

I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when I saw my father die. I was standing pretty much where I was now, leaning over the wooden veranda that surrounded our house and staring out at the grape pickers working their way along the neat rows of vines, heavily pregnant with this year's yield. I was just about to walk down the steps to join them when out of the corner of my eye I saw the man-mountain that was my father suddenly disappear from sight. At first I thought he had knelt down to collect a stray cluster of grapes – he detested waste of any kind, which he put down to the Presbyterian mindset of his Scottish parents – but then I saw the pickers from the rows nearby dash towards him. It was a good hundred-metre run from the veranda to reach him, and by the time I got there, someone had ripped open his shirt and was trying to resuscitate him, pumping his chest and giving mouth-to-mouth, while another had called 111. It took twenty minutes for the ambulance to arrive.

Even as he was lifted onto the stretcher, I could see from his already waxy complexion that I would never again hear his deep powerful voice that held so much gravitas, yet could turn to a throaty chuckle in a second. As tears streamed down my cheeks, I kissed him gently on his own ruddy, weather-beaten one, told him I loved him and said goodbye. Looking

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back, the whole dreadful experience had been surreal – the transition from being so full of life to, well . . . nothing but an empty, lifeless body, was impossible to take in.

After months of suffering pains in his chest, but pretending they were indigestion, Dad had finally been persuaded to go to the doctor. He'd been told that he had high cholesterol, and that he must stick to a strict diet. My mother and I had despaired as he'd continued to eat what he wanted *and* drink a bottle of his own red wine at dinner every night. So it should hardly have been a shock when the worst eventually happened. Perhaps we had believed him indestructible, his large personality and bonhomie aiding the illusion, but as my mother had rather darkly pointed out, we're all simply flesh and bone at the end of the day. At least he'd lived the way he wished to until the very end. He'd also been seventy-three, a fact I simply couldn't compute, given his physical strength and zest for life.

The upshot was that I felt cheated. After all, I was only twenty-two, and even though I'd always known I'd arrived late in my parents' lives, the significance of it only hit me when Dad died. In the few months since we'd lost him, I'd felt anger at the injustice: *why* hadn't I come into their lives sooner? My big brother Jack, who was thirty-two, had enjoyed a whole ten years more with Dad.

Mum could obviously sense my anger, even if I'd never said anything outright to her. And then I'd felt guilty, because it wasn't her fault in any way. I loved her so much – we'd always been very close, and I could see that she was grieving too. We'd done our best to comfort each other, and somehow, we'd got through it together.

Jack had been wonderful too, spending most of his time sorting through the dreadful bureaucratic aftermath of death. He'd also had to take sole charge of The Vinery, the business

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Mum and Dad had started from scratch, but at least he'd already been well prepared by Dad to run it.

Since Jack was a toddler, Dad had taken him along as he went about the yearly cycle of caring for his precious vines that would, sometime between February and April, depending on the weather, bring forth the grapes that would then be harvested and ultimately result in the delicious – and recently, prize-winning – bottles of pinot noir that lay stacked in the warehouse, ready to be exported across New Zealand and Australia. He'd taken Jack through each step of the process, and by the time he was twelve, he could have probably directed the staff, such was the knowledge Dad had given him.

Jack had officially announced at sixteen that he wanted to join Dad and run The Vinery one day, which had pleased Dad enormously. He'd gone to uni to study business, and afterwards had begun working full-time in the vineyard.

'There's nothing better than passing on a healthy legacy,' Dad had toasted him a few years ago, after Jack had been on a six-month visit to a vineyard in the Adelaide Hills in Australia, and Dad had pronounced him ready.

'Maybe you'll come in with us too one day, Mary-Kate. Here's to there being McDougal winegrowers on this land for hundreds of years to come!'

While Jack had bought into Dad's dream, the opposite had happened to me. Maybe it was the fact that Jack was genuinely so enthralled by making beautiful wines; as well as having a nose that could spot a rogue grape a mile off, he was an excellent businessman. On the other hand, I had grown from a child to a young woman watching Dad and Jack patrolling the vines and working in what was affectionately known as the 'The Lab' (in fact, it was nothing more than a large shed with a tin roof atop it), but other things had caught

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my interest. Now I regarded The Vinery as a separate entity to me and my future. That hadn't stopped me working in our little shop during school and uni holidays, or helping out wherever I was needed, but wine just wasn't my passion. Even though Dad had looked disappointed when I'd said that I wanted to study music, he'd had the grace to understand.

'Good for you,' he'd said as he hugged me. 'Music is a big subject, Mary-Kate. Which bit of it do you actually see as your future career?'

I'd told him shyly that one day I would like to be a singer and write my own songs.

'That's a helluva dream to have, and I can only wish you luck and say that your mum and I are with you all the way, eh?'

'I think it's wonderful, Mary-Kate, I really do,' Mum had said. 'Expressing yourself through song is a magical thing.'

And study music I had, deciding on the University of Wellington, which offered a world-class degree, and I'd loved every minute of it. Having a state-of-the-art studio in which to record my songs, and being surrounded by other students who lived and breathed my passion, had been amazing. I'd formed a duo with Fletch, a great friend who played rhythm guitar and had a singing voice that harmonised well with mine. With me at the keyboard, we'd managed to get the odd gig in Wellington and had performed at our graduation concert last year, which was the first time my family had seen me sing and play live.

'I'm so proud of you, MK,' Dad had said, enveloping me in a hug. It had been one of the best moments of my life.

'Now here I am, a year on, chucked out the other end of my degree and still surrounded by vines,' I muttered. 'Honestly, MK, did you really think that Sony would come begging you to sign a record deal with them?'

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Since leaving uni a year ago, I'd slowly become more and more depressed about my future career, and Dad's death had been a huge blow to my creativity. It felt like I'd lost two loves of my life at once, especially as one had been inextricably linked to the other. It had been Dad's love of female singer-songwriters that had first ignited my musical passion. I'd been brought up listening to Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez and Alanis Morissette.

My time in Wellington had also brought home to me just how protected and idyllic my childhood had been, living here in the glorious Garden of Eden that was the Gibbston Valley. The mountains that rose up around us provided a comforting physical barrier, while the fertile earth magically grew an abundance of succulent fruit.

I remembered a teenage Jack tricking me into eating the wild gooseberries that grew in prickly brambles behind our house, and his laughter as I'd spat out the sour fruit. I'd roamed free back then, my parents unconcerned; they'd known I was perfectly safe in the gorgeous countryside that surrounded us, playing in the cool, clear streams, and chasing rabbits across the coarse grass. While my parents had laboured in the vineyard, doing everything from planting the vines and protecting them from hungry wildlife, to picking and pressing the grapes, I'd lived in my own world.

The bright morning sun was suddenly eclipsed by a cloud, turning the valley a darker grey-green. It was a warning that winter was coming and, not for the first time, I wondered if I'd made the right decision to see it out here. A couple of months back, Mum had first mentioned her idea of taking off on what she called a 'Grand Tour' of the world to visit friends she hadn't seen for years. She had asked if I wanted to join her. At the time, I was still hoping that the demo tape I'd made with Fletch, which had gone out to record companies around

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the world just before Dad died, would produce some interest. Yet the replies that told us our music wasn't what the producer was 'looking for just now' were piling up on a shelf in my bedroom.

'Sweetheart, I don't need to tell you that the music business is one of the toughest to break into,' Mum had said.

'That's why I think I should stay here,' I'd replied. 'Fletch and I are working on some new stuff. I can't just abandon ship.'

'No, of course you can't. At least you have The Vinery to fall back on if it all goes wrong,' she'd added.

I knew that she was only being kind and I should be grateful for the fact I could earn money working in the shop and helping with the accounts. But as I looked out now on my Garden of Eden, I heaved a great big sigh, because the thought of staying here for the rest of my life was not a good one, however safe and beautiful it was. Everything had changed since I'd gone away to uni and even more so after Dad's death. It felt like the heart of this place had stopped beating with his passing. It didn't help that Jack – who, before Dad had died, had agreed to spend the summer in a Rhône Valley vineyard in France – had decided with Mum that he should still make the trip.

'The future of the business is in Jack's hands now and he needs to learn as much as he can,' Mum had told me. 'We have Doug on site to run the vineyard and besides, it's the quiet season and the perfect time for Jack to go.'

But since Mum had left on her Grand Tour yesterday, and with Jack away too, there was no doubt I was feeling very alone and in danger of sinking into further gloom. 'I miss you, Dad,' I murmured as I walked inside to get some brekkie, even though I wasn't hungry. The silent house did nothing to help my mood; all through my childhood, it had been buzzing with people – if it wasn't suppliers or pickers, it was visitors to the

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vineyard that Dad had got chatting to. As well as handing out samples of his wines, he'd often invite them to stay for a meal. Being hospitable and friendly was simply the Kiwi way and I was used to joining total strangers at our big pine table overlooking the valley. I had no idea how my mother was able to provide vats of tasty, plentiful food at a moment's notice, but she did, and with Dad providing the bonhomie, there had been a lot of fun and laughter.

I missed Jack too and the calm, positive energy he always exuded. He loved to tease me, but equally, I knew that he was always in my corner, my protector.

I took the orange juice carton from the fridge and poured the last of it into a glass, then did my best to hack through a loaf of day-old bread. I toasted it to make it edible, then began to write a quick shopping list to stock up on fridge supplies. The nearest supermarket was in Arrowtown, and I'd need to make the trip soon. Even though Mum had left plenty of casseroles in the freezer, it didn't feel right defrosting the big plastic tubs just for myself.

I shivered as I brought the list through to the sitting room and sat on the old sofa in front of the huge chimney breast, built out of the grey volcanic stone that abounded in the area. It had been the one thing that had convinced my parents thirty years ago that they should buy what was once a single-roomed hut in the middle of nowhere. It had no running water or facilities, and both Mum and Dad had liked to recall how that first summer, they and two-year-old Jack had used the stream that fell between the rocks behind the hut to bathe in, and a literal hole in the ground as a dunny. 'It was the happiest summer of my life,' Mum would say, 'and in the winter it got even better because of the fire.'

Mum was obsessed with real fires, and as soon as the first frost appeared in the valley, Dad, Jack and I would be sent

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out to collect the wood from the store, well seasoned in the months since it had been chopped. We'd stack it in the alcoves on either side of the chimney breast, then Mum would lay the wood in the grate and the ritual of what the family called 'the first light' would take place as she struck a match. From that moment on, the fire would burn merrily every day of the winter months, until the bluebells and snowdrops (the bulbs for which she'd had posted from Europe) bloomed under the trees between September and November, our spring.

Maybe I should light one now, I thought, thinking of the warm, welcoming glow that had greeted me on freezing days throughout my childhood when I'd come in from school. If Dad had been the metaphoric heart of the winery, Mum and her fire had been that of the home.

I stopped myself, feeling I really was too young to start looking back to childhood memories for comfort. I just needed some company, that was all. The problem was, most of my uni friends were either away abroad, enjoying their last moments of freedom before they settled down and found themselves jobs, or were working already.

Even though we had a landline, the internet signal in the valley was sporadic. Sending emails was a nightmare, and Dad had often resorted to driving the half hour to Queens-town and using his friend the travel agent's computer to send them. He'd always called our valley 'Brigadoon', after an old film about a village that only awakens for one day every hundred years, so that it would never be changed by the outside world. Well, maybe the valley was Brigadoon – it certainly remained more or less unchanged – but it was not the place for a budding singer-songwriter to make her mark. My dreams were full of Manhattan, London or Sydney, those towering buildings harbouring record producers who would take Fletch and me and make us stars . . .

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The landline broke into my thoughts and I stood up to grab it before it rang off. ‘You’ve reached The Vinery,’ I parroted, as I had done since I was a child.

‘Hi, MK, it’s Fletch,’ he said, using the nickname that everyone except my mum called me.

‘Oh, hi there,’ I said, my heart rate speeding up. ‘Any news?’

‘Nothing, other than I thought I might take you up on your offer to stay at yours. I have a couple of days off from the café and I need to get out of the city, eh?’

And I need to be in it . . .

‘Hey, that’s great! Come whenever you want. I’m here.’

‘How about tomorrow? I’ll be driving down, so that will take me most of the morning, as long as Sissy makes it, o’course.’

Sissy was the van in which Fletch and I had driven to our gigs. It was twenty years old and rusting everywhere it could rust, belching out smoke from the dodgy exhaust pipe that Fletch had temporarily fixed with string. I only hoped Sissy could manage the three-hour journey from Dunedin where Fletch lived with his family.

‘So, I’ll see you round lunchtime?’ I said.

‘Yeah, I can’t wait. You know I love it down there. Perhaps we can spend a few hours on the piano, coming up with some new stuff?’

‘Perhaps,’ I answered, knowing I wasn’t in a particularly creative space just now. ‘Bye, Fletch, see you tomorrow.’

I finished the call and walked back to the sofa, feeling brighter now that Fletch was coming – he never failed to cheer me up with his sense of humour and positivity.

I heard a shout from outside and then a whistle, the sound Doug, our vineyard manager, used to alert us to the fact that he was on site. I stood up, went to the terrace and saw Doug

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and a group of burly Pacific Islanders walking through the bare vines.

'Hiya!' I shouted down.

'Hi, MK! Just taking the gang to show them where to begin the pulling out,' Doug replied.

'Fine. Good. Hi, guys,' I shouted down to his team and they waved up at me.

Their presence had broken the silence, and as the sun appeared from behind a cloud, the sight of other human beings, plus the thought that Fletch was coming tomorrow, lifted my spirits.

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Atlantis
Lake Geneva, Switzerland
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‘You look pale, Maia. Are you feeling all right?’ Ma said as she walked into the kitchen.

‘I’m okay, I just didn’t sleep very well last night thinking about Georg’s bombshell.’

‘Yes, it certainly was that. Coffee?’ Ma asked her.

‘Uh, no thanks. I’ll have some chamomile tea if there is any.’

‘There is, of course,’ interjected Claudia. Her grey hair was pulled back tightly into a customary bun, and her usually dour face had a smile for Maia as she placed a basket of her freshly made rolls and pastries on the kitchen table. ‘I take it before bed every night.’

‘You must be feeling unwell, Maia. I have never known you to reject coffee first thing in the morning,’ commented Ma as she collected her own.

‘Habits are there to break,’ Maia said wearily. ‘I’m jet-lagged too, remember?’

‘Of course you are, *chérie*. Why don’t you eat some breakfast, then go back to bed and try to sleep?’

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‘No, Georg said he was coming later to discuss what we do about . . . the missing sister. How reliable do you think his sources are?’

‘I have no idea,’ Ma sighed.

‘*Very,*’ Claudia interrupted. ‘He would not have arrived at midnight unless he was sure of his facts.’

‘Morning, everyone,’ said Ally as she joined the rest of the household in the kitchen. Bear was tucked up in a papoose strapped to her chest, his head lolling to one side as he dozed. One of his tiny fists was clutching a strand of Ally’s red-gold curls.

‘Would you like me to take him from you and put him in his cot?’ asked Ma.

‘No, because he’s bound to wake up and howl the minute he realises he’s alone. Oh Maia, you look pale,’ said Ally.

‘That is what I just said,’ Ma murmured.

‘Really, I’m okay,’ Maia repeated. ‘Is Christian around, by the way?’ she asked Claudia.

‘Yes, although he is just about to take the boat across the lake to Geneva to get some food supplies for me.’

‘Then could you call him and say I’ll hop on the boat with him? I have some things I need to do in the city and if we left soon, I’d be back in time to see Georg at noon.’

‘Of course.’ Claudia picked up the handset to dial Christian.

Ma put a cup of coffee in front of Ally. ‘I have some chores to do, so I will leave you two to enjoy your breakfast.’

‘Christian will have the boat ready in fifteen minutes,’ said Claudia, putting down the handset. ‘Now, I must go and help Marina.’ She nodded at them both and left the kitchen.

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’ Ally asked her sister when they were alone. ‘You’re as white as a sheet.’

‘Please don’t fuss, Ally. Maybe I caught a stomach bug on

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the plane.’ Maia took a sip of tea. ‘Goodness, it’s strange here, isn’t it? I mean, the way everything carries on just as it did when Pa was alive? Except he isn’t, so there’s a gaping Pa-sized hole in everything.’

‘I’ve been here a while already, so I’m sort of used to it, but yes, there is.’

‘Talking of me looking unwell, Ally, you’ve lost a lot of weight.’

‘Oh, that’s just baby weight—’

‘No, it isn’t, not to me anyway. Remember, the last time I saw you was a year ago, when you left here to join Theo for the Fastnet Race. You weren’t even pregnant then.’

‘I actually was, but I didn’t know it,’ Ally pointed out.

‘You mean, you didn’t have any symptoms? No morning sickness or anything?’

‘Not at the beginning. It kicked in at around eight weeks, if I remember rightly. And then I felt truly awful.’

‘Well, you’re definitely too thin. Maybe you’re not looking after yourself well enough.’

‘When I’m by myself, it never seems worth cooking a proper meal. And besides, even if I do sit down to eat, I’m normally jumping up from the table to go and sort this little one out.’ Ally stroked Bear’s cheek affectionately.

‘It must be so hard bringing up a child by yourself.’

‘It is. I mean, I do have my brother Thom, but as he’s deputy conductor at the Bergen Philharmonic, I hardly see him, apart from Sundays. And sometimes not even then, if he’s touring abroad with the orchestra. It’s not the getting no sleep and the constant feeding and changing that bothers me; it’s just the lack of someone to talk to, especially if Bear isn’t well and I’m worried about him. So having Ma’s been wonderful; she’s a fount of knowledge on all things baby.’

‘She’s the ultimate grandmother,’ Maia smiled. ‘Pa would

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have been so happy about Bear. He really is adorable. Now, I must go upstairs to get ready.'

As Maia stood up, Ally caught her older sister's hand. 'It is so good to see you. I've missed you so much.'

'And I you.' Maia kissed the top of Ally's head. 'I'll see you later.'



'Ally! Maia! Georg is here,' Ma shouted up the main staircase at noon.

A muffled 'Coming!' emanated from the top floor.

'Do you remember when Pa Salt bought you an old brass megaphone for Christmas?'

Georg smiled as he followed Ma into the kitchen and out onto the sun-filled terrace. He looked much more collected than he had the previous night, his steel-grey hair neatly brushed back and his pinstriped suit impeccable, accessorised tastefully with a small pocket square.

'I do,' Ma said, indicating for Georg to sit down under the parasol. 'Of course, it made no difference, because the girls all had their music on full blast, or were playing instruments, or arguing with each other. It was like the Tower of Babel on the attic floor. And I adored every moment of it. Now, I have Claudia's elderflower cordial, or a chilled bottle of your favourite Provençal rosé. Which is it to be?'

'As it is such a beautiful day, and I am yet to have my first glass of summer rosé, I will choose that. Thank you, Marina. May I do the honours for both of us?'

'Oh no, I shouldn't. I have work to do this afternoon and—'

'Come now, you're French! Surely a glass of rosé will not affect you adversely. In fact, I insist,' said Georg, as Maia and

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Ally walked out onto the terrace to join them. ‘Hello, girls.’ Georg stood up. ‘May I offer you both a glass of rosé?’

‘I’ll have a small glass, thank you, Georg,’ said Ally, sitting down. ‘Maybe it will help Bear sleep tonight,’ she chuckled.

‘None for me, thanks,’ said Maia. ‘You know, I’d almost forgotten how beautiful it is at Atlantis. In Brazil, everything is so . . . *big*: the noisy people, the vibrant colours of nature and the strong heat. Everything here feels comparatively soft and gentle.’

‘It’s certainly very peaceful,’ said Ma. ‘We are blessed to live in all the beauty that nature can provide.’

‘How I’ve missed the winter snow,’ murmured Maia.

‘You should come to Norway for a winter; that will cure you,’ smiled Ally. ‘Or even worse, you’ll get constant rain. Bergen gets far more of that than it does snow. Now, Georg, have you had any thoughts on what you told us last night?’

‘Other than discussing where we go from here, no. One of us must visit the address I have, to verify if this woman is the missing sister.’

‘If we do, how will we know whether she is or isn’t?’ asked Maia. ‘Is there anything that we can identify her by?’

‘I was handed a drawing of a . . . certain piece of jewellery, a ring that was apparently given to her. It is very unusual. If she has it, we will know without a doubt it is her. I have brought the drawing with me.’ Georg reached into his slim leather briefcase to pull out a sheet of paper. He placed it on the table for them all to see.

Ally inspected it closely, with Maia looking over her shoulder.

‘It is drawn from memory,’ Georg explained. ‘The gems in the setting are emeralds. The central stone is a diamond.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Ally. ‘Look, Maia, it’s arranged in a star shape, with’ – she paused to count – ‘seven points.’

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‘Georg, do you know who originally made it?’ Maia chimed in. ‘It’s a very unusual design.’

‘I am afraid I do not,’ Georg replied.

‘Did Pa draw this?’ Maia asked.

‘He did, yes.’

‘Seven points of a star for seven sisters . . .’ Ally murmured.

‘Georg, you said last night that her name was Mary,’ said Maia.

‘Yes.’

‘Did Pa Salt find her, want to adopt her and then something happened and he lost her?’

‘All I can say is that just before he . . . passed away, he was given some new information, which he asked me to follow up. Having discovered where she was born, it has taken me and others almost a year to trace where I believe she is now. Over the years I have taken many a false turn, and it has led to nothing. However, this time, your father was adamant his source was reliable.’

‘Who was his source?’ Maia asked.

‘He did not say,’ Georg replied.

‘If it is the missing sister, it’s a terrible shame that, after all these years of searching for her, she’s found only a year after Pa’s death,’ Maia sighed.

‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful if it *was* her,’ said Ally, ‘and we could bring her back to Atlantis in time to board the *Titan* and go and lay the wreath?’

‘It would,’ Maia smiled. ‘Although there is one big problem. According to your information, Georg, “Mary” hardly lives next door. And we leave for our cruise down to Greece in less than three weeks.’

‘Yes, and sadly, I have a very busy schedule at present,’ said Georg. ‘Otherwise, I would go to find Mary myself.’

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As if to underline the point, Georg's mobile rang. He excused himself and left the table.

'May I suggest something?' Ma spoke into the silence.

'Of course, Ma, go ahead,' said Maia.

'Given that Georg told us last night that Mary currently lives in New Zealand, I made some enquiries this morning to see how far it was to travel between Sydney and Auckland. Because—'

'CeCe is in Australia,' Maia finished for her. 'I thought about that last night too.'

'It is a three-hour flight from Sydney to Auckland,' Ma continued. 'If CeCe and her friend Chrissie left a day earlier than they are planning to, maybe they could take a detour to New Zealand to see if this Mary is who Georg thinks she is.'

'That's a great idea, Ma,' Ally said. 'I wonder if CeCe would do it. I know she hates flying.'

'If we explain, I'm sure she would,' said Ma. 'It would be so special to unite the missing sister with the family for your father's memorial.'

'The question is, does this Mary even know about Pa Salt and our family?' Ally asked. 'It's not often these days that all us sisters are gathered together,' she mused. 'It seems to me like the perfect moment – that is, if she *is* who Georg believes her to be. And if she's willing to meet us, of course. Now, I think the first thing to do is to contact CeCe, sooner rather than later, as it's already the evening in Australia.'

'What do we do about the rest of the sisters?' asked Maia. 'I mean, do we tell them?'

'Good point,' said Ally. 'We should email Star, Tiggy and Electra to let them know what's happening. Do you want to call CeCe, Maia, or shall I?'

'Why don't you do it, Ally? I think that, if it's okay with

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everyone, I'll go and have a lie-down before lunch. I'm still feeling a bit queasy.'

'You poor darling,' said Ma, standing up. 'You definitely look a little green.'

'I'll come inside with you and make the call to CeCe,' said Ally. 'Let's just hope she isn't on one of her painting trips in the Outback with her grandfather. There's apparently no signal at all at his cabin.'

Claudia appeared on the terrace from the kitchen. 'I will start preparing lunch.' She turned to Georg who had walked back to the table. 'Would you like to stay?'

'No, thank you. I have some pressing matters to attend to and must leave immediately. What has been decided?' he asked Ma.

As Ally and Maia left the terrace, Ally saw that beads of sweat had appeared on Georg's forehead and he seemed distracted.

'We're contacting CeCe to see if she will go. Georg, you are convinced that this is her?' Ma asked.

'I have been convinced by others that would know, yes,' he replied. 'Now, I would have liked to chat further, but I must leave you.'

'I'm sure the girls can deal with this, Georg. They are grown women now, and very capable.' She put a reassuring hand on his arm. 'Try to relax. You seem very tense.'

'I will try, Marina, I will try,' he agreed with a sigh.



Ally found CeCe's Australian mobile number in her address book and picked up the receiver in the hallway to dial it.

'Come on, come on . . .' she whispered under her breath as

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the line rang five or six times. She knew it was pointless leaving CeCe a message as she rarely listened to them.

‘Damn,’ she muttered as CeCe’s voicemail kicked in. Putting the receiver down, she was about to go upstairs to feed Bear when the telephone rang.

‘*Allô?*’

‘Hello, is that Ma?’

‘CeCe! It’s me, Ally. Thanks so much for calling back.’

‘No problem, I saw it was the Atlantis number. Is everything okay?’

‘Yes, everything’s good here. Maia flew in yesterday and it’s so great to see her. When exactly is your flight to London, CeCe?’

‘We leave the Alice the day after tomorrow to head for Sydney. I think I told you we’re stopping over in London first for a few days, to sort out selling my apartment and to see Star. I’m dreading the flight, as usual.’

‘I know, but listen, CeCe, Georg has brought some news. Don’t worry, it isn’t bad, but it’s big news – or at least, it might be.’

‘What is it?’

‘He’s had some information about . . . our missing sister. He thinks that she might be living in New Zealand.’

‘You mean, the famous seventh sister? Wow!’ CeCe breathed. ‘That *is* news. How did Georg find her?’

‘I’m not sure. You know how cagey he is. So—’

‘You’re going to ask me if I can just pop over to New Zealand to meet her, aren’t you?’ said CeCe.

‘Full marks, Sherlock.’ Ally smiled into the receiver. ‘I know it would make your journey a little longer, but you’re by far the closest to her. It would be so wonderful to have her with all of us when we lay Pa’s wreath.’

‘It would, yeah, but we don’t know anything about this person. Does she know anything about us?’

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‘We’re not sure. Georg says he only has a name and address. Oh! And a picture of a ring that proves it’s her.’

‘So what’s the address? I mean, New Zealand’s a big country.’

‘I haven’t got it on me, but I can get Georg to speak to you. Georg?’ Ally beckoned him over as he emerged from the kitchen on his way to the front door. ‘It’s CeCe on the phone. She wants to know whereabouts in New Zealand Mary lives.’

‘Mary? Is that her name?’ said CeCe.

‘Apparently. I’ll pass you over to Georg.’ Ally listened in as Georg read out the address.

‘Thank you, CeCe,’ said Georg. ‘All costs will be covered by the trust. Giselle, my secretary, will book the flights. Now, I’m going to pass you back to your sister, as I must leave.’ As Georg handed the receiver to Ally, he added, ‘You have my office number, contact Giselle if you need anything. For now, adieu.’

‘Okay. Hi, CeCe,’ Ally said, giving Georg a small wave as he walked out of the front door. ‘Do you know where in New Zealand that is?’

‘Hold on. I’ll ask Chrissie.’

There was a muffled discussion before CeCe came back to the phone.

‘Chrissie says it’s way down on the South Island. She thinks we should be able to fly to Queenstown from Sydney, which would make everything a lot easier than going to Auckland. We’ll look into it.’

‘Great. So, are you up for it?’ Ally asked.

‘You know me, I love a bit of travel and adventure, even when it involves planes. I’ve never been to New Zealand, so it’ll be fun to get a glimpse of it.’

‘Brilliant! Thanks, CeCe. If it’s easier, email me the details

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and I'll call Georg's secretary about booking the flights. I'll fax a picture of the ring to you too.'

'Okay. Does Star know about this?'

'No, and nor do Electra or Tiggy. I'm going to email them all now.'

'Actually, Star's calling me in a bit to talk about meeting up in London, so I can fill her in. This is really exciting, isn't it?'

'It will be if it's actually *her*. Bye for now, CeCe. Keep in touch.'

'Bye, Ally, speak soon!'

3

CeCe The Gibbston Valley

‘Cee, you’re holding the map upside down!’ Chrissie said as she glanced over to the passenger seat.

‘I am not . . . oh, maybe I am.’ CeCe frowned. ‘The words look the same to me either way, and as for the road squiggles . . . Jesus, when did we last see a signpost?’

‘A while back. Wow, isn’t this scenery spectacular?’ Chrissie breathed as she pulled the hire car onto a verge and peered out at the majestic dark green mountains that unfolded under a ponderous cloudy sky. She reached to turn up the heating as raindrops began to splash onto the windscreen.

‘Yup, I’m completely lost.’ CeCe handed the map to Chrissie and looked in front and behind her at the empty road. ‘It’s ages since we left Queenstown. We should have stocked up on supplies when we were there, but I thought there would be other places along the way.’

‘Right, according to the directions we printed off, we should come to a sign for The Vinery very soon. I guess we just have to keep going and hopefully find someone who can point us to it.’ Chrissie tucked a lock of black curly hair back

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from her face and gave CeCe a weary smile. Their journey had involved stopovers in Melbourne and Christchurch, and they were both hungry and tired.

‘There’s hardly been a car for miles,’ CeCe shrugged.

‘Come on, Cee. Where’s your spirit of adventure gone?’

‘I dunno. Maybe I’ve gone soft in my old age and prefer home to sitting in a car completely lost, whilst it pisses down with rain. I’m actually cold!’

‘It’s coming into winter here. There’ll be snow on those mountaintops before much longer. You’re too used to the climate in the Alice, that’s the problem,’ said Chrissie as she put the car in gear and they set off once more. The windscreen wipers were working at full tilt, the downpour now rendering the mountains around them a washed-out blur.

‘Yeah, I’m definitely a sunshine girl, and always have been. Can I borrow your hoody, Chrissie?’

‘Sure. I did tell you, though, it was much colder here. Good job I packed a spare one for you, wasn’t it?’

CeCe reached over into the back seat and opened one of the rucksacks. ‘Thanks, Chrissie, I don’t know what I’d do without you.’

‘To be honest, nor do I.’

CeCe reached for Chrissie’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Sorry I’m so useless.’

‘You’re not useless, Cee, just not very . . . practical. Then again, I am, but I’m not as creative as you, so we make a good team, don’t we?’

‘We do.’

As Chrissie drove, CeCe felt comforted by her presence. The past few months had been the happiest of her life. Between spending time with Chrissie and going off on painting jaunts into the Outback with Francis, her grandfather, her life – and her heart – had never been so full. After the

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trauma of losing her close bond with Star, she'd thought she could never be happy again, but between them, Chrissie and Francis had filled the bit of her that had been missing; she had found a family where she fitted in, however unconventional it was.

'Look! There's a sign.' She pointed through the driving rain. 'Pull over and see what it says.'

'I can see it from here and it's saying left to The Vinery – woohoo! We made it!' Chrissie cheered. 'By the way,' she said as she steered the car down a narrow bumpy track, 'have you told your sisters yet that I'm coming with you to Atlantis?'

'The ones I've spoken to, yup, of course I have.'

'Do you think they'll be shocked . . . about us?'

'Pa brought us up to accept everyone, whatever their colour or orientation. Claudia, our housekeeper, might raise an eyebrow, but that's only because she's from the older generation and very traditional.'

'And what about you, Cee? Are *you* comfortable about us in front of your family?'

'You know I am. Why are you suddenly being so insecure?'

'Only because . . . even though you've told me all about your sisters and Atlantis, they didn't feel . . . *real*. But in just over a week, we'll actually *be* there. And I'm scared. Especially of meeting Star. I mean, you two were a team before I came along.'

'Before her boyfriend Mouse came along, you mean? Star was the one who wanted to get away from me, remember?'

'I know, but she still calls you every week, and I know you guys text all the time, and—'

'Chrissie! Star's my sister. And you, well, you're . . .'

'Yes?'

'You're my "other half". It's different, completely different, and I really hope there's room for both of you.'

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‘Of course there is, but it’s a big deal, you know, “coming out”?’

‘Grrr, I hate that phrase.’ CeCe shuddered. ‘I’m just me, the same as I always have been. I hate being put in a box with a label. Look! There’s another sign for The Vinery. Turn right just there.’

They set off down another narrow track. In the distance, CeCe could just make out row upon row of what looked like stripped, skeletal vines.

‘Doesn’t seem like this place is very successful. In the south of France at this time of year, the vines are covered in leaves and grapes.’

‘Cee, you’re forgetting the seasons are the other way round in this part of the world, like in Oz. I’d reckon the vines are harvested in the summer, so probably somewhere between February and April, which is why they look bare now. Okay, there’s another signpost. “To Shop”, “To Deliveries” and “To Reception”. We’ll head for reception, shall we?’

‘Whatever you say, boss,’ said CeCe, noticing the rain had now stopped and the sun was beginning to peep through the clouds. ‘This weather’s just like England,’ she murmured. ‘One minute rain, the next minute sun.’

‘Maybe that’s why so many English live here, although your grandfather was saying yesterday that the biggest group of migrants here is the Scots, closely followed by the Irish.’

‘Setting off to the other side of the world to make their fortune. It’s sort of what I did. Look, there’s another sign to reception. Wow, what a lovely old stone house that is. It looks so cosy, set in its valley, with mountains shielding it on every side. It’s a bit like our home in Geneva, without the lake,’ CeCe commented as Chrissie drew the car to a halt.

The two-storey farmhouse was nestled in a hillside just above the vineyard, which extended down in terraces into the

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valley. Its walls were fashioned from sturdy grey rock, ruggedly cut and intricately laid together. The large windows reflected the burgeoning blue light of the sky, and a covered veranda hugged the house on all sides, with planters of cheerful red begonias hanging from the railings. CeCe could tell that the main house had been added to over the years, as the stone walls were different shades of grey, aged by the weather.

‘The reception’s over there,’ Chrissie said, breaking into her thoughts as she pointed to a door on the left of the farmhouse. ‘Maybe there’ll be someone who can help us find Mary. Have you got that pic of the ring Ally faxed you?’

‘I stuffed it in my rucksack before we left.’ CeCe climbed out and grabbed it from the back seat. She unzipped the front pocket and pulled a couple of sheets of paper out of it.

‘Honestly, Cee, they’re all crumpled,’ said Chrissie in dismay.

‘That doesn’t matter, does it? We can still see what the ring looks like.’

‘Yeah, but it doesn’t appear very professional. I mean, going to knock on the door of a complete stranger to tell her or someone in her family you believe she’s your missing sister . . . She might think that you’re nuts. I would,’ Chrissie pointed out.

‘Well, all we can do is ask. Wow, I suddenly feel nervous. You’re right, they might think I’m crazy.’

‘At least you’ve got that photo of your sisters and your father. You all look normal in that.’

‘Yeah, but we don’t look like sisters, do we?’ CeCe said as Chrissie closed the car doors and locked them. ‘Right, let’s go before I chicken out.’

The reception – a small pine-clad showroom tacked onto the side of the main house – was deserted. CeCe rang the bell, as requested by the notice on the desk.

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‘Look at all these wines,’ Chrissie said as she wandered round the showroom. ‘Some of them have won awards. This is a pretty serious place. Maybe we should ask to try some.’

‘It’s only lunchtime and you go to sleep if you daytime drink. Besides, you’re driving . . .’

‘Hello, can I help you?’ A tall young woman with blonde hair and bright blue eyes appeared from a door to the side of the showroom. CeCe thought how naturally pretty she was.

‘Yes, I was wondering if we could speak to, um, Mary McDougal?’ she said.

‘That’s me!’ said the woman. ‘I’m Mary McDougal. How can I help you?’

‘Oh, er . . .’

‘Well, I’m Chrissie and this is CeCe,’ said Chrissie, taking over from a tongue-tied CeCe, ‘and the situation is that CeCe’s dad – who’s dead, by the way – has a lawyer who has been hunting for someone who CeCe and her family have called the “missing sister” for years. Recently, the lawyer got some information that said the missing sister might be a woman called Mary McDougal, who lives at this address. Sorry, I know it all sounds a bit weird, but . . .’

‘The thing is, Mary,’ said CeCe, who by now had gathered her wits, ‘Pa Salt – our father – adopted six of us girls as babies, and he used to speak about the “missing sister” – the one he couldn’t find. We’re all named after the Pleiades star cluster, and the youngest, Merope, has always been missing. She’s technically the seventh sister, just like in all the Seven Sisters legends, right?’

As the woman stared blankly back at her, CeCe continued hastily.

‘Actually, you probably don’t know of them. It’s just that we’ve been brought up with the myths, though most people, unless they’re interested in stars and Greek legends, have

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never heard of the Seven Sisters.’ CeCe realised she was rambling, so she shut her mouth before she could say more.

‘Oh, I’ve heard of the Seven Sisters all right,’ Mary smiled. ‘My mother – who’s also called Mary – read Classics at uni. She’s always quoting Plato and the like.’

‘Your mother’s called Mary too?’ CeCe stared at her.

‘Yes, Mary McDougal, the same as me. My name’s Mary-Kate officially, though everyone calls me MK. Er . . . do you have any other information about this missing sister?’

‘Yes, just one thing. There’s this picture of a ring,’ said Chrissie. She placed the crumpled image in front of Mary-Kate on the slim counter that separated them. ‘It’s a ring with emeralds in a star shape with seven points and a diamond in the centre. Apparently, this Mary got it from, um, somebody, and it proves that it’s her, if you know what I mean. Sadly, that’s the only physical clue we have.’

Mary-Kate glanced at the picture, her brow furrowing slightly.

‘It probably means nothing to you, and we’d better leave,’ CeCe mumbled, her embarrassment growing by the second. She grabbed the piece of paper. ‘So sorry for bothering you and—’

‘Hold on! Can I take another look?’

CeCe stared at her in surprise. ‘You recognise it?’

‘I think I might do, yes.’

CeCe’s stomach turned over. She looked at Chrissie, wishing she could reach for her hand and have her own comfortably squeezed, but she wasn’t at *that* stage in public yet. She waited as the young woman studied the picture more closely.

‘I couldn’t say for sure, but it looks a lot like Mum’s ring,’ said Mary-Kate. ‘Or actually – if it is the same one – it’s mine now, as she gave it to me on my twenty-first.’

‘Really?’ CeCe gasped.

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‘Yeah, she’s had it for as long as I can remember. It wasn’t something she wore every day, but sometimes on special occasions, she’d take it out of her jewellery box and put it on. I always thought it was pretty. It’s very small, you see, and she could only fit it on her little finger, which didn’t look right, or her fourth finger, which already had an engagement and wedding ring on it. But as I’m not about to get engaged or married, it doesn’t matter which finger I wear it on,’ she added with a grin.

‘So does that mean you’ve got it now?’ CeCe said quickly. ‘Could we take a look at it?’

‘Actually, before she left on her trip, Mum asked me if she could take it with her, as I so rarely wear it anyway, though maybe she decided not to . . . Listen, why don’t you come upstairs to the house?’

At that moment, a tall, well-muscled man wearing an Akubra hat put his head around the door.

‘Hi, Doug,’ said Mary-Kate. ‘All okay?’

‘Yeah, just popping in to get some more water bottles for the gang.’ Doug indicated the group of burly men standing outside.

‘Hi,’ he said to CeCe and Chrissie as he crossed to a fridge and pulled out a tray of water bottles. ‘Are youse tourists?’

‘Yeah, sort of. It’s beaut round here,’ said Chrissie, recognising the man’s Aussie accent.

‘It is, yeah.’

‘I’m just going to pop upstairs with our visitors,’ said Mary-Kate. ‘They think I may have some family connection to them.’

‘Really?’ Doug stared at CeCe and Chrissie and frowned. ‘Well, me and the boys will be having our tucker just out there, if ya need anything.’

Doug indicated a round wooden table where his men were gathering and sitting down.

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‘Thanks, Doug,’ said Mary-Kate.

He nodded, gave CeCe and Chrissie a piercing look, then left.

‘Blimey, you wouldn’t mess with them, would you?’ breathed CeCe, staring at the group outside.

‘No,’ Mary-Kate said with a grin. ‘Don’t mind Doug, he’s our manager – it’s just that since Mum and my brother Jack left, he’s gone all protective, y’know? The boys are great actually. I had a meal with them last night. Now, come through.’

‘Seriously, we can wait outside if you want,’ Chrissie said.

‘It’s fine, although I’ll admit I’m finding this all a bit weird. Anyway, as you’ve just seen, I’m well protected.’

‘Thanks,’ said CeCe, as Mary-Kate pulled up part of the counter to let them in. She led them up some steep wooden steps and along a hallway into an airy beamed sitting room, which faced the valley and mountains beyond on one side, and was dominated by a huge stone fireplace on the other.

‘Please, sit down and I’ll go take a look for the ring.’

‘Thank you for trusting us,’ CeCe said as Mary-Kate crossed the room towards a door.

‘No worries. I’ll tell my mate Fletch to come in and keep you company,’ she replied.

After Mary-Kate left and the two of them sat down on the old but comfortable sofa in front of the fireplace, Chrissie squeezed CeCe’s hand. ‘You okay?’

‘Yup. What a sweet girl she is. I’m not sure I would have let two strangers into my house after that story.’

‘No, but people round these parts are probably a lot more trusting than they are in cities. Besides, as she says, she has a team of minders just outside.’

‘She reminds me of Star, with her blonde colouring and big blue eyes.’

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‘I know what you mean from the pictures you’ve shown me, but remember, none of you sisters are related by blood, so the chances are high that Mary-Kate isn’t blood-related to any of you either,’ Chrissie pointed out.

The door opened and a tall, lanky man in his early twenties entered. His long, light brown hair hung down from underneath a woollen beanie, and his ears sported several silver piercings.

‘Hi there, I’m Fletch, good to meet you.’

The girls introduced themselves as Fletch sat down in an armchair across from them.

‘So, MK’s sent me in to make sure you guys won’t hold her at gunpoint over her jewellery,’ he grinned. ‘What’s the story?’

CeCe left it all to Chrissie to explain, because she did stuff like that so much better.

‘I know it sounds strange,’ Chrissie finished, ‘but CeCe comes from a weird family. I mean, *they’re* not weird, but the fact their father adopted them from all over the world *is*.’

‘D’ya know why he adopted all of you? I mean, specifically?’ asked Fletch.

‘Not a clue,’ said CeCe. ‘I guess it was probably random, like, on his travels. We happened to be there, and he swept us up and took us home with him.’

‘I see. I mean, I don’t see, but . . .’

At that moment, Mary-Kate arrived back in the sitting room.

‘I’ve looked through my jewellery box and Mum’s, but the ring isn’t there. She must have taken it with her after all.’

‘How long is she away for?’ asked CeCe.

‘Well, what she said when she left was, “for as long as I want to be”.’ Mary-Kate shrugged. ‘My dad died recently, and she decided she wanted to take a world tour and visit all the

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friends she hasn't seen for years, whilst she was still young enough to do it.'

'I'm sorry your dad died. As we said, so did mine recently,' said CeCe.

'Thanks,' said Mary-Kate. 'It's been really tough, y'know? It was only a few months ago.'

'Must have been a shock for your mum too,' said Chrissie.

'Oh, it was. Even though Dad was actually seventy-three, we never thought of him as old. Mum's quite a bit younger – she has the big Six-O coming up next year. But you'd never know how old she was either – she looks so youthful. See, there's a photo of her over there, taken last year with me, my brother Jack and my dad. Dad always liked to say that Mum looked like an actress called Grace Kelly.'

When Mary-Kate brought it over, both girls stared at the photo. If young Mary-Kate was pretty, Mary senior was still displaying the signs of a true beauty, despite being in her late fifties.

'Wow! I'd take her for not much older than forty,' whistled Chrissie.

'Me too,' said CeCe. 'She's . . . well, she's stunning.'

'She is, but more importantly, she's a great human being. Everyone loves my mum,' Mary-Kate said with a smile.

'I'll second that,' said Fletch. 'She's just one of those special people; very warm and welcoming, y'know?'

'Yeah, our adoptive mum, Ma, is like that – she just makes all of us feel good about ourselves,' said CeCe as she studied the other pictures arranged on the mantelpiece. One was a black and white shot of what looked like a younger Mary senior, dressed in a dark academic robe and cap, with a bright smile on her face. In the background were stone columns flanking the entrance of a grand building.

'So that's your mum too?' CeCe pointed to the photo.

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'Yeah, that was her graduation from Trinity College in Dublin,' Mary-Kate nodded.

'She's Irish?'

'Yup, she is.'

'So, you really don't know how long she'll be abroad for?' Chrissie asked.

'No, as I said, the trip is open-ended; Mum said that not having a deadline on when she had to return was part of the treat. Although she did plan out her first few weeks.'

'Sorry to hassle you, but we'd love to meet up with her and ask her about that ring. Do you know where your mum is now?' said CeCe.

'Her schedule's stuck to the fridge; I'll go take a look, but I'm pretty sure she's still on Norfolk Island,' Mary-Kate said as she left the room.

'Norfolk?' frowned CeCe. 'Isn't that a county in England?'

'It is,' said Fletch, 'but it's also a tiny island that sits in the South Pacific between Australia and New Zealand. It's a beautiful place, and when MK's mum's oldest friend Bridget came here to visit a couple of years back, they took a trip there together. Her friend liked it so much, she decided to up sticks from London and retire there.'

'Yup, Mum's still on the island, according to her fridge schedule,' Mary-Kate said as she reappeared.

'When does she leave? And how do we get there?' asked CeCe.

'In a couple of days' time, but the island's only a short plane ride from Auckland. I know that the planes don't fly every day, mind. We'd have to find out when they do,' warned Mary-Kate.

'Shit!' CeCe murmured under her breath. She glanced at Chrissie. 'We're meant to be flying out to London late tomorrow night. Have we got time?'

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‘We’ll have to make time, won’t we?’ Chrissie shrugged. ‘I mean, she’s just down the road, compared to coming all this way back from Europe. And if the missing sister can be identified by this ring, then . . .’

‘I’ll check flights to Norfolk Island, and Queenstown to Auckland, ’cos it’d be faster to fly than drive,’ said Fletch, standing up and moving to a long wooden dining table covered in papers, magazines and an old-fashioned fat-bottomed computer. ‘It might take some time because the internet around here is dodgy, to put it mildly.’ He tapped on the keyboard. ‘Yup, no connection at the moment,’ he sighed.

‘I saw your brother in that photo. Is he in New Zealand at the moment?’ CeCe asked Mary-Kate.

‘He is normally, but he just went off to the south of France to learn more about French wine-making.’

‘So he’s gonna take over the vineyard from your dad?’ Chrissie clarified.

‘Yup. Hey, are you guys hungry? It’s way past lunchtime.’

‘Starving,’ both Chrissie and CeCe answered at the same time.

After the four of them had put together some bread, local cheese and cold meats, they cleared space on the dining table and sat down to eat.

‘So where do you guys actually live?’ Fletch asked.

‘In the Alice,’ said CeCe. ‘But my family home is called Atlantis, which is on the shores of Lake Geneva in Switzerland.’

‘Atlantis, the mythical home of Atlas, father of the Seven Sisters,’ smiled Mary-Kate. ‘Your dad really was into his Greek legends.’

‘He was, yeah. We have this big telescope that still stands in an observatory at the top of the house. By the time we could talk, we knew all the names of the stars in and around

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the Orion and Taurus constellations by heart,’ said CeCe. ‘I wasn’t interested, to be honest, until I came to the Alice and realised that the Seven Sisters are goddesses in Aboriginal mythology. It made me wonder how there could be all these legends about them literally everywhere. Like, in Mayan culture, Greek, Japanese . . . these sisters are famous all over the world.’

‘The Maori have stories about the sisters too,’ Mary-Kate added. ‘They’re called the daughters of Matariki here. They each have special skills and gifts that they bring to the people.’

‘So how did each culture know about the other back then?’ Chrissie questioned. ‘I mean, there was no internet or even a postal service or telephone, so how can all the legends be so similar without there being any communication between people?’

‘You really need to meet my mum,’ chuckled Mary-Kate. ‘She doesn’t half ramble on about subjects like that. She’s a total brainbox – not like me, I’m afraid. I’m more into my music than philosophy.’

‘You look like your mum, though,’ said Chrissie.

‘Yeah, a lot of people say that, but actually, I’m adopted.’

CeCe shot Chrissie a look. ‘Wow,’ she said. ‘Like me and my sisters. Do you know exactly where you were adopted from? And who your birth parents are?’

‘I don’t. Mum and Dad told me as soon as I was old enough to understand, but I’ve always felt that my mum is my mum, and my dad is . . . *was* my dad. End of.’

‘Sorry to pry,’ CeCe said quickly. ‘It’s just . . . it’s just that if you *are* adopted, then . . .’

‘Then you really might be the missing sister,’ Chrissie finished for her.

‘Look, I understand your family have been searching for this person for a while,’ Mary-Kate said gently, ‘but I’ve never

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heard my mum mention anything about a “missing sister”. All I know is that it was a closed adoption, and it happened here in NZ. I’m sure Mum will clear it all up if you get to see her.’

‘Right.’ Fletch stood up. ‘I’m gonna try getting online again, so you guys have some idea of whether you can travel to Norfolk Island in the next twenty-four hours.’ He moved along the table to sit in front of the computer.

‘Does your mum have a mobile?’ Chrissie asked.

‘She does,’ said Mary-Kate, ‘but if you’re about to ask me whether we can contact her on it, there’s only the tiniest chance that she’ll have a signal on Norfolk Island. Part of the beauty of living there is the fact they’re fifty years behind everywhere else, especially in the modern technology department.’

‘Okay, Houston, we have lift-off!’ Fletch exclaimed. ‘There’s a seven a.m. flight from Queenstown to Auckland tomorrow morning, landing at eight. The flight for Norfolk Island leaves at ten a.m. and lands just shy of a couple of hours later. What time does your onward flight leave Sydney tomorrow night?’

‘Around eleven p.m.,’ said Chrissie. ‘Are there any flights to Sydney leaving Norfolk Island late afternoon?’

‘I’ll take a look,’ said Fletch, going back to his computer screen.

‘Even if we can get a flight out at the right time, it would only give us a few hours on Norfolk Island,’ said CeCe.

‘It’s a tiny island, though, eh?’ Fletch commented.

‘Mary-Kate, do you think you could just try your mum’s mobile?’ Chrissie asked. ‘I mean, to go all that way and then find she isn’t there would be a real pain.’

‘I can try, for sure. And I can call Bridget, the friend she’s staying with, too. Mum left her number on the fridge – I’ll go and get it, then call both of them.’

‘We’re in luck!’ said Fletch. ‘There’s a flight at five p.m.’

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from the island into Sydney. If you land in the morning at ten forty Norfolk time, that should give you plenty of time to meet up with Mary-Kate's mum. Who, by the way, is always known as "Merry" – she was apparently called that when she was little because she never stopped giggling.'

'That's cute,' smiled Chrissie.

'Not a nickname I was ever given as a baby,' muttered CeCe under her breath. 'Me and Electra were the angry, shouty sisters.'

'I've just tried my mum and Bridget, but I only got their voicemails on the mobile and the landline,' Mary-Kate said as she appeared from the kitchen. 'I left messages saying you were trying to get in contact with Mum about the ring and that you're planning to visit tomorrow, so if they manage to listen to their answer services, they'll know you're coming.'

'Well?' Fletch peered at them over the computer screen. 'There are three seats left on the flights to Auckland and Norfolk Island, and only two back to Sydney. Are you gonna go or not?'

CeCe looked at Chrissie, who shrugged. 'Whilst we're here, we should at least try to get to see Mary-Kate's mum, Cee.'

'Yup, you're right, even if it is an early wake-up tomorrow. If I give you my credit card details, Fletch, can you book us on the flights? Sorry to ask, but I doubt we'll find an internet café anywhere locally.'

'You won't, and course I will, no hassle, eh?'

'Oh, and just one last thing: can you recommend anywhere that we can stay the night?' Chrissie said, always the practical one.

'Sure, right here in the annexe,' said Mary-Kate. 'We use the dorms for the workers, but I'm pretty sure there's one room spare just now. It's not fancy or anything – just bunk beds – but it's the nearest place to rest your heads.'

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‘Thanks a million,’ said Chrissie. ‘We’ll get out of your hair now. I’d like to take a wander outside. The countryside around here is incredible.’

‘Okay, I’ll just show you to your dorms and . . .’ Mary-Kate glanced at Fletch before saying, ‘Mum left the freezer full, and I can defrost a chook casserole for dinner tonight. You guys want in? I’d love to hear more about your family and what the connection might be to me.’

‘Yeah, it would be great if you turned out to be the missing sister. And that’s so kind of you to invite us,’ CeCe smiled. ‘Thanks for being so hospitable.’

‘It’s the New Zealand way, eh?’ shrugged Fletch. ‘Share and share alike.’

‘Thanks,’ said Chrissie. ‘See you guys later.’

Outside, the air felt cool and fresh, and the sky was now a deep azure blue. ‘It’s so different from Australia here – it reminds me of Switzerland with all these mountains, but it’s wilder and more untamed,’ CeCe commented as they walked side by side past the sweeping acres of vines. They found a narrow path that led up an undulating hillside, and as they walked, the vegetation became coarser and less civilised. CeCe brushed her fingers over the leaves of the shrubs they passed to release the bright green scents of nature.

She could hear the calls of unfamiliar birds from the trees, and a faint rush of water, so she pulled Chrissie off the path towards it. They navigated their way through brambles – still wet from the earlier downpour and now glistening in the sunshine – until they stood beside a fast-running crystal-clear stream, splashing across smooth grey rock. As they watched dragonflies skimming over the surface, CeCe turned to smile at Chrissie.

‘I wish we could stay here for longer,’ she said. ‘It’s beautiful, and so peaceful.’

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'I'd love to come back one day and explore properly,' Chrissie agreed. 'So . . . what do you think about Mary-Kate not wanting to know about her birth parents? I mean, you defo had your doubts when you went in search of your own birth family.'

'That was different.' CeCe swatted a bug from her face, panting as they followed the stream uphill. 'Pa had just died, Star had gone all weird and distant . . . I needed something – or someone else of my own, y'know? Mary-Kate still has a loving mum and brother, so she probably hasn't felt the urge to shake things up.'

Chrissie nodded, then reached out to CeCe's arm to tug her back. 'Can we stop for a second? My leg's aching.'

They sat down on a patch of mossy grass to catch their breath, and Chrissie swung her legs onto CeCe's lap. In comfortable silence, they gazed out over the valley, the farmhouse below and the neatly ordered lines of the vine terraces the only sign of human habitation.

'So, have we found her?' CeCe asked eventually.

'You know what?' Chrissie replied. 'I think we might have done.'



Dinner with Mary-Kate and Fletch that night was very relaxed, and it was after midnight and two bottles of excellent house pinot noir when CeCe and Chrissie said their goodbyes and made their way outside to the annexe. As Mary-Kate had said, the room was basic but had everything they needed, including a shower and thick woollen blankets to ward off the creeping cold of night.

'Wow, in the Alice I'm normally throwing the sheets off me 'cos I'm dripping with sweat, and here I am huddled under

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the covers,' chuckled CeCe. 'What do you think of Mary-Kate?'

'I think she's cool,' commented Chrissie. 'And if she did turn out to be your missing sister, it would be fun to have her around.'

'She said she was twenty-two, which would fit in perfectly with the rest of us. Electra, who's the youngest, is twenty-six. Or maybe we're just on a complete wild goose chase,' CeCe added sleepily. 'Sorry, but I'm about to drop off . . .'

Chrissie reached for her hand from the bunk opposite. 'Night night, honey, sleep tight. We've got an early morning call tomorrow, that's for sure.'