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1 JUNE

214 days to go . . .

Big River State Forest

12:00 am

Everything fizzed and flickered out.

The force of the crash-landing had shaken up every cell in my body. I was trembling all over, but my arms and legs felt numb and helpless. I couldn't see a thing—I was surrounded by darkness . . .

Darkness and smoke!

The fumes were filling the cabin, fast. I could feel the small space I was in warming up. My blood pumped, driven by panic. I thrashed my hands around, still trying to find the lever that opened the canopy. I had to get out before I choked to death!

I fumbled about, coughing from the smoke. Something in the undercarriage collapsed, sending the wrecked jet lurching. I fell forward, slamming the windscreen hard with my head. A

small crack zigzagged across in front of me, but the thick glass remained otherwise intact.

Then came a *whoomp* from the rear of the aircraft, followed by the crackling of flames—the Orca had fully ignited! Intense heat engulfed me and my desperation soared. I instantly pushed myself back into my seat, brought my knees up and kicked at the canopy with all my power. I kicked again and again until it opened a few centimetres, letting the night air gush in. I gulped it down as the fire behind me intensified.

I kept kicking until finally, I heard a snap. The canopy yielded and I bashed my way out, coughing and spluttering, dragging myself and my backpack out of the cabin.

I rolled to the ground, shot to my feet, and then raced away from the burning wreckage and into the darkness.

12:04 am

After a few seconds I stopped running and looked back. The Ormond Orca was a mass of flames and some nearby trees had caught fire.

As I stood there, mesmerised, watching it all burn in blurry-eyed shock—amazed that I was still alive—the burning Orca buckled, then exploded! The force of the blast was so strong

that when it hit me it threw my body to the ground, and I almost collided headfirst with the thick trunk of a tree.

I ducked my head just before a torn panel of the Orca wing hurtled past me and sliced like an axe blade into the tree trunk, just centimetres above me.

12:06 am

From where I was lying, I could see the jet's burning body in the moonlight. Steaming debris was strewn all over the smoky area surrounding what was left of Great-uncle Bartholomew's Orca. If I'd wanted to alert the authorities to where I was, I couldn't have done a better job.

My ears were buzzing and the sound around me was all muffled. I felt around for my backpack, grabbed the strap and pulled it to me. My shoulder throbbed from the bug extraction.

Face-down in the dirt, my damaged body tried to recover and regain control. I couldn't help thinking of Bartholomew and his fighting spirit. It was my fault he was dead. Sumo and Kelvin shouldn't have involved an innocent person, but I shouldn't have either. How much longer could he have lived if I hadn't shown up and brought so much danger with me? He could have had another ten years with his life's work,

the Ormond Orca. He spent so long building it—and then it took me just one flight to completely obliterate it all . . . My great-uncle and his aeroplane crashed on the same day. And they'd both gone up in flames.

'I'm so sorry,' I whispered.

12:13 am

Keeping my head down, I stumbled through the scrubby bushes, trying to get as far away from the wrecked aircraft as I could. My legs weren't obeying me—they were shaky and uneasy, and I kept falling on my hands and knees. I wanted to quit running and find somewhere to hide, but I had to keep going. I knew it wouldn't be long before the crash site would be swarming with the police cars I'd seen from the air. I imagined them racing closer right now, homing in on the smoke billowing in front of the moon like a signal flare.

12:19 am

My exhausted legs suddenly gave out completely from under me, and I fell hard to the ground. I crawled to a sitting position and checked myself over for serious injuries. My fingers were cut and bleeding, my right arm was bruised and had a graze that was slowly seeping blood. Underneath

my shredded jeans, my legs were swollen, scratched and bruised.

I dug my phone out and, unbelievably, it was still working. I'd have to get a signal before I could try calling Boges.

I still couldn't believe I'd survived the landing, but I used that piece of luck for motivation to keep walking. Each time I staggered, I got back to my feet and walked on like a crash-test dummy come to life. The sound of distant sirens kicked me back into action and I hobbled deeper into the forest as fast as I could. I wouldn't let them catch me now.

1:35 am

Despite my best efforts, I'd been walking pretty slowly, trying to keep close to the edge of the forested area where the moon helped light my path. I was ready to duck back into the dense brush at the slightest alarm. I'd reached a ridge that looked over the lights of a small township in the valley beneath. I figured I could get down there in a couple of hours and decided that as soon as I could find a safe place and a signal, I'd ring Boges. As I stepped over a rocky platform, everything in my vision started fading and melting away . . . all sound dissolved . . . I stumbled, dizzy, and collapsed . . . I held on

to my senses just long enough to drag myself under the jutting rock.

6:45 am

My eyes opened and I bumped my head on the rock that I'd forgotten was above me. My body was half undercover, half exposed—I must have blacked out, exhausted. I shivered and pulled myself up in a tight ball to get warm.

Sunlight was starting to streak across the sky, and in the east, the horizon was a light grey. It was time to get going. Stiff and sore with cold, I got up and started walking down the sloping ground, sliding and slithering, heading for the town I'd seen last night.

I must have been about halfway down, and had reached a wide, level clearing, when I heard voices. I stopped, ducked back behind a eucalyptus tree, and kept completely still, listening intently.

'. . . can't have gone too far . . . somewhere around here . . . Joe McAlister said he thought he saw someone heading east from the crash scene.'

The man's voice got louder as it came closer to my pitiful hiding place.

'He's had all night to make his escape,' said another male voice. 'He could be anywhere by now.'

'You saw the plane wreck,' the first voice continued. 'It's a miracle he walked away from that, so I reckon he's gotta be pretty messed up. Probably got some serious injuries. I don't reckon he could've got very far.'

I crouched down, grabbing the straps of my backpack tightly, making myself as small as possible.

'Cover this area thoroughly. I'm going to head that way. Meet you back at Stony Falls Creek Road.'

The first voice seemed to trail off, so I figured I only had one searcher to deal with.

Seconds later, footsteps approached the eucalypt I was crouched behind. They cautiously trudged through the damp, fallen leaves, and for a second my mind flashed back to the painstaking moments I'd spent hiding in the rocky crevice after fleeing the Blackwattle Creek car crash.

But this time I knew that whoever was approaching was more than likely going to see me. I needed to decide, fast, whether I should run, or stay and fight.

I'd hesitated too much to run, and began bracing myself for an attack when I felt something strange—some sort of vibration—under my feet. The ground was rumbling! The trees around

me were bending, and leaves were lashing, as a powerful wind whipped my face. I knew this sound, I knew this feeling . . . I looked up, and there in the sky was a helicopter descending!

I squinted, trying to get a better look at it. It was black and sleek, smaller than the ones I'd seen before. It didn't look like a police chopper, so who was the pilot?

I glanced around, trying to locate the guy who'd almost been on me moments ago. He was just metres away, cowering and shielding himself from the windy blast, his light brown overcoat flapping behind him. I wanted to run while he was distracted, but my only path was through the clearing, and that was impossible right now. Instead, I retreated, and watched as the helicopter descended in a cloud of dust, now only metres from the ground.

To my horror, I saw two familiar figures climb out of the cabin and creep along the skids. One after the other, they jumped to the ground.

Sumo and Kelvin!

The helicopter lifted and thundered back into the sky, quickly disappearing from sight as Sumo and Kelvin straightened up and started scanning the place. The guy in the coat approached them.

I was trapped: I couldn't backtrack, and I had nowhere to run, except right for them! But then

came a sound from behind me like drumming. It approached, becoming louder and louder, like a wayward train. This was no helicopter, but whatever it was had distracted the three guys in my view.

'What's going on?' I heard one of them shout.

The noise was thunderous. I turned around and through the scrub, I saw dusty flashes of movement, then a blur of dashing legs and tossing heads—a mob of wild brumbies! They must have been disturbed by the chopper! Down through the trees they galloped as a group, deftly jumping over logs, kicking up dirt and startling birds that rose squawking at their passing. They were coming right for us—we would be run down, trampled! Smashed to pieces by sharp hooves!

I grabbed the trunk of the tree beside me and pulled myself as close to it as possible. I had no choice but to close my eyes and hope for the best as the mob dashed my way. The pounding closed in and the entire mob rushed at me in a deafening haze of reckless hooves.

The thud of their hooves faded and all was still again. I crouched next to the eucalyptus tree, listening. All I could hear was the silence of the forest. They were gone. I was unscathed! I wiped dirt and grit from my face and looked

into the clearing. As the dust settled I saw a writhing body lying in the path the brumbies had taken. It was Kelvin! He'd been trampled!

Sumo and the other guy ran to his side. This was my chance! I sucked up the pain in my aching body and ran for it.

9:29 am

I'd almost reached the town, so I stopped in a secluded, sheltered spot to try to clean myself up a bit. I could feel blood caked on my forehead and my knuckles, and my jeans were tattered and torn—obviously they were not designed to withstand vicious dog attacks, plane crashes, or fugitive runs through the bush.

From the bottom of my backpack, I gratefully dug out the tracksuit Melba had given me, and awkwardly pulled it on. The warm, fleecy material was comforting, and it kept the icy morning air at bay. I made the best of my appearance and began to walk tentatively into the potential trap waiting for me in town.

Big River

9:37 am

Big River was a medium-sized country town, and from where I stood it looked like most of its

shops were still closed. One had its doors open—a small convenience store, with faded green strips of plastic dangling over the doorway. I couldn't see anyone suspicious—no cops, no park rangers, and no sign of Oriana's thugs. There was no-one around at all, aside from an old blue cattle dog tied to a wooden bench out the front of the open store. I went over and scanned the ads and signs in the shop window for what I was looking for, and there it was: a crooked, handwritten poster that read, 'High Speed Internet'.

I huddled down beside a post office box and called Boges.

'Cal,' he said a bit sleepily, 'are you OK? I heard something about arson, murder and theft. Sounds like my friend Cal, I thought! What happened?'

'I'm all right, but Great-uncle Bartholomew died right in front of me. He had a heart attack,' I said. 'Sumo and Kelvin showed up, then they set the house alight . . . and he pretty much died right there in my arms. If it weren't for me, he'd still be alive.'

'That's rough, dude. But not your fault, OK?' Boges said slowly, urging me to agree with him. 'Your great-uncle was really old, right? And probably not in the best shape already. Don't beat yourself up about it.'

'Hard not to,' I said, knowing what Boges was saying was true, but also knowing that my search for clues to the Ormond Singularity had impacted badly on another innocent person. 'They were smoking us out of the house,' I continued, 'and I had to get away from there, so I . . .'

'So you?'

'So I took the jet.'

'You what?!' Boges screeched.

'I wouldn't have stood a chance on foot, and before he died, Bartholomew told me to take the Orca. So that's what I did.'

'Incredible!'

'It was awesome! I was absolutely freaking out, but it flew and it got me out of there. I landed near Dimityville Airport. Well, I crash-landed. Just got out before the whole thing exploded.'

'Are you serious?!'

'Deadly. I can't believe it myself. Sumo and Kelvin nearly got me again earlier this morning, but anyway . . . I've just reached a town called Big River, and there's a place I can see that looks like it has internet connection,' I said, thinking of all the sensitive information I wanted to pass on to Boges.

'Discretion,' he said, understanding.

'That's right.'

'Chat online? I can text you new login details.'

'Yep,' I agreed. 'I'll be online in ten.'

'Cool, but be careful there's no-one hanging around, searching for you. I'm sure the cops are crawling over the place, and don't forget you've got the private detective your uncle Rafe hired on your case, too.'

'Yep. It seems OK right now, but I don't want to stick around for long. I need to go and find a new place to hide out for a while.'

9:47 am

I hurried over and peered into the shop. In the back, behind shelves stacked with tinned food and jars, were two old, bulky computers sitting side by side on a desk with orange plastic chairs in front of them.

I parted the plastic strips and walked through the doorway. The woman behind the counter took no notice of me, barely looking at me as I bought a packet of crisps, a muffin and a bottle of orange juice. She was glued to a small TV that was propped up near the till on some phone books. The place was quiet except for the sound of the TV chattering away with some talk-show hosts dishing out bad jokes and cheesy smiles in between infomercials.

'I want to log on, too,' I said.

She shrugged, sniffing and giving me my change. 'Either of those,' she said, pointing to the back of the shop.

9:52 am

I sat down at the first stone-age computer, glancing back towards the street. Still no-one around. I signed-in to chat, all the time automatically scanning the street outside the doorway. I hoped the brumby incident had taken Kelvin, at least, off my back for now, but Sumo could still be in hot pursuit, and the police would be scouring the townships surrounding Dimityville.

A news banner stretching across the top of the monitor caught my attention. I clicked on the featured photo that I instantly recognised as being 'Kilkenny'. A video clip slowly loaded and soon I was watching aerial footage of police and firemen surrounding the smouldering ashes of the house.

I sat there in a trance, remembering all that had happened at that place. Sadness welled up in me as I thought of my old great-uncle. A newsreader interrupted the footage to bring the latest on the story, while footage of the

Ormond Orca crash site replaced the Mount Helicon home. I leaned in so I could listen to it on low volume.

'The wreck of the stolen jet—belonging to the elderly Mount Helicon resident Bartholomew Ormond, who earlier perished in a deliberately-lit fire following a home invasion—has been located in Big River State Forest,' reported the newsreader. 'Police have not retrieved a body from the crash site. An internal source has reported that the offender is none other than 15-year-old Callum Ormond, and that he may be seriously injured. Callum, the victim's nephew, is the teen fugitive whom police have been seeking for many months. He is considered to be armed and extremely dangerous. The public are being warned against approaching him. Police are appealing for information on his whereabouts. It's alleged Callum lit the fire deliberately to cover the theft of the aircraft, and the murder of Bartholomew Ormond.'

9:56 am

login name: dmo_hunter. password: bogesisawesome. i'll be on in 5.

I killed time waiting for Boges by jumping onto my blog and typing up a new message.

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Web Search

Hello, Callum



Contact Cal

Messages for Cal

Male
15 years old
Richmond

Please don't believe the latest reports that are going down right now about how I killed an old man, set fire to his house and stole his aeroplane. It's all lies. Don't ask me how the cops are getting it so wrong. It all feels like a conspiracy. Yes, I went to 'Kilkenny'. I went there to see if my great-uncle could help me out of this mess. These two guys who've been chasing me for months turned up at his property. They set fire to the house to get me out of there. But it wasn't me or the fire that killed Bartholomew . . . it was the stress of it all. We were under attack and his heart couldn't take it. I never meant for him to get caught up in this nightmare. I only wanted his help. And he died trying to protect his home . . . and me.

My great-uncle told me to fly the jet—the Ormond Orca. He spent his whole life crafting it, and he wanted me to use it to fly myself out of danger.

Here is the truth: murderous criminal gangs are constantly threatening my life and I have been forced to take drastic action to save myself. Every single thing I've done has been about protecting my family and staying alive. I've only ever acted in self-defence and would never intentionally hurt anybody.

Oriana de la Force is behind my great-uncle's death. The police should investigate her.

Inbox [1]
Update Profile
Sign Out

POSTED BY TEENFUGITIVE AT 10:01 AM

1 Messages

bogesy: u there?

dmo_hunter: yep, thanks for sorting that out. just saw a newsflash from kilkenny. cops r blaming me . . . as usual. calling me a murderer. again.

bogesy: yeah, i saw it too. do what u can to ignore it. gran's just calling out. back in a minute.

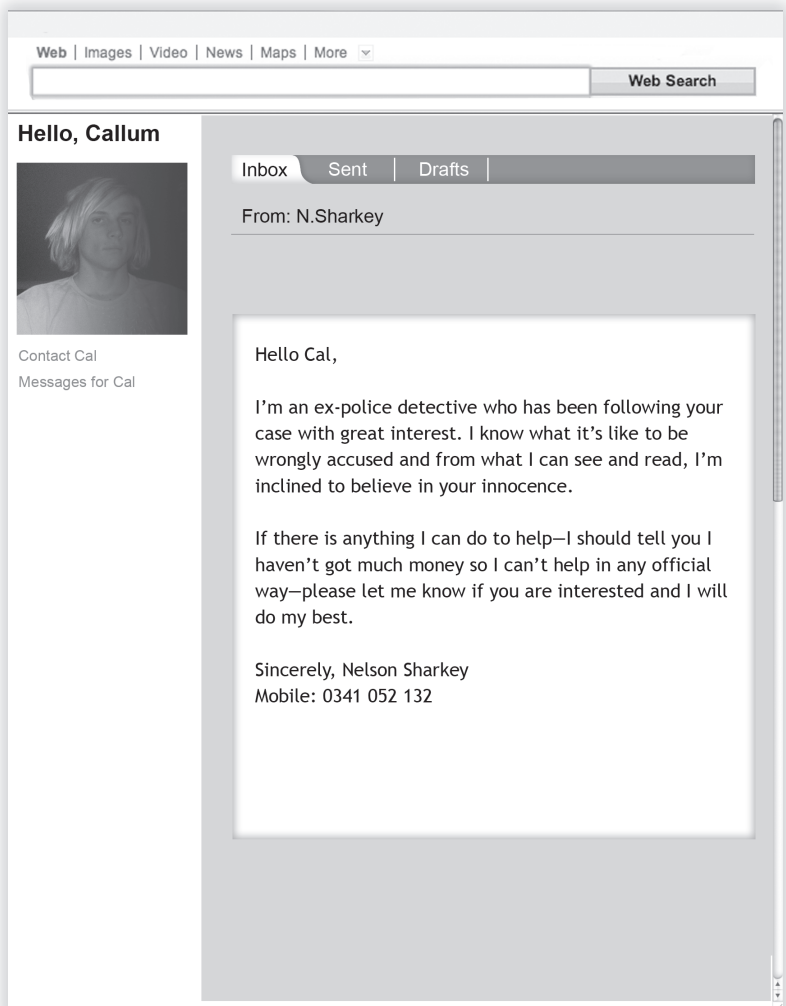
Next I checked some of the new comments on my wall. Lots were from people whose names were becoming familiar, like Jas and Tash. Seeing all the friendly comments from people who believed in me really made me feel a whole lot better. But I was missing home real bad . . . and I knew all the friendly messages in the world couldn't stop a question coming into my mind, no matter how hard I tried to push it away: how come total strangers believed in me when my own mother didn't?

10:11 am

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dmo_hunter: back yet?

Boges hadn't returned. I was starting to get frustrated and twitchy in my plastic seat, when I realised I had a private message waiting for me on my blog. It was a message from a stranger.



I read the email a few times over. Was Nelson Sharkey genuine or were the police trying a new

tack, hoping to trick me into contacting them and revealing my position? There was something about the message that rang true. Or maybe I just wanted it to. I was suspicious. Life on the run had made me a totally different person from the trusting kid I'd once been.

I didn't reply to the email but made a note of the phone number Nelson Sharkey left and then went back to check on Boges again.

dmo_hunter: you back? prob not a great idea for me to hang out in here too much longer.

bogesy: sorry dude, gran just spilled a carton of milk all over the kitchen floor, and she couldn't bend over to clean it up. bad back. she was trying to mop it up with two tea towels under her feet . . .

dmo_hunter: lol.

bogesy: yeah, pretty funny. before u ask, gab's ok. still on life support, still no real change, but no more talk of switching her off. rafe's the same as always, and your mum's pretty much the same too. and by 'the same' i mean 'weird'.

I recalled the scene with Mum at the hospital and felt my muscles tense with anger. I still hadn't forgiven her. I filed that thought away and forced my attention back to Boges.

dmo_hunter: soon as I can, i'll be back in town.

bogesy: only if it's safe.

dmo_hunter: i just read an email from an ex-cop, a guy called nelson sharkey. it came in through my blog. he said he wants to help me. reckons he knows what it's like to be falsely accused of something. said he believes i'm innocent and that i could contact him if i wanted his help.

bogesy: . . .

dmo_hunter: i'm not stupid, i'm not about to write back and arrange a meeting. i know it's probably a set-up.

bogesy: i didn't say u were stupid. it's just . . . so hard to know who to trust. but u never know, he could be legit. it's about time you got a good break. an ex-detective on our side could be very helpful. don't make any hasty decisions on that one. hey, explain 'magpie'?

dmo_hunter: magpie. ok. oriana bugged me. buried a transmitter in my shoulder back when she abducted me in january.

bogesy: what?! she's been able to track you all along?!!

dmo_hunter: i know! anyway, when we realised it was there, bartholomew dug it out for me and then he fed it to his pet magpie, along with some mince or something, so that the bird would

lead oriana's thugs away from where we really were. worked for a day or so . . . until maggers came back.

bogesy: so cool.

dmo_hunter: my great-uncle was awesome. we also talked about the ormond jewel and I reckon my dad might have used our life savings to buy it from someone. remember how all our money disappeared? one hundred thousand dollars? the ormond jewel had been given to an ancestor in tudor times by queen elizabeth 1 herself.

bogesy: awesome! that's why there was the empty jewel case and that's why your place was broken into! but who's your ancestor?

dmo_hunter: a guy called black tom butler, the tenth earl of ormond. he was an agent of the queen in ireland.

bogesy: dude, the *black*jack! black tom! that's what the drawing must have meant! and . . . it's a butler with the tray, not a waiter! like winter said.

dmo_hunter: exactly! black tom was a rich and powerful earl back in the days of QE1, and looked after her interests in ireland. i think that's why she gave BT the jewel, like a bonus or something.

bogesy: we need to track this down—fast! so what does it look like?

dmo_hunter: like a giant emerald, set in gold with rubies and pearls around it. and it's a locket that opens up to a miniature portrait of QE1.

bogesy: nice, nice.

dmo_hunter: hope so. u seen winter lately?

bogesy: not since we sprang you from the clinic. she rang me that night and told me she got out ok. why?

dmo_hunter: no reason.

bogesy: all this new info is going to make our investigation heaps easier.

dmo_hunter: doesn't feel like it's getting easier. we're dealing with a double-key code. great-uncle bart told me that the ormond riddle and the ormond jewel had to be put together somehow to solve the mystery of the huge secret my dad had stumbled on in ireland—the ormond singularity. we're almost halfway through the year, and we have a long way to go yet.

bogesy: we'll get there.

dmo_hunter: how the hell are we going to figure out the ormond singularity? we don't have a clue where the jewel is, and the riddle has the last two lines cut off! HOW ARE WE EVER GOING TO FIND THEM AND BRING THEM TOGETHER?

bogesy: we'll get there. somehow.

dmo_hunter: if you say so. another thing, my great-uncle told me i should speak to his sister, my great-aunt millicent. he reckoned she could have access to helpful info.

bogesy: he's right, you should speak to her. where is she?

dmo_hunter: i don't have a clue. we've never met. i'd almost forgotten all about her. and it's too late to ask bartholomew for more details.

bogesy: i'll see what I can do. hey, i have something for you.

dmo_hunter: ?

bogesy: jennifer smith's number. i'll text it to you.

dmo_hunter: you're a legend. back in touch soon, ok.

10:41 am

I was about to get up and leave, thinking if there was still no-one around I'd get onto the highway and try my luck getting a lift back to the city, when a guy came into the shop to buy milk.

'What's going on round this place?' he asked the woman at the cash register, who stared back blankly at him. 'There's roadblocks in and out of town,' he explained. 'You got an escaped criminal on the loose round here?'

The woman shrugged. 'I dunno,' she said. 'I don't listen to the news. It's all bad.'

'Come on,' said the man, picking up his milk and his change, 'you ought to look on the bright side.'

The girl looked around the convenience store. 'Not much of that round here,' she muttered.

It was so frustrating being delayed again, when I had so many leads I wanted to look into, but it was clear I needed to keep out of sight for a while, until the roadblocks were lifted—make the authorities believe I'd left the area.

When the man walked out of the store, I paid for my internet usage, bought a loaf of bread, some peanut butter and another bottle of juice and moved on.

Keeping away from the shops that had just started to come alive with customers, I followed signs to a picnic ground. It was a grassy area where wintering willow trees hung over a brown river. It made me think of a place Mum and Dad took me and Gabbi to a couple of summers ago to learn how to jet ski. There was a small toilet block, and a brick barbecue and wooden table with benches were set out near a narrow white footbridge that led to the other side of the river. The place was deserted. It wasn't the season or the time for picnics.

After ducking into the toilets, I hurried over the footbridge, noticing a low, isolated building

set several hundred metres upriver. It looked like a scout hall or some kind of community building—it had a padlocked double door at one end, and a row of web-covered windows along the river side. A faded notice outside the door indicated that it was a summer camp for visiting scout groups, but could be used in the winter for other community meetings.

A broken window at the far end of the building was exactly the sort of thing I was looking for, and it didn't take me long to get through it and inside. I found myself in a small room with two sets of bunk beds on either side. Opposite that room was another one, completely identical. There were three sets of these rooms in a line, enough beds for twenty-four people. Further along was a bathroom, a run-down kitchen, a storage area, and the hall, which had a raised area like a stage at the front, next to a lectern.

I grabbed a sleeping-bag from a pile in the storage area and dragged it along with me, thinking I'd take it with me when I left. The interior was cold but I was exhausted. I went back to the room opposite the one I had first come into, and flicked on the lamp that was sitting on the bedside table. It worked; light filled the room. I pulled the plug out and stuck

my phone charger in instead, then threw myself on one of the lower bunks and pulled a folded blanket over me.

Images of Great-uncle Bartholomew's pale face as he lay dying on the floor by his telescope wouldn't leave my mind. At least we had some time together, I told myself. And without that, I might never have known about the existence of the Ormond Jewel, or Black Tom Butler, or found the potential leads on the Ormond Singularity . . . which was ticking down to extinction with every passing day.

I knew I had to shake off these disturbing thoughts and get some sleep.