

TROUBLE TWISTERS

BOOK ONE

GARTH NIX
SEAN WILLIAMS

EGMONT

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PROLOGUE

A Bolt from the Blue

The year the twins turned twelve, everything changed.

It started with a small black cloud scudding over a perfectly ordinary suburban landscape. Neither Jack nor Jaide noticed it, even though they were standing sentry outside their house, eyes peeled for the first sign of their father's arrival. Their attention was fixed on the street and its occupants, not the sky above.

A taxi appeared in the distance, and the twins craned their heads hopefully, but it turned off before it got to their house. They sagged in disappointment.

'I wish Dad wasn't late *all* the time,' said Jaide.

'Here's hoping it's not genetic,' Jack gloomily replied. This time, their father was a full day late . . . and counting.

Jaide sent a hard look her brother's way. 'Speak for yourself, Jack. I'm not the one who takes after him.'

This was true. Jaide had her mother's green eyes, red hair and fair skin, though she never burned in the sun, whereas Jack had the brown eyes, black hair and brown skin of his father's side of the family. Or at least they assumed their

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father's side looked like that; they had never actually met any of the other Shields. They all lived far away, the twins were told, and weren't very friendly. Even their mother had only met their father's relatives once. And clearly, it hadn't gone very well.

Jack vowed to himself that if the Shields *were* late all the time, he wasn't going to be like them. Genes weren't everything, their mother liked to say. Jack wanted to believe this.

Several hundred yards behind their house, the cloud turned right at a church spire and spun twice anticlockwise, as though lost.

Instead of their hoped-for father, the next person the twins saw was the postman. He smiled at them and put a letter in their postbox.

'Hey, maybe it's a card from Dad!' said Jaide. Hector Shield was a treasure-seeker, hunting lost masterpieces for auction houses and galleries. Sometimes cards from him took even longer to arrive than he did.

'He's probably just making long-distance excuses,' muttered Jack.

Jaide pushed past her brother, opened the postbox and took out the envelope.

'It's not from Dad,' she said, examining the cream-coloured envelope curiously. 'But it *is* for us.'

The envelope was made of a thick, flecked paper and addressed in ornate, formal handwriting that neither twin

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recognised. It also referred to them by their real names, the ones their mother only used when they were in big trouble:

Jaidith Fennena Shield & Jackaran Kresimir Shield

‘Who’s it from then?’ asked Jack, peering over Jaide’s shoulder.

Jaide turned the envelope over. There was no return address anywhere and next to the stamp was a four-pointed star – like the compass symbol on a map – printed directly on the envelope.

Something about the star unsettled Jack. But he couldn’t help asking his sister, ‘Are you going to open it?’ Jack would rather know something disturbing than have to wait in suspense.

‘Of course,’ Jaide told her brother, trying to sound as calm and cool as she usually did. It took a lot to bother Jaide. ‘What’s the hurry?’

She didn’t tell him that there was something about the card that made her hesitate too. Something about it just felt . . . odd.

She ran her thumb along the flap and tore it with a satisfying rip. The smell of salt and sand hit her nostrils, as though a strong sea breeze had just rushed over her – even though they lived nowhere near the sea.

Jack wasn’t hit by this strange sensation. As his sister hesitated, he pulled the envelope from her frozen fingers and

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tugged out the card from within. It was white, with the same four-pointed star embossed in gold on the front.

The day darkened momentarily. Then the single black cloud moved on and the sky was immediately blue again.

‘Maybe we should show it to Mum first,’ Jack said.

‘It does have our names on it,’ Jaide pointed out. She flipped open the card.

Inside were a few lines written in the same old-person’s handwriting.

My dear troubletwisters,

The cats have been very restless, so I expect I will see you soon.

With love,

Grandma X

‘Grandma who?’ asked Jack.

‘That’s not Mamma Jane’s writing,’ said Jaide, thinking of their mother’s mother, who lived with their aunt in an apartment on the other side of town.

‘Let me see that.’

Both Jack and Jaide jumped as their mother reached past them and snatched the card from Jack’s fingers. Neither twin had heard her coming.

After reading the message, Susan Shield’s lips tightened and she shut her eyes for a moment. The twins watched her, puzzled by her reaction.

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‘This isn’t really for you,’ she said finally. ‘I want you to forget you ever saw it.’

‘But it was addressed to us,’ Jaide said.

‘I know, but it shouldn’t have been,’ their mother replied firmly.

Jack couldn’t help himself. ‘What’s a troubletwister?’ he asked.

‘We’re not going to talk about it now. I want you to forget it,’ Susan repeated in a warning voice. The twins knew that tone. They only ever heard it when they were caught doing something particularly bad, like climbing on the roof or blowing things up in the microwave.

‘But we didn’t do anything wrong,’ Jaide protested.

‘I know,’ said Susan. She knelt down and pulled them both in for a quick hug, which typically Jaide resisted and Jack leaned into. ‘But let’s move right along, OK? Why don’t you go and have a jump on the trampoline?’

‘We’ve already done that,’ said Jack.

‘Who jumped the highest?’ Susan asked.

‘I did,’ both twins declared. They glared at each other for a moment, then ran off through the house, since that was marginally faster than going around to the back garden.

Susan watched them run. As soon as they were out of sight, she read the card a second time, then realised that there was something else in the envelope. Susan pulled it out just far enough to see it was a map, with some instructions written on the side. Angrily, she stuffed it and the card back in the

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envelope, which she then shoved into her back pocket.

‘Where are you, Hector?’ she said savagely as she closed the postbox flap with a loud rattle and went inside.

Half a mile away, the solitary black cloud stopped above a derelict building site and a single stroke of lightning flashed down. The muted clap of thunder that followed could have been a car backfiring.

The twins, busy on the trampoline, didn’t notice it. Jaide, the eldest by four minutes, was shorter by half an inch, but even so she could nearly always jump far higher than Jack, much to his annoyance.

‘Do you really think I take after Dad?’ Jack asked while gathering his breath for another challenge.

‘I don’t know. I guess we both do, a little bit.’

‘So you could be the late one, not me.’

‘Maybe, but I’ll always jump the highest.’

‘Only because you hog the middle.’

‘That’s not true!’

‘You know,’ said a voice from the back fence, ‘I reckon you both hog the middle, given the opportunity.’

The twins stopped jumping. For all their differences, the surprised looks on their faces were identical.

‘Dad?!’ they both asked.

The familiar, floppy-haired figure of Hector Shield smiled at them over the fence.

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‘Better late than never!’

The twins practically bounced over the trampoline net in their haste to get to him.

‘You made it!’ Jack said.

‘What took you so long?’ Jaide asked.

‘It’s good to see you too, kids.’

The twins opened the gate and Hector stepped into the garden. He was dressed in his usual rumpled dark-blue corduroy trousers and jacket, and was wheeling a large and battered black suitcase behind him. His long arms easily enfolded them both in a great big hug.

Neither twin noticed that there were scorch marks on his jacket. But Jack, burying his head in his father’s shirt, withdrew after a moment, sniffing. Hector smelled like burned toast.

‘Why did you come this way?’ Jack asked.

‘My, uh, taxi dropped me off on the wrong street.’

Jaide didn’t care how their father had got there, just as long as he was home. ‘Did you bring us any presents?’ she asked.

Hector smiled at Jaide. He always brought back a little bit of treasure for each of them from his trips. His presents were invariably exciting and strange, like the antique wind-up horses he’d brought back from Spain the year before, or the Mayan goblets for drinking ceremonial hot chocolate he’d produced at Christmas.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘We’ll have a present-giving ceremony after I’ve had a shower and a cup of coffee.’

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They turned towards the back door and all three stopped as they saw Susan standing there with her arms folded and a tense expression on her face.

‘Ah,’ said Hector. ‘You go on ahead, Jack and Jaide. I think your mother wants a word.’

The twins grabbed the handle of the battered Samsonite case. It was something of a ritual for Jack and Jaide to take it up to their parents’ room and they were happy to get out of the way of the brewing parental argument. Since their mother worked shifts as a paramedic, any unexpected change of schedule (like their father being a day late) wreaked havoc with all the complicated juggling of school, after-school activities and work.

‘It’s heavy,’ puffed Jack when they reached the stairs.

‘Our presents must be huge!’ Jaide let go of the handle and lifted the suitcase from its base. Together they negotiated the hairpin bend halfway up and lugged the suitcase into their parents’ bedroom. The room was decorated with a series of nineteenth-century watercolours by an artist their father had discovered in Paris, depicting a series of small animals and birds all dressed in Victorian costume.

The twins started to hoist the suitcase up on to the bed, but Jack lost his grip at the last second and Jaide couldn’t hold it alone. The case fell back on the floor. Jack leaped aside, and with an almighty crack, the solid outer shell of supposedly indestructible plastic split in the middle and all the contents cascaded out across the twins’ feet.

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For a second, Jaide and Jack were shocked into silence. Out in the garden, they could hear their mother cry, ‘But Hector, you only just got back!’

The twins stared down at the shattered suitcase.

‘Dad’ll be mad,’ said Jaide. ‘What do we do?’

‘I can’t believe it broke,’ said Jack. ‘It must have fallen a million times before.’

Jaide picked up the two broken halves of the top of the suitcase and held them up to her brother.

‘Look! It’s *burned*. No wonder it broke.’

Jack came around and saw a jagged scorch mark running from one end to the other. He sniffed, and smelled the same odd smell that had been on their father when he had hugged them.

‘Do you think – do you think he was in some kind of accident and that’s why he’s late?’

‘I don’t know.’

Jaide put down the broken lid and examined the pile of things at their feet. Most of it looked pretty ordinary, just shirts and socks, underwear and toiletries. But there was a pair of particularly old and tattered corduroy trousers that had something sticking out of the leg.

Jaide picked up the trousers and an iron rod fell out. Jack quickly reached down to pick it up.

‘Ow!’ he exclaimed as a bright blue spark jumped to his grasping fingers. He dropped the rod quickly on to the bed.

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Both of the twins looked it over, eager to spot something special in it. But it was just a two-foot-long length of iron, pitted and scarred, utterly unmarked by rust.

‘Not much of a present,’ Jaide said, reaching for it. There was no spark, but a wave of dizziness rolled through her.

She shut her eyes and waited for it to pass, but instead the feeling got stronger.

‘Are you all right?’ Jack asked nervously. Jaide had suddenly gone very pale.

‘No,’ she said and swayed sideways. Jack steadied her and tried to snatch the rod away, to throw it back on the bed. But the moment he touched the cold iron again, a wave of dizziness hit him as well.

The floor sagged underneath them. The ceiling bowed. Every corner curved and twisted as though they were seeing the walls through buckled glass.

‘What’s going on?’ Jack’s voice boomed like a foghorn.

‘It’s the rod!’ Jaide’s voice squeaked like fingernails down a blackboard.

‘Let it go!’

‘I can’t!’ She shook her hand, but the rod was firmly attached to her palm. ‘It won’t let go of me!’

Jack tried to let go too, but he was stuck as well.

The angles and lines of the room bent even further, tangling their world in knots. Bile rose in their throats. Jack shook his head wildly and Jaide blinked and swallowed, hoping that this

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would somehow make things look right again. But it didn't and they felt a sudden pain in their ears, a pain followed by a horrible, whispering voice that at first was so soft they could only feel it and not understand. But it grew louder and more strident, until it was the only thing they could hear, as if it emanated from inside their own heads.

++Come to us, troubletwisters. Join us . . . welcome, most welcome!++

The twins spun round and tried to head for the door, though now it was only a tiny rectangle at the end of a distorted tunnel of walls. Their feet still moved, but it was no use – the rod was fixed in place above the bed and they couldn't let go.

++We see you! We see you!++ crowed the voice triumphantly. **++So close, so close!++**

As the voice spoke, the watercolour animals on the walls twisted and writhed out of their frames, morphing into hideous, three-dimensional shapes with bulging eyes like those of a monstrous goldfish, eyes that rotated and shifted to peer intently at the twins.

Even worse than their attention was the fact that the eyes were entirely white, without iris or pupil, and the whiteness was buzzing and blurry, like the worst kind of fluorescent light.

++We see you! We see you!++

Jaide almost yanked her arm out of her shoulder socket as she tried to free herself from the rod. She kept her head down as she struggled, trying not to meet the gaze of those terrible

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eyes, the eyes that she felt were drawing her in, sucking her into some other place, some other dimension.

Jack too averted his eyes, but the room warped and weirded around him even more. He sensed more than saw that there was something behind these impossible spaces, and desperately he tried to look at something that didn't hurt his brain, but there was nothing.

Both twins screamed at the same time.

Hector and Susan Shield heard the scream, and when they whirled around to the house, they were shocked to see its angles shifting. The roof, which normally met at a sharp point, was now as flat as the horizon, while the chimney had stretched up a dozen feet.

'Keep back!' Hector shouted to Susan, acting a second before she could. He leaped through a door that had become triangular and ten feet high, and ran up the stairs, becoming distorted himself in the process.

Then he was gone, engulfed by the bizarre geometry.

Upstairs, Jaide could feel a ghastly coldness creeping up her fingers and into her arms. It robbed her of her natural warmth and weakened her muscles, making it even harder to fight. She knew that if it spread much further, she wouldn't be able to resist at all and whatever lay behind the voice would get her.

To Jack it felt as though he was being skewered by the

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multiplying eyes. Each new pair pinned him more tightly to the spot. If he met their gaze, he knew he would be lost. He kept moving his head, shifting his line of sight, blinking, but he knew there were just too many awful white eyes . . .

‘Kids!’

A flash of purple-blue light cut through the mangled angles, dazzlingly bright and refreshingly straight. It struck the metal rod square in the middle. The twins were flung apart by a soundless explosion, even as another bright ribbon lashed out like a whip, gathering up Jaide and Jack and then looping back to the hands that had cast it. Through their shock, the twins recognised their father, but he looked like nothing they had ever seen before. Light rippled up and down his body like a gas flame, concentrating in his open hands. His hair waved like a nest of electric snakes.

Hector Shield grabbed the lightning as if it was a rope and hauled on it as hard as he could, pulling the twins to him. They reeled into his arms and he took the iron rod from their frozen hands without difficulty.

The white eyes flared brighter.

++No!++ the voice cried. **++They belong to us! They want to be with us!++**

‘Never!’ shouted Hector.

He raised the iron rod. Lightning burst from its tip, chain lightning that crackled across a dozen white eyes, bursting them like trodden-on grapes. But more and more eyes kept

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appearing, and they grew closer and closer despite everything Hector did. The twins clung to him, not understanding what was going on, but in no doubt at all that they were in mortal danger.

‘Get behind me!’ Hector croaked to the children. He held up the rod again, but only a flickering spark jumped out. The eyes were everywhere, drawing nearer and nearer, as if a vast creature with ten thousand eyeballs was peering down at the small, helpless group of humans. The floor beneath their feet was tilting and rising at the sides, turning into a funnel, making them slide forward, and they all had the growing sensation that hidden behind or below the multitude of eyes there might also be a mouth.

‘Get . . . get behind me!’ the twin’s father called out again. ‘Then run for the stairs!’

++Come to us!++ countered the voice. It sounded very self-satisfied now, as if Hector’s words were a concession of weakness.

The twins disobeyed both instructions. Jack stayed absolutely still, transfixed and paralysed. Jaide actually took a step forward.

‘No!’ she shouted back at the great cloud of eyes. ‘Go away!’

‘Jaide! Don’t –’ Hector yelled, dropping the iron rod and gathering the children in.

A tide of darkness swept over the room, snuffing out the glowing eyes. At the same time, the air became hot and gusted

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furiously through the room. The wind pulled at Jaide, lifting her off her feet till Jack and Hector pulled her back down.

‘I can’t see!’ Jaide screamed as the wind tore at her again. The darkness was almost worse than the staring eyes, and the wind kept getting stronger, accompanied by terrible crashing noises all around.

‘Down!’ shouted Hector. He pushed them flat on the floor as something – possibly the bed – flew over their heads and smashed into the wall. Clothes whipped from the wardrobe with a sound like giant birds flapping, and then the wardrobe itself blew into matchwood. Hector started to drag the twins back through the doorway.

The walls screamed as the roof came off and spun away. The twins screamed too, not knowing what was making the noise.

Then they felt their father’s hands on them, pressing them to him, holding them down.

‘Calm down, kids. We’ll be all right. Take slow breaths. In for five seconds . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five – and now out for five seconds . . .’

As he counted, the darkness lifted. Jack found himself following his father’s instructions even as his heart pounded in terror. Sunshine slowly filtered in from above, through the gaping absence where the roof had been. Jaide felt her brother grow calm and that helped her relax too. The wind slowed to a gentle breeze and then stopped altogether, to be replaced by an eerie silence, like being in the eye of a storm.

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Behind the silence, as though behind a pane of glass that could shatter at any moment, the eyes were waiting.

‘That’s it,’ said Hector. ‘Nice, slow breaths . . .’

Jack’s eyes shut for a moment. He twitched and raised his head. Suddenly he felt incredibly sleepy, as if he’d been woken in the middle of the night. He looked at Jaide, who was also nodding off.

Both of them slumped in Hector’s arms and he walked them quickly down the stairs, looking anxiously behind him several times. Halfway down, he met Susan.

‘Get them outside,’ Hector said urgently. ‘Away from the house.’

Susan grabbed them, the intense energy of her grasp keeping them just on the right side of awake. They were moving fast, running down the stairs, into the garden, out through the back gate into the lane and then several houses down, where Susan propped them against a fence and checked them over.

She had just taken their pulses when an incredibly loud thunderclap made them all flinch. Looking back, they saw a black column dotted with tiny bright lights rising up above the house. Lightning stabbed at the house out of a clear sky and then all that was left of the building was suddenly sucked up into the column, broken into pieces and spat back down again in a shower of debris.

‘Hector . . .’ whispered Susan.

The black column disappeared in a plume hundreds of feet

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high. Dust rolled out in a cloud down the lane, making Susan and the twins cough and wipe their eyes.

But there, emerging from the dust, was the twins' father. He had blood streaming from a cut above his left eye and his corduroy jacket was ripped to shreds, but he was alive. In his right hand, he held the iron rod.

Jack and Jaide felt an incredible surge of relief. They smiled up at their father, but their eyes were dazed, and their exhausted minds stunned with shock and incomprehension.

'What have you done?' asked Susan.

'Susan, it's not . . .'

'Not your fault?' She pointed angrily at the metal rod in his hand. 'I knew you didn't go by plane. I looked up the arrivals, but I thought maybe – just maybe – I missed one and you had kept your promise.'

'I was going to say *it's not that simple*.' Hector knelt by the children and laid the rod down on the road.

Jack blinked up at his father, slowly regaining his senses. Next to him, he felt Jaide shift and Jack knew that he should say something, but he didn't have the strength to speak.

'Dad,' Jaide whispered. It took a great deal of effort to get the words out, so much so that she hardly knew if she was saying them right or getting them in order. 'We touched the . . . we saw the . . .'

'I know, sweetie,' said Hector. 'It'll be OK, I swear.'

'How will it be OK?' asked Susan. 'How will it be OK,

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Hector? Our house has just been *destroyed*. You and the kids almost died.'

'We knew this might happen one day,' Hector said quietly. 'The potential is there, and one way or another, it will be realised.'

'*She* made it happen!' Susan tugged the letter out of her back pocket and flung it at him. '*She* did this.'

Hector scanned the four short lines and sagged back on his heels.

Jack didn't know what was stranger – what had happened or the fact that his parents didn't seem to be as surprised as he was. Jaide, meanwhile, wondered what on earth the card from the mysterious Grandma X had to do with it all.

'There must be a way to make it stop,' Susan said, clutching the twins tightly. 'There *has* to be.'

'She didn't make it happen,' said Hector. 'But the children have to go to her now.'

Go to her? Jaide thought. This was all happening too fast.

Susan could barely put her fears into words. 'No! She'll want to take them . . . she'll want to use them . . . I won't let them go!'

Jack had so many questions. But he was so tired and shocked he couldn't even begin to ask them. For now, he just listened. Questions would come later. Plenty of questions.

'She won't use them,' said Hector firmly. 'The choice will be their own. As it was for me, when I chose you.'

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‘But you didn’t stick with that choice,’ said Susan, her words as sharp as a knife. ‘Did you?’

In the distance, they heard the sound of sirens cutting through the howling of dogs and the shrill repetition of car alarms.

Hector looked behind him and both Jaide and Jack followed his glance. Smoke was beginning to curl and twine out of the shattered walls and rooftops, and little flames were jumping in the shadows.

‘They have to go,’ said Hector. ‘The twins . . . we might not be so lucky next time. I need you to take them to Mother before their Gifts fully awaken.’

‘What gifts?’ Jaide finally found the strength to speak up. ‘What’s happening?’

Hector looked at both of the twins. ‘I can’t tell you now. But you’ll find out soon. All you need to know is that it’s very important you go with your mother. Now.’

‘You’re not giving us any choice?’ Jack asked.

‘There is no choice.’

Jaide still didn’t understand. ‘What about you? Aren’t you going to come with us?’

‘Yes, Hector,’ Susan said. ‘Aren’t you going to come with us?’

A flicker of intense pain passed across Hector’s features. ‘You know I can’t go with you, Susan. Me being there would . . . interfere . . . as I interfered today.’

Susan looked away, back towards the burning house.

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‘You might as well go now then,’ she said.

Hector nodded sadly. He bent down and kissed both the twins on the forehead, picked up the iron rod and stood, his glasses askew and misted over.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘One day, troubletwisters, I hope you’ll understand.’

Hector turned to Susan, but she would not look at him, not even as his footsteps slowly receded down the lane. Jack couldn’t watch him either – he felt like something inalterable was happening and their family was never going to be the same again. Only Jaide managed a small wave as their father left. She had no idea whether or not he saw it.

A minute later, a clap of thunder echoed across the ordinary suburb and a single black cloud slunk off towards the horizon, marking the end of the ordinary life of Jaide and Jack Shield.



CHAPTER ONE

The House on Watchward Lane

Everyone kept telling Jack, Jaide and Susan how lucky they'd been to survive the explosion that destroyed their home.

'I'd buy a lottery ticket if were you,' the insurance assessor had said.

The fire brigade investigator had agreed, adding, 'A gas main normally goes up all at once, not in stages. You're the luckiest family alive.'

But the twins didn't feel lucky. As far as they were concerned, they just got unluckier and unluckier. First their home got blown up and then they were told they had to move to their unknown grandmother's house, miles and miles and miles away. And yet, every time someone heard their story – like that morning in the latest and hopefully last slimy motel off the motorway – out came that annoying sentence: 'You were lucky!'

'Everyone keeps saying we were so lucky,' said Jaide as they got back into the car. 'So how come we've had to drive for three whole days to some crummy town we've never heard

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of, to see a woman you *clearly* don't like? Dad is who-knows-where –'

'That's enough,' snapped Susan. 'It's been a long drive and I need you both to be cooperative. We're almost there. Don't ruin it now.'

They drove in silence for a while, Susan fuming to herself and the twins in no better mood. Then Susan quietly added, 'Your father will come when he can. He has urgent business. And we *are* very lucky that we're alive and that your grandmother is so keen to have us come to live with her.'

Grandma X lived by the sea in a town called Portland – but not one of the Portlands that anyone had heard of. In fact, as Jaide quickly learned on the Internet, this Portland didn't even make the top ten of cities or towns with the same name. It was small and old and sounded generally unexciting. There was only one small school, two parks, one part-time cinema (without a 3D screen) and a main street with half a dozen shops. The nearest shopping mall was at least forty minutes' drive away. To the twins, it might as well have been on the moon, but without the fun of riding in a spaceship to get there.

'Are we going to be stuck here for good?' Jack asked as their mother drove slowly down the main street of Portland, peering at the street signs. Some of them were so faded they were completely illegible. 'I mean, like, forever?'

'No,' said their mother. 'It's only till the insurance money comes in and our old house is rebuilt.'

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‘Why couldn’t we stay in the hotel until then? Or with Aunt Marie?’

‘I told you. Aunt Marie has her hands full with Mamma Jane. It’s going to take months to rebuild and . . . and I thought we needed a change of scene anyway.’

Jaide knew it was pointless to try to pin her mother down any further than this. Clearly, something strange had happened the hour their house had been destroyed. And there was a link between the freaky things the twins had seen, their father’s quick disappearance and the relocation to Grandma X’s house. But Susan wouldn’t talk about it. Once Hector had gone, it was like the words they’d exchanged had never happened.

There was one question Jaide figured was safe. ‘Do we have to call her Grandma X?’ she asked.

‘Just call her Grandma.’

‘What does the X stand for?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know Dad’s mother’s name?’

‘No,’ their mother answered with a distracted sigh. She was looking back and forth between the hand-drawn map Grandma X had sent and the GPS screen. With an irritated snort, she pulled over to the side of the road. ‘I don’t understand this. We’ve just passed Crescent Street and Dock Road. There’s no Watchward Lane between them and it isn’t in the navigator database.’

‘She said to come in from the east.’ Jaide held up the map,

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which had some carefully lettered instructions on the side.

‘It can’t make any difference which way we come from,’ said Susan. But her voice trailed off and she made a U-turn. ‘I must have missed it. We’ll have to go back round.’

‘Why does she call us troubletwisters?’ Jaide asked.

‘She’s old,’ said Susan. ‘It’s probably some saying from long ago, like a pet name.’

‘I don’t like it,’ said Jaide. ‘We’re not trouble.’

‘Yes, you are,’ said Susan. ‘Sometimes anyway.’

‘And what do her cats have to do with anything?’

Jack glanced out of the window and caught a glimpse of a narrow lane between a bookshop and a hardware store. He blinked and lost sight of it, then spotted it again through the rear window.

‘There!’ he called out. ‘We’ve gone past it! Next to the shop with all the different stepladders out the front.’

‘Well done, Jack!’ Susan said. She spun the wheel and executed another U-turn. ‘There’s the wretched lane at last.’

The car turned into the narrow, cobbled lane that zigzagged between two rows of houses and then up a slight hill, ending in a cul-de-sac opposite a high, whitewashed stone wall topped with gargoyle cats and roosters. There was an arched entrance just wide enough for the car, its gate propped open behind it.

Susan drove through the entrance and followed the long circular drive and its companionable line of poplar trees

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around to the front of the house. When she turned the engine off, they all sat in silence for a moment, looking out.

The house was old and built of once-rosy bricks that had mostly faded to a dull pink. It was three storeys high and in place of a fourth storey it had a widow's walk, a kind of verandah that embraced the very steep roof, which was made of pale timber shingles. Several chimneys projected up much higher than the roof peak, and on the tallest, a weathervane in the shape of a crescent moon with attendant stars pointed firmly south-west despite the wind quite obviously bending the tops of the poplar trees from the east.

'I bet it's mouldy inside,' said Jaide.

'And there's no hot water,' said Jack.

'We'll just have to make do,' said Susan. 'It's not as if we have any choice, thanks to your fa—'

She bit her lip. Jack waited expectantly for her to finish.

Neither Jack nor Jaide entirely bought the official story of a slow gas leak that rapidly got worse and ended in the explosive destruction of their house. The only problem was, they couldn't explain what had happened either. Jack and Jaide had talked about it between themselves, but all they could recall was taking their father's suitcase upstairs, and they both touched some kind of metal pipe, and then suddenly everything was twisted and staring and exploding. But the only other person who'd seen it was their father, who was gone. It made them think that maybe it hadn't been like that at all. Because it

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was so unbelievable. Even thinking about the weird, white eyes made Jaide shiver.

‘What I mean is,’ Susan said, ‘we’ll have to make do as best we can. And this,’ she added, looking gloomily at the big old house, ‘is what’s best.’

‘I didn’t know Grandma ran an antique shop,’ said Jaide.

‘What?’ asked Susan. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The sign, about the antiques,’ Jaide replied, pointing out of the window. ‘Over the blue door there.’

The house had two front entrances. There was one with four broad stone steps leading up to a big door, right where they were parked, but there was also another one further along, consisting of three small steps that led down to a sunken door that was painted a lovely cornflower blue. An old, hand-painted wooden sign above the door read *ANTIQUES AND CHOICE ARTICLES FOR THE DISCERNING*.

‘Where?’ asked Susan. ‘Honestly, I don’t have time for this and I doubt Grandma X will appreciate you making jokes about her being an antique or whatever it is you’re thinking.’

Susan got out of the car and slammed the door behind her.

‘You can see it, can’t you?’ Jaide asked Jack.

Jack narrowed his eyes. He was looking straight at it as far as Jaide could tell, but his face screwed up uncertainly.

‘Not really . . .’ he said. ‘At least, I don’t think so . . .’

For a moment, everything that had happened in their old home crashed back into Jaide’s mind: the darkness, the wind,

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the glowing eyes, their father fighting to save them from forces she didn't understand. It felt like a dream, a nightmare, and she didn't like the feeling that the nightmare might be more real than the reality before her.

'Are you coming or not?' called their mother from the front steps.

'Like we have a choice,' Jaide murmured. She threw open the door. Her feet crunched down on to gravel and Jack's followed a second later.

He was glad to stretch his legs. It had been a long and boring drive. The house loomed over them, no doubt full of their grandmother's rules and regulations. He couldn't bear the thought of staying still a moment longer.

'Race you around,' he said.

'On three,' Jaide told him, then started running immediately, heading anticlockwise along the front of the house.

Jack concentrated on catching up, barely hearing their mother's *tsk* of exasperation behind them. The earth was loose underfoot, even when he crossed the edge of the gravel and hit the garden proper. There was no lawn, just lots of woodchips and twigs and dead-looking weeds. He turned left, hot on Jaide's heels, and saw that there *was* a proper garden behind the house, including a broad lawn that was dominated by a Douglas fir tree that had to be three times the height of the house. Jack wondered why it hadn't been visible as they'd driven in.

Jack had almost caught up with Jaide, as he usually did

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unless she had a really huge head start, and was about to grab her hoody and pull her back when a sudden, stern voice above their heads made him stumble.

‘You’ll be on your very best behaviour. I expect nothing less!’

The voice came from a half-open window midway along the side of the house. Jaide skidded to a halt, assuming the telling-off was directed at them. Jack crashed into her back and they both fell over.

‘Are you arguing with me?’ the voice continued.

The twins disentangled themselves and looked nervously up at the window. But there was no one leaning out and they realised that whoever the woman above was telling off, it wasn’t them.

‘Do you think that’s –?’ whispered Jack.

Jaide shushed her brother, even as she jumped up and tried to see inside, hoping for a glimpse of whoever was talking, presumably Grandma X. Jaide was a great jumper and climber, better than Jack. He had the edge in a straight sprint on level ground, but if there was any climbing or scrambling up something involved, Jaide always left him behind.

‘I’ll keep my side of the compact if you’ll keep yours,’ said the unseen woman.

A deep-toned bell chime resonated through the house. Something clattered inside the kitchen.

‘Shhh, they’re here.’

Jaide managed to pull herself up enough to see over the sill,

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just in time to catch a glimpse of a tall, elderly woman with silvery hair disappearing through a doorway. She wore a long-sleeved black shirt tucked into the top of blue jeans, a belt that sparkled as though it had metal threaded through it and cowboy boots with silver heels and tips. The sound of those boots on the polished floorboards ricocheted after her, brisk and no-nonsense.

There was no one else there. Grandma X might as well have been talking to the air or to herself.

Jack pulled himself up next to Jaide, just as something leaped on to the window sill from inside the kitchen. The twins both fell back in surprise, ending up in a tangle on the ground again.

‘Meow?’ asked the sturdy ginger tomcat, looking down at them with a quizzical expression.

Jack felt his elbow, which hurt, and laughed in relief. ‘You gave me a fright.’

The cat turned its head on one side, sniffed and began to lick its paws, totally ignoring the twins.

‘Kids? Where are you?’

Susan’s voice travelled through the house and around it, ambushing them from all sides.

‘On three,’ said Jack, but he was already moving.

He was well in the lead by the time he reached the next corner. The trunk of the mighty fir flashed by and he almost stumbled on its roots, which rose like the coils of a serpent out

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of the earth all around the tree. Those roots were making short work of the garden's stone walls, which stood cracked and tumbled on all three sides. Over the fallen walls, Jaide caught a quick glimpse of the neighbouring house. Its windows were smashed and doors boarded up, and there were black marks all up one wall that looked like they were from a fire. It had clearly not been lived in for a long time.

The southern side of Grandma X's house was a featureless, smooth brick wall with no windows below the third floor. As they skidded round the last corner and came back to the front door, Jack slowed slightly to let his sister catch up, but not enough that she could win.

'There you are.' Susan was waiting at the top of the stone steps, speaking cheerfully, but with a forced edge that told the twins not to push their luck. 'Come and meet your grandma.'

Jaide joined Jack, breathing heavily. Standing so close they touched shoulders, they walked together up the steps. The door at the top led into a hallway so dark and gloomy that Jack could only make out shapes and Jaide couldn't see anything at all.

'The twins, at last,' said the same voice they had heard through the kitchen window. Grandma X stepped out of the gloom, her hands outstretched, reaching for the twins as if to grab them and pull them back into the darkness. Jack flinched away, but Jaide didn't move, struck at once by how much Grandma X looked like their father, especially in the eyes.

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Though hers were as grey as granite and their father's a more kindly brown, they both had the same bright, piercing gaze.

Jack didn't notice her eyes. He was just shocked at how fast she was as she gripped him by the shoulder and Jaide by her hand, and drew them both in to kiss their foreheads before letting them go.

'I knew you'd come one day,' she said. 'And look at how grown-up you are! Already twelve, already troubletwisters.'

'What *is* a troubletwister?' asked Jaide.

'That's a story for another time,' Grandma X said, putting an arm around their shoulders. 'Won't you come inside and see your new home?'

'We won't be staying long,' said Susan, following closely behind. 'Just until everything's fixed.'

Grandma X sniffed. 'You are welcome for as long as you need. I have plenty of room.'

Grandma X led the twins through the door. Jaide stepped hesitantly across the threshold, eyes adjusting slowly to the darkness. Four tall chestnut and mahogany cabinets lined the sides of the front hall, all of them latched shut, the latches fastened with heavy old bronze padlocks. The air smelled odd, a mixture of the heavy, damp smell of old wood and something else, something that neither Jack nor Jaide could identify, but made them think of ancient things. This reminded Jaide of the blue door and the sign that said antiques. She had been so busy chasing Jack that she hadn't seen it when they'd run round the

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house, and for some reason it had gone right out of her mind. Now the smell brought back that lost memory and she wanted to check it out.

‘Hang on,’ Jaide said, pulling free. ‘I want to get something from the car.’

‘Hang on yourself,’ protested Jack. He made a grab at her arm and she was unable to shrug him off. Together they stumbled back out into daylight. There Jaide turned to look at the front of the house.

For an instant, both the sign and the blue door were nowhere to be seen. There was only an expanse of weathered, pinkish brick where she thought they’d been.

Then she blinked and they were back.

‘I didn’t imagine it,’ she told Jack. ‘I knew it!’

Jack stared at the door, and the sign, and the words, *ANTIQUES AND CHOICE ARTICLES FOR THE DISCERNING.*

‘You were right,’ he said, amazed that what seemed so solid now had been barely visible before. ‘Why couldn’t I see it at first?’

‘I don’t know,’ Jaide said. ‘And why couldn’t Mum see it at all?’

‘Kids?’ came Susan’s voice from inside. She sounded cross and was trying unsuccessfully to hide it. ‘Come on, don’t be rude, please.’

‘This is weird,’ Jaide said, more to herself than to her brother.

‘*Definitely* weird,’ Jack responded, and he flashed her a grin

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that surprised her. ‘Maybe Portland will be more interesting than we thought.’

Something squeaked above them. The weathervane was shifting, slowly and thoughtfully, to point to the south. But the poplars in the drive and the topmost branches of the great fir tree were still bending west, in answer to the *easterly* wind that had grown stronger, herding in a huge mass of dark, angry clouds.

Jaide shivered, but not entirely from the coolness of the wind. She pulled her hoody up and hurried inside, with Jack following close behind her.



CHAPTER TWO

Here and Gone Again

‘Lounge, drawing room, study, kitchen,’ their grandma was saying, sweeping down the hallway like a ship in full sail, tapping on doorways as she passed them. The back half of the hall, past the locked cabinets, was dominated by a number of stern-faced portraits that peered down their noses from the walls. Beyond the paintings there were two glass-fronted bookcases that instead of holding books displayed a collection of curious trinkets: snow globes, crystalline animals, brass ornaments and the like, all arranged neatly, but with no obvious sense of order.

Jack and Jaide caught up, hurrying lightly on their trainers, their scuffling footsteps a sharp contrast to the crack of Grandma X’s boots. At the very end of the hall, alone on the wall, a tiny silver mirror caught Jack’s eye as he was hustled past it to the stairs. He saw his and his sister’s faces in it, stretched and twisted into a pair of question marks.

‘I’ve prepared rooms for you on the first floor,’ Grandma X said as she led them up the creaking steps. The stairwell was as

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wide across as most rooms and continued on into the shadows far above.

‘I’m sorry it’s come to this,’ Susan said, walking one step behind her. ‘I hope we won’t be staying long and —’

‘Think nothing of it,’ interrupted Grandma X. ‘You are my daughter-in-law and the troubletwisters are my grandchildren. Blood is thicker than water. *Our* blood especially.’

‘Yes, I’d like to talk to you about that.’ Susan shot a swift glance at the twins. ‘Later.’

‘Don’t fret, my dear.’ Grandma X stopped at the first turn on the stairs and looked down at her guests. They stopped expectantly beneath her. The dim light cast deep shadows in her lined face. ‘Prudence is my middle name.’

‘What’s *prudence*?’ asked Jack.

‘It means *being careful*,’ said Susan.

‘And it really was my middle name,’ said Grandma X with a faint smile. ‘Once upon a time.’

‘What does the X stand for?’ asked Jaide.

Instead of answering, their grandmother continued up the stairs.

Susan put a finger to her lips. Jack nudged his sister and she nudged him back. They didn’t need to put into words what they were thinking, which was that the longer they were in their grandmother’s company, the odder she seemed. Her house was odd too. It wasn’t just the mystery of the blue door. Everywhere Jaide and Jack looked, strange details caught their

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eyes, like the compass wallpaper featuring letters other than N, W, S and E – they weren't even English letters – and banisters that looked less carved than grown into long spirals. There were more paintings and, on the first-floor landing, the occasional old, silver-tinted photo of a person from ancient times. Some of them had little brass nameplates on the bottom of the frames. Jack peered closely, wondering if they were related to Grandma X and therefore to him.

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. Ursula Southeil. Lorenzo Ghiberti. Helena Drebbel . . .

None of the names rang a bell.

'I've put you in here, Susan,' said Grandma X. She opened the door to show a narrow, L-shaped room with windows down the long wall that overlooked the old, empty house next door. There was a twin-sized bed tucked into one corner and a heavy cupboard looming next to it.

'Thank you,' said Susan. She was unable to hide a small sigh in her voice. The twins knew she was thinking of her old bedroom, the one that she had shared with their father. A shiver of memory ran through Jack, of white eyes and bulging animal faces, but he suppressed it. There was nothing here to be frightened of, he told himself. It was just . . . odd. Different. Not home.

Grandma X swivelled on her heel and indicated the door opposite Susan's room.

'This will be yours, troubletwisters.'

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Jaide and Jack pushed the door open. It was very heavy, and creaked. The first thing both of them saw was a golden chandelier suspended from a dome in the ceiling. It had four points like a ceiling fan and hung almost as low as Grandma X's silver hair.

The chandelier's metallic angles caught and reflected the light that was streaming through the high windows that faced the front of the house. Strange gleams and shadows flitted across the two four-poster beds, which had curiously-patterned brocade curtains. These were drawn back and tied at the posts, but when let loose would make the beds like perfect little tents inside the room.

There were matching wooden chests beside the beds and another solid wardrobe tucked into the opposite corner. The floor was bare, polished boards, like everywhere else they'd seen in the house, but there was a thick blue rug to fill the space between the beds. It had a gold four-pointed pattern woven into it, a compass symbol very much like the one on the ceiling that rose directly above it, and on the wallpaper from the other room, and on the card their grandmother had sent. It was like a coat of arms, cropping up everywhere around her.

The walls were painted white, giving the room a lightness that ran counter to the gloom and mystery of the rest of the house.

'I get this one,' said Jaide, rushing forward to claim the bed on the left. Mattress and posts squeaked as she jumped on it,

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crumpling the bedspread under her knees. Jack was less enthusiastic. He too missed his room back home, just as he missed the familiar streets of his suburb and his friends, but he was happy enough with the other bed. He bet that if he pressed close to the window from his side, he could glimpse the sea.

‘I think you’ll be comfortable here,’ said their grandma from the doorway. ‘Let’s go down and have some lunch. You must be tired after the trip.’

‘What’s on the next floor up?’ asked Jaide.

‘That’s where I sleep,’ Grandma X replied.

‘Don’t go up there,’ Susan warned the twins. ‘We mustn’t invade your grandma’s privacy any more than we already have.’

‘It’s not an invasion. I’ve been expecting you.’

‘That’s, uh, very kind. But you don’t want these two little whirlwinds going through your things.’

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ said Grandma X thoughtfully. ‘In any case, I must ask you to particularly avoid the widow’s walk at the very top of the stairs. This is an old house and the roof needs work. I’d hate for you to slip and take a fall.’

‘Did you hear that, kids? Stay right away from there.’

Jack nodded. Jaide made a movement that her mother accepted as agreement, though in fact she was thinking of the here-and-gone-again antique shop. Grandma X hadn’t mentioned it.

‘Is that the only place we can’t go?’ Jaide asked.

‘Can’t go?’ said Grandma X. ‘There are places you should

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not go certainly, as I have mentioned. Then there are *other* places to which you may not yet have found your way.'

Jack gave Jaide a *What?* look, but his sister was only intrigued. That sounded to her like permission to explore, perhaps even a challenge.

'This house was modernised some fifty years ago,' said Grandma X as she led them back downstairs to the kitchen. 'It has central heating, electricity and the telephone. That probably seemed modern enough to the people who owned it back then.'

'What about television?' Jack asked.

'I can't abide television of any sort,' Grandma X replied, making both twins' stomachs sink. 'If I want to watch a film, I'll go to the cinema.'

'And the Internet?' Jaide added in desperation.

Grandma X looked down at her and a slow smile spread across her face.

'I have found the World Wide Web useful. I'll give you the password when you're settled in. However, my own computer must remain private, I'm afraid. Perhaps you have brought your own?'

'Thank you,' said Susan. 'Normal rules apply, guys. You can use my laptop, after everything is packed away.'

Their luggage was still in the car. They had brought what little had survived the explosion with them, supplemented by new clothes hastily bought from a department store before

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leaving the city. Everything they owned in the world was contained in just a few bags.

‘You should eat first,’ said Grandma X firmly. ‘Lunch is ready.’

A platter lay on the chrome kitchen table, protected from more than just flies by a Portland Lighthouse tea towel. The broad-shouldered ginger tom the twins had seen before looked up from his contemplation of the covered food as they entered. His nose twitched hopefully.

‘Not for you, Ari,’ said Grandma X, shooing the cat away. ‘That’s Aristotle. Watch out for him. He’ll take the food out of your mouth if you let him, particularly if Kleo isn’t around to keep him in check.’

‘Where’s she got to, by the way?’ she added, speaking directly to the cat. ‘I thought she’d be here to say hello.’

Ari jumped on to the sink and flicked his tail.

‘Perhaps she will grace us with her presence later,’ said Grandma X as she handed out plates and swept away the tea towel, revealing a generous spread of bread, cold meat, cheese and salad. ‘Do you like lemonade? I’ll get us all a glass each.’

Jaide and Jack exchanged a glance, remembering the scene they had witnessed in the kitchen earlier and the letter they had received the day of the explosion. Their grandma talked to cats. Worse, she seemed to think they talked back. That was almost as bad as the house having no television.

They sat at the table, feeling awkward and out of place. The

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kitchen was probably the most normal room in the house, but here they were subjected to the scrutiny of the cat, Grandma X and their mother, who was watching to make sure they were on their best behaviour. Neither twin felt inclined to cause trouble at that moment. Apart from the faint sound of a clock from elsewhere in the house, it was suddenly very quiet.

Tick-tock, went the clock. *Tick-tock*. Then, out of nowhere, *tick-tock-tack*, as though it had improvised a whole new beat, just because it could.

‘Help yourself,’ said Grandma X, and the twins realised that she had been waiting for them to start.

Jack made himself a particularly thick sandwich with lettuce, ham and tomato, while Jaide made a much neater and more organised version of the same thing. Susan just had bread with butter, while Grandma X made an open sandwich balancing a bit of everything on top of a generous spread of mustard. Ari stuck out his pink tongue, as if he could taste it from a distance, and looked as though he was waiting for the first opportunity to pounce.

‘You said you wanted to talk to me about something, Susan,’ Grandma X said.

‘Well, yes. Hector says – that is, Hector said –’ Again, the twins’ mother glanced at Jaide and Jack as though wishing they were elsewhere so she could talk to her mother-in-law in private, but simultaneously afraid to let them out of her sight. ‘He doesn’t know how long it will take to fix things, to return

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everything to normal. I'm hoping it won't take long, but –'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you either,' said Grandma X, reaching out to pat her daughter-in-law's hand. 'You are welcome to stay here as long as it takes.'

'I know, I mean – that's not quite what –' Susan's phone buzzed. She picked it up, but it stopped ringing even as she looked at the caller ID and pulled a face. 'Oh, blast. That's work. I've been waiting to hear from them about getting something temporary while we're up here.'

'That's a sensible idea.'

She shook the phone. 'I'd call back, but I don't seem to be getting any signal now.'

'You may have to go out to the road,' said Grandma X. 'Mobile phones don't work well in this old house.'

'OK, I'll be back in a moment,' said Susan. She gave the twins a stern *behave* look and headed off down the hallway.

There was a minute's awkward silence in which Jack's mouthful of sandwich lost its taste and seemed to swell up like a lump of plaster, so heavy and thick it took three tries to swallow it.

'What does a house being old have to do with Mum's phone?' asked Jaide. 'It's new, and radio waves either get through things or they don't.'

Grandma X beamed at her. 'You're a smart girl, Jaidith. I do believe we're going to get on just fine.'

Both twins were keenly aware that she hadn't answered

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Jaide's question, but before they could ask again, Susan came back, looking unhappy.

'I have to start work tomorrow,' she announced.

'So soon?' asked Grandma X. 'You've only just got here.'

'They're desperate. Someone suddenly took ill and there's a shortage of helicopter-trained paramedics nationwide. I'm all they've got.'

'I suppose it is fortunate to have skills that are in demand.'

'Except this job is out of town, with three-day shifts,' replied Susan, running her fingers through her hair.

'That *is* a shame,' said Grandma X, glancing at the twins. 'But we'll manage, won't we?'

Jack thought about being stuck in the big old house with their strange grandma and his heart seemed to falter inside his chest. He glanced across at Jaide. She was staring down into her lap, a sure sign she was upset. It wasn't their fault the house had blown up, and they hadn't chosen to come to Portland. Now they were trapped, without even having their mother around for the first few days.

Jack wished their father would appear and sweep them away to wherever he was, even though he was apparently somewhere incredibly remote because Susan said he couldn't even call them for a few weeks. So there was no point wishing for something that could never happen, or arguing either. Their mother had to work and it was an important job. She saved people's lives, after all.

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Susan's expression was a mixture of hope and desperation. 'I'll make it up to both of you when I get back, I promise,' she told them. 'We'll do something fun.'

'They'll be all right,' Grandma X assured her. 'I'll get them settled in. School starts on Monday anyway, so they'll have plenty to occupy their minds.'

Jaide groaned. She'd forgotten all about school! They'd had the last week off, but now it was Saturday and that was already half over. The prospect of starting at an entirely new school only made things worse. Temporary it might be, but they wouldn't know anyone at first. All their friends were so far away they might as well not exist.

'I'm not hungry,' she said, pushing her half-eaten sandwich to one side.

Jack pushed his aside too, even though he *was* hungry. He didn't put what he was thinking into words because if he said, 'My life sucks,' he could say goodbye to any time on his mother's laptop.

'I guess you had those snacks in the car,' said Susan with strained goodwill. 'Let's get the bags out now and then we can try to relax. We could take a walk along the beach. Would you like that, kids?'

The prospect of getting out of the house helped restore some of the twins' energy, even if it meant they had to unload the car first. There was depressingly little to carry and they had all their bags inside after just a few trips. While Grandma X

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went upstairs to get changed, Susan took the twins in her arms and hugged them tightly.

‘It’s only three days,’ she said, sounding more as if she was talking to herself rather than to them. ‘That might be long enough.’

‘Long enough for what?’ asked Jaide.

‘You mean for Dad to come back?’ Jack chimed in.

‘Long enough for *something* to happen certainly,’ said Grandma X as she came down the stairs.

The humans’ voices faded into the distance. Ari jumped down from the window where he’d been observing their departure, and then up to the table, via a chair, the stove and the fridge, just for fun. With one sharp claw, he snared a slice of ham, which he delicately ate and then chased down with several licks of lemonade from Jack’s cup.

The cat purred to himself as he enjoyed the lemonade. Grandma X was never this distracted – and the children had only just arrived! He could hardly imagine what else might be forthcoming when they settled in and discovered what they were.

The faintest noise came through the open window – the sound of a mouse rustling through the dry grass near the front steps. Ham and lemonade were forgotten in the twitch of a whisker. The chase was on! With a sudden leap, straight through the window, Ari was gone.

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High above, the weathervane twirled around thirteen times, anticlockwise, in a carefree defiance of the prevailing wind.