' Harriet glared at Tash over the rims of her red spectacles, the ones she wore in court to make witnesses feel uncomfortable when she cross-examined them. 'You know I don't like you going out and leaving the little ones alone when your father and I aren't home.'

'Nine's not little!' protested Bruno. 'It's virtually double figures.'

'Clancy's old enough to be in charge, isn't she?' said Tim mildly. 'She's starting high school in a couple of weeks.'

'Four weeks and three days.' Clancy gave her father a reproachful look. She was trying not to think about high school until she absolutely had to.

'This is so unfair!' cried Tash. 'I'm the one who's out in the fresh air, doing physical exercise, and I'm the one who gets yelled at?'

'Hey!' said Tim. 'No shouting at your mother.'

‘I don’t need you to defend me, thank you, Tim,’ said Harriet crisply.

Clancy’s stomach churned. She couldn’t bear it when her family argued, the words swirling and banging off the walls like a swarm of trapped insects. At least when they were all staring silently at their various devices, lost in their individual universes, there was no shouting.

Then Harriet turned on her. ‘Tell me the truth, Clancy. You heard the phone ring, but you were too scared to answer it, weren’t you? For God’s sake! You should have grown out of that by now.’

‘I didn’t hear it,’ faltered Clancy. ‘I was . . . thinking.’

Tash rolled her eyes. Bruno burst into unkind laughter. Even Tim shook his head. Clancy felt her face burn. Why hadn’t she just said she was reading? Then at least Dad would have stuck up for her.

But it was true, she really had been thinking. She’d started re-watching *Cosmos* on the iPad (streaming it illegally, which Harriet would definitely disapprove of), and then she’d got stuck on the idea of the endlessly expanding universe.

Endlessly. Expanding. All those stars, all those galaxies, rushing away from each other into the cold, silent, empty dark. Everything falling apart. Forever. Energy leaking away into nothing. Order collapsing into chaos, inevitably, irreversibly. This process, Neil deGrasse Tyson informed her, was called *entropy*, and it was Clancy’s new least favourite idea.

But Harriet would never understand that Clancy hadn't picked up the phone because she was worrying about entropy.

The call had been from their uncle Mark. Clancy couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him, except in photographs, and at Nan's funeral. But he was Tim's brother, and he was in trouble. Mark had always been wild; but never as wild as this.

'I didn't even know he was in New Zealand,' said Tash.

'No one did,' murmured Tim.

Bruno bounced on the couch. 'Is Mark going to jail? Are we related to a criminal?'

Clancy asked cautiously, 'So, what has he done, exactly?'

'He broke into a zoo and let all the animals out.' Tash folded her arms. 'So juvenile.'

'It was an aviary, and he released the birds,' said Tim. 'Some kind of environmental protest, something about endangered wetlands. He meant well.'

'There was property damage, too,' said Harriet. '*Extensive* property damage, allegedly.'

'No one was hurt,' said Tim. 'Don't make it sound worse than it is.'

Harriet snorted. 'He's been arrested. How much worse do you want it to be?'



**H**arriet made decisions quickly; they had lost too much time already. She and Tim would fly to New Zealand to rescue Mark: Harriet because she was a lawyer; Tim because he was Mark's brother and the one Mark had called for help.

'You're the only one Mark's ever listened to,' said Harriet.

'Apart from our father,' said Tim. 'But—'

He didn't need to finish the sentence. They all knew that Pa couldn't help with anything anymore.

'New Zealand, cool,' said Tash. 'About time you guys took us overseas.'

'You can't all come,' said Harriet. 'Far too expensive at such short notice. Just Bruno.'

For once, Clancy and Tash were united.

'*Bruno?*'

'Why Bruno?'

'Because he's a boy? He is such a spoilt brat!' Clancy scowled at her brother.

‘Why can’t I go? I never get to do anything!’ cried Tash.

Tim put up one hand. ‘It’s nothing to do with being a boy. It’s because he’s the youngest. You two are mature enough to manage. We’re trusting you.’

Bruno chanted, ‘I’m going to New Zilland. I’m going to New Zilland.’

‘Dad! Bruno’s being racist,’ called Clancy.

‘Fine, go to New Zilland.’ Tash shrugged. ‘I’ll stay with Az.’

Clancy began to panic. ‘What about me? You can’t leave me at home all by myself!’

‘Everybody out!’ cried Harriet. ‘Tim, will you clear the room of children, please? I need to make some phone calls.’

‘Clear the court for Her Honour,’ said Tim.

Harriet gave him a sharp look. ‘Sarcasm is not helpful at this point. And if you were capable of organising yourself and your idiot brother, I wouldn’t have to—’

Clancy didn’t wait to be cleared. She ran to the small bedroom she shared with Bruno, and slammed the door on everyone. But it was no use. This apartment was too small for arguments: the thin walls shook with angry voices and the air was sour with resentment like the smell of burned food.

Clancy huddled in the corner of the bunk. She couldn’t lose herself in *Cosmos* again because she’d left the iPad in the living room. Instead she listened to Harriet’s clear, firm voice as she booked flights and hotels, and arranged

emergency leave from work. ‘Shouldn’t take more than a couple of days,’ Clancy heard her say. ‘Lucky it’s summer and there’s not much on, and my husband’s on holidays, of course, until school goes back – yes, he’s a music teacher—’

Staring at the luminous stars she’d stuck to the bottom of the bunk, Clancy wondered, since Dad was on holidays and Mum didn’t have many cases to attend to, why hadn’t they all gone away somewhere together? Other families went on trips to Bali, to Disneyland, camping at the beach. But her family never did. Somehow it was never convenient. Mum was in the middle of an important case, or Dad was playing at a festival, or Tash was going on a training camp with her football club, or Bruno was doing a drama workshop.

Anyway, they would never agree on the best place to go. Tash loved camping, but Clancy hated it. Tim liked music, but Harriet preferred history. Bruno liked swimming, but Harriet hated the beach. Clancy wanted to go to the desert so she could see the stars, but that would be too hot for Tim.

There had been that one awkward trip to Sydney a couple of years ago, to visit Po Po, their Chinese grandmother, and their uncles. But the uncles had been at work all the time, and Po Po and Harriet didn’t get on very well. Tash explained to Clancy and Bruno, ‘Po Po’s not happy about Mum marrying Dad.’

‘Because he’s not Chinese?’ said Clancy.

‘No! Po Po’s not racist. It’s because he’s a music teacher.’

‘Well, that’s dumb,’ said Bruno.

Anyway, they hadn’t gone back to Sydney.

*Lucky for Mark we were home*, thought Clancy...

...and now would be the perfect moment for Hagrid to arrive on the doorstep to whisk her off to Hogwarts, or the Doctor in the TARDIS. But exciting things like that would never happen to her. If Hagrid did knock on the door, he’d probably be looking for Tash...

Right on cue, there was a tap on the bedroom door, and Clancy jumped. ‘Come in.’

But it wasn’t Hagrid or the Doctor; only Tim. He perched on the end of the bottom bunk, and Clancy sat up. ‘Have you found someone to stay with me?’

‘What? Oh, no, you’re not staying here. You and Tash are going to Polly’s.’

There was a pause.

‘Polly. You know, my sister, Polly?’

‘I know who she *is*,’ said Clancy. ‘But we don’t *know* her.’

‘Of course you know her. You’ve met her loads of times.’

‘Twice, maybe. At Christmas. And all she said was, “how’s school?” I can’t stay with her.’

‘You’ll be fine. Tash will be there.’

‘Dad, *please* not Polly! Isn’t there someone else?’

Tim sighed. ‘Sorry, Clancy, I know it’s not ideal. I sympathise, but we tried everyone else we could think of. It’s such short notice. Polly’s family, so she couldn’t

say no! That's a joke,' he added quickly. But Clancy knew it wasn't, not completely.

Tim went on, 'Our flight leaves first thing tomorrow morning. Mum thinks we'll be able to sort everything out in a couple of days. Hopefully.'

Bruno zoomed in, singing. 'I'm flying to New Zeeland, and you're going to Pol-ly's, porrible Polly, porrible Polly—'

'Hey!' Tim frowned. 'Bit of respect for your aunt, please.'

Tash thrust her head round the doorway. 'If it's only for a couple of days, why can't we stay here by ourselves? We're responsible – well, I am. Don't forget I can start learning to drive next year.'

'Not in my car!' yelled Harriet from the bedroom.

'And you know Clancy's too much of a wuss to do anything risky—'

'That's true,' said Clancy humbly.

'I'm *trustworthy*,' said Tash. 'I'm not *wild*. Not like Mark...'

Tim stood up abruptly and left the room.

'Too soon?' Tash called after him. 'Too soon.' She shrugged at Clancy.

'Can you get out of my room?' said Clancy.

'It's Bruno's room, too. Bruno, do you mind if I stay in your room?'

Bruno had scrambled up to his top bunk and was rummaging for his most precious Lego creations to pack for New Zealand. 'I don't care.'

'Get out, get out, get out!'

Clancy pushed her sister out of the room and slammed the door. Bruno peered down as she leaned against the door to stop Tash breaking back in.

‘How are you going to cope when it’s just you and her?’ he said. ‘When you’re at Polly’s and I’ve flown to *New Zealand*?’

Clancy didn’t answer. She had no idea.



Their protests were no use. Before the day was over, Tash and Clancy had packed their bags and Tim had driven them across the city to their aunt’s house. They’d never been there before, and Clancy briefly entertained hopes of a mysterious mansion with a portal to a parallel world, or a tower lookout with a telescope, or at least a shabby cheerful cottage with a sprawling garden and a multitude of pets.

Harriet had always said they couldn’t possibly have pets in their inner suburban flat.

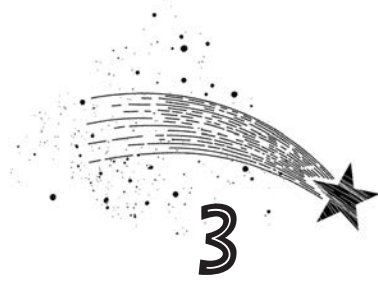
But Polly’s place turned out to be a narrow, boring townhouse in a row of narrow, boring townhouses, in a narrow, boring suburb called Tutt’s Flat, where Clancy and Tash knew no one and there was nothing to do.

Polly peered anxiously into the car. ‘Do you want to come in for a cup of tea, Tim? Coffee? A beer?’

‘No, thanks.’ Tim didn’t like beer. ‘Better get going. Early start tomorrow.’ There was an awkward pause. ‘Thanks for taking the girls, Polly. We really appreciate it.’

‘No problem!’ cried Polly, her voice high and nervous. ‘Happy to help! Any time! Give my love to Mark! Good luck!’

Tash stumped inside as Clancy watched their father drive away. When the car vanished at the end of the street, she turned to climb the steps into Polly’s house and her eye was caught by the pinprick of a star just above the roofline. It shone steadily, silver against the deep blue velvet of the sky, and Clancy felt obscurely comforted.



**T**heir aunt Polly was no Hagrid, Nanny McPhee, or even Mary Poppins. She was single and had no children of her own, no sense of humour that Clancy could discover, and she spoke to the girls in a brittle, falsely cheery voice that put their nerves on edge.

‘We’re just people, you know?’ complained Tash, privately, in the cramped spare room they were sharing.

‘Not alien life forms,’ agreed Clancy.

It was clear that their aunt was just as uncomfortable with them as they were with her. Polly rushed off early in the morning to her work as an orthodontist (‘Teeth don’t take holidays!’ she said, in her special bright voice) and rushed back home in the evening with bags of takeaway food.

She smiled nervously at them over Thai green curry, showing her own brilliantly white and even teeth. ‘Are you having a good time, girls? Not too bored? Why don’t you go to the movies tomorrow? Or the arboretum?’

Tash looked up. ‘The aquarium?’

‘No, no!’ Polly tittered. ‘That’s fish. The arboretum is a tree collection.’

‘So, a park?’ Tash rolled her eyes. ‘That sounds fascinating.’

‘Of course, you’re right, that was a silly idea,’ agreed Polly. ‘Sorry.’

They lapsed into silence. Clancy pushed her food around her plate.

‘Is it all right? Too spicy? We can try the other restaurant next time. Unless... you do like Thai, don’t you?’

Clancy muttered, ‘It’s fine.’

Tash said, ‘Clancy hates curry. She hates everything, pretty much, except cereal.’

‘Oh! I didn’t realise... But you know, cereal is not good for your teeth... I’ll pick some up tomorrow.’

‘It’s *fine*.’ Clancy scowled at Tash and scooped up a forkful of plain rice. Of course Tash would eat anything. Tash loved spices. Tash would try any bizarre culinary experiment that Tim served up – eel or brussels sprouts or blue cheese sauce, food that any normal person would gag at.

At least the food Polly provided wasn’t as weird as that. In fact, Clancy didn’t mind being at Polly’s too much, as she had good wi-fi. Lucky Clancy had remembered to bring the iPad. She lay on the couch in Polly’s neat, dim, apparently-never-used living room, mildly bored, watching videos for hours, while Tash prowled

the hot streets outside like a tiger on the loose, hunting for entertainment. The *couple of days* that Harriet and Tim had promised to be away stretched into three, then four.

By Wednesday night, Polly had become almost as restless as Tash. At last, reluctantly, guiltily, their aunt confessed that she had plans of her own. She had booked a trip to Sydney, weeks ago, to spend a few days with friends. 'I'm supposed to leave tomorrow... But of course I can't go while you're still here, can I?'

*Polly has friends?* thought Clancy in genuine surprise.

'You should totally go,' said Tash immediately. 'Don't worry about us.'

'Is there any chance your parents might be back by tomorrow night? Or even Friday might be all right, I suppose...?'

'Definitely,' said Tash promptly. 'Last night Dad said the end of the week, for sure.'

'I don't want them to rush back because of me. I did promise to look after you.'

'You'd only be leaving us for one night, tops.'

'Are you sure you'd be okay?' It felt as if Polly were begging for their permission. 'I don't get away very often, and I was looking forward to it...'

Clancy said nothing, but she didn't want Polly to leave them all alone, not even for one night.

'I promise I won't throw a party or anything,' said Tash.

'Oh! I didn't even think of that!' Polly screwed up

her face anxiously. ‘But I know I can trust you. If you’re *absolutely* sure...’

‘Absolutely,’ said Tash.

And Polly went.

‘I can’t believe she actually did that,’ marvelled Clancy later, still shocked, even long after everything that happened next.

‘Maybe not her best call,’ agreed Tash.

★ ★ ★

Early on Thursday morning, just before Polly dived into her Uber to the airport, she said, ‘Will you do me a favour, girls, if you get a chance? Go and visit your grandfather. I usually pop in before work on a Thursday.’

Tash was offended. ‘I was going to visit Pa anyway. I’ve already been. Twice.’

‘Clancy?’ Polly hovered with one foot in the car. ‘I know Pa would love to see you.’

Clancy squirmed. ‘Yeah, okay,’ she muttered.

The car door slammed, and Polly was driven away.

Tash threw her arms in the air. ‘Free at last!’ She pointed at Clancy. ‘And you’re coming to visit Pa today. You promised.’

‘Can’t I stay here?’ pleaded Clancy.

‘If you don’t come, maybe I will throw that party after all—’

‘Tash! You wouldn’t!’

‘Not if you come and see Pa.’

‘Okay, okay.’

Clancy slumped against the doorway while Tash stalked inside. It was so early that a single star still lingered low in the dawn sky. Was it the same star she’d seen before, the night Tim left them here? *It must be Venus*, thought Clancy, the morning star that was actually not a star at all, but a planet...Morning star, evening star, a steady silver light that would become invisible when the sun rose.

But of course Venus would still be there. It struck Clancy for the first time, with a pleased, private sense of discovery, that the stars didn’t really ‘come out’ when night fell; they were there all the time. It was just that the sun’s light was so bright that you couldn’t see them anymore.

It made Clancy wonder what else might be lurking around, invisible to the eye. Just because you couldn’t see something didn’t prove it didn’t exist. You couldn’t see gravity, but that was real...so maybe all kinds of things like ghosts and magic and UFOs were real, too...

A prickle ran down Clancy’s spine, and she hurried inside after her sister.



Clancy trailed slowly behind Tash as they walked to The Elms, the aged care home where Pa had lived since he had his stroke, four years ago. The sun was hot and high in the sky, and the shadows of the tree trunks made crisp stripes across the pavement. Clancy loved Pa, of course, and she wanted to see him. But she hated going to The Elms.

That was because Pa hated The Elms, too.

Before his stroke, before Nan died, Pa had had a great life. He and Nan had travelled all around Australia finding rare birds for Nan to photograph and Pa to record in his observation notebook. Now Nan's photographs and Pa's notebooks were in boxes, shut in a cupboard in Pa's room. He didn't often take them out. There weren't many opportunities for birdwatching at The Elms. There was a canary in a cage, but you could only note that once.

The Elms was only a few blocks away from Polly's house. That was the main reason why Pa had ended up

living here: so it would be easy for Polly to drop in and see him. But Polly worked long hours and Pa went to bed early, and now Polly only visited her father a couple of times a week.

Tash strode briskly ahead. If Clancy hadn't been with her, she probably would have run, despite the heat. Tash loved to run; she played football; she was always in a hurry. Clancy preferred to take things slowly. And carefully. Watching her sister's back disappearing down the driveway of The Elms, Clancy felt both guilty and annoyed.

Clancy dawdled as Tash punched in the security code and held the automatic sliding doors open impatiently. She arrived at the doorway just in time to see a ginger cat slink out and vanish into the bushes.

'Tash! You let the cat out!'

'Only because you're so *slow*.' Tash marched up to the shrubbery. 'Hey, cat! Come here!'

'Don't yell like that, you'll scare him.' Clancy peered through the leaves. 'Puss, puss. Come on, Ginger,' she coaxed, but the cat refused to emerge.

'It's not coming,' said Tash.

'Maybe if we leave the door open, he'll come back in by himself?' suggested Clancy.

'I'm not standing here all day!'

'What about the poor cat? What if it gets run over?'

Tash shrugged. 'You can stay here and wait for the stupid cat if you want to. I'm going to see Pa.'

‘Tash!’ wailed Clancy, but her sister had already whisked herself inside.

Clancy stood for a few moments in the doorway, half in and half out, feeling the cool air-conditioning on her sweaty skin. She glanced nervously at the reception desk, but the chair behind it was empty. The receptionist must have been taking a lunch break. There was no movement from the cat.

At last Clancy cast a despairing glance around the foyer, grabbed a chair and propped it in position to hold the doors open in case Ginger changed his mind, then ran after Tash.



They found Pa in the big lounge room with the other residents. He was sitting in his wheelchair in front of the television, with his head drooping onto his chest. He seemed to be dozing, not watching the ancient movie that was playing on the screen.

‘Whatcha watching, Pa?’ Tash swooped in with a quick hug and a kiss. ‘Is it *The Great Escape* again?’

Pa blinked at her in confusion, and shrugged. When he saw Clancy, he pulled a surprised face, and reached out his left hand to give hers a squeeze. His right hand lay unmoving in his lap. Since his stroke, he hadn’t been able to use his right arm or hand, and he couldn’t speak, at least not much. He could say *yes* and *no* and *bugger*, and that was about it. And although he

could stand up on his right leg, it wasn't much use for walking.

A tiny wrinkled lady in the next chair gave a fretful groan.

'Bye, Myrna!' said Tash cheerfully as she pulled Pa's wheelchair out of the semicircle. Clancy trailed behind as Tash pushed Pa down the corridor to his room. It was big enough for a bed and a cupboard, and he had his own bathroom, but the window looked out onto a dull view of a corner of the building, and Pa often kept the curtain shut.

'Sp-sp-sp?' Pa gestured to Clancy and Tash, eyebrows raised. He held up three fingers, then two.

'I don't understand, Pa,' said Clancy.

'Sp-sp-sp!' He held up his left hand in midair, and waved it in the general direction of – somewhere.

'Sorry, Pa,' said Tash. 'I don't get it either.'

He thumped his fist on the arm of his chair. 'Sp-sp-sp!' He pointed to the group of family photos on the wall beside the bed. Tash scrambled up, pointing to one picture, then the next.

'No,' said Pa. 'No...' Then, triumphantly, 'Yes!'

It was a photograph of all of Pa and Nan's children as teenagers: Mark with a broad grin and crazy hair; Tim all spotty and sulky, hiding behind a floppy fringe; Polly, hair neatly combed with a worried expression on her face; and the identical twins, Pip and Bee, much younger than the others, long dark curls tumbling over their shoulders.

Clancy recognised them vaguely, but apart from Polly, she hadn't met most of them for years. After Nan died and Pa had gone to live at The Elms, the siblings had drifted in all directions and hardly saw each other anymore.

Tash took the photo down and Pa put his finger on Polly's face. 'Sp-sp?'

'Where's Polly?' guessed Tash. 'Why didn't she come this morning?'

'She's gone to Sydney,' said Clancy. 'Didn't she tell you?'

Tash frowned. 'It's supposed to be a secret.'

'Even from Pa? It's not like he can tell anyone.' Clancy perched gingerly on the edge of the bed. She felt slightly better now that another adult knew about Polly abandoning them, even if the adult was only Pa. Tash and Polly had agreed there was no need to worry Tim and Harriet by telling them about her little trip. 'You'll only be alone for one night,' said Polly. 'Two at the most. What could possibly happen in a couple of nights?'

'Absolutely nothing,' Tash assured her.

Clancy supposed they were right. Probably. And Pa didn't seem too worried. But Pa didn't know about Mark being arrested in New Zealand. Tim and Harriet and Polly had all agreed it would just upset him. It wasn't as if he could do anything to help. Polly had told him Tash and Clancy were staying with her just for fun. No wonder he was confused.

Clancy swung her legs back and forth and tried to think of something to talk about. Conversation with Pa was hard work, because it was so difficult for him to talk back.

‘Want to look at photos?’ Tash reached into a box at the top of the cupboard and pulled out an album. Clancy knelt on the bed so she could peer over Pa’s shoulder while Tash turned the pages.

‘There’s your old house, at Rosella. Remember when me and Clancy were little and we all lived with you there, and you and Nan used to look after us while Mum and Dad were working?’

‘Yes.’ Pa smiled.

‘No,’ said Clancy sadly. She’d been too young; she could hardly remember the Rosella years at all. The family had lived with Nan and Pa until Clancy turned three and Bruno was born, when they’d moved to the apartment. But they’d still visited Rosella often, and always had Christmas there, though Harriet’s family were upset about that. Rosella had sometimes felt more like home than their actual home did.

But now the house was rented out to pay for Pa’s room at The Elms, and they couldn’t even visit anymore.

‘Look at me! How cute was I?’ Tash studied a photo of her younger self with satisfaction.

‘Sp-sp-sp.’ Pa tapped the picture with one finger.

‘Yes, that was my first footy,’ agreed Tash.

‘I was just as cute as you,’ muttered Clancy, eyeing

a photo of herself in a high chair, with something that looked like pumpkin on her chin.

Pa turned a page and sighed as he stared at photos of his garden. It had almost been a wilderness, a bush garden, to attract the birds that he and Nan had watched from the deck.

‘Is that Nan?’ said Clancy, and for a moment they all paused silently to gaze at the photo of Nan at the beach, laughing and holding onto a big sunhat that framed her round face like a halo. There weren’t many photos of Nan, because she had usually been the one behind the camera. Clancy found that the tighter she tried to hold onto her memories of Nan, the blurrier they became.

‘Sp-sp-sp.’ Pa touched Nan’s laughing face gently with his finger.

Clancy picked up the album and some loose photographs fell out. ‘What are these?’

They were strange photos, wheels of light above a dark horizon. ‘Sp-sp!’ explained Pa, gesturing upward. He mimed clicking a camera, and waggled his fingers.

‘Did Nan take these?’ asked Tash.

‘Yes!’

‘They look like those paintings. You know, that guy—’ said Clancy. ‘That Vincent guy?’

‘Sp-sp-sp!’ said Pa, excited.

‘I know what they are!’ said Tash. ‘Star trails! Time lapse star photos. Is that it, Pa? Is that what Nan was doing?’

‘Sp-sp-sp!’ Pa launched into a long story, none of which the girls could understand. Seeing their blank faces, he banged his fist on the arm of his chair and let out a roar of frustration. He hit his forehead with his hand. ‘Aargh!’

‘Don’t, Pa, don’t!’ begged Clancy.

Pa slumped in his chair. ‘Sp-sp-sp,’ he said gloomily. *Never mind.*

There was a short, bleak silence.

Tash changed the subject. ‘Hey Pa, do you remember the day we moved out, and I went missing, and no one could find me? Everyone was freaking out. Mum crawled under the deck looking for me, Dad went up on the roof, Nan knocked on all the neighbours’ doors, Bruno was screaming in the pram, Clancy was bawling—’

‘I was not!’ said Clancy.

‘Yes, you were. You don’t remember,’ said Tash dismissively. ‘But Pa, you ignored everyone else, and you went down the road to that patch of forest that joins onto the national park, and you found me there hiding under the trees. And I said I didn’t want to move into the flat, and you and I should live in a cubby in the forest forever, just the two of us. Remember that?’

‘Ah...’ Pa nodded. But Clancy thought he didn’t look too sure.

Tash slammed the album shut. ‘What about a game of chess?’ She rummaged in the cupboard. ‘Memory? Snap? Monopoly?’

‘*Not Monopoly,*’ said Clancy.

‘Sp-sp-sp?’ asked Pa.

‘Because she’s a nightmare to play with!’ Clancy glared at Tash. ‘She steals all the one-dollar notes, so no one ever has the right change to pay rent, and she always builds hotels on the Jail and you’re *not allowed to.*’

‘That’s what developers do in the real world. Get over it,’ said Tash. ‘I’m not as bad as Bruno. He buys one property of every colour to make a rainbow, and then no one can win. Want to play, Pa?’

Pa waved his hand wearily. ‘Nah.’

‘It’s no fun with only two,’ said Clancy.

‘At least with two, you always get a winner.’ But Tash put the box back on the shelf. ‘I guess we’d better go,’ she said. ‘Lunch time.’

Clancy slid off the bed in relief. ‘Is it lunch time for you, too, Pa?’

‘Pfft!’ Pa fired up briefly, tapping his watch indignantly. ‘Sp-sp-sp!’

‘Pa’s had his already,’ said Tash. ‘They have lunch at twelve, and dinner at five, don’t you, Pa?’

‘Sp-sp-sp,’ agreed Pa disgustedly.

Tash grabbed the handles of the wheelchair. ‘Come on. If you’re lucky, you might catch the end of *The Great Escape.*’



Clancy and Tash left their grandfather parked in front of the television. The movie had finished, and now there was a concert playing, with a violinist in a flamboyant cravat and a sparkling waistcoat. Pa snorted, but he seemed resigned to enduring it.

At the front door, they found pandemonium.

Half a dozen residents who were not supposed to leave the building had discovered the open door and taken their chance to shuffle through it. Now they had scattered along the street, or trundled across the road, as fast as their shaky legs and walking frames could take them.

Blue-uniformed staff were frantically sprinting out the door to bring them back, and the foyer swarmed with staff and residents and visitors, all talking excitedly. An announcement from the agitated receptionist echoed through the corridors: ‘Staff to the front door. Code purple, repeat, we have a code purple!’

‘Oh, Clancy.’ Tash shook her head sorrowfully. ‘What have you done?’

Clancy was struck silent with horror.

‘But there’s a *sign* on the *door!*’ The manager of The Elms, a youngish white woman in a red jacket and unsteady high-heeled shoes, wobbled across the foyer. Her name tag read *Belinda*. ‘Who is responsible for this?’

Clancy’s face glowed hot with guilt and embarrassment. ‘I’m really sorry,’ she whispered. ‘I didn’t mean to. It was for the cat.’

Belinda wheeled around sharply. ‘For the *cat?*’

Miserably, Clancy scuffed the toe of her shoe on the tiled floor. ‘He ran out,’ she mumbled. She wished Tash would say something. Tash was so much better at talking to people.

‘What cat? There is no cat.’ Belinda frowned. ‘Are you visiting someone?’

‘Yes, Pa – I mean, Godfrey Sanderson. He’s our grandfather.’

‘Godfrey is your grandfather?’

Belinda blinked. Clancy could guess why. Their mother was Chinese, but Pa wasn’t – he was Tim’s father. Tash and Clancy didn’t look anything like Pa. Belinda’s reaction was the kind of thing that made Tash furious, but it just made Clancy feel sort of tired.

Belinda recovered quickly. ‘Didn’t you see the sign on the door? *Do Not Allow Residents To Walk Out Unaccompanied?* Or did you think it would be funny? Is this some kind of prank?’

‘No! The cat—’ But clearly Belinda didn’t believe in the cat. Clancy said miserably, ‘I just didn’t realise—’

‘So if Godfrey is your grandpa, your mum is Polly, is she?’

‘No, she’s our aunt,’ said Tash.

‘I see.’ Belinda turned to the receptionist. ‘Lorraine, could you look up Polly Sanderson’s number for me?’ She swung back to the girls. ‘Your aunt knows you’re here, yeah? Maybe she’d better come and pick you up, and I can have a word to her about not letting children wander around without adult supervision. Don’t you know how dangerous that is?’

Tash’s eyes narrowed. ‘We’re not *children*. I can learn to drive next year.’

‘Please don’t call Polly,’ begged Clancy. ‘I’m really, really sorry. It’ll never happen again, I promise.’ *Because I am never, never coming back here as long as I live.* Everyone was staring at her. She wished a black hole would swallow her up.

‘You can call Polly if you want, but she won’t pick up,’ said Tash coolly. ‘She switches her phone off when she’s at work.’

Those were both true statements, thought Clancy. And Tash hadn’t actually said that Polly was at work *today*.

Belinda raised her thinly plucked eyebrows. ‘Let’s make sure. Lorraine?’

‘Just checking,’ said Lorraine hastily, tapping at her computer keyboard.

But before she could find Polly's number, there was an interruption.

'Sp-sp-sp?'

Clancy spun to see Pa in his wheelchair, rolled into the foyer by one of the staff, a cheerful-looking young African woman whose name tag read *Neneh*.

Pa waved his hand at the chaos in the foyer, the residents milling in confusion, staff rushing in and out. 'Sp-sp-sp?'

'There was a breakout,' Tash told him. 'Kind of *slightly* our fault.'

Clancy could have hugged her for using the word *our*.

Neneh shook her head at Pa. 'Oh, Goffrey, you in trouble again? Belinda throw you out this time for sure!'

Clancy gasped.

'She can't do that!' cried Tash. 'It had nothing to do with Pa!'

'I will be speaking to your daughter,' said Belinda to Pa. 'I can't let this pass without consequences.'

Pa gave an indignant, wordless roar.

'Pa doesn't want to stay in your stupid home anyway!' Tash's black eyes blazed, her chin jerked up, and in the next instant, she'd grabbed the handles of Pa's wheelchair and thrust him toward the doors. One of the staff was just guiding Myrna back inside with his hand on her walking frame. Tash shouted, 'Clancy! Door!'

Instinctively, Clancy sprang to obey. She heard Neneh burst out laughing, and Belinda shout, 'Wait a minute!'

But it was too late. Pa and Tash were already halfway down the drive. Clancy sprinted after them, and the doors hissed shut behind her.