

Chapter 1

TIME TO DECIDE

‘We need to get out of here, now,’ said Mum. ‘This debacle will send up red flags online. Our security has been compromised. We’re not safe here any more.’

Mum was watching the immigration vehicles pull out from the end of the driveway. A couple of them had tried chasing Ingrid on foot, but they were not an athletic bunch. They soon hurried back to speed after her in their cars.

Joe, Fin, April, Loretta and Dad were preoccupied with cleaning themselves up. They were still covered in manure-laced water.

‘We’re not going anywhere,’ said April. ‘I need a shower. I smell worse than Joe’s feet. Pumpkin, get off!’ Pumpkin was rubbing his face lovingly on April’s soggy sock.

‘I quite like the smell,’ said Dad, sniffing his own shirt. ‘It’s the smell of spring in the garden.’

‘Spring in the garden after a flock of chooks has pooped all over everything,’ said April.

‘You’re not listening. You all need to pack a bag now,’ said Mum. ‘We need to leave this building in less than three minutes. If our cover is blown, there could be helicopters on the way here already.’

‘No!’ said Joe, firmly. This caught everyone’s attention. He was so rarely adamant about anything. ‘This isn’t a b-b-building. It’s our h-home.’

‘Technically it is a building,’ said Fin. ‘It would be more accurate to say, this is *more* than a building, it is our home.’

April whacked Fin with the back of her hand. ‘Stop being pedantic when Joe is trying to be profound.’

‘Besides, Mrs Peski, you have to be reasonable,’ said Loretta. ‘This isn’t a good time of year to travel. There are too many tourists in Europe, and Brazil is no fun when it’s cold.’

‘You don’t understand the seriousness of this situation. Your lives are in jeopardy,’ said Mum. ‘The Kolektiv probably already know you’re here.’

‘Pah,’ said April. ‘I’m not worried about the Kolektiv. It’s Professor Maynard I don’t trust.’

‘She could be on her way too,’ said Mum. ‘We can get to the coast by nightfall. I’ve got enough cash to bribe our way onto a container ship bound for South America. Once we get to Chile, we can make our way across country to the Amazon jungle. I know a tribe who will give us shelter. No one will ever find us.’

‘Nup,’ said Fin. ‘I’ve got a history assignment due tomorrow. I’ve been working on it for weeks. I’m handing it in.’

‘Yeah, and I’ve just been made captain of the school rugby team,’ said April. ‘I’ve got responsibilities. Those drongos need me.’

‘And I l-l-like it here,’ said Joe.

‘Harold, talk to them,’ said Mum. ‘We need to leave.’

‘No,’ said Dad. ‘We’re not going anywhere. I’m tired of living in fear.’

‘Better to live in fear than to die in fear,’ said Mum.

‘No,’ repeated Dad. ‘I’m staying. I agree with the children. If someone comes here, we’ll face that when it happens. Hopefully it won’t happen.’

‘You’re mad,’ said Mum.

‘Yes,’ agreed Dad. ‘I know.’ No one was more aware of his mental health limitations than Dad himself. ‘You can run if you want to.’

Mum turned to the children, ‘Come with me. It’s for your own good.’

‘Yeah, nah,’ said April. ‘I’m taking a shower.’ She headed for the staircase. Pumpkin scrambling along behind, trying to lick her socks.

Mum looked at Joe. He looked at the floor. He didn’t want to say anything – Mum knew what that meant.

‘Fin?’ asked Mum. ‘You’re the one who’s always logical.’

‘You’ve damaged your credibility,’ said Fin. ‘Dad may be weak and cowardly, but we know that. Whereas we found out three months ago that we don’t know you at all. Maybe it’s *you* we should be most afraid of.’

Fin turned and left the room too. Like Joe, he didn't want to look his mother in the eye.

Mum and Dad were the only ones left.

'This is a mistake,' said Mum. 'A terrible mistake.'

'That's all right,' said Dad. 'While you were away we got used to making lots of those.'