WILLIAM WENTON AND THE SECRET PORTAL

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WALKER BOOKS

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Depository for Impossible Archaeology

Pontus Dippel positioned his forehead against the scanner next to the lift. He was on his way to do one last pass before he left for the night. The items downstairs, collected from all corners of the globe, were some of the rarest and most valuable artefacts in the world. Now they were safely stored in the Depository for Impossible Archaeology – a secured room beneath the Institute for Post-Human Research.

A green beam flashed across Pontus' forehead and the lift opened with a *ding*. He entered and two guard-bots wheeled in behind him as the doors closed. When the lift opened again, Pontus proceeded down a long hallway and stopped in front of a steel-clad security door. Neither Pontus nor the guard-bots noticed a dark figure materializing behind them.

Pontus placed his forehead on another scanner.

"Welcome," a computerized voice said.

The door slid open with a quiet *swish*, and light spilled

into the dark hallway. He was about to continue into the room when one of the guard-bots behind him said, "HALT!"

Pontus whipped around and spotted a figure coming towards them. A woman slowly stepped into the light. She had black, uncombed hair that draped like tentacles over her face, and rows of yellow teeth that snarled inside her grinning mouth. Something on the woman's left hand glinted in the dim light.

"HALT!" the guard-bot said again.

With one swift movement, the woman raised her metal hand and a beam shot out – vaporizing the two robots.

"No, it—it can't be…" Pontus said, holding up his hands in defence and backing away. "It's not possible. You're supposed to be … dead!"

The woman followed him into the room, closing the door behind them.

CHAPTER 1

William looked up at a red lamp in the ceiling that read: *live*. He could feel heat radiating from the powerful stage lights near by. A stressed-out woman wearing a headset stood across from him while busy workers passed around her, carrying large cables. William kept his gaze on the headset-woman. When she gave him the thumbs up, it would be his turn – his first appearance on TV.

Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that he would find himself in a situation like this. William had lived under a secret name at an undisclosed address in Norway for most of his life, but now it felt as though everyone knew who he was – or at least had heard his name. And tonight, because he had solved the world's most difficult code, he was going to be on national TV. Slowly, he was being turned into a celebrity, and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

The woman with the headset gave him the thumbs up.

He heard applause from behind the stage wall and people calling him. There was something menacing about hundreds of people he didn't know shouting his name. William froze. It felt like his feet were stuck to the floor.

"William Wenton … where are you?" he heard the host's voice calling from the stage. "Maybe he found some code back there that he had to crack first."

The audience laughed.

Someone started chanting, "Will–yum … Will–yum."

Soon, hundreds of voices were chanting in unison, "WILL–YUM … WILL–YUM … WILL–YUM."

People clapped and stomped their feet. The headset-woman rushed over and angrily motioned for him to get going. William took a deep breath and slipped through the opening between two of the stage walls. He stopped as the bright lights hit his face – completely blinding him – and the audience burst into enthusiastic cheers.

"This way, William!" the host's voice said from somewhere in the light.

As William began to walk, he caught his foot on a wire and fell flat on his face. A few people gasped, but there was one person who laughed. It was Vektor Hansen, a self-professed genius and master code-breaker. The same self-professed genius William had beaten in solving the Impossible Puzzle, the world's most difficult code.

William kicked the wire away from his foot and stood up.

"I hope you're insured," the chubby host said, waddling over to help him up.

William looked up in confusion at Ludo Kläbbert, whose whitened teeth beamed in a broad grin. William hadn't seen Ludo since the Impossible Puzzle exhibition, where William had cracked a code that turned his life upside down. Ludo led William over to a sofa and gestured for him to sit.

Vektor stopped laughing the instant their eyes met and scooted over to put as much room between himself and William as he could, while Ludo slipped behind a desk and sat down. He smiled at them for a few seconds. William felt the heat from the broiling spotlights on the ceiling above and watched as two TV cameras rolled across the floor in front of them. One of the cameras pointed right at him and William could see himself on a screen at the side of the stage. He'd always had pale skin, but he looked extra washed-out now in the bright lights.

"So how does it feel, William … sitting here with the man you so epically humiliated a few months ago?" Ludo asked.

William had never tried to humiliate anyone. He looked at Vektor again, who had his arms and legs crossed – his loathing of the young code-breaker was very clear.

"How does it feel?" Ludo repeated impatiently.

"I don't know," William said. "I mean … I didn't mean to break the code."

"Didn't mean to break the code?" Vektor said, chuckling.

"How can someone solve a code that difficult without even wanting to?"

"Vektor has a point," Ludo said, looking at William. "How could you possibly have solved the Impossible Puzzle … by accident?"

William could have told them that forty-nine per cent of his body consisted of a high-tech metal called luridium – a metal that somehow allowed him to solve difficult codes in a trance-like state – but he stayed silent.

"He probably knew the solution beforehand," Vektor said, squinting at William.

"Is that true, William?" Ludo followed up. "Did you already know the answer?"

"No … I didn't know the answer," William said. He glanced out at the audience, who were sitting on the edge of their seats in rapt attention. "That's the truth. I didn't know anything. It just … happened."

They sat in icy silence for what seemed like for ever, then Ludo clapped his hands and grinned. "We can't get so carried away that we forget why we're really here." Ludo laughed, leaping out of his chair and pointing at the studio audience. "Are you ready to get started?"

The audience broke into rapturous applause.

"Are you ready for a challenge?" Ludo said, now pointing at William.

"Um…" William hesitated. No one had said anything

about a challenge.

"Great," Ludo cheered and snapped his chubby fingers in the air.

Suddenly, a woman in a long glittering dress appeared from behind the stage wall. She was pushing a serving trolley, with a big silver platter and a shiny lid covering it.

Ludo turned to the audience. "Are you ready?" he cried and pointed to the percussionist in the house orchestra beside the stage. An enthusiastic drumroll made the air in the hot studio vibrate and the audience started cheering again.

"What do you say," Ludo shouted to the crowd. "Should we give Vektor Hansen another shot?"

The audience responded with a "YESSS!" so loud that the floor trembled.

"Do you want to see what's underneath the lid?" Ludo pointed at the trolley.

"YEEEEEEAH!" the audience yelled, even louder.

With a dramatic gesture, Ludo grabbed the handle on the lid and whipped it off.

A gasp ran through the audience.

William couldn't believe his eyes. In front of him were two small colourful boxes. Both boxes had large gold letters on the front that read: *The Difficulty.* A plastic window underneath the letters revealed the contents: a metallic cylinder that looked like the Impossible Puzzle – the puzzle that William had once beaten Vektor in solving.

"Do you see what it looks like?" Ludo said, smiling at William. Ludo picked up a box so the audience could see it too. "These will be available in every toy store in the country tomorrow."

An excited gasp ran through the crowd. William couldn't believe it. It was a toy version of the Impossible Puzzle.

"Who wants two of the world's best code-breakers to compete to see who can solve the Difficulty the fastest?"

The audience burst into raucous applause. Did people really want the two of them to compete at solving a *toy*?

Ludo raised his hands to signal the crowd to be quiet, then he turned to William. "Well, what do you say, William? Are you ready for a challenge?"

William looked over at the audience and then at Vektor, who grinned at him, and William got the feeling that he had been tricked into this, and now, there was no way out.

"But they're not … real—" William started.

"Wonderful," Ludo cut him off. "And what do you say, Vektor?"

Vektor removed his leather waistcoat, and gave his blond ponytail a toss. "I'm always ready for a good puzzle." He cracked his fingers.

"The rules are simple," Ludo said. "The first one to solve the Difficulty is the winner."

Ludo nodded to the woman in the long dress. She opened the boxes and set both cylinders on the table in front of them.

Ludo raised his arms as if he were about to start a drag race, then he turned to William and Vektor.

"Are you ready?"

Vektor nodded.

Once again, William was about to protest, but he stopped himself. Yes, he had been tricked into this situation but he was in it now. In a split second, he adjusted his mind, looked at the puzzle in front of him and nodded. "I'm ready."

"GREAT!" Ludo shouted and started counting, "THREE … TWO…!" His chubby arms lingered for a couple of seconds, then dropped as he cried, "ONE!"

In a flash, Vektor snatched the cylinder. William did the same. He could tell right away that the toy wasn't the same quality as the Impossible Puzzle – most of the pieces were plastic and the device was a lot lighter. Sections of the cylinder could be turned and small square tiles could be moved up and down. Each square had a small symbol. William would have to move the pieces around in a specific order until he had solved the code.

He looked at Vektor, who was already well underway – his long fingers flying over the puzzle, twisting and turning the cylinder. Vektor was so engrossed in what he was doing that a drop of saliva had started to form on his lower lip.

William closed his eyes and concentrated, waiting for the luridium in his body to take over – the way it always did when he started to think about solving a code. Then he felt it. The

unique sensation of the luridium starting to kick in – a tingling in his stomach that moved up his spine and out into his hands.

Everything around him disappeared and the cylinder began to glow and come apart – the various sections floating up into the air. William knew that only he could see the symbols as they twirled and looped above him. Some of them slid upwards, others sideways – a pattern was starting to form. This was how the luridium organized the codes so that William could calculate his own way to the answer. William looked down at the cylinder, and began moving the little squares around, mimicking the movements of the floating symbols.

Faster and faster his hands moved, twisting and turning the various sections of the cylinder at a breakneck pace. William knew that he was going to win – nothing could stop him now.

A bright light flashed in front of his eyes. At first, he thought someone had pointed one of the monstrous stage lights directly at him, but it felt like the light was inside his head – splitting into tiny lightning bolts that swam across his vision. A ringing in his head exploded like a bomb and he felt his body go limp. Something was wrong. His fingers were shaking uncontrollably – he could hardly hold on to the Difficulty, and the glow that had surrounded the puzzle an instant before was gone.

Something was *very* wrong. His whole body trembled and his hands were so cold that he could hardly feel them. Suddenly, William sensed that his surroundings had changed. Somehow,

he was standing in a large cave. He looked up and saw an enormous glowing golden ring levitating in front of him.

And then, William was back in the studio. As if in slow motion, the cylinder slipped from his numb fingers, dropped to the floor and shattered. He stared in confusion at all the pieces lying on the ground in front of him. William saw people leaning over and whispering to each other, and then he looked up at Vektor, who was holding the two pieces of his toy up in triumph.

It had split in two. Vektor had solved it. He started hopping around like a deranged kangaroo, gloating, "I WON! I WON! I BEAT WILLIAM WENTON!"